

“Dry paddle – empty pot”: Meaning-making ocean in a *Sama* community

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Abstract

The article deals with processes of maritime meaning-making. Grasping the ocean as a socio-cultural sphere and closely following the everyday life of a Sama community, practices and implicit meanings are approached in their entangling. Daily activities to make a living, material transformations concerning concrete houses and money, the strong emphasis on togetherness and the role of hoping (mudah-mudahan) as a guiding motive are addressed.

Introduction

The article is based on a three-month ethnographic field research conducted in 2019, aiming at understanding processes of maritime meaning-making by the example of a *Sama* community. *Sama* is the emic term for an ethnic group and their language who by outsiders and in the literature are mainly referred to as *Bajau*, *Bajau Laut*, *Bajau Dilaut*, *Sama-Bajau* or *Bajo*, depending on the region and the author. They are believed to have originated from the Sulu Archipelago in the Philippines and today live in Eastern Borneo, Sulawesi and Eastern Indonesia. Together with the *Orang Laut/Orang Suku Laut* (‘sea people’ or ‘sea tribe people’) and the *Moken/Moklen*, they are one out of three Southeast Asian ethnic groups that have been described as ‘sea nomadic’ or ‘boat dwelling’ (see Sather 1997, Chou 2010). Even though *Sama* nowadays do not predominantly live on boats (anymore), nonetheless, many still live a life that is essentially set within and largely depends upon the ocean. Therefore, *Sama* are particularly knowledgeable people concerning processes of maritime meaning-making.

The ocean as a socio-cultural sphere

Although maritime societies have long been subject to anthropology, maritime anthropology as a sub-discipline only evolved in the 1970s. In the 1975’s collected edition “Maritime Adaptation in the Pacific” (Casteel & Quimby, eds.) the different contributors look at the adaptation of maritime societies to their physical environments with ethnographic, historical and archaeological approaches. The ocean here is conceived as a mere physical or ecological space that contains fish as

a resource. Although the contributors address technological, social and cultural change and, to a lesser degree, risk, the experiences that people make and the meanings the ocean has for them are not addressed. This goes along with the reasoning of the editors who argue in their introduction that “just as urban anthropology is a contemporary subject so is maritime anthropology” because of “the rapidly increasing interest and concern on the part of many different nations and scholarly specialties in the resources and potential uses of the world’s oceans and seas” (Casteel & Quimby 1975: 4). Similarly, the volume “Those who Live From the Sea. A Study in Maritime Anthropology” (Smith, ed. 1977) looks, as the title suggests, at the ocean as an economic zone, which people *take from*. While in the former collection ecologic regions, species and equipment are at the centre of discussion in the context of adaptation and resource management, this collection sets focus on technological and consequent economic and social changes. However, here too, intimate insights into people’s lives and their experiences with and evaluations of these changes are hardly touched upon, and the ocean remains nothing more than a “new frontier” (Smith 1977: 2).

Another focus in maritime anthropology, which has become especially prominent in the last two decades is one on environmental degradation and maritime conservation that takes multiple epistemological approaches and ontologies into account. E.g., in the context of marine conservation, Lauer & Aswani, who researched among fishers in the Solomon Islands, argue:

“The study of situated practices demands that we devise a variety of methodologies and multiple theoretical frameworks to more fully explore, comprehend, and appreciate indigenous people’s lives and perspectives in a rapidly changing world” (2009: 327).

With the increase in international marine protection programmes as a starting point, Clifton & Majors (2012) argue similarly that the respective socio-cultural contexts, the conceptions of nature and environment and the relative power of the parties involved need to be considered in order to make conservation measures locally successful. Here, however, it becomes quite clear that such approaches (see also Rubow 2016), despite their intentions to take socio-cultural contexts and multiple understandings of ‘the environ-

ment' into account, can easily portray groups of people as inferior and in need of help as well as display maritime regions as particularly ecological and vulnerable ones. This does not only presuppose the existence of such spaces and defines where, and where not, they are to be found but also reinforces global hierarchies and reduces people in certain areas, even if labelled as agents, to subjects of ecological issues.

Since Ingold's "The perception of the environment" (2000), the (sensual) experience of environments and the processual making-sense of them have increasingly been addressed. Ingold comprehends the environment as a "relative term – relative, that is, to the being whose environment it is" and approaches it as "the world as it exists and takes on meaning in relation to me, and in that sense, it came into existence and undergoes development with me and around me" (ibid.: 20). The fact that Ingold chooses to speak of *his* environment here, illustrates that his approach is strongly subject-centred. Similar approaches have since been taken to various environments and beings (e.g. see the realm of multi-species anthropology) including water and the seas (see, e.g., Allen-Collinson & Hockey 2010; Ota 2006; Helmreich 2007, 2011; Merchant 2011). E.g., for water, Strang argues: "water, as the most omnipresent and vitally important aspect of the environment, lends itself to an analysis of the relationship between human experience and the construction of meaning" (2005: 92), and focusses on the universalizing qualities of water:

"[A]lthough meaning is a human product, the environment is not a tabula rasa, but instead provides elements whose consistent characteristics are the basis for meanings that flow cross-culturally, creating common undercurrents in culturally specific engagements and interpretations" (ibid. 97).

While I agree with Strang that comparisons of meaning in the context of water are highly interesting for anthropology because of the omnipresence of water, I believe that framing water as something that constructs cross-cultural meaning is problematic as this would propose that the qualities of water exist independently of perception and cultural interpretations and thus, inherently suggest a hierarchy in which perceptions and meanings are products of water. However, taking temperature as an example, which in water physically affects the human body, cross-culturally, about twenty-five times faster than in air, a person freezing could be, culture-specifically, called a 'sissy' or a 'warrior' which can consequently evoke, e.g., embarrassment for or enjoyment of being cold. This makes the perception of water temperature more complex than a simple distinction between a pleasurable or unpleasurable thermal experi-

ence as done by Strang (2005: 100). Consequently, being cold can be, consciously or unconsciously, be ignored or emphasized. This is one of the many things I could observe when teaching diving¹ to about two hundred different people; male and female, aged between 12 and 80 years, coming from various countries of all continents. As this example indicates, the seemingly common thermal characteristic of water does not necessarily reveal or generate cross-culturally common perceptions and meanings, but also differences. This leads to the chicken-egg-problem of whether, initially, it is (the perception of) water that shapes (cross-cultural) meaning or (culture-specific) meaning that shapes (the perception of) water – a problem inherent in human-environmental-relation approaches in general and which, in a way, intensifies the very nature-culture-dichotomy these studies often aim at overcoming. Therefore, instead of getting lost in this question, comparative research considering water should allow for more open-ended and less subject-focussing approaches.

Worth mentioning are furthermore approaches that have an inter- or cross-regional take on the ocean as that of Eveli Hau'ofa, who, comprehends the Pacific as "a sea of islands" in opposition to "islands in a far sea" (2008: 31). Similarly, Pauwelussen criticizes the land-focus in maritime anthropology, pointing out that: "living at sea and in intimate correspondence with the sea is part of the human repertoire of dwelling" and that "As such, it deserves attention as part of the diverse ways people organise their way of life" (2017: 150). While I strongly agree with her concerning the overall representation, the critique is not all adequate looking at the anthropological literature on 'sea nomads'. Pauwelussen's "amphibiousness" (2017), which she means in a physical as well as in a social sense and which she uses as a methodical as well as an analytic tool to conceptualize the mobile world of the *Bajau* is therefore interesting, but it overlooks the writings that focus on the elevated status 'sea nomads', including *Bajau*, used to have in the past, precisely because of their ability to move in diverse physical and social worlds – especially the seas – and the marginalization that followed, caused by Indonesian nation-building and international economic-growth programmes (Chou 2010, 2016; Lenhart 2001, Sather 1997).

Pauwelussen further argues:

"[T]he spatial bias (and land-bias) in thinking community is persistent. Perhaps so much so, that it has become ubiquitous, making even critical social scientists sometimes unreflective of why a sense of belonging together, or support, should be place-based" (2016: 5).

¹ I worked as a scuba dive instructor near Lombok for about a year from 2014–2018.

Such questioning, however, can easily lead to the often-made misassumption that people who live a mobile life do not care about place. This common mistaking is addressed as “locomotion” by Mazzullo & Ingold, by which they refer to a simply mechanical understanding of movement that requires disconnection from land, while they point out that from nomadic perspectives, “it is precisely through their movement that they are entwined with the land” (2008: 36). Emphasising the strong inherent meaningfulness that places have for *Orang Laut* as “inalienable gifts received from their ancestors” (2010: 59, whole book), Chou similarly explains that “Space, for the *Orang Laut*, is a continuous expanse defined by movement, perception and behaviour or activity” (Chou 2010: 61). Nevertheless, in various regions of the world, mobile connections to and ownerships of place have not been legally recognized by the sedentary political powers (see Gilbert 2007, 2014, Brighenti 2010, Chou 2010, Mazzullo 2013). Thus, instead of comprehending places as containers inside which mobility is carried out, I comprehend mobility as an activity that emplaces and localizes meaning. A village, then, is not a self-contained and fixed space. Rather, it is where people leave from and return to while others stay. Hence, in terms of research, it is a gateway to insights into the meanings of people’s lives within and beyond the village.

To conclude, I conceptualize the ocean, or the seas, as socio-cultural spheres: Rather than to think in terms of dualistic human-environmental-relations (or multi-species-relations), which imply the idea of a certain agent on the one hand and humans that perceive it and interact with it on the other, I instead try to grasp maritime meaning-making and approach it as a consistent process, characterized by complex mutuality rather than relationality. By following many dimensions of everyday life, I attempt to capture the multidimensionality of this sphere, which exceeds the three-dimensionality of space, its sensual perception and ontological interpretation.

Researching multidimensionally

The most important method in my research was participant observation as “thick description” (Spittler 2001). As I wanted to know what the ocean means and why/how, I wanted to put myself into the same situations as the respective people to have a similar experience and to understand as emically as possible. Such an approach means that there is more than just ‘one’ participant observation. Consequently, in the course my research I obtained a variety of roles and participant observation became a diverse methodological field.

One of my roles was that of a teacher. Originally, I offered to teach English so that it would not only be me who profits from my stay on a tangible level. I thought that English, as a tool for international communication, would be something useful that I could offer that is at least partially free of bias. However, it turned out to be at least as beneficial for my research as for the children’s education as through the role of an unpaid teacher I became a known and well-accepted member of the village as a whole, and not only a guest of my two host families. I thus consider teaching as a special form of participant observation in which I was not participating as an ‘add-on’ but instead, I became a participant by ‘adding in’.

Mainly, however, I did participant observation as an ‘ad-on’ to follow manifold aspects of everyday life and, where I could, took the role of an “apprentice” as a methodological approach (Coy, ed. 1989; Downey & Dalidowicz et al. 2015). Due to my background as a dive instructor, it was easy for me to join activities underwater and to be observant, as for an instructor it is essential to be aware of the (changes in) environmental conditions as well as the physical abilities and mental states of the people in the group at the same time without verbal communication. As I wanted to find out about meanings the ocean has for people, I was especially interested in activities in the sea, but I soon realized that other activities, like cooking, collecting freshwater, washing and the playing of children are also important and need to be conceptualized together. I had the opportunity to take part in many different activities as I was lucky enough to be invited to accompany and learn from both women and men. Beside work activities, eating or spending time in the house together; the planning ahead, the waiting and changing of plans, the simple conversations about wishes, hopes and worries, the jokes, and the changes in atmosphere at home when guests came and left – or, differently put: the ‘breaks’ between the more articulated activities – were crucial for my understanding too. This, I think, clearly shows that close around-the-clock participant observation cannot be replaced by any other method.

I also consider learning the language a method. I had taken an Indonesian language class before I left but my skills were very limited. Nonetheless, I thought of it as an opportunity because it forced me to learn the language by doing. I see three main advantages in this: (1) The order in which words are learned are in accordance with the frequency of their usage within the research context and therefore point to local significances that might otherwise be overseen, (2) The connotation one learns with the words are situated in locally made experiences and not learned in a mirroring way to one’s native language system which

could lead to misinterpretations based on linguistic pre-assumptions, and (3) It makes close attentiveness to facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice as means of communication as well as a generally high attentiveness fundamental. Yet, it also limited me. I had difficulties following conversations that I was not part of because people were either speaking faster or because they spoke *Sama*.² I learned many words in *Sama* as people enjoyed teaching me, but I never reached a point where I could speak or understand more than a few sentences.

Furthermore, I conducted semi-structured interviews, but it was difficult to get people to talk in an artificial setting and the informal conversations that I had throughout my research in different situations were a lot richer. Nevertheless, the interviews were still valuable as they initiated conversations with people who I normally did not talk to for more than a few minutes.

Last but not least, I also applied photo-voice (Harper 2002; Briggs & Stedman et al. 2014) with waterproof cameras. My aim was mainly to share the task of researching and to be able to take the perspective of others through the photos they take and the reflections they make in the following interviews. However, the method did not work by the book and to observe how the method did and did not work and to experiment with it to make it applicable in my particular research context was as informative as the photos (about 1000) and videos (about 140) themselves, which were taken under, in and above water. I noticed that rather than asking people to take photos and explain them to me at a later time, it was more comfortable for them and thus more practicable to take videos, in which they could but did not have to talk and reflect at the moment of production. Another advantage of videos is that this way, one does not grasp an artificially stative perspective but a more natural process of moving. In this context, I also realised that the term ‘perspective’ is too sharp in general. What I primarily aim at by saying ‘researching multidimensionally’, therefore, is not simply to hint at the also important fact that the research was conducted above and under water but to remark that the experience of living and the construction of meaning are, at any moment, too many-sided and complex to be approached as *points* of view.

To sum it up, by ‘researching multidimensionally’ as a mix of methods, I have tried to grasp different physical, temporal, demographic and socio-cultural dimensions to look at how they play and constitute meaning together rather than at how they relate to and distinguish one from another.

The village “Sweet Water”

The village, in which about 500 people live, is located on/at a tiny c-shaped island. Most of the island itself are three rocky, barren hills that have partially been chopped off to use the rocks to build houses as well as to create flat space. Beside the hills passes the village path, which is about 700 m long. The seaside of the path is packed with about 100 houses while the hillside of the path, which can be seen as a protective wall, is often used to hang up the laundry. Most of the houses have direct access to the sea as they have at least two doors: one directing towards the island and one directing towards the sea. About half of them are stilt houses built on water – here one could also speak of direct access to the island from the sea instead of access to the sea from the island. Some of the few buildings that do not have access to the sea are the primary school and a small hall which is used for political meetings, weddings and other gatherings. The mosque is also located on the inside of the island as well as a few family houses. These places, obviously, are reached on foot. However, when visiting family members or friends that do have access to the sea from their house, especially when transporting something or combining the visit with a trip, going by boat is often preferred. Visitors from the same village may, therefore, enter the houses, which are almost always open, from the island or the sea alike. Thus, the island and the village should not be understood as congruent, and the difference does not simply lie in a physical space versus a place inhabited by humans that thus is constituted with meanings. Rather, the village is as much over the sea as it is on the island and with the island being so small – mainly just the path connecting the (stilt-)houses – it is debatable whether one can speak of land in the first place (Fig. 1).

The village’s local name is Boe Manes, which translates to ‘sweet water’ and refers to freshwater in contrast to *boe aseng*, which literally means ‘salty water’ and refers to seawater as well as to the sea. This means that, following the local terms, the village is named after (the occurrence of a type and taste of) water and not (e.g., the formation of) the island. During my stay, I was told many times that the access to freshwater is a huge advantage of the village. It comes from a mountain top of the neighbouring island and needs to be collected either from there or, if there has been enough rain, it can be obtained from one of the small under-water-pipes that lead the water towards communal access points in Boe Manes. It was explained to me by several people that this was the reason why they

² As not everyone in Boe Manes speaks Sama, speaking Bahasa Indonesia is as common.



Fig. 1. Inside view of Boe Manes, 2019. © Charlotte Schenk

became settled and/or why they settled there and not somewhere else. Electricity is available from 6 pm to 11 pm and is used for illumination, to charge smartphones and tablets, to listen to music and the radio and, in some cases, to watch TV. There was no cell phone reception anywhere near the village during my stay, however, shortly after I left it was set up.

The first month, I lived with Ana³ and Nur, a couple in their thirties, and their daughter who live in a concrete house. The other two months, I lived with another family in a wooden stilt house on the other side of the village. While Nur's family is mainly involved in trading bigger fish and evaluates changes in the village, like the increasing construction of concrete houses, rather positively, the second family makes a living from underwater searching and fishing and is critical toward recent developments. They consist of Erma and Saldrin, who are also in their thirties and their three children. Life in those two families was quite different in many aspects. Particularly noticeable to me were the differences in the availability and the handling of food, money and other resources, the work activities and the familial interactions. While for Ana and Nur the somewhat proud and self-ironic motto: “Makan, tidur, makan” (eating, sleeping, eating) ruled the day and implied – this is not to be understood in an arrogant way – that they were wealthy enough to eat a lot and to be idle, Saldrin explained to me in a more serious manner that life, for *Sama*, was unpredictable and hard work. In this context, he introduced me to the saying: “Busai toho – pario kosong” (dry

paddle – empty pot) which, as he said, is what *Sama* people's life is like. The daily activities, responsibilities, challenges and worries of these two families as well as their biographies, skills and opinions varied in many aspects but were similar in others. Therefore, I had the opportunity to closely follow different lives in the same village. I was also quite mobile within the region through the economically and socially motivated travel of both families and my visa extension. Furthermore, I got to know many children, who also took an important role in my research, and several adults like teachers, vendors and politicians. Although I felt grounded, especially in the first couple of weeks, this was because I was not used to doing absolutely everything together and being asked constantly where I was going to or coming from, with whom and to do what, and not because I was really set put. In fact, I was moving a lot. I was just not moving alone.

Entangling occupations

The everyday life in Boe Manes is shaped by a variety of activities. These activities comprise of: (1) mariculture and trade: e.g., live-fish farming, business trips and pearl farming; (2) underwater searching: e.g., diving for seafood by day and night and spear hunting; (3) overwater catching: e.g., with hand-line and net by day and night; (4) cooking: e.g., rice and fresh water as well as conserving fish; (5) collecting water: from access points in and neighbouring to Boe Manes as well as saving rain water, (6) washing: the laundry as well as

³ All names are self-given pseudonyms.

personal hygiene; and (7) sea bathing: the daily playing of young children (for more details see Schenk 2020, chapter one). While it is interesting to look into the details of each of these activities, what is most important here, is how entangling they are. This does not only apply for the technical aspects of these practices but also for the social, spatial and temporal dimensions that are blurred together by these practices, and which unite and emplace. However, they also make differences possible and visible.

The biggest difference concerns the financial stability and is linked to whether a family predominantly lives on catching or trading. While everyone in the village, at least occasionally, goes fishing as well as everyone is, at least occasionally, involved in trading, some people specialize in trading and thus work as middle(wo)man and others specialize in catching activities and, depending on convenience, sell their catch either to such traders, or travel to the bigger trade stations in the wider area themselves. However, as this is a time-consuming activity that conflicts with fishing and, furthermore, requires the funds to pay for enough fuel for the long trip, this is usually only done if the trip can be combined, e.g., with the necessary shopping of specific goods or visiting family in villages on the way for a specific occasion. As the catch strongly varies in size and species, and the ability to go fishing depends strongly on the weather conditions, the income of fishers is insecure and irregular. Traders, obviously, also depend on the fishers' catches and, for them too, bad weather means that travelling is not possible. However, they still can buy from different fishers and, as they go on trading trips only every couple of days, it is easier for them to navigate the weather conditions, which, however, does not mean that they are better at reading weather and sea. Fishers, here, are the experts and, due to their knowledge, are able to exhaust the time spent working (at outer sea) to the max.

Nonetheless, beside these differences, which are not to be underestimated, similarities overweight. While not everyone is affected to the same extent, a certain unpredictability, that is characterized by weather conditions, good and bad catches and the availability of fresh water rules the life of all. Fresh water is free for everyone, but yet only available to anyone, if it has rained enough and thus, is independent of socio-economical positions. Trips to trade stations, whether as trader or fisher, have the important social function to stay in touch with family and friends beyond the own village, whether one is visiting or being visited. The same goes for fishing practices that are performed in a group, e.g., fishing with big nets, in which family members, often from different villages, come with their boats to work together, as well as for

sharing a meal before or after and thus, stay socially in touch in the context of work. Moreover, fishing can be an activity that parents and children or couples perform in order to spend some fun time together. Especially children at the age of around ten and older spend their afternoon this way to learn and contribute in a playful way while their younger siblings improve their swimming and diving skills in the water under and beside the stilt houses (watch on vimeo: Schenk 2021a). This is not to romanticize. It all is not separable from cooking and eating. Whether the catch or the trade was successful, very immediately, becomes tangible in the frequency, the size and the diversity of the meals, which are shared and which, in a way, are the social, physical and temporal engine of the everyday life.

Like the *Sama* saying Saldrin told me suggests, a dry paddle means an empty pot and to fill a pot, one inevitably needs to travel through the sea, whether it is to go fishing, to sell fish and seafood or to buy rice and other foods. Also, freshwater, just like fish, is part of the game, as it is essential to fill a pot as well. Villages, fishing grounds, freshwater access points, trade stations, shops and markets, institutions like schools and celebrations like weddings, therefore, must be understood as one immediate, spatial-temporally open sphere which is marked and navigated by needs and preferences – meanings – above, across and underneath the sea. Thus, fishing and farming, cooking and eating, sharing and trading, the different forms of water and weather conditions, movement and (im)mobility and, most importantly, the inherent obligations, worries, aims and wishes of people must be studied in their entanglements to approach 'meaning-making ocean'. All these practices are, in one way or another, enmeshed and require routinized flexible movement over the sea for subsistence (watch on vimeo: Schenk 2021b).

(Un)setting materialities

During my stay, about 20 concrete houses were being built from governmental funding. As there are only about 100 houses in total, this is a considerable number. Thus, I was interested in people's opinions and experiences.

To me, the main difference was atmospheric in terms of temperature, colour and sound. In the stilt house, air circulated even on the hottest days, I could hear the water slosh on the stilts and the sun beams entered in golden tones. In the concrete house, it was hard to bear the heat on any day and the walls reflected the sunshine in a depressing grey. Most people seemed to feel this way in terms of atmosphere, as, if they had a wooden and a concrete part to their house, they chose to relax in the wooden part most of the time. Cleaning

is also easier, as the dust from the fire can simply be swept through the gaps between the wooden planks and because ants cannot easily enter.

However, there are other relevant aspects that give more room for discussion. One concerns safety. As there are many storms with heavy rain and strong winds, people generally felt safer in concrete houses. As we had to evacuate the wooden house several times during such storms, including night-time, which was then shaking considerably, I could relate to that fear. However, earthquakes also occur in the area frequently, and people were aware that, in such a case, the risk of dying was bigger in a concrete house. Yet, as this had not happened to date, this fear was on a rather theoretical level and feeling secure was, therefore, in favour of concrete houses. Nevertheless, looking into this more thoroughly, it needs to be mentioned as well that in order to build concrete houses, rocks are chopped off the hills, which makes them less stable. Hence, concrete houses indirectly make landfalls more likely, which, indeed, have cost several lives.

Another aspect is status. While concrete houses were seen as modern and as a symbol of prosperity and thus, were something most people were, at least partially, interested in having, this, however, did not consequently mean that villages that had a high number in concrete houses were seen as good villages. In fact, the case was rather the opposite as such villages happened to have higher crime rates and people drinking alcohol. This may just be a coincidence. Nonetheless, social stability and access to fresh water were the deciding factors whether a village was seen as good or bad, and not the material the houses were built of.

What needs to be mentioned furthermore, is the role that the dynamics in the community play overall. Especially with the governmental support that was proudly organized by the village's mayor, not to ask for support, or not to accept support, could lead to the assumptions that certain families were not in need of support in general, which could then be problematic in other situations. I thus think that to openly decide against a co-financed concrete house, may only be an option for families with a certain financial stability. Overall, what was most congruent, was that the articulated opinions and the actions taken were often not fully conform, which may simply be explained by the social, political and economic complexity of the topic.

Linked to all aforementioned aspects is the aspect of culture, which may also be the most important one. *Lupa budaya* (forgetting or losing culture) was mentioned to me in the context of houses by several people. This, obviously, concerns the material aspect of stilt houses as something that connects people to their history and thus is meaningful to them in terms

of identity. Accordingly, I was told that when the stilt houses are gone, the culture will irrevocably be lost with them. However, this also concerns non-material aspects in a very direct way, like the performance of some practices. E.g., washing, without sewage, is a lot more convenient in the open, over-sea stilt-houses, and relocating a house, e.g., closer to a reef to make fishing easier, is also much more feasible when it is wooden.

Besides that, there are also indirect consequences, like the financial conflict that comes with concrete houses, as they are only partially funded and expensive in maintaining, while the need to buy boats, fishing equipment and fuel, which are also getting more expensive, remains. As a consequence, fishing techniques are unlearned and the trips to different fishing grounds are not always affordable, which again impairs the catch and the money made. Because of that, some *Sama* articulated the wish to *lari ke ref* (run off to the reef), which implied to escape from the developments in the village and to start a more traditional life on a reef. However, their responsibility for the extended family; like for elderly parents that depend on their grown-up children, for teenage siblings that are not yet capable to provide for themselves, and for the own children that need to visit the primary school in the village or that communally travel from the village to a high school in the area, make such a move almost impossible. Yet, the fact that the opportunity, even if difficult, still exists, is what is most important. This includes the economic feasibility as well as the political freedom to do so. Widely, however, people aimed for material wealth the way they imagined it in Western countries and, most of them, did not seem to look critically at the consequences concrete houses may have for them.

The growing role of money is also complex and difficult. I was often told about financial worries in a winey way, and it took me a while to understand that this was not an attempt to ask me, as a 'rich European', for money but normal conversation in which worries were shared with family and friends. Those, however, are expected to help if they can and are being helped, if needed. While there was no shame for needing supportive money and accepting it from close people or distanced institutions, demanding money in the form of payment for provided services, e.g., for working as security personnel during the election or for occasional technical works in and outside the village, was not common at all. Moreover, fishers sold their catch cheaply without much negotiation. Rather than claiming 'one's rights', they either worked harder to meet their family's needs or, when exhausted, pointed out their indignance as described above. This also meant that money was a source of regular worry and stress, which was referred to as *sakit kepala* (headache), and which had a con-

siderable impact on the overall everyday dynamics. As there is a big difference between good and bad days and weeks for fishers, this becomes evident also in food. Often, there was only enough for two basic meals a day, which had to be shared with members of the extended family that were either too young or too old to provide for themselves. I was told that, while sharing is still important, in the past, when money was not common, people used to share a lot more and that today, people sell most of their catch because they want the money. Hence, now the value of fish is mainly a monetary one and it is rather sold than eaten. However, I was also told that, before, they used to have fewer financial worries.

In comparison to some Melanesian societies in which local currencies, mostly shell money, have long been a means of payment and where state money was often integrated into the existing ways of exchange and trade as an additional currency (see Akin & Robbins, eds. 1999), in Boe Manes, the Indonesian Rupiah and concepts of making money and consuming come into conflict with the historically strong societal emphasis on sharing and helping in the form of “generalized reciprocity” (Sahlins 1972), which needs to be seen as an “economy of sharing” rather than an “economy of gift [exchange]” (Spittler 2016: 153; translated from German). Whereas in the past people used to share the catch, people now sell most of it and only share the leftovers. This, as rice and life in general have become more expensive, consequently resolves in a destabilizing circle: (1) The catch is getting smaller and less predictable, (2) more of the already smaller catch is sold, thus even less of it is shared while (3) people depend on sharing even more as, beside the smaller catches, the financial efforts to pay for housing, rice and other foods as well as for fuel have risen. Therefore, the saying “dry paddle – empty pot” has not become any less true in the course of ‘modernisation’. *Tinggal di atas laut* (living over the sea) is thus described as very difficult, whether it is in a (self)devaluating way by those who aim for Western ideals, or to express regret for and fear of more cultural loss. Furthermore, the trade that comes with money is challenging people’s sense of mutuality and togetherness, which are central to their sense of identity, as I will explain in the next section. Consequently, for people involved in fishing as the main source of income, concrete houses and money have had rather destabilizing and displacing than stabilizing and emplacing effects.

Reassuring mutuality

Living with two families, teaching in the local primary school and applying photo/video-voice, I also learned about more implicit aspects of people’s everyday life,

that go hand in hand with the explicit activities and material aspects mentioned above.

Takut sendirian (scared alone), was a phrase I heard often when spending time with children, but also adults. E.g., when I asked children in school to introduce themselves, they basically fell silent. However, they were very loud and not a bit reluctant, when I let them chorus English words from the board or do other group activities. Similarly, when playing the memory game that I had brought, they rather solved it together like a puzzle, instead of competing against each other. I also observed discomfort in adults when they were left to themselves, which they hardly ever were, as well as a focus on cheering rather than winning in competing situations, e.g., when playing volleyball. Overall, the people did not seem very ‘self-reliant’ to me. E.g., when there were things, that they wanted to own or that they were unhappy with, they frequently suggested that they *harus menunggu* (had to wait) and expected things to change on their own terms. While Chou explains a decrease in self-reliance among *Orang Laut* with governmental charity (2010: 103), I think that the ways in which charity money is expected and taken in Boe Manes make low self-reliance visible, reinforces it and indeed creates dependencies. However, I do not think that low self-reliance is the reason for it in the first place. Rather, what looks like a lack in autonomy needs to be linked to the unpredictability in fishing and the corresponding role of sharing and helping as a matter of course and the concept of togetherness.

Bersama terus, which translates to ‘together continuously/constantly’ and, as a verb, *terus*, also means ‘to carry on’, I heard mainly when people talked about people that are important to them. E.g., Saldrin referred to the few men who, like him, still go diving at night as “seperti keluarga (like family) – bersama terus”. As he does not spend much time with them effectively, I understand *terus* not necessarily on a spatial-temporal level but on an emotionally existential one and think that *bersama terus* can be translated as ‘together consistently’. Especially the fact that they share the dangerous and unpredictable activity of underwater searching as well as that they are among the few people left with the knowledge and the skills to do it, bonds them. Even if they do not necessarily work at the same time at the same place, knowing that they make the same experience and have the same responsibility is comforting. *Bersama terus*, then, as I understand it, means that only ‘together’ they can ‘exist’ and ‘continue’ into the future. This can be but is not necessarily congruent with biological or in-law kin groups. While the familial bonds I observed were, though mainly friendly, rather compulsive in nature, what I look at here are groups bonded by shared stances and

positions. These become especially important in times of transformations, which challenge the traditionally strong emphasis on the community.

In this context, I was also told by Saldrin “*Satu Bahasa, satu suku, tapi budaya sudah lupa.*” (One language, one tribe/ethnic background but the culture is already forgotten/lost.) as well as “*Disini tidak bersama.*” (Here, it is not together.). Thus, the fact that people take existential strength from togetherness, makes them powerless when alone in their stance. Nonetheless, the strong mutual support still prevails the frictions when it comes down to it in specific situations. Problems, most of the time, are dealt with as communal matters and, if it is inevitable that people worry, it is ensured that, at least, they do not worry alone, e.g., expressed as: “*Kita pikir bersama.*” (We think together). Confrontations of underlying differences in the wider village are usually easily avoidable and, in the context of the extended family, they are bridged. This continuous bridging of differences within families in combination with the changes, however, can be a massive strain. E.g., Saldrin and Erma had to handle a lot of worry before Ramadan, as the catches were not very big, but they still needed to accumulate enough money to be able to get through the time ahead, in which they would not have the physical strength to work hard. Despite this pressure, Erma’s parents, two young sisters, her brother and his wife entered their house every day, took coffee and sugar and joined in for at least one meal. Erma, in this context, told me that she likes to cook a lot of rice but that it is difficult because she does not have much money to buy it, but also, that her mother and siblings need to eat. To me, the extent they entered the house to eat appeared like a self-service restaurant or a bottomless pit. I understood that people have a lot of responsibility for their families and that helping each other is of high value, but I also had the impression that the responsibility and help were very unbalanced. When I lived with Ana, who is also the oldest among her siblings and whose mother is also elderly, she only occasionally cooked for this part of her family. One of her younger sisters often joined for dinner but brought her own rice. Erma’s family sometimes brought an uncooked fish, but this was not comparable to the amounts of coffee and rice they took, and I had the impression that they acted more helplessly than they were on purpose. I was unsure if my interpretation was too negative but towards the end of my stay, I found that Saldrin felt that way too. In a conversation with him, I said cautiously that Erma’s family is eating a lot with them, and he seemed somewhat relieved that I had brought up the topic. He asked me whether I had already noticed it and told me that he cannot say anything against it,

as then, they would get angry, but that the way they behave is not okay; that his house is like a hotel and although he likes to help, when they see that it is already difficult, it is not okay to take as much as they do, that he is forced to go fishing every day even when he is in severe pain while they “*istrahat terus*” (constantly take a break). He said again that if things get too bad, he will take his family and move to the reef. In this context, moving to the reef is not only a solution to and a critique of the difficult economic/fishing situation and the cultural loss I have explained before, but also a way to escape from social problems that have arisen from the tension between money as a necessity in a globalizing capitalist world on the one hand, and support in the form of generalized reciprocity/reassuring mutuality as a responsibility in the specific cultural context on the other. The symptom of a ‘headache’ that Erma often articulated may then also be seen as a metaphor for two conflicting ways of thinking: self-centred and group-centred.

Not to be self-reliant, or more accurately, not to be self-centred, is deeply socially rooted and essential to the socio-cultural organization in Boe Manes. Looking at people’s history, this is not surprising. If one literally sits together in the same boat, not only for hours, but for weeks and months, and shares a space of about 5 sq. m while moving over the sea in the exact same ways together, it is natural that people are not as self-centred as people who walk as a means of movement. Even if people may, socio-economically, be just as inter-dependent in other settings, by walking, they situationally establish individual relations with different people and distance from others throughout the day on their own behalf. If, however, one always moves together on a boat, therefore the group instead of the own body being the smallest physical unit most of the time, it is not surprising that people ‘think together’, are ‘scared alone’ and rather than to relate to each other, ‘consist together’. Now, people in Boe Manes do not live on boats anymore. Nonetheless, it is only a few decades ago that they have. Besides in stories, this still is evident in the bodies of middle-aged and older people, who have grown into the position that is taken when sitting still in a boat. Furthermore, the village is populated very densely and the part that is ‘land’ is literally tiny. Walking alone, and also walking in general, is therefore still hardly possible. This makes sharing existential and keeping things to oneself pointless. Thus, there is no point for competition as one is not competing with others but adding one’s strength into the group’s mutual share of knowledge, ability and achievement. While this may be a general characteristic of economies of sharing, I believe that the yet unforgotten ethno-biography of living in boats

and the physical experience of moving together adds an intensifying quality to ‘togetherness’ that is unique to ‘(sea) nomads’. For some, this is a relief and reassuring to be part of that mutuality while for others, it means pressure to reassure it. Reassuring mutuality, therefore, does not mean that everyone is uniform, but everyone is inseparably part of that mutuality in different ways.

Patience, luck and support as a guiding motive

Overall, there is certain level of unpredictability prevailing life in Boe Manes, concerning, e.g., the weather, the catch and the financial situation. By unpredictability, however, I do not mean uncertainty, which is defined as an “open-ended field of unpredicted possibilities” (Boholm 2003: 167), which makes future developments not at all anticipatable. Nevertheless, the related concept of risk, which, in contrast to uncertainty, is defined as a “bounded set of possible consequences” (ibid), does not fit either, as risk, in the social sciences, is mostly thought in the context of crises, which are situations in which ‘normalcy’ is at-risk and management strategies are put at test (Macamo & Neubert 2012: 85). Risk, then, is linked to an event, e.g., caused by an unpredictable hazard (Bollig 2012: 35) or an action which possibly could but does not necessarily have to (Haltermann 2012: 63) damage something that is of value to people, including their lives (Rosa 1998: 28). In Boe Manes, however, a certain level of unpredictability is an ordinary part of everyday life and not problematic as such, although, of course, there are difficult times and situations. Yet, rather than to “routinize crisis” (Vigh 2006: 151), people live over a “choppy sea” (ibid: 165), not only in a metaphoric way, but as the unpredictable, yet mostly trusted and routinized order of the everyday.

Beside misinterpreting this unpredictability as crises, the way people live in accordance with circumstances in which it is hardly possible to plan ahead in detail, can also easily be mistaken for a lack of self-reliance and disinterest in the future by ‘outsiders’, as the outside-views Lenhart collected about *Orang Suku Laut* show (1997: 591). Especially in all sorts of fishing activities that I either accompanied or that I was involved in otherwise, like conversations, good or bad catches were anticipated or interpreted as either *beruntung* (lucky) or *tidak beruntung* (not lucky). Accordingly, people did not think in terms of ‘success’ or ‘failure’, linking the outcome to the own merit, but to circumstances one cannot influence. What was seen as own ability, however, was the variety of fishing skills one has and thus how flexible one is. This notion of luck is strongly connected to *menunggu* (waiting),

since, if one is not lucky, one needs to be patient until the time is better again. Another aspect that relates to waiting and luck is *membantu* (helping). If the conditions are not good, one does not need to wait alone until things get better but, in the meantime, gets help.

These three aspects: waiting, luck and helping, are all part of the same, yet manifold concept and can be summarized by the expression ‘*mudah-mudahan...*’ (hopefully...), which is used, very frequently, to start a sentence. E.g., it is used when the weather is bad, and one hopes that soon, the weather will be good enough so that fishing or trading is possible again. The waiting, or, more accurately, the patience, then, is a trustful anticipation rather than passive despair and thus constructive in the local context. This also applies to long term concerns, like moving back to the reef. Even if efforts to make this move are not necessarily visible, it does not mean that there are none: “As one waits, incremental and unstable day-to-day practices are simultaneous with the maintenance of a broader vision for the future.” (Stasik & Hänsch et al. 2020: 2, see also Hänsch 2019). Thus, to sustain a life in Boe Manes that keeps up the possibility of moving to the reef, even if no direct actions are taken, still is an action towards fulfilling that wish in the future while it also takes other, more immediate conditions into account, like the education of children and the support of the extended family. The future vision is then brought into and kept in the present by regularly expressing: “*Mudah-mudahan, tahun depan sudah...*” (Hopefully, next year already...). Even if everybody knows that it is very unlikely that it is going to happen this soon, nonetheless, everybody knows that it is still being aspired. *Mudah-mudahan*, then, predominantly refers to patience. As already mentioned, *mudah-mudahan* is also used to express, e.g., the hope for a good catch and then primarily refers to luck. Here too, *mudah-mudahan* concerns something that one wants, however, unlike in the example above, it is not the aspect of time that is stressed but the limited control that one has over it. Finally, *mudah-mudahan* is used to express the desire to be able to help or the longing for receiving help in difficult times. This, however, are only nuances. More importantly, these aspects are complementing: If one is unlucky, one needs to be patient and possibly rely on help while, if one is lucky, one needs to help others who are waiting unluckily. Therefore, it is luck, or unpredictability, within the concept of *mudah-mudahan* which is central to it, as if one knew the outcome beforehand, one might still need to be patient or to help/take help, but there would be no point to hope for what is already definite. The notion of *beruntung* and *tidak beruntung* as opposed to, e.g., the notion of ‘success’ and ‘failure’, therefore is a recognition and acceptance

of a general level of unpredictability and a limited direct influenceability of certain matters. Furthermore, unpredictability in Boe Manes does not mean that everything is unknown or beyond one's control. While it is not known what the weather will be like or how fruitful a fishing trip is going to be, *mudah-mudahan*, in contrast to the pure not-knowing of uncertainty, is characterised by the assurance that there will be help if needed, as well as that, at some point or another, fishing will be fruitful again. What is uncertain is when things will happen in which of the routinized ways. Therefore, the concept that fits here instead of uncertainty or crises, is that of hope.

Hope, nonetheless, should not be seen in a solely positive light. First of all, it is necessary to understand that “hopes have two sides: hopes for the good and fear of the bad” (van Hooft 2014: 58). While *mudah-mudahan* can mean a trustful and creative attitude in a difficult time, it can also mean a worried and restricting attitude in bad times or good times prone to change. Furthermore, it can be used as an accepted way to express critique. E.g., if someone says: “Hopefully, they will be lucky fishing” it may really mean: “They rely too much on us, which would not be legitimate to articulate by other means. Conversely, it can be a way to ask for help indirectly and then, instead of comforting people, put pressure on them, as it is increasingly happening in the context of the material transformations. Therefore, while *mudah-mudahan* is a socio-culturally established way to trustfully anticipate the only partially predictable immediate and long future, it can also be ‘(mis)used’ to evade accountability. While van Hooft recognizes the implicitness of worry in hope, he approaches hopefulness as “the positive side of a host of deep concerns and anxieties. The hopeful person” in his understanding, “is the one who stresses the positive side while the less hopeful person is preoccupied with the anxieties” (ibid: 64ff). However, one could also argue that, vice versa, hope is always implicit in worry: If it was already certain that the outcome is bad, worry would not make sense, but regret. Thus, someone who is/chooses to be hopeful, at the same time, is/chooses to be worried, and vice versa. I therefore prefer to look at hope as (the whole scope of) imaginable developments that one fears/tries to prevent and wishes for/aims at. In other words, I understand hoping as the socio-cultural assessing of experienced unpredictability that can be anywhere between optimistic and pessimistic outlooks.

The correspondence of the evaluation of what is possible or realistic and, within that, what one wishes for/aims at and is worried about/tries to prevent is not only important to understand hoping as a concept, but it makes it also extremely interesting as an approach

to understanding societies and people and could be a useful tool in anthropological research in general. Unlike van Hooft, who states that: “One is hopeful for the future despite the past rather than because of it” (ibid 51), I think that *mudah-mudahan* is based on past experiences: No matter how badly or how well things go, people in Boe Manes know things will change eventually. It is the past experience of both worry, followed by relief, and comfort, followed by worry, which constitutes *mudah-mudahan* and which, as an underlying motive guides people through the present. I use the term motive here to avoid separating between emotion and reason, as I agree with van Hooft that hope is both cognitive and emotional (ibid. 40ff). Furthermore, while *mudah-mudahan*, like affect, is in constant motion, unlike affect, the processes I have observed appeared to be (intra-)spheric rather than (inter-)relational as well as conserving rather than releasing in nature. Thus, instead of affect as “*felt difference*” (SFB 1171 Affective Societies 2016: 4), I comprehend *mudah-mudahan* as a guiding motive characterized by differently experienced mutuality.

To give one example: When Saldrin's catch is *unlucky* several times in a row or if there is strong wind for a while, so he has to *wait* until he can go to the reef, it means that he cannot make much money to buy rice. This, at the same time, means that Erma has headaches because she is worried that she cannot cook enough rice for her extended family as well as that Saldrin feels pressured to return to the reef despite exhaustion and possible danger, while, at the same time, Erma's family feels free to take the *support* they need. It is *hoping* that the catch will be *lucky* again if they are *patient* for a while that motivates and reassures Saldrin and Erma to carry on working just as it motivates and reassures Erma's family to keep taking *support*. Hence, while their experience is not identical, it is however centred in their mutual existence and driven by common notions and needs.

‘Living over the sea’, thus, means a lot of things. It can be dangerous as well as safe, exhausting as well as relaxing, scary as well as exciting or comforting and so on, depending on (1) where (e.g. in the village, at the reef, at the deeper sea, travelling), (2) what time (e.g. day, night, weather), (3) doing what (e.g. fishing overwater/underwater, trade, play, travel) and (4) in what context (e.g. economic/social, worry/pressure, celebrations, leisure, escape). The most congruent aspect, however, is unpredictability, and thus, *mudah-mudahan*. *Mudah-mudahan*, or the ability to wait, to take things as they are and the will to help is vital to ‘living over the sea’. As a motive, it guides through good and difficult times. Although experienced differently, it is rather constituting a group that ‘together navigates a

boat' than individuals that 'find their own seats within that boat'. The wordplay: "Orang Sama bersama-sama meaning" (*Sama* people together) but also pointing at their sameness/equality (*Sama* for the ethnic group, *bersama-sama* for 'being/doing together', and *sama* for 'same'), is another indication, and was also expressed in an interviewing conversation with an elderly woman and her middle-aged daughter: "Itu dibilang Sama karena Bajo, dia selalu bersama. Dia kemana akan bersama; ke tempat duduk, kumpul bersama. Jadi, dinamakan Sama." (It is called *Sama*/same because *Bajo*, he/she is always together. Wherever he/she will be/go, he/she will always be/go together; to the sitting place, gather together. So, the name is *Sama*/same. Boe Manes, 28/04/2019).

Summary

The most common and time-consuming occupations in their practice, entangle people (within and beyond family), places (within and beyond the village) and time (day/night/weather). This concurrence of people, place and time expresses a routinized flexible movement over the sea for subsistence. This routine, however, is shaken by current transformations concerning concrete houses and money. While concrete houses and money both have a settling function in the sense of a spatial and an economic fix, in the local context, they have rather destabilizing and displacing than stabilizing and emplacing effects. This has to be linked to the strong emphasis on togetherness: With the background of living on boats and the inevitably togetherly experienced movement and 'exposure' to difficult and good times, people think rather group-centred than self-centred and are inseparably part of a mutuality in different ways. Within this mutuality, one finds the notion of *mudah-mudahan* which can be assigned to patience, luck and support and which, as an underlying, differently experienced, guiding motive, flexibly moves and embeds people in their 'life over the sea'.

Complex consistency as a way of meaning-making

Following everyday life, I hope to have shown that the living practices, evaluations, meanings and the ways they continuously are (re)shaped and shaped newly are too complex and too entangled to grasp the ocean as either an economic zone as was done when maritime anthropology as a sub-discipline evolved in the context of a growing world population and increasing globalisation, or as an ecological zone as is often done in more recent works in the context of pollution and climate change.

Furthermore, I hope to have shown that the sea is also where it does not appear physically. While I partially agree with Schneider who states that:

"The problem is merely that Euro-American researchers coming from a different tradition of perceiving the sea fail to see in it what indigenous people see: distinct bodies of waters of different qualities, paths and boundaries" (2012: 195),

I think that it is also a problem if researchers only look for the sea as bodies of water. Like food is existential to life and exceeds its materiality, the sea in Boe Manes does too. It is omnipresent in such a way that it cannot simply be framed as a resource, species or environment. Hence, it is not sufficient here to grasp water in its totality (Orlove & Caton 2010), as substance and symbol (Helmreich 2011) or as an emerging "fluid object in more senses than one" (Hastrup & Hastrup 2016: 20) as these approaches still widely objectify. What I have suggested instead is to grasp the omnipresent but sometimes hidden inherence of water or the seas as complex socio-cultural spheres. Comprehending this way also dissolves the dualism that human-environmental-relation approaches often fail to overcome.

While I do not generally question human-environmental-relation approaches, I think they are only suitable if environments are experienced in the context of noticeable change e.g., due to disaster, war, displacement, migration, commute, travel or extreme sports, or moreover, because research is conducted in a society that socio-culturally makes a strong conceptual division between people, place and time; hence: if living is experienced from a *sedentary point of view* as movement *between* places that have spatial and temporal borders. However, if living is experienced from a *mobile motion of view* with no conceptualized ends or exits it may be misleading to seek for relations in the polar sense of the word. It is for differences in spatial comprehension, as I have explained in the theoretical section, that mobile groups of people have had severe difficulties to legally claim their land/sea. Thus, I do not simply mean to tackle the much-criticized but hardly resolved nature-culture-dichotomy but to ask of anthropologists to more strongly reflect on their own sedentary backgrounds (or as applicable) as well as their self-centred backgrounds (or as applicable). When mobility and practical/occupational/economical/social/emotional entanglements 'with the environment' and 'with one another' are so intimate and routinely and continuously inherent in everyday life as is the case in Boe Manes, approaches that try to find *relations between* are not beneficial since such – despite also hinting at connecting processes and however meaningful they may be – hint at differentiating and subject-forming processes as In-gold's take on the perception of the environment shows:

“Organic life, as I envisage it, is active rather than reactive, the creative unfolding of an entire field of relations within which beings emerge and take on the particular forms they do, each in relation to the others. Life, in this view, is not the realisation of pre-specified forms but the very process wherein forms are generated and held in place. Every being, as it is caught up in the process and carries it forward, arises as a singular centre of awareness and agency: an enfoldment, at some particular nexus within it, of the generative potential that is life itself.” (2000: 19).

This may not be wrong, but neither is it universally true. E.g., Chou writes about the Southeast Asian seascape:

“[T]he more one looks, the more one can see into it. At its most intense, all boundaries between self and other, as well as persons and objects, completely disappear. It is at this point that one discovers the real meaning of water in Southeast Asia.” (2016: 281).

Hence, depending on the socio-cultural context, rather than (multi-polar) co-existence, (complex) consistency may as well be a way of perceiving and making sense. This needs to get more consideration in anthropological analyses and, more importantly, in method, which too often predetermines from where and where to anthropologists look (e.g., psychological anthropology relies strongly on ego-centring methods, including research on socio-centrism).

In short: The sea/life, in Boe Manes, is experienced similarly as well as differently by different persons and it is experienced differently by the same persons in different instances of its expanse. This may not be surprising. However, the crux is that it can only be (fearlessly) experienced/lived *together*, as the centre of experience does not lie in individual persons but in the dynamics essential to ensure the consistency of a group: – a mutual purpose; like food for subsistence, which blurs together rather than to form “singular centre[s]” (see Ingold’s quote above). Only together, driven by the motive *mudah-mudahan*, ‘the ocean’ means the socio-cultural sphere that makes people’s life across person, place and time the multifaceted but same unit that continuously evolves and (re)shapes as an open complex.

Outlook

With all the habitual foci in today’s anthropology, I believe, the discipline should not lose its interest in, its appreciation of and its fascination for being human per se. Also, with these foci often being on crisis, conflict, devastation and rapid transformations, we should not forget to consider the continuous establishing and mastering of ‘ordinary’ everyday life, which probably is more meaningful to and characteristic of our existence than the more ‘exceptional’ battles. If, however, we are taught to focus on ‘relevant’ topics to make our

research ‘ethically legitimate’ and ‘useful’, we are discouraged from looking beyond what we can imagine. In my opinion, this is at the risk of epistemological bias. Anthropology, then, becomes the study of unknown details within somewhat predetermined and isolated topics, rather than the emic study of people and society that identifies connections and comprehends conceptual horizons.

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