

The West Obituaries

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Migrant forged new life on pearl boats

AMAT BIN BAKAR
Pearler

Born: Singapore, 1932
Died: Broome, aged 79

Amat Bin Bakar, who died on November 5, came to represent the multiculturalism that is now a byword for Broome. His story, like so many of the town's pioneers, began over the ocean waves, in this case Singapore.

Yet it mirrors the same hopes and ambitions that drove legions of Europeans to seek a new home in a different country — self-betterment. In effect an orphan, Amat was born into the Depression years and was raised in a Buddhist monastery because his widowed mother was without the finances for his care.

By the age of nine, he was returned to her. Though a street kid, he was a morally strong Muslim exposed to Buddhism. When a teenager, he was working on Singapore's wharves and first came to Australia at 14 to work for Streeter and Male in Broome, a company central to pearling by the start of the 20th century.

Amat returned to Singapore but in 1950 was rehired by the firm, which was impressed by his work ethic. He arrived in Derby on a boat comprising mainly Malay men, most of whom, like Amat, made a permanent home here and left a legacy of future generations.

He thrived as a young crew member of the pearling fleets and furthered his reputation as a responsible, honest worker. Soon he was a tender for many of the top divers, who entrusted their lives to his judgment.

Amat progressed to be bosun, in charge of more than 100 men of



diverse nationalities — Japanese, Malay, indigenous Australians, Chinese, Indonesian, Timorese from Koepang and Europeans. He carried out his duties with pride and, having experienced the aimlessness of a life without possessions, he became a mouthpiece for those who otherwise would not be heard.

Intuitively, he was aligned with the Australian principles of respect, equality and a fair go.

Amat Bin Abu Bakar was born on July 16, 1932, the eldest of what he thought were four children. He barely knew his father, a full-Chinese man named Buna Chow, who was married to his mother, Rahmah Binte Abdul Rasel, a Muslim of Malay, Arabic and Indonesian stock.

The father was the breadwinner from his job at Singapore Hospital but his early death left his wife financially exposed. According to family lore, the father had, before dying, sent Amat's siblings to China where they lost touch with Amat and their mother.

A Buddhist monastery took in Amat for rearing before returning him to his mother, still poorly educated. Determined to improve his lot, he jumped at the chance of a fresh start in Australia.

This he achieved through hard work, including eight years as a part-time gardener at Broome District School and a similar length of time as a stevedore on the Broome New Jetty. He was proud of the fact that he could afford a carer for his mother up to 1987, when she died in Singapore.

In 1964, he married Phyllis Namagee, a Kitja woman from Halls Creek and a member of the Stolen Generation. They bought a home and raised children — Mark, Bernadette, Arnold and Andrea — instilling in each Amat's strong work ethic. Apart from a visit to Singapore in 1962, he never had a holiday or annual leave and worked to the point where his body could no longer carry him.

A proud Australian, he was equally appreciative of his Singaporean heritage. Friendly and generous, he spoke and understood seven languages, and willingly lent money to the needy and gave to the poor and charities.

He enjoyed offering food to visitors. Whatever free time he had was usually spent fishing, crabbing, drag-netting or boating. To him, seafood was a gift of God and was meant to be shared. Invariably, his catch was shared.

Amat Bin Bakar, also known as Amat Chi and Buna Chi, had cancer and died in Broome Hospital. He was 79. He leaves his wife, four children, nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Torrance Mendez with
Mark Bin Bakar