

Intersections: Asia and Australia *continued*

De-demonising ‘people smuggling’ between Indonesia and Australia

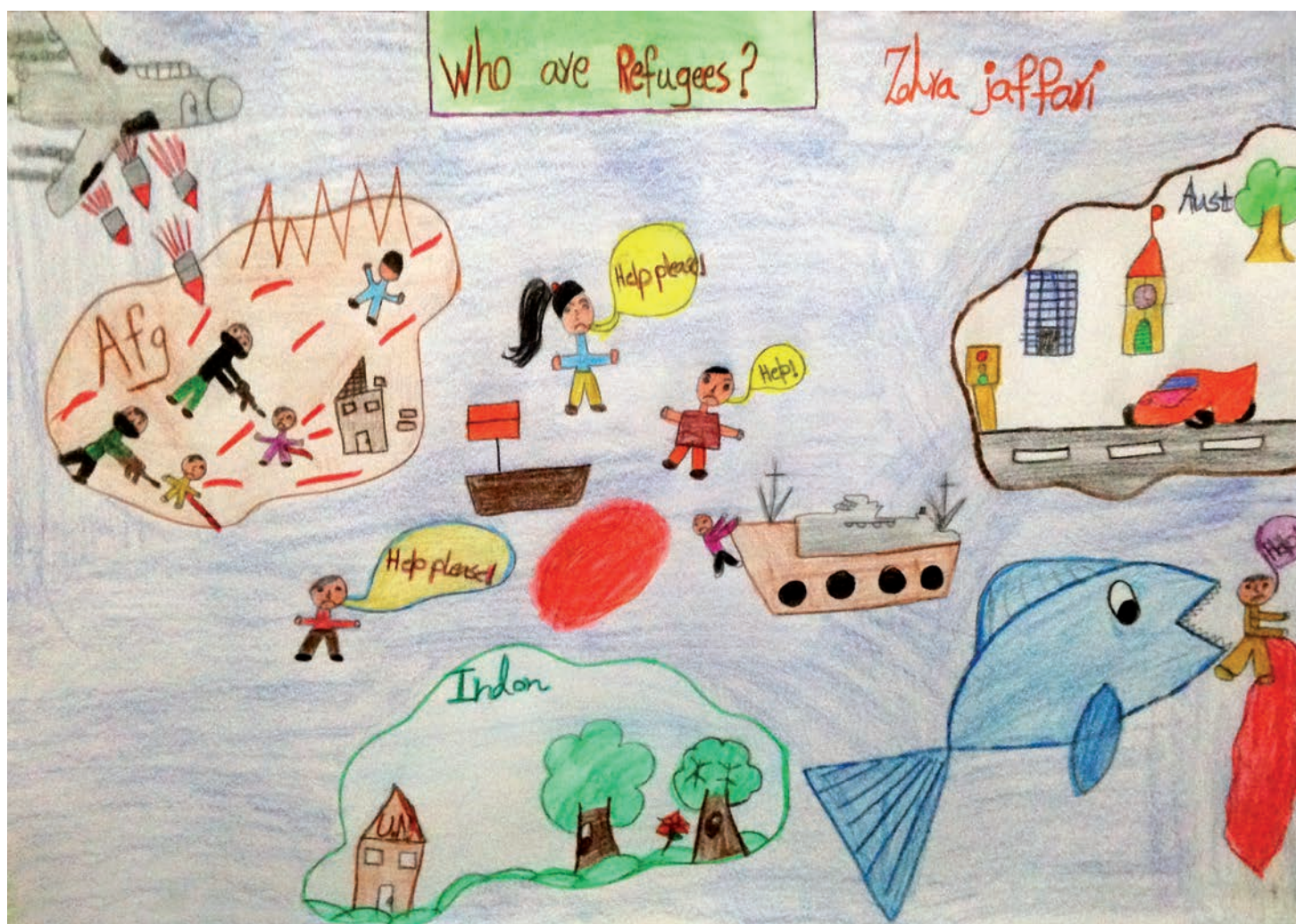
Antje Missbach

FOR THE LAST THREE YEARS, I have studied political, economic and legal aspects of so-called ‘people smuggling’ from Indonesia to Australia. Between 2009 and mid-2013, more than 50,000 asylum seekers made their way to Australia by boat, with the help of Indonesian transporters. Their arrival in Australia not only triggered hyper-politicised debates on migration, refugee protection and national security, but also led to the adoption of more restrictive asylum policies and deterrence strategies by successive Australian governments. Indonesia, as a result of pressure from Australia, has also adopted a number of policies that are detrimental to the free movement of asylum seekers and refugees, although they tend to be ineffective in curbing the activities of smugglers.

Over the last decade, transnational people-smuggling networks have grown substantially as demand among asylum seekers and other migrants has risen. There have always been facilitators who provide services to paying customers wanting to cross international borders, but smugglers have become increasingly indispensable in the present global migration flows, especially for those whose journeys involve difficult passages such as an ocean crossing. Smuggling is now the norm rather than the exception, not least because of increasingly restrictive border regimes around the world. Now, it is often only smugglers who can facilitate (unlawful) movement into and out of countries for those escaping life-threatening situations in their countries of origin.

The politicized debate on people smuggling has thrived on simplistic depictions of smugglers as ‘natural born criminals’ and ‘the scum of the earth’ – as described by former Australian PM Kevin Rudd. People smugglers are blamed as solely responsible for the human disasters along smuggling routes, whether at sea or on land. They are accused of exploiting their clients – considered innocent and helpless victims – financially and sometimes, sexually. Seemingly interested in amassing riches rather than in the well-being of their customers, smugglers are depicted as evil. But the excessively simplistic assumption that, without smugglers, nobody would die when fleeing for their lives is wrong.

The mainstream media and populist politicians alike tend not only to disregard the need for people-smuggling, but also to ignore the multi-layered composition and ever-changing configurations of smuggling networks. To facilitate the journeys of asylum seekers from Indonesia to Australia, a number of services are required, including temporary housing, provision of food, transport, organising boats and crew, collecting and transferring money. The most visible service providers in the operation are the Indonesian fishermen who ferry the asylum seekers and face the consequences of the law both in Australia and Indonesia. My research aims to disturb the ethical dichotomy between ‘bad smugglers’ and ‘good migrants’ by showing that the vilified transporters are often themselves victims of global structural changes.



Above:
Child's drawing;
photo taken
by author.

In my research, I have studied different actors within Indonesian people-smuggling networks, including former (rejected) asylum seekers working as recruiters and organisers, Indonesian fishermen, over-represented among imprisoned people smugglers, and members of Indonesian security forces who provide security for people-smuggling operations. To establish the social backgrounds of convicted smugglers, I have relied mostly on the verdicts of Indonesian courts. To retrace their decision-making and risk-taking strategies, I have held open interviews with smugglers during their imprisonment and after their release.

My work complements a number of recent studies on irregular migration and mobilities of asylum seekers and refugees as well as forced immobility that have been carried out by colleagues at different universities in Australia. Savitri Taylor, Amy Nethery and Brynna Rafferty-Brown have written in great detail about the lack of refugee protection and immigration detention in Indonesia. Linda Briskman and Lucy Fiske have mapped the ‘stuckness’ of asylum seekers rendered immobile in Indonesia by current externalised Australian border policies, and long-term observers of migratory flows, such as the late Graeme Hugo, have studied the politics of limbo in Indonesia. Susan Kneebone has scrutinised the regional mechanisms, such as the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and related Transnational Crime, which are responsible for immobilising

asylum seekers and refugees. Andreas Schloenhardt and Xavier R. Goffinet have conducted a number of insightful studies on the law enforcement of anti-people-smuggling legislation and the prosecution of Indonesian smugglers both under Australian and Indonesian law.

Convicting hundreds of Indonesian fishermen has had no serious impact on the operational capability of any smuggling network, as willing replacements are readily available in the large pool of impoverished Indonesians. Arresting and punishing recruiters and organisers has not proven sufficient to combat people-smuggling networks more broadly, as it is also relatively easy to replace them with members of the same network or even with competitors. For now the number of asylum seeker boats leaving Indonesia has decreased, as a result of Australia's unilateral approach of forcibly returning boats to Indonesia. The diplomatic and financial sustainability of this approach is highly questionable, as the Indonesian government has protested against it repeatedly. My findings support demands for policy-makers and opinion-leaders to shift their attention away from the facilitators of irregular migration towards the root causes of forced displacement and, thus, to eliminating the need for flight which engenders reliance on people smugglers.

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Celebrating Asian Studies in Australia

Dolly Kikon

I WORK IN NORTHEAST INDIA as a political anthropologist. Over the last fifteen years, Northeast India has become an important site for an array of scholarship. For security analysts, it is a place to study armed conflict and insurgency; human rights scholars have documented some of India's worst cases of state violence in the region; for new fields like borderland studies the region is an important location to study connections and flows; and policy makers grapple with difficult questions about implementing development programs in militarized places.

My own academic trajectory – from history, law, to anthropology – has enabled me to engage with the region in various ways. Conversations with academics, practitioners, and non-government organizations in the last fifteen years have allowed me to contribute towards debates about citizenship, politics, and resources both inside and outside the academy. Producing theoretically driven and ethnographically rich work means engaging with the eclectic intellectual community of scholars working on Asia and beyond. As a student of law in India, a graduate student in Hong Kong and California, a postdoctoral fellow in Sweden, and university

lecturer in Australia today, I have truly experienced the richness of Asian Studies. And scholars across Australia have offered new concepts, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks to understand the ongoing social, economic, and political developments in Asia.

In 2016, I came across two excellent monographs published by Amsterdam University Press (AUP): *Beyond Bali: Subaltern Citizens and Post-Colonial Intimacy* (Asian Heritage Series) by Ana Dragojlovic, an anthropologist at the University of Melbourne, and *Borderland City in New India: Frontier to Gateway* (Borderland Series) by Duncan McDuie-Ra, Professor of Development Studies at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney. Many exciting works on Asian Studies have been published over the last few years, but these two works stand out for two reasons. Firstly, both scholars not only connect the reader to new concepts about place-making, mobility, and belonging, but also to people and regions in Asia (Bali and Northeast India) that are relatively underused as sites for engaging with critical and important themes in the social sciences. Secondly, the monographs assert the importance of paying attention to interconnections and crossings (both geographically and socially) in order to make original contributions to the academy.

Michael Herzfeld, professor of Anthropology at Harvard University and a member of the editorial board of the Asian Heritage Series at Amsterdam University Press explained the importance of Dr Dragojlovic's work for the Heritage Series: “Our effort is to capture the dynamics of a very large continent, Asia, and the way in which scholarship has emerged here.



Above: Two standout AUP publications.

Europe's presence in Asia has been quite intimate through its history of colonialism. Ana's book is about Balinese migrants in the Netherlands, and the vagaries of the concept of Balinese-ness. Her book describes a group of people who were caught in the conflict between the colonial powers and the local majority.”

Reflecting on her ethnographic journey, Dragojlovic said that the book project evolved from her doctoral dissertation at the Australian National University (ANU). Initially she was intrigued to explore how Balinese people created a particular image of uniqueness as a result of their contact with anthropologists, Euro-American artists, and the Dutch colonial state since the beginning of the twentieth century. Dragojlovic noted that her encounters with Balinese interlocutors in the Netherlands “caused a major puzzle” because they were not critical about Dutch colonialism. However, it was such ethnographic surprises that enabled her to present and meticulously discuss new concepts such as postcolonial intimacy in her monograph.

The variety and breadth of scholars in Australia working on Asia is impressive, and my conversations with graduate students and prospective candidates affirm that the future of Asian Studies is a vibrant and exciting one. My encounters with Dr Dragojlovic and Professor McDuie-Ra's works give me reason to celebrate Asian Studies in Australia.

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