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Reflections on Bajau History*

H. ARLO NIMMO

I

LONG, long ago, somewhere in Southeast Asia, a people abandoned the land to live on the sea in boats. It was not, of course, a conscious decision to give up the land; rather it was the result of a long and intimate association with the sea, possibly in the early days of human history in that part of the world. One writer (Sopher 1965) has suggested that these people were once land-dwelling hunters and gatherers whose lives had been oriented to pursuing the flora and fauna of the sea. Somehow, they acquired the boat-dwelling habit, and eventually became dispersed throughout Malaysia as they are found today. The theory is plausible, but with the current state of knowledge, how or why these people became boat-dwellers must remain speculative. We only know that when the first Europeans began to penetrate insular Southeast Asia, they encountered enclaves of timid boat-dwellers in the more remote reefs and islands.

The Portuguese made the first European report of sea nomads in the Malacca area in 1511. Magellan's crew saw

*This paper is based on 24 months of field research among the Tawi-Tawi and Sibutu Bajau. The first field trip, June 1963 to January 1964 was supported by a grant from the East West Center, Honolulu. The second trip, October 1965 to April 1967 was sponsored by grants from the National Science Foundation, Washington, D. C.; the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, New York; and the Carnegie Foundation, New York. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of these foundations.

them near present-day Zamboanga in 1521; the narrator of that voyage writes simply and only that "The people of that island make their dwellings in boats and do not live otherwise" (Pigafetta 1906:53). As early as 1675, Dutch colonial officials wrote of boat-dwellers in Celebes, and Thomas Forrest, a British explorer, also encountered these peoples in Celebes, as well as in eastern Borneo, in the 1770's. Later, in 1839, the British mention the elusive Mergui Island boat-dwellers for the first time. Today boat-dwellers are still found in some of these places, but they are rapidly abandoning their boats and returning once again to the land; perhaps within another decade or so, their nomadic watery way of life will belong entirely to an era of the past.

This paper records some of my own thoughts on one group of these nomadic boat peoples, the so-called Bajau of the Sulu Archipelago in the southern Philippines. My purpose in writing this paper is threefold: 1) to clarify the identification of the boat-dwelling people of Sulu; 2) to offer some of my own reflections on the history of these peoples; and 3) to discuss their present distribution in Sulu.

II

Much confusion exists concerning the identification of the Bajau people of Sulu.¹ Although most northern Filipinos still refer to all the native peoples of Sulu as "Moros," a designation early bestowed upon Sulu's Muslims by the Spaniards, for some time now it has been recognized that several ethnic groups reside in Sulu (Saleeby, Landor, Taylor, Arce, Stone). Excluding the large island of Basilan, Sulu's native population has commonly been divided into three ethnic groups, namely the Taosug, the Samal, and the Bajau. In earlier publications (Nimmo 1965, 1966), I followed the traditional divi-

¹ The various spellings of "Bajau" found in the literature include Badjao, Bajao, Badjaw, and Badjau. In earlier publications (Nimmo 1965, 1966), I followed the spelling (i. e. "Badjaw") used by the Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila. I have adopted the present spelling because it is phonemically more correct, and it is in keeping with the standardized spelling used in Sabah to identify these same people.

sion of Samal and Bajau, but after more extensive research in Sulu, it has become apparent to me that the divisions are artificial and misleading. It is much more realistic to regard the so-called Bajau as members of the more comprehensive Samal group.

Concentrated on Jolo and Siasi Island, the Taosug are clearly a distinct people; their language, as well as other aspects of their culture, distinguish them from the other peoples of Sulu. Historically, they have been the politically dominant group in the archipelago, and they usually consider their Islam more orthodox than that of most Samal-speakers. Famous for their fierce pride and quick tempers, they were among the most formidable pirates of Malaysia in earlier centuries and were never completely subdued by the Spanish and American colonial forces. The 1960 Census of the Philippines lists their numbers at 238,386, and they continue to hold most of the major political positions in the archipelago.

Scattered throughout the archipelago, but more concentrated in the south, the Samal are fishermen and small farmers with occasional copra plantations in the island interiors. According to the 1960 Census, the Samal (including the "Bajau" which the Census grouped as a separate people and language) population in Sulu is 81,000. These people are more heterogeneous as a group than are the Taosug; members range all the way from Bajau "sea gypsies" who still spend nomadic lives in tiny houseboats to sophisticated Muslim hadjis who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Sulu's Samal-speaking population is extremely diverse and complex; almost every island — indeed, sometimes each village within an island — views itself as unique from other Samal groups. Earlier writers gleaned some notion of this complexity by singling out the so-called Bajau as a separate people.² However, I repeat, it is

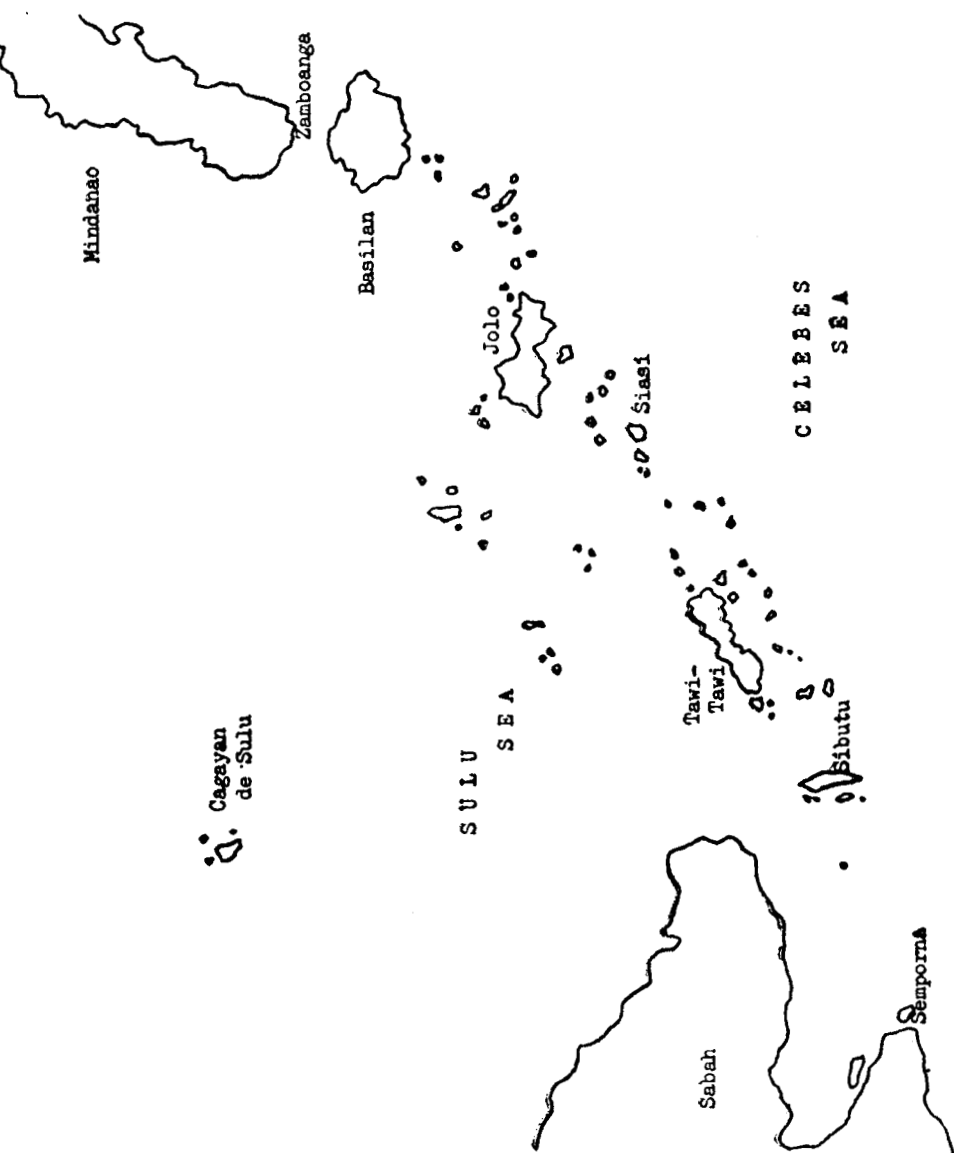
² Stone (1962) dealt with this complexity by dividing the group into first and second class Samal; although a step in the right direction, the Samal population of Sulu is much more complex than this. In an early version of a published paper, Arong (1962) suggested that the Bajau be called "Sama Palau" to identify them as members of the general Samal population as well as to distinguish their uniqueness. His suggestion was a valid one, but unfortunately that portion of the paper never reached press.

misleading to regard the Bajau as a people distinct from the remaining Samal population; these people speak dialects of the Samal language, view themselves as Samal, and are identified as a group of Samal by the other people of Sulu. Perhaps their chief distinction from Sulu's other Samal is that some of them have not yet fully embraced the Islamic faith.³ Nonetheless, some Muslim Samal would view other Muslim Samal as different from themselves as are the so-called Bajau.

Although the boat-dwelling people of Sulu are identified by a variety of local names, throughout Sulu they are most commonly called *Sama* or *Samal*; the former is the name by which they usually identify themselves. The Taosug sometimes refer to them as *Luwaan*, a Taosug word apparently derived from the word-base *luwa* which means "to spit out," as something is spit out which is disagreeable to the taste. "Outcast" would probably be the best English translation of the word, but a more vivid interpretation was offered by a Taosug informant who said that the Taosug call the Bajau "*Luwaan*" because everytime they see a Bajau, they feel like vomiting. His explanation well reflects the social outcast position of most Bajau groups in Sulu. Contrary to Szanton (1963:468), my observation is that this is not a name commonly heard among the Bajau themselves; rather it is the name most offensive to the sea folk, at least those of the Tawi-Tawi and Sibutu areas. Another local name for the Bajau is *Palau*, the name for the house-like structure on some Bajau houseboats. Some Bajau find the name offensive, others think it simply ridiculous, and still others are indifferent to it. "Bajau" is not widely used in Sulu, but is commonly used in eastern Borneo to identify the boat-dwelling Samal, as well as all other Samal-speakers, in that area (Sather, Sopher).

I have chosen to call Sulu's Samal-speaking boat-dwellers "Bajau" for three reasons: 1) it is already established in the

³ Earlier writers (e.g. Arce 1962, Szanton 1962) have too uncritically labelled the Bajau as "pagans." The appellation is misleading in that it fails to recognize the great influence of Islam on Bajau society, and overlooks the fact that most Bajau villages (excluding the Tawi-Tawi and Semporna Bajau) have mosques.



literature as the name for the boat-dwelling people of Sulu; 2) it does not have the offensive connotations to the Bajau which both "Luwaan" and "Palau" do have; and 3) the name distinguishes this group of Samal from the remaining Samal populations of Sulu. "Bajau," then, shall be used to identify the boat-dwelling population of Sulu, or those who occasionally still use the boat as living quarters, or those who have only recently abandoned the boat-dwelling habit. Although the nomenclature is still not completely satisfactory, it will serve in the present context. These Bajau people have been reported as far north as Surigao, Davao, and Zamboanga on Mindanao Island, in almost all the major island groups of Sulu, near Semporna, Sabah, and on numerous Celebes coasts. Although the land-dwelling Samal generally identify themselves as "the people of such-and-such island," I shall refer to them as land-dwelling Samal.

At least two major groups of Bajau are found in Sulu. The Bajau of Tawi-Tawi, Sibutu and Semporna form a single group; these Bajau are connected by many and important kinship ties, and intermarriage among the three areas is still fairly common. Few and insignificant kin ties extend from these people to the northern Bajau. The southern Bajau view the Siasi, Jolo, Basilan and Zamboanga Bajau as a different, albeit a closely related, group of Samal. The northern Bajau possibly subdivide their members further, but I can speak confidently only of the Tawi-Tawi and Sibutu people.

Several cultural anomalies distinguish the southern Bajau from their northern kinsmen. Within the memory of living persons, the three southern groups shared a single boat-type, the *djenging*; in fact, some of the Siasi Bajau still refer to the Tawi-Tawi Bajau as "Samal *djenging*." Today the *djenging* has been replaced by the outriggerless *lipa* (a boat-type from Borneo) among the Semporna, Sibutu, and some of the Tawi-Tawi people. Only in Tawi-Tawi is the *djenging* occasionally still found. The fishing techniques of these people also distinguish them from other Samal-speakers in Sulu; their hand-woven fishing nets are not found elsewhere in Sulu. The art forms (flags, grave markers, and boat-carvings) of the Tawi-

Tawi and Sibutu Bajau also reveal close cultural relationships.⁴ I am unfamiliar with the art of the Semporna people but am willing to venture that it is of the same tradition as the Sibutu and Tawi-Tawi forms.

Compared to the northern Bajau, the southern people are less nomadic as a group. They are predominantly reef-dwellers and their movements are usually limited to nearby reefs, whereas some of the Bajau of Siasi, Jolo, Basilan, and Zamboanga seasonally journey to the waters of Palawan, Cagayan de Sulu, Borneo, Celebes or even distant Manila in pursuit of rich fishing grounds. Also, the southern Bajau usually travel and fish in nuclear family groups whereas the northern Bajau more often fish in male groups while the wives and small children remain at home. However, all Bajau movements follow definite, predictable patterns, and these sea people are not the fleeting wanderers depicted by some earlier writers (e.g. Szanton 1963:41). An elaborate cult of shamanism, most highly developed at Sitangkai, also distinguishes the southern Bajau from their northern kinsmen.

At some time in the indeterminable past, the boat-dwelling people of Tawi-Tawi, Sibutu, and Semporna probably lived as a single group of people possibly among the islands and reefs of the Sibutu Islands. These people still view themselves as a single *bangsa*, or ethnic group. The Tawi-Tawi people are the most conservative of the three groups; about two-thirds of them still use boats as permanent living quarters, and some of their villages consist of flotillas with no houses. In Tawi-Tawi, some 1500 of these people are concentrated in six different villages, namely Luuk Tulai, Bandulan, Tungkalang, Lamium, Tungbangkao, and

⁴ Szanton (p. 40) reports "definitely distinguishable" differences between the Sitangkai and Tawi-Tawi grave art. He was, however, able to visit only one cemetery in Tawi-Tawi and the cemetery of the acculturated Bajau of Sitangkai. Had he been able to visit the other cemeteries in both Tawi-Tawi and Sibutu, I think he would have seen fewer differences between the two groups. Sitangkai art is becoming much simplified, but the older forms as well as the early photographs of the art in Taylor's article (1931) reveal affinities to the Tawi-Tawi Bajau art.

Lioboran (see Map 2). In Sibutu, the Bajau villages at Sitangkai, Tungnehat, Tandowak, and Omapoi add approximately 3500 to the Bajau population. The Sibutu Bajau, as the Semporna Bajau, are predominantly house-dwellers who use the boat as living quarters only during fishing trips. The two Semporna villages, Bangau-Bangau and Labuan-hadji, have a combined population of probably no more than 1000. Thus a conservative estimate of the entire *bangsa* is 6000. Intermarriage among the villages within each of the three areas is, of course, common, with intermarriage among the three population centers less so. Nonetheless, such intermarriage is still frequent between Semporna and Sibutu people, and between Sibutu and Tawi-Tawi people. I know of no recent marriages between Tawi-Tawi and Semporna, although these two groups have genealogical connections through Sibutu.

III

Legends are admittedly dubious data for the serious historian, but they cannot be ignored in discussing a people's history; where people think they came from is important.

The Bajau of Tawi-Tawi and Sibutu tell of a time long ago when their ancestors lived at Johore, a place to the west near Mecca, in villages of boats much as some of them still live today in Tawi-Tawi. One day a strong wind began to blow, and so the leader of the village stuck a pole into what he thought was the sea floor and tied his boat to it. The other villagers, also fearing the wind, tied their boats to that of the leader. It turned out, however, that instead of going into the sea floor, the pole had dug into the nose of a giant sting ray which lay sleeping under the flotilla. That night when the villagers were sleeping, the ray awakened and swam to the sea, pulling the boats with it. When the people awakened the next morning, they were far in the open sea and did not know the way back to Johore. For one week they drifted helplessly on the sea, until finally the leader pleaded to God for help. Within minutes, God sent down a spirit which entered the man's body and instructed him to sail for two days toward the east. This the flotilla did, and on the second day, land was spotted.

Upon reaching shore, the Bajau stuck a large pole (called *samboang* in Samal) into the sea floor and all the boats were tied to it. This was the first mooring place in the Philippines for the Bajau and was thus called "Samboangan." Today it is still called this by the Bajau while the rest of the world knows it as Zamboanga. Shortly after their arrival in Zamboanga, the boat-dwellers became subjects of the powerful Sultan of Sulu. During the course of his many marriages throughout Sulu, the Sultan gave groups of Bajau as portions of his bride prices; consequently, the Bajau became scattered throughout the Sulu Archipelago, as they are presently found.

This story was collected in Sitangkai, but many versions of it are also found among the Tawi-Tawi Bajau. One version relates that all the Samal-speaking people were pulled from Johore to Sulu by the giant sting ray; some of them continued to live in boats while others built houses on land and became farmers — thus the present diversity in Sulu's Samal population. Other versions maintain that the Bajau were pulled by the ray from Zamboanga with no mention of Johore or as to how they may have arrived at Zamboanga. Some versions state that only a single family boat was pulled to Sulu, and its descendants became Sulu's Samal population. One of the present Bajau headmen at Sitangkai is able to trace his genealogy back seven generations to the time when his people lived at Johore. Allowing a generous 30 years for the reign of each headman, this would mean that the Bajau left Johore some 240 years ago; however, this date is much too recent, since Magellan's crew saw boat-dwellers in Zamboanga in 1521.⁵

Diverse though the individual accounts are, most of the stories share the common theme that the Bajau came from outside Sulu, with Johore and Zamboanga having been the most frequent homelands. The fact that the tradition of a homeland beyond Sulu still persists has suggested to some (e.g. Saleeby, Sopher) that the Bajau have not been in Sulu for a very long time — at least not long enough for the memory

⁵ Additional versions of the Johore story are found in *The Sea Nomads* (Sopher 1965).

of a homeland to be forgotten from their legends. But an equally valid counter-argument is that myths and legends are always entering a people's traditions, and the Johore story may be a recent addition to Bajau lore; good stories still spread rapidly in Sulu, and quite possibly the Johore legend is simply a good story which appealed to the Bajau imagination.

The Taosug tell another version of the origin of the Bajau people. According to this story, long ago all the people in Sulu lived as a single group. One day a great tidal wave was seen approaching the islands; to save themselves from the wave, half of the people built boats while the other half ran to the mountains. The people who had built boats were washed to sea and became the boat-dwelling people of Sulu, whereas those who had run to the mountains became farmers and are the present Taosug population. It is significant that this story does not mention the other Samal groups of Sulu, a typical Taosug attitude that all non-Taosug natives of Sulu are simply "Samal." Unless pressed to do so, the Taosug rarely make subtle Samal-subdivisions which the Samal-speakers do.

Another Taosug story tells of an ancient time when the Bajau were very devout Muslims. One Friday when they were praying in their mosque, built on piles over the sea, they saw a school of fish pass below. Forgetting their prayers, they jumped into the sea after the fish. God became angry with them and would not let them return to the mosque; ever since they have been wandering the seas as pagans.

An early mention of the Johore story occurs in the undated "Genealogy of Sulu," a traditional history of the Taosug people of Jolo Island. The following two quotations constitute the only mention of the Bajau in the Genealogy; the third quotation is by Najeib Saleeby, from whose book, *The History of Sulu*, all the quotations are taken.

After these [i.e. the Taosug people] came the Bajau (Samals) from Juhur. These were driven here by the tempest (monsoon) and were divided between both parties. Some of the Bajau were driven by the tempest to Brunei and some to Mindanao (p. 33).

The first inhabitants of the Island of Sulu were the people of Maym-bung. These were followed by the Tagimaha and the Baklaya. Later came the Bajaw (Samals) from Juhur. Some Bajaws were taken by the Sulus and were distributed among the three divisions of the island, while others drifted to Brunei and Magindanao (p. 40).

The noted emigration of the Bajaws or Samals of Juhur must have begun in the earlier parts of the fourteenth century, if not earlier. These sea nomads came in such large numbers and in such quick succession as to people the whole Tawi-Tawi group, the Pangutaran and Siasi Groups, all available space on the coast of Sulu proper, the Balangingi Group, and the coasts of Basilan and Zamboanga, before the close of the century and before the arrival of the first Mohammedan pioneers (1963:40).

The Genealogy and Saleeby both assume that all the Samal-speakers came to Sulu as boat-dwellers; more recent writers, (Sopher, Arce) have also accepted this position.

The only comprehensive study of Southeast Asia's nomadic boat-dwellers is that of David Sopher (1965). Sopher has collected all the scattered published references to the sea nomads and pieced them together into a culture-historical account of the nomadic boat peoples of Southeast Asia. Sopher identifies four major areas where sea nomads are found in Southeast Asia: 1) the west coast of Malaya and the Mergui Archipelago; 2) the South China Sea, including the Riouw-Lingga Archipelago, the Tujuh Islands, Bangka and Billiton Islands and adjacent coasts; 3) North Borneo and the Sulu Archipelago; and 4) Eastern Indonesia, especially Celebes. After discussing the nomads as they occur in each of these four areas, he proposes that they represent a single culture from a common point of origin.

He supports his proposal by listing the following characteristics which he claims are shared by all the sea nomads of Southeast Asia: 1) the boat-dwelling habit; 2) sparse population; 3) Palaeomongoloid and Veddid physical features; 4) a substratum of language different from surrounding populations; 5) great skill in handling and building boats; 6) simple fishing methods; 7) strand-collecting for commercial and subsistence purposes; 8) a past history of piracy; 9) general poverty of material culture; 10) little or no agriculture;

11) domestic customs related to the forest primitives of Malaya; 12) social organization of small groups within set geographic limits under an elected leader; and 13) "Indonesian" animistic and shamanistic religion with Islamic influences.

Sopher believes that the sea nomads were at one time Veddid hunters and gatherers on the coasts of the Riouw-Lingga Archipelago who later mixed with proto-Malays who moved from the north into Malaysia. As other cultures of Malaysia evolved, the hunters and gatherers persisted but became more oriented to a life at sea. Various pressures then dispersed them throughout Southeast Asia, including overpopulation, unfriendly local population, unmanageable winds and currents, fear of piracy, and wanderlust.

As Sopher was well aware, he was working with a very fragmented literature, and he would probably expect that field research among the sea nomads would expand and alter some of his findings. My comments on Sopher's study will be first limited to his discussion of the Sulu Bajau since this is the only group of sea nomads for which I have additional data. Following this, I shall offer some of my own thoughts concerning origins and migrations of the Sulu sea folk.

Sopher identifies four groups of closely related peoples in the Sulu area: 1) the nomadic Bajau, concentrated in the Sibutu Islands and the Semporna region of Sabah; 2) the Lutangos, a little known sea people who supposedly once lived near Olutanga Island in the Moro Gulf; 3) the sedentary Bajau (or Orang Sama) on the northwest coast of Borneo; and 4) the Samals (or Samales-Laut), a sea-faring folk found throughout the Sulu Archipelago but more concentrated in the northern islands. Excepting the Lutangos, Sopher's categories — with elaboration — well describe the Samal-speaking population of Sulu. The Lutangos appear to be a group of boat-dwellers who lived near Olutanga Island during the latter half of the 19th century. Sopher's sources suggested to him that these sea nomads eventually intermarried with the forest people of Olutanga. The name of the people, as well as mention of them, is not found in the later literature. Most likely,

they were boat-dwellers who lived for a time in the Olutanga area, but later moved on; it is unlikely that they became amalgamated into a non-Samal land-dwelling population—at least, such has not been the history of other boat-dwelling groups in Sulu. Sopher's so-called "Nomadic Bajau" are the people I have described as the Bajau of Tawi-Tawi, Sibutu, and Semporna, whereas some of his "Samals" or "Samales-Laut" are the people I have called the "Bajau" of Siasi, Jolo, Basilan, and Zamboanga. These two groups are much more closely related than Sopher was able to determine from the literature. Sopher's "sedentary Bajaus" or "Orang Sama" are found not only on the eastern coasts of Borneo, but also throughout the Sulu Islands. As mentioned earlier, they are usually called simply "Samal" by Taosug-speakers, although they identify themselves as the people of their particular island homes. In Borneo, as all Samal-speakers, they are more commonly called "Bajau." Their Islam is generally more orthodox than the previously mentioned Samal-speaking peoples.

Linguistic data was not available to Sopher to enable him to establish the position of the Bajau language in relation to the other dialects of Sulu (p. 181). A thorough linguistic analysis of the Samal language has yet to be made but it is clear that the boat-dwelling people of Sulu speak dialects of the same language spoken by the land-dwelling Samal.⁶ I learned Samal from the Tawi-Tawi and Sibutu Bajau and was able to speak with land-dwelling Samal-speakers from Zamboanga, Jolo, Siasi, Tawi-Tawi, Sibutu, Sabah, northern Celebes, and eastern Kalimantan. Dialectal differences occur in the form of intonation and vocabulary but all the dialects I encountered were mutually intelligible. The Samal appears to be more closely related to some of the languages of Borneo and Indonesia than to those of the Philippines, whereas Taosug is apparently more closely related to the northern Philippine languages than to Samal. I hasten to add, however, that my

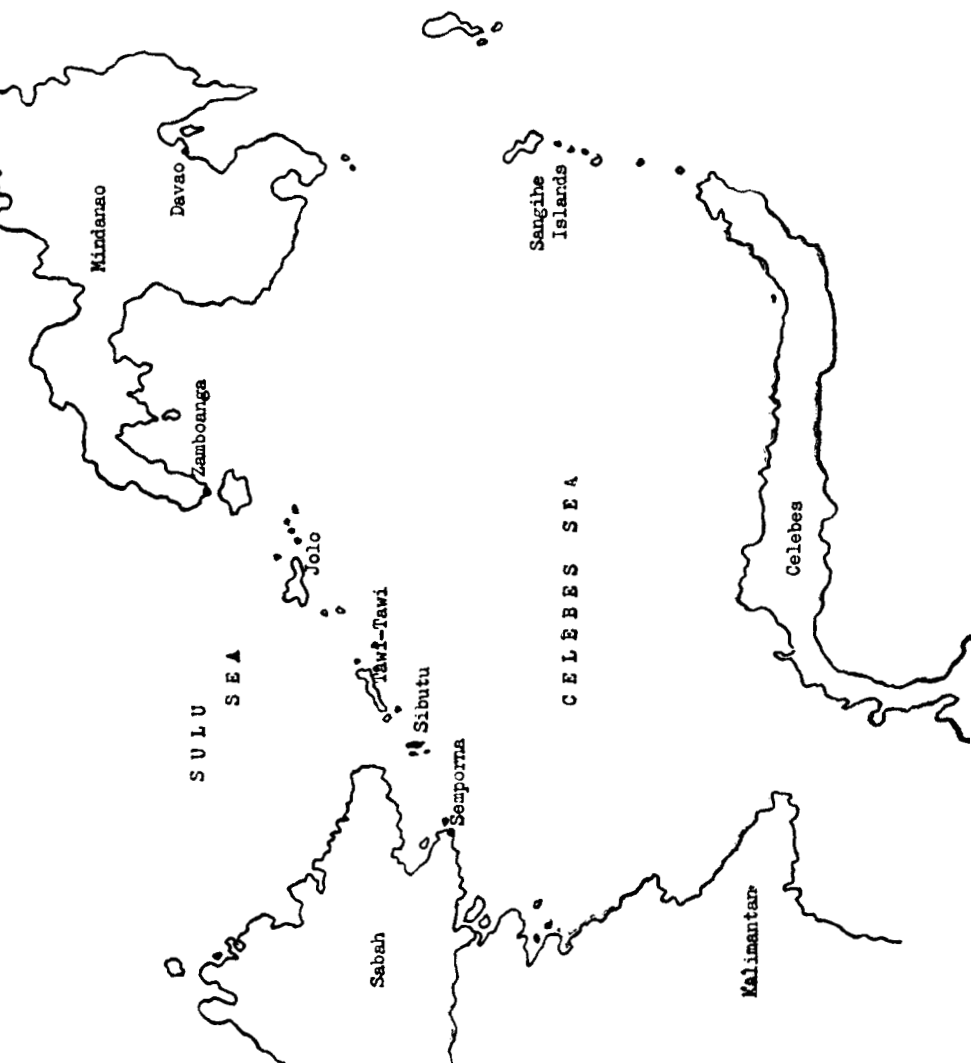
⁶ Mr. Kemp Palasan of the Summer Institute of Linguistics is currently engaged in an intensive study of the Samal dialect spoken at Siganggang, Siasi.

observations are purely impressionistic, and only future linguistic research will establish the position of the two languages in relation to each other and the other languages of Malaysia.

In his discussion of boat-types among the four groups of sea nomads, Sopher states that the outriggerless boat is common to all the sea nomads of Southeast Asia (pp. 205, 208, 210), and he consequently feels that it is an original feature of the "sea nomad culture." However, among the Sulu Bajau, the outriggerless boat, the *lipa*, is recent, having first come into the archipelago from the east coast of Borneo, probably in the early 1900's. Within a few years, it will probably completely replace the *djenging*, the outrigger boathouse that was once common to all the Bajau of Tawi-Tawi, Sibutu and Semporna. The Bajau of Siasi, Jolo, and Zamboanga still use an outrigger boathouse, and the *lipa* is not found north of Tawi-Tawi.

The simple fishing techniques which Sopher found among the other sea nomad groups (pp. 218, 226, 228, 229, 230, 233, 234) are not characteristic of the southern Sulu Bajau. Although some of their fishing methods are no doubt recent, the Bajau practice at least ten different types of fishing, and their methods are no less "simple" than those of other native fishermen of Sulu. As mentioned earlier, these southern Bajau are identified in Sulu as net-fishermen, and although this is their most common fishing method, it is certainly not their only one.

In his discussion of Bajau migrations, Sopher suggests that the occurrence of *tripang* has been important in determining the dispersal of the sea folk since wherever they are found, *tripang*-collecting is one of their most important economic activities (pp. 244-248). *Tripang* is found in great abundance on the Sibutu and Bilatan reefs of Sulu, but its collection is not of great economic importance to the Bajau of those areas. Nor is there evidence to indicate that *tripang* collection may have been more important in the past than it is now. Had the Bajau been first attracted to Sulu by *tripang*, it is unlikely that the product would have fallen to



its present economic insignificance, especially since the Chinese demand for the product has not decreased within recent years.

Sopher discovered evidence of uxori-local residence among only a few of the western Malaysian boat-dwellers (p. 273). Because the literature does not mention its occurrence among other sea nomads, Sopher postulated that the rare cases may be the result of acculturation to surrounding peoples. Had more complete data on the Sulu boat-dwellers been available to Sopher, he would have found additional support for his common "sea nomad culture." The Sulu Bajau profess an ideal of uxori-local residence which may, or may not, be practiced in reality. The high incidence of uxori-locality and the accompanying large uxori-local households found among the Sitangkai Bajau are rare among Philippine peoples and probably have historical roots in the Indonesian area where they are more common. Should the practice be found among other sea nomads, it would further support the relationships which Sopher proposes.

In his discussion of the religion of the sea nomads (pp. 277-288), Sopher makes generalizations which are not true of the religious beliefs of the Sulu Bajau. He found that "there is absent the personal relationship which continues after death, in Indonesian thinking, between the soul of the deceased and the surviving relatives" (p. 279). Such could not be further from the truth in regard to Bajau religion since the majority of pre-Islamic Bajau religious practices are directed to deceased ancestors. In fact, if native Bajau religion were to be given a convenient label, it would probably be called "ancestor worship."

Sopher believes that the present Bajau—indeed all Samal-speakers—are descendants of migrant boat-dwellers from the Riouw-Lingga Archipelago who arrived in Sulu during the early part of the 14th century. His belief is based on the cultural, linguistic and physical similarities shared by the Riouw-Lingga and the Sulu people as well as upon the above-mentioned Johore legend found among the Sulu Bajau. Sopher postulates that disrupting, rapid changes in the Johore region

forced or frightened these boat-dwellers to seek new homes to the east. He proposes two main dispersal routes: one along the northern and eastern Borneo coasts into the Sulu Islands, and a second along the southern Borneo coasts. Some of these southern migrants went to Celebes where boat-dwellers are still reported and a few of them may have eventually found their way to southern Mindanao and Zamboanga, and then to northern Sulu. Movements among the different Samal-speaking peoples of Mindanao, Sulu, Borneo, and Celebes can still be observed today, and there is, therefore, little doubt about the relationship of these peoples. Much more doubtful, however, is the relationship between the Samal-speakers and the boat-dwellers of the Malay Peninsula.

Today's Samal-speakers are dispersed in a ring around the Celebes Sea with their greatest concentration on the eastern Borneo coasts and the southern Sulu Islands of Sibu and Tawi-Tawi. Their numbers in the Celebes are still imperfectly known although they are reported on the northern coasts, the Gulf of Bone, and in the Sangihe Islands (Benden 1966). To my knowledge, Samal-speakers are not found on the southern and northern Borneo coasts, nor in Java and Sumatra. Had these people migrated as boat-dwellers from Johore along the routes proposed by Sopher, they would seemingly have left pockets of their members along the way; however, there is no mention of Samal-speakers between the Malay Peninsula area and the Celebes Sea area.

If boat-dwellers from Johore ever did reach Sulu, they probably came in small family groups in search of new fishing grounds. Present-day Bajau movements consist of such small family fleets seeking new, usually near-by, fishing grounds, and such has probably always been the nature of their movements. If Sopher is correct, when these people arrived in the Sulu waters, they would have found the southern islands, much of the eastern Borneo coasts, and some of the Celebes coasts largely uninhabited since today many of these coasts are inhabited almost exclusively by Samal-speakers, and it is difficult to imagine that the characteristically timid boat-dwellers would have driven other peoples from these coasts.

Although only archaeology and perhaps historical linguistics can provide a final answer, it appears that the Samal have been in their present homes for a good number of years. Much of the culture of the Sulu Samal, as well as language cognates, is shared with the Taosug people. Some of this similarity is obviously due to the unifying influence of Islam, but much of it reflects a tradition which is uniquely Sulu and pre-Islamic. Had the Samal arrived in Sulu from Johore only 600 years ago, they would seemingly have remained more distinct from the Taosug—especially in view of the little interaction which presently occurs between the two groups.

Today's large population of Samal-speakers in the Celebes Sea rim presents additional problems to Sopher's theory. The 1960 Census of the Philippines reports some 81,000 Samal-speakers for Sulu. Sabah claims approximately 60,000 Samal-speakers (*Colony of North Borneo Annual Report* 1962). Data on the number of Samal peoples in Kalimantan and Celebes are still uncertain, but their numbers are probably at least as great as those in Sabah, and possibly greater. Thus, there are about 200,000 Samal-speakers in eastern Malaysia, and this is a conservative estimate. According to Sopher, these people are descendants of what must have only been a handful of boat-dwellers who arrived from Johore some 600 years ago. Such rapid population growth is not impossible, but it is a bit improbable, especially in view of the slow population increase reported for present boat-dwellers in Sulu (Nimmo 1967:212).

Even if the above problems are dismissed, Sopher's proposed relationship between the eastern and western boat-dwellers has further weaknesses. Many of the traits which Sopher finds common to the Southeast Asian sea nomads, e.g. Palaeomongoloid and Veddid physical features, a sub-stratum of language different from surrounding populations, great skill in handling and building boats, simple fishing methods, general poverty of material culture, domestic customs related to the forest primitives of Malaya, and "Indonesian" animistic and shamanistic religion with Islamic influences, and which are part of his "sea nomad culture," are found among other

peoples of Southeast Asia and are not unique to the sea folk. They consequently offer little proof for a common culture once shared by the eastern and western sea nomads.

If the eastern and western boat-dwellers do not represent a common culture from a common origin, there is only one other explanation for their occurrence in Malaysia, i.e. the groups have independently acquired the boat-dwelling habit. Rather than call upon an exodus from Johore to explain the presence of boat-dwellers in Sulu waters, it may be more realistic to suggest that the boat-dwelling habit evolved independently among certain Samal groups. Throughout coastal Malaysia the boat is used as part-time living quarters by many peoples; it should, therefore, not be too surprising to find more than one group who have become permanent boat-dwellers. Thus, the boat-dwelling habit, rather than boat-dwellers, has spread throughout Malaysia. This position assumes that Samal culture evolved in eastern rather than western Malaysia, quite possibly in eastern Borneo.

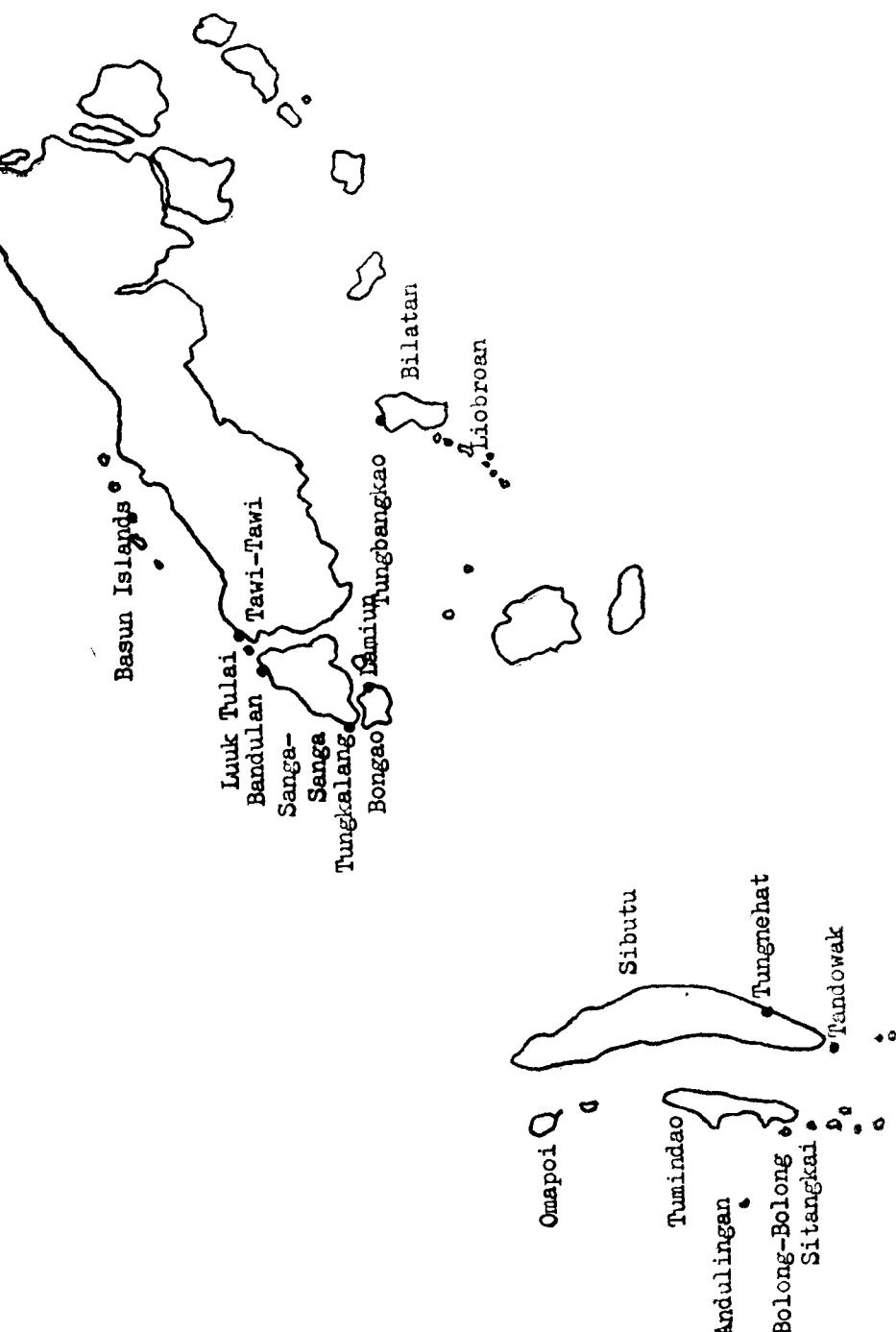
But the final word on Bajau origins has yet to be written. Somehow the ancestors of these people became boat-dwellers; whether they arrived in Sulu from Malaya as boat-dwellers or acquired the habit in Sulu has yet to be determined. Certainly the boat-dwelling habit is a practical adaptation to reef living and fishing, and perhaps it is no accident that the most confirmed boat-dwellers are found on the great reefs of southern Sulu.

IV

The large Bajau population in the Sibutu Islands hints that these reefs and islands were at one time the home of all the Bajau of this southern group. However, the population itself is in no sense conclusive. Possibly the Sibutu waters were more conducive to the Bajau way of life and thereby led to a more rapid population growth. The fishing nets which identify this group of Bajau probably evolved in a reef environment similar to that of Sibutu—at least, presently these nets are used exclusively for shallow reef-fishing.

There is, however, some indication that the Bajau may have moved into Sibutu from the north. The native boat-type of these people, the *djenging*, has double outriggers and is more closely related to the outriggered water craft of the northern Sulu Islands and the rest of the Philippines than it is to the outriggerless boats more common to the Borneo waters. Also, the narrow, deep-hulled *djenging* is not well adapted to shallow reef waters as is the broad hulled *lipa*, the boat which is quickly replacing the *djenging*. In addition, the central religious ceremony of the Sibutu people demands dry rice from the Tawi-Tawi Islands; such rice from Borneo is considered improper unless no other is available. However, as previously noted, the Samal language appears to be more closely related to the Malayan languages than to the languages of the Philippines. It is interesting that these few hints of a Bajau homeland are in keeping with the origin story discussed earlier, i. e. the original Johore homeland, the voyage to Zamboanga, and the movement down the archipelago. A Borneo homeland is not out of the question, although it appears that many of the present boat-dwelling Bajau there came from Sibutu; certainly within recent years there has been a large Bajau movement to Semporna in search of employment.

Sitangkai is by far the largest Bajau village in Sibutu, although it has become so only within fairly recent years. Before the penetration of fish buyers to Sitangkai in the early part of this century, the Bajau flotilla in that area was moored at the nearby tiny island of Bolong-Bolong, and Sitangkai Island was used as a burial ground. At that time another Bajau boat village was located near the small island of Andulingan, west of Tumindao Island. The village has since disappeared, but people coming from that place who now reside in Sitangkai can still be distinguished by the unique intonation of their speech. A third Bajau boat village was located at Omapoi, the northern-most island of the Tumindao group; a small Bajau village is still found at Omapoi, although its residents are now house-dwellers. As the Andulingan and Bolong-Bolong people, these Bajau buried their dead on



Sitangkai Island. The fourth and final Bajau population center before Sitangkai's emergence as the commercial center of Sibutu was located near Tandowak Island at the southern end of Sibutu Island. Unlike the above villagers, these people buried their dead at nearby Luuk Malebo on Sibutu Island. A Bajau village is still located at Tandowak, but it is much smaller than the earlier flotilla that moored there. Since World War II, the majority of the Tandowak people have moved to Tungnehat, a village of land-dwelling Samal-speakers north of Tandowak. Tungnehat has since become the Bajau population center of that area, and is second in size only to Sitangkai. As all Sibutu Bajau villages, it is now a village of houses with only a few transient boat-dwellers.

The first Chinese fish-buyers arrived at Sitangkai in the early 1900's; however, it was not until after World War II that Sitangkai became a large population center. During this time, all the Bolong-Bolong and Andulingan Bajau moved to Sitangkai, as well as a good many of the Omapoi and Tandowak people. Consequently, today it has a population of approximately 3400, of which about two-thirds is Bajau, and has the largest concentration of Bajau in the southern Sulu Islands, if not in all of Sulu. The rapid growth of Sitangkai seems directly related to the development and expansion of commercial fishing in Sulu following World War II. After the war, many fish buyers arrived at Sitangkai, and their markets plus the security which the population center afforded apparently attracted the surrounding Bajau.

If the boat-dwelling habit of these Bajau evolved in Sibutu waters, it appears that the Tawi-Tawi people were the first to break away. Their dialect is more divergent from Sibutu than is the dialect of the Semporna Bajau; however, the Semporna people may have left the Sibutu region at an equally early time and maintained their linguistic affinities with Sibutu because of the frequent and easy movement between the two areas. The swift current, as well as the distance, between Sibutu and Bongao Islands, still acts as an effective barrier to native water craft between the Tawi-Tawi and

Sibutu Islands, and was probably even more effective before the advent of motor-powered boats.

Bajau boats from Sibutu probably first began to visit the Tawi-Tawi reefs on fishing trips. The great reefs of the Bilatan Islands of Tawi-Tawi allowed them to use the same fishing techniques they knew from the Sibutu reefs, and before long Bilatan became a permanent mooring place for Bajau boats. The fact that two small islands in Bilatan serve as the burial grounds for all the Tawi-Tawi Bajau further supports the contention that Bilatan was the first part of Tawi-Tawi visited by the Bajau. From Bilatan they spread to the Sanga-Sanga area. Old informants contend that Bajau boats were first moored at the small island of Takatmatahat (called Mandolan on most maps) located at the northern mouth of the channel between Tawi-Tawi and Sanga-Sanga Islands. The reefs surrounding Takatmatahat, as well as the reefs of the nearby Basun Islands, would allow these Bilatan migrants to use their familiar fishing nets. Banduulan and Luuk Tulai are fairly recent Bajau villages, and probably were formed by the boats from Takatmatahat. Several old people at Tungbangkao told me there were no Bajau villages in the Sanga-Sanga area during their youth, while some of the old people at Tungkalang told me they lived at that village when they were children. Non-Bajau residents of Bongao claim that the only Bajau they recall seeing at Bongao in the 1930's were occasional "wild-looking, long-haired, half-naked men" who sometimes peddled fish among the houses. Most likely Bongao's recent development as the commercial center of Tawi-Tawi has attracted some of the Bilatan people to that area.

In 1903, A. Henry Savage Landor traveled throughout the Sulu Archipelago and later wrote a book describing his experiences. Intrigued by Sulu's sea people, he described each of his encounters with them. However, the only Bajau he mentions in Tawi-Tawi are a few he met in Bongao town, even though he traveled along the northwest coasts of Sanga-Sanga and Tawi-Tawi Islands where the present Bajau villages of Tungkalang, Bandulan, and Luuk Tulai are located. Similarly, Carl Taylor's articles (1932, 1930) on the Sitangkai

Bajau do not mention the three aforementioned Tawi-Tawi villages although he, also, traveled along the coasts where they are now found. One traveling the same route today could not easily miss the villages, and the failure of both writers to mention them suggests that they were not there in 1903 and 1932 when the two men traveled through Sulu. However, in 1901, Phelps Whitmarsh described fleets of Bajau boats at Bongao; they may, though, very well have been transient fishermen from Bilatan. Probably the villages in the Sanga-Sanga vicinity were originally stopping places for Bajau fishermen from the Bilatan villages, and later, for any number of unknown reasons, became permanent mooring places for the sea people.

Within the memory of many living persons, Bajau boat villages in Tawi-Tawi have disappeared. For example, there was formerly a large Bajau flotilla near Karundung, a land village on Sanga-Sanga Island, across the channel from Bongao. In 1959, several people were killed near that village by a group of Jolo outlaws; almost overnight the Bajau boats left, many going to Tungkalang and some to Bongao to form the present village of Lamiun. Disagreements with their land-dwelling neighbors sometimes cause the Bajau to move their boats to another mooring.

The Semporna boat-dwellers are closely related to the Sibutu people; in fact, many of them consider themselves natives of Sibutu rather than Semporna (Richardson 1966). It is difficult to determine how long Semporna has been a permanent mooring place for Bajau boats, but Bajau boats must have frequented those waters for a good number of years since they were described by Thomas Forrest in the 1770's. Probably Sibutu Bajau were frequenting the Semporna waters even before they moved to Tawi-Tawi since many rich fishing reefs provide natural stepping stones between Sibutu and Semporna whereas the swift Sibutu Current between Sibutu and Bongao Islands acts as a barrier to small craft movement between those two areas during certain periods of the year. The small population of boat-dwellers in Semporna hints that the Bajau moved into that area from elsewhere; however,

as indicated earlier, the Bajau are extremely mobile people, and very possibly their numbers were greater in the Semporna region in earlier years.

V

No visitor is in a Bajau village long before he entertains the inevitable question: Why have the Bajau moved to houses? No single answer is available, although a number of reasons are apparent.

In Tunbangkao and Sitangkai, the abandonment of the boat-dwelling habit seems directly related to the penetration of fish-buyers to those villages. In Tunbangkao, these fish-buyers arrived no longer than five years ago, whereas they have been in Sitangkai since pre-World War II days. Before the arrival of the fish-buyers, Bajau fishing must have been mostly at a subsistence level, with the sea folk trading their large catches for the fruits and vegetables of the land-dwelling Samal. This must have certainly been the case in the Sibutu Islands where there was no commercial center before the fish-buyers came to Sitangkai. Old Bajau in that area tell of long sailing trips they formerly made to Jolo to sell their dried fish for manufactured items. And even in the more populous Tawi-Tawi Islands, only recently has Bongao emerged as a commercial and business center, and these Bajau too, until very recent years, were primarily subsistence fishermen. The same situation must have prevailed in the Semporna area since that port too has become an important commercial center only within fairly recent years. The sedentary resident fish-buyers added a permanence to the traditionally fluid Bajau boat-villages as well as a ready market and cash income for the Bajau fishermen. The close relationships which the Bajau formed with the fish-buyers, coupled with the security in the form of the buyers' firearms and later, law-enforcement officers, apparently encouraged the Bajau to moor regularly at these villages. The example of the fish-buyers' houses led to the construction of houses by a few of the more influential members of the Bajau community, and house-living

quickly became a mark of social prestige in Bajau society as others followed the example of the first house-dwellers.

At Sitangkai, there has been a great increase in the Bajau population since the arrival of the fish-buyers, and Tunbangkao is similarly undergoing a rapid population increase as more Bajau are making their permanent residence in that village since the fish-buyers arrived. The Bajau in these villages are by no means confirmed house-dwellers; most families use their houses as living quarters only when they are in the village, but return to the houseboats for fishing trips and other travel. Thus for many of these people, house-living is a luxury which they enjoy only when they are resting from fishing, or fishing the waters near the villages.

It is more difficult to assign a reason to the construction of houses in the Sanga-Sanga villages of Tawi-Tawi. These villages are not located near rich fishing grounds and consequently have not attracted fish-buyers. However, these people are closely related to, and have frequent contacts with, the Tunbangkao Bajau, and the prestige of the house-dwelling habit at Tunbangkao has probably been an important impetus for the construction of houses in the Sanga-Sanga villages. An equally important impetus has been the construction of the Catholic Mission School at Tungalang. The school building with its educational and medical facilities has served much as the fish-buyers in the other villages in providing security and permanence to the former boat-village.

In Sitangkai, Islam has accompanied the move to houses. These Bajau boast of a new mosque, five hadjis, and an imam schooled in Kalimantan. Although Bajau society was greatly influenced by Islam long before the move to houses, it has only been since the move that the Sitangkai Bajau have been recognized as fellow Muslims by the land-dwelling people. The Tawi-Tawi Bajau have yet to construct a mosque in any of their villages, but it seems only a matter of time before such is done. Similarly, Bangau-Bangau has no mosque although a number of its residents regularly attend services at a nearby land mosque, and these Bajau, too, will probably construct their own mosque in the near future.

"Paganism" and the boat-dwelling habit have always been the identifying earmarks of the Sulu Bajau. With the full acceptance of Islam and the abandonment of the nomadic boat-life, these sea folk will cease to exist as a "pagan", outcast people, and become amalgamated into the general Muslim Samal population of Sulu. Probably within another decade full-time boat-dwellers will disappear completely from the Sulu waters.

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