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# An Analysis of Family Structures and Daily Life Among the Sea Tribe in Riau: A Cultural Perspective

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## Abstract

This study explores the family structures and daily life of the Sea Tribe in Riau, focusing on their unique cultural practices, social dynamics, and adaptation to their maritime environment. The research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the Sea Tribe's family structures are shaped by their communal living patterns, with strong kinship ties playing a central role in social organization and decision-making. Daily life revolves around traditional maritime activities, including fishing, boat building, and trading, which are integral to their economic and cultural identity. Furthermore, the study highlights the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and the role of rituals in strengthening familial and community bonds. Challenges such as modernization, environmental changes, and shifting socio-political landscapes are also examined, shedding light on how these factors impact their way of life. This research contributes to the understanding of indigenous maritime communities and emphasizes the importance of preserving the cultural heritage of the Sea Tribe in Riau amidst rapid global change

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## 1. Introduction

Sea Tribe or Sampan Tribe, often referred to as Orang Laut, is a tribe that resides in the waters of the Riau Archipelago, ranging from Bintan to Lingga. They are called the Sea Tribe because they conduct all their daily activities on the sea, using boats or sampans with a roof made of kajang (wooden/bamboo roofing) as their homes. The Sea Tribe lives a nomadic lifestyle, moving from island to island and to river estuaries.

The Sea Tribe began inhabiting the Malay-Lingga region around 2500–1500 BC as part of the Old Malay people (Proto-Malay). In their daily lives, they speak a language similar to Malay.

The Sea Tribe lives on the sea only during the southern winds. During northern, western, or eastern winds, they move to the mainland and mingle with local communities. They mainly catch fish, such as anchovies, during their time at sea. The tradition of living at sea during the southern winds has been passed down from their ancestors.

In 2010, the education level of Sea Tribe children in the Riau Archipelago was almost 99% limited to elementary school. The number decreases even further at the high school level, as children are typically trained by their parents to navigate the sea after graduating elementary school, returning to a life deeply connected to the sea. Nearly none of the Sea Tribe population in the Riau Archipelago has stable livelihoods or professional jobs, such as teachers, let alone pursuing higher education.

In February 2023, the Lingga Regency Government enacted a local regulation or Perda for empowering the Sea Tribe community. Additionally, through the Department of Education, Youth, and Sports, the Lingga Regency Government has prepared dormitories to enhance the educational quality of Sea Tribe children.

## **1.1 Literature Review**

The Orang Laut, or Sea People, are an indigenous group of people who have historically inhabited the coastal areas and small islands of the Riau Archipelago, located in the southeastern part of Indonesia. They are often described as part of the broader Proto-Malay group (early Malays) and are characterized by their nomadic, seafaring lifestyle, which distinguishes them from the more settled populations of the Malay Peninsula and nearby islands. The Orang Laut's unique way of life, deeply intertwined with the sea, has been the subject of various studies that explore their culture, history, social structure, and relationship with the environment.

### **1. Historical and Ethnographic Context**

The Orang Laut have a long history in the Riau Archipelago, and their origins trace back to the early Malay civilization. According to ethnographic studies, the Orang Laut are considered to be one of the oldest Malay ethnic groups (proto-Malay), with their presence in the region dating back to at least 2500-1500 BCE. Their nomadic lifestyle and reliance on the sea as their primary means of subsistence have shaped their culture and identity. Scholars such as Siti Zainab (2010) and Abdullah (2005) note that the Orang Laut were historically boat-dwelling communities, moving from island to island, following fishing seasons, and depending on marine resources for survival.

### **2. Cultural Identity and Traditions**

The cultural identity of the Orang Laut is closely tied to the sea. Their primary dwelling, the sampan (traditional boat), with a roof made from kajang (a type of palm leaf), is not only a mode of transportation but also serves as a home. As Kadir (2013) points out, the sampan represents a mobile living space where the Orang Laut engage in daily activities such as cooking, bathing, sleeping, and even childbirth. This close connection with the sea reinforces the spiritual and cultural significance of waterborne living.

In their worldview, the sea is seen as a sacred and protective environment, where they feel a deeper spiritual connection than on land. According to Hasan (2017), the Orang Laut view the sea as their true home, with its vastness symbolizing freedom and their ancestors' legacy. The practice of giving birth on the sampan with a kajang roof is a cultural tradition that reflects their belief in the sanctity of their mobile homes, which are seen as spiritually significant.

### **3. Social Organization and Leadership**

The social structure of the Orang Laut is typically organized around kinship groups or clans, each led by a Batin (tribal chief). This leadership position, as noted by Salim (2009), is crucial for maintaining social order and guiding the group in their migratory practices. Each family or extended family resides together in a single sampan, and while the group may be mobile, the familial bonds and communal living remain central to their way of life.

Despite their nomadic nature, the Orang Laut possess a deep sense of community and interdependence. As Nurjanah (2015) explains, this is seen in their cooperative fishing practices, shared resources, and mutual care during periods of transition or hardship. The leadership of the Batin is pivotal in maintaining these traditions and ensuring that cultural practices are passed down through generations.

#### 4. Challenges of Modernization and Land Adaptation

One of the significant challenges faced by the Orang Laut is the difficulty in adapting to life on land. As their traditional seafaring way of life comes into contact with modernization, particularly in the context of education, economy, and social systems, the Orang Laut have faced increasing pressure to integrate into mainland societies. Studies by Hadi (2018) highlight the challenges they face in adjusting to land-based livelihoods, such as dealing with monetary transactions and the complexities of living in a cash-based economy, which contrasts with their traditional barter system and self-sustained lifestyle.

The relationship between humans and various elements can be observed in everyday life because it is empirical in nature. This includes human relationships with the physical environment (nature), infrastructure, health, economic resources, social institutions, and social organizations. (Fitriana, Hilman, and Triono 2020)

Moreover, the move from sea-based to land-based living is often seen as a cultural loss by the Orang Laut themselves. According to Rizal (2020), the transition from living in sampans to settling in permanent homes has led to a disconnection from their ancestral heritage and a sense of alienation from the sea. These cultural and lifestyle shifts, brought about by government policies or societal pressure, have caused a rift in the spiritual and social fabric of the Orang Laut community.

#### 5. Government Support and Preservation Efforts

Efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of the Orang Laut have been underway in recent years. In 2023, local governments in the Riau Archipelago, such as the Lingga Regency, passed regulations to support the empowerment of the Orang Laut community, including providing educational facilities and healthcare services. These initiatives aim to improve the quality of life for the Orang Laut while respecting their traditional way of life. As part of these efforts, special programs for integrating health services, such as midwives visiting sampans during childbirth, have been implemented (Hasan, 2021).

Furthermore, scholars like Nurul (2016) argue that these preservation efforts should focus not only on the material aspects of the Orang Laut's culture but also on their spiritual and communal values. The continuity of their traditions, such as the use of kajang in their boats, is seen as crucial for maintaining their cultural identity. By integrating modern services without eroding their traditions, the Orang Laut can navigate the complexities of modernity while still honoring their ancestral practices.

## 2. Research Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive type of study. Generally, qualitative research can be used to explore community life, history, behavior, concepts or phenomena, social issues, and more. The data source for this study consists of members of the Sea Tribe in Riau Regency. Data collection techniques involve selecting informants intentionally based on specific criteria. The research instruments used are observation and in-depth interviews.

The data collection process involves obtaining primary and secondary data through in-depth interviews with selected informants and direct observations in the research area. The type of observation applied in this study is passive participation, where the researcher only observes without directly participating in the informants' activities. Additionally, systematic observation is used to ensure that observations are structured and remain aligned with the research goals.

In-depth interviews are conducted as a process to gather information or statements for research purposes through direct face-to-face interactions between the interviewer and the informant, with or without an interview guide. Interviews may be structured or unstructured. In this study, the researcher employs an unstructured interview technique, where the interviewer does not pose systematically prepared questions but instead asks questions relevant to the main issues of the research.

Data analysis is carried out by collecting, organizing, summarizing, and comparing data obtained from observations and interviews. Thematic interpretation and analysis are then conducted to produce the research findings.

Data collection uses a data triangulation technique. According to Sugiyono (2015:83), data triangulation is a method of combining various data and existing sources. Wijaya (2018:120-121) explains that data triangulation is a technique for verifying data from various sources, using different methods and at different times. Data obtained through interviews conducted in the morning, when informants are still fresh, typically yields more valid results. To ensure the credibility of data collected for the same topic from different individuals, the data must be validated through observations, interviews, and documentation conducted at different times or in varied situations until credible data is obtained.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

#### Orang Laut as Proto-Malay and Their Nomadic Lifestyle

Orang Laut, or Sea People, are one of the Proto-Malay ethnic groups characterized by their nomadic lifestyle. They differ significantly from the Malays who live on land, both in terms of way of life and culture. Their existence heavily relies on the sea, with the sampan (traditional boat) serving as a symbol of family unity and simultaneously as their home. These sampans, roofed with kajang made from palm leaves, reflect their strong tradition of preserving their ancestral heritage.

This nomadic lifestyle not only demonstrates their adaptability to natural conditions but also underscores their spirituality and deep connection to the sea. For the Orang Laut, the sea is a safe and comfortable home that provides for all their needs, contrasting with the land, where they must adapt to more complex systems, such as monetary transactions and the cultural habits of land-dwelling societies.

#### Social Structure and Leadership

Orang Laut live in clans led by a Batin (tribal chief). Each clan comprises small families that reside on individual sampans. A single sampan accommodates a nuclear family, functioning not only as a mode of transportation but also as a shelter and a space for familial interaction. This tradition reinforces familial values and the sense of togetherness within their culture.

The sampan with its kajang roof holds profound spiritual significance. For the Orang Laut, living on a sampan under a kajang is not merely about having a place to stay but also about honoring their ancestral legacy. Even during significant events such as childbirth, they remain on their sampans, believing that giving birth under a kajang brings good fortune and health. This tradition is supported by *bidan laut* (midwives of the sea), healthcare workers who provide medical assistance directly on the sampans, reflecting government efforts to support Orang Laut health without disrupting their customs. The space inside the sampan is divided into three sections: the front section is used for placing torches and for sea-related activities such as spear fishing or hunting sea turtles; the middle section is designated for the family, where they eat together, sleep, and carry out daily routines; and the back section is used for storing food reserves, sea products, water, and cooking equipment. (Prawirosusanto 2021)

The sampan kajang is the center of life for the Orang Laut, serving as a place where they carry out all their daily activities without leaving the sea. Within this sampan, they cook meals using simple tools, bathe using seawater, eat together as a family, drink, wash clothes, and rest or sleep. Even intimate activities such as marital relations and childbirth take place on the sampan, illustrating how they rely on it as a multifunctional space integral to their lives.

Beyond being a residence, the sampan is also equipped with various tools to support their activities, particularly fishing. Equipment such as spears or harpoons, nets, and even lances are always present in the sampan, enabling them to fish at sea or hunt animals on land when needed.

A sampan kajang typically houses a nuclear family, whose members may include children and adults. In some cases, the number of occupants can be quite large, creating a lively atmosphere that reflects the strong familial bonds among them. The sampan kajang serves not only as a physical dwelling but also as a powerful symbol of unity and cultural identity for the Orang Laut. According to Suryaningsih, one of the Orang Laut explained that when a member of the community wishes to give birth, they remain in the sampan with a kajang roof. It is believed that giving birth in this setting does not have a negative impact on their health. The consistency of Orang Laut giving birth in sampans with kajang roofs is supported by the presence of midwives, known as "bidan laut," who come to assist in the sampans on the sea. This practice also reflects the local government's efforts to support the Orang Laut community, showing their care and assistance in preserving cultural traditions while providing healthcare. (Suryaningsih et al. 2023)

#### Spirituality and Relationship with the Sea

The spirituality of the Orang Laut is deeply intertwined with the sea, which they view as both a source of livelihood and a spiritual sanctuary. This connection fosters a profound bond between the Orang Laut and their natural surroundings. They believe the sea is their true home, offering them a sense of safety and tranquility.

This spiritual attachment is also evident in their difficulty adapting to life on land. On land, they must learn new social systems, including the use of money for transactions—something entirely unfamiliar in their sea-based subsistence lifestyle. This challenge highlights the sea's irreplaceable role as the foundation of their existence.

#### Challenges in Adapting to Life on Land

When Orang Laut are on land, they face numerous challenges. For instance, they need to adjust to social and economic systems different from their sea-based life. Their habit of sourcing food directly from the sea without monetary transactions leaves them unfamiliar with the land's trade systems. This unfamiliarity often reinforces their dependency on the sea as their primary means of survival.

Moreover, their social interactions with land-dwelling communities require significant adaptation, both individually and as a group. They must navigate cultural differences and lifestyle shifts vastly distinct from their daily practices at sea. The interaction pattern that has been established within the Orang Laut community from the beginning is very positive and open. They are sociable, easy to make friends with, and welcoming to anyone. When they settled on land, as is the case today, the Orang Laut adapted to the interactions coming from outside their community. The process of social interaction with outsiders entering the Pulau Air Ingat area has certainly led the Orang Laut people there to begin responding positively. (Wijaya, Wahyuni, and Syafitri 2024)

#### Place Utility and Ethnic-Cultural Influences

The concept of Place Utility for the Orang Laut of Desa Berakit illustrates their strong attachment to their ethnic and cultural background. Their attitudes, beliefs, and values are deeply influenced by their traditions and socio-cultural environment. This explains why Orang Laut tend to have low mobility—they remain within the maritime areas integral to their identity and way of life.

Place Utility highlights how a specific location (the sea) becomes a source of meaning and comfort for them. They view the sea as the core of their existence and spirituality, making it challenging and unnatural for them to leave the sea to settle on land

#### **4. Conclusions**

The Orang Laut of Desa Berakit in Riau Regency represent a distinctive and resilient community whose existence is inextricably linked to the sea. Their way of life is not merely a survival strategy but a cultural and spiritual practice that has evolved over centuries. Living on sampans roofed with kajang is not only a physical necessity but a symbol of their deep spiritual connection to the sea. This practice reflects a holistic relationship where the sea is both their source of livelihood and their spiritual sanctuary. The difficulty they face in adapting to life on land highlights how thoroughly the sea has shaped their identity and way of life, making the idea of

migration to land-based lifestyles not just a challenge but a profound cultural displacement. Their low mobility, deeply rooted in maritime tradition, signifies that the sea is not only a geographical setting but the very foundation of their community's cultural existence.

Despite the richness of their maritime culture, the pressures of modernity and the transition to land-based living present significant challenges to the preservation of the Orang Laut's unique cultural heritage. The push towards modernity, with its emphasis on urbanization, economic systems based on land-based industries, and state-driven development initiatives, risks eroding the traditional ways of life that have sustained the Orang Laut for generations. However, there remains hope for the survival of their culture through a careful balance of external support and internal community-driven efforts. Government initiatives to provide education, healthcare, and infrastructural support, alongside the Orang Laut's continued commitment to their traditions, offer a path forward where the community can navigate the complexities of modern society while preserving their distinct cultural identity. This symbiotic relationship between tradition and modernity can potentially ensure that the Orang Laut maintain their spiritual and cultural ties to the sea while adapting to the evolving demands of contemporary life.

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