

The Samas Dilaut: From the Seas to the Highways

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Who Are the Samas Dilaut?

To outsiders, the Samas Dilaut have always been Bajau (variously spelled Badjao, Badjaw, Badjau). This is also the designation used on them by anthropologists like Bruno Bottignolo, Jose Arong, and until very recently, Harry Arlo Nimmo. Among themselves, however, they are Samas Dilaut, not Bajau.

In literatures they have been traditionally identified as a separate group from the Samas of the Sulu archipelago. Many scholars and anthropologists classify them as a sub-group of the Sama tribe, thus, identifying them as part of the Moro population. In its 1981 ethnographic map the National Council of Churches of the Philippines-People's Action for Cultural Ties (NCCP-PACT) identified the Bajau as the 13th Moro group. They however do not belong to the Moro people. While they speak the same Sama language called *Sinama* and share some of the sociocultural practices of the Sama people, they were never Islamized, never took part in the three-centuries of anti-colonial struggle, and never been part of the centralized structure of the Moro proto-nation (Arquiza, etal. 2000, 19).

One theory of the origin of the Samas Dilaut states that they were boat people who migrated to the Philippines from Johore, Malaysia in the early 14th century. Others argue that they were originally of the Philippines as land-based Sama group who inhabited the Sulu archipelago before other ethnic groups came. Anthropologist Harry Arlo Nimmo states that while it is difficult to pinpoint a Sama Dilaut homeland, there is strong evidence suggesting that the Samas evolved as a linguistic, cultural group either within the south-central Sulu or eastern Borneo and from there dispersed to their present location in the Sulu islands.

One evidence that attests to the Samas Dilaut being indigenous to Sulu is their language. The Sama Dilaut speak in the same tongue as that

used by other Sama groups of Sulu. They also share many cultural characteristics with the latter, indicating that the land-dwelling Islamized Sama groups and the Samas Dilaut were once one people. Nimmo points out that compared with the Tausug language, which appears to be more related to the dialects spoken by other inhabitants in the north (suggesting that the Tausug might not have been native to the Sulu islands), the Sama language (*Sinama*) is more closely related to those spoken by the inhabitants of Malaysia.

As a tribe, the Samas Dilaut are a highly dispersed group. Warren (1985) says that the tribe's identity was derived from their nomadic way of life, and this prevented the crystallization of cohesive kinship groups. The nuclear family was about the only discrete kinship unit that they recognized. Traditionally each boat household comprised a family, which formed temporary alliance with other families (boathouses) in a mooring site. A basically egalitarian society, the Samas Dilaut had no recognized leader except a *panglima*, a generally older man, who served as arbiter in case of conflict (Warren 1985, 68). Beyond this moorage no formal political organization existed, but because of the many kin ties and frequent movements among several moorages, these constituted a single, albeit dispersed [Sama Dilaut] community (Nimmo, cited in Arquiza, et al. 2000).

Historically, the sea-roving Samas have maintained ties with neighboring shore groups. During the reign of the Sultanate of Sulu they performed an invaluable role as procurers of sea products, mainly as pearl divers and *tripang* (sea cucumber) fishers. Warren says that for provisioning the Sultanate's trading needs, they were assured of protection. However, as a marginal group with no land and property and neither a territorial base nor the internal political structure to weld localized kindred groups into viable political communities, the Samas Dilaut are perennially dependent on strand-dwelling Tausug or Sama headmen for their security and meagre benefits. What helped them out from becoming totally subjugated by shoreline and inland rulers was their mobility and their ability to shift allegiance. This must also be the reason why they are about the only ethnic group in the Sulu islands that did not get proselytized and did not fall under the absolute control of the Tausug chieftains. Such a unique position set them apart from the slaves and other subjects of the Sultanate (Warren 1985, 67-69).

Throughout history, the Samas Dilaut have been an outcast group. Islamized groups in Sulu consider them physically repulsive and "impure." The Tausugs, in particular, call them pejorative names, such as *luwaan*

("that which was spat out", referring to God's rejection of their way of life) or *pala-u* (an unflattering description of their houseboat and sea-drifting ways). During the Spanish rule, there were proscriptions against their entering villages, and in Zamboanga under the Spanish colonial government they were not allowed to carry arms, a mark of their low status in a militant society (Warren 1985, 68 citing Furber). Contempt for the Samas Dilaut in the Sulu islands is backed by legends explaining their outcast position.

As a tribe with a long tradition of independence from shoreline rule, the Samas Dilaut have an ethnocentric worldview, according to which water is central to their lives, and land is but a speck in a vast sea where they reside. The government and its institutions, along with the residents of the land are outsiders to the Samas Dilaut world. The Samas Dilaut, thus, would not and could not own land since to do so would be to get tied down to it (Arquiza, et al., 39).

The Northern and the Southern Samas Dilaut

Nimmo classifies the Samas Dilaut into two types: the northern, and the southern. The northerners are found in Siasi, Jolo, Basilan and Zamboanga; while the southerners are found in Tawi-Tawi, Sibutu, and Semporna in Sabah. The southern Samas Dilaut are interconnected with intermarriage and important kinship ties and regard the northern group as different from them although few and insignificant kin ties exist between them. They traditionally fish in nuclear family groups, are predominantly reef-dwelling and limit their movement to nearby reefs (Nimmo, cited in Arquiza, et al., 21).

Compared with the southern group, the northern Samas Dilaut are more mobile and adventurous. Traditionally they fish in male groups, leaving behind their families in the moorages. Some of them seasonally sail to as far as the waters of Palawan, Cagayan de Sulu, Borneo, Celebes and even Manila Bay (Nimmo, cited in Arquiza, et al., 21). Unlike the southerners who regard themselves as coming from one ancestry, the northern Sama Dilaut subdivide themselves into different sub-groups. Both disclaim any affinity with the other (Alojamiento and Tiannok, 2001).

At present, the northern Samas Dilaut's mobility and adventurousness can be manifested by their audacity to leave homeland (Sulu Islands including Basilan and Zamboanga) and go to cities all over the Philippines to beg. Since fishing has become unviable, many of the northern Samas

Dilaut have left the seas for the streets. A good number of northern Samas Dilaut have migrated to the south, most notably in Sitangkai in Tawi-Tawi where fish and other marine products are relatively abundant. They however do not consider themselves permanent residents of Tawi-Tawi and are generally indifferent to the island's mainstream life. They occupy the shallow waters and seasonally go home to their homes in the Sulu islands to pay tribute to their *'mbob* (ancestors).

Of the now sedentarized southern Samas Dilaut, many are still dependent on fishing as a source of livelihood although the problem of piracy has forced many families to leave the occupation to the men. Many have likewise turned to seaweed farming and trade-based occupation (fish and sea cucumber dealing, portering, transport, warehouse labor). Having close kin ties with those in Sempurna (in Sabah, Malaysia), they frequently visit their relatives there. The southern Samas Dilaut enjoy free ingress and egress in Sabah.

The northern Samas Dilaut population of Sitangkai are migrant fishers who seasonally come to the island every time fishing and other economic activities in the north are going down. Some of them came as early as the 1970s while others trickled in between the 1980s and the 1990s. All of them however consider themselves transients in the island even if they have not gone back to Sulu in the last twenty years. They dissociate themselves from the other Sama groups in Sitangkai and insist that they live in the place only to engage in *pagosaha* (occupation). If their means allow them, they see to it that they visit their relatives in Sulu or go back somewhere to their hometowns.

The Samas Dilaut of Sitangkai

In the 1970s with the outbreak of war in the Sulu Islands, hordes of migrants came to Sitangkai. The advent of seaweed farming beginning in the seventies up to the nineties also encouraged the continuous influx of Tausug populations, even Visayans from Dumaguete and Cebu. The town is now host to settler communities of Tausugs from Jolo, Tapul, Parrang, Siasi and other places in the north, and Sama Dilaut groups from Jolo, Kabingaan, Laminusa and other northern islands.

The Tausugs started coming to the islands after the outbreak of the secessionist rebellion in Jolo. With the continuous decline of the copra industry beginning in the later part of the 1980s many Tausug farmers turned to the more profitable seaweed farming. The shallow seas of Tawi-

Tawi became the logical choice to resettle in, and Sitangkai's wide "open" seas enticed many families to take advantage of the agar-agar boom. In time, hundreds of hectares of what used to be fishing grounds for the native Samas Dilaut turned into vast seaweed farms of migrant tribes.

Sitangkai's population is multi-ethnic, classified into five general categories: the Tausug, the Chinese, the Samas Beheng (sedentary Sama), the Samas Dilaut, and the Bisayas. There are classes within each of these categories, but as ethnic categories the Tausugs are the political elite group; the Chinese are the merchant class; the Samas Beheng are the commoners; the Samas Dilaut and the Bisayas are the lowest-ranking groups. The Tausug's powerful position has its basis in the tribe's monopoly of the town's political resources. Having minoritized the indigenous Sama populations (Samas Beheng or Samas Sitangkai and the sedentarized and semi-sedentarized southern Samas Dilaut), the Tausugs have come to dominate as well the political and economic life in the island. The Chinese, on the other hand, being a pioneer merchant class, have long secured their social position in the island and established their hold in its economy.

The above ethnic classification is further class-determined. There is a class of endemic, sedentary Sama population who call themselves Samas Sitangkai or Samas Beheng, who practice Islam as a religion and who set themselves apart from the "Samas *Palau*" or Samas Dilaut (sea-dwelling Sama). The latter hold a distinct classification as non-Muslim and statusless. Though many of them could now be found crammed in the shabbiest corners of Sitangkai's slum, surviving on fishing and seaweed gathering, their palau status has not changed and they are considered the bottom of Sitangkai's social strata. Beside them - or probably below them — there likewise exist the still boat-dwelling and sea-roving Sama Dilaut (the real palau), consisting of one family, based on the number of boathouse (*lepa*) that could still be found mooring in Sitangkai reef.

The Samas Beheng likewise dissociate themselves from the southern Samas Dilaut who, having lost their reefs to Tausug seaweed farmers, have chosen to settle in Sitangkai (or in Semporna, in Sabah, Malaysia) and subsist on fishing and seaweed gathering. Having fallen under the Tausug socio-political domain, many of these people have also to convert to Islam while holding on to their traditional practice of ancestor worship (*pag-'mbob*). Most of them would also now deny their kinship with the still *lepa*-dwelling palau.

At the fringe of these indigenous Sama groups are the northern Samas Dilaut who come seasonally to Sitangkai waters to engage in fishing

and other sea-based activities. Like the southern Palau, this tribe is regarded as non-Muslims and practice the *ag-'mbob*. Outside the dominant Tausug group and the second-class Sama tribes, all the rest of the Christian non-indigenous population are referred to as "Bisaya". This reference is also a status ascription: it denotes a subordinate class composed of workers, hired househelps and petty government employees.

The demands of agar-agar production necessitate the constant supervision of the seaweed farms so that agar-agar growers have to stay nearby. This has brought about the emergence of Tausug communities at seas, known as *punduhan*, made up of clusters of houses numbering between 20 and 200. Families in these *punduhans* are generally fragment members, usually the productive forces needed for the maintenance of seaweed farming. They are usually able-bodied males and females from ages 16 and above, with many unmarried. Wives are tagged along to keep house for the farming husbands, along with little children who could not be left to relatives in the shores. Schooling children and the aged are usually left to the care of shore-dwelling relatives. This is a matter of necessity, as life at seas is difficult, with no surface water, no electricity, and no land to step on or plant vegetables in.

The migrant Tausugs call their seaweed farm *pag-umahan*, a "shore-bound" term they use to describe the farm they left on land. The term has been transposed over into their present scape, indicative of their displacement. The word *punduhan* itself denotes a phenomenon of displacement. A Tausug term, it means an outpost, a temporary living quarter away from home. Home to the Tausugs is the *higad* (shore), their traditional habitat. The word also alludes to the fate of the Samas Dilaut, who are being gradually and continually expelled from their fishing grounds and reef dwellings because of the influx of the Tausug sea farmers into the seas and the consequent setting up of seaweed farmers' communities.

Like the copra farm they left behind, the *pag-umahan* is a feudal structure. To be able to engage in agar-agar farming the producer should have a start-up capital to enable one to build a hut at sea and buy planting materials. Some agar-agar producers would borrow money for boat or engine to be paid in harvested crop. Most agar-agar producers have outstanding debts to the *bos*, the local capitalist, the agar-agar dealer and warehouse owner, usually a Tausug or Chinese merchant who provides them with start-up and maintenance capital for farm production.

In the *punduhan* there are many small-scale seaweed buyers who themselves maintain farms and loan out money (at most PhP100) for gasoline and a day's consumption for their lowly agar-agar gatherer, and

who in turn sell their hoard of agar-agar to bigger capitalists in Sitangkai, Bongao or in as far as Zamboanga. The average producer delivers the harvested crop to the warehouse of the capitalist in Sitangkai. A kilo of wet agar-agar is sold at PhP3, dried agar-agar is at PhP23. Work cycle is so much like copra production except that a producer has to replant every year. Growers usually have big *pantans* (platforms made of bamboo slats adjoined to their houses used for drying sea products) to dry agar-agar. The Sama Dilaut fishers and gatherers have always associated agar-agar with their subsistence economy, so that they normally sell their gathered seaweeds wet. Being better fishers and divers than (seaweed) farmers, they commerce in fish, manta ray, or sea cucumber for which their smaller *pantans* have better use.

The Samas Dilaut seaweed scavengers are in the lowest bottom of this production structure. Having no seaweed farm of their own they have to rely on strong winds to be able to engage in seaweed gathering. They are like the "rural scavengers" who engage in the gathering of washed away seaweeds after harvest (*agpuwah*). Traditionally the Samas Dilaut would gather seaweeds as they would seashells for their consumption needs. The present occupation of collecting float-away *agal-agal* is an adaptation to the agar-agar "plantation economy" introduced by the migrant Tausugs.

To secure their trade, the more clever capitalists would recruit farming relatives from hometowns in Sulu, to engage in agar-agar production in the seas. This ensures them steady supply of farm labor. In exchange for start-up capital (for engine, boat, initial capital for farm input and house materials), the farmer has to sell the crop to the *bos*, thus the *bos* is guaranteed constant supply of agar-agar the whole year round or until all the producer's debts are paid up. Supplemented by other trading activities in the islands (backdoor smuggling, fish trading, etc.) not a few Chinese and Tausug merchants turn millionaires overnight.

At the losing end of this big agar-agar boom are the Samas Dilaut who, after losing fishing grounds, not to mention dwelling places, have to make do with chasing after float-away agar-agar from around the plantation area. What are now the Tausug *punduhans* were once the Sama Dilaut's mooring places. Constantly harassed by the usually gun-wielding Tausug sea-rovers, they find themselves edged out of their traditional territory, and escape somewhere "where there would be no *A'a-suk*, (Tausug)"—unfortunately a growing impossibility as the Tausugs have virtually taken over the territory. Sama Dilaut families who choose to remain in the *punduhan* have to live by the regular extortions of Tausugs who like confiscating their fish catch.

Most of the municipal waters have been privatized by Tausug seaweed farmers, turning the destitute Sama Dilaut into virtual sea scavengers. While there are a few Sama families who have managed to catch up with the current agar-agar boom (while at the same time being increasingly threatened by Tausug and Chinese business interests), those with neither boat nor implement to engage in deep-sea fishing have to make a living from gathering reject seaweed and mangled fish (leftover from dynamite fishing).

Because of their physical location (girdled in between the houses of the superior Tausug and Sama Sitangkai tribes), the Samas Dilaut have to behave in a certain way, i.e., be watchful so as not to offend their neighbors in any way. While many of them have been converted into Islam, in reality, they would not readily claim religious or ethnic affinity with the Samas Sitangkai and the Tausugs. The Tausug and Sama Sitangkai groups, on the other hand, do not or would not readily recognize nor accept them as Muslims like them either. Thus, compared with the northern Samas Dilaut, the southern group is more "fettered." Being on the outer fringe towards the seas and away from the direct gaze of their oppressors, (no footbridge connects the houses of the northern Samas Dilaut with those of the Tausug and Sama Dilaut community), they enjoy physical separation and greater freedom of movement. They also need not aspire to social acceptance among the sedentarized groups via Islam, education, and the like.

The City Beggars: Survival Strategies

Many northern Samas Dilaut, losing all hope to find sustenance in the Sulu islands, have resettled in the slum areas along the bays of cities like Zamboanga, Cebu, Davao, General Santos, Cagayan, and very recently, Iligan. A great number of them, however, have become "city nomads": going from place to place collecting loose change.

Many of the older Sama Dilaut men are partially disabled, with fingers or arm missing, and deaf or exhibiting signs of mental retardation. The fingers and arm were lost to *timbang-daying* (literally, kill fish) or cyanide fishing, a common practice in the Sulu archipelago. Deafness and mental deficiency, on the other hand, are attributed to *komplesol* (the use of compressor in deep-sea diving). *Komplesol* also accounts for the high mortality rate among the men, followed by *lampasan* or piracy, and diseases. Women in their 50s and up are mostly widows or went through widowhood (rate of remarriage, along with divorce, is high among the Samas Dilaut).

Stories of violent encounters and escape at sea are plenty, with boys as young as ten having first-hand account of how their father or relatives were killed by the *munduh*, how their boat and fishcatch taken from them. The assailant would be identified as an A'a-suk (Tausug), a term used to refer to anyone in the Sulu shores who is hostile to the Sama Dilaut.

In the cities far away from the A'asuk, this role ascription (oppressor) seems to have been given over to the Bisaya or the Christian settlers with whom they have to coexist and extract loose change from. While most Sama Dilaut itinerants consider the Bisayas kinder and more generous as compared with the Tausugs, the Bisayas are also perceived as *amonoh* ("will kill or likely to cause them harm"). On the other hand, the Bisaya settlers perceive the "dirty Bajau" as doing nothing but begging around.

Indeed, among the Samas Dilaut now in the urban centers, almost everybody has at one time or another begged for a living. While some of them might have been permanently displaced from their homeplaces in the islands, there are those who only seasonally foray to the cities and get back home after earning enough to last them for a few months in their villages. The venture, ironically, is so much like the sea-drifting days of old when they had to move to another reef in search for richer ground, except that this time it is loose change they fish for.

As beggars, the Samas Dilaut can be ingenious. For those with physical defects they put their disabilities to use. The otherwise able fake a handicap. Infants are a useful prop which girls sling around their waists as they stalk the streets. Young boys use the *tambol*, an improvised drum played in a kind of a lightning performance aimed at cars and jeepneys stopping at gasoline stations for refill or under the red traffic light. Sometimes they would go from house to house to perform the *tambol*, accompanied by girls who would dance to the boys' singing. They call this part *taygon*, from a Bisaya word meaning Christmas carol.

Not a few agencies have come to the succor of the Samas Dilaut. Most of these projects involve provisioning of shelter and fishing boats and scholarships for the young. In Basilan the Office of Southern Cultural Communities (OSCC), a government agency tasked to look after the indigenous peoples of the South, is into livelihood, literacy and health assistance. OSCC however is much maligned for its inability to respond to the real needs of its target population. Much of the funds go to construction of learning centers, foot bridges, and cuthall fences. Moreover, most of its beneficiaries are not really Sama Dilaut but Tausugs and Samas Ba'ngingi who are closer to agency people.

In cases where the Samas Dilaut have to maintain beneficent relationship with help groups and are forbidden to beg, they would go to another city to keep on with their trade. In Iligan, for instance, Sama Dilaut beggars would ply the route to Marawi City, Valencia in Bukidnon or Pagadian and Cotabato to be able to engage in the occupation. Help from whatever quarters is always inadequate. The Samas Dilaut refer to their begging trade as *anarget*, a term they once used to describe a crude fishing method (spear fishing) they employed in the islands.

There are however Sama Dilaut groups who have now found other means of sustenance. In Cebu the men work as tricycle drivers and porters in the harbor. The women vend *panggi* (cassava) and other food items. Those with motorboats engage in fishing and, occasionally, *anged-jo* (coindiving). In Davao City many Sama Dilaut migrants have managed to adapt themselves into the slum economy of Matina Aplaya and Isla Verde, working as fishermen, pearl-divers, and vendors. Their children also attend school and religious service offered by their benefactors. In some cases, converting into the Christian faith is a precondition for receiving any benefit (usually shelter and fishing boat). While attending Church service might only be a strategy for economic survival rather than a matter of conviction, there is a growing number of sedentarized Sama Dilaut who now deny their identity and are quick to look down on those who are still practicing the *ag-mboh*, their traditional system of worship.

Entry into Christian- and Bisaya-dominated culture usually implies leaving behind Sama Dilaut culture and tradition. In many migrant communities there are changes happening to the tribe. The *panglima*, once the spiritual leader, healer and arbiter of conflict, is now dislodged, replaced by the clever young man who is not only adept at the Visayan language, but also in negotiating the tricky straits laid out by Church and development agencies, businessmen and politicians. Social organization is also beginning to approximate the Tausug and Sama communities in the islands, wherein a leader called *nakura* negotiates on behalf of the members of the tribe who in turn play *tendog* or followers. For the women who once enjoyed high position and independence in the unstratified primitive-communal Sama Dilaut society, resettling in *labat-Bisaya* (Christian land) means falling behind their men and adapting to subordinate roles.

But not all is lost to sedentary life. Even as Churches, government agencies and NGOs do their all to tie the Samas Dilaut to the land and their development projects, the Sama Dilaut have remained mobile. Kin ties that once existed between islands have now been transferred between cities, and any written contract may be disregarded in favor of another

opportunity elsewhere. Sama Dilaut population even in their urban dwellings is in constant flux, with families regularly moving around to visit relatives in another place or look for new spaces. The house, which used to be a makeshift hovel, to be abandoned overnight in case of trouble, may be made of sturdier materials now, but it has not been thoroughly privatized, and as such may accommodate any tenant any time. Even *anarget* could not be abandoned altogether, as anytime of the year, when business slows down or livelihood projects fail, there is always another city, another street to explore.

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