

## **Sama Dilaut as Guardians of the Sea**

### **- two possible solutions to the migration crisis**

Theme of paper: Sama Dilaut Migration and Politics

#### **Introduction**

Sama Dilaut is one of the most widespread indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia. Throughout hundreds of years, migration has been an important part of their lifestyle, driven by trade and search for new livelihoods at sea, or “magosaha” as in the title of Harry Nimmos book from 2001. Sama Dilaut has a unique knowledge about the sea and are using a wide range of fishing techniques, which also includes kites, spear guns and fish traps. They also live within what is called the coral triangle, and are native to some areas that are known for its biodiversity, as for example Tawi-Tawi in Philippines, Sipadan in Malaysia and Derawan in Indonesia.

However, today Sama Dilaut from the Sulu area are facing a migration crisis due both to conflicts and reduced fish stocks. Thousands of Sama Dilaut have fled from northern Sulu to nearly all major cities in the Philippines as for example Manila, Cebu and Davao City, and from southern Sulu to Sabah in Malaysia, Kalimantan in Indonesia, and Brunei.

The Sama Dilaut migration crisis is part of a larger international problem facing fishing communities throughout the world. Today nearly three billion people get most of their protein from sea and fishing is the most important source of income for 10-12 per cent of the world's population (Living Blue Planet Report 2015). However, from 1970 to 2010 the marine vertebrate populations declined by 49 per cent. Whereas populations have started to increase in northern latitudes (from previously depleted levels) they are on decline in subtropical and tropical regions. Apart from over fishing, coral bleaching, acidification, and plastic waste are mayor threats to the ocean. Consequently, many people living in tropical coastal areas are facing increasing difficulties.

In other words, depleting waters is a major reason behind the Sama Dilaut migration, and are along with population growth a source of conflicts between local groups as well as increasing tensions between national states and people in flight.

Can anything be done to create opportunities for Sama Dilaut to remain in their ancestral domains? In this paper, I will try to depict a broader picture of Sama Dilaut's situation in Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia and discuss two possible solutions to the migration crisis found in Davao City and Wakatobi concerning the epithet “Guardians of the sea”.

#### **Methodology**

From 2010 to 2017 I have visited several Sama Bajau communities in Malaysia (a total of eight communities in Semporna, Kota Kinabalu and Lahad Datu), Philippines (a total of six communities in Tawi-Tawi, Cebu, Bohol and Mindanao) and Indonesia (a total of seven communities in Wakatobi, Buton, Derawan, Lasolo and Togian). I have conducted longer field periods in the community of Matina Aplaya in Davao City, Philippines, and in the

Semporna region. During these field trips, I have learned the basics of both Central Sinama and Indonesian Bajo.

During the work with this paper I have beside reading literature about Sama Dilaut by for example Harry Nimmo, Clifford Sather, Kemp Pallesen and Natasha Stacey, also read WWF:s report Living Blue Planet Report from 2015 concerning the health of the oceans as well as the human communities making a living from the sea.

### **Sama Dilaut as Guardians of the Sea**

In this section I will try to give a broader picture of Sama Dilaut's contemporary situation in both Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia based on my research, and pinpoint initiatives taken to improve their situation.

#### Sama Dilaut in Philippines

The Sulu area of the Philippines is thought to be the native area for the Sama people. Here the variation of the Sama-Bajau languages is the greatest, and according to the linguist Kamp Pallesen it is likely that a proto Sama-Bajau language were in existence around 800 AD in the Basilan Strait area (Pallesen 1985).

Today many Sama Dilaut from northern Sulu are spread over many Philippine cities, where they mostly live in coastal communities on stilt houses within or close to the city centre. In these communities, Sama Dilaut get their income by different means as for example from fishing, pearl vending, bicycle taxi, boat making, recycling of left-over metals and electronics, selling of shoes and second hand clothes and labour work. Over a year, many Sama Dilaut also use to beg in harbours and streets. However, this is mostly concentrated to December around Christmas. At the same time, Sama Dilaut are facing a lot of discrimination and are far down on the social ladder. They are derogatory called "Badjao" which is not a preferred and self-chosen word among the Sama. Sometimes it is also pronounced "Bad-jao" which further underlines the words negative connotations.

Fishing practises used are for example spear gun fishing, hook and line fishing, net fishing (including net drive) and fish trap fishing. Compressors, dynamite and cyanide are also used in some communities.

In Sulu, fish is still more plenty than in many urban areas of the Philippines, and most Sama in these areas still make a living from fishing. However, fish is on decline and lack of alternative livelihoods make it difficult to change way of life. Therefore, shop owners, boat builders etc. are also dependent on the sea in these communities. The lack of income diversity combined with overall reduced fish stocks is a driving force behind the use of destructive fishing methods. Sama Dilaut fishermen are also sensitive to market prices. The use of cyanide is for example intimately connected with the high prices of aquarium fish and other live fish.

One good example can be found in the Sama Dilaut community in Matina Aplaya, Davao City, where I have spent several months and made annual visits since February 2010. In the community of approximately 350 people, no destructive fishing methods as for example compressors, cyanide and dynamite fishing are in use. However, due to reduced fish stocks, only a few families make a living completely from the sea today, while most families

alternate between fishing and other types of livelihood. Thanks to a tight co-operation with a local NGO:s as well as a local church, the community has organised a couple of income generating activities throughout the years, as for example hand-collecting of aquarium fish with landing nets, which do not impose a great threat on the marine ecosystem but still provide a good income as well as creates incentives to keep the coral reefs intact. Collection of aquarium fish do also have a limited impact on fish stocks, since aquarium trade mostly targets juvenile fish that are subject to naturally higher mortality rates than adults. While the Sama Dilaut of Matina Aplaya were selling aquarium fish they also got support to set up their own company, hence escaping layers of middlemen.

In 2016, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources of the Dept. of Agriculture initiated the project “Bantay Laut” in Davao Gulf in which 600 Sama Dilaut fishermen will be drafted as guardians of the sea. In the community of Matina Aplaya, several Sama Dilaut fishermen have already been recruited and given fiberglass boats and engines, whereas they will report illegal fishing to marine police and collect plastics and other garbage from the ocean. However, they are still to be given radio equipment and monthly wage.

One of the ideas behind the “Bantay Laut”-project is to re-claim the epithet “Guardians of the sea”. In centuries, Sama Dilaut were not harassing the natural environment in any larger extent due to small scale fishing with no or little bycatch. This makes sense if we consider that Sama people for long have been living in areas with some of the richest marine biodiversity in the world, as for example Tawi-Tawi, Sipadan and Derawan. As a matter of fact, areas traditionally controlled by indigenous peoples have a larger natural biodiversity than other areas. According to a World Bank report from 2008, 80 % of the world’s terrestrial biodiversity is located within land traditionally controlled by indigenous peoples (The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity Conservation, 2008).

Many indigenous peoples possess a profound knowledge about the natural environment, enabling them to extract multiple resources without hurting core ecological functions. In many indigenous cultures, there is also a belief that the natural environment will always supply them with what they need, hence making storage of food unnecessary. That belief is strong also among Sama Dilaut. This is what Marshall Sahlins called the “Original affluent society”: in traditional hunter and gatherer communities people had limited means but also limited desires (Sahlins 1972). They didn’t have to own more possessions than they could carry while leading a nomadic life and they were always assured that the nature would provide them with their needs. Or as stated in the following metaphor: “nature is their bank”. This fits in well with Sama Dilaut boat dwellers who only keep the most basic necessities and give priority to mobility. Hence, Sama Dilaut were certain that they could always rely on nature, and they didn’t have to exploit nature in a larger extent.

### Sama Dilaut in Malaysia

In Malaysia, most Sama people are living in the Sabah region in north-eastern Borneo. Some of the Sama inhabitants came to the area hundreds of years ago, while others have arrived relatively recently from the Philippines. Today Semporna is one of the strongholds of Sama Dilaut culture and the place with the highest concentration of boat living Sama Dilaut, of whom most or perhaps all originally came from Tawi-Tawi. These boat dwelling Sama Dilaut are living near islands such as Denawan, Omadal, Kulapuan, Nusa Tengah, Pulau Gaya, Mabul and Pulau Maiga close to land dwelling Sama people. There are also boat dwelling Sama Dilaut people near the communities of Bangaw-Bangaw and Labuan Haji.

In Semporna, there are also a large number of Sama Dilaut people from Sitangkai who predominantly reside in Bangaw-Bangaw. Probably all of these people live in houses today and they are more integrated to the surrounding community than the Tawi-Tawi Sama Dilaut. Some of them have Malaysian national identity cards and some are working in the labour market as for example boat men, construction workers and plantation workers. In addition to the Sama Dilaut from Tawi-Tawi and Sitangkai there are also other Sama Dilaut groups as well as other Sama people from other parts of Sulu living in the area, of whom many lack legal status.

The marine environment in Semporna is very rich, but also far from its historical diversity. The area makes up of plenty of islands and is home to two marine protected areas, the Tun Sakaran Marine Park and Sipadan National Park. The latter has one of the highest marine biodiversity in the world, and only a limited number of entry permissions are issued daily. However, because of decades of fish bombing and trolling some of the areas coral reefs are in poor condition. Live coral reef coverage is less than 50 % in the majority of the reefs, and only Sipadan has a coverage higher than three quarters with its 95 % coverage (Reef Status of Semporna Priority Conservation Area 2009).

The poverty facing many Sama Dilaut is obvious. A majority of the Sama Dilaut lack national identity cards and cannot access public education and health care. They also face risk of deportation to the Philippines, especially if they enter the central parts of Semporna. At the same time fishing is getting increasingly difficult and some Sama must rely on illegal fishing practices, as for example compressor diving at night, cyanide fishing and bomb fishing in order to make a living. Failed migration policies, lack of national support, population growth and less fish make life more difficult.

For decades, Semporna has been a large fish exporter and numerous trucks leave the city every day for Tawau or Kota Kinabalu for further shipping. What keeps the system rolling is an increasing demand for fish around the world, and fish merchants try to maximize their profit by giving credit to Sama Dilaut fishermen. As a consequence, many Sama people are today indebted giving them no possibility but to increase fishing pressure as they live on resources yet to be extracted. Merchants also take advantage of the fact that most Sama Dilaut lack Malaysian identity cards and do not have means to set up their own trading routes, hence offering a very low price. It is also important to take into account that explosives were introduced in the area by fish merchants who aimed to increase their sell in the mid-1900s (Sather 1997), and not by Sama Dilaut fishermen. Local restaurants and fish exporters provide an important market for live fish, but do also create incentives for use of cyanide.

At the same time, Semporna is a popular tourist destination for divers and snorkelers from Asia, Europe and North America. The tourist industry creates incentives for national and local governments to sustain the natural environment. However, there are also examples of photo safaris in which, mostly Asian, tourists pay money to organizers for taking photos of Sama Dilaut communities, as for example in Pulau Gaya, Pulau Maiga and Denawan. In general, Sama Dilaut people benefit very little from the tourism expect from the spin over effect from sanctuaries, even though the area lies within their traditional realm. Most tourist enterprises are owned by Malaysian and foreign entrepreneurs.

In Indonesia, the Sama Dilaut (also known as Indonesian Bajo) are living over a great area stretching from eastern Kalimantan, south to the Lesser Sunda Islands and east to Maluku. However, the variation of their dialects is far from as big as in the Sulu area implying that they have not been living long in the area. Nevertheless, Sama Dilaut boat-dwellers reached Indonesia's southernmost island of Rotia as early in the 1700s (Stacey 2007).

Between 2011 and 2017 I have been visiting the community of Sampela in Wakatobi four times. The community is located within a UNESCO Marine Biosphere Reserve, named Wakatobi National Park. Here, only traditional fishing methods are allowed and larger commercial fishing boats are banned. In Sampela, no cyanide, compressors or explosives are in use and catch is still better than in probably all communities I have visited. Common fishing techniques are spear gun fishing, shallow water harvesting, hook and line fishing and traditional net fishing that cause little hurt on the corals. These fishing methods have been in use for centuries without resulting in a significant decline in marine resources. However, there is a problem of reinforcing the regulations of the marine reserve, and large scale fishing boats are occasionally operating in the area. In other Sama communities in the area as for example Mola in Wangi-Wangi and Mantigola in Kaledupa, fishermen are also using compressors and collecting protected species, as for example turtles.

At the same time, there is also a distorted pricing of marine product in Wakatobi resulting in unreasonably low price for Sama products, compared with the end price of the trade chain. Here, the fish trade is controlled by merchants who can reduce prices since few fishermen has the means to sell their products beyond the community boundaries. At the same time price for other staple foods, as for example rice and cassava is high. As a consequence, many Sama from Sampela have migrated to Ambon and Tanjung Pinang where price of marine products is higher, but fish not necessarily more common. Also in Sampela, many fishermen are indebted paying high interest rates.

In a yet unpublished study presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> International Sama Dilaut conference in Tawi-Tawi December 2015, I and professor Erika Schagatay at Mid-Sweden University showed that skin diving can enable a sustainable living in the area surrounding Sampela (Schagatay 2016). Hence, there is a possibility to combine a marine protected area with traditional Sama Dilaut fishing practices.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, I have tried to give a broad picture of the more sea oriented Sama groups in Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. I have also mentioned possible solutions to the crisis regarding the epithet "Guardians of the sea".

The problem facing Sama Dilaut communities is complex: reduced fish stocks, population growth, lack of national recognition, exploitation by dominant groups and market distortion are all challenges for the Sama.

The migration crisis may be counteracted by empowering Sama Dilaut in their traditional domains. The introduction of well managed natural reserves including indigenous peoples (as in Sampela) as well as a reclaiming process of the Sama identity as guardians of the sea (as in Matina Aplaya), can both keep the natural environment flourish and enhance Sama Dilaut culture.

At the same time, Sama Dilaut people are exploited by the setting of unrealistic market prices. If we compare the price of a grouper or a lobster in a finer restaurant with the price given to Sama fishermen, the distortion gets obvious. Hence, the value of the marine resources must rise and benefit whole communities. At the same time, unregulated and unreported large scale fishing must be kept on a minimum.

We also face a reality where the expansion of debt is spreading into the tiniest capillaries of human societies. This is a driving force behind exploitation of natural resources and can be used as a tool for further control and exploitation of Sama fishermen. Hence, the Sama Dilaut crisis is part of a larger problematic with a dysfunctional economic system based on debt.

The Bantay Laut initiative in Mindanao highlights a good example of how to empower the Sama Dilaut and care for the environment. However, some politicians use such initiatives to increase their popularity and many Sama Dilaut communities in Philippines have experienced many empty promises. As previously mentioned, Sama Dilaut are still waiting for radio equipment and monthly wages.

The ocean has a great resilience. If parts of the ocean are kept strong and get time to recover this can strengthen other parts of this huge and complex ecosystem. A reclaiming process of free and guarding Sama Dilaut fishermen in combination with well managed marine protected areas including indigenous peoples can safe guard Sama Dilaut culture and language.

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