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Changing Tides: Cultural and Socio-Economic Transformation among the Sama of Eastern Indonesia, 1816-1942

Introduction to the Proposed Project

Looking out over a Sama village in eastern Indonesia for the first time, watching men and women paddle their small dugouts between a cluster of dilapidated pile-homes in a shallow lagoon, noticing the trash and debris swirling in their wake, the sinking corrugated roof of the schoolhouse, and an empty mosque built on a foundation of dead corals, I wondered how it is that these sea people came to occupy such a lowly socio-economic position. Indeed, scholars have long argued that the Sama, also referred to as Bajo, Bajau, or Sama-Bajau, once served an integral function in the world of early modern Southeast Asia as the primary procurers of sea goods highly prized for the China trade, as well as navigators, sailors, contraband runners, defenders of coastal rulers, and sometimes pirates of unmatched prowess (Andaya, 1984; Villiers, 1990). Yet, today the Sama are among the most economically impoverished and socially and politically marginalized ethnic groups in the region.

My dissertation will examine this tremendous yet understudied transformation by studying the ways in which the imposition of colonial rule in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as a convergence of other regional and global factors triggered extreme political, social, and cultural changes in the lives of the Sama. A central part of this study will focus on the way these sea-centered and semi-nomadic people experienced and understood these changes. To do this I will use Sama oral traditions, such as indigenous sung epics known as iko-iko, that provide a Sama perspective on these events, in conjunction with colonial documents and other available sources. This research will thus be of interest not only to scholars of the histories and cultures of Indonesia generally, but will also have broader relevance for those interested in the relationship
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between memory and history in non-literate societies. I hope also to contribute to the
conversation of those studying the dynamic connections between the global forces of
international trade and colonial expansion and the lives of indigenous populations in Southeast
Asia and other areas of the world.

Found throughout the islands and atolls which today form part of Indonesia, eastern
Malaysia, and the Southern Philippines, Sama peoples have for centuries linked the maritime
world of insular Southeast Asia through a network of fishing grounds, littoral settlements,
migratory patterns, and trade routes (Sather, 1995). Historically their importance to commerce
and daily life also ensured that the Sama occupied a fundamental position in the cultures and
politics of major port polities, whose foundation myths often cited the Sama as key to the
creation of their worlds. With the advent of colonial rule in eastern Indonesia, however, major
technological, commercial, and political changes were introduced that had a profound and at
times devastating effect on the Sama. As the colonial state became increasingly anxious to curtail
the movements of indigenous populations and trade goods in the eastern islands, the Sama were
subjected to new regulations and more stringent controls, as well as projects aimed at their
resettlement (Tagliacozzo, 2005).

In addition to those changes triggered by Dutch colonial expansion into the eastern
islands of the Indonesian archipelago, a number of political and commercial changes at the
regional and international levels also had a major impact on the Sama. At the regional level,
among other factors, an increase in the number of predatory raiding bands operating in eastern
Indonesia led to tremendous instability in Sama communities, who were often a primary target of
these ocean-going groups in search of slaves and other valuables (Warren, 1981; Velthoen,
2002). This increase in raiding led to a further dispersal of Sama communities throughout the
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eastern archipelago and prompted many local rulers to ally with these powerful roving bands rather than maintain their traditional reliance on Sama peoples for maritime prowess and commercial success. At the international level, fluctuations in China's demand for trepang and tortoise-shell among other prized sea products procured primarily by the Sama, and the impact of those oscillations on local markets contributed greatly to a decline in Sama economic stability and social prestige in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Sutherland, 2000). When combined with numerous other changes that took place both within and beyond the region, such as the introduction of new ship technologies and the creation and enforcement of Dutch, Spanish, and English colonial borders in the eastern archipelago, the events of the 19th and 20th centuries had an overwhelming influence on the highly mobile Sama. My research will show how these factors led to an overall decline in the Sama's socio-economic and political position vis-à-vis local and regional polities. But equally important was the fact that these events triggered dramatic changes in Sama culture. It is these cultural changes and the Sama's perceptions of these events that I hope to identify and describe through Sama oral traditions such as iko-iko.

Relationship of the Project to the Relevant Literature and Major Theoretical Issues

The study of Sama peoples in Southeast Asia is a growing field of research that includes the work of historians, anthropologists, linguists, archaeologists, and conservation biologists. While colonial scholar-administrators often wrote of the Sama in their reports to the metropole (e.g., Vosmaer, 1839; Goedhart, 1908), it was not until the 1960s that the first scholarly monograph was published in which the Sama were a central subject of inquiry. David Sopher's 1965 work was the first to systematically survey a large number of written sources pertaining to the Sama, as well as the other "sea nomads" of Southeast Asia. While Sopher's study is still an indispensable reference for research on Sama communities in the southern Philippines, eastern...
Malaysia, and Indonesia, the fact that his research was based primarily on European records and that he never interacted with the Sama first hand has limited the overall value of his conclusions and descriptions of Sama history and culture.

Since Soper’s monograph, two of the most influential works on the Sama were produced by anthropologists. Arlo Nimmo’s study of the Sama in the southern Philippines (1972) and Clifford Sather’s study of the Sama in northeast Borneo (1997) were among the first extensive studies of the Sama based on long periods of fieldwork and in-depth study of Sama culture. As a transnational ethnolinguistic group whose widely dispersed population shares a high degree of linguistic, cultural, and historical similarities, these early studies have proven useful for scholars researching the Sama wherever they are found. Nevertheless, the need for extensive, site-specific research on the large numbers of Sama people living in eastern Indonesia remains great. Despite similarities with their counterparts in areas of the Philippines and Malaysia, the historical experiences and cultural practices of the Sama in Indonesia are highly unique and therefore must be studied in their proper context.

Further, of those studies that have made the Sama of Indonesia their central focus, few have examined these communities from a historical perspective. While the anthropological works of Christian Pelras (1972), Celia Lowe (2006), and Natasha Stacey (2007) have all contributed greatly to our understanding of the Sama, the only book-length historical study of the Sama in Indonesia to date is Jennifer Gaynor’s 2005 dissertation. In her work Gaynor examines Sama history during the 1950s, yet her analysis does not look further into the Sama past. An influential essay by historian Leonard Andaya (1984), on the other hand, examines the links between the Sama and major polities in the region between c.1400-1800. Andaya identifies the 19th century as a key turning point after which the prestige and political importance of the Sama
rapidly declined, yet the centuries in which the Sama experienced this dramatic transformation have remained unexamined. My project will research the history of Sama peoples during these formative centuries in order to illuminate the convergence of historical forces which brought about these major changes in Sama lives.

Because the Sama are without a written historical tradition, the history I intend to research requires an ethnographically informed approach to the study of the past that recognizes the value of alternative sources beyond the written word. Furthermore, this project necessitates a particular interpretation of social and cross-cultural interaction in a given society in terms of that society’s own norms and categories (Geertz, 1973; Dening, 1980). The benefits of this sort of ethnographic history have been amply demonstrated in several fields of history where the scarcity of indigenous written historical documents and a sophisticated tradition of local orators has encouraged historians to look beyond the written word in their studies of the past (Vansina, 1961; Price, 1983; Neumann, 1992). For Southeast Asia, those who have employed this methodology have demonstrated its effectiveness in illuminating the sometimes subversive histories of indigenous peoples previously assumed to be without a history (Rosaldo, 1980; Weiner, 1995; Duggan, 2008).

Among the Sama, oral traditions like iko-iko that relate the story of heroic ancestors, their travels and trade, and often their encounters with outsiders—be they pirates, Dutchmen, or other non-Sama ethnic groups—are rich in metaphors, symbolism, and verifiable historical events. Similarly, the names given to important features of the land and seascape and the histories that inform those toponyms can also communicate a great deal about the Sama past (Fox, 1997). When combined with a critical use of colonial documents, these rich sources can begin to reveal Sama experiences of colonialism and the processes by which their economic, political,
and cultural importance came to be overshadowed by colonial expansion into eastern Indonesia along with a confluence of other regional and global factors and the tremendous upheavals that followed in their wake.

**Preliminary Research and Preparation**

My interest in Sama history stems from my own background as a commercial fisherman and my travels in Indonesia. Prior to graduate studies, fishing paid my way through college and afforded me the opportunity to travel to Indonesia where I stayed in fishing communities in Bali, Lombok, and Sumbawa on two separate occasions. Upon entering graduate school at the University of Hawaii (UH) in 2006, my own history of interaction with the sea attracted me to the histories of sea-centered peoples in Southeast Asia such as the Sama. My dedication to the topic only increased as a result of my first period of extensive historical and ethnographic research among Indonesian Sama communities in 2007. For my Master’s thesis I spent three months living in Sama villages across Southeast Sulawesi and conducted over 150 hours of interviews with Sama elders about their memories of the years between 1930 and 1998. In the course of this research I not only learned a great deal about Sama history, but I also established strong friendships and research contacts within Sama communities that will be of great support during my dissertation research. This research resulted in the successful completion of my Master’s thesis, several conference papers, and publication of two articles in academic journals.

In addition to field research in Sama communities, my thesis research also drew extensively from Indonesian language sources, a language in which I have 4+ years of instruction. My current interest in understanding the present social and economic marginality of the Sama from a historical perspective, however, also necessitates reading proficiency in Dutch in order to utilize the extensive colonial archives. Although UH does not offer instruction in
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Dutch, I have studied with a private tutor and, with funding from the Arts and Sciences Advisory Council, I was able to enroll in an intensive Dutch language program at Leiden University in The Netherlands in 2009. Since leaving Leiden I have continued my study of the language through self-instruction and translation and my reading ability has improved greatly as a result. The skills I acquired in Leiden enabled me to conduct preliminary research in the National Archives (NA) and the Royal Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) while in The Netherlands. From these archives I was able to collect a great deal of sources on the Sama and in the process I became well acquainted with the various repositories and their organization; a familiarity which will greatly expedite future research in The Netherlands.

Proposed Research in Indonesia and the Netherlands

Conducting research that follows the leads and contacts that I developed in 2007 and 2009 is crucial to the success of my project. As mentioned above, my research methodology will include a mixture of text-based historical analysis of colonial documents and non-Sama indigenous manuscripts, interviews with Sama elders, and ethnographic observation. To my knowledge, archival materials for the 19th and 20th centuries have yet to be mined specifically for insight into Sama history. My preliminary research, however, has demonstrated the potential of Dutch records, reports, ship’s logs, photographs, and maps for revealing a great deal about colonial projects and policies that had an intense impact on the Sama. These sources have also proven revealing when read with an eye toward Sama actions, movements, and other “cultural statements” embedded in colonial records (Stoler, 2009). Ultimately, the most novel component of my research will be the observation and recording of iko-iko, as this form of sung epic has rarely been recorded and has yet to be analyzed for what they can offer in terms of Sama historical knowledge and perceptions of the past (Lowe, 2006; Nuraini, 2008). I have already
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recorded one such epic in Southeast Sulawesi and I have developed strong leads for recording further *iko-iko* in Sulawesi, Sumbawa, and Flores.

During my Fulbright-Hays year I will devote approximately three months conducting archival and library research in the national archive of Jakarta. However, I intend on spending the majority of my time as a Fulbright-Hays grantee, roughly seven months, living and researching in a diverse sample of Sama communities, namely in Buton, Kendari, and Toli-Toli (Sulawesi), Bima (Sumbawa), and Labuan Bajo (Flores). My plan is to record and analyze the oral traditions and life histories of elders in those villages where I have already established local contacts. The final two months of my Fulbright-Hays tenure will be spent gathering sources that can only be obtained in The Netherlands. As I am already familiar with the collections I intend to use and I have already collected a number of important documents, I will be able to use this short period of time efficiently. I hope also to be able to pursue new leads which may arise after my research in Indonesia.

Contacts and Academic Affiliation

Through a combination of research conducted for my thesis and my recent pre-dissertation research, I have established important contacts in Indonesia. The historian Azyumardi Azra, Rector and Professor of History at Universitas Islam Negeri, Jakarta (UIN), has agreed to advise me during my Fulbright-Hays tenure, and I will affiliate with the history department at that university while in Jakarta. Muhammad Neil of Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar (UNHAS), an anthropologist specializing in the maritime communities of Sulawesi and eastern Indonesia, has also agreed to advise me during my time in Sulawesi. As research in Sama communities is central to my project, I have arranged to work closely with two Sama
research assistants and translators, Iskandar Marhalim and Tikung Mamat of Southeast Sulawesi, both of whom have extensive knowledge of the Sama in Indonesia and who assisted me in 2007. It is through these individuals and their numerous connections with Sama communities throughout the region that housing and interviews have been arranged in various Sama villages. Iskandar Marhalim has also been instrumental in locating Sama elders who possess the knowledge and skill of iko-iko and has prearranged interviews with individuals in Toli-Toli (Sulawesi), Labuan Bajo (Flores) and Bima (Sumbawa) for early 2010.

**Plans for Scholarly Exchange**

Scholarly exchange will be an important aspect of my Fulbright-Hays tenure in Indonesia. Both UIN and UNHAS have numerous venues for sharing academic work and receiving important feedback from both students and professors. Both Professor Azra and Muhammad Neil have expressed an interest in arranging such opportunities during the course of my affiliation with their universities. I will also print several copies of my thesis and published journal articles to distribute to interested scholars and donate to UIN, UNHAS, and other libraries in Indonesia. The same will be done with my dissertation once finished. Lastly, if granted permission, I will make both audio and written copies of the recorded iko-iko and distribute them to the Sama who allow me to tape their performances and to other Sama individuals as well as regional libraries in an effort to preserve and disseminate this precious cultural and historical resource.

**Conclusions and Support**

To study the fascinating transformation that the Sama experienced during the course of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries requires the scholar to utilize all available sources that may reveal the complex processes by which the Sama arrived at their current position. To this end, I propose to
employ my skills in language and area studies as well as my previous research experience in Indonesia and in The Netherlands in order to uncover the local, regional, and global dynamics of this unstudied history of Sama cultural change, adaptation, and socio-economic marginalization. At the University of Hawaii I have been fortunate to undertake innovative course work in Southeast Asian studies and history, as well as in ethnographic history and world history, while also studying the Indonesian language. My committee is similarly wide-ranging and has offered encouragement and supervision at every stage. I am receiving advice from three historians of Southeast Asia, a specialist in ethnographic history and the oral traditions of Oceania, and a world historian. Taken together, I have the unique, multifaceted skills and the essential support network required to successfully conduct this research.

I believe that this research will produce a new understanding of the historical circumstances that produced the Sama’s current situation, the importance of these highly mobile sea peoples in the history of the region, and the ways in which they reacted to, adapted to, and understood the advent of colonial rule and other monumental changes in their world.

Furthermore, by working with the oral traditions of a marginalized, mobile community this study will examine hitherto ignored aspects of the Sama past through the use of sources important to them. Rather than relying wholly on European records to reconstruct this period of Sama history, this project will center upon those forms of historical memory such as iko-iko that the Sama have maintained yet have so far gone unstudied by historians. Beyond the production of my PhD dissertation, I intend to publish articles related to my research and to continue researching the histories of Sama and other marginal populations in Southeast Asia. As a professor I hope to encourage student interest in Southeast Asia generally and in the fascinating and strategically important region of Indonesia specifically.