Philippines' Badjao sea gypsies are tossed by modern winds

Their centuries-old way of life is threatened by rising costs and shrinking fisheries. For some of the fishermen, their only hope is that their children won't have to follow in their footsteps.

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PUERTO PRINCESA, PHILIPPINES — The motley caravan of boats, their engines popping in staccato rhythm, headed out to sea sounding like a platoon of sputtering lawn mowers.

Painted bright red, turquoise and orange, they carried a dozen men wearing baseball caps and T-shirts fashioned as turbans to block the equatorial sun.

Johnny Aralaji perched on the pointed bow of one of the craft, his sun-creased face frowning in concentration. He was born on a boat like this. His family wandered, allowing the currents to lead them.

"The life of the sea is hard," said Aralaji, who was wearing a shirt decorated with palm trees and hula girls. "It's dangerous."

Now gray-haired and past 70, Aralaji is among the Philippines' dwindling population of Badjao, or sea gypsies. Itinerant, often-illiterate Muslim fishermen, they've been known in this part of the world as the Bedouin of the sea.

Many cling stubbornly to their traditional way of life: wandering the southern oceans on houseboats, following schools of fish and trying to outdistance danger.

But the life of these seafaring nomads is drying up.

Proud and hardworking, they're threatened by soaring costs for fuel and repairs, killer typhoons, pirates, religious rebels and the steady disappearance of fish.

Most Badjao here no longer live on their boats, instead taking up residence in thatch-roofed houses on bamboo stilts like this community on the island of Palawan, in the Philippines' southwest. But it seems they can't bear to be away from the water. Their communities extend 100 yards from the beach into the marshy coastal waters, connected by warrens of over-water pathways made of bamboo, wooden planks and overturned canoes.

They still go to sea in bancas, rickety craft with bamboo outrigging lashed together with wire and fishing line. They fashion their own hooks and lures. Small gas-powered motors and cellphones are their only modern conveniences.
On the water, times are tough. On land, they are worse. Throughout the Philippines, more than 200,000 Badjao remain marginalized, shunned as uneducated and incorrigible.

Non-Badjao children throw coins into the water and laugh as the fishermen scramble from their boats to compete for the handouts. Badjao who abandoned life at sea have ended up as street beggars in big cities such as Manila.

Some say the Badjao's years on the open water are numbered. Others believe the indigenous tribe that has peopled the Philippine seascape for more than 1,000 years will go on.

"They're a quiet people -- they don't care about politics. They just want to be left alone," said Rey Santiago, a senior archaeologist at the National Museum of the Philippines in Manila, who has studied the Badjao. "I think they will find a way to keep their lifestyle alive."

Aralaji, leader of a coastal community of 400 residents called Bagong Silang, is pragmatic about the future. He knows that many young Badjao must take second, often menial jobs on land to make ends meet.

Quiet, prone to brooding, the man who was born on the sea does not romanticize his people's lot. Neither do the younger Badjao.

"I don't want to be a fisherman," said Sonny Apsar, 29, a rail-thin father of five. "It no longer makes sense."

On this morning, the men's hopes were high. They had pooled $80 to buy gas for six boats. When times are good, they travel four hours out to sea where the stone fish, grouper, whitefish and tuna are bigger and more plentiful.

A good catch brings only $20 for the entire group. When times are lean, they secure their gas on credit and take their chances closer to shore. Apsar's father once spent two days at sea and returned with just two fish, barely enough to feed himself.

For years, the Badjao have been known as masters of the seasonal currents of the Sulu and South China seas. Tradition has it that a Badjao fisherman, simply by dipping his hand in the water, can judge a current's direction and strength and the time it will take to reach his destination.

The best can sail at night on instinct and are expert free-divers, holding their breath for long periods as they plunge for pearls. They bury their dead in sailboats so the body can navigate to the afterworld.

Bluejeaned and barefoot, Apsar said he has heard the elders' tales. But he has modern problems. At 15, his parents arranged for him to marry a girl a year his junior. He never had time to get an education, and now cannot read or even write his name.
A grandfather was killed by pirates off the island of Mindanao and the family never found his body. Months ago, with his 12-year-old daughter in need of eye surgery, Apsar had to sell his prized 16-foot boat to a relative for far less than it was worth.

Now on the water in a borrowed 24-footer, he spotted the sleek aqua craft being piloted by an uncle. "I'm very in love with that boat," he said wistfully. "If I had the money, I'd buy it back."

He's been forced to work as a scooter-taxi driver and sell handmade trinkets to tourists. He relies on friends and family to lend him their vessels.

He wants to buy a tour boat and take people on dolphin-watching excursions; one half-day trip can yield a fisherman's monthly pay.

"My dream is that my children do not have to fish like me," he said. "That is why I work so hard."

The men killed their motors in 90-foot waters. Using spools, they unraveled fishing lines fitted with 300 hooks and waited. If they hooked a big fish, two men would pull the line with their hands. A long battle would leave their palms bloody. But on this day, the catch was disappointing.

At midday, the boats gathered for mealtime. The younger men lashed the smaller vessels together end to end. Apsar reached into the ice cooler to select the best fish.

He slow-cooked them on a charcoal grill, using a bolo knife to cut off the heads for soup.

Squatting in a circle, the men used their bare hands to break apart the blackened fish and scoop up rice and white sweet potato.

"A big restaurant," Apsar said, smiling, as he read a text message from his wife on his cellphone.

Soon the dishes and pots had been washed in the sea and stowed. Apsar headed for home, where the women and children would gather atop the bamboo dock, eager to inspect the catch.

Near shore, as Aralaji barked orders in his native Samar dialect, Apsar spotted a tour boat headed out to sea. His eyes followed the vessel enviously.

"Whatever it takes, I am going to take my family away from this life," he said quietly. "I don't want this for my children."