

A JONG SAILS FROM THE HEART

Voyage on Board the RV Heraclitus

The Story of the Jong School, Teluk Bakau, Bintan

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Chapter One

The Beach at Teluk Bakau

One afternoon on New Year's Day, I saw a group of people playing close to my house. The sails attracted me like a magnet.

I'd spent the better part of two decades chasing exactly that particular pull — sails on a horizon, wind filling cloth, the specific way a hull answers the water beneath it. I'd sailed a black ferrocement junk, the RV Heraclitus, across the Coral Triangle and the open Pacific, through typhoons and doldrums both, leading an expedition whose whole reason for being was coral reefs and the people who lived alongside them. I knew what it meant to read a sky for weather, to feel a boat go from dead in the water to alive in a matter of seconds. What I didn't yet know, standing on that beach in Teluk Bakau, was that all of it — the ocean crossings, the reef surveys, the years of watching wind — had been preparation for something the size of my own two hands.

The boats these kids were sailing were smaller than anything I'd ever properly considered a boat. A meter long, maybe less. Hand-carved, no bigger than an arm. Unmanned — no one aboard, no rudder held by a living hand, nothing but wood, cloth, and a design tuned so precisely to wind and water that the boat sailed a straight line entirely on its own. I'd crossed oceans on a vessel built to carry twenty people. Here was a boat built to carry nothing at all, and somehow it held my attention just as completely.

I met Zakir that day, and it started the whole thing.

Zakir

I love sailing — not just the boats themselves, but the entire spirit that moves people to go out and be with the elements, to brave the sea in whatever form that takes. I'd built a life around that particular love, first as a sailor, then as the leader of an expedition that spent the better part of a decade documenting coral reefs across Southeast Asia and the Pacific. I knew the ocean at scale — thousands of miles of it, whole archipelagos, the open blue-water stretches where land disappears for weeks at a time.

Zakir knew a different scale entirely, and it turned out to be just as deep.

Jongs are seductive boats, in their own particular way. In the Western sailing world, a boat's always "she." At first you flirt around the edges, watching from

afar, inspecting, curious. You strike up a conversation with the owner, catch a glimpse of the jong's name, its personality.

Eventually, I got married too. I bought two jongs during a racing event in Teluk Sebong, from Bugis jong-makers out of eastern Sumatra. Zakir picked them out himself — my matchmaker, choosing my wives.

We renamed the boats. One, Zakir's choice: Bule Kampong, literally "the white man from the village." The other, my own choice originally — Planet Samudra, ocean planet — though we cut it down, and she became simply Planet.

"You need to get married with your jong," Zakir told me, late one night, sipping coffee on the beach. I'd sailed enough of the world's oceans by then to think I understood what it meant to belong to a boat. I was wrong, or at least I hadn't yet understood it the way Zakir meant it. A ship the size of the Heraclitus asks for your labor, your leadership, your whole waking attention for months at a stretch. A jong asks for something quieter and, in its way, harder — a kind of intimacy with an object smaller than a child, one you have to learn to read the way you'd read a person.

[Photo: Zakir and Michel choosing the first jongs, Teluk Sebong, 2013]

The tradition of the jong predates the arrival of Islam here, rooted deep in an older, animist world of spirits. Originally, jongs carried gifts of betel nut and other sacred food out to sea; over time they evolved into genuine sailing art pieces. Though they're unmanned boats, plenty of secrets still guard the jong. Every builder finds his own way to improve on the design, though the underlying form itself never changes — rooted in geometry and symmetry, based on the proportions of the human body.

I spent many nights with Zakir and his family, and plenty more alone, turning over the mystery surrounding the whole world of jongs. A kind of waking dream state, reinventing their possible history for myself.

They're intimately tied to the Orang Suku Laut, the original nomadic tribe who once controlled the seas around Riau. They became the navy of the Malays in time, but also cultural players at the courts of the Malay aristocracy. Many of the Orang Laut groups are more mixed now, more settled, some pushed fully to the margins — but a spirit of freedom still runs through them. The Malays themselves are wary of the power of Orang Laut magic. And you do need a kind of magic, genuinely, to sail a jong well.

"You need to keep your heart clean."

I'd heard versions of that idea before, on the Heraclitus, in the language we used for our own particular practice — attention, presence, the discipline of staying awake to what the moment actually asked of you. Zakir arrived at the same truth from an entirely different direction, through wood and wind and a lineage older than anything I'd carried with me across the Pacific. I recognized it anyway. Some truths, it turns out, get discovered independently by anyone who spends enough real time paying attention to the sea.

Zakir is gone now. He's no longer with us, though it's strange to write that sentence in the past tense, because so little about the school actually feels past. His hand is still in every jong built here, in every kid who learns to carve a hull the way he once showed me — holding the boat between my own arms, listening for exactly where the mast fitting should sit, teaching by feel rather than by measurement, because a jong was never really built with a tape measure in the first place. I'll come back to him again and again in these pages, the way you do with anyone whose absence never quite becomes absence, not entirely, not on a beach where his work is still visibly, physically holding the wind.

Meeting the Village Before the School

Before there was a school, there was a village, and before the village properly opened itself to me, I'd already spent time trying to understand who actually lived along this stretch of coast, and how.

I remember visiting a settlement of Orang Suku Laut not far from Teluk Bakau, houses built on poles above water that rises and falls with the tide, fish sheltering between the posts and the discarded fishing nets below. The village's spokesman elder greeted me in his house, one of his grandchildren asleep in the middle of the room. We talked for a long time, trading analogies about our respective lives. What I took from it, mostly, was that he missed the freedom of the open sea. He'd been a true nomad once, sailing between islands in Malaysia — places I'd sailed myself, on a considerably larger boat — and to Singapore. We both held a kind of mental map of the same waters; we talked about stars, about navigation, about where to find fresh water on islands most maps didn't bother naming.

Political change had closed off most of that freedom by the time I met him. He needed a passport now, a permit, for journeys his family had made without either for longer than anyone could quite say. We have no passports, no money for permits, and so on. His people had been pushed into one small corner of land, wedged between mangrove swamp, tide washing sewage and rubbish out to sea twice a day, one brackish well for washing, nothing fit to drink.

I couldn't yet see, sitting in that house, how directly this conversation would end up feeding into everything that came after — but it did. The Orang Suku Laut are the deep root system beneath the jong itself. Understanding what had been taken from them, and what still survived despite it, turned out to be essential to understanding why a small wooden boat, no bigger than a child, could still carry this much weight.

The First Race

We decided to organize a first race in Teluk Bakau, during the tail end of the northeast monsoon, in March 2013. That first event proved the local community could rise to a real challenge, handling the logistics of something entirely new. It came together with a great deal of **gotong royong** — people helping each other, helping the community, simply because that's what you do here.

Though the original plan called for something much smaller, attendance grew, and we ended up with four villages competing, capped off by a rarely performed interactive dance that evening to celebrate.

"When's the next one?" — a question that kept coming up, again and again, in casual conversation. Not wanting this to be a one-off but a real program with a long-term vision, we started planning the next race. Trying to stay holistic about it, the seasons themselves gave us our tempo — one race for the **utara**, the northeast wind that runs from December through late March, and a **selatan** race for the southwest winds that follow, arriving as early as June and holding through September. That same rhythm has held every year since 2012: two races, set by wind rather than by calendar, the way the whole tradition was always meant to run.

[Photo: The first Teluk Bakau race, March 2013]

We built a **pondok** at Zakir's house that year. Wood was chosen and distributed; about ten new jongs were born, at least half of them entered in the coming **selatan** race, still months off. The **pondok**, built entirely from local material, became the builder's own place — somewhere anyone could come watch a jong being made firsthand. A second builder lived in Teluk Bakau too, and with my own small fleet of two, we formed the core group of jong owners — the ones who'd maintain and keep the boats alive, while other players helped launch them, learned to test and tune a jong even if they never owned one themselves. Everyone loved watching them, playing with them, regardless.

The boat became part of an Indonesian group we named Kelompok Jong "Sekapur Sirih" — bringing together the different jong owners and players from around Bintan, so the villages got properly represented, not just the capital, Tanjung Pinang, which in local eyes was really its own separate thing entirely, apart from Bintan itself. *Sekapur sirih* — the betel leaf and lime offering, respect and hospitality — became the name and, in a real sense, the whole spirit of what we were building.

With the jong and sampan dockyard in place, it was time to think about a traditional yacht club too — a grand name, honestly, for a few tables under a tree and an old recycled fishing boat fitted out with cushions. But a proper *pondok* stood there now, used freely by local fishermen, a kitchen and bar slowly coming together. A gateway to the sea, on a coastline getting fenced off and developed a little more every year. We did the opposite instead — built an access road, opened the area back up.

The Story of a Single Race Day

The night before a race, a few jongs get opened up, sails fully out, and won't go to sleep until the whole thing is over.

I hosted a party the night before that first *selatan* race, with three live chickens left over from the Ramadan closing celebration of Idul Fitri — though I was actually out on Nikoi Island that same night, rescuing a stranded yacht off the reef. We cooked the chickens afterward in our new wood-fired pizza oven, had a few drinks, some music. But mostly I watched the last details being finished on the jongs. I learned that night to secure my *anak* — literally "child," the outrigger float — making sure the wedges sit solid. I noticed too, without being told directly, plenty of small details being kept quietly secret — someone taking a small handful of raw rice, a spell or two, no doubt, but concentration as much as anything else.

You cannot race with a heart that isn't clean.

By six the next morning, the crew's already up and running. Poles go in, the beach gets one last cleaning, chairs arrive, food arrives. By seven, the first jongs start showing up — some by car from hours away, some by bike, some on foot. Six villages, that first *selatan* race. A few set up small shops selling snacks; we provide drinks for the players.

The elder opening the ceremony leads the first prayer; local leaders from the different areas come out to show their support. The beach fills with jongs laid out everywhere, a real rainbow of color across the sand. But the most important element of all is here too, and not shy about it: the wind, gusting

fifteen knots. Everyone already knows there'll be a few casualties in the race today. And the tide's rising, fast.

The tender boat moves into position; each jong gets a number that determines its spot on the starting line, drawn from a box so no one can cheat — though some positions do give a slight edge regardless.

Mati lampu. Power cut. Happens daily around here. So neither the stereo nor the microphone work, and voices start rising just to be heard. The first players take position, the crowd's already getting excited, shouts and screams building.

The finish line's set, and the first jongs head out to sea. It's tricky racing — this is the first *selatan* race ever held here, and it took our own team days just to work out how to tune for it. We've got a real edge there, at least.

"Twenty-seven." That's me. I pick up my jong, having made no adjustments beyond tightening the outrigger, and walk toward the starting line, a small camera in hand to catch a bit of the action, though my whole concentration's really on giving Bule Kampung her chance. The wind's blowing fourteen knots, gusty. *Satu, dua, tiga* — together with the whistle, though the wind's loud enough that the whistle's really all I hear. A few seconds' delay on my start because of it. From there, all you can do is watch your own horse, wait for a hand signal from a teammate telling you the result. The walk back to the beach feels genuinely serene; I make third place, enough to reach the finals.

This is my own account, but a hundred other people are living through these same exact steps today.

My second jong, Planet, runs wilder — bigger, harder to hold a line, veering straight into another boat before either of us quite know what's happened. By the time the finals come around, luck's entered the race as a serious player in its own right. Bule Kampung takes an early lead in her final, then inexplicably lets Zakir's own boat slip past right before the line, settling for second herself. Planet, having finally shaken off the boat she'd rammed earlier, makes an unbelievable last sprint to finish third — a completely wild boat, that one, more interested, I think, in stirring up trouble than in winning outright, though probably the fastest hull in my small fleet. I'd need to learn how to properly tame her.

I couldn't quite believe it myself. Luck walked right alongside me that whole day.

The race brings people together — old, young, men, women, no real boundary between any of it. But maybe the most important part of all is that the kids

take a real interest. A tradition worth being proud of, worth cherishing, worth growing for the future.

It's competition, it's about playing clean, and it's about as green as anything gets — no carbon footprint at all, an art built entirely on precision, attention, and true values, a game of technique and of our planet both, and a vehicle, in the end, for sharing ideas.

Some thanks were owed, that first year, and they're still owed now. To Nikoi, for helping sponsor the event, in money and in time. To every player who gave their time and energy, cutting grass, cleaning the beach, and everything in between. To Amie, my wife, for putting up with me through long, sleepless nights, always with a smile, never once refusing to make me a coffee. And to Zakir — simply because without him, none of this would have happened at all.

The next race would be held in March 2014. It's been held every year since, twice a year, set by the wind rather than the calendar, exactly the way Zakir first taught me it should be.

Chapter Two

What the Game Actually Is

People ask me, sometimes, why after spending half my life around the globe — privileged to witness some of the grandest shows left on our planet, coral reefs stretching further than the eye could hold, whales surfacing beside a ship in the middle of open ocean — I ended up this enthusiastic about a few little fragile miniature sailing boats.

Because they're true masterpieces. Each single jong carries its own individuality.

I'd searched, by that point, across cultural manifestations from tribal and modern societies both, trying to learn something true about what it actually means to be human. I take my body for granted most days. I don't take my mind or my heart that way, or try not to. Both require real work.

The world of jongs is a school, and I'm one of its students.

[Photo: Michel and Zakir at the pondok, testing a new hull]

There's so much more here than meets the eye. Buckminster Fuller, a man whose ideas had already shaped how I thought about the Heraclitus and everything we tried to build aboard her, put it well: ninety-nine percent of who you are is invisible and untouchable. That's true of nearly everything, I suppose. But the jong makes it visible in a way few other things manage to.

The work that goes into the game carries a design of the highest sophistication, the ultimate simplicity — and at the same time it relies on ancient knowledge passed down through generations, so far back that no one really knows where the line begins. The dimensions are based on the human body, rooted in animist belief where spirits are everywhere, including in your own jong, and every player carries a few secrets of his own.

It's really a detective story, in its way, and you spend your time trying to collect as many viewpoints as you can, to build the sharpest possible picture. The real difficulty is that everyone, by cultural design, wants that picture kept a little blurred.

There's the physical object first — traceable back to the kolek sauh, the local sailboat whose hull and racing rig you can still find right across the northern Riau Archipelago, from Johor and Singapore down through Sumatra and the islands near Batam and Bintan. I was told it once served as the vessel that

carried food out to the spirits of the sea — betel nut, betel leaves, grains of rice. Those rituals still happen, not performed in public exactly, but very much still part of the tradition before a race begins.

In the Malay tradition there are two kinds of information — what can be readily shared, and what has to stay secret. Like in a lot of tribal societies, your real name is never actually spoken. Plenty of players genuinely believe they're sailing with the help of their own ancestors, called in with particular mantras of their own.

It's highly competitive too, since the whole tradition's taken the shape of a race, and races need winners. Players come specifically to test their own work against everyone else's.

There's a metaphysical dimension to it as well, and this isn't just theory — the jong, as an extension of yourself, gives you real feedback on the effect of your own focused attention. You can trace pieces of this back to Sufi tradition, still strong across various communities in the Riau Archipelago, especially the Naqshbandiyya order, which arrived early on the east coast of Sumatra. I recognized something of it immediately, having spent years aboard the Heraclitus learning our own version of the same discipline — presence, attention, the particular quality of focus that either makes or breaks a maneuver at sea, whether that sea is an ocean or a few hundred meters of shallow lagoon.

The Orang Suku Laut, and What Was Taken

The tradition of seamanship across Asian cultures has shifted drastically over the years, and nowhere more than here in Riau.

The Orang Suku Laut — the people of the sea — once controlled the ocean around Riau entirely, serving as advisers to the Malay sultanate. Now they're largely relegated to sedentary life on portions of land no investor ever wanted. The Malay aristocracy has long looked down on the people who make their living from the sea, treating them as lesser Malays. The provincial government rarely features the sea in its own plans at all, treating it mostly as a source of exploitation, particularly among the Chinese trading community that's amassed real fortunes from sea products over the decades.

Less than a hundred years ago, the sea and ocean around the entire world were full of sails. The Riau Archipelago was one of the great pivots of world trade between east and west — essentially everyone passed through here, at some point. Now, apart from a handful of traditional sailing boats used during

a couple of provincially funded races, and a few small fishing canoes or sampan, the art of traditional sailing has almost entirely disappeared.

Somehow the jong survived all of it. Partly because it never demanded many resources to begin with. The essence of it is time and skill, and without time there's no possibility of ever furthering either.

What It Takes

It takes a lot. Time to select the tree, the right season to cut it, the time it takes to dry the wood before you can even begin to shape it. It takes passion, patience, dexterity, precision, a genuine geometrical knowledge that gets passed hand to hand rather than written down.

You learn it either by watching and playing, or — better — by being properly taught. The measurements are based on the human body, geometry built from halves and thirds and similar simple ratios, without ever needing a tape measure. My friend Zakir once showed me the dimensions of the jong he'd chosen for me by holding it between my own arms, listening as it found the exact spot where the mast fitting sat right. Everything needs to balance; trials are necessary to cut the sails properly. Lightness of the hull matters, but the most underrated element of all is the outrigger and its float, called the **anak** — the child.

I haven't seen women race, though there's no real taboo against it — more, I think, that the culture simply assigns different activities to different genders, the way boys play with cars and girls with dolls back where I grew up. I've watched Zakir's own daughter try her hand at it, though when it comes to actual racing, the girls tend to shy away. She'll likely race, eventually, in the children's category we added later — a new addition that feels like exactly the right direction for all of this to keep growing in.

Building the Wider Tradition

After we'd gathered enough people for that first race, a lot of younger men, including a few from the local government office, decided it was genuinely "cool" to own a jong of your own. I kept telling anyone who'd listen: everyone wants a nice motorbike, but no one wants to take care of a jong. It probably helped that I took second and third place that first year myself, and though I put the winnings straight back into the **kelompok**, it lit a small fire under a few people. A bit of pride, I think, and healthy competition doing exactly what healthy competition does.

We took thirty jongs to compete regionally on the small, mystical island of Penyengat that November — a real pilgrimage for the group, our first trip outside Teluk Bakau's own waters, sailing boats we'd built ourselves into a place thick with its own royal Malay history. The provincial government started taking real notice after that. More races followed. A group formed in Malang Rapat; Berakit started organizing too. The Orang Laut themselves made the trip and raced during a *selatan* race not long after — the descendants of the very people who'd once been the jong's original keepers, coming back to race alongside the rest of us.

[Photo: The Penyengat trip, November 2013 — thirty jongs loaded for the crossing]

In December of the following year, we held a ceremony to call the wind — not a race exactly, but its own kind of ritual, the community gathering to ask the season to turn favorable, the same instinct that had once sent betel nut and rice out to sea in a jong's original form, centuries before anyone thought to race them.

[The Future I See From Here](#)

I'm often asked what I see coming next for the jong.

There's a real, strong popularity returning to it. A few years back, Zakir was more or less the only one holding the fort in the whole Teluk Bakau area. Now the races draw dozens of groups a season, and the tradition's clearly regaining ground it had spent decades losing.

The future, I think, is in making smaller races too, on the fringe of whatever the government sponsors officially — keeping control of quality, choosing the times and places that actually suit the art, so the people without much cash to spare can still be fully involved, close to home. There's real market potential in it too, enough that a few people could eventually earn some kind of living from it, partially financing the races themselves.

The races matter enormously, because they keep the jong, and the player, honest to their essence — sailing machines, tested against wind and water and each other, nothing more and nothing less. There's a separate contest too, for the most beautifully decorated jong, and while that serves its own purpose, putting a few jongs into offices and living rooms where people can admire them, the real soul of the jong stays out on the water, where it's always belonged.

This is exactly why passing the tradition on to children has become the thing I care most about now. We started making smaller jongs specifically for the

kids of Teluk Bakau — a new and genuinely exciting development, exciting enough that we built a full children's race around it, with prizes of school supplies and t-shirts rather than cash, so there's no real difference in stakes between any of the kids competing.

What's actually exciting, more than any single race, is the platform it's created. So much passes on informally — a diagram drawn in the sand that the tide will erase within the hour, a trick shown once and remembered forever. The kids are receptive in a way that genuinely surprises me, showing off to their friends what they've just learned, passing the knowledge sideways as fast as it moves down through the generations. Beyond the jong itself sits the whole world of the ocean, ready and waiting to capture them the same way it once captured me.

I dream, some days, of filling the whole coast of Bintan with sails again. We went backward for a while, leaning on motors and engines, all in service of saving time. But people here still have some time left to give. A little help can carry this a very long way.

Singapore was originally Malay. So was Borneo, so was much of what's now called Malaysia. Different jong-like designs exist across Micronesia, the Philippines — I've heard that Bali, until fairly recently, held its own races with a traditional design entirely its own. The possibility for real expansion feels close to endless. Somewhere down the line, I can picture an international event — jong builders and racers from across this whole scattered, related tradition, meeting on one beach, comparing what centuries of separate island life did to a single shared idea of what a small boat, sailed by wind alone, is actually for.

I am only, in this particular school, still a child myself. I learn something new from these masters every single time I show up.

The Wind Decides

A Story of the Selatan Race, Teluk Bakau

August 15, 2026

You never step in the same river twice.

A jong, if you've never seen one: a small wooden sailboat, carved by hand, no bigger than a child is tall — raced unmanned across shallow water, steered by nothing but the set of its sail and the skill of whoever built it.

Two things govern every race day here, and neither of them can be argued with: the wind, and the tide. Everything else — when we race, how wide the beach is, whether a boat sails true or breaks — gets decided by these two long before anyone picks up a jong. And yet no two years are ever quite the same river. The wind that carried last year's race turned northerly halfway through, in the middle of what should have been steady Selatan season — a reminder that even a forecast checked on three different apps is really just a polite guess.

Indonesia doesn't really have four seasons. It has two winds. The northeast monsoon blows from December through late March, damp off the Indian Ocean, and the rains come with it. The southwest monsoon arrives as early as June and holds through September, dry off the Australian continent, and the country dries out behind it. Our races are named the old way — after the direction the wind comes from that season. The Utara race sails under that northeast wind. The Selatan race sails under the southwest wind that follows. Teaching the academic half of a youth course, I keep learning this alongside the kids — that a wind compass in the West is a pragmatic thing, four cardinal points and done, while Indonesian navigators kept their own names for the wind between the points, the northeast and the southwest carrying their own words, their own weight.

Tide runs on its own clock, separate from the wind's. Pasang is the water rising. Surut is the water falling, the sand widening, the seagrass bed drying into flats you can walk across. This year the tide was right, but the navigable window was narrow — ten in the morning to six at night — which shaped everything else about how the day had to run.

Tomorrow is the Selatan race.

That's what I kept telling myself the evening before, watching it come together on the shore of Teluk Bakau. This year, for the first time, we really managed to fold the kids into the pre-race preparation itself — not a separate lesson off to the side, but the real thing, happening around them. The different kelompok gathered to set the next day's lineup. Some had already unloaded their jongs and staked out their patch of beach, and without wasting time, they were out practicing the course, hunting for the particular angle the wind wanted, fine-tuning rigs against it. Twenty-three groups came this year — Batam, Penyengat, Dompak, Teluk Sebong, Tanjung Siambang, Teluk Bakau, and more from around Bintan and Tanjung Pinang. Limiting each group to ten jongs let that many in without turning the day into something unfinishable.

We had funding for twenty kids. We taught closer to twenty-five, once my own daughter and a few of her friends folded themselves into the group — nobody was going to turn them away. They watched the big adult jongs being readied nearby, watched the pickup trucks unloading hull after hull from each kelompok, before it was their turn to hold a small training jong into the wind for the first time.

What struck me most, watching the grown boats come off those trucks, was how many new ones there were. Slightly bigger. A slightly greater ratio of mast to hull, built to carry a bit more canvas. New sails, cut clean. Everyone had brought their best boat this year. I'll admit to a small, private regret watching them — mine is old now, semi-retired, still sailing but not really competitive anymore. A new generation of real racers is coming up, and it shows. There were more wrinkles from the sun on the old faces than I remembered, some kelompok now in matching racing kit with their team's name printed across it, others as traditional as the day the school started. The new jongs themselves are leaner than the old ones — less decorated, less "punk," a cleaner style taking hold. That's evolution, I suppose, happening in real time on a beach in Bintan.

Every one of those hulls, old or new, started the same way: a piece of pulai wood, cut and left to dry for a month or two before anyone dares shape it. Rush that step and you're already building a bad jong. Once cured, the hull is drawn out by hand and hollowed as thin as the wood allows without losing its strength — until what's left is light enough to fly.

The wind held close to 10 to 14 knots through the day — fast, exciting, and genuinely beautiful, the kind of conditions a photographer dreams about. And the beauty of it is something we protect on purpose. There are no cigarette banners here, no bank logos, none of the usual noise that sponsorship drags onto an event like this. We'll take sponsors' money gladly — it's what keeps

this running — but not at the cost of hurting the eye. Call it artist's snobbery if you like, but the setting matters. The attention belongs on the art of the racing jong and the people sailing it, not on what's printed behind them. Picture a sacred Balinese ceremony strung with noodle-brand advertising flags, and you'll understand exactly what we're trying to avoid. It's a difficult balance to hold, and we only manage it because just enough sponsors, year after year, are willing to show up quietly and let the boats be the only thing anyone's looking at.

This year, after some searching for hands to sail them, two of my older jongs went out with new racers at the helm — both well past twelve years old themselves, boats and sailors alike, and I loved watching them race regardless. Aji, who's become genuinely good, helps keep the fleet maintained and is close with Hassim, who years ago helped build a healthy, honest rivalry with Zakir in the school's earliest days. Darts, who's worked on Nikoi Island since building first started there, bought a jong of his own this year and raced it for the first time — he named it Nikoi Island, after the place and the sponsor both. Nikoi has backed us for years now and never once asked for a logo hung anywhere. That kind of sponsor is rarer than it should be.

The jury has changed almost as much as the boats. These days it runs on printed sheets, laptops, handheld radios relaying calls from the water to the starting line, a man stationed at the finish with a camera running to settle any dispute before it starts. In the earliest years, everything was done by hand — someone cutting little paper slips and writing each result out one at a time. We've kept roughly the same number of people on the jury even as the job itself needs fewer hands, so a fair few now spend the day sitting comfortably, enjoying themselves more than working. There's something almost quietly socialist about it — everyone paid the same, whether the job that day was essential or mostly ceremonial, because friendship counts, seniority counts, a little harmless corruption and quiet negotiation counts as good sport around here. Seen up close, it's a strange and genuinely extraordinary lesson in how a small society organizes itself. A total system, if you want to call it that. How far down that rabbit hole do you want to go? Honestly, you have to be there to even start to understand it.

All the senses fill up on a day like this, including the ones that don't show up in any official record — salt, color, the smell of algae drying on the sand, wind, water, the constant flap and snap of sails catching and losing the breeze all at once. A symphony that has nothing to do with music and everything to do with paying attention. The sails do the rest, letting each jong lift almost off the water, flying more than sailing.

Schools came again this year too — some purely to watch, others to help. One team spent the morning cleaning the beach. Another looked after the visiting guests. We tried QR codes for the first time, a small piece of the modern world stitched into a very old one. That evening, the traditional dangkung played on the same sand as electro and avant-garde performance, one dissolving into the next without anyone treating it as strange. Among it, the kids' group took the floor themselves, performing a choreographed dance led by Dwi. They'd been rehearsing for almost two weeks straight for it — building, in that time, an entire small tale of wind and waves and sea, but also of secrecy, and magic, and simply being together, which is really what the whole day is about underneath everything else.

By evening, the fleet was back on the sand, salt-crusted, sails down. The same wind that carried the whole day would keep shifting with the season, the way it always does, and somewhere around March or April it would swing back around toward the north, and it would be time again to start thinking about the Utara race. The tide would rise and fall exactly the same the next morning, indifferent to who'd won.

None of this is really about nostalgia. It's closer to a reminder: that this coastline has always been a maritime place, that wind and tide shaped how people here lived long before anyone wrote it down, and that a small wooden boat, raced by a kid on an August afternoon, is still part of that same story — a slightly different boat, a slightly different kid, the same river never stepped in twice. We're not trying to keep any of it behind glass. We're trying to keep it in people's hands, one season, one tide, one kid at a time.

Let's keep this going.

Michel Lippitsch, The Jong School — Teluk Bakau, Bintan Island