The villagers of Lamalera, on the remote Eastern Indonesian island of Lembata, live by whaling and fishing as their ancestors did. Their whaleboats have no engines; their harpoons are hand-forged and they use no explosives. They are almost certainly the last true subsistence whalers in the world.

Story by the exhibition’s curator PATRICIA MILLES

Whale hunting and fishing underlie the structure of the village of Lamalera. There are about 2,000 people, comprising 19 clans, living in a cluster of hamlets around a small beach. During the whale migration season the sea-hunters go out at first light every day except Sundays, in a fleet of handbuilt boats moved by paddle, oar, and handwoven palm leaf sail. Most of their lines and ropes are handmade from handspun cotton or palm leaf and bark. Their weapons are long knives, a gaff, sometimes an iron lance, and iron harpoons set on bamboo poles up to six metres long—all hand-forged from scrap iron. The harpoonist balances on a bamboo platform at the bow, and leaps out over the water to add power as he hursts the harpoon into the whale.

Each boat is owned and managed by a kind of corporation linked to a clan. The catch is shared according to a system of rights and obligations which rewards everyone who has had a part in building, equipping, maintaining and operating the boat. Each clan has its own system for each different species. They catch giant manta ray, turtles, sunfish, sharks, some smaller toothed whales and dolphins, but their hoped-for target is the sperm whale which provides them with large reserves of meat to dry and trade.

With no arable land to grow food, Lamalerans depend on trading dried whale meat and fish for vegetables, fruit, staple cereals and tobacco grown in the hills inland. They also trade for cotton needed to spin thread for making ropes and cloth, and for pigments to dye thread for weaving ikat cloth. Today’s world has created the need to find cash for education, medicine and manufactured goods, but this money economy, in which tourism is now vital, remains separate from the food barter system by which they actually survive.

The impetus for the exhibition came from seeing a collection of material and photographs brought back by Sydney anthropologist Anita Lustberg and artist Jean Weiner who lived in Lamalera for a year, in 1994-95. Much of the material in the exhibition is drawn from this collection, together with a painting of a Lamalera helmetman and reproductions of some of Jean Weiner’s watercolours and drawings. The exhibition is augmented by other material I acquired or borrowed with their help when I visited Lamalera with them last June.

My first reaction to Lamalera, on wading shores from an outrigger canoe, was surprise at how small this village was, to have generated all I had read and heard about it. The journey from Sydney had taken three days - two flights, a long car ride, an eight-hour boat trip sitting on a crowded hatchcover under a blue tarpaulin, and finally the canoe.

The beach was not gold, but grey volcanic sand and you could walk its length in five minutes.

It is a working beach. About 30 thatched boatsheds extend along the back of the beach. In and around them are always a few men and boys building or repairing the boats, repairing sails, weaving baskets and mats from palm leaf, or just talking. Around the sheds are bamboo racks of drying fish and whale meat, and here and there a goat or a small grey pig is tethered. I stayed in the Kefal clan house above the boatsheds, with sisters Bright and Teresia Kefal. On the first morning I heared a percussive, gutural chanting, and looked towards the sea. Across the line of vision, not 200 metres away, passed a whaleboat, its crew of 12 wiry men driving paddles and oars through the water in perfect unison, singing to the boat. For a moment I lost the sense of time; it was an ageless sight.

Sea-hunting is deeply enmeshed in the cultural and spiritual lives of Lamalerans. They believe that their boats have souls which endure through continual repair and rebuilding. A new boat incorporates some timber from the last one, and boat names are perpetuated. Some boats are thus descended from the boats of the ancestors. The boats are built according to the received ancestral designs and methods. Every step in boatbuilding has its own ceremony to bring success.

The Lamalerans’ ancestral religion was animist, involving the belief that spirits dwell in every object—every tree and stone, every house, fish, cloud and flower. Ceremonies often entailed animal sacrifices. Conversion to Catholicism began in the 1890s but it was not until the 1920s that a determined German priest, Vater Bernardus Bode, brought the whole village into his fold. He persuaded the clans to bury their sacred stones in the foundations of his new church, and on a ceremonial site on the beach he built a tiny chapel dedicated to St Peter, patron saint of fishermen. Bode also got them to substitute holy water for blood sacrifices in their ceremonies. A village monument shows him, a figure of authority, standing on the bow of a whaleboat.

The whaling boats, called tona and supung, are built without nails. Wooden treenails hold the planks together and the hull is tied to the ribs and thwarts with sharkline and strong palm binding. These lashings are passed through lugs carved in one piece along the planks. The structure is squeezed together with wedge and vice so the lashings can be tightened. This ancient method of boatbuilding is known as ‘fished-hug’. The boats are interestingly decorated and painted, with eyes at the bow, and a distinctive carved and painted decoration at the end of the sternpost, called a maddi. The maddi all have a spiral motif and a variety of other figures or designs, some Christian, some from ancestral times. The ears and mouth of the boat are believed to be near the end of the stern post. A woven palm hood is placed over this when the boat is in the boathouse and removed when it goes out to sea.

During a too-brief stay of five days I managed to go to the weekly barter market, attend Mass in the huge, airy church with a mural showing the
village’s conversion, see whales caught, cut up and shared, and acquire some wonderful material for the exhibition. The market at Pulandoni seemed a quiet, serious business. It is women who do the trading. They sit quietly with their wares until a whistle was blown by the market official. Then, because theirs were the light loads, the women with dried whale meat and fish rose and went around the market offering it for exchange to the seated produce traders, carrying back a hand of bananas, a few chokoes, root vegetables, papaya to put in their baskets. They now had heavy loads to carry on their heads for the six kilometre walk home.

While this was happening three sperm whales had been caught. When I got back to the village two were tied up at the water’s edge, secured by ropes through their spouts to rocks farther up the beach. The great bodies flapped from side to the waves, while a throng of little boys, whalers of the future, danced exultantly on them, leaping and splashing in the reddening water. Three boats were still a long way off with a whale, and the village’s one functioning motorised boat, known as the ‘Jonson’, was sent out with food for the crews and to help them get past some difficult currents. I was lucky to be able to go along on the Jonson.

The three whaleboats were roped together in a line, the sternmost one with a whale alongside. A scavenging shark was enthusiastically dispatched with knives and its long body hauled on board. The crews now put the masts and sails up, and the Jonson whined and strained with the effort of getting them past the difficult point. It was extraordinary in such a short time to see whales caught—another five were landed two days later. Many visitors never see a whale. The aftermath was the cutting up, which kept most of the men from Mass the next day. The beach buzzed with activity, nameless gobbets were spread out on the sand, women carried away on their heads bowls of dripping meat or great thick slices of white blubber, and around the houses people were cutting up their shares to hang up and dry.

Among the things I brought back were one of the green enamel bowls commonly used to carry whale flesh, and a pair of machete-wielding men’s thongs entirely worn out by long walks from the beach and to the markets. An ikat weaving with whale patterns for tourists, boatbuilding tools and materials, two madiu, an oar with a round blade, a paddle, a coil of whale rope made of gembah palm and sea hibiscus bark, and an old woven palm leaf sail were among the treasures which are now displayed in the exhibition. The sail was a difficult decision, a magnificent object, but bulky and fragile to transport, its size and poor condition creating obvious display problems. The vendor, sailmaker Kiwan Bukololo, tried his stoned to mend as much as he could, weaving in new patches right up to the moment when the inter-island boat was in the bay and I had to depart. It now hangs in the exhibition.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is a large weathered sperm whale skull from the Museum’s collection, displayed for the first time and needing much care and skill to move because of its fragile condition. Apart from this and a magnificent scrimshaw plaque borrowed from the National Library of Australia, there are no whale materials in the exhibition—none could be brought from Lamalera because they are prohibited imports under the international convention which protects endangered species (CITES).

How does Lamalera whaling fit into today’s climate of protecting whales? International bans apply only to commercial whaling and are binding only on member nations of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). The IWC exempts genuine subsistence whaling. Indonesia is not a member, but Lamalera whaling would certainly meet the IWC’s criteria for exemption because of the village’s cultural, nutritional and economic dependence on it.

In a world where dedicated volunteers may spend days and nights trying to save beached whales, and where it took years of campaigning to stop the total extinction of some whale species, many people will find subsistence whaling abhorrent. The Australian Task Force on Whaling in 1997 recommended a policy of global bans on all commercial whale killing, not because of danger to some species but because there is no humane way to kill a whale. Genuine subsistence whaling will always be exempted, but the moral question for conservationists is which should be saved, a traditional culture or the whales?

The Lamalera’s catch is tiny and their living is hard and precarious. For the hunters themselves it is highly dangerous. By tradition they hunt only toothed whales, and their major target, sperm whales, are not endangered. They take small sperm whales, up to 12 metres or so, about the same length as their boats. They use every bit of the whale, except the skull, and this they treat with respect as housing the spirit of the whale, keeping it with others at one end of the beach.

Records kept in Lamalera for the last 40 years indicate an average of about 20 sperm whales caught a year. In 1995 there were 38, but in 1983 only two were caught. The total in most years since 1978 has been less than 16. In lean years, people with no whale meat to trade may survive starvation by trading salt and calcined lime made by women, who dry sea water and burn coral. This is a far cry from the enormous catches of the commercial fleets, using explosive weapons and factory ships in the 19th century and this century adding spotter planes and motor coaches armed with canons. In the final years of Australian whaling, the annual quota for the Albany whaling fleet was more than twice Lamalera’s total catch over 40 years.

Lamalera’s immediate future is tied to tourism. Tourists want to see traditional whaling. They pay to go out with the fleet, to photograph and film. They also buy souvenirs—woven hats and boxes, whaleboat models, ikat weavings with whale designs. The villagers need cash, and tourism has helped maintain and actually strengthen traditional crafts and practices. But the future also depends on the willingness of young men to learn the dangerous skill of the harpoonist or live the arduous life of an outman. In the words of one Lamalera man interviewed in a documentary film in 1988: "If we want to stay here, hunting at sea is the only way to make a livelihood. Anyone who stays must provide their own food to eat. With the shrinking distances and corporate growth of today, who can say how long this traditional society will continue as it is?"

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- J Blake, D Wissen, R H Barnes The whale hunters of Lamalera, documentary film, Granada Television, 1988

Readers can meet and sail with the whale hunters of Lamalera on an overseas tour developed by the Museum. Details page 15