

The First Whale of the Year: Reflections on learning to whale, and learning to write about whaling, in the Savu Sea

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Background

This “Note from the Field” is a self-reflexive exploration of both experiencing, and writing about, traditional whale hunting in Indonesia. For the past year I have been working in Lamalera, a village on the southern side of the island of Lembata, which sits near the end of the chain of islands that make up the province of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Lamalera is famous for being the last *adat* or traditional whaling village in Indonesia, though they also hunt other large marine prey including dolphins, porpoises, manta rays, as well as flying fish and various coral species. It is how Lamalerans hunt—jumping with harpoons onto the backs of their prey from sail boats called *tena*—that has captured the attention and romantic imagination of photographers, reporters, and TV crews from Indonesia and around the world in recent years. The iconic photograph of an elegant body launched mid-air over the sleek back of a surfacing sperm whale shows up in magazines, at the regional airport, and on t-shirts in roadside stands in the island’s main town.

Lamalerans have struggled with their recent notoriety. While it has increased the flow of tourism here, it also increased the attention of conservation NGOs and the state. Commercial whaling was banned in Indonesia in the 1980’s and exploitation of all cetacean and manta species was recently banned by the current Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries (MMAF). Efforts by the MMAF, in concert with various marine conservation NGOs, to convince Lamalerans to switch from whale hunting to whale watching tourism have been refused

by the community at different junctures since 2009. The national government is wary of garnering negative international attention for whaling and is also concerned about the population levels of mantas in the region, as two species have already been listed as endangered. These logics, however, fail to appreciate the centrality of hunting to Lamalerans' cosmology, identity, and economy. Furthermore, they expose a rift between the national identity that the state is still working on stitching together and the staggering cultural diversity represented in its more than 17,500 islands. As I am often told there, "Lamalera was here long before Indonesia existed."

In local cosmology, marine prey is categorized as *rejek* or blessings that have been sent to the community by their ancestors to nourish the current generation. Refusing this gift would be sacrilege to a group of people that still actively worships their forbearers. This represents a type of foundational cosmological difference between Lamalerans and Western fisheries science, but it is not the only reason for Lamalerans' inability to comply with various conservation efforts. Much of life in Lamalera is conceptually organized around hunting. All residents belong to clans, and each clan cooperatively operates a hunting boat, which is in turn tied to a clan house and a yearly calendar of rituals. When the boats come back from a hunt, animals are parted out through a complex and centuries-old system based on which boats successfully caught the animal and the clan relationships between the people in each of the boats. Traditionally, gender roles have been defined through this work as well: it is the responsibility of men to go to sea, but it is the responsibility of women to prepare and cure the meat and barter the meat for fruit, vegetables, and rice at weekly open air markets with women from mountain farming villages. This barter system, in turn, connects Lamalera to the rest of the island.

Lamalera, like many other rural places in Indonesia that still maintain strong *adat* traditions, is also struggling with how much *modernisasi* or modernization they want to allow in their village, and how to control its flow. While it is a much larger identity issue tied to technology, schooling, out-migra-

tion, and the money economy, this struggle has manifested most symbolically in an inter-generational conflict about how much hunters use outboard motors versus paddles and sails. Outboard motors have been forbidden on the traditional harpoon boats, or *tena*. In the last few years, however, the current generation of fishers have started to tow the *tena* out to meet the whales using smaller boats outfitted with 15 hp Yamaha outboards during hunts. These outboards were given to villagers as part of a rural development aid program from the central government. Older generations, and many of the people no longer active in the fishery (those who have attained government jobs or moved away to work in cities on bigger islands) disagree with this use of the outboards and have called for a return to “the old ways.” This inter-village conflict has in turn come to intersect with conservation conflicts, because the use of motors endangers Lamalera’s “traditional” hunter status, which may serve as some protection against government regulation. The iconic nature of this “story” has also captured international media attention, deepening the fissures and raising the stakes of the conflict within the community, as the narrative is repeated in news articles, TV specials, and photo essays.

Hunting in Lamalera is divided into two types based on season: 1) hunts that occur during the *musim lefa* which begins in May and ends in October and represents the bulk of fishing activity where boats go out and actively hunt a variety of marine prey, and 2) the *Baleo* hunts, which are opportunistic hunts that happen only if a sperm or orca whale is spotted off the coast. The following description comes from a *Baleo* hunt in March of this year, the first successful hunt of the year.

The *Baleo*

The call comes at about 9:00 a.m., in the middle of an interview with Mr. Marno, the boat maker and his son, Jon, about traditional rope making rituals. Now that they are done with the boat that they have been building since January, Jon is intermittently working on his motorcycle and adding to the conversation.

Mid-thought, Jon's whole body suddenly perks up like he's been electrified, and Marno and I look over. "There's a *Baleo*," he says, raising a finger to alert us to the sounding, and then he begins to repeat the call himself. "*Baleooooo, Bale-Baleooooo.*" Marno picks up the call, and then the men in yards of the houses around us, the sound rising and echoing throughout the village. I stop the tape and move to get out of the way and pack up. Jon, now in the middle of running around to get ready, looks at me and says, "Flo, do you want to come with us in the tow boat? "Yes!" I practically shout at him (I've been waiting for this day for months). "Meet us at the boathouse then," he says.

I trot home, passing men walking quickly or jogging towards the beach. At home, I frantically grab a big t-shirt and fill up a water bottle, and then run out the door. I tell Mama Theresea (the mother of the house where I live) that I'm headed out for the *Baleo*. She looks at my small bag with motherly suspicion, asking if I packed any food. I admit that I haven't, and she scolds me soundly, sending me off with a handle of bananas. I pass my neighbor Mama Ani on the way down to the beach, and she laughs in delight seeing my little sacks and my running, knowing that I'm going to go on the hunt. "Did you bring long sleeves?" she calls after me, and I lie, pointing to my bag with the big t-shirt. I will seriously rue this moment later when I am sunburnt within an inch of my life.

The beach is busy with bodies running back and forth, men, women, and children gathering to launch the boats. I find Jon and his family at their boathouse, and we start dragging the tow boat, called a *bodi*, down the beach into the surf. We're one of the first to launch. It's Jon, two crewmen (a young boy and an older man), and me. Jon mans the motor, while the other two sit in front to bail and manage the ropes. Jon keeps us in position as we watch our *tena* team come together and launch. Some *bodi* launch after us, others come streaming back in at top speed from the horizon, having been out porpoise hunting. Ten *tena* eventually launch with their accompanying tow boats. We end up in the middle of the group as we hook up to our *tena*, the *Starfish*. Jon's brother Peter is the *Lamafa*, or chief

harpooner for our *tena*. From the launch forward he's perched on a bamboo harpoon platform that extends from the front of the boat. Each time I turn around to check our tow-line, it is his bearded and fiercely concentrating face that I see, frowning at the horizon. The boats head out at full throttle, and we travel southeast, past the bay to the other side and towards the tip of the island. It takes about two hours, the boats traveling diagonally with the current. The men start actively scanning about an hour into our trip. Peter stands on his platform and holds his left hand flat up to his face at eye-level. His right hand comes up to make a right angle with the bottom of the left hand. This blocks out glare from the sun and makes a flat horizon so that he can focus on the smallest signs of surfacing or spouting, blocking out all other visual noise from the rolling horizon.

As we travel, we spread out so the farthest boats are barely visible on the horizon, others off to the sides are closer in. At two hours, we cut the engines and stop to scan. Suddenly, our rope manager sees a sign, and we are off to the east. For me, every dark spot on the waves looks the same, but he's seeing something for us to follow. Nearby boats follow our movement. A few minutes, later my inexperienced eyes finally see the sleek and bumpy grey back of a sperm whale break the surface. At first, I only see the stumpy dorsal but then a bigger section of the whale's back. It moves with that ponderous grace of all large mammals. This makes it look slow, but we're traveling at top speed to try to catch up with it. Right then, the sighting feels like the most exciting moment of my life, and I let out a sort of throttled squeak of joy. The men around me only murmur but all strain forward, tense with anticipation. We follow along, gaining on it slowly. I look back, and Peter has his spear at the ready and is now crouched on his platform. The whale changes direction northward and we follow, getting close. About 20 yards away we let off the lines for our *tena*. Another tow boat comes in from above and drops off its *tena*, the two boats coming to meet, in motion, on top of the whale. The men in both *tena* are rowing madly to keep the boats in motion. The men in my boat and others bellow "*FULE, BAPA,*

FULE!” (Pull, men, Pull!). Both Peter and the other *Lamafa* are poised to jump, but it is the other man that is in a better position. He jumps off, but it’s not an elegant leap—more like a pole vault, his body hiked up to bring the most weight down on the harpoon point. The pole comes off the harpoon, and it takes a moment to see if it made contact. Other boats come into position, or try to, their *tena* crew yelling back if they think their tow boats are positioning them incorrectly for entrance. The boat that has now harpooned the whale starts to be pulled around as the whale sounds and moves southward below us. It picks up speed, and the men onboard pull like crazy on their rope as they are being hauled along, in order to bring in the slack line and hitch themselves closer. We hook up with our *tena* again, and we’re off on the eastern side, chasing, looking at the tilt of the boat being pulled and then the whale itself, which is surfacing often now to breathe because it’s wounded and swimming at top speed. We chase, all boats trying to come into position a second time for a harpooning.

Men start to shout and gesture like crazy for a moment because a second whale has arrived. “*Temannya ikut!*” exclaims Jon, tapping my shoulder (“Its friend has come!”). Some boats peel off and try for the second whale, which is now heading northwest. I see my neighbor, Markus, is second man up on his *tena*, standing behind his *Lamafa* who jumps for the whale, but misses, Markus shouting at top of his lungs at the crew when the miss becomes apparent. We let go of our *tena* again for a second try on the first whale, which has surfaced again to the southeast, but the position is wrong, and we circle the *bodi* back around. Jon, who is standing up to steer now grabs my shoulder to show me that the harpoon boat attached to the first whale has capsized, the crew now in the water holding on to the boat or various pieces of paddle or sail. They’ve let go of the harpoon line in order not to lose a man or the boat, so we all pick up our *tena* and spread out again looking for signs of either whale, leaving the capsized *tena* to be righted by its *bodi*.

We motor in a wide loop, looking for signs in the water and looking at the behavior of the other boats. We see the second whale again through its spouting and chase it east and

north, only to lose it again. We head back south towards the open ocean, the men starting to get antsy. Though there is no discussion, at some point I think that they give up and start back in the direction of home. About 15 minutes further north and towards the island, we see promising activity in another boat and we're off again at full throttle, following. This time the *bodi* and *tena* come in from all different directions. We watch as another boat again gets the first harpoon and then chases this hope, this time north and east. We keep pace for a bit, gradually gaining on the whale, which they tell me is the second one. On all the *tena* around us the *Lamafa* are beginning to enter their crouched position again, harpoons at the ready. We're well positioned with a few other boats on either side when we let go of our *tena*. Another *Lamafa* in the *Lucky Wind* jumps to harpoon a second time, his crew and others again shouting "Fuuuuuule!" as they row. The whale changes direction westward, but the *tena* are encircling it now. They end up clumped up on top of the whale, and a third and fourth *Lamafa* jump and harpoon, including our *Lamafa*, Peter. More boats come, and at least five boats get so close that they are banging up against each other with the whale under and between them before drifting apart again. A number of *Lamafa* now jump to harpoon from this cluster.

The whale turns over and over in the water trying to rid itself of the harpoons and attached ropes but gets more tangled each time. It wriggles around so it can smack its giant tail, first in the water creating big splashes, and then against the boats themselves, the crews throwing themselves out of the way of the edge of the boat where the tail is making contact, splintering bamboo poles and the top rails on the boat. Eventually, the whale gives up fighting so hard. In accordance with their right, the first *tena* to harpoon brings the whale alongside the boat and men from other *tena* jump on board to help. One man climbs down to stand on top of the whale itself once they have started to secure it to the side of the boat. He makes a deep cut to the base of the whale's skull so that it will bleed out and end the process quickly.

The water around the boats, a bit pink before, starts to turn red now. In this moment, my mind is pulled away from our current activity, and I can't help but think back to the conversations that I have had with so many people here about how the images of blood in the water that have brought Lamalerans so much worry. "People from the city, people from the West, they see these pictures with the blood, and they think we're savages," a friend explained once. I hear versions of this story over and over. It's a strikingly beautiful color, brilliant red in the midst of this dark turquoise water, and yet I find myself wishing for their sakes that whales' blood ran clear.

It takes another hour at least for the whale to be secured and for the boats to get their ropes and harpoons sorted out. The *bodis* sit outside the cluster of *tena*, motors idling. Jon realizes we're low on gas and taps our extra tank, asking me to hold the pipe in the inlet tank and check the flow. I feel ridiculously gratified to be given even this smallest task. While we're waiting, Jon reaches for a cigarette, pushing out a sigh of relief with his first drag. Our bailer explains to me that the men in the *tena* cannot smoke, drink, or eat after the whale has been harpooned but before it has died. It wouldn't be respectful. At first, I think he is talking about the rules for all boats and fall all over myself to apologize because I've been drinking water all through the day, but he quickly clarifies: "Just the men in the *tena* are forbidden, not us in the *bodis*, Flo."

We wait a bit longer and then head back to the *tena* with the whale. Peter, our *Lamafa*, has been helping there to secure the whale, and we pick him up to bring him back to our *tena*. Peter sort of cannon balls himself into the water with open arms, making a giant splash that flings water all over us. I think he does it on purpose, and I laugh in surprise. No one else laughs or yells at him though, and I realize to my immediate chagrin that he jumped that way on purpose, his hands full of a long knife and a harpoon, to avoid cutting himself or losing the tools. Feeling like a green idiot, I hand him two bananas to make up for my gaffe, which he gratefully wolfs down. We bring him over to our *tena* where he repeats the giant splash. This time I do not laugh.

It seems like we're set to go, but it takes us almost another hour to leave. First because the blood in the water has attracted a shark that another boat captures, and secondly because, according to tradition, we need to execute the complex maneuver of tying all the boats together in a single file line: first all the *bodis*, then the *tena*, with the *tena* that first harpooned (and now carries) the whale making the triumphant caboose. This operation requires much gesticulation, passing of ropes, and some swimming (a risky maneuver now with this much blood in the water because it draws sharks). With this completed, we all slowly begin the trek homeward, engines chugging at half speed. I take out my phone and realize it is 4:00 p.m., and we've been out all day. We are far enough east and south that it takes us about four hours to travel home, this time fighting the current. The boat in front of us calls for cigarettes as they've run out. They send along a little closeable Styrofoam container on a rope into which we stick a few cigarettes and then toss back over. We mostly sleep, Jon dozing and steering at the same time.

The sun sets over our bow, its ridiculously pink light casting a rosy glow over our procession and making us into a living, breathing postcard. Once it's dark, we watch as the lights come on in the towns on the island, and the crew point out the various towns to me based on their position and light pattern. Our crewman starts to bail again, and, as the water hits the surface of the ocean, sparkles light up the dark glassiness like tiny stars. Bioluminescence, or *menyala* ("lights") Jon says, laughing as I scramble around the boat to watch with a wondrous grin splitting my face. He points behind us to our wake, which is indeed sparkling. I stick my hand over the side and twirl it around in the water, each movement of my fingers reflected in sparkles a moment later. I feel filled with pure, child-like joy at the sheer beauty of it. I look up and see the stars above, a bit hazy from cloud cover but still visible, and think of the stars now below in the water. I picture our line of boats skating along home in between these two layers of stars, and I feel such an overwhelming sense of connection, for these

bodies, to this sea, and this place that I have to mentally smack myself for such romanticism.

As we come up to our familiar coast, people are shining flashlights along the cliffs. When we come around the point to our little inlet, flashlights and torches light up the beach, the families of the crews waiting to bring us all in. Voices are laughing and hollering with excitement in the dark as people run back and forth and bring the first boats in. We cut the motor, pull in over the reef, and hit the beach. Timed with the waves, the boat is pushed up the beach by about twenty men arrayed along the sides and pulled from the top with a rope towed by a group of about ten wives, children, and grandparents. “*Ja Ho!*” is the call for pushing/pulling, after someone counts off one, two. Once the boats are pulled into shelter, I meet up with Marno, who asks how it went. I tell him it may have been the best day of my life. He smiles and accepts that this is as it should be. With our boat secured he tells me to go home, eat, and rest. Tomorrow morning, we will all get up before the sun to start the hard work of cutting up and sharing out the whale according to *adat* law. I walk slowly home, tired, burnt, and creaking with salt, but happy. I climb the stairs to my house, to find a group gathered on the porch. They all gasp and chuckle at my crusty state. “Theresea,” I call on my way to the bath, “man, was I glad for those bananas.”