FROM THE SEAS TO THE STREETS: THE BAJAU\textsuperscript{1} IN DIASPORA IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract. Focused on the Bajau in Purok 4, Tambacan, Iligan City, Philippines, this paper employs participant observation, key informant interviews, and secondary data as its research tools. Findings of the study reveal that uprooted from their home base, the sea-dwelling Bajau continue to become wanderers in urban centers mainly subsisting on begging (ag-pangamuh) and exposing the women and children to street and health hazards. The major concerns affecting them include their day-to-day food needs, lack of livelihood, no regular income from street begging, and poor health and sanitation. Current initiatives of concerned individuals include alternative learning system in situ, educational support to the schooling pupils, feeding during weekends, and initial health/sanitation and alternative livelihood activities.

Keywords: begging and urban survival

1. Brief Situationer

The Bajau are the most sea-oriented people of the Sama-speaking peoples found chiefly in a maritime region stretching from the coastal areas of Zamboanga Bay to the Sulu Archipelago in the Philippines. Panaguiton (2010:3) citing several sources contend that they are known to be navigators, sailors, fishermen, pearl divers, boat builders and mat weavers. They are generally deemed respectful, joyful, simple, humble, hospitable, easily pleased, and go along with others with a high sense of gratitude. In addition, they are described to be hardworking/thrifty, nonviolent/peaceful, and contented/happy people (Teo 2001:5). While there may be variations, Roxas-Lim (2001) describes the Bajau as follows:

Bajau tend to be identified as “nomadic,” subsistence fishing, foraging groups, living in relatively small, isolated enclaves, in areas remote from centers of commerce, industry, and central authority. Their social organization is based on the nuclear family and close blood and affinal kinsmen, and loosely organized communities focused on fishing activities and common mooring places. ... Mainly uneducated, poor, and helpless (until the 1960s), they are prey to all sorts of depredations by more powerful groups (Roxas-Lim 2001:16).

Related literatures show the Bajau are basically nomadic and highly mobile. With the problems of access to sea resources, they have to go where the resources are. Thus, the movement to the urban centers. The massive influx of the Bajau\textsuperscript{2} to the cities indicates there is something happening in their places of origin.

\textsuperscript{1} “Some writers think that Bajau is actually a corruption of the Malay word berjauh, which means ‘getting far apart’ from ‘Johor’, a place believed to be their ‘homeland’ (Bin Hinayat 2002:1 citing Yap Beng Liang, 1977) ... The word ‘Bajaul’ in Brunei-Malay, which sounds like the term Bajau, literally means ‘to fish’” (Bin Hinayat 2002:1). The traditional socioeconomic activities thereby depict the fishing community in the region.

\textsuperscript{2} It is important to note that determining the total number of population of the Bajau in the country is difficult. “Nobody actually knows the exact number” (Vicente, 2001:4), although in the Philippines, according to government figures in 1986, the Bajau population was around 25,000-30,000. The World Evangelization Research Center estimates them to be around 52,200 as of 2000 (http://kcm.co.kr/bethany_eng/p_code4/1104/html). In actual census, the Bajau might have identified themselves as “Sama” and counted as Samal. Intermarriages and movement to other places like Semporna also matter.
Due to the violent clashes between government forces and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) armed groups in the 1970s, a number reportedly fled to many parts of Sabah and several areas in the country. The loss of their traditional fishing grounds to big commercial fishing businessmen has also exacerbated their dismal state. Movement to the urban centers made them more marginalized in the process. In the words of Sather in Bottignolo (1995: vi-vii): ‘…everywhere the Badjao, as a sea people, have tended to be marginalized, excluded from positions of power, despised, and confined to the lowest rungs of the social ladder…’

The Bajau temporary settlement is geographically located in Purok 4 of Barangay Tambacan, Iligan City. This is a coastal community closely located at the mouth of Iligan River and connected to the city’s central market area at Barangay Poblacion by a hanging bridge. It is worthwhile to note that the Bajau’s entry in the Bisayan community who has established residence ahead of the Bajau in the area met with vehement initial opposition from the community. Some Bisayan residents complained that their place is not only a dumping ground of garbage, but also of the Bajau. They think the Bajau are dirty; they called them squatters and mendicants. They accused them of stealing from and harassing fruit vendors and passers by. One Bajau key informant told of incidents that the Bajau children were stoned by Bisayan children. That their hard-earned money taken forcibly by drunk Bisaya loitering in the city. Bajau boys were insulted and physically attacked while girls were reportedly harassed. Conflict between the Bajau and the Bisayan group at Tambacan often finds expression at the water source. The water problem makes them vulnerable to inter-ethnic conflict with the Bisayan residents in the area.

The Bajau mostly come from Basilan, Jolo, and Zamboanga, conflict-ridden areas in Mindanao. As of July 2010, the population totalled 432 with the predominance of females. With observed early marriages, population will most likely multiply fast.

The Bajau are bereft of access to social services. No one is literate among the adults. They are heavily dependent on the public water system connection of their Bisayan neighbours for their drinking needs, washing clothes and dishes, bathing, and all other household water needs upon payment of a fee. With regards to waste disposal, the Bajau houses have no sanitary toilets. A common toilet is being used by them on pay per-use basis, depending on the usage. Php2.00 is charged for solid human waste disposal and Php1.00 for urination.

Respiratory infection is observed to be common among household members and primary complex among young ones. Children are especially vulnerable to infection. Common ailments include fever, cough, cold, bronchopneumonia, sore eye, diarrhea, and skin-related diseases.

Food need is determined on a day-to-day basis mainly dependent on income from begging. Agpangamuh or begging is a key means for survival usually done by almost all of the household members, especially the women and children thereby exposing them to street and health hazards. They earn between P40-P100 daily on the average (42 Philippine peso is equivalent to 1 US dollar). Infants are usually utilized as props. Older girls would sling them around their hips and go about begging in the streets. Some infants are
also made to lie down naked on sidewalks. Other begging strategies include knocking on vehicle windows, sitting on the sidewalks, or going from house to house begging. Boys employ the tambol, which are improvised drums from PVC pipes which they beat to produce rhythms of popular songs. Some children also engage in diving for coins thrown by boat passengers (angedjo). Other sources of income among women are grated cassava or pangi making (magliis) and mat weaving (ag-tepoh), as well as and pearl and fancy jewelry selling among men.

Fig.3. Begging in the city for survival

In general, the major concerns affecting them include their day-to-day food needs, lack of livelihood, no regular income from street begging, and poor health and sanitation. Recognizing the Bajau’s dire condition of poverty and insecurity, what development framework and strategies need to be adopted amidst a harsh urban center far from their sea-based home?

1.1. Need for a People-Centered Development Framework for the Bajau

Since poverty among the Bajau indicates underdevelopment, deprivation and degradation, a call for an appropriate development intervention is a must to enable them to survive their constantly changing environment poverty eradication being part of the international millennium development goals (MDGs). The concept of development as increased capacity is recommended by Bryant and White (1982 as well as by Cuyno et al. (1982). This development comprises four major components, namely: capacity building, equity, empowerment and sustainability manifested by economic progress, wider distribution of this economic progress, productive employment and better social condition (health, education, housing, food and water). Warren Ford (1987) emphasizes development as being humanistic, participatory, democratic, and sustainable. It must pursue the goal of improving the quality of life of the majority of people and realizing the potentials of human personality wherein people take active part for they are the reason, the actors, and the beneficiaries of all development efforts. At the same time, respect for human freedom, dignity and rights are emphasized by Soedjatmoto (1979): “freedom should be the developmental goal, co-terminus with economic growth and social justice for without a democratic atmosphere, a people-centered development is never possible”.

1.2. Quo Vadis, Bajau?

As a social phenomenon, migration is influenced by the push and pull forces in our society. How can the Bajau gain control over their own lives and live as normal human beings when issues and concerns keep piling up? The impending issue of eviction is characterized by failed attempts of the local government to haul the Bajau back to the province. After a while, they always come back in droves and unsurprisingly more in number. Which specific government agency should look into their condition and assist them? The Bajau are not classified as part of the indigenous peoples (IP) listing by government agencies neither part of the program and services with budgetary allocation in the locality. In regard to policy formulation, with the proliferation of the Bajau in many cities in the country from the north to the south, this is a national issue where the situation in their place of origin should be dealt with via legislation and coordination with multi-level agencies. Enactment of a policy after sincere consultation and meaningful participation of the Bajau themselves and stakeholders who are working with them is in order. There are other equally important
political and cultural concerns concerning the absence of traditional leaders and codified customary laws that make them more dispersed and disunited.

It is a daunting task to look deeply into their situation and concretely address their economic, sociocultural, and political marginalization. Their condition poses a continuing challenge on what can be effectively done for the group. In this context, it is worthwhile to quote Nimmo’s epilogue in his “Magosaha: An Ethnography of the Tawi-tawi Sama Dilaut” (2001:233):

…the search for sustenance has taken them to new currents very
different from their past. These currents are without boats and are
flowing toward an uncertain future that will test the survival skills they
learned…

1.3. Recent Private Sector/ Concerned Citizens’ Initiatives

Notwithstanding unsustained past efforts of certain institutions, some private citizens in the locality have addressed a few of the Bajau’s basic concerns such as hunger and malnutrition, lack of livelihood opportunities, inaccessible education, poor health and sanitation, bleak environmental conditions, and social stigma. In May 2011, daily alternative learning system (ALS) classes were conducted in situ among the elderly and young in the overcrowded bamboo and nipa (nypa fruticans) structure in the settlement. Snacks were provided throughout the learning period. As an offshoot of the ALS, 22 young pupils enrolled in the local elementary school for the primary level, although there is an attrition rate of about half due to some economic and social reasons.

A week-end ALS program is established from August 2011 to March 2012 and serves as entry point for other interventions. Concomitantly, a feeding program serves variations of rice porridge (lugao) to almost a hundred ALS participants and other children in the settlement after classes. Bajau leaders were recognized. Lectures and demonstrations on proper hygiene and sanitation were likewise given. Existing traditional and entrepreneurial skills were identified and developed through alternative livelihood efforts (rag making, mat weaving and pearl necklace production). Moreover, innate artistic abilities (traditional songs and dances) were given expression. Some health issues were given attention. Environmental coastal and domestic clean-up efforts were conducted by the Philippine coastguard and nautical students in the locality.

These private efforts are but a small contribution towards community development and capability building among the Tambacan Bajau with their democratic participation. However, these interventions can be sustained only with the institutionalization of collaborative efforts, funding, and monitoring.

2. Concluding Statements

There may be many others in the country in varying levels of marginality but the case of the Bajau is quite phenomenal. They are internal refugees and marginalized victims of the armed conflict, not mere squatters or beggars. The changing concept of sea space increased the competition for resources which, in turn, has resulted to changes in interpersonal relationships, identity, and niche. With the uncontrollable forces surrounding them, their spatial movement highly underscores the need to adapt, otherwise they face the risk of extinction.
Meanwhile, the increasing rate of early marriages in the settlement multiplies more mendicants. A number of them are becoming fluent in Bisaya dialect to enable them to transact business with the outside world. Exposed to the urban setting, the Bajau are now also drawn to modern entertainment such as television sets, cell phones, keyboard organs, cassettes, and karaoke. Like everyone else, they are also caught by change in a fast-paced globalizing world. While they have seemingly low aspirations, behind poverty are smiling faces, generosity, leniency, happy disposition with their “
tambol” (improvised drums), songs, dances, and marital rites and celebrations. Life simply goes on for the Bajau and their children’s children.

Indeed, the Bajau continue to live and survive in a new environment with their own coping mechanisms that negate the essence of meaningful and sustainable development. In the face of this stark reality among the Bajau, an integrated and collaborative development is badly needed. This calls for a people-centered approach that must be truly humanistic, participatory, democratic, and sustainable.

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4. References