

## TIES AND TIDES OF KNOWLEDGE: LIVING AS A COMMUNITY, LIVING AS THE SEA PEOPLE

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### INTRODUCTION

Traditional coastal communities possess marine knowledge that enable them to live with and live on resources in different eco-niches like intertidal strands, mangroves, mudflats, beach forest, and coral reefs. Chao Lay (which means Sea People in Thai language) or former sea nomads of Thailand are indigenous groups who used to make temporary settlement on islands and along the coastal areas. The sub-groups of Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi, total of 43 villages in southern Thailand, have intangible marine heritage that facilitate their wise uses of marine and forest areas for centuries. The Chao Lay are said to have the great ability in, “reading the water to remember the wind, and reading the sky to remember the star” (Kuain 2008). At present, marine knowledge and skills remain significant in some communities.

The case in point is Rawai beach community in Phuket Province in southern Thailand, where two sub-groups of Chao Lay, the Urak Lawoi and the Moken have chosen this area as a settlement hundreds of years ago; not only because of the shallow water near the beach and the nearby coral reefs, but also because it is a bay that is sheltered from the winds from two directions. So the place is very suitable for both living and for foraging and fishing with abundant land and marine resources. The knowledge of settlement site selection is very crucial, and most of the Chao Lay villages on the islands and shore are located in the bay or beach protected from the wind and storm. Fresh water can be easily found nearby in the form of spring, stream, or pond.

### BOAT AND BOAT BUILDING: THE ART AND HEART OF MARINE LIVELIHOODS

The Urak Lawoi’s Prahu and the Moken’s Kabang are traditional boats that signify the art and the heart of marine semi-nomadic livelihoods. Not only were they vehicles, but they were also homes that form a floating community in the old days. In fact, the Moken Kabang has been declared “Thailand National Intangible Cultural Heritage” by the Department of Cultural Promotion, Ministry of Culture, in 2018. Such unique human- and wind-powered boats allow the Moken and the Urak Lawoi to access and to use resources in a sustainable manner. Both Prahu and Kabang were equipped with rectangular sails made with long pandanus leaves sewed together with rattan cord, and long oars were used.

Traditional Prahu and Kabang do not have any synthetic parts and do not require chemical or antifouling paint. The maintenance is simple and can be done by boat owners themselves. Caulking materials are made from wood bark hammered and shredded into small pieces. After the caulking, then the natural resin from *Dipterocarp* tree is used to seal cracks. The boats then

become lighter and more buoyant after each maintenance, and the owners pride him/herself of having such well-maintained boats.

The evolution of Moken's Kabang may reflect the change in the technology and transformation of intangible cultural heritage and symbolism behind the building, and maintaining, and living/travelling on the Kabang (Ivanoff 2000). The Moken's Kabang are quite special in that the gunwales were formerly made of *zalacca* woodstem (*Zalacca wallichiana*) secured by rattan cords fixed over monolog dugout. These stems are long and light, so they boat remain bouyant even when filled with water; therefore, kabang is "unsinkable". If seawater should splash in or fill in the Kabang, then after quickly baling out water, the kabang will stay afloat again. Being in the Kabang, the Moken feel relatively secured due to the special features of the boat and due to their intimate knowledge of the sea and surrounding islands. During rainy and stormy season when marine travel is difficult then *kabang* can be hauled up onto the beach because *zalacca* wood become even lighter when dry. Although all kabang may look the same to outsiders' eyes, each kabang has a distinctive characteristic in the Moken's eyes and they can identify whose kabang it is from afar (Hinshiranan 2001).

The "second generation" Kabang are those monolog dugout equipped with wooden planks instead of zallaca. These planked Kabang become too heavy to equip with sail, so diesel motor replaced sail and oars. The "third generation" Kabang are those made entirely with wooden planks. The planks are much less durable compare to monolog dugout, but each plank is easier to be replaced when wood is deteriorated. When the Moken are owners and operators of this technology, they are relatively self-dependent and do not have rely on outside technology and helps where monetary cost is involved. Moreover, frequent travel and movement make the natural resources appropriation spread in wider areas and do not degrade the environment. Therefore, their life and living on boat tend to be more sustainable. It is documented that around 1960s and 1970s, the Moken on Surin Islands, Phang-nga Province still travel to visit their friends and relatives on islands in the Mergui Archipelago, thus maintaining strong ties within their groups.

Unfortunately, the art of making traditional boat is also gone from most Urak Lawoi communities in Thailand. There are a few elder Moken men on Surin Island communities who still remember how to choose suitable tree in the forest to make boat, and how to craft up Kabang –Moken traditional boat, but since large trees are hard to find, they are mostly in the National Park, Reserved Forest, or private property, so the art and knowledge of boat building of these former sea nomads will all be gone soon. As for Rawai community, nowadays this intangible cultural heritage of Chao Lay both the Urak Lawoi and the Moken have disappeared. Those who still engage in hunting-gathering and fisheries have to use popular motorized Hua-thong boats that are rather more difficult to maneuver and costlier to maintain.

With the adoption of Hua-thong boats and the use of motor, Chao Lay travel much less for group visit and exchange due to the cost of diesel oil. Not only do they become more sedentary and less mobile, there is less socialization and sense of community dwindles from the cultural identity of groups of island to the identity of a particular island.

Although the Urak Lawoi and Moken have adopted the use of Hua-thong boats, some men still have the vivid memory of boat crafting and they can build model boats that scale down from the real ones with ease. The Urak Lawoi of Sireh Community in Phuket Province and the Moken of Surin Islands in Phang-nga Province have used this knowledge to produce beautiful model Prahon and Kabang boats (Arunotai 2008). However, these are exclusively sold in the Chao Lay community so the sales are still quite limited.

## **THE KNOWLEDGE OF MARINE HUNTER-GATHERERS**

Both groups of the Chao Lay in Rawai were hunter-gatherers, adept at finding food from the sea and seashore. The area in front of their beach is where they find shellfish such as clams, with both children and elders able to help look for clams using spoons to simply dig and search through the sand. When the tide recedes, the Chao Lay are able to go out further and look for crabs, oysters, and small octopus. Abundant small shellfish in the sand, rock oysters, small crabs, and sea cucumbers are fall-back resources during stormy period when going out to sea is difficult and dangerous. The women, the elders and the children still maintain the knowledge of finding these resources and this helps guarantee food security even for the poorest families and during the most difficult time. The community still retains the principle of sharing food especially in time of crisis. Therefore, the roles of marine knowledge and skills also affirm Chao Lay social connectivity and collectivity.

Marine knowledge and skills are also reflected in place names in the Chao Lay language. Around Rawai area and even around Phuket Island, there are many Chao Lay place names. These names are representation of collective memories of landscape and seascape that further reaffirms the long history and close connection that the Chao Lay have with the area. Collective memories together with traditional beliefs help the Chao Lay to conserve particular area. In Rawai, there is a fresh water canal that provide fresh water source and the Chao Lay also use it to moor their boats during the stormy period. Several Chao Lay elder recalled that as children, they came to bathe in the canal, and others came to wash their clothes, beating each piece against the rocks or digging in the sand to make a natural wash basin. The sandy bank along the inner part of the canal was used as a place to bury infants who passed away, since Chao Lay believe in the spirits of the place, there is an unwritten rule of respecting and keeping the area peaceful and clean (Arunotai 2019).

Chao Lay, both the Urak Lawoi and the Moken, have strong social and emotional ties to their community, that is why the sense of community and togetherness is very strong. They rarely move away, even those who marry outsiders usually bring their spouse in to live in the community.

## **TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND THE EFFECT ON MARINE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

The decrease of fish stock and other marine resources, together with unpredictable weather and strict regulations in marine protected areas resulted in Chao Lay's gradual loss of livelihood and

traditional knowledge. Rapid tourism development in the concrete form of hotels and resorts, restaurants and commercial areas and recently pubs and bars is surrounding the Rawai community, so it is undeniable that tourism infrastructure and activities is becoming the fact of life for the people here.

In Rawai community, Chao Lay used to have small fish stalls to earn some cash for their extra catch, however, with the development of tourism, there are many seafood stalls, souvenir shops and restaurants which lined the entrance of Rawai village. However, these are mostly owned by outsiders who make a fortune from seaside location and from the reputation of “sea people” village.

Lesser number of Chao Lay remains fishers and gatherers. With marine resource degradation and several marine areas designated as national park or protected areas, their fishing and gathering grounds have shrunk. Those who still fish have to go further, longer, and taking riskier means at sea. Chao Lay’s sacred space and worshipping places have turned into commoditized land (Arunotai 2017).

Despite their current plight and dire situation, the Rawai community has inspired others with the principle of sharing/giving during the most difficult time like during the semi-lockdown due to COVID-19. The extension of community food security into “Exchanging of Fish and Rice” between Karen indigenous mountain communities and Chao Lay communities also reflected how the often neglected knowledge and skills became the inspiration and hope for urban populations who rely on purchased food from convenient stores or modern trade stores, during which the semi-lockdown affected the distribution and sales of food.

In summary, the knowledge and skills of the Chao Lay are thus like the tides that are now ebbing, but may be revitalized if natural resources are recuperated and regenerated, and if market economy and conservation policies are adjusted for the benefit of traditional communities.

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