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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Misa, Lefa, Puang: ritual, piety, and performance in opening the ocean season in a Southeast Asian marine hunting community

Florence Durney

IKOS - Institutt for kulturstudier og orientalske språk, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

## ABSTRACT

Lamalera, a small community on the island of Lembata in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, is home to a rich tradition of marine hunting and an environmental cosmology that brings together its people, their ancestors, and the Savu Sea. Each year the community, its diaspora, and other island residents gather to celebrate, demonstrate symbolic patronage of, and observe the opening of the ocean hunting season, or *Musim Lefa*. Over time the ritual cycle has adapted, and taken on different layers of significance, as Lamalerans have worked to preserve their hunting-based way of life, in the face of changing economic, social, and legal contexts. Applying the overall conceptual framework of this thematic issue, this article examines the opening of the Lefa as an adaptive constellation of piety, performance, patronage, and protection through time. It argues that the festival represents a unique moment each year for contestation and renegotiation of symbolic and practical power.

## KEYWORDS

Identity performance; ritual practice; Indonesia; whaling; marine; missionization

## Introduction

In the final hour of evening sun in the last week of April, hundreds of community members gather on the central beach below the boat houses that line the back of their small cove. All ages are included, from the eldest to the smallest clan members, the ranks swelling with all those Lamalerans who have come home, from across the island, from the provincial capital of Kupang, and from Indonesia's larger cities. With help from family, children have spent the day making small floats, some wood, some woven palm, some plastic, that are decorated with flowers and sometimes crosses and other individually meaningful or beautiful objects. As darkness falls, candles are lit, stuck to the floats with their own wax, and then prayers begin. People pray to the community's ancestors who bring the gifts of whales and other marine prey to this coast, and to God. For this ritual, prayers are offered specifically for Lamalerans, across the generations, who have died at sea. All around the beach groups of faces gathered around the

**CONTACT** Florence Durney  [florence.durney@ikos.uio.no](mailto:florence.durney@ikos.uio.no)

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candles are illuminated and cast into shadow by the warm light: small round faces, eyes big with excitement, and older, more careworn ones, wrinkles carved deeper by the lambent flames. As prayers are finished, older children compete for the job of walking into the water, to carefully release the floats – without losing gingerly mounted candles, or letting the flames go out – onto the calmer surface that sits past the lapping edge of wavelets. The crowd watches as one when a hundred or so small glowing circles begin to drift away from us, onto a sea that stretches out into the inky darkness beyond the edges of the cove.

This ritual, which is part of what has become known as the *Misa Arwal* (beginning or opening mass), comes during a multi-day ritual cycle and celebration that constitutes the opening of the marine hunting season, or the *Musim Lefa*, in the community of Lamalera, Indonesia. It takes place between 28 April and 1 May each year. Lamalera is a small settlement of just under 2,000 people perched on the southern coast of the island of Lembata in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. This community, whose name means ‘sun dish’ in the local language of Lamholot, is home to a rich cultural tradition of marine hunting and an environmental cosmology that links its people, the Savu Sea ecosystem, and their ancestors in co-constitutive relations. Lamalerans hunt for a variety of large marine prey including sharks, rays, and finfish like marlin, but the community has become most famous for hunting toothed cetaceans, the largest and most iconic of which are sperm whales. Lamalerans have become famous not only for what they hunt, but for the iconic way that they hunt, from small wooden boats with small crews. This kind of hunting is possible in part because of the geography of the Solor Archipelago, which is made up of volcanic islands with steep coastal shelves. As a result, large marine prey, including many species of cetaceans<sup>1</sup>, pass relatively close to shore.

Previously, Lamalera was part of a larger cultural sphere that practiced marine hunting and trading throughout the region. It is now the one remaining community that has not agreed to become part of a marine conservation area, and instead continues to practice a way of life that includes hunting, consuming, and trading marine prey. Within the last 20 years Lamalera’s marine hunting practices have been challenged both locally and at the district level, and across scales and forms of governance to the national and international level, raising questions about how best to balance the community’s rights to traditional ways of life with extant and evolving resource management frameworks and policies in Indonesia (Durney 2020, Li 1999, Zerner 2003). These questions are tied to a larger international discourse about who has the right to hunt cetaceans and how that developed in the wake of the formation of the International Whaling Commission in the 1940s, and the rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s, for which whale conservation in particular became a standard-bearer (See Kalland 2009). They also relate to an ongoing national discussion about how to govern traditional and customary communities in a continually evolving Indonesian legal and cultural framework (Hauser-Schäublin 2013; Butt 2014; Dove 2006).

Each year the community mushrooms in size for these few days, as the Lamaleran diaspora, residents from the island’s other communities, district government officials, and a small number of tourists come to the village to participate in, demonstrate symbolic patronage of, and observe one of Lembata’s most culturally significant events, the

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<sup>1</sup>The taxonomical order for whales and dolphin species.

opening of the ocean hunting season, the Lefa. Over the years, the opening of the Lefa has changed and taken on different layers of significance as the community has worked to hold on to its hunting-based way of life, in the face of changing economic, social, and legal contexts – and, in 2020 and 2021, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this article, following Frost (2016)’s call for a more systematic examination of festivals and Hüsken and Michaels (2013) argument that festivals are ‘moved forward by networks of agency,’ I examine the opening of the Lefa as an adaptive constellation of piety, performance, patronage and protection as it has moved through time, arguing that the event represents a unique and important venue each year for contestation and renegotiation of symbolic and practical power that involves a variety of different stakeholders.

In doing so, I first what constitutes pious performance of the ritual cycle as it adapts to changing social and political forces, focusing on changes brought about through Catholic missionization. In the second section I examine how ritual performance has come to relate to a politics of traditional identity performance that explicitly positions itself against questions of authenticity and invention debates (Teves 2018) and engage certain kinds of patronage. To do this work I draw on the historical ethnographies of Gregorius Keraf and Robert and Ruth Barnes who worked in Lamalera between the 1970s and 1990s, and on my own ethnographic data collected in Lamalera during in situ fieldwork and through ongoing conversations with community participants between 2016 and 2022.

### Contextualizing the Misa Lefa

As it is currently practiced<sup>2</sup>, there are four main parts to the opening of the marine hunting season. The first day brings the *Tobo Nama Fate*, which means ‘to sit on the sand’ in the local language, Lamaholot. It is important to note here that the incorporated Catholic elements of the ritual cycle are named and take place in the national language Bahasa Indonesia, while the older rituals are named and take place in the local language, or in a mixture of the local language and Bahasa Indonesia. Before missionization many rituals, including those associated with the beginning of the hunting season, were conducted in a highly localized and secret ritual language, passed down through ritual practitioners within clans. Today some words and phrases have survived, but a functional ritual language is no longer present, and has not been for some time according to previous research (Barnes 1992).

The *Tobo Nama Fate* involves the community sitting down together in the sand in front of the boat houses that fully line the back of the settlement’s small cove and central beach (named *Batabalamaik*) for a ritualized discussion and dispute resolution forum. The group is split into two sections that sit facing one another on either side of the small chapel, a shrine to Saint Peter, that divides the boat houses into two roughly even sections. People sit according to where they live in the village, which correlates to a story about the original settlement of Lamalera. According to this oral history<sup>3</sup> Lamalera was founded when a group of whale hunters came to the site led by a man

<sup>2</sup>This description is included for context for the reader, but also because no holistic description of the ritual cycle has been published in English since the 1980s, after which the event has experienced some changes.

<sup>3</sup>This oral history was related to me directly by community elders in interviews and its general outlines are well known. It was also documented in the ethnography of Keraf (1978) and in the ethnography of Barnes (1996).

named Korohama, who negotiated with two clans already living in the hills above to settle with his people at the beach. Korohama and his people were already whale hunters who had, after multiple migration events, been living on the coast just to the east<sup>4</sup>, but who kept being drawn to this new area by the coastal current pattern and the presence of whales. The two extant clans, called the *tuhan tahan* or landlord clans, are the Lango Fujo and the Tufaona clans. As Gregorius Keraf, who was the first to document the ceremony in the anthropological literature, explains:

Half the beach belongs to Libu (Tufaona clan) and the over half the Gesiraja (Lango Fujo clan). People call the boundary *ika kota* (fish heads). The whole populace gathers at *ika-kota*. All those who live to west of the *ika-kota* sit facing east, and those who live to the east ... sit facing west. (1978; cited in Barnes 1996, 270).

The ceremony is led by community elders, including the *Like Telo*, the name for the group of heads of the five original clans of Lamalera, which has historically served as a kind of customary leadership group for the community. The purpose of the event is to discuss issues from the previous hunting season with the goal of finding solutions and ensuring congruence in the forthcoming one. Going to sea without conflict is what is required by the *nenek moyang* (ancestors) and is understood to be directly involved in creating the conditions for a plentiful hunting season. In Lamaleran cosmology, ancestors share a connection with marine prey and through this share the responsibility of bringing animals to the waters off Lamalera for the community to hunt. Some interlocutors have described this as a physical connection linking the living, ancestors, and animals in a grounded way through land and sea, others see it more metaphysically. This first understanding echoes what Allerton sees as a common regional understanding of ‘spiritual landscapes,’ where spirit beings are connected to specific areas, or seas in this case; where landscape is given agency and potency; and where the separation of the sacred and the profane common to Christian doctrine becomes problematic (Allerton 2009a, 235–251).

Marine prey is classed as *rejeki* – an Indonesian loan word from Arabic blending the concepts of fortune, blessing, and sustenance.<sup>5</sup> A plentiful hunting season will in turn mean that the hunting boats can ‘feed all of the people of the village, including the small children, the adults, the orphans and the widows, as well as all the people around the mountain’ (Keraf 1978; cited in Barnes 1996, 270). Feeding children, widows and orphans is a common concept that was often repeated by my interlocutors in relation to hunting success and is an emblem of Lamaleran cultural identity. It is a social safety net that community members see as setting them apart from other communities, and especially apart from social life in urban centers of Indonesia, Malaysia, and beyond (Author, in review).

On the evening of the *Tobo Nama Fate*, the three members of the *Like Telo* group who come from hunting clans bring any unresolved or large issues to the head of one of the landlord clans, the Lango Fujo, for a ritual that is done in seclusion. During the 2017 season opening this meeting was also attended by a senior Catholic priest who comes

<sup>4</sup>Thought to be a settlement that is today a village called Wulandoni, with which Lamalera has many cultural and trade ties.

<sup>5</sup>*Rejeki* is an alternative spelling of the term *rezeki*, which is a derived form of the Arabic word *rizq*. *Rizq* refers to everything given by Allah for an individual’s physical and spiritual needs.

from the community and now lives in Kupang. Before the sun rises the next morning, the head of the Lango Fujo clan, along with some younger male relatives who will assist him, wakes up to begin the next ritual: the calling of the spirits of the whales. This ceremony requires climbing to a grouping of stones, called Whale Stones, which are situated in a depression within the forest far above Lamalera, on the slopes of the now extinct volcano that looms over the island's south. The use of these stones is attached to their role in local cosmology. According to the oral history of the Langu Fugo clan, sperm whales are animals that were once buffalo on land but that transformed into whales in the water. In the clan's specific ritual language they call the sperm whale the *sora tare bala* or 'buffalo with ivory horns,' referring to sperm whales' large ivory teeth that the Lamalerans use for carving. According to legend, once upon a time a buffalo from the Langu Fugo territory was on its way down the mountain to the main beach, Batabala-maik, to enter the ocean, where it would become a whale. It began its journey too late in the day and when it realized this and turned back, it faced the setting sun and was turned to stone. It is this stone that is understood to be the same stone where the Whale Stone ceremony is currently performed. As one of the five leading clans, the Langu Fugo clan is responsible for the wealth of the community, and thus it is their duty to perform the role of asking for assistance from the spirit of the 'sora tare bala' or buffalo-sperm whale to come down the mountain again, repeating the path from the slopes to the ocean.

Today, at the main rock a blood sacrifice is made to the whale spirits in the form of a chicken, and prayers in ancestral language are made for them to come because the community needs them. Afterwards, the chicken is cooked and consumed by those present. A series of calls is then made to the spirits of the animals and the clan members process down the mountain, through Lamalera's sister settlement Lamamanu, stopping at a series of smaller stones that are marked as alters along the way for prayer and offerings, until finally the procession reaches the central beach, enters the water, and removes all adornments, thereby delivering the spirits into the sea.

This ritual also shares many commonalities with sacrifice practices throughout the region. In the introduction to a comprehensive edited volume on sacrificing in Eastern Indonesia, Signe Howell makes two points that underscore this. Firstly, she notes that while sacrifice has been functionally explained in myriad ways,<sup>6</sup> 'whatever the act ... may or may not do, it seems safe to assert that it acknowledges that the living and the dead, spirits and deities all belong to a single community' (1996, 2–3). This central point of intentional gathering is relevant to understanding the Whale Stone sacrifice, and to the operation of sacrifice more broadly within the Lamaleran context. Ancestors, whale spirits, and the living are all understood to live in dialog throughout the year, but this understanding is reaffirmed and concretized at this particular moment. Specific elements of the ritual are also repeated throughout Eastern Indonesia. Howell notes that many sacrifice ceremonies involve commensality, usually in the form of a communal meal 'where the meat is divided amongst all present' which 'includes both humans and spirits' in an act of binding, as is the case here. Further, communication with ancestors and spirits via sacrifice often follows a familiar pattern: invocations accompany 'a large-scale communal ceremonial event' which 'usually address the recipient with an offer to

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<sup>6</sup>Howell concludes that the concept is a 'ragbag of elements' without much comparative power (1996:3).

eat, to protect the sacrifices and the vitality of the community ... spoken ... usually in verse form employing archaic or special vocabulary,' a description that clearly encompasses the elements of the Whale Stone ceremony, and its place within the larger ritual cycle (1996, 21).

After the whale spirits have been summoned comes the *Misa Arwal*, described in the opening of the article. This ritual also includes a less formalized element of ancestor veneration earlier in the day where families clean the graves of their ancestors, now located in the cemetery directly across from the community's Catholic church, leaving lit candles and prayers. According to the records of some of the first missionaries who came to Lamalera in the mid-19th century, prior to missionization Lamalerans used to bury their dead for short periods before exhuming the bones, most importantly skulls. Skulls were then placed within the clan houses<sup>7</sup> on the beach that shelter the hunting boats, where they would be venerated with offerings of fish or rice at specific points during the year, and potentially before going to hunt (Heslinga 1891 and Wintjes 1894, cited in Barnes 1996, 121). By the time that Dutch ethnographer Ernst Vatter passed through the community in 1929, all human remains had been transferred to the cemetery and reburied as part of missionization efforts (1932; cited in Barnes 1996, 124). Today, many Lamalerans visit the graves of their more recently dead family as well as their more distant ancestors as part of everyday worship, and on Catholic holidays such as Christmas and Easter. For example, the mother of the family that I lived with for most of my fieldwork visits the grave of her husband, who has been dead for more than 20 years, almost every morning after mass, for prayer and council on family affairs. In another example, on my first trip to Lamalera in late 2016, I sat next to a man on the cross-island bus who was traveling home from where he lives and works in central Java. He had come by ferry, a trip that takes about four days, to visit his family for Christmas, but also – just as important, he noted – to pray to the graves of his ancestors, as he had not had a chance to come home for some years. This daily familial ancestor practice combined with an expansive historical incorporation of ancestors corresponds to an understanding of the category of ancestor that has been documented across the region. In dialog with fellow eastern Indonesianists Judith Bovensiepen and Gregory Forth, Catherine Allerton commented on this categorization, noting that in nearby Manggarai and Nage traditions, the 'category of "ancestor" embraces both early founding ancestors and more recently deceased "mundane" forebearers' (Allerton 2009a, 241). This stands in contrast to other Indonesian cultural contexts where 'ancestor status was not automatically granted to "mere forebearers" but "had to be earned"' (Allerton 2009a, 241).

On the final day of festivities, the community of Lamalera and its many guests gather again on the beach and the Catholic priest performs a second mass on the steps of the beach altar, the *Misa Lefa*, or Lefa Mass. Today the service is assisted by altar servers, and supplemented by the church choral group, which is primarily made up of women. During the lead-up to the 2017 Misa Lefa the women of the chorus rehearsed their pieces at least once a week for two months before the day of the mass. During the mass the priest blesses and anoints a single hunting boat with holy water. This single

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<sup>7</sup>Lamalera's community is divided into five leading clans, and a larger group of 'younger brother' clans. All boat houses are attached to a single clan.



boat is then launched for a ceremonial initial sailing, to symbolically open the hunting season.

The afternoon following the *Misa Lefa* a final gathering takes place, where crews from all the hunting boats come to sit and eat local snacks like popped corn and drink palm wine together that is served by the mothers, sisters, and wives of the crews. Through deliberate conversation, conviviality, and consumption the group comes together to do the final work of the season opening: smoothing over any difficult issues that may have arisen through the events of the last four days, so that the community as a whole can launch the hunting boats the next day without conflict. This once again confirms the importance of harmony or social cohesion undergirding so much of social life here.

The opening of the *Musim Lefa*, as described above, is a generalized description, based on my own ethnographic research and cross-referenced with the writings of others. While necessary for giving an organizational overview for the rest of the article, if left on its own this kind of descriptive portrait runs the risk of fixing the community outside time and cut off from the myriad relational ties that bind it to the broader island community, to the nation of Indonesia, or to the marine environment. Throughout the rest of the article my analysis shifts to examine the ways in which the rituals and festivities of the opening of the hunting season have evolved over time and in relation to the socio-political context of the community. Like other festivals in Asia and elsewhere, the *Musim Lefa* is contingent upon social and political change, and subject to continuous adaptation and reinvention. As Duffy and Waitt have argued in their work on festivals:

The festival is, in fact a paradoxical thing: festival events function as form of social integration and cohesion, while simultaneously they are sites of subversion, protest or exclusion and alienation. It is precisely this paradoxical nature that creates the festival's socio-spatial and political significance for notions of community and belonging (Duffy and Waitt 2011, 55)

Drawing on this interpretation, Frost (2016) goes on to say that there is thus 'no necessary contradiction within festivals between ... culture and commerce, politics and entertainment, or tradition and regeneration. But it does require a careful and detailed analysis of the whole – an ecology of festivals – to understand how this works.'

Frost's point corresponds to a strain of post-structuralist theory that would argue that nearly all communal activities and cultural performances reflect political and economic structures. Religious cultural practices – such as the festivals explored in this thematic issue – are no exception to this rule, as Webb Keane has argued:

The history of any set of cultural practices is in part a matter of accretion and of stripping away. To revelation is added commentary. Liturgies produce architectures; both require officers ... Offerings expect altars, altars support images, images enter art markets, art objects develop auras. Rituals provoke anti-ritualist purifiers. Purified religions develop heterodox rites. By virtue of their relative autonomy of particular uses and inferences, their capacity to circulate across social contexts, and their materially enduring character over time, (cultural) practices are inherently prone to impurity and heterogeneity (2008:S124).

Binaries such as politics vs entertainment are often strawmen that allow for what anthropologist Roy Ellen has called 'the categorizing impulse' (2008) but which often do not exist in the lived reality of people. At the same time, meaningful (rather than reflexive) categorization and tracking of the different generative elements of festivals



allows us to see how discernible stakeholder groups or interested social forces expand, shrink, and compete in term of their presence and action, and thus allow us to ask questions about what an event is doing to and for a community – as slippery as that term itself is – over time. Frost's framework for an analysis of festivals from an interdependency perspective, as implied in her use of the term 'ecology,' seems productive for theorization and empirical research on festivals that seek to move past binaries without abandoning the process of creating analytic categories. In this thematic issue we have coalesced around a thematic analysis of three elements common across each of our case studies: piety, patronage, and play – which in this article is framed as performance of political action and cultural expression. My analysis of the celebration of the Misa Lefa follows this conceptual framework. I argue that the Misa Lefa represents a specific and unique cyclical opportunity for different elements of the community to exercise power and influence. In the sections below I point to three distinct constellations of events and people that have produced shifts in the Lefa that have each given way into new regimes of operation.

### The evolution of piety: opening the *Musim Lefa* through time and the impact of missionization

To examine the separable elements of Lamalera's Lefa and how they have evolved with the pressures of a living community, we need to first consider its historical transformations. To do this I rely on the work of Gregorious Keraf and Robert Barnes, read through and alongside my own ethnographic research from the past five years. Keraf was a linguist from Lamalera who made his way through the educational system provided by the Catholic seminary school system in the province of Nusa Tenggara Timor and went on to complete a doctorate in linguistics at the University of Indonesia in the 1970s, the first person from Lamalera to do so. His work was published under the title *Morfologi dialek Lamalera* in 1978, but this text also included ethnographic descriptions that have been drawn on by those who have worked in Lamalera and the surrounding communities that also speak Lamaholot, including by Robert Barnes, a British anthropologist who published the first holistic ethnographic monograph of Lamalera based mostly on long-term fieldwork from the 1970s and 80s. Keraf does not describe all of the events of the Lefa, but what he did record is illuminating. Some events described are very similar to the ways that they are performed today, while others are rather different in form. Attending to the details of both changes and continuities regarding the practice of the cycle of rituals and festivities allows us to begin to trace what kinds of internal and external pressures have waxed and waned in their influence on the 'ecology' of this festival system and helps us to better understand the Lefa in its current form.

In writing about the Tobo Nama Fate, Keraf notes that at the end of the ritual:

Of all of the fish encountered, not excluding a single one, the tails, fins and bones are gathered at the *ika-kota*. After ... they call for a market – not a market like one on the shore, but a market at sea. They appoint one or two boats located at either the eastern or western end of the beach to go to announce a market, that is they are first to go to sea. They next day one or two boats go to sea by themselves. They day after that for the first time all the boats go to sea together (Keraf 1978, translated and cited by Barnes 1996, 270).

Today, bone collection is not included as part of the ceremony, and the boat that is selected to go out for the first run is selected in conjunction with the priest at a mass that occurs the next day, as described above. But the larger pattern of events – that a single boat goes out on the first day, to be followed later by the rest of the active fishing fleet – remains.

Both Barnes and Keraf note that historically during the Lefa a set of sacred stones, or *nuba nara*, that used to sit at the beach and at specific sites in the village were also required to be fed (Barnes 1996, 270). The stones were understood to be linked to the clan ancestors. In an act of symbolic subjugation that is difficult to overstate in terms of visual and practical impact, the stones were uprooted and buried under what is now the Catholic church on the hill above the cove in around the turn of the century, during the same period that skeletal remains were removed from the boat houses. These removals are understood to have taken place under the direction of the first missionary permanently assigned to Lamalera who came to settle in 1920, a German member of the *Societas Verbi Divini* named Father Bernhard Bodi (Barnes 1992). In the 1980s there was some discussion within the community about excavating the stones and reviving this part of the ritual cycle. Barnes argued that this movement for retrieval was motivated by multiple factors. These included a push within the Catholic Church in the 1980s for ‘inculturation,’<sup>8</sup> on the one hand, and a contemporaneous desire to strengthen traditions on behalf of the three Lamaleran members of the *Like Telo* leadership body and their clans (1992, 172). This latter desire, he reasoned, was also about complying with a government program to ‘encourage the refurbishment of traditional culture’ in relation to boosting tourism (1992, 173). At the time, Barnes’s primary interlocutor reported that while there was support for this action of exhumation within the community, they were convinced that ‘no such step could be taken so long as a European missionary was resident in the village’ (1992, 173). In the end the stones remained where they were, and as of 2022 the stones are still buried under the church, despite the fact that the current priest is a native of the province, or the fact that Lamalera did indeed become a site for tourism and media attention in the intervening decades.

The removal of the stones is a rather large and materially grounded example of negotiation and displacement of practice in relation to Church involvement in the festivities, but it is not the only one. Barnes notes that historically, on the day before all the boats go out to sea together for the first time of the season, a ritual would take place where two pieces of cloth would be ‘sewn together at the temple at the center of the beach where the St Peter Chapel now stands’ (Barnes 1996, 270). Today, instead of the fabric sewing ritual there is an open celebration of mass at the St Peter Chapel. Of all the rituals, this mass, along with the *Misa Arwal* the night before, draws the largest crowd, from within the community and throughout the island. It is attended by district government staff and is covered most extensively by the regional press. This event is visible regionally as the opening of the fishing season in Lamalera, to the point that the name for it, the Lefa Mass, or *Misa Lefa*, is often used as a shorthand for the whole cycle of rituals and festivities from 28 April to 1 May. Barnes also notes that before missionization

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<sup>8</sup>Inculturation is a theological term within Catholic missionary literature and practice that refers to the integration of the Gospel with local cultural practices, as opposed to a previous policy of separated accommodation (see Norgat, Napolitano, and Mayblin 2017).

blessings that are now done with holy water, such as the blessing of the boats, were previously done with animal blood from sacrificed goats or chickens (1992, 175).

The active role the Church has taken in relation to the Lefa festivities may have reached a new peak in the 1980s when another missionary, Father Dupont, tried to take on the Lefa organization himself, both ‘to strengthen its Christian elements’ and ‘to emphasize traditional custom and traditional ritual language’ (Barnes 1996, 271). Crucial for our purposes here, Barnes goes on to note that the priest was

unsatisfied with the result, feeling that too many people did not enter into the spirit ... They gathered in front of the decent group great house of Kelake Langu section of the Bata Ona clan, with the great displays of the principle ropes, *léo fā*, of each of the boats. They then moved to the chapel at the beach. All was fancy, but too many did not do the right things (Barnes 1996, 271).

The ropes referred to here are those that are traditionally attached to harpoons. They are sacred tools in hunting practice. In my own interviews older hunters described that traditionally there were eight ropes with specific purposes and positions. The main rope referenced above, called the *talé léo fā*, was described to me as ‘the soul of the boat’ and today it is stored, coiled, in the center of the boat. Traditionally the ropes were of different thickness and made of different mixtures of materials, based on what type of marine prey they would be used for. Today many of the ropes used in active hunting have been replaced with manufactured nylon ropes. The *talé léo fā* is not often used in everyday hunting practice but is still made within the village and its production requires a multi-day ritual involving many men and women from the clan and boat-owning group for the boat that the rope will go into. Ropes are replaced when they break during a hunting trip or when they become too degraded by saltwater. Paying due attention to ropes, to their maintenance and to their active management within boats is highly important because failure to do so can lead to the worst outcomes, including severe injury and death of crew members. Once harpooned, the small wooden boats and their crews are attached to animals that weigh up to 40 tones, that dive hundreds of meters at a time, and swim 37 kilometers per hour.

Returning to Barnes’ account, by the end of May of that year the fleet had caught nothing, because Barnes’s interlocutors explained, ‘the lord of the land had held the ceremony as a Christian service in the yard in front of a clan house of Bata Ona ... without inviting various leaders of the principle clans’ (Barnes 1996, 271). The lack of fish prompted the lord of the land to ‘quietly redo the ceremony properly (that is, by calling the spirit, *puang alep*, of the fish), at the chapel in the centre of the beach in June,’ after which the fleet almost immediately began to catch whales (Barnes 1996, 271).

Today, the Whale Stone Ceremony – what Barnes refers to above as the ‘calling of the *puang alep*’ – is still present within the ritual cycle and it remains one of the most separated from the Catholic admixture. In recent years, however, this ceremony has come to face a new and different set of pressures, primarily in relation to media exposure and political positioning, as I will discuss in more detail below.

When examining the historical ethnographies of Keraf and Barnes on the opening of the Lefa, it becomes clear that, for past generations of Lamalerans, one of the largest elements of negotiation and adaptation concerned the role of the Church and the integration (and de-integration) of Catholic priests and liturgical practices. In that first

struggle, the position of the Church has not been diametrically opposed to local beliefs and practices at all points during the history of missionization within Lamalera. Rather, as is common in Catholic missionization history globally, Church leadership cherry-picked which elements they tried to integrate or suppress, at times supporting specific elements of local practices while actively working to forbid or undermine other elements. The choosing of what and what not to support was tied both to individual priests' perceptions and behavior, as well as changing discourses of best practice within Catholic missionary doctrine. Thus, inculturation may have come to the fore in the 1980s in the Indonesian Catholic ministry, but it was preceded by a period of missionary practice that looked rather different. Barnes notes that Bruno Pehl, Lamalera's second resident missionary who served from 1951 to 1962, 'employed a rhetoric that had little in common with inculturation' and whose own writing showed a serious effort to end what he termed as 'heathen' customary practices (1992, 173). Community responses to the Church's actions were also mutually constitutive – at times participating in integration, and, as in the last example, at times exercising a form of what Indigenous scholars now refer to as refusal – an intentional strategy of refusing to engage with or participate in various forms of usurping power structures (Simpson 2014).

Today Lamalera is an openly and devoutly Catholic community. In fact, none of Indonesia's four other nationally recognized religions is practiced there, something that was both reported to me with some pride by community members and reflected in census records, echoing a type of one-religion-per-village separation that is often seen throughout the region. At the same time, again like many other traditional and Indigenous communities globally, Lamalera also has a strong identity as a customary community that predates the arrival of the Church. Many Lamalerans who are active in the Church are also active in the preservation of traditional belief practices. For example, a nun from Lamalera has begun the effort of gathering writings about Lamalera from all sources she could find in a small archive in her home, an archive that I have relied upon at multiple points during my work. A priest from one of the group of five origin clans wrote his theology doctorate about Lamalera, and has also written a local dictionary including specialized terms and related cultural descriptions. In trying to understand how the current generation thinks about this issue during fieldwork, I asked a question about the ways in which belief systems have come together and how that process is experienced by living people in Lamalera when invited to observe a traditional ceremony for rope making, an event which blends Catholic prayer with much older ritual practice. One interlocutor explained how community members balance their religious practice this way: Lamalerans do not perceive a problematic 'separation between the ancestors and God'. 'All of it is *sakral* (sacred), I was told, and in that sense "thus it is all the same"'. This description reflects well the current form that the opening of the *Musim Lefa* takes, one where there is room for Catholic prayer, ancestor veneration, and calls to the spirits of animals, or *puang alep*, in the form of the Whale Stone ceremony. This may denote a different strain of a regional pattern in dealing with Catholic missionization. For example, based on her work on the neighboring island of Flores with Manggarai agriculturalists, Catherine Allerton has argued that communities have formed an 'anti-syncretic' response 'in which they reject the possibility of a fully Catholic landscape' and maintain the two belief systems – a local animistic agricultural belief system and Catholicism – through a 'strict separation of "religion" (agama) from the "custom"

(adat) associated with the land’ (2009b, 271). In Lamalera, by contrast, there does not seem to be the same strict terminology-based separation, but there is an ongoing commitment to maintaining both belief systems side-by-side, often entailing rituals from both systems within the same event.

### Recent shifts in the Misa Lefa ecology: positionality, performance, patronage

Today, negotiations between the Catholic elements and pre-existing local practices during the Lefa opening have become less visible. Instead, the causal element of change that seems most important to understand in the current era is the Gramscian struggle of position that the community has been engaged in with external state and non-state actors in relation to their identity as a small-scale traditional or customary marine hunting community, and the role that the rituals of the Lefa play in this position war (Durney 2019). In the past decade Lamalera’s profile as the last traditional whalers of Indonesia has grown, and along with it has come a conflict about international reputation, marine conservation, tourism, and tradition. During this same period Indonesia has experienced a large increase in both government and NGO investment and deployment of marine conservation projects, both in relation to the global degradation of marine ecosystems and the growth of marine tourism in what is called the Coral Triangle.<sup>9</sup> For Lamalera, this has meant decreased access to formerly negotiated marine hunting grounds (Durney and Åman 2021), efforts to regulate marine resources in new ways, and economic development programs that have aimed to shift the community away from hunting. The community remains steadfast in its commitment to marine hunting and has expressed resistance in various ways. One of the main areas of recourse for the community is in their identity as a small-scale or traditional-customary community, both designations which are eligible for certain kinds of legal protection in Indonesia, and which also have broader sociopolitical salience with the public (Durney 2019). This broader struggle manifests itself in many aspects of individual Lamalerans’ daily lived experience, and it creates distinct reverberating effects throughout the community with regards to the Lefa. It shows up most visibly in the ways in which different elements of the community, and the community as a whole, interact with its external audience. This external audience includes the local, national, and international press that show up to report on the festivities every year, as well as visitors in the form of district level bureaucrats, other residents of the island of Lembata, and tourists. It also includes the publics at the national and international level that consume the stories, images, and films that are produced about the community. These journalists, visitors and other audiences are all patrons of the present-day festival, playing a role in its preservation while also shaping it in new ways. The rituals and festivities surrounding the opening of the Lefa become a locus of important performativity and their consumption by audiences a co-constitutive act. Everyone’s presence in Lamalera is indicative of some positionality. For example, the presence of local government officials each year, including the district head or *bupati*, allows for a balancing of observation and patronage of the island’s most

<sup>9</sup>A regional biogeographic designation for the waters of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, which are considered a global marine biodiversity hotspot.

well-known, and in some sense, most controversial community. In 2017, for example, a large convoy of district government employees in uniform came to attend the mass, pose for pictures in front of the boat houses for both personal and press photos, and mingle with crowds on the beach. For members of the Lamaleran diaspora, meanwhile, the festival provides an opportunity to display to themselves, their origin community, and even their ancestors that they remain both pious and invested in their heritage. For those who cannot attend, social media now provides a new way to engage and participate through viewing, sharing, and commenting on pictures and videos sent through apps like Facebook and WhatsApp.

The fact that the events are often documented by the regional and sometimes even national press is made use of by all actors involved. The community itself does not control who comes to the village for the beach ceremonies every year, in part due to their outdoor, open-access nature. Because of that, those participating in these events have taken on an awareness of an external gaze<sup>10</sup> that is highly interested in seeing externally defined expressions of Indigenous authenticity (Conklin 1997, 2013) and not everyone agrees how best to position the community in relation to that gaze. One example of this is the ongoing debate about the use of outboards, which are now common in certain elements of marine hunting but which are eschewed entirely during the public Lefa opening ceremonies and for a period at the beginning of the season, the length of which has been contested and negotiated (Durney *in press*). One of the points of keeping outboards out of the Lefa events is to visibly demonstrate to audiences who do *not* understand the importance of outboards to maintaining its traditional hunting practices, that Lamalera is still connected to past forms of material practice and thus deserves legitimacy as a traditional community.

Other elements, such as the calling of the *puang alep* at the Whale Stones, seem to have gone through periods of closure and openness, based on a perpetual risk analysis that Lamalerans must run individually, as clans, and as a community, to display local belief practices and thus affirm their unique cultural identity without that same exposure leading to the disruption of ritual practices. This calculation has run alongside, and intermixed with, the issue of practice and suppression based on the efforts of missionaries discussed above.<sup>11</sup> During the 2017 ceremony I witnessed this risk calculation happen in real time, and I observed the steep cost that opening sacred ceremonies to international camera crews can have.

The week before the Lefa I interview the current clan head of the Lango Fujo clan as well as the mother of the Lango Fujo clan house to learn about their roles. I arrive at 4:00 am the morning of the ceremony. I arrive in the dark, and drink coffee with the family of the clan head as we watch how over the next hour the house fills slowly. The clan head had granted permission the day before to two members of a South Korean film team to come with us, and there had been some discussion of the logistics of this, in terms of who would accompany them from the village. Half an hour later, Frans, a resident who sometimes works as a guide, arrives with three of the Korean team and a German photographer, as well as two other guides who have been sent from the district level tourism office to accompany the South Korean team throughout their trip. The clan head and his family

<sup>10</sup>See Hooks (1992) for a theorization of gaze in film and cultural studies.

<sup>11</sup>Barnes, for example, wrote about the ceremony from interlocutor reports but never included direct accounts.

are visibly unhappy about these additional bodies, but do not forbid them from coming. Preparations and cups of coffee are finished, and we head out in the predawn light. This year, the clan leader is aided in his duties by his younger brother, who is in his twenties, and another teenage relative.

We start the climb to Lamamanu, a settlement higher up the mountain where one of the original landlord clans live. On the road, we are joined by even more people: a small Japanese film crew their Jakarta-based translator, another guide from Lembata's capital, and a local minder in the form of my own extended household, Uncle Louis. These other additions are greeted with impassivity from the leader. We stop at a house to pick up a live rooster for the ceremony and this first sign of potential cultural activity prompts a flurry of camera crew action, with cameras picked up and directed into everyone's faces. The men keep calm in the midst of the crews' flurry, ignoring the cameras and wearing practiced blank faces, and we move onwards.

Camera crew activity flags as for the next two hours we hike up the slopes of the volcano, through fields of legumes and corn, and then into the forest. The Korean team starts to slow down, sweating, swearing, and crashing through the brush along the trail, hampered in their efforts by a combination of dew-slicked rocks, the increasing incline, and badly suited footwear. At some point crossing a densely planted bean field, we lose the Japanese translator and Frans the guide. We string out through the forest, the clan members up ahead, keeping the groups in communication through a series of trills that imitate birds.

We arrive in a small depression in the forest, the site of the main sacred rock formation, called *Rangafak*. The clan members get to work as the crews struggle into the clearing. They clear the rock area of weeds, then harvest a series of plants they will use in the ceremony: ferns and a long-leafed grass, and coconuts which will be used for their water. Most of this is done without speaking, as an atmosphere of focused quiet hangs over the group.

Since there is no verbal communication between the documentarians and the members of the clan, an issue erupts when it becomes clear that the site preparations are over and the ritual elements of the ceremony begin, without announcement or fanfare. Over the next hour a distressing scene unfolds where the Japanese and Korean film crews fight for the best position, crash around in the bushes, argue about creating a press-line and violating it, yell at each other about appropriate conduct, and get in each other's shots.

Throughout this disturbance, the clan members carry on with little reaction, the head of the clan performs a ritual that includes the sacrificing of the chicken and the anointment of the rock with a mixture of holy water, tobacco, and collected plants. The rest of the chicken is plucked, cut up, and cooked over a small fire. Once cooked, a piece is given to the rock, and the rest is then offered to everyone present, along with the coconuts for water. The clansmen then tie the collected ferns around their waists, heads, wrists, and ankles – an activity that greatly excites the camera crews.

Once ornamentation is complete, the clan head's brother moves to the north of the clearing where a higher rock outcropping stands. He brings a small gong and a bundle of collected leaves. Standing on top of the rock, he begins a song that asks for the whale spirits to come because the people of Lamalera are hungry. He hits the gong four times and calls the spirits, making a series of three different trills that mimic



animal sounds and then waves the greens in a beckoning motion. He quickly moves off the rock and out of the clearing, continuing his pattern of sounds and gong beats. The other clansmen fall in behind him, while the clan leader explains to me on the way out of the clearing that the crews are to stay behind the procession and that they need to stay silent on the way down the mountain. It is dangerous to get out of place, I am told, or to look behind (a reflection of the legend). It is important to stay in order so the whale spirits do not get confused about the request and the direction that the procession is going. I am asked to explain all this to the now scrambling crews. With the South Korean team, I use our shared English, and I make an attempt at hand signals for the Japanese team, the German photographer already having taken off. As we head down the mountain paths to get to the smaller whale rocks, the rules are instantly thrown out of the window as the crews run up and down the trail trying to get good shots of the clansmen, now both adorned and singing, coming down the mountain in a truly National Geographic-level fantasy. The procession moves quickly, through uncleared brush, and as we get to the smaller mountain hamlets, through people's yards and animal pens. I lose the group at some point, and after walking on my own, find the South Korean team sitting on the side of the main path down the mountain with a visibly tired and frustrated Louis. (Somebody will tell me later that at some point during the time I was on my own, this team was made to leave because of their lack of ability to follow the rules.) Louis then tiredly asks if I will help him explain the crew about the issue of the presence of whales, and I agree with a sinking feeling. The head cameraman irritably says to me, gesturing at Louis, 'I have been trying to ask him and he won't tell me, or he doesn't understand, so can you ask for me when are the actual whales going to appear? We are not here for that long!' Louis's previous answer – that the appearance of whales is not something that can be predicted – was not believed, but my answer, the same answer, was grudgingly accepted. I did not ask the crew why this was, but it is hard not to think that it involved, at least in part, my Whiteness, my status as a researcher, or a combination. What is clear though, is that Louis, the actual expert, as a life-long whale hunter from the apparent subject community, did not have it.

We make it back to the clan house in Fukalere, the hamlet of Lamalera highest on the hill. Here the final Whale Stone altar rests in the yard where we catch up with the rest of the group, which has stopped for a break. From here we will proceed to the final rituals down at the beach and the men will enter the ocean and deliver the spirits.

From a strategic perspective, allowing outsiders to document this ritual is important to Lamalera's position struggle. The ritual functions as an important node in the community's case for cultural authenticity and thus their right to hunt marine animals. It provides a specific kind of visual evidence for their historical and spiritual connection to the land, to the ocean, and to marine animals that can stand against an ongoing global discourse that portrays Indigenous marine hunters as people who do not care about the environment or animals, and the constituent images of blood in the water that are circulated by conservation activists, animal rights advocates, and urban viewers within and outside Indonesia interested in marine conservation and charismatic megafauna (Boykoff, Goodman, and Littler 2010; Coté 2010, Author 2019 and in review). The atmosphere that the images can capture bolsters the community's rootedness as a

traditional or customary group, as they are currently popularly understood in Indonesia (Davidson and Henley 2007).

Journalists and photographers have a specific role to play in this scheme, and their continued presence is negotiated locally with this in mind. For example, even during the writing period of this article multiple mass media publications have appeared, including an article in *National Geographic* itself detailing both the ceremony and conflict surrounding it (Bock-Clark 2021) and a new, award-winning film by a documentarian from Japan who had previously worked in Lamalera in the 1990s (Ishikiwa 2021). These media appearances are part of a much longer list of media coverage of Lamalera,<sup>12</sup> including some facilitated by anthropologists: Robert Barnes brought a documentary team to Lamalera in 1987 as part of a film series entitled 'Disappearing World'.<sup>13</sup> Access and exposure thus have a long history in Lamalera; however, they can take a complicated and at times heavy toll. Different people in the community both benefit from and experience harm in relation to this politics of identity performance that crops up around the Lefa festivities. For some people, access and exposure can bring monetary benefits and a degree of prestige. This includes those who have found ways to work with tourists and those who are in traditional positions of leadership. In this sense the role of media takes on a certain aspect of patronage. Often the same individuals also experience harm, such as breach of privacy, stress and discomfort, interruptions of sacred and/or practical labor, and outright disrespect, as the example of the filming of the Whale Stone Ceremony described above. There are also other people important to both ritual and community functions more generally, but who may not play visible roles, who are left mostly out of the image frame. Women, for example, play critical supporting roles in many of the rituals.<sup>14</sup> They are caretakers of clan houses and community spaces and make festivities possible through their organizational, culinary, and affective labor, but are often not adequately or accurately represented. These tensions that are created during the Lefa, or more accurately during the mediatization of the rituals and festivities, often bleed back into the community throughout the rest of year and must be negotiated between individuals, families, and clans (see Nolin 2010).<sup>15</sup>

It is in this current mediatized form that the *Misa Lefa* fits most easily under the category of festival, as it resembles several of the other Asian festivals discussed in this thematic issue, which are likewise subjected to various 'external gazes' and transformed by mass and social media (Hüsken and Michaels 2023; Rots & Haugan 2023; Sen 2023; Swancutt 2023). This is a fairly recent development: historically, the audience was likely smaller, and the entire ritual cycle was likely more inwardly focused within the community. To what extent the *Misa Lefa* was always a 'festival' in the modern sense of the word may be subject to debate – but then, the category 'festival' is not clear-cut, as there is no single consensus about minimum criteria for scale, content, or audience. In any case, the purpose of this article (or indeed the thematic issue as a whole) is not to come up with a new theorization of the term. Instead, we took a 'family resemblance approach to the categorization of religiously affiliated public events across Asia' in order

<sup>12</sup>There have been documentaries by British, South Korean, Japanese and German filmmaking teams, appearances in the *New York Times* in 2017, *Kompas* (Indonesia's largest Newspaper (2017)), and *The Daily Mail* (2015) and many more).

<sup>13</sup>Blake, John (producer). 1988. *The Whale Hunters of Lamalera* (Disappearing World). Manchester: Granada.

<sup>14</sup>An expression in Indonesia meaning to return to one's rural roots.

<sup>15</sup>See Barnes 1996, Egami and Kojima 2013, Nolin 2007 for information on Lamalera's catch data.

to explore commonalities that appeared through a shared focus on the concepts of piety, patronage, and play (Teeuwen, Sen, and Rots 2023). In thinking across these categories for the *Misa Lefa*, one could argue that the patronage roles of both the media and the post-New Order regional government, and the addition of elements of the Catholic public mass, have had a role in shifting the overall nature of the event from a specialist local ritual cycle towards a more festival-like event. The use of social media by the community and diaspora in relation to the event, and the related attendance of Lembatan islanders from other villages, may also be linked to support of festivals as promotable cultural events by the regional arms of the Ministry of Tourism. In recent years the Ministry has channeled both funding and logistical support into festivals as a form of internal and international tourism development, both in this province and across Indonesia. Either way, in combination, these changes all serve to increase the number of attendees and stakeholders, and in this sense shifts the event away from that of a ritual ceremony focused on local practitioners and more towards an event that incorporates and addresses a diverse and external audience. In this sense I would argue that the *Misa Lefa* has experienced some tinge of the observations of Fournier (2019), cited in this issue's introduction, that traditional festivals in Europe have transformed into 'fairs,' 'where visitors behave primarily as consumers' (Teeuwen, Sen, and Rots 2023). While I would *not* argue that most attendees in the Lamaleran context are market-based consumers, the movement from a larger proportion of actively involved participants to an event that involves a larger number of attendees that are there solely to watch the events does seem to follow a larger global pattern.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this event, regardless of changes to what is considered proper displays of piety, to norms about who can be present to support or witness, to notions of authenticity debates, or to public health measures, remains a hugely significant activity for the community. In this article, I have laid out historical and recent ethnographic data to support the case that the *Misa Lefa* represents a unique forum for different elements of the community, and for Lamalera as a whole, to negotiate power and identity. My argument is threefold and can be summarized as follows. First, prior to missionization, the events surrounding the opening of the season were a way to petition ancestors and the spirits of prey, whose power over community life was reinscribed at this time through ritual. The event cycle may have also served as a way for clan leadership to display power and influence both through their participation in various events, be that through conducting ritual sacrifice or leading community planning and negotiation for the oncoming hunting season – a function that the event cycle still supports today, and which follows regional trends (Howell 1996). Second, when Lamalera was missionized by the Catholic Church, the ritual cycle opening of the *Musim Lefa* became an important venue for the church to exert its symbolic and practical power, though what form this action took fluctuated through time. Initially sublimating and displacing previous belief practices seems to have been prioritized, and certain parts of the *Lefa* changed with this effort. Later an 'inculturation' approach was adopted by the Church, traditional practice was (re)encouraged, and the Church itself, or at least the resident missionary, became a sort of patron of the opening of the *Lefa*.

Third, today's expanded and potentially more festival-like atmosphere of the *Misa Lefa* goes hand-in-hand with a new shift in its ecology: one where the celebration and those who participate in it have to grapple with a politics of identity performance, governance negotiation, and awareness of multiple external gazes that has arisen in relation to an ongoing struggle to maintain traditional marine hunting practices in the face of conservation pressure from both state and NGO actors. In this latest permutation of the *Lefa* different kinds of actors and patrons have become involved. The role of regional and international media in portraying the ritual cycle has taken on major significance, something that the community knows and can make use of in their struggle to defend themselves as an authentically customary community, but only to a certain degree: long-standing and often harmful essentializing discourses about how traditional and Indigenous peoples should act and appear still control much of what media actors choose to portray. This makes the media a patron with a specific type of warping impact: one that has elevated certain participants within the ritual cycle and minimized the role of others, in a way that does not always accurately portray community functions.

Members of the media are not the only kinds of audiences who come to Lamalera for the *Misa Lefa* today, however. Members of the district government also attend the ceremony, enacting their own forms of patronage and power. Tacit support of Lamalera's traditions by the local government is important for the community and their struggle to represent themselves to higher state levels. At the same time, the presence of the government serves as a reminder that Lamalera does not function as an autonomous community. Finally, today the *Misa Lefa* represents an opportunity for the community's diaspora, which provides significant support in the form of remittances, networks of kin, opportunity, and labor (and, therefore, are both participants and patrons) to return home and re-experience an important, identity-affirming tradition.

Ultimately the *Lefa* is an annual celebration that brings together important threads of Lamalerans' lived experience in a way that no other event achieves within this unique culture. Disentangling these threads, and those tensions that have pulled them into different alignments, is important for the construction of a sort of ecological analysis of the *Misa Lefa* over time, but it remains an event that works primarily to bind rather than to separate, tying together the living and the dead, humans and marine animals, political allegiance, cultural heritage, and God.

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## Notes on contributor

**Florence Durney** is a cultural anthropologist whose research interests center on the relationships of human societies and their environments. The majority of her work has focused on humans and the marine environment, and the ways in which that relationship is differentially understood and put in practice around harvest and management, with a regional focus in Southeast Asia. She is currently working on two book projects: one on traditional marine hunting in Indonesia and a co-edited volume on aquatic spiritual practices under environmental pressure across Asia.

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