

## **Bajau Laut – the last Frontier at Sea**

**Edjie** is an underwater hunter. He dives among the rocks on the sea floor in search of fish. He wears a homemade harpoon, small swimming goggles and a pair of homemade flippers of wood. For some reason, he uses only one wooden flipper, but he is fast and smooth. He dives 5-10 meters at each dive and he never equalizes his ears. When he sees a fish, he shoots.

Near to the outrigger boat Edjie's eight year old son, Loglog, dive over and over again. He appears happy and tries to catch starfish from the bottom, which he drops back into the sea again. He is not given a spear yet. Old Bogo, the grandfather, rows the boat in the direction of Edjie. He holds the oar in one hand and rows with his right foot.

Suddenly, Edjie reaches the surface with a big smile on his face. He has a grouper impaled on the spear and rushes to the boat put the fish in water - a live fish will earn a higher price in the market.

One hour later we run into Chinatown, I, Edjie and Loglog, with wet clothes, without shoes and with a living predatory fish in our hands. People are used to see the so called sea gypsies but stare wide-eyed at the wet foreigner. We run into a jewelry store and are greeted by a Chinese with a hearty smile. He weighs the fish and pay at once: 300 pesos, or almost €6.

When we came back to the boat, Bogo had already cooked lunch: cassava and freshly caught fish. We ate in silence, I, Edjie, Bogo and Loglog, three generations of Bajau and a "melikan" (white person) on a homemade bangka (boat). All around us curious townsfolk and hungry birds gathered, but we did not care. We continued to eat straight from the bowls. The feeling of freedom was intense.

### **Living with Sea Nomads**

I first came in contact with the Bajau Laut in 2010. As a 23 year old anthropology student, I started to live in a small Bajau community in the outskirts of Davao in Mindanao, Philippines, hosted by the diver Edjie and his family. Since then, I have also visited Bajau villages in Malaysia and Indonesia in a total of seven trips.

The Bajau Laut are called the people of the sea, or even sea gypsies or God's forsaken. They are one of three people who traditionally lived on boats - the other is the Moken and Orang Laut. Moken received international attention during the tsunami disaster of 2004, when they survived the disaster although they stayed on some of the most vulnerable islands. They understood that a tsunami was coming and they took refuge in the mountains.

Bajau Laut is the largest of the three groups and they live scattered over a huge area in the southern Philippines, east Malaysia and central Indonesia. Their nomadic lifestyle has made this huge spread possible and they live in pockets throughout Southeast Asian coastlines in healthy coral environment. In the 90's they were even accused of illegal fishing activities in Australian waters. For hundreds of years they have been involved in fishing, trade of tripang, pearls and spices and recruited as navigators and divers in sultanates. Today some Bajau are living as beggars in the streets of Manila, next to tourists on exploited tourist paradises in Malaysia and in water villages located hundreds of meters out at sea in Indonesia, easy to spot on Google Earth. They call themselves "Sama", which means "we".

## **Bajau Laut History and Myths**

According to one of the Bajau's creation myths, there were originally two people, a man and a woman, and they had two children. One child was thrown into the water and became the ancestor of the Bajau. The other child was left on shore and became the ancestor of all other people.

Bajau Laut's history has been controversial for a long time. Their language exhibits the greatest variation in the Sulu Sea in the Philippines, but it is not related to any other language in the Philippines. Therefore, it is likely that the Bajau arrived to Sulu from somewhere else and later spread to Malaysia and Indonesia.

According to a Sama legend they come from Johor, west of Borneo. They belonged to the powerful Sultanate of Johore and had a key position in the trade at sea. But one day a Bajau princess was kidnapped and brought to the east. Anchored to a huge sting ray the Bajau followed in their boats and took up the pursuit of the kidnappers and eventually ended up in the Sulu Sea.

Research carried out in the area do not support the idea that Bajau come from Johor. There are no linguistic or archaeological evidence to suggest this. The linguist Robert Blust at University of Hawaii has instead located Bajau's origin to southeastern Borneo, where he found some similarities between Bajau's language, Sinama, and local languages. An interesting observation is that the Austronesian inhabitants of Madagascar come from exactly the same area of southeastern Borneo – the Barito River.

## **Remarkable Diving Skills**

Bajau's diving skills are widely known. The fisherman Sulbin has become widely known with over three million viewers on Youtube in a BBC-production with narration of David Attenborough. In the movie, Sulbin walks on the seabed for almost two minutes before he spears a fish. In yet another BBC production the world famous diver Tanya Streeter visits a Bajau village in the Gulf of Togian in Sulawesi, Indonesia, in which she dives with Bajau kids who descends 10 meters over and over again.

Bajau diving is extraordinary. Fisherman like Edjie and Sulbin can dive repeatedly for hours and spend most of the time under water. According to Erika Schagatay, professor in Health Sciences at Mid-Sweden University, the bottom time during a longer time of fishing is much more interesting than the maximum under water time for an individual dive. In practice this means quick dives with short surface time. If fish is plenty and water conditions are good a day of fishing can end up with a substantial catch. In fact, Edjie has caught tens of thousands of fish throughout his life - much more than traditional San hunters in the dessert of Kalahari in southern Africa.

Relaxation and also praying are crucial elements in Bajau diving. It is important that they are completely relaxed and calm, and they rarely eat before diving. Less stress and less food in their stomachs will make the so called diving response much stronger, a diving reflex that reduces the pulse and leads most of the blood to the brain and heart.

Also women are diving. In the community of Sampela in Wakatobi, Indonesia, many women are diving for shell fish and tripang. In the movie "Sulawesi, les nomades de la mer" the director Svea Andersson follows a 8 months pregnant who sea harvests with her family under

water. In Philippines, numerous of videos have captured showing Bajau women jumping into the water with babies on their backs picking up coins that are being thrown to them by ferry passengers.

### **Difficult Living Conditions**

Bajau Laut has a difficult situation today. Less fish, poverty, conflicts, and national borders have made their life a tough time. In Philippines, you can find many Bajau beggars in cities as Cebu and Manila. They have fled the unrest in southwestern Philippines where conflicts between the national army and independence groups have been going on for decades. In the area of Sabah, Malaysia, which border both the Philippines and Indonesia, the Bajau are constantly jammed in between national states. Even if they have sailed these waters for centuries, they face risk of custody and deportation if they travel these areas without legal documents in the 21st century.

In the Philippines, Bajau Laut are seen as an indigenous group and they can access education and health services, even though the security situation is very poor. In Malaysia, most Bajau Laut are stateless and they have no opportunity to attend school or get medical. A medical check-up costs 50 RM, little less than €11, which is a large amount for most Bajau. They are also facing a lot of discrimination in both these countries. In Indonesia, the situation for the Bajau is somewhat better, because they both recognized as citizens and live in a relatively safe environment. Throughout Indonesia there are tough tensions between Bajau fishermen, large-scale fishing boats, loan sharks, authorities and environmental groups.

A big problem is also reduced fish stocks, partly as a result of large-scale fishing, but also because of destructive fishing practices such as fish bombing and cyanide fishing, which is also carried out by some Often Bajau is the last outpost in a long chain of fishermen, merchants and consumers starting with Bajau fishermen who stun fish with cyanide for the live fish market or trapping sharks for their fins only, and ends up at five-star restaurants in Singapore or Hong Kong. They are driven to do so because of the pressures of the market, reduced fish stocks, little governmental support and higher living costs. Clifford Sather writes in his book “The Bajau Laut: Adaptation, History, and Fate in Maritime Fishing Society of South-Eastern Sabah” that the first fish bombs were introduced by merchants who wanted to increase their market shares.

However, the majority of Bajau fishermen do not use any destructive fishing methods and they try to make a living with nets, hooks, harpoons and fish traps only. Many are living from hand to mouth and their situation is getting increasingly more difficult. Only a few decades ago Bajau were known for their beautiful prows, but today there is no time for aesthetics.

Earlier we met Sulbin who has become world famous on Youtube. But who is really the man behind the success? I have met Sulbin on the island of Mabul outside of Sabah, Malaysia, and he is a very poor man. He and his wife have given birth to seven children but only two of them did have survived infancy. Every year, many Bajau kids die on the island of Mabul due to infections next to tourists from US, Europe and eastern Asia, partying and feasting on lobster. Hence, Sulbin is a world famous yet stateless fisherman.

A few decades ago there were plenty of Bajau house boats in both Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Today they are much less and perhaps the last stronghold is Semporna in Malaysia one can still find hundreds of houseboats and see new being built. However, in Indonesia there is most likely no permanent houseboats left, but the practice of “pongka” in which fishermen and sometimes whole families stay several weeks at sea in their boats in search of

livelihood, is still in use. In the Philippines, though, it is too dangerous to stay in the boats and there have even been reports of bombs being thrown into houseboats.

### **Water Tides and Spiritualism**

The sea Bajau have a life that completely revolves around the water tides. Twice a day there is low tide and twice a day there is high tide. By following the tides Bajau will measure the time and know what to do next. In low tide they go sea harvesting in the shallow waters, they repair their boats and play at sea shore, when it is high tide they go diving or line-and-hook fishing in deeper water. At night they always stay in their boats choosing a safe anchorage with modest winds.

Bajau traditional religion is a syncretism of Islam and animistic beliefs. They believe in spirits of both forefathers and ghosts, and they are very keen to appease or more important, not to disturb these spirits. Sicknesses and misfortune is mostly attributed to some conflict with spirits and they have traditional djinns who can enter trance and find the reason of sicknesses. Each year, hundreds of Bajau Laut will gather in Sitangkai in southwestern Philippines and perform big ceremonies.

Discipline and respect of past generations is important in everyday life, as the forefathers might get badly tempered by unethical behavior or too much change. In Bajau Laut cosmology boat living is seen as a morally more good living than house dwelling. Even the roof can play an important role – a metal roof might be a reason for misfortune, unlike a palm roof. Many Bajau Laut also wear amulets from time to time.

The placenta has a crucial role in Bajau's understanding of the world. Among many Bajau Laut, the placenta is seen as the twin of the child and it is commonly wrapped and placed in to the ocean after birth. The placenta twin is thought to protect the child and give him a good relationship with the sea.

Deep in Bajau culture and cosmology is a belief that the ocean will always give them what they need. The ocean is a treasure that will never cease. However, it is very important for the Bajau to get aware of the challenges that we are now facing. Coral bleaching, over fishing, a warmer ocean, a drastic drop in big fish – these things might have a crucial impact on their life in future. Well-managed nature reserves may provide some breathing space for many Bajau Laut, but too many have already been forced to leave the ocean to start make a living as beggars or street vendors.

Bajau is the last frontier at sea. If the situation of Bajau Laut deteriorates, we know that the health of the ocean is significantly on the decline.

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