

## UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY AND DIASPORA: THE CASE OF THE SAMA-BAJAU OF MARITIME SOUTHEAST ASIA

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### **Abstract**

*The Sama-Bajau or the Sinama-speaking peoples are deemed to be the most widely dispersed indigenous ethno-linguistic group in maritime Southeast Asia. The Sama-Bajau “diaspora,” which constitute a locus of points across territorially-defined spaces, gives rise to specific socio-cultural contexts which in turn results in the emergence of distinct notions of identity. This diaspora, therefore, gives the student of culture the opportunity to observe ethno-genesis as either “completed,” incipient or on-going processes of the creation of identities that exhibit rare tensions between ideas of sameness and difference. The former is a function of a common origin, which may be real or perceived, while the latter results from site-specific sources of distinction such as those brought about by socio-cultural adaptation to environment, intercultural contact with other peoples or other external sources of culture change. This article interrogates this tension between sameness and difference through a selection of examples seen in labels of self-designation, language, and, religious and ritual practices.*

**Keywords:** Sama-bajau, diaspora, ethnic identities, maritime state

### **INTRODUCTION**

A very brief review of the literature of the seminal publications on the Sama-Bajau reveals that they consist mainly of ethnographies or socio-economic histories of the people in the three territorial areas of the Philippines (Nimmo, 2001 and Bottignolo, 1995), Malaysia (Sather, 1997 and Obon, 1999); and Indonesia (Stacey, 2007 and Saat, 2010). More recent publications focus on ritual and performance (Hussin and Santamaria, 2012 and Abels with Hussin and Santamaria, 2012). This article aims to link the three territorial areas of the Sama-Bajau through an interrogation of notions of ethnic identity a within the context of the so-called “diaspora” in the region of maritime

Southeast Asia. It will be shown that Sama ethnic identity is characterized by tensions between notions of sameness and difference. This interrogation is pursued through the use of data gathered by the author in the field as well as through data from recently published materials written by known experts in the area of Sama-Bajau studies. The first section of the paper reviews basic concepts of “diaspora” and “ethnic identity.” The second section reexamines “Sama-Bajau” and other related labels as markers of ethnic identity. The third section looks at the theme of language and identity. The fourth section examines religion, ritual practice and identity. This article concludes with a discussion of the notion of “fluid identities” found not only

among various groups of Sama-Bajau, but also among other ethnicities in Southeast Asia.

### “DIASPORA” AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Before proceeding any further, it is best to present definitions of the two basic concepts of this paper. The first concept is that of the “diaspora.” Some rethinking of the concept of diaspora must be done in order to appropriately capture the condition of the Sama-Bajau of maritime Southeast Asia. The word diaspora is understood to refer to “that segment of a people living outside the homeland” (Walker Conner as cited in Sudesh, 2006, p. 32). More often than not, it is associated with the dispersal of the Jewish people from their so-called promised land. Since it is quite beyond doubt that the central region of maritime Southeast Asia is the “home” of the Sama-Bajau, the historical usage of the word may not be most appropriate in describing their situation. Worth considering is William Safran’s (cited in Sudesh, 2006) detailed operationalization.

Connor’s definition be extended and that the concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral,’ or foreign regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland --- its physical location, history and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not --- and perhaps cannot be --- fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return --- when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal

consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (p. 37)”

Examined closely and related to local lore, the first, second, third and sixth characteristics appear to apply to the Sama-Bajau. The first need to be slightly modified to read: “they or their ancestors, must believe that they have been dispersed...” Return to the supposed homeland (the 4<sup>th</sup>) and commitment to its restoration (the 5<sup>th</sup>) do not appear to be aspirations presently expressed by the Sama-Bajau. Specifically, many Sama-Bajau communities claim that Johore in the Malayan peninsula is their point of origin. This point of origin is contained in Sama-Bajau myths with many variants. The following is an example of such an origin myth as noted by Sather (1997):

“The Bajau came originally from Johore. Once a Johore princess disappeared during storm at the sea. The Sultan of Johore organized a group of people to search for her. However, the lost princess could not be found, and the people who were looking for her found themselves far from Johore, and were unable to find their way back again, and so they settled down along the coastal areas of Borneo, Sulawesi, and in the Sulu Archipelago. (p.17)”

Myths of origin must not be taken literally. Hoogervorst contends that “such claims “must be contextualized in a setting of semi-mythological lineages from... patron-client relations with ruling dynasties” (Hoogervorst, 2012, p. 252). Sather (1997) explains that the myths link them to “the most prestigious of all Malay kingdoms... Johore... was heir to Malacca, the later claiming, through Palembang, an uninterrupted chain of succession from Srivijaya...” (p. 17). In the opposite side of the maritime Southeast Asian region, specifically in the area of Selayar in South Sulawesi, parallel origin myths exist. However, instead of Johore, Luwu, Goa and Bone are mentioned as points of origin. (Sopher, 1965, p. 160-161, Liebner, 1996, p. 12 and Nuraini, 2012, p. 148) The link with these kingdoms can be explained by the by the service or utility provided by the Sama-Bajau to these centers. Owing to their sea-orientation,

the Sama-knowledge of the sea currents, the wind patterns, the stars and other features of their water world made them very adept seafarers. This skill made them useful to sultans as allies in trade, raiding and warfare (See: Saat 2003, p. 9 and Hoogervorst, 2012, p. 261). Linguistic evidence points to central maritime Southeast Asia as the “home” of the Sama-Bajau. Pallesen (1985) indicate “the area around Basilan Strait including what is now Zamboanga City” as the habitat of Sama-Bajau speakers sometime in 800 AD (p. 117). Citing the study of Blust, Nuraini (2012, p. 148)) suggests the Barito Estuary in Southeast Borneo as an early point of origin in the process of dispersion. From there, they would have moved up to the area of the Sulu Archipelago and then later disperse southwards again towards the coasts of North Borneo and Sulawesi.

The second concept of importance in this article is that of “ethnic identity.” De Vos (2006) puts forward the definition of an ethnic group as “a self perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of tradition not shared by others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include “folk” religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity and common ancestry or place of origin...” (p. 4) In a nutshell, De Vos therefore views ethnicity as “a subjective sense of continuity in belonging” (p. 11) Therefore, “the ethnic identity of a group consists of its subjective, symbolic, or emblematic use of any aspects of a culture, or a perceived separate origin and continuity, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups” (p. 11). The operative phrase in this definition is “to differentiate themselves from other groups.” This emic-orientation is a most important key in understanding the plural nature of Sama-Bajau ethnic identity. Following the logic of this definition, it may be said that there is not “one” Sama-Bajau identity, but “several” or “many.” Operational problems in defining Sama-Bajau identity(ies) often arise when outsiders attempt to propose blanket definitions or labels. Gusni Saat (2003), for instance, opines that during the

colonial period, the Sama-Bajau had three basic components of identity, “namely the common terms of reference, Sama or Bajau, their language and their religion, Islam” (p. 1). This rather essentialist view of ethnic identity is confronted by several methodological concerns. First of all, Gusni Saat did not specifically indicate the time period for this colonial period which varies across the present-day nation-states of the Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Second, historical records or accounts of the Sama-Bajau tend to be very ethno-centric and spotty at best. Third, ethnographic studies which ought to be able to validate ethnogenesis, that is the emergence and transformations in identity, only started in the region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The following three sections offer a critic of this essentialist view, while at the same time illustrating the highly nuanced character of Sama-Bajau identity (ies).

#### **THE “SAMA-BAJAU” LABEL AS A MARKER OF IDENTITY**

Who are the Sama-Bajau? The label is usually used to refer to the Sama or Sinama-speaking peoples of maritime Southeast Asia. “Sama-Bajau,” however, is a label of convenience. It is a composite label of the autonym, “Sama” and the exonym, “Bajau.” Sather (1997, p. 2) attributes the term to Pallesen (1985) who actually uses the term “Sama-Bajaw” (p. 43). Like the author of this article, Pallesen finds much use in composite term as it can be understood by a very wide range of readers or audiences. In truth, in many places in the Philippines and Malaysia, the autonym “Sama” is hardly recognized by outsiders. “Bajau, “Badjaw” or “Badjao” is the hegemonic exonym. Pallesen observes that “Bajaw” (or its other cognates) “appears to be gaining ground as a self-designation” (p. 43). In Indonesia, particularly in the area of Sulawesi, “Bajo” is the exonym of regular use (Sather, 1997, p. 7). However, this author still encounters many individuals who insist on being called “Sama” or “A’a Sama” (literally, Sama people) in the field. Such being the case, this

author has decided to eschew the use of “Bajau” and its cognates, and to use the label “Sama” habitually when addressing informants in the field. In consultations with state agencies and in academic conferences as well as publications, the

composite Sama-Bajau is used in order to be generally understood.

**Table 1. The Sama Label and its Sub-categories**

<b>Composite/Academic Label</b>		
Sama-Bajau (Sama-Bajaw)		
<b>Self-designation</b>		
<b>Sama or A’a Sama</b>	<b>“Not” Sama</b>	
<b>Sama Self-Categorization by Dwelling Place</b>	Abaknun	Yakan Jama Mapun
Sama Dilaut or Sama Mandelaut (Sea Sama)	Sama Lipid/Bihing (Coastal Sama)	Sama Dileya/Dea (Land Sama)
<b>Self-designation by toponym</b>		
Sama Sitangkai (Sama of Sitangkai Island)	Sama Tabawan (Sama of Tabawan Island)	Sama Simunul (Sama of Simunul Island)

Source: Compiled from Field and Various Sources.

Table 1 indicates the relationship of the composite academic label with labels of self-designation. It should be noted that the Sama-Bajau also categorize themselves according to dwelling place. As such, the Sama of the sea call themselves “Sama Dilaut” or “Sama Laut;” the Sama of the coastal or littoral areas call themselves “Sama Bihing” or “Sama Lipid;” and, the Sama of the land call themselves “Sama Dileya” or “Sama Dea.” Furthermore, they also distinguish among themselves according to toponyms: “Sama Sitangkai” or the Sama of Sitangkai Island; “Sama Tabawan” or the Sama of Tabawan Island, and “Sama Simunul” or the Sama of Simunul Island. When talking with Sama individuals, this author finds the use of toponyms most convenient as it immediately establishes place or origin and the Sama language or dialect spoken.

It should be noted that the Sama Dilaut also call themselves “Sama to’ongan” or true Sama. The land Sama of Sabah call themselves “Sama asli” or native/original Sama. In addition to these designation of self, more exonyms come from the dominant Tausug (aka Suluk) of

the region. The Tausug call the land Sama, “Samal” and have several pejorative terms for the sea Sama such as “luwa’an,” literally, “spat out” or “vomited out;” “lutao” and “pala’u” which some informants refer to “floating excrement.” Needless to say, it is best to avoid using these pejorative terms. In addition to this, in the Philippines, the label “Bajau” and its cognates refer specifically to the Sama Dilaut. It should further be noted that some peoples who are categorized under the Sama-Bajau label do not call themselves Sama or Bajau. These are the Abaknon of Capul Island in the Province of North Samar, the Yakan of Basilan Island and the Zamboanga Peninsula, and the Jama Mapun of Mapun Island in the south-central area of the Sulu Sea (Pallesen, 1985, p. 43). The Abaknon is a Sama-speaking group that was colonized quite early by the Spaniards. The Yakan constitute a Sinama-speaking group that successfully resisted and whose political institutions were eventually recognized by the Sulu Sultanate, thereby earning for themselves an identity all of their own (Frake, 2006 and Sherfan, 1976). The Jama Mapun is a relatively

isolated group that had more interaction with the inhabitant of Sabah.

The review of labels of self-designation as well as so-called accepted exonyms, therefore reveal that Sama identity or identities is more nuanced than that proposed by Gusni Saat's in his assertion about a common term of reference, that is either "Sama" or "Bajau," as a component of identity. The so-called common term is riddled with variation or differentiation, processes of othering and self-othering that matter to the people in the field. Furthermore, the acceptance of the labels is highly differentiated within as well as among groups. In some cases, as in the Yakan, Jama Mapun and the Abaknon, they are either totally rejected or simply do not apply. As such this so-called component of identity ought to be received critically. Ironically, the label of Bajau or Sama, which may mean "same," "being one," or "together," is not uniformly received by all Sinama-speaking peoples.

### **SAMA-BAJAU LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY**

Pallesen (1985, pp. 45-50) identifies ten major groupings of Sama-Bajau languages comprising of 44 distinct languages or dialects. These are: 1) AB: Abaknun; 2) ZB: Zamboanga or Sibuguey Bay (Sama Batuan, Sama Lutangan, Sama Sibukuq); 3) Yakan: YK (Northern Yakan, Southern Yakan), 4) Northern Sulu: NS (Tagtabun Balangigniq, Tongquil Balangingiq, Linungan, Panigayan Balangingiq, Landang-Guaq, Mati, Sama Daongdong, Kawit Balangingiq, Karundung, Pilas); 5) Western Sulu: WS (Sama Pangutaran, Sama Ubian); 6) Central Sulu: CS (Sama Kaulungan, Sama Dilaut, Sama Musuq, Sama Laminusa, Sama Balimbing, Sama Bannaran, Sama Bangaw-Bangaw, South Ubian); 7) Southern Sulu: SS (Sama Tanduuq-baas, Sama Simunul, Sama Pahut, Sama Sibutuq, Sama Sampulnaq); 8) Jama Mapun: JM; 9) Sabah Land Bajaw of North Borneo: NB (Kota Belud Bajaw, Kawang Bajaw, Papar Bajaw, Banggi Bajaw), Putatan

Bajaw; and, 10) Indonesia Bajaw: IB (Sulamu, Kajoa, Roti, Jaya Bakti, Poso, Togian-1, Wallace, Togian-2, Minahasa).

These Sama-Bajau languages exhibit varying degrees of cognacy or shared vocabulary. Table 2 shows the results of a test done by Pallesen based on a 193-meaning list. A score of 75% and above may be considered high in terms of mutual intelligibility, while a score below 75% may be considered low. Note that only 13 pairings out of 66 score above 75%, thus indicating the very heterogeneous nature of this family of languages. Intelligibility is therefore relatively low among groups, even those that are quite proximate to each other in terms of location or distance of living spaces from each other. This highly empirical data pointing to low intelligibility further cast doubt on the idea of the Sama-Bajau language as a significant component of identity. The notion of sameness, that is the idea of belonging to a larger language group, is checked by the very real challenge of intelligibility. This linguistic paradox uncovers a very problematic tension between "sameness" and "difference," thereby making language a rather unreliable peg in the issue of Sama-Bajau identity.

**Table 2. Adjusted Scores of Sama-Bajau Languages Based on a 193-meaning List**

<b>AB</b>
63 <b>YK</b>
63 66 <b>ZB.1</b>
68 71 <u>82</u> <b>ZB.2</b>
66 68 <u>79</u> <u>81</u> <b>ZB.3</b>
65 65 66 73 72 <b>WS.1</b>
69 68 73 73 <u>79</u> <u>82</u> <b>NS.2</b>
67 68 68 76 76 <u>86</u> <u>81</u> <b>CS.2</b>
64 63 70 74 71 <u>76</u> <u>79</u> <u>82</u> <b>SS.4</b>
63 61 67 71 67 69 72 73 <u>78</u> <b>NB.1</b>
63 67 63 67 67 71 71 73 71 <u>74</u> <b>JM</b>
60 61 63 67 67 68 72 70 72 63 67 <b>IB.1</b>

Source: Pallesen, 1985, p. 112.

Nuraini (2012) agrees with the assessment of Pallesen (1985) and Akamine

(2005) “that Indonesian Bajo is a language in its own right within the Sama-Bajau linguistic family...” (p. 146). She notes that there are at least two major dialects in this group: one found in Northeast Kalimantan and Northwest Sulawesi separated by Makassar Strait, and another found in the Flores Sea area of Southeast Sulawesi, Kangean and Lesser Sunda Islands. (Refer to Figure 2 for a map of languages). She therefore concludes that “while language could be regarded as a common denominator in defining Bajo identity in Indonesia, this not a reliable indicator in the case of the Bajo community due to the linguistic variety pointed above” (p. 146, underscoring mine).

### RELIGION AND BELIEF SYSTEMS AS IDENTITY

Just like labels of self-designation and language, Sama-Bajau religious practices and belief systems significantly vary across time and space. It has been observed that the more sedentary land-oriented Sama tend to practice more orthodox forms of Islam (Jundam, 1983 and Horvatic, 1992). In the Island of Simunul, one of the centers of Islamic knowledge in Tawi-Tawi known for the Sheikh Makdum Mosque, the oldest in the Philippines, Horvatic (1992) notes a lively debate spurred by ideas on religious practice between traditional *imam* who are basically trained locally and *ustaj* who have received Islamic instruction abroad. These debates are usually centered on Sama rituals that not found elsewhere or universally in the Islamic world. Some examples of these rituals to name a few are the *pagtulak bala'*, the ritual stoning of evil done at the shallows of the sea; the *pagputika'an*, a ritual to deremine auspicious days, foretell the future and find lost objects; and, *hinang-hinangan*, a ritual against sorcery. It is quite clear that even in this center of Islamic knowledge production, religious and ritual practices are contested and full of contradiction at the individual level:

“When we focus on individuals, it is difficult ignore the contradiction between the things that people say in different contexts, and between the things that people say and do. Tor example, one teacher dismisses that actions of imam as superstitious and accuses them of being greedy. Upon every occasion, however, this same teacher continues to invite them to her house to perform the very rituals she criticizes. It is as if this teacher holds two different and competing interpretations (which she probably does not see as distinct and competing), and feels no compulsion to systematize them into a consistent pattern... (p. 188).”

As for the Sama Dilaut, scholars who have studied their religious and ritual practices tend to hesitate to call their religion Islam. Nimmo (2001), for instance, acknowledges “Islamic influences” in “Sama Dilaut religion” but at the same time says that “much of it reflects the religion found throughout the islands prior to the coming of Islam” (p. 139). Bottignolo (1995), an Italian priest who studied the Badjao of Tawi-Tawi in the early 1990s insists on the existence of a separate Badjao religion which he calls “Umboh...the name of the first man, and the great Badjao ancestor, is also the name of their religion” (p. 58). Furthermore, Bottignolo categorically rejects the simplistic expression that states that the Badjao are Muslims.

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188). The importance of ancestors is likewise observed by Stacey (2007) in the *Tukang Besi Islands of South Sulawesi*:

...Are they Muslims? I should not be happy to commit myself to such a highly uncritical common place even though, correctly or incorrectly, they make use in their religious observances of names, prayers, and liturgical actions learned from the Muslims. But they do have religion. It is not to be found among the great historical religions because it is typically *Badjao*. It is a religion which does not base its faith on a book, but rather organizes itself around a set of principles of a cosmic order.

These are conclusion I have drawn after four years of firsthand research there among them. The sea is the home of *Mbo mandilao* (the ancestors of the sea), who are believed to be descended from the prophets (*nabbi*). There are seven original *mbo mandilao*: *Mbo Jango*, *Mb Tambirah*, *Mbo Buburra*, *Mbo Marraki*, *Mbo Malummu*, *Mbo Dugah*, and *Mbo Goyah*. The leader and most powerful is *Mbo Jango*. These ancestors are considered to be like humans and each possesses a different power... The word *mbo* also means grandparent, and is a term applied to senior village members both living and dead. In this latter sense, the notion of an ancestor is not a genealogical one (Sather 1997:316). The ancestors are considered to be sacred and the *Bajo* are generally reluctant to speak of them outside the appropriate time or place; it is generally forbidden to mention their names in casual conversation (Sather, 1997: 31-32).

Given the above-mentioned characteristics of practice, Stacey describes *Bajo* religion “as a syncretic practice in which elements of Islam are fused with *Bajo* indigenous cosmology and ritual practice” (p. 31, emphasis mine). In this manner, Stacey affirms the idea that the *Bajo* have a religion all their own, and that this religion is not quite Islam.

The existence of an independent *Sama-Bajau* religion notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that many *Sama-Bajau* groups, particularly in Sabah, are undergoing

Islamization. A most wonderful article written by Kazufumi (2001) details the changes in representation of the *Bajau* of Sabah from fearful pirates, to gentle sea nomads to “protectors of Islam.” He notes that many of the *Bajau* in Sabah have started to regard themselves as “*semacam Melayu*, or a kind of Malay” (p.221). He relates this development to the highly racialized politics of Malaysia where categories of *bumiputera* (sons of the soil or natives) as well as Malay, inclusive of the language, custom and Islamic religion, are accorded special privileges by the legal system. The process of equating *Bajau* with Malay has taken a special meaning in Sabah. Kazufumi notes that “this is shown in such an expression as *masuk Bajau*, or to enter *Bajau*, which means to convert to Islam. Just as *masuk Melayu* means the equivalent in Peninsular Malaysia” (p. 222). This fairly recent trend may have led some scholars, such as Gusni Saat, to conclude uncritically that Islam is the religion of the *Bajau*.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Islam is not the only pathway available to the *Sama-Bajau* who are seeking to reconstruct their identities given changing social, economic and political conditions. Aoyama (2014) studied the emergence of the “*Christian Bajau*” in *Davao City*, Southern Philippines. He notes that Christianization “proved to function as an apparatus to reconstruct their ethnic identity to survive as the “*Christian Bajau*” in the multiethnic city of *Davao*, where the “*Bajau*” had been marginalized between the mainstream Christians (Roman Catholics and Protestants) and Muslims. As they acquired a new religious language, which eventually helped each one of them improve their sense of self-dignity and self-identification as a human-being and as a “*Bajau*,” at least in their imagination.

To cap this section on religious and ritual practices, it may be worthwhile to relate that the author of this article has met a Protestant Pastor working with a *Sama Dilaut* community in *Batangas City*, south of Metropolitan Manila. Obviously proud of his work in conversion and

pro-active socialization of the Sama Dilaut to urban lifestyle, this pastor has quipped that the Sama Dilaut under his care “are no longer Badjao. They are now Goodjao.” As the political correctness of this new label is not the subject of this paper, the author will, for the moment, hold on to his views. Still, the emergence of the “Goodjao” eloquently, and perhaps even poignantly, points to the fluidity of identity which refuses to be permanently pegged by the so-called “basic components” of labels of self-designation, language and religion, which by themselves are equally fluid constructs of the creative mind.

**Table 3. Estimated Bajau Population Distribution 2000**

Country	Bajau Population	Percent of Total Population
Indonesia	193,147	0.09
Malaysia (Sabah)	347,193	13.75
Philippines	564,093	0.74
Total	1,104,433	0.40

Source: Kazufumi, 2007 as reproduced in Clifton and Majors, 2012.

The Sama-Bajau continues to live, figuratively and literally, in the margins of three nation-states in maritime Southeast Asia. Table 3 shows their distribution in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Their general marginalization continues, despite their relatively large total number in population, a number that is over four times bigger than that of Brunei. What accounts for their continuing marginal statuses within their respective nation-state boundaries? One reason for this could be linked to their inability to create a pan-Sama Bajau identity that could bridge the diverse identities and translate them into sources of empowerment. No such agency exists. Such agency can come in the form of a conference, a confederation of associations, or a social movement. Indeed, ordinary Sama-Bajau know that other Sama-Bajau exist elsewhere, but their

awareness of each other’s condition is minimal at best, and it is beyond the means of many of them to visit all or most of the Sama-Bajau habitats or living spaces (as it is also beyond the means or life span of this researcher to do the same). Scholarship and publication on the Sama-Bajau are also written mainly by outsiders using alien languages. Can the modern nation-states of maritime Southeast Asia benefit from an empowered confederation or network of Sama-Bajau associations? Perhaps, the maritime nation-states of Southeast Asia are not too keen in helping empower people who live in highly porous and even contended borders of national territories. But then again, perhaps the leaders of these contemporary maritime nation-states should take their cue from the Malay kingdoms of the past, the kingdoms whose alliances with the Sama-Bajau peoples led to their political, economic and cultural flowering. If one pauses to think, even just briefly, the Sama-Bajau knowledge of the currents, the underwater worlds, the stars and the winds are still very useful in this day and age of environmental destruction and state insecurity due to the movements of criminal elements across national boundaries. A cultural and political alliance with them ought to help in the pursuit of the common good of the region.

## CONCLUSION

This article presented operationalized definitions of “diaspora” and “ethnic identity.” Upon some modification of these definitions, it proceeded to review notions of Sama-Bajau ethnic identity through a critique of so-called “basic components” of such, namely, labels of self-designation, language, and religion and ritual practice. Set against the wealth of knowledge produced by scholars of the field, this critique implicates these components as weak, if not overly-deterministic or essentialist, constructions of Sama-Bajau ethnic identity. To conclude, this article proposes a more nuanced view of Sama-Bajau ethnic identity. First of all, as the “diaspora” ensures that the



Sama-Bajau will constantly be in contact a multitude of cultures, a relational perspective of ethnic identity should be seriously considered. Second, aspects or components of identity are inherently complex and cannot be limited to three variables. A more multi-variable approach to identity does not only make sense, but is also socially appropriate. In this case, social, political and economic contexts determine which variables are salient over a given period of time. Third, ethnic identity formation should not be seen as complete or completed processes. It is always in a continuous state of flux.

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