

# THE BUSINESS NETWORK OF BAJAU TRIBE SEA FISHERIES ON THE INDONESIA-MALAYSIA BORDER

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## ABSTRACT

*This article describes the history, culture, and livelihoods of the ethnic Bajau people in Indonesia. Special focus is placed on the Bajau tribes that live and own fisheries on Sei Batang Island in the province of North Kalimantan along the Indonesia-Malaysia border. Data was gathered from in-depth interviews with fishermen and local figures of the local Sei Batang Bajau community. Secondary data was collected from historical archives, previous studies on the Bajau tribes, and other relevant literature. Though the Bajau have historically been known as people of the sea – their homes and settlements even appear as if to float above the sea surface – the Bajau tribes living along the Indonesia-Malaysia border are unique for their atypical identity as “land Bajau” and the environmental and cultural issues they face as a historically overlooked ethnic group in Indonesia. This paper also discusses the legal issues that arise from the Bajau tribes’ activities along the Indonesia-Malaysia maritime border.*

**Keywords:** Bajau, Fisheries, Maritime Tribes, Indonesia-Malaysia Border.

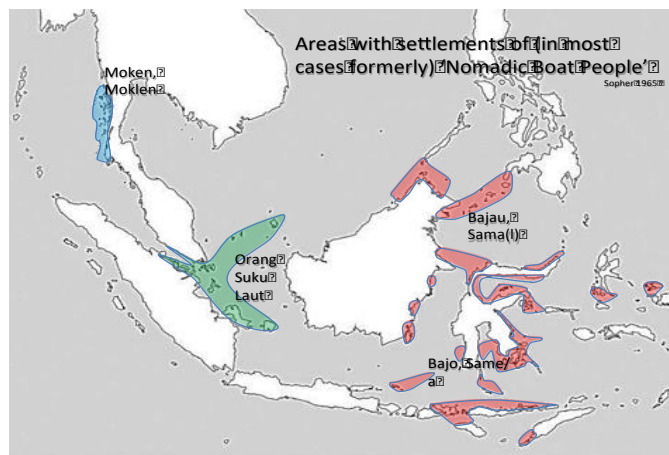
## INTRODUCTION

Tribes and ethnicities are often associated with specific geographical locations and environments (e.g. Murut are "hill people", Toraja are "inland people", and Tidung are "mountain people"). This is similar to the concept of labeling people “villagers” and “city slickers”. In practice, tribe names are often shorthand for a community’s identity as defined by the environment and area they live in. Frequently, this labeling of ethnic groups results in stereotyping that affects inter-ethnic relations.

When Indonesians speak of tribes that live on the sea, they speak of the “sea people”, the “Bajau”, “Bajo”, or “Sama” people. These people call a large part of the Indonesian waters their home.

According to oral traditions, the ancestors of the Bajau people originated in Johor, Malaysia. As the tales tell it, the Bajau are descendants of the Johor people ordered by their king to find and return his runaway daughter. These seekers were commanded to search the entire archipelago for the missing princess. They discovered her on the island of Sulawesi, where she had chosen to stay. Those who settled on Sulawesi with the princess became known as the Bajau people. In one folk tale, the princess became betrothed to a Bugis prince who allowed her people to settle in the land known as Bajoe. In other versions, the Johor seekers failed to find the princess, and elected to settle in the Tomini Bay area, both in Gorontalo and Toge Island, rather than return to Johor.

In the context of the sea as an economic source for Bajau fishermen, the theoretical sea can also be understood as an arena for interaction between human groups and groups from different places of origin and ethnicity which can serve as an economic network in the context of improving the welfare of life. The Bajau, as maritime cultural stakeholders, have a network that is not limited by the state, which can be developed to improve their welfare as a form of a traditional economic system shows in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1**  
**BAJAU TRIBE DISTRIBUTION MAP IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

The sea is seen as a situation of social practice and cooperation between maritime community groups that are built through socio-cultural and economic networks. Ethnic identities and inter-ethnic coexistence function as norms for regulation of that interaction and cooperation. This potential has not been utilized in the context of increasing welfare. The world of life / maritime culture of the Bajau people is a means of improving social and environmental welfare by developing economic networks that have been the culture of the Bajau people as maritime cultural stakeholders

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The “sea people”, “sea nomads”, or Bajau people, are known to build their settlements on and around reefs throughout Southeast Asia. The name “Bajau” itself is used to refer to this ethnic group both within and outside of Sulawesi. The Bajau call themselves the “Sama” people and refer to other, non-Bajau tribes as “Bagai” or “land-dwellers”. The Bajau language (*baong sama*), though grammatically similar to many other Southeast Asian languages, has a unique property: they use the term “*sama*” to refer to other Bajau people, regardless of tribe. The term *bagai*, in contrast, is a blanket term for all outsiders, or non-*sama*. A *sama* can also be used to refer to any single Bajau tribe, collectively these tribes are referred to as *sama-sama*. The term *sama* holds meaning that goes beyond the Indonesian definition of the word *sama* which means “the same”, “equal”, or “alike” (Tahara, 2017).

For the Bajau tribes living on Sei Batang Island of North Kalimantan, just along the Indonesia-Malaysia border, their sea activities occasionally trigger international border debate. As inhabitants of the area along an international border, in their pursuit of their livelihood at sea

they are often unknowing witnesses and participants in activities that are related to national sovereignty, maritime border law, and national security.

In the marine fishery business, especially fishermen, since the change in the mode of production of marine fisheries from the production of basic necessities to the mode of fishery that produces market commodities, since then fishing communities have started to depend entirely on external forces such as capital, technology, managerial aspects, and so on others without it (Smith, 1980). For Bajau fishermen, the capital is mainly in the form of boats or ships, equipment, especially motorbikes or engines (propulsion) and fishing gear. Capital is also in the form of commodity goods (especially fish catch) which are still handled by traders.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach

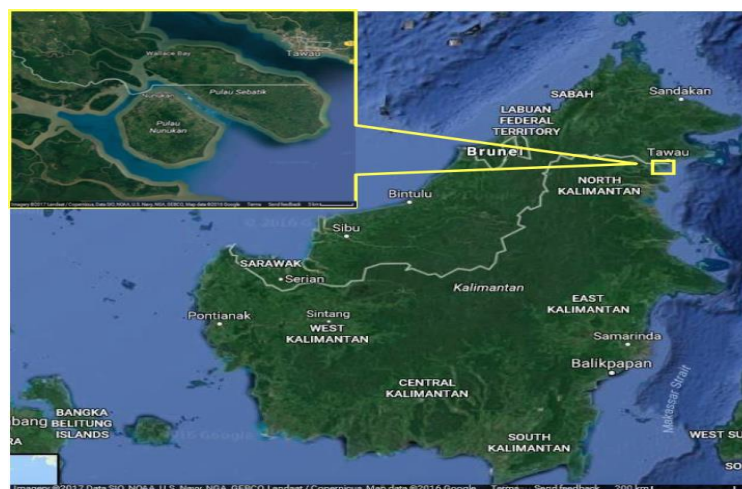
This research is an ethnographic study of the Bajau people on the Indonesia-Malaysia border conducted using a combination of field observation, interviews, and literature study. The process began with the gathering of secondary data with a search of the Indonesia National Archive in Makassar, studying relevant books, articles, and academic papers on the topic.

Information was gathered via in-depth interview with fishermen and traditional Bajau leaders in the Sei Batang Island Bajau community.

### Research Location

Field studies took place from June to August of 2018 in the village of Tanjung Karang in the regency of Nunukan in North Kalimantan. Figure 2 shows the location of the village of Tanjung Karang.

An in-depth overview of the Bajau people and history was obtained through participant observation. In-depth interviews with Bajau sailors were crucial for gathering first-hand information of the Bajau people's experiences at sea. Secondary information was collected from studies of relevant literature found in libraries, historical archives, and other written sources.



**FIGURE 2**  
**RESEARCH LOCATION**

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Ethnic Bajau in Southeast Asia

Since the first European explorers mentioned the ethnic Bugis as a seafaring people several hundred years ago, there has been confusion distinguishing the Bugis from the Bajau people.

Indonesia's vast waters have been the economic arena of the Bajau people for centuries. These seas border 10 different countries: India, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, the Republic of Palau, Australia, East Timor, and Papua New Guinea. Indonesia's maritime border is made up of a ring of 92 different islands including small islands. The Indonesian government's lack of oversight in these border islands has led to many issues with neighboring countries relating to piracy, national security, human trafficking, and smuggling among other shady activities. A study conducted by Kazufumi (2017) estimated the number of ethnic Bajau living in the southern Philippines, Sabah Coast, Malaysia, and eastern Indonesia at around 1.1-million. The same study noted that many of these tribes maintained active socio-cultural and socio-economic networks with the other Bajau tribes.

According to one oral tradition, the Bajau people were originally refugees from Johor Malaysia who became stranded in South Sulawesi. Hence the existence of a settlement known as "Bajoe" village in Bone, South Sulawesi. Another version of the story describes the Bajau originally settling in Palopo, South Sulawesi and spreading out from there.

To other ethnic groups, the name Bajau is synonymous with a negative stereotype of robbers and sea pirates. In 1511, Tome Pires, a Portuguese national, described Bugis merchants as sailors who traveled from Malacca to the island of "*Macacar*" (Makassar). In his writings, the Bajau people were described as robbers and pirates. According to the narrative developed in several regions neighboring Bajau settlements, the ethnic Sama people were notorious sea pirates and robbers. Since the Bajau and Sama inhabited the same general area – and they were both known for their identities as people of the sea—the two ethnic groups were lumped together under a single label, "Bajau" or "Bajau-Sama". Eventually, the reputation of the Bajau people as robbers and pirates spread throughout the archipelago. There was a great backlash from the Bajau community who refused to be equated with pirates and robbers.

In order to combat this stereotype and raise awareness about the disadvantaged and historically overlooked Bajau tribe, Tahara (2013) established the "*Kekar Bajau*" organization. This organization's members come from all around Indonesia and have even connected with Bajau tribes in Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines through the establishment of The Bajau International Communities Confederation (BICC). In order to raise awareness about the Bajau people in Indonesia, this organization recruited the aid of Bajau groups in other, more developed nations. Their shared ethnic identity has allowed for Bajau people from four different countries to come together. Abdul Manan was appointed as the president of Bajau-Indonesia, the Indonesian branch of BICC.

Despite their reputation, the Bajau people have always been more than mere sea nomads and fishers. They are known as suppliers of various international market commodities. Bajau divers collect underwater items such as pearls, shells, scales, coral, and seaweed for trade. They also care for mangrove forests and drive their local economies with sales of mangrove root, bark, and wood. The Bajau have also been known to trade aloe, resin, honey, beeswax, and bird nests in their interactions with the Bugis and Makassar kingdoms (Andaya, 1984).

Much research and study has been conducted on the maritime tribes of Indonesia (Mandar, Buton, Bugis, and Makassar), but historians have largely overlooked the Bajau tribe and their interactions with the other maritime tribes. For example, many Bajau people can be found in Buton and its surrounding areas like Wakatobi and Tiworo. The closeness of the Buton and Bajau people can be seen in Wajo market where Buton and Bajau people interact and trade. “*Wajo*” is the Buton term for the Bajau people (Zuhdi, 2010).

The Bajau people have always felt a sense of superiority on the sea when comparing themselves to “land” tribes. However, Indonesia’s land tribes have enjoyed modern breakthroughs in science and technology that the Bajau tribes have difficulty accessing. This inequality in development has only served to emphasize existing stereotypes that the Bajau tribes are isolated and underdeveloped.

Bajau tribe settlements in Indonesia outside of South Sulawesi can be found in Flores, West Nusa Tenggara, Central Sulawesi, Southeast Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Sumatera, and Gorontalo. Virtually all these tribes accept the oral histories that claim their origins in Malaysia. Bajau tribes are in consensus that the Bajau people are a world tribe and belong to no single country. BICC, representing all the Bajau tribes of Southeast Asia, registered the Bajau ethnic group as a UNESCO world tribe.

BICC was established with the goal of providing economic aid to Bajau tribes, providing education to Bajau sons and daughters, and preserve Bajau culture in the face of a developing global culture. The BICC is chaired by a member of the Sabah Parliament, Datuk Sri Saleh Keruak who is also a Bajau child. Bajau tribes in Indonesia are the most underdeveloped of the Bajau groups in Southeast Asia. Bajau groups in Malaysia are still fishermen, as the generations of Bajau before them, but have access to modern technologies that have raised their economic status above that of traditional fishermen. The famous tourist hub, Phuket, is largely controlled by Bajau business owners. The underdeveloped and overlooked state of Bajau tribes in Indonesia, especially in comparison to Bajau tribes in neighboring countries, has inspired the President of Bajau-Indonesia to focus efforts on elevating the living conditions and quality of life of Indonesian Bajau.

The Bajau people originally fled to the sea to avoid war and riots on land. This mass exodus of Bajau tribes explains why modern Bajau groups live in coastal settlements with structures that float above the water and still maintain networks with tribes in several countries throughout Southeast Asia.

Recently, cases of damage to coral reef ecosystems and the population decline of marine biota of high economic value are often associated with the disruptive practices of Bajau tribal fishermen such as the use of explosives and toxic chemicals and the displacement of rocks. In efforts to tackle this issue, conservation programs that do work in developing nations such as Indonesia emphasize the need for a participatory and collaborative approach to marine resource management, with particular attention paid to involving Bajau fishermen (Clifton & Majors, 2011).

### **Bajau Marine Fishery Business**

Bajau tribes in Sei Batang Island of North Kalimantan are still economically reliant on the sea for their primary income. Unlike other Bajau tribes, these tribes in Sei Batang Island are known for their courage and skill in “*fighting*” the sea. In fact, most of them do not classify themselves as Bajau as commonly understood. According to the Sei Batang Island Bajau, the

Bajau most know of are “sea Bajau”, whereas they categorize themselves as “land Bajau.” In their view, the Sea Bajau tribes are very different from themselves. These land Bajau live primarily on land settlements and cultivate their land as a second source of income. Some among them even rely on the land as their primary source of livelihood.

These other sources of income have allowed the Bajau the freedom of more control over their fate. Instead of long periods of inactivity for the months of April to June (they call it the south wind season), these Bajau tribes can manage plantations or work in the plantations or orchards of land-owning relatives. The Bajau people who first settled in Sei Batang after migrating from Derawan experienced improvements in their economic status and quality of life despite not owning land. They enjoyed more economic fulfillment due to the greater number of traders in Sei Batang willing and ready to purchase their catch. The Bajau of Sei Batang consider the fish traders, who are all ethnic Bugis, as close partners in the seafood trade. This relationship between the Bajau and Bugis in Sei Batang can be compared to that of a “owner” (Bugis) to a “member” (Bajau).

There are six ethnic Bugis “owners” living in Sei Tawan who control the economic activities in Sei Batang. Each of these owners oversees 5 to 7 “members”. These owners loan capital to their members in the form of boats, engines, fishing gear, and daily living costs. The loaned capital is returned from the catch. Bajau members, however, own their own boats. These boats are made of plywood. Their boatmaking skills has been key in their survival over the centuries. The “discovery” of plywood gave these Sei Batang Bajau the confidence to borrow money from owners to invest in the construction of their own boats. With only 2- to 3-million Indonesian rupiah, they can construct a 1x6m boat. Having invested in the construction of their own boats, the Sei Batang Bajau no longer need to rent boats from the owners.

Every trip out to sea for a Bajau fisherman can last 3-5 days. Within a month, a Bajau fisherman will go out to sea 5-6 times. Their boats (called *lepa* by the Bajau) are powered by engines of less than 30GT. A single *lepa* is crewed by three Bajau fishermen; one acting as the “boss” with the other two as “crew”. The two crewmembers are usually close relatives of the boss. Whatever catch they get is shared between all three members with the boss collecting the largest share. They fish with a fishing rod, a hook, and a longline. The Bajau fishermen usually receive this fishing equipment from fisheries in Sei Batang. However, Bajau fishermen aren’t usually familiar with net fishing techniques, and thus the nets they receive are typically used as decoration for their homes. Neither fisheries nor the Department of Fisheries offer training for the usage of nets in fishing. In addition, these fishing nets often increase operating costs. The Bajau *lepa* boats aren’t usually large enough to accommodate these nets.

A typical catch consists of white fish, grouper, red fish, ray fish, barracuda, and lobster. On average, a Bajau boat will capture 20-30 fish on a single excursion. Though this isn’t very much, it is enough to meet the daily needs of the Bajau fishermen. The average weekly income of a Bajau fisherman is Rp.150,000 and they can make up to Rp.750,000 per month. One informant, a Bajau fisherman, said he felt the income he earned was quite low, but he remained satisfied with the amount because it could be put towards repaying the borrowed capital for the construction of his *lepa* and rented engine from the owner in Sei Taiwan.

The most pronounced problem experienced by every fisherman, especially those who are interested in becoming entrepreneurs and who are already entrepreneurs, is the difficulty in obtaining initial capital and managing it. “*It is difficult to have capital*” or “no capital” are phrases that are always heard from the mouths of fishermen when discussing the conditions of their business and daily economic activities. Bajau fishermen are aware and have proven

themselves that the capital component is the most decisive factor of production in driving their daily fisheries economic business. In fact, all Bajau fishermen, even every fishing family have or are dreaming of owning their own boat or business unit.

### **Legal Problems along the Indonesia-Malaysia Sea Border**

The fishing grounds of the Sei Batang Bajau fishermen isn't far from Sei Batang Island. There are three primary fishing spots: Pancang Bor located about two hours sailing distance from Sei Batang; Takat; and Karang Unarang Island. Bajau fishermen usually fish in Pancang Bor and Takat, and only fish in Karang Unarang after failing to catch fish in either of those spots. Some Bajau fishermen even go as far as Bunyu Island to find catch. The Bajau fishermen of Sei Batang don't travel too far in their search for sea catch, largely because the fish communities in Pancang Obor and Takat are abundant throughout the year except during the South Wind Season. Another reason they rarely travel far from Sei Batang is their fear of being captured or arrested Indonesian or Malaysian marine police.

This fear is rooted in their tendency to forget to bring their National Identity Card. They also lack the proper technology that would allow them to detect when they've crossed the boundary between Indonesia and Malaysia. According to Sei Batang marine police, compared to Bugis, Makassar, Buton, or Mandar fishermen, Bajau fishermen are unique in their proclivity for failing to produce proper identification upon being inspected. The majority of incidents that lead to the arrest of a fisherman at sea involve Bajau fishermen.

The maritime territory on the border of Indonesia and Malaysia is widely known to be troublesome. This international border is often a place where issues relating to international law and Indonesian national security arise. It is also known for being a hotspot for illegal activity such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and labor issues. The ethnic Bajau that live and work along this maritime border could be developed and utilized by the Indonesian government for the purposes of improving border security and defense.

### **CONCLUSION**

The practice of utilizing marine resources for economic purposes is a defining part of Bajau tribe culture throughout the world. Members of the Bajau ethnic group can be found in many countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam). The "*Bajau*" identity is not tied to a single nation, and it is this status as a "world tribe" that has allowed Bajau groups in many different countries to establish working relationships and economic networks between countries, although this occasionally is cause for conflict with the law at the Indonesia-Malaysia border.

The sea is the stage for social practices and cooperative relations between groups of maritime communities that are built through socio-cultural and economic networks. Ethnic identity and living in harmony between ethnic groups are ideals of interaction and cooperation. This potential has not been realized in the context of stability in defense and security. The shared experiences and culture of the Bajau people in countries throughout southeast Asia has served as a unifying factor in international relations.



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