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The Identity and Social Mobility of Sama-Bajau

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ABSTRAK

Rencana pendek ini adalah mengenai pengukuhan identiti dan kesannya ke atas mobiliti sosial di kalangan Sama-Bajau pra-merdeka, yang secara umumnya membabitkan mereka di tiga buah wilayah di Alam Melayu, iaitu Malaysia, Filipina dan Indonesia. Rencana ini cuba memberi tafsiran ke atas persoalan bagaimana dinamik dan proses pengukuhan identiti itu berkait secara terus dengan pergerakan sosial Sama-Bajau, dari keadaan yang tidak baik kepada yang lebih baik. Didapati ada tiga komponen utama identiti Sama-Bajau, iaitu Sama atau Bajau, bahasa, dan Islam. Ketiga-tiga dasar identiti ini berkait erat dengan tiga faktor lain, iaitu orang perahu, kurang nilai Islam dan ekonomi yang berasaskan laut dan pulau. Faktor-faktor inilah yang menjadi ciri kepada dasar identiti Sama-Bajau zaman pra-merdeka. Kepada anggota masyarakat yang berkuasa atau berpengaruh, ciri-ciri identiti Sama-Bajau ini dipandang sebagai amat rendah. Persepsi ini menyebabkan Sama-Bajau terasing dari masyarakat lain. Kebolehan Sama-Bajau untuk mempertingkatkan status sosialnya tertakluk kepada kedinamikaan proses pengukuhan identitinya. Berdasarkan pengalaman sejarah, Sama-Bajau di Malaysia, Filipina dan Indonesia menampakkan kejayaan mereka memartabatkan status sosial dari yang tidak baik kepada yang lebih baik kerana transformasi ke atas ciri-ciri identitinya. Mobiliti sosial ini memperlihatkan adanya dua gerak kuasa sosial yang menghalang mahupun mendorong kebolehan Sama-Bajau untuk membangunkan dirinya: faktor struktural dan faktor kebudayaan.

Kata kunci: Sama-Bajau, identiti, mobiliti sosial, masyarakat maritim, status sosial

ABSTRACT

This brief article deals with identity consolidation and its impact on the social mobility of Sama-Bajau in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. It interprets how identity consolidation among Sama-Bajau has improved their social status. There were three basic components of identity among Sama-Bajau throughout the Malay World during the colonial period: namely the common terms of reference, Sama or Bajau, their language and their religion, Islam. These were closely associated with their being boat people, being rela-

tively un-Islamic, and having a maritime economic base. These characteristics were an embarrassment in the eyes of dominant neighbouring groups, and earned Sama-Bajau a low social status. The ability of Sama-Bajau to raise social status was strongly connected to the dynamic process of identity consolidation. Their history throughout the region implies that when their social status was raised, it was due to a transformation of those three elements of identity, a development which was strongly influenced by both structural and cultural factors.

Key words: Sama-Bajau, identity, social mobility, maritime society, social status

INTRODUCTION

In the past, Sama-Bajau were one of the major maritime peoples of Southeast Asia (Lapian, A.B. & Nagatsu Kazufumi 1996). Scholars have found that Sama-Bajau communities inhabited places as far apart as the Martaban Gulf in Burma, the Malacca Straits, the Sulu Sea, Borneo Island, the Celebes Sea and the seas off northern Australia. Europeans ran into them all over the region as early as in the 16th century. In the Celebes Sea in 1657, Dutch officers noted the existence of Sama-Bajau communities. In the early 18th century Dutch officer Francios Valentenjin in Ambon also referred to two manuscripts written in the 1670s regarding Sama-Bajau. In those manuscripts, Pigafetta wrote that the islanders lived on boats (Warren 1981: 69). They were under numerous names: Orang Seleter in Johor and the waters off Singapore, Orang Suku Laut in Riau and Sama-Bajau in the southern Philippine, Sabah and Sulawesi (Tom Harrisson 1975-76). Ethnically, Sama-Bajau are Malays and exhibit many Malay cultural traits. The total population of Sama-Bajau spread over the three nations of Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia has been estimated at almost a million. In any case, they numbered not less than 467,000 in 2000 (Gusni 1999). This makes them a major sub-group. Unfortunately, most of them still lag behind in terms of education and economic standing. Many are in fact rather poor (Collins 1995), especially those living in the southern Philippines and in eastern Indonesia (Peralta 2000).

Sama-Bajau have to a certain extent been negatively presented in much of the relevant literature. They were generally considered sea gypsies or sea nomads, which connoted a low level of civilization. However, such descriptions need not necessarily have bothered them, judging from their pride of identity and the preservation of their culture. This article is concerned with their identity and its connection to social mobility. Based on studies done in areas where they reside, I venture an interpretation of how the process of identity consolidation was able to raise their status among their neighbours.

THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

The straightforward question about what the identity of Sama-Bajau is cannot be answered here. Hitherto, the issue has been rarely touched on in the literature about them. However, some central ideas about the cultural identity of Sama-Bajau will be discussed. An attempt to answer the question “Who are the Sama-Bajau?” is also an attempt at describing their cultural identity. In simple terms, identity refers to the major characteristics of an ethnic or sub-ethnic group. These involve symbols used by outsiders, which in time come into general use and distinguish the group from its neighbours. They also function as means to unite the group members, including those scattered across the region. This inter-group ritual also involves a mutual determination of status. Where a particular group’s elements of identification make an impression on others, the members of that group tend to receive favourable treatment from them. Otherwise, respect may not be forthcoming. Consequently, a member of a low-status group will suffer isolation in the greater social context. This understanding of inter-group relations is applied in this study.

Elements of identity can vary significantly. In the case of Sama-Bajau, three basic components will be studied. First, there is the group’s terms of reference. It has in fact two names, ‘Sama’ and ‘Bajau’, each with its own history. ‘Sama’ in Malay means ‘kita’ or ‘we’. It is believed to have originated from within the group itself, a belief supported by the fact that it still is commonly used among their members in referring to the group. This practice is almost universal in Sabah, the southern Philippines and in southern Indonesia. Unlike ‘Sama’, ‘Bajau’ is not a term of self-reference popularly used in Sama-Bajau communities. They seem to prefer calling themselves ‘Jomo Sama’ (People of Sama) or ‘Jomo Bajau’ (People of Bajau). The reluctance to adopt ‘Bajau’ as a term of equal status to “Sama” seems to be due to the general feeling that the former had external origins. Some scholars opine that ‘Bajau’ should be kept for exclusive use by outsiders. When this term was imposed on the Sama-Bajau is still being debated, and very little is written about it. One view is that it originated in Brunei, where the Malay word ‘berjauhan’, which means ‘the eternal state of being far away’ had currency. Another hypothesis is that the term from the Bugis ‘Waju’ which refers to the ‘bujak laut’. The *bujak laut* is an important tool used for catching sea fauna, such as fish, crab and tripang. The Sama-Bajau call it ‘sapang’. Both suggestions carry associations to the Sama-Bajau’s maritime mode of life. A significant point here is that in pre-colonial times, Sama-Bajau had apparently had a relationship with prominent powers in the Malay World. In most contexts, despite the difference in usage mentioned earlier, there is no conflict between ‘Sama’ and ‘Bajau’. They complement each other in defining the group. It is also a convention among Sama-Bajau communities to qualify themselves with place names so as to signify geographic origin. Examples of such are Sama Siasi, Sama Simunul, Sama Semporna, Sama Kota Belud, Sama Tuaran, Sama Mangkabong,

Sama Sangkuang, Sama Sabah, Sama Indonesia and Sama Philippines. These names express differences in community size and status. With regards to community size, they increase from *kampung* (village) to district level, and from state to country level. This is one way by which the Sama-Bajau differentiated themselves from each other. Many reasons and meanings are involved in this practice. A pride over geographic origin is of course suggested, as are the level of prosperity and stability.

The second component of identity for Sama-Bajau is language. A popular slogan regarding language in Malaysia is “*bahasa jiwa bangsa*” or “language is the soul of the nation”. Language is undoubtedly crucial in making the group easily distinguishable. In the case of Sama-Bajau, others have traditionally recognized them mainly through their language, since geographic location has been difficult to determine. In fact, since their lifestyle has scattered them across the archipelago, language has become the easiest method of identification. Only by speaking the language can a member of the group convince both outsiders and fellow members about who they are. Researchers also tend to categorize these communities through the criterium of language. Subsequently, language served as a sign of ethnic affiliation for the far-flung Sama-Bajau when the Europeans first arrived in the 16th century.

The third element of identity is Islam. To many Europeans, Sama-Bajau had a rather bad reputation, as expressed in common terms used for them, like sea-gypsies or sea-nomadic people, or *luawan* or *Lutau* among the Tausug in Southern Philippines. They do however profess themselves to be Muslims. Researchers wonder instead about when the Sama-Bajau became Muslims, and what religion they had before Islam came along. According to the social stratification practised within the Sama-Bajau, the group with the lowest status is called Sama Pala’u, which refers to small groups of families staying in boats and living as sea nomads. One of the reasons for their low social status seems to be due to an general prejudice that sea peoples or pala’u cannot help but be rather lax as Muslims. Members of the Sama Pala’u consider themselves Muslims, even if they may not practise all the basic Islamic teachings. In principle, Islam is vital to the identity of Sama-Bajau everywhere. The general wisdom is that ‘Sama-Bajau are Muslims’.

Three factors contributing to the low standing Sama-Bajau among the Malays at large are that they are boat peoples, they do not practise Islamic rituals properly, and their economic base is maritime. The Sama-Bajau has thus been trying to change the negative perception that dominant groups have of them, largely through social mobility. This is no easy process, since the prejudice has existed for some time.

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND GROUP STATUS

Mobility in Sama-Bajau society are of two types: horizontal and vertical. The first has been occurring for over a hundred of years. As understood by many scholars of Sama-Bajau culture, horizontal social mobility refers to migration by sea. The Sama-Bajau, who are believed to have originated from the Malay Peninsula, can now be found in the Sulu Archipelago, Borneo and the Celebes Sea. This kind of mobility does not bring about any obvious change in social prestige. It is merely a shift within what is principally the same social stratum.

Vertical mobility affects a real change in social status for Sama-Bajau. In order to manage this type of social mobility, Sama-Bajau modify the characteristics of their identity. For example, they settle permanently in a specific place. This so called sedentary process is apparently vital to an upward change in inter-group status. Carol Warren (1983), in her studies about the ideology, the identity and change of a Sama-Bajau community in Semporna district in Sabah, believes the process to be the main factor in identity consolidation. Success in establishing permanent settlements eases the negative perception others have of them. Through adopting a sedentary mode of life, Sama-Bajau are considered to have proven themselves capable of creating and advancing material culture, and are thus worthy of being considered cultural equals. The classic case in this regard is Kota Belud in Sabah, Malaysia. In Kota Belud, Sama-Bajau are economically more advance, and have for instance developed skills like padi plantation, and cattle and horse breeding. Spenser St. John (1974) described Sama-Bajau as “very expert fishermen, salt-makers, and iron and cloth peddlers”. The strong foundation of this material culture later enabled the Sama-Bajau in Kota Belud to adapt quickly to the new social system brought in by the British North Borneo Chartered Company. Yap Beng Liang (1995) also found that colonial policies in North Borneo had a positive impact on the economic transformation of Sama-Bajau in Kota Belud.

Many scholars studying the origins of Sama-Bajau fail to take into account the problem of original identity. This led them to consider the group apart from its place of origin, the Malay Peninsula. The common claim made today about the origins of Sama-Bajau communities throughout Sabah Malaysia, the southern Philippines and southern Indonesia is that they have been and are a maritime people. As such, their culture status has suffered and they were often considered practically uncivilized. However, all the three basic components mentioned earlier suggest that Sama-Bajau is a Malay sub-group, and their differences are only contingent. In assuming that Sama-Bajau evolved from Malay mainstream society, Sather was of the opinion that the sub-group might once have been permanent landlubbers (1997). Linguistic evidence shows that Sama-Bajau language has many similarities with the Malay spoken on the Malay Peninsula. Both languages have many terms in common (Akamin 1996; Collins 1995). The *Royal Annals of Brunei* record that Bajau played a very important part in the

early days of the sultanate. One of their roles was that of inland traders in the marine off-season (Tom Harrisson 1975-76). Although this reference may not be a strong argument, signs found elsewhere in Malay World convince us that the ancestors of Sama-Bajau belonged to the cultural mainstream. Among these are an old map of Singapore where a river named Sungai Bajau is marked, in *Suma Oriental*, there is mention of Bajau and off Sumatera there is an island named Pulau Bajau. Unfortunately Bajau in *Suma Oriental* was initially mistaken to be a reference to the Bugis. Today, in Jambi in Indonesia, there still exists a Bajau community at Kampung Bajau (Bajau Village). All these indicators are in line with oral tradition of the Sama-Bajau throughout Sabah Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines which claim that their original home is Johor. Despite variations in the narratives, that is the main storyline. Sather (1997) also suggests the same thing in his studies. In the Sulu Archipelago, Sama-Bajau were historically unwelcome by the Tausug because the latter did not consider them sufficiently Muslim. Either through a lack of knowledge about ritual details or because of their nomadic way of life, Sama-Bajau did not fully practise rituals like Friday prayers. Only when the Sama-Bajau in the southern Philippines had adopted a sedentary lifestyle were they recognized by groups like the Tausug as Muslims (Nimmo 1994).

Islam is also one reason why Sama-Bajau in the Sulu Archipelago are today divided into two groups, namely the Badjau and the Samal. Probably because those with a more maritime mode of life were normally considered less Muslim, groups which were land-based tended to distinguish themselves from the former by introducing the new term 'Samal', which referred to Sama-Bajau who were land-bound and who worked in agriculture or were urban. The need for this term expresses the successful transformation of the three social factors: Islamic rituals had been seriously adopted, the boat community had become land settlers, and the economic base had become agricultural and urban.

The Sama-Bajau along the west coast of Sabah once enjoyed recognition from the Brunei sultanate because they were Muslims. They enjoyed a high political status as important partners in Brunei's exercise of power in Sabah (Gusni 2003). A similar situation can be found among the Sama-Bajau in northern Sulawesi and Kalimantan in Indonesia, where economic, politic and marriage ties with the political elite were facilitated by the fact that they were Muslims.

Thus, it is especially on the west coast of Sabah that the Sama-Bajau has had success in improving their otherwise low inter-group status. Since they now lived on dry land, they no longer had obvious associations to sea-living, to religious laxity and to maritime economy. Unlike their fellows in the Philippines and Indonesia, the Sabahan Sama-Bajau were a dominant people before the arrival of colonial power. They had secured strong positions in politics, agriculture and trade. Where commerce was concerned, they played an vital role as agents for the distribution of goods from China to the inland indigenes of North Borneo (Tom Harrisson 1975-76). Agriculturally, they were producers of rice,

cattle and horses. Where religion was concerned, they were generally considered Muslims by the Sabahans. As mentioned earlier, the name of “Bajau” was a reference used by outsiders. This implies that Sama-Bajau had had close contacts with these other groups. Already during the 14th century, before the colonial age, Sama-Bajau had established ties with several Malay sultanates in different parts of the archipelago. Amongst these were Brunei (Tom Harrison 1975-76), Luwu, Bone and Goa in the Celebes Sea around South Sulawesi (Matulada 1995). In addition, several small Bugis regimes in Kalimantan also had contacts with Sama-Bajau rulers at Gunung Tabor and Sambaliung (Warren 1981:69). Their seafaring expertise interested the sultans, who thus wished to maintain ties with them. In Kalimantan, the Sama-Bajau traded with Bugis rulers as suppliers of sea products such as fish, mother of pearl and tripang. In southern Sulawesi, the Sama-Bajau served as sea guards and in the navy of the governments of Luwu, Bone and Goa. It is not impossible that there was intermarriage between Sama-Bajau women and the royal family at Luwu.

In North Borneo, Sama-Bajau were important along the west coast after having established permanent settlements there. Kota Belud, Mangkabong, Kabatuan and Putatan were strongholds of the settled Sama-Bajau. All these settlements were established prior to the extension of Brunei’s power to North Borneo. When Brunei became the political centre of the Malay World in the 16th century after Malacca had been conquered by the Portuguese, Sama-Bajau on the west coast of North Borneo gained importance in the eyes of the sultanate of Brunei, which had ambitions of controlling the entire North Borneo region. Subsequently, Brunei appointed representatives called Pangeran to keep administrative centres in major Sama-Bajau settlements, like Mangkabong River, Kabatuan River, Inanam River and Putatan River. The Pangeran were sometimes appointed from among leaders of the Sama-Bajau. In time, blood relationships were formed between the Sama-Bajau and Brunei royalty. For example, the wife of Pangeran Jalaluddin bin Pangeran Abdul Rauf, the owner of Kota Kinabalu (until he ceded his rights over to the British North Borneo Chartered Company in 1898), was Sama-Bajau.

In the Sulu Archipelago, the situation of Sama-Bajau at that time was a stark contrast to that of their fellows in North Borneo. The Tausug people who dominated Sulu society harboured resentment against the Sama-Bajau and their nomadic culture. The Tausug had many derogatory expressions for the Sama-Bajau, such as pala’u, luwa’an, kalingeh and lutaw (Nimmo 1968). Although the Sama-Bajau considered themselves Muslims, the Tausug refused to accept them as such. Nevertheless, the Sama-Bajau did gradually gain acceptance from the Tausug as fellow Muslims after many of them had settled permanently on land and had erected their own mosques. The globalisation of the Southeast Asian economic sphere in the 19th century, largely due to the commercial activities of foreigners like the Europeans had a positive impact on the social status of the Sama-Bajau in the Sulu region. Two of the main products of the Sama-Bajau,

namely tripang and mother of pearl, fetched high prices on the international market. Because of this, Tausug entrepreneurs, who were often political leaders, and Chinese traders established commercial ties with them. The economic advantages now enjoyed by the Sama-Bajau transformed the way they were perceived by the dominant Tausug. Subsequently many Sama-Bajau communities gradually settled in places like the Tawai-Tawi Islands. In addition, Tausug and Chinese traders encouraged them to settle on land in order to consolidate patron-client relationships.

CONCLUSION

All the three basic elements of identity of the Sama-Bajau have their roots in mainstream societies in the Malay World. "Bajau" was a reference used by dominant groups for the Sama-Bajau. Islam as a way of life was adopted at an early stage by the Sama-Bajau under the Malacca and the Brunei sultanates. It is possible that the original way of life of this people was not as sea nomads and sea gypsies. They may have turned to the nomadic way of life only when conditions dictated it. In a longer perspective, their nomadic lifestyle was therefore a temporary change. The Sama-Bajau Kota Belud is the classic example in this regard. When the Sama-Bajau had an opportunity to settle permanently on land, they adapted very quickly and soon developed a new material culture.

The maritime mode of life adopted by the Sama-Bajau over many of centuries downgraded their social status among the dominant cultures. The dire economic circumstances surrounding the life of wanderers restricted the development of their material culture and limited the spiritual influence of Islam. The role they came to play in the economic and cultural life of the region involved a low social status, which means that changes can come only through a reconfiguration of their position within that socio-economic complex.

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