INDONESIAN FISHERMEN
DETAINED IN BROOME:
A REPORT ON THE SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Anthony Reid
Introduction

On 3 and 4 July 1991 I was able to interview the 15 Indonesian fishermen still held in the Broome jail, as a result of sentences given them in the Broome Court of Petty Sessions in January 1991. 232 Indonesian males had been seized from 13 vessels inside Australian waters on 24 and 25 December 1990. Except for the 84 minors and others of diminished responsibility such as deaf-mutes, all had been sentenced to the severest prison terms available under the Quarantine Act of 1908, the WA Fisheries Act of 1905, and/or the Continental Shelf (Living Natural Resources) Act of 1968. Most first offenders had already been returned to Indonesia after prison terms of six months or less. Those still imprisoned were generally second offenders or juragan (deemed to be "masters" of vessels in terms of the law) who had incurred total sentences ranging between 9 and 13 months. The full reasons for the variety of lengths of sentences were however incomprehensible to the fishermen or to the prison officers I spoke to.

Like almost all other boats apprehended in the northern waters of Western Australia (notably King Sound, the Indian Ocean reefs of Ashmore [Pulau Pasir], Scott [Pulau Datu], Cartier [Pulau Baru] and Rowley Shoals) since 1988, those apprehended last December were diving for trochus shells. Trochus and other sedentary marine organisms were not initially excluded from the Australian acceptance of traditional Indonesian fishing at Ashmore Reef, Scott Reef, Browse Island and Cartier Island - all of which are uninhabited and situated roughly midway between the Australian mainland and the Indonesian island of Roti. Under the 1974 Memorandum of Understanding between the Australian and Indonesian Governments, Indonesian "traditional fishermen" (defined as those using methods "which have been the tradition over decades of time") were allowed continued access to these reefs. In 1983, however, Australia proclaimed the Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve and forbade the taking of all sedentary organisms, including trochus, on the grounds of severe depletion of stocks.

The Australian Government has defined a "box" area around the reefs in question where Indonesian "traditional fishermen" continue to be permitted to take fish and marine organisms, excepting in the Ashmore Reef Reserve (see maps). All the vessels apprehended, however, were small vessels known in Indonesia as perahu layar motor, that is wooden vessels constructed by local craftsmen but carrying a motor to supplement or replace the sailing rig. They were therefore not regarded as "traditional".
Homelands of the Fishermen

Of 35 vessels apprehended in this area between 1988 and mid-1990, four were recorded as from Roti or Kupang. These represent fishermen from the Muslim community of Papela on Roti, who have long fished the Ashmore Reef - which is much closer to them than to any Australian population. Rotinese were indicated by several of my informants as the ultimate source of their information about the route southward to Australian trochus beds. All vessels appeared to make Kupang or Roti their last stop for supplies, petrol and water.

The overwhelming majority of boats apprehended, however, and all the 15 individuals I interviewed, came from just three very small islands in Sulawesi Tenggara (SE Celebes):

Masaluka, just off the Sulawesi mainland at Kasiputih, in Kec. Kasiputih, Kab. Buton.
Maginti, NW of Muna, in Kab. Muna.
Kadatuang, just off Baubau, in Kec. Laompu, Kab. Buton.

All tend to identify themselves initially as Butonese, because the Sultanate of Buton was the supreme authority for the area, the Kabupaten of Buton still covers southern Muna and the southern mainland of SE Sulawesi, and its capital, Baubau, is still their major market. However each of these small islands speaks a mutually intelligible dialect of Muna. Although widely separated, the islands are closely related by culture, intermarriage and a common involvement in reef exploitation. There is some admixture of Bajau ("sedentary sea-nomads") on the islands, and a few immigrant Bugis or Baubau small traders. The populations however are relatively homogeneous Muslim Muna.

Information travels quickly around this network of islands. The rise in price of trochus in 1990, and reports of their abundance in the King Sound area, produced a rush of 15 or more boats from the three islands last December. However there appears to be as much competition as cooperation between the boats, and each is an entirely independent commercial operation.

The Island Economies

All three islands are specialised fishing communities, occupied for centuries in line-fishing and diving on the reefs for trepang, shells, pearls, tortoise-
shell and clams. Apart from some coconut and fruit trees there is no agriculture on Maginti and Masaluka, and only a little corn and tapioca in Kadatuang. The islands import their rice and other essentials by selling dried fish and reef products to the Baubau or Ujung Pandang markets. It is striking that they have never adopted nets or fish-traps.

Until the 1970s the economies appeared to be based on exploiting the reefs adjacent to their own islands. Most informants' fathers had been simply line-fishermen working from their own tiny boats (kole-kole or sema-sema), built on the islands for about Rp 30,000 (A$20).

These fishermen represent one of the poorer sectors of the economy of a poor Indonesian province. Gross Domestic Product per capita of Sulawesi Tenggara was Rp 408,000 (about US$230) in 1987, putting it 22nd out of Indonesia's 27 Provinces. The isolation of the islands deprived them of social services such as schools and health facilities until the 1960s and '70s, and both birth and death rates were traditionally very high.

Conditions appear to have improved in recent years, however, probably as a result of more regular supplies of imported rice. BPS figures give Sulawesi Tenggara the most rapid improvement in life expectancy over the last five years, from 51.4 to 58.2. Infant mortality appears to have dropped markedly in recent years, giving rise to very rapid population increase.

Among the four prisoners from whom I obtained life histories, La Musa's experience in Kadatuang was typical. His father had 8 children of whom 4 survived, while he himself had 8 children of whom all survived.

Sulawesi Tenggara as a whole has one of the country's highest rates of population increase (3.66% pa), and on these reef-dependent islands the problem seems critical. Duncan Graham (Good Weekend May '91) noticed the unusual youthfulness of the population in Maginti and Kadatuang. The population explosion, the steady empowerment of the reefs around their own islands, and the rise in expectations resulting from the introduction of primary schooling and commercialisation, have driven the fishermen ever further afield in search of their traditional products. There is also a marked out-migration of young men, particularly to Maluku. Rural Buton and Muna kabupaten (ie these two large islands and the surrounding small ones, minus the two kabupaten capitals) have exceptionally low sex ratios of 92 and 93 respectively (BPS 1991: 341), indicating at least a quarter of young men must have left.
The Economics of Off-shore Voyages

About twenty years ago the boats of the islands began to grow bigger, and their sailing range wider. The typical operation is now based on voyages of a month or more, in boats 7 metres in length and a ton or more in weight, carrying 10-18 divers. These boats cost 1-2 million rupiah (A$700-1400) to build, outside the reach of ordinary fishermen. Better-off islanders, particularly those who own orchards of coconut or fruit trees, have the boats built on the islands by local or Tanah Beru (Makassarese) craftsmen. Most owners have a single prahu, but seldom if ever sail on it themselves.

In the 1980s engines began to be fitted to these boats (as had happened earlier in wealthier areas). Because these had to be bought from outside they cost more than the boat itself - 2 to 3 million rupiahs. Nevertheless they justified the cost with a greater range, speed and safety. Prahus were able to buy them through a credit arrangement (known as bacicila) with the taukeh (Chinese merchant) to whom they sold their harvests. He would allow them to pay the balance of a debt on an engine by instalments, without charging interest, on the understanding the vessel only sold its harvest to him.

The economics of a fishing voyage on these islands, as generally in Indonesia, are based on a system of sharing the proceeds (bagi hasil). Each member of the crew (except for boys on their first or second voyage) contributes an equal share to the costs of petrol and supplies for the voyage, and obtains an equal share of the profits when the voyage is over. The profit of the boat-owner is organised in a similar way, by allocating two shares (for a smaller boat of about 10 men) or three shares (for a crew of 15) to the motor - ie to the owner.

Even the sums of around Rp 100,000 (A$70) the fishermen need to contribute as their share of voyage costs are usually borrowed from wealthier islanders. If a voyage fails, the fishermen do not have to reimburse the boat-owner (who simply misses out on his share), but they do have to repay this loan. The interest on the loans is often also organised through the profit-sharing principle, so that (for example) 2 shares out of the total of 20 or so might be allocated as bagian modal (shares for the capital), to be divided up among those who had advanced money.

Each crew chooses one of their number as a juragan (pilot or skipper), whose principal responsibility is to identify promising places to dive. Juragan were often quite young or inexperienced. Their selection was said
to be based on "the person the crew trusted". The ability to identify trochus beds was seen as partly natural but partly supernatural. The *juragan* has exactly the same shares of the proceeds as others.

Trochus (Indonesian: *lola*) has been collected from the reefs of eastern Indonesia throughout this century for export through the port of Makassar (Ujung Pandang). The fishermen of Kadatuang have been engaged in the industry at least since the 1960s and probably long before that, for sale to merchants in Baubau. With the increase in price in recent years, and the progressive exhaustion of trepang and giant clams, trochus have become the most important item in the economy of the fishermen of all three islands.

The first major target of these fishermen outside southeast Sulawesi waters was the north coast of Flores, which was fished extensively for trochus in the 1970s and '80s. As these stocks became exhausted, they moved further east in the 1980s, to the reefs of Maluku (notably Tanimbar) and Irian, and also to northern and central Sulawesi. The high prices of trochus have led to its being gathered to the point where it is scarce everywhere - so that a whole day's diving by a crew of 15 may yield less than 10 shells. Irian was said to have the best remaining supplies of trochus in Indonesia, but my informants were frightened by the ferocity of coastal Irianese in protecting their reefs.

By contrast, the abundance of trochus in King Sound seemed remarkable.

**The Voyage to Australia**

My informants agreed that Roti fishermen were the ones who were first aware of the trochus beds of Australia, and who pointed the way to the Buton boats. The first of the latter appeared to be a Maginti boat in 1988, of which the *juragan* was La Mala, a man from Siampu (near Kadatuang) who had married and settled in Maginti. He navigated to Australian waters with the assistance of a Rotinese. He was arrested, but because both the boat and the crew were returned to Indonesia little was lost on the voyage. La Mala himself did not return, and is now thought to be in central Sulawesi, but the reports the crew brought back of abundant trochus were influential on all three islands.

All vessels appeared to sail from Sulawesi southward through the Larantuka Strait, and usually to call at Kupang for supplies of food and petrol. They often took on water at Roti.
Who bears the cost of Australian penalties?

Normally when a ship is lost at sea its owner bears the loss. This may have been the initial response when the first boats were burned in Australia, but repeated burnings have made boat-owners reluctant to take such risks on a voyage to Australia. Some crews deceived the boat-owners by saying they were going to Flores, since they would not otherwise be allowed to sail, or at least not on the usual terms. Since boat-owners in the three islands generally knew what was going on, one crew went as far as Tolitoli (on the north coast of Sulawesi) to hire a boat from a Buton/Muna man they knew there.

The risks on trochus voyages to Australia are known to be so high that boat-owners are now insisting on spreading some of their risk to the fishermen. One of my informants from Kadatuang made two trips to Australia, on both of which he was arrested. On the first occasion, in 1989, the prahu-owner insisted on 5 shares of the eventual profits instead of the usual 3, and also required the crew collectively to deposit Rp 650,000 against the cost of the boat, which they would forfeit if the boat did not return. The owner thereby transferred about a tenth of the risk of his boat loss to the 16 crew-members, who had to borrow more than usual to make the voyage - Rp 120,000 each in this case. On the second occasion, in December 1990, a different boat-owner required only the usual 3 shares, but demanded that the crew deposit Rp 1,250,000 with him. My informant was able to raise the money from a different money-lender, even though he had not paid off the first loan.

Both owners and crews suffer from the confiscation of boats, as does to some degree the whole fishing community on the island. Imprisonment of course directly affects those imprisoned. Although physical conditions are relatively good, and the large number of Indonesians in the prison eased the sense of alienation they feel, I had no doubt that imprisonment is a real hardship for them. They are paid the minimum rates allowable for prisoners ($11 per week), and if they avoid spending anything at all on cigarettes etc they could accumulate up to $250 during a six month imprisonment, but in most cases this would not cover the debts they incurred on the voyage south (averaging about $80), the partial costs of returning home (the Indonesian Department of Social Welfare generally pays their passage from Bali to Ujung Pandang, but not always thereafter) and the income foregone during a six month period. During their absence their families are reduced to penury and further dependence.
Some Thoughts for the Future

Uncontrolled exploitation of Australian waters by the methods of these Sulawesi fishermen would undoubtedly result in the drastic depletion of sedentary marine organisms here as it has in Sulawesi (Whitten, Mustafa and Henderson 1987: 239-43). A deterrent is necessary, and destruction of the boats appears the most appropriate.

Imprisonment is a further deterrent, but the legal and moral difficulties of imprisoning very poor people for long periods because they cannot pay the prescribed fines make this highly problematic. The particularly heavy punishment of the juragan of offending vessels on the assumption that he is equivalent to the master of a ship in Australian law is especially inappropriate. The Northern Territory approach, of keeping all offenders on their boats until they are sentenced, and then sending them home and burning the boats, appears more humane and cost-effective.

The category of "traditional" prahu entitled to visit Ashmore and Scott Reefs may be useful as a means to preserve fish stocks, but it is highly arbitrary. Boat types have changed constantly over the last century, and the introduction of motors to supplement sailing prahu is a general trend throughout Indonesia. In 1987 there were already 111,000 motorised prahu engaged in Indonesian marine fishing, though only 750 of them in Sulawesi Tenggara (BPS 1990: 278). Obliging the fishermen of Roti to sail to Ashmore without motors exposes them to risks which are now unnecessary and therefore unacceptable. More than sixty men of Papela have reportedly been drowned on voyages to the reef over the past 6 years. While the short run presents problems of appropriate disincentives to violators of Australian law, the longer run raises the deeper issues of how relations should be managed between Australia's scarcely populated northwest and Indonesia's heavily-populated southeast. Australian fisheries are handicapped in this region by the distance from infrastructure and markets, and the high cost of labour. Indonesian fishermen do not face these problems, and could operate efficiently on the Australian northwest.

If a system can be devised whereby certain Indonesians fish the northwest coast under licence and with due safeguards for fish stocks, this would create a long-term vested interest in both countries to see that the agreements are upheld and a model of responsible fishing developed which might be emulated elsewhere in the region. The proceeds from such licences could help fund the policing of the coast against unlicensed or irresponsible fishing.
Unfortunately this is unlikely to help the reef scavengers of the small islands of southeast Sulawesi, who have long survived largely by their ability to operate where governments do not reach. Serious research is needed on how Indonesia and Australia might cooperate to restore the reefs of those islands and develop alternative income sources for them.

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The views expressed here are my own.

Literature


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Map 1  Eastern Indonesia and Northern Australia