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## Thinking through Refugee Objects – A Case Study of the Sri Lankan Bremen

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## EXHIBITION REVIEW

# Thinking through Refugee Objects – A Case Study of the Sri Lankan *Bremen*

XAVIER LEENDERS & SALLY MAY

As MV *Bremen* – a small tuna fishing boat – motored away from the southeast coast of Sri Lanka towards New Zealand, little could the sixty-six asylum seekers and crew know the circumstances that would lead to Australian Customs confiscating their boat in Geraldton, Western Australia. Upon arrival, thirty asylum seekers were returned to Sri Lanka, and most other passengers were placed in detention. Some years later, *Bremen* was acquired and accessioned into the Western Australian Museum's collections. Now, the museum looks to better understand the lives of those aboard *Bremen*, both before and after their voyage. Perhaps it can provide the opportunity for people with similar experiences to tell their stories?

The storage and potential display of such a vessel poses significant challenges. Apart from issues of preservation, unpacking the social complexities of *Bremen* and its associated material is critical in exploring the enigmatic and desperate circumstances of those who undertook this potentially perilous voyage. The boat itself is an object of many social lives, its character defined not only by its use in a migratory journey, but by a complex web of social and cultural relations that coalesce into something that can speak equally to both local Australian issues and broader global debates. This article traces just a few of these lives by exploring the *Bremen* and its material culture as marked by the humanity and choices of those vulnerable people who embarked upon the journey. For Australia citizens, however, *Bremen's* story begins on Tuesday 9 April 2013.

It was a balmy winter's day around 1pm when, to the bemusement of people boating in the harbour and the patrons of a foreshore café, an over-crowded fishing boat (built to accommodate four crew) appeared in the mid-west port of Geraldton, 420 kilometres from the state's capital, Perth. Leaving Sri Lanka in late February, the sea-weary boat and its occupants had spent forty-four days at sea. Geraldton is a busy industrial port, and so the arrival of a 14 × 5-metre fishing boat, certainly not of Australian origin, was an oddity.

To those looking out from the foreshore café the blue and white hull advertised in bold letters the shipbuilder's company, Blue Star Marine, the Deutsche Bank and less conspicuously the vessel's name.<sup>1</sup> The passengers and crew on

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

<sup>1</sup> Ashlee Mullany, 'Asylum boat carrying 66 Sri Lankan passengers sails into Geraldton', *News Limited*, 10 April 2013, [www.news.com.au/news/western-australia/asylum-boat-carrying-72-sri-lankan-passengers-sails-into-geraldton/news-story/eb511fbc6fc11300a34fc11e0a33e6a](http://www.news.com.au/news/western-australia/asylum-boat-carrying-72-sri-lankan-passengers-sails-into-geraldton/news-story/eb511fbc6fc11300a34fc11e0a33e6a) (accessed 9 October 2016).

the other hand advertised with makeshift banners that their intended destination was New Zealand, beneath which was written, 'please help us'.<sup>2</sup> A New Zealand flag mounted on a white fabric backing fluttered on a staff over the wheelhouse.<sup>3</sup>

The mysterious appearance of *Bremen* represented a serious breach in Australia's border surveillance, especially since at the time Geraldton still sat within Australia's migration zone. *Bremen* was just metres from the mainland when it was intercepted, having avoided national and local border control surveillance for some weeks. Once alerted, the authorities swiftly commandeered the vessel, piloting it to a secluded berth where it was designated Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel No. 647 (SIEV 647). The sixty-six men, women and children disembarked and were sent to undisclosed detention centres or returned to Sri Lanka within two weeks.<sup>4</sup> On 7 September 2014, Australian Immigration and Border Protection gifted *Bremen* and its contents to the Western Australian Museum (WA Museum), subject to compliance with the following quarantine directives: isolate and destroy any foodstuffs, clear the three holds for inspection, and chlorinate/dispose of the water in the vessel's bilges.<sup>5</sup> In December 2015, *Bremen* was brought to the Museum's Collections and Research Centre in Welshpool, Perth.

Though *Bremen* is certainly a special case, its gifting to the WA Museum is not unprecedented. A number of asylum-seeker vessels, such as the Australian National Museum's Vietnamese *Hong Hai*, have found new life in the public domain. Though Australian customs general burn or sink 'illegal' fishing boats, *Bremen* is constructed from inflammable fibreglass, and thus averted destruction.

Concerns have been expressed that the break in the state's tradition of burning illegal fishing and asylum-seeking boats and its gifting to a museum may represent 'another kind of trophy of sovereign power over the border-scape, perhaps as a source of shame and symbol of defeat, neutralised and out of place – high and dry ... [and] framed by, and incorporated into, a "safe" national narrative'.<sup>6</sup> Such concerns are not unwarranted. Who owns these vessels? How can they be exhibited without distilling or distorting the experiences of refugee peoples? These issues require a reflexive approach to curation and exhibition development, and so the museum's endeavours to acquire an asylum-seeker boat warrant a brief consideration of the context in which *Bremen* was collected.

<sup>2</sup> Aleisha Orr, 'Geraldton asylum seeker boat a "game changer"', *WA News*, 10 April 2013, [www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/geraldton-asylum-seeker-boat-a-game-changer-20130410-2hl33.html](http://www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/geraldton-asylum-seeker-boat-a-game-changer-20130410-2hl33.html) (accessed 9 October 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Suvendrini Perera, 'In Flight. Castaways and the Poetics of Survival', *Griffith Review* 47, *Looking West* (2014): 288–98; neither the banner nor the New Zealand flag were amongst the 3,000 items removed from the *Bremen* by museum staff.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Taillier, 'Dozens of Sri Lankan asylum seekers who made it to WA still in detention two years later', *ABC News, Perth, WA*, 10 December 2015, [www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-10/dozens-of-asylum-seekers-who-made-it-to-wa-still-in-detention/7015122](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-10/dozens-of-asylum-seekers-who-made-it-to-wa-still-in-detention/7015122) (accessed 9 October 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Taillier, 'Geraldton refugee boat donated to Western Australian Museum', *ABC News*, 8 September 2014, [www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-08/refugee-boat-donated-to-wa-museum/5727852](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-08/refugee-boat-donated-to-wa-museum/5727852) (accessed 9 October 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Perera, 297.

By 2014, the WA Museum's \$428.3 million redevelopment of its principal site in Perth's Cultural Centre was advanced, with a multi-disciplinary content team working on six major content areas. One of these content areas aims to explore Western Australia's place within global social, economic and environmental contexts. Stories of migration in its many forms – emigration and immigration (forced and voluntary), asylum seekers and refugees – are particularly important aspects of this content area. By crafting a space for exploring personal experiences of migration, and to foster debate about related issues, the museum endeavours to tell deep human stories.

Notwithstanding, two important questions need to be asked: what place does an asylum-seeking vessel have in a museum's collection and, by extension, what does the vessel do there? At first glance, *Bremen* is metaphorically *powerful*. The vessel speaks directly to Australian public issues concerning refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>7</sup> Images of *Bremen*'s passengers and crew waiting to be processed by Australian authorities evoke the popular Australian 'boat people' narrative, yet hidden behind these images are deeply emotive and insightful stories. While public discourse might frame the boat by the generalities it exemplifies, its specificities can tell a deeper narrative. As an object that both typifies and challenges public perceptions of asylum seekers, *Bremen* is uniquely capable of initiating debate on related topics that might otherwise be stifled or distorted in other public forums.

This power to initiate discourse – to tell stories – illuminates the object as something situated within a web of social and cultural relationships. *Bremen* is a symbol of the complex entanglement of ideas and world events that compose asylum-seeker and refugee issues. For though the boat is now cemented within a particular narrative defined largely by its final sea-based journey, the object is a part *of* and is constituted *by* a greater sociocultural network that ranges from the political climate of Sri Lanka, to the economic globalisation and charity of the Deutsche Bank. This network, though spatially disparate, enables us to trace the processes by which the boat has come to symbolise and speak to broader world issues. The *Bremen* can make connections, and by doing so, it helps us to unpack the social contexts that frame the personal experiences of those sixty-six people who made it their temporary home. It would be impossible, at least within the scope of this article, to trace the entirety of this network. That being said, it is worth mentioning here some of the social and material contexts that coalesce in *Bremen*'s current standing as a museum object. Most importantly, for those who embarked on the boat, their (albeit generalised) story undoubtedly begins with the Sri Lankan civil war.

With the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam by the Sinhalese-controlled Sri Lankan government in 2009, the Sri Lankan civil war ended. Tamil and Sinhalese peoples form the largest ethnic groups that inhabit Sri Lanka, though both speak a different native language. While the origin of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

civil war can be traced to British colonial rule, Tamil peoples have traditionally been marginalised both politically and economically in Sri Lanka, something that continues to this day. Despite the cessation of war and efforts by the Sri Lankan government to ease tensions between the two ethnic groups, many Tamils (and some Sinhalese) fear further conflict and insecurity, accusing their government of genocide and human rights abuses. In recent decades, both Sinhalese and Tamils have sought refuge in Australia – many using boats to cross the Indian Ocean and utilising the west coast as a point of entry. Though the majority of those that seek asylum are Tamil, Sinhalese who illegally leave Sri Lanka (or assist Tamils to leave) face vilification and jail should they return.

While political and social unrest takes its course in Sri Lanka, Australia has constructed its own social crisis: how best to deal with refugees and border security. Many asylum seekers have settled in Western Australia, but those designated as ‘boat people’ have, and continue to feel, the Australian public spotlight. Though relatively few in number compared to Australia’s overall refugee humanitarian intake, people who have arrived by boat attract overwhelming social and political attention (now the federal government refuses to provide these persons refugee status). This attention often plays on the generalities and misconceptions concerning refugee or asylum-seeker experiences, sometimes to the extent that these people are labelled ‘queue jumpers’ or ‘illegals’.<sup>8</sup> *Bremen* tells a different story of those Sri Lankans who travelled the Indian Ocean, supposedly towards New Zealand.

When *Bremen* arrived in Australia, it carried sixty Tamil passengers, including a pregnant woman, children and four babies, plus six Sinhalese male crew members. However, in its previous life, *Bremen* was a commercial tuna boat, only built to accommodate four. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami devastated Sri Lanka’s south and east coast, the United Nations and Deutsche Bank commissioned Blue Star Marine to build four tuna fishing boats, replacing those destroyed in the disaster.<sup>9</sup> *Bremen* was named after a German city, and in recognition of its German sponsor, the Deutsche Bank. By 2013 *Bremen* was close to ten years old – not particularly old for a well-built and well-maintained commercial fishing boat. *Bremen*, however, is a lightly constructed sandwich fibreglass boat. Currently, the fibreglass is in an advanced state of deterioration, delaminating and cracking, which allows water to soak into the foam core between the fibreglass laminations. The keel, which should be stiff, flexes more than 100 mm when lifted and some eight metres of external wood belting that would otherwise seal the deck and the hull is missing on both sides of the vessel.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet McHugh-Dillon, ‘If They Are Genuine Refugees, Why?’ *Public Attitudes to Unauthorised Arrivals in Australia. A Review of the Evidence for the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture* (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2015), [www.foundationhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Public-attitudes-to-unauthorised-arrivals-in-Australia-Foundation-House-review-2015.pdf](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Public-attitudes-to-unauthorised-arrivals-in-Australia-Foundation-House-review-2015.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> The museum would like to acknowledge the help of Mr Asitha Mendis of Solas Marine for providing the museum with plans used to build *Bremen*. Dated 5 April 2016 held on file, *Bremen 2014/01*, Maritime History Department, WA Maritime Museum, WA Museum.

Material evidence and the small progress *Bremen* made in around forty-four days suggest that it was not seaworthy for the voyage to Australia let alone to New Zealand. There were holes in the outer fibreglass skin and a number of patches visible below the waterline, suggesting that the vessel was taking in water. The mechanical and electronic instrumentation on the *Bremen* was comparable to any similar-sized fishing vessel in Australia, yet there are signs that the 78-horsepower, four-cylinder saltwater-cooled engine was not functioning efficiently or even reliably during its voyage. When the engine was removed and dismantled for conservation treatment, it was discovered that the harmonic balancer was corroded to the forward end of the crankshaft. Corrosion had also occurred on the perimeters of the boat's three propeller blades, further signs of an inefficient or malfunctioning engine. These impediments to propulsion do not take into account that the vessel was severely overloaded with both passengers and equipment.

*Bremen's* dilapidated state poses significant questions about its voyage, particularly concerning the viability of the crew's planned route. *Bremen* is fitted with a 4,000-litre diesel fuel tank and may have carried additional fuel in jerry cans that were discarded during the vessel's voyage. The vessel motored approximately 5,000 kilometres from Sri Lanka to Geraldton and therefore must have been running short on diesel or had refuelled somewhere before reaching Geraldton. Alternatively, the vessel was not always motoring (perhaps due to engine problems) as on average it covered only 114 kilometres a day while at sea. A seaworthy, 14-metre vessel with an efficient engine should have progressed further. Moreover, for *Bremen* to have remained undetected by Australian authorities for so long indicates that it had remained outside of Australian territorial waters, with the intention of crossing the Great Australian Bight by way of the Southern Ocean. These are treacherous seas for any seaworthy vessel, let alone one in *Bremen's* condition. We can therefore be fairly certain that (a) *Bremen* would never have made it to New Zealand, and (b) *Bremen* was in very serious danger of sinking when it arrived in Geraldton.

Items found aboard the boat also paint a picture of life at sea. Though the vessel was fumigated and cleaned before being gifted to the museum, museum staff found onions, garlic, rice, noodles, lollies, packaged biscuits, broad beans, lentils, dried fish, and coconuts on board the vessel. There was also a variety of fishing gear on board, indicating that passengers may have caught fresh fish. *Bremen* had only one single-ring gas stove that was connected to portable gas bottles. Catering on rough seas is difficult at the best of times and appears to have been basic and meagre. Some 1,700 two-litre plastic bottles of water were stowed in the three holds under the vessel's foredeck, which would have previously been used to store fish in ice (see [Figure 1](#)). The port side of the wheelhouse appears to have been cordoned as a toilet facility. Bedspreads and blankets had been tied across the deck housing for privacy.

Images published by the media of the people leaving the boat reveal that most carry just one small plastic shopping bag of their possessions. Hence, many possessions remained on board the boat. Most are clothing, but medications,





Figure 1. Ian Thilthorpe registering and raising bottles of water stored in the holds of the former tuna boat, MV *Bremen*.

inhalers, toiletries, nail clippers, hair brushes, lotion, cosmetics, mobile phones, vitamin supplements, comic and paperback books, playing cards, board games, notebooks and CDs were also found. The console in the wheelhouse was decorated with Buddhist figurines, charms and brightly coloured plastic flowers. While accessioning these items certainly tasks the museum with questions concerning the ethical nature of collecting, their documentation provides a subversive insight into the lives of those people aboard the *Bremen* – an insight that, for all intents and purposes, undermines populist discourse that would seek to define them as the ‘generalised other’. *Bremen*’s voyagers are ‘real people’, their experience aboard deeply human, a notion that will now forever mark the boat’s material character.

So, against the odds, both crew and passengers survived the voyage.<sup>10</sup> Upon arrival in Geraldton, government officials disembarked the passengers. The sick or injured people were taken to receive medical attention, but within two weeks, thirty-eight people had been returned to Sri Lanka. Several received temporary protection visas and twenty-five were sent to undisclosed detention centres where their applications are at various stages of completion.<sup>11</sup> The fate of those returned to Sri Lanka or in detention is not known.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Davis, ‘Asylum boat arrives in Geraldton’, *The Geraldton Guardian and The West Australian*, 9 April 2013, <https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/regional/gascoyne/a/16647075/asylum-boat-arrives-in-geraldton/#page1> (accessed 9 October 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Taillier, ‘Dozens of Sri Lankan asylum seekers’.

The treatment of these and other persons seeking asylum by the Australian government is its own issue for discussion elsewhere. However, from a museum perspective, *Bremen* offers a unique opportunity. *Bremen's* asylum seekers have had their trust betrayed by both their government and whoever organised their passage. Such is their fear that they may be unprepared to talk to Western Australian Museum staff. To do so would require them to trust yet another bureaucratic authority, let alone to reminisce on what was likely a traumatic experience. Ironically, *Bremen* may be a vehicle for helping their voices to be heard. The Western Australian Museum will endeavour to assist them should they wish to tell their stories. In the meantime, *Bremen* initiates discussion, its symbolic and entangled presence establishes a talking space for other asylum seekers, successful in seeking refugee status or otherwise.

If those who embarked upon *Bremen* can be understood for what they are – real people with deeply human experiences, situated in a web of sociocultural happenings – then others of similar circumstance may also have stories to tell – teachings that can inform and destabilise the otherwise generalist narratives that are sometimes purported in the public sphere. It is exactly because of the vessel's varied social life – its place within a broader network of social relations – that we can unpack public discourse that surrounds refugee issues *and* contrast it against the personal experiences of those whom these issues concern. The museum is still working on how best to tackle this challenge. Understanding the general requires us to trace the personal, so now *Bremen* – one-time tuna boat, former asylum seekers' vehicle, and museum artefact – can act as a different form of vehicle, one that exports ideas, rather than people, to foster constructive and empathetic public debate.

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