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The Songs of Salanda and Other Stories of Sulu. By H. Arlo Nimmo. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994. x, 237 pages.

Playing With Water: Passion and Solitude on a Philippine Island. By James Hamilton-Paterson. New York: New Amsterdam, 1987. 282 pages.

Cebu. By Peter Bacho. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991. 205 pages.

Among the Bajau, "wind-songs" signify not the seductive sounds made by the movements of tropical air. They are melodious prayers, petitioning favorable winds to guide one's houseboat to a distant moorage or fishing grounds. For H. Arlo Nimmo in *The Songs of Salanda and Other Stories of Sulu* they are currents of memory, invocations recreating the Sulu that he knew for two years in the sixties but that now is altered forever.

H. Arlo Nimmo was a young American anthropologist living alongside the boat people on the waters south of Tawi-Tawi, preparing demographics for his dissertation. However, although those statistics and graphs finally became *The Sea People of Sulu* (1972), he had lived too intimately with Bajau individuals and families to be satisfied with scientific summaries and cultural generalizations. So he did what writers of fiction do: he gathered anecdotes about the people he had known, allowed himself to make small variances in story line and chronology, and published a memorable, often emotional collection sufficiently equivalent to be themselves called the songs of the wanderer Salanda. As enlightening as the authentic details provided are (such as the constant diet: fish and cassava; the Tausugs' attitude toward the Bajau as society's dregs; the influence that the spirit world, *saitan*, has on the daily behavior of these animists; the arrogant role of Chinese tradesmen among these fisherfolk), it is in Nimmo's portrait of people whose lives he shared that they cease to be numbers and are restored to life. This, even as the Sulu of the sixties has been changed forever by civil war, overpopulation, excessive logging, and similar destructive intrusions into a world once stable, self-sustaining, and worthy of esteem.

Nimmo quickly learned the local language and spent as much time subsistence fishing as note-taking. He offered the people his few medical skills, along with aspirin and a tube of penicillin. He became so immersed in the Bajau's water-world that, quite properly, in these stories he is only an "inside outsider": the stories belong to the Bajau, although his muted love for them is unquestionable. The "Melikan's" best friend, early and late, is Masa whose remarriage when his wife dies in childbirth is a way of recognizing family needs. There is Salanda, who improvises her songs of struggling love and, sadly her life as well; Amak, the Tausug pirate/smuggler, befriender of his people who is finally decapitated by the PC and placed on exhibition; Lam, the gross Chinese fish merchant, abusive of his wife Najima and friend to no one; Wu, a Chinese mestizo who with his daughter's help survives near-bankruptcy; and children like Boy Bangsa whom Nimmo nearly adopts though he knows that life in the States may deprive Bangsa of his finest qualities. An American priest and nun help define Christianity in a world of animists and Muslims, simply by being good people in the service of others. Another American who has lived contentedly with his extended Muslim family since 1938 and has no desire to return to the States knows, as do Fr. Raquet and Sr. Evangelista, where he belongs, where the heart is happiest. Only Mrs. Dickens, visiting patroness from the embassy in Manila, is out of touch with reality; but even she is treated kindly, for her eccentricity.

Another anthropologist, Donn Hart, who devoted much of his research life to Siaton, Negros Oriental, always wanted to do what Nimmo does so well: to individualize the people with whom he spent so many years. But despite several efforts, Hart died before he could transform his data into fiction.

For a work comparable in joyful personal immersion of an American in the daily events of the Philippine south, one might turn back to James Hamilton-Paterson's 1987 book, *Playing with Water: Passion and Solitude on a Philippine Island*. Four months of every one of several years, the British poet, short-story writer, and novelist lived alone on an islet off a southern island identified only as Tiwarik (a Tagalog term for "topsy turvy," referring here to the extraordinariness of a solitary "alien" who nevertheless was wholly accepted as part of the village of Sabay.) One one side Tiwarik looked seaward; to leeward there was Sabay: the best of two worlds. As a skilled, knowledgeable fisherman (often with spear on the coral bottom), he easily became the object of an admiration, a feeling he reciprocated. He earned (and communicated) his mystic moments as life-enhancing. His love for the people of Sabay is endearingly clear, people "who can survive typhoons, the rise and fall of governments, all sorts of disruptions and calamities" and who by sharing poverty diminish its impact, through "delicious improvisings in the face of disaster." Sabay is free of absentee landlordism, the pleasure yachts of reckless wastrel Westerners, the floating factories of the Japanese.

Briefly visiting Manila, Hamilton-Paterson found it a pseudo-paradise for the privileged, and a place of both economic and sexual abuse for all others. Nimmo, during occasional flights from Sulu to attend conferences in Manila, had similar experiences. Manila is not the Philippines, as more and more presentations of the Visayas, Palawan, Mindanao and Sulu—by such master hands as Resil Mojares, F. Landa Jocano, Thomas Kiefer, and editor of *Kinaadman* Fr. Miguel Bernad, S.J.—repeatedly prove.

An unfortunate exception is the novella *Cebu* (1991) by Philippine-American Peter Bacho. Its central character is Ben Lucero, a Cebuano-American priest barely out of the seminary. He feels marginalized because his Ilocano and Tagalog parishioners cannot understand him. In another sense, he cannot understand himself. He was never close to his American soldier-father because of regular shifts from base to base. He fantasizes that Cebu, the birthplace of his mother, is his home. Yet when he must convey her remains there, he is thoroughly confused by its desperate poverty, nepotism, and "folk Catholicism." Consequently he is easily dominated by Tia Clara, his mother's old friend, and by Ellen, her sexually aggressive assistant. Only when a man wounded during a demonstration at the U.S. embassy in Manila says he wants the last rites from a *real* priest, does Ben remember his vows and return to his Seattle barrio. However, the quiet routine there is broken by his friend Teddy's sex games with Sugar Silvario, by Ben's considering suicide when he hears that Ellen has died aborting what might be his child, and by Filipino gang violence which ends in Ben's death when he refuses absolution to a murderer.

The apparent theme of *Cebu* is that the Filipino sense of *utang na loob* can become bizarre, or even barbaric, when carried to extremes. Old Carlito crucifies himself to atone for his granddaughter's death by leukemia. Remedios consigns her son to the seminary out of gratitude for her having survived the Japanese occupation. Clara's possessiveness toward Ben derives from her promise to Remedios to care for him. She later assumes he will return to Cebu out of guilt for his possible part in Ellen's death. Instead, Ben satisfies his debt of honor by refusing absolution to a murderer who therefore kills him (though even seminarians know that absolution is always conditional anyway, depending on God's ultimate determination of guilt or innocence, and of contrition). Lesser analogies to *utang na loob* misconceived occur as acts of vengeance/"payback": mutilation of a Japanese soldier, the bloody feud between Filipino gangs in Seattle, and Teddy's brute response to a loud spectator at a boxing match.

Such a thematic pattern, if intended, is nearly impossible to *experience* in the absence of adequate characterization of what could have been profound ambiguities in various people; disproportionate focusing (stories tangled within stories and reliance on incidental narrators and editorial asides); labyrinthine chronology; and an astounding lack of descriptive detail. *Cebu*, whether remembered or encountered, is virtually nondescript. Ben himself

is absent from 60 percent of the novel. His struggles with conscience are less convincing than his sexual bouts with Ellen—on par with Teddy's trysts with Sugar. Richly textured undertones are everywhere avoided, while Bacho concentrates on scenes of sex and violence. Character after character is one-dimensional and overreactive.

Cebu lacks the power and importance of fiction by resembling the hastily collected cultural notes of a beginning anthropologist indifferent to the penetration of personality found in Nimmo's considerable explorations, as scientific observer and as participating friend. Bacho lacks the intimate objectivity, the double vision, required of realistic writers; he comes closer to representing an "outside-insider" than an "inside-outsider."

Manila is not the Philippines. Paradoxically, sometimes the outlying provinces, as in the South, while seeming peripheral can be—when properly experienced—central to understanding the complex nature of a Filipino. Unfortunately, through the wrong eyes even Cebu may not be Cebu.