

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Sea Nomads: Description and Analysis: The Sea Nomads

Review Author: H. Arlo Nimmo

Philippine Studies vol. 15, no. 1 (1969): 209–212

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

plished in very summary fashion. We must admire careful, thoughtful work and scientific precision, but here the reader is left with the impression that he has read a "working-paper," and that there must be more to follow. In the final analysis, the book's great strength is exactly what the author claimed for it: namely, careful attention to the methods and problems involved in collecting some kinds of sociological data. The emphasis upon field-work problems and methods makes this book a very useful one for any student contemplating field work in any geographical area. Readers interested in purchasing romantic books on exotic Asian subjects need not feel compelled to acquire this one; this book is for serious students.

WILLIAM G. DAVIS

THE SEA NOMADS: DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

THE SEA NOMADS: A Study Based on the Literature of the Maritime Boat People of Southeast Asia. By David E. Sopher. Singapore, Memoir of the National Museum, No. 5, 1965. x, 422 pp., 9 maps, 5 plates.

When European explorers and traders first began to penetrate insular Southeast Asia, they encountered a timid boat-dwelling people among the more isolated islands and reefs of the Malaysian seas. The unique sea-faring life of these folk aroused the interest and imagination of more than one passing traveler, but their nomadic movements and remote habitats discouraged long-range observation by any single observer. Consequently, their history consists of a line or two from an explorer's journal, a brief mention in a colonial administrator's report, a chapter from a travelogue, or an occasional Sunday supplement story. From this widely scattered and fragmented literature, David E. Sopher has written *The Sea Nomads* which, in the words of the author, "has as its theme the comprehensive description and analysis of the nomadic boat people of Southeast Asia" (p. vii).

Sopher's book begins with an ecological description of the Malaysian coasts and seas, the sea nomads' habitat. Part II is a discussion of the major groups of sea nomads as they are found in (1) the Mergui Islands on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula; (2) The South China Sea, including the Riau Lingga Archipelago, the Tujuh Islands, Bangka and Billiton Islands, and adjacent coasts; (3) North Borneo and the Sulu Archipelago of the southern Philippines; and (4) Eastern Indonesia, especially Celebes. In the third section, a comparative discussion of the four groups, Sopher suggests

that all the Malaysian sea folk represent a single "sea nomad culture" from a common point of origin. He supports his contention by discussing the following traits which he claims are shared in varying degrees, by all the sea nomads of southeast Asia: (1) the boat-dwelling habit; (2) sparse populations; (3) Palaeomongoloid and Veddid physical features; (4) a substratum of language different from surrounding populations; (5) great skill in handling and building boats; (6) simple fishing methods; (7) strand collecting for commercial and subsistence purposes; (8) a past history of piracy; (9) general poverty of material culture; (10) little or no agriculture; (11) domestic customs related to the forest primitives of Malaya; (12) social organization of small groups within set geographic limits under an elected leader; and (13) "Indonesian" animistic and shamanistic religion with Islamic influences.

Part IV deals with references to the sea nomads prior to the nineteenth century, and provides additional data for the conclusions presented in Part V regarding sea nomad origins and migrations. Sopher proposes that the sea nomads were at one time Veddid strand collectors in the Riau Lingga Archipelago who, after acquiring the use of small boats, became differentiated from the hunting and gathering people of that area. Later these Veddid peoples mixed with Mongoloid proto-Malays who moved into the area from the North, but persisted as boat-dwellers. Various pressures, including over-population, unfriendly local populations, unmanageable winds and currents, fear of piracy, and wanderlust, then dispersed the boat-dwellers throughout Malaysia to their present homes.

Probably the most important part of Sopher's study is Part II, the description of the sea nomads as they are found throughout Malaysia. This is the first comprehensive study of these little known peoples, and Sopher has done a commendable job in view of the scattered bits and pieces of data with which he had to work. Additional field research may alter some of his theories, but it is unlikely that future researchers will discover significant printed references to the sea nomads which Sopher has not already processed. Questionable, however, are his theories of migrations and relationships between the several sea nomad groups. As he himself is aware, the paucity of information on the sea nomads raises difficult obstacles to the proof or disproof of such relationships. Many of the traits which he finds common to the four groups of sea nomads, such as Palaeomongoloid and Veddid physical features, a substratum of language different from surrounding populations, great skill in handling and building boats, domestic customs related to the forest primitives of Malaya, and "Indonesian" animistic and shamanistic religion with Islamic influences, and which are part of his "sea nomad culture," are in no sense peculiar to the sea folk and could

equally well describe any number of other ethnic groups in Malaysia. Thus they offer little proof of a common "sea nomad culture" for the four groups of boat-dwellers.

Philippine readers will be most interested in his discussion of the Sulu sea nomads, the Bajau. Sopher suggests that all of Sulu's Samal-speaking population (which includes the Bajau as well as more confirmed agriculturalists) came to Sulu and eastern Borneo as boat-dwellers from the Johore region of Malaya. His theory is based in part on a Sulu tradition found among some Samal-speaking groups which mentions Johore as a homeland and in part on the fact that the Sulu sea folk share many of the above listed traits with the sea nomads of western Malaysia. The 1960 census of the Philippines lists 68,793 Samal speakers and 12,232 Bajau speakers for Sulu; apparently the census-takers were unaware that the language of the Bajau is Samal. Thus there are some 81,000 Samal-speakers in Sulu today, a conservative estimate. Add to the Sulu people the 45,000 Samal speakers reported in Sabah and the population increases to 126,000. We can only guess at the number of Samal speakers in Celebes and Kalimantan, but their numbers are probably as great as those on the Sabah coasts. Therefore, a conservative estimate of the Samal-speaking people is about 170,000.

Sopher proposes that these people are descendants of boat dwellers who migrated to the Sulu area from Johore in the fourteenth century. It is unlikely that the mass movement of sea nomads from Johore to Sulu as described in the Sulu traditions ever occurred. And even if the movement had occurred, it is even more unlikely that these peoples would have passed along the southern and northern Borneo coasts (as suggested by Sopher) without leaving occasional pockets of their members enroute; except in northeast Borneo, no boat-dwellers have been reported on these coasts. As Sopher notes, and as can be observed in Sulu today, sea nomad movements of migrations are normally made by small kin groups seeking new, usually nearby, fishing and collecting grounds. If sea nomads from Johore ever reached Sulu, they probably would have come in such small family groups. Within 700 years, these small groups of sea nomads from Johore increased to a population of 170,000. Such rapid population growth is not out of the realm of possibility, but it does tax probability—especially in view of geneological data from the present Sulu boat dwellers which reveal an almost negligible population increase over the past three generations. Perhaps it would be more reasonable to assume that the boat-dwelling habit evolved independently in the eastern seas; throughout Malaysia, boats are used as part-time dwellings by many coastal peoples, and it should, therefore, not be surprising to find more than one group of people who have become full-time boat dwellers. Rather than all Samal speakers having come to Sulu as boat dwellers, some may have

acquired the boat-dwelling habit in Sulu as a unique ecological adaptation to certain sea environments.

The Sea Nomads was Sopher's doctoral dissertation in the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley. Completed in 1954, it was accepted for publication by the National Museum in Singapore in 1958, but was not published until 1965. Since the study was completed in 1954, additional material has been published on the sea nomads of Sulu which has not been incorporated into the present volume. Much of the material, however, was published at about the same time *The Sea Nomads* was in press, and so Sopher cannot be blamed for its omission. Possibly the new data would have altered some of Sopher's conclusions, as will, no doubt, future research among the other sea nomads. Nonetheless, the book is an important contribution to the culture history of southeast Asia and serves as a foundation for future research among the sea nomads.

H. ARLO NIMMO