

# A TALE OF TWO FESTIVALS: EXAMINING SAMA/BAJAU CULTURE IN THE KAMAHARDIKAAN FESTIVAL OF BONGAO, TAWI-TAWI PROVINCE, PHILIPPINES AND THE REGATTA LEPA FESTIVAL OF SEMPORNA, SABAH, MALAYSIA

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## Abstract

A cursory review of tourist events in the southern Philippines and East Malaysia reveals the emergence of quite a number of festivals that veers away from the nature of traditional ones. These festivals are non-traditional for the two important reasons. First, they are instigated by authorities above the *kampung* or village level. Second, they are largely secular festivals that have less to do with the respective cosmologies of communities, but rather have more to do with a perceived need to create a sense of pride or solidarity beyond the family/clan or village level. Generation of income through tourism revenue may also be added to these two reasons. Two examples of this relatively new type of festival are the *Kamahardikaan* Festival of Bongao, Tawi-Tawi Province, southern Philippines and the *Regatta Lepa* Festival of Semporna, Sabah State, East Malaysia. This chapter compares the two festivals through Eric Hobsbawn's (1983) concept of "invention of tradition." The invention of new festivals is seen as a function of the need of asserting identity(ies) and/or creating new ones simultaneously. Part 1 discusses old and new festivals found among the Sama or Sinama-speaking peoples of maritime Southeast Asia. It also connects this to the concept of the "invention of tradition." Part 2 interrogates the comparability of the *Kamahardikaan* and *Regatta Lepa* festivals as subjects of academic inquiry through a discussion of the character of their sites and their respective histories. Part 3

presents a visual and textual analysis of officially published documents of the two festivals. It focuses on the semiotics of the production of symbols as well as discourses on the histories of place and peoples. By way of conclusion, part 4 connects the respective characters of the two festivals with prevailing discourses on national character and political culture of Malaysia and the Philippines.

*Keywords:* Sama-Bajau culture, festivals, identities, power, "invention of tradition."

## **Introduction: Sama-Bajau Festivals and Festivities, Old and New**

The Sama-Bajau or Sinama-speaking peoples of the southern Philippines and East Malaysia whom usually refer to themselves as "Sama," in this paper, we have decided to use the generic Sama-Bajau as very few people aside from experts in the field understand the nuances of the autonym. Among them, festivals or festivities are associated with rituals like the *Pag-omboh Magpaiibahau* offered to ancestors, religious celebrations like the *Maulid un Nabi* (also, *Maulid al Nabi*) or the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad and *pagkawin* or wedding celebrations called *lami-lamian* or *karamaian*. The first two festivities are decidedly religious in character. They are either related to indigenous forms of ancestral worship or Islamic religious practice. The third type comes in the character of social or communal celebrations that may also contain some religious undertones, but are largely secular events. Regardless of their religious or non-religious character, these festivities rarely go beyond the extended family or clan (*kauman*), village (*kampung*) or ethnic grouping (*kaum, kumpulan etnik* or *bangsa*) of the people who mount and celebrate them. Such is the reality of traditional life as confined by the invisible but equally very real boundaries of the *kauman*, *kampong* and *kaum*.

The coming of "modernity" which brought with it the structures and hierarchies of the centralized state allows for the breaching of the boundaries of the *kauman*, *kampung* and *kaum*. New units of the modern state such as the district and the state in the case of Malaysia, and the municipality and the province in the case of the Philippines are imbricated upon these traditional notions of community or entities. These new units of community become alternative foci and loci of identification that simultaneously co-exist and compete with the traditional entities. Indeed, ideas relating to residency (or domicile) and citizenship have become very important sources of new identities as opposed to the ethnically homogenous notion of *kaum* or *bangsa*. Apart from being able to say "I am a Bajau," a Sama individual living in Bangau-Bangau is

enabled to say, "I am a resident of Semporna District," as well as "I am a Malaysian citizen." In this manner, state structures and hierarchies allow the people to conceive or imagine new identities, and more particularly, to borrow from **Fernando Zialcita (2005)**, "a community broader than kin" (p. 37).

As earlier stated, the invention of new traditions such as the Kamahadikaan and the Regatta Lepa festivals may be seen as a function of the need of asserting identity(ies) and/or creating new ones simultaneously. More particularly, festivals such as these (re)construct correct identities, correct statuses, and correct dispositions or "structured, structuring *habitus*" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 52) relating to the state. As such, it may be hypothesized that the character of such festivals reflects the respective characters of the states that instigate them. In order to fully understand this conceptualization of new festivals, it would be most proper to review Hobsbawn's (1983) definition of "the invention of tradition":

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past... (p. 1)

Hobsbawn's inculcation of "values and norms of behavior by repetition" coheres very well with Bourdieu's (1990) "*habitus*" as "structured, structuring dispositions" (p. 52). These notions may also be linked with the idea of "governmentality" (Foucault, 1991, p. 87) that may be achieved through programs and projects of power. In this vein, it may be argued that festivals as a means of creating and allocating values are not merely cultural events, but instead are very political ones. Power and politics in the Kamahardikaan and Regatta Lepa festivals may likewise be seen in the attempt to harken to a "suitable past." The very names of these two festivals indicate their respective creators' attempt to certain aspects of the past. On the one hand, *kamahardikaan* refers to two things from the past. First, it refers to Tawi-Tawi's "independence" from the Sulu Province in 1973 when then President Ferdinand E. Marcos created it as a separate province by virtue of Presidential Decree 302. Second, it alludes to the *mahardika* class of freemen during the heyday of the now defunct Sulu Sultanate. The two other classes that were present at the time are the *datu* or *barbangsa* (aka *datu balbangsa*) class comprised of the ruling elite and the *ipun* class of slaves (Jundam, 1983, p. 27). *Mahardika* is a cognate of the Bahasa Melayu

(or Bahasa Indonesia) *merdeka*. *Kamahardikaan*, therefore, means independence, freedom or the state of belonging to the class of free individuals. As the domain of the defunct Sulu Sultanate has been absorbed into the territory of the Republic of the Philippines and as the Philippines is a republican and democratic state, the system of classes which includes the *mahardika* has been effectively abolished. Therefore, as a concept referring to a class, *mahardika* squarely belongs to the past. On the other hand, *Regatta Lepa* as the name of a festival is of hybrid origins. *Regatta* is a word of Italian origin referring to a contest of sea vessels. *Lepa* is, however, a Sama word referring to the houseboats of the Sama Dilaut or the sea-dwelling Sama-Bajau. Found in monuments, welcome arches and government buildings, the image of the *lepa* is iconic on both sides of the Philippine-Malaysian border. The artifact evokes a completely sea-oriented past of the Sama Dilaut that is fast receding into memory. Oddly, despite its iconic stature, the actual *lepa* houseboat has become rare sight in the southern Philippines largely due to the unavailability of huge logs from which their hulls are made. In Semporna, *lepa* are owned mostly by land-dwelling Sama Kubang who commission their construction mainly for participation in the Regatta Lepa Festival. As most of the Sama Dilaut in Semporna live in houses on stilts built the shallows of the coastline, the *lepa* has been transformed from a functional to a symbolic or ornamental artifact. Like the *mahardika* class, the *lepa* is an artifact of the past.

What specific functions do new festivals perform for state entities and other social forces? Hobsbawm (1983) discusses functions in his enumeration of types of invented traditions:

They seem to belong to three overlapping types: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour. (p. 9)

Hobsbawm's "type a" which corresponds to the establishment or the projection of social cohesion is most important to the state structures or entities that are overlaid upon traditional communities such as the numerous *kampung* that comprise the Sama-Bajau communities of Semporna in Sabah, East Malaysia and Tawi-Tawi in the southern Philippines. The creation of awareness of identities above and beyond the *kampung* and the creation of a sense of belonging to these entities are of paramount importance. As soon as this awareness is created, "type b" functions which correspond to the establishment and legitimation of institutions, correct statuses and relations of authority can be pursued. In this process, intermediate entities are important as they represent

the “face” of the state on the frontlines. In the case of the Kamahardikaan Festival, the face of the state is the Province of Tawi-Tawi and the component municipalities it comprises. In the case of the Regatta Lepa Festival, the face of the state is the District of Semporna and the State of Sabah. As for “type c” functions which correspond to socialization of values, beliefs and conventions, these may be seen in the programming of events where the ordering of official messages from government officials in either ascending or descending may be observed. In addition to these, socialization functions can be seen in the semiotics of the design of official materials such as logos, posters, souvenir programs and the like.

### **Comparing the Kamahardikaan and Regatta Lepa Festivals: Sites, Histories and Semiotics**

Before proceeding with the discussion, at this juncture, it would be most appropriate to interrogate the comparability of the Kamahardikaan and Regatta Lepa festivals. Several aspects make the two festivals comparable. First of all, the two festivals are conducted at sites that are contiguous to each other. The District of Semporna exists in the northeastern coast of the Malaysian portion of the great Island of Borneo, while the Province of Tawi-Tawi straddles the southern end of the chain of islands linking Mindanao Island and North Borneo. Sitangkai, the southernmost municipality of the Republic of the Philippines is a mere six to seven-hour boat-ride from Semporna. Looking at the map of the area, the two sites – one on the mainland and the other in the islands – share the biological and cultural space of the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas.

Second, as they virtually share the same space at the core of maritime Southeast Asia, the ethnic composition of the two sites are quite similar. Semporna is mainly Sama-Bajau (Sama Ubian, Sama Simunul, Sama Dilaut of Sitangkai and Sama Kubang) with a sizeable population of Suluk (aka Tausug) and Bugis. The Municipality of Bongao of Tawi-Tawi Province is also mainly Sama-Bajau (Sama Pangutaran, Sama Sibutu, Sama Sitangkai, Sama Tabawan, Sama Siasi and others) with a growing population of Tausug and Bisaya from the Central Philippines and Mindanao. The Sama Dilaut or sea-dwelling Sama people of Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia and of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi Province, Philippines are known to be related by blood. These relations of sanguinity are affirmed by their participation rituals that are conducted on both sides of the Philippine-Malaysian border. As if extending nomadic patterns of lifestyle, some Sama Dilaut individuals are known to maintain households on both sides

of the border. Some have even managed to acquire Philippine and Malaysian passports and identity cards.

Third, as mentioned earlier, these two festivals are relatively new. The Kamahardikaan Festival dates back to 1973, and the Regatta Lepa Festival to 1997. The Kamahardikaan Festival celebrates the formation of the Province of Tawi-Tawi via Presidential Decree 302 issued on 27 September 1973. It effectively separated the place from Sulu Province. Unlike religious festivals which are, more or less, organic to the memory of a certain community and whose origins stretch way back into an unknown or “hoary” past, these two festivals are instigated by the state through the agencies of government. As such, they have less to do with the religion or the “cosmologies” of the communities. Instead, they may be seen as instruments of the state in defining symbolic or cultural capital which in turn support the state in terms of ideological socialization. The two festivals may, therefore, be categorized as “public rituals.” It may, therefore, be hypothesized that the two festivals, as public rituals, closely follow or help define the “notions of the nation” held by the state that instigated them.

Fourth, as relatively new festivals both the Kamahardikaan and Regatta Lepa are still evolving in form and content. For instance, some residents say that the Kamahardikaan celebration has become longer. It is said that it is originally a simple one-day event that was held to commemorate the provincial day. The festival as observed in 2009 officially spanned 19 days of different events. Similarly, the Regatta Lepa Festival also has gone through several changes. Records show that the first festival was held on February 6, 1997. Subsequent records show that the second was held on March 29, 1998, and then the third was held on April 11, 1998. Since then, April appears to have been the designated month for the festivities.

Comparability is established in the preceding paragraph through an examination of same-ness or similarity in the two cases to be studied. Instances of difference, however, add other layers of interest to the act of comparison. They help explain separate trajectories as well as distinct productions of meaning. In the case of the Kamahardikaan and Regatta Lepa Festivals, the significant difference lies in the respective nature of the two states that instigated their creation. The Philippines is a unitary state with a presidential political system that has been characterized as a “cacique democracy” (Anderson, ca 1988, p. 16). It has experienced an early introduction of elections at the local levels during the American period. Local government units have been further strengthened by the Local Government Code of 1991. Awareness of the locality as an electoral constituency is therefore well embedded in the minds of citizens.

It may, therefore, be expected that this awareness will be reflected in the symbols, texts and meanings of the Kamahardikaan Festival. Malaysia is a federal state with a parliamentary political system that has been invariably described as having a regime characterized by “consociational” power arrangements among ethnically differentiated groups (Mauzy, 1993, p. 106). Constitutionally, the Malaysian state recognizes privileges among “Malays and other bumiputeras.” This system of consociational relations and privileging of groups will likewise reflect in the symbols, texts and meanings of the Regatta Lepa Festival.

### **The Semiotics of Celebration: Symbols, Texts and Meanings**

In terms of content, the two festivals are still evolving. Since the Kamahardikaan Festival is about two decades older, it has more events than the Regatta Festival. (Refer to Table 1) In total, the Kamahardikaan has 24 events while the Regatta Lepa has 14. In both festivals, the cultural events appear to have to most popular patronage. Among the cultural events in both festivals, two parallel each other in terms of following. First in terms of popularity is the “fluvial parade,” as it is called in the Kamahardikaan Festival, and the “Lepa Ride,” as it is called in Regatta Lepa Festival. The sea orientation of the two communities seems to be underscored by the popularity of these two events. In the Kamahardikaan Festival, participation in the fluvial parade is limited to sea vessels representing the 11 constituent municipalities of the province. Each sea vessel has as many dancing participants as it could carry. The sea vessels which usually carry a full *kulintang* music ensemble are mostly *lantsa* (aka *lacha*, medium to large-size motorized wooden boats) and *pelang* (wooden boats with bamboo outriggers). No traditional Sama Dilaut *lepa* is observed. In the Regatta Lepa festival, participation is open to all *lepa* owning families from the various *kampong* of Semporna. *Lantsa* and *pelang* are also seen to participate in the Regatta Lepa Festival. They, however, for obvious reasons do not participate in the “Beautiful Lepa” competition. These vessels are not owned by residents of Semporna. Instead, they are owned by Sama-Bajau participants coming from Tawi-Tawi Province, Philippines. The *lepa* usually features one or two dancers performing at the prow while the *kulintang* ensembles are hidden under the roofed area of the vessel. In terms of luxury in the quality and quantity of décor, the Regatta Lepa Festival seems to outdo the Kamahardikaan Festival. This may be a function of the relative wealth of the residents of Semporna compared to Tawi-Tawi Province. In both festivals, the most beautifully decorated sea vessels received recognition and cash prizes from the organizing committees.

Traditionally, Sama-Bajau sea vessels are decorated with colorful sail-like *sambulayang* banners, *panji* (square-shaped) and *kipas* (triangle-shaped) flags. In the Regatta Lepa Festival, participants take decoration a step further by festooning their boats (and even the dancers!) with Christmas lights creating an ambience of the Tivoli Gardens floating on the sea.

Another very popular event in the two festivals are the beauty pageants. In the Kamahardikaan, this event is called *Budjang Tawi-Tawi* (Ms. Tawi-Tawi). Again, contestants are limited to 11 ladies who represent the constituent municipalities of Tawi-Tawi Province. The competition is open to all ethnicities. They are judged according to how they fare in a “summer look” competition, which is a euphemism for the possibly haram swimsuit competition (held in a private session so as to give respect to Islamic sensibilities), a talent show, an evening wear competition including casual and native attires, and (the usually dreaded) interview portion. Interestingly, the questions asked in the interview portion are on very general topics of great variety. They are the same or similar to those asked in other beauty contests in the Philippines. In the Regatta Lepa Festival, the beauty pageant is called *Ratu Lepa* (Lepa Queen). The pageant used to be called *Ratu Igal* or Igal Queen emphasizing the cultural importance of the igal dance tradition as an icon of Sama-Bajau culture. Finalists are short-listed from the various participating kampung that makes up Semporna. They are judged according to how they dance the traditional Sama-Bajau, the beauty of their costumes which are quite heavily-sequined or embroidered compared to the usual traditional attire, and how well they do in the interview portion. In contrast to that of the Budjang Tawi-Tawi contest of the Kamahardikaan Festival, the interview portion of the Ratu Lepa contest emphasizes knowledge on Sama-Bajau culture. The questions in this interview portion revolve around, dance, music, ritual and other aspects of Sama-Bajau culture. This makes the whole session akin to a quiz show on Sama-Bajau ethnographic details.

As for cultural performances, both festivals have two events that showcase the songs, dances and other performance forms of their respective places. The Kamahardikaan Festival presents a “Cultural Extravaganza & Welcome Night” that features performances from the “Jama Sambatao,” Tawi-Tawi Province’s official music and dance troupe. The other cultural presentation is the “Municipal Night” which presents numbers from the constituent municipalities of the province. The Regatta Lepa Festival’s main cultural show is the “Program Kasih Lepa,” the culminating activity of the festival held at the *padang* or town square. The program features traditional and contemporary Bajau music and dances from the various kampung of Semporna as well as guest artists from outside regions such as Sandakan. The other cultural show is the “Malam



Maglami-lami,” taken from the Sama-Bajau word, *lami-lami*, which means merry-making. This program features the music from invited *kulintangan* ensemble music groups and the dances of the candidates of the Ratu Lepa beauty pageant.

A stark contrast can be noticed in the manner of (re)presentation of local culture in these two festivals. In the Kamahardikaan Festival, Sama-Bajau culture and identity is downplayed as the larger identity of being “Tawi-Tawian,” or a citizen of the Province of Tawi-Tawi is emphasized. This emphasis of constructing an identity above the *kaum* or ethnic group is most present in “Jama Sambatao,” a label that is (re)constructed from the names of the major ethnic groups of the province, the Jama Mapun, Sama, Bajau and Taosug. In the Regatta Lepa Festival, Sama-Bajau identity is emphasized in almost all occasions. The Sinama language is used to name programs such as the “Malam Maglami-lami.” Sama-Bajau culture is also re-affirmed in the language and discourse of the program for the Ratu Lepa beauty pageant. This downplaying of Sama-Bajau culture in the Kamahardikaan and its emphasis on the Regatta Lepa can further be tested in the texts, symbols and meanings contained in the official documents of the two festivals.

**Table 1: Comparison of Events in the Kamahardikaan and Regatta Lepa Festivals**

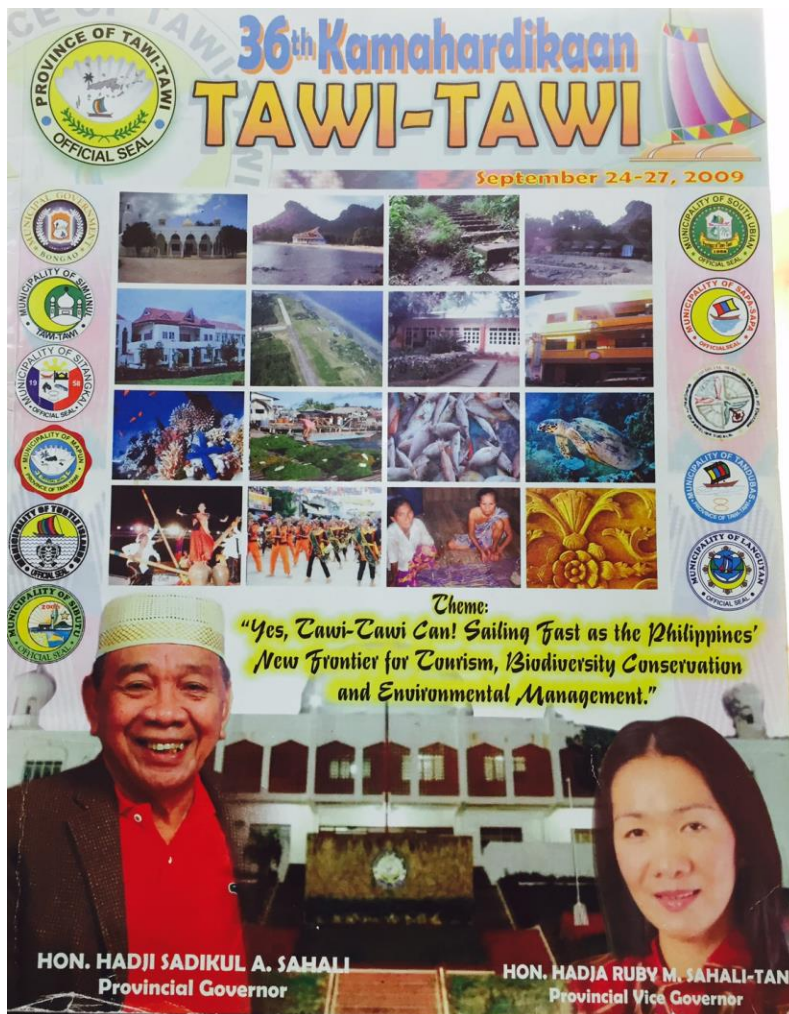
Type of Event	Kamahardikaan (N=24)	Regatta Lepa (N=14)
Cultural Events	10	12
Sports Events	7	1
Welfare/Volunteer Events	4	0
Trade/Economic Events	2	1
Political/Administrative Events	1	0

Note: Based on field observation and the official program contents of the 2009 Kamahardikaan and the 2011 Regatta Lepa Festivals

What follows is an analysis of the images and texts that are found in the two programs gathered by these researchers during their observation of the Kamahardikaan Festival in 2009 and the Regatta Lepa Festival in 2011. The analysis will focus on 1) statements relating to a “continuity with the past” or “with a suitable past” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p.1) regardless of whether they are real or imagined events; 2) statements relating to Sama-Bajau culture as well as that of the Tausug (Suluk) and other groups in the locale of Tawi-Tawi; and 3) statements concerning “social cohesion,” legitimization of “institutions, status or

relations of authority,” and “socialization,” which corresponds to Hobsbawm three types or functions of invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 9).

From an aesthetic point of view, the cover page of the 36<sup>th</sup> Kamahardikaan Festival of the Province of Tawi-Tawi is rather “traditional” as it resembles Philippine folk art or craft (figure 1). The composition presents a classic case of *horror vacui* or the abhorrence of empty spaces found in many Philippine folk artistic expressions such as mat weaving or wood carving. There is no focal point in the composition as many elements compete to draw the eyes for attention.



**Figure 1: Cover Page of the 36<sup>th</sup> Kamahardikaan Festival**

Source: 36<sup>th</sup> Kamahardikaan Festival Program (2009)

There is extremely liberal use of font types and color, and as many images are crammed into all available space. Interpreted as an “administrative-legal” visual essay, the image fits very well with the Philippine value for unbridled democracy or chaotic pluralism. Pluralism is observed in multiple channels of political communication which is conveyed eloquently by the inclusion of the 11 seals of the component municipalities of the Province of Tawi-Tawi whose seal is portrayed slightly bigger than the rest. In this composition, Sama-Bajau culture and heritage are incidental to the more important portrayal of the political forces that sponsor the festival.

At the lower one-third part of the composition, one can read the festival’s theme which reads, “Yes, Tawi-Tawi Can! Sailing Fast as the Philippines’ New Frontier for Tourism, Biodiversity Conservation and Environmental Management.” The theme is adopted from the “Malaysia boleh!” (Malaysia can!) Slogan but modified to suit local aspirations that are linked to notions of sustainable development or progress. The central photo montage underscores these aspirations through images, while text contained in the inner cover page of the program operationalizes them:

The cover is a capsulized [sic] presentation of the various development projects in Tawi-Tawi together with the natural and historical endowments which are depicted in the theme: “Yes, Tawi-Tawi Can! Sailing Fast as the Philippines’ New Frontier for Tourism, Biodiversity Conservation and Environmental Management.” The two pictures: Provincial Governor Hji. Sadikul A. Sahali and Vice-Governor Hja Ruby M. Sahali-Tan are the man and woman behind the progress of Tawi-Tawi. The seals are of the 11 municipalities comprising the province. (36<sup>th</sup> Kamahardikaan Festival Program, 2009, inner cover)

The inclusion of the photographs of Governor Hadji Sadikul A. Sahali and Vice Governor Hadja Ruby M. Sahali-Tan, a father and daughter team, spliced over the image of the provincial capitol building in the front cover of the program and their special mention in the inside page as “the man and woman behind the progress of Tawi-Tawi” reflects the power of the local elite and local government in the Philippines. Patronage is part of the reality of Philippine political life in both local and national levels. The Sahalis constitute a very powerful political family in Tawi-Tawi. One other daughter of the governor, at the time of fieldwork, serves as an assemblywoman in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) while a son serves as mayor of the Municipality of Panglima Sugala, the family’s bailiwick. This pattern of political dynasties or oligarchy has been described by some observers as a state of an “anarchy of families” (McCoy, 1994) or as a “cacique democracy” (Anderson, ca 1988, p. 16).

In marked contrast to that of the 36<sup>th</sup> Kamahardikaan Festival, the cover of the 18<sup>th</sup> Regatta Lepa Festival is a composition of order, balance and focus (Figure 2). Aesthetically, it is a visual essay of modernity as seen in the sleek and simple lines of the overall composition, the use of only two types and two colors of fonts, the plain and unadorned background and the dominant (if not hegemonic) location of the festival logo. The Regatta Lepa logo provides the visual focus of the composition. Although Semporna and Sabah figure as place names in the composition, they are not emphasized as local government or administrative units. Their seals do not figure in the composition.



**Figure 2: Cover Page of the 18<sup>th</sup> Regatta Lepa Festival**  
Source: 18<sup>th</sup> Regatta Lepa Festival Program (2011)

Instead, they are simply spaces or places where the festival takes place. In this configuration of meaning, compared to that of the Kamahardikaan Festival, administrative and political units like the State of Sabah and the District of Semporna do not seem to be as important in the Regatta Lepa Festival. What may be considered to be of importance is Sama-Bajau culture as it is appropriated by the Malaysian state for specific purposes.

Interestingly, the Regatta Lepa Festival logo is an abstraction of the real *lepa* boats which unobtrusively ornament the lower portion of the cover design. In this manner, the abstract mirrors the real. In this overall design, the Sama-Bajau artifact of the *lepa* is appropriated by the Malaysian state for economic and political gains via a creation, juxtapositioning and (re)definition of symbols. For instance, the festival slogan in the lower part of the program cover design declares "*regatta lepa lambang keunggulan seni budaya*" (The Regatta Lepa symbolizes excellence in culture and the arts). Subtly attached to the festival slogan is the symbol for the national slogan of "*Satu Malaysia*" (One Malaysia). The process of attachment allows for the reading of double meanings. On the one hand, the Regatta Lepa can indeed, by implication, symbolize excellence in culture and the arts of the Sama-Bajau. On the other hand, it can also symbolize excellence in the culture and arts of "1 Malaysia." In this manner, the Sama-Bajau artifact of the *lepa* is appropriated and "mobilized" by the Malaysian state in line with its developmental and symbolic or cultural goals. The mobilization of symbols is even more apparent in the explanation of the Regatta Lepa logo:

Bulatan kuning di belakang logo ini melambangkan Sabah merupakan negeri pertama menerima pancaran matahari, ia juga sebagai symbol kedaulatan bangsa di Semporna. Sambulayang yang berwarna merah melambangkan keberanian bangsa yang sanggup mengharungi lautan kehidupan. Lepa pula sebagai symbol kenderaan yang digunakan turun-temurun dan kekal hingga sekarang – ia merupakan satu warisan yang sangat berharga. Kocakan air laut melambangkan kepayahan perjuangan sebuah untuk memartabatkan nama di persada kehidupan dan juga merupakan sumber kehidupan masyarakat di Semporna. Semibulatan berwarna kelabu menzahirkan maksud 'global' – walaupun dunia bergerak pantas, namun budaya masyarakat masih kukuh dan dipusakai hingga kini. Biru melambangkan perpaduan bangsa di Semporna yang hidup harmoni dan aman sehinggakan mereka dapat bersepakat dan bersatu menangani segala pancaroba. (18<sup>th</sup> Regatta Lepa Festival Program, 2009, p. 1)

The yellow circle in the background of this logo symbolizes Sabah as the first state to receive light of the sun, it may also be interpreted as a symbol of national sovereignty in Semporna. The red *sambulayang* banner symbolizes the courage of the people who are willing to face life in the sea. As a symbol, the *lepa* is which is a vehicle used for many generations that remain until this present day, is considered a very valuable heritage. The waves of the sea symbolize the difficulties and struggles that are faced to uphold dignity in life, and they also symbolize the source of livelihood of the communities of Semporna. The gray semicircle declares a global aspiration -- although the world is moving fast, a culture which we inherit from the past is up to this day still strong. Blue symbolizes the unity of the nation in Semporna living in harmony and peace so that they may agree and unite to overcome all challenges.

The construction of symbols and the attachment of meanings are most apparent in the explanation given above. Indeed, the sun becomes the State of Sabah and, at the same time, the symbol of the unquestioned and unchallenged sovereignty of the Malaysian state in Semporna. The message is clear. Sabah and Semporna belong to Malaysia. The *sambulayang* is given the meaning of courage held by the Sama-Bajau who are the people of the sea. The *lepa* becomes an important heritage or cultural property that links the present with the past, thus giving the festival the legitimization of age. The waves become national challenges to life and dignity, while the grey semi-circle above the sun becomes the global aspiration to move with the world while preserving heritage. And finally, blue is used to evoke national solidarity for harmony in peace in a multi-ethnic nation-state. The official symbolization of the Sama-Bajau artifact of the *lepa* as "a very valuable heritage" also allows the Malaysian state to send subtle yet very important messages concerning legitimacy. In this case, the process of symbolization affirms the status of the Sama-Bajau of a *bumiputera* or native people enjoying privileges in the ethnically-defined politics of the Malaysian State.

In summary, the visual analysis of the covers of the Kamahardikaan Festival and the Regatta Lepa Festival programs point to political values that are observable in the Philippines and Malaysia. Both undoubtedly imply the importance of developmental goals. On the one hand, however, the Kamahardikaan Festival underscores the role of pluralism via local government units and members of the political elite. These are values that are quite well-embedded in the Philippine ideology of "democratic" exercise. On the other

hand, the Regatta Lepa Festival stresses the importance of indigenous cultural heritage under the aegis of national unity, values that are observably pursued in Malaysia's "ethnically-defined" politics of consociation which it is a debate on how to characterize Malaysia's contemporary politics continues to evolve. Some scholars do not hesitate to use "racially-defined" in their description of this country's politics. "Race" is, however, a contentious term that varies in operationalization from one national context to another.

The texts within the pages of the two programs likewise reflect the contents and contexts of the respective inventions of traditions upon which they are based. Reflecting political pluralism and political elite-orientation of the Philippines for instance, apart from the various activities of the provincial festival and among others, the Kamahardikaan Festival program contains: a) brief history of Tawi-Tawi; b) socio-economic profiles of the province and the constituent municipalities; and 3) the pictures of and messages of greetings from the president of the Republic of the Philippines, the province's representative to the House of Congress, the governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the province's three members of ARMM Regional Legislative Assembly, the governor, the vice governor and the 11 mayors of the constituent municipalities of the province. The photographs of the national, regional and local elite, numbering 28 in all, contained in the program makes the look like a directory of political personalities. This figure does not include the photographs of the appointed heads of offices as well as heads of national line agencies in the province.

In contrast to the Kamahardikaan Festival program, the Regatta Lepa program is much simpler and shorter. It contains, apart from the festival events, the following: a) a written background piece about the *lepa*; b) an explanation of the festival logo; c) photographs of the governor of the State of Sabah and his wife; d) photographs of and messages from the Chief Minister of Sabah who is also Malaysia's Finance Minister, the Malaysian Minister of Rural and Regional Development (Menteri Kemajuan Luar Bandar dan Wilayah Malaysia, KKLW) who is also a member of Parliament representing Semporna, and the District Officer of Semporna; and e) written background pieces about the KKLW, the Lembaga Penyatuan dan Pemulihan Tanah Persekutuan or the Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Administration (FELCRA) and the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA). With only five (5) photographs of political and administrative personalities combined with five (5) written pieces about matters relating to the festival and sponsoring agencies, the Regatta Lepa Festival program may be deemed to be more oriented towards Sama-Bajau culture and administrative entities rather than political entities or personalities. This

orientation towards themes and administrative agencies reflect a corporatist/consociational mode of engagement where political communication is limited to recognized channels and entities. More significant to our discussion here is the presence of background materials about the KKLW, the FELCRA and the MARA. These are the agencies that most significantly help promote the rights and privileges of the Malays and other *bumiputera* in Malaysia. It may, therefore, be said that the content of the Regatta Festival program re-affirms the values of the ethnically-defined politics of the Malaysian state.

At this juncture, it will be quite informative and helpful to study the “invention” of tradition through a close reading of texts contained in the programs of the Kamahardikaan and Regatta Festivals. In the Kamahardikaan Festival program, two texts are deemed to be important: a) “A Brief History of Tawi-Tawi” contained in the inner cover page of the program, and b) the message of the Honorable Hadji Sadikul A. Sahali, Governor of the Province of Tawi-Tawi. Parallel to these are two texts from the Regatta Lepa Festival: a) the “*sejarah lepa*” or background information about the Sama-Bajau *lepa* contained in the inner cover page of the program, and b) the message of Y.A.B. Datuk Seri Panglima Musa Haji Aman, Chief Minister of the State of Sabah who also serves as Malaysia’s Minister of Finance.

Oddly, the piece titled “A Brief History of Tawi-Tawi” starts by mentioning a literary work rather than a historical treatise of archaeological information: (Refer to Appendix A for the full text)

The Arabian Nights tell about Sinbad he [sic] Sailor having visited a far away group of islands with “a colossal tortoise,” a mythical creature also told in Tawi-Tawi and Sulu folk legends. Austin Craig, in his “A Thousand Years of Philippines History Before the coming of the Spaniards,” also described “an archipelago and its people that fit the write up on Tawi-Tawi and its people.” Part of the description is that the islands are at the east of Borneo and that its people practice the setting of food on a small boat to be drifted a [sic] sea (which is to this day a Sama practice). (36<sup>th</sup> Kamahardikaan Festival Program, hereafter KFP, 2009, inner cover page)

Alluding to myth, the first sentence is an attempt to portray a past for Tawi-Tawi that is as old if not older than the famous “101 Tales of the Arabian Nights.” A long history stretching back to myth or time immemorial, in this case, can be interpreted as legitimacy accorded by ancient time. The second sentence quoting the famous American historian, Austin Craig’s book title, “A



Thousand Years of Philippines History Before the coming of the Spaniards," further bestows upon Tawi-Tawi "history" the legitimizing patina of time. The operative phrase, in this case, is "before the coming of the Spaniards." The subtexts of the two sentences can very well read: Tawi-Tawi is older and therefore more important than the rest of the Philippines. The last sentence in this paragraph refers to the Sama-Bajau *magtulak bala'* ritual. This ritual which is indeed practiced by many Sama-Bajau groups to this day (Cojuangco, 2005, pp. 2-9; Nimmo, 2001, pp. 165-166). Mention of the "Sama" is most appropriate in this first paragraph as Tawi-Tawi is known as the Sama-Bajau homeland.

The second paragraph continues to associate Tawi-Tawi with legend and ancient times saying, without citing sources, that "sea culture in the Philippines may have started 3,000 years ago (KFP, 2009, inner cover page)" in this place. It proceeds to present a conjecture about the origin of the name, Tawi-Tawi, saying that it "comes from the Indo-Malay 'Jau,' which means 'far away' (KFP, 2009, inner cover page)." In truth, this is just one of the assumptions about the place name. Another opinion says that it comes to the word "Tawid-Tawid, meaning mini-ocean (Jundam, 1983, p. 5)." The attached meaning of "far away" is however interpreted as an expression of "sentimentalism [that] somehow settled deep in the Tawi-Tawians psyche, perhaps underpinning the people's love for peace (KFP, 2009, inner cover page)." Place name, in this case, is put forward as the source of identity of the people. "Tawi-Tawian" as an identity based on the name of the province as well as the value for "peace" is repeated several times in the Kamahardikaan Festival Program. These points are important for two reasons. First, Tawi-Tawi was technically separated from the Province of Sulu and its residents see it fit to maintain some distance from its mother province. Second, the residents of Tawi-Tawi consistently emphasize that their province is peaceful compared to Sulu Province. Informants consistently mention this point when welcoming us to their residences. They complain about their association with Sulu Province which to this day suffers from military encounters between the Philippine military and rebels. This implies that Tawi-Tawi Province suffers because of its association and proximity to Sulu Province. True enough, in terms of crime rate and a number of incidences of military confrontation, Tawi-Tawi may be touted as the most peaceful province belonging to the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao.

The third paragraph appropriates the story of the famous Moroccan traveller, Ibn Battuta, to galvanize Tawi-Tawi's historicity:

A more definite early reference to Tawi-Tawian recorded history is one by the Moorish traveler Ibn Batutu. After reaching China, he sailed southeast and reached the Kingdom of Tawal Isi in 1355 AD. He wrote in his travelogue that the kingdom was ruled by a queen. And [sic] that her court was luxurious, her people pearl-fishers, and that she had a navy that preys on Chinese trading fleets. In Sama legend, there is also Princess Hatima who ruled Tandubas and northeastern Tawi-Tawi in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. (KFP, 2009, inner cover page)

Whether Ibn Battuta ever reached Tawi-Tawi or not is a topic that is very open to debate. That Tawalisi is or is in Tawi-Tawi is also not “definite.” The Kamahardikaan Festival Program cites no sources and may be said to be engaged in a creative interpretation of historical events and/or historiographical texts. The idea that Tawalisi might be in Tawi-Tawi is first mentioned by the historian Henry Yule (1866, p. 159). A review of his text reveals that he did not present data about this statement associating Tawalisi and Tawi-Tawi. The language that he employed in the text is also more “conjectural” rather than “definitive.” William Henry Scott (1984, p. 83) also casts doubt over this conjecture about Tawi-Tawi being Tawalisi. Moreover, the queen (or princess) often referred to by scholars who examine Ibn Battuta’s travels is named Urduja thus evoking the locale Pangasinan in the northern Philippines or some other places in Southeast Asia, and most definitely not Tawi-Tawi. The non-inclusion of Urduja’s name in this paragraph is therefore understandable, and the mention of Princess Hatima of Tandubas may, therefore, be seen as a clever device of juxtapositioning of narratives with the possible goal of reinventing Tawi-Tawi’s historical narrative. The Kamahardikaan Festival program does not cite any sources for this brief history. A close examination of the themes and writing style of the text, however, points to “The History of Tawi-Tawi and its People,” a historical tome by Muhammad Kurais II (1979).

At first glance, the fourth paragraph appears to privilege the Sinama-speaking peoples as one of the earliest groups to populate the archipelago:

Present Day [sic] Tawi-Tawians, particularly, the Sama, the Jama Mapun and the Badjao are descendants of sea-faring people who came to the island in waves as late as 1,000 years ago from the Indo-Malay Archipelago (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia) and Southeast and South Asia (Thailand, Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India). History points to this. Also, the physical features and characteristics, social idiosyncracies and peculiarities of today’s Tawi-

Tawians have similarities with those of the people of the countries mentioned above. (KFP, 2009, inner cover page)

The various Sama groups, the Yakan and the Badjao (aka Bajau or Badjaw) are most definitely Sinama-speaking peoples. Indeed, linguistic evidence point to the Barito Estuary area of Southeast Borneo as their place of origin, and that they may have moved to the area of the Sulu Archipelago sometime in 800 AD (Blust, 2005, p. 43; Blust, 2007, p. 210). No evidence, however, point to Thailand, Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India as the place of origin of Sinama-speaking peoples. It appears that this mention of places in mainland Southeast Asia and South Asia indicates the anonymous writer's belief in the unsupported discourse on the "Indianization" of Tawi-Tawi. Indianization, of course, implies a desirable interpretation of history which points to an early period of civilization that predates both the coming of Islam and Christianity to the area that is now known as the Philippines. The fifth paragraph, however, immediately takes away this privilege based on precedence by portraying the Tausug as having come to the area of the Sulu Archipelago at a much earlier period:

The Tausug of Tawi-Tawi either came from Sulu (e.g., Jolo island, Pangutaran, Pata, Tapul, Lugus, and the Siasi Island group), or are the descendants of the area's earliest known settlers like the agriculture-oriented Tau-Gimba (literally, Jungle Tribe) and Tau Subah (literally River Settlers), who came to Tawi-Tawi (or the entire Sulu archipelago) much, much earlier (2,000 to 3,000 years) ago. (KFP, 2009, inner cover page)

This portrayal of the Tausug as indigenous to the Sulu area or as a group of people that came much earlier has no historical and archaeological basis. Linguistically, the Tausug language is closest to Butuanon of northeast Mindanao. Pallesen (1985) notes that "the vocabularies of these two languages, TSG and BUT, are 77% cognate on the Swadesh 100-meaning list (Swadesh, 1955). A cognacy of 80% (the figure above, adjusted by 3% for convergence) represents a separation between TSG and BUT of 7-8 centuries" (p. 16). The insistence on the Tausug "2,000 to 3,000 years ago" is therefore unconvincing and most likely based on speculation (or plain invention). What accounts for this privileging of the Tausug? This may have something to do with the changing ethnic composition and ethnic power configuration of the province. Ever since the infamous "burning of Jolo," migration from the Sulu Province has led to the

increasing number of Tausug residents in Tawi-Tawi. The Philippine census of indicates that “majority (71.45 percent) of the household population in Tawi-Tawi classified themselves as Sama Dilaya or Tausug (35.82 percent and 35.63 percent, respectively). Others classified themselves as Sama (Samal)/Abaknon (15.21 percent), Jama Mapun (5.84 percent), Badjao/Sama Dilaut (2.52 percent) or belonged to other ethnic groups (4.43 percent)” (National Statistics Office, 2002). At the time of fieldwork, the governor is Tausug and the vice-governor is of Tausug-Visayan origin. One of the regional assembly men is of Tausug-Visayan origin; one is Sama; and, one is of Sama-Tausug origin. Among the members of the Provincial Board, four are Tausug; three are Sama; and, one is Visayan. Of the municipal mayors, two are Tausug; two are Sama; two are of Tausug-Chinese origin, three are of Sama-Tausug origin; one is of Chinese-Sama origin; and, one is of Tausug-Visayan origin. In terms of “pure” and “hybrid” identities, the political elite composition is skewed towards the Tausug. The re-invention of historical narratives favoring or privileging the Tausug may, therefore, be linked to this trend of Tausug ethnic domination in Tawi-Tawi.

The sixth to the tenth paragraphs goes through important historical events such as the introduction of Islam, the period of the rise of the Sultanate of Sulu, the Spanish and American colonial periods, the Marcos dictatorship which saw the separation of Tawi-Tawi from the Province of Sulu, and the establishment of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in the late 1980s. The eleventh paragraph concludes this piece with a listing of the names and terms of service of six governors of the Province of Tawi-Tawi. This list once again emphasizes the importance of local government and the local power elite. Based on this list, one realizes that since 1973 Tawi-Tawi had two Christian governors who came from outside the province, two Sama governors, and two Tausug governors. Tawi-Tawi, therefore, had more non-Sama than Sama governors its more than four decades of separation from Sulu Province. Perhaps, this marginalization of the Sama-Bajau in relation to other ethnicities can be seen as one important reason for downplaying ethnic identities in provincial events such as the Kamahadikaan Festival.

In contrast to the Kamahardikaan Festival program, the inner cover page of the Regatta Lepa Festival program features a note or background material on the Sama-Bajau cultural artifact of the *lepa*. (Refer to Appendix B for the full text). The *Sejarah Lepa* text begins with this description of the *lepa*:

Lepa dalam bahasa kaum Bajau pantai Timur Sabah di daerah Semporna adalah bermaksud perahu. Ianya selalunya diperbuat dari kayu jenis Ubar Suluk ataupun Seraya Merah dan merupakan

peninggalan budaya yang diwarisi sejak zaman-berzaman oleh suku kaum Bajau Semporna ini. Kewujudan lepa adalah dipercayai bermula dari kaum nelayan yang tinggal di kepulauan sekitar persisiran pantai Daerah Semporna, walaupun ianya sudah wujud sekian lamanya, namun ia lebih dianali setelah kawasan Tongtalun diisytiharkan sebagai Daerah Semporna pada awal kurun kedua puluh ini. Sehingga hari ini, Kampung Nusalalung di Pulau Bum-Bum masih lagi menjadi pembuatan lepa yang utama dan di kampung ini jugalah lepa mula dibuat sejak dahulu kala. (18<sup>th</sup> Regatta Lepa Festival Program, hereafter RLP, 2011, inner cover page)

In the language of East Coast Bajau of the District of Semporna of Sabah, *lepa* means boat. Considered to be an important cultural relic that is passed one generation to another among the Bajau of the Semporna District, it is usually made of wood called *Ubar Suluk* or *Red Seraya*. The making of the lepa is believed to have started among fisher folk who lived in the islands along the coast of Semporna District. Although present in the area for a very long time, it became better known when the place called Tongtalun was established as the District of Semporna in the early twentieth century. At present times, the village of Nusalalung in the Island of Bum-Bum is again becoming a major center for the manufacture of the *lepa* which it has been making since time immemorial.

The above-quoted text begins with its explanation of the *lepa* as a sea vessel by mentioning the *Bajau*, the outsider label for the Sama who constitute the main ethnolinguistic group living in Semporna. What it does not mention here is the existence of a number of sub-groups of Bajau living in Semporna, thus giving the impression that there is only one undifferentiated tribe of people. It also does not mention other groups such as the Tausug (aka Suluk) and the Bugis who are also very much present in Semporna. As a festival, the Regatta Lepa is mainly about and for the Bajau... a celebration of their culture as a matter of administrative emphasis. The text proceeds to call the *lepa* "an important cultural relic." As a "relic," it evokes an acceptable past, in the same manner, are official historical narratives. The *lepa*, therefore, facilitates the legitimization of the Bajau in the place called Semporna. The "important cultural relic" points to them as an equally "important" native people (aka bumiputera) who have always lived their lives in Semporna "since time immemorial." The place name, Semporna District, is an official creation of the Malaysian State. The Bajau place

called Tongtalun is transformed into this administrative unit. Sampulna, the Sama word for perfection is made into the Malay-derived, Semporna. The attachment of the word “district” officially welcomes it to the created hierarchy of the Malaysian State. The state therefore effectively creates a new entity through appropriation and administrative/political fiat. Through the discourse of official, therefore, the Malaysian State is able to create and emphasize certain values or truths that understandably facilitate the pursuit of its interests.

The second and third paragraphs read like museological texts that describe the main parts of the *lepa* and the different kinds of sails that it uses, respectively. The fourth paragraph briefly discusses the uses of the *lepa* in occupational endeavours such as the transport of fish catch as well as cultural events when *tagungguh* music and other performances are presented in the sea vessel. The fifth paragraph finally talks about the Bajau Laut (aka Sama Dilaut), a specific grouping of Sama-Bajau, and their relationship to the cultural artifact of the *lepa*:

Di antara beberapa pecahan suku kaum Bajau di Daerah Semporna ini, kumpulan Bajau Pala’u adalah merupakan kumpulan yang paling utama dalam menggunakan *lepa* ini. *Lepa* menjadi tempat tinggal mereka dan mereka hanya turun ke daratan apabila hendak mendapatkan makanan dan air ataupun untuk mengekebumikan ahli keluarga yang meninggal dunia. Namun cara hidup ini semakin pupus ditelan masa. Ini disebabkan ramai di antara pengamal cara hidup ini sudah bermastautin di daratan dan juga atas sebab usaha kegiatan mengangkap ikan perlahan-lahan digantikan dengan kegiatan-kegiatan ekonomi yang lain umpamanya dalam sector perindustrian. Bagi mereka yang masih menjalankan kegiatan menangkap ikan, perubahan masa dan teknologi telah mengakibatkan penggunaan *lepa* ini sendiri semakin berkurangan di mana mereka sekarang lebih gemar menggunakan perahu dengan enjin bot yang lebih maju dan tidak perlu bergantung kepada keadaan angin seperti halnya apabila menggunakan *lepa*. (18<sup>th</sup> Regatta Lepa Festival Program, hereafter RLP, 2011, inner cover page)

Among the groups of Bajau in the Semporna District, the Bajau Laut is foremost in their use of the *lepa*. They make the *lepa* are their homes and they only go to shore when seeking food and water or to bury family members who have passed away. Unfortunately, this way of life is becoming extinct through the passing of time. This trend is because many of Bajau Laut already reside on land, and fishing is slowly being

replaced by other economic activities in the industrial sector. For those who still fish, the changing times and technology have resulted in the dwindling use of the *lepa* itself. More Bajau Laut now prefer to use boats with engines which they feel are more advanced as they do not have to depend on the wind which is the case with the *lepa*.

The Bajau Laut comprises one of the Sama-Bajau groups in Semporna. Their sea-dwelling and nomadic lifestyle makes them distinct from the Bajau Obian, Bajau Kubang, Bajau Simunul and others which are land-based Bajau. That they are “foremost in the use of the *lepa*,” is an understatement. More precisely, the *lepa* is associated with the Bajau Laut. The *lepa* is the traditional houseboat of the *Bajau Laut*. Other land-based Bajau groups have, apart from cultural and touristic functions such as participation in the Regatta Lepa Festival, absolutely no use for the *lepa*. Sadly, for the reasons mentioned in the quoted paragraph as well as the increasing unavailability of appropriately sized timber, the *lepa*-living culture of the Bajau Laut is truly fast becoming extinct. In recent times, wealthier land-based Bajau such as the Bajau Kubang own more *lepa* than the Bajau Laut. In the Regatta Lepa, the Bajau Kubang have appropriated the *lepa* as their cultural artifact, regardless of the contradiction presented by their land-dwelling lifestyle and land-oriented culture. Ironically, the sea-based culture of the Bajau Laut celebrated by the Regatta Lepa via the symbolization of the *lepa* is no longer, figuratively and literally, owned by the Bajau Laut. Effectively, this “artifice” makes the Regatta Lepa a festival of nostalgia, a veritable invention of a tradition linking the present to an irretrievable past. The past is however re-created and made approachable via the creation of a touristic culture centered on the *lepa* which has ceased traditional functions as a vessel of dwelling or fishing. We adopt Michel Picard’s (1996) conceptualization of “touristic culture...defined as a state of confusion between the values of the culture and those of tourism.” This much is admitted by the concluding paragraph which subtly drops the “laut” from the specific grouping, the “Bajau Laut” and shifts the process of (re) constructing identity to the generic identity of “Bajau in Semporna District”:

Kini hanya terdapat segelintir penduduk tempatan yang menggunakan *lepa* sebagai tempat bergantung kehidupan seperti pada zaman nenek moyang mereka. Ianya sekarang lebih merupakan sesuatu yang melambangkan warisan budaya suku kaum Bajau di Daerah Semporna. (18<sup>th</sup> Regatta Lepa Festival Program, hereafter RLP, 2011, inner cover page)

Now, there are only a handful of locals who depend on the *lepa* for their livelihood as in the days of their ancestors. It is now more of a cultural heritage which symbolizes the Bajau in Semporna District.

In summary, like the text of "A Brief History of Tawi-Tawi" the "Sejarah Lepa" creates a version of an acceptable past. This past is centered on Bajau culture through the artifact of the *lepa*. By touting the *lepa* as an important cultural relic, the Regatta Lepa Festival in effect recognizes the Bajau as an important cultural or native group in Sabah, Malaysia. Some ambiguity is however observable in subtle shifts between the specific "Bajau Laut" culture and identity and the generic "Bajau" culture and identity, implying the marginalization of the former over the latter. Whereas the Kamahardikaan Festival projects a discourse peace and development via local power and autonomy and/or independence, the Regatta Lepa Festival projects a discourse of excellence via cultural heritage.

The message of Governor Hadji Sadikul A. Sahali printed in the 36<sup>th</sup> Kamahardikaan Festival program starts with the usual Islamic greetings of peace and proceeds to greet the citizens of Tawi-Tawi on the twin occasions of the founding anniversary of the province and Hariraya Edil Fitri or the end of the holy month of Ramadan:

My warmest salam and felicitations to the good and peace-loving constituents of Tawi-Tawi on these twin triumphant occasions this September: The commemoration of the 36<sup>th</sup> Founding Anniversary of our beloved and peaceful province, Tawi-Tawi, and the celebration of the grandest Muslim Festival, the Hariraya Eidil Fitri. The first symbolizes our collective celebration of our worldly achievements as reflected in continued economic growth, peace and progress of our province. The second connotes our spiritual salvation and the unity of the Muslim Ummah. (KFP, 2009, p. 8)

It is well worth noting that apart from the indigenized Arabic word of "salam," the word "peace" appears twice in the governor's opening felicitation. The people of Tawi-Tawi are described as "peace-loving," and the founding anniversary of the province is emphasized as a collective symbol of achievements in "growth, peace and progress." As already mentioned earlier, this condition of peace is by implication always compared to the almost constant state of war and chaos in the Sulu Province, which is acknowledged as Tawi-Tawi's mother province. Tawi-Tawi may indeed be the southernmost province



of the Philippines, but it need not be lumped together with the other problematic places of Muslim Mindanao primarily because of this condition of peace. This discourse on the value of the condition of peace continues in the second paragraph of the governor's message:

I wish to take this opportunity to urge and inspire our people to be vigilant against any form of influence of evil that may disrupt the peace prevailing over our land, to sustain their support for the programs of good governance initiated by our leaders, and to live in accordance with the moral and ethical teaching of Islam and of other faiths. To keep nourishing our people's culture of peace and to maintain ethnic and religious harmony and tolerance in Tawi-Tawi affords us the most effective strategy to secure lasting peace in our province. (KFP, 2009, p. 8, underscoring ours)

The governor mentions "peace" three times in this paragraph. He also warns against "evil that may disrupt the peace." Though specifically not mentioned, three sources come to mind: the remnant or break-off forces of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) that is still quite active in the Sulu Province, the Abu Sayaf Group of bandits and petty terrorists that regularly pass through Tawi-Tawi to head off to Sabah, Malaysia or elsewhere, and the numerous factions of pretenders to the throne of the Sultanate of Sulu that every now and then create tensions between the Philippines and Malaysia. Also noteworthy is the governor's call for the maintenance of "ethnic and religious harmony and tolerance" in the province without mention of the majority group of the Sama-Bajau or any other ethnic group. The development formula in Tawi-Tawi, as in other places in the Philippine, is based on a "color blind" political strategy that favors no particular group. As such, the relatively new and non-organic identity of "Tawi-Tawian" (people or resident of Tawi-Tawi) is emphasized the primordial sources of identity such as ethnicity.

Finally in the last paragraph of his message, consistent to the value of giving importance of local government and related administrative units in a condition of democratic pluralism, the governor gives thanks to "all our people, Local Government Official [sic], National Officials [sic] Police and Military Groups, Civil Society Organizations" who helped secure "a most enduring peace and progress in Tawi-Tawi." (KFP, 2009, p. 8, underscoring ours)

Consistent to the discourses uncovered in the previously presented visual and textual analyses, the message of Chief Minister YAB Datuk Seri Panglima Musa Haji Aman manages to insert the national slogan of Malaysia in his

traditional Islamic greetings that include salutations of “..SALAM SEJAHTERA DAN SALAM 1MALAYSIA”(Peace, Prosperity and the Peace of One Malaysia). He proceeds to congratulate the executive committee of the 18<sup>th</sup> Regatta Lepa Festival for the year 2011. Afterwards, he links the festival slogan and Bajau culture to the national slogan of One Malaysia:

Tema “Regatta Lepa Lambang Keunggulan Seni Budaya 1Malaysia”, amat signifikan dengan konsep 1 Malaysia yang menonjolkan keunikan budaya suku kaum Bajau di Semporna, dalam kepelbagaian suku kaum dan etnik di Sabah yang hidup aman, makmur dan harmoni. (RLF program, 2011, p. 6)

The theme "Regatta Lepa: Symbol of Excellence the Culture and Arts of One Malaysia," is very significant to the One Malaysia concept that highlights the unique culture of the Bajau in Semporna and the diversity of tribes and ethnic groups in Sabah who live in peace, prosperity and harmony.

In this statement, there is no ambiguity in the act of making the Bajau-centered Regatta Lepa Festival a symbol of excellence in the culture and art of one Malaysia. Bajau culture is therefore made to signify the culture and arts of Malaysia, thus once again privileging the Bajau as a source of indigenous of bumiputera culture. The One Malaysia concept privileges this unique culture within the universe of diverse culture living together in “peace, prosperity and harmony.” The following paragraph re-iterates the State government’s support for the festival which is seen as a “pemangkin kepesatan sektor pelancongan tempatan “ (catalyst of the rapid growth of the local tourism sector ) which has contributed the development of Semporna District and Sabah State as a whole.

The chief minister ends his message with the following aspiration:

Saya berharap tradisi Regatta Lepa ini akan mengangkat budaya lepa suku kaum Bajau ini bukan sahaja sebagai produk pelancongan bertaraf dunia, malah sebagai budaya yang menjadi kebanggaan seluruh rakyat Malaysia. (RLF program, 2011, p. 6).

I hope this tradition of the Regatta Lepa will uplift the *lepa* culture of the Bajau people not only as a world class tourism product but even more so

as a source of pride for the entire culture of the people of Malaysia.  
(translation ours)

The semiotic process of equating is very clear in the statement quoted above. Bajau culture is represented by the cultural artifact of the *lepa*. The *lepa* is the cultural source of the Regatta Lepa Festival. The Regatta Lepa Festival, in turn, is a source of pride for Malaysia. This process of privileging allows for the equating of the Bajau with Malaysia, or even more so with “Malay and other bumiputera.” How is this process possible? Nagatsu Kazufumi (2001) points to a discourse that cites the Bajau in textbooks and other official documents as either “authentic *bumiputera*” (p. 220) or “*semacam Melayu, or a kind of Malay*” (p. 221). Nagatsu, for instance, cites a 1981 Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) textbook that states the following:

[Of *bumiputera* groups in Sabah] the third ethnic group [*kaum*] is the Bajau. They are Muslims and immigrant nations [*bangsa*] to Sabah. They came from Johor during the Sultanate of Brunei era. They are regarded as *bumiputera* just as the Brunei Malay is... The Brunei and the Bajau people seem to be a similar kind of Peninsular Malay people [*Orang Berunai dan Bajau adalah seakan-akan sejenis dengan orang Melayu Semenanjung*]. Their cultures are almost the same as Islamic cultures of the Malay [Khoo 1981:75] (Nagatsu, 2001, p. 220, underscoring ours).

Nagatsu (2001) further notes that the Bajau are characterized as coming “from Johor not from the Philippines.” (p. 221) This expressed and most likely imagined origin allows them to be regarded “as the same ethnic group as the Malay, or are an ethnic sub-group of the Malay” (Nagatsu, 2001, p.221). These particular factors of legitimacy springing from either a real or imagined point of origin in the Malayan peninsula and perceived sameness to Malay ethnicity do seem to explain convincingly the privileging of Bajau culture in the Regatta Lepa Festival over other ethnicities such as the Tausug or the Bugis. The Tausug or Suluk position in Sabah as a native group is complicated by factors such as their perceived origin as coming from the southern Philippines as well as political ambitions of some claimants to the Sultanate of Sulu that in turn claim Sabah as its royal domain. Nagatsu (2001) further opines that “...the new authorities produced attractive images or categories of the (especially native) ethnic groups so that each group could imagine its legitimate position in the nation” (p.226). Such is the process of “re-imagination” and “invention” seen in the case of the Regatta Lepa Festival.

## **Conclusion: Values, Festivals and the Re-invention of Tradition**

This chapter has examined the Kamahardikaan Festival and the Regatta Lepa Festival through the lenses of “the invention of tradition” as propounded by Eric Hobsbawn (1983). It has discussed the differences between old and new festivals found among the Sinama-speaking peoples of the southern Philippine and East Malaysia. It has also interrogated the issue of comparability between the Kamahardikaan Festival and the Regatta Lepa Festival. For operationalization of its inquiry, it has gone through visual and textual analyses of the content of two officially published programs of the two festivals. The analyses have yielded some insights which are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2: Values, Contexts and Themes in the Kamahardikaan and Regatta Lepa Festivals**

<b>Festival</b>	<b>Values</b>	<b>Ideological Context</b>	<b>Political and Cultural Capital</b>	<b>Participation</b>	<b>Sama-Bajau Culture</b>
Kamahardikaan	Peace, Progress, and Autonomy	Local government and local elite-centered pluralism	Residence or proximity to local power base	(Inclusive) Open to all via local government representation	Downplayed or Erased/Effaced
Regatta Lepa	Culture, Heritage and Identity, Progress	Administrative agency-oriented and corporatist/consociational ( <i>bumiputera</i> ) political arrangement	Ethnicity or “race.”	(Exclusive) Sama-Bajau participants via Sama-Bajau kampung	Emphasized

The Kamahardikaan Festival projects a discourse of peace, progress (aka sustainable development) and autonomy. Peace is an often repeated value as the Province of Tawi-Tawi belongs to the rather problematic region of the southern Philippines, contiguous to the equally problematic Province of Sulu, and is part of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, a regional unit of administration that was born out of accommodation and compromise between the Republic of the Philippines and the belligerent force of the Moro National Liberation. The ideological context that is well-reflected in the activities, the visual semiotics and the texts of the festival is the power and prestige accorded

to local government as well as the local political elite. The political and cultural capital of individuals and groups in the Province of Tawi-Tawi appear to be embedded in notions of residency, citizenship and proximity to the local elite, qualities of the heavily skewed politics of local patronage found in the rest of the Philippines. Participation in the Kamahardikaan is inclusive or open to all via the local government. In this context, identities associated with local government such as the one expressed in the label of “Tawi-Tawian” (resident or citizen of Tawi-Tawi) are emphasized, while ethnicities such as membership to the Sama-Bajau tribe are downplayed, erased or effaced.

The Regatta Lepa Festival likewise projects a discourse of progress. However, this discourse of progress is set in the larger context of global competition. Along with progress, discourses on excellence in culture and the arts through heritage and identity are observable. The ideological context of the Regatta Lepa Festival is however very different from that of the Kamahardikaan. In the Regatta Lepa, the ideological context of ethnic or *bumiputera* politics is very palpable. Furthermore, there is an absence of a directly elected local government that is similar to what may be seen at the lowest levels of government in the Philippines. As such, the Malaysian political setting is understandably described as corporatist or consociational in terms of sharing or diffusion of power. In this kind of setting, the faces of local government entities are therefore absent. Instead, administrative agencies that relate to ethnically-defined power arrangements take their place. A good example of such an agency is the MARA. In the Malaysian setting, membership to certain ethnic groups or “race” serves as the currency of political or social exchange. This being the case, it is quite understandable or logical to expect participation in the Regatta Lepa Festival to be relatively “exclusive,” that is, limited to Sama-Bajau participation via predominantly the Sama-Bajau *kampung*. As such, Sama-Bajau culture and identity are privileged or emphasized.

In due time, the culture, political culture, and political systems of Malaysia are expected to change. Along with this change, one can expect changes in the “(re)inventions of traditions” found in the values, ideologies and expression of festivals such as the Kamahardikaan and the Regatta Lepa.

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank and acknowledge the financial support provided by University of Malaya under the Sustainable Science Research Cluster (SUS) for the research grants RP001A-13SUS, RG155-12SUS & RG212-13SUS.

The authors also acknowledge the contributions made by the communities as research participants who patiently took part in this study. This study would not be possible without all of their assistance.

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