



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The dynamics and sustainability of Ambon's smoked tuna trade

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**Abstract** This article analyses the contemporary nature of the smoked tuna (*ikan asar*<sup>1</sup>) trade in Ambon city (in Maluku province, eastern Indonesia) with particular regard to the operation of its central precinct along Piere Tendean Road, between the outer city suburbs of Galala and Hative Kecil, and the connection between this area and the region's fishing grounds. The precinct is chosen as a focus since its location has been determined by a complex set of historically determined socio-political forces that are still actively in play. The article's case study emphasises the dynamic nature of circumstances concerning the supply chain of products in locations experiencing substantial population growth, socio-cultural disruption and/or modernisation. The 'foodways' involved in the article's case study are, thereby, not discrete and/or stable but, rather, volatile ones that have been variously shortcut, diverted and/or disrupted under external pressures of various degrees of magnitude and/or immediacy. The maintenance of the foodways involved has required adaptation,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ikan asar* is a term that refers to smoked fish in general (*ikan*: fish + *asar*: smoked) but is used almost exclusively in Ambon to refer to smoked tuna. To avoid ambiguity we refer to 'smoked tuna' throughout the article rather than using the Bhasa term that its retailers and consumers commonly employ.

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ingenuity and the investment of socio-cultural commitment over and above the simple inducement of commercial opportunity. The food product engendered by this dynamic system is therefore not purely a market commodity (as in a simplistic economic model) but rather a cultural one with distinct attributes and significance that crystallise the intersection of various spheres of human and environmental activity in a spatio-temporal context. In attempting to provide an analysis of Ambonese smoked tuna and its Galala–Hative Kecil precinct – and the *context* of the Ambonese circumstances that have delivered it – the article also reflects on the sustainability of the trade and the manner in which the dynamic development of the Ambonese population may overwhelm the adaptive potential of its entrepreneurs and patrons.

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## Introduction

Ambon city is the administrative and economic centre of the Maluku archipelago, which forms the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago (see Fig. 1). The region has played a prominent part in regional and global trade networks for over a thousand years (Ellen, 2003: 4–14) through its production of the food spices obtained from clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*) and nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*) trees and, in particular, through the high value of these products in Western Europe in the 12th–19th centuries (ibid: 5). The latter factor also resulted in the forceful intrusion of European powers into the region, with Portugal initially establishing a tenuous colonial presence in Ambon in 1526. The Netherlands displaced Portugal in 1609 and dominated Ambon and the region (albeit with brief periods of English occupation in 1796–1802 and 1810–1814) until the Japanese occupation in 1942 and Indonesian independence in the post-War era. The current population of Ambon city is around 356,000, a substantial increase on its 1980s' population of c200,000, largely due to migration into the region from the islands of western and central Indonesia (mainly Java and Sulawesi). Along with creating environmental stress on Ambon Bay and its fishery (Fig. 2), the new arrivals significantly modified the religious demographic of the population, which was c65% Christian (a legacy of its long period of European

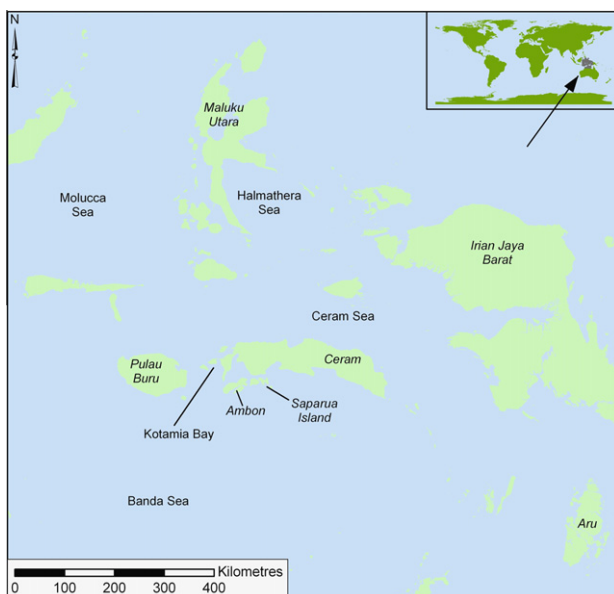


Fig. 1 Ambon and the Maluku region (map: Greg Luker, 2011).

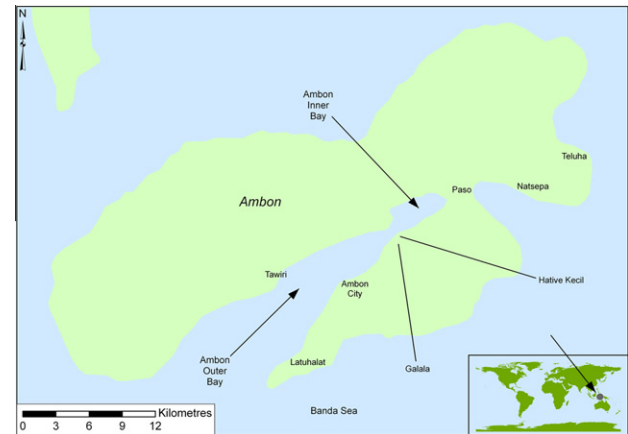


Fig. 2 Ambon Bay (map: Greg Luker, 2011).

colonisation) and c35% Muslim in the 1980s. By the end of the 1990s the ratio was closer to 50/50. Tensions between Christians and Muslims, who had lived in relative harmony for much of the preceding century, were exacerbated by the low-socio-economic status of many recent Muslim migrants, who lacked socio-economic networking and commercial opportunities on the island, and by the presence of a small number of religious fanatics amongst them. As discussed below, these tensions flared into civil war in Ambon (and in many of the other Maluku islands) in 1999–2002, resulting in widespread destruction of areas of Ambon city and outlying villages and a severe diminution of external trade with (and tourism to) the island and region in general.

From the mid 2000s on a number of central Indonesian Government and provincial initiatives attempted to restore the infrastructure of the island and to re-integrate it into the region. Since 2006 the island has seen a series of major civil works, including the construction of bridges and port facilities and commercial ventures, including high quality hotels such as the Aston, at the beachside village of Netsepa, and the Swiss Belhotel in central Ambon city. For much of the 1980s and 1990s one of the key international tourism events in the city was the annual Darwin-Ambon yacht race, which commenced in 1976 and continued until 1998 (when it was suspended due to Ambon's political instability<sup>2</sup>).<sup>3</sup> In 2006, part of its attempt

<sup>2</sup> See 'Darwin to Ambon – Yacht Race and Rally', online at: <http://www.darwinambonrace.com.au/>, accessed September 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The race also led to the establishment of a sister city agreement between Ambon and Darwin signed in Ambon in October 1988 and countersigned in Darwin in July 1989.

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