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Contemporary Boatbuilding Traditions in Sulawesi

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Indonesia is a very rich country in terms of maritime heritage, both underwater and ethnographic. The historical relevance of the islands in the global maritime trade network is recognised worldwide, so as the particularity of boat construction and navigation techniques. Contemporary wooden boatbuilding activities and traditional sailing still survive in various Indonesian regions. After a first visit to the island of Sulawesi, in 2018, the authors identified a case study particular significant to enhance the study of the Indonesian maritime heritage: the boatyards of South Sulawesi, Tana Beru and Bira. These boatyards were inscribed in 2017 on the UNESCO representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Vessels constructed in these boatyards are generically called pinisi, a common name attributed to large passenger and cargo boats propelled by sail and engine, which were traditionally associated to the schooners. Boatbuilding construction techniques and ship design in Indonesia are constantly changing, therefore, it is getting more and more important to deepen our knowledge into the complexity of people nautical and maritime skills and activities and to record hull shape and construction characteristics of the boats they produce. Several small boatyards are also widespread in Sulawesi, here, a variety of small-size wooden boats are built. The study consisted in the use of the ethnographic method, considering together social, linguistic, material culture aspects, and maritime traits and manifestations of societies involved in boatbuilding and maritime activities. Hull shapes and construction characteristics have been recorded using the 3D photogrammetry, the resulting 3D models have been used to extrapolate two-dimensional visions of naval lines and construction drawings useful as long standing record of a changing tradition, comprehensible to boatbuilders, nautical architects and engineers, and useful for possibile future reconstructions. So far, very few and limited studies have been conducted on the communities involved in the construction of wooden boats in this region, nautical terminology has never been systematically recorded and existing boats have rarely been surveyed in detail. Understanding the social and linguistic background of people living and working in the Sulawesi boatyards, and of those involved in the life of the boatyards, is crucial to reconnect past to present practices of building boats, to understand changes in traditions and the economic implications related to transitions in building techniques and vice versa. Local wisdom related to maritime knowledge and boat construction, as well as their detailed terminology have also been captured through the recording of oral stories, rituals and practices.

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