

 Sasi

The Harmony of the Bajo Tribe and the Sea, Woven in Tradition

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Amidst the roar of the waves and the salty scent of the sea, there is a tribe known as the Bajo or Bajau, a community that has built a civilisation on the water for centuries. They are scattered along the coasts of Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Nusa Tenggara, as far as the Philippines and are often referred to as “sea nomads” because of their ability to live a nomadic life on the ocean. The ocean is not just a collection of salty water teeming with biodiversity, but also a source of livelihood, a home, and a mother to the Bajo tribe.

Despite their nomadic lifestyle, they have maintained traditions that are deeply ingrained in their culture. For the Bajo people, tradition is not just a habit, but a way of life. It marks time, binds the community, and serves as a bridge between humans, nature, ancestors, and the Creator.



Of the many traditions that still survive today, there are several that are preserved among the Bajo tribe in Kepulauan Togean and have very deep meanings, including:

Bapongka: When the Sea is Not a Boundary

The *bapongka* tradition is a hereditary legacy of the Bajo people's way of life, which is closely tied to the sea. This tradition involves going to sea together for several weeks to several months, living on boats. The Bajo people often travel from island to island and even from country to country. *Bapongka* comes from the word *pongka*, which means to break or remove bad ties, both spiritually and socially. For the Bajo people, their true home is the vast, boundless ocean.

In practice, the Bajo people use their ancient knowledge of sea navigation using constellations, wind directions, and tidal waves. Usually, they also bring their partner and children to help gather various marine products. The men serve as navigators, fishers, and captains who steer the boats in any direction, while the women help meet the daily needs on the boat and sell the catch. It can also be done in groups consisting of three to four boats that will depart together and help each other during the voyage. This tradition also underlies the widespread distribution of Bajo settlements in coastal areas, especially in Eastern Indonesia.

This tradition is not without restrictions; there are rules that every Bajo person must obey to ensure that their voyage goes well. They are prohibited from throwing anything into the sea, such as charcoal, rice washing water, coffee grounds, ginger and chili water, and orange peels. In addition to these restrictions, this tradition also uses sustainable fishing practices that preserve the ecosystem. The catch is sold in the villages where they stop, or exchanged for other agricultural products such as rice, sweet potatoes, and sago.

The understanding of this tradition, which has been passed down from generation to generation, is in line with the conservation values embraced by modern society. Local wisdom has instilled the value of preserving the ecosystem in a sustainable manner so that it can continue to be used by future generations.

Tiba Pinah: Praying for Mercy from the Sea

The phrase *tiba pinah* can mean “throwing betel nuts into the sea.” This ancient Bajo tribe tradition is generally performed to ward off evil, but it is also used to search for people lost at sea and to cure diseases that cannot be treated medically. In the beliefs of the Bajo people, the sea is not only inhabited by visible creatures such as fish and coral reefs, but also invisible creatures such as the guardians of the sea named *Bunggaran* (male) and *Ibunggaran* (female). It is said that these beings watch over and protect them while they are at sea. Thus, when something undesirable happens at sea, they will ask for help in the form of the *tiba pinah* ritual. This ritual is led by a sandro (shaman), who is believed to have supernatural powers. *Sandro* itself is not limited by gender; it can be either male or female.

Bapongka: A Bajo family in Togean performing the bapongka tradition, an ancient tradition involving wandering and searching for sustenance around the sea.

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Tiba pinah: People of the Bajo tribe gather and pray together to ward off evil and ask for safety from the Almighty. This ritual also strengthens the bonds between community members.

Before it begins, the traditional elders and community leaders gather with the *sandro* and are given advice not to do anything that would upset the guardians of the sea. They also prepare all the materials for the ritual, including three areca nuts, gambier, eggs, three colours of rice (white/yellow/red/green/black), three cigarettes, banana leaves, and cork to make a kind of raft decorated with rattan.

The ritual is performed in the afternoon, and the aforementioned materials are arranged on the raft made of cork, like a ship laden with cargo. Before it is floated out to sea, the *sandro* will call out the name of the guardian of the sea while reciting a mantra appropriate to the needs of the community at that time. During the ritual, there are certain restrictions that must be obeyed by the community. For three days, they are prohibited from carrying out activities in the area where the ritual was performed.

The direction of the raft determines where the community will conduct their search (for fish or missing persons). If the raft travels east, the community will search in the east, and vice versa.

Tiba pinah illustrates an important philosophy of the Bajo tribe: humans and other creatures live side by side. They believe that the sea is not only available to them, but also to invisible creatures who can be asked for help at any time. This tradition also reflects their appreciation for the mysterious nature of their habitat. To this day, this tradition is still practiced by the Bajo people, even though they have also been touched by modern life. *Tiba pinah* remains alive and is an intangible cultural heritage of the Bajo people and a treasure trove of knowledge for the seafaring people of the archipelago.

Pamali: Unwritten Laws Governing Life

If *bapongka* is a tradition of migration and *tiba pinah* reflects adaptation, then *pamali* is the other side of Bajo wisdom, full of warnings. *Pamali* in Bajo culture means taboo or prohibition: a moral and ethical system that has been passed down from generation to generation to be obeyed and respected. *Pamali* serves as a controller of behaviour, especially in the relationship between humans and nature, both real and supernatural. If violated, it is believed to bring bad luck, loss of catch, storms, or even death at sea.

For example, the prohibition against going to sea when someone has died shows sympathy and respect for the community; *pamali* protects the sea, showing compassion for the natural environment that sustains life; or *pamali* prohibits breaking promises made to the guardians of the sea as a form of behavioural control and discipline.

Although it sounds like a myth, *pamali* actually contains strong moral, ecological, and social values. The prohibition on fishing at certain times helps maintain the balance of the marine ecosystem. The prohibition on being arrogant or rude teaches ethics and respect for nature. In a modern context, *pamali* can be seen as a form of local wisdom that regulates environmental sustainability naturally, long before the term “conservation” was known.

The Bajo people believe that *pamali* is the “law of the sea” that must be obeyed in order to live in harmony. Violating *pamali* not only invites bad luck, but also shows a lack of respect for the sea, ancestors, and community. This is where *pamali* serves not only as a prohibition, but also as a reminder that humans are only a small part of the vast universe and the deep sea.



BALAI
PELESTARIAN
KEBUDAYAAN
WILAYAH XVIII



FESTIVAL BUDAYA BAJO Bajofest Togean



Dance: The Lagi Sangang Sikali dance performed at Bajo Fest depicts the life of the Bajo people, who have been preparing since dawn to welcome the sea as their friend, source of livelihood, and spiritual space.

Bajo Tribe Dance: An Expression of Harmony Between Nature and Humans

Like other tribes in Indonesia, the Bajo tribe also recognises dance as a means of creativity, expression, and symbol of hope. These dances, accompanied by meaningful poetry, are a form of local wisdom expressed through movement and speech. There are several Bajo dances, such as the *dalle* dance, *mamaloy kami*, and *lagi sangang sikali*.

The *dalle* dance tells the story of the joy of the Bajo people after fishing and bringing home a bountiful catch. This dance is accompanied by a poem entitled “Ooo tete,” which refers to Mbo Lillo, the ancestor of the Bajo people who is believed to be the guardian and protector of Bajo sailors as they navigate the waves. The betel nut and *sirih* mentioned in one of the verses of this poem are symbols of offerings to the ancestors, depicting the harmonious relationship between the Bajo people and the sky, earth, and sea.

The *mamaloy* dance is a dance full of hope from the Bajo tribe to the ruler of the sky (*Kuaso Langi*) and the ruler of the earth (*Kuaso Tana*). The lyrics sung in this dance contain a call to the silent shore to bring good winds (*Sangey Malassou*) such that their boats can return with abundant catch. This poem describes the life of the Bajo people, who place their hopes in the sea where they live.

The *lagi sangang sikali* dance depicts the life of the Bajo people from dawn onwards as they prepare to welcome the sea as their source of livelihood and spiritual space. This dance expresses the harmony between humans and the sea, with each rhythmic movement resembling waves, the cooperation between fishermen, and their determination in facing challenges in the middle of the ocean.

In general, the women dance nimbly, while the men play music to accompany the dancers' agile movements, creating harmony between the fluidity of the movements and the perfect melody.

Many Traditions, One Philosophy: Living in Harmony

Bapongka, *tiba pinah*, and *pamali*, as well as various types of poems and dances, may appear different in form, but they all stem from the same philosophy: living in harmony with the sea, with each other, and with God. These traditions are forms of cultural expression that affirm the identity of the Bajo people as a religious, resilient, and adaptive maritime community.

Amidst the tide of modernisation and changing lifestyles, these traditions also face significant challenges. Many young Bajo people now live on land, attend school, and work in cities. However, in coastal villages such as Togean, traces of these traditions remain. There, the *bapongka* tradition is still practiced, people are still reminded of *pamali* before they go to sea, and dances and poems continue to live on stage.

Ultimately, traditions are not just stories and customs of the past, but also guidelines for the future. In every dance movement and verse of poetry, there are prayers and hopes that life will always be protected, and in every taboo that is upheld, there are valuable lessons about how humans can live in harmony with nature. Tradition is a reflection of the wisdom of the Bajo people—that the sea is not just a place to make a living, but also a spiritual space that shapes their character and outlook on life.

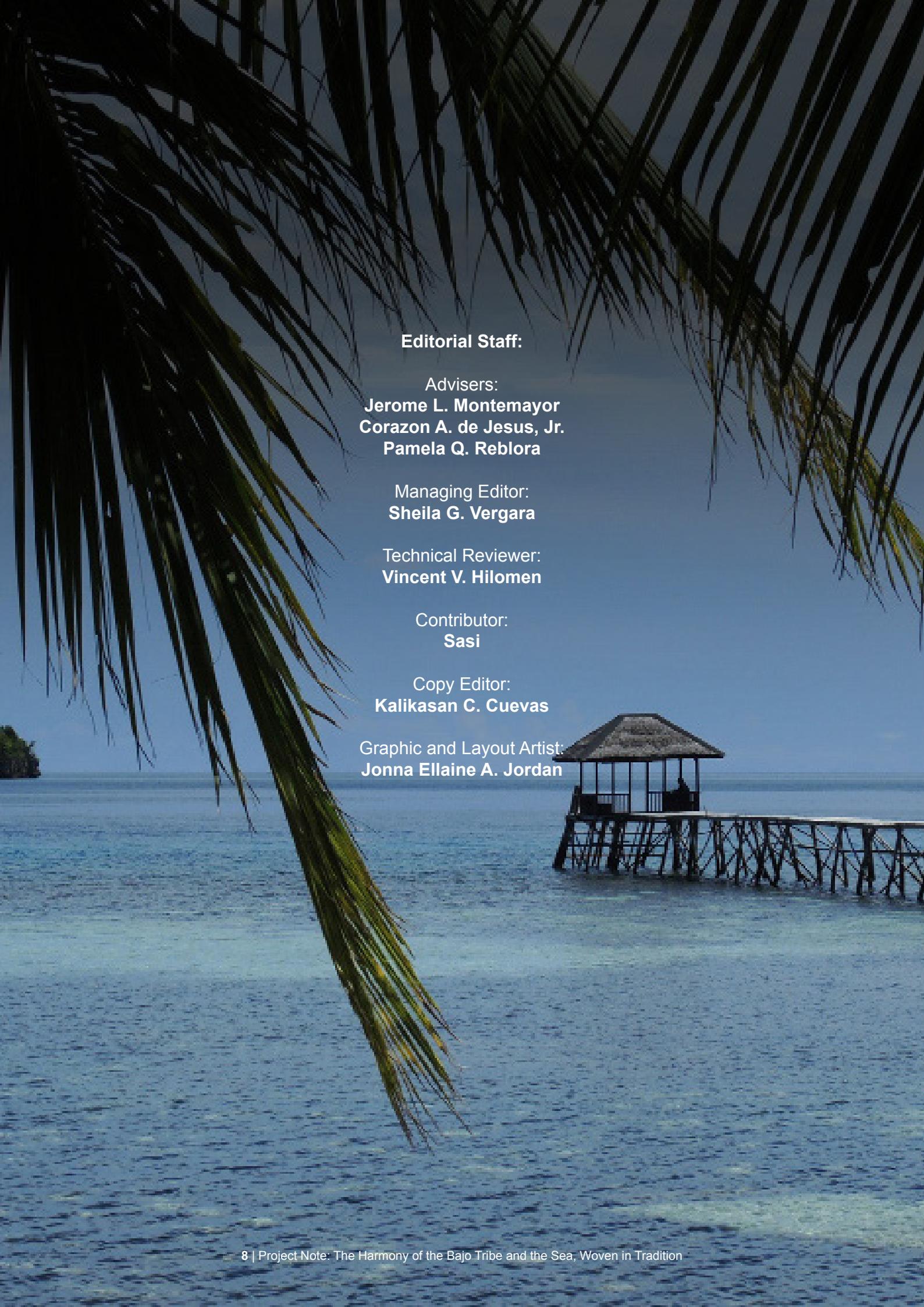
While the world is now busy discussing the ecological crisis and climate change, the ancestors of the Bajo tribe had already implemented conservation in their traditions. Perhaps it is time for policy makers to learn from them—from the tribe that lives on the sea—about how to harmonise human needs and natural resources in a wise and sustainable manner.

The project *Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN region (ASEAN ENMAPS)* aims to improve marine protected area network management in key Large Marine Ecosystems across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. It applies science-based strategies to conserve biodiversity and sustain fisheries. The project also aims to strengthen governance, build the capacity of stakeholders, promote knowledge sharing, and advance sustainable financing for long-term conservation. ASEAN ENMAPS is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme through the funding of the Global Environment Facility, and with the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity as the executing agency.

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A photograph of a tropical beach. In the foreground, the dark fronds of a palm tree hang down. To the right, a wooden pier with a thatched-roof pavilion extends into the clear blue ocean. The water is calm with some gentle ripples. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

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