

HINANGAN BAJAU PRODUCTS: SAMAL-BAJAU CULTURAL CREATIVITY AND PRESERVATION AMIDST ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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The history of the Samal-Bajau community in the coastal areas of Maluso Municipality in Basilan Province, Philippines speaks of not only their capacity to fish from the sea but also to produce items made out of the materials in their coastal ecological zone. With the presence of the Claret Samal Foundation, Inc. (established in 1996), which has been helping them produce saleable products tagged as *Hinangan Bajau* Products, among others, these Samal-Bajaus are now producing items which are entirely new to their culture. They even integrate into their vocabulary new words which are the names of some of these products.

This paper tackles the issue of cultural creativity vis-a-vis cultural preservation in the context of environmental crisis and opportunities using Michel de Certeau's concepts of "permission" and "praxis" as framework of analysis. The paper argues that in producing new items amidst social and environmental crises, the Samal-Bajaus also reproduce their identity and culture. The paper concludes that this whole cultural project embodies what Certeau calls praxis. The ecological condition of the Samal-Bajaus permits creativity in their identity, which also allows the preservation of their culture.

The Bajau: Names and Stereotypes

The Bajaus are found in the southernmost part of the Philippines down to the Malaysian and Indonesian archipelagos, although their origin can only be gleaned from conjectures (Stone 1974:4-99; and Tamayo 2008:3). "For convenience, and keeping in mind their mobile way of life, Bajau populations may be categorized according to the geographical areas they

occupy or frequent. The northern areas are Zamboanga, Basilan, Jolo, and Siasi, while the southern areas are Tawi-Tawi, Sibutu, and Semporna in Sabah. Recently, the Bajau villages in Tawi-Tawi are Tungalang, Luuktulai, Bandulan, Lamiun, Tungbangko and Lioboran" (Roxas-Lim 2001:7, and see also Tamayo 2008:3). It must however be noted that today the Samal-Bajaus are also found in different cities in the Philippines like Manila, Cebu, Davao, and Iligan. With a language called *sinama* (Teo 2001:58), these people intersperse with other ethnolinguistic groups in the areas where they settle (see also Roxas-Lim 2001:7).

As a name for a people, the term "*Bajau*" has many synonyms and hence represents a degree of confusion. In the literature, to refer to the same group of indigenous people, different terms can be used: "Bajaos," "Luwaan," "Pala-u," (Orosa 1923), "Badjaw" (Stone 1974), "Badjau," "Jama Mapun," "Orang Cagayan" (Casiño 1974), "Badjaos" (Bottignolo 1995), "Palau" or "Iumaan" (Teo 2001; 'Badjao, Bajau of Philippines - People in Country Profile' [n.d.]), "Orang Laut," "Bajau Laut" (Roxas-Lim 2001), "Bajao," "Badjao," "Bajaw" (Revel et. al. 2005; Almario 2001), "Badyaw," "Laut" (Tamayo 2008), and "Bajau" (Roxas-Lim 2001; Teo 2001; Tamayo 2008). With the adjunct "*Samal-*", the same indigenous group has other formulations: "Samal-Badjau," "Samal Cagayan" (Casiño 1974), "Samal Dilaut" (Roxas-Lim 2001), "Sama Dilaut" (Malabong 2001; Torres 2001), "Sama Dilaot" (Revel et.al. 2005), "Samal Luwaan," and "Samal-laud" (Teo 2001). This range of labels is compounded by other labels such as "Sama-Siasi," "Sama-Balangingi," "Sama-Simunul," "Sama-Sibutu," "Sama-Saut," "Sama-Ubihan," "Sama-Sibuku," etc. (Peralta 2000).

This seemingly confusing number of terms referring to the people also known as *Bajau* can be attributed to some factors. The different names for this indigenous group points to human ecology: "the complexity of the composition and the diversity of the sea nomads and the elasticity, flexibility and mobility of membership and affiliation" (Roxas-Lim 2001:2, citing Clifford Sather 1996). Another factor is the archipelagic nature of the southern Philippines and of the neighboring islands down south. "It seems that the morphology of the Sulu archipelago and the constraints on the development of its natural wealth", observes Alain Martenot, "have fostered the tendency, more or less evident according to the place, of the Sama to divide into different groups" (2005:205). This means that many of these often-called "sea gypsies" would refer to themselves in relation to their different mooring places, usually along the coasts of the different islands.

The archipelagic context of the differentiation would then point to the linguistic nuances this group of people have. Hence, "linguists have sub-

divided these boat people into dialect groups, which may reflect a combination of differences in places of origins, or historical incidents and influences" (Roxas-Lim 2001:3-4)¹. The diversity of names can also be traced to how some researchers transcribed the name stated by their key informants. This is matched by the different translations found in the neighboring archipelagos of the southern Philippines such as in Indonesia and Malaysia.

What might help to clarify the ethnic identification is the use of "Sama" or "Samal" as an overarching ethnolinguistic name (Revel et. al. 2005:19, 205) to which names of branches or subgroups are attached. For example, the term "Sama-Tabawan" would refer to the Samals found in the Tabawan islands in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines. "Sama-Siasi" would mean the Samals of Siasi in Sulu, Philippines. The "Samal-Bajau" therefore would be another branch of the Sama.

The 'Samals' commonality, aside from the language, is that "the most notable common cultural trait is that they invariably prefer to live on boats and tend 'to wander around the seas' so that early European accounts grouped them together as 'sea gypsies' or 'sea nomads'" (Roxas-Lim 2001:3-4; Bottignolo 1995:9; Martenot 2005:205). However, with the present-day sedentary coastal Samals I personally observed in their sturdy houses in Basilan province and in Zamboanga City, I would still point to their sea-orientation as their common eco-cultural trait.

The Bajaus are tagged with a variety of stereotypes. With regard to the intergroup relation, the Bajau of Sulu archipelago are thought to be outcasts, shy (Stone 1974:75, 78), passive and timid (Roxas-Lim 2001:2; Orosa 1923:70). They are the *cargadores*, tricycle drivers, haulers of cargo in Tawi-Tawi, "isolated," "homeless, forlorn wanderers" (Roxas-Lim 2001:2, 11, 18), the most neglected (Tamayo 2008:3), seen as submissive, without initiative, and inferior to the Samal [used as different from Bajau] and Tausug (Teo 2001:58; Torres 2001:80; Panaguition 2008:11). These stereotypes, I suspect, contribute much to the Bajau themselves feeling inferior as a tribe.

In the class hierarchy of indigenous groups, the Bajaus assume a subordinate status in relation to the Tausug and to the Samal in Bongao and Sulu archipelago (Stone 1974:75-86). They are derogatively considered the most "primitive" (Teo 2001:59), and the lowest class (Tamayo 2007a;

¹ All Sama dialects belong to the Austronesian branch of languages however much they may differ in pronunciations and vocabularies.

2008:3; Orosa 1923:69). The Bajaus were said to have a "low level of social and political organization" (Roxas-Lim 2001:1). They are the most marginalized among the IP (indigenous people) groups (De Castro 2001:55; Roxas-Lim 2001:11; Tamayo 2007a; 2008:3) and they "were trained" by the Tausug and Tausug-Chinese businessmen "only to the extent of enabling them to undertake the menial tasks" (Roxas-Lim 2001:19-20), when they are offended, they "simply move to another place" (Orosa 1923:70). The Bajaus are seen as poor and dirty (Malabong 2001: 69; Teo 2001: 61). They are the "'sea gypsies,' living in dirty, vermin-loaded and foul-smelling *vintas*, constantly roving." "They bathe but seldom and change their clothes only when these are worn to pieces" (Orosa 1923: 69-70).

Tagged as a "vanishing tribe" (Tamayo 2008:3; 2007c), the Bajaus have low self-esteem (Panaguigon 2008:11).² According to Roxas-Lim, the Bajaus "are dwindling in numbers and disappearing as a distinctly recognizable maritime cultural group" (2001:24). "It also appears that, regardless of their actual economic status, the Bajau tended to project an image of poverty and helplessness. This may have been brought about by the condescending and discriminatory attitude and predatory behavior of the dominant groups and persons" (Roxas-Lim 2001:21). With their sea-based eco-culture and economic condition, many Bajaus are forced to prioritize livelihood activities over education. Hence, they are also seen as educationally backward (Teo 2001:61). Recently they are associated with being street beggars not only in the city of Zamboanga but also in Manila, Philippines.

On the other hand, the Bajaus are recognized as knowledgeable navigators, sailors, (Roxas-Lim 2001:11), fishermen, pearl divers (Nimmo 2001:5), and they are also known for their boat craft, as skilled builders (*tukang*) of varying boat types, "such as the tiny *banka* (canoes), *lepa-lepa* (houseboats), *vinta* (sailboats), *kumpit* (pump boats), *tolak-tolak* (boats less than 25-50 meters long), and *basnig* (long, ocean-going boats for passenger and cargo)" (Roxas-Lim 2001:23). Apart from being boat-builders, the Bajau are also reknowned weavers of their trademark mats (Panaguigon 2008:11).

They are also acknowledged for their hard work and thrift (Teo 2001: 58). They are described as peace-loving (Tamayo 2008:4; Teo 2001:58), respectful, joyful, simple, humble, hospitable, easily satisfied, getting along easily with others, and having a high sense of gratitude (Panaguigon 2008:11). "In spite of their predicament, the Bajau are a nonviolent and peaceful, seemingly contented and happy people" (Teo 2001:59).

² See also the brochure of the *Hinangan Bajau* Products.

Bajau Eco-Culture, Livelihood and Art Production

Much of the Bajau way of life is sea-related. This includes their dwellings, history, socio-political relations among themselves, morality, belief, knowledge, tradition, law, economics, language, art, practices and capabilities. The timing of Bajau ceremonies and rituals greatly depends on their fishing seasons. A research project done by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS, now the Department of Education or DepEd) Regional Office IX about the cultures in Western Mindanao, found that the Bajau ceremonies like weddings, circumcision, and healing are usually held when fishing activity is less intense (1990:24).

The same observation, specifically for ceremonies associated with birth, ear-piercing, superincision for adolescent boys, and death, can be found in Arlo Nimmo's ethnography of the Tawi-Tawi Sama Dilaut (2001:168). This clearly shows a link between their sea-based ecology and their beliefs as well as traditional practices. Roxas-Lim has a word on this: "Their proclivity 'to wander about the seas' actually demonstrates how Bajau livelihood is intimately linked to marine life and timed with the seasons, the weather, and the periodic growth and decline of marine and land resources" (2001:8).

Their skill is also translated into making toys for their children such as dug-out *banca*, miniature pettiguns, small spears, small paddles, and banana leaf strips for weaving (Ducommun 1974:142; CSFI 2010a). Adult Bajau men, in particular, are also known for making fishing related crafts like *pana* (an improvised fish speargun with thin steel as its arrow bullet), *bingit* (fishing hook), and *layag* (sail) (CSFI 2010a). The Bajau women, on the other hand, are skillful in mat weaving using dyed *pandan* leaves. Their mats woven with colorful intricate designs are basically for household use, rituals, and wedding gifts for their daughters who will marry (Benton 1974:158; CSFI 2010a; CSFI 2010b). The Bajau women also make accessories out of the variety of shells the male Bajaus retrieve from the seas into bracelets, anklets, and necklaces (CSFI 2010a).

The sea-based orientation of the Bajau is also a cultural context from which their livelihood and art productions emerge. Because the Bajau navigate the expanse of the archipelagos in the southern part of the Philippines, their main livelihood is fishing and pearl diving (Orosa 1923:69; Nimmo 2001:5). "As late as the 1960s, the Bajau in that islet (Tumindao Reef about 10 km from Sitangkay proper, and only 30 km from Sabah) were subsistence fishermen, seashore foragers, and intermittent cultivators of root crops and vegetables, if and when they managed to find suitable unclaimed land" (Roxas-Lim 2001:18). What allows the Bajaus to catch more fish even in the deepest seas is their long tradition of being sea gypsies and their

unique knowledge of the seasons and fishing. Their skills in diving for pearls and collecting marine foods were also brought about by their economic needs and eco-cultural tradition. Moreover, the retrieval and collection of a variety of seashells by the Bajau males also make possible the production of bracelets, anklets, and necklaces by the Bajau women. Indeed, "the sea is their heaven, their lifeblood, their everything" (Teo 2001:59).

Seaweed farming, meanwhile, has also become one of their major sources of income especially in some parts of Sulu (Torres 2001:78). Wilfredo Torres III in his study on the Sama Dilaut in Kabuukan Island in Hadji Panglima Tahil municipality, Sulu notes that "their livelihood activities are inseparably linked with their intimate knowledge of these areas" (2001:75). Even the trading that the Bajau have engaged in since early years, were of commodities gathered from the sea. "At the beginning, trade items for export were primarily rare and exotic goods, such as pearls, corals, sea turtles, and variety of shells, spices and medicinals" (Roxas-Lim 2001:9).

One other art form the Samal-Bajaus are known for is mat weaving. Their basic material for this is *pandan*, which is a tropical upright green plant with fan-shaped sprays of long, narrow, blade-like leaves that may grow to about 1.5 meters long, and which has woody aerial roots.³ In Maluso, Basilan, *pandan* plants usually grow at the littoral areas near rivers and streams (CSFI 2010a). The location of the *pandan* is indicative of the coastal dwelling places of the Bajaus. It is women, mostly mothers, who stay home and weave to produce mats. Mat weaving is a skill a Bajau woman should master.⁴ What influences the different mat designs are their own experiences with the seas: rainbows, boats, houses on stilts, and ocean waves (CSFI 2010a). Perhaps in a deeper sense, it is the Bajau consciousness of their ecology and the emotions engendered from their mundane life which make possible the unique mat designs.

The Bajaus recall abundance in livelihood and more prolific art production in the distant past. However, with the increase in the number of commercial fishing companies and illegal fishing activities in the southern part of the Philippines, the Bajaus face many challenges and difficulties in their livelihood and forms of creative expression. Bajau fishing catch has

³ 'Pandanus amaryllifolius', *Wikipedia*. (2011).

⁴ Similar cultural expectation among the Samals was observed by Nena Eslao Benton in Manubul, Siasi, Sulu:

"At the time boys go on fishing trips, the girls stay home more often, helping their mother with the housekeeping and also learning more seriously some handiwork techniques such as weaving floor mats from dyed *pandanus* leaves" (1974:158).

been adversely affected by bigger and more aggressive fishing companies operating in the same area. Roxas-Lim documented in her study on the Bajau and Samalan communities in the southern Philippines: "Depletion of fish catches and other marine products, competition of commercial fishing companies, illegal methods of fishing, such as the use of dynamite and cyanide, and over-fishing by the use of seine nets all contribute to the decline of fishing as a means of Bajau livelihood" (2001:18). Moreover, the Bajaus also experience extortion in the seas, and some even being killed by pirates.

"The Bajaus are considered the poorest among the poor in the area [Basilan]. Their situation is worsened by the instability of peace and order. Moreover, the sad lives of the Bajaus are made more difficult by pirates who would steal the engine of their sailboat or worst, [sic] kill them in the middle of the sea" (Tamayo 2010:4).

These stories are also infused into the consciousness of the Bajau children. I visited the Barangay Townsite of Maluso, Basilan in November of 2007 to witness the Bajau *Ongka-Ongka* (which roughly means getting together for merrymaking). I was dumbfounded when I witnessed these tragic stories of the Bajau fishermen dramatized in the talent portion of their "Search for *Bajau Datu maka Dayang-Dayang '07*" (a beauty contest for young Bajau men and women).

As Roxas-Lim's study noted "... a combination of population pressure, declining fish catches, and competition of commercial corporate fishing fleets drove small-scale fishermen like the Bajau to look elsewhere for their livelihood. The young men sought employment in Bongao, Jolo, and as far as Zamboanga and Sabah" (2001:18). Moreover, in a consultation with these Bajaus, which was organized by the Claret Samar Foundation, Inc. (CSFI), held on February 6, 2010 in the same place I visited, it was expressed by the Bajaus themselves that they usually are victims of cheating in fish trading. They usually trade with their *paltera* (middle business person who lends money to the Bajaus for capital in fishing) and *suki* or regular buyer of their fish who procures fish and takes it to sell in other places (CSFI 2010d).

For mat weaving, one of the essential materials is the pandan leaf. However, at present, there are only a few remaining places where the Bajaus can freely get *pandan* leaves (CSFI 2010b). The scarcity is caused by the increase in the demand for the multi-colored mat made of *pandan* leaves called *tepoh*, and for other mat products in the market in different places. Although the *pandan* grow wild, it faces increased pressure from cutting of *pandan* leaves that is no longer proportionate to its rate of natural growth (CSFI 2010b). In consequence, the Bajaus now are sometimes forced to use

the shorter *pandan* leaves, which are hard and fragile compared with the longer leaves, thereby affecting the quality of their products (CSFI 2010b).

Weather conditions also affect the production of *tepoh*. Drying the *pandan* leaves is an important part in the process of producing *tepoh*. Consequently, bad weather prolongs the process of mat weaving and of making other products. In a focus group discussion in Maluso, Basilan held in February 2010, the Bajaus also said that they usually do not weave when faced with domestic problems, which in turn could be affected by livelihood struggle due to strong wind and/or rain (CSFI 2010c).

Bajaus also use mangrove wood (*bakawan*) for the production of *tepoh*, as it is a particularly good firewood, which is needed to boil the *pandan* strips in dye. This process produces coloured *pandan* strips ready for the next step. According to the Bajaus, dried *bakawan* wood produces a quality of heat that allows a maximum colorization and results to bright-colored *pandan* strips (CSFI 2010c). However, the *bakawan* in surrounding areas are becoming depleted (CSFI 2010c). The depletion of the mangrove was already observed in the late '90s by Aurora Roxas-Lim (2001) in Sitangkay and Sibutu, both in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines. She observed that mangrove wood was being imported from Sabah, whereas in the 1950s it was still abundant in Sitangkay and Sibutu (Roxas-Lim 2001:17).

The depletion of *bakawan* is taking place alongside the loss of other materials that are useful for boat building, such that there are fewer boat-makers and now the importation of materials for boat-making from Kalimantan and Sabah, particularly Semporna and Sandakan (Barbosa 2001:41; Roxas-Lim 2001:23). The Philippine government now prohibits the cutting of mangroves, but unfortunately, more and more people are cutting *bakawan* to sell as wood-fuel not only in their area but in other places as well. All these add to the problems of the Bajaus in relation to their production of the mats *tepoh*.

The Bajaus, CSFI and the *Hinangan Bajau* Products

The general literature above on the Bajau resonates with the situation of specific Bajau communities found today in Maluso, Basilan Province, in the southern part of the Philippines. With a lingua franca of Chabacano, Basilan is 71% Muslim and 27% Christian ('Basilan,' *Wikipedia* 2011), the remaining 2% would comprise the Lumad or those that are neither Muslim nor Christian (Rodil 2000). Although the Yakans are native to Basilan, other ethnolinguistic groups like Tausug, Zamboangueño Chabacano, Bisaya/Cebuano, Ilonggo/Hiligaynon, and Samals (Bangingi and Bajau) are

also found there ('Basilan,' *Wikipedia* 2011). The more recent migrants are the Tagalogs, Ilocanos, Waray, Bicolanos, Maranaos, Iranuns, and Maguindanaos ('Basilan,' *Wikipedia* 2011). However, among these groups in Basilan, the Bajaus are perceived to be the most marginalized, neglected, disadvantaged, and they are being described as a "vanishing tribe" (Tamayo 2010).⁵ This condition is aggravated by the maltreatment caused by the "more dominant" groups in the place and the unfair trading scheme of some *suki* and *paltera*.

The harsh condition of the Bajaus in Basilan became one of the compelling reasons why the Claretian Missionaries decided to establish the Claret Samal Foundation, Inc. (CSFI) on July 30, 1996 (Tamayo 2010:3). This foundation was created to cater to the needs of Bajaus particularly in Maluso and Lantawan municipalities of Basilan Province, Philippines. Maluso is a fourth-class municipality located on the southwestern part of Basilan with twenty barangays (Maluso, Basilan, *Wikipedia* 2011) and, as of August 2007, with 48,178 people (NSCB 1997-2011). Lantawan is also a fourth-class municipality located on the northwest part of Basilan with twenty-five barangays ('Basilan', *Wikipedia*, 2011), and as of August 2007 with a population of 28,978 (NSCB 1997-2011).⁶

Under the care of the CSFI are five Bajau communities in Maluso—Teheman of Brgy. Shipyard Tabuk, Lutah of Brgy. Samal Village, Calle Subah of Brgy. Townsite, Brgy. Shipyard Main, and Calle Basah of Brgy. Townsite—and one in Lantawan—Pangasaan of Brgy. Tairan (CSFI 2009). According to the CSFI document prepared in April 2009, these six Bajau communities constitute the 462 Bajau households, 787 Bajau families, and 2,958 Bajau individuals. The CSFI⁷ is committed to help these Samal-Bajau communities foster their identity and live in a peaceful setting where there is quality of life rooted in their indigenous culture⁸.

⁵ See also CSFI and *Hinangan Bajau Products* brochures.

⁶ The same site however puts Lantawan in the 3rd Income Class level.

⁷ CSFI was previously headed by Fr. Dennis G. Tamayo, CMF, and today by Bro. Joseph Roy D. Villarin, CMF.

⁸ The CSFI has the following vision and mission:

"We, the Claret Samal Foundation, Inc. envision the development of communities of dialogue among peoples of different faiths. As a Claretian pastoral endeavour, we commit ourselves to a liberating process, education for empowerment, dialogical and responsible partnership, respect for indigenous cultures, and the integral human development of the Samal-Bajau people" (CSFI brochure).

As the CSFI programs were carried out, the *Hinangan Bajau* Products (HBP) came into existence. *Hinangan* is the Bajau term for "made" so that *Hinangan Bajau* Products would mean products made by the Bajaus (CSFI 2010a). However the "Bajau" in the HBP are those of Maluso and Lantawan Municipalities of Basilan province. They are the Bajaus who are part of the Claret Samal Foundation, Inc. The *Hinangan Bajau* Products include different kinds of bags, wall decor, prayer mats, throw pillows, lampshades, hats, bracelets, soap dishes, ladles, fans, fruit baskets, slippers, flower vases, and small outrigger canoes for display. All these have a motif of *tepoh* with the combination of other native materials. Since 1996, the CSFI has been witnessing the capabilities and ingenuity of these Bajaus in mat weaving. Through the HBP, the CSFI aims to further the Bajau livelihood, while at the same time preserve their artistic culture.

The *Hinangan Bajau* product label was conceptualized on February 21-27, 2007 during the Product Development Training organized through the collaboration of Claret Samal Foundation, Inc. (CSFI) and the Peace Equity Access for Community Empowerment Foundation, Inc. (PEF), a non-stock and non-profit organization which "provides development funding to CSOs [Civil Society Organizations] and envisions communities of the poor with power to govern and act together to better their lives" (PEF Brochure). This training aimed at facilitating the creation of other forms of products, while maintaining the *tepoh* as the motif (CSFI 2010a; Tamayo 2007b). The training was part of the "Most Promising Exhibitor Award" granted by the PEF to the CSFI, which had accepted the invitation of the former to showcase their products in the Trade Fair at Glorietta, Makati City last November 26-29, 2006.

The label for *Hinangan Bajau* Products was conceptualized by the Bajau Core Group Leaders of the CSFI (representatives of the different Bajau communities in the areas of Maluso and Lantawan Municipalities of Basilan). This new label ushered the Bajau to publicity in brochures and in the Internet, and the brand was also marketed to enable a new sense of Bajau pride, appreciation, and identity.

The logo shows houses on stilts and an outrigger canoe floating in the sea. When asked, the CSFI staff claimed that the logo symbolizes the Bajau dream house, and to my mind, a dream community: the closeness of the houses disconnected from the land speaks of the Bajaus' solidarity among themselves and their sense of security. The Bajau wish to find peace in the

In line with this are five major programs of the CSFI: community organizing; education; cultural preservation; health and livelihood.

sea. The Bajaus' humility in lifestyle, as well as communitarian value is one stark implication of the logo.



Figure 1. *Hinangan Bajau logo*

The *tepoh* mat is expected to be used in any *Hinangan Bajau* Product, as it is something the Bajaus are known for. The different kinds of bags, cushions, wall decors, double, prayer mats, throw pillows, hats, bracelets, fans, slippers, wallets, coin purses, flower vases, and some of the lampshades are made of *tepoh*. The ladles and lampshades are made of bamboos and coconut shells, while the small outrigger canoes are of things usually found at the seashore where Bajaus usually settle.

While these products are related to the eco-culture of the Bajaus, there are modifications being integrated in the designs and identification. Many of the designs are new and are tailored to suit the demands of the market where these Bajau products are showcased. However, the product designs are basically from the ideas of the Bajaus themselves. There were facilitating activities coming from other people but mainly for enhancement of quality for example to improve their cutting and sewing of *tepoh* and other cloth, but basically the Bajaus were already able sewers and weavers, and had already been producing and displaying saleable items when the PEF saw their potential and designed Product Development Training for the Bajaus in Maluso to suggest ways to make them more competitive in the market. The Bajaus themselves still decide on how to create the designs for a particular item while incorporating lessons learned from the trainings.

There are Bajau products that have Bajau names because these are part of their material culture. However, these products have to be labeled in English

so as to attain wide access in the bigger market. It was the previous project-in-charge of the CSFI, with the help of the PEF, who identified the Bajau products' English names. At present, the *Hinangan Bajau* products are labeled with codes which correspond to local terms of the Bajau producers (makers) and to specific English names of the items. But this process underwent consultations and was accepted by the Bajaus themselves.

Surprisingly, the Bajaus in HBP are also producing and creating and using items and equipment which are quite foreign to their culture. Some of their productions are kit and document bags typically used by professionals in the academe and in different organizations, when they attend seminars, workshops, and conferences, and which are not really part of Bajau everyday life. The fan and flower vases made of *tepoh* are also not found in the traditional Bajau material culture (CSFI 2010a). The use of sewing machines and other equipment used in producing new HBP, which are new to the Bajaus, are some of the technologies that are also not traceable to their indigenous tradition (CSFI 2010a).

The production and usage of new items also results to the production and usage of new vocabulary. For example, they call the document bag they produce "*enbélop*" because this bag looks like an envelope (CSFI 2010b). They also appropriate the English names of equipment and products which do not have the *sinama* translation.

With these developments in *Hinangan Bajau* Products the following questions arise: How do the Bajaus of Maluso and Lantawan municipalities of Basilan produce new saleable items and adapt certain vocabulary which are new to their culture? What is the contribution of the Bajau environment to their new livelihood activity? In producing these commodities, where can we locate the preservation of culture? Is cultural preservation consistent with market-oriented creativity?

Using Certeau's "Permission" and "Praxis"

Hoping to find a good lens to think over these questions, I have opted to make use of the notions of "permission" and "praxis" of the French Jesuit and scholar Michel de Certeau. In Certeau's (1997) formulation, the concepts of "permission" and "praxis" take a theological tone. The following elaboration of the said concepts springs from a particular theological context, but will be appropriated for the questions raised in this paper. What follows is just an interpretation of the concepts and as "permitted" by my reading of it.

When we look at a familiar reality in a new way because a certain experience makes it possible, "permission" happens. After listening to an inspirational message, or reading a novel, or watching a movie, we may see particular familiar circumstances differently. Yet, this different and new way of looking at a familiar thing is brought about or made possible by the reading of a novel or listening to a talk. "If the register of our perception or understanding is modified, it is because the event in question [a simple experience like watching a movie for example] makes possible or in a very real sense permits another type of relationship to the world" (Certeau 1997:143). The Bajaus' new designs in weaving and their production of new forms of bags made of *tepoh* can be seen as having been "permitted" by the new Product Development Training they underwent. Applying this to a more basic sense, the environmental context from which the Bajaus live also "permits" the different traditional livelihood they are known for.

To reiterate, perhaps the appropriation of the notion of "permission" in this paper is also "permitted" by my reading of Certeau's article about it. This "permission" includes the many ways of interpreting what Certeau wrote as he authorized those interpretations. And Certeau's exposition of this concept (as an event) cannot be reduced to one objective interpretation of such concept because it "permits" all these interpretations. In giving the example of Freud's psychological theory and method, Certeau posits:

"The fact is that Freud cannot be reduced to an object of knowledge. The Freud-event escapes all "objective" definition. It is disseminated in a multiplicity of interpretations. It cannot be grasped as an object, but this is precisely because it "permits" all these interpretations" (1997:143).

Perhaps the Bajau way of life cannot be reduced to any fixed book or knowledge about their culture. In the same fashion, their present art productions in the *Hinangan Bajau* Products livelihood cannot entirely speak of the Bajaus' skill and capabilities. This is because, in the words of Certeau the Bajaus are an open "book." The new interpretation or experience, however, points to something of the past. "Each explication postulates the reference to a past event which makes other expressions possible" (Certeau 1997:144).⁹

⁹ The past event, as it were,

"is 'historical' not because of its preservation outside time owing to a knowledge of it that supposedly has remained intact, but because of its introduction into time with various discoveries about it for which it 'makes room'" (Certeau 1997:144).

Moreover, the new explication or production of events also manifests fidelity, which "is not a repetition or an objective survival of a past" but "is linked with *the absence of the object* or of the particular past which inaugurated it" (Certeau 1997:144-145, emphasis in original). With the fear of hasty generalization, any new cultural production manifests itself as a testimony of the past tradition, and a testimony of the tradition's survival in the present. The Bajau livelihood and art productions also emerge from their coastal-based beliefs, tradition, knowledge, practices and capabilities. "The 'truth' of the beginning of an event [or tradition for that matter] is revealed only through new possibilities which it opens. That truth is both *shown* by the differences in relation to the initial event and *hidden* by new elaborations" (Certeau 1997:145, emphasis in original). The truth is shown by the differences because these new elaborations are actualized possibilities of the initial event's truth (or perhaps the initial event's potency). The truth is hidden by the new elaborations because these elaborations particularize, thereby limiting, the truth of the initial event (or perhaps the potency of the initial event).

Consequently, "permission" implies not just new explication but also action. This action can be seen, for example, in the act of producing new cultural elements. In performing or visual arts, the artist enacts a certain skill that produces art forms as an effect.¹⁰ When a Bajau produces a new dugout with many decorations using materials brought about by globalization, it is neither an application of how the dugout should be made nor an application of any Bajau doctrine regarding making a canoe. The making of such is of course a product of an initial Bajau tradition, but it may be a beginning of another one. In this cultural production, we see a trace of a previous knowledge that at the same time permits new discoveries.

And this is where we see the risk, for we cannot beforehand know the depth of what this production can bring about in the new discoveries or interpretations of it. The language of this art production is never static because every time there is art production, there is an opening of new artistic forms and knowledge. The sea-based and coastal ecology of the Bajaus permit their artistry in mat weaving and production of other accessories. But this new artistry also opens a new horizon of possibilities for other forms of art. I remember the Bajaus in Maluso expressing their eagerness to produce

¹⁰ This enactment is a matter of doing, which

"is not the 'application' of a doctrine and its putting into practice, or its justification. Even less is it an object determined and already depicted by a particular language. It is a consequence of a knowledge, but a beginning and a risk" (Certeau 1997:152).

cellphone cases made out of woven pandan. They also expressed their willingness and excitement in producing other modern accessories.

This new art-knowledge allows another form of art but will never be identical to it because this action (or cultural production for this matter) is praxis. "It is impossible to contain praxis within such statements as their content or object. Praxis is not a 'thing' that can be 'expressed' in a 'formula'" (Certeau 1997:152). An event is always richer than its language because an event is praxis. Praxis is the avenue for the dynamism of cultural productions and language. Language as it feeds the possibility of cultural production may be challenged by the new forms of art. Language is alive because it grows through the new elements we find every time we produce any art form or practice as there is always something new in praxis. Art production is also alive because though they may depart from language, they can never be contained in language. Praxis always slips thought.¹¹ The present Bajau art production is praxis in the sense that it departs from the Bajau traditional knowledge and language but is not entirely captured by the brochure and articles about their *Hinangan Bajau* products.

Since from time to time these Bajaus have been making their way to Zamboanga City where I reside, my acquaintance with them in seminars and workshops, between 2007 to present, has enabled them also take part in this study. I did focus group discussions and informal interviews with the Bajaus and CSFI staff and attended a Bajau consultation in Maluso organized by the CSFI on February 6 and 7, 2010. These were commissioned by the CSFI in January of 2010 to document some aspects of the *Hinangan Bajau* Product as preparation for a possible project proposal that would further its sustainability. As an output of the said documentation, with the cooperation of the Bajau communities in Maluso under the auspices of the CSFI, four short articles were written and are now in the custody of the CSFI. The said unpublished articles are some of the sources used in this paper.

Creativity in the Context of Environmental Crisis

It has been established above that in livelihood and art production, the Bajaus also face difficulties and challenges brought about by social and ecological factors. With the social and ecological crises, novel practices emerge. The

¹¹ "Praxis always brings about, in relation to what is present and pointed out, gradual or abrupt displacements which will make possible other laws. In itself, action is a permanent divergence with a relation to an institution which is the reference point of new movement and which will then be changed by such movements" (Certeau 1997:152).

HBP is designed for an open market. In producing and advertising crafts that would cater to the needs of many people in a wider market, the Bajaus realize the need to mass produce. Of course this mass production is made possible by the training they underwent and the machines they use that speed up productions. Though traditionally producing *tepoh* was never the concern of the Bajau men, in the present, they take part in its production and even in making other accessories (CSFI 2010a; CSFI 2010b). For example, in producing a fan, the women cut and weave *pandan*, aside from sewing, while men are in charge of making the handle made of bamboo.

This gendered participation is not traditional and is partly due to the increase in the market demand. Moreover, the Bajau men are better in making the *luwag* (ladle made of coconut shell and bamboo handle) as well as lampshades coated with much *tepoh*. They also produce, among other things which are not traditionally Bajau, the kit and document bags, fans, flower vases, and folders made of *tepoh*.

The participation of the Bajau men in the production of crafts is also brought about by the decline and harsh condition in fishing activities. Many Bajau men are now afraid to venture out to the deepest seas because of risk of less catch and the presence of pirates. The same ecological crisis therefore, in this case, "permits" Bajau men's ingenuity in producing crafts together with their women. It would be my contention then that altogether these livelihood challenges also "permit" the Bajaus to embark on the HBP as an alternative livelihood.

The advent of the HBP and the increase in the demand also permitted many Bajau women to engage in weaving as the *tepoh* becomes part of the raw materials in making other items. This also permits the Bajaus more creativity in designs. Weaving for the Bajaus is infused with meaning and emotions (CSFI 2010b). The Bajaus would say that a *tepoh* is 'beautiful' because the weaver exerted much mental effort in it because the process of weaving is thought of carefully. In an FGD, the Bajaus claimed that the quality output of a *tepoh* also depends on whether the weaver is happy at the moment of weaving or not. Sadness causes the weaver to stop in between the process and this eventually causes the weaver to commit mistakes along the way (CSFI 2010b). When the design and the quality output of a craft largely depend on the mind and emotion of the weaver, each weaving then permits infinite possibilities for output. Each output is therefore permitted by the state of being of the weaver: her emotion, wisdom, knowledge of tradition, and environment. And every weaving, I propose, becomes a manifestation of permission.

Producing mats all the time might not promise sustainability, since the *pandan* and *bakawan* are fast depleting in the area. Also, this livelihood might not be lucrative enough if only one or two crafts are being produced all the time. Again, with the training they received, the Bajaus now combine different materials to produce a variety of desired outputs. This can be seen in their production of bracelets (*gallang*), wallets (*pitaka*), coin purses (*puyo*), mat wall décor (*tepo-tepo madingding*), and 'envelopes', all using the motif of the *tepoh* (CSFI 2010b). They have also appropriated *coínpers* (from the English 'coin purse') to their everyday language, since they began to produce coin purse made of *tepoh*. But there are other new names being integrated to their day to day language as a result of their journey with the HBP. And hence, the production of new terms in their vocabulary is permitted by the HBP.

What perhaps would be a good model for this permission of creativity is the Bajau *tenes-tenes*. This is a traditional Bajau song, which is sung by the Bajau women as they weave the *pandan* multicolored strips into *tepoh*. As a matter of tradition, the Bajau weaver sings to avoid laziness and bad output (CSFI 2010b). However, this is a medley song, the lyrics and tune of which vary from one weaver to the other depending on their feelings and moods at the moment of weaving (CSFI 2010b). The *tenes-tenes* that is sung by the Bajau women during mat weaving is traditional because it was their practice a long time ago, but at the same time the rendition allows the singer/weaver to innovate the lyrics and tune.

Although on the one hand it can be said that the production of new crafts through the HBP was permitted by the development trainings these Bajaus underwent, the same training, however, was also permitted by the increasing scarcity of raw materials for the production of *tepoh*. That is why the training was primarily aimed to introduce the Bajaus to new ways of producing other crafts than just the *tepoh* (CSFI 2010a). The Bajau creation of products other than the *tepoh* was then permitted, on the other hand, by the unfavorable weather condition, proliferation of harsh fishing corporations, piracy in the seas, corruption by the "middle-men", and the depletion of *pandan* and mangroves. It can be gleaned from this that what permits the new productions by the Bajau through HBP is their sea-based ecological crisis. Yet all these become the conditions for the Bajaus' creativity in the production of new crafts.

Cultural Identity and Preservation

The Bajau creativity that emerges from the environmental crisis in the advent of the HBP in Maluso, Basilan can also be seen as a recreation of identity.

The CSFI makes brochures and utilizes the internet for publicity and recognition. As their products are patronized by many people, the Bajaus gain respect from other ethnolinguistic groups (CSFI 2010a). In this way, they slowly get the fair treatment they deserve as they relate with other groups. More is the pride they feel when their products are talked about and acknowledged by many people in the Philippines and even abroad. Seeing themselves in the printed media awakens a certain hope not just for economic emancipation but for identity reformation. This is similar to what Torres argues in his study on the Sama Dilaut community in Kabuukan island, Hadji Panglima Tahil in Sulu¹². The Bajaus in Maluso now are admired by many people, including organizations and foundations, for their ingenuity (CSFI 2010a). In producing new crafts, they also produce new forms of relationship with other people and among themselves. Their creativity in craftsmanship permits creativity in their identity.

In the creative production of new crafts and new relationships and identity, where is cultural preservation? The production of new art forms which permit the invention of a new vocabulary and later reformation of identity is what Bajau culture permits and therefore maintains a sense of fidelity to its source. It has been demonstrated how the traditional eco-cultural condition of the Bajaus supported their sea-based livelihood and crafts, which also permits their alternative livelihood—the HBP. As they find ways to survive amidst ecological and social crises, the fruit of this creativity points to something of the past which makes other discoveries possible. This fruit is linked with the “absence of the particular past which inaugurated it” (Certeau 1997:144-145). As the fruit, new forms of Bajau relationships and identity serve as evidence of a past tradition and a testimony of tradition’s survival in the here and now and I would like to posit, cultural preservation.

The production of coin purse (*coïnpers*), kit, document, and folder bags permit the Bajaus to earn for a living and in turn have the financial capacity to also produce *tepoh* in different sizes, which is actually traditional to the Bajaus (CSFI 2010a). Clearly the new production of crafts allows the Bajau traditional craft to continue and perhaps to flourish. The Bajaus also usually pray to their ancestors and *Omboh* (their ancestor god) as sources of their

¹²Torres notes that

“the Sama’s experience of a better life through seaweed farming may have changed their aspirations in the sense that they have become more aware of their right to self-determination. The researcher further believes that the establishment of seaweed farms among the Sama is also a form of identity renegotiation” (Torres 2001:83).

skills and knowledge for guidance before they produce the *tepoh* (CSFI 2010b). In this case, *tepoh* making becomes an experience of continuing and reliving their tradition and legacy. The passing down of knowledge and skills from generation to the next is inherent in the Bajau concept of *pusaka* (cultural inheritance), where the present Bajaus also try to pass on to their children the knowledge and skills of mat weaving and even boat-building. With my experiences with these Bajaus of Maluso, I can sense an emerging spirit of hope and inspiration and this is expressed in one of the FGDs. They exclaimed: "*hindi na kami katulad ng dati na marginalized!*" (We are no longer marginalized unlike before!) (CSFI 2010a). Hence, cultural innovation in the context of permission is cultural preservation.

The emancipatory spirit also manifests in the way these Bajaus become outspoken in making decisions and participative in seminars and conferences they attend (Panaguiton 2010). In an FGD in Maluso last February 2010, the Bajaus admitted to their willingness to be trained by non-Bajaus and their openness to using cell phones (CSFI 2010b). They are eager to learn to do product inventory and quality control (CSFI 2010d). Unlike before, the Bajau parents and children have now become appreciative of education. But this may have other consequences. For example, the Bajau children in attending school may be deprived of their time in helping their parents in the house or in the seas. With the enticing swirl of distractions in the schools, some Bajau parents are afraid of the discontinuity in their *pusaka* or inheritance (CSFI 2010a). When these Bajau children grow up, they might lose the knowledge and skills in mat weaving or boat-building. But all these are part of the "risk" involved in this Bajau event. Recalling Certeau, the new Bajau spirit and apprehension are "a consequence of a knowledge, but a beginning and a risk" (1997:152). They are a consequence of previous Bajau culture and tradition and manifest as a beginning of a new Bajau tradition. However, they also manifest a risk because the horizon this beginning opens up cannot be known or grasped *a priori*.

Conclusion

It is the Bajau eco-culture that permits the kind of traditional livelihood the Bajaus of Maluso and Lantawan municipalities of Basilan currently have. The traditional livelihood and contemporary social and ecological challenges permit the Bajaus to produce new saleable items and appropriate new language for these. As the new production of culture shows fidelity to the Bajau past, preservation of culture happens—creative reliving of the Bajau tradition and legacy—thereby recreating an identity. This demonstration of

the Bajau cultural permissions, creativity, and preservation, I propose, is an embodiment of what Certeau calls "praxis."

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