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Fluid Ontologies: Colonial Legacies and an Indigenous Oceanic Worldview in the Sulu Archipelago

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In recent decades in Southeast Asia, dramatic social, economic and political changes have profoundly impacted the lives of Indigenous populations. In Malaysia, the Sama Dilaut, known as the “sea nomads,” are under pressure to abandon their traditional way of living at a time of rapid modernization. Over centuries, the Sama Dilaut have developed a harmonious relationship with their environment, practicing sustainable small-scale fishing methods that have minimal impact on marine ecosystems. In their worldview, humans are not considered exceptional but interconnected with the ocean and species that inhabit it. This contrasts with the Western-centric worldview, where nature-culture dualism prevails, viewing humans as separate from nature and encouraging exploitative attitudes toward the environment. This article outlines and acknowledges the value of the Sama Dilaut culture, knowledge of the sea and struggles against dominant power structures. It advocates for recognizing Indigenous rights to ancestral lands and seas and integrating Indigenous knowledge and communities in conservation practices. These goals are essential for achieving justice for Indigenous peoples and offer significant potential in the search for alternative approaches to combating climate change.

Keywords: Indigenous culture, sea nomads, marginalized community, oceanic worldview, Sama Dilaut



< Fig. 1 Bajau Laut stilt houses outside Bodgaya, Semporna (Source: Abrahamsson, 2018).

Introduction

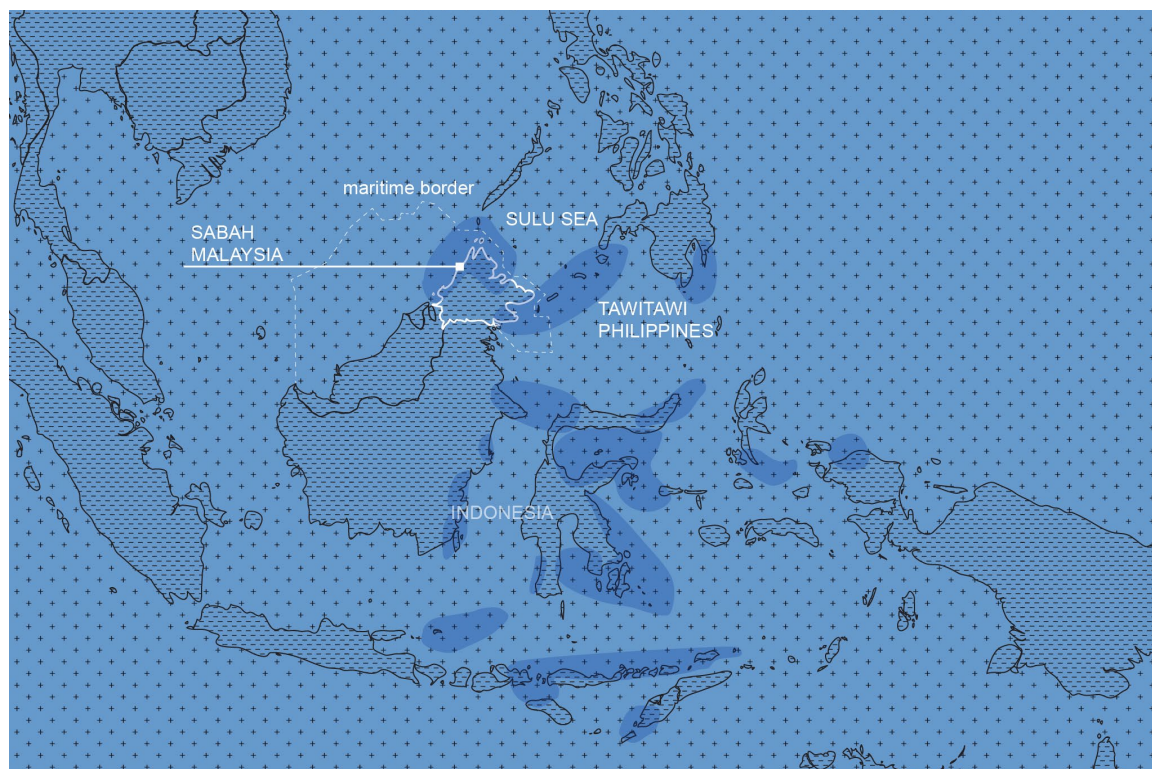
Historically, as terrestrial beings, humans have developed a predominately land-based lifestyle and culture. Compared to land, the ocean has been perceived as distant and unfamiliar — a mysterious and unpredictable space. This perception has contributed to the dominant view of the ocean as external and alien, a space of “others.” It wasn’t until the late twentieth century that the ocean rose to the forefront of geopolitics and cultural and environmental studies.

The 1945 Truman Proclamation, which extended US control of all the natural resources on its continental shelf, catalyzed the global declaration of a 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) by nations worldwide. Decades later, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was established, leading to the remapping of all the oceans on the planet. Simultaneously, an unprecedented number of transoceanic studies emerged, including notable works like Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and Epeli Hau’ofa’s *Our Sea of Islands* (1993). The discovery of the relationship between sea-level rise and anthropogenic climate change has also drawn increased public attention to the ocean (DeLoughrey 2019). In this context, the interdisciplinary field of “critical ocean studies” emerged (DeLoughrey 2019), challenging the terrestrial-biased definition of culture (Williams 1976) and seeking alternative ways of understanding the ocean. Critical ocean studies represents an important shift from a long-term concern with mobility across transoceanic surfaces to theorizing oceanic submersion, thus rendering vast oceanic space into an ontological place with multispecies engagements (DeLoughrey 2019).

Critical ocean studies is linked to the theoretical movements that challenge the dominant

Western power-knowledge paradigm and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and non-human actors. Sandra Pannel (1966) has argued that Western perceptions “tend not to recognize these spaces as culturally defined” but as “watery voids.” Scholars seeking alternative oceanic imaginaries often turn to Indigenous peoples and cultures known for their interconnected relationship with the environment and other species. For maritime Indigenous peoples, the marine environment is not just a source of economic bounty but the center of their cosmology and rituals.

This article sheds light on a group of maritime Indigenous people called the Sama Dilaut (also known as Sama Badjau or Badjau Laut) residing in the Sulu Archipelago of Southeast Asia. In a region with a history of colonialism, rapid modern development and fragile ecosystems, the Sama Dilaut face multifaceted challenges that endanger the continuity of their Indigenous lifestyle and livelihood. These challenges include social discrimination, political injustice and declining fish supplies due to unsustainable commercial fishing and climate change. This article demonstrates their culture’s challenges and tenacious vitality, thriving wherever there is room in the shadow of modernity. In the twenty-first century, although most scholars conducting fieldwork among Sama Dilaut have documented the decline of their boat-dwelling lifestyle (Nimmo 2006), a resurgence of boat-dwelling communities has been observed along the coast of Semporna in Sabah (Abrahamsson 2011; fig. 2). This article reveals how these Indigenous people cope with the impact of modern society and offers valuable insights regarding the harmonious coexistence of humans and the ocean. It serves as a call to researchers and designers from various fields to recognize and value Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, which have long been marginalized by the dominant



^ Fig. 2 Location of Sabah in relation to the maritime border of Malaysia and the Philippines (Source: Di Fang, 2024).

Western knowledge production system. Shifting our perspective this way will open the door to alternative scenarios of our collective future and potential solutions to the ecological crisis.

The Origin, History and Tradition of the Sama Dilaut

The earliest mention of people identifiable as the Sama Dilaut (meaning “people of the sea” in the local language) goes back to the sixteenth century (Sather 1997). The assumption is that they adopted a maritime lifestyle centuries ago to supply the high demand for high-end sea products such as *trepang* (sea cucumber) and shark fin. Since then, from that area, they have spread throughout the adjacent region of the Sulu Archipelago. The sea-dwelling Sama Di-

laut are known as exceptional divers with excellent fishing and navigating skills, and they have historically played a significant role in maritime trade in Southeast Asia. They can hold their breath underwater for a long time to catch the fish, using homemade spearguns, swimming goggles and swim fins (Schagatay 2011; fig 6). In addition to fishing, seaweed cultivation is also a common way to make a living.

There are different theories about the origin of the Sama Dilaut and how they spread and settled on different islands in the Sulu Sea. Linguistic reconstruction has placed the home area of the Sama Dilaut, who speak proto-Sama, around the Zamboangan coast of southwest Mindanao and the neighboring island of Basilan (Pallesen 1985). According to Robert Blust (2007), the historical migration has resulted in the “geograph-

ically displaced language” of the Sama Dilaut, severing their culture and language from the dominant Philippine and Malaysian cultures.

The Sama Dilaut were traditionally animistic and this orientation is retained in contemporary Sama Dilaut communities. In their mythology, the supreme deities are *Umboh Dilaut* (lord of the sea) and *Dayang Dayang Mangilai* (lady of the forest). *Umboh Tuhan* is regarded as the creator deity who made humans equal to animals and plants (Hussin and Santamaria 2008). They also have *umboh* (ancestor), which refers to ancestral spirits believed to influence fishing activities (Jubilado et al. 2011). In the Sama Dilaut worldview, the gods and goddesses are not bound to a specific place but are present wherever the sea is. This outlook, centered around a special relationship with the ocean, can be described as an oceanic worldview.

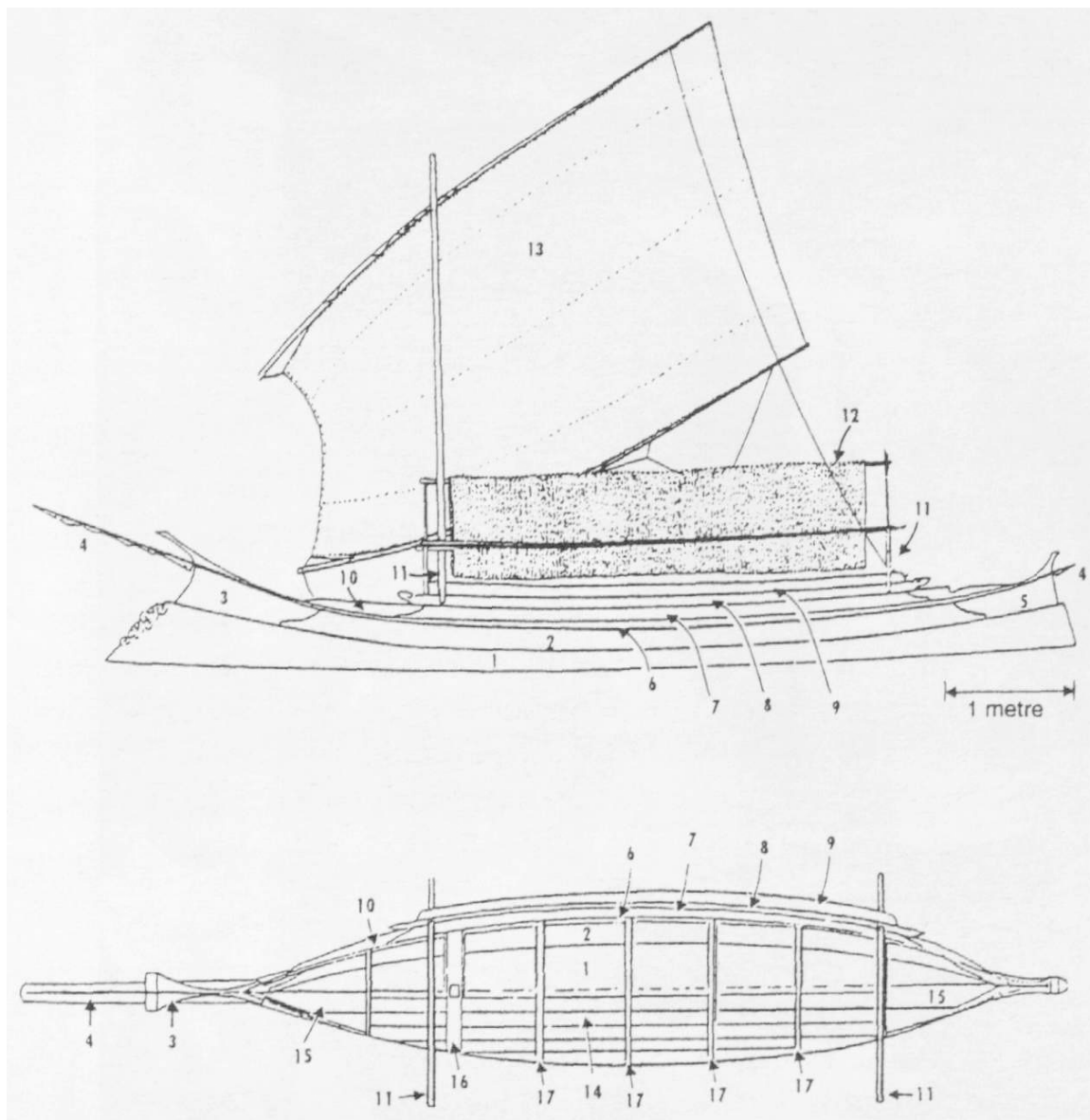
The *lepa* (houseboat) plays an important spiritual role in the lives of sea-dwelling Sama Dilaut (figs. 3 and 4). In the nomadic past of the Sama Dilaut, before a young man was to be married, his family would build or buy him a *lepa*, so he and his wife could live as an independent fishing unit. Upon his death, his *lepa* would be disassembled and serve as his coffin for burial. Family *lepa* usually tow smaller dug-out canoes called *buggoh* or *birau* made from a single log (fig. 5). The boat-dwellers, usually related to each other, would share a common place where they moored their boats, eventually forming a “moorage” collectively. Before undertaking long or dangerous journeys, a *lepa* is often blessed with magic spells to protect it from pirates. The Sama Dilaut also pledged to *Tuhan Dilaut* and the *umboh* for protection at sea (Sather 2001). The ocean is their homeland, and the *lepa* ties them together while ancestral spirits guard them wherever they travel, from the cradle to the grave.

Sama Dilaut in the Bordering State of Malaysia-Philippines under Colonial Legacies

Unlike land-based cultural communities, the Sama Dilaut does not recognize land ownership and arbitrary nation-state borders imposed by land-based power. They recognize only the sea, the reefs, sacred sites and burial grounds, mostly found in mangrove areas partially submerged in water, as their “ancestral domain” (Alamia 2005). They see the sea as a single interconnected space where they can move as far as the water flows, as their ancestors have been doing for centuries (Solomon 1970). Free movement on the water is the lifeline of their culture, defining the periphery of their place, family connections and food sources. However far they travel, the tie with their ancestral lands and seas is unbreakable, and they regularly visit their places of ancestral origin. Many Sama Dilaut who settled along Sabah’s east coast migrated from the Southern Philippines and periodically have returned to Philippine waters, often to their places of ancestral origin in the islands of Tawi Tawi and other sites in the Sulu Archipelago or Palawan (Acciaioli et al. 2017).

Sabah is a Malaysian state bordering the Southern Philippines. Historically, it was ruled by the Sultanate of Sulu before the British North Borneo Company came to power in the nineteenth century. After colonization, it became part of contemporary Malaysia. Due to its relationship with and proximity to the many islands that comprise the Sulu Archipelago, it is a major destination for migration among the Sama Dilaut in the Southern Philippines.

Both colonial and post-colonial governments view the Sama Dilaut’s transboundary movements as security threats and have attempted to sedentarize and accommodate them in stilt houses on land. Between 1901 and 1910, the



^ Fig. 3 Sketch of a *lepa*: 1 *Teddas* (keel), 2 *Pangahapit* (strake), 3 *Tuja'* (bow section with raised poling platform), 4 *Jungal* (side-pieces ending forward in a projecting bowsprit and aft in a small stern projection), 5 *Tuja' buli'* (stern section), 6 *Bengkol* (lower sideboard forming fitted gunwale), 7 *Kapi kapi* (middle sideboard), 8 *Koyang koyang* (upper sideboard), 9 *Dinding* (wall of living quarters), 10 *Ajong ajong* (forward side-piece) (Source: Sather, 2001).

British North Borneo Company introduced new policies restricting the Sama Dilaut's mobility and incentivizing permanent settlement. In 1963, Sabah gained independence by signing

the Malaysia Agreement, which included specific conditions to ensure special interests and safeguards for Sabah. Embedded in the constitution and federal laws, these conditions have



^ Fig. 4 A lepa used by a family on Danawan Island (Source: Abrahamsson, 2011).



^ Fig. 5 Sama Dilaut kids in a buggoh/birau (dugout canoe) in Omadal (Source: Abrahamsson, 2015).

made entry and residence registration in Sabah extremely strict.¹

The strict border controls have reinforced the arbitrary post-colonial national borders that divided the transboundary maritime region, exacerbating the pressure on the Sama Dilaut to abandon their nomadic lifestyle. Under this pressure, some have settled permanently on land and adopted a more terrestrial lifestyle over time. Others have continued to ply the seas in their *lepa*, at least for part of the year. Many have built stilt houses in coastal areas where they live outside the fishing season and engage in other activities such as seaweed cultivation (fig. 1). Consequently, the moorages of the Sama Dilaut are being replaced by sedentary settlements along the shorelines, most of which are rather permanent (Jumala 2011). Even more troubling than this shift toward sedentarization, the Sama Dilaut are often regarded as illegal migrants in Malaysia despite long periods of habitual residence. Their lack of legal status severely threatens their most basic human rights and subjects them to discrimination by the government and other groups (Acciaioli et al. 2017).

Coastal development driven by economic growth and tourism further exacerbates Sama Dilaut's displacement. With no legal status and limited knowledge of the administrative system, they are stigmatized as "uncivilized" and "backward" by the government and other groups, leading to their removal from coastal areas to maintain a positive image for tourists and consumers. In the documentary *Sama Dilaut*, Rosalyn Dawila Venning, the founder of the Indigenous Children's Learning Centres (ICLC), a non-governmental organization, talked about

her experiences working with Sama Dilaut children in an educational program. She shared how the kids were often picked on because people thought they smelled like fish. To help with this, Venning and the teachers would wash the children at the start of the school day, hoping to ease the stigma and help them fit in better with their classmates.

Additionally, the establishment of Marine Protected Areas and competition from commercial fishing companies further restrict the Sama Dilaut's access to their traditional fishing grounds. These economic activities and conservation efforts follow a Western style of development and overlook the rights, livelihoods and profound knowledge of Indigenous peoples like the Sama Dilaut, contributing to their marginalization and displacement from their ancestral domains.

In the first week of June 2024, Malaysian authorities evicted hundreds of sea nomads from their homes off the coast of Sabah state. Their houses and boats were burned in an effort that the authorities claimed was aimed at boosting security and combating cross-border crime. This operation targeted the Bajau Laut (Sama Dilaut in Malay) community living on seven islands in Semporna, including Pulau Bohey Dulang, Pulau Maiga, Pulau Bodgaya, Pulau Sebangkat and Pulau Sibuan (Latiff 2024).

The loss of their traditional livelihoods has forced many Sama Dilaut to adapt to land-based urban lifestyles with little knowledge or support (Abrahamsson 2011). Without the right to land, legal identity or access to legal employment, they face food insecurity and exploitation by other ethnic groups. The once vibrantly rich sea-nomadic lifestyle of the Sama Dilaut now

1. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Federation of Malaysia, North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore. 1963. "Agreement relating to Malaysia." https://web.archive.org/web/20110514204944/http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1_60000/21/36/00041791.pdf.



^ Fig. 6 Bajau Laut speargun fishermen, Kulapuan Island, Semporna (Source: Abrahamsson, 2012).

faces extinction due to the legacy of colonization, modern economic models, and biased land-based systems.

Conclusion

The ongoing struggles of the Sama Dilaut reveal the deep scars left by colonial legacies and the persistent marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and ways of life. The forced sedentarization, legal discrimination and loss of access to their traditional fishing grounds reflect the broader issue of how modern, Western-centric models of development continue to undermine Indigenous communities. In recognizing the rich oceanic knowledge and sustainable practices of the Sama Dilaut, we find not only a call for justice but also a potential pathway to more ecologically sound and inclusive futures.

A report from the World Bank (Sobrevila 2008) demonstrates that areas where Indigenous peoples have traditionally lived tend to have greater natural biodiversity than other areas. For centuries, the Sama Dilaut inhabited areas with some of the richest marine biodiversity without depleting natural resources. Spencer Greening (La'goot/Tsimshian) has explained the conceptualization of nature for Indigenous people (Reed et al. 2024): "There isn't really a word for [nature] in a lot of languages. And so it only becomes something when we other it. In an Indigenous sense, nature is just our place, our home, and where we belong to. And you wouldn't need to define it in that way. But [. . .] in the Western sense, we're able to define it because we've othered it." Many scholars have echoed this point in describing Indigenous relationships with more-than-humans. According to Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), more-than-humans in an In-

Indigenous context must be broadly understood as relatives or teachers for humans, who have the least experience with how to live reciprocally with the world around us (Reed et al. 2024).

To form new visions of a collective future that includes all species and nature together, we need a transformative shift away from the prevailing Western-centric ways. Recognizing Indigenous peoples' rights and culture is the first small but crucial step toward this larger change. To protect the Sama Dilaut, a maritime-based Indigenous group, there is an urgent need to reform the current land-based system to include ocean space. By recognizing their rights and embracing their oceanic worldview, we not only protect their heritage but also enrich our understanding of the ocean as a material and cultural space. This ultimately enhances the concept of "thinking with" the ocean and exercising the interconnectedness of all life.

Policy Recommendations

- Recognize Indigenous rights to both ancestral lands and seas.
- Integrate Indigenous knowledge and communities in conservation practices.
- Promote cultural preservation.
- Enhance education and awareness.

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