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TO BECOME “CHRISTIAN BAJAU”:  
THE SAMA DILAUT’S CONVERSION TO  
PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANITY IN  
DAVAO CITY, PHILIPPINES

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**To Become “Christian Bajau”:  
The Sama Dilaut’s Conversion to Pentecostal Christianity in Davao City, Philippines**

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**Abstract**

The predicament of the Sama Dilaut who fled conflict-mired areas in the Southern Philippines northward to other cities in the Philippines was recently reported through various media; yet little scholastic work was done to explore the meaning of the changes they experienced. This paper attempts to analyze the mechanism of their conversion to Pentecostal Christianity and its impact among the Sama Dilaut migrants in Davao City, Mindanao, Philippines at the turn of the 21st century. The bulk of the data for this paper was collected through ethnographic fieldwork from 1997 to 2005.

I will examine three questions: 1) how the Philippine government’s policies on poverty alleviation for cultural minorities framed the life of the Sama Dilaut migrants; 2) why the Sama Dilaut migrants chose Pentecostal Christianity, not other organizations that were also willing to help; 3) how their conversion reconfigured the Sama Dilaut community, from within and in relation to its host society.

I will argue that in contrast to the “the Sama Dilaut experience with official Islam in Sabah, Malaysia” by Japanese anthropologist NAGATSU Kazufumi, the acceptance of the Christian faith among the Sama Dilaut in Davao City has not offered them upward social mobility in the main stream society; instead, it served as significant apparatus to reconstruct their ethnic identity to survive as the “Christian Bajau” in the multi-ethnic urban market society. I will also argue that it created space for the converts to conceptualize and operate an economy of gifts, which does not contradict the individualism that Pentecostalism brings its followers

**Introduction**

The Sama-Bajau constitutes one of the more distinctive maritime populations in Insular Southeast Asia. It spreads over three nation-states: Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. According to

Japanese anthropologist Kazufumi Nagatsu, the total Sama-Bajau population is approximately 1,100,000 (Nagatsu 2010a). Until the mid-twentieth century, some Sama-Bajau groups lived in boats and were known as “sea nomads” in Western literature. The ethnic names those groups used to call themselves varied from place to place. The most famous ones used in academic literature are the Bajau Laut in Malaysia and the Sama Dilaut in the Philippines. Both groups were studied by American anthropologists in the 1960s (Nimmo 2001; Sather 1997). At that time, the sea-based Sama abandoned boat-living, and it was presumed that they would be integrated into the surrounding Muslim populations.

But the conflict between the Muslim secessionist groups and the Philippines government forces in southern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago in the 1970s was a significant event that changed this. War, and the attendant deterioration of peace and order, especially the entry of Tausug pirates in their areas eventually drove the Sama-Bajau to emigrate. (Nimmo 2001; Aoyama 2006; Bracamonte 2005). Some Sama-Bajau moved southward to Sabah, Malaysia, while others moved northward to other cities in the Philippines. Another reason behind the emigration of the Sama-Bajau, particularly the Sama-Dilaut, was the introduction of the commercial cultivation of agaragar (seaweeds) in the Sulu archipelago at about the same time. Initially, the cultivators were the Sama, but later they were displaced by the Tausug who came to seek relatively more peaceful places as the cited warfare escalated in their own areas in Jolo island (Nimmo 2001).

The predicament of the Sama Dilaut who fled conflict-mired areas in the Southern Philippines northward to other cities in the Philippines has been recently reported through various media. Recent audio-visual presentations in international circulation include “Dancing on Waves,” a documentary film featuring the hardship the Sama (called the Bajau in the film) migrants experienced in the urban centers in Luzon, including the National Capital Region (Metro Manila), by a Filipino freelance director Rosalie Matilac. This film showed the tradition of the Sama such as decorated houseboats and their distinctive dancing that were lost or about to be lost as circumstances forced them to live on land. It successfully brought out some real faces and voices of the Sama-Bajau migrants, whom the audience would not know much about except for vague images of beggars in the streets or divers for coins thrown at them from ferry boats at piers. Aside from documentaries, personal videos that capture the Sama-Bajau’s (mostly referred to as the Bajau in the video clips) contemporary life in urban centers of the Philippines can be also found on YouTube.

There have also been reported attempts of NGOs to help uplift the living standard of the Sama-Bajau who live in marginalized squalor in large cities other than Metro Manila. For example: Ramon Aboitiz Foundation Inc. (RAFI) started a “Bajau Integrated Area Development Project” in Cebu (RAFI 2012a; RAFI 2012b); Hope for Change helped a Sama Dilaut community settle in Iligan (Bracamonte 2005); and Integral Development Services (IDS), Philippines, worked with the “Badjao,” or a mixed population of Sinama speaking groups including both sea-based and land-based groups, in Davao (Aoyama 2010).

Such development projects, basing on the development framework suggested by international donors and other concerned parties from local government units, colleges and churches, were normally designed to empower the said communities. The project components typically comprised education, health, livelihood, and infrastructure, including housing. They were supposed to be carried out through the collaboration or participation of the community members as beneficiaries. While promoting the integration or mainstreaming of the target communities into the surrounding societies, those projects, whether explicitly stated or not, were carefully designed not to force cultural change: rather, they sometimes even attempted to promote the culture and heritage of the target communities. But in any case, those projects did not seem to be particularly concerned with the non-material or spiritual domain of the Sama-Bajau's life, such as religion.

Besides, little scholastic work was done to explore the meaning of the cultural changes the Sama-Bajau in such urban centers experienced. Especially, literature on the religious aspects of their urban life was virtually nonexistent. A few scholars wrote that part of the Bajau's social denigration was framed in religious terms and that the Sama-Bajau (the Sama Dilaut in particular), was typically regarded as a people "without religion," and therefore, "not civilized." (Bracamonte 2005; Aoyama 2006). This negative image of being "pagan" could be traced back to the historical formation of ethno-class in Sulu archipelago where the non-Islamized Sama were treated as a second-class people by other dominant ethnic groups such as the Tausug and the land-based Sama who embraced Islam much earlier (Stone 1962; Warren 1981). While the general population in urban Philippines outside the Sulu archipelago does not necessarily share such historical context, being without religion (which refers to revealed religions such Christianity and Islam), may still provoke images of primitive, marginalized outsiders in the host societies where their neighbors are mostly Christian or Muslim.

This paper attempts to examine the experience of their conversion to Pentecostal Christianity and its impact among the Sama Dilaut migrants in Davao City, Mindanao, Philippines at the turn of the 21st century. The bulk of the data for this paper was collected through a series of ethnographic fieldwork from 1997 to 2005. The data collection techniques employed were combinations of household surveys, surveys on social inequality, selective personal interviews on oral life histories, and participant observation. The Sama Dilaut migrants lived with other Sinama speaking migrants (land-based Sama) in a depressed area called Hacondo (pseudonym) along the coast of Davao City. Within the settlement, there was a clear boundary between the Sama-Dilaut and the other groups. Non-Sama populations in Davao City, however, usually were not aware of such a difference, and tended to group the Sinama speaking residents in Hacondo generally as the "Bajau" or "Badjao," with or without negative connotations. The Sinama speaking residents in Hacondo accepted the term the "Bajau," and indeed, used it to refer to themselves to the non-Sama populations in the city. In this paper, I will focus on the Sama Dilaut in particular, but also use the terms the "Bajau" and the Sama-Bajau when it is necessary.

Following this introduction, this paper is organized as follows. First, I will briefly review the Philippine government's development policies for cultural minorities, which set institutional frameworks for the life of the Sama Dilaut migrants in urban centers. Second, I will describe how the Sama Dilaut migrants chose to accept Pentecostal Christianity, not the other development projects offered by other organizations. Third, I will try to analyze how their Christian conversion reconfigured the Sama Dilaut community, from within and in relation to its host society. In conclusions, I will delineate the difference in impact between "the Sama Dilaut experience with official Islam in Sabah, Malaysia" studied by Japanese anthropologist NAGATSU Kazufumi (Nagatsu 2004) and the acceptance of the Christian faith among the Sama Dilaut in Davao, Philippines, which I am presenting in this paper.

### **1. Philippine government's development policies for cultural minorities**

As Yasuaki TAMAKI, a Japanese anthropologist wrote in an overview of the Philippine government's development policies from the American colonial period to the early 21st century, the Philippine government's development plans have two distinct features (Tamaki, 2010: 67). The first is that, compared with the counterparts of Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippine government's development plans were not regularly made. In fact, they were planned rather in "unplanned" manners over the periods of time. The second is that while its master plans and policies constantly viewed the private sector and the market mechanism as primary drives for development, the contents of individual policies changed from one administration to administration. Those policies were formulated not necessarily to achieve long-term development goals, but rather to deal with the socio-economic situations (such as serious security problems) that each administration faced during its own time.

Accordingly, there was no consistency in the Philippine government development plans on how to regard the "margins" (Tamaki, 2010: 67). The term "margins" here refers to ethnic minorities, especially indigenous peoples. For the purpose of this paper, as Eder and McKenna (2004) carefully did so, I also divide "minority ethnic group" into two categories, indigenous peoples and Filipino Muslims. The review below mainly concerns with the former. The political terms to refer to indigenous peoples constantly changed, Non-Christian Tribes, Tribal Filipinos, Indigenous Cultural Communities, etc. Reflecting the political intensions in each period, different government agencies were created and dissolved (Eder and McKenna 2004; Tamaki 2010; ILO 1993). However, despite such fluidity of the government agencies, as Tamaki (2010: 68) pointed out, one thing can be clearly said: the national government always viewed those peoples as obstacles to its development project. Therefore, the government constantly attempted to assimilate or integrate them into the nation-state. This lasted until the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown by so-called the People's Power in 1986.

For the first time in the nation's history, the "1987-1992 Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan" under the administration of President Corazon Aquino (1986-1992) referred to the Indigenous Peoples (called "cultural communities" in its Chapter 9). Then, "Updates of the Philippine Development Plan, 1990-92" declared that the government should consider the Indigenous Peoples (called "tribal Filipino") not as mere beneficiaries of development, but rather as the partner for development (Tamaki, 2010: 79). There are also two other factors that we should consider to understand the government's policies for the development of cultural minorities in the process of re-democratization following the Aquino administration. The first is the normative framework. The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines unprecedentedly stipulated articles and sections on the Indigenous Peoples' rights, including the Declaration of Principles (Article II, Section 22), Local Government (Autonomous Regions of Muslim Mindanao and Cordilleras, Section 15-21, Article X) and National Economy and Patrimony (Ancestral Domains, Section 15, Article XII). Second, two institutional frameworks were introduced. The first one is "The Local Government Code of 19912 (R.A. 7160), which enabled NGOs, POs (People's Organizations) including indigenous cultural communities to participate in the policy process in Local Government Units (LGUs). The second is "The Act of Indigenous Peoples Rights of 1997" (R.A. 8270), or IPRA, which I will brief below.

The IPRA was enacted under the administration of President Fidel Ramos (1992-1998). It is often praised as an innovative act that stipulates the indigenous peoples' rights and the protection of such rights in a comprehensive manner (UNDP 2004). As Tamaki (2010: 97) noted, however, its contents themselves should not be considered original because they were apparently influenced by the ILO Convention, No. 107, 1957 (Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention), its amended version, ILO Convention, No. 169, 1989 (Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries), and the draft of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 1993. But the fact that the enactment of such act as a domestic law in a "developing country" as early as in 1997 should be considered praiseworthy. The essence of the IPRA is that it stipulates the indigenous peoples' rights to the ancestral domains (Chapter III). To implement the IPRA-related policies, National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) was created in 1998. NCIP has the authority to review the applications of the claims of the ancestral domains placed by indigenous peoples, and if such applications are approved, then to issue the Certification of Ancestral Land Claim (CALC).

The IPRA, combined with NCIP, serves as a stepping stone for the Philippine government to protect the rights of the indigenous peoples and include them as its citizens. In reality, however, two major concerns remain. The first is the effectiveness of the IPRA. Because of the complicated procedures, it turned out to be too difficult for most of the unlettered indigenous peoples to apply for the CALC solely on their own, and therefore, in most cases NGOs and other organizations support them on such procedures. It is also pointed out that the IPRA lacks a punitive clause. Besides, intense resistance

against the IPRA comes from those who view the act as a major obstacle of development projects and corporative activities (Tamaki, 2010: 99). The second is a question on the potential beneficiaries of the IPRA, which primarily centers on the rights to the land. Even if the chapters and sections on the ancestral domains in the IPRA were thoroughly implemented, would that be able to benefit all the indigenous peoples in the Philippines? The scholars who studied cases of indigenous peoples or ethnic cultural minorities in urban centers expressed their doubts about the effectiveness of the IPRA because it fundamentally lacks the framework to embrace cultural minorities with higher spatial mobility and without specific territorial demarcations on land (Aoyama 2006; Tamaki 2009; Tamaki 2010).

As stated above, the Philippine government historically viewed the cultural minorities as obstacles to its development plans. It was only after re-democratization set in under President Aquino's administration that the government began to regard the cultural minorities as its partners for development, and established the institutional framework to protect their rights as Indigenous Peoples. Nonetheless, such framework was limited to Muslim Filipinos and larger groups of Indigenous Peoples (ethnic cultural minorities), and it did not consider other smaller ethnic cultural minorities, who are less politically organized, less sessile, and therefore less recognized by the government, to enjoy the government protection. Marginalized ethnic populations with higher spatial mobility offer examples worth consideration. Even among such marginalized populations, there exist various levels of socioeconomic and political status according to the relationship with the other in each local society. Tamaki (2009) studied the Aeta, a group of indigenous people in Tayabas City of Luzon Island. He revealed that the government, schools, churches and NGOs massively started their interventions to support the Aeta in the early 1990s, which eventually led to the emergence and enhancement of the leadership among the Aeta. In contrast, in the case of the Sama Dilaut migrants in Davao City, Mindanao, when the author began her first fieldwork in 1997, very little assistance from the government or NGOs was seen to reach their settlement. With scarce resources, how could this group of people attempt to shift their relationship with the local government and their neighbors of other dominant ethnic groups to insure their survival and improvement of social being in the city? This is the question I will examine in the following section.

## **2. How did the Sama Dilaut migrants in Davao City accept Pentecostal Christianity?**

### **2.1 The socioeconomic and political conditions of the Sama Dilaut in Davao City in the late 1990s**

The timing of the Sama Dilaut's Christian conversion in Davao City overlaps the era of the post-EDSA re-democratization. This period is characterized by the introduction of a series of neo-liberal economic reforms in the country. It is also in this period that the government formulated more comprehensive measures for poverty alleviation. Such anti-poverty measures were coupled with the

institutionalization of the participation of civil society in the political process, and decentralization. For example, the minimum basic needs (MBN) was meant to be met through the initiative and participation of the LGU, Barangay in particular, the smallest unit of administration in the Philippines, and potentially, through the collaboration with NGOs and POs as well. Yet, despite the progress in such institutional framework, it did not automatically guarantee that the mainstream society could reach out to all the underprivileged to the very bottom of the social ladder. One of such marginalized ethnic communities is the Sama Dilaut in Davao City.

The research site is located in a depressed area called Isla Bella (pseudonym) along the coast of the Davao Gulf. Davao is a multiethnic city, with a majority Christian population, mostly the speakers of Visayan languages including Cebuano (the lingua franca in the city). However, Isla Bella is known for its relatively high density of Muslim populations. When I started my first fieldwork in 1997, the Barangay Captain and most of the Barangay Councilmen controlling Isla Bella were Maranao, one of the major Muslim groups in Mindanao. From 1998 to 1999, I conducted my first household survey in Isla Bella. The data was collected from all "Bajau" households (Sama Dilaut and land-based Sama other than Sama Laminusa who insisted they should be considered different from the "Bajau" for religious and other reasons) in Isla Bella and also from the non-Bajau households (Maranao, Tausug, Cebuano, and Sama Laminusa) in the two areas adjacent to the Bajau-inhabited areas. The Bajau households covered by this survey were a total of 184, while the non-Bajau ones counted 180.

The results of the 1998/1999 household survey in Isla Bella revealed that the "Bajau" were more economically disadvantaged than their neighbors from other ethnic groups. Their educational attainment was also significantly lower with the average of 1.2 years (0 year in mean) among the males and 0.9 years (ditto) among the females respectively. Most of the males at the income earning age claimed to be fishermen. However, the productivity of their fishing operations was generally low, and they did not earn enough to support their households. Some males abandoned fishing and became shell and pearl vendors, while quite a few females sold "ukay-ukay," or secondhand clothes, to make money. In addition, some of the elders, females, and children were reported to be beggars. The respondents usually stressed that the Bajau were all hard working, but their income levels were not only small but also subject to day-to-day fluctuations. Aside from income and expenditures, the Bajau households in general also showed substantial disadvantage in access to both formal and informal credit markets, housing facilities, and the possession of durable goods than the other ethnic groups.

The standard household survey I employed above was designed based on the census. Its results might give the impression that the "Bajau" in Isla Bella were uniformly poor, or the poorest of the poor, in the urban center. Nonetheless, a disparity in social status did exist among them. In 1999, I also conducted a survey on the subjective sense of inequality among the Bajau. It was found that there were five kinship-based groups, which were ranked according to the shared criteria for higher and lower community standings. The top two groups turned out to be land-based Sama, who had heavier Muslim orientations and relatively stable sources of income. The third and fifth groups were Sama-



Dilaut, and the fourth, another group of land-based Sama. It is these three groups with lower community statuses that would accept Christian faith later. Interestingly, the higher criteria most frequently mentioned among the twenty raters in this survey include "those who receive assistance from the outside, such as the government," and "those who became Christians," despite the fact that the survey was conducted before the massive conversion.

The economic predicament drove the Sama Bajau to search for resources that they needed to manage and cope with risks that arose in daily life outside their settlement. Such resources should be accessed only through negotiation with other dominant ethnic groups. However, the Sama-Bajau in Davao City lacked the capacity to negotiate with the Barangay, most of whose members were Muslim Maranao (Aoyama 2010). In the late 1990s, some Christian Cebuano people visited the Sama Bajau in the research site. Among them were social workers from City Social Services and Development of Davao (CSSDO), a concerned individual from CARITAS, a charity arm of the Roman Catholic Church, and her friends. Some of them continued to deliver assistance for a certain period, while the others only came sporadically. Aside from assistance in kind (food, stationery for children, etc.), they also offered adult literacy programs, livelihood projects, various forms of assistance for children to promote school education, and so on. Nonetheless, their projects did not always produce substantial results due to several problems: poor infrastructures; communication barriers that arose from cultural and linguistic differences; insufficient information, knowledge and understanding of the "Bajau" in the research site as a mixture of Sinama speaking populations from different places of origin; limited financial capacities of the organizations; and the insecurity of the employment status of the social workers (contractual workers). Besides, the difficulty with identification of the leaders in the Sama-Bajau settlement made it even harder for the outsider to find the appropriate entry points (Aoyama 2010).

I also conducted a survey on the inter-ethnic-group images in 1999. Its results showed the non-Bajau respondents tended to attribute the predicament of their "Bajau" neighbors primarily to the Bajau's own defects in norms and values, which they believed led to their "lazy" way of life. It should be also noted here that very few respondents related the Sama-Bajau's sufferings to the socioeconomic and political structures of the surrounding society. The negative images about the "Bajau" were associated with the lack of "cleanness," "knowledge," "diligence," and "religion." Asked what would be needed for the "Bajau" to improve their standard of living, non-Bajau respondents suggested "livelihood projects," "education," "group consultations for value formation," and other projects mostly related to economic activities and education of the children. Put another way, these responses can be interpreted to reflect the popular discourse that the "Bajau" would not be able to achieve upward social mobility unless their culture and values were changed (Aoyama 2006). It should be also stressed that "being without religion" was often further related to the low status of the "Bajau" being "uncivilized."

## **2.2 Brief history of the Sama Dilaut church in Hacondo**

Surprisingly, in 2002, two thirds of the Sama Bajau (108 out of the 180 households) in the research site claimed to be Christian. This is a dramatic increase, considering the fact that only nine households claimed so back in 1999. At that time, approximately 80 per cent (147 out of the 184 households) reported practicing their indigenous beliefs called “mboq” in the Sinama language. By 2002, though, two churches already stood in the research site. One was Southern Baptist, and the other, Pentecostal. This paper focuses on the latter, which came to the area earlier and had more followers then. This church was first developed by the Sama Dilaut with the middle community status in the settlement, and later joined by the Sama Dilaut with the lowest community status. Both kinship-based groups were originally from Zamboanga City and its neighboring areas. They shared the similar linguistic and cultural characteristics, although the former showed somewhat better socioeconomic adaptation in Davao City.

The deacon of the church is called Pastor John (pseudonym). His self-reported birthday is December in 1966, and he was born in Rio Hondo, Zamboanga City. As an adult man, he used to live with his wife and children in a “bangka” (small boat with outriggers), and did many businesses to support his family. Sometimes he sold pearl and shell products to the crew of cargo ships, and at other times, he worked as tourist guide in beach resorts. Occasionally, he went gathering marine products in the near waters. He was in his early twenties when he made the initial contact with Christian missionaries in the late 1980s. A Sama Dilaut man, one of his rivals in shell and pearl business, cast a curse on him. The effect of the curse was deadly, and he became so sick that neither quack doctors (“anawal”) nor spiritual leaders (“djin”) proved to be effective. He was healed only when a land-based Sama pastor from Alliance Evangelical Church in Zambowood prayed to God for him. Later, he met Pastor Jorge (pseudonym), a native speaker of Illongo (one of the Visayan languages), and received baptism in the form of total immersion in the sea. Back then, dominant Muslim groups (Tausug and land-based Sama) in Rio Hondo and its neighboring areas discriminated against the Sama Dilaut, and would not allow them to become Muslim. But they did not overtly protest against the Christianization of the Sama Dilaut.

John and his family left Rio Hondo when Pastor Jorge decided to leave for Davao del Sur Province, where he was originally from, and invited them to come with him. By the early 1990s, John and his family settled in Isla Bella. In 1993, with the money that Pastor Jorge contributed, John built a house, in which he and his family presently reside. At the time, the house also served as a meeting place for worship and prayers. The members of the church were no more than three families, namely his own, his brother’s one and their in-laws. Although the church was so small, it was important in its own right: it helped make their faith visible to the other. Indeed, it soon began to attract more evangelical missionaries from outside. Such missionaries brought not only resources as gifts and love offerings but also a sense of “respect” to John and his fellows who became “Christian Bajau.” The resources, including cash, were collected and distributed by Pastor Jorge and John. Most of them were utilized to

improve the maintenance and extension of the church, infrastructures (walkways, electricity and water), helping the church member uplift their plight and pursue better quality of life. By 1994, the church members increased to fifteen families. As the church members agreed, John became a pastor. It was also around the same time that Pastor John and his followers joined “God’s People Christian Fellowship,” an indigenous independent Pentecostal Church headed by a Cebuano pastor in downtown Davao City. Since then, Pastor John’s church has become “God’s People Badjao Fellowship.” Pastor Jorge, an independent church establishing pastor, agreed before he left Isla Bella in 1998.

From the year 2000 onward, Pastor John continued to develop his agency as the leader of the “Christian Bajau” in Isla Bella. The massive influx of his Sama Dilaut neighbors into his church happened around the year 2000 and 2001. This period overlapped with the time Pastor John extended his connections with Christian missionaries outside Isla Bella who had contacts with foreign Christian missionaries from other more developed countries, especially the West. The missionaries who came to help Pastor John during this period include evangelicals from Korea and North America. One of the missionaries who most frequently and passionately visited Pastor John’s church was Pastor Pancho (pseudonym) from California. His wife Sara (ditto) was a registered nurse, and she often accompanied Pastor Pancho to the area. In 2004, the couple settled in Davao City, and since then, they have supported Pastor John’s church in many aspects.

### **3. How did the Christian conversion reconfigure the Sama Dilaut community?**

#### **3.1 Emergence of a new leader, community and congregation**

This section deals with the experience of the first generation of Pentecostal Christian. It covers the time from the year 2003 to 2005. Although I am aware of the vital importance of each individual follower’s experience, I will not discuss it here due to space limitation. Instead, I will focus on the church community with which those individual believers interacted and became embedded. More specifically, I will shed light on the emergence of the Sama Dilaut pastor as a new leader, the emergence of a community and congregation, and the reorganization of the social relationships with other ethnic groups.

Pastor John emerged as a new type of leader among the Sama Dilaut in the research site. Unlike the previous leaders who became such according to their functions (fishing leaders, religious leaders, sociopolitical leaders, etc.), he became a leader with multiple functions. One of the more significant roles he played was obviously a religious leader who served the religious and spiritual needs of his church members. The following role was more secular and more novel: as an intermediary between his church members and the outsider, namely evangelical missionaries at first, and then later on, NGOs and government agencies. Aside from his positive and adventurous character, Pastor John had the advantage in communication over most of the other Sama Dilaut in the research site: He had a

good command of the Cebuano language, the lingua franca in Davao City; Although he was never a fluent English speaker, he was unfazed by outsiders speaking to him in that language; and he also had children who were educated at least in high school and therefore could serve as English-Sinama interpreters when English-speaking visitors came to the area. He associated his ability to communicate with people of different languages as proof that God had given him wisdom and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Pastor John and his wife Doris (pseudonym) together with other Sama Dilaut junior pastors, and youth leaders organized Sunday worship, Wednesday evening worship, women's prayer meetings, youth prayer meetings and other gatherings for the church members in the research site. Among those meetings, Sunday worship was attended by most of the church members regularly. In many cases, people came to the worship as a family, which was typically composed of a husband, his wife, their children, and sometimes grandchildren. Devotions at the church usually started around 8:00 am. Then, worship followed around 9:00 am and lasted until midday. There were no pews or divisions in the church: there was only a raised platform at one end and a spacious floor in front. Pastors and assistants performed their roles on the platform, while the congregation stood or sat on the floor and participated.

The worship involved a lot of emotional verbal and bodily expressions. First, they sang many hymns translated in the Sinama language. The songs were usually accompanied by an electric keyboard and "kulintang" (gongs) and the congregation sang and danced their praises to the Lord. As more members came to join and excitement filled the church, individuals followers stood up one by one, and passionately shared his or her "testimony" to the gathered community. Their testimonies often took forms of narratives in which their faith in God brought them blessings: their problems solved; anxieties mitigated; financial or material needs met; and so on. Such individual testimonies comprised a significant part of the entire Sunday worship. Then, the congregation stood up all together, and expressed its praise and thanksgiving to God through individual free and spontaneous prayers. As the animation mounted, the congregation was invited to place individual offerings in a basket in front of the platform. They continued to sing and dance together until Pastor John finally appeared on stage and the Bible study began. He would let his son or daughter read the Bible passage he selected according to how the Holy Spirit guided him before the worship. Following the Bible reading, he then delivered a very passionate sermon using much body movement and emotional facial expressions. The content of his sermons were meant to meet the needs of the congregation, and he used many episodes and examples to make it easier for the followers to understand.

The worship was often concluded with faith healing, which gave much solace to any church member suffering from illness and other misfortunes. Pastor John, and missionaries from other cultures/countries who were present, prayed for the suffering person, then other members of the church eventually joined the prayer in a very sympathetic and earnest way. Such healing sessions marked the climax of the worship that lasted for hours with strong emotional and bodily involvement,

and it was not unusual for some of the followers to fall into a faint, spiritually overwhelmed. They seemed to have significant impact on the suffering member's psyche to express, in front of the gathered community and evangelical missionaries, his or her faith in God and thankfulness for every blessing that God had given and would continue to give in the future. The Sama Dilaut in the worship looked so different from the "Bajau" in streets; they looked more cheerful, more motivated, more confident, and more comfortable being themselves. In short, the Christian conversion brought a sense of community among the Sama Dilaut as congregation. It nurtured a sense of self-dignity and self-identification in each of the individual follower.

### **3.2 Reorganization of the social relationships with other ethnic groups**

Aside from worship and prayer meetings, the goods and services that the evangelical missionaries brought apparently increased the resources for the Sama Dilaut for their daily life. But that did not produce a substantial change in political relationship between the Sama Dilaut and other ethnic groups in the Barangay. In the first place, the non-Sama populations in the Barangay still had much better access to the government services and NGOs' assistance. They also had higher capacity to negotiate with their partners to draw what they wished to receive according to their daily needs. It could be said that they did not mind the missionaries helping the Sama Dilaut because they were aware that such goods and services were not enough to change the established inter-ethnic-group power relations in Isla Bella. In other words, they viewed the gifts from the missionaries as sporadic "dole-outs" for the marginalized ethnic minority who were not equal "citizens" yet in the sense that the Sama Dilaut did not count as voting constituents at that time. Besides, given that the majority of the Barangay council were Muslim Maranao, there was not much room for the "Christian" Sama Dilaut to instantly improve their political bargaining position.

At the city level, however, their Christian conversion began to make a slight but essential change in the inter-ethnic-group relations between the Sama Dilaut and other ethnic groups, of which Christians formed the majority, in Davao. This change reflected the fact that Pastor John was recognized as the Christian leader of the "Bajau" and supported by missionaries from North America and Korea, as well as wealthy Cebuano figures that had direct connections abroad, especially the West. Such people were locally perceived to be powerful enough to protect the Sama Dilaut from their traditional discrimination by Muslims and other leaders in Isla Bella. Their conversion to Christianity now formed a religious basis for their political acceptance and protection.

Perhaps Pastor John succeeded to a certain degree in utilizing the disparity between the Philippines and the West in order to mitigate the disadvantageous status of the Sama Dilaut against Muslims and mainstream Christians in Davao City. Indeed, his connection with missionaries from North America gradually helped realize the empowerment of the Sama Dilaut in the local politics. In 2005, supported by Pastor Pancho from California, Pastor John worked hard to develop political connections with the city mayor and other economic and political leaders. As Pastor John and his Christian fellows became

well recognized in the wider society, they also began to be recognized as well by their non-Sama neighbors within Isla Bella. The Barangay councils and other political aspirants evidently softened their attitude when the church organized the Sama Dilaut to register as legitimate voters for the local elections.

Pastor John worked hard for his Christian community. Nonetheless, he never expressed his intentions to be directly involved in social movement to improve the status of the Sama Dilaut. It seemed that he managed to build up a sub-system within the existing social structure, in which the Sama Dilaut utilized the help and influence of the outsider (foreign missionaries from the West) as their patrons so that they would not lose any more ground to the dominant ethnic groups in the surrounding society. His Sunday sermons repeatedly stressed that all human beings are equal before God, and that each individual members of his church may receive blessings from God if he or she had faith. But his sermons seldom referred to any interests in participatory community involvement in the Barangay, or other forms of political action, for the benefits of the Sama Dilaut community. Pastor John's indifference to the local politics in those days could be related to the fact that his legitimacy as a pastor and leader had very little to do with the local politics. It depended on his capacity to constantly collect resources from outside and distribute them to his "Sama-Dilaut" church members for their basic survival. Survival comes first before a political base can develop.

## **Conclusions**

This paper investigates the Sama Dilaut migrants' experience with Pentecostal Christianity in Davao City, Mindanao, Philippines in the early 21st century, using secondary sources and first-hand data gathered through fieldwork from 1997 to 2005. Three major conclusions may be drawn. First, against the political and social background and the availability of opportunities in the host society, the acceptance of Christianity by the Sama Dilaut, at least so long as the first generation of the converts are concerned, did not immediately serve as a vehicle for them to pursue upward social mobility. Second, the Christianization, however, proved to function as an apparatus to reconstruct their ethnic identity to survive as the "Christian Bajau" in the multiethnic city of Davao, where the "Bajau" had been marginalized between the mainstream Christians (Roman Catholic and Protestants) and Muslims. This empowerment could be associated with the presence of evangelical missionaries, especially those from the United States, who were perceived by the local populations to present the West. Third, the influx of the Sama Dilaut to the church under a Sama Dilaut pastor led to the emergence of a new community of Sama Dilaut congregants. As they acquired a new religious language, which eventually helped each one of them improve their sense of self-dignity and self-identification as a human-being and as a "Bajau," at least in their imagination. The church created a ritual space where the gathered community and the individual congregants incessantly interacted with and supported each other. Such sense of community, aside from the goods and services provided by the missionaries as gifts, helped the followers' psyche to cope with the stress that arose from everyday life in the urban center.

Lastly, I would like to compare the case presented in this paper to the case of “Sama Dilaut experience with official Islam in Sabah, Malaysia” studied by NAGATSU Kazufumi (Nagatsu 2004). As Nagatsu pointed out, the Sama Dilaut’s religious experiences and the related changes in their social status in the contemporary history in Malaysia are different from those in the Philippines, across the national borders. As the Sama Dilaut who inhabited in Sulu Archipelago and its neighboring areas, both began to embrace Islam in the 1940s to 1950s. However, the Sama Dilaut in Sulu (Philippines) continued to be considered as “illegitimate” Muslim groups by their neighboring dominant ethnic groups, especially the Tausug, who justified their discrimination against the Sama Dilaut through a local myth that they were an inferior group who were once cursed by Allah. On the other hand, the Sama Dilaut in Semporna (Malaysia) became gradually recognized as Muslim, and nowadays are widely accepted as members of the local Muslim society. Nagatsu attributed this phenomena to basically two factors: 1) the “officialization” of Islam in Malaysia; and 2) the Sama Dilaut’s intentions to seek approval from religious institutions as part of their strategy to secure a position in the local society.

Unlike the case of Malaysia, the Philippine government’s development policies historically lacked coherence and implementation. The private sector, rather than the government, played the more significant role in development projects. The government’s policies for ethnic cultural minorities, or indigenous peoples, dramatically shifted its principle to the protection of their rights after President Aquino administration. But the IPRA, primarily oriented to the rights for ancestral domains, was not meant to offer measures to uplift the well-beings of the ethnic cultural minorities, such as the Sama Dilaut, a maritime people with no definite ancestral domain, who are forced to survive in the urban centers. Normative and institutional frameworks for religious policies that could be found in Malaysia do not exist in the Philippines. Besides, its central government often does not intervene directly in local politics, especially in those in the “border-space” (Nagatsu, 2010b: 26) remote from the capital, where local politicians and other social forces are deemed more powerful even before the decentralization was officially institutionalized in the 1990s (Abinales 2011).

As they embraced Christianity, the Sama Dilaut in Davao City increasingly accessed the influence of missionaries from other countries, or the West, who were not directly involved in the local politics but considered to be as “symbolically” powerful as, or even more powerful than, the local politicians and other leaders. Their intentions were somewhat common with the Sama Dilaut in the Semporna’s case in terms that both made advantage of the authority of the “outsider,” whether the national government or evangelical missionaries from the United States, in order to seek a better social status in the local society where they had been marginalized.

However, what critically separates the two cases is the institutional framework: In Semporna, the religious experience of the Sama Dilaut developed in the process of the “officialization” of Islam in and by the nation-state; in Davao, the Sama Dilaut’s religious transformation happened still within the geographical territory of the nation-state, but it occurred in a secular nation where the government is

not in a position to intervene the religious affairs. Their acceptance of Christianity took place under the layers of intensions of different private actors in the landscape of Davao City, one of the rapid growing Asian cities in the contemporary globalized world. Their new identity of “Christian Bajau” did not directly lead the Sama Bajau to participate in any religious affairs outside their community.

Literature on the Global Pentecostalism indicates the impact of the conversion on the economic well-being and political empowerment of the converts varies from place to place (Anderson et al. eds. 2010; Hefner ed. 2013). It is premature to discuss the medium- and long-term impact of their acceptance of Christianity on social life at this moment. Yet, it is noteworthy that Sama Dilaut mothers, who tended to earnestly participate in activities in the church, grew more concerned with education of their children, and they were also willing to pursue economic opportunities, not just always receive assistance given to them as gifts. This might cause a fundamental change in the pattern of savings and investment and the profile of educational attainment and occupation over time, depending on the opportunities available in the surrounding society.

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(Philippines/2008/Director: Rosalie Matilac a.k.a Nannette Matilal/60min/Filipino with Sinama dialect, shown in English with Japanese subtitles as one of the awarded films at EARTH VISION The 17<sup>th</sup>, March 6-9, 2009, Tokyo).