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All in a day's work

The clattering of wood on wood grew louder as I approached the Sunda Kelapa Docks, north of the sprawling city of Jakarta. Once a major trading centre for the Portuguese in the 16th century, it then became the domain of the Dutch East Indies Trading Company.



The old fish market still heaves with the morning catch and towering in the background are the tall-masted elegant Bugis schooners from South Sulawesi. They belong to one of the last fleets of working sailboats in the world and still ply the seas between hundreds of Indonesian islands carrying merchandise, as they did centuries ago.

But it is not until you take a closer look at the schooners that you see the backbreaking work needed to fill their cavernous holds. The day I visited the docks, rows of men, dusted white from sacks of flour they were carrying,

stepped carefully from the dock to the boats like a trail of ants on the forest floor. Further along, I found the source of the sound, which had first drawn me in – huge planed hardwood planks suspended from shoulder to shoulder being piled high both on and below deck.

With air travel now predominantly giving us the means to reach far off destinations, it seems inevitable, and perhaps a little sad, that travelling by boat has gradually declined, although I suspect that Cruise ship passengers and South Sea pirates would beg to differ! Nevertheless, the hard work & activity at traditional ports and harbours across the world still fascinates me and provides a wonderful source of imagery, which I never tire of.

From manual labour to the control and maintenance of high technology, 'people at work' formed one of the first themes I tackled when studying documentary photography, fifteen years ago. For a whole month, we would spread out into Newport and Cardiff in search of the working populace - steel workers, window washers, bakers, cartoonists, blacksmiths and tattoo artists. Some of my subjects became part of a larger story later in the year, such as the tattoo artist and his relationship with the human canvas, and the finer details of the tattoo itself.

The working men and women of South Wales had provided me with a solid grounding in the art of story telling with images. Let loose from the confines of the Welsh Valleys and into the streets of Calcutta and market towns of Latin America, it was immediately obvious, how important the fundamentals of this training was, and how this theme was likely to feature in my future photography.

About two years later I travelled to Kyoto, Japan to photograph a story about the importance of water in Japanese culture. While researching the story, a local Shinto priest told me that the traditional making of Sake still required the purest of water and a very large vat of fermenting rice. Red tape followed intrigue. Gaining access to the process needed written permission, a series of interpretive meetings and the wearing of starched white overalls, white Wellington boots and an official photographer's armband. Inside the room everything was spotless. Stood in the vats on wooden shoes, sinewy men were stripped to the waist,



perspiring from the heat and the exertion of shovelling wads of rice on to conveyer belts. They were oblivious to my presence and their pace never slackened.

Not much of our lives are spent in repetitive work anymore, but it has continued to be the norm in many developing countries we visit. We read ominous stories about 'sweatshops' but rarely see the conditions or nature of the work, only the end products in our high street shops. Much of it, though, is very visible - laundry washers outside the Taj Mahal, rice planters in Vietnam, Brazilian miners, Muslim potters, Indian tea and yoghurt makers. Many of these jobs have been done by generations of families and will probably continue on into the next generation even if they can now call home on their mobile!



Four years ago, I travelled to the State of Gujarat in India to see how the people and culture had recovered, one year on from one of the world's worst earthquake disasters. Entire villages had been reduced to rubble and in one of the main cities, Bhuj, where many buildings had survived, the feeling of desolation and helplessness was overpowering. Yet life obviously went on and the monumental process of rebuilding homes and businesses was gathering pace.

In recent years, Gujarat had begun attracting tourism with its unique traditional textiles still worn by men and women. With little prospect of this welcomed new income returning soon, many of the women had reverted to providing wholly for their local market. In the village of Lodai, the epicentre of the earthquake, funds had finally been allocated for building materials and a forest of stabilising core wire already covered the ground. In the middle of all this sat a woman quietly stitching cloths and embroidery. It was a scene that could not have spoken more plainly of their determination to carry on and the huge amount of work that lay ahead.

Sabastiao Salgado is probably one of the greatest proponents of the documentary image and his 'Workers' project shot over several years, brilliantly recorded both the plight and courage of mostly manual labourers across the world. We would do well to follow in his footsteps and expand on his coverage, not only to satisfy our own curiosity, but to add to a greater collection of work images at home and abroad.

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