



PANGLONG

People of the Sea at Berakit

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A personal history, in words and photographs

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Iwent out, the way I used to go out in my expedition years, to meet people of the ocean.

Not to study them. Not to file a report. Just to go by boat to the edge of a mangrove swamp, where the tide rises under the houses and the fish come to shelter between the posts, and to sit in someone's home and drink tea and talk about boats and stars and the price of fish, the way you do when you recognize, in another man, the same map of the sea you carry yourself. That village is called Panglong by the people who live in it. On the government sign at its entrance it is written differently — Desa Berakit, Kecamatan Teluk Sebong — but the sign is not the place. The place is a community of Orang Laut, the sea people of the Riau Archipelago, and this book is what I have gathered of them: their history, and beside it, what I have seen and felt with my own eyes over more than a decade of coming back.

This is not an anthropology. It is a record of a friendship with a place, offered so that it is not forgotten.



Berakit, on the older photographic record of the village.



People of the Sea

Before there were provinces, before there were passports, before anyone drew a line on a map and called it Indonesia or Malaysia or Singapore, there was the sea between them, and there were people who lived on it rather than beside it.

The Orang Laut — literally “people of the sea,” also called the sea nomads or, less kindly, sea gypsies — are among the oldest inhabitants of the Riau Archipelago and the waters around the Strait of Malacca. For centuries they were not marginal to the great trading world that passed through these straits; they were essential to it. They controlled the sea lanes around Riau. They served as the navy and the sea power of the Malay sultanates, ferrying rulers, guarding harbours, and enforcing the sultan’s authority on water that no army on land could ever hold. In the courts of the Malay aristocracy they were more than muscle — they were cultural players, bound into the ceremony and the magic of Malay kingship in ways the sultans themselves half-feared. It is said the Malays were wary of the power of Orang Laut magic, and that a Jong — the small ceremonial sailing boat still raced today at Teluk Bakau and a handful of other villages — could not truly be sailed without it: you need, as the old saying goes, to keep your heart clean.

That world has been dismantled with a thoroughness that is hard to overstate. Colonial administrations, and later the nation-states that succeeded them, drew borders across water that had never needed them. Passports and permits replaced a mental map that ran from the Riau islands to Singapore to the coasts of Malaysia — a map held not on paper but in the memory of a people who navigated by stars and knew where to find fresh water on islands with no name on any chart. The aristocracy that had once needed the Orang Laut’s ships came to look down on

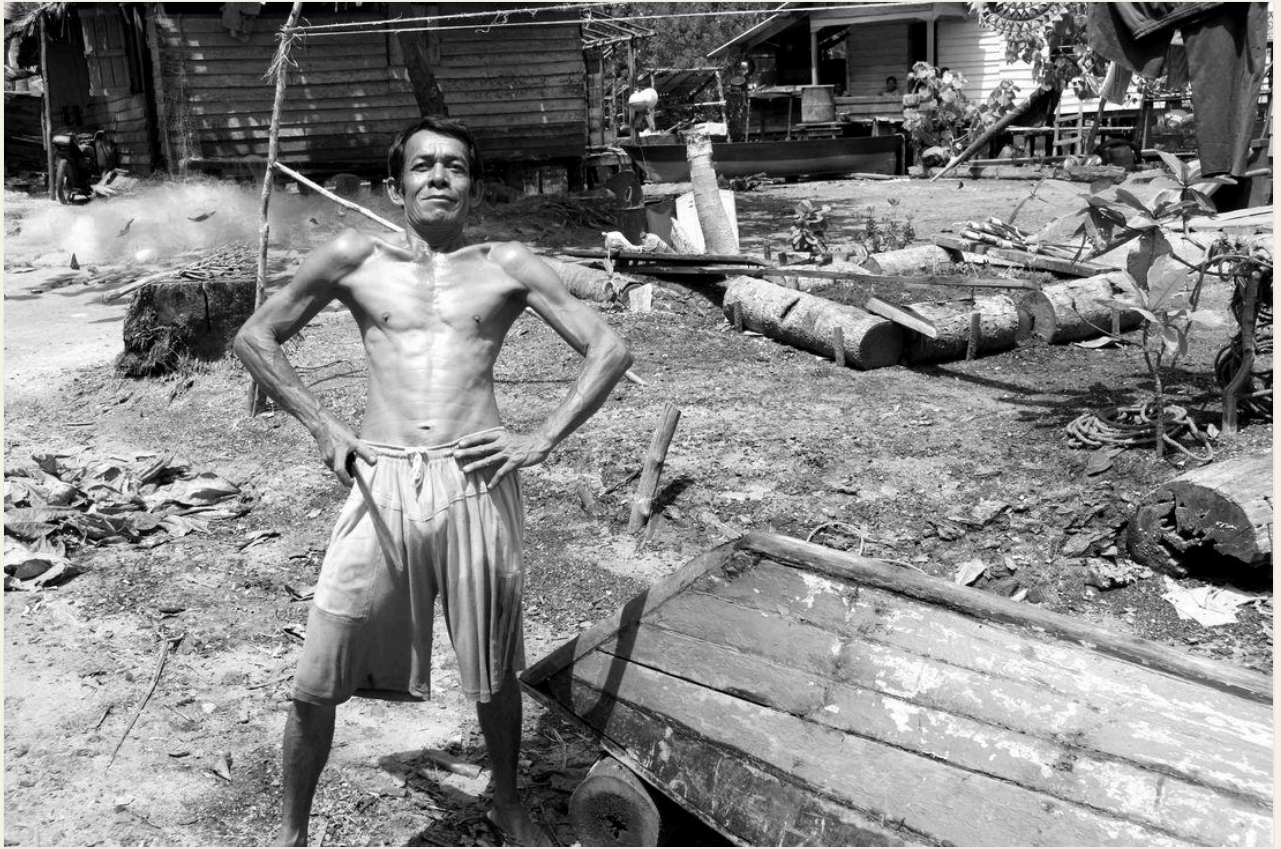
the people who made their living from the sea, as “lesser” Malays. Provincial governments that speak often of the land rarely speak of the sea at all, except as something to be exploited — most visibly by traders, historically Chinese merchant families, who came to hold near-total control over the fish trade in villages like this one.

The result, repeated up and down this coast, is a people once sovereign over the water now settled — not always willingly — onto small, often unwanted parcels of land: the corners no investor wanted, wedged between mangrove swamp and government boundary line. Many Orang Laut communities are intermarried now with settled Malay populations; some have been pushed into outright poverty and social exclusion; and yet, in the middle of all of it, something persists. A spirit of freedom, a set of skills, a knowledge of tide and current and fish that no amount of marginalization has managed to erase.

Panglong — the Orang Laut settlement at Berakit, on the northern shoulder of Bintan island — is one small, specific place where all of this history has come to rest.



Mending a net.











Finding Panglong

The sign is easy to miss if you are not looking for it: a government placard, white and municipal, planted near the entrance to the settlement.

PEMERINTAH KABUPATEN BINTAN. KECAMATAN TELUK SEBONG. DESA BERAKIT. Underneath, in smaller letters, the name of the hamlet within the village — Teluk Merbau — and the office of its RT, its neighbourhood head. A line further down, half bureaucratic and half practical for a place with this history of movement across borders, states that any guest staying more than twenty-four hours is required to report.

It is the kind of sign that exists to record an address, and it does that job well enough. It does not say that “Panglong” is the name the people here actually use for themselves and their place — a name that predates the district office and will likely outlive it. It does not say that the houses behind it stand on stilts over water that rises and falls with the tide, connected to each other and to the shore by a network of boardwalks built from salvaged, weathered planks, repaired again and again with whatever wood comes to hand. It does not say that the walls of some of these houses have been painted — hearts in red and pink, a mural reading “Let’s Care in Environment and Teamwork on Community” — by a school whose reach extends further into this village than a bureaucratic sign could ever suggest.

Berakit sits at the far northern point of Bintan, looking out toward the open sea and the small islands beyond, on a coast still fringed by mangrove forest thick enough to swallow a boardwalk in green within a few paces. It is close — closer than the province’s own maps of tourism and investment would suggest — to Teluk Bakau, the village where I have spent much of the last decade helping to

keep alive the tradition of Jong racing, the small unmanned sailing boats that are themselves, by every account I have found, an inheritance from the Orang Laut who once dominated these waters. When another Jong group formed at Malang Rapat, word came that Berakit was getting ready to join as well, that the Orang Laut here had made the trip themselves and raced during the selatan season. It says something large in a small way: the line between “Jong village” and “Orang Laut village” is not a line at all here. It is the same people, the same coast, the same water.









Teluk Merbau, RT. 01 – Panglong, on the government's sign.

How Panglong Came to Be

The village has a date, and a name attached to it, in a way that the deeper history of the Orang Laut mostly does not. Panglong's own beginning is recent and specific: the first family landed here in 1962, come from Kubung Island — a small island that has since been swallowed into the growing city of Batam. The man who led them was called Bone Pasius Boncet. Three years later, in 1965, three more families arrived and settled beside them, and together these four households became the forerunners of everyone who lives in Panglong today.

It is a short enough span of time that it is still, in a sense, living memory — not the deep centuries of the sultanates and the sea power that came before it, but a single lifetime, carried forward now by Bone Pasius's own descendants. His son, Fransiskus Xaverius Tintin, leads the village today as its elected Tribal Chief, and is, by all accounts, the only person from the community to have gone on to any formal education past school — a one-year diploma that the villagers speak of, I am told, with a certain quiet pride.

What moved a handful of families to come ashore and stay, in a way their own ancestors mostly had not, is not written on any sign. But something of it becomes visible in how the village organized its spiritual life once it had settled. For years after the first landing, there was no church or mosque here at all — Catholics from the village went to worship at Pengudang, down the coast, and Muslims went to a different village nearby, in Berakit itself. It was not until 2010 and 2011 that Panglong built its own houses of worship, on its own ground. The small church that went up carries the name of Bone Pasius — the founder himself, remembered rather than sainted, by a community that still counts itself as his family in the

most literal sense. The mosque, a short walk away, became the house of worship for Tintin's own uncle and his family, who are Muslim. A scattering of Protestant households worship differently again.

None of it, from what I have seen and been told, causes trouble. Tintin himself is said to hold to a simple rule as village chief: no one may impose a religion on Panglong that would disturb its peace, and anyone who tries to sow that kind of division, whatever the excuse — politics, faith, the old distinctions of ethnicity — will be made to leave. It is not the only mixing the village lives with easily. Malay, Bugis, and Chinese families keep shops and stalls alongside the Orang Laut households, and Malay — not the Orang Laut's own older tongue — has become the everyday language that lets everyone here talk to everyone else, at the market, at the jetty, at sea.

Panglong is, in this sense, a single small answer to a much larger question. Across the whole of the Riau Archipelago there are reckoned to be some forty-four Orang Laut communities, numbering close to thirteen thousand people between them — most concentrated in Lingga, a good number more scattered through Batam, Anambas, and Karimun. Within Bintan Regency alone, the sea people live on in half a dozen named places besides this one: Air Kelubi, Kawal Pantai, Mapur out in Sebang Bay, and others. Seventy-five families call Panglong home today — not a large number, set against thirteen thousand, but a number that has held, roughly, since the days when it was still four.



A grandfather, a mother, a son — the village, carried forward.

The Elder's House

The tide is coming up, rising under the poles of the houses. Fish are seeking shelter between the posts and discarded fishing nets.

I remember the spokesman elder of the village greeting me in his house, one of his grandchildren asleep in the middle of the room. We start a conversation, the way two men who have spent their lives near boats will, with analogies drawn from our respective lives. What I take from it mostly is that he misses the freedom of the open sea. He was a true nomad once, travelling to islands in Malaysia — places I had often visited myself — and to Singapore. We discover, without quite meaning to, that we hold the same mental map of this stretch of water: the same islands, the same talk of stars and navigation, the same knowledge of where to find fresh water when you need it.

In the village stand four old charcoal ovens, still standing, still kept — not swept away, but preserved, deliberately, as a monument. Not to some glorious past. The kilns burned mangrove wood into charcoal to feed the gambier and pepper trade that swept through this archipelago in the 1800s, a plantation economy that ran on firewood the way ours runs on oil: gambier had to be boiled for hours over open flame to yield its extract, and the land for pepper vines had to be cleared and burned before a single vine went in. The forest was eaten from two directions at once — cut on land to make room for the plantations themselves, and cut again at the water's edge, mangrove by mangrove, to keep the kilns fed. That trade moved on, the way it always did once an area's forest gave out, because it was built to consume and move, the way a fire consumes and moves. Whatever I might once have wanted to make of those ovens — a room for the stars, a room for navigation,

a museum of some happier past — the ovens themselves argue for something plainer and harder: they are what is left standing when an economy treats a forest, and the sea beside it, as fuel.

We sip tea, eat some cake, and talk about how they handle their boats — always two people taking turns on watch, cooking on board, the practical choreography of a life lived at sea. He used to travel freely between Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Now political changes require passports, permits. “Not possible any more,” he tells me. “We have no passport, no money for permit.” They have been pushed into one small corner of land, wedged between the mangrove swamp and whatever else the map allows them. Before, he tells me, there was no malaria. People did not get sick the way they do now. The tide washes the area clean twice a day, but the sewage and the rubbish all go out with it, into the same sea that feeds them. There is one well the women use for washing; the water is brackish, unfit to drink.

Whisky, he tells me, was used as medicine — fuel to stay warm, a way to start the day quickly, courage to face a storm. He shows me, on our tea glass, roughly how much. And because sailors the world over end up talking about the same things eventually, the conversation drifts for a moment to the price of women in different ports — more a bonding ritual, a way of talking about human nature, than anything else.

A man arrives, trying to buy fish. He is not the only one. Several houses are weighing their catch, packing it in ice, waiting for it to be collected for the market in Tanjung Pinang, the commercial capital of Bintan. Red snapper goes for around six thousand rupiah a kilo — less than a dollar. A Chinese family holds something close to a monopoly on buying fish here, and runs the store that supplies the village’s basic goods. I watch five large cuttlefish being cleaned — fifteen thousand rupiah a kilo, though you cannot buy them yourself; most families are in debt to

the Chinese traders and must keep selling to them out of that debt, a quiet, ordinary form of bondage that nobody in the village bothers to name as such because it has simply always been the arrangement.

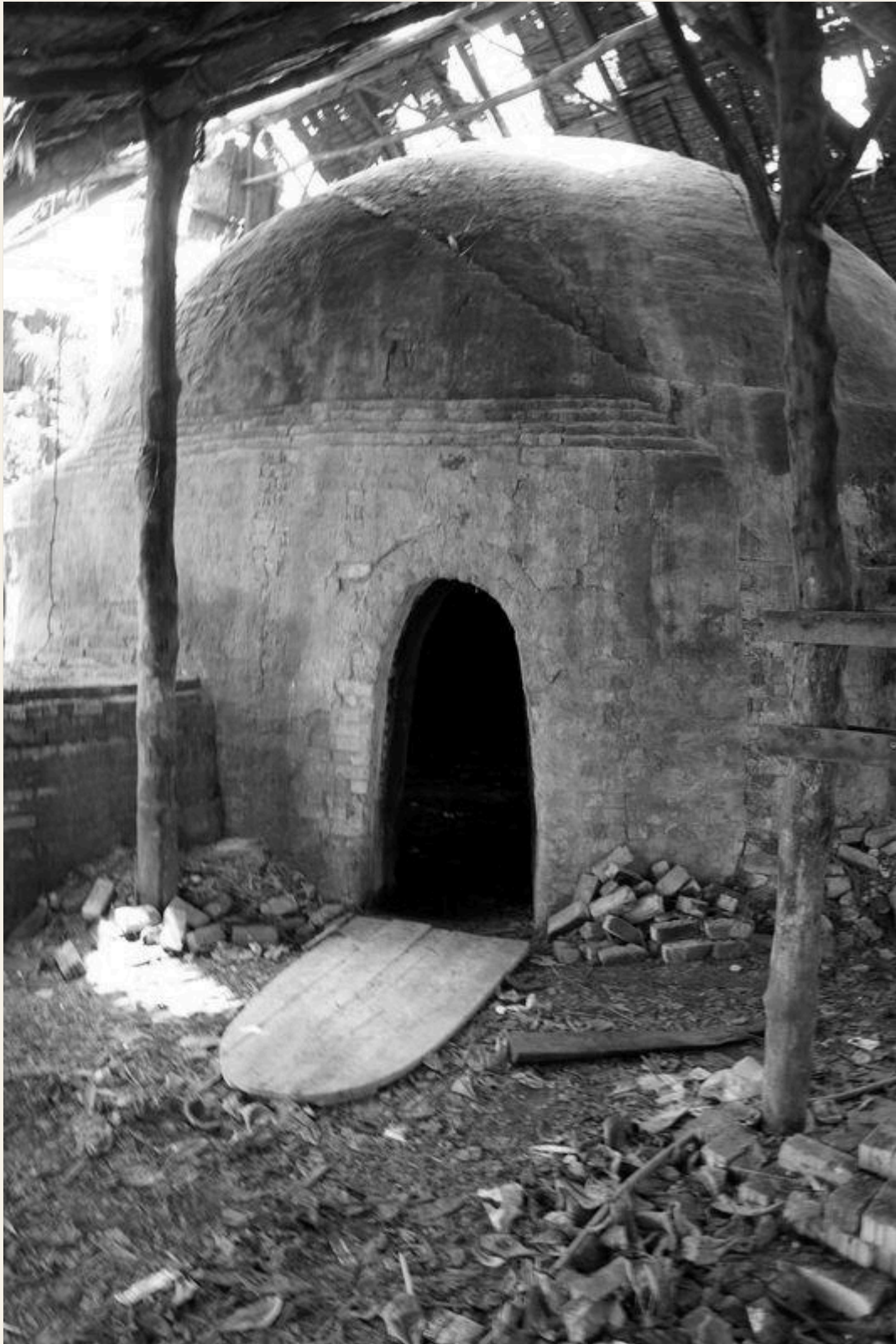
Fishing-trap production is at its height when I visit. Traps are everywhere. It is Chinese New Year, and the season for a particular fish that fetches the highest price when it is carrying eggs — so the game, unspoken but understood by everyone, is to catch the pregnant females. I cannot help the thought that follows: every egg that might have replenished the sea with new fish is instead ending up in someone's New Year dinner. A few households keep pens of live fish — groupers, snappers — and buckets of crabs, feeding the live-fish trade that eventually surfaces, unrecognizable, in the tanks of fancy restaurants far from here. One family is cracking open shells with a heavy hammer, a pile of thick conical shells beside them.

It is about two in the afternoon, and most households are cooking over wood fires. There is a feeling of independence in each house — a self-reliance, an intimacy with the marine environment around them, that keeps providing for their needs whether or not anyone from the government or the market ever notices. A couple of weeks before this visit, Heena had given beads to the women of the village, to see what they might do with them — an experiment in necklaces, in beaded bags, in a small exchange of craft that had nothing to do with fish prices or debt at all.





One of the four charcoal ovens, kept standing.



Inside the firing chamber.





Semah Laut: What Is Owed to the Sea

There is a word for what the tea and the tide and the charcoal ovens are all, in their different ways, circling around, and it is not a word I heard spoken directly in the elder's house, though I understood, afterward, that I had been sitting inside its logic the whole time. The Orang Laut of Panglong call it Semah Laut — an offering to the sea — and it is less a single ceremony than an entire way of remaining answerable to the water that keeps you alive.

The ritual itself, carried out by individuals or by several households together, sometimes en masse, is built from a short list of humble things: yellow pulut, glutinous rice dyed with turmeric, is the central offering, set aside for Jerambang, the highest of the Sea Gods. Eggs go to the god who guards the coast. Betel nut and its accompaniments — sirih pinang, sirih bakik — are requests for safety, carried the way a sailor anywhere carries a small superstition against a hard crossing. Green beans and cigarettes are left for the seven Sea Gods to share between them. Banana leaves serve as the plate beneath it all, the surface everything else is laid on before it goes into the water.

Beneath the list of ingredients sits a cosmology as detailed, in its own way, as anything in the courts of the old Malay sultans who once feared Orang Laut magic. Jerambang is the highest god, the owner of the sea, the one who protects, who provides, who can withhold health or bring illness as easily as he brings a good catch. Beneath him the sea has other, more particular guardians: a spirit of the water's centre; one who watches the flow of the rivers as they run out to meet the tide; a guardian set at the edge of every island; a presence felt in the navel of the water, where foam gathers; another known by the "teeth" of the water — the

clear, sharing current where two bodies of water meet and mix. None of it is decorative. A people who have navigated by star and current and the memory of where fresh water can be found on an island with no name learn, sooner or later, to give the sea a face, several faces, rather than leave it as the blank, uncaring thing it can otherwise seem to be.

The purpose of Semah Laut, when it is explained plainly, comes down to three things: gratitude for a good catch, a request for continued luck, and — this is the part that struck me most, turning it over afterward — a request for forgiveness, for whatever has been taken badly, or too much, or without enough care. It is not a ritual that assumes the sea owes the Orang Laut anything. It assumes the reverse.

That assumption has a very practical edge to it. Coral reefs, in the belief system that surrounds Semah Laut, are taboo ground — the gathering place of the Sea Gods themselves, and to damage a reef is understood, in the most direct terms, as destroying a god's home. Whatever the theology, the ecology underneath it holds up: a reef is nursery, shelter, and food source all at once for the fish that feed the village, and it does the unglamorous work of breaking the force of a wave before it reaches a mangrove root or a stilt-house piling. A community that believes its gods live inside the reef has, whether it thinks of it this way or not, built itself a reason to leave the reef alone that a fisheries regulation could never quite match. It is a shame, and no fault of the belief system itself, that dynamite and bomb fishing found their way into these waters anyway, for however long, before the ban of 2005 — proof that no cosmology, however carefully built, is proof against a fast profit taken by someone passing through rather than someone who has to keep living beside what is left afterward.

I do not think Semah Laut is best understood as folklore, a quaint survival to be filed alongside the charcoal ovens as evidence of an older world. It is closer to what the elder was telling me, without quite using these words, over tea: that a life built this close to the water requires you to keep accounts with it — not the

accounts of a ledger, but something nearer to a conscience. Ask, give thanks, ask forgiveness. Repeat, for as long as the tide keeps rising under the poles of your house.



The tide, and what is owed to it.

What the Water Gives, and What It Takes

Everything in Panglong runs on the rhythm of the tide, and almost everything depends, in the end, on the sea giving something up. The economy of the village is not separate from its geography — it is written into the pilings the houses stand on, into the drying racks and the nets slung over every rail, into the small mountains of shell midden that build up, year after year, in the shallows beneath the boardwalks: conch and clam shells picked clean and left to accumulate, a kind of quiet archive of every meal the sea has provided.

The boats themselves are simple, hand-built, endlessly repaired rather than replaced — a plank patched here, a rope re-spliced there, an old brick lashed on as ballast, a bottle wedged in as a float. Nothing is thrown away that might still serve a purpose; nothing is bought new that can instead be mended. Alongside the working boats, the floating platforms of yellow plastic pontoons — crude, ugly, entirely practical — that now do the job once done by wood, piled with drums, buckets, coils of net, the accumulated gear of people who fish for a living and cannot afford for any of it to be wasted.

And yet the sea that gives so much is also, unmistakably, in trouble. Marine debris collects in the same corners where the fish once sheltered. Plastic bottles, packaging, worn fishing line — the same currents that once carried only what nature put into them now carry everything else besides. It would be easy, and dishonest, to romanticize a way of life that is this exposed to hardship. It would be just as dishonest to pretend that the hardship is the whole of the story, or that it is somehow the fault of the people living it.

The numbers, where anyone has bothered to collect them, only confirm what a look at the drying racks already tells you. In the early 2000s a Panglong fisherman working these waters with simple gear could still bring home sixty or seventy kilos in a day; once the reefs around the village had taken real damage, that same day's work started yielding ten or twenty. In 2005 the government finally moved to ban the worst of it — the dynamite, the bombs, the gear built to strip a reef bare rather than fish it — but a reef does not repair itself on a bureaucrat's schedule, and the recovery, where it is happening at all, has been slow enough that incomes here still sit close to where they sat twenty years ago: somewhere between sixty and ninety thousand rupiah a day, six or seven dollars, for a full day's work on the water that has fed this village since Bone Pasius first brought his family ashore.



Sea cucumbers, drying.



Fish, drying on the net.



Ikan billis, salted and drying in the sun.







VII

Boats, and the Debt Every Jong Owes

I did not come to the Orang Laut of Berakit only as a visitor with a camera. I came to them, indirectly, through a boat.

For years I have worked to keep alive the tradition of Jong racing at Teluk Bakau — small, unmanned sailing boats, raced by the whole length of their sail and the trim of an outrigger called the *kate*, “the child,” rather than by any crew aboard. The Jong predates the arrival of Islam on this coast; it belongs to an older, animist world, in which small boats were once sent out with gifts of betel nut and other offerings for the sea, and only later evolved into the sailing art pieces that still race here today. Its geometry is drawn not from any tape measure but from the human body — a builder like my late friend Zakir could hold a Jong between someone’s outstretched arms and know, by that alone, whether the hole for the mast was cut in the right place.

None of this belongs to me, or even, really, to the villages that race Jongs today. It belongs, first, to the Orang Laut — the original nomadic tribe that controlled the sea around Riau, intimately bound to the Jong long before I ever set foot on this coast. They became, in time, the navy of the Malay sultans, but also cultural players in their courts; the Malays themselves are said to have feared the power of Orang Laut magic, and it is still said that you need to keep your heart clean to truly sail a Jong.

That debt became concrete, not just historical, the year we built the *Naga Languit* — a six-metre manned kolek, unlike the small unmanned Jong, that Zakir turned up with one day: just a hull, a mast, and a large plastic sail. We built her a paddle to serve as rudder, and patched the hull with wood dust set into kerosene. A friend’s

father, a parachutist, gave us cloth to cut into a proper sail. But the *Naga Languit* was wildly unstable at first, capsizing again and again, until she found her feet — and she only really came together, only really became sailable, with the help of the Orang Laut of Berakit, whose knowledge of trim and balance and the particular temperament of a boat like this one was simply beyond anything the rest of us knew. She sailed once, eventually, all the way to Nikoi Island.

It is one small story among many, but it says plainly what the history says more abstractly: whatever still floats and sails and races on this stretch of the Riau coast, in one way or another, owes something to the people who came first.



Naga Languit, under sail.



Naga Languit, and her captain, young.



The captain of Naga Languit, years later.



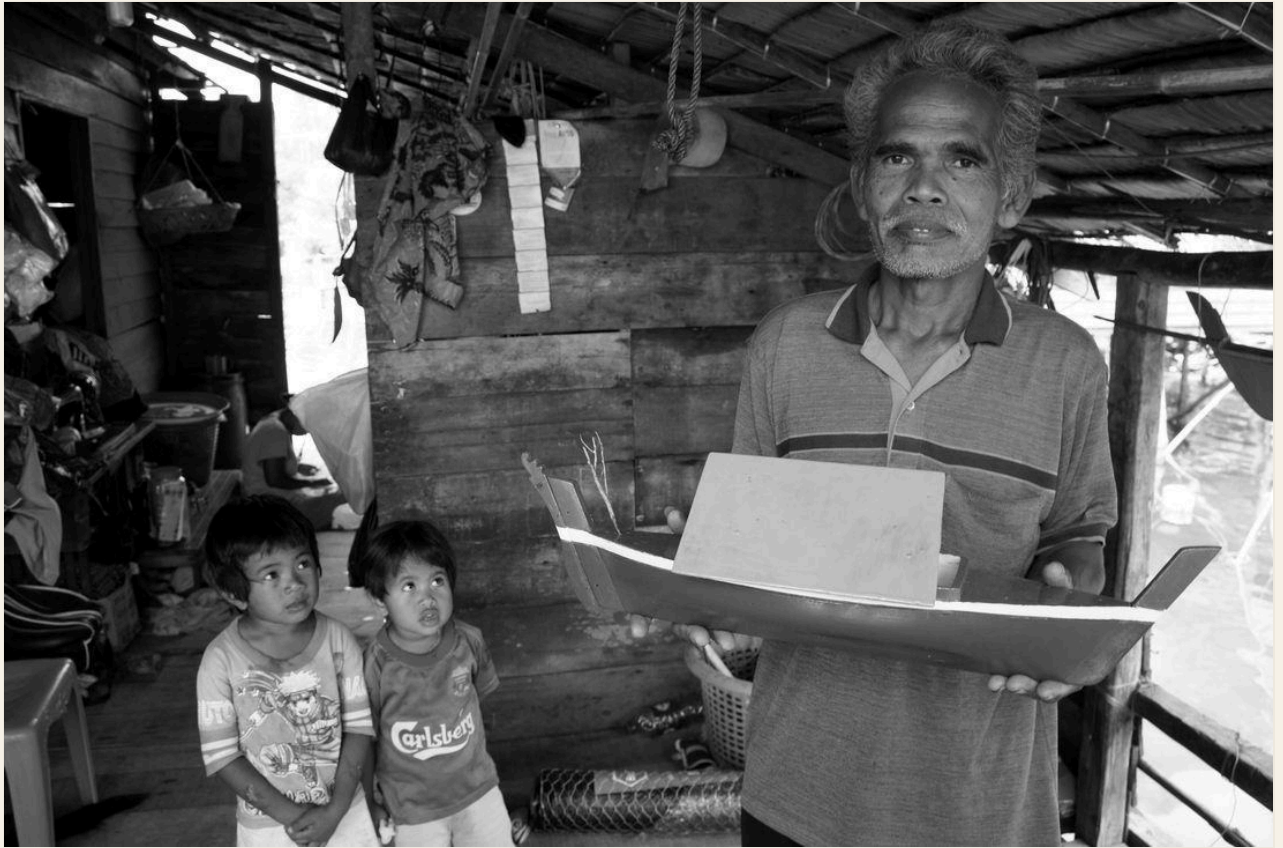












A model boat, and an audience.



Under the Painted Wall

Children grow up on stilts here the way other children grow up on solid ground, running the same boardwalks their grandparents built, catching small fish between the same posts, sitting on the same weathered planks to watch whatever there is to watch on the water.

Some of the walls of Panglong have been painted — not by an agency or a contractor, but by a school. Hearts in fading pink and red decorate the sides of a house whose paint has otherwise given up entirely to salt and sun. On another wall, in careful, hand-lettered colours: *Let's Care in Environment and Teamwork on Community*. A small girl in a Planet Samudra Jong School t-shirt stands smiling in front of both murals, in two photographs taken minutes apart — proof, if any is needed, that the conservation work of a small sailing-boat school and the daily life of an Orang Laut fishing village are not two separate stories at all, but one story that happens to be photographed from two different angles.

The four charcoal ovens are still standing at the other end of the village, kept as a monument to what that older economy cost the forest and the sea beside it. Beside that honest reckoning, something gentler is also under way here, quietly, without needing my permission or my plan for it: beads handed from one woman to another to see what new pattern might come of them; a t-shirt worn by a child that connects a fishing village to a beach half an hour away where small boats are still raced the old way; a mural painted by children who will grow up, if the sea is kind to them, still living on these same stilts, over this same water, carrying forward — whether they know its full weight or not — one of the oldest ways of belonging to a place that this coast has ever produced.



Planet Samudra Jong School.







"Let's Care in Environment and Teamwork on Community."





AFTERWORD

The sea does not keep a history the way we do. It does not file, it does not sign, it does not draw a border and ask a stranger to report to an office within twenty-four hours. It rises and falls under the same poles whether anyone is watching or not, and it has done that under people who read the stars for their address long before any government printed one on a sign.

What the Orang Laut have always known, and what a place like Panglong still teaches anyone willing to sit on its boardwalk for an afternoon, is that the water is not scenery. It is not a view to be had from land, or a resource to be drawn from at a price fixed by whoever happens to be buying that season. It is a way of measuring a life — by tide instead of clock, by current instead of road, by what the reef still gives instead of what a market will pay. A people who once held that whole map in their heads, who navigated by starlight between islands with no name on any chart, understood something about the ocean that the rest of us are only now, clumsily, being forced to relearn: that we do not stand apart from it, that its health and ours were never two separate questions.

The tide will keep rising and falling under those stilts long after this book is closed. Whether Panglong is remembered as an address on a government sign or as what it has always been — a people, a history, a way of belonging to the sea that this whole region owes far more to than it admits — is not really up to the sign.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Panglong, Berakit





















































