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Special Focus

Introduction: Seeing Southeast Asia through a Sea-Nomadic Lens

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Recent academic literature shows an increasing interest in nomadic populations, not as remnants of a distant past but as fully fledged participants in the construction of past and current geopolitical orders (Levin 2020). Among such populations are the "sea nomads" of Southeast Asia. These latter belong today, and in the recent past, to three distinct ethnolinguistic groups: the Moken/Moklen, currently living off the southwestern coast of Myanmar and Thailand; the Orang Suku Laut of the Riau-Lingga Archipelago, the larger islands of Bangka and Belitung, Johor and the southern coasts of the Malay Peninsula; and the Sama-Bajau of the southern Philippines, the east and northeast coasts of Borneo, Sulawesi and the islands of eastern Indonesia.

This Special Focus section is meant to redress the fact that the academic literature dealing with Austronesian-speaking sea nomads is much more extensive for the Sama-Bajau and Orang Suku Laut than it is for the Moken and other sea-dependent peoples of western Southeast Asia. This imbalance reflects at least partly the sources available for these three main groups. For the Moken, comparatively detailed ethnographic accounts only date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (cf. Anderson 1890; Carrapiett 1909;

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White 1922). There are no earlier historical records. In contrast, references to the ancestors of the Orang Suku Laut and Sama-Bajau appear in Chinese and European sources going back to at least the sixteenth century (see Andaya 1975; Falarti 2013; Trocki 1979; Sather 1997; Warren 1981). Archaeological research applied to the history of sea-nomadic groups is still in its early stages of development, although the recent volume edited by Bellina, Blench and Galipaud (2021) includes a valuable summary of the results of this research. Finally, until now, few linguists studied Moken and Moklen (see Lewis 1960; Larish 1999; Pittayawat 2005). To a lesser degree, this is also true of Sama-Bajau.

While space limits prevent us from discussing the contributions of archaeology, genetics and other relevant disciplines, the articles that appear here relating to linguistics, history and anthropology are meant to fill gaps in our current knowledge, particularly concerning the Moklenic populations, and so provide the background for more extensive comparative work regarding Southeast Asia's sea-nomadic communities generally.

In this connection, the two historical linguistics articles on the origins and past contacts of the Moken by Geoffrey Benjamin and Pittayawat Pittayaporn are particularly valuable. Benjamin draws on Alexander Smith's argument (2017, pp. 435–36) that Western Malayo-Polynesian is an invalid linguistic grouping[1] and that Proto-Moklenic, because of its early differentiation from other branches of Malayo-Polynesian, must have been among the earliest Austronesian languages to arrive in the Malay Peninsula, very likely between 3000 and 2500 BP. Building on recent archaeological findings as well as linguistic evidence, Benjamin argues for the involvement of Moklenic groups in the metal trade with land-based Austroasiatic-speaking kingdoms. Pittayawat, in contrast, challenges this interpretation by situating Moklenic in a Malay linguistic ecology. In Pittayawat's view, characteristics of Moklenic that others (Benjamin, this issue; Larish 1999, pp. 417–50) attribute to ancient contact with Austroasiatic-speakers may in fact be the result of prolonged contact with Malay prior to the sixteenth century. Therefore, these two articles present diverging interpretations of Moklenic history: Benjamin suggests a presence of between two and a half and three millennia as well as a large area of dispersal across the Malay Peninsula, while Pittayawat argues for a later northward migration from the Riau Archipelago and sustained contacts with Thai and Burmese languages happening only since the sixteenth century. To temporarily close this discussion, we may retain Benjamin's view that contacts with Austroasiatic- and Malay-speakers may have occurred not as a single process but at different times and places where no Moklenic-speaking populations remain today. If true, today's Moken and Moklen, who arguably shared a common history until at least the fifteenth century (Pittayawat, this issue), could well be the last representatives of a once more diverse ethnolinguistic group.

A process of linguistic convergence similar to that which took place between Moklenic and the languages of adjacent land-based groups in western Southeast Asia also took place between Sama-Bajau and Tausug (the language spoken by the dominant land-based population of the Sulu Archipelago), who later emerged following the rise of the Sulu Sultanate (Pallesen 1985). Also, like the Moken, in the course of their dispersal, Sama-Bajau-speakers also spread into areas where, in this case, not Austroasiatic, but other major branches of the Malayo-Polynesian languages predominate; for example, in the southern Philippines, Sulawesi, the Malukus and eastern Lesser Sundas. Proto-Sama-Bajau appears to have evolved among a formerly riverine population living most likely in the southern Barito River basin of Borneo (Blust 2007, p. 103). As a distinct linguistic grouping, Sama-Bajau emerged much later than Moken if we accept Smith's reconstruction, and presumably, like the Orang Laut, they were initially drawn seaward into the easternmost extension of a first-millennium Malay trading network (Blust 2007, p. 103). Early Malay borrowings in Sama-Bajau give evidence of this connection (Pallesen 1985, p. 9). From Borneo, Proto-Malayic appears to have spread to Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, where, as the Strait of Melaka became a major Asian trading hub, it evolved into the various forms of modern Malay that then spread back to

Borneo and throughout much of island Southeast Asia (Adelaar 2004). In the process, variants of Malay also became the language of the Orang Suku Laut and related groups in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. Historical sources, however, indicate that at least some Orang Suku Laut were originally Aslian, and hence Austroasiatic-speakers, while others appear to have spoken an early, pre-Malay form of Malayo-Polynesian. That the Orang Suku Laut are now Malay-speaking thus appears to relate not to their origin but rather is more likely the product of a comparatively recent language shift (Sather 2021, p. 299).

These historical-linguistic processes underline a common tension or oscillation that has historically existed in relations between sea nomads and land-based polities (and populations) as the latter have sought to bring the former within their economic and political orbit. This tension is historically linked to the emergence of maritime Southeast Asia as a major hub of East-West trade, an emergence in which a variety of seafaring groups, including sea nomads, played a major part. This tension is a major theme in all three of the anthropology papers in this issue. Boutry and Ivanoff, taking oral literature as an entry point, discuss the genesis of a Moken nomadic identity as it arose out of their longue-durée interactions with pre-Islamic Malay populations. Oral literature links Moken identity to a refusal to embrace Islam and resistance to further attempts to integrate them into a hierarchically structured political system. Similarly, Sather shows how the transition from the Sulu Sultanate to colonial and postcolonial governments caused some Sama Dilaut communities to become sedentary and assimilate into an increasingly urban population, while others, newly arrived in Sabah, were consigned to statelessness, some even abandoning former villages and returning to permanent boat-dwelling. Chou also shows that the Orang Suku Laut, despite being honoured in the past with titles from ruling sultans, always maintained a large degree of autonomy by filtering state control and preventing any formation of a state from within their ranks. Sather and Chou stress that the capacity of Sama Dilaut and Orang Suku Laut to evade state control was precisely what made them valuable to island Southeast Asia’s trading states (as opposed to mainland Southeast Asian agrarian states). Various strategies of resistance and encompassment are discussed, such as the use of outsiders like *tauké* (Chinese middlemen) by the Moken (Boutry and Ivanoff), shore-based patrons as go-betweens by the Sama Dilaut (Sather) or *kepala* (head) by Orang Suku Laut communities as brokers to filter the coercive powers of state authorities (Chou).

That sea nomads were never totally enveloped by land-based polities—although never fully autonomous either—is related to another common trait; that is, their adaptability, resilience and capacity to withstand radical change and so perpetuate their identities over time. This Special Focus section is concerned with the history, origins and social life of these sea-nomadic communities and how they have adapted to changes and for the most part maintained their cultural continuity. This theme is central to the three anthropological papers. By exploring the ways these populations are present or exist in the world and the key driving forces that have helped them maintain their identity, the three anthropological papers further advance our understanding of what it means to be sea nomads. Indeed, while there is a renewed academic interest in understanding the role of sea-nomadic populations in Southeast Asian history, there is a risk of losing sight of who we are actually talking about. For instance, Sather clearly demonstrates that not all Sama-Bajau can be considered sea nomads. The Sama Dilaut are in this respect the “real” sea nomads and have a distinct relationship to space, locality and time, as well as to other populations.

As an etic category with its origins in the work of Western scholars (particularly Sopher 1965), it would be fairly easy to dismiss the term sea nomads outright. But the fact that it has been extensively used and debated (Lenhart 1995; Chou 2006) suggests it characterizes a way of being in the world that is different from that of not only inland but also sedentary coastal populations, including maritime fishermen. The term “nomad” has its roots in the Greek *νομὰς*, meaning “pasture”, and later on took the meaning of a people “without a fixed abode”. Emphasizing mobility and the lack of fixed settlement, this definition of nomadism has led many authors to question the actual nomadic nature of sea nomad populations, as it appears that most of them have sea- and land-based territories (or "maritory"), therefore preferring the terms "semi-nomadic", "sea-oriented" or "maritime mobile populations". Postcolonial politics of sedentarization have cast further doubt on the relevance of the term sea nomads to characterize these populations in modern times. However, Chou and Sather, by building on Deleuze and Guattari's work on nomadism (1987; 2010), demonstrate that physical mobility less defines nomadism than their relationship to space and time, their sociopolitical structures and relationships to surrounding polities. Contrary to state-sedentary societies inhabiting "striated space", sea-nomadic groups link their identity to a "smooth space" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 381) in which the sea links everything. Hence their "portable identity" (Sather), which enables them to meet and connect to other "'sea people', and, in times of trouble, to find among them shelter and possibly even a new home". This singular relationship to the sea as defining a nomadic and "shareable" identity is also well illustrated by Boutry and Ivanoff, who describe how the Moken can easily connect, for instance, to the Urak Lawoi',[2] despite their different linguistic and historical backgrounds. Sociocultural adaptability is therefore a common trait of sea nomads. Chou illustrates how an Orang Suku Laut can be a member of at least two groups: a paternal kinship group and a maternal kinship one. They can regularly adjust their marital residence, depending on where they would have the best opportunities to eke out a living or find relatives with whom to live and work. Most importantly, this contingent and flexible arrangement enables a more even distribution of their population throughout the archipelago.

The anthropological papers also highlight divergences between the three sea-nomadic groups discussed here. One difference lies in their claims to territorial rights. The traditional seasonal sedentarism of the Moken has no counterpart among the Sama-Bajau and the Orang Suku Laut. In claims to territorial rights, different groups of Orang Suku Laut claim collective ownership over different islands and coastal areas. The ownership and rights over a territory are contingent on each group's exclusive story. The crucial aspect is the claim that they were the first to recognize the potential of the area as a moorage ground or as a place to be cleared of jungle for settlement (Chou 2010, pp. 59–66). While the Sama-Bajau generally exercise claims to territorial rights like the Orang Laut do, the Sama Dilaut, in contrast, are, or at least were, genuinely landless. Today, this condition has had disastrous consequences, causing some to be classified as "irregular" or "stateless migrants" without permanent residence in any one state—hence making them legally "invisible" from the perspective of the nation-state (Girard n.d.). Like the Moken, the Sama-Bajau have traditional oral epics (Revel 2012, p. 128). These, however, are not about past migrations or encounters with other ethnic groups, as in the Moken case, but tell the adventures of upper-world heroes and heroines; i.e., they are not situated within a landscape of specific places through which the ancestors are believed to have journeyed.

There is obviously a need for more comparative studies of sea-nomadic populations. Convergences and divergences in theorizations of identity and its perpetuation ought to relate to issues of language maintenance and transformation as explored through the two historical linguistics papers. The examination of Moken oral literature by Boutry and Ivanoff arrives at the same conclusion as the linguistics-based suggestion of Pittayawat that the Moken may not have been directly connected to the power centres present in the Strait of Melaka but rather interacted with individuals from the northern regions of the Malay Peninsula. A closer examination of the modalities of interactions between sea-nomadic societies and land-based polities—together with the sociopolitical organizations of these polities—may help us better understand divergences among sea-nomadic groups. The Sama-Bajau and Orang Suku Laut shared a long-standing relationship with states of a "segmentary" nature (Kiefer 1972, pp. 41–43) that allowed "marginal people" living on their peripheries, like sea nomads, considerable autonomy and political independence, while these people still acknowledged the symbolic sovereignty of the centre. In the Sulu Sultanate, these positionally defined segments differed by rank, economic activities and ethnicity (Sather 1984, pp. 7–11; 1997, pp. 35–44). Within this system, the Sama-Dilaut, as sea nomads, occupied the lowest rung (Sather). In contrast, Orang Suku Laut groups took on more or less important statuses in their relationship with rulers, to whom ties varied with their distance from centres of political power (Chou). The comparatively recent language shift (in contrast to Sama-Bajau- and Moklen-speakers) of Orang Suku Laut to Malay may indicate that the development of their identity as "sea people" was contemporary and embedded in the political organization of sultanates of the Strait of Melaka. In contrast, Sama-Dilaut identity arose from a diversification among Sama-Bajau-speaking groups and the differentiated status they came to occupy in the political structure of the Sulu Sultanate. The Moken and Moklen may be the last of a once more widely distributed ethnolinguistic group most of whose members were later integrated into the various land-based polities in mainland Southeast Asia. The present-day Moken were able to thrive as sea nomads when they reached the Mergui Archipelago, an intermediary space beyond the control of island Southeast Asian polities, and have yet—at least until recently—to be integrated into the modern Burmese and Thai mainland states.

While these final suggestions remain largely speculative, we trust that the ideas presented in the articles that follow will stimulate further comparative work and so advance our understanding of these resilient sea-nomadic populations, both past and present.

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