

The Spice Routes: A Contemporary Perspective

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The Indonesian government has a very important program called the Spice Routes (Jalur Rempah), led by the Directorate General of Culture. This project is intended to reconstruct and revitalize the connections (maritime networks) as well as to investigate the social and cultural implications of the spice trades. The project has two main objectives, the first is to propose the spice routes as a world heritage to UNESCO. The second is to commodify this tradition for Indonesian development, particularly in the area of tourism. As of now, at the discursive level, narratives about the spice routes are dominated by an unfortunate focus on the archeology, history—meaning study of the past—and the notion of spices as herbs. One of the consequences is that this approach encourages talk about the connections of Indonesia and the West triggered by the search for trade of spices. In term of politics, they encourage a focus on colonialism. The fact that the spice routes are also the networks of many other commodities, people and cultures tends to be overlooked. This presentation will introduce an ongoing research project at the Institute of Social Science and Humanities, Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) which will contribute to the extension of these concerns by looking at the exploitation, trade, and cultural implications of maritime commodities such as trepang, salt, mangroves and corals. We will focus on one particular example, that is the trepang heritage. The trepang heritage is a three hundred years-old (1669-2021) tradition of Indonesian fishers fishing in the Australian Sea. Stimulated by the demand for trepang in China, by the second half of the same centuries, Indonesian ‘trepangers’—popularly called Macassans despite being a mix of several maritime ethnic groups—sailed down to the Australian Sea and established a trepang industry on the north coast of the Australian continent. Since 1907, Indonesians can no longer work on the Australian land, however the traditions of the Indonesian trepangers in the Australian Sea continue to exist. Interestingly, in Australia, the story of the connections of the Australian Aboriginals is still actively used and in fact revitalized to inform different trajectories, such as voicing the fact that the Australian Aboriginals were not isolated tribes before the coming of Captain Cook, thus correcting the history of Australia and the story of Islam on the continent. As such, by looking at this heritage, we argue first that non-spice commodities are also important in shaping the so-called spice routes. And, second, that the discussion of spice routes is not only the story of the past but also of contemporary ongoing realities.