

Islamization of the Sama Dilaut in Sabah, Malaysia

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Southeast Asia

The Sama Dilaut (lit: 'maritime' Sama), or the Bajau, are a subgroup of the Sama-speaking people. The Sama Dilaut of Kallong village, Semporna District, Sabah, Malaysia, are migrants from Sallang Island, Sulu Archipelago, the Philippines, approximately 100 km away. Until the 1960s-1970s, the Sama Dilaut in both countries were politically and religiously marginalized. In the late 1990s, the Sama Dilaut of Sallang remained marginalized, disregarded in local politics and considered impious Muslims, even *kafirs* (non-Muslims) despite the fact that most of them professed Islam. The Sama Dilaut in Kallong, however, had improved their status. They occupied village political posts and enjoyed their own district representatives; their status as Muslims was acknowledged by local society. This essay discusses the historical dynamics of the Sama Dilaut's Islamization, the process by which they gained acceptance as Muslims in post-colonial Malaysia. The discussion is based on historical and ethnographic data collected between 1997 and 1999 in Semporna District, Sabah.

By Nagatsu Kazufumi

Following independence, Islam increasingly became a pillar of identity for Malaysia's dominant Melayu population. With Islamic revivalism (*dakwah*) prevailing in the 1970s, the government began to directly involve itself in Islamic affairs; federal and state governments alike strengthened their commitment to the administration of Islam through religious institutions. Islam was thus made official throughout Malaysia.

Sabah gained independence as a state within Malaysia in 1963. Direct government involvement in Islamic affairs here started relatively late. It was not until 1971 that the first official Islamic institution, the Sabah Islamic Council, or MUIS (Majelis Ugama Islam Sabah), was established. Since it emulated the system already organized in Peninsular Malaysia, MUIS was able to institutionalize its administrative system effectively and rapidly. Through its branches it began to administer religious activities at district and village levels. MUIS also assumed the management of religious schools in the state.

Incorporation

At the end of the British colonial period in Semporna, local Muslims attributed Islamic legitimacy to the Sulu Muslim society, heirs to the once flourishing Islamic Sulu Sultanate. Muslim intellectuals of Sulu origin thus held prominence in local religious affairs. This situation changed dramatically in the post-colonial period. In 1960, a native political leader built the first religious school in Semporna. He appointed a Melayu from Negeri Sembilan, a state in peninsular Malaysia, as its headmaster and concurrently as chief imam of the district mosque. In the 1970s, the MUIS branch in Semporna

began to take charge of local Islamic affairs, appointing village religious leaders and integrating them into its religious bureaucracy. In running religious schools, it employed as teachers peninsular Melayu intellectuals and, later, local graduates of the state religious schools.

As Islam became increasingly officialized, Muslim society in Semporna was divorced from the Islamic order of Sulu and incorporated into that of the Malaysian state. Religious professionals of official standing and MUIS came to represent Islamic authority. The district socio-religious order was transformed: a dichotomous notion of Islam prevailed, where anything official was considered more legitimate, anything unofficial less legitimate. Traditional Muslim intellectuals of Sulu origin therefore became less and less influential, unless they were granted official standing.

Becoming Muslim

Until the 1950s, the Sama Dilaut believed in supernatural or ancestral spirits and held rituals for these spirits. In the mid-1950s, a government-appointed district *khatib* (Islamic preacher) invited a Sama Dilaut leader to convert to Islam. The leader accepted the *khatib's* invitation and, together with some Sama Dilaut youngsters, learned the prayers. This marked the beginning of their Islamization. In the late 1960s, he built a simple prayer house, a *surau*, in the village. Meanwhile, the youngsters studied Islam at the *khatib's* house. Although the Sama Dilaut were initially not accepted into the local Muslim community, this changed after the 1970s.

Here it is worth recalling the fate of the Sama Dilaut of Sulu in the Philippines. Although they began to embrace Islam in the 1940s, their neighbours still do not fully recognize them as Muslims. This is largely due to the persistence of the myth that Allah once cursed the Sama Dilaut, thus disqualifying them from the status of 'correct' Muslims. How, then, did the Sama Dilaut of Semporna gain their recognition as Muslims? Three phases of their Islamization – participation in public Islamic activities; acquisition of Muslim

A Sama Dilaut imam delivering *duwa'a*, or voluntary prayer, at the village mosque. He was the first Sama Dilaut in Semporna to study the Qur'an in the 1960s. As a devout imam, he leads religious practices in the village.



community symbols; formation of a new class of Islamic intellectuals – are discussed below.

In the mid-1960s, some Sama Dilaut tried to enrol their children in the religious school. Parents of the other Muslim students expressed strong objections to this, as the above-mentioned myth still prevailed. The peninsular Melayu headmaster rejected their objections, claiming that such a myth was nowhere present in the Qur'an. None of the parents could challenge him on this point. In like manner, the Melayu chief imam criticized local Muslims for their exclusion of the Sama Dilaut from the district mosque. Soon after the Sama Dilaut were admitted into the religious school and the district mosque.

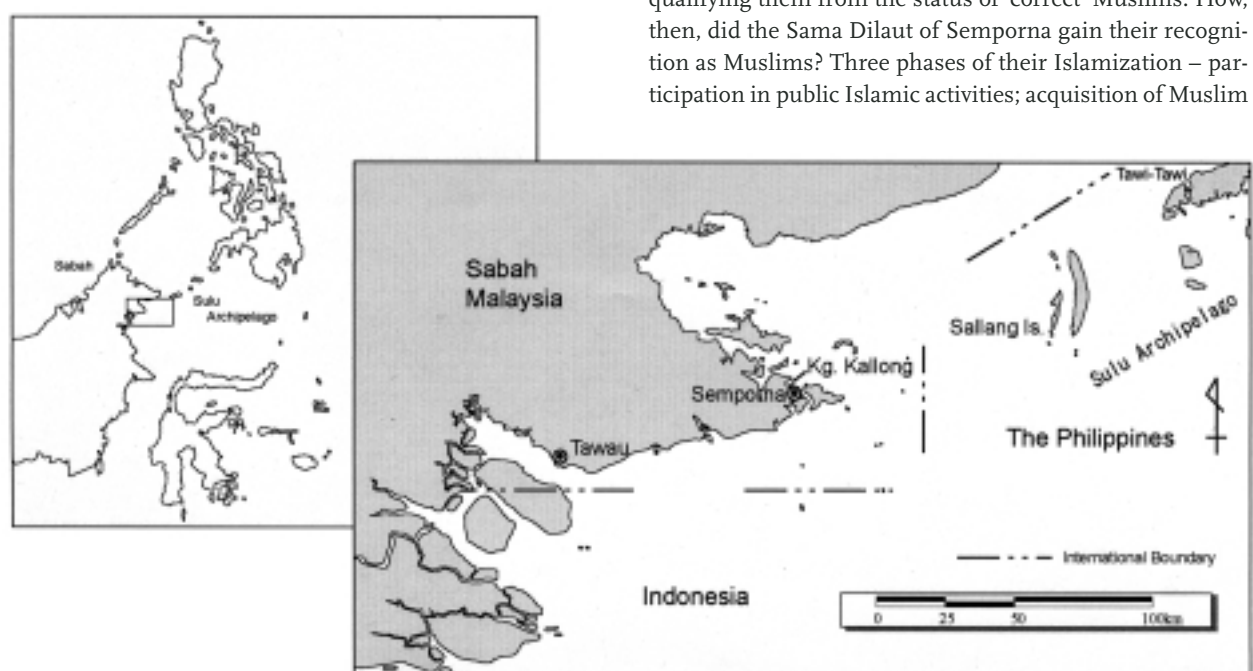
Sama Dilaut youngsters who studied Islam under the *khatib* became imams in Kallong village in the early 1970s. In 1977 MUIS granted three of these imams a letter of authorization, certifying that they were 'correct' Islamic leaders. MUIS also permitted them to hold Friday congregational prayers at the village *surau*. The *surau* was then administratively re-categorized as a mosque. The Sama Dilaut thereby officially acquired symbols of a Muslim community, namely, religious leaders and a mosque.

From the late 1980s onwards, MUIS and its schools employed Sama Dilaut religious high school graduates, who formed a new generation of Islamic intellectuals commonly referred to as *ustaz*. Renowned for their Islamic knowledge, they were invited to deliver religious lectures and became part of a regional intellectual authority on Islam. The *ustazs* ensured the Sama Dilaut's status as Muslims; since they were teaching Islam in the village, the impression prevailed among local Muslims that the Sama Dilaut were practicing Islam 'correctly'.

The Sama Dilaut's Islamization was intrinsically linked to socio-religious change in Semporna, brought on by the 'officialization' of Islam in Malaysia. Essential to their Islamization was the separation of local Muslim society from the conventional Islamic order of Sulu, from which the Sama Dilaut had been stigmatized as outcasts. As official – state sanctioned – religious personnel and institutions came to represent Islamic authority, local Muslims had no choice but to accept as legitimate the Melayu teacher's claims and Islamic symbols that MUIS authorized. As the official-unofficial dichotomy of Islamic legitimacy reformed the district's socio-religious order, the presence of the *ustazs* was proof of the 'correctness' of the Sama Dilaut's religious practice.

Touching upon one final perspective, it is important to add that the Sama Dilaut imams sought the authorization of MUIS as part of their strategy to fight discrimination. Given their intentions, their Islamization was, at least in part, a vehicle for attaining social position within the new socio-religious order of post-colonial Malaysia. ◀

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