

# ONE OF MANY THOUSANDS

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WE LEFT the ship in *prahus* and were paddled swiftly towards the dim outline that was Taam Island. The setting sun silhouetted a row of white thatched houses behind a long white beach. As we approached the shore, the last light faded away, leaving a silvery rim of sand to separate the black sea from the darkened island.

A small group of barely discernible figures approached as we stepped out to meet our hosts. Then, out of the darkness and stillness of the tropical night, we heard children singing—rows and rows of wide-eyed children welcoming us with tremendous spontaneity and enthusiasm. We stood in silent wonder, not quite believing that this tiny speck on the map was now under our feet. But it was certainly real, and, as the song ended, the children thronged around us waving and shouting.

People were running on to the beach from the village and more *prahus* were sliding on to the sand, laden with young men who had ventured into the darkness to examine our ship. The noise was deafening, the chaos was delightful, and everyone was happy.

So began the recent Australian National University biological expedition to Taam — one of nearly fourteen thousand islands in Indonesia (six thousand are inhabited). Taam Island belongs to the Kai group, which lies about five hundred miles north of Darwin. Each of the fifty or so islands of the group is oceanic in origin; that is, it arose from the sea bed because of volcanic activity below.

Most of the islands are low-lying, formed exclusively of coral rock and covered with dense vege-

tation. To the zoogeographer, the Kai islands lie in an area of biological interchange, known as 'Wallacea'. The name is, of course, derived from that of the great biologist of the last century, A. R. Wallace, who extensively explored and collected in this area.

Wallace suggested that within the area of the Celebes and Moluccas there existed animals derived from both Asian and Australasian faunas, and that the ancestors of the animals now living in Australia had migrated southward through this region. Wallace's findings here led him to the publication of a theory of evolution essentially the same as that of Darwin, and have particular relevance to the evolution and range of existing Australian fauna.

Since these early studies the area has remained of considerable interest to zoogeographers and classical systematists, particularly with regard to vertebrate animal groups. With this interest, a group of graduate zoology students from the Australian National University obtained support from scientific institutions in Australia, the U.S.A. and Indonesia and from commercial companies in Australia to mount an expedition to one of the Kai islands for the purpose of collecting representative specimens of the vertebrate fauna.

Taam Island was selected as the site for our operation for three reasons. First, it is of sufficient size (six square miles) to support a wide variety of animals, yet small enough to be thoroughly explored by a small group of field workers in the five-week period available to us. Secondly, it is four hundred and thirty feet above sea level at its highest point—higher than similar islands of comparable size and therefore having a wider range of habitats. In the third place, it is more accessible than most of the adjacent islands.

The expedition party travelled by road from Canberra to Darwin, the equipment being shipped separately by freight truck. From Darwin a boat was chartered to take the expedition to Tual, the capital of the Kai islands.

After two days in Tual, the expedition proceeded to Taam on the chartered ship, the m.v. *Haeremai Star*, of Darwin. Also on board were the chief administrators of the Kai group and a delegation of high-ranking government, police and army officials. We had met all of these people in Tual during a civic reception in our honour.

After the singing, the noise level rose as shouts and laughter came from the darkness on all sides. Children with happy, curious looks on their faces surged around us as we were escorted through the village to a large house on the hill behind. Here we were introduced to the head man of the village,



ABOVE: Spices drying outside a house in Taam.

BELOW: Rain forest on the island.



the Bapa Radja, and the government officials explained the purpose of our visit to the local people.

The *Haeremai Star* was unloaded the following morning and sailed early in the afternoon. Among the passengers was one member of the expedition party who had developed a tropical ear infection and was forced to return to Darwin for treatment. There were now four of us left on the beach to watch the ship sail toward the eastern horizon, once more bound for Tual. The skipper had promised to return in five weeks.

After three days spent in putting up tents and shifting equipment, in which we were helped by



*The view from offshore as the expedition was leaving Taam.*

many local people, we had a completed camp site next to the village school. Now we were ready to start work, to take a closer look at this speck on the map. Our first move was to set out in our twelve-foot dinghy, fitted with a small outboard motor, with the intention of circumnavigating the island. During this trip we were plagued by engine trouble and by waves swamping our obviously inadequate craft. Nevertheless, the journey was completed in three hours.

We saw a small, steep island, very thickly timbered and with a steep, jagged coral shoreline, broken at infrequent intervals by stretches of sand ten to two hundred yards in length. Two coconut plantations provided the only relief from the thick jungle covering most of the island, though occasional gardens (cleared areas used by the local people for growing crops) were distinguished by the surrounding fences (to keep out goats).

The next four weeks were spent in concentrated collecting of insects, plants and, our special interest, vertebrates. We were particularly impressed by the wide variety of vertebrates; the large numbers of birds and bats included several which were not pre-

viously known to live in this area. Highlights of our collection were large fruit bats and the cat-like cuscus, which is related to the possum.

Though the large fruit bat, *Pteropus neohibernicus*, has not to our knowledge been reported previously from the Kai islands, it is known from the nearby Aru islands. The smaller bats, of which we collected six species, may also prove interesting; they are active only at night, and rest by day in coral caves.

Small passerine birds were numerous in the thick forest. The bright blue kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*) was often noticed. Several species of sea birds were collected; perhaps the most spectacular were frigate birds, which fly in groups high above the island. Probably the most interesting bird group will be the pigeons, several species of which were collected.

With the exception of the tree-dwelling cuscus, the only mammals collected were several species of mice, rats and the distinctive, powerfully scented shrews.

Small lizards were, of course, very numerous. We were especially interested to find large goannas inhabiting the island. Two species of tree snakes and large amythestine pythons, up to nine feet in



*Boats at sunset off the island.*

length, were the only snakes encountered. Frogs do not occur there.

Our days were spent in collecting specimens and the nights in skinning and preserving them. During these energetic days we were helped tremendously by the islanders—warm, friendly, generous people who were only too pleased to help in any way they could and brought us any animals they found. The young boys were particularly helpful, carrying some of our equipment, helping us to set traps, and collecting reptiles. They thoroughly enjoyed the excursions and were greatly amused at our antics. We felt that we had little to offer in return for such kindness, but shared our food and did what we could to provide medical assistance.

The Kai group as a whole has been subject to a number of external influences, of which the earliest has had the most lasting effect. During a period of concerted exploitation of the spice islands by Arab traders, many Arabic customs were established and have survived numerous later occupations. The Islamic faith, in particular, has taken hold and remains the predominant religion in islands remote from administrative centres. However, Tual con-

tains several denominations of Christians, who now outnumber the Muslim population. Roman Catholic and Protestant missions conduct schools and hospitals in Tual and on nearby islands. Such missions tend to have a large following in their immediate vicinity, but provide essential educational and medical facilities to Kai islanders of all faiths and from all parts of the group.

Non-religious influences have been colonial and military. The Dutch occupation established the beginnings of centralised control in conjunction with regional administrative sectors. But apart from this legacy of administration, the Dutch have left few lasting social influences. During the war the Kai islands were occupied by Japanese forces and subsequently taken by the Americans. Though some sectors of the population suffered terribly during this time, the scars of war have healed and Kai islanders have resumed their traditional activities largely unchanged. American service jackets are proudly worn, often with the recognisable form of a Japanese combat cap. The Bapa Radja of Taam speaks Japanese, but Dutch is not used or understood on the island. English is taught to school-

children as a compulsory second language to Bahasa Indonesia.

Life on Taam is very easy-going, most of the day being spent in obtaining food. The women gather fruit and vegetables (nuts, beans, peas, corn, lemons, limes, mangoes and bananas), while the men catch fish. The people's main source of protein is fish, though meat (goat or chicken) is occasionally eaten. Some of the men work in one of two co-operative coconut plantations producing copra, which is the island's main marketable commodity. The staple food is embal, a poisonous root similar to a sweet

potato. After the poison is squeezed out, the root is ground, sieved and baked into a type of bread.

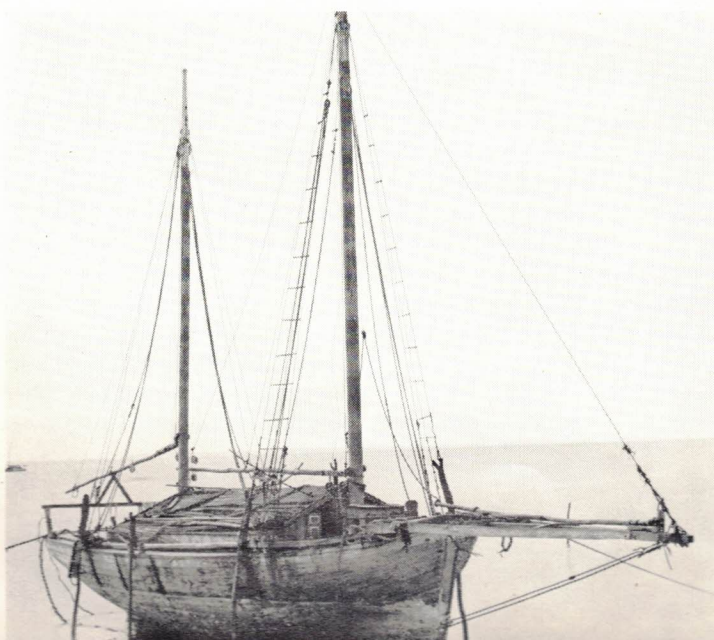
Taam is noted for its pots, whose construction is another important facet of the island women's lives. The pots are used mainly for carrying and storing water and food, and are exported throughout this region of Indonesia. The pots are made from local clay, which is moulded into shape, sun-dried, painted in traditional patterns with dyes made from coloured clays from a nearby island, and baked in large open fires on the beach.

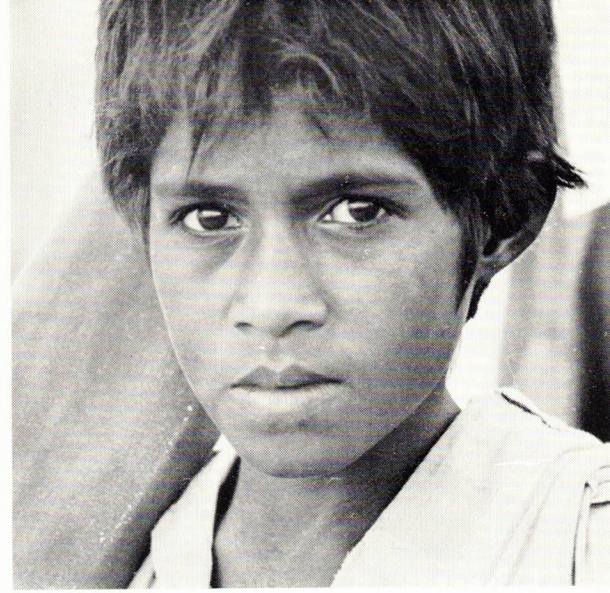
The pots and copra are exported in one- or two-



*At left, the evening meal is being prepared. The adze at right is used in boat-building.*

*A two-master at her moorings, and one of the oldest of Taam's villagers.*





*A view of the main street, and a member of the younger generation whose name is Husen.*



*Women firing pots on a beach.*

masted schooners, whose construction is carried out by some of the men on the island. With great dexterity, using only an axe and adze, they make boats which may be up to eighty feet long. These are replicas of boats the Arabs still build in North Africa and the Middle East; the only recent modification in their construction appears to be the use of nylon ropes.

The islanders' houses have wooden frames with bamboo thatching in the walls and on the roof. The walls are covered with lime made from coral burned in large piles on the beach.

Four teachers educate the island children between the ages of about six and sixteen.

It was difficult to return to 'civilisation' after our stay on this lovely island, with its tranquil way of life, especially since it meant leaving so many new-found friends. But that time had to come. We returned to Darwin with many happy memories, and some very interesting biological specimens.

THE AUTHOR: *When he accompanied the biological expedition to Taam Island, Mr. Smyth was studying at post-graduate level in the Australian National University.*