Flying Fishermen

The fishermen of Lamalera village in Indonesia catch whales in a time-honoured tradition of a subsistence way of life

His sinewy body wrapped in a grey-and-maroon striped *lungi* (a wraparound sarong used by men in south India), he stands out in the crowd of suits and boots at the 11th meeting of COP to the CBD in Hyderabad's Hitech City, the swanky venue for the global bash. He is usually found hovering around a venue where discussions about issues faced by coastal communities are held, and it is easy to place him at first glance as a fisherman. But Bona Beding is no common fisherman. He is one of those 'flying' types, who jumps into the sea with a harpoon to catch big fish. Bona, as he is fondly called by people who know him, is a whaler from Indonesia.

Not being fluent in English does not stop Bona from smiling invitingly at curious passers-by. Though he has Riza Damanik of KIARA, the Indonesian non-governmental organization (NGO), to help with translations, Bona is not intimidated by the English speakers as most non-English-speaking people usually are. In his broken English, he intervenes to correct the speaker if he is referred to as a 'hunter': "I do no hunting. This is not a game." Bona understands the nuances of language, even of a language foreign to him, and will not yield easily. "It is not hunting like it is in Japan or Taiwan. It is a giving from God." That is what the people of his village Lamalera, who catch whales "only to consume within the village and never to earn profits" believe.

Lamalera, situated in the southern part of Lembata Island in the East Nusa Tenggara Province of Indonesia, is populated by around 4,000 indigenous people. Damanik says, "Many have filmed Lamalera. Its whaling traditions are famous." True to his words, a deluge of websites on the village pop up in any Internet search. One of them is from the pages of the famous National Geographic magazine—a striking picture of a fisherman jumping headlong into sea, caught midair against a coruscating blue noon sky, in a process labelled 'subsistence hunting'. "I don't yet jump like that. But my father does. But one day I will overtake my father," says Bona on seeing the picture.

"Fishing is not just an activity. It is a way of life," says Bona.

Handover tradition

Bona's father, Stephanus Beding, 74, is the *lamafa*—the captain of the fishing boat. The *lamafa* tradition, akin to monarchy, involves the son taking over the captaincy of a boat from the father. But *lamafa* is not just a leader but also the general. He is the one who takes the plunge into the sea, to battle with the sperm whale. "Fishing is not just an activity. It is a way of life," says Bona. As Damanik ends his interpretation with that brief line, Bona nudges him to add: "It is a philosophy." Listening to Bona outline the tenets of this philosophy, it is difficult not to be convinced that it indeed is a philosophy of living.

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BONA BEDING

Members of the whale fishing community of Lamalera, Indonesia, setting out to sea at the start of the region's whaling season

The fishing community of Lamalera believes that the sea and the land have an intimate connection. Therefore, before the May-October whaling season sets in, the community members begin with a ritual that starts on the top of a hill. Bona claims the existence there of a naturally shaped stone that resembles a whale. The community members offer prayers in front of the stone, and carry a bunch of produce such as fruits and rice from the land to the sea. They drown them as an offering to the sea, which, symbolically for them, is the mother of their village. "We believe that we take from the sea to the land and hence must give from the land to the sea," says Bona.

The fishermen have strict rules about whaling: They do not catch a baby whale or a female whale. They do not go whaling on Sundays, most of them being Christians. Most interestingly, they do not chase a whale beyond a particular point at sea. Bona is unable to pinpoint this in terms of a measure of distance, but he and his clansmen know the boundary by sight, and whales are not to be chased once they cross that limit.

Lamalera's relationship with the sea might seem merely ritualistic, but it runs deeper than that. It has a rather strong correlation with conserving what gives life to the community. Though there are two kinds of whales in the region—sperm and blue whale—the Lamalera fishermen hunt only the sperm whale because only this species "breeds a lot." The blue whale is considered an endangered species by the international environmental community. But that does not concern the people of Lamalera. They believe they understand their sea better. "But the international community always looks at us from the outside. They never try to get into our community and understand what the sea means to us," says Bona.

In 2009, Lamalera waters were declared a part of the Sawu sea conservation area. The decision was followed by a prohibition on traditional whale capture, which has sustained the community since the 13th century. But strong opposition from the Lamalera community persuaded the government to withdraw the Lamalera waters from the Sawu Sea conservation area.

Mere ruse

"We consider ourselves the owners of the sea. We know that the quality or quantity of whales has not declined. Why would we destroy something we depend upon?" asks Bona. "This marine protection is only a ruse to allow privatization. We will not let that happen in Lamalera," he says. Damanik, whose organization, KIARA, has worked with coastal communities,

adds that the declaration of protected areas throughout the country has been followed by privatization and tourism in those areas.

Damanik puts the process of marine protection in Indonesia in context. To date, 15 mn ha of marine area has been brought under protected areas. By 2020, the Indonesian government aims to increase this to 20 mn ha. Damanik claims that this expansion is mindless as it does not take into consideration the valuable traditional knowledge available with indigenous communities. Sometimes fishermen, who accidentally venture into protected areas, are shot down by coastal guards.

All around the world, the issue of rights over sea territory has seen conflicts. Indian fishermen languishing in Pakistani jails or fishermen from Tamil Nadu shot dead by the Sri Lankan Navy are examples. The situation in Indonesia is no different. The irony, however, is that often the human massacre is the result of a rather contorted battle waged by the State to conserve some species. Since the Aichi Targets adopted by COP10 aims to bring 10 per cent of the earth's coastal areas under protection, governments have been clamouring to reach that number, often overlooking huge losses to livelihoods, and sometimes even life.

Bona opens a digital image on his Macbook. It is of near-naked children lying on the beach, covered in sand. If only they had slightly protruding bellies, and snot or rashes—instead of smiles on their faces, the image would fit the perfect stereotypical caricature of poverty. Bona knows that. He asks: "Do you think these children are poor?" He is not being rhetorical, he demands an answer. "They are happy. In Lamalera everybody is happy. Nobody is rich or poor. I want to be a fisherman. I want my son to be a fisherman. Why do you oppose?", he asks the conservationists and governments ridden with a development agenda.

Bona is unable to indicate the average income of the Lamalera villager nor is he able to say if everybody in Lamalera can afford a Macbook like his. A closer look at the village might reveal inequalities, or it might not. Bona says that the Muslims in the village do not fish. Christians and Muslims have different days assigned to sell produce in the market. It is convenient to momentarily forget divisions along religious lines. Utopia does not exist, either in the developed urbanscape or in the romanticized countryside. But that is not reason enough to not give people a choice. Lamalera wants to fight for that choice, asserts Bona.

Primarily a barter community, the women in the village go to the markets to sell their produce. Fish is traded for other agricultural products. Lamalera seems the idyllic example of a community that sustains itself. From Bona's wraparound sarong to the boat's sail, everything is made from locally available material. Bona hands out a visiting card and says, "The paper is made from a local tree." It is this way of life that people like Bona want to defend.

In the last three years, spearheaded by Bona, a local festival called *Baleo* (a fisherman's chant when out at sea to catch a whale) is being celebrated as a symbol of the contentment of the community members with their lives.

As part of the cultural programme, a compact disc is handed out to all outsiders, which contains songs about Lamalera—a village whose very name is musical and rolls off the tongue in four syllables, La - ma - le - ra. One of the songs, whose tune is reminiscent of the sway of boats on a calm sea, goes "La, La for Lamalera, the plate of the sun", a song about the traditions and customs of the village.

Bona plays the song at a seminar and considers it self-contained and sufficient to make the critical point that the villagers of Lamalera know how to respect the sea, what it gives back to them, and how to find contentment in their relationship with it.

For more

vimeo.com/1937097
A Whale Hunt in Lamalera – Indonesia

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Indonesia: The Whale Hunters