



# Social Organization of the West Coast Bajau

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## Abstract

In this paper<sup>1</sup> I describe the social organization of the West Coast Bajau of Sabah, Malaysia. A brief survey of their geographical and historical setting reveals trends of increasing individualism and the weakening of reciprocal economic exchanges. I then present data on Bajau kinship, household structure, and marriage. These data reveal that the Bajau household is markedly individualistic in nature, determined more by choice of residence than by prescribed family roles. This individualism is further seen in Bajau engagement and marriage practices. Finally, I discuss factors which contribute to a Bajau sense of identity. I show that reliance upon reciprocal labor is still a part of Bajau society, as observed in village feasts which strengthen social cohesion among the Bajau. The village exchanges are practiced within the framework of Islam. Thus, while in some ways the Bajau are an individualistic people, their reciprocal feasts and the common thread of Islam contribute to their community life and sense of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the editorial corrections and comments of several SIL colleagues who reviewed drafts of this paper: Dr. Sue Russel (formerly Sue Harris), who provided many suggestions for improvement in the early stages of writing this paper; Doris Blood; Dr. Tom Headland; and Paul & Cynthia Crosbie.

## Contents

Abstract

1. Introduction
  2. Setting
    - 2.1. Historical Overview
    - 2.2 The West Coast Bajau Today
    - 2.3 Research Setting
  3. Kinship
  4. Household
    - 4.1. Composition
      - 4.1.1. Case study #1
    - 4.2 Developmental Cycle
      - 4.2.1 Case study #2
    - 4.3 Inheritance
    - 4.4 Household Production and Exchange
      - 4.4.1 Case study #3
  5. Marriage
    - 5.1. Engagement and Marriage
    - 5.2 Residence
    - 5.3 Polygyny and Divorce
  6. Exchange and Identity
    - 6.1 Village exchange
    - 6.2 Identity
      - 6.2.1 Case study #4
  7. Conclusion
- References

## 1. Introduction

The West Coast Bajau of Sabah, Malaysia belong to a cluster of peoples related culturally and linguistically. Members of this cluster are generally known to outsiders by the name of ‘Bajau’ or its variants (e.g., Badjaw, Badjao, Bajao, Bajo), but the Bajau peoples most commonly refer to themselves as *Sama*. Their total number has been estimated at 750,000 to 900,000 (Sather 1997:2, 5). They are widely dispersed across the coasts and islands of the Sulu Archipelago, Borneo, and eastern Indonesia. The Bajau have traditionally been known as sea nomads, involved in extensive maritime trading and dwelling in boats. However, the great majority of Bajau are now sedentary house dwellers (Yap 1995:2). While some such Bajau continue to derive their livelihood primarily from the sea, others have adopted an agrarian way of life.

In Sabah, there are two groups of Bajau, the West Coast Bajau and the East Coast Bajau. The dichotomy of land versus sea orientation is readily observed in these two groups. The West Coast Bajau, who have settled slightly inland along the western and northern coasts, have become proficient in rice cultivation and livestock rearing, whereas the East Coast Bajau, who reside along Sabah’s east coast and particularly in Semporna, are more sea oriented. The distinction between the West and East Coast Bajau extends beyond the land/sea orientation. Intelligibility testing has confirmed that the West Coast Bajau and East Coast Bajau speak separate languages (Banker 1984:110; see Casad 1974 for a discussion of the theory and techniques of intelligibility testing). Some speakers of these two groups would claim to understand each other, but this may be due to individual exposure to and acquisition of the other’s language (Sather 1997:10). East Coast Bajau is comprised of a complex chain of dialects, most of which can be identified with the Southern Sama language (ISO sbs)<sup>2</sup> spoken in the Philippines (Smith 1984:12; Walton and Moody 1984:122). The close association of the East Coast Bajau with the Bajau peoples of the Sulu region is apparent. Moreover, whereas the West Coast Bajau language (ISO bdr) has been influenced by the Malayic languages further south on Borneo’s west coast, the East Coast Bajau language has borrowed from Tausug (ISO tsg), the trade language of the Sulu region (Smith 1984:12). Hence, the West Coast Bajau have much weaker ties with Bajau groups living in the Sulu than do their cousins on the East Coast.

The focus of this paper<sup>3</sup> is on the West Coast Bajau. The social organization of the West Coast Bajau is described, with reference primarily to Bajau kinship, household, marriage, and the means by which Bajau identity is reinforced through village events.

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<sup>2</sup> See the *Ethnologue* (16<sup>th</sup> Edition) for standard descriptions of these languages. Each of the world’s known languages has been assigned a unique three-letter code as listed alphabetically in the *Ethnologue’s* Language Code Index.

<sup>3</sup> The research for this paper was conducted in the Bajau village of Menunggui in 1997-98. My primary focus during these two years was to learn to speak Bajau and prepare some language learning materials, in accordance with the terms of my research pass granted by the Economic Planning Unit of the Malaysia federal government. Subsequent fieldwork on the language in 2001, 2003-04, and 2006 enabled me to write a dissertation describing the grammatical system of West Coast Bajau (Miller 2007).

It will be demonstrated that, although the Bajau are very individualistic in their choice of household arrangement, as well as in choices bound up with marriage and residence, they maintain social cohesion and a strong common identity through their village-wide involvement in feasts and other exchanges, most of which are grounded in the context of Islam. Before moving to a description of their social organization, it is helpful to look briefly at the history of the West Coast Bajau in Sabah, and appreciate something of their past and present interaction with neighboring ethnic groups.

## 2. Setting

### 2.1. Historical Overview<sup>4</sup>

The origin of the Bajau peoples is uncertain. Kemp Pallesen, using comparative linguistic data, has proposed a ‘dispersion hypothesis’ according to which the proto-Bajau spread north and south from a point near Mindanao, Philippines, more than a thousand years ago. Pallesen hypothesizes that by A.D. 1100, Bajau groups had reached Southern Sulu and the northeast coast of Borneo (1985:116–23). Origin myths among the Bajau themselves suggest a more recent arrival to the Sulu Archipelago (Sather 1997:17). Bajau and Brunei oral tradition claim that the Bajau originally came from Johor. According to such traditions, the ruler of Johor sent his daughter to Sulu to marry the ruler of Sulu. The fleet of Johor warriors that escorted her was attacked by the Bruneians. The Johor princess was captured and married off to the ruler of Brunei. The Johor warriors could not return to Johor because they had failed in their mission. So some of them settled along the west coast of Borneo, while others became sea wanderers known as Bajau Laut (‘Sea Bajau’). If the Brunei ruler mentioned above is to be identified with the first Sultan of Brunei (Sultan Muhamad), as has been suggested, this initial Bajau migration could have occurred in the latter part of the fourteenth century (Hamzah 1995:3, 5).

It is not certain when the West Coast Bajau initially settled in what is now the district of Kota Belud, but their presence there has been documented since Spenser St. John wrote about them in the 1850s and 1860s (Yap 1995:2). Prior to British colonial rule, which began in Sabah in the 1880s, the West Coast Bajau were (like the Dusun and Brunei-Malay communities) under the nominal rule of the Brunei sultanate. Some Bajau petty chiefs held honorific titles such as **datu**.<sup>5</sup> These titles were apparently bestowed on them by the Brunei royalty (Evans 1922:220, quoted in Yap 1995:4). The authority of the Datus among the Bajau was weak. As St. John noted, the Bajau “are individually very independent, and render no obedience to their chiefs unless it suits their own convenience” (1974:372, quoted in Yap 1995:4). Their history in this respect differs from that of the Jama Mapun, a neighboring Sama-Bajau group living on the

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar presentation of this material, see Chapter One of my dissertation (Miller 2007).

<sup>5</sup> The honorific term ‘datu’ and its variants are widely used among the Malays. In this paper, Malay words are shown in bold font, and Bajau words are shown in italics. Where the Bajau word is a Malay borrowing, it will still be identified as a Bajau word.

island of Cagayan de Sulu (now part of the Philippines). Prior to the arrival of the Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, Jama Mapun society had a complex system of social stratification composed of: (1) nobles and notables, (2) commoners, and (3) slaves, where prestige, wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of the nobility (Casino 1976:128). Relations between the West Coast Bajau and other ethnic groups such as the Dusun and the Murut were often hostile. Even among themselves, the Bajau were divided. Dr. Ben Liang Yap offers the following scenario:

There was no attempt among them to form a united political entity and there was no chief strong enough to assert his authority and maintain peace. The authority of the Brunei sultan, too, was ineffective here and there was no organized and uniform system of law. Each community has [sic] its own leaders and governed the conduct of its members by means of customary law. (1995:4)

In those earlier days the West Coast Bajau were closely tied to the sea, harvesting fish and other marine resources. However, increasing contact with the rice-growing Dusun brought a gradual shift to the exploitation of land resources, though primarily at a subsistence level. Barter trading occurred between the Bajau and other ethnic communities, primarily the Dusun. This gave rise to the rural markets known as **tamu** (*semio*). The **tamu** promoted good will between the different ethnic groups. Some Bajau traveled further inland for barter trading with Dusun villages (Yap 1995:4–6).

During the period of British colonial rule, Bajau resentment toward restrictions to their freedom and having to comply with taxation and a new system of land management led to discontent and even rebellion. Two such revolts were the Mat Salleh Rebellion in the 1890s and the Pandasan Rebellion in 1915, which also involved the Iranun and some Dusun. Gradually, with the help of traditional leaders incorporated into the colonial administrative system, peace and order were achieved. Interethnic hostility also lessened, which encouraged permanent settlement as well as trade. The introduction of money currency required the Bajau to expand beyond subsistence activities to produce surplus goods and to work as wage earners. Yet in the early 1960s, most Bajau continued to work in homestead agriculture such as rice growing and fishing, and those who grew rice did so mainly at a subsistence level (Yap 1995:7–12).

Since the time of independence from British rule in the mid-1960s, a number of trends are bringing changes to the Bajau in food production, education, and business/wage-earning activities. Government subsidies and the increasing availability of tractors have encouraged wet-rice cultivation, at the expense of Bajau interest in fishing. There is increased reliance upon hired labor in the rice fields, whereas at one time this work had been done by families and organized work parties. Although Bajau farmers have moved from subsistence production to production for cash, in the 1980s most of them were still small producers. Subsidiary crops are also grown for home consumption or for supplemental income. Bajau businesses are growing in number, but tend to be small and primarily related to food selling. The number of schools in Kota Belud has mushroomed in the last thirty years. Owing largely to the increased opportunity for and appreciation of education, Bajau are working today in a variety of wage-earning jobs, including white-collar or professional employment. Improved

transportation has enabled many Bajau to work in other parts of Sabah, whereas poor transport in former times had discouraged people from leaving their villages (Yap 1995:13–19).

This brief historical sketch enables us to appreciate some important defining features of the West Coast Bajau:

- As a people they have resented, and sometimes resisted, external powers, and the hierarchical structures imposed upon them by such powers, preferring to remain strongly individualistic, even among themselves. This helps to explain the present tendency of the West Coast Bajau toward individualism in their social organization.
- Increased education and ease of transportation have combined to encourage greater independence among young people, contributing also to individualism as more and more choices are made available to them.
- The West Coast Bajau have long established close, cooperative ties with their Dusun neighbors, who have become important regional trading partners. Thus, it should not be surprising that intermarriage between the Bajau and the Dusun is quite common today.
- Owing to the increased mechanization of wet-rice cultivation over the past twenty years, the Bajau no longer rely on communal labor to produce food. Hence, in order to affirm communal ties, they must find other ways to encourage village-wide exchange.

## 2.2 The West Coast Bajau Today

Currently, the West Coast Bajau number somewhere in the range of sixty-five thousand,<sup>6</sup> spread along Sabah's coastal regions from Kuala Penyu in the southwest to Terusan, east of Pitas. They speak one language, which comprises a chain of mutually intelligible dialects (Banker 1984:101, 111). The West Coast Bajau do sometimes refer to themselves as 'Bajau' but more commonly they use the autonym *Sama*. As Sather has pointed out, the term "Sama" is normally followed by a "toponymic modifier", that is, a place-name referring to an island or stretch of coastline where the speaker or his dialect or both originate (1997:5). This is also true of the West Coast Bajau. Those living in the Kota Belud area are identified as *Sama Tempasuk* or *Sama Empasuk*, while Kota Belud residents refer to West Coast Bajau living in other communities of Sabah as *Sama dopo'* (lit., 'half Sama'), alluding perhaps to the smaller percentages of Bajau in places like Tuaran and Papar. Kota Belud District, on the Tempasuk plain about halfway between Kota Kinabalu and Kudat, contains the largest group of West Coast Bajau in Sabah. The Bajau in Kota Belud numbered nearly twenty thousand in the 1991 census (Malaysia, Department of Statistics, 1995, quoted in Sather 1997:25). Kota

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<sup>6</sup> This population estimate is based on the previous estimate of forty thousand given in Banker (1984:112), assuming an annual population growth of roughly 2% from 1984 to 2010.



Belud is the cultural heartland of the West Coast Bajau, or so it is regarded by the Bajau living there.

The West Coast Bajau are not the most populous ethnic group in the Kota Belud District, because they are outnumbered by the Dusun.<sup>7</sup> Other ethnic groups are represented in smaller numbers, including the Chinese (centered in Kota Belud town) and the Iranun (concentrated in villages northwest of town, along the coast). Some villages in the district are wholly Bajau; others are of mixed ethnic composition (Yap 1995:2), and interethnic marriages are somewhat common. However, because the Bajau are Muslims and the Dusun generally are not, intermarriage between these two groups only occurs where the Dusun spouse converts to Islam. As will be seen later, this is a fairly frequent practice. Although no such religious barrier exists between the Bajau and the Iranun (who are also Muslim), and extensive cultural borrowing has occurred between these two groups, they do not tend to live in mixed villages. The Iranun live in closer proximity to the sea and many earn their living as fishermen. The Iranun language (ISO ill) is not closely related to Bajau. Hence, although intermarriage occurs, the two groups remain distinct from each other. While the Bajau may not be the largest group in Kota Belud District, they are the most influential, as reflected by the fact that most people in the district, whatever their ethnic identity, have learned to speak Bajau. It is the trade language of sorts in this region, and is frequently heard in places like the market, the schoolyard, and soccer matches. Comparatively few Bajau have learned to speak the Dusun or Iranun languages.

### 2.3 Research Setting

The research for this paper was conducted within a two year time frame (1997-98), primarily in the West Coast Bajau village of Menunggu, in Kota Belud District, less than one mile from Kota Belud town. During this time the researcher stayed intermittently with a Bajau family in Menunggu.<sup>8</sup>

As recently as the 1940s, Menunggu was inhabited wholly by the Dusun. Since that time, however, there has been an influx of Bajau, while the former Dusun residents moved on to nearby villages such as Tempasuk. Apparently the Dusun were looking for larger plots of land, including rice fields, of which Menunggu has none. Those Dusun

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<sup>7</sup> 'Dusun' is frequently used as a cover term for several related Dusun varieties (where 'variety' does not attempt to distinguish between 'language' and 'dialect'). Sometimes 'Dusun' is replaced by 'Kadazandusun', a term which encompasses the Coastal Kadazan variety spoken some 90 km south of Kota Belud. In Kota Belud District itself, Dusun varieties include Tempasuk Dusun (ISO tdu)—sometimes called Tindal—and Central Dusun (ISO dtp).

<sup>8</sup> I wish to thank Mr. Jumel Hj. Ghani and his family, who hosted me during my stays in Menunggu village and adopted me into their household. I am grateful to all the residents of Menunggu for welcoming my visits and answering questions as I gathered data for this paper. I want to particularly acknowledge my Bajau friend Mr. Adnan Hj. Abdul Razak, whose comments have contributed substantially to the content of this paper.

who did not leave Menunggui converted to Islam, and have easily assimilated into the Bajau community. This illustrates well the relationship that exists today between the Bajau and Dusun peoples in Kota Belud: there is frequent contact between the two groups, which is primarily friendly, but only those Dusun who have converted to Islam become integrated into the Bajau community. Today nearly all residents in Menunggui are Bajau, except for spouses of mixed marriages, who to varying degrees participate in the social life of the village. Menunggui only achieved official village status in 1977. It includes neighboring Karang Benai in its administration.

Menunggui is a small village, comprising fifty-seven households. On one side it borders the Tempasuk River. The village is intersected by a major paved road leading towards Kuala Abai village on the coast. Individual households maintain vegetable gardens and fruit trees, and while there are no rice paddies in Menunggui, a number of village residents own rice paddies in other areas of the district, some of which they maintain themselves. There are two small food stores in Menunggui, offering snacks and a few kitchen supplies like cooking oil, salt, and canned fish. Most social interaction happens here and at the bus stop, where the main road intersects with the village lane. Right across the street from the bus stop is the village kindergarten (**tadika**) and village house of worship (**surau**). As will be seen, most organized social and religious activities in the village occur not in public places but rather in individual homes throughout the village.

### 3. Kinship

The West Coast Bajau, like many other Bornean societies, are a cognatic bilateral society. Victor King has acknowledged that bilateral societies tend to permit greater emphasis on choice in cooperating with kinsmen, and that residence may be a more useful organizational principle to apply in such a context than that of kinship relations (1978:12). Choice of residence, rather than prescribed kinship roles, is the most important organizing feature of Bajau society. Although residence is primarily among kin, the emphasis is on choice.

Only one type of kinship terminology has been identified among the West Coast Bajau. In a neighboring Bajau society, the Jama Mapun, who inhabit the island of Cagayan in the Sulu Sea, three kinship terminology systems have been cited, each corresponding to a distinct status group within Mapun society (Casino 1976:139). The fact that only one kinship terminology system is used among the West Coast Bajau reflects the egalitarian nature of their society, as contrasted, especially in former times, with the Jama Mapun.

Few West Coast Bajau are able to name their kin beyond the second generation ascending lineally. However, they are quite aware of those who are included among their collateral relatives. Where the precise genealogical tie of the relationship is not certain, as is often the case, relative age to ego is the factor of primary importance in assigning a kinship term, as Harris described for the Tagal Murut (1990:47).

The word most often used by the West Coast Bajau for their kin is *denakan*, which literally means 'sibling'. Like for the Malay term **saudara**, *denakan* can also mean 'relative', and more broadly still can mean 'comrade' or 'brother' (perhaps signifying the fraternal bond of Islam). When *denakan* carries the meaning of relative, the

reference includes not only one's siblings but also one's parents' siblings and their children, and is extended through second cousins. *Denakan* may include affinal kin, in particular brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. The term excludes reference to one's immediate lineal family (e.g., parents, grandparents, and children) and one's parents-in-law. *Denakan* may also be used as a term of address, though more commonly in the broader sense of 'relative' or 'comrade' as opposed to 'sibling'. Whereas *denakan* refers in general to close kin (inclusive of second cousins), the term *waris* is used for distantly related kin (inclusive of and extending beyond third cousins). According to one source, however, *denakan* is normally used as a reference only for distantly related people, whereas closer relations (such as second cousins) are specified according to the particular relationship. Even so, the way to inquire how someone is related to someone else is to ask, *Pian le' bi bedenakan?* 'How are you (pl.) related?'

There is no indigenous Bajau term for the nuclear family or the conjugal pair. Rather, Malay terms are employed for the nuclear family, such as **anak beranak** or **sekeluarga**. Within the family, children address and refer to their mother as *iyang* and their father as *emma'* (although the Malay terms **emak** 'mother' and **bapa** 'father' are sometimes used). Parents normally call their children by their first names or nicknames and refer to them as *anak*. While *anak* (or simply *nak*) may be used as a general term of address for children, as a term of reference it applies only to one's own children. The eldest child is referred to as *anak sioko*, the youngest as *anak siari*.

Ascending to the second generation, one's grandparents (on both mother's and father's side) are referred to and addressed as *iyang too* (lit., 'old mother') and *emma' too* (lit., 'old father'). All previous generations are referred to and addressed as *embo'*. Ancestors who have already died are known as *kembombon*. Moving the other direction, ego's second and following descending generations (e.g., grandchildren and great-grandchildren) are referred to as *empu*, though they are not addressed that way.

Ego ordinarily addresses his siblings by their first names or nicknames. If younger than himself, they are referred to, and sometimes addressed, as *di'*; if older than himself, as *ka'*. Gender is ordinarily not specified, but may be so by adding the terms *dendo* ('female') or *dela* ('male'). The oldest sibling is referred to as *ka' sioko* and the youngest as *di' siari*. Siblings having the same mother and father are called *bedi' beka'*. Half-siblings have no special name; they are addressed, and otherwise treated, as full siblings. All cousins are referred to as *kaki*, and may be specified according to degree as *kaki entedo* ('first cousin'), *kaki menduo* ('second cousin'), or *kaki mentelu* ('third cousin'). However, cousins of whatever degree are addressed the same as siblings: *di'* is used for cousins younger than ego, and *ka'* for cousins older than ego. Aunts are referred to and addressed as *bu'*, uncles as *pa'*. Nephews and nieces are referred to, but not usually addressed, as *anak bua*.

Most of these kinship terms may be extended collaterally, particularly as terms of address (as has just been demonstrated with regard to siblings and cousins). In fact, one may say that, as terms of address, they are extended indefinitely in the case of the ascending generations, since one might address any older person in the community using one of these terms. Which term is appropriate depends upon age. Thus, any person the same age as ego's parents would be addressed as *pa'* or *bu'*. For persons slightly older or slightly younger than ego, the polite terms of choice are *sioko* and *siari*,

respectively. Clearly, in West Coast Bajau, kinship terms are distinguished primarily by generation.

Kinship is not the main organizational feature of Bajau society, but it does play an important role in several aspects of Bajau social organization. Certain rights and obligations exist between kin that influence household structure, inheritance, marriage arrangements, and village exchanges. These kinship rights and obligations will be further explored in the following sections, beginning with household. Kinship is the backbone of the household, though it does not define household composition as such.

## 4. Household

### 4.1. Composition

The Bajau household is defined more by shared residence and domestic activities than by any prescribed family unit. The West Coast Bajau, who are not known to have ever been headhunters, do not share the tradition of longhouses common to so many Bornean societies. The Bajau employ the term *ruma'* for 'house', and it refers more to the physical configuration of living space, together with its occupants, than to any particular family or social ordering. As Boutin (1990:94) has described for the Bonggi, membership in the Bajau household domestic unit is defined by shared residence and activity, rather than by formal rules.<sup>9</sup> This makes the Bajau household a fluid rather than a fixed entity. The Bajau household is not necessarily limited to members of the 'family' (as a consanguineal unit). This is illustrated by the following case study:

#### 4.1.1. Case study #1

During a fifteen month span, one Menunggui household witnessed the coming and going of at least four individuals who had maintained previous ties with that head of household, or with one of his children. In just one case was there a (distant) family connection. Most of these impermanent household residents were women, who took up their share of the cooking and washing for as long as they stayed (whether for three days or several weeks). They ate with the rest of the family, shared the same sleeping space, and in other ways participated in the activities of the household. Whether these women simply needed a temporary place to stay, or were experiencing family tensions at home, or were sought as companions for the teenage daughter of the family, they functioned as a part of the household for the duration of their stay.

As indicated by table 1 below, a majority of households in Menunggui (67 percent) consist of nuclear families. (The nuclear category here includes not only the traditional

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<sup>9</sup> In etic terms, a 'household' consists of those who cook at the same hearth. The researcher's general observation is that the residents in a particular *ruma'* share one hearth, but this was not empirically verified when gathering the data for this paper.

nuclear unit consisting of two parents and unmarried children, but also any household in which there are no married children living together with one or both parents.) Almost all the other households are variations of stem families, where a stem family “links the nuclear family of one married child with his or her natal family” (Parkin 1997: 28). There is one case of an extended family, where two married children live with one or both parents. The table evidences considerable diversity in household composition. Although the traditional nuclear family household consisting of parents and unmarried children predominates (twenty-four cases out of fifty-seven), it still comprises less than half of the households in Menunggu. Table 2 shows that most Menunggu households range from five to eight persons, which suggests the prevalence of nuclear family households, but the table also indicates a high number of households with only one to two persons. The diversity in household composition evidenced in these tables is best explained by considering the development cycle of the household, which is discussed below.

Table 1. Household Composition in Menunggu Village

<i>Type of Composition</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>A. NUCLEAR</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>66.7</b>
single <sup>a</sup>	6	10.5
two unmarried siblings	1	1.75
man, wife	2	3.5
man, wife, step-child	1	.8
man, wife, unmarried children	24	42.1
man, wife, unmarried children, wife's unmarried sister	1	1.75
single parent, unmarried children	3	5.3
<b>B. STEM</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>29.8</b>
man, wife, married child and spouse	1	1.75
man, wife, married child and spouse, grandchildren	3	5.3
man, wife, married child and spouse, grandchild, married child's sister-in-law and her child	1	1.75
man, wife, unmarried children, married child and spouse, grandchildren	6	10.5
man, wife, unmarried children, wife's mother	3	5.3
man, wife, unmarried children, wife's mother and unmarried siblings	1	1.75
man, wife, unmarried children, man's parent and unmarried siblings	2	3.5
<b>C. EXTENDED</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.75</b>
man, wife, unmarried children, two married children and their spouses, grandchildren	1	1.75
<b>D. JOINT</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.75</b>
man, wife, unmarried children, man's mother, man's half-sister and her spouse, man's cousin	1	1.75
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<sup>a</sup> of the 6 single households, four consisted of single unmarried men or women, 1 a divorced wife, and 1 a widow		

Table 2. Household Size in Menunggu Village.

<i>No. of Persons</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1-2	11	19.3
3-4	8	14.0
5-6	10	17.5
7-8	14	24.6
9-10	7	12.3
11-12	5	8.8
> 12	2	3.5
<b>Totals</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## 4.2 Developmental Cycle

It is instructive to look at the household in terms of its developmental cycle. King identifies the following general developmental cycle for Bornean societies:

There is a desire on the part of married couples to achieve independence during their lifetime, and apart from one child who is usually charged with the care of aging parents, most married children set up independent residence and establish a separate household. (King 1978:14)

The developmental cycle of the West Coast Bajau household is well characterized by King's statement. The desire for a couple to "achieve independence during their lifetime" is clearly evidenced in the data by the large number of nuclear family households. The fairly high occurrence of stem families is indicative of the tendency for aging Bajau parents to stay with one or more of their children. To summarize the developmental cycle of the Bajau household, there is a tendency for the conjugal pair to begin their life together as part of the natal household of either wife or husband. The uxorilocal or virilocal residence is typically not prolonged, but it may continue long enough for the conjugal pair to have their own child. This arrangement is in most cases short-lived, however, as the conjugal pair look to establish their own residence (which may however still be on land belonging to the wife's or husband's family). With this transition, a new natal household is established, which is a nuclear arrangement until such time as children of the conjugal pair become old enough to marry and have children themselves. At this point the household reverts again to a stem arrangement, as one or more of the married children take up either temporary or permanent co-residence. The stem-family arrangement may persist until both of the original conjugal pair die, move to a nearby house where they can still be interdependent with their married child, or stay with children who have moved to other villages.

Looking more closely at this developmental cycle of the Bajau household, it becomes clear that individual choice governs residence decisions throughout the cycle. A newly married couple may choose to attach themselves temporarily to either spouse's natal family (or both) as they strategize how and where to secure land for beginning a

new household. Sometimes they will stay on in one spouse's natal family to inherit the land through that spouse, or they will move on to land which one spouse or the other will inherit someday. Post-marital residence is largely determined by economic concerns and reflects the prerogative of the young couple to choose their initial and subsequent places of residence. The bilateral kinship system, by allowing a conjugal pair to choose their manner and degree of filiation, helps to explain the fluidity of the Bajau household. The same concept is clearly stated by Masuo Kuchiba, who, in describing the rural Malay household, emphasizes the importance of the individual (ego) in the Malay kinship system. The bilateral organizational principle, Kuchiba observes, causes individual interests to prevail over corporate feelings. Economic factors rather than institutional obligations govern decisions pertaining to matters like residence. "And the family cannot maintain a strong, fixed framework, since it is characteristic of the bilateral kinship system that its boundary is flexible and changes with circumstances" (1979a:48). This statement applies readily to the West Coast Bajau, though what Kuchiba refers to as 'family' is better described here as 'household'.

Choice is again operative at the developmental stage of the household where children of the conjugal pair become old enough to look after themselves. Given the increasing mobility of today's society, young people may choose to leave their natal households even before marriage for work or study opportunities elsewhere. It is rather common for an aging couple to have children (married or unmarried) scattered all over the state, as they take advantage of their freedom to choose where and how to live on the basis of economic opportunities and personal desires. The following case study illustrates one such family:

#### **4.2.1 Case study #2**

TJ is a widowed mother whose husband died many years ago. She has nine children. Her three oldest children are sons who have married and settled elsewhere, one in a neighboring village and two in other parts of Sabah (Semporna and Pitas). Her fourth child is an unmarried daughter who lives and works in Kota Marudu as a nurse. Her fifth child is a married son with one child. They live in his mother's house (this son has a second wife in a different village). TJ's sixth child is an unmarried daughter who is attending teacher-training college in Semporna but who lives with her mother when the school is not in session. TJ's remaining two sons and one daughter are unmarried and live at home while completing their secondary schooling.

TJ's family is an illustration of the freedom young people have to choose their residence, once they have finished their secondary schooling. Some young people, married and unmarried alike, go to Peninsular Malaysia to work or to further their studies. Not all unmarried children who have completed their schooling leave for other places, but for those who remain, work opportunities are scarce. Sometimes they will assist their parents in their work, such as transporting and selling foodstuffs in the market. Or they may find more formal work opportunities nearby that incline them to stay at home. In any case, it is choice that governs what young people do following



their secondary schooling, as they determine (with the help and consent of their parents) what is in their best interest, and the best interest of the family.

Finally, there is the matter of caring for aging parents (the original conjugal pair in the developmental cycle). According to one young man in the village, it is not necessarily expected that one of the married children remain in the natal household in order to look after the parents. He claims it is common for all children to leave the home as they grow older, though they are expected to at least check up on their parents. Table 1 shows a few cases of one or both parents living alone in the village. Sometimes the aging parent or parents will move to a nearby, semi-detached house where they may live and cook alone. In such cases, they are still under the watchful eye of one or more of their children, and a grandchild may be sent to sleep with the grandparent(s) during the night. Sometimes the grandparent(s) move permanently away from the natal household in order to stay with one or more of their children in other villages or towns. If the grandparent(s) do stay in the same house with their children and grandchildren, typically resources will be pooled so that the family cooks and eats together. In this way, the grandparents are well provided for until their deaths. Once again, choice is the governing factor. No special responsibilities for the care of parents are assigned to any one child (e.g., the oldest or youngest). Aging parents are looked after in any number of ways, depending on what individual families decide is best.

### 4.3 Inheritance

Since choice is so prominent at various stages of the development of the Bajau household, and since economic constraints often govern decision-making, it is worth considering the matter of inheritance (*pesoko*). Land ownership and inheritance is of central importance to the people of Menunggui village. A considerable portion of income of many Bajau families is derived from the land and its produce. In Menunggui itself there are no rice paddies; the land here is generally divided into small plots of one-half to two or three acres, being used for residence and for growing fruit trees and gardens. Among the forty-seven households in Menunggui for which data were collected on land acquisition, thirty-eight inherited their land, whereas only nine had bought their land. In the case of nineteen Menunggui households (more, if siblings' households are counted), land is owned in other villages such as Taun Gusi, Pendasan, and Labuan. Such plots of land tend to be several acres in size. Rice or fruits are cultivated on these lands, and constitute an important source of income for Menunggui households.

Land inherited by a son or daughter remains in the possession of that son or daughter throughout his or her lifetime. Thus, children do not inherit land from their parents jointly, but from their mother or father individually. In customary Bajau land transmission, then, women share equally with men in the inheritance of land. Marriage does not result in shared land ownership. If a woman divorces her husband, she retains whatever lands that she has inherited from her parent(s). Kinship is of obvious importance here, since the usual mode of land inheritance is from parent to child, and marriage itself does not revoke the ownership of land inherited from one's parents.

There are several ways in which land can be inherited. Sometimes the father or mother (one of whom possesses title to the land on which they live) will enter the names of the children onto the land grant before he or she dies. This is the official means of land transmission, and costs eighty *ringgit* (approximately USD25) per individual whose name is entered onto the grant. According to Bajau *adat* (custom), the land is divided equally among the siblings, regardless of their sex or their ordering within the family. However, this has become impractical where plots of land, sometimes already subdivided through the inheritances of previous generations, are too small to be further divided among several siblings. In such cases, the family will usually resort to more informal arrangements of inheritance. The eldest son is entrusted with the greatest responsibility in administering such transactions after the land-owning parent has died. In such cases the parent will have made his or her wishes known to the eldest son prior to death. In practice, a plot of land will likely already have been informally divided among those siblings who choose to remain on their parent's land, even before the land-owning parent has died.

Disputes concerning informal land inheritance among siblings are all too common, however, and if they cannot be resolved at the village level (by the *orang tua* 'native chief'), the disputes are settled in the courts. This is not a desirable solution, because when the government is asked to step in and make the grant, the land must be officially measured (*sinukat*), which is time consuming when done by the government, and costly when done privately. Furthermore, the courts administer their decisions on the basis of **syariah** (Islamic law), which allots twice as much land to males as to females, and which tends to favor the eldest son. It would seem that many such disputes could be avoided if prior to their death, more landowners explicitly designated on their land grant whom they wished to inherit the land and in what quantity. In the case of cultivated lands outside of Menunggui which are inherited by siblings, typically these lands are not divided among the heirs but rather their use is equally shared. That is, all siblings in the area (at least those who are willing) share in the labor and cost of cultivating the land, and all share in the profits of the harvest.

It is common for land in the family to be sold, both to others within the family and to outsiders. As was pointed out earlier, many children (particularly the current generation), when they complete their schooling or get married or both, leave Menunggui and settle elsewhere. In such cases they may decide to sell their portions of land, either to their own siblings or to relatives, or to outsiders. In addition to buying land from one's sibling or other relative, or a village resident, an individual may apply for land from the government. There is a minimal application fee, but if the application is approved, the land must be officially surveyed before one's name can be entered into the grant. The survey, if done by the government, may take from two to three years.

Inheritance extends also to various material possessions. These include family treasures of real or sentimental value, such as knives, spears, jars, and ornately carved metal boxes. Again, the eldest son is entrusted with the responsibility of properly distributing these items, the wishes of the owner having been expressed to him prior to the owner's demise. Items may be equally distributed among siblings, but this depends upon the owner's wishes. One source remarked that disputes regarding household inheritances may occur when the other siblings do not agree with the eldest son's handling of the distribution of such items. Such disputes may also end up being

resolved in court. Animals may be inherited. Typically, an animal will be promised to a very young child. All offspring of that animal will belong to the child when he or she receives the inheritance.

Clearly, kinship plays an important role in inheritance matters, in that land and other possessions are passed down from mothers and fathers to their children (by formal or more informal arrangements). It is also clear that the eldest son in the family has a special responsibility to administer the possessions that he and his siblings have inherited from their parents, particularly when no formal arrangement has already been made. But, as for many other aspects of Bajau social organization, choice is also important in deciding matters of inheritance. Siblings may buy and sell (often to each other) the portions they have individually inherited, and the fact that there are so many land disputes among siblings suggests that negotiation rather than established precedent governs many decisions of inheritance. The oldest son has some measure of increased responsibility, but his handling of inheritance matters is not always respected or appreciated. It is significant that land inherited by a woman stays in her name after marriage. Apart from providing security for the woman, her inheritance may offer another option to a young couple deciding where to reside and helps explain the high incidence of uxorilocal residence (see under Marriage).

#### 4.4 Household Production and Exchange

For the West Coast Bajau, as with other Bornean societies, the household is the basic unit of production. The head of household (normally the man, except in cases where a divorced or widowed mother looks after her children) is expected to provide materially for the family. There are certain kinds of work done almost exclusively by men, others by women; some tasks are shared by both sexes. Men are expected to build and repair houses and other structures. Increasingly this is done by those who contract their labor for such services. Only men earn an income as vehicle drivers. (Many Kota Belud residents depend on such drivers for their transport, being unable to afford their own vehicles.) Men are more commonly employed as regular wage earners than women, particularly after marriage. Men may find employment as teachers or in some other government sector, such as the Department of Public Works (**Jabatan Kerja Raya**, or JKR). In the daytime, the coffee shops in town are a man's domain, where business deals are struck and contracts negotiated. In the domestic realm, men perform such tasks as fishing and slaughtering large animals. Although both men and women share in the task of shopping for food, traditionally it is the man who will buy and bring home fish for his family's consumption.

Women assume the greater share of the domestic tasks. Women alone do the cooking and washing, these tasks being performed by the mother as well as daughters who are old enough to help. Both men and women are involved in the raising of children, but mothers assume the primary care of infants and small children. Many Bajau women are skilled at such activities as sewing and the weaving of mats made from screwpine (**pandan**) leaves. They engage in such physically demanding tasks as cutting down banana plants, repairing fences, burning rubbish, and otherwise maintaining the land. While men obtain food, women raise and sell food. Women tend the house gardens and the fruit trees. Some Bajau women from Menunggu work long

hours daily in Kota Belud town's indoor market, where they rent or buy tables on which to sell produce. They may grow the produce themselves, or they may buy it from outsiders. The two small food shops in Menunggui are both operated by women, who live next to their stores and supply them with home-cooked pastries and packets of noodles. Women may also work as house helpers in other homes, as in the case of a Menunggui widow who must continue to work in order to support her children. Two Menunggui wives are employed as teachers, and two have other jobs working in the local education department. Another wife works as a policewoman. In this way, a small but not insignificant number of women have found gainful employment outside of the home.

From the standpoint of household exchange, then, while men are expected to provide a steady income for their families, their wives assume the domestic tasks of cooking and cleaning. Even so, as we have seen, women may be significantly involved in generating income, most commonly in producing food. Furthermore, children are expected to contribute their labor to the household as they become able. Girls help their mothers with the cooking and washing, while boys lend a hand with household repairs or even the construction of houses. Sons may also be called upon to help their mothers transport and sell produce at the market. Consider the following case study of a family living in a rural village near Menunggui:

#### **4.4.1 Case study #3**

RJ and his wife have nine children, seven of whom still live at home. RJ, now age sixty-four, is a pensioner, having earlier worked with **Lembaga Padi Sabah** (Sabah Padi Board). He owns other land in a neighboring village, on which he cultivates rice. RJ pays 150 *ringgit* per acre to have his rice harvested with a tractor. He is currently building (with his own hands) a large chicken coop, intended to house up to twelve hundred chickens, in order to secure more income. RJ's family also raises six cows. His wife, in addition to helping RJ manage the rice fields, grows various fruits and vegetables near their house. Their eldest daughter, still unmarried and probably in her late twenties, sells the produce for them at the market, where she owns a stall. Sometimes she works on her father's rice fields, to which she journeys on foot.

This case study demonstrates that a man will continue to strategize ways of generating income after he has begun to draw a pension. The family in this example endeavor to secure income from a number of sources, utilizing the labor of grown children as well as parents. Aging parents will continue to work as long as they are physically able. If, as in the above case, they own rice fields, older parents will typically spend many hours a week tending to the fields. A grown child decides whether he will help support his aging parents and how he will support them. Grown children who remain with their natal family often contribute to the family income, as in the case of RJ's eldest daughter above. They may also agree to finance certain household expenses from their own paychecks, such as buying rice for the family, or paying the monthly electricity bill. Such arrangements reflect an understood rule of reciprocity between parents and their grown children who continue to reside with

them. Those young people who secure work for themselves elsewhere may send money back to their families, though not all do. While individual choice and negotiation, rather than established precedent, govern how or whether young working people support their families, if they do stay with their parents, they are expected to contribute somehow to the family income.

The Bajau household is the primary organizational feature of Bajau society. But much variation exists from one Bajau household to another. What comprises a Bajau household, and how it functions, are questions decided not so much by normative kinship roles in the culture, but by choice of residence. Decisions regarding postmarital residence, land inheritance, residence of grown unmarried children, and the care of aging parents are made on the basis of economic and other personal factors. Choice is operative throughout the developmental cycle of the Bajau household. The individualistic orientation of the Bajau household is also seen in the domain of marriage, discussed in the following section.

## 5. Marriage

### 5.1. Engagement and Marriage

In West Coast Bajau affinal terminology, the husband is referred to as *ella* and the wife as *endo*. Teknonyms are widely employed among the West Coast Bajau as a polite way to refer to or identify someone. Spouses may call each other by their teknonyms (e.g., *iyang Ali* 'mother of Ali', where Ali is the oldest child). In fact, a husband or wife refers to his or her parents-in-law as *metoo*, a term that includes also collaterals and ascending generation(s) of the parents-in-law. Spouses of ego's children and grandchildren, as well as the spouses of ego's siblings' children and grandchildren, are referred to and addressed as *ayuwan*. If ego is male, he refers to and addresses his spouse's brother(s) as *bayaw*, and her sister(s) as *langu'*. If ego is female, she refers to all siblings-in-law as *langu'*, regardless of sex. The terms *bayaw* and *langu'* are also applied to the spouses of ego's siblings. As a term of address, *bayaw* (or simply *yaw*) is widely used among men with no specific affinal ties. The term *biras* is used to refer to and to address the spouses of one's own spouse's siblings.

The West Coast Bajau maintain a somewhat ambivalent attitude about marriage between cousins. J. D. Freeman has observed among the Iban that marriage between cousins of whatever degree is encouraged as this "constantly reinforces the network of cognatic ties linking individual Iban, and kin that might otherwise have been dispersed are brought together again" (1960:76). Sather has reported that, among the Bajau Laut, the offspring of brothers (that is, immediate patrilineal parallel cousins) are considered to be 'of one semen'. In such cases, "marriage requires a prior ritual payment to negate what are considered to be the spiritually deleterious consequences of such a union." More distant patrilineal ties, however, are "generally ignored," such that "all other cousins are strongly preferred marriage partners" (1997:171). The West Coast Bajau, like the Bajau Laut, discourage marriage between the offspring of brothers. They consider such unions to be *panas* (lit., 'hot'). However, this patrilineal tie (*wali*) is sometimes taken into account beyond one's immediate kin, so that the ritual payment

(*kepanasan*) has to be paid not only by first cousins but also by second or even third cousins (depending, it seems, upon local *adat*). In any case, the West Coast Bajau do not strongly encourage marriage between cousins. Of the households surveyed in Menunggu, one instance was found of marriage between first cousins, and seven instances of marriage between second or third cousins. In at least three cases the *kepanasan* was levied, so these were presumably *wali* marriages, but the penalty was never exacted beyond the level of second cousin. In contrast to the Iban and even the Bajau Laut, the West Coast Bajau place little emphasis on maintaining close cognatic ties between kin.

Traditionally, parents were the ones to choose marriage partners for their children. Nowadays, young people have considerable freedom to choose their spouses. However, the engagement and wedding procedures still follow the traditional form, showing the continued involvement of parents in the marriage of their children. The engagement process begins with a party of inquirers (*risik risik*), representing the interested man's father, to the father of the bride-to-be. This party may be led by the village chief, or some other relative of the man's father, who is skilled in the art of indirect or metaphorical speech (*tilaw-tilaw Idaan*) and employs it to make the marriage proposal (a procedure known as *mendo*, 'to ask one's hand in marriage'). If, upon consultation, the bride-to-be agrees to the proposal, a series of negotiations is undertaken, typically between representatives of the two fathers, until agreement on a bridewealth price is tentatively reached. At this point, a date for the official engagement (*seruan*) is set. On the day of the *seruan*, the groom's father together with his representatives and *denakan* arrive at the house of the bride, where a similar party of representatives and relatives of the bride's father has assembled. The agreed-upon bridewealth amount is made public to the families, and then they negotiate until they decide upon a final amount on this and other payments, such as those required by *adat*. Also at this time, the date of the wedding may be fixed. The bridewealth (*berian*) is sometimes brought to the bride's house at the time of the *seruan*, and sometimes at a date closer to the wedding. The couple is now officially engaged (*betunang*). Some couples, whether by choice or necessity, avoid the engagement process altogether. This often happens when their respective parents are opposed to the match, in which case the couple will take the matter to the native chief (*orang tua'*) or to the *imam* (Muslim religious leader). If the mediating village leader cannot convince the parents to approve of the match, he will submit the case for approval under the jurisdiction of Islamic law. Thus, a couple is not without recourse to alternative methods for getting married if their families refuse to condone the match.

The marriage contract, called the *akad nikah*, is performed in the home of the bride and attended only by intimate family and friends of the bride and groom. The central participants in this contract are the groom, the officiating *imam* and the bride's father or another close male relative (*wali*), together with a witness (*saksi*). The bride herself remains in a separate room until the conclusion of the contract ceremony. The marriage contract includes the provision that the required *adat* amount has been paid. While the *akad nikah* is a quiet and contractual affair, the social consummation of the wedding occurs later, often the following day, and is the occasion for much feasting and village celebration. The mid-day wedding feasts are held at the houses of both groom and bride, for which invitations are separately issued. At a prescribed time, the

groom and his party make their way to the home of the bride. The couple ascend the lavishly decorated bridal dais and seat themselves side by side amid a throng of spectators. This climactic event is called *ngenda' kawin* (**bersanding**). Many people, once they have feasted and paid their respects to the host, will leave prior to the *ngenda' kawin*. In this respect, one may consider the feast itself to be the central event. Following the marriage, *adat* requires that the couple spends two or three nights at the home of the wife; then the couple is escorted by the husband's family to spend an additional night or so at his family's home. After these traditional visits to the home of each family, the couple decides where they will reside on a more permanent basis.

Preparations for the wedding feast begin the night before, and those cooking the food work throughout the night. Food preparers include both relatives and some of the villagers, whose help is not financially compensated. Rather, those who contribute their labors can expect to have the favor returned on a future occasion. The food preparation takes place in a festive environment. Ordinarily, the night before the *ngenda' kawin*, a special ceremony called *mandi badak* (**berinai**) occurs in the homes of both bride and bridegroom. Following the *mandi badak*, coffee and refreshments are served, often accompanied by the performance of traditional Bajau percussion music (*titik*) and a type of Bajau dance called the *runsay*. These festivities continue all night. In such an atmosphere of music and mingling, the work involved in preparing for the feast can be seen as an opportunity for significant social interaction. Those involved in the feast preparations consist of both relatives and village neighbors, illustrating the importance of residential proximity in the formation of obligatory ties among the West Coast Bajau.

The payment of bridewealth (*berian*) among the West Coast Bajau pales in scope and significance to such Sabahan groups as the Tagal Murut, where wifegiver is superior to wifetaker in a relationship of primary significance to Tagal social organization. Harris describes the list of bridewealth items offered by the wifegiver as non-negotiable:

If the prospective wifetaker feels the requirement too great, then he finds another woman to marry. Because this list is always costly in proportion to the wifetaker's ability to pay it, the wifetaker only pays a portion at the time of the wedding and remains in debt to the wifegiver. Thus the wifetaker is obliged to participate in future exchanges in which the wifegiver remains in a superior position. (Harris 1990:57)

In contrast to the Tagal, the Bajau engagement process is marked by continuous negotiations between the wifegiver and wifetaker, until both families agree upon an acceptable bridewealth. The amount of the bridewealth paid varies depending upon the wifetaker's means; nowadays it is commonly six thousand or seven thousand *ringgit*. While this is a substantial sum for the average Bajau head of household to manage to find, he can usually do so by selling some of his animals, and of course, by setting aside funds in anticipation of his son's future marriage. Rarely will he need to go to his kin for loans, which would put him in their debt. He will make sure that he has enough money prior to seeking a wife for his son. Unlike the Tagal, where bridewealth payments basically extend over a lifetime, the Bajau wifetaker hands over the entire sum prior to the wedding. He is not thereafter significantly obligated to the wifegiver, with the possible exception that there does remain a visible tendency for uxorial

residence. Several Bajau have claimed this to be the traditional preference. One could therefore surmise that, as with many other Sabahan groups, the newly married husband is expected to spend some amount of time working for the wifegiver. Even so, the uxori-local pattern observed for the Bajau is not nearly so strong as is seen, for example, for the Upper Kinabatangan people in Sabah's interior, who have a very strong uxori-local tendency for at least the first year. For the Upper Kinabatangan, if the wifetaker has a job in a different town, he is usually expected to pay a higher bride price to compensate (Stu Lyman: personal communication).

If a marriage lasts only a short time, and the resulting divorce is not on account of some abuse or other fault of the husband, the bridewealth payment may be returned to his family. However, if the couple has been married long enough to have one or more children before they divorce, the bridewealth will not be returned to the husband's family. Bridewealth, then, is conceived as a sort of payment made by the wifetaker in exchange for the right to the children his wife may bear. If the union does not last long enough to produce children, the wifetaker has the right to reclaim his bridewealth payment. Sather (1997:256) has noted a similar provision among the Bajau Laut, where the amount of bridewealth that can be reclaimed diminishes once the husband has enjoyed the woman's sexual favors, and is reduced to nothing once one or more children have been born to him. The purpose of the bridewealth among the West Coast Bajau is also to help defray the heavy costs of putting on the wedding itself. Weddings in Kota Belud are lavish affairs, requiring the purchase of many decorations associated with the *ngenda' kawin* and other ceremonies. The feast requires the slaughter of one or more large animals. The wifetaker ordinarily supplies these animals (*belanja' angus*) in addition to the *berian*. Considering that the wifetaker must himself put on a feast on the same day as the *ngenda' kawin*, in effect he finances two feasts. His expenses are therefore considerable. Nowadays guests attending the wedding feast will commonly pass small cash gifts in envelopes to the host or his representatives.

The other economic transactions at the time of marriage include the *penongot* (**mas kahwin**) and various *adat* payments. The *penongot* is ordinarily fixed at 140 *ringgit* and is paid prior to the *akad nikah*. In fact, during the *akad nikah*, the *imam* pronounces that this sum has been paid; otherwise the marriage is not valid. The *penongot* is more (three hundred *ringgit*) if the bride or bridegroom is said to be *keturunan datu'* ("descendant of a datu"), one of the few remnants in Bajau society of a noble class. Nowadays the *penongot* does not represent a substantial expense for the wifetaker, but is required nonetheless. Finally, if the bride or the bridegroom or both have mixed blood in their ancestry, such as Dusun (*Idaan*) or Iranun, they must pay the fixed *adat* amounts associated with each ethnic group (e.g., *adat Idaan*, *adat Iranun*). Again, these are not normally prohibitive amounts, but since *adat* payments have remained fixed for long periods of time, they may have been a considerable expense in past years.

## 5.2 Residence

It was mentioned above that Bajau *adat* prescribes two or three nights of residence with the bride's parents and one night of residence with the groom's parents for the newlywed couple. After this, they are free to choose what living arrangement most suits them. Table 3 shows the pattern of post-marital residence in Menunggui village.



Table 3. Co-residence in Bajau Households, Menunggu Village

<b>Initial Co-residence<sup>a</sup></b>		
<i>Co-residence</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
uxorilocal	15	38.5
virilocal	7	17.9
neolocal (on husband's land or his family's land)	1	2.6
neolocal (on wife's land or her family's land)	2	5.1
neolocal (purchased land, or government housing)	10	25.6
ambilocal	4	10.3
Totals	39	100.0
<b>Present Co-residence</b>		
uxorilocal	7	14.9
virilocal	4	8.5
neolocal (on husband's land or his family's land)	14	29.8
neolocal (on wife's land or her family's land)	11	23.4
neolocal (purchased land)	10	21.3
ambilocal	1	2.1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<sup>a</sup> Note that data were obtained for 39 households concerning <i>initial</i> co-residence but for 47 households concerning <i>present</i> co-residence.		

While initial co-residence tends more often than not to be uxorilocal (see table 3), there is no strong preference, and a couple may even choose to be ambilocal, dwelling alternately with the husband's parents or relatives and the wife's parents or relatives until such time that it becomes feasible to establish neolocal residence. The period of uxorilocal or virilocal residence varies from a few weeks to several years, but for the most part, married children seek to establish their own household rather than remain in their natal household or spouse's natal household. Sather (1978:44–46) has identified a pattern of delayed secession among the Bajau Laut, whereby newly married couples typically remain for several years in the natal household of husband or wife before establishing a household of their own. Among the West Coast Bajau, secession is preferably sooner than later. There are, however, at least five cases in Menunggu where uxorilocal/virilocal co-residence has been established for at least ten years. By

this time the wife's or husband's parents may have died, or moved to stay with other children.

The data in table 3 indicate a clear shift from uxorilocal, virilocal, and ambilocal initial co-residence to neolocal present co-residence (usually on land which either the wife or husband has inherited or will inherit). The fairly high count of initial neolocal residences indicates that some couples altogether bypass the initial uxorilocal or virilocal residence. Sometimes this owes to the provision of government housing for the couple, if their job(s) are in education or other government-related employment. Many, perhaps most, of the current generation of young people from Menunggui move to other places after marriage, or even before marriage if they find work elsewhere. It is not clear how this 'scattering' of the younger generation affects the co-residence tendencies of young couples nowadays. Conceivably, as more unmarried children move away from their natal households and meet their future spouses elsewhere, there will be the tendency to begin their new households elsewhere too, in neolocal arrangements.

Interestingly, table 3 shows that the percentage of neolocal residence on purchased or government land actually decreases when comparing initial to present co-residence. Presumably this is because some couples, after initially residing on purchased or government land, decided to move on to land inherited by one spouse or the other. Hence, it is not unusual to find several grown siblings living with their families on adjacent lands. Of course, if both husband and wife have inherited land from their respective parents, they may choose which land to settle on. This highlights again the prominence of choice in the development of the Bajau household. In this case the choice is negotiated, because each partner retains his or her inherited land after marriage, and therefore, each possesses a certain degree of leverage when negotiating the decision of where the couple should reside.

### 5.3 Polygyny and Divorce

Islamic law allows for a Muslim man to marry up to four wives, provided that he treats them equally. In Menunggui village, in the forty-seven households for which data were available, there were six polygynous marriages. (In one case, a widow survived her husband who had another wife). This figure is inclusive of all marriages in the households, not just marriages of the heads of household. It is uncommon for a man to have more than two wives. There is no particular stigma attached to polygyny, but economic constraints may prohibit a man from supporting more than one family. A certain man explained his personal reason for marrying more than one wife as a desire for more children, so that he might be cared for in his old age. With so many Bajau children typically leaving for different places after growing up, he wants to have enough children to ensure that at least one or two will stay near home as he gets older.

Divorce was fairly common among those households surveyed in Menunggui. There were four cases where a woman had divorced and remarried, two cases where a woman divorced and did not remarry, and one case where a man had divorced and remarried three times. The actual number of divorces is probably much higher than the data indicate, because this information was always volunteered, never solicited. In the event of a divorce, young children (up to at least seven years of age) will normally stay

with their mother, or with a relative such as a grandparent or aunt. The husband is expected to pay a monthly sum to his former wife for the support of her child(ren), unless or until she has remarried. Older children may often choose with whom they want to stay. There is no redistribution of inherited property or possessions at the time of the divorce; each spouse retains what belongs to him or her. This reflects the ego-centered focus of West Coast Bajau society, in that both men and women move fairly easily in and out of marital commitments without sacrificing their basic personal economic interests. As was previously mentioned, even a man's payment of bridewealth may be returned to him if the divorce occurs soon enough after the marriage.

In summary, marriage among the West Coast Bajau is marked by negotiation and choice rather than by inherent superior-inferior relations between wifegiver and wifetaker, or indeed, between husband and wife. The negotiating process begins between the families of the prospective couple, until the bridewealth and other payments have been settled. In some cases a couple finds it desirable or necessary to go directly to the village chief or *imam*, should their families be unwilling to see the match happen. The negotiating continues after marriage as the couple chooses where and with whom they will live, as befits their particular economic situation. While a man may choose to live with his wife's family and develop certain obligational ties with them on the basis of sharing their household, there are no societally imposed pressures for him to do so. Hence, post-marital residence is governed by choice rather than by prescribed kinship roles. The husband and wife retain their own property after marriage, which has important consequences for post-marital residence and the relative security of the woman, as well as for the inheritance of land by their children. Not even the bond of marriage negates an individual's inherited land holdings, and this indicates the importance of negotiation and choice for Bajau couples in working out the major decisions of their lives.

## 6. Exchange and Identity

### 6.1 Village exchange

While the household is the basic unit of production in West Coast Bajau society, there are certain contexts in which production and exchange occur at a village level. Traditionally, the cultivation of rice was communal work, involving a form of village-level exchange. Although rice production was practiced on individual plots of land, at harvest time people voluntarily formed work parties to both harvest and thresh the rice. The amount of rice collected by each worker was noted. As each worker had his own field harvested, he would be repaid for his services based on how much work he had done for his respective neighbors. This form of reciprocal exchange, called *seliu-liu*, also involved communal feedings. The family whose land was being harvested would provide a rice meal to feed the helpers. The *seliu-liu* is seldom practiced nowadays, as labor has become mechanized by tractors and mills. It is no longer necessary to call upon the help of others in harvesting or husking one's own rice. While such innovations have in many ways improved the lives of rice farmers, they have also contributed to individualism in the culture, as people have become more self-reliant.

However, village-level exchange is still realized among the Bajau, primarily in the form of feasts. Putting on such feasts requires the labor of others, whether neighbors or relatives (often both), and this contributes to the social solidarity and Bajau identity of the village, as does the actual partaking of the feasts. Village exchanges figure prominently when there is a death in the village. The following discussion traces the series of events set in motion at such a time:

When a death occurs in the village, a chain of events is initiated that involves neighbors and kin alike. The body of the deceased is buried within twenty-four hours, if possible. As the body is being prepared for burial at the home by the *imam* and other religious personnel, relatives and acquaintances of the deceased gather at the home to pay their respects to the family and to witness the carrying away of the corpse (on a specially-decorated platform) to the graveyard. This initial large gathering of people at the home of the deceased is called *nibaw*. For seven nights following a death, relatives and village acquaintances gather at the home of the deceased in order to observe what the Bajau call *bejogo*, or 'keep watch'. The clothes and personal possessions of the deceased person are arranged inside the house in a special place called *bangkay-bangkayan*, purportedly to be guarded against disturbance by a spirit-possessed person the Bajau call *mangat*. Relatives of the deceased arrive from distant villages, and many local neighbors come, particularly young people. Coffee and simple snacks are served. People entertain themselves by conversing and playing games, sometimes late into the night. One may consider the *bejogo* to be an event of both social and material exchange. The guests enjoy coffee and an opportunity for games and conversation, while the grieving family of the deceased receives the support of relatives and neighbors.

On the fifth night of the *bejogo*, an important event takes place in preparation for the memorial death feast to be held two days later. This event, known as *ngisi kalas*, involves the wrapping of specially-prepared rice in *silat* leaves. The triangular bundles of rice will then be cooked and distributed to guests attending the death feast to be held two days later. Primarily older women participate in the *ngisi kalas*. These women, summoned by oral invitation, are both relatives of the deceased family (who may come from neighboring villages), and neighbors. As many as forty to fifty women will gather in the house of the deceased for the *ngisi kalas*, which occurs during the *bejogo* and may last for several hours. Their work proceeds in an orderly fashion, as the women seat themselves in small circles and enjoy conversation and refreshments while they work. The women are not paid for their labors, but are asked to volunteer their efforts (the Bajau have a word *buyu'* which means 'to solicit one's volunteer help'). In return, they enjoy refreshments and a festive social occasion. Those villagers who seldom visit others' homes to assist them in *ngisi kalas* or other activities will not have many helpers when it is their turn to host such events. This underlies the importance of reciprocity in Bajau village-level exchanges.

The *bangi pitu'* ('day seven') memorial death feast is the first in a series of five such feasts which a Bajau family puts on, at seven, twenty, forty, one hundred, and three hundred sixty-five days after one of their immediate family member has died. How elaborate these feasts are depends upon the wealth and inclinations of the family. The largest *bangi* feast is the *bangi kementaun*, or anniversary feast, which draws the most feastgoers. An animal may be slaughtered for the anniversary feast, and for some of the smaller *bangi* feasts as well. A typical *bangi* feast is held in the early afternoon, at the

home of the family of the deceased relative. The feastgiver invites his guests by word of mouth beforehand. The number of invited guests is typically between ten to twenty, though for a larger feast they may number up to forty. The most distinguished guest is the *pakir* or religious practitioner who leads the prayers that are performed prior to the feast. The guests gather in a circle on the floor inside the house, and the host announces the purpose for the gathering, at which time he identifies the deceased person being remembered in the feast. The *pakir* then begins the Arabic prayers, which are accompanied by the burning of incense. The other guests join in the prayers. The meal follows just after the prayers. The *pakir* is served first, as the most honored guest. After the guests have eaten, and before they leave, each is presented with a large package called *duang*. The *duang* consists of various cakes, snacks, rice (including the *kalas* prepared two nights before), and food left over from the feast. Each guest brings a *duang* home to his family. In this way the feast is 'extended' to all the households whose respective heads attended the feast.

The cooking for these *bangi* feasts is done by the wife of the feastgiver, who is assisted by her grown daughters, daughters-in-law, and other women relatives. Those who serve the food are typically the sons of the feastgiver, together with other boys or young men of the village whose help has been requested. For the most part, putting on a *bangi* feast is a "family affair," involving the labor of close relatives. A married woman may call upon her consanguineal and affinal kin to assist her in preparing and serving the food. They in turn may call upon her for help when they put on their own *bangi* feast. Kinship ties are clearly important in the preparation of the *bangi* feast. The invited guests are often heads of households in the village, not necessarily related to the feastgoer. In addition to the *pakir*, invited guests may include the *orang tua'* (native chief) and other village leaders. Feastgoers may also include relatives from neighboring villages, though seldom from more distant places. There is no evident material exchange between feastgiver and feastgoer. What the host of the *bangi* feast gains primarily is social prestige, in that he is able to put on the feast and to laden his guests with food to bring home to their families.

The *bangi* feasts have as their stated purpose to remember or "show care for" a deceased relative, though these feasts are neither required nor encouraged by Islam. The giving of *duang* is particular to Bajau *adat* (shared also by the Iranun culture) and is not an Islamic practice. However, the Bajau consider their *duang* as *sedekah*, or alms, given in remembrance of the deceased person. Almsgiving itself is an Islamic practice: the Bajau have integrated this Islamic practice of *sedekah* with their particular traditions and beliefs. Some Bajau say that merit is accrued to the dead through the giving of *sedekah*. For the Bajau, *sedekah* involves obligations to both the living and the dead, and is an important aspect of many feasts.

Some Bajau speak critically of the *bangi* feasts, considering them to be wasteful and lavish affairs which constitute a considerable hardship for ordinary people, and which detract from the whole intention of honoring the dead. There is a possible parallel here with what Kuchiba has observed for villagers in Kedah, West Malaysia, where some villagers regard the traditional Malay *kenduri* feasts as being "wasteful and ostentatious," whereas others believe they are beneficial because they foster reciprocity (1979b:120). Generally speaking, the *bangi* feasts are widely accepted within the Bajau community. Such feasts, because they gather together heads of households in the

village, are an important source of village solidarity. Kuchiba offers the following description of the role of feasts in a Malay village:

In the Malay village, strong dyadic relationships centered on the individual prevail; the villagers feel little solidarity as a community, and exclusive community organizations of long standing which could foster feelings of solidarity are few. In addition, family and kinship relationships are not stabilized within clear boundaries. The resultant feelings of instability are relieved, and the solidarity of the village is reinforced by the Malay custom of inviting each other to communal feasts at every opportunity. At the least, friendship is expressed and reconfirmed through this custom, which is ritualized in the feast. And through the ritual, solidarity is sanctified and strengthened. Where, as in the Malay village, permanent organized neighborhood associations are not found, it is necessary to repeatedly reconfirm community solidarity. (1979b:113–114)

In a way similar to what Kuchiba describes for the Malay village, reciprocal feasts provide a means for the Bajau to strengthen neighbor and family ties. The Bajau people highly value togetherness. A common expression in the language is *Mangan nya' mangan no, asal jo kurung-kurung*, which can be translated as 'whether or not we eat, the important thing is that many people gather together.' In a society where individual choice factors prominently in the organization of the household, as well as in the marriage contract, the feasts offer something of a counterbalance, to draw the community together in shared rituals and to affirm friendships. Reciprocity in the putting on of the *bangi* feasts, as well as attending the feasts, is not obligatory. Nevertheless, reciprocity is recognized as a natural means of strengthening relationships in the village.

While the *bangi* feasts are neither encouraged nor endorsed by Islam, they do involve the reading of Arabic prayers (*mosoduo*) by an *imam* or *pakir*, and hence the context of such feasts is Islamic, as demonstrated also by their concept of the *duang* as *sedekah*. We shall now briefly consider other feasts of the Bajau that are more explicitly grounded in Islamic beliefs and practice. Islam provides the framework for a number of village events; in this way it solidifies community ties and contributes significantly to a shared sense of Bajau identity.

Many feasts performed by the Bajau are directly tied to the Islamic calendar. The observance of Ramadan, during which time Muslims refrain from eating or drinking from dawn until dusk, draws the Bajau together as Muslims who share a common identity and purpose. During Ramadan, nightly prayers are held at the village *surau*. These prayers (*sembahyang tarawih*) involve both men and women, primarily young or middle-aged. After prayers, a rice meal and drinks are served to everyone in attendance. Different families in the village prepare the food on a rotational basis, and this is organized in Menunggu by the Committee of Village Development and Safety (JKKK). This giving of food by community members is also considered to be a form of *sedekah*, which people offer in the remembrance of close loved ones who have died. The *tarawih* prayers and subsequent feedings are truly a village-wide event. Nearly every family is involved in the preparation of food at some time during the month, and participation in the prayers is open to anyone who wants to come. In this respect, the *tarawih* prayers differ importantly from the *bangi* feasts, which happen irregularly and

with participation only from invited heads of households. The success of the *tarawih* event hinges upon strong leadership and grassroots support. Where these are lacking, as in some neighboring villages, the prayers and village feedings are not performed.

The month of Ramadan ends with the **Hari Raya Puasa** holiday, the occasion for much feasting and visiting. Every home is opened to visitors, and exchanges occur between neighbors and relatives alike. Reciprocal visitation is expected. No one particular feast is associated with **Hari Raya Puasa**, but as this event nears, a number of households perform feasts called the *kenduri arwah*, which are practiced in honor of deceased family members. At such feasts, *sedekah* is given to the *pakir* (who leads the prayers), considered as alms to accrue merit for those remembered during the prayers. Most of the other feasts that the Bajau observe are related not to the Islamic calendar but rather to events in a Muslim's life cycle. An obvious example here is the marriage feast already discussed in the previous section. In addition, feasts may be performed at a baby's hair-cutting ceremony, and to celebrate a boy's circumcision. Smaller feasts are held to honor the fulfillment of a vow, or to request divine protection in the warding off of sickness or other danger.

What can be said to summarize the nature and significance of the Bajau feasts? It is difficult to make generalizations about the feasts, given their great number and diversity. We have seen that, particularly where large scale preparations are required (such as the all-night cooking prior to the wedding feast, and the *ngisi kalas*), the feastgiver calls upon the help of his relatives and village neighbors alike. In terms of the attendance of feasts, feastgoers sometimes include relatives but they nearly always include village neighbors, as seen for the *bangi* feasts. From this we may conclude that participation in feasts, whether as feastgiver or feastgoer, is motivated as much by village residence as by kinship ties, though one's close kin are usually called upon in the putting on of feasts.

Concerning their significance for the Bajau community, the feasts constitute a form of natural (not obligatory) reciprocal exchange, both in putting on the feasts and in attending such feasts. Reciprocal labor is no longer practiced in the cultivation of rice, but it is still practiced in the putting on of feasts and the *ngisi kalas*. Reciprocity in the attendance of village feasts encourages village solidarity. In all of its forms, reciprocity works against the individualistic tendencies of the culture, tendencies which were illustrated in the previous discussion of the Bajau household and marriage. But the feasts and other exchanges do more than promote social cohesion in the village. They also constitute familiar expressions of Bajau *adat*, viewed within an Islamic context that provides yet further layers of shared meaning. Hence, the feasts and other Bajau exchanges contribute importantly to Bajau identity. It is to the question of identity that we now turn.

## 6.2 Identity

Menunggui is casually described as a Bajau village. What makes it a Bajau village? Certainly not a homogeneous Bajau population. Tables 4 and 5 offer a breakdown of the interethnic composition of marriages in Menunggui village.

Table 4. Ethnic Composition of Marriages in Menunggui Village.

<i>Husband's Ethnicity</i>	<i>Wife's Ethnicity</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
West Coast Bajau	West Coast Bajau	24	51.1
West Coast Bajau	Non-West Coast Bajau	12	25.5
Non-West Coast Bajau	West Coast Bajau	11	23.4
<b>Totals</b>		<b>47</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 5. Breakdown of Interethnic Marriages in Menunggui Village.

<i>Husband's Ethnicity</i>	<i>Wife's Ethnicity</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
West Coast Bajau	Dusun <sup>b</sup>	10	43.5
Dusun	West Coast Bajau	5	21.7
West Coast Bajau	Malay	1	4.35
Malay	West Coast Bajau	1	4.35
West Coast Bajau	Javanese	1	4.35
Javanese	West Coast Bajau	1	4.35
West Coast Bajau	Cagayan/Brunei	1	4.35
Filipino	West Coast Bajau	1	4.35
Ubian	West Coast Bajau	1	4.35
Iranun	West Coast Bajau	1	4.35
<b>Totals</b>		<b>23</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>b</sup>Of these Dusun women, one is mixed Dusun/Chinese.

As shown in table 4, nearly half (twenty-three out of forty-seven) of the marriages for which data were available in Menunggui are interethnic. (In every marriage at least one spouse had at least one Bajau parent.) Furthermore, nearly the same number of Bajau husbands married non-Bajau wives as Bajau wives married non-Bajau husbands. As shown in table 5, the majority of non-Bajau spouses are Dusun, whom the Bajau refer to as *Idaan* (a term they often extend to all non-Muslim native Sabahans). While the data may appear to indicate that there are no significant exogamous restrictions, the Bajau do not marry non-Muslims. Hence, those Dusun married to Bajau spouses in Menunggui have *posok Islam* ('enter Islam'). In this regard, note that while the Iranun constitute another substantial Muslim people within Kota Belud District, there is less intermarriage between Bajau and Iranun than between Bajau and Dusun, at least in Menunggui. Those Dusun who have married Bajau spouses and stayed in Menunggui have become very much integrated into the life of the village. Consider the following case study:



### 6.2.1 Case study #4

MJ is the founding *orang tua'* (native chief) of Menunggui village, having served in that role from 1977 until 1994. His parents were both Dusun, and moved to Menunggui from the Dusun village of Piasau in 1940. In 1950, when MJ was five years old, his father converted to Islam. Seven of his children (including MJ) joined their father in entering Islam, while four others (including the three oldest) did not convert and today live in Dusun villages. As for MJ, he married a Bajau woman from Menunggui and raises his own family here. Two of MJ's siblings who have married Bajau spouses have also stayed in Menunggui and raise families there.

Here is the case of a Dusun who, having grown up a Muslim and married a Bajau wife, came to assume the role of *orang tua'* or native chief, a position of obvious influence in the village and one that requires knowledge of Bajau *adat*. The case study illustrates the degree to which persons of non-Bajau ancestry may become incorporated into the Bajau community. In MJ's case above, he had the advantage of growing up in the area, having already become a Muslim. Non-Bajau spouses who come from the Kota Belud area, even if they grew up non-Muslim, most likely have already learned to speak Bajau. (It was already pointed out that most residents of Kota Belud District know how to speak some Bajau no matter what their ethnic background.) Spouses newly arrived to Kota Belud, without a prior exposure to the Bajau language and culture, do not always make the adjustment to the village with ease. But most non-Bajau spouses who have married and settled in Menunggui, even from places as distant as Peninsular Malaysia, eventually become fluent in Bajau, to the extent that some will even speak it at home with their spouse and children.

The crucial role of the village as an enculturating influence is demonstrated by the cases of two Menunggui Bajau men who each have two Dusun wives. Each man fathers one family in Menunggui and one family in a non-Bajau village. The Dusun wives who live in Menunggui have learned Bajau and speak it in the home, whereas the ones who live outside of Menunggui cannot speak Bajau and use only Malay in the home with their husbands and children. Furthermore, I have observed the Dusun spouses of Bajau in Menunggui participating in the full range of Bajau village and cultural activities, such as the *ngisi kalas* earlier mentioned, as well as the *bangi* memorial feasts. One is tempted to consider such non-Bajau spouses as having in effect become Bajau themselves, so far as their identity is concerned. However, they continue to be referred to by their ethnic origin, whether *Idaan* or *Jawa* (Javanese) or whatever their ethnic background is. Ethnic origin is no barrier to participation in Bajau society, but neither is it simply forgotten. The more important question is, does interethnic marriage threaten the identity of the Bajau village? From the evidence discussed above, it appears that the answer is 'no'.

Considering this question from the aspect of language use, maintenance of the mother tongue is one strong indicator of cultural preservation. Menunggui village presents a rather ambiguous picture. Everyday interaction in the village continues to be predominantly in Bajau, except sometimes between parents and young children. Of the

twenty-nine households in Menunggui for which data were obtained, Bajau is used with the children in thirteen cases, whereas Malay is used with the children in the other sixteen (even though husband and wife may use Bajau with each other). Looking more specifically at interethnic households, of the fifteen for which data were available, Bajau is used in five of them and Malay in ten. This indicates that interethnic marriage is not the only factor contributing to the (increasing) use of Malay with children in Menunggui households. Many couples, even those in which both husband and wife are of Bajau origin, perceive that using Malay with their children in the home gives their children a head start for their schooling. The use of Malay is particularly common in those homes with small children. It is not clear at this point whether such children will revert to using Bajau with their parents in later years. Apart from this, the Bajau language itself, like other Sabahan languages, is becoming increasingly influenced by Malay.

We return to our original question: What makes the village a “Bajau village,” if mixed marriages do not seem to significantly threaten Bajau identity? What, in other words, is at the heart of Bajau identity? Not only the Bajau language itself, but Bajau practices—such as the *bejogo*, the *ngisi kalas*, and the *bangi* feasts—continue to thrive in Menunggui and other villages. These practices, in addition to fostering social cohesion in the village through patterns of reciprocity, contribute importantly to Bajau identity. Non-Bajau spouses become enculturated into this web of social interactions when they take up residence in the village. It is my contention, then, that the forging of a Bajau identity depends crucially on the maintenance of the village feasts and other exchanges previously discussed.

These exchanges, in fact nearly all aspects of Bajau social life, are strongly influenced by Islam. While many Bajau social practices are neither prescribed nor endorsed by Islam, they are nonetheless performed in some kind of Islamic context, such as the reading of Arabic prayers prior to *bangi* feasts. Many other aspects of Bajau village life, such as the observance of Ramadan and **Hari Raya Puasa**, are more explicitly Islamic. One can appreciate how a newcomer to the Bajau community, once he or she has converted to Islam, becomes integrated into Bajau social life. Islam enfolds its adherents in a common religious belief system and ritual, thus contributing to a sense of shared identity among the Bajau. Any discussion of Bajau identity must take into account both Bajau *adat* and the Islamic context in which it is so often practiced.

## 7. Conclusion

The primary social organizing unit in Bajau society is the household, the backbone of which is the nuclear family but which often expands to stem-family arrangements, depending upon the stage in the developmental cycle of the household. Kinship is of obvious importance in shaping the structure of the household and several of its domains, such as inheritance and the care of elderly parents. But the Bajau household is governed more by choice of residence than by prescribed family roles. Young people may leave their natal households prior to marriage if work or schooling opportunities beckon them elsewhere. Siblings normally inherit lands from their mother or father but may work out various arrangements among themselves to suit their preferences.

Elderly parents are housed and otherwise looked after depending upon arrangements decided upon by the family. Because of the emphasis on choice in deciding residence, the Bajau household is of a fluid and impermanent nature. Even non-kin may be incorporated into the household, at least temporarily. The picture of the Bajau household that emerges is markedly individualistic in nature.

This individualism is further evidenced in Bajau engagement and marriage. Marriage among the Bajau is kin exogamous; marriage between close cousins is discouraged. In fact, the Bajau frequently marry outside their own ethnic group, the only limitation being that the spouse will have converted to Islam. Bridewealth is negotiated between wifegiver and wifetaker rather than delivered as an ultimatum by the wifegiver. A young Bajau couple may choose where to reside after marriage, following their personal and economic interests rather than norms prescribed for them by the culture. While residence is frequently among kin, the emphasis is on the choice of the couple. Here again, choice of residence is more determinative for Bajau social organization than are kinship ties. The husband and wife retain their own inherited lands after marriage, so that individual interests are by no means negated by the marriage contract. Choice governs nearly every aspect of the Bajau marriage, be it choice exercised as a couple, or negotiation exercised between partners in the marriage contract.

Despite the disappearance of some forms of cooperative labor, such as was once used for harvesting rice, reliance upon others' labor continues to characterize Bajau society. This is seen particularly in the Bajau feast. Residence is at least as important as kinship ties for determining who participates in the feasts, since village neighbors very often work together in putting on the feasts as well as attending them. To put on a major Bajau feast requires the labor of many people, and this encourages a generalized form of reciprocity at the village level, and between kin. Attendance at such feasts fosters solidarity among invited guests, and between feastgivers and feastgoers. Hence, the individualism of Bajau society, as seen in the emphasis on choice in the Bajau household and Bajau marriage, is countered by village-level exchanges where one is obligated in various ways to his neighbors and kin, and where social cohesion is otherwise strengthened.

Furthermore, the Bajau feasts and other exchanges help define Bajau identity, since they derive from Bajau *adat*. Islam provides one kind of shared framework for these village customs, and facilitates the entry of non-Bajau spouses into the village as they are (or become) brothers and sisters in the Islamic community. Hence, while in some ways the Bajau are an individualistic people, their community life is continually reinforced, through cooperative social behavior and also through a sense of shared identity. The Bajau village is where this reinforcement occurs. It remains to be seen whether the Bajau village will continue to function to preserve a distinctively Bajau culture and society, as young people move away from their villages in search of life opportunities elsewhere, and as families increasingly use Malay rather than Bajau in the home.

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