

The linguistic background to SE Asian sea nomadism



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ABSTRACT

Sea nomadism is a unique and characteristic subsistence strategy in island SE Asia reflecting a confluence of sophisticated maritime technology and resources scattered across thousands of islands. The languages of the sea nomads in Island SE Asia fall into three major groups, Samalic or Sama-Bajaw, the Orang Laut of Eastern Sumatra and the Riau islands, and the Moken/Moklen complex of the Andaman Sea, west of Thailand and Myanmar. All of these are Austronesian, the great phylum of languages which originated in Taiwan more than five thousand years ago. Less well understood are the river nomads of Borneo and the 'sea peoples' of the China coast, although the Borneo peoples spring from the same upsurge of mercantile innovation as their seagoing cousins. However, the Chinese groups seem to have limited interchange with the ISEA networks and presumably have a quite different origin. Today they speak no unusual languages, but the antiquity of cross-straits interaction argues that their roots may well lie far in the past.

The overall conclusion is that while archaeology suggests some type of maritime nomadic lifestyle may well reach back to deep antiquity in ISEA, language data shows that its modern forms are unlikely to be more than 2000 years old (in the case of Moken/Moklen) and more recent still for the other groups. This in turn suggests a replacement model; old networks were erased by the growth of new and similarly earlier sea nomads assimilated by more competitive newcomers.

Keywords: Island SE Asia; sea nomads; languages; Sama-Bajaw; Moken/Moklen

ACRONYMS

ACD	Austronesian Comparative Dictionary
BP	Before present
PAN	Proto-Austronesian
PMP	Proto-Malayopolynesian
SCSIS	South China Sea Interaction Sphere

1. Introduction

Sea nomadism is a unique and characteristic subsistence strategy in island SE Asia reflecting a confluence of sophisticated maritime technology and resources scattered across thousands of islands (Yesner 1980). Nomadic pastoralism on land is a response to patchy and ephemeral grazing resources. In the same way, sea nomads can respond to mobile maritime resources and a changing market and exchange environment, which requires the flexible transport of goods. We do not know if the practice of sea nomadism in ISEA evolved once or many times. There are archaeological reasons for thinking inter-island movement of resources may be as old as 20,000 years in the region in the Talaud islands (Ono et al. 2010). Blench (in press a) has termed this the ‘South China Sea Interaction Sphere’ to try and capture the intensity of commercial interaction over millennia and the exchange of goods, languages and cultural practice (see also Acri et al. 2017). One of the clues to the origins of sea nomad populations in the Southeast Asian region are the languages they speak.

This paper¹ presents an overview of what is known about these languages and what historical conclusions can be drawn from this. It focuses in particular on Samalic, both because it is the most widespread and internally ramified of the three major subsets, and because it is implicated in one of the most striking migrations of ISEA peoples, the colonisation of Madagascar. Although there is now a fair amount of descriptive material on the languages of sea nomads, so far there has been only very limited ethnolinguistic analysis. For example, we do not know whether some of the specialised technologies, such as techniques of fishing and fish preservation, have distinctive terminologies, or simply borrow from major languages.

Two further issues are highlighted in the classification of maritime peoples; the inclusion of the Tanka, and other coastal traders of the China coast, and the inland river traders who traverse the river systems in the interior of Borneo. The paper also suggests that the Vezo, a people on the coast of southern Madagascar who practice extensive maritime migrations may well result from a separate migration, distinct from the Barito/Malay ships which are the principal source of the dominant Malagasy language. Whatever the antiquity of the subsistence practices, sea peoples languages turn out to be in a close relationship with dominant regional languages such as Malay and not marginal languages with substrates of hard to identify lexicon (although Duano constitutes a partial exception). This suggests that the present groups evolved in symbiosis with the great trading cultures of the region.

2. The broad picture

The languages of the sea nomads in Island SE Asia fall into three major groups, Samalic or Sama-Bajaw, the Orang Laut between Eastern Sumatra and the Riau islands, and the Moken/Moklen complex of the Andaman Sea, west of Thailand and Myanmar (Sopher 1977). All of these are Austronesian, the great phylum of languages which originated in Taiwan more than five thousand years ago. Map 1 shows the approximate distribution of these groups, with the caveat that highly mobile people can touch many islands outside their normal zone of migration. The possibility that the Vezo people of Southern Madagascar should be included in this grouping is envisaged in the map. Table 1 summarises the linguistic affiliations of sea nomad populations;

Table 1. Linguistic affiliation of sea nomad populations

Category	Location	Linguistic Classification
Samalic	Scattered from Sulu throughout Eastern Indonesia	Subgroup of Greater Barito
Orang Laut	Between the Riau islands and the East Coast of Sumatra	Malay dialects
Urak Lawoi	Andaman Sea, West of Thailand	Malay dialect
Moken/Moklen	Andaman Sea, West of Thailand	Malayic or parallel branch
Vezo	Southern Madagascar	Malagasy, part of Greater Barito

¹ Some sections of this paper were presented in Paris at EURASEAA XV, in July 2015, but for the most part it is newly written for this book. Particular thanks to Karl Anderbeck for reading the first version and saving me from a major error.

Map 1. Distribution of languages spoken by SE Asian sea nomads



All these languages are Austronesian and part of the broad category of Western Malayo-Polynesian, which includes most of island SE Asia. Malayo-Polynesian is a somewhat unsatisfactory subgroup, as it has not proven possible to subgroup it further as it divides into a complex parallel array. This may reflect a pattern of ‘explosive dispersal’ of early Austronesian languages out of Taiwan something which is also reflected in the archaeology (Spriggs 2011; Blench 2012, 2016).

Malayic, however, is a much smaller grouping, consisting of languages which spread out with the Malay trading empire, generally identified with the expansion of Srivijaya in the 6-7th century (cf. Adelaar 1992 for a linguistic characterisation). The causes of this expansion remain controversial, but increased access to improved maritime technology was clearly a factor. The fact that the languages of sea nomads are all associated with a relatively small area of ISEA, SE Borneo and adjacent waters, is clearly significant.

3. The Samalic [Bajau] languages

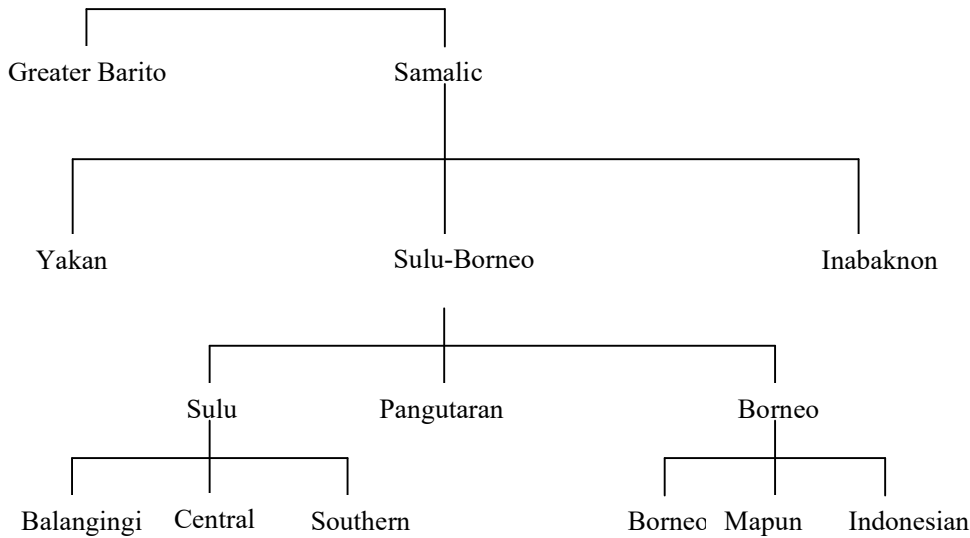
The Samal [Sama-Bajaw] peoples speak a cluster of related Austronesian languages, now generally referred to as Samalic. Although the majority of these are in the Philippines, they are not related to the Philippines group of Austronesian but to Borneo languages, in particular the Greater Barito group (Blust 2005). Figure 1 shows a schematic tree of the relationships between the Samalic languages. However, the Sama Bajaw peoples are highly fragmented and those in the sea between NE Borneo and the Sulu archipelago speak languages related in complex, overlapping chains (Mead & Lee 2007).

Their languages are relatively well described with overviews in Pallesen (1985), Mead & Lee (2007) and detailed studies of individual languages such as Verheijen (1986) [Sunda dialects], Akamine (2003) [Sinama], Collins & Collins (2001) [Mapun]. Behrens (2002) [Yakan], Brainard & Behrens (2002) [Yakan], Miller (2007) [West Coast Bajaw]. The Sama-Bajaw are well-known for their lengthy epic recitations, and these have been described in some detail in Zacot (1978) and Nuraini-Grangé (2008). Ethnographic descriptions are also quite abundant, although not all are very reliable (see Nimmo 1972; Sather 1975; Allison 1984).

Despite their strong presence in the Philippines today, the affiliation of Samalic strongly points to a Borneo origin. Pallesen (1985) argued that their genesis may have been as late as the fifteenth century, although the internal diversity of Samalic seems to point to an earlier date. It is striking that some Samalic languages are

spoken by farming populations in the Philippines (Yakan, Mapun and Inabaknon) and it is likely these are settled sea nomads rather than indigenous farmers whose relatives took to the ocean.

Figure 1. The Samalic languages



Source: Adapted from Pallesen (1985)

It is likely that the genesis of the Samalic peoples is connected with the growth of maritime activity in the area between SE Kalimantan and Sulawesi and thus with the rise of Srivijaya. We know that the voyages which crossed the Indian Ocean and brought about the genesis of Malagasy originated in the same area, and it is likely that the explosion of Samalic reflects the spread of new types of boats, but also the importance of ‘feeder’ trade, pioneering new sea-routes, discovering sources of raw materials and manufactured goods and building links with fragmented populations around the shores of the numerous islands. The Samal, and elsewhere the Orang Laut, functioned as the antennae of the great Malay trading ships and the two cultures existed in symbiosis. So while it is likely that some form of maritime nomadism existed prior to the rise of the Samal, it was wholly displaced by a modernised combination of foraging and trading over the last millennium.

4. The Orang Laut languages

The Orang Laut languages are spoken in the region between the Riau islands and the west coast of Myanmar, taking in the diverse communities on islands south of Singapore (Map 1). Although the first record of one of these languages was published in the early nineteenth century (Smith et al. 1814), the literature is extremely patchy. Skeat & Ridley (1900) represent a first description of these languages, while Anderbeck (2012) represents a comprehensive overview

of the materials on the languages of the ‘Sea Tribes’. He divides these languages into four major subgroups, broadly defined by geography, Kedah, Duano, Riau and Sekak. His conclusion is that all the records of the Orang Laut languages form a defined subgroup of Malayic, except Duano, which has some

Photo 1. Orang Laut settlement in Riau



Source: CC

intriguing anomalies.

The Riau Orang Laut/Orang Sawang live on the Riau islands and across to the Straits of Singapore and the east Coast of Sumatra (Photo 1). They have been divided into as many as forty-five groups (Chou 2010: 26) although this is an ethnographic classification, not a linguistic one. The review by Anderbeck (2012) of the scattered linguistic data concludes that the Riau speak a Malayic language, very close to Peninsular Malay and that there is no evidence of a substrate. It is therefore most likely that the Riau developed together with the rise of the Malay trading empire and do not inherit anything from a prior sea nomad culture.

Kedah is the dialect cluster spoken by the Urak Lawoi who live south of the Moken/Moklen and are often grouped with them. However, linguistic data indicate their genetic affiliation with Malayic and show little influence from Austroasiatic (Saengmani 1979; Hogan & Pattemore 1988; Robert 2010). Ethnographically, they have been little studied and the most lengthy piece is hardly more than an account of a visit by tourists (Granbom 2007).

The Duano language [dup] is spoken by approximately 17,500 people, mostly in the coastal region of Riau and Jambi Provinces of Sumatra, but a few on the opposite coast in Johor, Malaysia. Other names for the Duano include *Orang Kuala* (people of the estuaries) and *Desin Dola* ('people of the sea'). The first record of Duano is Schot (1884) and a short unidentified wordlist is included in Skeat & Blagden (1906). Kähler (1946a,b) recorded some hard to interpret material from Rangsang Island. Seidlitz (2007) wrote a phonology of Duano based on material from both sides of the straits. Yusof (2006) [not seen] is an account of language obsolescence among the Duano and Kanak. Sandbukt (1983) is one of the few ethnographic studies of the Duano, focusing on the adaptation of subsistence fisheries to a market economy. Anderbeck (2012) has reviewed this literature and points to the exceptional nature of Duano, which does not share a number of sound changes characteristic of Malayic, as well as having an exceptional proportion of its lexicon from an unknown source. A possible hypothesis to explain this is that the Duano were originally one of the Orang Asli groups of the region, speaking either a now lost but archaic Austronesian language or something else perhaps affiliated to Aslian. Their language has gradually become relexified from Malay, but retains some of its previous phonology and lexicon.

Anderbeck (2012: 274) also highlights the intriguing problem of Jakun, a Malayic language spoken by one of the Orang Asli groups in Johor. The Jakun are not sea people, at least today, but their language shows common innovations with some of the Orang Laut lects. Earlier records of Jakun (in Skeat & Blagden 1906) show a much greater admixture of Aslian (i.e. Austroasiatic) lexicon and it seems credible that the Jakun were originally an Aslian group which has become progressively Malayised over the centuries.

The Sekak group of dialects include those spoken on the islands of Bangka and Belitung [=Loncong] (Nothofer 1994). Of these, the Bangka language is much better described than Loncong. Bangka is the subject of several ethnographic publications, including Anonymous (1862), Hagen (1908), Smedal (1989) and Chou (2003) as well as two linguistic studies (Kähler 1960, 1966; Smedal 1987). By contrast Loncong features only in two much older Dutch-language publications (Ecoma Verstege 1877; Riedel 1881). The Sekak group is severely endangered, with as few as 600 speakers, according to Anderbeck (2012).

5. The Andaman Sea languages

Two languages are spoken by the maritime peoples of the Andaman Sea, the 'Sea Gypsies'. Moklen and Moken are related to one another and ultimately to the Malayic group, either as a member of it or as a parallel branch of Western Malayopolynesian (Chantanakomes 1980; Makboon 1981; Larish 1999, 2005). The Moken/Moklen have been the subject of considerable ethnographic research (Anderson 1890; White 1922; Ivanoff 1997; Larish 1999). Although their lives are based on seagoing vessels, the Moken/Moklen are not wide-ranging traders like the other groups described here, but are confined to a relatively small area, exchanging maritime produce for necessary items¹. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly, the Moklen are sedentary seashore dwellers and land-based hunting plays a significant role in their subsistence.

Chinese records frequently refer to the *Kunlun* 崑崙, the ‘sea people’ found around ISEA. The problem is that these references are highly inconsistent and are often mixed with descriptions of Africans brought to East Asia via the slave trade (Wilensky 2002). References to dark skins may simply reflect weather exposure, but it is worth noting that the negritos would have been far more numerous in the Malay peninsula at this period and may well have also played a role in the sea trade (see discussion of the Jakun, above). Nonetheless, as Wheatley (1961: 283) observes, *Kunlun* is probably best understood as ‘a succession of peoples ranging from Malays around the coasts of the Peninsula to Chams along the shores of Indo-China’.

Estimating the time at which the Moken/Moklen broke from the Malayic stem is far more difficult and Larish (1999) has a lengthy discussion of this issue. He points out that Moken/Moklen has been heavily influenced by Austroasiatic languages (and more recently, Thai). Moken/Moklen has many changes in common with the Chamic languages of Vietnam and that this may point to the split of these two languages from Chamic at around the same period, namely some 2000 years ago. Indeed he goes further to suggest that the Cham-speakers themselves were originally sea-nomads who then settled. This is not impossible, but it would be entirely speculative. The Moken/Moklen split Larish assigns to a much later period, somewhere after the thirteenth century.

Another aspect of understanding the relationship of Moklen/Moken to the broader Austronesian world is their technical vocabulary. The external cognates of Moklen/Moken in relation to fisheries present an intriguing contrast. Because these groups have moved into an entirely new zoogeographic area, the fish fauna is largely unfamiliar or only related to Indo-Pacific species at the genus level. Larish (1999) has a very extensive dataset on both fish names and other fisheries terminology such as traps. Curiously, Blust has not incorporated the Moken/Moklen data into the Austronesian Comparative Dictionary² (ACD) comparative sets, despite the thesis in which they are presented being compiled in Hawai’i.

An exploration of this terminology shows that very few fish names are retained from PMP, whereas many are borrowed from Thai or calqued (i.e. the Thai name is literally translated in Moken/Moklen). The following tables take the Moken/Moklen names given in Larish (1999) and compare them with the reconstructions in the ACD and other data, where available. One of the rare fish names that reflects PMP is the name for the sailfish (*Istiophorus* spp.) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Sailfish in Moklen/Moken

Language	Form	Gloss
Moklen/Moken	*l/nayan	<i>Istiophorus gradius</i>
PAN	*layaR	sail
Fijian	saku layar	sawfish

This word has a rather tangled history, since the PAN reconstruction is for ‘sail’ and yet the forms for ‘sailfish, swordfish’ seem to reflect a prior form such as the Fijian, which by the later period is applied to any large predatory species, including the swordfish.

Another intriguing case is the big-eye scad, *Selar crumenophthalmus*, which is found throughout the region. The ACD gives this as PMP although only three forms support a reconstruction at this level. However, the Thai forms also resemble the Austronesian closely, and are etymologisable, suggesting this may be an early borrowing *into* Austronesian. The Moklen/Moken is probably not a direct cognate of the Austronesian forms but a calque from the Thai (Table 3).

² <http://www.trussel2.com/acd>

Table 3. Big-eye scad in Moklen/Moken

Language	Form	Gloss
Moklen/Moken	ma ³² .ta:ʔ ⁴⁴ ʔa ³² daʔ ³⁴³	big-eye scad lit. ‘eye big’
PMP	*qatulay	<i>Trachurops crumenophthalmus</i>
Samal	tulay	<i>Selar crumenophthalmus</i>
Thai	pla ta: lɔ:	big-eye scad lit. ‘fish eye big’

By contrast, Table 4, Table 5, Table 6 and Table 7 show the Moklen/Moken reflexes of mainstream Austronesian lexemes to do with the sea and fisheries, which seem to be inherited entirely regularly.

Table 4. Lake → ocean in Moklen

Language	Form	Gloss
Moklen	taʔaw	ocean
PAN	*danaw	lake
PMP	*danaw	lake
Proto-Chamic	*danau	lake
Malay	danaw	lake

Table 5. Gill-net in Moklen/Moken

Language	Form	Gloss
Moklen/Moken	*pukat	gill net
PMP	*puket	dragnet
Malay	*pukat	drift-net

Table 6. Hearth on boat in Moklen/Moken

Language	Form	Gloss
Moklen/Moken	*dapan	fireplace in boat
PMP	*dapuR	hearth
Malay	dapur	kitchen
Acehnese	dapu	kitchen

Table 7. Fishtrap in Moklen/Moken

Language	Form	Gloss
Moklen/Moken	*bubəy	fishtrap
PAN	*bubu	conical bamboo basket trap for fish
Kavalan	bubu	fishtrap
Malay	bubu	fishtrap

Clues to some of the trade goods the Moklen/Moken may have handled are to be found in words such ‘bracelet/brass’ (Table 8).

Table 8. ‘Bracelet’ in Moklen/Moken

Language	Form	Gloss
Moklen/Moken	*gila:ŋ/ŋila:ŋ	bracelet/brass
Acehnese	gelen	bracelet
Proto-Chamic	*ko:ŋ	bracelet/brass/copper
Proto-Katuic	*kəŋ	bracelet ~ brass
Proto-Bahnaric	*kəŋ	bracelet

This word has no reconstruction in Austronesian and it appears these brass goods must have been traded in the region between the Austroasiatic speakers on the mainland, the Chamic speakers and eventually the Moklen/Moken.

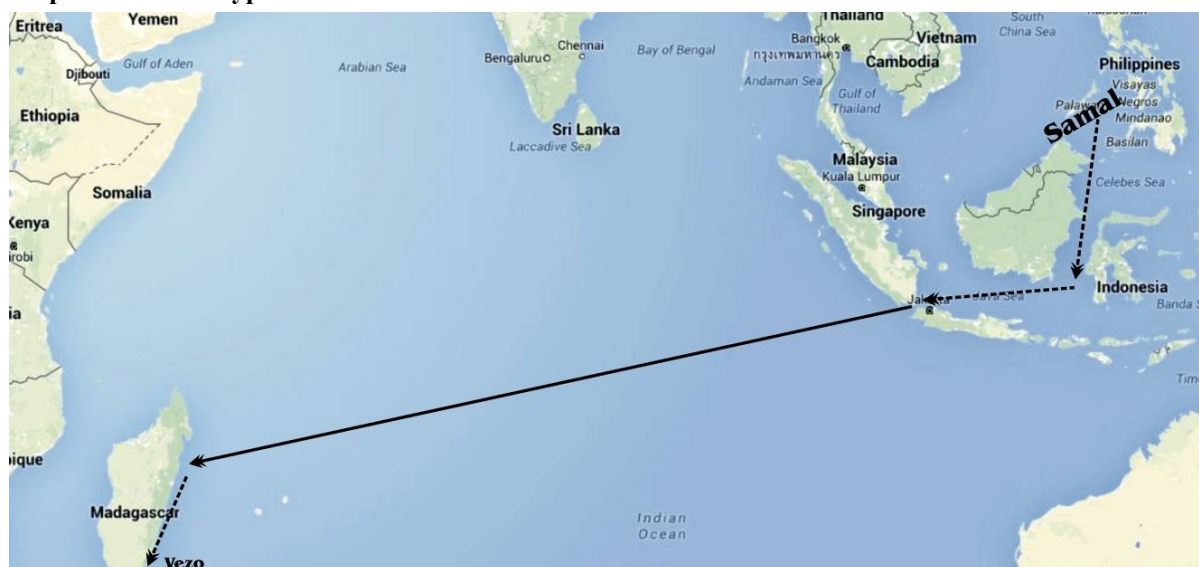
6. The Vezo hypothesis

The Vezo people live on the south coast of Madagascar and practice seasonal migration in search of fish (Koechlin 1975; Astuti 1995; Sanders 2005). The Vezo spend many months a year at sea, living on sandbanks and fishing. Dahl (1988) argued for a link between the Vezo and the Sama-Bajaw languages, indeed that the name ‘Vezo’ was a phonological transformation of Bajaw. There is no direct linguistic evidence in basic vocabulary for a connection between Vezo and Bajaw. However, it is very striking that Vezo marine fish names are very different from other Malagasy names, although they resemble those of their neighbours, the Antanosy (Bauchot & Bianchi 1984; Poirot 2011). Given that Vezo is generally close linguistically to Merina, this is quite surprising and may point to a distinct origin for their fishing culture. To approach this, Table 9 presents a brief list of Vezo fish names and their likely origins in ISEA languages.

Table 9. Vezo fish names and their corresponding Malayopolynesian etymologies

Vezo	English	Latin	Commentary
akio foty	requiem shark	<i>Carcharhinus</i> sp.	Almost all Austronesian languages have lost the initial velar, which is retained only in Agutaynen <i>kiw</i> , Komodo <i>kiu</i>
aloalo	barracuda	<i>Sphyraena barracuda</i>	Also other <i>Sphyraena</i> spp. The reduplicated form could be a direct Malay borrowing: ikan alu alu <i>Sphyraena obtusata</i> (same species is known to the Vezo)
fay andema	stingray	<i>Dasyatis</i> sp.	cf. Borneo languages, e.g. Bintulu, Melanau <i>pai</i> <WMP * <i>pariH</i>
gepo	herring	<i>Herklotsichthys</i> sp.	cf. Gela <i>kepo</i> , <i>Herklotsichthys quadrimaculatus</i> , fourspot herring. Ross et al. (2011) reconstruct POc * <i>kep^wa</i> Clupeidae, but this suggests that the form goes higher in the Austronesian tree and this species is the referent.
hatoka tendro	torpedo scad	<i>Megalaspis cordyla</i>	cf. PMP * <i>qatulay</i> a fish: the big-eyed scad <i>Trachurops crumenophthalmus</i> Samal <i>tulay</i> scad-like fish: <i>Selar crumenophthalmus</i> . This is one of the rare examples, where Vezo connects directly with Samal. Other cognates are (curiously) in Oceanic and Chamorro
lamera, lamahira	moray eel	<i>Echidna</i> spp.	POc has * <i>maraya</i> for ‘eel’ but typical attestations are Raga <i>marea</i> (generic eel). However, Micronesian languages such as Carolinian (<i>li</i>) <i>mware-mwar</i> ‘white or yellow eel with black banded stripes’ have a <i>li-</i> prefix denoting (at least in Puluwatese ‘bird, fish, eels’. Could the <i>la-</i> prefixes in Vezo reflect this?
lovo hara	marbled grouper	<i>Epinephelus polypeakadion</i>	cf. Longgu <i>yulava</i> ‘ <i>Cephalopholis argus</i> , peacock rock cod’ Teop <i>rovu</i> ‘rock cod generic’
talantala	small-spotted pompano	<i>Trachinotus bailloni</i>	? pompanos are usually <i>Alectis</i> spp. <i>talatala</i> is usually for the queenfish, <i>Scomberoides commersonianus</i> or the needlescaled queenfish, <i>Scomberoides tol</i> . ACD has PWMP * <i>talantalanj</i> for horse mackerel although given the vague definition in the sources, this could be a wide variety of spp.
varavara	blackspot snapper	<i>Lutjanus fulviflammus</i>	Hebert (1964) notes the Vezo name and compares with Malay <i>babaran</i> , <i>poisson à ecailles</i> .
vavana	sawfish		cf. Malay <i>bambanan</i> .
voavoa	Indo-pacific tarpon	<i>Megalops cyprinoides</i>	NB FAO (1984) gives <i>bekapoka</i> . poss. WMP <i>bulanbulan</i> which certainly looks cognate with <i>bokalana</i>

Map 2. The Vezo hypothesis



It certainly would not be unreasonable to imagine the Bajaw, following the route pioneered by the Malay ships, reaching Madagascar independently. However, this hypothesis needs more positive linguistic evidence before it can be accepted uncritically. Map 2 shows a possible route for a Bajaw migration to Madagascar.

7. Should we include river nomads?

Apart from sea nomads, very large islands such as Borneo create opportunities for a comparable lifestyle on inland rivers. At Banjarmasin in SE Borneo, many permanent houseboats carry trade goods up and down the rivers from the coast to the interior (Photo 2). The peoples operating these boats are also from the same ‘Greater Barito’ group as the Samalic languages and the Barito who are the core population of Madagascar. It is likely that this adaptation came about at the same period and for similar reasons as the evolution of the Sama-Bajaw.

Photo 2. River trading boats at Banjarmasin



8. Boat-people along the coast of China

Apart from the sea peoples of ISEA, there have also been coastal fishing and trading groups along the coast of SE China for a long period (Anderson 1972). The best known of these are the Tanka (*Dànjiā* 疍家) now replaced in official sources by *shuǐshàng rén*, 水上人 (‘on-water people’), and the Hoklo (Hok-ló 福佬).

The Tanka today speak Cantonese, but historic sources suggest that they originated among the Mien (Yao), which would account for earlier reports that they spoke a quite different language. The Tanka are distributed across a wide area and are also a recognised minority in Vietnam, where they are called *Dàn*. The Hoklo speak the Hokkien dialect of Min. Both these peoples are very numerous by the standards of ISEA, but the great majority no longer practice a maritime lifestyle. Indeed the Hoklo played a major role in the genesis of the Chinese population of modern-day Taiwan.

There is very little reliable historiography of these peoples, as much of the literature is mixed up with speculation on their relationship with the Ba Yue of Chinese records. Their languages do not provide significant clues today. Nonetheless, a minority still operate from houseboats, and are still fully engaged in a maritime lifestyle in the modern era (Photo 3). Modernised fisheries have largely displaced their role as fishermen, but trading is clearly an effective substitute. To what extent their network was entirely separate from the ISEA sea peoples remains an open question. However, the peopling of Taiwan is clearly associated with a thriving cross-straits traffic in raw materials and an energetic regional network so it would not be unreasonable to push back this type of subsistence to an early period (Blench, in press, b).

Photo 3. Hoklo traders in front of Xiamen



9. Historical interpretation

The first conclusion that can be drawn from this review of the languages of sea nomads of ISEA is that none of them are in any way unusual in terms of genetic affiliation. All the languages are part of mainstream subgroups of Austronesian, Malayic or Greater Barito. This strongly suggests that, unlike marginal foragers in other parts of the world, the evolution of sea-nomad society is tied to historical events over the last two thousand years. How can this be interpreted in the light of long-term archaeological evidence for intensive traffic between islands in the region and regional exchange networks?

The answer may be that technological and mercantile innovation was a force sufficiently powerful to completely replace the more informal, dispersed and linguistically diverse networks that previously existed. We know that Malayic spreads out from Borneo, and that trading networks developed rapidly. It has been suggested above that the Samalic languages reflect an expansion from the same area, probably using the same type of boats and feeding local trade items into the Malay network. This almost certainly was initiated with the growth of the Srivijaya trading empire from the 6-7th century onwards. The evolution of mercantile sea-traders did not end with the Samal. Later groups such as the Buginese and Makassarese of Sulawesi (who probably originate as a distinct identity in the 16th century) also serviced the commercial networks although they remained more obviously land-based.

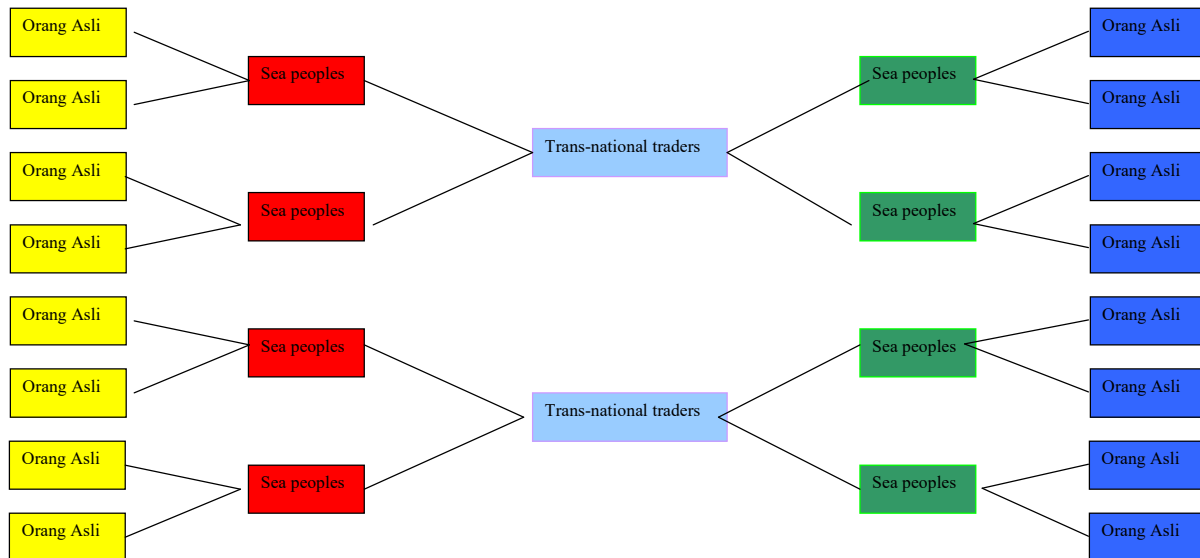
Very intriguing is the possibility that the relationship between the shore hunter-gatherers, the sea nomads and long-distance merchants played a role in the evolution of the trans-Isthmian trade. The movement of Indian Ocean goods to the South China Sea can be shortened considerably by making use of land routes across the isthmus of Kra. Archaeological excavation has focused on the narrowest point, illustrated by the excavations at Khao San Kheo (Bellina & Silapanth 2006; Bellina-Pryce & Silapanth 2006; Bellina-Pryce this volume). However, in a complex region such as this, there would probably many strategies both to cross and circumnavigate the isthmus. Larish (1999) has proposed that the Moken/Moklen evolved as facilitators of the trans-Isthmian trade. He says;

‘Various lines of evidence support the possibility that the Moken/Moklen represent a remnant population of a once larger and more widely distributed -possibly trans-Isthmian- PMM ancestral population. The PMM may have established on the early Peninsular politico-cultural zones... or were

possibly vassals to one of the ethnolinguistic groups that dominated these areas. Most importantly, present-day speakers of Moken and Moklen are found distributed at the coastal endpoints of four separate trans-isthmian routeways.’

The evidence from the Jakun and Duano allow us to expand this hypothesis. Prior to the expansion of Malayic, the region must have been occupied by a complex mosaic of fishing peoples, sea traders and land-based foragers. As the potential for long-distance trade expanded, demand for food and forest products, as well as labour and construction, allowed these groups to develop more specialised and formalised niches. The Orang Asli foragers and fishers supplied the local produce and the Orang Laut facilitated local movement of goods and services, feeding the long-distance trade. The model is schematically represented in Figure 2

Figure 2. Schematic model of trade mosaic in the trans-Isthmian region



Over time, the constant interaction with Malay culture gradually relexified these divergent speech communities until they ‘became’ Malay, with their language only containing scattered pointers to their original speech community.

The peopling of Madagascar also occurs during this significant period, apparently in Malay-captured ships with Barito-speaking crews (Blench 2010). The Malagasy language also contains a significant Sulawesi component (Blench in press b), arguing for interaction across the islands, something which appears to be confirmed in the genetics (Ricaud & Kusuma this volume). The possibility that the Vezo result from an independent migration of a Samalic group using a route already pioneered should be considered.

Less well documented are the river nomads of Borneo and the ‘sea peoples’ of the China coast. There is reason to believe the Borneo peoples spring from the same upsurge of mercantile innovation as their seagoing cousins. However, the Chinese groups seem to have limited interaction with the ISEA networks and presumably have a quite different origin. Today they speak no unusual languages, but the antiquity of cross-straits interaction argues that their roots may well lie far in the past.

The overall conclusion is that while archaeology suggests some type of maritime nomadic lifestyle may well reach back to deep antiquity in ISEA, language data shows that its modern forms are unlikely to be more than 2000 years old (in the case of Moken/Moklen) and more recent still for the other groups. This in turn suggests a replacement model; old networks were erased by the growth of new and similarly earlier sea nomads assimilated by more competitive newcomers.

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