

MBAL ALUNGAY BISSALA: Our Voices Shall Not Perish* **Listening, Telling, Writing of the Sama Identity and Its Political History in Oral Narratives**

Mucha-Shim Lahaman Quiling

Alungay bissala, alanyap na bangsa.
 Lost language, banished people

(an old Sama Dilaut adage)

Mba' Alungay Bissala (Our Voices Shall Never Perish) retells the everyday politics of the Sama people in the shared borders of Southeast Asia. Through their narratives and testimonials, the Sama peoples' stories in the shared borders of the Philippines, the Indonesian and the Malaysian Borneos, are woven in ordinary people's discourses into a new perspective toward understanding the sea-nomadic existence and the sea-faring peoples' experiences of war, migration, and the challenges to social integration as that, rather than purely descriptive ethnography, is a political discourse. Historical memory especially of pre-colonial Southeast Asian maritime society aided in the building and redefining of the regional and national identities of Sama-diaspora-communities, and locates this ethnic and religious community in the construction of cultural majorities and minorities. This descriptive and exploratory study aimed to answer the problems: Does a traditional primordial bond exist among the Sama diaspora in Southeast Asia? If so, to what extent has modernization impacted on this traditional bond? This study attempted to reconstruct the olden-day "homeseas"—as that ancestral domain and socio-psychological and physical territory -- lived by the ancestors, as remembered by the present generation of Sama elders and traditional leaders, and culture-bearers. It revisits the Sama (or Sinama-speaking) diaspora communities to rediscover the social-economic, ecological-spiritual, and politico-communal life as defining elements of a shared "primordial bond" among Southeast Asian Sama diaspora. This work assumed a subjective-reflexive perspective, relying largely on personal contacts and social networks.

Research Problem:

The study-tour largely relied on personal contacts and social networks, and attempted to reconstruct the olden-day "homeseas" lived in by the ancestors as remembered by the present generation of Sama elders that remain extant in oral narratives. It revisited the Sama (or Sinama-speaking) diaspora communities inhabiting the Philippine-Indonesian-Malaysian basin from time immemorial to the present, in the process rediscovering the social-economic, ecological-spiritual and politico-communal life as defining elements of a shared 'primordial bond'. Embarking from the shores of Sulu in southern Philippines and sailing through olden-day routes and stations of contact, this tour was able to re-establish those social networks that re-bonded the Suluan Sama with the rest of the Southeast Asian Sama in Eastern Kalimantan of Indonesia, particularly the City of Tarakan, and part of Eastern Borneo of Malaysian territory. The same social networks and ancestral links have been preserved by language and the common sea of collective memory in everyday narratives and stories.

Research Objectives:

In summary, the general objective of this project was to present a descriptive narrative of the past and present situation of the Sama people in Southeast Asia, particularly in the shared waters of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Specifically, it aimed to present such narrative from the perspective and voice of the ethnic communities themselves, in a format and language familiar and accessible to grassroots communities.

Much may have been written and reported about the ethnic communities in Southeast Asia, and these are mostly social scientific accounts by foreign anthropologists and sociologists who have ventured

to study ethnic communities in dispassionate, non-engaged and objective academic researches, armed with social theories and scientific methodologies that are out to be experimented and proven. Yet, not much has been heard from the ethnic communities themselves and their candid accounts of everyday life experiences. As an engaged and subjective endeavor, this study hoped to fill this information gap and, more so, to produce a “report” that captured the “voices from the streets” in a language familiar and accessible to non-literate and non-academic communities themselves, which certainly have a lot to do and learn about their history, culture, and their shared narrative of the present.

Research methodology:

The main research method used was participant observation and personal journaling through story-telling and the recording of everyday voices.

Since this project was a personal documentation of my journey retracing the route of migration, revisiting the settlements, and, as close as possible, re-living the maritime life of the sea nomadic ancestors, the main research method used was participant observation and personal journaling through recordings with a video camera, my principal means of data gathering and storage.

Secondary data utilization

Data from previous researches and fieldwork provided a secondary information base, not only for backgrounding but for the major text, necessary for an in-depth understanding and reconstruction of the story of the sea-nomadic people. These researches included those conducted under the auspices of Lumah Ma Dilaut Center for living traditions from 2004 through 2007 (November-December) and in the summers (April and May) of 2008, 2009 and 2010. In these studies, substantial data on indigenous knowledge systems, the philosophy of sea-nomadism, and religious beliefs and spiritual practices among the Sama of Sulu seas were collected in three case villages in Basilan (Barangay Tampalan), Sulu (Barangay Laminusa) and Zamboanga (Barangay Si Mariki), all of them provinces located in Southwestern Mindanao.

Through the API fellowship, a subsequent study tour and field immersions (and exposure) were done in Kota Tarakan in East Kalimantan Indonesia, alongside brief visitations to the coastal Bajau village in Sabah, North Borneo, to create a three-country triangulated comparison of the Sama Dilaut in Southeast Asia. Because a researcher’s visa was not granted by Malaysia, however, the Sabahan tryst was excluded from the data presentation, except when a contextual perspective was necessary to bring in the situation of the Sama people in that area.

Previous studies and knowledge on the subject

This researcher built-up on the experiences and knowledge gained from previous research projects [i.e. “Rephotography and History of Sulu Maritime life of 1898 and 1998” for Ateneo de Manila (2000), “Evolving a Development Framework for Sama Dilaut Diaspora” for Hope for Change, Incorporated (2002) and “Sama Dilaut Indigenous Knowledge Systems” for Lumah Ma Dilaut (2007-2008)] was concurrently part of her doctoral research paper in the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies [ICRS] on the social-religious history of Southeast Asian sea-people. The study incorporated related historical documents and archival materials made available at the Ateneo de Manila University and in Philippine national libraries, specifically from collections on the Philippine Islands series by Blair and Robertsons, and accounts in the travelogues of various American colonial government officials in Sulu and Mindanao.

Research Locale

The research locale is limited to purposively chosen sample communities of Sama in Sabah, North Borneo in Malaysia, and East Borneo in Kalimantan in Indonesia. Field immersions and exposure in Kota Tarakan in East Kalimantan Indonesia was done from October 15, 2011 to May 14, 2012 in Indonesia.

Discussion

In discussing the Sama history and identity, one ought to start by describing the ethnonym and enumerate some basic anthropological and demographic information about the Sama. Nimmo

and Cojuanco for the Sama Dilaut, and Nolde and Stacey for the Bajo of Indonesia are among the good sources.

Following the disruptions and progress in history, it must be reckoned that there have been changes and shifts in the construction of the Sama identity and the way their history is being told. Yet what seems salient has been the common understanding that the oldest account of the Sama presence in Sulu, as based on the linguistic studies of Kemp Pallesen (in Cojuanco 2007) and corroborated in the epic account of one of the numerically major groups of Muslims in Mindanao, the Ilanun, that the Sama were aboriginals of Sulu. In the Ilanun genealogy of the epic hero, Bantugan, mention of the marriage of the princely characters of the People of the Lake to an equally revered Sama princesses is projected to have transpired in 840AD (Monib Abbas, Ilanun epic researcher, posted in “Moro History and Culture”, 2011), which date tallies with that of the M’ranao royal informants of Margarita Cojuanco in her book “The Samal” (2007). Other writers such as Harry Arlo Nimmo and James Warren debunk the claims of Sopher who believed in the Johore original dispersion theory. Instead, they support the hypothesis that the Sama are aboriginals of Sulu and their coming predated that of the Tausug sultanate.

On the other hand, basing on genealogical accounts of Sulu and Borneo royalty, some writers believe in the Johore original dispersion theory and support the sultanate claim of Sulu as that of being one hegemonic race or nation, namely the “Tau Suluk” or “Tausug”. They also place the Sama origin to have not happened until later in the 14th to the 15th century. Accordingly, the mass exodus of the Sama people from Johore was associated with their desire to flee from subjection by the Brunei Moro king, to whom a number of Bornean nobilities had removed their allegiance. The Sama were allegedly either slaves or freemen subjects of the Bornean princes, who established the Sulu sultanate. The former in effect transferred their loyalty to the King of Jolo. In one tarsila it is claimed that the Bajao “shifted allegiance” from the Brunei kingship of Johore to the Sulu sultan during the Brunei-Sulu conflict. In mainstream

Philippine history, this is usually taught in schools as the “coming of Bornean datus”. While this could indeed be true, neglecting to acknowledge the incidents prior to the Brunei-Sulu royal debacle, results to a careless impression that the Sama or Bajau were not only subjects and corsairs [opportunistic military missionaries] of the Sulu sultan, but were also physically imported by the royalty to Sulu. While there is no way of exactly verifying this, we can only surmise that this view of history seems to have succeeded in blurring and veiling the fact that Sama people were already in Sulu before the sultanate was brought to our shores by the Arab missionaries and Borneo princes. Consequently, this also seems successful in diminishing the Sama people’s stake and prior claims to Sulu, and their centrality to the making of its history, ergo the justifiability of their being subjects of the Sultan. This particular historical slant has been also observed by Nolde and Stacey in their study of everyday politics among Bajo of Indonesia particularly in relation to the local sultanates of Bone, Luwu, Tidore, Bugis, and others. The hegemonic claims of royalty over the territory and its sweeping subjection of minority ethnics into their realms have been widely popularized and reproduced in myths and popular tales of the Sama people around the SEA basin [i.e., Salsila Laminusa and L’Galigo].

In Sulu and Mindanao, there are, presently, at least two contending views of the Sama identity. One supports the hypothesis that the Sama are a distinct and separate grouping belonging to the thirteen ethnolinguistic communities, in the same classification level and category as the Tausug; that the recent nationalist movements have collectively labeled as Bangsamoro nation. In western Mindanao alone, there are at least four such ethnolinguistic communities: namely the Sama, the Tausug, the Yakan, and the Jama Mapun. In this classification, the sea-faring and semi-nomadic subcultural grouping Bajau is held as separate from the land-based Sama. Another ideological view classify the Sama as a subgrouping of the Tausug, therefore, an ethnic classification belonging to a bigger collective of the Bangsa Sug or Tausug nation. This view is popularized and supported in myths like the Johore original

dispersal theory and endorsed by well-loved and much-quoted Moro historians Cezar Adib Majul and also Najeeb Saleeby). It is worth noting that the Johore Original Dispersal Theory however has been debunked in findings of deep ethnography and linguistics, by foreign researchers an analysis also taken by contemporary historians who remind us of the value of the process of history as “long duree”, where the lasting impacts of events making up history in the long run should be more decisive in shaping the narrative landscape of a certain civilization, rather than basing it from an atomistic appreciation of isolated events as the unit of historical analysis. We are also cautioned from being overly passionate, which could risk our turning dogmatic and ahistorical in our appraisal of social changes. But these too are easily dismissed as that of “colonial” vantage, because these historians are mostly western educated and foreign, mainly Americans and Europeans, scholars and Philippine educated local historians usually reading from colonial records and quoting mainstream (i.e., Philippine) history.

Religious marginalization

Meanwhile, it is also important to establish the link of the Sama identity to the first propagators of Islam, the Hadrami missionaries from Yemen, consisting of the shariffs and sayyeds, especially since the first known mosque in Sulu was in Boheh Indangan in Simunul island. It was established by a man known only by the generic referent as the “Learned” of “Makdum” (i.e. “Shaikh Makdum”). Up till today, a number of “tampat” or revered graves of local saints are found in traditionally Sama island communities, one of them being that of Tuan Awliya Imam Hassan of Laminusa island. What is interesting to know is that the present strain of Islam that many Sama community still practice is a syncretic variant of the sufi tradition, proof that the old teachings of the early Muslim Sufi saints are still extant and rooted in the Sama religious tradition. The variant of Islam as Sufi influenced is, however, considered by the Ahlus Sunna (i.e., sunni Islam) that majority people in Sulu follow, as “folk islam” and a form or bid’a or innovation, which is also taken to mean a “form of deviance”.

Economic disenfranchisement

Another historical gap that needs unearthing consists of the travails of the Sama Ba’ngingi. The conventional view places these fierce marauding and maritime experts to be newcomers in Sulu Zone, gaining fame and attention only toward the end of the 18th century. Before that, they were as common and random as any Sinama-speaking ordinary fishers and slave raiders “infesting” the SEA peninsular waters. Due to the boom of trade and the increasing influence of the Sulu sultan, the Ba’ngingi found their economic use as retainers and patrons, supplying marine commodities and delivering slaves to the Sulu kingdom and serving the naval force of the royal army, earning them the honor “defender of faith” (Majul). Toward the close of the 19th century, however, alongside the decline of the sultanate in what Anne Reber (1966) called “the decay of [maritime] economy” was the gradual marginalization of the *Sama raja laut* (masters of the sea) and the easing out of the Sama Ba’ngingi and the Ilanun from the center of the maritime political scene. This was helped in no small measure by European and British incursions into the Sulu-Borneo basin, which stigmatized and outlawed slave-raiding and contraband trading as piratical, of which the Portuguese and Spanish religious missions in the Philippines subsequently labeled as unethical and religiously immoral. This has become the justification for Spain to escalate its colonial campaigns and pursued its conquests of the Muslim Sulu kingship society that lasted for 300 years in a so-called “wars with the Moros” that called “Guerras Piraticas”. The coming of American invaders would ‘resurrect’ the old pride of the Ba’ngingi, as many of its leaders and nobility became coopted into the colonial administration and are now unfairly judged by history as collaborators.

What seems amissed in this historiography was the sustained and enduring autonomous spirit of the Ba’ngingi, who valiantly defended their traditional governance and the social structures vested on the *Panglima* (chieftain) and the social unit of *banunna* (community). This culminated in a legal campaign and the authoring of the 1925 Zamboanga Declaration petitioning the American Congress

to retain the colonial status of the Sama (Moro province) territory and their willingness to be “Americanized”, instead of being part of the independent Philippine Republic. Many of the Moro leaders who signed that declaration were Sama Bangi’ngi datus, hadjis, and panglimas.

In the meantime, the present political nomenclature of the Sama people has become even more complex and complicated. While the Sama people have come to be understood by deep ethnologists and anthropologists as different and distinct ethnic, on a parallel footing as the rest of the 13 Moro ethnolinguistic grouping; they are also held to an “autonomous nation” within the realm of polity of the Sulu sultanate. In recent times, a new breed of historians, chroniclers, and intellectual leaders, mostly under the retinue of Sulu royalties, have been advancing the view that the Sama have always been part of the hegemony of the Bangsa suluk or Tausug, and were subjects of the Sultan of Sulu. Any contrary claim is interpreted as a betrayal of national loyalty and, in the extreme case, of Islam. Still, other Moro intellectuals consider the claim for autonomy as ethnocentric and, worse, conveniently supporting the colonialist agenda by its tendency to “divide-and-rule”. In the meantime, anti-colonial and postmodern Filipino and Mindanawon scholars affirm, in the spirit of plurality and diversity, and consider it positive, that ethnic communities such as the Sama should assert their autonomy and emancipate themselves, not only from the master frames of foreign colonialists and homogenizing Filipino majority politics, but also from what Pierre Bourdieu termed a “symbolic violence” of bondage to debilitating cultural dictates and psychological control, by local hegemony and patronage. Regrettably, in the din of all these debates and contending views, the voice of the Sama people remains garbled, if not muffled and silenced.

Oral narratives on the common origin of the SEA Sama

This study was an opportunity to search for a shared origin story common to the Indonesia and Sulu groups of Sama in SEA. Of the few so far

that have been made known to this researcher, one version of the Sama cosmogeny can be considered as unique and “unadulterated” by learned scholarships and theories.

The common oral narratives of the dispersed groups of Sama people in Southeast Asia provide initial clues as to how they view the world and how they valorize their self as a people. Common myths on the origin of their peopling and dispersal within the expanse of the southeast asian sea basins of Borneo-Sulu-and-Sulawesi abound. Indonesian inter-religious scholar, Benny Baskara (2010) was able to identify and collect at least five such tales and legends, primarily based on translated versions from the Lontarak Assalena Bajo (translated as “The Manuscript of the Origin of the Bajo of Sulawesi”) of the Bajo of Sulawesi, as made available by his primary reference and also translator of the lontarak to English, Abdulla Anwar (Anwar 2000 in Baskara 2010).

The arts of memory, to which the oral traditions of myths and epics belong, has long been the mode of transference of culture for indigenous communities in Southeast Asia. Orality preceded writing, wrote Nicole Revel (2005), who added that, “oral tradition precedes any attempt to fix a narrative into canonical text”.

And by “knowing nothing”, Revel (2005) reaffirmed the conviction that communal memories contained in stories are not a one-woman repertoire as “the art of orality is independent of individual creativity”. Oral narratives are traditions of the anonymous composition of a cultural community, she notes, where through this, we are able to detect, step by step, and bring to the surface, the hidden structure that underlies the society and culture we have committed ourselves to understand (Revel 2005: 6).

The acknowledged version of the origin of the Sama Dilaut among the Sulu archipelago is similar, but not as detailed, perhaps owing to the fact that the Sulu Sama Dilaut, unlike the Indonesian Bajo people, had no traditional writing system (e.g. similar to the land-based Sulu Sama who had the Jawi

writing). Therefore, the Sama Dilaut's salsilabs are generally transmitted and preserved orally through the epical katakata or plaintive ballads.

One version of the origin myth is summarized in a royal *tarsila* of one of the Sulu sultanate claimants. The story talks of the olden days, where it is said that a princess from the Kingdom of Johore was lost or abducted and all the king's men including the reliable allies, the Bajaus, who were then land-based communities of both agriculturists and fishing societies, were dispatched in search of the princess. The unfortunate searches of both princely nobles and subjects (i.e., Sama and Bajau) resulted to their dispersal in the entire archipelago where many of the contingent failed to return to their kingdom and decided to relocate and settled in the new found territories, consequently forming each of the various kingdoms from Johore to Malakka, Brunei, Sulu, Luwu, and Bone.

As for the Sama and Bajau people, this started the sea-faring societies amongst them, that also brought them scattering all over the region and archipelago; but unlike the princely nobles, they never resettled and instead remained as a society of "floaters" roaming the seas. A similar version is also spoken of in many variants of the same myth, among the land-based [sedentary] and sea-faring Sama in Sulu, where a common tale was of how Sama ancestors went sailing the stormy seas from Johore and were washed away and scattered by big waves. What seems interesting and parallel in the various accounts is that the Johore original dispersal theory purports to strengthen the myth that the Sama people sprang from a centralized and organized polity based and dependent on the existence of a pre-historic Johore monarchy. According to this version, the Sama people were originally land-based agriculturists who were subjects of the Brunei kingship. One time, the Brunei kingdom warred with the Sulu kingdom whereupon the Sama, who were either allies or subjects of the Sultan, defected to the Sulu king and were banished from Brunei. This was similar to the Baskara's Bajo story where the Sama Dilaut were dispatched by the benevolent Brunei king in search of a lost princess. Meeting

strong winds and a storm in the sea, the Sama warriors were lost in the sea and scattered in all directions, and that started the diaspora of communities.

In contrast to the above tales of an unautonomous Sama society, we also hear of accounts that graphically illustrate the free-spirited and autonomous communities of seafarers who stood as co-equal with the rest of the tribes, nations, and sectors of humanity. This version of the origin of Sama ancestors seems to be the strand where Mboh Kuraysiya's account of cosmogenesis is an example:

"[o]nce upon a time, land and sky were only one. Upon the separation [no explanation why] the sky rose and earth descended. The earth had sea and land. On the land along the coast is placed the masjid. While the people from all nations were praying, many fishes swam by. There was excitement and confusion. Some got their spear guns and went after the fish. Others ran toward the hills. Those who went upland became A'a Releya or the people of the plains. Those who dove into the sea became the Pehak Sama or the Sama people"

(Quiling-Arquiza, Alojamiento and Enriquez 1999).

Indeed, to reiterate Revel's (2005) assertion, oral narratives are a kind of "social fresco" where the story weaves a "worldview and a set of values of a given society with traditional ways of life in today's world are revealed to listeners or remembered by them. It is a way to teach, to transmit a heritage".

But other researchers wishing to stretch further beyond the historical constructions by centralized governments and established institutions have had to look beyond myths and found their inferences on equally solid, as in literally material, bases to challenge the master frames of these mainstream accounts. And so they resorted to what might perhaps be considered less mythic, but nonetheless oral narrative in nature but are already preserved in recorded forms: the family genealogies or *tarsila*

[also salsilah] kept by the first ruling class of society. On acquiring such on hand, Margarita Cojuanco (2005) made use of genealogical accounts not only to corroborate studies by linguists and anthropologists to ascertain pre-recorded accounts of past history of settlement and dispersal of the Sama people of Southeast Asia but also to verify and even dispute well-held beliefs in contemporary and mainstream narratives and popular historians' accounts. In her foray into various tarsilas for almost two decades now, Cojuanco (2005, 16) noted in her book: "with the intention of verifying information from Saleeby's Studies of Moro History, Law and Religion, and [Cezar Adib] Majul's Muslims in the Philippines, I undertook a search for tarsilas for the truth or falsity of the "Johore Origin Myth", a recurring oral tradition among the Samal people and the entire Muslimdom!"

Conclusion

Marginality is not solely of minority groups. De Certeau (year) believes that marginality is universal, massive and pervasive. He calls it a "culture activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized" (xvii).

Marginality is not always a lack in number or attributed to numerical inferiority alone; it is all about inclusion into or exclusion from a so-called mainstream system or official institution.

The process of marginalization is a writing-off of culture and a silencing out of subordinate voices from the major narrative and frame of discourse. Because language and writing are a privilege of institution, marginalization is a form of repression and political discrimination, often resulting from economic disenfranchisement or deprivation of the capital to be able to produce culture.

Helping shed light on the shaping of the identity of Sama people as constructed at different junctures in history, throughout various government and politico-religious regimes, this study not only focused particularly on aspects of religion and

culture as the primary shapers of identity, but, perhaps, more important than merely resorting to unrecorded myths and oral narratives, it tried to listen to everyday discourse in the contemporary life and politics of ordinary Sama people.

New religious discourse overwrites, displaces, and erases old ones. Newish religious culture replaces traditional ones.

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