

**R. H. Barnes. *Sea Hunters of Indonesia: Fishers and Weavers of Lamalera*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. 467 pp., 49 plates, 28 figures, 4 maps, 7 appendices.**

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"What a wonderful discipline anthropology is," a friend—a political scientist—remarked the other day, with equal measures of envy and bemusement. He treated me to a playful impersonation of the popular author he was reading. "I went off to this strange place, hung out with these really weird people, and now I'm going to tell you all about . . . Heidegger!" Behind his caricature lay a certain truth: the anthropology sections of bookstores seem to be filled with volumes of pared down ethnography, married, in more or less harmony, to "big" ideas. Theoretical fashion, market forces, and institutional constraints all have a role in determining what gets published in the discipline. With shorter page limits and research periods becoming the norm, the comprehensive monograph seems a thing of the past.

Or so one would think. In the context of current trends in anthropological writing, the most remarkable thing about R. H. Barnes's meticulous, exhaustive *Sea Hunters of Indonesia* may well be its date. A quick comparison with another recent Eastern Indonesian ethnography brings out the contrast. Drawing on everything from *The Phenomenology of Mind* to the latest findings in linguistic anthropology, Webb Keane's *Signs of Recognition* provides a highly focused analysis of the dynamics of ritual speech and ceremonial exchange in Anakalang, West Sumba.<sup>1</sup> With ethnographic detail at the service of theory, in this lean, carefully crafted study, nothing, at least on the face of it, is left to chance. If Keane's book represents the best of new trends in American ethnography, Barnes's recalls the values of a different era and national tradition. Focused on the inhabitants of Lamalera, a coastal village on Lembata, an island to the east of Flores, *Sea Hunters* is a richly detailed, voluminous account of what Barnes so modestly calls "what happens to be in many ways an exceptional way of life."<sup>2</sup>

Barnes initially envisioned his research in Lamalera as leading to a companion study to his 1974 monograph, *Kédang: A Study of the Collective Thought of an Eastern Indonesian People*.<sup>3</sup> But while the two books were published by the same press and bear some cosmetic similarities, they were written with rather different aims. Although he had conducted a preliminary survey relating to Lamaholot, the language spoken in Lamalera and much of Lembata, Barnes ended up choosing for his first fieldwork "a place which was as little subject as possible to foreign influences and which had not been previously studied."<sup>4</sup> The product of eighteen months of research in an isolated mountain village, *Kédang* was, according to Rodney Needham, who wrote the foreword to the book, "one of the most masterly studies to have come out of Oxford social

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<sup>1</sup> See *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Barnes, *Sea Hunters*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Barnes, *Kédang: A Study of the Collective Thought of an Eastern Indonesian People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

anthropology as it was under the aegis of the late Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard.”<sup>5</sup> Barnes’s strategy, and Needham’s praise, reflected the debates then raging in social anthropology. “Asymmetric prescriptive alliance” was the focus of “a great deal of clamour,” “with some critics of the notion going so far as to assert that societies of this type do not and even cannot exist.”<sup>6</sup> Written in “plain English”—unlike the Dutch accounts that were “inaccessible to scholarly attention”—*Kédang*, Needham promised, would put that fallacy to rest.

In showing the importance of the prescriptive system at all levels of a local conceptual order, *Kédang* represented, according to Needham, “a superb addition to Indonesian ethnography, a genuinely structural analysis of social thought and action, and a singular contribution to a comparative understanding of certain primary modes of human consciousness and experience.”<sup>7</sup> In *Sea Hunters*, by contrast, the cultural phenomena that most often figure as guiding topics in a structural analysis have shifted into the background of the discussion. Asymmetric alliance, for instance, receives only two paragraphs, which calmly advise the “interested novice” what to consult in the literature.<sup>8</sup> The existence of the phenomenon no longer in question, what monopolizes the reader’s attention, in this chapter as elsewhere in the book, are the niceties of Lamalera practice: relationship terms, listings of clans and their relations as wife-givers and wife-takers, percentages of marriages that follow the normative order, what happens in the case of “improper unions.” While the Catholic church has transformed some aspects of the system, asymmetric exchange still seems to be alive and kicking in Lamalera. When a man married his genealogical father’s sister’s daughter in 1982, Barnes tells us, “the nature of the genealogical connection was even more scandalous than the fact that this former Catholic lay brother had taken up with a woman who was at the time a nun.”<sup>9</sup>

Unlike *Kédang*, *Sea Hunters* is not, predominately, about marriage alliance and its resonance in collective thought. Lamalera’s claim to fame—and the attentions of growing numbers of tourists—is the fact that it is the only village in Southeast Asia, and one of the few places in the world, where one finds an indigenous tradition of sperm whale hunting. The book’s contents reflect this distinction, which in some degree shaped all of Barnes’s numerous stints of research in the village: a week-long visit during his dissertation fieldwork in 1970, when he accompanied a fishing boat to sea; a three month study in 1979 on whaling and conservation for the World Wildlife Fund; a six month project in 1982 on economy and culture; a three week stay in 1987 with a

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. v.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. vi.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> See Barnes, *Sea Hunters*, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

BBC film crew making a documentary on whaling.<sup>10</sup> Barnes draws upon, but does not replicate, Ruth Barnes's work on textile production in the village<sup>11</sup>; although the subtitle is "Fishers and Weavers," the latter get somewhat shorter shrift. Ten of the book's eighteen chapters relate in some way to the sea and the villagers' highly elaborated means of deriving their livelihood from its depths.

In addition to whales, Lamalera men hunt porpoises, dolphins, manta rays, sharks, and a variety of other more or less elusive creatures. They pursue their prey in locally produced plank boats, powered by the wind, when possible, and by rowers, when necessary, as in the heat of a skirmish. Despite his self-avowed lack of fluency in the local language, Barnes provides an embarrassment of riches in his data on fishing. We learn the name—and length (!)—of every piece of wood in the boats; the structure of the boat-owning corporation and the rules for dividing every kind of catch; the nuances of rope-making and sail-mending, and the forms and functions of eight kinds of harpoons. We are also treated to a vivid description of the chase:

Once the boat is close enough, the harpooner will jump with his full weight behind the harpoon, trying to thrust the harpoon as deeply as possible into the *iting lango*, the house of the dorsal fin, that is the area around the fin, while twisting the harpoon head to fix the flange in the blubber so that it will not pull out. Once the harpoon has struck home, the whale starts and either dives or pulls the boat at great speed, usually in circles. Having been in such a ride in July 1970, in which the *Menula Belolong* [the name of a boat: DR] was pulled through a group of thrashing whales and in front of charging boats, I can attest that it is an exciting experience.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed. Barnes goes on to describe the prohibitions enforced during such a chase: the rules preventing the fishermen from discussing anything but the matter at hand, and then, only in veiled terms. While the Christian conversion brought an end to some of the rites once associated with whale hunting, others continue in an amended form.

As attuned to the specifics of Lamalera's history and economy as he is to the features of the villagers' boats, Barnes also provides an extensive account of the village's past and the nature of its long-standing role in local networks of exchange. If whale hunting makes Lamalera unique, other aspects of its position in a regional system of relations put it in the company of a range of Southeast Asian coastal groups. Long a backwater, from the perspective of precolonial and colonial centers, Lamalera nonetheless mediated between the outside world and societies in the island's interior. The land-poor villagers' prowess at sea provided, on the one hand, fish and whale meat to barter for produce from mountain communities, and, on the other, whale oil

<sup>10</sup> See Barnes's account of his research in Lamalera, "Ethnography as a Career: Second Thoughts on Second Fieldwork in Indonesia," *JASO* 19(3): 241-250. Barnes takes credit—or, better, blame—for introducing tourism to Lamalera. "In the academic year 1977-8, two distinguished academics employed in Australia visited Oxford after having within twelve months led shiploads of elderly foreigners to Lamalera's shore, thus giving value to the insincere assurances I had provided the director of tourism in Larantuka, Flores, in June 1987, that I would indeed seize any opportunity to send hordes his way." *Ibid*, p. 242.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Ikat Textiles of Lamalera: A Study of an Eastern Indonesian Weaving Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Barnes, *Sea Hunters*, p. 293.

and ambergris to trade for the foreign imports which became the key components of bridewealth. In the 1880s, Lamalera's coastal position led to its selection as the location of the first mission post on the island; boys from the village began to attend the mission school in Larantuka, Flores, even earlier. As a result of its historical involvement with the mission, in contemporary times, Lamalera society not only straddles the border between sea and shore; it links and separates a local sphere of production and exchange and the realm of the modern nation state. A "dual economy" persists in the village, on the one hand depending on traditional activities and allies, on the other, on salaries and wages from afar. To this day, the villagers maintain a heterogeneous array of transactional forms, from gift exchange to barter to monetary transactions; in the past, slave-raiding and warfare were also integral parts of the system. In a region long plagued by famine and feuding, Barnes points out, more "primitive" practices do not represent outmoded "survivals" from the past, but resilient strategies for coping with an uncertain world.

A story could be gleaned from the information that Barnes so conscientiously provides us—a story about violence and value, about the meaning of Christian conversion, about the ongoing links between marriage alliance and relations to the outside world. Drawing on insights gathered over close to two decades, *Sea Hunters* could potentially tell us a good deal about the ways in which people in places like Lamalera at once cross and reproduce social boundaries. Yet, in the end, the book's strengths turn out to be its weaknesses. Focused on an isolated, apparently "untouched" society, Barnes's first work was a study of the logic of representations. Turning to a place with a long history of contact, he takes as his topic how the "standard features" of local life are changing "under pressure from the outside world."<sup>13</sup> Framed however loosely, this under-theorized appeal to "social change" risks turning the narrative into an elegy, with the careful measurements and long lists of vocabulary serving only to commemorate a loss. While there can be little doubt that Lamalera's success as a source of priests, professors, and officials has hastened its decline as a producer of expert fishers, one would have to look more carefully at how the villagers conceive of these varied pursuits to determine whether the coming years will spell the end of the distinctions that set them apart.

I would not have wanted Barnes to delete the long story of the clan that controls all the mice in the province. Nor would I have wanted to miss learning of the history of whaling in the Timor Straits and of the resounding failure of the Dutch companies that attempted to take it up. But I do wish that Barnes had shown the same irrepressible curiosity in exploring how Lamalera values relate to a wider sphere of social action. The power of ethnography, in a supposedly "modernizing" Indonesia, lies less in the ability to catalogue the exotic than to find something unexpected in the seemingly familiar. Beginning with names of volcanoes and ending with a long list of fish, with plenty of dry humor and loving attention to detail in between, this study reflects the pleasures of ethnography. But perhaps a little Heidegger would have helped.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.