

## Foreword

This book, Natasha Stacey's *Boats to Burn*, is a study of considerable importance for an understanding of maritime relations in the Arafura and Timor Seas. The Arafura and Timor Seas link Australia and Indonesia. These seas provide more than just a source of shared resources; they also offer a common history of maritime involvement. This book explores this critical, but little known maritime history and considers its implication for the present.

*Boats to Burn* focuses on the role of a distinctive population, the Bajo or Bajau Laut, who are remarkable for their sailing and fishing traditions. Known as the 'sea nomads' of the region, the Bajo have established themselves throughout eastern Indonesia searching out marine resources — trepang (or sea-cucumber), shark fin, turtle and trochus shells — and feeding these products back into a trade network linking island Southeast Asia to the Asian continent.

Bajo migration has been integral to the maritime development of eastern Indonesia. In the seventeenth century, the Bajo were primarily established on many of the small islands of the Sulawesi region; by the 18th century, they had sailed southward and had reached Roti, the southernmost island of the Indonesian archipelago. Records of the Dutch East India Company from May 1728 report a Bajo fleet of some 40 small family boats searching for trepang first along the southern coast of Roti and then in the Bay of Kupang. The Bajo thus sailed as the advanced scouts for other Macassans, particularly the Bugis, searching out new areas for gathering trepang.<sup>1</sup>

By 1750, Dutch Company officers began issuing formal letters of permission to Macassan boats to allow them to gather trepang without hindrance. These letters covered not just the Timor coast but also the coasts of northern Australia, which was then referred to as New Holland.

Describing the situation in northern Australia in the first years of the nineteenth century, Matthew Flinders sketches the beginning of this trepang-gathering industry:

The natives of Macassar have long been accustomed to fish for trepang ... upon a dry shoal lying to the south of Rotee but about twenty years before, one of their prows was driven by the northwest monsoon to the coast of New Holland, and finding trepang to be abundant, they afterwards returned; and have continued to fish there since that time.<sup>2</sup> (1814, II: 257).

<sup>1</sup> See Fox, James J., 'Notes on the southern voyages and settlements of the Sama-Bajau' in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 133:459-65. 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis ... in the years 1801, 1802 and 1803*. 2 vols. London. 1814.

If we accept Flinders' account and recognise the "dry shoal lying to the south of Rote" as Ashmore Reef, then it follows that the Bajo arrival on the northern coast of Australia was roughly contemporaneous with the arrival of Captain Cook in Botany Bay. What is remarkable, however, is not these early dates, but the fact that Bajo sailing patterns at least to the seas in and around Ashmore Reef continue to this day.

One of the great values of Natasha Stacey's research has been to trace the historical continuity of Bajo sailing patterns and demonstrate their continued presence in Australia waters even in times when little attention was paid to the area of Ashmore Reef, Cartier Island and the smaller reefs further to the south.

For the contemporary period, Dr Stacey focuses on a group of Bajo who originate from two villages in the Tukang Besi Islands of Southeast Sulawesi but have settled at a site, Tanjung Pasir, in the village of Pepela at the eastern end of the island of Rote. While still maintaining close contact with their origin villages in Sulawesi, these Bajo fishermen now regularly sail into Australian waters in search of shark. They form part of a much larger group of eastern Indonesian fishermen who are permitted to fish within an area delimited by the 1974 Memorandum of Understanding agreed upon by Australia and Indonesia.

Whereas the Bajo have been doing this for centuries, the majority of other Indonesian fishermen are relative late-comers to shark fishing, particularly shark-fishing in Australian waters. These various fishermen, however, have been able to take advantage of the terms of the MOU that defines 'traditional fishing' by the use of a sailing technology rather than by the continuity of recognised historical traditions – a situation that has greatly disadvantaged the Bajo.

Dr Stacey's study raises a range of critical policy issues in regard to the rights of access to fishing. These issues have become even more complex as resources in the area defined by the MOU have diminished and many fishermen from Pepela, including Bajo, have turned to the use of small, motorised *bodi* rather than sailing *perahu* to penetrate deeper into Australian waters in pursuit of shark. This has been met by concerted apprehension efforts in the past few years, forcing further shifts in the dynamics of this 'traditional' fishery.

Dr Stacey's research relates to the period prior to these latest developments. She did her fieldwork in 1994-1995 with further follow-up research in 1997. Her study is nonetheless particularly relevant to an understanding of small-boat – so-called 'traditional' – fishing in the region. The explorer-navigator, George Windsor Earl, described the Bajo as a 'singular people'. He encountered the Bajo

when they visited Port Essington in 1840 and wrote of his plans, which he never succeeded in carrying out, of sailing with them in eastern Indonesia.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, Dr Stacey has done what Earl never managed to do. She has lived with Bajo in their villages and sailed with them over long distances; thus she has come to know them intimately and appreciate the dilemmas they face. Her book is a plea for the recognition of these 'singular' people whose world has been radically altered by international regulations, large-scale commercial fishing, and ever-diminishing resources for small-boat fishermen.

Ultimately this is a book in which good ethnography raises critical questions for public policy. The impoverishment of the coastal communities in eastern Indonesian whose previous livelihoods depended, in part, upon access to Australian waters calls for efforts at redress. The absence of alternative livelihoods for these fishermen leaves them with few options but to continue to sail into Australian waters, taking greater risks in the process. This situation is particularly acute for the Bajo who have little access to land. Each apprehension only increases the impoverishment that has prompted the problem in the first place.

We may all hope that this book will serve as a catalyst for further cooperation between Indonesia and Australia in addressing the problems of the Bajo and other poor fishermen of eastern Indonesia.

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<sup>3</sup> See Earl, G. W., p. 335 in *The Eastern Seas, or Voyages and Adventures in the Indian Archipelago in 1832-33-34*. London. 1837 and p. 65 in *Enterprise, Discoveries and Adventures in Australia*. London. 1846.