

# 'Strange peoples'

Writing in 1670, Cornelis Speelman offered one of the earliest descriptions of the Sama Bajo of eastern Indonesia preserved in the archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Though brief, Speelman's account was most influential. His assessment of who the Sama Bajo were, and what they were capable of, formed the basis for later representations of these people in Company documents. Perceptions of the Sama Bajo changed little over the next century, and they continued to be portrayed as simple sea nomads and slaves of the landed kingdoms of Sulawesi. This enduring view influenced the manner in which Sama Bajo peoples were reported on and dealt with by Company officials in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it continues to be influential in more recent accounts of Sama Bajo history.

Lance Nolde



INFLUENTIAL AS IT IS, Speelman's monumental 646-page report to his superiors and successors, known as the *Notitie*, actually contains very little information on the Sama Bajo. In Speelman's time, and still today, the Sama Bajo were encountered across the length and breadth of eastern maritime Southeast Asia; from the southern Philippines to the Timor coast, and from eastern Kalimantan to the Bird's Head of West Papua. The Sama Bajo with whom Speelman was most familiar, those of eastern Indonesia, form one subgroup of the larger Samalan ethnolinguistic family, arguably the most widely dispersed peoples indigenous to Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Known most popularly as 'sea peoples' or 'sea nomads', the Sama Bajo are a highly mobile people who live in boats or in littoral villages scattered throughout the region, and are unrivaled in their abilities as sailors, navigators, fishers, hunters, and collectors of various sea products. Despite their pervasiveness in Indonesian waters, however, very little about the Sama Bajo was known to Speelman and his contemporaries. For Speelman, Sama Bajo peoples were an interesting but peripheral feature of eastern Indonesia's political and commercial scene.

#### A guide for future governors

Speelman's cursory notes on the Sama Bajo were written in 1669 following the VOC's conquest of the South Sulawesi kingdom of Gowa, and the principal port and commercial center of that kingdom, known as Makassar. Prior to its defeat, Gowa was the most powerful kingdom in eastern Indonesia and its port-city Makassar (named after its chief inhabitants, the Makassarese) was the most important entrepot in the region. There, traders of all nations came to acquire Malukan spices, slaves, textiles, and products harvested from the forests and seas, which were then shipped to other parts of Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and the wider Indian Ocean world. The Makassar Wars (1666-1669), as they came to be known, were the culmination of VOC efforts to establish a monopoly on the spice trade out of Maluku. By removing Makassar from Gowa's authority, the Company mostly eliminated what had been the main source of spices outside its own control. Gowa's defeat also resulted in a permanent Dutch presence in South Sulawesi and the creation of a system of port-controls, maritime patrols,

and sailing passes designed to regulate and restrain the movement of people and goods between Makassar and other areas of the Indo-Malay archipelago.

Speelman's *Notitie* was written as a memorandum of transfer and instructions for those officials who would head the newly established Company-post in Makassar after the admiral's return to Batavia. A copy was deposited in Fort Rotterdam to serve for future governors as a reference and guide to the complicated world of South Sulawesi politics, culture, and commerce. Later VOC governors of Makassar consulted the *Notitie* when writing their own reports and when forming decisions regarding native affairs in Sulawesi. Seen as the earliest and most reputable source of information regarding the local situation, Speelman's take on South Sulawesi, including his portrayal of the Sama Bajo, was echoed in the writings of subsequent officials throughout the eighteenth century.

#### Enduring impression

"These people", Speelman wrote of the Sama Bajo, "before the war lived in fairly large numbers under the jurisdiction of Makassar, most living on the islands offshore ... [and] they travel also to all the islands further out to sea ... collecting

Above: Sama Bajo women returning home after harvesting firewood.

Below: Pile-homes in a Sama Bajo village off the east coast of Sulawesi at low tide.

tortoiseshell from there which they must deliver to the King of Makassar ... [they] furthermore must always be prepared to go anywhere in their boats, whenever they are sent by the king to his advantage, as these people are slaves of the king." In addition, those settled in island villages, "many of them", he noted, "live in boats on the water, and forage everywhere around the islands." During the roughly three years he spent in South Sulawesi, Speelman came to see the Sama Bajo as simple fisher folk who served as slaves of the Makassarese kings. They provided their lords with sea products and seaborne transportation whenever called, but the Sama Bajo otherwise remained at the geographic and sociopolitical margins of Makassar.

Knowledge about the Sama Bajo among Dutch officials in Makassar increased only minimally in the following decades. Whenever the Sama Bajo do appear in Company documents they are invariably described as wandering fishermen, and reference is usually made to their perceived status as slaves of the Makassarese and Bugis kings. When commenting on the Sama Bajo in their reports, officials typically rehashed one aspect or another of Speelman's description, or simply referred the reader to Speelman. Thus, in Company documents written almost sixty years after the *Notitie* was completed,





# The Sama Bajo in VOC perception and policy

the description of the Sama Bajo remained mostly unchanged, such as in a memorandum from 1727, where the Sama Bajo were said to “serve mostly in regard to navigation ... and can be compared only to freebooters”. “For their description, and regarding Gowa’s authority over them,” the author wrote, “your Honor shall refer to the memorandum of Lord Speelman in which these *Badjos* are mentioned foremost as wandering gatherers of goods from every place, formerly only in service for the Makassarese, but now also for the Bugis.”

Even after nearly a century of interaction with these “strange peoples”, the portrayal of the Sama Bajo in Company discourse remained largely the same with little or no augmentation. In a memorandum from 1760, for example, the governor describes the Sama Bajo as “a people who have no home”, who “dwell in any place where they can obtain a livelihood by fishing”, and who are “subjects of the Makassarese and used by them as slaves”. Just as his predecessors, this governor ends his piece on the Sama Bajo by referring his readers to Speelman as the primary source of information. Highly similar descriptions of the Sama Bajo appear in the reports and missives of each successive governor of Makassar until the dissolution of the VOC in 1799, and even in the colonial records of the nineteenth century.

## Linking Company perception and policy

More than simply a discursive phenomenon, there is reason to suggest that this enduring impression of the Sama Bajo also affected the manner in which the Company administration in Makassar reported on and dealt with Sama Bajo peoples in areas under their jurisdiction. As mentioned above, the daily reports and missives produced by each governor were not merely records but were active, ongoing participants in discussions about Company policies and practices. In the case of the Sama Bajo, the institutionalized perception of these wandering sea peoples may have informed Company practices in ways that proved detrimental to VOC trade monopolies and its attempt to control the waterways.

For nearly sixty years after the Makassar War, the Sama Bajo were the sole group of seafarers from South Sulawesi who, at least in practice, were not required to possess Company-issued sailing passes, and their vessels were not routinely inspected upon entering or departing from Dutch-controlled Makassar. Where the Dutch administration in Makassar put forth tremendous effort beginning in 1671 to circumscribe and supervise the movements of traders from other Sulawesi ethnic communities, the smaller, less suspicious Sama Bajo boats apparently were not subjected to such stringent controls. Perceived as a relatively benign fisherfolk, it became de facto Company policy in Makassar for the Sama Bajo to come and go much more freely than other groups.

This aberration in Company policy proved detrimental to its commercial and security interests. Contrary to the conventional perception held by Speelman and his successors, the Sama Bajo were a vital element of the Gowa kingdom and its political and commercial dominance in eastern Indonesia. Since before the fifteenth century Sama Bajo groups were strong allies of Gowa and the related kingdom of Talloq, serving as fishers, sailors, traders, and warriors, and their elite held esteemed positions within the Makassarese court. Sama Bajo fleets sailed throughout the Indo-Malay archipelago collecting valuable sea products, transporting precious spices and other commodities, and helping to expand Makassarese influence through trade and warfare.

Not surprisingly, the Sama Bajo continued to serve these same functions with vigor soon after Gowa’s defeat and they therefore took on a renewed importance in the changed political and commercial climate of eastern Indonesia. It appears that some Sama Bajo took advantage of their special treatment to bring contraband goods into Makassar undetected, while others navigated the nearby rivers and creeks to bring their cargo to market clandestinely. Sama Bajo regularly sailed in and out of the waters surrounding Dutch Makassar carrying trade goods, letters, and even weapons and ammunition, using their small boats to move such ‘contraband’ without detection. In the more distant islands of eastern Indonesia as well, Sama Bajo boats carried on in their activities, transporting spices, sea products, wax, and slaves from various resource zones to key intermediary ports that remained outside Dutch control, as well as to the markets of South Sulawesi. Occasionally these Sama Bajo boats and crew encountered VOC patrol ships. In the waters of South Sulawesi they most often were allowed to sail on or enter the roadstead without inspection. On a few occasions, however, Sama Bajo boats – especially the larger, less stereotypically Sama Bajo vessels, and those in areas distant from Makassar – raised suspicions, and the encounter was more violent. In these instances Sama Bajo sailors either fled the patrol ship or attacked preemptively and engaged in battle. In the period between 1670 and 1726, several such clashes took place between Sama Bajo sailors and Company ships, a number of which resulted in the arrest of Sama Bajo crews. Reports and complaints from other Company outposts about Sama Bajo ‘smuggling’ activities, however, were far more frequent than such arrests.



Above: A Sama Bajo fisherman with a captive Fish-Eagle. Tukangbesi, Indonesia.

All photos by author.

A series of events in the 1720s called into question the practice of letting the Sama Bajo travel more freely than other groups. Reports of Sama Bajo smuggling, slave raiding, and involvement in the contraband trade in Maluku spices, increased in this period, and several violent clashes took place between Sama Bajo and Dutch patrols. This surge in undesirable events forced the Dutch to reevaluate their conventional treatment of Sama Bajo peoples in and around Makassar. Yet, within discussions regarding the need to control the ‘excessively free’ and ‘unbounded’ movements of Sama Bajo peoples, the established description of the Sama Bajo remained little changed. Even in the face of these disruptive activities the Sama Bajo were portrayed as simple, benighted subjects forced to take part in the machinations of their Makassarese and Bugis rulers. Accordingly, while Company practice and policy in Makassar regarding the Sama Bajo began to change, the way in which the Sama Bajo were perceived and depicted in administrative records did not. In the eyes of the Dutch administration, the Sama Bajo remained, as one official wrote in 1759, “slaves of Bone and Gowa ... such as was noted in the statement of the Honorable Lord Speelman.”

This dominant perception of the Sama Bajo also influenced the manner in which Sama Bajo people appeared, or did not appear, in Company records. As poor, wandering “vagabonds of the sea” [zeeschuimers] who lacked any sort of political or social organization, and who were little more than industrious slaves, Dutch officials apparently could not envisage Sama Bajo peoples holding any kind of status or authority in Sulawesi or elsewhere in eastern Indonesia. Thus, when a powerful Sama Bajo leader waged war against the Sultanate of Bima on numerous occasions in the eighteenth century, the Dutch administration in Makassar just assumed the leader was a Makassarese noble rather than the high-status Sama Bajo he was. Institutional wisdom suggested it was inconceivable that Sama Bajo could hold positions of such power, that they could lead Makassarese troops in war, or that they could govern coveted lands on behalf of Gowa’s king. The strength of such long-held perceptions apparently blinded most Company officials to the complexity of the Sama Bajo and prevented them from understanding the importance of these communities for Makassar and for Indonesian commerce more generally.

## So much more

This view of the Sama Bajo as having been marginal sea nomads and slaves of Makassarese and Bugis kings remains common in popular and scholarly literature. Elements of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Dutch representations of Sama Bajo culture and status are often strongly present in more recent scholarship and, as a result, much of what has been written reflects the Sama Bajo’s current socioeconomic marginalization more so than their historical significance. Recent research in Sama Bajo, Makassarese, and other local oral and written traditions, in conjunction with a more thorough examination of the VOC archives, however, reveals an entirely different picture than these familiar, but inaccurate characterizations of the Sama Bajo.<sup>2</sup> More than nomadic fisher folk, the Sama Bajo in the early modern period were a powerful and proud people who fulfilled a variety of roles critical to the creation and maintenance of Indonesian sociopolitical and commercial networks. They were not only the primary collectors of valuable sea products so crucial to international trade, but they were also navigators and explorers, traders and merchants, seaborne raiders, nobles and figures of authority within landed polities, and even territorial powers in their own right.

Lance Nolde, Department of History,  
University of Hawaii at Manoa  
(lnolde@hawaii.edu)

## References

- 1 Sather, C. 1995. “Sea Nomads and Rainforest Hunter-Gatherers: Foraging Adaptations in the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago,” in P. Bellwood, J. Fox & D. Tryon (eds.) *The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Canberra: ANU Press, 256-257.
- 2 This is the focus of the author’s dissertation. Nolde, L. 2014. *Changing Tides: A History of Power, Trade, and Transformation among the Sama Bajo Sea Peoples of Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period*, PhD dissertation, University of Hawai’i at Manoa.