

How far can we read the practice of SE Asian sea nomadism into the past?

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Defining sea nomads I

- ❖ Sea nomadism is a characteristic subsistence strategy in island SE Asia today but we have little idea of the antiquity of these societies or how they can be characterised archaeologically.
- ❖ Which is a characteristic problem for site-based archaeology rather than problem-based archaeology
- ❖ Sea nomadism can be defined as the subsistence strategy of populations with no permanent land base, based on the exchange of maritime resources for staples and trade goods
- ❖ Sea nomadism exists because there are patchy and seasonal aquatic resources, fish etc. which can only be exploited by fishermen willing to move
- ❖ And opportunistic trade, moving goods between non-standard ports and along non-standard routes, often smuggling or at least extra-legal

Defining sea nomads II

- ❖ Sea nomads thus correspond extremely well to pastoralists in land contexts, except that pastoralists own their mobile resource, i.e. livestock
- ❖ Sea nomads exist in an ambiguous relationship with more settled land and maritime populations, both feared and depended upon
- ❖ As far we know, there are three areas in Island SE Asia where sea nomads are active today
 - The Mergui archipelago, west off Thailand/Myanmar, where the Moken/Moklen/Urak Lawoi live
 - Between Riau and Sumatra, where the Orang Laut operate
 - and in the large area between NE Borneo, the Sulu archipelago and NW Papua, where the various Samal populations live
- ❖ However, there are scattered reports of Orang Laut in other parts of Indonesia, as might be expected

Defining sea nomads III

- ❖ So the first question is whether these populations are related?
- ❖ They speak different languages...
 - The Moklen/Moken two languages related to each other and ultimately to the Malayic group
 - The Riau Orang Laut/Orang Sawang speak at least two dialects of Malay (Sekak and Bintan Orang Laut Malay)
 - The Samal speak a cluster of related languages, interestingly not related to the Philippines group of Austronesian but to Borneo languages. There are, however, some Samalic languages spoken by farming populations in the Philippines (Yakan and Abaknon), suggesting these are settled sea nomads
- ❖ This suggests these are local adaptations to a foraging lifestyle and not relics of some ancient nomadic culture spread over the region

SE Asian sea nomads



Adapted from a map by Torben Venning

Sama Bajaw In Sabah



ex Torben Venning

Sama Bajaw In Ternate



Orang Laut

Riau islands



Moken

‘Sea gypsies’



Moken

‘Sea gypsies’



Moklen



Urak Lawoi



Defining sea nomads IV

- ❖ A question which is not fully answered is whether we should regard the highly mobile trading peoples operating on the southeast China seacoast as nomads
- ❖ Peoples such as the Hakka definitely don't follow the fish, but some do live on their boats and pursue a trading lifestyle up to the present
- ❖ Hakka traders operating in the shadow of the skyscrapers of Xiamen



River nomads in Kalimantan?

- ❖ And.. there are river nomads, operating on the great inland rivers of Borneo.
- ❖ At Banjarmasin, many of these permanent houseboats carry trade goods up and down the river
- ❖ Something clearly connected with the presence of Barito languages in Madagascar..



River nomads at Banjarmasin



Makassar

- ❖ Makassar remains an important focus for shipbuilding, refitting, trading
- ❖ The old port and the shipyards further east are an important ethnographic source, still little-exploited

Ports and shipyards at Makassar



Houseboat at Makassar



Drying fish in Makassar



Are the Vezo Bajaw?

- ❖ In the southwest of Madagascar, the Vezo people are semi-nomadic fishermen who have a lifestyle similar to many Bajaw groups
- ❖ They set off for long term circuits of the reefs, setting up camp on sandbanks, living on boats and exchanging fish for staples
- ❖ Interestingly, their fishing terms are quite different from standard Malagasy
- ❖ Is it possible these represent a distinct migration from the Bajaw area who have brought the subsistence strategy and then have switched to Malagasy (like other parallel migrations to Madagascar)
- ❖ The case is open

Are the Vezo Bajaw?



Vezo fish smoking



The origins of sea nomadism

- The type of sea-nomads present in SE Asia today are almost certainly linked with the rise of trading states, which probably do not go further back than two millennia.
- Sea-nomads depend on such states as buyers for fish and other aquatic resources as well as carrying their trade goods from one region to another.
- And that this in turn is a result of the South Asian impact in Island SE Asia
- The first tentative evidence for this is around 200 BC but things probably really get going around 200 AD, if we accept Chinese diplomatic reports, describing the polities of ISEA
- And the rise of Srivijaya (? 6-7th century AD) presumably provided much greater stimulus

How should we look for archaeological evidence?

- ❖ In this way the nomads are able to acquire key technologies, including iron tools and improved boatbuilding techniques to extend the range and diversity of their commercial activities.
- ❖ We can refine techniques for seeking direct archaeological traces of sea-nomads but it is also crucial to build their input into models of the rise of complex polities.
- **The first step** has to be for archaeologists to accept that the absence of evidence to date is a problem; that this is a well-documented synchronic subsistence strategy in the present and therefore its history needs to be uncovered
- A more in-depth study of sea nomad material culture is essential
- But clearly, distinctive items such as the pottery stoves used on beaches for smoking fish would an indicator

How should we look for archaeological evidence?

- As general evidence for exchange of marine products for other trade goods
- Sea nomads were not necessarily in the same places in the past
- Can we look for linguistic clues? Do the different trading communities share common lexical items for fish, stoves or other items
- This is still to be discovered

THANKS

❖ To fishing families around SE Asia who allowed me to take pictures of their lifestyle

