

## **Recording the past of “peoples without history”: Southeast Asia’s sea nomads**

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ABSTRACT—This essay has been developed from the conviction that scholars of all disciplines, particularly from Southeast Asia, must work together to prioritize the task of recording the traditions of “marginalized peoples” before practices, beliefs and memories disappear completely. Although anthropologists dominate contemporary studies, historians have much to offer, especially in dealing with the relationship between such groups and the state. Here I provide a background to historical work on sea peoples, tracking the evolution of the now accepted view that, traditionally, they were respected by land-based states and that this relationship was mutually beneficial. However, the demise of reciprocity combined with state pressure for the adoption of a sedentary existence led to a decline in regard for the maritime skills of sea peoples and the services they once provided. In seeking to resurrect a past that emphasizes indigenous agency, there is a need to break out of disciplinary confines and develop methodologies and approaches that more effectively link the past with the present.

Key words: Sea people, historiography, state, marginality, “watery Zomia”

### **Introduction**

The social patterns and lifestyles of sedentary lowland communities, so often contrasted with groups who live at the margins of the state, has been described as “one of the basic features of the social landscape of Southeast Asia and adjacent regions in East and South Asia.” (Jonsson 2005, 5) Since the Second World War, which marks the slow end of colonialism (apart from Thailand), anthropological studies across the region have shown how the lives of upland groups, forest dwellers

and sea peoples have been fundamentally affected by religious conversion, economic development and state policies that seek to assert greater authority over territory and subjects. Until relatively recently, historians have been less involved with the study of “marginalized peoples” because they depend so heavily on documentary sources that privilege major political and cultural centers. Yet increasingly, research that highlights Southeast Asia’s incorporation into world history is recognizing that all these “people without history” were intimately involved in the far-reaching changes that have accompanied economic and religious globalization from the 15th century onwards. Historians have given greater attention to groups living well beyond the major political centers, investigating how they responded to the effects of change and the ways in which these developments influenced their position within larger states. (Andaya and Andaya 2015)

The current essay tracks the trajectory of historical research on the sea peoples of maritime Southeast Asia. Placing the discussion in a wider framework, it begins by reminding readers that the shift away from “center-oriented” histories of Southeast Asia to studies of communities located at the margins of state control has itself an academic evolution. It is also important to remember that the chronology of documenting change among such groups is shallow, since before the 15th century references to people beyond the areas of core authority are rare. The textual references that exist, however, do offer a glimpse of how land-based societies viewed those who lived outside the cultural mainstream. For example, during his visit to Cambodia in the late 13th century Zhou Daguan remarked on the social hierarchies between the lowland, sedentary Khmer and semi-nomadic upland groups (whom he said were generally known as “Zhuang”). It was these “savages” who supplied most of Angkor’s domestic slaves, and people from upland areas were “so despised that if there is a quarrel between two city dwellers, it only takes one of them to be called Zhuang for hatred to enter into the marrow of his bones.” (Zhou 2007, 59) In a similar fashion, old Javanese texts refer to “impure” people who were regarded with contempt because they “eat what is considered unclean,” while Chinese visitors to Java spoke of “ugly” individuals with tousled hair and bare feet who consumed “snakes, ants, and all kinds of insects and worms.”

(Robson 1995, 139 ; Huan and Mills 1970, 93) In combination with lifestyle, religious differences could also mark a cultural boundary and a 15th-century text from Chiang Mai views Animist upland groups who remained outside the Buddhist community as *milakkha*, a Pali equivalent to the Sanskrit *mleccha* or savages. (Swearer and Sommai 1998, 38-39)

As this essay will demonstrate, we must be careful in assuming that such attitudes were regionally characteristic in pre-modern times, for both legendary accounts and written sources supply evidence of continuing and valued connections between governing elites and groups whom contemporary scholars often describe as “stateless.” (Scott 2009, 10 ; Reid 2015,49-52) Nonetheless, the historiographical shift by which academics began to discuss such people with greater respect was hardly swift. In the 19th and early 20th centuries the first generations of ethnologists, largely preoccupied with issues of evolution and ethnic hierarchies, were not at all averse to using terms such as “primitive” or “savage.” For their part, historians were equally ready to adopt the conceptual hierarchies expressed in documents emanating from centers of cultural and political power, be they European or indigenous. Yet as Southeast Asia emerged as a regional field of study after World War Two, we can trace a slow trajectory that shows how scholars began to consider alternative ways of viewing the relationship between “peripheral” peoples and evolving state structures. Social scientists, involved with communities targeted by government development programs, have been instrumental in this shift. It is thus not surprising that anthropologists have dominated research on people living at the “margins” (a term often incorporated into titles of books and articles). (Duncan 2004; Alexander and Wadley 2006) Much of this research has concentrated on the adverse effects of governmental “modernization” policies and has stressed official disdain for the rights or well-being of minority peoples. Against this background, James Scott’s 2009 publication, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, mounted a trenchant challenge to the victimization model, arguing that “self-marginalization” and “self-barbarianization” explain the mainland Southeast Asian retreat to highland “Zomia” as groups deliberately sought to distance themselves from the center’s tax and labor demands. (Scott 2009,173) Scott’s material drew heavily from Southeast Asia’s land-based societies

and he had little to say about the application of his model to sea-going boat dwellers, once such a feature of the maritime environment of insular Southeast Asia. Acknowledging that he could have given more attention to the peoples who inhabited a “watery Zomia,” Scott argued that these groups should be regarded as “a seagoing, archipelago-hopping variant of swiddeners dwelling in mountain fastnesses.” (Scott 2009,xiv) He goes on to suggest that their “non-state” option was to “to take to their boats.”

Dispersed on the water, they could evade slavers and states amid the complex waterways of the archipelago while raiding, slaving, and occasionally serving as mercenaries themselves. They were, for a time, to the Malay Sultanate of Melaka, a watery version of what the Cossacks were to the tsarist armed forces. (Scott 2009, 328)

This generalization, while intriguing, merits interrogation and has stimulated a detailed and largely supportive response from a team of anthropologists, including those working on sea peoples. (Bourdier, Boutry, Ivanhoff and Ferrari 2015) Historians and archaeologists have been more skeptical, since the perception of “state avoidance” as an embedded characteristic of sea peoples was probably encouraged by the literature that developed in the colonial era, which referred to the “timidity” of some boat people and viewed those who were engaged in piratical activities as operating beyond state control. (Sopher 1977, 131,145) Prior to the 19th century, however, Scott’s argument that such groups, like their land-dwelling counterparts, sought out “zones of refuge” in order to avoid state incursion is rarely borne out by the historical sources. Indeed, cumulative evidence points to the contrary, showing that both sea-dwelling groups and land-based authorities actively cultivated mutual connections and that both drew benefits from this association. These benefits only began to decline in the 19th century. The historiography of sea peoples in Southeast Asia thus presents a telling example of the need to locate any contemporary study in a chronological framework.

## **The historiography of sea peoples**

When did historians of Southeast Asia begin to direct their attention to societies “beyond the state”? In 1955, when most Southeast Asian countries were asserting their new independent status, the publication of Jacob van Leur’s 1940 collection of essays, belatedly translated into English as *Indonesian Trade and Society*, urged historians to adopt a new view of Indonesian history. No longer could this history be surveyed from “the deck of a ship, the ramparts of the fortress, or the high gallery of the trading house.” (van Leur 1955, 261) In the same year the first volume of Bertram Schrieke’s *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, which included material written thirty years earlier, also appeared in English and conveyed a similar message – that Indonesian history should be viewed in terms of a continuum rather than treating the period of Dutch control as identifiably separate. (Schrieke 1966) Though many historians of Indonesia could have read these books in the original Dutch, the impact of the English translations is evident in John Smail’s classic 1961 article, with its call for an “autonomous history” of Southeast Asia that would give more thought to indigenous agency. (Smail 1962, 72-102) The following year Harry Benda’s article talked of the value of regional generalizations but, with a prescient sense of future trends, he also referred to the need to move away from “national” histories and study “the area’s constituent parts and sub-parts.” Indeed, this was a theme constantly emphasized by another major influence on Southeast Asian historical writing, O.W. Wolters. “Whether in Indonesia or elsewhere,” he wrote, “the locality or sub-region should remain the focus for studying history.” (Benda 1962, 106 ; Wolter 1982, 51) Implicit in this comment was the belief that the experiences of communities located at the peripheries of state authority could make a significant contribution to regional histories. Despite the fact that historians are textually oriented and despite the fact that (as linguist, Tom Hoogervorst, remarked), “the earliest available textual sources on the region contain references to maritime communities,” historical and comparative studies of sea peoples have been slow to develop. (Hoogervorst 2012, 245-265) Expressing some sympathy for the historian’s dilemma, the anthropologist Cynthia Chou

acknowledged the “scattered” nature of the documentary sources and references that merely “speckle the time chart.” (Chou 2006, 246) It is significant that overviews of the historical literature relating to “aquatic peoples” are typically divided into specific areas—the Orang Laut of the southern Melaka Straits, the Moken/Moklen and Urak Lawoi’ (meaning Orang Laut) of the northern Straits and the Bajau Laut of the Sulu Archipelago and eastern Indonesia.

(Chou 2010, 50-58) Even comparative overviews are organized in terms of these geographical subdivisions and there appears to be a scholarly consensus that it was (and is) difficult to create a general history of sea peoples as a distinctive group that shares features in common. Though frequently used, the very term “sea nomads” is problematic, since it is clear that from very early times that some sea peoples may have been mobile but that they also maintained bases on land. (Bellina, Favereau and Dussubieux 2019,105) Opinions regarding their occupations also differ. Various individuals, such the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Combés (1620–65), the Flemish gem trader Jacques de Coutre (1572-1640), the Dutch minister François Valentijn (1724-1726) and the English captain and explorer Thomas Forrest (1729–1802) stress the piratical nature of the sea peoples and their “treacherous nature.” (Combés 1903,103-5 ; Peter and Roopanji 2014, 77-8 ; Combés 1727, 66-67 ; Thomas 1779, 374) On the other hand, they could be described as helpful purveyors of food items and knowledgeable pilots. Historical sources also show that there were marked differences in social organization between the small kinship-based groups described by de Coutre and (according to Combés) the hierarchical political structures of the Lutaos (thought to be from “laut” or sea) in the southern Philippines. (Borschberg 2014, 77 ) Furthermore, historians are acutely aware that early commentaries are not necessarily reliable and we should not assume that these documents reflect personal knowledge of the lives of mobile and elusive sea nomads. For example, in compiling official reports, shore-dwelling Dutch East India Company (VOC) administrators often found it convenient to draw on information already to hand, even if it was no longer current. In his much-cited *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Valentijn’s account of the Bajau of northern Sulawesi thus reproduced a number of comments included in reports produced nearly fifty years earlier. The first of

these reports was submitted by a VOC minister, Jacobus Montanus (a Latinized version of van den Berg), who had visited Manado in 1675, but may himself have been relying on informants rather than his own experience. The second was compiled by Governor Robert Padtbrugge following an inspection tour of northern Sulawesi in 1677. Following the same pattern, the 1669 account of sea people in the Sulawesi region by the VOC governor of Makassar, Cornelius Speelman, was repeatedly tapped by his successors when they compiled their own submissions. (Sopher 1977, 300 ; Nolde 2014,42-3 ; Noorduyn 1983, 96-121)

Nineteenth-century accounts by colonial scholars, journalists and officials represent a rather different genre, for their observations on customs, beliefs and legends of the sea peoples were typically based on their own observations. However, this also meant that comparative overviews were constrained by national interests and linguistic limitations. British accounts of the Orang Laut, such as the articles published by the Singapore-based editor, James Logan (1819-69), focused on the Melaka Straits, but British reports and academic works largely overlooked information about the Orang Laut compiled by Dutch officials such as Count L.C. von Ranzow, Resident of Riau, between 1822 and 1826, Eliza Netscher, Resident of Riau, 1861-7 and J.G. Schot, who had been a controleur in Sumatra. The British rarely looked eastwards to the Bajau of northern Borneo, much less eastern Indonesia, which lay within Dutch territory, while the Dutch themselves did not track Bajau activities in the Sulu zone. (Verschuer 1883 ; Andaya 2006) Overall, colonial investigations into the activities of sea peoples were primarily generated by their reputation as pirates and European interest appears to have faded when piracy was brought under control in the latter part of the 19th century, except for passing notices. (Skeat and Ridley 1969, 247-250; Chou 2010, 53-58) In the historiography of sea peoples, notes Cynthia Chou, “a long period of silence followed the colonial administrative reports.”(Chou 2006)

Nonetheless, incentives for historical research were on the horizon. Armando Cortesão’s 1937 discovery of the long-lost manuscript of the *Suma Oriental* by Tome Pires, found in the Archives of the Chamber of Deputies in Paris, was a major historiographical breakthrough because it accorded the sea people, the “Selates” (from Malay selat, meaning

Straits), such prominence. Through negotiations with the Hakluyt Society, Cortesão translated and edited this two-volume work, which was published in 1944 but only became generally available after World War Two. (Cortesão 1944, xiii-xviii) One can thus understand that it took some time to attract academic attention but in his 1947 review, J.V.G Mills described the *Suma Oriental* as “ the most valuable and comprehensive description of the East in his time ... of the greatest historical importance.” (Mills 1947, 226-7) Four years later its value was similarly acknowledged in an article on early Melaka written by R.O. Winstedt, who specifically commented on this “new discovery.” (Winstedt 1948, 726) Yet it was not a historian but a geographer, David Sopher, who first exploited the work (which he describes as “an unparalleled source, only recently published”) to reconstruct the past of Southeast Asia’s sea peoples in his 1954 UC Berkeley dissertation. (Sopher 1977, 319) Though João de Barros had certainly described the Orang Laut role in the founding of Melaka in his *Da Asia* (published in 1553), it was the *Suma Oriental* that highlighted their importance in the maintenance of state authority in the Melaka Straits. In addition, while the information made available in this publication marks a milestone in historical understanding of the Orang Laut, Pires also accorded the sea peoples of eastern Indonesia, the Bajau, considerable attention, though Sopher pointed to the lack of clarity in these references and the apparent confusion with seafaring Bugis. (Sopher 1977, 323-5 ; Gaynor 2016, 40-4)

Over a decade passed before Sopher’s dissertation was published in 1965, but the 1960s saw a considerable advance in understanding the historical role of sea peoples, especially in the Melaka Straits. Rarely mentioned in the context of “sea nomad studies,” Paul Wheatley’s *Golden Khersonese*, which appeared in 1961, gave a deeper history to the “corsairs” so often mentioned by Pires. (Wheatley 1961) Excerpts from early Chinese records show that the first reference to Orang Laut raiding appears in the 5th century, when the Chinese pilgrim Faxian described the seas around Singapore as being “infested with pirates, to meet whom is death.” (Wheatley 1961, 38) Later sources, like one from the 13th century, talk of fleets of “two or three hundred pirate prahus” operated by men who were quite willing to butcher the crews



of ships they had pillaged. (Wheatley 1961, 82) Understandably, Chinese observers did not realize that these “pirates” were working in tandem with land-based overlords in a mutually beneficial arrangement by which booty was shared and sea-lanes monitored. Their ability to supply the marine products in such demand on the internal market was also a key element if any ambitious harbor chief wished to lure overseas traders, especially those from China. The emergence of Srivijaya on the east coast of Sumatra is dated to the 7th century and because of their dual role as reliable collectors and loyal guardians, the Orang Laut became, as Wolters put it, “the Maharaja’s maritime subjects par excellence.” (Wolters 1970, 9-10)

By the time the entrepôt of Melaka was established, sometime before 1403, the pattern of partnership between Orang Laut and coastal rulers was well established. Because of their relatively large numbers and maritime skills, the Orang Laut were an essential ally for Melaka’s kings and their cargoes of sea products were vitally important in attracting the traders who provided the town with so much revenue. (Cortésão 1944, 233; 467) They patrolled the seas to warn of impending danger, to bring traders to port and to harass the shipping of Melaka’s rivals. According to Pires, the first ruler of Melaka had ennobled a number of Orang Laut leaders, from whom “all the mandarins” [fidallguos, nobles] of the Melaka area were descended. (Cortésão 1944, 233-8; 469 ; Andaya 2006, 194-198) The position of Laksamana, head of the fleets, may well have been given to men with Orang Laut connections. (Andaya 2006, 196) Under such leadership, sea-going communities acted as an arm of the state, their skills harnessed to make approved attacks on trade vessels and deliver captured cargoes, or a percentage of these cargoes, to the center. When Europeans reached the region in the 16th century, they described the latter practice as “piracy,” although it was little different from Portuguese and Dutch attacks on the shipping of rival nations or indigenous vessels, regarded by most Europeans as a permissible commercial venture even when no war had been declared. (Borschberg 2002, 59-72) Nineteenth-century appreciation of this long-standing practice was provided in Nicholas Tarling’s *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World*, which appeared two years after the publication of *Golden Khersonese*. (Tarling 1963) Though written

primarily from a British perspective and although the relevant Dutch archives were not tapped, Piracy and Politics collated evidence showing that the collaboration between “pirates” and their overlords on land was a mutually beneficial and centuries-old arrangement. Since booty and captured crews were shared, piracy became incorporated into the government structure and was “intrinsic” to state revenue. (Anderson 1997, 87-105) This context helps explain the well-known response of Singapore’s Sultan Hussain to Stamford Raffles: “Piracy is our birthright, and thus brings no disgrace” (Merompak itu sudah pusakanya. Sebab itu tiada menjadi ‘aib). (Sweeney 2006, 385)

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, the *Suma Oriental* had attracted the attention of the Dutch archivist, Mrs. M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofsz, and her dissertation, translated into English, was defended as a published book at the University of Amsterdam in 1962. Though, as the title indicated, it was essentially a history of trade, Meilink said that she was “inspired” by the writings of Van Leur and Schrieke and she certainly made reference to the “seafaring people” described by Pires. (Meilink-Roelofsz 1962) From a historiographical viewpoint, it is intriguing that her book coincided with the publication of Benda’s article because he had specifically noted “the vast archival resources” regarding the operations of the Dutch East India Company, reminding readers that they were both accessible but still largely unexplored. In particular, he stated, “the records of the 17th and 18th centuries should in the years to come yield increasingly solid source materials.” (Benda 1962, 126) With regard to the historiography of sea peoples, his words proved prophetic. Although Dr. Meilink had used VOC sources extensively to reconstruct patterns of early trade, there had been little interest in what we now term the “early modern period,” in part because historians were preoccupied with nationalism and the creation of independent states. However, the call to focus on sub regions did not go unanswered. Five years after Sopher’s study appeared in print, Leonard Andaya, a student of O.W. Wolters, began research on his thesis. His study of the kingdom of Johor in the 17th and 18th centuries, linking the information provided by Pires and other early writers with VOC documentation and Malay texts, detailed not only the economic importance of the Orang Laut as collectors of sea products but also their close relationship to

Melaka's dynastic line. (Andaya 1975) In subsequent years a number of other studies of specific areas along the Straits provided additional information about the relations between ruling houses and the Orang Laut and their changing fortunes in the Straits of Melaka. (Andaya 1993 ; Barnard 2003 ; 2013 ; Mozaffari-Falarti 2013 ; Andaya 2006) They reaffirmed not only that the Orang Laut were key components of economic and political structures (for instance, in Siak, Kedah, Jambi and Palembang), but that their raiding was normally carried out in collaboration with authorities on the land. Although a strong state could call on loyal Orang Laut to bring to book any of their fellows who attempted to branch out with independent sea-raiding activities, they could easily drift away if the center failed to provide the expected rewards or if traditional fidelities were somehow severed. Indeed, following the murder of the Johor ruler in 1699 and the accession of a new regime, many Orang Laut opted to place themselves under the rulers of Perak or Palembang. (Andaya 1993, 126) Yet ties of allegiance could often overcome economic disadvantage. In the early 18th century, as Jambi's fortunes declined, representatives of the new ruler of Johor tried to persuade Jambi Orang Laut to transfer their loyalty "asserting that they would be better off under Johor than they would be if they remained under their own ruler." Despite the parlous state of the Jambi economy, the Johor enticements were unsuccessful. (Andaya 2013)

From the 1970s references to the Orang Laut have become standard in all publications dealing with Southeast Asia's maritime history but scholars also began to investigate the changing connections between sea peoples and the state as European influence increased. In 1979 another student of Wolters, Carl Trocki, published a revised version of his Ph.D. thesis on the founding of the new state of Johor in the early 19th century. (Trocki 1979) Prince of Pirates provided a telling example of the ways in which an indigenous ruler responded to European pressure by settling Orang Laut on land in order to break their connections with "piracy." European aversion to nomadic life styles, especially when maritime borders were being carefully negotiated, was also evident in Borneo. James Warren is best known for his work on the Sulu zone but in an earlier study he explored the policies of the North Borneo Company, which were aimed at relocating the seafaring

Bajau and compelling them to become “law-abiding” subjects. Specific regulations regarding taxation, licensing and resettlement finally forced the Bajau community in these waters to settle on land and seek other forms of subsistence and thus brought about lasting changes in Bajau society. (Warren 1971)

The heavy reliance on European documentation, however, raised the question of access to local sources and the challenge of seeing events from an indigenous perspective. Even in 1964, when reviewing Tarling’s *Piracy and Policies*, Michael Swift referred to what was then a “hot topic,” the question of Euro-centrism, expressing regret that Tarling had not paid more attention to the pirates themselves. As a possible source, he mentioned the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (The Precious Gift,) by Raja Ali Haji, which had been known to scholars since the late 19th century, but had been little used in historical research. (Swift 1971, 109-111 ; Matheson 1971, 375-392) Swift’s point was well-taken, for this text supplies the most sustained information about the Orang Laut of the Riau-Lingga archipelagos. It shows that during the 17th century, and for much of the 18th, the Orang Laut were critical to the functioning of the Johor kingdom. In the opening pages the author, Raja Ali Haji, thus chose to invoke the legend of Badang, (Matheson and Andaya 1982, 13) an Orang Laut leader whose exploits had been recorded in earlier texts and whose strength was due to his supernatural powers. Mention of the rakyat laut, the sea people, recurs through the text, with references to their support during succession disputes and their role in patrolling the seas and as the first line of maritime defense. Although Orang Laut leaders were rewarded with titles and presented with gifts, Malay rulers at this time never sought to restrict their nomadic traditions or incorporate them into a formal court-based structure, and their relationship was based on a long history of reciprocity and mutual benefit. Put simply, the use of force over highly mobile people was not an option. There is no way that Orang Laut from islands like Siantan could have been compelled to render tribute to the Malay kingdom of Riau-Lingga, and their willingness to die in its defense during the Dutch attack of 1784 attests to a long history of beneficial interaction. (Matheson and Andaya 1982, 170 ; 219) A generation later, faced by a threatened Dutch attack on Riau, it is the sea people who are called together to

prepare their ships and make ready their ammunition. (Matheson and Andaya 1982, 223)

It is equally evident that the European campaign to eliminate piracy could not have been accomplished without Orang Laut responsiveness to their overlord's commands. In 1823 a representative of the Sultan of Riau even went to Batavia with Orang Laut leaders so that they could confess their involvement to the Governor-General and make a formal promise to co-operate in combatting piracy. According to the *Tuhfat*, the root cause of continuing raiding in the Melaka Straits in the 1830s, was the presence of Ilanun raiders from the southern Philippines, "who were not Johor sea people but were of another race... This was the reason they dared to rebel against His Majesty." Those Orang Laut who joined the Ilanun had been coerced or lured by false promises of rewards. Furthermore, says Raja Ali Haji, their dispersal was not due to oppression by the state but to the harsh treatment inflicted by maverick princes and roving marauders. From his point of view, the land-based authority on Riau was a stern but fair overlord. On the island of Karimun (an Orang Laut stronghold), for instance, the new Riau-appointed head, Raja Abdullah, "brought together all the Karimun people who had been scattered far and wide. He paid the debts of all who owed money and ordered them to return to Karimun; ... for several months he spent money to re-assemble the people. Gradually they gathered, as he governed them justly." (Matheson and Andaya 1982, 219, 223, 243-4, 262-3, 269, 286-7) Raja Ali Haji's sympathetic attitude to the Orang Laut was very different from that of Munsyi Abdullah, scribe to Stamford Raffles, who described them as dirty, superstitious, little better than animals. (Sweeney 2006, 36)

From the 1980s access to local material that included references to the sea people did progress as more texts became available through publications of original manuscripts, transliteration, translations and digitization, particularly by the Malay Concordance Project. Such texts provide insights that move beyond European stereotypes of shy family groups living on boats or piratical marauders. Noting the reference to sea peoples in the Kedah text, *Syair Perang Maulana*, Cyril Skinner remarked that the role of the Orang Laut in the history of Malay kingdoms "is only now coming to be recognized" (a point that had

been made even more forcibly in Leonard Andaya’s article on “aquatic sea peoples,” published the previous year. (Skinner 1985, 276 ; 284 ; Andaya 1984,34-51) The great Malay epic, Hikayat Hang Tuah, which probably originated in the 15th century, pays tribute to the role of the Orang Laut in defending Melaka, patrolling the seas, providing transport for the ruler and protecting Melaka’s trade. ( Andaya 2006, 193) Their role as fighters and warriors is celebrated in other works. The Syair Sultan Maulana, for instance, challenges 19th-century European stereotypes of the sea peoples who roamed the waters of the northern Melaka Straits and southern Thailand as timid and fearful. Here they are presented as fearsome warriors, who could be imagined as heirs to the “raksasas” or ogres of ancient legend. (Skinner 1985, 76 ; Luce 1965, 146 ; Rivers 2003, 101) Joining Thai forces to fight the Burmese, an Orang Laut captain and his crew are praised for their courage and skill in maritime reconnaissance; the same text notes that on another occasion the “smart” (terlalu cekap) Orang Laut captured three enemy Burmese. The poet, himself a participant in the campaign, does not hesitate to express his contempt for the Siamese (which the sea people would have shared), whose crews were happier when close to the familiar shore (sebelah darat ia berkenan). Indeed, the Siamese boats were so poorly equipped and the Siamese themselves deemed to be such poor sailors that “we were shamed to be in the same expedition.” (Skinner 1985, 17; 101, 109, 169, 173, 185, 275)

While transcriptions and translations of Malay texts were becoming more available, anthropological investigation also moved rapidly ahead with research distinguished by field work among sea-dwellers themselves. A 1971 Ph.D. dissertation by Clifford Sather, for instance, picked up the story of resettlement in southeastern Sabah, showing how a sea nomad community was affected by the shift to the land and the social consequences of their adaptation to lives as commercial fishermen and wage laborers. (Sather 1971; 1977) In the southern Philippines H. Arlo Nimmo was similarly interested in investigating the kinds of changes that occurred when nomadic boat-dwelling people like the Sama Bajau moved to houses and embraced a more sedentary life. (Nimmo 1973, 334-345) However, despite a flurry of activity in the 1970s (a period described by Cynthia Chou as a “golden age for sea nomad studies”),

the momentum was not easily maintained. (Chou 2010, 9 ; Pelras 1972, 133-68 ; Fox 1977, 459-465) An overview of research on Southeast Asia's sea people compiled in 1995 by Lioba Lenhart and updated by Cynthia Chou in 2006 certainly acknowledged recent studies by anthropologists. (Lenhart 1995, 245-260) Nevertheless, Lenhart felt that fieldwork among maritime peoples was still "insufficient" and that there was little interaction among researchers themselves. Less than a decade later Cynthia Chou concluded that although the Bajau situation was somewhat better, field research on the Orang Laut was "dismal." (Chou 2003, 7) The point is made more clearly when we compare the published work on Malaysia's Orang Asli with that on the Orang Laut. While Lye Tuck Po recorded 1,715 publications and other documents on the Orang Asli produced between 1824 and 2001, a 2002 book on Tribal Communities in the Malay World contains twenty chapters, only three of which are on the Orang Laut. (Lye 2001 ; Benjamin and Chou 2002) It is not difficult to suggest some reasons. Cynthia Chou, for example, described the problems she faced when researching the Orang Suku Laut of Riau; there were no guides, language studies were completely absent and it was not easy to locate specific Orang Laut sites. (Chou 2009, vii) One can understand that functioning as a "participant observer" in a water and boat-oriented community is challenging for anthropologists, but there are also significant gaps in historical work. For example, although the material for the 19th century is plentiful (while mostly concerned with piracy), we know relatively little of how sea peoples fared under 20th-century colonial rule. One of the traditional duties of the Bajau was the transport of high officials as they moved along the coast, a duty that became part of their *herendienst*, or statutory labor, under the Dutch. Were they pleased or humiliated, one wonders, when Dutch officials elected to travel by motorboat? (Gaynor 2016, 159-60)

#### Historians, **comparisons** and contemporary conversations

Twenty years ago, in the revised edition of his 1982 book, O.W. Wolters reminded us that "comparative studies [are] the only justification for regional studies." (Wolters 1999, 235) In thinking beyond the three broad "categories" of sea peoples (Moken, Orang Laut and

Bajau), modern work has taught us the value of an interdisciplinary and comparative approach. Fresh approaches and a rethinking of accepted views can frequently result from drawing connections between sources that originate from different points in time, that are shaped by a specific cultural context or that reflect different academic backgrounds. By the same token, a comparative orientation can also point up the disciplinary silos that often impede interdisciplinary conversations. For example, in 1984 Leonard Andaya revisited the sources used by Sopher, looking particularly at the relationship between “aquatic populations” and coastal polities. (Andaya 1984 ; Hall, Ghosh, Gangopadhyay and Mukherjee 2018, 203-228) On the basis of this evidence, Andaya suggested that it was often the initiatives of sea-dwelling groups that helped transform otherwise minor settlements into thriving commercial hubs. The involvement of Orang Laut in the founding of Melaka is an obvious example but he also cited the case of a 19th-century Bone prince, Arung Baku, who was invited by the Sama-Bajau from the area of Kendari in eastern Sulawesi to settle among them because “he had a good reputation among the various [Sama-Bajau] tribes.” Twenty boatloads of Sama-Bajau followed him, and Kendari rose to become an important trading center. (Andaya 1984 ; Vosmaer 1939, 132-33 ; Sopher 1977, 148 )

Because of the time and place of its publication (over three decades ago in a commemoration volume for the University of Malaya’s history department), it was some time before the significance of Andaya’s argument, subsequently developed more fully in his 2006 book, *Leaves of the Same Tree*, was noticed by anthropologists. (Andaya 2006, 173-201) Confirming the view that links between sea peoples and landed authorities were once very strong, two studies by ethno-historians deserve particular mention because they have combined contemporary fieldwork with documentary evidence from the pre-modern past. Jennifer Gaynor and Lance Nolde both worked closely with Dutch archival material but they also collected oral legends and lived and sailed with the Sama Bajau of Sulawesi. (Nolde 2014) They were assiduous in collecting orally transmitted and chanted Bajau memories contained in the poetic verse of *kelong* and *iko-iko*, only some of which have been transcribed. As one old woman told Nolde, “if you want to learn about past times you



must listen to iko-iko. That is Sama history.” (Nolde 2014, 12; 17-18 ; Nuraini 2012, 141-66 ; Gaynor 2016, 126-7) They were able to find manuscript accounts, written in Makassarese, Dutch and Bugis, that had been preserved in archives or were in the possession of local families. (Gaynor 2016, 107-164 ; Nolde 2014, 12-42) Most importantly, they both affirm that, prior to the 20th century, the Sama Bajau not only played a key economic role but also maintained their links to the Makassarese and Bugis court hierarchies as the kingdom’s “muscles and sinews.” (Andaya 1984, 39 ; Nolde 2014) In a field where information is still “sparse and fragmented,” this approach to historical research is a significant step forward. (Abels 2012, 14 ; Nuraini 2012, 141) An especially pleasing contribution to this conversation is the mediation of archaeologists. For instance, a recent article has concluded that sea-dwelling groups became intermediaries in facilitating the economies of trading states, and suggests that their mobility may have helped in the diffusion of aspects of material culture, such as decorated pottery styles. (Bellina, Favereau and Dussubieux 2019, 105) It is equally encouraging to see that historical findings are supported by the scientific analysis of genetic and linguistic data from various Bajau groups, whose genomic ancestry reveals a long history of miscegenation that enabled them to maintain their own culture even as they became part of a unique “maritime creolization. (Kusuma 2017, 1004–1010)

Any expansion of interdisciplinary conversations thus has the potential to raise new and intriguing questions that can stimulate further research. At the basic level, one might ask how it was that sea peoples developed the remarkable aquatic abilities marking them off from land dwellers. As early as the 12th century a Chinese account especially mentioned the “variety of wild men from near the sea which can dive in water without closing the eyes.”(Hirth and Rockhill 1966, 62) In a similar vein, Munysi Abdullah expressed his amazement at Orang Laut diving: “they jump into the sea like a fish and disappear from sight for half an hour. They then reappear, one or two hundred depa (around 360 meters) from where they jumped.” (Sweeney 2006, 364) While the British engineer, John Thomson (1821-84), a man with considerable experience of Singapore waters, dismissed this description as an example of “oriental hyperbole,” he acknowledged that the Orang Laut

were “expert divers.” Fifty years later another observer was amazed to see the way in which the Moken (“splendid divers”) could use a “corkscrew motion” of the hands and feet to descend to the ocean floor, which lay five fathoms below. (Thomson 1874, 105 ; White 1922, 171)

In contemporary times scientists are helping historians to better appreciate the acquired skills and biological adaptations that enabled sea peoples to function in their maritime environment. Anna Gislén from the University of Lund, who has been working with the Moken of southern Thailand for almost two decades, has supplied an explanation for the underwater vision that helped sea peoples collect the marine products that in past times were so desired on the international market. Her team has demonstrated that the visual acuity of Moken children is facilitated because their “terrestrial eyesight” is adjusted by maximally constricting the pupil, an acquired skill that can be “taught” to others. (Gislén et al. 2003, 833-36 ; Gislén et al. 2006, 3443-50) Likewise, international attention has been drawn to a research project headed by Melissa Ilardo, which has shown that natural selection among the Bajau (and presumably other sea peoples) has resulted in genetic variants that have increased the size of the spleen. This provides a larger reservoir of oxygenated red blood cells that allow “breath-holding” divers to remain under water for extended periods of time and reach depths of up to seventy meters. In consequence, the Bajau can spend about the same work time beneath the water as marine animals such as the sea otter. (Ilardo 2018, 569–580 , Ilardo 2018)

These projects, undertaken by specialists in the biological sciences, obviously pursue different lines of inquiry from their colleagues in the humanities or the social sciences. A further widening of cross-disciplinary and participatory conversations could involve the voices of sea peoples themselves as a means of conveying some sense of how they relate to the waterworld that is their home. For example, land-dwellers have long been ambivalent about moving into the underwater environment and for many it remains a domain where innocent divers can be caught in a powerful downcurrent or fall victim to an unexpected attack by some predatory sea creature. (Andaya 2019) In tropical waters sharks were thought to pose a particular problem, moving the poet John Keats (ignorant of the practice of employing shark charmers) to

lament the sacrifice of Ceylon divers, who in search of pearls held their breath and “went naked to the hungry shark.” (Andaya 2019, 9) In the late 19th century, however, one Orang Laut was reported as saying that “We Orang Laut are not afraid of sharks. I have never known an Orang Laut to be taken by one, though our occupation leads us constantly into the water ... sharks are our brethren.” (Thomson 1874, 112 ; Andaya 2019, 9) A special relationship with other marine creatures, which could include those hunted for food, is a feature of sea-oriented societies, where boundaries between human and marine animals dissolve and where the “shared personhoods” of hunter and prey may become one. (McNiven 2019, 215-30) As Andar (an Indonesian Bajau interviewed in a recent documentary) explained, every Bajau has an octopus twin. “People don’t know which one is their animal twin, but if they spear an octopus and they suddenly fall ill, it means they have speared their twin and they need to perform a ritual.” (Swazey and Colaciello 2018)

For the new field of sensory history, these cultural insights could suggest possibilities of exploring the relationship between the bodies of sea-peoples and the water in which they move so effortlessly. More than a hundred years ago, a description of “sea gypsies” contrasted the Filipino use of diving suits with the Moken preference to enter the water naked. This was attributed to the Moken reluctance to rely on other people, who lowered and hauled them up, and to their association of paralysis of the legs (the “bends”) with wearing diving suits. (White 1922, 107) However, a modern observer might think differently. She or he might wonder, for example, whether the sensation of water enveloping and supporting the unclothed body, including areas that would be covered on land, infused the Moken diving experience with a feeling of freedom from the gravitational pull of landed existence. And, if so, they might ask how such feelings could be captured by academic wordsmiths. Is “a special sense of oceanic solitude and liberty” best conveyed to land dwellers through visual media, as Guillem Valle sought to do in his 2016 photographic exhibition, “Suspensa”? (Morgan 2019) But how would Bajau divers react to a journalist’s commentary that relates the movement of their underwater bodies to their marginalization in national life? “Their poses are serene and balletic but the margins of the images are skirted by a sense of gloom, as the sea around the men fades

to black. They appear suspended as though caught in a gel, a reflection of their precarious state of limbo as a people.” (DenHoed 2016)

Because contemporary studies of marginalized groups often invoke the concept of an ethnic limbo—the reality of which sea peoples are well aware—the complex pathways by which changes in long-standing practices have been navigated merit particular attention. (Swazey and Colaciello 2018) Fast disappearing under the pressure of modernity and the influence of monotheistic religions, traditional beliefs, especially those associated with places controlled by powerful sea spirits, beg for further research. (Chou 2010,87-90 ; Ivanoff 2018,177-288) Yet a historian might point out that the adjustment of rituals and customs linked to the maritime environment, often modified by human intervention, has an extended past. Munsyi Abdullah, for instance, describes the offerings made by Orang Laut to the spirit (hantu) of Batu Kepala Todak, a rock shaped like the head of the swordfish that was linked to Singapore’s legendary history. One wonders how Orang Laut reacted when this rock was “blown up” in 1843 to accommodate military quarters or, five years later, when another spiritually charged site, the Batu Belayar (“sailing stone”) was destroyed to widen access to Singapore harbor.(Rivers 2003, 102-3)

The ramifications of technological change among sea peoples also call for continuing research. For example, Malay descriptions of Orang Laut boats with prows carved in the shape of an ogre (raksasa) or that resemble “a lad created by magic” have resonances with boat symbolism among the Moke but the comparative dimension, as in Sabah, shows how quickly the boat-building heritage can disappear. (Skinner 1985, 77-79 ; Ivanoff 1977 ; Ali and Kon Ling 2008, 33-49) In the 17th century the Orang Laut of the Melaka Straits were armed with poisoned daggers and spears made of wild palm that could be thrown so hard “that they can penetrate an iron breastplate and any shield no matter how sturdy they are.” (Borschberg 2002, 79) To what extent does greater access to a monetized economy and the ability to simply purchase metal spearheads and nylon fishing lines undermine older beliefs that fishing gear is imbued with supernatural power? (Chou 1997, 621)

Connecting the past more forcibly with the present will help to historicize the processes of change as sea peoples are encircled by the

nation state and must deal with the expectations of dominant cultures. A “documentary-like” film of Bajau produced in the southern Philippines seventy years ago may have used well-known actors in the primary roles and the script may have been in Tagalog, but it addressed Bajau grievances that remain relevant today, such as entitlement to the resources of the sea. (Toohey 2005, 281-312) In foregrounding Indonesian Bajau themselves, a recent documentary, “Our Land is the Sea” (Air Tanahku), directed by Kelli Swazey and Matt Colaciello, clearly articulates the sense of loss felt among the older generation in a Bajau community in eastern Indonesia. Widespread conversion to Islam, the prohibition or decay of many traditional rituals and the decline of a fishing economy have so separated modern Bajau from their descendants and so changed the relationship with the sea, that for some the very essence of “Bajauness” is disintegrating. (See above, fn. 88)

A key element in this cultural change is the extent to which the adoption of “modern” influences has affected the aural and oral legacy. In a presentation at Monash University in January 2015, for instance, Cynthia Chou noted that “music” among the Orang Laut now typically refers to Western-style contemporary songs (lagu pop) and hymns (lagu gereja). (Chou 2019) Bajau knowledge of the chanted iko-iko is similarly declining as the older generation passes and as a new generation relegates such performances to a “non-modern” and thus less desirable category. (Nuraini 2012, 163) Yet change itself is opening up new avenues for research. Certainly, opportunities to examine the particular skills and practices associated with sea-dwellers are receding as a more sedentary lifestyle and religious conversion takes hold. Nonetheless, in the 21st century the potential to locate obscure written material, record oral memories and visually capture experiences of the present are greater than ever before. Even more importantly, researchers are now able to partner with sea peoples and share their joint findings with international colleagues and the general public in ways that were never previously possible. (Shapiro 2015, 26-28)

## **Conclusion**

For some anthropologists working in maritime areas, the notion of a “watery Zomia” has been appealing because it projected a past in which sea peoples had deliberately chosen to avoid interaction with the state and had carved out their own independent niches free of state demands or surveillance. Like their counterparts working on “marginal” people in mainland Southeast Asia, contemporary research has tended to focus on the tightening hold of national governments, especially the pressure to abandon a nomadic existence and settle on land. This essay, however, began with a historical perspective. Rather than juxtaposing a depressing present with a past when boat dwellers deliberately distanced themselves from land-based authorities, it has reiterated the findings of historians who have argued for long-standing reciprocal connections. The deterioration of these connections was due to the declining value of sea peoples in collaborative roles as collectors of marine produce, guardians of sea lanes and knowledgeable pilots. Concerned to reinforce national boundaries and to “know” who can be claimed as citizens, the independent states of Southeast Asia have become increasingly intrusive. “Sea nomadism” is now a misnomer as a sedentary existence becomes the norm. In the 21st century, it is said, there are almost no “true Zomians” left in Southeast Asian waters. (Bourdier, Boutry, Ivanhoff and Ferrari 2015, 105) While the descendants of maritime wanderers still live physically close to the sea and maintain a sea-oriented livelihood, questions must be posed about the ways in which future generations will relate to the sea environment.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that change itself is an important part of the historical experience of any community. Cynthia Chou, rather than deploring the Orang Laut preference for lagu gereja, has thus argued that the acceptance of these new artistic forms can be regarded as “sonic bridges” to ideas of modernity. (Chou 2019) A historian of Southeast Asia might also add that in this new present the networks of land-sea connections that have always been part of the maritime environment have been energized by the advent of the cheap cellphone and the unprecedented possibilities of generating ever-growing communities of cultural and economic interaction. In

other words, the study of change is valuable in itself. If researchers are to seize the historical moment and advance the field further, they need to exploit the international connections that technology now makes available and break out of disciplinary confines so that the past can be more effectively linked to the present. Yet any call to action also carries a caveat. Although comparative work will undoubtedly reveal unexpected data, any attempt at regional generalizations should be based on case studies. Only thus can that we appreciate the similarities and the differences in adaptation to specific “watery” environmental contexts and, in so doing, provide the sea peoples of Southeast Asia with an historical agency that they often appear to lack. One can only end with Chou’s telling comment: “Even though great strides have been made ... much more research is required.” (Chou 2010, 10)

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*footnotes*

1. It would be extremely helpful to have a historical overview of work on other sea nomad groups like that supplied in Cynthia Chou, *The Orang Suku Laut of Riau, Indonesia: The Inalienable Gift of Territory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 50-58.

2. F.H. Verschuer, "De Badjos," *Tijdschrift van het Koninklijke Aardrijkskundig Genootschap* 7 (1883): 1-7; Chapter 6 in Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006) provides the information collected by these early ethnographers.

3. Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World: A Study of British Imperialism in Nineteenth-century South-East Asia* (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1963). Tarling did not have access to Sopher's book, which had appeared the year before.

4. Briget Abels, "Introduction," in *Oceans of Sound: Sama Dilaut Performing Arts*, eds. Birgit Abels, Hanafi Hussin and Matthew Santamaria (Olms: Hildesheim, 2012), p. 14. Nuraini, "Indonesian Bajo history," p. 141 compares the lack of research on the Sama Bajau with that of the Sama Dilaut in the Philippines and Sabah.

5. See above, fn. 88. The village in which these interviews took place is Sampela, located on Kaledupa Island in the Wakatobu National Park in Indonesia's Banda Sea.