

The Bajaus Language

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Saidatul Nornis Haji Mahali

Center for Knowledge Promotions and Language Learning

Universiti Malaysia Sabah

88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

Email: saidatulnornis@gmail.com

Keywords: Sama-Bajau, Language, Vocabulary

Abstract. The Sama-Bajau peoples are one of the maritime communities found in Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia. Sama-Bajau has recently been suggested as a general term for the language spoken by the various Sama populations. The group as a whole is probably coordinated with Malay and the Philippine, and language as a member of the Hesperonesian branch of Austronesian. The Sama-Bajau peoples are noted for their close association with the sea and are even given the appellation of sea-gypsies. Nowadays, however, a large number of Bajaus have become house-dwellers through a small member still prefer to be boat-dwellers and lead a nomadic type of life. Most of them who have settle on land are strand-dwellers, perhaps because of their fishing activities which undoubtedly, require an easy access to the sea. Today, in Sabah, the Bajau people are enjoying an earned period of prosperity and importance, whereas in the past, here and elsewhere, they were treated usually as ‘odd man out’, ‘water gypsies’ and other condescending classifications. In general, the objective of this paper is to explore the language aspects of the Bajaus among three countries namely Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia, in terms of the basic vocabularies used in both the Bajau language and the Proto Austronesian language.

1. Introduction

The Southeast Asia sea nomads are divided geographically, culturally and linguistically into three major groups, each the product of an apparently independent history of adaptation. The first of these groupings comprises the Moken and Moklen of the Mergui archipelago of Burma, with extensions southward into the islands of southwestern Thailand (Hogan, 1972). The second is represented by a congeries of variously named groups, collectively referred to as *orang laut* (sea people), who inhabit the islands and estuaries of the Riau-Lingga archipelagos, the Bantam archipelago, and the coasts and offshore islands of eastern Sumatra, Singapore and southern Johor (Andaya, 1975; Sopher, 1965). A northern subgroup of *orang laut*, the Urak Lawoi, occupies the offshore islands from Phuket to the Adang island group. Finally, the third, and largest grouping consists of the Sama-Bajau, most of them maritime or stand-oriented communities, but also includes small numbers of boat nomads, who together form what is probably the most widely-dispersed ethnolinguistic group indigenous to the islands of Southeast Asia, living over an area of some one-and-a-quarter million square miles, from south-central Philippines, eastern Borneo and Sulawesi, south and eastward to the island of eastern Indonesia to Flores and the southern Moluccas (Nimmo, 1972 ; Sather, 1993a).

In general, the objective of the study is to explore the language aspects of the Bajaus between three countries- Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The objective being to examine the descendant between the Bajau language and the Austronesian proto language.

2.1 The Sama-Bajau Peoples

In Malaysia and Indonesia, variants of the terms '*Bajau*' and '*Bajo*' (for example Badjaw, Badjao, Bajao, Bajo) are applied by outsiders to both nomadic and sedentary Sama speakers, including land-based agricultural communities, some of them, such as those of western Sabah, without an apparent history of past seafaring. In the southern Philippines, the term '*Bajau*' (and its variants) is reserved exclusively for boat-nomadic and formerly nomadic groups, while more sedentary *Sama* speakers, particularly those living in the Sulu archipelago are generally known to outsider as '*Samal*', an ethnonym applied to them by the neighbouring Tausug, but also used widely by Christian Filipinos and others (Kiefer, 1972 ; Sather, 1993b). In eastern Indonesia, *Sama* speakers are called '*Bajo*' by the Bugis, a term also widely used by others, and both '*bayo*' and '*Turijene*' (people of the water) by the Makassarese. In Borneo, they are termed '*Bajau*' by the Brunei Malays and by other coastal Malay-speaking groups (Evans, 1952). At present, the name *Bajau* has gained wide currency among all groups in Sabah including *Sama* speakers themselves.

Most Sama-Bajau speakers, with the principal exception of the Yakan and Jama Mapun refer to themselves as '*Sama*' or particularly in central Sulu, as '*Sinama*'. The term '*Sama*' (or a'a Sama, Sama people) appears to be the most widely used antonym, employed in self-reference throughout the entire area of Sama-Bajau distribution. According to Pallesen (1985) the term is also reconstructable as the proto-form of the antonym by which Sama-Bajau speakers have referred to themselves since early in the present millennium.

When used as an ethnic label, in self-reference, the term '*sama*' is normally coupled with a toponymic duster, or stretch of coastline. Use of these modifiers indicates the speaker's geographical and/or dialect affiliation (Sather, 1993b). For example, '*sama Sibaut*' refer to the settled '*sama*' speakers who inhabit or trace their origin to Sibaut island, near Siasi, in the Tapul island group of Sulu. In Sabah and southern Sulu, boat-dwelling groups and those with a recent history of boat-nomadism commonly identify themselves as '*sama dilaut*' or '*sama mandelaut*', names that mean literally, the 'sea' (laut) or 'maritime Bajau', or as the '*sama to'ongan*', the 'real' or 'true Bajau' (Sather, 1993a ; Frake, 1980). In Sulu and eastern Sabah, sea-nomadic and formerly nomadic groups are generally known to other '*sama*' speakers as '*sama Pala'au*' or '*Pala'u*', or '*Luwa'an*', and to the neighbouring Tausug as '*samal Luwa'an*' (Kiefer, 1972). Both names have pejorative connotations, reflecting the pariah status generally ascribed to the Bajau laut by those living ashore.

Curiously enough, the Bajau of Sabah never refer to themselves as '*Bajau*'. Neither do they have a word or a nomenclature for their own group, which bears a phonetic resemblance to the word '*Bajau*'. Rather, they call themselves '*Sama*'. Be it '*Bajau*' or '*Sama*', these people have a way of explaining the origin of these term through their oral traditions. According to their stories, when the Bajau met again after a long separation, they instantly recognised one another, and so the remark made between them was '*sama*' ('same), meaning that to the same group, fate had separated them across distant islands, and hence emerged the word '*Bajau*', consisting of the verbal prefix '*ber-*' in Malay and by Sabah Malay dialect (*ba-*) and the root-word '*jau*' ('far'), meaning 'living far away from one another'. However, the origin of the words Sama and Bajau as given above is just folklore. The linking of the Bajau of Sabah to the orang Badjo of Sulawesi and relating the name '*Bajau*' to a place by the name of Badjoe near Bone (Nimmo, 1972), seems more likely. This is due to the well-known fact that the people of the Malay archipelago acquire their group labels from the names of places (inclusive of rivers and hills) where they establish their dwelling.

The Sama-Bajau are coastal people. They are noted for their close association with the sea and are even given the appellation of 'sea-gypsies' or 'water-gypsies' (also sea-gypsies) of Singapore and Johor. The Bajau are known for being a seafaring people and are warlike in nature. Evans had described them 'as Proto-Malayan people, who are essentially maritime'. Evans had also recorded earlier in the century that there were still Bajau sea-gypsies and wanderers, 'who are born, live and die in their boats'. Nowadays, there are few of these wanderers left. However, the tradition of living in houses built in water with high stilts to support them lives on to this day.

In Malaysia (Sabah), the Bajau are present along both the eastern and western coastal plains, from Kuala Penyu to Tawau on the east. In eastern Indonesia the largest numbers are found on the islands and in coastal districts of Sulawesi. Here, widely scattered communities, most of them pile-houses settlements, are represented near Manado, Ambogaya and Kendari; in the Banggai, Sula and Togian island groups; along the straits of Tioro; in the gulf of Bone; and along the Makassar coast. Elsewhere settlements are present near Balikpapan in east Kalimantan, on Maratua, Pulau Laut and Kakaban and in the Balambangan islands off the eastern Borneo coast. Others are reported, widely scattered, from Halmahera through the southern Moluccas, along both sides of Sape straits dividing Flores and Sumbawa; on Lombok, Lembata, Pantar, Adonara, Sumba, Ndao and Roti; and near Sulamu in western Timor. In Sabah, boat-nomadic and formerly Bajau laut are present in the southeastern Semporna district, while Sulu-related groups are found in the Philippines in small numbers from Zamboanga through the Tapul, western Tawi-tawi, and Sibutu island groups, with major concentration in the Bilatan islands, near Bongao, Sanga-sanga and Sitangkai.

2.2 The Sama-Bajau Language

Language is more than just a tool for communication. it is often a key to understanding their relation to other cultures and other peoples. A person's language is an integral part of his identity. The Bajau are a culturally and linguistically diverse people living in the southern Philippines, eastern Indonesia and Sabah, Malaysia. The Bajaus speak a Malayo-Polynesian language which they themselves call '*Sama*'. The '*Sama*' language is spoken in the Philippines and Malaysia.

The Bajau language, as it is spoken in Sabah, is divided into a number of divergent, though mutually intelligible dialects. The strongest dialectic division separates the language spoken by the Bajau of the west coast from the host of dialects spoken on the east coast. West coast Sama, the language spoken from Papar to Kudat, is subdivided into regional varieties, each the product of years of local isolation. East coast Sama is divided much more sharply into dialects which, for the most part, were brought already formed by immigrants coming to Sabah. From various islands of the Sulu archipelago. Many, like Sama Ubian, Sama Simunul and Sama Sibutu, are named after the Philippine island from which they derive. A few, like Sama Kubung spoken by long-time these Sama dialects are divergent enough as practically to constitute separate languages in their own right.

The Bajau language as spoken along the west coast of Sabah belongs to the same general language group as does the Bajau language spoken on the eastern side of the state. The west coast Bajau, too, sometimes refer to themselves and their language as Sama. But the fact that their language is now quite different from that spoken on the east coast or in the southern Philippines indicates that they have been in Sabah for a much longer time.

Hence, the Bajau language spoken all along the east coast areas of Sabah are very closely related to the southern Samal dialects of the *Sama* language groups of the southern Philippines. Some have lived in Sabah for several generations, other for only a few months or years, but no great distinctions is found between the speech of these groups and that of the area's in the Philippines from which they came. Some of the names by which these east coast Bajau refer to themselves and their language are: Kagayan, Ubian, Laminusa, Bajau Banaran, Bajau Semporna, Bajau darat, Bajau

laut, Simunul and Bajau Balangingi. All of these groups are considered to share a common language background, though differences exist between them.

In eastern Indonesia, the Bajau speak what appears to be a single language, characterised by only minor dialectal differences, known as Indonesian Bajau. In the eastern coastal districts spoken, known as central and southern Sama. In Sabah, the two are frequently classed together as east coast Bajau. Both are divided into a variety of local dialects with close links to allied dialects spoken by Samal groups in the neighbouring Sulu archipelago of the Philippines.

A separate language, known as west coast Bajau is spoken in the northern and western coastal districts from Kuala Penyu to Terusan, with some overlapping the east coast Bajau in northern Sabah. Recent linguistic studies show that the boat-nomadic Bajau laut are not a linguistically homogenous population, nor are they linguistically distinct as a group from the shore-based sama-speaking communities present around them. Those living in Semporna and southern Sulu speak southern Sama, while those in western Tawi-tawi and central and northern Sulu speak varieties of central Sama. Except for the division in Sabah between east and west coast Bajau, locally contiguous dialects, whether spoken ashore by settled land-based communities, are usually mutually intelligible, in most areas grading into one another without sharply defined language boundaries.

The list below illustrates the Bajau family resemblances.

2.2.1 Numerals

Austronesian Proto Language (APL)	Malay Language (ML)	Bajau Darat (BD)	Bajau ¹ Laut (BL)	Bajo ² Sangkuang (BBS)	Bajau ³ Yakan (BY)	Bahasa ⁴ Suluk (BS)
* isa'	satu	Isa'	assa	dakau	Dembua'	hambuk/isa'
* duwa	dua	duwo	ruwa	dua	due	duwa
* telu	tiga	telu	tullu	tullu	tellu	tu
* mpat	empat	mpat	ampat	Mpa'	ampat	upat
* lima	lima	limo	lima	lima'	lime	lima
* enem	enam	enam	onom	nnang	ennem	unum
* pitu'	tujuh	pitu'	pitu'	pitu	pitu'	pitu'
* walu'	lapan	wawu'	walu'	walu	walu'	walu'
* siam	sembilan	siam	siyam	sanga	siyam	siyam
* sangpu	sepuluh	sepu	sangpu'	sapulu	sampu	hampu'

2.2.2 Colours

APL	ML	BD	BL	BBS	BY	BS
* qitem	Hitam	iram	attom	lohong	ittem	itum
* kuning	Kuning	kuning	kuning	kune'	binaning	bianing

¹Sources: Interviewed with Mohd Asri bin Haji Ispal.

²Sources: Adapted from James T.Collins (1996).

³Sources: Interviewed with Nasir bin Ajimin .

⁴Sources: Interviewed with Bakri bin Bibi.

* putiq	Putih	pute'	pote'	pute	pute'	puti'
* mairaq	Merah	darag	keyat	mira	peyat	pula
* bilu	Biru	biru	bilu	ngulo'	bilu	bilu
* qizaw	Hijau	gadung	goddung	nyulo'	gaddung	gaddung

2.2.3 Anatomy

APL	ML	BD	BL	BSS	BY	BS
*mata	Mata	moto	mata	mata	mata	mata
*qatey	Hati	atai	atai	ate'ina	atai	atai
* paha	Paha	po	pa'a	paha	paa	pa'a
* kaki	Kaki	betis	tape'	nai	betis	siki
* dilaq	Lidah	dela'	dalla'	della'	della'	dilla'
* tangan	Tangan	tangan	tangan	tangang	tangan	tangan
* mulut	Mulut	buwa'	bowa'	boa	behe	simud
* telinga	Telinga	telingo	tolinga	talinga	taienge	tai'nga
* ijuSung	Hidung	urung	ung	uro'	ulung	ilung
* ulu	Kepala	tekok	kok	tikolo'	kolo'	u

2.2.4 Animals

APL	ML	BD	BL	BBS	BY	BS
* manuk	Ayam	manuk	manuk	mano	manu'	manuk
* asu	Anjing	uwa'	ero'	asu	asu	iruk
* manuk	Burung	manuk- manuk	manuk- manuk	manu'-manu'	manu'- manu'	manuk- manuk
* liwati	Cacing	sasing	sassing	sasing	luati	sassing
* iSeKan	Ikan	ding	daing	danga'	tenna	istak
* pusaq	Kucing	using	kuting	meo'	meaw	kuting
* kambing	Kambing	kambing	kambing	bembe	kambing	kambing
* kabeg	Kelawar	kobog	kavog	kalalawar	kabeg	kabog
* Rusa	Rusa	payau	payau	payoi	sumude	payau
* ulay	Ular	so	sowa	soa	sawe	has

The items in the table above illustrate the numerals, colours, anatomy and animals in Bajau language. It is showed Bajau, a clear descendent of the Austronesian Proto-Language.

Austronesian Proto Language (APL)	Malay Language (ML)	Bajau Darat (BD)	Bajau Laut (BL)	Bajo Sangkuang (BBS)	Bajau Yakan (BY)	Fijian ⁵	Bahasa Suluk (BS)
* duwa	dua	duwo	Ruwa	dua	due	rua	duwa
* telu	tiga	telu	Tullu	tullu	tellu	tolu	tu
* mpat	empat	mpat	Ampat	mpa'	ampat	va	upat
* lima	lima	limo	Lima	lima'	lime	lima	lima
* enem	enam	enam	Onom	nnang	ennem	ono	unum
* pitu'	tujuh	pitu'	Pitu'	pitu	pitu'	vitu	pitu'

The items in the table above shows that all of the languages have similarities including the Fijian language which further clarifies that belong to the Austronesian Proto language family.

3 Conclusion

To conclude, today in Sabah the Bajau peoples are enjoying an earned period of prosperity and importance, whereas in the past, here and elsewhere, they were treated usually as 'odd man out', 'water gypsies' and other condescending classifications. Initially, the different coastal locations and ecologies seemed to have affected the Bajau to differentiate them into two distinct dialect groups but remained largely mutually intelligible.

We should realized that Bajau language not only been spoken in Sabah but most widely dispersed to Southeast Asia. Hopefully, this preliminary study will unearth some informations about this community. Especially when all this peoples are always referred as maritime community. The close association among these cognatic languages may lead to the fact that Bajau language is in the phylum of Malayo-Polynesia.

References

- [1] Andaya, Leonard, *The Kingdom of Johor 1641-1728*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- [2] Collins, J,T, Bajo Sangkuang: Laporan Awal, *Jurnal Dewan Bahasa*, vol. 40, no.1, pp. 4-24, 1996.
- [3] Conklin, Harold, *Preliminary Linguistic Survey of Mindanao*, Mimeographed, Chicago: Philippine Studies Program, 1955.
- [4] Crowley, Terry, *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics*, [Port Moresby]: University of Papua New Guinea Press; Suva: University of The South Pacific, 1987.
- [5] Evans, I,H,N, Notes on the Bajaus and Other Coastal Tribes of North Borneo, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 25, pp. 48-55, 1952.

⁵ Sources: Adapted from Crowley (1987)

- [6] Frake, Charles,O, The Genesis of Kinds of the People in the Sulu archipelago, In, Charles O, Frake, *Language and Cultural Description: Essays*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980.
- [7] Hogan, David, Men of the sea: coastal tribes of south Thailand's west coast, *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 60, pp. 205-235, 1972.
- [8] Kiefer, Thomas,M, *The Tausug: Violence and Law in a Philippine Moslem Society*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972.
- [9] Nimmo, H, Arlo, *The Sea People of Sulu*, San Francisco: Chandler, 1972.
- [10] Pallesen, A, Kemp, *Culture Contact and Language Convergence Linguistic Society of the Philippines*, Monographs Series No. 24, Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 1985.
- [11] Sather, Clifford, The Bajau Laut, In, V,T, King (ed.), *Essays on Borneo Societies*, Hull Monographs on South East Asia, No,7, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- [12] Sather, Clifford, Bajau, In, Davis Levinson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, Vol. 5, New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1993a.
- [13] Sather, Clifford, Samal, In, Davis Levinson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, Vol. 5, New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1993b.