



SAMA BAJAU

NÒMADES DE LA MAR

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THE EXHIBITION

Sama-bajau. Sea Nomads

The Sama-Bajau people live in the Sulu Sea, between the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, and are the only human race specifically adapted to the sea. They only go to land to trade, build boats or bury their dead. Millennia ago, their ancestors specialised in the exploitation of marine resources.

The Sama-bajau are an expert fishing community and have developed the ability to manage these resources for centuries, without depleting them. Now they have to adapt to a different reality due to geopolitics, conflicts and discrimination.

Within its collections, the Museu Marítim de Barcelona has various objects from the Philippines. Among these objects are two complete boats, made in the 19th century and arriving in Barcelona in 1899: two single-trunk canoes invented tens of thousands of years ago that take us back to the origins of navigation and shipbuilding. By means of these pieces and photographs, the MMB dedicates this monographic exhibition to the Sama-Bajau, a unique culture due to its adaptation to marine life.

Curator: Pere Izquierdo, head of the Collections and Knowledge area of the Museu Marítim de Barcelona.

The exhibition has been installed in the Espai Mirador of the MMB from November 24, 2023 to May 12, 2024.

EXHIBITION TEXTS

TWO PHILIPPINE CANOES IN THE MMB

Within its collections, the Maritime Museum of Barcelona has various objects from the Philippines. Among these objects are two complete boats, made in the 19th century. They arrived in Barcelona in 1899, shortly after Spain sold its archipelago to the United States, when it had already lost it in the war of independence against the Katipunan, the movement that fought to free the country from colonisation.

These are two canoes that take us back to the time of the very invention of navigation and shipbuilding: a **bangka**, a canoe made from a single, hollowed-out trunk, and a **vinta**, an evolution of this primitive vessel that gives straighter shapes to the hollowed-out trunk and adds one or two planks on each side.

These single-trunk canoes were invented thousands of years ago and are still in use in some parts of the world. By adding more planks and transversal reinforcements, they would end up giving birth to the keel of later vessels.



Vapor "Puerto Rico". 'A. Casals, 1912.MMB

JOLO ISLAND, PHILIPPINES

Jolo (or Sug) Island is a volcanic and very fertile island, a little bigger than Menorca, to the south of the Philippines. It is shared by two ethnic groups, the Tausug, who fuelled piracy in the area for centuries, and the Sama, among whom are the Bajau.

It was governed from the 15th century by the Sultanate of Sulu, who opposed the colonisers and was dedicated to enslaving people from other islands to export them in exchange for weapons. By a treaty signed in 1851, it came under Spanish sovereignty, but it was not occupied until 1876, when 9,000 soldiers and 33 ships had to be sent to do so.

The Sultanate of Sulu renounced its earthly power in 1915 in favour of the United States of America. Nonetheless, it retained its spiritual power. The last officially recognised Sultan, Muhammad Mahakuttah Kiram, died in 1986.



THE SAMA-BAJAU, THE ONLY HUMANS ADAPTED TO THE SEA

The Sama are a people of fishermen and small farmers, with occasional coconut plantations in the interior of the islands. The group is more heterogeneous than the Tausugs, and ranges from fully Islamized groups, who have embraced Islam, even the animistic group locally known as Bajau "sea gypsies". These marine nomads are less appreciated by the people of the land, to the point that the Tausug call them *luwaan*, which can be translated as "people to be spit on".

The Sama-Bajau are scattered over Southeast Asia. The population is estimated at 1.1 million, of which 564,000 live in the Philippines, 200,000 in Indonesia and 347,000 in Malaysia.

Millennia ago, the ancestors of the Sama-Bajau specialised in the exploitation of marine resources. This led to a selective pressure that made them the only human race specifically adapted to the sea.

Recent studies have shown that the Sama-Bajau's spleen is much thicker than that of the people living on land around them. This allows them to accumulate oxygen and last up to thirteen minutes without breathing, while they go down to depths of up to 70 metres to fish.

Young Sama-Bajau boys deliberately burst their eardrums to avoid having to compensate for the pressure during dives. This often causes them to have hearing problems.



NOT SO NOMADIC

Although they have been classified as a nomadic people, most of the Bajau settle and move in specific and reduced areas, which they only leave to go on commercial or fishing expeditions.

Traditionally, they lived in nuclear families, each one of which occupying a houseboat which was moved according to their needs, and where the marine resources were abundant.

These boats form small settlements in sheltered places, and families are linked to them even if they do not live there permanently. It is quite common for them to plant a small underwater garden beneath the usual site of their home, with sea anemones and other resources that may be useful in future times of scarcity.

In the 20th century, the Bajau people began to build stilt houses, fixed houses on the water, on top of wooden stakes, around Chinese commercial establishments that bought their sea cucumbers and other marine products.



A Sama-Bajau woman weaving at her home in Labuan Haji, Semporna, Malaysia.
(Erik Abrahamsson, Wikimedia Commons)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sama_woman_making_a_traditional_mat.JPG

A COMPLICATED PRESENT AND FUTURE

The Sama-Bajau have always been belittled by the surrounding land peoples, unable to understand the mentality of the seafarers. Of the governments in the area, only the Philippines recognises them as nationals and provides them with passports and public services. Indonesia and Malaysia put strong pressure on them to settle down and live on land, while they consider those born at sea to be foreigners.

The ancestral Bajau religion, which worships the sea god Omboh Madilao, has been strongly influenced by Hinduism and Islam (Zakat/charity) even in areas where local pressure has meant the latter has not been fully imposed.

The marine environment where these people live has been overexploited by foreign industrial fishing, and now they are forbidden to fish where they have always fished, under conservationist pretexts. Understanding between the people of the sea and the people of the land is not easy. For some, only what is moving is of interest. For others, everything that can be located and fixed.



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