

New York Times July 31, 1994

**THE SONGS OF SALANDA
and other stories of Sulu**

By H. Arlo Nimmo

237 pp.; map Univ. of Washington Press

Billed as fiction, all but the last of these 16 reminiscences are bucketsful of images summoned from the well of memory. Anthropology professor H. Arlo Nimmo spent two years in the mid-1960s living among the boat-dwelling Bajau in the Sulu Islands of the southern Philippines. Here he sheds the fetters of academic writing to dab color onto life at this vanished edge of perpetual summer. While Mr. Nimmo's ingenuous prose never approaches art, its lucid candor itself creates the spell he desires. Among the people we meet are women shamans battling the *saitan*, the spirits who "cause illness and other misfortune"; a terrified American soldier on R&R who knows his return to Vietnam will mean his death; the breathtaking Salanda whose seductive singing wins her more men than she can manage; devoted Sister Evangelista who heals sick children and shoots tigers; and patriot/pirate Amak who fights the Philippine Constabulary to keep his people free. Particularly touching is the concluding "Sulu" which provides the tragic epitaph inspired by Mr. Nimmo's return after 20 years to find that Marcos's butchery in Islamic Sulu has raped its land, slaughtered its people and turned this South Seas Eden into one more paradise lost.