

Oral Histories and Traditions of the Sama Dilaut: Their Way of Life in Sitangkai, Sulu Archipelago, the Philippines

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Mr. Omboh Injak Pallah was a famous story-teller among the Sama-Dilaut in Sitangkai, the Philippines. He was the oldest and first of Sama Dilaut imam. I interviewed with him several time in the 1970s. The following descriptions were summary of his narratives on our history (*suli-suli*), cultural beliefs, traditional practices, and changes of socio-economic life of the Sama Dilaut.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a tiny uninhabited island of Sitangkai was used as the Sama Dilaut burial ground. Sitangkai is situated at the southwestern end of Sulu Archipelago, the Philippines. The Sama Dilaut then lived on the houseboats, called *lepa*. Their main moorage site was located at Bollong-Bollong about a few kilometers north to Sitangkai islet, while the other moorage sites were at Halo Sobbo reef, Andolingan Island, Umapoy Island, Siseyoung Gusih islet, Sikulan Island and some reefs around Sibutu Island. All the moorage sites are now administratively situated in the Sitangkai Municipality, Tawi-Tawi Province, the Philippines.

Sometimes around 1900, a Chinese from Borneo, named Bua, visited Sibutu Island and Sitangkai to investigate the possibility of setting up small trading stores there. As he was aware that the success of his venture depended upon his contacts with the Sama Dilaut,

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Bua established good relationship with the neighboring populations in Bollong-Bollong Island, who were dominantly the Sama Dilaut. The trade was done smoothly through exchanges of goods like clothes, sugar, rice, coffee, fishing equipments, tobacco, cigarettes and others for dried fish brought by the Sama Dilaut.

In 1905 the first American administrator arrived at Sibutu Island. By that time Sitangkai became a commercial center of the archipelago with about twenty houses on stilts and a sizable flotilla of Sama Dilaut living on the houseboats called *kubuh* or *lepa*. In 1915, the first governmental elementary school was built and an American custom officer began to live in Sitangkai. Due to the economic booming, the island continued to attract the Sama Dilaut, the Sama Deyaq (land dwelling Sama) and the Tausug from Jolo, Siasi and Tawi-Tawi.

However, with the outbreak of the World War II and the establishment of the Japanese outpost in Sitangkai, the Sama Dilaut returned back to their houseboats and fled to the more remote island for fear of the Japanese. Sitangkai was left uninhabited by the natives. Only the Japanese soldiers lived there. After the war, the Sama Dilaut, the other Sama, the Tausug and Chinese merchants returned to Sitangkai. Some of the Sama Dilaut built houses on stilts in the sandbars of Sitangkai.

Because of the abundance in fish and the other sea products, people clustered to Sitangkai purposely for business venture. Even though there was no source of drinking water, people came to the island for business. They got their drinking water from rain. Some were forced to use galvanized roof to obtain water during rainy days. People who did not have water tanks were forced to buy water. They do so even today.

The scarcity of water discouraged agricultural production, except for coconuts. Coconuts grow even in sandy soil along the beach. Thus the people in Sitangkai have had to import agricultural products such as rice, sugar, coffee, onion, garlic, spices or else from Tawi-Tawi or Jolo in Sulu Archipelago, from Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia, or even from Indonesian islands.

HOW SITANGKAI GOT ITS NAME

Since there was no written record as to how Sitangkai got its name, we have to trace the name Sitangkai from their oral tradition. According to the local *sarsila* (unwritten history) narrated by Omboh Injak Pallah, Sitangkai got its name from a Chinese merchant named

Tan Kai. Around the beginning of the 20th century, he said, the Chinese trader came to Sitangkai through the back door, either from Malaysia (the British North Borneo) or Indonesia (the Netherlands East Indies) and began to settle permanently in this small islet for business in marine products.

At that time Sitangkai was already inhabited by some Sama Dilaut, the Sama and the *karatuan* (*datu* or royal family). They constructed houses on stilts in the shallow sea water about a few meters away from the shoreline of the island, which is now named Sitangkai.

The Sama Dilaut, the Sama Deyaq and the Tausug traded their marine commodities with the goods in the store of Tan Kai. After a few years of trading, Tan Kai became very progressive. People from the neighboring island and islets were attracted to the island where Tan Kai established his trading port to buy his goods or barter their catch for his goods.

It is within the local dialect of the Sama Dilaut and the Sama Deyaq to add a prefix “si” to name of a person. It happened when a Sama Dilaut was asked by his friend where to trade his fish, he answered in the Sama language, “Ma si Tan Kai” (At Tan Kai). From thereon, fisherfolks in the neighboring islands and islets went to the Tan Kai’s store and traded their catches for goods in his store. So Tan Kai became very popular in the area and the word “Si Tan Kai” were always uttered. Thus, the place began to be called Sitangkai.

From the past, the Sama Dilaut have lived on the sea and been known as “Sea Gypsies.” Most of the time, they could only obtain fish for subsistence. If they caught more than what they needed for the daily consumption, they bartered the catches for some personal belongings, like clothing and others. They were eager to trade the catches, particularly when there was a strong demand to earn enough money for buying jewelries or boats as their property.

The main products of Sitangkai today are algae seaweeds (*agar-agar*) and dried fish. Other marine products like shark fins, abalones, sponges, trepang, or mother of pearl shells are only secondary.

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The Sama Dilaut like other ethnic tribes in the Philippines keep numerous religious beliefs and practices which greatly influence their life. These beliefs and practices are sometimes factors that have hindered their desire for better education and for the socio-economic or

political changes.

Let me explain some of the beliefs and practices of the Sama Dilaut in Sitangkai. Certain spirits called *jin* are considered to guard the *nunuk* (balete or banyan tree, *Ficus stipulosa*) or big rocks which are considered sacred. For example, if someone is sick, the Sama Dilaut believe that the individual has happened to disturb one of the said spiritual and sacred places and he can only be cured when certain offerings are given to the spirits. The offerings must be done by traditional medical specialists called *jin* or *wali jin*, who may offer small pennant of different colored clothes, usually red, green, yellow, white, blue and pink. Yellow colored cooked rice, *buwas kuning*, will be placed in seven small pieces in a shell called *kohang*. *Kohang* is a small bivalves shell.

Offering a lighted cigarette on the grave of the grandparents or close relatives may give them fortunes. It is their belief that *omboh* or spirit of the dead has the power to communicate with the Supreme God and that they can ask favors for their living relatives like fortunes in fishing, other venture, curing sickness and others. The Sama Dilaut also offer tobacco, bitter nuts, colored lime, and others and pour perfume generally called *tonek* to the grave of the dead in order to ask the spirits to bring them with good lucks in fishing or curing sickness and also with longer lives.

An epidemic of certain endemic disease to a member of the family is considered to be caused by the *omboh* who feel uncomfortable as the family purposely forget respect for the *omboh*. Respect for the *omboh* should be shown by offering cooked rice (usually yellow in color), fish, and some fruits.

The Sama Dilaut believe that a sick person whose sickness is cursed by *omboh*, or the other spirits, should not be taken to the hospital. Only the offerings to the *omboh* can relieve him from the sickness. The sick person is allowed to go to hospital only after he is permitted to do so by a traditional medical specialist who in advance has asked forgiveness from the *omboh* for having paid less respect to them.

LIFE IN BOATS AND HOUSES

The Sama Dilaut were once boat dwellers who inhabited the shallow seas of the Sulu Archipelago. They were called "Sea Gypsies" or "Sea Nomads" due to their high mobility.

The Sama Dilaut, even today, sometimes suffer from social discrimination, discontentment and dissatisfaction, which have forced them to move repeatedly from one

community to another. The Sama Deyaq call the Sama Dilaut “pala-u”, which means out-cast, because they lived in the boat and formed a house-boat community away from the house dwellers. The Tausug call the Sama Dilaut *luwa'an*, which means outside in the sense of vomiting. After the 1970s, they have repeated migrations due to the unstable peace and order in Sulu. Traditionally their high mobility has been deeply concerned with the necessity to earn for survival. When they discover a rich fishing ground, or when they are invited by relatives for fishing venture, they need to move to there.

In the past, the Sama Dilaut regarded the boat as a permanent place to live in. The boat was their house. All of their personal belongings were kept in the boat. It was on the boat and sea where they did all their daily activities. To them life in the boat was decent and peaceful, as no one might disturb them. In time of mistress within their moorage, they could easily move and hide to another nearby island.

Today, most of the Sama Dilaut of Sitangkai have abandoned their boats as living quarters. Just after the liberation from the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, the Sama Dilaut of Sitangkai have started to build their houses on stilts in the shallow water. Galvanized roofs of the house are used to gain rain water. Many of those who transferred to house dwelling began to accept Islamic faith and have strong desire for school education.

In 1966, about fifty Sama Dilaut families lived in the house-boats in Sitangkai. While in 1980, about thirty house-boats anchored in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi [Sangogot 2000]. However, almost all the Sama-Dilaut of Sitangkai and Tawi-Tawi have transferred to house-dwelling by the 1990s for different reasons. Today, they only use their boats for fishing ventures and maritime transportations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Sama Dilaut know that they are despised by the other Sama and the Tausug and that they are regarded to be an outcast group in the local society. The latter groups still retain prejudice that the Sama Dilaut are dirty and have no religion. Among their own peoples, the Sama Dilaut are generous and friendly. If a Sama Dilaut has no food to eat, he will go to the near-by house or boat and expect to be fed by the neighbors. In return, it is his duty to do the same for his neighbors. They are not proud, but humble. Any violence is a shocking thing to the Sama Dilaut. If they have a dispute with their neighbor, they will not fight, but

instead will move away.

Modern school education of the Philippines has drastically changed the lifestyles of the Sama Dilaut. It improved their dwellings patterns and the other material lives. Consequently the Sama Dilaut moved from the boat to the house. Economic status has also been improved. Some of them have their own pump boat or even a speed boat for fishing. Today they use nylon net instead of traditional ones which were made of fiber of bark. Some of them own transistors radios, TV sets, karaoke, gas stove, chairs, tables, mirrors, eye glasses, watches, shoes, or else. But many of the Sama Dialaut still keep respecting and following the old traditions in various aspects of their everyday life.

Finally let me show our voices which seek our indigenous and basic human rights. These voices are also deeply interrelated with an attempt to preserve the Sama Dilaut Culture.

- 1) We need to be recognized and respected as human beings.
- 2) We aspire to live in some permanent settlements without any interference of the other tribes who have long despised us for being poor and dirty.
- 3) There is a strong need among us to preserve our unique maritime culture which is in an endangered process of distinction. We need a global recognition that our culture survives.
- 4) We understand that education is the most significant means in order to materialize the objectives mentioned above. Therefore a special education system for the Sama Dilaut should be properly designed in cooperation with the national as well as global NGOs. Such education may aim at helping us to preserve our culture on the one hand, and to improve our socio-economic life and political status on the other.

We would like to suggest "mobile floating school system" as a means of special education for the Sama Dilaut children. The mobile floating school is supposed to be set up in our traditional houseboat, *lepa*. There the children are to be taught how to read, write and calculate. Vocational trainings for modern fishing or aquaculture may also be included in the curriculum. In addition, knowledge of the elders concerning boat building, mat weaving, or traditional fishing are to be taught on the boat too. The school may move one place to another wherever it is required.

At the same time, school scholarships should be provided for the talented

children of the Sama Dilaut. Such scholarships may serve as an impetus for them to succeed the coordinator of the education system and to improve and adjust the system to the situation in an era of globalization in the future.

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