



By Michel Lippitsch

Glimpses Into The World of **Jongs**

“You need to get married with your Jong,” says Zakir, late one night while sipping coffee on the beach.

I first met Zakir on New Year’s Day, sailing his Jongs with a few friends. The beach was full of kids playing and the sails attracted me like a magnet.

Eventually I got married too. I bought two Jongs during a racing event in Teluk Sebong, from the Jong makers of Bengalis in Eastern Sumatra. Zakir chose the Jongs, my “wives”, acting as my matchmaker. We renamed the boats, *Bule Kampong* (literally the white man from the village), and the other simply became *Planet*, in honour of our planet ocean.

The tradition of the Jong was originally designed to send gifts of betel nut and other sacred food out to sea. There was a time when the sea around Riau was filled with sails. Jong racing was a popular Malay pastime in Singapore but the massive development of the coastline and a faster pace of life have almost made the Jong a memory of the past.

However, a ferry ride across to Bintan is where you can still learn the art. Although they are unmanned boats, many secrets guard the Jong. Each builder finds new ways to improve the design, but the fundamentals remain the same. They are rooted in geometry and symmetry, based on the human body.

They are intimately connected to the *Orang Suku Laut*, the original nomadic tribe that controlled the sea around Riau.

They became the navy of the Malays as well as the cultural players in the courts of the Malay aristocracy.

The Malays are sometimes scared of the power of the *Orang Laut magic*: And you do need a little magic to sail a Jong. “You need to keep your heart clean.”

The first event in Teluk Bakau on the east coast of Bintan took place in March 2013. It proves that the locals can rise to a challenge and takes care of the logistics for a complex endeavour.

In the spirit of trying to be holistic, the seasons gave us our tempo, and we now organise two races a year: One race for the *Utara*, or northerly winds, and the other, a *Selatan* race for the southerly winds.

At 6am, the crew is up and running. Poles are fixed in place and there’s a last beach cleanup. By 7am, the first Jongs arrive, some by cars from a few hours away, others by bikes, still others by foot. In all, six villages are participating.

The elder opens the ceremony with a prayer, while the beach fills up with Jongs. Over a hundred coloured sails spread out, singing in the wind. The most important element is here: The wind. Blowing in gusts of 15 knots, everyone knows there will be a few casualties during the race.

The tide starts rising. Fast.

Number 27. *Bule Kampong*. That’s me. The wind is blowing 14 knots. Slightly gusty. I am there, on the starting line





with ten other boats, waiting for the signals. Each number is called out.

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

“*Satu. Dua. Tiga. Go!*” From there you watch your “horse” and you will know the result from a hand signal from one of your teammate.

Time for my second Jong, *Planet*, to race. A truly “wild horse” this one. I do a quick adjustment on my lestring and “*Satu. Dua. Tiga.*”

Here she goes, she deviates and collides with another boat, actually a friend that we nickname *Kacamata* (glass eye) because he wears thick eyeglasses. But somehow the two Jongs are slowly going, they cross the line and make it to the finals. By this stage luck has entered the race, to become a serious player to be reckoned with.

We are now bringing in a race for the kids, the next generation of players. Without them, it is only a matter of time till the game dies.

In the spirit of a living museum, we have also built a *Rumah Jong* (the house of Jong) to showcase and share information on traditional Jong sailing. It is the seat of our new Jong School.

Our *kelompok* (group) takes its name from ancient Malay tradition, *Sekapur Sirih*, a traditional welcome dance. The names are loaded with symbolism: *Sirih*, the betel leave, is a symbol of respect for others, generosity, and altruism; *Kapur*, the lime, its whiteness reflects the purity of the heart.

The upcoming *Selatan* race is sponsored by Nikoi Island, the Biosphere Society Singapore through Yves De Leeneer,



Fishead, BaliBow, and a few individuals with a value for the game.

The race brings people together: Old, young, man, woman, there is no boundary. Kids are now taking an interest. It is a tradition to feel proud about, to cherish and grow for the future.

It is also a competition. It is about a clean game, and it is as green as it can get with no carbon footprint. It is an art of precision, attention and true values. It is a game of techniques and interaction with our blue planet (away from your electronic devices). It is a vehicle to share and present ideas with.

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