

THE BAJAU LAUT OF NORTH BORNEO

The Sea-Gypsies of Semporna Islands

An exhibition of photographs by A Prathap
Special photographer, The Times of India, Chennai

Officiated by YB Datuk Seri Dr. Santhara JP
Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture (Malaysia)

20 May 2022 (Fri) 8.00 pm

curated by Sivarajah Natarajan

Sutra Gallery

12 Persiaran Titiwangsa 3, 53200, Kuala Lumpur



A Point of Balance I | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 31" | 2019 | **RM 3700.00**

The Sea-Gypsies or Bajau Laut are Children of the Sea. Their point of reference has always been the sea. For millennia they scourge the sea edges and understand the nature of the sea. For them, man-made national boundaries have no meaning.

THE BAJAU LAUT OF SEMPORNA ISLANDS

For some of us, owning a home by the sea is something of a dream. For the Bajau Laut or Sea Gypsies who live off the coast of North Borneo, their houses are built right in the sea and the sea has become an integral part of their lives.

The Bajau Laut community follows a seafaring lifestyle throughout their lives, rarely setting foot on land. Very few traditional communities in the world can boast of a profounder connection with the ocean than these nomadic people of the sea. For countless generations, being the true masters of the sea, they roam the waters of the 'Coral Triangle' between Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia. The Bajau Laut live in the Sulu archipelago. Being their own true masters, they are citizens of no country and belong only to the sea.

Today, a sizeable population of approximately 35000 people live in wooden houseboats or stilt huts built atop coral reefs near Semporna. Semporna is located on the southeastern coast of Sabah, Malaysia. Sabah is also known as North Borneo bordering Brunei, Sarawak (Malaysia) and Kalimantan (Indonesia). The Bajau Laut are exceptional free divers as they hunt for fish, lobster, sea cucumber (tripang), sea urchin and other marine life. Many have mastered the art of free diving to incredible depths of well over 20 metres while holding their breath for several minutes.

Following the footsteps of their ancestors, they live solely on what the sea gives them. Apart from being excellent at fishing and diving, they are also skilled at constructing stilt huts and making different types of boats. The materials used to build huts on water and land are mainly sourced from nearby surroundings.

The huts on land and water are known as Kubu-Kubu. There are three types of traditional houses which are built on the boat, land and sea. Lepa is the boat where the Bajau family resides. Small boats used by children to play and navigate between the stilt house to the shore, is called the Gubang. The main boat is not used for fishing, instead, a gutter is used.

During a wedding, a few boats (Lepa) are attached together to get more space to conduct their traditional ceremonies. Women give birth on their boats or in their stilt huts. Children are seen wearing a thread around their neck as a custom, a kind of amulet for protection. To communicate the death of a Bajau man, a white flag will be erected on the front side of the boat and for women, the flag is erected on the rear end of the boat. The Sea Gypsies treat the sick through traditional methods and are not exposed to medical facilities.

The head of the Bajau village is called Panglima. He has the authority to issue an authorised letter "Surat Lepa" which acts as a document for the Bajau community when they navigate on the sea or land.



When these Sea Gypsies spend the occasional night or two on solid ground, they often report of feeling 'landsick'. They prefer the sea and would only go to the shore to conduct their little business. This may include selling their catches, collecting fresh water for drinking, or to buy some essential things as well as to bury the dead. Most would return to their boats by nightfall. Bajau's staple food is Tapioca (called putu) along with grilled or salted fish and sea weed.

Trapped in a time limbo, the Bajau Laut do not know how long they have been around. They keep track of time from the sun and have never found the need to go to school and they do not even know their age. The Bajau Laut have their own language (Bajau language/Sama Bajau) and rarely communicate with outsiders. The Bajau Laut women smear burak, a paste made out of pounded rice, spices and sea weed on their face to protect their skin from the heat of the sun, caused by the reflection of sea. Most of the children have golden hair as they are exposed to sea and sun for a much longer time.

Nowadays, a few NGOs have started to take up the challenge of educating the younger generation of the Bajau Laut. Curious tourists have begun to land up on their doorsteps. In the process, the Bajau Laut children are no longer as timid as before and have learnt to say "Hello" on seeing the tourists.

A Prathap | 2022

Images are shot from the Islands of *Selakan, Bohey Dulang, Tatagan, Omadal and Maiga*.

With inputs from Associate Professor *Dr. Hanafi Hussin*, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur



*Datuk Ramli Ibrahim,
Chairman, **Sutra** Foundation*

A Prathap's photographic forays in Malaysia in the last 13 years has been mainly with Sutra Foundation. With several impressive solo and group photography exhibitions and several major publications to his credit that featured his works on dance, A Prathap has been a major and consistent collaborator with Sutra.

The present exhibition on the Bajau Laut of North Borneo is one of the rare occasions where dance is not his subject matter.

Prathap is a perfectionist and a professional through and through. I remember the relentless manner in which he pursued his subject and his determination to obtain permission to photograph in the restricted zones of the Semporna Islands and made sure that he had sufficient time to study and photograph the endangered lifestyle of the Sea-Gypsies.

A Prathap's compelling and extensive coverage on Sutra Dancers and the present exhibition on the Bajau Laut of Sabah, place his works as important manifestations of the contemporary bi-lateral cultural link between Malaysia and India. His artistic and sensitive photographs speak of the human connection that transcends man-made national boundaries and reaffirms this vital connection during these troubled global times.

A Prathap is a Special Photographer with The Times of India, Chennai. He has spent more than 18 years behind the camera, freezing images of national and international events, personalities and performers, and documenting life for posterity in all its myriad situations. Though it began as a hobby (and later became his profession), photography developed for Prathap in a natural progression to become a love as he deepened his aesthetic appreciation and knowledge. Prathap has an intense passion to learn new things from situations and people. He brings the same passion and curiosity while covering a wide range of subjects.

Prathap started his career in 2004 with News Today, an evening daily in Chennai, and subsequently joined The Times of India after it began its Chennai edition in 2008. He was involved in directing a short-film and documentary that was screened at Bridging Cultures, a documentary film festival organized by Brooklyn College City University, New York.



He has been documenting Kattaikkuttu, the folk theatre of Tamil Nadu, since 2012. Since 2008, he is also documenting Datuk Ramli Ibrahim, Chairman, Sutra foundation, Kuala Lumpur. Datuk Ramli Ibrahim was acknowledged as a "Living Heritage" by the Government of Malaysia and the United Nations declared him to be a UNESCO Living Treasure. He is also a recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. In 2018, he was conferred Padma Shri by the Government of India.

Prathap's works were exhibited during the "*Vision of Odissi*" at Forum Art Gallery, Chennai (2012), "*Joined In Dance*" photography exhibition at Sutra Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (2013), "*Between Creations*" foyer exhibition at The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre & at Sutra Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (2014), "*Transforming Lives – Transforming Culture*" photography exhibition on Kattaikkuttu at Café Amethyst, Chennai & Grand by GRT Hotel, Chennai (2015), "*Padme*" an exhibition showcasing the artwork of select painters, sculptors and photographers from all over the country at Forum Art gallery, Chennai (2015), "*Quintessential Sutra*" a pictorial book by Sutra Foundation, Kuala Lumpur, co-published by the Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia [ITBM] / Malaysian Institute of Translation and Books (2015), "*Ganjam*" photography exhibition at Sutra Gallery, Kuala Lumpur & Bellevue, the Penang Hill Hotel, Malaysia (2016), "*Ramli In Konark*" photography exhibition at Sutra Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (2016), "*Myriad Faces*" photography exhibition on Kattaikkuttu, jointly organized by the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Indian Cultural Centre (Malaysia) at Sutra Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (2017), "*Perceive-Dance and Monuments*" photography exhibition at Art Bistro, Grand by GRT Hotel, Art Houz and Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai (2017), "*Cave of the Heart*" photography exhibition featuring Ramli Ibrahim at the Ellora Caves (2018) "*Scared hills*" photography exhibition featuring Ramli Ibrahim and Geethika Sree at excavated Buddhist archaeological sites Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri and Udaygiri(2019), Contributing Photographer for "*The Kumbha Mela Prayagraj Joined In Dance*", Malaysia-India Experience (2021) and currently documenting the "*Sea Gypsies of Borneo*".



A Point of Balance II | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 32" | 2019 | **RM 3700.00**



Dwelling – Chores | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 35" | 2019 | **RM 3,100.00**



Embrace | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 34" | 2019 | **RM 3,400.00**



Euphoric Moment I | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 34" | 2019 | **RM 3,400.00**



Dawn Light | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 34" | 2019 | **RM 3,100.00**



Euphoric Moment II | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 34" | 2019 | **RM 3,400.00**



Incandescent Horizon | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 36" | 2019 | **RM 3,500.00**



Langit Biru | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 33" | 2019 | **RM 3,400.00**



Misty Morning | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 34" | 2019 | **RM 3,400.00**



Sunset | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 35" | 2019 | **RM 3,400.00**



The Lightness of Being I | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 35" | 2019 | **RM 3,400.00**



Evening Contemplation | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 36" | 2019 | **RM 3,500.00**



The Lightness of Being II | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 35" | 2019 | **RM 3,400.00**



Water Earth Sky | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 41" | 2019 | **RM 3700.00**



Waterworld I | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 36" | 2019 | **RM 3400.00**



Waterworld II | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 35" | 2019 | **RM 3400.00**



Waiting Room | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 31" | 2019 | **RM 3100.00**



Waterworld III | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 42" | 2019 | **RM 3700.00**



Sibling Care | Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Luster (260gsm) | 24" x 34" | 2019 | **RM 3,200.00**

Acknowledgment

YB Datuk Seri Dr. Santhara JP | Datuk Ramli Ibrahim | Trustees of Sutra Foundation
Vivek Menon | Dato' Jude Mohan | Muslianshah Bin Masrie | Arif Kaser | Hanafi Hussin
A Subramani | Karthik Venkatasubramanian | B Ramanth
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Exhibition open for viewing 21.05.2022 - 10.06.2022

Mon - Fri (10 am - 5 pm)

enquiries: **Sutra** Gallery: +603 4021 1092 | +601 9333 1092

Sivarajah Natarajan (Curator) : +601 2233 2364