

Seeing and being seen: Stateless Bajau Laut children and the politics of visibility in tourism spaces

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INTRODUCTION

When searching for “Semporna Bajau Laut” online, the first images often show clear seas, children paddling small boats, and smiling faces.¹² Similar images appear in searches for “Semporna tourism,” where Bajau Laut children are often incorporated into the visual landscape of tourism. These representations make children highly visible, but often through simplified and aestheticized images.

This visibility exists within a longer history of mobility and political exclusion. The Bajau Laut have historically relied on maritime mobility across the Sulu Sea, but colonial territorial governance increasingly linked mobility to territorial classification (Warren, 1971). Although many Bajau Laut in Semporna later settled in sea-based communities, settlement did not necessarily result in political belonging (Sather, 1997, 2001). Following the formation of Malaysia in 1963, many remained without formal citizenship and continue to experience marginalization.

Tourism can create opportunities for visibility while simultaneously producing different forms of constraint. Drawing on Jamal’s (2019) pluralistic justice, this study examines the (in)visibility of stateless Bajau Laut children in and around Pulau Omadal, Semporna.³

The study focuses on how stateless Bajau Laut children are seen and represented within tourism spaces, and how visibility is encountered and negotiated through everyday interactions. Through *Seeing and Being Seen*, the study considers visibility as a relational process shaped by power, encounters, and conditions of belonging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children in Tourism and the Politics of Visibility

Recent tourism scholarship recognizes children as social and political actors rather than passive dependents (Bakas, 2018; Canosa & Graham, 2016, 2023). Yet their participation remains mediated by adults, institutions, and normative assumptions about childhood (Canosa & Graham, 2016, 2023), meaning that visibility does not necessarily produce agency. This study therefore examines the conditions and implications of children becoming visible in tourism spaces, particularly under structural constraints such as legal exclusion and statelessness.

Bajau Laut, Mobility, and Representation

Scholarship on the Bajau Laut has examined mobility, statelessness, and social marginalization from historical, legal, and ethnographic perspectives (Sather, 1997, 2024; Chuah, 2016; Aoyama, 2023). Sather (1997, 2024) foregrounds maritime mobility and fluid boundaries, while Chuah (2016) highlights the political and institutional conditions of statelessness. Aoyama (2023) further emphasizes relationality and co-presence in ethnographic engagement. Together, these studies provide important accounts of Bajau Laut mobility, exclusion, and social relations, but give less attention to how these conditions intersect with tourism and visual representation.

Research specifically addressing Bajau Laut children remains limited. Andal (2025) finds that existing studies often position children through vulnerability and intervention or through cultural

¹ Semporna is a coastal district in the eastern part of Sabah, Malaysia,

² Laut is a Malay word meaning “sea”.

³ Pulau is a Malay word meaning “island”.

resilience and maritime identity. Less examined is how Bajau Laut children are made visible and interpreted within tourism and media representations.

Tourism, Media, and the Politics of Visibility

Visual media shape how Bajau Laut children are encountered by outside audiences. Recent documentaries, including *Jom Kita Ke Laut: Itui suli-suli Bajau!* (Azlee, 2025) and *Bajau Laut – The Sea Is Our Home* (Peter, 2025), present contrasting forms of representation, from community participation to displacement and statelessness. Online tourism imagery similarly foregrounds children through images of smiling faces, boats, and sea-based life. Such representations may generate attention or empathy while also shaping how children are framed for outside audiences.

Taken together, existing scholarship connects childhood, mobility, statelessness, and representation, yet their intersection within tourism spaces remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap through *Seeing and Being Seen*, examining visibility as a relational process shaped by how children are seen, how encounters take place, and how visitors and communities become part of the field of visibility.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study examines stateless Bajau Laut children in and around Pulau Omadal, Semporna, which is connected to the wider tourism environment despite not being a tourist island. Fieldwork was conducted during a four-day visit in June 2026 through participant observation and informal conversations with residents, government representatives, and Iskul Sama DiLaut Omadal (Iskul) staff.⁴ Rather than formally interviewing children, the study observed everyday activities and interactions while reflecting on the researcher's own position and access to the community. Fieldnotes focused on encounters, community boundaries, and visibility. Tourism-related images and media materials were also examined as contextual representations. Data were analyzed thematically and reflexively. Institutional ethics approval was obtained in January 2026, with attention to anonymity, identifiable images, and community boundaries.

FINDINGS

An Island Within a Tourism Landscape

Pulau Omadal is not a conventional tourist destination, but it is connected to the wider tourism landscape of Semporna. Nearby islands such as Bum Bum and Mabul are established tourism destinations, while resorts and tourism agencies bring visitors into the surrounding area. During fieldwork, a government staff member introduced me to a homestay on Pulau Omadal that had opened more than a year earlier and was already receiving visitors.

Iskul staff also described another form of tourist presence. Some visitors make short stops on Pulau Omadal primarily to photograph Bajau Laut residents and children, without communication or exchange. Although I did not observe these encounters directly, this account suggests that physical presence does not necessarily produce interaction. Bajau Laut residents and children may become visible through tourism photography while remaining outside the tourist encounter.

Pulau Omadal is connected to tourism through surrounding routes, short visits, and local accommodation, yet these involve different degrees of community engagement. Tourism can therefore make Bajau Laut residents visible without creating sustained interaction.

Tourism Development and the Limits of Participation

Tourism was also considered as a possible opportunity for Bajau Laut children. Iskul staff described a proposal for Bajau Laut students to act as local guides, introducing visitors to the island and local life. The proposal did not proceed because community agreement had not been reached. Staff also raised concerns about the children's readiness, responsibility, and safety. This suggests that visibility does not automatically lead to participation, which requires community agreement and preparation.

⁴ Iskul Sama DiLaut Omadal is a community-based Learning Initiative for Stateless Bajau Laut Children, founded in 2015 on Pulau Omadal.

At the same time, tourism cannot be understood simply as accepted or rejected. While the proposal involving children had not proceeded, a community leader had begun operating a homestay that was already receiving visitors. Different forms of tourism therefore develop under different conditions. Tourism may create opportunities for Bajau Laut children, while particular forms of participation remain subject to community processes and concerns about their readiness and safety.

Taken together, these findings show that tourism creates different conditions of visibility and participation on Pulau Omadal. *Being seen* does not necessarily involve communication, and being considered as a potential participant does not necessarily lead to participation. The relationship between visibility and participation is shaped by the community conditions through which tourism enters everyday life on the island.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Seeing and Being Seen in Tourism Spaces

This study shows that visibility in tourism is not simply a matter of making children visible through images or encounters. Visibility is relational and uneven. Visitors may observe Bajau Laut children, but how tourism encounters take place is also shaped by community conditions and processes. Access to people and places is therefore part of the visibility process itself.

Seeing and Being Seen shifts attention from visibility as a fixed condition to the relationships and conditions through which children become visible within tourism encounters. This perspective moves beyond viewing children simply as passive objects of representation or fully empowered subjects. Instead, it highlights how visibility is shaped through everyday encounters, community conditions, and unequal positions.

Unease as Ethical Position

This study does not seek to offer a definitive solution to the challenges faced by stateless Bajau Laut children. Greater visibility or tourism participation may create opportunities while also introducing external expectations and forms of governance. Following Jamal's (2019) pluralistic approach, justice remains open and contested rather than resolved through a single intervention.

The study therefore contributes an exploratory perspective on visibility in tourism spaces. Rather than treating visibility or inclusion as inherently positive, it asks whose terms shape the encounter, who can enter, and what becomes visible. Remaining with this uncertainty provides a basis for further inquiry rather than a final resolution.

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