As the fleet gathers offshore after the night’s fishing, a selerek enters Pengambengan Harbour in western Bali to unload its catch. Beneath extravagant masthead decorations, the portrait of a Muslim saint watches over the crew. All photography by Jeffrey Mellefont.

These could be the world’s most spectacular traditional fishing craft, but their home port is a remote estuary on the Indonesian island of Bali that few visitors ever see. ANMM research associate, Jeffrey Mellefont, unveils a boatbuilding tradition steeped in ritual, religion and magic.
The harbour is criss-crossed by smaller outrigger boats or tenders, ferrying in the weary crews or shifting blocks of ice out to the boats at anchor. Ashore there’s a frenetic hubbub of activity as each boat’s catch is weighed, iced and boxed. There are food and coffee stalls to refresh countless workers, and makeshift welding shops set up to repair broken gear brought ashore from the boats. Hundreds of tonnes of lemuro (sardines) or inseng (small mackerel) are disappearing into trucks and the panniers of an army of motorcycles. Some are bound for canning or fish-meal factories along the shore. Others are heading to local markets in villages and towns all over Bali where the fish will be sold either fresh or as panggang, an age-old brine-pickling technique that’s both a preservative and a flavour enhancer.

By late morning it’s over. The fish and the workers have gone and most of the gaudy fishing boats have motored home to moor in a large, sheltered river estuary just two kilometres to the east along the coast. Some have simply anchored off the estuary, because later that afternoon their large crews will be shuttled back on board to spend another night scouring the sea off Bali’s southern coast.

Many visitors to Bali will see those fish for sale in local village markets or in restaurants as they enjoy the sights, colours, tastes and aromas of Balinese culture. This most famous of the Indonesian islands is known, of course, for the lavish decorations of its temples, sculptures and carvings – indeed, for the creativity of its many artists, painters, sculptors, weavers, dancers and musicians. And yet very few tourists ever see the extraordinary decorated fishing fleet that lands this catch – even though it’s certainly the largest-scale assemblage of movable cultural heritage in Bali. Moreover, it’s just possibly the most spectacular fishing fleet anywhere in the world today, if its combination of traditional timber construction and rich, ritual decoration is the measure.

Where could you have something as conspicuous as this glittering armada? It’s easy, really. The vast majority of Bali’s southern coast. Some have simply anchored off the estuary, because later that afternoon their large crews will be shuttled back on board to spend another night scouring the sea off Bali’s southern coast.

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Hindu Bali, with its focus turned largely to the island of Sulawesi, Makassans last year on an exclusive tour of Sulawesi, recounted in Signals (Bill September 2014).

Another specialist Muslim seafaring culture originates in Madura, an island just off East Java. It’s not far from Bali but is flatter, dryer and less fertile, so its people are more dependent on the sea for a livelihood. The Madurese developed a fascinating variety of quite unusual craft that ranged widely, fishing, hauling and trading under sail until recent times. Some were among the most highly decorated of all Indonesian vessels, enlivened by intricate carvings in a rich palette of painted colours.

Many new exuberant banners, headings and embellishments that would seem more at home on royal or ceremonial vessels than on humble, hard-working commercial or subsistence craft.

One particular seafaring hull form became widespread in places where Madurese seafarers worked and settled, and was sometimes adopted by their neighbours. This is the form we find today in the great fishing fleet of western Bali. It’s a waterworthy, double-ended, rather flat-bottomed form that’s able to safely ground and dry out at low tide. This makes it independent of wharves and slipways for mooring, maintenance and cargo handling, so it’s well suited to remote or under-developed ports that are no more than beaches or mudflats. Distinguishing features include the high, pointed, flat stem post and cutwater called lenggi, seen in the photograph opposite.

Variants of this Madurese hull form were used as trading, fishing or general-purpose craft, with or without decks or deckhouses, and housing a huge triangular sail laced between long bamboo spars. The distinctive Madurese style of rudder, a long, heavy blade slung over one side that was shifted laboriously to the lee quarter on each tack when under sail, is still in use today. Motorised, they often mount outboard engines alongside the main sail, with long trailing propeller shafts that can be raised from the water to avoid fouling ropes or nets. According to their location and details of construction, these Madurese workhorses were known by various terms, including colepak, leu, pukurnan and peranguran.

The bug, fully decked and highly decorated versions used today in the Bali疼ese fishery are known there as selerek. Ordered by enterprising ship-owners living on the western end of Bali, where many Muslims from nearby Java have settled, most of them are hand built on beaches in eastern Bali. The tropical timbers used include camphor (Indian laurel — Calophyllum inophyllum) and pake projects — Tintamarre graminis), mostly imported from other islands. They are shaped into a rigid shell of thick, interlocking plans, edge-fastened by concealed wooden trenails before the reinforcing timbers — such as floors, ribs, beams and stringers — are added.

This is the age-old, pre-Indonesian technique that creates strong, durable hulls. Electric drills and chainsaws now make the work somewhat quicker and easier.

Little changed, however, are the rituals, prayers and feasts essential to every boat’s construction, paid for by the new owner and conducted by Islamic leaders from the devout Madurese boatbuilding communities. A vital commencement ceremony is the ‘marriage’ of the froggy or stem and stem posts — considered to be male — to the long, straight keel timber (lonas) which is considered female. The symbolism is explicit, with the motions in the keel and the tensions in the stem and stern posts.

The names for these timbers derive from the Sanskrit terms for penis and vagina that arrived in the archipelago as part of the religious symbolism of Hinduism, more than 1,000 years ago — long before the arrival of Islam, which the Madurese adopted from the about the 15th–16th centuries AD.

Another crucial ceremony is boring a ‘navel’ in the keel, into which a grain of gold and a written prayer are inserted. The shavings from the hole are considered female. The symbolism is considered female. The symbolism is explicit, with the motions in the keel and the tensions in the stem and stern posts.

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Another crucial ceremony is boring a ‘navel’ in the keel, into which a grain of gold and a written prayer are inserted. The shavings from the hole are believed to have magical properties and are kept for ritual use by the owners. Many ceremonies, including launching and periodic blessings during the vessel’s life, call for the sacrifice of a chicken or goat and the sprinkling of their blood, holy water and flower petals. The high stem post is a focus of rituals, and often houses a shrine or altar (onggok) where these offerings are made. It’s always blessed with the same serpentine design — the signature of every Madurese prahu — which some比喻s the vessel’s eye.

It’s clear from the terminology and rites that the vessel is considered to be a living entity with its own spirit. The embellishments aren’t simply decoration. They are talismans that, like the ceremonies, are vital for safety and success, and without them the vessel wouldn’t be complete or fit for its purpose.

It’s also clear that these beliefs go back to the earliest animistic practices that preceded the Indian and Middle-Eastern religions carried to the archipelago over the centuries by sea trade.

The finished selerek are motored to Bali where they are fitted out for fishing, and where most of their decorations are added — carved, painted or sculpted by local artisans to the owner’s specifications. And since, at this end of the island, the Balinese owners and seamen are a mix of Muslim and Hindu, the boats exhibit a fusion of Islamic and Balinese–Hindu traditions and iconography. Thus on the large, serrate name boards we might find Hindu deities such as flute-playing Krishna or elephant-headed Ganesh, or, alternatively, Arabic calligraphy with a figure that’s clearly a prominent Muslim cleric or saint.

Equally, though, there might be a pin-up girl, pop star or GP motorcycle-racing hero – depending on how orthodox or secular the owner may feel. Dragons, eagles, flying fish or mermaids also appear.

Matlehead devices might depict the onion-shaped dome (monum or ubad) of a mosque. Others show an elaborate, multi-coloured construction derived from...
the crown (mahkota) of a high price or raja in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, which was once widespread in the archipelago but contracted to Bali ahead of the spread of Islam. While these talismans come at the cost of considerable woodwork, close examination reveals them to be quite lightweight, fabricated of welded wine and painted panels of thin plastic. Adding both woodwork and weight are the big, vividly painted but non-functional stacks of bamboo spars called gelandra, overhanging the stern and supported by a structure that was once a sail rest. Gelandra have long appeared on Madurese fishing boats, their owners citing tradition and ‘decoration’ if asked to explain them. 

Crow’s nests are covered in densely carved botanical motifs in a style that’s familiar in Java and Bali, with a subtle shading of polychrome hues – a technique which Madurese woodcarvers specialize. However it’s the depiction of wheels on these lookout structures that identifies them most clearly as something many Javanese, Madurese and Balinese would recognize whatever their religion; the royal chariot that carries Prince Rama and his noble chambare Arjuna into battle in a familiar story performed in the shadow-puppet dramas called wayang kulit. This form of theatre is one of the cultural icons of Indonesia, presenting a variety of religious influences mixed with local and imported legends that demonstrate the well-nurtured Indonesian talent for cultural borrowings and fusion. And that’s exactly what the selerek fleet of western Bali represents, too.

Selerek operate at night with spotlights, mostly in pairs. The slightly smaller boat of the couple, identified by the fishermen as the female, carries a purse-seine net hundreds of metres long and 50 metres deep between its float line and lead line. It also carries the fish spotter in a crow’s nest. The larger partner, known as the male, helps to encircle and close the net around a school of fish. After most of the net is hauled back on board the female boat the entrapped fish are transferred from the sea into the ice-holds of the male boat, which can load up to 30 or 40 tonnes.

Both boats of a pair of selerek share the same name, frequently chosen to be propitious, lyrical or devout – examples translate as Magic Jewel, Faithful Friend, Full Moon, New Star, Star of Istanbul, Light Arun, Divine Prayer, Spiritual Peak. Some prosperous owners have large fleets, one reported with 25 pairs. But some of the smaller and older boats of this fleet still operate solo. They are known as janda, the term for both widow and divorcee.

A pair of big selerek can carry more than 40 crew, who work or rest on deck with no shelter or facilities whatsoever. They don’t earn wages but receive a share of the catch’s sale price. After deducting the running costs, including fuel, ice, breakages and an allowance for maintenance, half the profits go to the owner. The other half is divided evenly among the crew, except for the captain (mahakabu), who receives a larger share, and the fish spotter (pangung), who gets even more since he’s considered the most important man on board. The fishing goes on every night except for those of the full moon, sweeping the entire southern coast of Bali right up to its eastern end where the spotlights of the fleet can be seen at night by tourists enjoying seafood at beachside restaurants. It continues for most of the year except during the heaviest weather of the wet season, the time for major maintenance and refits.

It should be noted, though, that this intensive purse-seine fishery is probably not sustainable. The fleet, and individual boats, have grown in size in the last decade, numbering over 150 at a recent survey. They have provided good livelihoods, reflected by increasingly colourful and elaborate decorations of the vessels. However the nets have illegally small meshes of about 14 millimetres, so nothing escapes. Unsurprisingly, poor years have been reported recently, and the subsistence fishermen operating the little, one-man outrigger jukung that have traditionally worked this coast claim that the big nets leave little for them.

The Australian National Maritime Museum takes an active interest in the maritime affairs of our archipelagic neighbour Indonesia. In 1987, when assembling its vessel collection, the museum acquired a Madurese perahu lite to represent the maritime connections between Australia and Indonesia. This 15-metre-long craft, with a hull form related to that of the selerek, came from a community that sends boats like it to fish in northern Australian waters under sail. The museum’s perahu, called Sekar Amun (A Blossom in Safekeeping), was sailed periodically by staff on Sydney Harbour to learn more about its sailfitting and steering gear. Unfortunately some peculiarities of its construction meant that it couldn’t be preserved indefinitely by museum staff and it’s no longer in the collection. Nonetheless, over the course of 20 years this vessel and the traditions it represented, including the decorative arts of the boatbuilders, were researched and documented, displayed and published. This and other records of Indonesian boatbuilding traditions held by the museum are a resource for future researchers.

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