Research Trends on Southeast Asian Sea Nomads

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Sea Nomads in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia, a region encompassing an expanse of coasts and islands rich in varied maritime resources, is known widely for its long-established maritime traditions. What is regrettably less known is the phenomenon of sea nomadism. The history and culture of the mobile boat-dwelling people, often known as sea nomads, dates back many centuries. Today, they continue to traverse the waters of the archipelago and to challenge the classical idea of citizenship that is defined within bounded territories and guaranteed by a sovereign state. Their continued widespread distribution throughout the area bears testament to a very different indigenous perception and mapping of the region.

Debates have broiled over the most appropriate term of reference for the boat-dwelling mariners, variously known as “sea folk,” “sea gypsies,” “sea people,” “boat people,” “sea roaming groups,” “maritime mobile groups,” and “sea hunters and gatherers.” These terms have all proved lacking in scientific and ethnographic merit. In comparison, the term “sea nomads” has steadfastly remained the term of preference by the general public, researchers, and officials. This is not to say that the term “nomad” has not been disputed. Opponents of this appellation maintain that it is etymologically derived from the Greek expression nomás which means “moving around and living on pasturage.” Hence, the argument goes, the word is irrelevant for maritime communities. Proponents of the term nonetheless argue that contemporary anthropological usage has broadened its meaning to include all groups of people who practice spatial mobility to enhance their well being and survival.

Communities of sea nomads are widely regarded by other inhabitants of the area as the orang asli of the region. This term has been translated variously as “indigenous peoples” (Chou 1997) or as “true,” “genuine,” and “real” inhabitants (Sather 1997:17, 20). Whichever translation one is inclined toward, the heart of the matter is that the space which others have named “Southeast Asia,” comprising a number of bordered nation-states, is, in contrast, a space of deep emotional and personal meaning for the sea nomads. From the latter’s perspective, it is a space charted by the extent of their sea-faring skills and postulated as a network of places connected by inter-related kinship ties to form what
they call *tempat/tanah saya* (my place or my territory). Based upon these premises, sea nomads claim ownership of and sovereignty over this entire space, despite the interference posed by current political borders.

The existence of early and extensive trade and seafaring networks in the region (Sather 1995) reflects the almost unhampered movement of sea nomads historically. In the past, they were vigorously involved in symbiotic relations with the early Malay states of the western Malay region and later with a succession of sultanates in coastal Borneo, the southern Philippines, and eastern Indonesia (Sather 1997:329-33). In the process, they generated great wealth by providing maritime commodities to facilitate trade, formed a naval force to secure and protect sea lanes that were absolutely vital to the development of maritime Southeast Asia, and served as “integrating information-carriers” connecting subsidiary chiefs with a developing peasantry. These roles were central to the larger-scale integration of an increasingly centralized politics that shaped and developed maritime Southeast Asia (Benjamin 1986:16). Paradoxically, as states emerged, the sea nomads became progressively peripheralized and impoverished. It has reached the point that they are now defined as being on the margins of “otherness” for the culturally and politically dominant populations of the region.

My purpose in this essay is to relate briefly the study of sea nomads to current discussions concerning flexible citizenships, borders, and borderlands. My discussion is based on a selection of works representative of past and present writings, including several recent, unpublished manuscripts—all of which contribute to a more refined, deeper, and coherent understanding of the sea nomads. Regrettably, there is still a dearth of ethnographic studies.

Numerous widely scattered communities of sea nomads can be found all over Southeast Asia. They consist of at least three major ethnolinguistic groups, each with their own histories, culture, and speech patterns. They are: (a) the Moken and related Moklen of the Mergui Archipelago of Burma, with extensions southward into the islands of southwest Thailand (Court 1971; Hogan 1972; Ivanoff 1985); (b) the Orang Suku Laut, literally the “Tribe of Sea People,” comprising diverse congeries of variously named groups inhabiting the Riau-Lingga Archipelago, Batam, and the coastal waters of eastern Sumatra and southern Johor and, until recently, Singapore (Logan 1847; Carey 1970; Andaya 1975; Sandbukt 1982:17; Mariam Mohd. Ali 1984; Wee 1985; Chou 2003); and (c) the Bajau Laut, the largest and most widely dispersed of these groups living in the Sulu Archipelago of the Philippines, eastern Borneo, Sulawesi, and the islands of eastern Indonesia (Sather 1997:2).
The sea-faring activities of the sea nomads today create an endemic sense of anxiety and social instability in state officials. Their mobility and sense of multi-local belonging-ness greatly strains all interpretations and conceptualizations of citizenship within bounded territories. Until the middle of the last century, the sea nomads lived entirely afloat as boat-dwelling fishing communities. Since then, rapid change has occurred as political borders and boundaries have been drawn and re-drawn with the birth of new nations and the question of citizenship.

Unexpectedly, the recent catastrophic tsunami that shook the world brought international media attention to the sea nomads of Southeast Asia (see, for example, “The Wisdom of the Sea,” Bangkok Post, 17 January 2005:1, 8). Unfortunately, it has also given officials an opportunity to pressure sea nomads to become sedentary. State developmental programs have caused an increasing number of families—willingly or unwillingly—to erect pile-houses over the shallow bays that had previously served as spots for boat anchorage.

Revisiting Past and Present Works

A mish-mash of Chinese and Arab accounts are about the only sources of material available for our understanding of the sea nomads before 1500. By putting together the important work of Chau Ju-kua as complied by Hirth and Rockhill (1911) with Ferrand’s (1913) invaluable collection of Arab and Persian documentation of this region, we see how the sea-faring lifestyle and activities of the sea nomads were hastily interpreted and the people themselves presented as “pirates and cruel; sailors dread them” (Chau Ju-kua 1911:11).

Gaps in information on the sea nomads speckle the time chart from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Piecing together European records of exploration, travel commentaries, and passing comments sketchily fills the lacunae. Samples include the following.

- Portuguese references to the Celates or Orang Selat, sea nomads seen in the Strait of Malacca and the Riouw-Lingga Archipelago in the sixteenth to eighteenth century (Barros 1777; Pires 1944). There is also a scattered Dutch and English literature from this period on the sighting of sea nomads in the same area.
- Spanish sources from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries focussing on the Sulu Seas. In particular, the Historia de las islas de Mindanao, Joló y sus adyacentes (1667) is a detailed and comprehensive description of the Spanish frontier by Francisco Combés, a clergyman with a deep interest in customs and languages.
• Portuguese reports compiled by the missionary François Valentijn (1724-1726) on the eastern Bajaus at the end of the seventeenth century.
• English reports, especially the description by English captain and explorer Thomas Forrest (1780; 1792) of the Bajau at the close of the eighteenth century.

The character of these writings was highly descriptive and oftentimes exaggerated. Very much based upon personal “enquiries and conjectures” (Forrest 1780: preface), these narratives were not necessarily based on scientific methods. From the European perspective, the sea nomads were a novel ethnographic phenomenon. Often their habitats remained unknown to the Europeans, who were only able to write about what they occasionally and fleetingly observed from a distance during exploratory voyages. Information about the sea nomads was also contingent on political changes in the archipelago. When the Dutch displaced the Portuguese in Malacca at the dawn of the seventeenth century, Portuguese writers shifted their focus. This is why Valentijn makes little mention of Malacca and Sumatra in his *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* and, compared to earlier Portuguese writings, hardly mentions the Celates.

From the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the study of sea nomads was done mostly by colonial administrators. Contributions such as Findlayson and Raffles (1826 in Gibson-Hill 1973:122) described the sea nomads as a “lower class of Malays.” In 1906, a two-volume compendium of Malayan ethnography by English ethnologist W.W. Skeat and C.O. Blagden was made available. It drew up a classification based on putative physical anthropological distinctions among what the authors regarded as the primitive tribes of Malaya. They incorrectly classified the Orang Suku Laut as primitive forest nomads of the interior of Batam Island and, even more confoundingly, described the “Orang Laut, Sambimba” as possessing no boats and fearing water. This misinformation resulted in a distorted understanding of the boat nomad culture and misled later writers on Malaya such as Heine-Geldern (1923), who relied on this book as a guide to the little known sea nomads of the region.

Skeat and Blagden (1906) also wrote within a political frame of mind that almost completely ignored the ethnographic continuum running from the mainland of Johor through the Riouw (Riau) Islands to the east coast of Sumatra. This led them and others to miss out on a better-informed ethnographic understanding of cultures and histories that did not correlate with recently constructed political borders. Much of the narrative unearthed from these early writings about the sea nomads is configured in encounters between mobile populations in fixed localities. Observing from a distance, the writers of this period did little to map out and understand the movements and migrations of mobile populations. Seen in this light, their understanding of sea nomads stood in a troubled relationship with territorial boundedness.
A long period of silence followed the colonial administrative reports. It was almost fifty years later, in 1954, that the sea nomads were thoroughly analysed in a doctoral dissertation by David Sopher. Initially published in 1965 as *Sea Nomads: A Study Based on the Literature of the Maritime Boat People of Southeast Asia* and reprinted in 1977 with a postscript under a slightly revised title, *The Sea Nomads: A Study of the Maritime Boat People of Southeast Asia*, the work has since become a classic. Based on secondary material of published research and observations by other writers, Sopher’s study is concerned with the cultural patterning and geography of the sea nomads. For the first time, we have a comprehensive study based on geographical methods of the mobile boat-dwelling people “over a very extensive area…stretching more than 2,000 miles.” Sopher looked beyond the confines of political borders and boundaries to present an overview of the cultural geography, migratory movements, and environmental relationships of the sea nomads.

More systematic as well as more scientifically sound work, especially by historians and social scientists, on the society and culture of sea nomads also appeared around the time of Sopher’s publication. Examples of other influential works were Hans Kähler’s 1960 linguistic study, *Ethnographische und linguistique Studien über die Orang Darat, Orang Akit, Orang Laut und Orang Utan im Riau-Archipel und auf den Inseln an der Ostküste von Sumatra*, and Nicholas Tarling’s 1963 historical study, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World*. Although scientifically better informed studies were now materializing, the topic of boat-dwelling mariners continued to be understudied and published works remained sporadic.


The above listing of books, articles, and unpublished manuscripts is but a suggestive and not a definitive list. There are scholars whose works are of the highest quality who could not be mentioned here. An invaluable project to compile a comprehensive bibliography of works on the sea nomads was undertaken by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, in the early 1990s; their findings were published in the first two issues of the *Sama Bajau Studies Newsletter* (1995, 1996).

This body of work of the last forty years is of great value. Much of what has been documented pertains to issues concerning the socialization of time, space, and identity. A substantial amount of literature has also focussed on processes of change, modernization, and development. This interest is due very much to the quickening and broadening processes of economic, social, political, and technological development that have had an impact on intercultural contact everywhere in the post-war decades. Sound research techniques and fieldwork participation have produced more accurate and refined ethnographic detail that integrates viewpoints and experiences both within and between core, semi-marginal, and marginal societies.

For the first time, too, we see fundamental theoretical revisions about the prehistory and indigenous cultural history of the region. New approaches in linguistics and anthropology, including functionalism and structural-functionalism, Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives, and interpretive and postmodernist approaches, have been tried, worked on, and debated. This has opened an understanding of the social organization and cultural premises that structure the sea nomads’ daily life and led to new insights into identity, social hierarchy, and stigmatization at the local, transnational, and supranational scale of sea nomad mobility.

Two recent works can serve to illustrate some trends. The first is James Warren’s 1998 monograph, *The Sulu Zone: The World Capitalist Economy and the Historical Imagination*. This text focuses on the relationship between social groups like the Sama Laut, Iranun, Balangini Samal, and Taosug and their physical environment. It develops a “critical understanding and discussion of historiographical methods and models in problematizing of economic and cultural ‘border zones’ in a changing global-local context” (9). This exciting piece of work involves “framing and re-presenting the ethnohistory of the Sulu zone in its own terms… rather than merely as a corollary of the
history of Western [imperialist] expansion” in the region (13). Inspired by the historiographical formulations and debates of the neo-Marxist dependency theorists, particularly Andre Gunder Frank (1978) and Paul Baran (1957), by the World System approach of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), and by the theories and concepts of Latin American economists and Annales historians, Warren demonstrates the evolution of areas and the concept of “periphery” as “a series of intersections, encounters or ‘historical accidents usually due to contact with foreign formations’ (Meillassoux 1972:101)” (Warren 1998: 14-15). Second, my own forthcoming essay (2005) looks at political and social tensions between fixed national boundaries with inflexible state requirements of citizenship, on the one hand, and the flexible requirements of the Orang Suku Laut of Riau, Indonesia, on the other. This essay reflects attempts in recent research to capture and place the dynamics of sea nomads, well known for their mobility, within the wider social science of borders, citizenship, and nation states.

Closing Thoughts

Although great strides have been made in the study of sea nomads in Southeast Asia, much more research is required. This exercise of revisiting older writings and reviewing recent works has adumbrated potential directions that could lead to new ranges of knowledge in the field. In addition, much of the older ethnographic record—which narrowly looks at the organisation of sea nomads’ travel routes, their techniques for spatial production of locality, and the often humdrum preoccupations of small scale communities—can be reread from other points of view. These issues and ethnographic details can be reconceived as dynamic and exciting interstices of transnational mobility and cultural belongingness. In them we can see how the ideas of community, citizenship, and legal rights are reconfigured, reinterpreted, and reconceptualized in the encounter between mobile populations and nation states.

References

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