

Chapter 4: Bajo Voyages to the Timor Sea

The history of Bajo voyaging to the Timor Sea is well documented, and the historical record can be compared with an analysis of Bajo narratives detailing sailing and fishing voyages. It is evident from these sources that Mola and Mantigola Bajo have a long history of sailing to the Timor Sea. This is not a recent phenomenon but represents a continuation of voyaging over more than two centuries. From the outset, this **lama** fishery has been a commercial venture and Bajo have been part of local, regional and international trading economies from the beginning.

The history of Indonesian fishing activity in the region commenced with Macassan voyaging to Marege (the north Australian coast) and continues with post-Macassan fishing in the Timor Sea. The movement of European settlers into the northwest region after the 1870s, the development of a pearling industry off the Kimberley coast, and the recruitment of Indonesian labour into the industry brought about a contest for control over the marine resources of the region. This has been further driven by the expansion of Australian fishing activity in the region and the move southward by other ethnic fisher groups in Indonesia.

Australian accounts of fishing activity in the Timor Sea by maritime peoples from the Indonesian Archipelago have not revealed any source that specifically mentions or identifies Bajo activity in the region (see, for example, Serventy 1952; Bach 1955; Crawford 1969; Bottrill 1993; Campbell and Wilson 1993). Indonesian fishermen are generally referred to by generic terms, as 'Malays' or 'Indonesians', and vessels are reported to have originated from a number of different islands across the archipelago (Crawford 1969: 125). However, by examining Bajo narratives in conjunction with some of these historical sources, it is possible to identify some of these fishermen as Bajo from Mantigola and Mola, and hence to provide dates for early Bajo fishing activity in the north Australian region.

One particular account of an incident known among the Bajo as *pesawat jatuh* (the plane that crashed) concerns an encounter between the Mantigola Bajo crew of a *perahu* fishing at Seringapatam Reef and the crew of a British aircraft that crashed on the reef in the 1930s. When augmented by Australian archive and newspaper reports of the event, this provides important evidence of Bajo activity in the Ashmore Reef area (see Map 4-1). This incident has not been previously documented in the literature concerning the history of Indonesian fishing activity in the Timor Sea, and it marks a time in Bajo history remembered as a period of relatively unrestricted activity in the Timor Sea before the archipelago was

occupied by the Japanese and distant shore fishing activity was restricted. Ethnographic texts concerning Bajo voyaging prior to World War II also show that it has always been primarily motivated by commercial purposes and that Bajo have sought shark fin for decades.



Map 4-1: Key locations in northern Australia.

Macassans, Malays and Europeans in Northern Australia

From at least the 1720s (Mitchell 1994: 56) until the early 1900s fleets of *perahu* sailed from Makassar (South Sulawesi) to the northern Australian coast each year to collect trepang or *bêche-de-mer* — a genus of edible holothurians found in abundance on the seabed in shallow tropical waters. Processed trepang has long been a commodity in great demand in Chinese markets, where it is considered as a culinary delicacy with potent medicinal properties. The trade soon extended to other marine commodities, including turtle shell and shark fin. This trade began well before European colonisation of the Australian continent, and involved significant contact with Australian Aborigines. The trade operated through the city of Makassar and the majority of people involved in the industry were Makassarese. As a result the term ‘Macassan’ is applied to the industry in the literature, but it is thought that the fishing crews included Bugis and Bajo (Macknight 1976: 18).

The Macassan fleets fished three areas: the Northern Territory coast from Cape Don to the Gulf of Carpentaria; parts of the Kimberley coast of Western Australia from Cape Londonderry to Cape Leveque and perhaps further south towards Port Hedland; and the offshore reefs and islands in the Timor Sea

(Crawford 1969: 89; Macknight 1976: 2, 27). Evidence of Macassan fishing activity is documented in Dutch archival records, in recorded contact with other Europeans, and also from the results of archaeological investigations (Crawford 1969; Fox 1977a; Macknight 1976; Bottrill 1993; Campbell and Wilson 1993; Mitchell 1994). In addition to the activity of the Macassan fleets, historical sources also document fishing activity by Bajo *perahu* travelling independently or accompanying Macassan *perahu* to Arnhem Land and the Kimberley coast in the 1840s (Macknight 1976: 18, Mitchell 1994: 32).¹

Ashmore Reef, located 840 km west of Darwin and just 90 km south of Roti, has been regularly visited and fished by Indonesians since the eighteenth century. The area has its own Indonesian name — Pulau Pasir (Sand Island). A Rotinese narrative details the accidental discovery of Sand Island in the 1720s, and Dutch historical sources ‘confirm that Ashmore was known to Indonesian fishermen in the first half of the eighteenth century’ (Fox 1998: 118–9). During a visit to Kupang in 1803, Flinders obtained information linking Macassan trepang fishing activity to ‘a dry shoal lying to the south of Rottee [Rote]’ (probably Ashmore Reef) and met a number of Macassans on the coast of northern Australia in the same year (Flinders 1814: 257).² Since Ashmore Reef has a supply of fresh water and a sheltered lagoon, it has long been an important ‘staging post’ for Indonesian *perahu* on their voyages further south to other islands and reefs (Fox 1998: 117).

Macassan voyages to northern Australia began to decline in the latter part of the nineteenth century and came to an end in 1907. In 1882, licensing and customs duties were imposed on Macassan trepangers in the Northern Territory, and licences were not issued to the Macassans after 1906 (Macknight 1976: 106, 125). The Macassans were never licensed to fish in northwestern waters (Campbell and Wilson 1993: 31) so it is not clear why they also ceased to visit the Kimberley region (Crawford 1969: 114). All foreign fishing in territorial waters was illegal under Western Australian legislation from the 1870s, but these laws were never enforced because ‘the Kimberley coast remained virtually beyond the limits of government control’ (ibid.: 116–7). Although the reasons are unclear, Macknight (1976: 118) believes that those Macassans who ceased to visit Australia switched to other maritime activities within the Indonesian Archipelago.

When the Macassan fleets ceased operations in the Northern Territory and Kimberley region, fishing activity along the northwest coast of Australia and on offshore reefs was maintained by fishermen in smaller *perahu* originating from regions other than Makassar. Very little is known about these voyages and

¹ There is no record fishing activity by other groups operating independently of Macassan fleets along the northwest Australian coast in the nineteenth century.

² Flinders thought the Macassan fleets had accidentally discovered an abundance of trepang in northern Australian waters some 20 years earlier.

few records remain, but the visits are thought to have been widespread (Crawford 1969: 115, 124).

Between the early 1900s and 1924, historical sources report fleets or solitary *perahu* originating from a number of different islands across the Indonesian Archipelago. For example, vessels from Kupang sailed to Roti to take on supplies, then sailed south to Ashmore Reef and from there to other offshore reefs and islands. Vessels also sailed along the Kimberley coast, working nearby areas such as Long and Holothuria reefs, and often landed on the mainland to collect supplies of wood and water and process their catch before returning to Kupang to sell it (Crawford 1969: 124–5; Campbell and Wilson 1993: 18).

The initial decline of Macassan voyaging to Arnhem Land and the Kimberley coast in the 1870s coincided with the growth of the pearl shell industry in the Pilbara and later the Kimberley region from the 1860s, when European settlers began appropriating land under pastoral leases (Campbell and Wilson 1993: 16–18). Initially, pearl shells were mainly gathered from exposed reefs during low tide, but by the 1870s Aborigines were employed as divers and ‘Malay’ men from Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines were indentured to European captains to work as seamen and divers on pearling luggers (McGann 1988: 2; Bottrill 1993: i; Campbell and Wilson 1993: 16). The first Indonesians to work in the pearling industry were recruited directly from coastal villages on the islands of Alor and Solor in 1870 (McGann 1988: 21–2). In 1874, 316 divers were recruited from Timor, and in 1875 it was reported that as many as 1000 ‘Malays’ from Makassar, Solor, Ende, and Singapore (along with 200–300 Aborigines) would be working during the next pearling season in northwestern Australia (Bottrill 1993: 15–16). Sama-speaking Bajau from the Philippines were added to the labour force with the further expansion of the industry (McGann 1988: 42, 45).

When the underwater diving suit began to be used in 1886, Aborigines and Malays ‘were considered unsuited to work with mechanical apparatus’ (Campbell and Wilson 1993: 17). Coupled with later legislative changes regulating the use of Indigenous and indentured labour, this eventually led to a decline in the number of Malays and Aborigines engaged in the pearl shell industry. They were mostly replaced by Japanese workers who came to dominate the now Broome-based industry from the late 1880s until its decline after 1935 (*ibid.*). However, some men were still drawn from Kupang and surrounding islands to work in the pearling industry until the 1960s (Anderson 1978).

In the 1880s, the first European pearlery left Cossack for Kupang. As well as recruiting Malay labour for the northwest pearling industry, they went into partnership with Dutch, Arab or Chinese merchants and fished the northwest for pearl shell in vessels flying the Dutch flag. From Kupang, pearlery could fish waters outside of Australia’s 3 nautical mile territorial waters without a licence,

and there was no law preventing them from obtaining shelter and supplies along the Australian coast if needed (Bach 1955: 208). These men were joined shortly after by other pearlers from Port Darwin and Broome (Bain 1982: 187). The first pair of entrepreneurial pearling captains to skipper vessels operating out of Kupang in the 1880s were Hart and Geach Drysdale. Their place was taken by Henry Francis Hilliard who came to dominate the Kupang-based fishing activities in the Timor Sea in the 1890s. He in turn was followed by his son Robin Hilliard, W.S. Smith and Alex Chamberlain (Crawford 1969: 115; Bain 1982: 187).

The Bajo Encounter with Tuan Robin

Older Bajo men claim that their fathers or grandfathers were the first to sail to Ashmore Reef from Mantigola. At some point in the Dutch colonial period, they say that a crew of Mantigola Bajo on a *perahu* anchored at Kupang met a schooner captain known as Tuan Robin. This man asked the Bajo crew to work for him to collect turtle shell in Australia. The Bajo agreed and accompanied Tuan Robin on his schooner. They spent a number of weeks catching hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and removing their shells at an island off the coast of northwest Australia. On their return to Kupang the Bajo were paid for their efforts and went back to their home village. These Mantigola Bajo were only employed by Tuan Robin on this one occasion.

Si Mbaga, an elder of Mola Selatan accompanied his father and grandfather and other men from Mantigola on this journey to Kupang. At that time he was an adolescent and acted as the *tukang masak* (cook). It is difficult to estimate the age of Si Mbaga, but he was probably over eighty years old in 1995. When the Bajo crew went with Tuan Robin, Si Mbaga stayed behind in Kupang and looked after their boat, so his knowledge of some of the events is based on information passed to him by his father and grandfather.

In the old days only Raas people and Madura people went to Ashmore Reef [Pulau Pasir] and Scott Reef [Pulau Datu]. In the old days Raas people lived at Semau Island [Pulau Samahung]. Ashmore Reef was the place to cook trepang. We heard stories about Ashmore Reef from Raas people. We first wanted to go net fishing [ngambai] at Rote. The Raas people told my grandfather about Ashmore Reef. We obtained a sailing clearance in Kupang and followed them to Ashmore Reef. At that time, there weren't any problems [any regulations about fishing at Ashmore Reef]. We only had to obtain a clearance in Kupang if we wanted to go fishing and cook trepang at the island. This was the first time we went to Ashmore Reef. The second time [was when] we met Tuan Robin in Kupang.

We were anchored at Tanoo [Tenau Harbour, Kupang] and wanted to go fishing for trepang at Ashmore Reef when a schooner sailing ship

came and anchored near to us. The captain of the schooner was Tuan Robin and he had five Alor people with him. We met Tuan Robin and he asked us to work for him. We said to him that we wanted to fish for trepang, fish and trochus at Ashmore Reef but he said, 'if you want to, come and work for me in Marege [Australia] and collect turtle shell'. My father and grandfather, along with six other crew, were taken on the schooner to Kea Island [Pulau Kea], an island off the coast of Marege, while I stayed in Tablolong to look after the boat. I was already a youth, already circumcised, at that time....

They were taken to Marege for 17 days to collect turtles [kulitang]. They collected 40 bags of turtle shell. My father said that they didn't kill the turtles. Tuan Robin instructed them to heat up water in a drum. After that, the turtles were pulled up onto the boat and the hot water was poured over the turtles and the shells peeled off. Then the turtles were thrown back in the water. Aboriginal people [*orang* Marege] took a few of the turtles to eat.

After 17 days the schooner returned to Tanoo and they got off the boat and called a friend of mine from Tablolong who was at Tanoo at the time to take our *perahu* to Tanoo. The day after they returned, Tuan Robin paid each crew member two gold coins.

Complementary to Si Mbaga's recollections are comments by Si Bilaning, a contemporary of Si Mbaga, who also lived in Mantigola and was probably over eighty years old.

My father was one of the first Bajo to go to the *pulau* [Australian islands]. They were taken to Marege by Tuan Robin and he had a schooner with three layers of jib sail. There they collected turtles. From those times until now lots of Sama people sail to Ashmore Reef, Scott Reef, and Seringapatam Reef [Sapa Taringan]. In the old days it was open [to fish there], then later it was forbidden.

Kupang-based Australian and British captains soon diversified into fishing for marine products such as trochus, trepang and turtle shell traditionally taken by Indonesians. During trips between Kupang and Cossack, these captains had observed *perahu* from Timor and Madura returning with marine produce collected from Rowley Shoals and the Ashmore and Holothuria reefs (Bain 1982: 184–8). This lucrative trade passed through Dutch ports and a living could be earned that was less dangerous than pearling.

While Henry Hilliard continued to supply men from Kupang to the northwest pearling industry, he employed Europeans and other Indonesians to work on a fleet of Dutch-registered schooners and cutters and locally built *perahu*. Hilliard's fleet followed much the same sailing and fishing patterns as the Indonesian

perahu, fishing offshore reefs and various islands and reefs close to the Australian mainland where supplies could be obtained (Crawford 1969: 119–20). Vessels would stop first at Roti to obtain firewood and water and then sail south to fish the Ashmore, Scott and Seringapatam reefs, and sometimes as far south as Rowley Shoals and on to Minstrel, Clerk and Imperieuse reefs. When supplies ran low the vessels could sail to the Australian coast to re-stock and then work the reefs near the shores such as Long Reef and the Holothuria Reefs. In May, the vessels would congregate at Jones Island to catch hawksbill turtles and take their shells (*ibid.*). There are a number of references to Hilliard’s fishing activities, over a period from 1894 through to the early 1920s, in places that included King Sound, Adele Island, Scott Reef, Ashmore Reef and Rowley Shoals (Bach 1955: 209; Bottrill 1993: 23, 28).

Around the same time as Europeans established themselves in Kupang, a number of men set up beach-combing camps along the northwest coast of Australia where they collected turtle shell, trepang, trochus and pearl shell using Aboriginal labour. These beach-combers had strong connections with the Kupang-based captains (including Hilliard) who called regularly at their camps to trade. Their camps were located near to Adele and Browse islands, the Lacepede Islands and Lynheer Reef off the Kimberley coast (Bain 1982: 188–91).

Mr H.V. Howe, a Broome-based pearling captain before World War I, published an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1952 about the Kupang-based vessels then operating in the Timor Sea.³

In 1910, there were 25 vessels, of which six were European-style schooners of 50 to 60 tonnes, skippered by those aged master mariners, whose eventful maritime careers were — and still are — discussed with interest in all Asiatic ports from Karachi to Shanghai. The rest of the Koepang fleet consisted of native prahus of from 10 to 20 tons, skippered by Malay ‘Kungawas’,⁴ who, with lifelong knowledge of the coast and its winds and tides, and with the aid of more or less accurate compasses, navigated to and from various destinations with relatively few mishaps. These smaller vessels fished the coast and adjacent islands, because proximity of the mainland enabled easy replenishment of wood and water supplies. The larger schooners normally worked the six coral atolls which lie in a 500 miles-long chain about 100 miles off the Western Australian coast. From the north-east to south-west these are Ashmore, Seringapatam, Scotts, Minstrel, Mermaid, and Imperieuse Reefs.... On

³ While some of Howe’s comments are ethnocentric and characteristic of the time, his description of the method of turtle fishing complements that of the Bajo themselves.

⁴ This is apparently a corruption of the Bahasa term *punggawa* (captain or navigator), which is widely used by the Bajo and other maritime populations in Indonesia.

each of these islets the fishing schooners set up their boilers and smokehouses for treating the trepang and trochus shell.

The usual 'take' of a schooner on a five months' trip to the reef is worth between £2,000 and £3,000.... About once a fortnight the daily routine is interrupted by a day's fishing for hawksbill turtle, which yields the tortoise shell of commerce. Nets are stretched across the seaward ends of a number of the channels crossing a reef. At low tide all hands start wading from the lagoon, beating the surface of the channel before them, and driving the turtle into the nets. The catches are taken back to the island, where bags, dipped in boiling water, are laid across their backs for a minute or two. This treatment enables the flakes of tortoiseshell to be lifted from the hard bone to which it is attached. After collection of the tortoise shell the turtle is set free to grow another crop — which it does in about two years. Cruel as the process may seem, it does not appear to hurt the turtle, which show no sign of discomfort under the bag, and when released make their way back to deep water (apparently) unperturbed by the ordeal....

Notwithstanding the hardships of the life, trips to the reefs are popular with the Timorese, who are always eager to sign on as schooner crews. With his pay of £1 a month and the smoked fish he brings back, each man earns about £20 on a trip. This is good money for in Koepang a fair average quality wife costs only 30/-, and the local equivalent of a film star can be bought for £5, which is also the cost of building a good native house..... [O]ne trip to the reefs secures the fisherman a home, economic security for life, as much domestic felicity as the average man can expect, and still leaves him £5 to spend on furniture and wedding festivities! (Howe 1952: 7)

Some time between 1900 and 1910, Hilliard was joined by his eldest son, Robin Henry Hilliard, who was born in 1888. The exact date of Robin's arrival in Kupang and entry into the business is not known, but in 1914 it was reported by Mr Stuart, the Pearling Inspector at Broome, that Alex Chamberlain, formerly a Broome-based pearler for 10 years, had gone into partnership with Robin Hilliard in a Kupang-based trading company. Together they owned a British-registered schooner, the John & Richard (Bottrill 1993: 33).⁵ On 10 February 1915 Stuart wrote to the Secretary of Western Australian Fisheries about the activities of the Kupang fleet:

I found out that WA Chamberlain and R Hilliard had had an exceptionally fine year and had fished among other things £1,500 worth of turtle shell,

⁵ Bottrill visited the village of Pepela on Roti in 1988 to collect oral histories of fishing in the northwest region, and states (*ibid.*: 54) that Robin Hilliard was known to the Rotinese as Tuan Robin. We also know that he married a Rotinese woman from Oenale (personal communication, George Hilliard, 1998).

Chamberlain apparently works over a large area and will work Rowley Shoals for beche-de-mer and probably the territorial waters of the north-west north of Admiralty Gulf where I believe turtles are plentiful (Bottrill 1993: 37, citing letter in Fisheries Department File 57/38, Battye Library, Western Australia).

In the same letter Stuart listed nine vessels reported to be based in Kupang and working the northwest coastal areas and offshore islands and reefs in the Timor Sea. Aside from the John & Richard, these included two schooners, Petunia and Harriet, owned by a Dutch merchant called Tiffer, the Joker owned by Ah Kit, and five schooners owned by a merchant named Toku Baru (known also as Captain China) that were managed by Henry Hilliard.⁶

In 1923, another incident concerning the activities of Robin Hilliard was reported to Stuart. In March of that year, F.H. Clark, a pearler in the lugger Emelyn Castle, came across Robin Hilliard in charge of the schooner Petina at an inlet south of Red Island off Cape Bougainville. He was processing trepang on the coast. On boarding the vessel and examining the log, Clark found that the vessel was owned by Firma Thoeng Thay Company of Kupang and had a crew of 13 Kupangers. Hilliard had been cleared by authorities in Kupang for Scott Reef and had collected trepang there (Crawford 1969: 121; Bottrill 1993: 45).⁷

The activities of the Hilliard family in the northwest region continued for around three decades. If Si Mbaga was born around 1910, the Mantigola Bajo encounter with Tuan Robin would have occurred at the very end of that period. Robin Hilliard apparently stopped working the northwest coast around the time that his father died in 1924 (Bottrill 1993: 45).⁸ This may have been due to increasing Australian government control over illegal fishing activities and the Dutch refusal to issue more clearances for Scott Reef, but the beach-combers Hilliard had worked with were also growing old or had moved away and local resources were in decline (Bain 1982: 198).

After Robin Hilliard stopped fishing the northwest region he formed the Flores Pearling Company, a partnership with merchants from Broome and Makassar.

[Hilliard] proposed to H.S. Cross, an indent agent and pearl-buyer in Broome, that they move to the island of Flores, where there was

⁶ Toku Baru is still an established shop name in Kupang, and local people commonly refer to Chinese traders by the name of their shop.

⁷ Crawford (1969: 122–3; 2001) reproduces photographs of Hilliard's boat and trepang camp that were taken by Clark on 29 March.

⁸ By one account Henry Hilliard is said to have died of ptomaine poisoning in Makassar in 1920 (Bain 1982: 198), but Robin's son George has confirmed Henry died of food poisoning in Kupang in 1924 and is buried in the Dutch cemetery there.

gold-lipped shell in great quantities. At Makassar, an approach was made to Gros Kamp and Drofmeier, Dutch merchants. The Flores Pearling Company was formed and by 1929 fourteen luggers were working fifty miles off the coast and collecting large hauls of shell which was [were] sold through Osche & Co., of New York (Bain 1982: 198–9).

An advertisement appeared in the local Broome newspaper, *The Norwest Echo*, on 24 October 1926, announcing that Robin Hilliard was now pearling in the Dutch Indies, but still recruiting men for the northwest pearling industry during December-January each year (Bottrill 1993: 47). He continued to operate out of Labuan Bajo in Flores until World War II, when he and his partner, Alex Chamberlain, were interned by the Japanese. He was sent to Makassar in 1944 where he died in captivity and was buried (personal communication, George Hilliard, 1998).⁹

The Bajo Encounter with British Airmen in 1936

Si Pangasi, an elderly Bajo man aged around 75 in 1995, recalled a series of events that led to an encounter with British airmen from a plane which crashed on Seringapatam Reef in 1936.

I was one of the crew on the *perahu* Si Gambar Bulan. At that time I had just been circumcised. I was still single, still young. My older brother, Si Tuba, was the captain and Si Tedong was the owner of the *perahu*. There were ten crew: Pangasi, Tuba, Tedong, Tidong, Jalating, Balating, Kaling, Amang, Nappa and Mpeno. Balating is still alive and lives in Sampela. Tedong lives in Desa Bisaya, near Lasalimu in Buton. He moved there during the *gerombolan* [Kahar Muzakkar rebellion]. Mpeno lives in Mola Selatan. Jalating was lost [drowned] at Ashmore Reef.

From Mantigola we sailed to Kupang, actually to Air Cina, to the south of Kupang. We spent three days there then sailed to Ashmore Reef, then to Seringapatam Reef [Sapa Taringan]. We ate birds' eggs on Ashmore Reef. At that time, Buton people were not yet living in Pepela and Roti people sailed *sekoci* [a type of canoe] with *layar leti leti* [lateen rig]. There were Bajo living in Oenggai [on Roti Island], but not at Sulamu [Kupang].

We went to Seringapatam Reef to catch fish, not trepang, to salt it, to sell in Makassar. At that time we sold the fish for 4½ ringgit a kilo. The method of fishing is called **ngambai**, using nets and ropes. The nets were made from tree bark [**bagu**], with floats on the top and cowrie shells on the bottom, held in place with wooden stakes. Seringapatam Reef is one day and one night's sail from Scott Reef. Taringan is the name

⁹ An interview with Pak Nasseng from Sulamu village, near Kupang, in 1994 indicates that Robin Hilliard's involvement with Bajo people from different parts of the Nusa Tenggara region continued through the final stage of his career.

of a fish [**dayah taringan**], found in great quantities at this reef. There is no island or sand there, just reef.

While we were fishing at low tide, we saw a plane run out of petrol and fall out of the sky and land on the reef. Four people from the plane walked over the reef to where we were fishing and asked for help to take them to Kupang. So we took them to Kupang on our *perahu* and on the way we met a big ship, a foreign ship, with a motor, coming from the south. The people hailed the ship and boarded it and the ship returned to Australia. It was still Dutch times, maybe five years before Japan invaded Indonesia.

When we later returned to Kaledupa, the captain received a letter telling him to go to Bau Bau to get a reward and letter for all the crew, 40 ringgit for each crew and 90 ringgit for the captain. It was my second time sailing, the first time to Ashmore Reef, the second time the plane crashed. I did not go again after that.

Si Gambar Bulan was a *perahu* with a chaired stern [*pantat kadera*] and a central rudder with gaff rig [**lama cangking**], made from cloth. This was before gunter rig [**lama sande**]. Si Gambar Bulan was built by Tedong in Mantigola but he sold it before he moved to Bisaya.

This account indicates that Mantigola Bajo sailing voyages and fishing activity in the Timor Sea were clearly commercial ventures. This particular voyage is vividly recalled by Si Pangasi and other Bajo because of the extraordinary event that interrupted their fishing activity.¹⁰

Si Mpeno, who was born in Mantigola and is first cousin to Si Pangasi, described the relations between the Bajo rescuers and the plane crew in more detail.

We took the men on our *perahu*. We had to use sign language, pointing with our fingers, they only knew one word — Kupang. The strange thing was, if they wanted to lie down, they didn't go inside [the cabin], they only lay on the deck. They felt sick because of the smell of the fish, and it's true the fish smelt rotten. They gave us binoculars. When they spotted the ship, they waved at it with pieces of cloth. The ship approached, and they talked with the people on it, then boarded the ship. We received a reward later from Bau Bau.

Another elderly Bajo man, La Ode Ndoke, who lives in Mola Selatan but was born in Mantigola, went on his first trip to Australian waters as a crew member

¹⁰ Some of the *perahu* captains and crews voyaging to the Timor Sea in 1994 were related to the crew of Si Gambar Bulan. For example, Si Tuba, the captain of Si Gambar Bulan, was the grandfather of Samsuddin, who was the captain of Karea Baru in 1994 and the captain of another *perahu* apprehended in 1997.

on another gaff-rigged *perahu* called Asia which accompanied Si Gambar Bulan on the journey to Ashmore Reef.

When the plane crashed, we [Asia] were at North Scott Reef [Haring Utara] and they [Si Gambar Bulan] were at Seringapatam Reef. We were quite a long way from Seringapatam Reef. The first time we saw the plane it was flying in our direction and we thought it was going to land. But maybe because they still had a lot of fuel, the plane kept going and headed in the direction of Kupang. Not long after that, the plane fell and landed on the west side of Seringapatam Reef, near to Si Gambar Bulan. At the moment the plane fell, we didn't see it because it was too far away, but our friends who were closer saw the plane fall. Then the crew of the plane joined Si Gambar Bulan and halfway through the journey to Kupang the crew were taken on board a big ship. We went to have a look at the plane afterwards and measured the wingspan — it was 8 *depa* [fathoms] long. The frame of the plane is still there to this day. After the time I encountered the plane, I went to Ashmore Reef and Scott Reef twice, so I have been three times. After that I had a rest [from sailing] for a long time, then afterwards I worked as a *romusa* [involuntary labourer] on the roads in Buton for the Japanese.

This account provides an approximate location of the remaining wreckage of the plane at Seringapatam Reef. La Ode Ndoke went on to explain that the Bajo from Mantigola sailed all the way to Ashmore Reef, Scott Reef, and Seringapatam Reef in the past to fish because

At Scott Reef there is a lot of fish — there is more fish at Scott Reef than there is at Kaledupa Reef. There are no enemies or competitors there, it is possible to get between 1 ½ and 3 tonnes of fish in one trip.

Si Pangasi, Si Mpeno, and La Ode Ndoke were unclear about the nationality of the plane crew, but another surviving member of Asia's crew, Si Kiramang, thought they were from England. Mpeno and Si Panghasi could not remember much about the letter and reward, but another informant, Si Badolla, who was a young boy at the time and not actually involved in the rescue, vividly recalls this episode:

Between Ashmore Reef and Kupang the ship came, they took the men and Si Gambar Bulan did not have to continue to Kupang. Only they said to the Bajo 'wait in Kupang'. But they went home to Kaledupa. One month later there was a letter from Bau Bau. The letter was from Australia. They were ordered to go to Bau Bau to receive their reward. In the contents of the letter it was written 3000 ringgit. But they only received 300 ringgit because the amount had been reduced because of all the offices the letter passed through, from Java to Makassar and to

Bau Bau. Maybe if they had waited in Kupang they would have received more and maybe they would have been given a *surat bebas* [free/open letter], but instead it went through Bau Bau. It was already a lot less. I saw the letter, but it was written in English. We didn't know what it said, we only understood the numbers.

Si Badolla's recollection of the size of the reward diverges from that of Pangasi. Si Badolla also thought that if the crew of Si Gambar Bulan had stopped at Kupang on the way back to Mantigola, they may have received a larger reward and a *surat bebas* — a letter stating the Bajo had permission to fish freely at offshore reefs and islands in the Timor Sea and in Australian waters as part of the reward for their rescue efforts.

Si Bilaning, who was also living in Mantigola at the time, put these seemingly unrelated events into the context of the current Bajo political situation:

After the Bajo went with Tuan Robin to Marege [Australia], many Bajo used to sail to Ashmore Reef, Scott Reef, Seringapatam Reef; they would catch fish with nets [**ngambai**] and also take all kinds of sea products. At that time we used *perahu soppe* and *perahu lambo*, with sails made from tree bark, in the model of **lama tanja** [fore-and-aft tilted rectangular sail]. In former times the Bajo were free to fish there [*dulu bebas*], until later times when it became forbidden [*nanti sekarang dilarang*]. When the plane fell from the sky, the crew were taken to Kupang, but before arriving a big ship came and took the crew. The King of England [Raja Inggris] sent a letter to Kupang but the Government of Kupang sent it on to Bau Bau. Then after we met with the plane, fishing at Ashmore Reef, Scott Reef and Seringapatam Reef was not forbidden. It was free to catch fish [*bebas menangkap ikan*].

The type of sail (**lama tanja**) described by Si Bilaning is the same as that described by Si Mbagi earlier, and was the traditional sail plan used on *perahu* before the adoption of the Western-style gaff rig. Si Bilaning's comment that the letter was from the King of England was most likely a reference to official British or Commonwealth insignia. His account builds on the ideas expressed by Si Badolla about freedom to fish. The period following the rescue of the plane crew is perceived as one of relative freedom to fish the reefs in the Timor Sea, and the Bajo interpreted the letter in this light. The period of restrictions, when fishing became 'forbidden' (*nanti sekarang dilarang*), began in the early 1970s. These statements are made over and over again by Bajo in conversation about past fishing activities, and are part of a narrative invoked to legitimise their right to fish in an area that has come under increasing Australian control.

A second version of the plane crash story can be obtained from archival records and newspaper reports. The 1930s was an era of major developments in

aviation, numerous attempts were made to break records for long-distance flying, and these were regularly reported in the newspapers of the day. In July and August 1936, Lord William Francis Sempill twice attempted a record flight from London to Australia in a Monospar Croydon airliner, but failed because of engine troubles and damage to the aircraft (*The Argus*, 8 October 1936). He then gave the aeroplane to another pilot, Mr H. Wood, who successfully flew from London to Melbourne in September 1936 with a crew comprising Mr F. Crocombe (designer), Mr L. Davies (engineer) and Mr C. Gilroy (wireless operator). They then attempted to break the return Melbourne-to-London record of 5 days and 15 hours, departing Melbourne on the morning of 6 October in a blaze of publicity and arriving in Darwin that same evening with a time slightly slower than their predecessors (*The Argus*, 7 October 1936). The Monospar left Darwin for Kupang at 4.50 am on Wednesday 7 October and received wireless bearings from the Royal Australian Air Force base at Darwin until 7.15 am, when wireless contact faded (*The Argus*, 8 October 1936). The plane was expected to arrive at Kupang by 8.00 am, but by mid morning, when no news had been received of the plane's arrival, it was initially assumed that the flight must have continued to the limit of its fuel range at Rembang on Java. When no further word was received, the Administrator of the Northern Territory, Colonel R.H. Weddell, ordered the government patrol launch, the Larrakeya, to proceed immediately to a position off the coast of Timor where the last wireless message was thought to have originated (*The Argus*, 8 October 1936). The Federal Minister for Defence, Sir Archdale Parkhill, asked the Civil Aviation Board to arrange for a Qantas aircraft to undertake a search of the Timor Sea, but it was uncertain when an aircraft would be available,¹¹ so Prime Minister Lyons sent a telegram later that evening to the British Consul-General at Batavia (Jakarta) requesting that the Dutch Government begin an aerial search and rescue attempt.¹² Two Dutch flying boats were dispatched to Kupang from their base at Surabaya in West Java on Thursday morning and began their search on Friday morning. Meanwhile, the Larrakeya was joined by the Marella, a Dutch government patrol boat based at Kupang, and an S.O.S. was broadcast to ships in the Timor Sea to alert them of the missing aircraft. On the afternoon of Friday 9 October, wireless messages were received by radio stations in Kupang, Darwin and Melbourne from the SS Nimoda, a British cargo steamer bound for Durban, reporting that the airmen had been picked up from a fishing boat near Seringapatam Reef. Their rescue made the front page of *The Argus* on Saturday morning under the headline 'Monospar Crew Found Safe, Marooned on Sandbank, Rescued by Native Craft, Now Aboard British Steamer'. The story included the observation that:

¹¹ A scheduled Qantas flight from Darwin to Singapore did join the search for a while.

¹² These actions are documented in Records A461/9 and N314/1/7 in the ACT Australian Archives (Prime Minister's Department).

although all the resources of modern aircraft and wireless were employed in the search for the missing machine and its occupants, it was left to natives in a fishing smack and a wandering tramp steamer to effect a rescue.

The Argus published a wireless message containing an account of the rescue by Mr Crocombe, the Monospar's designer, on Monday 12 October.

Misled by wireless bearings from Darwin. Were assured, despite doubt on our part, that the bearings were correct as late as 6.15 am when bad atmospheric conditions made further communication impossible. Course kept after this, but no sign of land. Forced to assume wireless bearings correct, so proceeded further for 30 minutes. Passed over coral reef at 8.00 am. Using reef as base, we reconnoitred in each direction until petrol almost exhausted. Finally proceeded down line of reefs and located native fishing-boat in lagoon. Successfully landed on rock-strewn reef without damage, but in taxi-ing aircraft out of water to higher portion of reef the tail wheel casting was fractured. Ran out wireless aerial and tried to communicate with Koepang and Sourabaya without success, although heard both stations. Managed attract attention of boat. Carried few personal effects, iron rations, and water over one mile to boat, wading through deep rocky pools infested with giant clams and occasional small sharks. Had extreme difficulty making natives understand our plight. Finally persuaded them to take us on board and to head for Koepang. Spent 55 hours on boat on short rations of food and water, and in strong odour of fish and natives. Conditions were cramped. Picked up at 3.30 pm Friday by s.s. Nimoda in weak condition. Personnel magnificent in sharing hardships. Later established aircraft landed on Seringapatam Reef. Picked up by Nimoda 100 miles north-east of reef. Bitterly disappointed untimely end of flight. Machine running perfectly.

The message hardly evokes any gratitude toward the Mantigola Bajo who had been required to stop their fishing activity and sail back to Kupang. In a subsequent interview when the airmen arrived at Durban on 1 November, they said they had used a collapsible rubber boat to carry their personal belongings across the reef to the 'Malay fishing vessel' and then 'it took them five hours to convince the fishermen that they were not making a friendly call but wanted to be taken aboard' (*The Argus*, 3 November 1936). After the initial reports there is no further mention or discussion of the 'natives' or 'Malays' in the newspapers or archival material. Statements by Si Badolla and Si Bilaning about the letter of commendation cannot be confirmed. Despite the number of different Australian and British government officials and offices involved in the search and rescue, it seems most likely that the letter came from the British Consul at Batavia or the Resident at Timor.

Given the newspaper coverage, it is perhaps curious that the incident did not give rise to claims about Malays being engaged in poaching or illegal fishing in the region, of the kind which had previously been made in the 1920s (Bach 1955: 210). One reason may be that in 1936 Seringapatam Reef, unlike Ashmore Reef, was still in international waters. Being a tidal reef awash at high tide, it was defined as part of the continental shelf. Australia only claimed it in 1953.

Bajo Fishing in the Timor Sea Before World War II

Aside from the two encounters already described, personal recollections of Bajo men aged between 65 and 80 years document a range of activities in the Timor and Arafura seas in the period before World War II.

In Dutch times [*waktu* Balanda], black shark fin had a price of around 15 ringgit a kilogram in Dutch money. We used to sell the fin in Kupang. White *lontar* shark had a higher price, up to 50 ringgit a kilogram (Si Mbagu, Mola Selatan).

During Dutch times, when I was still young and before I was married, I sailed to Ashmore Reef and Scott Reef. We sailed to Ashmore Reef in a *perahu* called Saniasa owned by Mbo Kandora from Mantigola. It was a big boat, 80-tonne capacity with two masts, gaff sails, one rudder. The *perahu* had no cabin only an awning made from coconut fronds. We fished using a net [*ngambai*] and used poison [*tuba*] to catch the fish. We got lots of fish and sold it in Makassar. One share was 40 ringgit per person. One time we collected trepang and cooked it in sea water, the same as the Raas people [Madurese]. At Ashmore Reef we always met Dutch and Australian people; they didn't bother us — it was permitted [*bebas*] to catch fish, trepang, trochus, and turtle shell in those times. We could sail close to the coast of Australia and it was not forbidden, we were not disturbed or apprehended; they only ordered us to return to Indonesia. At Ashmore Reef there were also lots of fishermen from Raas. One time the Raas people had run into the reef and made a hole in the hull of their *perahu*. We gave them a plank of wood to repair the damaged one. One time we sailed from Mantigola to Dobo [Aru Islands] to fish for shark using shark rattles and handlines. From Dobo we sailed for one and a half days until we reached our fishing grounds. We sold the shark in Makassar for 5 rupiah per kilo. After the Japanese period I did not go sailing to Ashmore Reef or Scott Reef again (Si Kiramang, Mola Utara).

During Dutch times we went net fishing at Scott Reef. We could fill eight canoes with fish in one go. At the edge of the reef we used to fish for shark with shark rattles [*gorogoro*]. We still fished there after Japanese times. At that time people from Pepela used to fish at Ashmore Reef and

Cartier Island [Pulau Baru] in *sekoci* [a type of small *perahu*] for trochus and trepang — they were divers (Si Subung, Mola Selatan).

Even in Dutch times we exchanged **balur** [salted strips of dried shark meat] with Pepela people for sugar [*gula air* made from *lontar* palm]. So while net fishing we would also take sharks at the reef but the price of fins was not very high — fish had a much better price. We used longlines [**pissi borroh**] with 10 hooks, 5 *depa* long, made from tree bark [**bagu**] on the edge of the reef for shark. Like trochus, shark did not have a price then. We used to take cassava instead of rice and use poison to stun the fish (Si Pallu, Mola Selatan).

We used to fish at Ashmore Reef, Scott Reef, Adele Island [Pulau Haria], Rowley Shoals [Pulau Bawah Angin] for fish, trochus, trepang, from before the time Japan invaded Indonesia, when it was still Dutch times. The fishing gear used was **ngambai**, we used to catch lots of fish. In those times the net was made from tree bark before nylon. We made the net ourselves. We bought the tree bark from Buton. We pounded it until it was soft. At that time we made sails from tree bark. We made fish hooks from iron rods. At Ashmore Reef, if we went to get drinking water we used to step on the birds' eggs — there were so many. We used to collect the fresh eggs and eat them on the *perahu*, especially if we were constipated. There was water on all three islands and lots of rats. We used longlines near to Scott Reef. We also used shark rattles and when the shark emerged we caught it with a baited line. After we finished fishing we sold our catch in Kupang, Kalabahi [Alor], or Maumere [Flores]. Some people also sold their catch in Mola, Makassar, Ambon — wherever there was a town that required salted or dried fish (Si Badolla, Mola Selatan).

As well as reef fish caught using netting gear and fish poison, these narratives show that the Bajo pursued other marine products during this period, including shark, trepang, trochus shell, and turtle shell. Of particular interest was shark fin. Shark was caught around Scott Reef using small set longlines as well as handlines and shark rattles. Some species of shark commanded a higher price than others. According to Si Kiramang, during Dutch times some Bajo also undertook specific shark fishing voyages to fishing grounds located south of the Aru Islands in the Arafura Sea. The catch from these voyages was later sold by Bajo to traders in a number of towns throughout Indonesia.

Voyaging to the Timor Sea by Bajo and other Indonesians was interrupted during World War II due to the Japanese invasion of Indonesia in 1942 (Crawford 1969: 130). During the occupation, *perahu* shipping was strictly controlled and utilised by the Japanese for the war effort. Many *perahu* were lost or destroyed resulting in a shortage after the war (Dick 1975: 79). Fighting between Japanese

and Australian forces in the Timor Sea also deterred any fishing activity (Crawford 1969: 130). Ashmore Reef may have been used for bombing practice, and survival equipment and food caches were stored on the island (ANPWS 1989: 13).¹³ Serventy (1952: 13) made enquiries among Australian personnel operating in the Timor Sea and reported that no Indonesian fishing activity was observed during the war.

The Bajo recall *waktu Jepang* (the time of the Japanese) as a time of hardship and suffering. Some of the older men can still recite the Japanese national anthem or a few words of Japanese. Some, like La Ode Ndoke, were forced to work in road gangs on Buton. Si Nurdin from Mola Selatan recalls that he was on a *perahu* returning from Kupang, where he had been attending school, when the boat was boarded by Japanese soldiers. The crew were taken to Bau Bau, accused of being Dutch spies and sentenced to seven years jail. Si Nurdin spent 14 months in jail until he was released at the end of the war and returned to Mantigola. He still has a prisoner number branded on one forearm.

The Bajo Encounter with Australian Scientists in 1949

After the war the Bajo resumed fishing in the Timor Sea. This is documented in Bajo narratives and in European sources describing encounters between Australians and Bajo fishermen in the late 1940s. During a CSIRO fisheries survey of offshore islands and reefs in the Timor Sea in October 1949, the crew of the research vessel *Warreen* were surprised to encounter Indonesian boats near Scott Reef, Seringapatam Reef, Ashmore Reef and Hibernia Reef. Dr Dominic Serventy, the senior scientist aboard the *Warreen*, published a short article in 1952 describing some of their encounters with Indonesian vessels during the survey. This article is based on information recorded in the Biological Log, parts of which were written by Serventy (CSIRO 1949). The log is a key source of information on Indonesian fishing activity in the Timor Sea in this period.

Leaving Broome on 29 September 1949, the *Warreen* cruised up the northwest coast of Australia, past Cape Leveque to Yampi on Cockatoo Island, and then to Adele Island before heading to Scott Reef (Haring Selatan) and later to Sandy Islet (Pulau Datu). No sightings of Indonesian boats were made until 3 October 1949, while the *Warreen* was sailing between Sandy Islet and Seringapatam Reef, when 'the first official Australian contact with the present-day Indonesian fishing operations' (Serventy 1952: 13) was made at North Reef (Haring Utara). The vessel was described as:

A sailing boat, cutter-rigged ... probably a Malay prow. Heavy black hull, square transome, bluff bow, stumpy bowsprit, gaff mainsail (ibid.).

¹³ Although Cartier Island and the surrounding area within a 10 km radius has been a gazetted Defence Practice Area since World War II, the region has not been actively used as a testing area since the early 1990s (Environment Australia 2002: 25).

A few hours later, after sailing around Seringapatam Reef from the west side, the Warreen arrived at the northeast corner of the reef to find

2 Malay prows ... anchored inside the lagoon ... near a gap in the reef flat.... We saw several dinghies fishing in various parts of the lagoon but these made their way back to their mother-ship shortly after we arrived (ibid.).

On the following morning, Serventy and the Master of the Warreen, Captain Pedersen

went by launch through the gap into the lagoon and interviewed the crew of the two Malay prows. They were unable to speak Dutch or English but the Captains showed us their papers which indicated that the prows were the 'Sinar-Karang' and the 'Si Mapped', the former's port being Broo Base (ibid.).

The Sinar Karang and Si Mapped had 'papers stamped by the Dutch "Praucontrolle" at Kupang' (Serventy 1952: 13). Serventy recorded a lengthy description of the two engineless vessels in the Biological Log.

The prows were some 40 ft. in length and 6–7 ft. draft. They were of crude construction and appointments, with rattan sails, spars of bamboo, and ropes of coconut palm. The 'Si Mapped' had 4 canoes and the other boat 3. Both had home-made fishing nets of about 3" mesh with floaters of wood and tiger cowries as sinkers and the crew were evidently spinning their own twine. Both prows had a conspicuous array of sun-dried fish, split kipper style and stacked on bamboo racks which formed an awning over the deck. The fish included North-west Snapper (*Lethrinus*), Cods (*Epinephalus*), large Trevally (*Ferdauia*), Red Bass (*Lutjanus coastesi*), marine eels, file fish and Stingray. There was no shark flesh but a few dried fins of large sharks were hung up. There was no tuna. There was a lot of clam meat and some trepang. The shells (whole-back and plates) of 15–20 Hawksbill Turtles were in each boat and there was a considerable quantity of large good quality Trochus shell. It was estimated that each boat would have about 2½ tons of marine products. About 10 persons were present in each boat. It was impossible to ascertain how long they were fishing in the area; the latest date on the papers of the 'Si Mapped' was September 1, 1949, and that of the 'Sinar Karang' August 13, 1949. It appeared that their course to Seringapatam Reef had been via Ashmore Reef. Their name for Seringapatam Reef was 'Saringang' and for Scott Reef 'Poelodatoe'. They were asked about tuna occurrences and they recognised the Northern Bluefin from illustrations. It was abundant, they said, near Koepang but not plentiful in the Sahul Shelf. Each boat had a couple of immature

Brown Boobies and one pair of Lesser Frigate-birds, tethered by the leg. Apparently they were kept as pets. Our relations with the Malays were friendly and some of our men gave them presents of clothing, etc. When our launch left the 'Warreen' for the first interview the 'Si Mappé' ran up a white flag to her masthead (CSIRO 1949: 42–3).

This is the most detailed historical record of 'Malay' fishing activities in the area between the 1920s and the 1960s. It documents the methods used and the diverse products collected. However, the ethnic identity of the fishermen is not recorded, nor is their home island. Without more ethnographic information, it could be assumed that the boats came from Kupang. The only major port in eastern Indonesia with a name similar to 'Broo Base' is Bau Bau on Buton.

Si Akmad, a *perahu* owner from Mola Utara, confirmed that the Sinar Karang was indeed a Bajo *perahu* and Si Mappé was a village elder from Mola.¹⁴ It was a counter-sterned, gaff-rigged vessel owned by Si Lenang who died in 1996. The captain at the time of the encounter with the Warreen was Si Saran, who died a few years ago. He was the father of Si Hader, the owner of Nurjaya, a *perahu* apprehended for fishing illegally inside the Australian Fishing Zone, forfeited and destroyed in Darwin in 1994. Si Saran's wife lives in Mola Selatan and recalled hearing of the encounter from her husband.

According to Si Akmad, about ten vessels had left Mantigola for the offshore reefs and islands in the Timor Sea in 1949 to fish with **ngambai** gear and collect other marine products for later sale.

The cost [**ongkos**] of the voyage was not much in those days, for example 50 ringgit per person.... We also took cassava with us to eat, we would soak it and dry it and take it for food, especially if there was no money to buy rice. After we sold the fish, then we could buy rice. In those days, we used to store water in ceramic jars from Singapore and China.

On entering the Timor Sea, the fleet encountered strong easterly winds. Some vessels lost their direction (*jatuh haluan*) and were forced to return to Pepela. From there they started out again for Ashmore Reef. However, two vessels in the fleet, the Sinar Karang and the Bunga Rosi captained by Si Mappé, had already made it to Seringapatam Reef.

Si Kaharra, one of the most respected and knowledgeable Bajo captains in Mola Selatan, had been a young crew member on the Sinar Karang and remembered having his photo taken during the encounter with the crew of the Warreen. In the Biological Log, Serventy only notes the taking of photographs and movie footage of some of the *perahu* later encountered at Hibernia Reef

¹⁴ Si Mappé died some time ago but his son lives in Mola Utara and owns a motorised *perahu* used for turtle collecting expeditions.

(CSIRO 1949: 47–8). Some of the photographs taken by the Australians have been reproduced (Crawford 1969: 132), but others have not been located. CSIRO staff have located four movie films marked ‘Fishing around W.A.’ in the possession of the daughter of Bruce Shipway, one of the technical officers serving on the *Warreen* in 1949.¹⁵ One of the films contains a short section of footage recording a stopover at Cockatoo Island off the Kimberley coast (CSIRO 1949: 38), which is followed by footage of a double-ended *perahu lambo*, laden with various kinds of marine produce, and a bird tethered to the awning frame. This boat appears very similar to the Bajo *perahu* described in detail by Serventy at Seringapatam Reef. The footage, lasting only about 45 seconds, pans slowly along the length of the *perahu* showing some men wearing Muslim *songkok* (black fez hats) standing on the deck and in canoes tethered to the stern. The film footage ends with a young boy lowering a white flag from the top of the mast.

On 5 October, having departed Seringapatam Reef, Serventy counted ‘23 prows ... some of them 2-masted boats’ in the vicinity of Ashmore Reef, and then ‘12 prows near East Island’ (CSIRO 1949: 44). Having anchored north of East Island, the Australian party visited ‘one of two Malay prows anchored near the shore’ (*ibid.*: 45).

Embarked on the ‘Pintoe Doea’, a 2-masted boat, registered at Koepang and recorded in its book as from Waha Tomia. It had no fish on board, only a quantity of trochus shell. The only fishing gear seen was a trolling line, fitted with a single barbed 8-0 hook, the lure being a piece of sugar cane leaf.... This part of the lure is tied around the end of the hook and trace. Though no one of the 10 persons aboard understood English or Dutch, we were able to ascertain that tuna were not considered to be plentiful in these waters but that they were abundant at Koepang, Roti and Flores. They denied that they ate any birds of the island. From the prow’s book, S. Halfweeg [deckhand] ascertained that it had been trading as a carrier (cement and petrol) earlier in the year (*ibid.*).

This description of the Pintoe Doea does not indicate whether the crew were Bajo, but the *perahu* had come from or previously visited the town of Waha on the island of Tomia in the Tukang Besi Islands. Even though it is not possible to identify the ethnic origin of the crew, who may have been Butonese from Pepela, it shows that the *perahu* and crew had alternated between trading and fishing at certain times of the year. The *Warreen* spent two days at Ashmore Reef. Serventy and the crew found evidence of human activity on East and Middle Islets and West Island, including fish drying racks, piles of dried fish, and the remains of lesser frigate birds, and also noted the existence of two graves on East Islet (CSIRO 1949: 45–7; Serventy 1952: 14). These observations are less

¹⁵ These films have since been donated to the Batty Library in Perth.

detailed than those made at Seringpatam Reef, but the presence of drying racks could indicate net fishing operations by Bajo or Rotinese fishermen.

The Warreen then left Ashmore Reef and travelled to Hibernia Reef where '4 Malay prows were at anchor, but made sail as we approached' (CSIRO 1949: 47). About an hour later, the Australian boat caught up with the *perahu* under sail on the southwest side of the reef:

One boat was called the 'Bintati Moer'. On board one 11 men were counted. Hailed one crew and were informed they were going to Roti. Some dried fish was seen aboard and dried clam (ibid.: 47–8).

This is the moment at which Serventy noted that photographs were taken. Thereafter, the Australians visited Cartier and Browse islands but saw no further signs of Indonesian fishing activity.

During the survey those aboard the Warreen had seen a total of 30 vessels in the area (Serventy 1952: 13). At the same time another vessel, the FRV Stanley Fowler, was surveying the central and eastern parts of the Timor Sea along the Sahul Shelf but the crew did not sight any Indonesian *perahu* (ibid.: 14–15). Since the crew of the Warreen had not sighted any *perahu* at Rowley Shoals, Serventy thought that they were

too distant to attract, as yet, the enterprise of the Indonesians.... It is felt that the only reason these shoals have not been fished is because the Indonesians have not yet found them (ibid.: 15).

But he was wrong. Indonesian voyaging to Rowley Shoals prior to the CSIRO survey is well documented from oral history.

Bajo Fishing Activity in the Northwest, 1950s–1970s

The late 1950s and early 1960s — the height of the Kahar Muzzakar rebellion (1950–65) — was a period of relative instability for the Tukang Besi Island Bajo. In 1956–57, the Mantigola Bajo were forced to flee their settlement and most re-established themselves in Mola. According to Si Pallu, however, some Bajo from Mantigola (and after 1957 from Mola) continued to sail long distances on fishing and trading voyages around the Indonesian Archipelago and to the north Australia region, while others fished locally, not far from their settlement.

The following accounts of sailing and fishing activities in the period from the 1950s to the early 1970s are from men in their late forties to mid-sixties.

The first time I sailed to the region of Australia was to catch fish during the 1950s. I went with the old people to **ngambai**. At that time we still lived in Mantigola, it was before the rebellion. We carried 1 tonne of salt, that's a lot of salted fish! We fished all day long and our bodies ached because there was so much work to salt and dry the fish. We

caught so much fish we could fill the entire hold of the *perahu* with salted fish. After that I sailed all over, transporting goods to different places (Si Kariman, Mola Selatan).

After we moved to Mola, between 1959 and 1969, I sailed all over, transporting copra to Gresik, Surabaya [Java], Singapore, Tawao [Sabah], Sarawak. At that time we sailed *perahu lambo*, but we still used gaff sails [**lama cangking**]; it was before [the adoption of] gunter sails [**lama sande**]. The first time I sailed to Ashmore Reef was in 1970. Before this time, from before I was born, Bajo people sailed to Ashmore Reef to fish with nets [**ngambai**]. I heard many stories from my parents and old people. My father had a *perahu* he finished building in 1955, and after launching it he sailed to Ashmore Reef. But before my father had a *perahu*, my father's brothers sailed with my grandfather's *perahu* and went net fishing at Ashmore. Formerly, at Ashmore Reef there were coconut trees owned by Bajo from Mantigola. But after white people started living there, they chopped down the trees. Actually, in the past, those coconut trees marked the location of Ashmore Reef; from a long distance we could see Ashmore Reef. There are still a few tall coconut trees left (Si Acing, Mola Selatan).

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, we carried copra to Java, but in 1957 we couldn't go out because of the rebellion. Sometimes we carried copra in the 1960s and 1970s. I also carried asphalt once during the rebellion period. But then, in the 1970s lots of motor boats became engaged in the trade in Maluku and we stopped carry copra. Around this time we went fishing for shark, not reef fish, with shark rattles and handlines (Si Kaharra, Mola Selatan).

In 1962, during the time of the PKI [Indonesian Communist Party], I carried copra. In 1972–73, I sailed to the Timor Sea and fished for shark and collected trochus shell (Si Nurdin, Mola Selatan).

My father used to sail a *lambo* with gaff rig and counter-stern to Ashmore Reef and fish using nets. Between 1969 and 1971, I carried copra from Maluku to Surabaya and in 1972 I went shark fishing in the Timor Sea (Si Mudir, Mola Selatan).

My father had three *perahu* and each *perahu* did different work; we sailed them and other people borrowed them too. After 1957 we sailed *perahu lambo* to carry copra from Maluku to Java. One time we carried copra to Sarawak. In the past when we sailed to Surabaya we could sail three times during the east monsoon. We also sailed to Singapore. I went to Singapore in 1982 and spent eight months doing labouring work around the harbour but barely earned enough to pay for the trip. In the early

1980s we stopped carrying copra and started fishing again (Si Akmad, Mola Utara).

Between 1962 and 1965 I sailed on my uncle's *perahu* and carried copra from Maluku to Java. In 1967, we changed from gaff rig to gunter rig. In 1967, we carried asphalt between Kendari and Bone [South Sulawesi]. In 1968 I went to live in Central Sulawesi for nine years and after that returned to Mola (Si Hati, Mola Selatan).

In 1965 I carried copra. I caught turtle for Bali in 1972 and fished for shark in the Timor Sea in 1973 (Si Ntao, Mola Utara).

In the early 1980s I stopped carrying copra. Before that I used to carry copra to Surabaya which we bought on Taliabo Island [Maluku]. I could carry 5 tonnes of copra (Si Mohammad, Mola Utara).

These accounts show that the diverse fishing and trading activities of Bajo from Mantigola and Mola continued uninterrupted from 1949 until the early 1970s. The main form of fishing was still net fishing for reef fish which was dried for later sale. The use of the gaff rig provides further evidence for voyaging during the 1950s and early 1960s as the Bajo only adopted the gunter rig sail in the late 1960s.

These accounts also reveal that some Bajo became involved in new trading activities, especially in the transportation of copra from Maluku for sale at Gresik and Surabaya on Java. Copra was also taken as far as Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah. The extent of Bajo involvement in *perahu* trading prior to the 1950s is unknown. Si Badolla stated that Bajo from Mantigola engaged in carrying copra using *perahu lambo* well before World War II. It appears that during the 1960s *perahu* trading across the Indonesian Archipelago and to neighbouring countries was an important economic activity for many Mola Bajo.

Many Bajo ceased to engage in *perahu* trading activities in the early 1970s and returned to shark and trochus fishing in the Timor Sea as their main economic activity. In the early 1950s, net fishing for reef fish was commonly practised at places such as Ashmore Reef, but by the early 1970s shark fin and trochus fishing had largely replaced net fishing. The Kahar Muzzakar rebellion in Southeast Sulawesi and the migration of Bajo from Mantigola to Mola in 1957 must have had some effect on patterns of fishing. Other marine products, such as trochus shell and shark fin, were probably commanding a higher price than dried reef fish towards the end of this period. Regional economic growth in the late 1960s also stimulated increased exploitation of marine resources.

From the 1940s to the early 1980s, Bajo from Mantigola and Mola were engaged in a diverse range of activities dictated by a mix of individual preferences, weather conditions and economic factors. The latter included the availability of capital and market prices for cargoes and marine products. While

some Bajo preferred trading, others focused on fishing. As in many fishing communities, people alternated between the two pursuits depending on the particular social, economic and political situation at the time, as well as the seasonal cycle. The role of Bajo from the Tukang Besi Islands in the local Butonese *perahu* trading sector, as well as in fishing activities in the Timor Sea, is already documented in the literature (Dick 1975; Hughes 1984; Evers 1991; Southon 1995: 45–9).

Trading first became popular in 1940, when the Dutch East Indies Government, following the impact of the 1930s world economic depression, began to monopolise the copra trade and fix market prices. Despite the devastating impact of the Japanese occupation on local *perahu* shipping and trading in the islands (Dick 1975: 79), the government monopoly was revived after World War II, and while copra from Sulawesi was all supposed to pass through a government trading centre in Makassar, price controls created an illegal smuggling trade which resulted in *perahu* from Selayar and Sulawesi transporting copra to Surabaya and Singapore where prices were actually much higher (Heersink 1994: 67). It would appear that Bajo from Mola may have been involved in these copra smuggling activities.

According to Southon (1995: 44), the Butonese people of Lande began building and sailing *perahu lambo* in the 1940s, partly in response to opportunities created after World War II. During the 1950s and 1960s the informal trading sector expanded throughout eastern Indonesia because of problems in the formal sector. The Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (Royal Navigation Company), which had dominated trade in previous decades, was expelled from Indonesia in 1957, and the modern shipping sector was suffering the effects of political instability and economic contraction (*ibid.*: 45). The informal *perahu* trade in copra and cloves remained important in the Tukang Besi economy through the 1960s and 1970s, but a formal shipping business financed by ethnic Chinese investors began transporting cargoes in large motorised vessels after 1967. The subsequent decline in the Butonese *perahu* trading sector was compounded by a dramatic fall in the price of copra in 1972, and this forced the Bajo traders back into fishing (*ibid.*). This is the when my Bajo informants say that they resumed fishing activities in the Timor Sea. The Bajo entry into the trade of live turtles to Bali also began in the 1970s.