

Waves of Being

A Phenomenological Journey with the Bajau Laut

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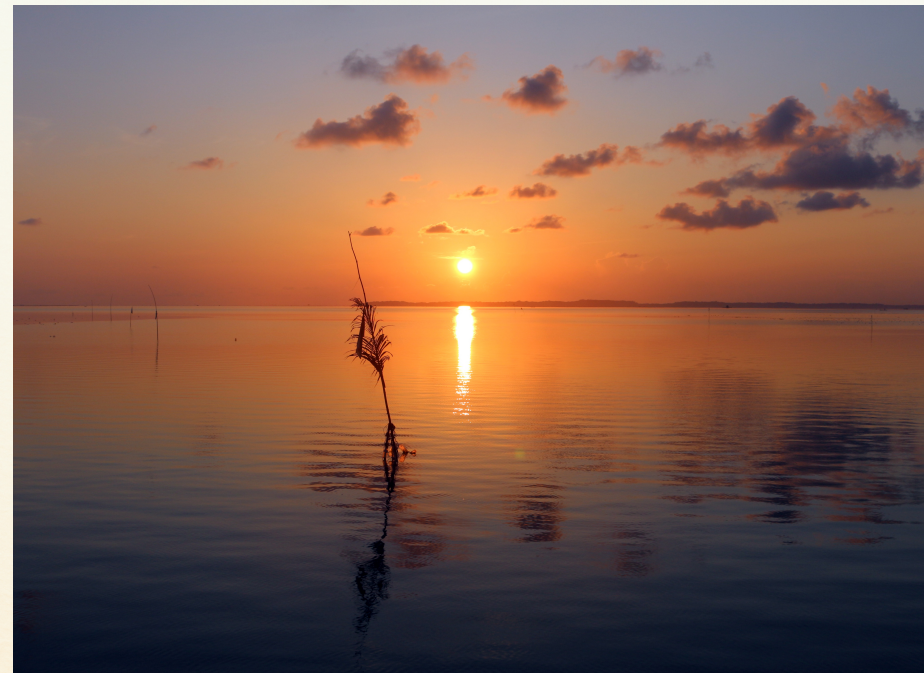


Erik Abrahamsson
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Into the Depths

In the heart of Southeast Asia, amidst the crystal-clear waters and sprawling archipelagos, live the Bajau Laut—often referred to as the "sea nomads." This photobook, through the lens of anthropologist, writer, and photographer Erik Abrahamsson, offers an unprecedented glimpse into their aquatic way of life, which has thrived for centuries in harmony with the rhythms of the sea. Since first encountering the Bajau Laut in 2010, Abrahamsson has immersed himself in their communities across the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, forging deep connections and gaining intimate knowledge of their traditions, challenges, and adaptations in the face of modernity. With a foundation in both Central Sinama and Indonesian Bajo, Abrahamsson bridges linguistic and cultural gaps, presenting the Bajau Laut's stories with authenticity and respect. This book not only celebrates the rich cultural tapestry of the Bajau Laut but also confronts the pressing environmental and socio-economic challenges they face, advocating for a deeper understanding and appreciation of their unique way of life. Join us on a journey into the lives of the Bajau Laut, where the sea is both home and horizon.



Diving at an Early Age

Bajau Laut children grow up by the sea and learn how to dive at an early age. During this process, many of them rupture their eardrums which impacts their hearing over time but grants them the ability to dive repeatedly without needing to equalize their ears. Today, regrowth of young divers is weak, but there are still Bajau children who grow up to become full-fledged divers.





Masterful Boat People

The Bajau Laut are skilled boat people, with children learning to master a boat at an early age. They are renowned for their balance, agility, and craftsmanship in boat building—skills that are deeply ingrained in their way of life. The girls depicted in the photograph reside within the Tun Sakaran Marine Park in Semporna, Malaysia.



Long Way to Learn

Becoming a full-fledged fisherman requires extensive training and hard work. It's not just about being proficient in diving and aiming; it also involves understanding a wide variety of fish and their specific behaviors, mastering boat handling, skillfully using a knife, and quickly identifying potential dangers. This comprehensive skill set can only be developed through at least a decade of knowledge transfer from the older generation to the younger. It is disheartening to see that the rate of this transfer among the younger generation is only a fraction of what it once was.



Born to Dive

The Bajau Laut exhibit a fascinating physiology during diving. The so-called diving reflex causes their pulse and heart rhythm to slow down, giving them a sense of relaxation. Furthermore, their spleens constrict while diving, releasing a surge of red blood cells. It has been shown that the Bajau have larger spleens compared to neighboring groups, a difference with genetic explanations. Many Bajau fishermen say that they feel more at ease under water than on land.



Imitating Sea Life

The Bajau Laut employ a diverse array of fishing techniques, using equipment that ranges from homemade spearguns and drift nets to cages and artificial octopuses. A unifying aspect of their fishing practices is the reliance on extensive marine knowledge. They even mimic the appearance and movements of an octopus to attract mates from among the coral.





A Life on Boats

Traditionally, the Bajau Laut have lived in houseboats, with nomadic groups existing in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia until only a few decades ago. Today, sea nomadic Bajau are only found in Sabah, eastern Malaysia. "If we live in a houseboat, we only have to pull up the anchor and leave," one Bajau Laut woman told me. Living in a houseboat also offers economic advantages, allowing them to stay longer at sea and be less dependent on middlemen for selling fish and buying commodities.



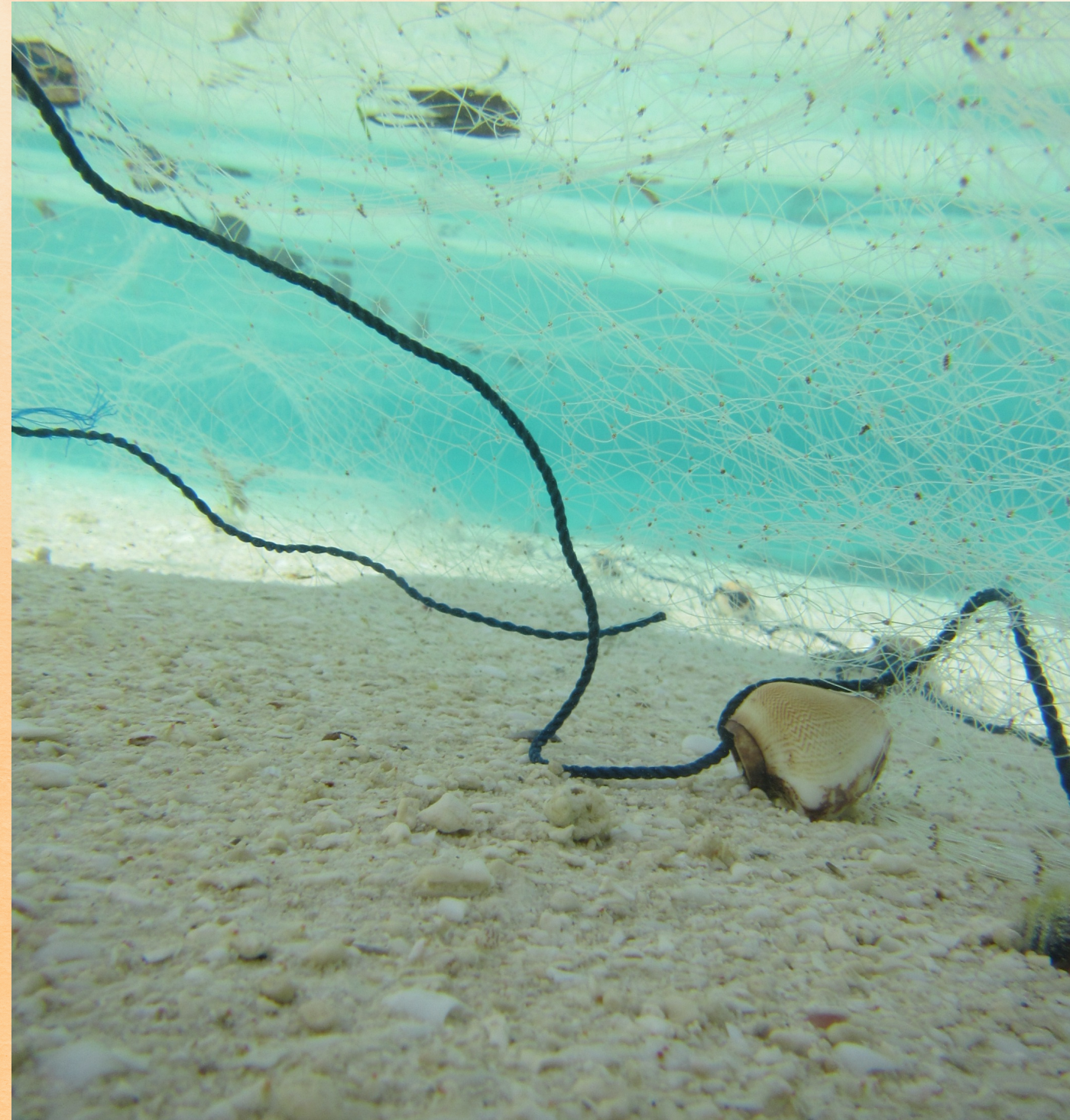
Women – Natural Divers

Among the Bajau Laut, particularly in Sulawesi, Indonesia, there are still many skilled Bajau female divers. While they mostly dive for shellfish, a few also use spearguns. Women are known to have a thicker layer of subcutaneous fat than men, which can help them stay warm longer in water. This might partly explain why the first person to swim the treacherous waters from Cuba to Florida was a woman—the then 64-year-old Diana Nyad. Additionally, there are remarkable examples of women's rapid adaptation to diving. For instance, Sara Campbell became a World Champion in Deep Diving in 2009 after only nine months of training.



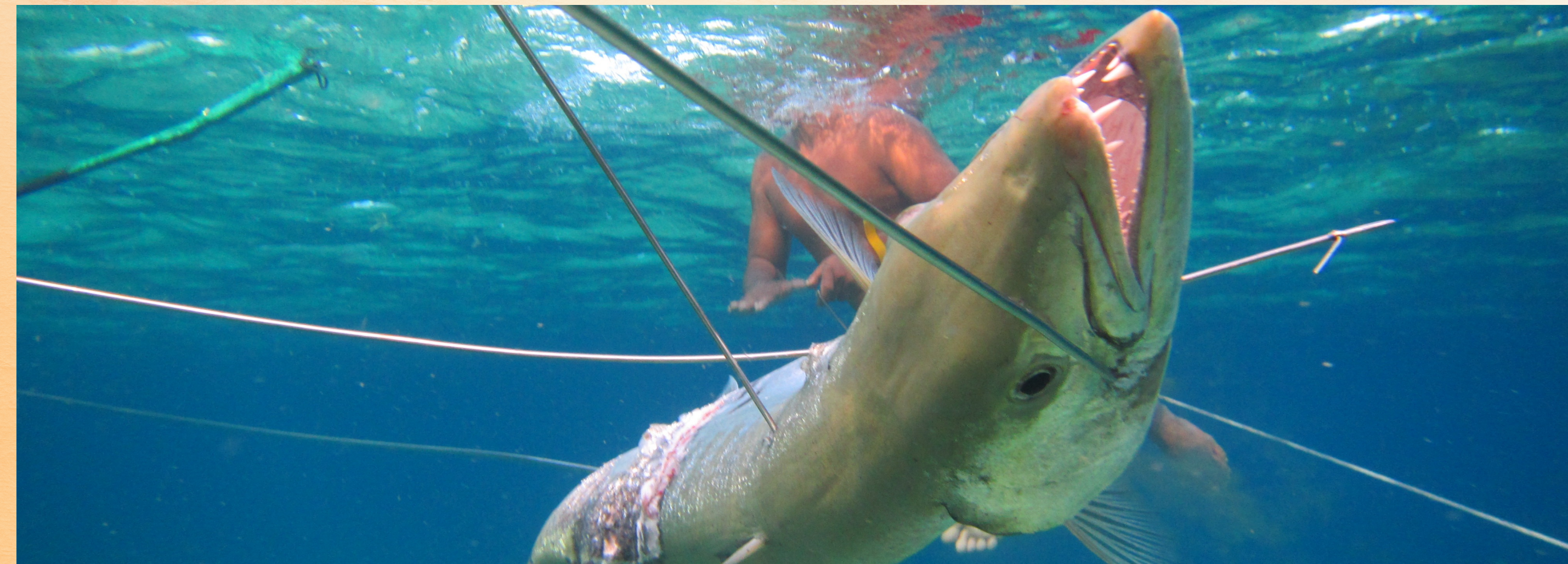
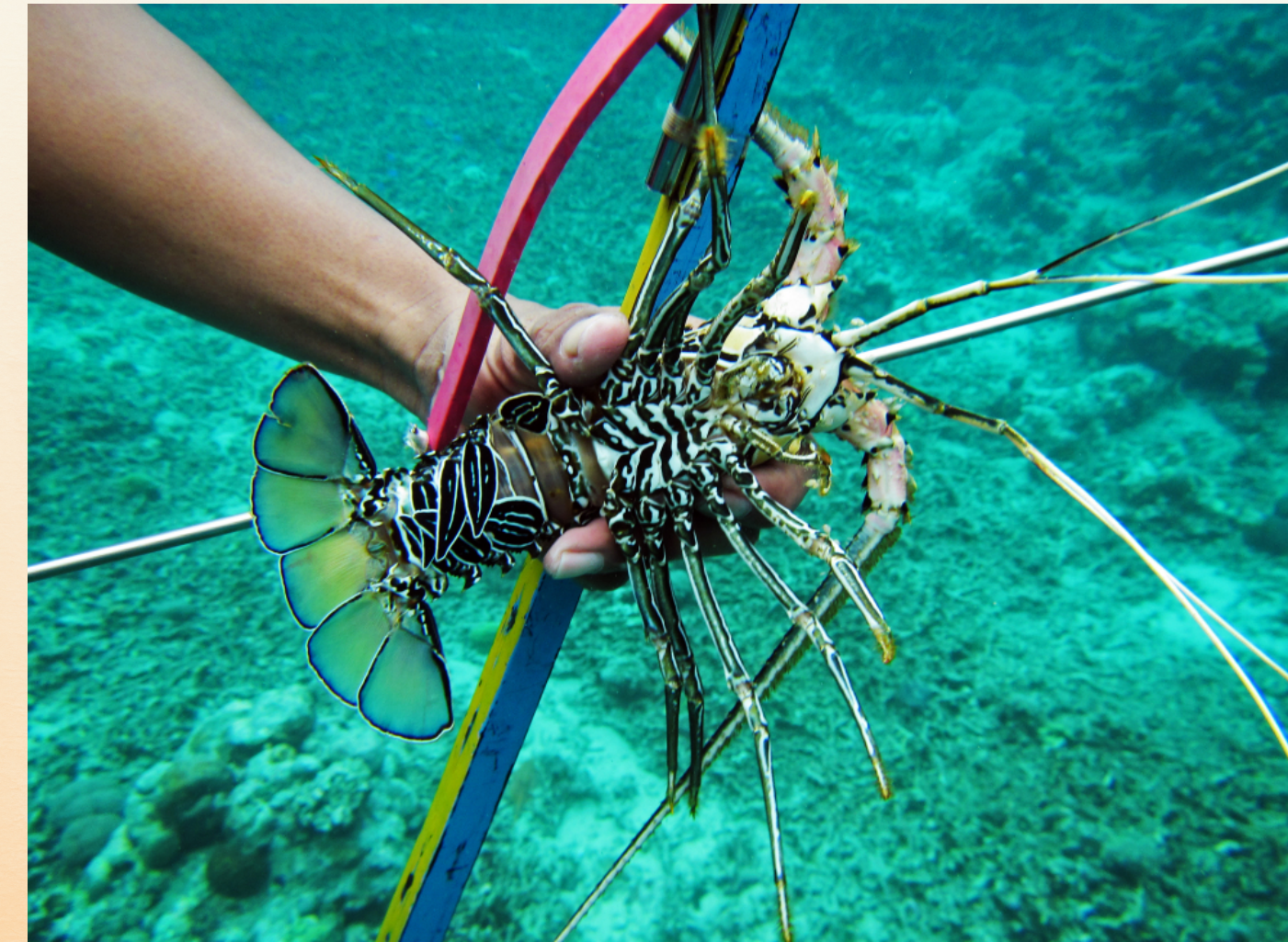
Crafting Identity: A Struggle Against Alienation

We are creative beings, as Karl Marx postulated. When we create, a piece of ourselves is transferred to the object we have crafted. However, if what we create becomes a product on the market beyond our control, we become alienated. The Bajau Laut live amidst their everyday material culture—homemade spearguns, houses, swimming goggles, dugout canoes. Their material culture is an integral part of their identity. Nevertheless, the largest and finest catch will always be sold.



Sea of Debt: The Financial Grip and the Environmental Costs

The Bajau Laut are known for supplying shark fins and other valuable marine species across the Coral Triangle. Yet, the portion of the profit they receive is minuscule compared to the final prices at upscale seafood restaurants. Simultaneously, many fishermen find themselves in debt, a situation that seemingly ensures the continuation of unsustainable marine resource extraction. The Bajau are often paid in advance for catches yet to be made, their fishing gear, utensils, and fuel effectively 'still at sea' in the form of groupers, mantis shrimps, and shark fins. The interest rates on these advances are steep, affecting not only the Bajau Laut but the marine environment as well.





Growing up by Dying Corals

The Bajau Laut children are raised in a remarkable environment beside the ocean, surrounded by corals and turtles. Yet, due to ongoing environmental degradation, it is projected that 90% of all coral reefs will be dead by 2050. To keep global warming within manageable limits, carbon emissions must be reduced by 8% annually





Diving for Coins

It's a common sight throughout the Philippines—Bajau children diving for coins in the harbor areas, as depicted in these photos from Bongao, Tawi-Tawi. This phenomenon stems from poverty, but also from objectification and exoticization. Onlookers are drawn to witness the supposedly 'exotic' and 'destitute' Bajau children showcasing their skills. I've observed children removing their clothes even before coins are tossed into the water, anticipating that the money won't be handed to them directly but thrown for them to retrieve. Meanwhile, the Bajau Laut navigate these stereotypes. For instance, why would they bring their shoes when they go begging in a Philippine metropolis?





Rebels - They Keep their Autonomy in the Modern World

The Bajau Laut have a deep connection to the water. However, due to civil unrest and declining fish stocks, many Bajau Laut from southwestern Philippines have migrated to urban areas. In these towns, numerous Bajau earn a living by selling second-hand shoes and clothes, waste material, and freshwater pearls. In a sense, they are rebels — maintaining their culture and lifestyle despite facing challenges. They devise strategies to preserve their autonomy, whether they reside on isolated islands or in metropolises.





Simply diving

Many fishermen prefer to exclusively use the speargun for fishing. It requires minimal preparation; one needs only the skill to dive and hunt. A popular saying among the Bajau is “ata’u amangan,” which literally means ‘know how to eat.’ This phrase is often directed at someone who refrains from performing a task due to fear or reluctance. The underlying message is: If you are not brave, how will you manage to put food on the table?





Stateless "Sea gypsy" Tourist Attraction

Many Bajau Laut in Semporna, Malaysia, grow up on idyllic islands with pristine white beaches. Photos of their remote communities often appear on international hotel booking websites, and photo safaris are organized regularly. Yet, one must question how much of this revenue reaches the so-called 'sea gypsies.' Typically, they receive only candies and some bread in exchange for their participation. Furthermore, they remain stateless, with no access to basic healthcare services.



Half-full Lounges

The Bajau Laut are confident in their skills – diving, swimming, and aiming. In fact, their swimming style differs from that of Western divers. Unlike Western divers, who typically enter the water headfirst, the Bajau start feet first and turn only after they are below the water's surface. They also use shorter, propeller-like kicks, allowing for precise movements underwater. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that they dive with their lungs not fully inflated, enabling them to descend with less effort and achieve better balance underwater, which is particularly advantageous during harpoon fishing.



Singing in Everyday Life

Singing is an intrinsic part of the life of the Bajau Laut, interwoven with daily routines and shaped by the flow of the tides and the day's chores. It serves not only as an expression of daily life but also as a means to resolve conflicts and tensions. For instance, a young woman might sing about her mistreatment by her in-laws, something that would be impossible to express in ordinary conversation.

There is an evolutionary theory suggesting that music came before language. When children learn to speak, they start with the melody and intonation—the rhythm of the language—not the words. Among Australian Aboriginals, 'songlines' describe the landscape in a way that can guide someone for hundreds of kilometers and be passed down through generations. They also believe that the world was sung into existence by the creators. This suggests a deep, universal connection between music, language, and the very fabric of society and the world.





The Ocean is Their Home and Heaven

The Bajau Laut believe they have an innate connection to the sea. For instance, many report feeling 'land-sick' if they spend too long away from the sea. This sensation could have several physiological explanations:

- Rocking (similar to the motion of waves) can shorten the time it takes to fall asleep and improve sleep quality.
- Natural sounds from water and waves can enhance concentration and promote relaxation.
- Grounding, which is linked to reduced inflammation and increased well-being, is effectively achieved through proximity to water or, even better, by swimming in the ocean.
- Consuming fish is known to improve sleep quality.

The drawing above was created in the sand of Maiga, Semporna, Malaysia.



Hardships on the Sea

The Bajau Laut in Semporna face numerous hardships in their daily lives. In Malaysia, many of them are stateless, which significantly hinders their access to healthcare and other basic services. They also live with the fear of being arrested and deported to the Philippines if they spend too much time on land. Although they consider the ocean their home, it can also become a trap in the long term. There are several acute problems affecting marine life, including overfishing, coral bleaching, plastic pollution, acidification, and global warming.





Green Architecture

The Bajau Laut have learned how to adapt their homes to the natural environment. Waves, floods, and erosion pose only minor problems for their settlements, while simultaneously providing them with unparalleled access to sea life. Bajau Laut build short term, and live long term.





Great Under Water Vision

Many Bajau children possess the remarkable ability to see clearly underwater. They can maximally constrict their pupils, enabling them to focus on small objects submerged. According to researcher Anna Gislén, who has studied this phenomenon among Moken children in Thailand Burma, all children have the potential to develop this underwater vision after just a few weeks of training.



Free but also Exploited

Crystal blue waters and a healthy, subsistence-based lifestyle make the existence of the Bajau Laut seem idyllic. To get their food, they do not go to the shopping mall but to the bottom of the sea. However, they are also acutely aware of the economic reality. From the perspective of world-systems theory, the Bajau Laut are essential providers of sea products that cannot be industrially harvested, such as mantis shrimps and sea cucumbers. Despite their crucial role, they are chronically underpaid, struggling on a dying ocean while others enjoy their catch in high-end restaurants.





A Sustainable Living

The lives of the Bajau Laut are determined by the tides. During low tide, they search the coral floor for shellfish, sea urchins, and more. Each day brings more food to harvest, in a constant cycle of two daily low tides and high tides. Collecting shellfish without destructive equipment can be a sustainable way of life—a practice humanity has engaged in for tens of thousands of years. The Bajau Laut utilize basic technology and natural skills to sustain themselves. This subsistence lifestyle should serve as an inspiration for future societies.

About

Erik Abrahamsson is an anthropologist, writer, and photographer specializing in the Bajau Laut. He first came into contact with them in 2010 and has since spent extended periods of time in Bajau Laut communities in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. He speaks the basics of both Central Sinama and Indonesian Bajo. He runs the blog www.theaquaticape.org.



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