

The Samal Bajaus

Maria Wendy A. Parojinog

The name is spelled in various ways: “Badjao,” “Badyaw,” or “Bajau.” Apparently, “Bajau” has the closest phonemic affinity to the language group in the area where this people belong. They are also sometimes called by about a dozen other names like: “Sama Dilaut,” “Laut,” or “Orang Laut” (at the Malaysian side of the border).

Sometimes called the “sea gypsies” these “once-boat-dwelling people” are traditionally to be found mainly in the south western Philippines (Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi areas), north western Malaysia and the northern parts of Indonesia down to Johore where a certain legend traces their origin. They belong to a bigger grouping called the Samals of which the Bajaus are considered to be of the lowest class. Driven to near extinction due to the exploitation by the neighboring dominant tribes, disease, starvation and apparent inability to cope with the social changes, they are sometimes referred to also as a “vanishing tribe.” At present, unofficial estimates place their number to about a few thousands.

The Bajaus are peace-loving people, oftentimes to a fault. They would endure all forms of hardship, inconvenience and lost opportunities if only to avoid getting into trouble, especially with people not of their own tribe. Hence, they prefer to live in peace by themselves at the coastal fringes of population centers, mangrove areas, coves and islets. With the huge logs which they use to carve into houseboats having gone very scarce (and expensive), their mobile dwellings have evolved into shanties on stilts – literally a ramshackle ensemble of poles, palm fronds, and if the family is better off, some pieces of miss-cut planks.

Most Bajaus are fishermen (traditionally, all of them were!) and they live on the bounties of the sea or on what is left of it. The women go out to gather clams and seaweeds by the coastal areas. Having lost their traditional fishing grounds (even gears, lives and all!) to pirates and poachers, they are left with meager means of livelihood. Extreme poverty has driven many of them to work as porters at the wharf and many have taken resort to begging. Many Bajaus now subsist on a once-a-day meal of ground cassava and fish. Bad weather and military operations can reduce this practically nothing for days on ends!

Wherever they live, they are considered citizens of the lowest class: ignorant, dirty, stench-smelling and deprived. Many people have very low regard for them that practically anybody could pick on any Bajau and go unchallenged. In Basilan, their situation is a picture of complete neglect that has driven whole families to flock to the big cities of Metro Manila, Cebu and Davao to beg in the streets. The Bajaus are at the receiving end of all the consequences of the on-going insecurities and violence beyond reach of government services.

Here in Maluso, there are no other people who are as collectively and individually poor as the Bajaus – without exception. Certainly none other could be poorer. Thus, this becomes the main reason why education is less prioritized.

Education to the Bajaus is a secondary option to survival. With this, only few are participating in classes, less is enrolled to schools. In rating, 4 among 5 Bajau teenagers are out of school youth because

livelihood comes first before anything else. The need to supplement daily food is basically the struggle among Bajau Brethren. Follow through, health needs is totally neglected.

Many among the Bajaus suffer illnesses due to hard work. Body is worn out throughout the day because of too much eagerness to earn something to buy food for the family. Fishing and doing labor at the Port eat up time of the male Bajaus. Laundering, clams gathering, selling, weaving makes up the day for the Bajau women. Because of this, they forgot to take good care of themselves and fell unhealthy and sickly and kids left unattended. The Bajau children, due to lack of nutritious food intake are malnourished. Younger siblings are left in the hands of older ones who instead of spending time learning in school left at home to look after household chores. Children are seen playing outside; dirty, coughing with runny nose, left out because parents are too busy looking for means to supply them with food. With this, children are prone to illnesses worst death because of negligence.

Claret Samal Foundation, Inc. (CSFI) amidst struggle against reality extends effort and time to address the needs of Bajaus. Education as the key component is introduced to them to allow them to value their identity and thrust to their humanity. In the Foundation, willing children ages 4-5 years who enlisted themselves to study is catered in Preparatory school. When finished the level, they become the Kinder pupils until they reached Elementary and secondary level including Senior High School. If they are still interested to pursue a degree, they are given the chance to choose the course they like to study in order to become a professional. They are expected to serve their fellow Bajaus by rendering their time extending assistance and facilitation. At present, 11 had already graduated from college and five Bajau of them returned the favour to the foundation as they teach Preparatory class and Kindergarten and Facilitators on assisting and monitoring Bajau schooler's needs in going to school.

Because they are already introduced in the mainstream society, these Bajau Brethren learn to compose themselves and are guided by proper hygiene and sanitation. The foundation provides opportunity to teach the Bajau family how to live healthy and free from illnesses through health care and mother's classes in the area. They are facilitated to visit health centers especially pregnant women who are assisted in prenatal check-up and immunization to Bajau babies. When not feeling, they are taught to consult for proper medication even referrals when hospitalized. Monitoring of health status is comprised in Health component assistance.

With the journey weaved with the Bajaus, CSFI has lots of vision to realize. As of this writing, we have 1 college student, 30 high school students, 95 grade 2-6 students and 80 pre-school to grade 1 who are studying in the Yellow School of Hope. They are only 207 students under our care. Only few among 2,000 bajau children roaming around Maluso,. But we do not sto on believing. We do not stop on dreaming. We promise to achieve our a goal and that is one day, Bajaus will no longer be called the less fortunate instead achievers whose culture and identity is a pride to exclaim, empowered through education and a tribe that will be respected by us!