

**Being Out of Place:  
Mendicants in Urban Landscapes**

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For over a year now, we have been working on a project that seeks to understand the phenomenon of mendicancy in urban centers. The project is primarily oriented towards policy changes to meaningfully assist indigenous peoples, particularly the urban poor in Manila. Provisionally titled: 'Being Out Of Place: Mendicants in Urban Landscapes', the project addresses the displacement and dispersion of cultural minorities within the Philippine nation-state. This essay is the first in a series of papers that addresses issues of mendicancy in the Philippines; the cultural minority under discussion is the Samal-speaking sea peoples of the Sulu Archipelago or the Badjao.<sup>1</sup>

The project is essentially concerned with formulating how the national government and city administrators perceive the very poor in Manila, and how the poor, in turn, seek to negotiate access to urban spaces. For the purposes of this paper, the very poor refer to those peoples who endeavor to support themselves through a variety of livelihood occupations such as pedicab drivers, vendors, laborers on

construction sites and those who directly depend on mendicancy or receive financial assistance from family members who beg. My interest in these issues arose, in part, from a concern with representations of mendicancy in urban centers as depicted in popular Manila newspapers during the latter part of 1996, 1997 and 1998. I became intrigued with processes by which begging was no longer associated with class per se, but with the intersections of ethnic identity, class and gender. Informed by contemporary writings on the cultural and political constructions of marginality, in particular the processes through which peoples are marginalized, I began to pay attention to the specificity of marginalizing discourses and institutions and the ways through which cultural minority status is shaped by national ideologies in the Philippines. I also became interested in understanding how marginalized peoples spoke about their experiences and how they actively engaged in what I would call a doubling of marginality through the intersections of indigenous and indigent—that is inscribed on the body of the beggar.

In the early stages of this project, the research focused on understanding why increasing numbers of cultural minorities were traveling to Manila, Cebu, Baguio and other cities to beg. We sought to untangle the complex tensions between the family, the state, local governance and globalization forces that are encountered by cultural minorities in their specific locales. While the movements of Samal/Badjao individuals and families from the Sulu Archipelago to other urban centers in the Philippines has been ongoing for at least 30 years, little attention has been given to understanding the constructions of marginality and displacement. I would suggest that listening to the experiences of specific Samal/Badjao peoples begging on the streets of Manila alerts us not only to how movement, romantically imagined as nomadism, has been reinterpreted by the state as transgressive, but also to the diasporic identifications that such movements carry within them.

### **Constructions of marginality**

The making of marginality within the nation-state has been the subject of considerable scholarship. Alonso (1994) discusses how cultural inscription of the idea of the state or the misplaced concreteness of the state has in part been secured through the spatialization of time and the symbolic and material organization of social spaces. It is, she notes, the peripheries of the nation or for our purposes, the hinterlands, where subordinated

groups are located. Alonso (1994) argues that differential power relations over public and private spaces hierarchize and homogenize differences within nation-states. I would suggest that such spatializing practices are also present in the Philippines. In government pamphlets, cultural and ethnic difference is culturally constituted through concepts of boundaries (wherein western colonial influences were successfully defended) yet such boundaries are re-worked to account for falling behind the mainstream in terms of socioeconomic development, attributed to their "centuries-long isolation" in distant locales. Indeed, states the government brochure published by the Office of Southern Cultural Communities, indigenous cultural communities are "found mostly in the hinterlands, where they are closest to nature" (OSCC 1997:1). For those acquainted with the extensive literature on indigenous peoples, the linking of peoples through place to nature (rather than the more encompassing term, the environment) has resonances with the culture/nature debates of the 1970s and early 1980s.

The word "nature" is currently being reworked in quite intriguing ways. Today, we see the packaging of private green spaces within selected subdivisions in large urban centers such as Manila as "cultivated nature." I would argue that the aesthetics of "cultivated nature" and "those who live in nature" (for want of a better term) is indicative of tensions that relate both to the complex and diverse

acts of consumption implicit in capitalistic appropriations of land and the lifestyles (ethnicized and leisured) that call forth such acts—be they creative and/or destructive. We saw this in advertisements<sup>2</sup> during the APEC meetings in the Philippines during 1996 where policies of liberalization were played out in a visualization of profits through the depiction of gently undulating but uninhabited land. No roads or bridges have been built on this landscape. Instead, superimposed on it is a signpost signaling a contemporary image of progress—a “road that branches out, leading to many opportunities”. It is a promissory land of untold riches, an empty and homogenous space that is nevertheless, a domesticated landscape. The indexical relation of signpost to road draws upon a recognition of the state’s sponsorship, indeed preoccupation, with infrastructure projects. Devoid of human habitation, such visual images obscure the tensions and contradictions, and in many instances, the conflict over ancestral domain claims, land management issues and environmental degradation in the Philippines today. Such officially sanctioned discourse demarcates indigenous peoples (and the rural poor) as absent, non-participants in the state’s agenda of sustainable prosperity. Imagined as both geographically distant and temporally distinct from Manila, indigenous peoples are further marginalized. They are relegated to the folkloric as carriers of a specific Filipino cultural heritage that at some level excludes their participation as

*active agents* in the colonial past. This was clearly seen in the recent centennial preparations and celebrations of the Philippine Republic.

It is important to remember that marginalization is played out not only in national discourses but in regional discourses of political autonomy as well. Issues of ethnic identity among the Tausug (and its variant: Tawsug), Samal and the Badjao will not be discussed here because of space constraints, but I do assume that you, the reader, are aware at some level, of the political circumstances and ecological concerns in the Sulu Archipelago. Although there is considerable anthropological literature on relationships between these peoples, there has been, unfortunately, a tendency towards essentializing the different groups. At the risk of generalizing, the Tausugs are always “fierce and proud” and the Badjao are generally described as “shy and gentle” people. Samal/Badjao peoples who have lived on the border of nation-state rule and Tausug regional dominance for many generations have elaborated a marginality that has developed in asymmetrical relations.

While differentiation *within* Samal/Badjao speaking groupings in the Sulu Archipelago appears to be primarily perceived as cultural differences such as livelihood practices and settlement patterns, ethno-linguistic differentiation is the marker between Tausug and Samal. Integrated at some level into wider trading networks with

Tausug traders as procurers of sea products, many Samal/Badjao continue to encounter overt discrimination or unfair dealing in their business transactions with non-Samal speakers. While seaweed farming, in a sense, is transforming economic, demographic and political relations between Samal/Badjao peoples and their more dominant neighbors, many remain in precarious circumstances. A largely unregulated commercial fishing industry, the destruction of coral reefs by dynamite, the clearing of mangrove areas (for wood to be used in seaweed farming and housing), piracy and armed conflict have had a significant impact on Samal/Badjao livelihood, curtailing their fishing and foraging activities. Many families have sought alternative forms of livelihood or have traveled to other places, often tracing the routes traversed by relatives weeks, months or years before them.

While there is some discussion of migratory movements of the Badjao in the literature, the migration I am discussing here relates to forced migration to places outside the Sulu Archipelago. Although this research is still ongoing, it appears that this migration can be conceptualized as dispersed. Relatively small groups of people have traveled to more distant sites in Mindanao. There are Badjao communities in Cebu and in other places in the Visayas as well as in Luzon. It appears that Samal/Badjao families have members living in many different locales; it is not unusual to have parents or elderly relatives living

in Zamboanga, while the siblings stay in Cebu, Malaysia or Siasi, and other family members live in Olongapo and Manila.

In seeking to understand this pattern of movement where people travel frequently from one locale to another, it is helpful to recall Tsing's (1994:53) comment about the Meratus: Such peoples "... cultivate dispersal as a form of autonomy and form multiple shifting alliances through which to negotiate marginality". While there are interesting similarities in the way Indonesian and Philippine government officials conceptualize and interact with indigenous peoples within the discourses of development and civilization, the difficulties facing the Meratus and the Samal/Badjao are significantly different. It is to these differences and the difficulties encountered by the Samal/Badjao that I now turn to.

The networks and circulatory routes created and traveled by different Samal/Badjao families *within* the modern nation has seen a gathering or a community-in-flux of a diverse grouping of peoples from the Sulu Archipelago as well as various other locales throughout the Philippines. How the state conceptualizes this community-in-flux reveals the ambiguous positioning of the Samal/Badjao and the conditions of their estrangement in contemporary Philippine society: their being out of place. For some state officials, the movements of these peoples out of the Sulu

Archipelago signified their timeless condition outside history as nomads in an undifferentiated sea-scape. One government official traced the route of a group of Badjao from the Sulu Archipelago whose small bancas were pulled by a motorized banca from Palawan to Mindoro and then on to Luzon in the mid-1980s.<sup>3</sup> In his presentation, their unidirectional movement was a singular event precipitated by violence and the acquisitional nature of their livelihood. In such a scenario, coerced travel forecloses multiple movements along a network of routes. He explained: "They only come from Jolo and Zamboanga. That's the place of the Badjao. Their livelihood is getting coral and seashells. When they consume the resources there, they move on. By nature, these people are nomads. They are a prehistoric people." It would seem that traversing the sea somehow entailed transgressing the border.

I suggest that understanding constructs of placeness, movement and displacement are important in interrogating the political and cultural processes that shape marginality and provide insight into how the Samal/Badjao particularly in urban centers, negotiate their political status with the state. If displacement is thought of as movement away from place, the relinquishing of locale, then the nomadic aspect of Badjao sojourns is reworked in contemporary circumstances as forced migration that has diasporic identifications. In com-

paring the border with the diaspora, Clifford (1994:303) considers that the term diaspora presupposes a longer distance and a separation more like exile, a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future. Despite the tensions that diasporas are usually contrasted against such as the nation-state and indigenous claims of political legitimacy grounded on continuity of habitation and the "natural" connection to the land (a strategic reworking of state perceptions of marginality), it is nevertheless helpful to posit that some movements of Samal/Badjao families may be conceptualized as embodying a diasporic form.

I am aware that contemporary writers often reject the origin of home and return evoked in diasporic literature and valorize multi-locale attachments with their decentered lateral connections that permit the circulation of people, money, goods and information (Clifford, 1994:302). But we also need to recognize that Samal/Badjao families may have formed multi-locale attachments through the routes they travel. While many Samal/Badjao still refer to locales in the Sulu Archipelago as "home," they nevertheless have lived for considerable periods of time in urban centers in southern Luzon and often travel to Manila where they stay in somewhat transient accommodation for relatively short periods. Other Samal/Badjao, often elderly women and young children, travel during September and October from Zamboanga to Manila by inter-island

ferry. Some of these family members stay with relatives or friends in Manila while others seek shelter under flyovers or other urban structures. Begging is a strategic act that helps support family members but it is also a means of negotiating a sense of identity and fostering new alignments in unfamiliar urban locales. Those Samal/Badjao who come from different places in the Philippines but who work together on the streets of Manila refer to each other as *kababayan* ("from the same place"). For many, this recognition is based not only on the basis of the more commonly accepted markers of difference, but a sharing of experiences that have diasporic identifications invariably located in violence and cultural difference. For those Samal and Badjao who support themselves and their families through mendicancy on Manila's streets, I suggest that the proximity of these previously conceptualized "distant peoples" ensures that they are no longer being imagined in distant and spatially bounded enclaves.

### **On the street**

Before discussing the dilemmas facing Samal/Badjao working in Manila, it may be helpful to examine the issue of mendicancy in a historical context. As we are all aware, social order is linked to public urban spaces in a diversity of ways. Acts such as mendicancy and vagrancy relate to issues of surveillance and control of the subjects of the state. Colonial and post-colonial policies with respect to

such acts have remained remarkably consistent. Working from Spanish colonial court records from the 1850s onwards, Bankoff (1987) noted that mendicancy was subsumed under the act of vagrancy with sentencing based on the perceived degree of public threat. The less dangerous type included persons who had no known occupation but made a living from gambling, scrounging off public charity and begging. Vagrancy associated with criminality, particularly theft and banditry, received heavier sentences, although Bankoff argued that in many cases vagrancy was a local response to the harsh economic realities faced by peasants. Policies towards vagrancy changed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the judicial apparatus of the state was institutionalized and strengthened. During the early twentieth century, American colonial administrators became increasingly concerned with the maintenance of social order that focused more on the surveillance and monitoring of the populace through public health such as sanitation and disease-prevention campaigns as well as education.

Social order continued to be a concern of state administrators of the Philippine republic, but it was during the rule of President Marcos that mendicancy and vagrancy were declared illegal. Approved by Marcos in 1978, Presidential Decree *No. 1563* described mendicancy as endangering social justice and the protection of life, property and dignity of the

citizenry. Mendicancy,<sup>5</sup> according to the decree, bred crime, created traffic hazards, endangered health, and exposed mendicants to indignities and degradation. The designated urban places identified by the decree were public roads, sidewalks, parks and bridges. It is this decree that state and city officials cited in 1996 and continue to cite as that which empowers them to arrest and detain persons regarded as mendicants, transients and vagrants. Begging along arterial roads, major traffic intersections and flyovers in Manila meant risking forcible apprehension by the city police. As increasing numbers of cultural minorities traveled to Manila in search of livelihood, their visibility was captured by daily newspapers.<sup>6</sup> People begging on Manila's streets came to fear the camera. For them, the police invariably followed the arrival of media.

In the months preceding Christmas, elderly women and young children can be seen begging along EDSA extension and Roxas Boulevard, and along other arterial intersections and near popular tourist sites. As they negotiate access to traffic islands and intersections through their presence/visibility, their claims to these places remain tenuous. Samal/Badjao families working on the streets of Manila form different and unlikely alliances with other workers of the city such as taxi drivers, bar girls, and street gangs or "solvent boys." New but tenuous alignments may be created and disbanded. But the women, teenage girls

and children face physical and sexual harassment from street gangs who also steal money from them. Wherever possible, Badjao women and children avoid these gangs but avoidance is more problematic when local government officials request financial assistance; doubly so when these officials can also apprehend and detain them under the anti-mendicancy act. Women and children detained by local government officials working in specific *barangays* have recounted acts of maltreatment, including physical beatings. Mendicancy is a precarious existence, and the fear of apprehension and detention is ever present. Indeed, the police seem to indiscriminately arrest anyone who is perceived to be loitering, resting or vending on the streets, not only beggars but also vendors, construction workers and laborers. Attempts to detain (*huli*) and the arbitrary nature of the act create uncertainty, distrust and fear among these people and there have been incidences where children have been hit by cars and injured while avoiding arrest. It appears that some arrests were made following complaints by large business establishments in the area.

In 1996, 1796 people were cared for at various DSWD Centers in the Philippines: 1130 were classified as transients, 222 as vagrants and 444 as mendicants. A significant number of these mendicants were identified as Badjao. Based on DSWD records, the number of Badjao arrested and detained decreased in 1997 but they

still comprise the largest grouping of cultural minorities held in holding centers in Manila. This period of detention is invariably a very stressful situation for families as very young children under the care of elder siblings or relatives are also detained. Parents or close relatives must present proof of their residency in Metro Manila before the children are released into their care. Often a social worker will visit their home before approval is given, thus further delaying the child's release. While very young children may be released within 1-3 days, the elder children and women face a period of uncertainty and worry as they seek to clarify whether they will be released, detained or returned to Zamboanga. For those families who are not residents of Manila, the DSWD may detain the women and teenage children for a period of three months for training in livelihood projects. Elderly women and children who give their residence as Zamboanga or locales within the Sulu Archipelago are returned under the *Balik Probinsiya* Program. Many women and children are not willing to go back as they have not made sufficient money to repay debts they or their families have incurred. Others might be unwilling to return because they have found work in Manila or they encountered difficulties in earning a livelihood in the south, particularly if the family is female-headed. Many government officials comment that the *Balik Probinsiya* program is ineffective as the people who go back to the Sulu Archipelago invariably

return to Manila and are arrested and detained repeatedly. Yet, until very recently, very little has been done by the concerned agencies to understand the circumstances of these peoples' lives or the reasons why they leave their homes to travel to Manila or other urban centers to beg<sup>7</sup>. Recent initiatives announced by the government are based on a recognition of the plight of cultural minorities, although such policies are oriented towards minimizing movement to urban centers and, in a sense, fail to recognize the structural violence experienced by the Samal and Badjao peoples in their everyday lives.

In rethinking the contemporary movements of specific individuals in the context of identity politics, we are exploring the impact of structural violence and cultural difference on Samal/Badjao families within the Philippine nation-state. Although the research for this paper is Manila-based, we have begun to travel to Samal/Badjao communities in Luzon to document migration movements and to collect life histories. One of the most disturbing aspects of this documentary process is the list of deaths recounted. While the incidence of violence that Badjao communities experience has been briefly discussed in the literature such as Harry Nimmo's concluding chapter of his recent book *Songs of Salanda* - where he stated that two-thirds of the Badjao population in the area where he worked in the 1960s have died or been driven out - there has not been, as far



as I know, any attempt to actually document these incidents or to understand how Samal/Badjao families deal with the violence and uncertainties that they encounter. From the small number of families we are currently working with, the incidence of male deaths is very high. Many men appear to be killed by pirates while fishing. In nearly all the families we have interviewed, at least one close family member has been murdered through alleged feuds with Tausugs or shot by pirates often referred to as Joloanons (from Jolo). We know very little about these men except that they are masked, armed and violent.

It appears that Badjao families in the Sulu Archipelago encounter very difficult circumstances in their daily lives. Many Badjao men no longer fish because of the danger of being killed and family members are forced to look for alternative forms of livelihood. It does appear that many Badjao families are living in a situation that could be called structural violence where they are politically dominated, economically exploited and sometimes murdered. Families burdened by substantial debts are often forced to migrate. What the government does not appear to understand is that the violence is ongoing. Families that migrated to Luzon in the 1970s or 1980s have been joined by female kin whose husbands or fathers were killed recently. It is on the female/child body, the body of the beggar, that in a sense, this struggle for survival is inscribed.

### **Mendicancy: An ethics of survival to work through the present**

Nearly all the family members whom we have talked to and interviewed over the past year and who have lived in Manila for some months are involved in some form of "lawful" work. Depending on the composition of the family, adult and teenage males work as vendors of shellcraft or cigarettes, pedicab drivers or laborers on construction sites. Elderly women and young children may beg. Mendicancy is gendered as women's work and although males also beg, they are usually young boys or disabled or elderly men. It is clear that begging is regarded as work (*trabaho*) and apprehension programs implemented by local *barangay* officials and the police are perceived as unfair and discriminatory. "*Kung magbenta sa Manila, hulihin ka, kung mag-sidecar hulihin ka rin, lalo na kung manghingi. Anong masama sa paghingi hindi naman kami magnakaw? Bakit nila kami hinuhuli? Paano na lang?*" (If we vend in Manila, we're arrested; if we take passengers on the side-car, we are arrested and most of all if we beg. What is wrong with begging? We are not stealing anything. Why are they arresting us? How should we be?)

While money earned from begging is considered as supplementary earnings, in many Samal/Badjao families, however, it is the only source of income particularly if these families are female-headed. This is generally the situation in Manila. Their earnings

vary considerably so that in one night, an elderly woman may earn from 20 pesos up to 200 pesos (less than US \$10). The money is spent on food, medicine and the immediate needs of the family although small amounts may be spent in leisure pursuits as well. Paraphrasing Grossberg, mendicancy can be considered "an ethics of survival to work through the present." As one Badjao woman explained to Martha: "We would not shame ourselves by begging if only we have livelihood in Zamboanga."

It is a matter of concern for all of us working on this project that government-sponsored campaigns during December 1998 were clearly designed to reduce the income of those dependent on mendicancy without providing other forms of assistance towards these families. Government campaigns presented members of cultural minorities as members of syndicates, implying that they were actively involved in criminal associations. At the beginning of this project, we were also interested in this issue but in the many months that we have spent visiting Samal/Badjao families, often on a daily basis, we were unable to locate or identify any systematic organization that could be described as a *sindikato*. Government officials referred to instances when individual Badjaos were observed giving non-Badjaos small sums of money. Upon investigation, however, it was ascertained that such sums were payments for debts, often for

accommodation during their stay in Manila.

Linking mendicancy with criminality has been particularly effective as a strategy to minimize the occurrence of begging, since the public is unwilling to engage meaningfully with the underlying issues of poverty and violence in Philippine society. Media representations of mendicancy are doubly ironic, as they divest cultural minorities such as the Badjao of presence/visibility and thus agency, denying their gestures for assistance and representing them as duplicitous, exploitative and manipulative – Badjao as simulacra of the beggar. Such media campaigns were especially distressing to the Samal/Badjao communities, particularly the parents, grandparents and relatives of young children who, through the terrible poverty in which they are living, are thus hindered in providing their children with adequate food and medicine that they so desperately need.

Mendicancy can be understood as a condition of estrangement encountered by specific cultural minorities in the Philippines, but it is much more than that. It can be seen as a contradictory engagement of the Other, which calls forth emergent identifications that destabilizes traditional notions of cultural minorities as "over there" on the peripheries of the state. Mendicancy is not criminal behavior but a performative act that provides a positioning from which to speak of

and as the marginal, the dispossessed and the emergent in the contemporary Philippine nation-state. Mendicancy calls forth our recognition of the Other through an ethics of care;

to give to the Other is an empathetic gesture. To deny the existence of mendicancy, now that, is a criminal act.

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policy staff to develop programs that would meaningfully assist cultural minorities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Samal-Badjau speaking peoples in the Philippines belong to a much wider grouping of Sama peoples that includes not only boat-dwelling and former boat-dwelling groupings but also shore- and land-based peoples. These peoples live in scattered settlements over a maritime area encompassing Palawan, northern and eastern Borneo and Eastern Indonesia. In the Philippines, Badjao (and its variants: Badjaw, Badjau, Bajao) has been used to refer to boat-dwelling and formerly boat-dwelling peoples while the more sedentary Sama-speaking groupings are referred to by the ethnonym, Samal. A widely used autonym by Samal-Badjao speakers is Sama Dilaut. Sather (1997:1-12) explores the cultural and linguistic similarities and differences between the Sama peoples in the region within a historical context. Interestingly, a commonly used ethnonym and autonym for many Samal speakers in Manila is Badjao. The problematics of self-naming among the marginalized groups of Samal speakers in Manila will be discussed in more depth in a forthcoming paper on Representations of Mendicancy.

<sup>2</sup>Sponsored by the Bankers Association of the Philippines. *Daily Inquirer*, Sept/October 1996.

<sup>3</sup>Their movement, being pulled by a motorized banca, implies that they were *pulled* (through/by technology) into the modern nation-state.

<sup>4</sup>Bankoff (1987) considers that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, policies were directed towards curtailing migration to Manila and controlling banditry in the provinces. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the state seized on the charge of vagrancy as a means of meeting its manpower requirements for the military. In the latter part of the century, however, vagrants were more likely to be deported to agricultural prison settlements in the south.

<sup>5</sup>A mendicant in the decree refers to any person who has no visible and legal means of support or lawful employment and who is physically able to work but neglects to apply himself to some lawful calling and instead uses begging as a means of living. If convicted, mendicants could be fined up to P500 or imprisoned for a period not exceeding two years. A habitual mendicant could be fined up to P1000 or imprisoned for a period not exceeding four years.

<sup>6</sup>Photographic images will be discussed in the forthcoming paper on Representations of Mendicancy.

<sup>7</sup>The Department of Social Welfare and Development has implemented a number of initiatives to assist Badjao people including livelihood programs.

<sup>8</sup>This view is widely held by the Samal-Bajau peoples living in Manila. The above quote is taken from Jill

Novera's notes. Although it is not discussed in this paper, apprehension programs (*huli*) are fearful and traumatic experiences, particularly for young children and elderly persons.

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