

KAYU JAWA: THE KIMBERLEY OF THE INDONESIANS

The speaker for the April 1995 meeting, Dr Ian Crawford, developed an interest in the topic of contact between Indonesian fishing parties and Aboriginal people after visiting a site near Kalumburu whilst traversing the Kimberley coast by lugger in 1963. He decided to focus on this contact for his doctoral thesis (written in London) and investigated the area known to the Indonesians - because of the species of mangrove that gave the beche-de-mer they found there a distinctive red colour - as Kayu Jawa. Of particular interest was the contact with the Aboriginal women, who did most of the trading.

Ian commenced his talk by reminding us that Indonesian contact on the Kimberley coast is occurring right up to the present day, and that the international law of the sea states that their fishing should be allowed to continue. It all started centuries ago with passing sailors seeking beche-de-mer or trepang, a holothurian or sea cucumber, as a food source. The coast is strewn with their favoured habitat - great sandbanks. By the 1750s, the Indonesians were trading with China. Beche-de-mer was regarded by the Chinese as an aphrodisiac. The British said, on the other hand, that one type, when dried, looked like a sausage that had been thrown up the chimney!

In discussing the history of Kayu Jawa, Ian told us that the Indonesians probably also took trochus and pearl shell, and perhaps iron ore from Yampi. They sailed first to Cassini Island as a fleet and divided into two, going north and south. The French captain Baudin made contact with several vessels in 1803 and during Phillip Parker King's survey in 1819-1822, Indonesian pottery shards were found on one of the islands. In the 1860s, a fleet visited Camden Harbour where a small European settlement had been established. The nature of beche-de-mer fishing changed in the late nineteenth century with the entry of white Australians into the trade. These men included Henry Hilliard and his son Robin, who worked from Kupang with Indonesian crews. We heard some details of their activities and how white involvement ceased with the Second World War, when the Japanese captured Robin Hilliard and beheaded him.

Ian's doctoral research involved excavations at Tamarinda in Napier Broome Bay where he recorded cave paintings and found tamarind trees which had been planted by the fishing parties. The tamarind trees remain the markers of their landings. They planted these to provide them with spices for their particular style of cooking. We saw slides of Ian's excavations on the beach where he found Indonesian pottery, musket balls, fish hooks and layers of ash and charcoal from their fires. This occupation he dated at 1821 from a brass coin located there. Tanya Thiess analysed the shards and estimated them to be from the island of Sumba.

Whilst carrying out his archaeological research, Ian found out that the staff of Burmah Oil Company had located Indonesian graves on Ashmore Reef. We heard how he landed on Ashmore Reef and counted 11 prahus in the vicinity which came from Ras, north of Bali, a 30 day sail with no navigation equipment. Instead the fishermen used the stars, birds, presence of seaweed, clouds and intuition. They also sailed down to the Rowley Shoals through very

dangerous waters. Here there is no water and no shelter and many disappeared. They caught fish and collected trochus shell out of which they ate the meat. They used wooden racks to dry this meat and other meat taken from clam shells.

The Indonesian influence on the indigenous people included introducing the Aborigines to the dugout canoe, which enabled them to get further afield. Ian also found that some of the old Aboriginal people remembered a little of the language used to communicate with the Indonesians. A range of questions and comments followed the talk and it was noted that there is a prahu on display at the Maritime Museum in Fremantle.

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