

The Bajau Laut
Adaptation, History, and Fate
in a Maritime Fishing Society of
South-eastern Sabah

Clifford Sather

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Preface

MUCH of the way of life described in this book has disappeared or been radically altered. The village in which it is set is today a semi-urban community, its former boundaries very largely effaced and its population increasingly merged and all but indistinguishable from that of the larger port town of Semporna which now almost wholly envelops it.

The research on which this book is based began just over thirty years ago. I first arrived in Semporna at the beginning of October 1964 as a young graduate student in social anthropology. My original plan had been to study the social organization of a sea-nomadic community. However, by the time I arrived in Semporna, the once nomadic Bajau Laut had settled in two permanent pile-house villages located at opposite sides of the narrow straits that separate the Semporna Peninsula from Bumbum Island. The larger of these two villages was Bangau-Bangau and here I began my research.

In 1964, Bangau-Bangau was still a newly founded village. The first houses had been built only nine years earlier, and although the intervening years had been a time of rapid transformation, many elements of the community's sea-nomadic past were still evident. A small section of the village population, somewhat less than one-fifth, remained boat-living; fishing was still the economic mainstay of the community, and most house-living families continued to return to their boats for extended intervals of sea fishing. The result was a pattern of social disjunction in which families moved between aggregation in a settled village community and dispersal at sea in ephemeral, variously organized fishing fleets. Both at sea and in the village, corporate groups were absent. Individuals largely organized their social relationships around collective activities rather than in terms of enduring groups with membership salient across all social and economic contexts. These distinctive features of Bajau Laut social relationships are examined at length in Chapters 5 and 6.

In the 1960s, when I began my research, conventional anthropological models of society were still poorly equipped to deal with communities in rapid transformation (Cohn, 1981). In my original dissertation (Sather, 1971b), I focused chiefly on the internal constitution of the Semporna community as it was at the time of my initial fieldwork, particularly on domestic relations, kinship, and leadership (see also Sather, 1976, 1978). From the outset, however, it was clear that Bajau Laut society also needed

to be understood contextually, as the product of a long-continuing interaction of sea and shore people, and historically, as shaped by events over a longer time period than that encompassed by a single field study. In the Semporna district, the Bajau Laut had been part of a traditional maritime state in the past, the Sulu Sultanate, and the nature of their identity as a community presupposed an encompassing structure of ethnic stratification, trade, and patronage. In writing this book, one of my chief purposes has been to locate this account within such a perspective so as to allow Bajau Laut society to be seen, not only in its own terms, but also both regionally and historically over time and against a changing background of shore and sea relations.

From the beginning, the village of Bangau-Bangau formed the principal site of my fieldwork. For eleven months (October 1964 to mid-September 1965) I lived in the house of the village headman, Panglima Tiring bin Hawani, sharing meals and contributing to the household budget as a member of the headman's large and active house group. I also accompanied the headman, his wife Amjatul, and their younger children on frequent fishing voyages. This arrangement proved to be an especially happy one, both personally, owing to the kindness and conviviality of my hosts, and also in terms of my research. Panglima Tiring's house group occupied the social and physical centre of the Bangau-Bangau community and all matters of general concern were brought, or eventually found their way, to the headman's house for discussion, debate, and, occasionally, for litigation, so that, from this well-favoured vantage point, few occurrences in the village went unnoticed. In August 1965, I paid a series of brief visits to additional sea-nomadic and formerly nomadic communities in Sulu province of the Philippines, spending two weeks in Sitangkai and visiting more briefly Sama Dilaut communities in the Siasi and Tawitawi island groups, travelling also to Jolo and Zamboanga. Some of this travel was done in the company of Bajau Laut families; at other times, I made use of the small inter-island passenger vessels that then plied the Sulu region. Returning by way of Sitangkai, I left Semporna in mid-September 1965.

While a faculty member at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, I had the good fortune to be able to return to Semporna for three weeks in May 1974 and for a further two months (July and August) in 1979 for additional fieldwork. On the latter occasion, I was accompanied by my wife and children, for whom this visit was their first introduction to the Bajau Laut. My son, then nine years old, spent his days in the company of village boys of the same age, and proved himself, like the friends he made, a remarkably adept fisherman and sailor, a natural-born *a'a dilaut*. Altogether, the present book is based on fourteen months of fieldwork. The ethnographic present, except where otherwise indicated, refers chiefly to the fifteen-year interval over which this fieldwork was spread, from October 1964 to August 1979. In July 1994, I paid a further brief visit to Bangau-Bangau.

On a number of occasions in the chapters that follow, I make extended use of individual case histories or record personal commentaries. In

doing so, I have generally used pseudonyms in place of personal names to protect the anonymity of those referred to. Otherwise places and events are, or were, as they appear.

Kuching
October 1995

CLIFFORD SATHER