THE POSSIBILITY OF ETHNOGENESIS OF THE BADJAO IN BARANGAY TAMBACAN, ILIGAN CITY

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ABSTRACT

The Badjao, who are considered part of the thirteen Moro ethno-linguistic groups in Mindanao specifically in the Sulu Archipelago area, are also found in Barangay Tambacan in Iligan City in Northern Mindanao. For centuries, they have remained relatively undisturbed by colonialism until the Moro insurgency in Mindanao compromised their position in the socio-political balance in the Sulu Archipelago causing them to experience anomie. The peace-loving Badjao stayed away from the insurgency. This however was interpreted by some Moro as a sign of cowardice. Heavily prejudiced and discriminated, the Badjao became victims to Moro aggression specifically the Abu Sayyaf. Many of the Badjao were pushed to escape their morbid situations in their former homeland and found their way in different places. Some ended up in Iligan City and decided to settle. For years, the Badjao became known as beggars and they themselves experienced and are still experiencing a change in their culture and identity. Their material culture, economic activities, social organization, spirituality and arts have to evolve with the changing situations and circumstances. From the house boats to the inland stilt houses, from fishing to begging, from the moorage to the barangay, from Islam to Christianity, and from traditional music to the digital discs these changes can be seen as possibilities towards the ethnogenesis of the Badjao away from their usual ancestral waters.

Field of Research: Ethnohistory, Badjao, ethnogenesis, Iligan City, local history

1. Introduction

Iligan is a city in northern Mindanao in the Philippine Islands. It was once a booming city with its steel and cement industries, but the closing of the 20th century saw the decline of such industries because of global competition. The city still has industrial plants, but in recent years, it shifted towards developing commercial sites and in promoting its tourism industry. Obvious however is the mendicancy that exists in the city. These beggars are mostly coming from the Badjao tribe, named by some books as one of the Moro ethno-linguistic groups in the Philippine south. This is not to say that the Badjao are Muslims. They are considered Moro because of their stay in the Sulu seas and as subjects of the Sulu Sultanate (Rodil, 2003). The Badjao in Iligan City are no longer seafarers and their inclination towards the Islamic faith is gradually diminishing. Out of the seas and into the cities, the Badjao are slowly being molded by the very circumstances they found themselves. In Iligan City, one can already observe the changing of their culture from sea gypsies to beggars.
2. Observing the Badjao in the City

One can see the Badjao crisscross through the streets looking for possible clients who are generous enough to give them something. They look horrible and are dirty, they smell bad, and are as equally annoying sometimes. One can observe them singing and performing musical instruments to appease passersby, who just like the gods of old, seldom respond favorably to the appeasement. Some are stationed near local food shops hoping for a share of crumbs. Some can also be found in the city pier, making diving a living: throw them a peso or something, and they will show off their diving skills. It is mendicancy in the sea. In the city, mendicancy is almost synonymous to the Badjao. People who have no idea about what the Badjao went through are prejudicial in their judgments.

3. Studies on the Badjao in Iligan

Most researches on the Badjao concentrated on their poverty. Sociologists and anthropologists have considered the general situation of the Badjao, and papers are already written on their social condition. These studies are a looking forward, a way of understanding where society can come in to help the Badjao in Iligan City as is clear in Bracamonte (2011). This study however is a looking back. It aims to look back at the Badjao experiences: experiences that are as of the present moment moving towards ethnogenesis, a change in culture and therefore of ethnic identity.

4. Theoretical Framework

The idea of this paper is that ethnogenesis is a product of a change of culture that in turn change the ethnic identity of the people experiencing the change. Ethnic identity as considered here is, according to Tan Chee-Beng (1997), the subjective approach: to make manifest the lifestyle of a people to ascertain their identity and not through a positivistic standpoint wherein a people is labeled an ethnic identity using a presupposed template of who they are supposed to be. Thus, ethnic identities are changeable and not statically rigid. Brian Shuop (2008) agrees with this approach and added that changes in ethnic identities happen all the time depending on situations that a people experiences.

This change however became possible when people are forced by circumstances to leave the security of already accustomed culture and tradition and adapt to new social conditions. These rapid periods of change break down social rules and can cause individuals belonging to a certain community uncertain of their position within a new community. According to Preston (1996), this condition was referred to by Emile Durkheim as anomic. Durkheim (1951) explained that there is in this condition an upsetting of the internal balance that kept a group of people in check. The old and accustomed traditions fail to identify for the individual his or her role in the community. In the absence of this balance, individuals react to the conditions of change until balance is achieved. Cultural change by a community is here a product of changing conditions. The old ethnic identity gives way to the formation of a new one based on these changing conditions. This change of ethnic identity is considered in this paper as ethnogenesis.
5. Methodology

In this attempt to put on record the changes that the Badjao is experiencing in trying to escape the calling of their past culture and in embracing a new one, the basic problem of this paper is the Badjao experience towards ethnogenesis. This is answered by presenting who the Badjao were in their traditional and ancestral domains, the causes of the migration of some of them to Iligan City, and their life in the city.

5.1 Sampling and data collection method

Many works on the Badjao culture are already present as of the writing of this paper. These written materials were presented to provide a picture of the Badjao in the Sulu seas. The narrative of the Badjao migration to Iligan and their culture in the city is done through oral history. A limited form of community immersion was also conducted and the researchers participated in some activities of the Badjao in their community in Barangay Tambacan, Iligan City.

6.0 Finding and Discussion

The Badjao, according to James Francis Warren (1981), is a group under the dominion of the Sulu Sultanate. He refers to them as Samal Bajau Laut with a culture centered on the sea. They are scattered in the Sulu archipelago and the Celebes rim. Nimmo (2001) called them Sama Dilaut. The term “Sama” is used as an autonym and the term “Dilaut” is used to distinguish the Badjao from the shore dwelling Sama people. Sama Dilaut means “Sama of the Sea”. But Nimmo also added that in eastern Borneo, the term “Bajau” is used to refer to all Sama speaking people and that what he called Sama Dilaut are also called Bajau Laut. Bajau is an Indonesian word meaning “boat dwelling people”. Regarding their origin, Goquingco (1980) believe that the Badjao or Sama Dilaut are among the great sea-voyagers of Eastern Indonesia who, since the most remote geological ages, sailed forth from these deep-sea regions. She argued that the Badjao are related to the Orang Laut of Johore and Southern Malaysia.

However, during the rising tides of insurgency in the Philippines during the 1970s when the Moro Islamic Liberation Front started spreading the ideals of the Moro nation, the Badjao were caught in the middle. Esplanada (1997), in presenting the case of the Badjao he interviewed in the mountains in northern Philippines, specifically in Baguio City, explained that the Badjao were attacked by both Christian fanatics and Moro secessionist rebels in their areas. Many of the stilt houses were burnt down. Not wanting any more trouble, the Badjao left some of their traditional areas and went as far as the island of Luzon in northern Philippines. It was because of these troubles that many found themselves in new environments and very different conditions.

The respondents in the Badjao community in Iligan City identified that the reasons why they settled in Iligan without any dreams of going back to their traditional habitat were piracy, banditry and discrimination. The respondents were once victims of looting and piracy. Pirates, like the infamous Abu Sayyaf Group, usually roam the Sulu area and loot fishermen. Some Badjao were allegedly killed if they showed resistance against these pirates. Two sisters claimed that they left the Sulu Sea after their father was murdered by the Abu Sayyaf group. Those who decided to settle on lands were always under suspicion by the dominant Tausug and Samal population. A Badjao cannot even construct a decent
house without the suspicion of the non-Badjao population. These people believe that, since the Badjao are poor they must have committed a crime or stolen something for them to be able to construct decent houses. Besides, they were viewed as traitors against the Moro cause because they did not join the secessionist movement in the 1970s. The Badjao also added that they like Iligan because the people are more tolerant to them in contrast to areas in Zamboanga where some of them experienced their palms being burned by cigarettes whenever they raised them to beg.

6.1 Material Culture

Central to the Badjao material culture is their boat, which after centuries of experience in boat building have become the highest manifestation of their artisanship. The boats themselves contained the finest carvings found in the Tawi-Tawi area (Nimmo, 2001). These boats serve as the dwellings for the Badjao (Perez III, et al., 1989). They have temporary stilt houses constructed only in times of boat repair and overhaul. Their material culture is very much centered on the sea. Dwellings are mobile in the case for boathouses and if ever they dwell outside these boathouses, they stayed in temporary stilt houses constructed near shorelines and only serve as general rest houses—for resting and for the night. The Badjao never developed any fondness for the land and the agriculture that it usually sustains.

In Iligan, most of the Badjao lives on land and have small houses. It is striking that none of them even own a boat. Since only very few have the skill of building houses, the Badjao hire their non-Badjao neighbors to work in the construction. Inside the Badjao house, the living, dining and sleeping spaces are in one place. Only the kitchen room is separated from the rest of the house. They do not have any table used for dining; they simply hold their plate or place them on the floor. Their living room does not have chairs, but a few already have a television and a DVD player. Clothes are placed in the basket because there is no cabinet.

6.2 Economic Activities

According to Orosa (1970), the Badjao were naturally fishers and divers, as they were known in the Sulu archipelago. Warren (1981) noted that the Badjao also engaged in trepaning, collecting edible sea cucumbers, and pearl diving. The Badjao of Parang, Maimbung, Tulayan Island and Tawi-Tawi were all pearl divers, sometimes in the service of private individuals. In some occasions though, the Badjao did try to make a living on land. Some landowners allow them to use undeveloped lands without permanent payment but with the condition that the Badjao would clear these lands themselves (Nimmo, 2001). This temporary venture on land though was temporary for most Badjao because they prefer the life of the sea, on which almost all of their economic activities are centered.

The Cultural Center of the Philippines (1994) discussed that the Badjao fishermen, who were also pearl divers, brought with them their immediate families as their fishing method require the group to participate. The husband plans the entire activity. Women can help in spearing fishes, setting up the nets, and can also navigate the boat. Children who were already taught the life of a fisherman assist their parents. Many times they sell their products to fish dealers in order to earn an income, but the Badjao usually only consider a subsistence economy if they felt that they already earned enough.
In contrast, this distribution of role takes a different shape in the city. The *ag-pangamuh* (begging) activity of the Badjao became a family livelihood in Iligan City. They woke up early in the morning to beg. Badjao mothers go to the streets bringing their young girls with their infant siblings to serve as props to draw sympathy from the people. The boys brought with them improvised drums made of plastic to be used as music instruments. They perform in many corners of the city and ask something in return. Badjao men are usually left behind in the community in Tambacan because their stature as men makes it difficult for them to convince people that they need help.

For them, any food brought from the proceeds of their *ag-pangamuh* (begging) for the day is enough to provide the temporary relief from hunger. This is not limited to Iligan City though, for some Badjao also travel to other neighboring cities to beg. Another form of begging is the *angedjo*, which is diving for coins thrown by ship passengers. This is another good source of income especially among the Badjao children and teenagers. In this activity, the Badjao improvised rafts made of floating Styrofoam and used them to travel towards the port in Iligan. These children would wait for a passenger ship to anchor in the port, and upon the anchorage, asked the passengers to drop a coin for them to show off their diving skills.

### 6.3 Social Organization

As observed by Goquingco (1980), though there were indeed those who settled on land, most of the Badjao lived as nomads on the seas. They usually interact and associate with each other within a moorage that is composed of families who are usually *dakampungan*, relatives or close relations due to alliances. In Nimmo (2001), central to the moorages were the leaders who were land dwellers and only went to sea to fish. Surrounding them were the semi-nomadic fishermen who only return to land during full moons. Outside the ties within a moorage are Badjao passersby who stopped over in the moorage while going to another destination. The Badjao family is nuclear with the father as the main fisherman while the wife and children provide support.

Since most of the Badjao in Barangay Tambacan came from different places, they rarely form the connection formed in the sea moorages in Sulu. Relatives or not, the Badjao in Tambacan helps each other in order to survive. Community groupings are not composed of *dakampungan*. Relatives usually come and go in Tambacan and social organizations no longer resemble that of the moorage. Badjao in Tambacan can be classified into two groups the permanent and the less permanent. Permanent Badjao firmly claimed that they would never leave Iligan City. In addition, some of them consider Tambacan as their base, especially when they return from their exhausting begging trips from Cagayan de Oro City, Davao City, Surigao City and other provinces frequently visited by them especially during Christmas. The less permanent Badjao are those who move constantly looking for better opportunities to accumulate cash. Badjao who came all the way from Sulu, Basilan, and Zamboanga stayed for weeks, or more than one month if the *ag-pangamuh* activity is good. The less permanent Badjao built small stilt houses and then later abandons these houses when they leave.

### 6.4 Religion

Though listed as part of the Moro Ethno-linguistic groups, the Badjao remained obscure in terms of how Islamized they are. Rodil (2003) asserts that the Badjao are only considered as such because of their
relationship with the Sultanate of Sulu. It is obvious that they are not Muslims. Goquingco (1980) believes that the Badjao are still primarily pagan with a pantheon of gods and spirits and pagan rituals. This paganism is manifested for example in the healing rituals of the Badjao. Nimmo (2001) mentioned that during healing rituals, the Imam played the role of a pagan priest who chanted some Arabic passages for the enhancement of their supposed magical powers. He added that these passages may sound a bit like taken from the Qur’an especially to the untrained ears, but the chants are memorized and usually recited without the aid of the Qur’an. In fact, not even one of the Imams owns a copy of the Qur’an. Calling the Badjao a Muslim therefore is really a huge stretch of the imagination. The Badjao world according to Nimmo (2001) is composed of supernatural beings, nature spirits, and ancestral spirits that can directly influence the world of the Badjao.

Almost all the Badjao in Tambacan are Christians. They were brought to the Christian faith because of the help extended to them by Christian religious groups. On the other hand, there are now only a few members of the community who professes to be Muslims. In the community, they are called pa-muslim-muslim, which is a Cebuano term that connotes a person who is a Muslim in label only. The Imam in the community is also known as the community drunkard. There is a New Life Badjao Community Church in Barangay Tambacan and most Badjao participates in prayer sessions and gospel sessions led by Badjao Pastor. Right after his prayer, the pastor reads part of the translated Bible to the participants and brings all into silent prayer. After which, they sing songs of praises (again translated by Christian missionaries) in their own language. After the songs of worship, a thanksgiving would follow where everyone is encouraged to give thanks to God. However, just like the Christian majority of Iligan City, the Badjao also believes in nature spirits and supernatural forces.

6.5 Art

The Badjao normally recognizes song, music, dance, carving and other forms of art as integral to their everyday life. Art is not alienated as mere performance or an activity separate from the regular flow of day-to-day living. For example, they have a song for almost any activity and most are improvised, except for the standard songs like Lugu (wedding song) and Panulkin (song for the dead) (Nimmo, 2001). The Badjao musical instruments are sometimes as improvised as their songs. Though they have the tambul (skinhead drums), drums is generally anything on hand that can be beaten. They also have agong (gongs) and kulintang (set of small gongs) and the gabbang, a xylophone-like instrument. Also used for dancing is the bola-bola, which is a pair of bamboo or shell clappers that are held in both hands (Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994).

In Iligan City, the Badjao community still practices their songs and dances. Their musical instruments are now mixed with plastic materials used as drums. This is one thing in their traditional culture that remains, though many of the Badjao are already using MP3 players in the touchscreen phones and other such technologies that the rest of the people in Tambacan are using, like the aforementioned DVD players. Part of their culture remained but it is slowly fading away with their engagement with mainstream society.
7. Conclusion and Recommendation

Ethnogenesis is commonly understood as the development of an ethnic identity by an ethnic group under circumstances that demand a change in identity, like a condition of anomie. It is a genesis commonly experienced by people reacting to tremendous amount of change in their social environment. The most obvious change in Badjao culture is the absence of houseboats in the Iligan Badjao community. Many of the Badjao eventually did away from the nomadic lifestyle that so characterized their identity in the Sulu area. Boat moorings are already out of the picture so their social organization already resembles the stationary lifestyle of the land. Economic activities, which centered on fishing and pearl diving in Sulu, are now centered on mendicancy. The Badjao too eventually embraced Christianity and whatever traces of Islamic influence found is no longer enough to have someone be called a Muslim. The Imam in the Badjao community in Iligan turned out to be the community drunkard and became one of the reasons why Christianity is preferred. Indeed, for the sake of survival, the Badjao of Tambacan is becoming a new group of people that practices a new way of life very different from where they were. Ethnogenesis is becoming apparent as a response to a dynamic and changing society.

References


