Time travels in whaling boats

ANITA LUNDBERG
Evans Postdoctoral Fellow, School of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University, UK and Visiting Fellow, The Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan, Malaysia

ABSTRACT
Reading this article is to embark on an adventure through certain ethnographic and archaeological texts about a specific form of boat construction. The voyage sets out from the village of Lamalera in Eastern Indonesia where whaling boats continue to be built according to traditions passed on by the ancestors. However, while researchers write about boats, they simultaneously board the boats in order to construct the sequence of their narratives. Whether they journey back through the eastern archipelagos in search of the origin of a boat’s design; or follow the plank by plank construction sequence; or whether they find a leak in previous boat building discourse – all are involved in intricate relations of becoming through the materiality of the very boats they desire to observe and describe. Narratives premised on unquestioned notions of linear time and travel. In this article, however, readers find themselves carried along on a different voyage, where time and travel are always in the here and now.

KEYWORDS
boat construction ● closure ● collecting ● Eastern Indonesia ● embodied stories ● ethnography ● material culture ● unconscious
of craft include: the quarter-moon shape of the hull which curves up at either end; a pivoting bipod mast, which supports the rectangular palm-leaf sail; and a long-handled oar with a round blade the size of a large dinner plate (Hornell, 1946; Horridge, 1985, 1982, 1979, 1978; Scott, 1981).

It has been the documentation of the evolution of this style of boat that has inspired many of Professor Adrian Horridge’s numerous texts on the watercraft of the Austronesian region and has gained him recognition as the leading authority on this construction principle (Horridge, 1978, 1979, 1982, 1985). He expresses great fascination in the lashed-lug design, especially since:

> this method of construction . . . was also characteristic of the early Scandinavian boats and it persisted in a modified form through the first period of the development of the Viking ship. . . . [W]e have here a very early and sophisticated way of building boats that was evolved in the long period of the Bronze Age. (Horridge, 1985: 52–3)

Horridge, upon first seeing the Lamaleran whaling boats, states that the ‘amazing feature of these boats is that when you look inside you see the traditional lashed-lug design in one of its perfect forms’ (Horridge, 1982: 51).