

A Few Jottings on Some Aquatic Populations of the Nusantara Archipelago

by Christian PELRAS

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On a number of coasts of the “Nusantara” Archipelago (on the west of the Malay Peninsula, in the Malacca Strait, around Borneo, in the southern Philippines, in Celebes, and sporadically in the Moluccas and the lesser Sunda islands), small groups of people exist who were nomads in the past but now are sedentary, or are becoming so, and who make their living exclusively on the sea or from its immediate riverine or marshy surroundings.

In spite of their tendency to abandon their boat habitats and build their villages on firm ground, and while on the surface it is not always easy to distinguish them from their coastal neighbors, they preserve their uniqueness with their cultural norms and their languages, and the dry-land dwellers often view them with a certain contempt. They are known locally by many names, but the Malay term of Orang Laut (Sea People) is often used to refer to them all together.

In a very valuable compilation which appeared a few years ago, D. E. Sopher¹ makes the conclusion that it is possible to reduce these populations to three large groups: Mawken on the coast of Burma and Siam; Orang Laut properly speaking between the Malacca Strait and the west coast of Borneo; Bajau in northern Borneo, the Southern Philippines, and in the Indonesian Archipelago (where they are called Bajo). According to him, the aquatic populations² of northern Borneo and the southern Philippines possess elements of the Mawken and Orang Laut.

Sopher thinks that in spite of the cultural modifications that have come about from the influence of the populations with which they have been in contact, these three groups originally shared a common culture which seems to have been linked to a certain fundamental racial type. The center of origin and of diffusion of this culture would have been situated in the Riau Archipelago.

Unfortunately, the sources guiding the author are uneven and contain many imprecisions on the fundamental points, notably technologies, social organization, and especially the languages of these different populations...so much so that one is not sure if it is a case of a number of small groups well distinguished from one another, but having kept some archaic traits that were formerly common to the entire region, or whether it's a matter of scattered fragments of the original ethnic group whose fundamental nature is still

¹ D. E. Sopher. The sea nomads : a study based on the literature of the maritime boat people of South-East Asia, Memoirs of the National Museum, Singapore, No. 5, 1965.

² Due to the evolution of their ways of life, it is no longer possible to group all these people under a common designation of “sea nomads ;” even those who still follow their ancestral life style—such as the Orang Seletar who are treated further in the present article, and whose habitat is the marshy mangrove of a river delta—could hardly be termed “maritime ;”; this is why I refer using the term “aquatic,” introduced in 1971 by the Paris-based Center for research on ethno-technology in aquatic milieus and taken up by L. Andaya in his contribution on “Historical links between aquatic populations and the coastal peoples of the Malay world and Celebes,” in Muhammad Abu Bakar et al., Historia : Essays in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Department of History, University of Malaya. Malaysian Historical Society, Kuala Lumpur, 1984, pp. 34-51.

recognizable in spite of a process of differentiation provoked by the isolation of each and by the diversity of the local conditions in which they find themselves.

Having had, in 1967 and 1968, the chance of meeting, in Malaysia and Celebes, three of these populations, and while these contacts were too short to allow me to do a true study, it seemed to me, however, interesting to present here these few notes, which will contribute in their small way to bringing an answer to these questions.

Duano

The western coast of Johor, on the Malacca Strait, is almost continuously lined with mangrove forests, marshy and difficult to penetrate. Some rivers, which for the most part have their source in a chain of hills that can extend almost 20 km into the interior, between Kluang and Kulai, interrupt from place to place this monotonous coastal greenery, flowing into the shallow waters of the Strait. It has been less than 50 years since the good road was established that links Johor to Malacca through Batu Pahat today; before that, the rivers alone gave entrance into the interior.³

At the boundary of dry land, where only the highest tides are felt, a village with the same name as the river contains Malay houses and Chinese stores next to the landing where the coastal fishers come to unload their boats.

But it is at the mouth itself of the same river that one can encounter establishments of people, distinct from the Malays, who are called, because of their habitat, Orang Kuala (River Mouth People). This designation has, moreover, been taken up officially by the JOA, Jabatan Orang Asli (Department for the Protection of Aborigines), under whose guardianship Orang Kuala have been placed.

In September, 1967, some time after I had found myself in Pontian District to study a village of Bugis colonists, I had occasion to come into contact with a group of these Orang Kuala established close by, at the mouth of the Benut River. Upon agreement with the JOA, I visited them five times during the months of September and October, short visits, not exceeding three days.

The village of Kuala Benut was then on the right side of the river, 100 meters upstream from the shoreline, on a narrow strip of mud revealed at low tide bordering the mangrove forest; it was composed of around 60 houses on pilings, aligned along a gangway of disjointed planks, with platforms a little larger in some places for drying nets and fish; ladders allowed access to the boats when the tide was low, but at the highest tides the water reached the floors.

To get there, one just had to wait at the landing stage at Benut, county seat of the *mukim* (parish) of the same name, for a small boat heading to the river mouth. One was rarely left to wait very long because every hour of the day one could meet an Orang Kuala coming up to the *bandar* (market town) to sell his fish or to stock up on fresh water and who accepted passengers for the return trip. The descent by rowing did not take more than half an hour or 45 minutes, except when the tide was rising and it was necessary to struggle against a contrary current.

³ About the difficulties of traveling along this coast as well as of penetrating further inland, as they still existed at the end of the 19th century, see Augustin Périé, Souvenirs de Malaisie. Limoges, 1892. (Ed. 2, Souillac, B. Valat, 1885).

Being welcome was not a problem. Thus, as attested by the logbook, the village was accustomed to having outsiders visit such as the rounds of the JOA staff, the regular visits of Dr. Ivan Polunin (whose work on the pathologies of Malaysian aborigines is well known, but who came there especially to study the mangrove fauna), but also the visit of a team from the University of Malaya, and visits by two French people, M. Bassot of the French Oceanographic Institute and his wife.

One can be amazed that a population so easily accessible has stayed till today so unrecognized. It is this ignorance that makes it hard to translate their ambiguous situation next to Malay society.

To begin, all the names given to them are not really theirs. They challenge the name Orang Laut because of the pejorative nuance that the land-dwellers have put on it and, moreover, the term does not distinguish them from the other groups who lead a similar life but whom they regard as fundamentally different. They challenge the name Orang Asli because they only see it as an official euphemism for Sakai; it is repugnant to those who are Muslims to be grouped in a community with the Temiar, Semai, and other Senoi who (they say) eat pork and keep domestic dogs. They had wanted the JOA to refer to them as Orang Melayu Kuala; but how can a body charged with the well-being and evolution of aborigines assist some Malays? In Malaysia, the two terms (Malay/aborigine) are fundamentally contradictory, their connotation not being ethnic, but social and cultural: what they really indicate is two states of civilization and the JOA objective is to narrow the gap separating one from the other; when the Orang Asli catch up to the norm of the Malays, JOA's role will be accomplished.

A short report published in 1949⁴ mentions a less frequently-used name, Desin Dola', but this is only a literal translation in their dialect for the term Orang Laut: *desin* signifies people and *dola*' signifies the sea. And yet, these people have a name, which they gave themselves. This name is Desin Duano.

The Duano people are established on the two shores of the Malacca Strait, but these on the Malay side are, by far, fewer in number: they were reduced in 1967 to three villages, of which Kuala Benut has been the most important: 390 permanent inhabitants, in addition to 5 families, employed by a Chinese commercial fisherman, living on their boats on the river near Benut. The two other villages are one near Rengit, the other on an island called Pulau Sialu, at the mouth of the Batu Pahat River. In other times there was another Duano village at Tanjung Toho, near Muar, but those residents have dispersed and have distributed themselves among the three others. Finally, there is a small community of fisherpeople, originally from Tampok, that the JOA has installed on the mainland near Pontian Besar, considering them to be Orang Kuala; but the people of Kuala Benut never had any rapport with this group, who—according to them—are only nominally Moslems and are very mixed with Chinese. Since I have not had a single contact with them, I would not know how to evaluate this.

On the east coast of Sumatra, the Duano have occupied a long length of coast, a number of villages between the mouth of the Kampar River and the Batang Hari delta. According to the village headman of Kuala Benut, Bujang bin Baso', and his brother Bedola', who are both natives of Sumatra, the Duanos' main places of residence there

⁴ H. D. Collings, "Aboriginal notes. XVI. A Desin Dolaq word list," Bulletin of the Raffles Museum, Singapore, Series B, 4: 100-103, 1949.

were, or would have been: Pulau Tandjung Batu (=Pulau Kundur), Tandjung Mendol (at the mouth of the Kampar), Kuala Kampar, Pulau Burung, Kuala Kateman (the main one), Singar Punai, Tanjung Datu, Concong Luar (=Kuala Langan, not far from Tembilahan), Perigi Radja, Pulau Basu, Kuala Indragiri (where they have been mixed with Malays), Kuala Batang Tuato, Kuala Retih, Djamih, Kuala Tungkal, Pasang Api, Istira, and Kuala Batang Hari.⁵

That a population of such a great number of locations, and in an area relatively well known, passed until the present rather unrecognized can be explained by the fact that they do not appear in the literature except by the diverse names given to them, in each of these places by their neighbors, so much so that the unity of these diverse groups is never apparent. The so-called Orang Lahut visited in 1928 at Kuala Kateman by Tassilo Adam,⁶ Orang Kuala located in 1861 by Tobias⁷ around the mouth of the Indragiri River, particularly at Kuala Retih; and the Orang Laut Bugis that Schot⁸ situated in 1884 between Pulau Burung and Pulau Basu were in reality factions of Duano people already fixed in their present habitat. The descriptions made some decades ago agree remarkably between themselves, as well as with my own observations.

The vocabulary collected by Schot with the so-called Orang Laut Bugis, except for a few dialectical variants, is the same language spoken today at Kuala Benut⁹ and which, I'll make clear right away, has nothing to do with the Bugis language. The informants of Schot told him that their ancestors were from the Bugis, who after taking part in wars at Johor against Raja Kecil (at the beginning of the 18th century) came to take refuge at the mouth of the Indragiri River. There, a catastrophe having destroyed their village and causing many deaths, they decided not to live in houses, and since then they have been established in their boats.

In this story two themes are superimposed: that of the destruction of the original village seems widespread among the boat nomads of the archipelago or their descendents; the second theme is of the ascendance of the Bugis, but it is more prosaic to see them (Bugis) installed among the Duano to make a business of *kayu bakau* and *kayu nyireh*,¹⁰ two woods of the mangrove from which a decoction gives a red tincture used to prolong the resistance of fish nets. One also knows that effectively, in the 18th century, Bugis made the Riau Archipelago the center of their commercial activities and that certain of

⁵ The present article was already written when I came across an article by H. Kähler, "Ethnographische und linguistische Studien von den Orang Laut auf der Insel Rangsang," *Anthropos* 41-44: 1-31, 757-785, 1946-1949. This interesting contribution, not listed in Sopher's bibliography, concerns the inhabitants of a village called Sendaur, at the mouth of the Sendaur River on the Rangsang and by the word list appended these people (also called here Desin Dola') are obviously Duano. This is to my knowledge their northernmost settlement on Sumatra's east coast and the closest to Kuala Benut. It is the more surprising that my informants there never mentioned its name to me.

⁶ T. Adam, *Die Orang Lahut an den Küsten Oost-Sumatras*, Mitteilungen der Anthropologische Gesellschaft in Wien, Vienna, 55 (5), 1928.

⁷ J. H. Tobias, "Verslag van eene togt naar Lingga, Reteh en Manda," *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van het Bataviaasch Genootschap*, Batavia, 10, 1861.

⁸ J. G. Schot, "Het stroomgebied der Kateman ; bijdrage tot de kennis Oost Sumatra," *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van het Bataviaasch Genootschap*, Batavia, 29, 1884.

⁹ The same can be said of the language spoken by the Sendaur people, as recorded by Kähler.

¹⁰ *Kayu bakau* : mangrove wood [*Rhizophora conjugata* (L.)]; *kayu nyireh* : *Xylocarpus moluccensis* (M. Roem).

their chiefs engaged in daring enterprises which put them in leading positions in a number of Malay sultanates, including Johor.¹¹ It is not surprising that a group like the Duano that was shown some contempt by their Malay neighbors sought an alliance, real or supposed, with representatives of this prestigious people (Bugis) to raise their stature. In contrast to the Malays, the Bugis never discriminated against marginal populations of this kind, and they have always been interested in obliging people who know the coasts of the region perfectly, and who could on occasion serve as agents of information.

My Duano informants consider that they have no link of relationship with the other non-Malay populations living in the region of the Straits. The enumeration and the locations that they give correspond largely to those in the exposition by Sopher: these are the following.

The Orang Seletar live on the extreme end of Johor State. I will speak of them later. The Orang Utan (Orang Rawa of Sopher), pagans, live in Sumatra, in the area of Selat Pandjang, Selat Morang, Selat Rawa, Sungai Sonel and Sungai Sirel, and they are also found in the Riau Archipelago. The Orang Mantang, “a very dirty people, pagans, eating pork, living with dogs” (so say Duano), are especially found around Pulau Karimun (at Kampung Karimun and Kampung Meral), Pulau Sanglang, Pulau Abang, Pulau Mapur, Pulau Penjelai, Pulau Daik (Lingga), and Selat Asam. The Orang Tambus are similar to the previous group, with whom they gladly mix, but they speak a somewhat different language, yet with inter-comprehension. They are found at Pulau Karimun, Pulau Daik, and Tanjung Pinang. These last two populations live mainly by harvesting shellfish but they equally hunt dugong by harpoon. The Duano fear them. Three groups of least importance share similarities with them (all pagans):

The Orang Sengkanak of Pulau Daik

The Orang Posik of Pulau Posik and Pulau Dair

The Orang Sebarok of Pulau Daik and Pulau Singkep; the latter wear their hair long.

Distinct from the preceding groups, the Orang Galang, on the island of the same name, do not live exclusively by the sea but also practice hunting and gathering in the island's interior. Such is the enumeration made by the Duano. Perhaps the list is not exhaustive, but it shows all the same that they have a good understanding of their region. For one of the populations mentioned by Sopher, however, which Schot calls Suku Nam, I have no data. According to Schot, it would have neighbored with Orang Laut Bugis, between Pulau Mendol and Tanjung Datu. It would have fled Lingga in the 18th century because of the incursions of the Ilanun pirates, and the group has a *bahasa laut* (a secret language spoken exclusively at sea) that, so says he, might be at the origin of the Orang Laut Bugis language. This last detail is rather hard to believe, when one knows the geographical extent of the Duano group, given, as we have seen, the link of their claim to Orang Laut Bugis. It seems that the name Suku Nam does not evoke any response by my informants, and it is likely that these people have merged with others.

¹¹ On the Bugis in general, see Ch. Pelras, “The Bugis” in The Peoples of South-East Asia and the Pacific, Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge (Mass.), 1996.

But what language do the Duano speak? It is definitely not Malay: Malays cannot understand a conversation between Duano.¹² However, a close examination of the vocabulary reveals it is composed mainly either of Malay words or of words that are very close and are only distinguished by minor phonetic modifications, thus *sangu=sungai* (river), *royu=kayu* (wood), *tuu=tua* (old), *matu=mata* (eye), *tulong=tulang* (bone), *dagee(ng)=daging* (flesh), *porot=pungut* (gather), etc...Other words testify to a simple change in sense: *ribut* (storm) in Malay signifies rain in Duano; *panti*, which means shallows (or shoal) in Duano corresponds to the Malay *pantai* (coast) and *monco(ng)* designates a beak instead of a muzzle or snout...Still for other words the presence of a Nusantarian root, less evidently, remains visible: *ia* for water, *dele'* for human, *debi* for female, *dengkulu* for hair, *temurun* for neck, *melongoi* for swim.

There remain on the list about 30 words designating actions, parts of the body, or natural objects for which it is difficult to determine the origin: *desin* (people), *mnu* (wind), *dola'* (the sea), *dita'* (small), *klongo* (nose), *co'* (to fall), *nyit* (to sleep), *kal* (to come), *bruit* (to take)... To this is added a whole series of demonstratives, interrogatives, prefixes, and adverbs which are different enough from Malay to render a Duano conversation to be incomprehensible to a Malay on first hearing. The structure of phrases seems to approach the structure of Malay, but to go deeply into this question would require longer texts.

Taken all together, we can nevertheless say that if Duano is not from Malay, it is legitimate to consider it a varietal dialect, hardly more different from standard Malay than, say, Minangkabau. As for those elements which diverge from their common heritage, it would need a thorough comparison of Southern Sumatra and Western Borneo dialects to say whether they are or are not survivals from a pre-Nusantarian (pre-Austronesian) heritage.¹³

The relationship that the Duano maintain with their Malay neighbors (whom they call Desin Damong) has the same ambiguity, marked by the desire to affirm, at the same time, both the relation that unites them and the differences that give to their group a distinct personality, of which they are well conscious. Their desire to be called Orang Melayu Kuala does not signify anything else.

By claiming to be "Malays" (Orang Melayu), the Duano distinguish themselves not only from the allogenic populations of Malaysia (Chinese or Tamils) but also from the large majority of Orang Asli (aborigines), the people of the interior and the forest who are pagans and speak Mon-Khmer languages.

However, the actual Malays, who usually snub them, hardly like the Duano, who conversely consider themselves to be the first occupants of this coast. "The Malays," the Duano say, "came here after us; and, moreover, the first king of this country was one of us." Is this a gratuitous assertion, or may we consider this as a recollection of the way Malacca was founded? In any case, what is true is that the Malays of the peninsula, and particularly those of the east coast of Johor State, have mostly come late, from diverse

¹² The presentation of languages of several Nusantarian aquatic populations (including Duano) and the main part of word lists which I collected among them have been published in Lexique thématique plurilingue de trente-deux langues et dialectes d'Asie du Sud-Est insulaire, 2 vols., Laboratoire Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Austronésien, editor. l'Harmattan, Paris, 1997.

¹³ I call "Nusantarian" the Austronesian languages spoken in Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines.

origins, united by the adoption of a common language and a culture in which Islam constitutes the dominant factor.

Basically, the Duano feel Nusantaranian (or, in other terms, they feel themselves as one of the many peoples who belong, broadly speaking, to the Malay cultural world); but in Malaysia there does not exist a recognized term to express this concept (*bumiputera* is in fact an official euphemism that distinguishes Malays from Chinese and, secondarily, from Tamils, without looking like making a racial discrimination). The only way to bring Duano and Malays closer, since the Malays are also a Nusantaranian population and dominate the peninsula by far, is for the Duano to become more Malay, if that is possible without losing their identity completely.

Another motivation for this effort of “calculated assimilation” lies equally in the Duano’s felt need not to be considered inferior. And it is in this perspective that the Duano frequently refer to Islam, the religion of the Malays: to make oneself a Moslem, when one speaks the same of a Chinese or an European, doesn’t one say “*masuk Melayu*” (to become Malay)? The Duano insist greatly, when they speak of other groups of “sea people,” upon their pagan character, which essentially translates in their eyes into making them consumers of forbidden foods (pork, dugong) and having dogs on board their boats. However, although the Duano have been Islamized for a long time (they already were in Schot’s time), they hardly seem to be good practitioners. I have not seen anyone who was diligent at performing the daily prayers; as for Friday prayers, they are hardly assiduous. A Bugis informant, their neighbor, told me they did not begin to frequent mosques regularly until about the 1950’s and that they amused the whole assembly with their mis-knowledge of how to practice Muslim rituals. Going one day from Kuala Benut in the company of the *penghulu* (headman), upon disembarking I saw him teased by some Malays who demanded, since it was Friday, “Then, Bujang, one has not gone to the mosque today?” To which, my companion asserted that he had been prevented from doing so because of the presence of a guest-stranger who had come to study the Orang Kuala *adat-istiadat* (custom/culture). This was a way for him, at the same time, to have these condescending compatriots notice that his people still had enough originality and importance so that someone would come from far away to be interested in them.

But, conversely, when I have sought to become informed of the particular specifics of the Duano *adat*, I have been told it does not differ from Malay *adat*; for lack of a much longer stay with the Duano, I was not able to put this affirmation to the test of observation, and it has hardly been possible for me to learn much more. In fact, it is probable that the Duano have preserved more than one peculiar trait. Thus when someone began to tell me of a custom according to which newlyweds must make an outing together in a boat, upon a diversion of this conversation I could not regain it, which suggests that it stood a good chance of being considered a survival of an ancient ritual of the Orang Laut, that is to say, seen from the Malay perspective, something “primitive.” One other particular, unknown to Malays, is the interdiction of marriage between parallel cousins, whether in the matrilineage or patrilineage. The terminology for kinspeople, on the other hand, is exactly parallel with Malay terminology.

The nature of relationships between Duano and Malay evidently does not favor marriage between them, even though there are some isolated cases (and yet, it seems that intermarriages mainly were with Bugis or with the Banjar people, those from the

Banjarmasin region in South-East Borneo). All together, the Duano live amongst themselves and their way of life just accentuates their isolation.

In 1967 the sole occupation of Kuala Benut people was fishing: estuarine fishing, by means of nets blocking the river; sea fishing near the coast by nets, floating lines, or traps; and mainly gathering shellfish and animals living in the river mud flats, on which they propel themselves forward by means of a plank support (*papun(t) bertongkat*). The sexes are not segregated in any of these activities, the women going to fish except when they have young children.

The boats (there are about 40) are made in the village. The most typical are the *jelo' penat*,¹⁴ dugouts with a hollowed keel, augmented with planking, and the *kota'*,¹⁵ a large boat for living aboard, roofed with *atap* (palm thatch); this latter type is still used by the families working for the fish entrepreneurs in Benut. This was certainly the usual mode of habitat for Duano in the past and it is still the case for the people of Kuala Benut who participate in the fishing campaigns which take place on the east coast of the peninsula, when the south winds disturb navigation in the Strait (May). One can thus still speak of the Duano as indulging in seasonal nomadism.

In fact, the nomadism attributed to the Duano ancestors was always contained in narrow limits; over a century, as one has seen, their points of establishment remained circumscribed exactly in the same area. Likewise, at the time when they lived on their boats, it is probable that their travels were of a weak amplitude. Thus their switch to houses on pilings without doubt did not constitute a total rupture with the ancient way of life that one might have imagined; these houses have no permanent character, they are easy to move, and the village of Kuala Benut, for example, has already several times changed its location in accordance with the retreat of the river banks in the course of years.

More important is the transformation that took place recently in the lives of the inhabitants of Kuala Benut. Indeed, in the course of 1968, on the initiative of JOA the village was established on dry land, in a part of the mangrove previously drained and cleared. Each family was allotted a patch of land on which to plant bananas and tubers.

I saw this change when I met the Duano again on my later visit, in October, 1968, and I would say that—contrary to my fears—they do not appear, for now, to have suffered too badly by this change. Fishing continues, of course, to be their essential activity, and they have kept the platforms of the old village as a landing stage. But the adoption of this new habitat is without any doubt an important step on the road to assimilation into Malay society, from which soon the Duano will be hardly distinguishable except by the possession of their own dialect.

Seletar

Although the JOA qualifies them equally as Orang Laut, there exists between the Duano and the Orang Seletar a shared antipathy. But bibliographic data do not allow one to say whether these two coastal populations of the south of Johor State are really distinct, or if they are two branches issuing from a common trunk at a recent date, who diverged

¹⁴ Cf. in standard Malay “jalor,” a kind of dugout.

¹⁵ Cf. in standard Malay “sampan kotak,” a kind of sampan.

from each other by reason of their different lifestyles and their opposite positions with respect to Islam (since the Seletar remain pagans).

It was only to get a hint permitting to answer this question that, always with the authorization of the JOA, I took advantage on my second visit to Malaysia, in September-October, 1968, to pay the Seletar a very rapid visit.

To categorize the Seletar as Orang Laut is not very exact, because they are in reality inhabitants of the mangroves. It is known that until the 19th century they lived on the north coast of the island of Singapore and that due to its development they moved to the other side of the Strait, of which the width never exceeds 2000 meters, and really no more than 500 in certain places. Currently, they number about 400 people: two or three families stay on Singapore island, on the Kranji River, the mouth of which is close to the causeway uniting Singapore and the peninsula; for the rest, some live along the Johor River, particularly in the environs of Bakar Batu (near Batu Lima), Tiram, and Kota Tinggi, and some others haunt the environs of the Pulai River, whose marshy delta on the east mouth of Johor Strait is subdivided into many small arms. It is these latter people that I sought to contact.

Leaving from Gelang Patah, a police sergeant drove me by a dirt road, relatively easy to traverse, belonging to a rubber plantation, up to a place called Simpang Arang. There, some skew shanties and a *balai kampung* (community hall) dominated by a TV antenna are grouped by a charcoal oven, owned by a Chinese, and from which the hamlet takes its name. Established some years ago on the initiative of the JOA, it represents an attempt to get the Seletar to adopt a “normal” life on land, but the only permanent inhabitants are three or four families, of which the headman of these is recognized by the administration; the other families continue their nomadism, and have not resigned themselves to leave their boats, saying they are unable to sleep if they cannot see the sky overhead.

From time to time they come to land to sell their fish catch and to provision themselves with rice, but this is quite irregular. Thus it was that the day of my visit, when I waited several hours—but in vain—at the landing stage at Simpang Arang, for the boats forecasted to arrive that day. Two young people of the village—one being half Chinese, which nevertheless did not prevent him from considering himself a Seletar—kept me company. They had a small transistor radio from which I heard issuing, in this unlikely place, the voices of Aznavour sing “The Mama” and Maurice Chevalier proclaim that “Paris will always be Paris”¹⁶... When the tide became too low to permit navigation in this arm of the delta waters, which was shallow, I returned to the chief’s house, and it is there that I collected some vocabulary and phrases that one will read in a following issue of this journal,¹⁷ as well as some information that is not systematic. But this store of knowledge, although meager, is enough to establish that there is no close relationship between Seletar and Duano. Contrary to the Duano, the Seletar have only a vague idea of their situation among the various populations of the Straits. They think that some populations similar to

¹⁶ Charles Aznavour (born in 1924) and Maurice Chevalier (1888-1972) were at that time two internationally famous French singers and these songs were among their best known hits.

¹⁷ In fact, these notes were not published until the publication of the above-mentioned Lexique thématique plurilingue de trente-deux langues et dialectes d’Asie du Sud-Est insulaire.

them exist “in the Indonesian islands,” that is, in the Riau Archipelago, but I am not sure that they are not repeating rumors outside of their own tradition.

It does not seem that the Seletar have a name other than that they are known by, and they accept it without any problem. Seletar is the name of a river on the north coast of Singapore, but it is hard to know if the toponym or the ethnic name came first.

The Seletar do not seem to have any complex about being called Orang Asli or Orang Laut. They feel a certain affinity with the “Malay aborigines” (Jakun) of the interior and say that there is, for example, mutual understanding between them and those of the Kluang region; the languages are 70% the same (data that I report with all reservations). All the same, at Segamat, well into the interior, is found the sacred place (*kramat*) where one venerates a mythical “queen” (*raja perempuan*) to whom the Seletar have been subject in the past. Some of them (*orang kita*) who have lived “on the Java coast” (in Riau?) were under the authority of a king. These two persons, gifted with special powers (they could travel from one place to another at the speed of wind) are in Seletar eyes the only legitimate possessors of power, and they do not recognize thus the sultans of Johor as their true rulers, because they are for them only temporary guests (*penumpang*). Likewise, they consider Malays as relatively recent occupants.

The Seletar are therefore conscious of being part of the veritable native population on the same level as the inhabitants of the forest, and if there are people disposed to accepting the name of Orang Asli, it is certainly them. On the other hand, they believe they have no particular relationship with the other Orang Laut of the region, and in particular with the Orang Kuala. An examination of the available vocabulary allows one to say they are right on this last point. Their language appears to be just a dialect of peninsular Malay,¹⁸ even if it is not immediately comprehensible because of the pronunciation and a tendency to contract words and letting drop certain intermediary parts of words; thus *darat* “land” becomes *da*’, *nyamuk* “mosquito” becomes *nye*’, *jawab* “reply” becomes *job*. But apart from these reservations, 85% of the words I have recorded are Malay. For the rest, 5% of them are found in Malay with a slight difference in meaning: thus, in Seletar, *tana* means mud instead of land, *adi*’ means child instead of younger sibling, *tebal* translates as wide and not as thick, etc... We have finally a residue of 10% of the words irreducible to Malay, and some of them appear to have correspondence with some vocabularies in Borneo, such as dog, *engko*’ (*uko* in many languages of Sarawak), or pig, *izhum* (*ilum* in Long Glat); for the others, I have not found any resemblance at the moment: *peng*, “monkey;” *beme*, “smoke;” *jo*’, “monitor lizard;” *tena*, “woman/wife;” *pemba*’, “thigh/leg;” *pereti*’, “day before yesterday;” *kedaza*’, “cheerful;” *unyit*, “move;” *guzu*, “rough”...

But it is more interesting to note that for the 15% of the words that are not Malay, less than 1% are common with Duano, three words of the first group: *tana* (mud), *moncong* (beak), and *kusal* (to wash); and only one word of the second group: *kokot* (hand).

The hypothesis of a recent common origin of these two maritime populations inhabiting the south of the Malay Peninsula appears therefore to be out of the question. In fact, all that is shared is a mutual opposition to their land neighbors, but their ways of life

¹⁸ Elements of an unpublished wordlist collected in 1967 by the German anthropologist Barbara Wall among Seletar living on the Johor River confirm my conclusions.

are truly different. Certainly, the Seletar live on boats, like the Duano did not so long ago. But these latter used to settle themselves more or less permanently in the open estuaries, while the Seletar inhabit the maze which is formed in the mangrove forest by the narrow channels of a marshy delta.

The differences in their physical settings corresponds with differences in their fishing techniques: the Seletar depend mainly on crustacea, caught in holes in the banks by means of iron hooks mounted on a long wooden stick; as for fish which are found in the channel, they were caught in the past with a spear (*tikam*), but this has been abandoned, since it does not allow good preservation on ice (don't forget that we are only about 15 kilometers from the most important urban complex of the Southeast Asian continent!), and they are now limited to using nets that extend from one side of the river to the other (*empang*). The Seletar indulge in collecting shellfish and are of course ignorant of the plank supports used by the Duano for this purpose, which would be of no use in their environment.

On the other hand, they venture little on the open water and do not in any way leave the Johor Strait, which is shallow, narrow, and calm—quite different than the open sea. They practice occasionally line fishing (*pancing*). Their boats, simple hollowed-out dugouts, which they used to make but which they now buy, hardly permit more adventurous navigation.

The situation of the Seletar in relation to Malays is quite peculiar: objectively, they are native Malays, ethnically more authentic perhaps than most of the Malays of the peninsula, who are mostly the product of the fusion of immigrants of diverse origins. But their non-membership in Islam places them decidedly on the margin of Malay society, even more so, without doubt, than does their attachment to an errant life, which, it is true, contributes largely to maintain the status quo. Finally, they readily mix with Chinese, because *sama-sama makan daging*: “both eat meat (pork)”. Marriage between the two populations is not rare. As for the role played by the *taukeh*, the proprietor of the charcoal works in the community of Simpang Arang, it would doubtless be interesting to clarify it. Is it not he who made a gift to the village of a television set, which I thought at first was installed with the help of the JOA?

The intrusion, through sound and image, of everything modern in the middle of this community of primitive foragers living close-by to a sprawling city-state whose shop windows offer tourists from around the world a complete assortment of the most recent technical advances, does not lack a certain picturesque quality. But one can ask oneself, if by refusing “Malayanization,” which would have for them at least the merit of integration into a balanced and stable society that is relatively close to their own, whether they run the grave risk of soon becoming marginal tramps of the industrial civilization...

Sama

(this section on the Sama, who are not inhabitants of West Malaysia, on pp. 152-165 of Dr. Pelras' paper, was not translated; the general conclusion given on pp. 165-168 is presented below)

Some remarks on the possible origins of these populations

The three populations in question present a great disparity in relation to each other, and from all points of view: language, traditions, political organization, etc. The main thing they have in common is that for a long time they have maintained an aquatic way of life that makes them unique compared to their dry-land neighbors. But apart from that, their ways of life were and remain notably different.

The Seletar inhabit the rivers and marshy coasts and venture little to sea. They live principally on the catch of crustacea. They are poorly equipped, their main instrument being the pronged harpoon.

The Duano, people of the estuaries, are essentially collectors of mud animals. They propel themselves through this element atop a "mud plank," a device known to other populations of Southeast Asia, from southern Japan and China to Java. They also use lines, nets, and fish traps, but go little at large, their boats only being able to navigate calm waters.

The Sama, finally, know the high sea well and are accustomed to long voyages. They used to have boats of heavy tonnage capable of carrying several families over long distances. And they were widely engaged in commercial fishing activities.

It would therefore seem improper to say that these three populations are part of the same culture, without giving this word such a vague meaning that it would be possible to include all the fishing populations of tropical Asia in it, which wouldn't be very useful.

In contrast, one will note that the languages of these populations, as different as they are, have a common trait. Each of them has some evident points of resemblance to Malay. This is not very surprising for the first two groups, which are located within the geographical area of Malay usage. It is more remarkable for the diverse dialects of Sama, one of which is spoken in the easternmost part of the Nusantara Archipelago. This fact favors Sopher's hypothesis, which puts their common origin in the region of Riau.

For Sopher, the common ancestors of these groups would have been composed of a veddoid population of coastal gatherers, who little by little became differentiated from the hunter-gatherers of the interior and acquired more mobility by adopting the use of boats—that, before the arrival of "Proto-Malay" mongoloids. Then, after their arrival, these two populations would have mixed together. Part of them would have ended up being assimilated by the Malay population, but some isolated groups would have continued to subsist by maintaining a way of life founded on marine nomadism. And if such primitive populations were able to survive in a region which, in fact—at least since the 7th century—has been a center of strong seaport-states, it is, says Sopher, because these states were not territorial but commercial ones and lacked a strong force of acculturation.

For my part, I do not think that it is necessary to suppose that these populations come from veddoids. Indeed, one can occasionally encounter among them certain types with not very much mongoloid traits, but this is also true of the Malays themselves. Both show, in fact, a great diversity of physical types.

As for considering them the last representatives of a culture previous to the arrival of the Austronesians, this seems unnecessary to me. It is not because the Malays today possess an "advanced" civilization relative to that of these "primitives" that they have a different origin.

In considering the vocabularies of Duano, Seletar, Sama, and Malay one has in fact the impression of their derivation from a common, relatively close, original stock, to which the languages of southern Sumatra and also those of western Borneo (Iban, Kendayan, etc.) must certainly be linked.

The secondary influence that Malay, vehicle of civilization, had on these languages tends to have us neglect the simplest hypothesis: namely, that Malay would originally have been only one of these languages.

The emergence of commercial centers at the outlet of the Strait of Malacca depended largely on the geographical conditions and on seasonal winds; therefore navigation between the south of China and the northeast coast of India required the presence in this region of ports of call and entrepôts, which then became centers of regional commerce.

One can suppose that populations related to one another lived on these coasts up to the marshy hinterland, wooded and rather inhospitable, whose way of life was close to that of the present-day Duano. There where the first ports became established, trade relations were established between the newcomers and some of these natives, from which the latter—first ancestors of the Malays—profited. At first, intermediaries for the distribution of forest products, they then turned little by little toward maritime commerce, and their language would naturally become the easiest means of communication between outsiders from diverse places and natives of diverse dialects. For that matter, Malay has always remained linked to maritime commerce, and the Malays are still outstanding coastal and downstream residents.

The other populations, less favorably localized, remained more or less distanced from those commercial activities and continued subsisting on local resources. Their mode of life became specialized according to their particular habitat: the interior of islands, banks or strands, estuaries, marshy deltas. Such a material differentiation accompanied by a certain withdrawal into oneself could only accentuate a dialectical diversification which probably was already underway. Such would be the origin of the innumerable mini-ethnics of the Riau Archipelago and of the coasts of Sumatra and Malaya.

But another group had a different outcome, and it is the one from which the current Samas—known to outsiders by the term Bajau or Bajo—arose. This one, which from its origin lived on the open sea, at first rippled out to the northeast along the coasts of Borneo, that is, along the route leading from the Malacca Strait to the Philippines. This migration would lead us to think that, from that time on, they were not content with subsistence limited to products furnished by a restricted environment. Perhaps they were already assuring the existence of a commercial network of marine products.

All this, certainly, remain largely hypothetical, but on this basis one can perhaps consider the whole question of the aquatic populations of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in a new light.

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