



J. Fox

Notes on the southern voyages and settlements of the Sama-Bajau

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 133 (1977), no: 4, Leiden, 459-465

**This PDF-file was downloaded from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl>**

# KORTE MEDEDELINGEN

JAMES J. FOX

## NOTES ON THE SOUTHERN VOYAGES AND SETTLEMENTS OF THE SAMA-BAJAU

Small settlements of a fishing people known as Bajau Laut are to be found scattered throughout the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur. Such settlements are presently reported at Labuan-Bajo at the western end of Flores (Gordon 1975: 41), at Balaurin, Kalikur and Wairiang on Lembata (Barnes 1974: 19), at Sulamu on Timor's Bay of Kupang, at Oe Nggae on the northeast coast of Roti, and on the tiny island of Ndao off the western tip of Roti. Linguistic and cultural evidence suggest a close relationship between these populations and other Samalan-speaking groups elsewhere in eastern Indonesia as well as in the southern Philippines and in eastern Malaysia (Molony and Noorduyn 1977). If, as this evidence indicates, the Bajau have only settled in Nusa Tenggara Timur in the recent past, it is of some importance for comparative studies to consider the historical information on Bajau Laut voyages to this area. An assessment of this information provides a rough idea of the period of actual settlement.

In the course of research<sup>1</sup> on the records (*Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren*) of the Dutch East India Company for the Timor area, I have encountered early references to Bajau Laut dating from the years 1725 and 1728. The first notes the presence of Bajau on the island of Alor; the second on the island of Roti and in the Bay of Kupang on Timor.

The first reference occurs in a letter dated 9 May 1725 (*Timor Boek*, K.A. 1921) from the chief officer in Kupang to the Governor General in Batavia and reads as follows:

... the chief ruler of Lamakera [a domain on the island of Solor], Manu Dasi, has brought here seven small Bajau Laut or Macassarese fishing vessels with 91 of their people — men, women and children — who, on the orders of the abovementioned interpreter and ruler of Lamakera, were taken captive at Bernusa on the island of Alor. (My translation).

A line in a letter of the same year, dated 22 March/May [?] (*Timor Boek*, K.A. 1921) from the ruler of Lamakera to the Governor General, adds the further bit of information that these people are "Bajau Laut from the domain of Papoek".

Several aspects of this incident deserve special comment. The Solorese are an Islamic sailing people who were among the first to ally them-

selves with the Dutch in the seventeenth century. All native rulers who signed contracts with the Company were specifically obliged to report and indeed to refuse access to foreign vessels that appeared in their waters. While this capture of the Bajau certainly reflects on their vulnerability, the fact that it occurred at all makes it apparent that Bajau Laut were, at this time, considered intruders. Two other pieces of information confirm this. The Bajau are described as 'Macassarese' but they are also identified with 'Papuk'. According to Pelras (1972: 164-165), *Papu* was the hereditary title of "the sovereign of the Sama" whose seat, if one can employ that expression in speaking of someone who dwells at sea, was at the base of the Gulf of Bone, in the Luwu region". The ethnographic fact that is most noteworthy in this brief reference is that these Bajau were travelling in small boats, in families, with an average of thirteen persons per vessel. The place where they were taken captive happens to be one of the prime areas that Bajau continued to visit in the nineteenth century (Van Lynden 1851: 322) and is one of the places where there is now a small Bajau settlement.<sup>2</sup>

The second early reference to Bajau Laut is perhaps even more significant. It occurs in a letter dated 14 May 1728 (*Timor Boek*, K.A. 1992 (2)) from the Company officer in Kupang to the Governor General. He reports that there had been no foreign ships or boats since his last letter except for:

40 small Bajau Laut boats which appeared here mostly in the domain of Thie [on the southwestern coast of Roti], some of whose people came ashore under the pretext that they had come to look for trepang; since the Rotinese rulers did not, however, trust the people, they refused them their shores and made them depart from there, whereupon the boats also appeared on the 8th of March in the open sea outside of this fortress, a fact that we could not let pass without respectfully informing you... (My translation).

A fleet of 40 Bajau boats searching for trepang on the southernmost island of the archipelago at this early date is indeed a fact worth noting but it is consistent with other historical information on the Bajau. Both Pelras (1972: 162) and Macknight (1976: 18, 50) have noted Bajau involvement in the Macassan trepang trade in the nineteenth century (see also Vosmaer 1839). This reference simply establishes this involvement for the previous century.

Macknight, who has written an exhaustive study on Macassan trepangers in northern Australia, puts the beginning of this industry between 1650 and 1750. His earliest reliable mention of a voyage to the south of Roti comes from a letter from a Company officer in Kupang in 1751 (Macknight 1976: 94-95; see also Hogendorp 1780: 430). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, Flinders (1814, II: 257) reports:

The natives of Macassar have been long accustomed to fish for the trepang... upon a dry shoal lying to the south of Rottee; but about

twenty years before, one of their prows was driven by the northwest monsoon to the coast of New Holland, and finding the trepang to be abundant, they afterwards returned; and have continued to fish there since that time. (My translation).

Among these "natives of Macassar" were undoubtedly some Bajau. Earl, for example, who had a great admiration for the Bajau and took a keen interest in tracing their movements throughout the Indonesian archipelago, documents the presence of Bajau in northern Australia. Among the praus that visited Port Essington in 1840, he notes "a vessel belonging to that singular people the Badju, a tribe without fixed home, living constantly on board their prahus, numbers of which congregate among the small islands near the southern coasts of Celebes" (Earl 1846: 65). Five years prior to this, in 1835, Earl had planned to go on a trepang-gathering expedition with Bajau, setting out from Macassar and going, via the Aru islands, to the north coast of Australia (Earl 1837: 335).

While historical sources thus indicate quite clearly that Bajau Laut were sailing to Timor (and perhaps beyond) by the first half of the eighteenth century, they provide no clear indication of when the Bajau began to settle on the islands of this area. It would seem reasonable to surmise that such settlement did not occur until after 1750 when, as records indicate (*Timor Boek* for 1759, K.A. 2857), 'Macassarese' vessels began to arrive in the Timor area with formal letters of permission allowing them to gather trepang without hindrance. If one accepts the close association of Bajau with the trepang trade, it is possible that settlement may not have begun until the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The most likely area of initial Bajau settlement was western Flores over which the Sultan of Bima claimed authority, as did, from time to time various rulers from Macassar (Gordon 1975: 50-51). By the early nineteenth century, small settlements of Bimanese, Macassarese, Buginese as well as Endenese dotted the coast of Flores. Kruseman, for example, reporting on this area in 1824, notes the foundation of two villages on the coast of Flores established by Macassarese and Bugis and engaged in "much trade in trepang" (Kruseman 1836: 41). It is probable that Bajau had a hand in this trade for, by 1854, Freijss reports the existence of two Bajau villages with 200 persons at Nanga Lilin at the western end of Flores (Freijss 1859: 451, 516). He also states that besides engaging in "piracy", Bajau were gathering turtle shells and trepang not only in the straits between Sumbawa and Flores but also on the southwest coast of Sumbawa and all along the north coast of both Sumbawa and Flores. The Bajau who lived on Flores were under the jurisdiction of their own Dalu, Dalu Bajau, who was appointed by the Sultan of Bima. (The Dalu whom Freijss met claimed to be of Bimanese origin.) "The Bajau of Sumbawa,<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, sail mainly for their own account and are thus without any supervision. But they have relations with the people of Goa who marry Bajau women and go with Bajau

fishermen on prow-journeys" (1859: 495). At about this same time, at the eastern end of Flores, Van Lynden reports that Bajau Laut were gathering trepang on the coasts of Solor, Adonare, and Lembata but had not, it would seem, settled at any one place: "In 1850 seven Bajau prows came to catch tripang" (Van Lynden 1851: 332).

The Bay of Maumere may have been another area of Bajau sttlement. Wichmann (1891: 205) reports that the village of Geliting near Maumere was settled by Buginese at the beginning of the nineteenth century and many maps, as well as some reports (Kleian 1891: 504), refer to Maumere itself as "Badjo". In the early twentieth century, a major Bajau settlement was Mökko (Meko) on the northeastern coast of Adonare. Vatter visited Mökko in 1929 and states the following:

The Bajau have been here for several generations; formerly, the houses they erected in the water had to give them protection against the warlike Adonarese but for some years now they have been living peacefully with the 'mountain people'. From here they trade throughout the whole Solor-Alor archipelago and even further as far as middle Flores (Vatter 1932: 180).

Barnes (in Molony and Noorduynd 1977: 1-2) has recently reported that Mökko was broken up by the Dutch and that some of the Bajau from this village now reside at Waijaran and Lewoleba on Lembata.

There are very few early records that might provide information on Bajau voyages to Sumba. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Sultan of Bima laid claim to Sumba and, though the Company never fully acknowledged this claim, it maintained only minimal contact with the island. As a result, Sumba appears to have been open to more unrestricted voyages than any of the other neighbouring islands that had been drawn within the sphere of Company control. Bimanese, Macassarese, and Endenese made regular voyages to Sumba. In 1775, for example, one Company officer reports that as many as 30 to 40 'Macassarese' praus would visit Sumba to trade for slaves and then sail on to Selura off the south coast of Sumba and to Pulau Pasir south of Roti to gather a great quantity of trepang (Roo van Alderwerelt 1906: 226-227).

Although Bajau are not specifically mentioned in this report, similar accounts for the nineteenth century make it clear that Bajau were definitely among the voyagers to Sumba:

Moreover the Buginese of Ende trade with the natives of Sumba: rubber, birds' nests, rope, fish-nets, maize, rice, kamuning wood, and slaves. Ten or fifteen paduakans from Lombok, Bali, the Bay of Boné, Macassar and Bima take part in this trade, especially in order to procure slaves who are sent on to Ende, Sapi, Sumbawa, Lombok, Bali, the Bay of Boné and the east coast of Borneo and there find ready buyers. Some thirty or so Bajau Laut or trepang fishermen take part in this trade in slaves, and very

few leave the Sumbanese coast without taking some slaves with them (Anon 1855: 297).

It would seem that, at this time, few Bajau who visited Sumba were inclined to settle there. Most Bajau apparently returned, as Freijss indicates, to settlements on Sumbawa and Flores.

Among the local populations near Timor, the people of the tiny island of Ndao preserve some of the most vivid memories of the coming of the Bajau. One legend concerning the Ndaonese hero, Pa Gage, explains the origin of the small Bajau settlement as the result of a deception in marriage negotiations between the Ndaonese leader and the visiting Bajau, an ensuing fight, and the eventual 'capture' of a number of Bajau: "those who were caught by the men of Ndao were forced to stay on Ndao and marry with Ndaonese so that they have descendants on Ndao to this day". Another legend tells of the armed retaliation against Ndao by other 'Bajau' who, from their description, seem more like Macassarese or Bugis. One such attack on Ndao by 24 'Macassarese' praus occurred in 1758 (Roo van Alderwerelt 1906: 195). If this is the retaliation that the legend refers to, it would imply a relatively early date for the 'settlement' of Bajau on Ndao. While this may well be possible, I have been unable to find confirmation of it in any of the numerous descriptions of Ndao and Roti in the nineteenth century. Only in the early twentieth century does Nieuwenkamp (1925: 91) report Bajau settled at Cape Tongga across the straits from Ndao and, with Macassarese and Butonese, at Oe Laba on Roti's northwest coast.

At present, the largest settlement of Bajau on Roti is at Oe Nggae on the northeast coast of the island. These Bajau speak a Sama dialect; they live primarily by fishing and by trading their surplus for other needs; they maintain close relations with other Bajau on neighbouring islands; they profess Islam, though they have chosen a Macassarese settled among them as their religious leader; and they erect distinctive wooden grave markers that resemble those produced by Bajau as far north as Sabah (Sather and Kiefer 1970). While asserting their 'Macassarese' origins, most of these Bajau say they have come to Oe Nggae from west Roti and many talk of moving on to Sulamu on Timor which has now become another important Bajau settlement.<sup>4</sup> Given this fluidity, it is thus not surprising that there are so few references to fixed Bajau settlements in the area.

In summary, we can draw the following conclusions. Bajau Laut were voyaging as far as Timor by the early part of the eighteenth century. They were largely involved in trepang gathering and were closely associated with 'Macassarese'. Actual settlement probably began in the early nineteenth century. The first settlements were most likely on Flores with the earliest documented Bajau settlements occurring on the western end of this island. Apart from the settlement known as Labuan-Bajo on western Flores, most other Bajau settlements have been less stable with populations shifting among various sites. Yet all present-

day settlements are in areas frequently visited by Bajau from the time of their early voyages.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The information that I cite here is simply what I happened to come upon in the course of my research on the history of Roti and Savu. I would like to express my thanks to members of the staff of the *Algemeen Rijksarchief* for their assistance. A systematic search of the V.O.C. archives for material relating to Bajau would undoubtedly uncover a great deal more data.
- <sup>2</sup> In later literature, Bernusa — where the Bajau were taken captive — refers to an area of Solorese settlement on the island of Pantar, next to the island of Alor. Whether the Bajau were actually captured on Pantar or Alor is of relatively minor importance. The fact that there is now a Bajau settlement on Pantar was pointed out to me by Dr W. Stokhof in written comments he made on an unpublished paper of mine on the languages of Pantar.
- <sup>3</sup> Freijss mentions "Djampea", "Kalatua" and "Wetter" as places on Flores which the Bajau visit. For Sumbawa, he says that the Bajau stay at "Bua", "Borong", and "Allas" (Freijss 1859 : 493).
- <sup>4</sup> Some of this information on Bajau settlements on Ndao and Roti has been summarized in Sather (1971 : 11-12) on the basis of notes that I provided him.

## REFERENCES

- Abbreviations
- BKI Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, uitgegeven door het Koninklijk Instituut.
- NTNI Natuurkundig Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indië.
- TBG Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, uitgegeven door Bataviaas Genootschap.
- TNAG Tijdschrift van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap.
- TNI Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indië.
- VBG Verhandelingen van het Bataviaasche Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen.
- Anon.
- 1855 Beschrijving van het eiland Soemba of Sandelhout. *TNI* Vol. 17: 277-312.
- Barnes, R. H.
- 1974 *Kédang: A Study of the Collective Thought of an Eastern Indonesian People*. London.
- Earl, G. W.
- 1837 *The Eastern Seas, or Voyages and Adventures in the Indian Archipelago in 1832-33-34*. London.
- 1846 *Enterprise, Discoveries and Adventures in Australia*. London.
- Flinders, M.
- 1814 *A Voyage to Terra Australis... in the Years 1801, 1802 and 1803*. London.
- Freijss, J. P.
- 1859 Reizen naar Mangarai en Lombok in 1854—1856. *TBG* Vol. 9 : 443-530.

- Gordon, J.  
1975 The Manggarai: Economic and Social Transformation in an Eastern Indonesian Society. Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University.
- Hogendorp, W. van  
1780 Beschrijving van het eiland Timor. *VGB* 1 : 192-214; 2 : 405-434.  
[1825—26]
- Kleian, E. F.  
1891 Eene voetreis over het oostelijk deel van het eiland Flores. *TBG* Vol. 34: 485-532.
- Kruseman, J. D.  
1836 Beschrijving van Timor. *De Oosterling* Vol. 2 : 1-41.
- Lynden, D. W. C. Baron van  
1851 Bijdrage tot de kennis van Solor, Allor, Rotti, Savoe en omliggende eilanden. *NTNI* Vol. 2 : 317-336; 388-414.
- Macknight, C. C.  
1976 *The Voyage to Marege': Macassan trepangers in northern Australia*. Melbourne.
- Molony, C. & Noorduyn, J.  
1977 "Sama/Bajau Studies: Recent and Current Research". (Unpublished Circular).
- Nieuwenkamp, W. O. J.  
1925 *Zwerftocht door Timor en Onderhoorigheden*. Amsterdam.
- Pelras, C.  
1972 Notes sur quelques populations aquatiques de l'Archipel nusantarien. *Archipel* Vol. 3 : 133-168.
- Roo van Alderwerelt, J. de  
1906 Historische aantekeningen over Soemba. *TBG* Vol. 48: 185-316.
- Sather, C. A. & Kiefer, T.  
1970 Gravemarkers and the Repression of Sexual Symbolism. *BKI* Vol. 126 : 75-90.
- Sather, C. A.  
1971 Bajau villages in the Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia. *Borneo Research Bulletin* Vol. 3, No. 1: 11-12.  
*Timor Boek*. Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren, Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague.
- Vatter, E.  
1932 *Ata Kiwan: Unbekannte Bergvölker im tropischen Holland*. Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut A.G.
- Vosmaer, J. N.  
1839 Korte beschrijving van het Zuid-oostelijk Schiereiland van Celebes. *VGB* Vol. 17 : 63-184.
- Wichmann, A.  
1891 Bericht über eine im Jahre 1888-89 im Auftrage der Niederländischen Geographischen Gesellschaft ausgeführte Reise nach dem indischen Archipel: Flores. *TNAG* Vol. 8 : 187-293.
-