

Chasing Waves: Reflections on Southeast Asian Fisherfolk

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The act of walking affirms, suspects, tries out transgresses, and respects the trajectories it speaks.

— Michel de Certeau (1984)

From 2014 to 2018, I travelled to the ten countries of ASEAN, and one of the things I learned is to accept a unified ASEAN heritage, including all of its cultural and political disparities. I remember the narratives from ordinary, marginalized people across the region, with whom I prefer interacting—transportation drivers, agricultural workers, fisherfolk, and other blue-collared workers—because I learn much from them. It's a sentiment akin to that of Randy David, who, in his book, *Understanding Philippine Society, Culture, and Politics* (2016), highlights the value of cab drivers. Familiar with the geographical space and cognizant of their society's surroundings (David 2016), drivers serve as gatekeepers to tourists and newcomers alike, the first to welcome, introduce, and converse with them.

Drawn from my fascination with boating, sailing, and maritime-related activities, I had numerous encounters with fisherfolks in Southeast Asia. It was an essential part of my adventures. As part of their Austronesian heritage, Southeast Asians explored, and have a special relationship with, the vast waters of the region. Rivers played a crucial role as the cradles of

Southeast Asian civilizations, and I traveled to many of them: the Chao Phraya in Bangkok, Thailand (2017); the Mekong and Nam Khan, both situated in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR (2017); and the Irrawaddy in Bagan, Myanmar (2018). The largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia is Tonle Sap, located in Siem Reap, Cambodia, which I visited in 2017; in the same year, I saw the Mui Ne Harbor in Vietnam, which offers a picturesque view of the South China Sea.

My travels also took me to Borneo Island; the Kinabatangan River (Sungai Kinabatangan) situated in Sandakan, Malaysia (2016); and the Floating Village of Kampong Ayer, Brunei Darussalam (2016). I also met some fisherfolk under the Suramadu Bridge, the bridge that connects Surabaya in Eastern Java and Bangkalan, Madura in Indonesia (2018). My fluvial, marine, and lentic sojourns also brought me to the Inle Lake in Myanmar; Kampong Ayer in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei; and the Mui Ne Bay in Vietnam.

Intha Fisherfolk of Myanmar

Christmas season had just ended in 2018 when I reached Lake Inle, located in the Taunggyi district of Shan province in the northern part of Myanmar. Culturally isolated and distinct from the southern part of the country, the inhabitants of Shan describe their ethnocultural boundary as *myelat* (which literally means “unoccupied land” or “middle earth” in Burmese); it is the transitional region between the Burman lowlands and the Shan highlands (Douglas 2013). Before 1962, the Shan region still recognized its indigenous political system called *saophas* (*chao pha*) and a political hierarchy ruled by traditional kings or *sawbwas* (Douglas 2013).

Myanmar is inhabited by diverse minority groups: Pa’O (Taungthu or Kula), Danu, Taungyo, and Intha, and the Inle region serves as a home to a number of them, with the Inle Lake—Myanmar’s second-largest—as their primary source of livelihood, mainly through fishing and trade.

The Intha, the first indigenous group I encountered, are unique because of their distinct fishing position. Intha fishers carefully row while standing upright on the edge of the boat. This unusual, remarkable method helps them maintain their balance and operate one's boat without using a conventional paddle. Moreover, the technique allows them to determine the precise water depth and avoid disturbing marine life, helping them catch fish relatively easier.

It is customary for the Intha fisherfolk to pass on their skills and knowledge to their sons. Notably, I asked one of the fisherfolks at what age they usually start teaching their children how to fish. According to them, training begins in the early teen years (13 to 15 years), and retire anytime between the ages of 60 and 70, depending on their physical condition. Moreover, training entails making different types of their own fishing gear. Some of these include *sawong*, a cone-shaped net made of bamboo; *tar pite*, a kind of gill net; and *meyar tan*, the bait, which is commonly shrimp. Their usual catch are the Mozambique tilapia (*Oreochromis mossambicus*), carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), and the *ngappi* fish, which is processed to make *buro* (fermented paste), similar to *alamang* (shrimp paste), a popular condiment in the Philippines.

Further, the Inle Lake also serves as the home of the Padaung or Kayan Lahwi group. The Padaung are known for their women who, from childhood to old age, wear a brass coil neck ornament that elongates their necks. This practice is drawn from an old tradition to protect Padaung women from rival indigenous groups (Korzhev and Kovalenko 2013). Their primary sources of livelihood are weaving, silversmithing, and lotus silk production.

Fisherfolk in Brunei's Floating Village

My adventure in Kampong Ayer, a well-known "floating village" in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, was also noteworthy. Populated by thousands of Bruneians, Kampong Ayer is considered the largest floating village in

the world. It serves as the central settlement among its fisherfolk and their households (Figure 1). The Italian explorer, Antonio Pigafetta, acclaimed the village as the “Venice of the East” because it resembled Italy’s “floating city.” The *kampung* or *pangampung*—a generic term for a Muslim village or community—is valued. It once served as a fortress, and helped protect military equipment such as the *lantaka* (bamboo cannon) and other portable cannons (Veneracion 1997).



Figure 1. The Kampong Ayer in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei viewed from Penambang (2016)

I was able to explore the village by riding a water taxi locally called *penambang*. It provides access to ecotourism sites sheltering Brunei’s renowned endemic flora and fauna. I was remarkably captivated when I had an up-close encounter with a proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*), a famous arboreal primate species distinguished by its long nose. It can only be found in the jungles of Borneo Island (National Geographic n.d).

My Kampong Ayer journey took two days and allowed me to interact with local fisherfolk. Because it is near the sea, the community relied on fishing for their main livelihood. As I established some rapport, I was given the opportunity to accompany them in one of their fishing trips. I primarily

observed their fishing techniques and gear, such as the *lantaw*, a type of net. They were able to catch various aquatic species that are also found in the Philippine seas. Surprisingly, Brunei's local terms for these fish are strikingly similar to the Philippines. Some examples are *tamban* (*Clupea*), *tilapia* (*Oreochromis niloticus*), and *rumahan* or *alumahan* (*Rastrelliger kanagurta*) in Tagalog. However, not all Kampong Ayer folks own a fishing boat, so some of them catch crustaceans (e.g., crabs) through a method using a *bintung*, a cage or trap built from bamboo.

During my brief stay, I also got a glimpse of their socioeconomic realities. Currently, Kampong Ayer fisherfolk and their families face a worsening livelihood because of the decreasing daily catch, all while enduring back-breaking working hours. Such circumstances compelled the government to import fish from other countries, such as Malaysia. On the other hand, local fishers have courageously continued to sail and fish in the South China Sea as an act of defiance, notwithstanding the forceful possession and expansion of the People's Republic of China (cf. Roach 2014; Tomacruz 2020).

Mui Ne Bay Fisherfolk of Southern Vietnam

Finally, I also visited Southern Vietnam's Binh Tuan province, the home of the Mui Ne fisherfolk. Just like Filipinos living next to vast bodies of water, Mui Ne relies heavily on marine resources from the South China Sea. Spending four days in the province, I learned that they prefer to fish at night because they can avoid strong and huge waves common during the day. I also noticed that their small, colorful, circular-shaped boats are comparable to the *tataya*, the paddling boats of the Mataw, the Ivatan fisherfolk in Batanes. *Tataya* is primarily used for catching the aloof *arayu*, commonly identified as *dorado* (Mangahas 1998) or *mahi-mahi* (*Coryphaena hippurus*) to outsiders. While the Mui Ne fisherfolks returned at dawn with their bountiful catch, I strolled through the beach and carefully watched them return to land and felt like I never left the Philippines.

Waiting along the shores for the fisherman were, I assume at least, the wives or children who help sort the catch, which consists of *dilis* or anchovies (*Engraulidae*), *galunggong* or mackerel scad (*Decapterus macarellus*), *hasa-hasa* or short mackerel (*Rastrelliger brachysoma*), shrimp (*Caridea*), and scallops (*Pectinidae*). This is strikingly similar to that of the Ivatans' *manala*, the Mataw's helper in carrying the catch at the end of each fishing trip (Mangahas 2009). These helpers are usually female, and wait from midnight until dawn for their fisherfolk to return. Some of these women wore their *non la* (leaf hat), which is similar to the Philippine's *salakot*, as they conversed and sorted the catch, which will be sold from six to ten o'clock in the morning.

On the beach, I had an insightful exchange in English with a young Vietnamese girl, Mina (not her real name), who together with her mother, helped sort her father's catch while the family carried it to market. Mina said that if they could not bring live catch, some of the fish would end up as their food or be processed, dried, and sold.

My trip to Southeast Asia was meaningful. To conclude, I underline the knowledge I learned from the people I spoke with. According to the recently deceased theologian, Jose de Mesa (2017), the relationship between one's own experience and those of others can be mutual. One can learn from others who in turn can learn from oneself, especially when these experiences underlie or resemble each other. This is what I proved in my travels—that Asian identities are intertwined. And I realized why we need to study the social conditions of our fellow Asians—to find the place of the Philippines in Asia, and the importance of Asia in and for the Philippines.

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