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CONTEXTUALISING THE SEA NOMADS’
DILEMMA IN THAILAND



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Eva-Maria Knoll

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**“HOPELESS AT SEA, LANDLESS ON SHORE”:
CONTEXTUALISING THE SEA NOMADS’
DILEMMA IN THAILAND ***

NARUMON ARUNOTAI

Abstract:

Since the beginning of 2016 – once again after a series of post-tsunami coverage – the plight of several sea nomad or Chao Lay groups in Thailand has found its way into national newspaper headlines and television news coverage. The persistent land disputes and other critical problems require an investigation beyond the conflict and dichotomy between indigenous communities and private businesses. By analysing contemporary dilemmas of sea nomads in Thailand this working paper seeks to throw light on the lives and circumstances of indigenous peoples in the context of a capitalist economy facilitated by a nationalist bureaucratic state.

1. Chao Lay (sea nomads) in Thailand – their plight and visibility

Thailand is well known for its cultural diversity. Especially the so-called hill-tribes in the northern region have attracted the attention of national agencies since 1960s due to counter-insurgency and opium-eradication efforts. The respective US Central Intelligence Agency document (1966) portrayed the heavily forested northern part of Thailand as, “Another area for possible Communist subversion ..”

The inhabitants of the North include some 200,000 hill tribesmen who are by nature independent, nomadic, and have little loyalty toward the central government. Many of the hill tribes have been hostile to the government over curbs on their opium growing and their slash-and-burn agriculture (*ibid.* 3).

Governmental programmes, and later royal projects for the socio-economic development of the region were carried out to improve the situation of these ethnic groups.

While the northern ethnic groups figured prominently in the policy realm, the southern groups were almost invisible until the media presence after the 2004 tsunami. These southern ethnic groups are known by a variety of ascribed, rejected and preferred names. For the local Thai, the ethnic groups of the south were known as Chao Lay, which means “sea people”. The older term Chao Nam (“water people”) fell out of fashion since it is rejected by the Chao Lay as demeaning. In many places, especially in Phang-nga and Phuket province, the name Chao Lay, however, has also become derogatory, as it is generally equated with uncleanness, lack of education, and ignorance. The negative labeling reveals ethnocentrism. The sea peoples’ lifestyle contrasts with that of the mainstream population. The latter regard frequent mobility as homelessness and rootlessness, learning in, from and about the natural environment as being uneducated, and living on boats or in bamboo huts as being dirt poor.

* The present paper is based on the talk “Hopeless at Sea, Landless on Shore: Looking beyond the Sea Nomads Plight in Thailand” presented by the author in the framework of the ISA Regional Guest Lecture at the Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences, July 15, 2016.

Later, the term “Thai Mai” (“new Thai”) was adopted and became popularised from the 1980s until after the tsunami. The origin of this term is still unclear. Some of the Chao Lay I am working with suggested that it is given by the Thai authorities and some said by King Rama IX (Arunotai 2016: 451). Thai Mai is an umbrella term encompassing three groups of sea nomads, Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi, who will be discussed in detail. The adoption of the term Thai Mai signifies the process of “Thai-isation” – the gradual assimilation of nomadic groups into the Thai population registration and schooling system. Since ethnocentrism still prevails in Thailand, the attempt to use the term Thai Mai also encourages the sense of pride of being “equally Thai” (Arunotai 2003). This politics of naming reflects the dynamism of perceived socio-cultural status of the group – and the interpretation varies – as well as several shades of meaning similar to the case of using the name “sea gypsy.” Some prefer the term due to its signification as exotic and eccentric group. Others consider it derogatory as it is value laden since the maritime nomadic lifestyle of the Chao Lay is seen as a counterpart to the “gypsies” in Europe.

The Chao Lay gained some public visibility in Thailand after the tsunami incident in 2004. Especially the Moken’s anticipation and survival of the tsunami disaster among thousands of dying locals and tourists attracted attention from the domestic as well as international media (see the volume *Indigenous Knowledge for Disaster Risk Reduction*, edited by Shaw et al. (2008).¹ The exonym Chao Lay, however, remains somewhat confusing. The fact that there are three groups, the Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi, is little known in Thailand and beyond. The name Moken has sometimes been used for all three, as the news about tsunami survival mainly portrayed the Moken of the Surin Islands in Phang-nga province. The Moklen are the least known of the three groups, as they had voluntarily assimilated themselves into Thai culture and lifestyle to avoid discrimination.

On December 26, 2004, among many others in the Indian Ocean, a massive tsunami caused by an undersea earthquake also hit the coastal areas of the Andaman Sea, which this article focuses on. Thailand’s Ministry of the Interior, Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation reported 4,244 people killed and 1,659 missing. The fact that only a few Chao Lay were among the dead although they lived on the most severely affected coasts attracted international media attention. The Chao Lay, especially the Moken and the Urak Lawoi, had “cleverly encoded the danger of tsunami disaster thanks to their legend of seven giant waves” (Arunotai 2008: 75). In the legend, the *laboon* (meaning giant wave in Moken) comes once in a while to cleanse the earth. In the transgenerational passing down of the legend young Chao Lay are taught to run to higher ground when the sea recedes suddenly, to save themselves from the wave’s impact. Although the languages of the Chao Lay have no script and no written sources, the three groups have a rich oral tradition. The story of seven giant waves proves historic experiences of these people with tsunamis and a successful intergenerational transmission of the respective knowledge.

Chao Lay² were in the headlines again in January 2016 as violence erupted after a long dispute on a land claim in Rawai Beach, Phuket province. The land claimant, a Thai company, was planning to build a villa project for tourism and sent heavy machinery and workers with wooden stakes to the beachfront land where the Urak Lawoi build their *balai* or sacred shrine for their rituals (see Tauli-Corpuz 2016 for more detail). For generations the Urak Lawoi have used the beach and its

¹ See also CBS News coverage – especially the 60 Minutes programme “Sea Gypsies Saw Signs in the Waves,” March 2005 (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/sea-gypsies-saw-signs-in-the-waves/>).

² Rawai village is populated by both Urak Lawoi and Moken. Chao Lay is therefore used in this case as a general term for both groups.

surrounding waters to moor their boats, dry sea products, set fish traps and other fishing tools, and as a playground for children. However, the Chao Lay do not claim private ownership of the land and older generations do not recognise the significance of title deeds.



Figure 1-2: A Moken village on South Surin Island before the tsunami. The same village was totally wiped out by the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004. However, all the Moken in the village survived by running to seek shelter on higher ground behind the village (photos: N. Arunotai).

The land dispute had long given rise to minor threats for the Rawai Chao Lay, but this violent incident received mass-media coverage and public attention. On January 26, 2016, the company sent in a bulldozer to dump large rocks to block the land entrance but the Chao Lay in Rawai tried to prevent this and to remove the rocks, after which a large group of men hired by the company began beating the Chao Lay, some with wooden sticks (Human Rights Watch 2016). Over ten Chao Lay were injured, two with large bloody wounds to their faces. As a result, twelve years after the tsunami, the Chao Lay have become visible again in the Thai national and international media³ and their plight regarding land insecurity is now widely known. Since then, they have actively joined with other marginalised groups to plead for their rights and for dignified treatment (Chumchon Thai Foundation 2012).



Figure 3: An example of digital news coverage of a land dispute and violence (credit: *Transborder News*).



Figure 4: Chao Lay travelled to Bangkok and sat in front of the United Nations building and the parliament to call for social justice (credit: *Transborder News*, from <http://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=11616>).

³ See *Transborder News* (<http://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=12856>) and Bangkok Post (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/843740/>); see also Smilie 2014.

After this brief introduction to the post-tsunami and 2016 media attention for otherwise “invisible” sea-nomads in southern Thailand, the next chapter takes a closer look at the difficult contemporary situation of the three groups of Chao Lay, i.e. Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi. In the subsequent section I will argue that the contemporary conflicts and the desperate situation of the Chao Lay in Thailand are driven by three forces: nation-state formation, neoliberal capitalism and the bureaucratic system of Thailand. In the conclusion I will contextualise the situation of the Chao Lay with another marginalised nomadic group in Thailand and describe the need for further research and resulting policy recommendations.



Figure 5: The Moken are the only group who still have the practicing knowledge of boat-building, living and travelling on their traditional boats. The photo shows Moken boats around the Surin Islands, Phang Nga province (photo: Paladej Na Pombejra).



Figure 6: The Urak Lawoi have become sedentary and usually settle in large villages. The photo shows a village on Lipe Island, Satun Province (photo: N. Arunotai).

2. Introducing three groups of sea nomads in Thailand

With the total population of around 12,000, Chao Lay communities are widely distributed over the Andaman coast and the islands of southwestern Thailand. They have excellent skills in swimming, diving and navigating, as observed by the American linguist Christopher Court, “The Chao Lay are more daring navigators than the local Thais” (Court 1971: 86).

The Moken communities are on Lao Island, Phyam Island, and Chang Island in Ranong province, and the Surin Islands in Phang-nga province. There are over 100 Moken in the Rawai community in Phuket province. The total Moken population in Thailand is around 1,000. It is further estimated that there are about 2,000 Moken in the Mergui Archipelago in Myanmar. They used to roam around in their boats during the dry season and set up shelters or huts on land on windy and stormy days during the wet monsoon season (Na Pombejra 2003). The Moklen live in over twenty communities throughout the coastal areas on islands of Phang-nga and Phuket province. They have never lived on boats, but formed coastal communities moving their settlements occasionally. There are approximately 4,000 Moklen in Thailand. The Urak Lawoi usually live in large communities. The villages are found on islands and coastal areas in the provinces of Phuket, Krabi and Satun. Although they did not live a maritime nomadic lifestyle like the Moken, they sail the sea for fishing and foraging. In several places the Moklen and Urak Lawoi used to harvest wild rice for their own consumption.

All three groups' languages are part of the Austronesian family, with the names of the languages being the same as their ethnic names. The Moken still speak their language. It is very different from the language of the Urak Lawoi, so the two subgroups cannot understand each other. The Moklen and the Urak Lawoi have gradually integrated into Thai society and many of them can no longer speak their own language. Native language skills also depend on the settlement; relatively distant villages can maintain their language and culture more easily than those adjacent to Thai villages. Urak Lawoi is quite similar to Malay and it can be said that the Orang Laut are their counterparts in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Moken and Moklen languages are somewhat mutually intelligible but the Moklen have integrated Thai words into their vocabulary.

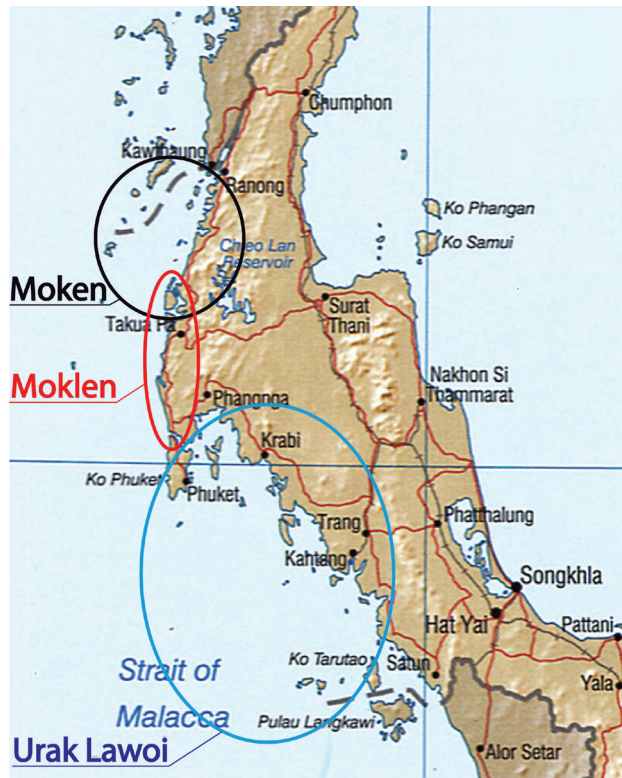


Figure 7: The map shows the distribution and number of Chao Lay communities in southwestern Thailand. The black circle represents the distribution of Moken communities (five communities, with a population of ca. 1,000), the red circle Moklen (over 20 communities, with a population of ca. 4,000), and the blue circle Urak Lawoi (sixteen communities, with a population of ca. 7,000). This map is adapted from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Thailand.

2.1 Moken

The Moken in Thailand abandoned their nomadic lifestyle about 30-40 years ago. Previously, they lived on their boats during the dry season (mid October to mid May) and travelled extensively to visit relatives and friends, and to forage for daily subsistence as well as for trade. During the wet season (mid May to mid October) when the sea is too rough to travel, they either camped frequently in sheltered bays or became relatively settled in small communities (Arunotai 2006a: 140; 2006b: 30).

The Moken travelled freely in the Mergui Archipelago, located in the Andaman Sea off the west of southern Myanmar (White 1922). In Thailand they used to sail the whole stretch of the Andaman coast, from Ranong down to Phuket or even Satun, the southernmost province of Thailand. Several decades ago, they started adopting a sedentary life in Thailand and also in the Mergui Archipelago in Myanmar (Ivanoff 1997). There were several reasons for this (Arunotai et al. 2007: 12), the main ones being:

1) **Violence, unrest and armed conflict between ethnic groups, and military forced labour in Myanmar areas, especially during the 1980s and 1990s.** This has an effect on the Mergui Archipelago as some islands were used as armed bases. The Moken gradually ceased travelling afar, to avoid getting caught in violent conflicts and being forced into involuntary labour.

2) **Demarcation of the national boundary** (between Myanmar and Thailand). The Andaman Sea used to be a continuous expanse of water on which the Moken sailed their *kabangs* freely. The essence of Moken maritime nomadic culture, the traditional *kabang* is a seaworthy boat made from a dug-out log with the gunwale made of light zalacca stems. With a sail, four to five oars and its unique bifurcated bow and stern, a *kabang* navigates deep as well as shallow water. However, after national boundaries were firmly drawn, crossing the border line required some kind of pass, to be occasionally checked by the authorities, particularly on the Myanmar side.

3) **Privatisation of land and development of the tourism industry around coastal areas and islands in southwestern Thailand.** The Moken used to be able to forage, moor their boats and make temporary camps on empty beaches. But as the coastal lands have become private property and been developed they have become off limits for the Moken.

4) **Declaration of a national park and protected areas in several places in the Andaman Sea.** Similar to the effect of privatisation, protected lands belonging to the state are also off limits for the Moken. Foraging grounds and settlement sites have become very limited, so the Moken travel less and less. In the past, the Moken could use forest products such as logs to build their boats, but now wood cutting and resource extraction is illegal in protected areas. Without the materials to build their boats, the Moken have to buy small, second-hand boats from local people, but these are not as seaworthy as traditional *kabangs*.

5) **Adoption of outboard motors.** Local fishing boats or *rua hua thong*, which the Moken acquire as an alternative to building *kabangs* (UNESCO 2001: 57), are not suited to taking a mast, sails and a rudder. As a result, the Moken have taken to using outboard motors, so boat travel has become costly as they have to buy diesel instead of harnessing the natural power of the wind and waves as in the old days. The Moken understanding of “the old days” is the time when their parents and grandparents were still young.

6) **Soft pressure to settle down.** There is no government policy of forced settlement in Thailand. And even if there was such a policy it would hardly be likely to restrain the Moken’s spirit of mobility. Rather, the Moken have settled down due to encouragement and incentives in the form of personal persuasion (as in the case of Lao Island), cash from wage labour (as in the case of Surin Islands), school for children (several islands), and also from other limitations as described above. Families with elderly people, widows, or sick members to care for also prefer the sedentary life.

More than half the Moken population in Thailand are stateless (as of 2017), as the Thai authorities have always pointed to their mobility across national boundaries and thus do not consider them as proper Thai citizens. However, the post-tsunami recovery and development effort, especially by non-governmental organisations and academic institutes, included collecting lineage information to file nationality requests. Several hundred Moken have obtained Thai citizenship because the Khuraburi district chief and officers considered these documentary requests, and others who are not legally qualified received the “white card” or “zero number card”, a kind of identity card for non-citizens. Thai citizenship would bring advantages for Moken such as healthcare coverage, ability

to apply for work in the formal sector, registration for their boats, freedom to travel throughout the country without having to file a request to the authorities, etc. The process for nationality requests is still ongoing, but has been neglected and delayed by local authorities due to bureaucratic rotation of staff and the difficulty and complexity of considering non-documentary data such as family oral history, midwife witnesses etc.



Figure 8: The Moken have traditional boats called the *kabang koman* or zalacca-wood boat, which they used as a home and vehicle to travel to the islands and coastal areas (photo: Paladej Na Pombejra).



Figure 9: At the beginning of rainy season, the Moken find sheltered bays to build their temporary encampment or huts on the beach (photo: Paladej Na Pombejra).

2.2 Moklen

The Moklen are the least-known group of sea people in Thailand. For the local people, they are generally known as Thai Mai, and for outsiders it is difficult to differentiate them from the local Thai, as they have gradually assimilated in terms of language and schooling. Their traditions and songs became a mixture, integrating elements from both Buddhist Thai and Muslim Thai. The reason for their relatively greater integration than the Moken and the Urak Lawoi is that the Moklen predominately lived on the mainland, with more interaction and relations with other groups. The only two islands with Moklen communities are Phra Thong Island and Ra Island, both of which are large islands relatively closer to the mainland, and the villages are usually mixed Chinese, Chinese Thai, Moklen and some Moken (Ferrari et al. 2006). In addition, many Moklen engaged in wage labour during the mining boom in the Andaman coastal provinces. Mining companies hired Chinese, Chinese Thai, Thai (migrants from other regions), and Moklen, so the Moklen have close associations with other groups.



There are over twenty Moklen communities along the Andaman coast, most located near the sea. In the old days they harvested wild rice and foraged for marine animals for subsistence. They had small dugouts called *kabang maad* (dug-out boat) which have now fallen out of use due to the difficulty in finding wood and other boat-making materials. After concessions or

Figure 10: A *kabang maad* sitting on mud in a mangrove area (photo: N. Arunotai).

private claims on seaside property, the landscape has been transformed into mining areas, shrimp farms, rubber plantations, housing developments, restaurants, hotels and resorts. Several Moklen communities or house clusters have had to move inland.

As some Moklen have taken wage-labour work in rubber plantations and orchards, they have become more familiar with agriculture. Some Moklen began to occupy forest land and started their own small gardens, and some saved up to buy affordable plots of land away from the coast. Of the three groups of Chao Lay, the Moklen are the only one with members living in house clusters or villages inland or on higher ground. Though some have become inland people (Chao Bok), the older people still have close ties to the sea and frequently come down to the shore to forage for fish, crabs, squid and shellfish. In contrast, the younger generation often no longer speak Moklen and before the tsunami none appreciated the fact that they were Chao Lay due to strong Thai ethnocentrism and negative labeling.

Several Moklen communities are located close to tourist areas, so occupations have diversified. Since fisheries and foraging have been limited due to depleted marine resources, the high cost of running and maintaining boats and the privatisation of coastal lands, many young Moklen have now turned to wage labour related to tourism. Compared with the Moken and the Urak Lawoi, the Moklen are the group that is most removed from their maritime traditions and facing higher risk of losing their language and maritime culture.

All Moklen have Thai citizenship, so their basic rights such as universal healthcare coverage and free education are guaranteed. However, there are problems of land insecurity, poverty, and loss of cultural identity and pride. Land disputes are a major problem in several Moklen communities. Residential areas, foraging grounds, sheltered bays and lagoons for mooring boats, and even spiritual sites such as sacred shrines and ancestral graves have been the subject of private claims. Some communities live in the mangrove or beach forests that have later been designated as state-protected areas.



Figure 11: The Moklen have long been a sedentary group who for various reasons occasionally move their villages. Traditionally their houses were made of bamboo and wood with thatched roofs. Now as wood is becoming expensive and scarce, modern concrete block houses are replacing traditional ones (photo: N. Arunotai).



Figure 12: The Moklen have also taken to using local motor boats instead of dugouts as in the old days. The favored subsistence remains fishing and foraging from around the beaches (photo: N. Arunotai).

2.3 Urak Lawoi

The Urak Lawoi are the largest group of Chao Lay in Thailand both in terms of population and by the size of their villages. They usually live in island villages, but travel out to sea to forage for several days or weeks. They make temporary camps during foraging trips, called *bagad* (Wongbusarakum 2002; 2007). They move their settlements occasionally due to epidemics, appearance of fierce or poisonous animals, or due to a misfortune such as the unusual death of community members.

Fishing and free-diving for marine animals for subsistence and trade has been the mainstay for the Urak Lawoi for several hundred years (Ukrit 2003). Some 50 to 60 years ago they started using local fishing boats with outboard motors instead of the traditional hand-built *prahu*. Modern equipment such as air pumps (*hookah*) for deep-water diving and nylon fishing nets have been introduced. The fish traps have changed from small, hand-made bamboo-rattan traps to large wooden structures with wire mesh.

Apart from depleted marine resources and greater competition with large-scale trawlers, the other two obstacles for Urak Lawoi fisheries are the expansion of marine protected areas and the destruction of fishing traps by tourist divers (Arunotai et al. 2007: 22–23). The former obstacle has deterred young Urak Lawoi men from continuing fishing, as several boats have been arrested, confiscated, and their owners fined heavily. The latter caused conflict between divers and Urak Lawoi fishers during the 2000s, because of overlapping diving and fishing zones. When tourist divers see beautiful fish in the traps, they either open the trap door to let the fish out or cut up the traps (Kaewnoo 2011). This problem was gradually resolved through greater dialogue between the tourism sector, communities and the relevant authorities.

Several Urak Lawoi villages are in areas undergoing rapid tourism development, like Rawai Beach in Phuket, Phi Phi Island in Krabi and Lipe Island in Satun. At present, many households in these three communities are facing serious land disputes and evictions. Communities have been marginalised and fenced off and houses have been pushed further inland to open up beachfront space for tourism as Chao Lay are not usually regarded as belonging in the tourist scenery.



Figure 13: A well near Rawai village, which served as a place for Chao Lay to bathe and wash. It was later filled as the Thai “land-owner” wanted to rent out the plot. (Photo: N. Arunotai)



Figure 14: The small entrance to the Moken quarter in Rawai village. As the adults usually go out to paid work, the community is left with the elderly and children during the day (photo: Paladej Na Pombejra).

Over 100 cases concerning Rawai village⁴ are now in the provincial court. The lack of land security also affects individual, family and community security. At Rawai village, the local authority cannot provide public utilities, as prior permission has to be granted by private landowners. Several Urak Lawoi and Moken households have no toilet or shower, and they need to use the nearby beach as a toilet. Some households have to use candles or lamps at night. Wells are either filled or polluted by nearby shrimp larvae farm businesses. The situation of the Rawai Urak Lawoi community is no different from large urban slums, with practically no public space for children and community recreation except for small seaside spots under large trees. Nowadays, however, even the seaside area has become crowded with seafood stalls that landowners rent out to non-Chao-Lay vendors.

The Urak Lawoi, who have lived in Laem Tong, Phi Phi Island, for hundreds of years, have found that their village is now surrounded by hotels and resorts. Part of their cemetery was desecrated and excavated for a hotel swimming pool. There is a problem with lack of fresh water and toilets, and there is no public space or playground for the children. Furthermore, the students' path to school has been claimed by a resort, so each morning the children have to walk through the resort ground to get there. The Urak Lawoi on Lipe Island are also battling with land disputes, and the island is dominated by several Tawkays, Thais of full or partial Chinese ancestry, and their powerful clans who control local land, businesses and wealth. These Tawkays have diversified their businesses from trade in marine products to tourism (resorts, diving, etc.). Since Tawkay clans insistently defend their business it is risky for Urak Lawoi to move for community rights.

All Urak Lawoi have Thai citizenship. The children usually go to the local school, so they are fluent in Thai. Some communities are experiencing loss of language and culture, but those who live collectively with little influence from mainstream culture are able to retain their language and rituals.



Figure 15: The first generations of Urak Lawoi houses were made of wood and bamboo, with thatched roofs. Later, when they became more settled, houses were made of wooden planks with corrugated iron roofs. When wood became expensive and scarce, then concrete houses were built, with planks and tiled roofs. A popular means of land transport is the motorcycle and sidecar (photo: Paladej Na Pombejra).



Figure 16: Urak Lawoi fish traps used to be small and hand-made; now they are still hand-made but have become much larger, with the use of new materials like wooden sticks, wire mesh, nylon nets and iron nails (photo: Paladej Na Pombejra).

⁴ By “Rawai village” I am referring to a Chao Lay community in Rawai sub-district; “Rawai beach” means the geographical area that comprises community and beachfront land, which includes disputed land, and “Rawai” refers to the name of the sub-district.

As mentioned earlier, the Chao Lay have become visible to the public because of the tsunami incident and due to the active role of the mass media (Arunotai 2006b: 34). At the time, indigenous marine knowledge and the almost forgotten “legend of the seven waves” was acknowledged as the essential thing that saved the Chao Lay from the disaster. Their celebrity, however, was short-lived, and their other knowledge and practices such as traditional boat-building and sailing remain under threat.

The Chao Lay came to public attention again in January 2016, with headlines about Rawai Urak Lawoi individuals being beaten during confrontation over a land dispute. The news seems to lead public opinion to a dichotomy between indigenous communities and private business. The following section will seek to give a deeper understanding of the threats and conflicts experienced by the Chao Lay.

3. Understanding Chao Lay conflicts and disputes as driven by three forces

In this article I am arguing that the persistent land disputes and other critical problems faced by the Chao Lay require an investigation beyond the conflict and dichotomy between indigenous communities and private businesses or the state. We need to scrutinise the ideologies and discourses driven by the three forces that have also defined and shaped relationships between peoples. These three forces of nation building processes, neoliberal capitalism and the bureaucratic system of Thailand, which are all disadvantageous for Chao Lay lifestyles, are discussed in the following.

3.1 Nation state, Thai-isation and ethnocentrism

Nation-building in Thailand went hand in hand with Thai-isation and ethnocentrism. It has been noted that the pre-modern Thai kingdom considered the ethnic diversity of its subjects as a plus, and although there were jokes about some ethnic elements these focused on differences rather than the feeling of contempt. During the colonial period, ethnic discrimination was downplayed out of concern that ethnic groups might switch their allegiances to the colonial powers rather than remaining loyal to the Siamese royals and the state (Eoseewong 2008: 17). Nationalism as an ideology and policy became a counter-colonialism agenda during the reign of King Rama VI (1910–1925), continuing through the Phibul Songkram government after the Siamese revolution in 1932.

It is thus important to analyse the birth of the nation state and the process of civilising the population through Thai-isation. During the Phibun Songkram government, the country’s name was changed from Siam to Thailand. New “Great Traditions” were invented and popularised. Men, for example, were encouraged to wear trousers and women to wear skirts instead of the traditional loincloth. Government offices had to raise the Thai tricolor flag at 8.00 a.m. and broadcast the national anthem. “Uncivilised” practices like chewing betel nuts were discouraged. Even present-day national icons such as the famous dish Phad Thai and the famous round dance Ram Wong were invented in this period of determined Thai-isation. There was also the effort to mainstream the central Thai dialect and culture through the education system and the media.

The definition and practices of Thainess have mostly been monopolised, so ethnic groups with unique languages and customs gradually became second class. For the Thai historian Eoseewong (2008: 19–21), the reasons why Thai nationalism does not leave much space for multiculturalism are:

- Thai nationalism was driven from the top instead of building bottom-up awareness about a common interest and shared future.

- Thai nationalism was politicised in order to serve the elite, and although there is a sense of Thainess and love of the nation it is not based on socio-cultural equity.
- There is a lack of knowledge and understanding about cultural diversity, and mainstream culture is exclusively based on particular language and traditions.
- Thailand is extremely centralised, not only politically and economically, but in terms of education, religion and even honours. In addition, local cultures and languages have been devalued in the face of honouring selected cultures as prestigious national elements.

After the threat of colonialism came communism. National security was strengthened militarily, and in terms of ideology there was a major effort to build national identity and values by uplifting the three pillars of the Thai state – the nation, religion (Buddhism) and monarchy. Through the process of Thai-isation, many ethnic groups in Thailand became assimilated and gradually lost their customs and identity. Today the Kingdom of Thailand has around 66 million inhabitants (2010 national census); 96 per cent of them are Thai nationals, some four per cent are other nationals, nearly half of them are Myanmar nationals. Although the database of the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropological Centre⁵ identifies over 50 ethnic groups in Thailand, only a few groups have retained their language, culture, customs and identity. The attempt to counteract this trend and to revive ethnic cultures and languages began only about 20 to 30 years ago.

As ethnic groups with different languages and radically different, namely marine-based nomadic, semi-nomadic and mobile lifestyles, the Chao Lay, however, stand in sharp contrast to the wet-rice, agriculturally based, land-based mainstream culture of the Thai and related ethnic groups. Accordingly, the Chao Lay, have experienced various degrees of discrimination and marginalisation. For decades this marginalisation went almost unnoticed since, for Thai citizens living outside the southwestern provinces and for the rest of the world, the Chao Lay were practically non-existent in the pre-tsunami period.

3.2 Neoliberal capitalism

The Andaman Coast, especially Phuket, began being more populated over 200 years ago due to trade, farming and tin mining. Tin mining gradually spread along the coast both on land and at sea. In 1980s, Thailand was among the top tin-mining countries in the world. Around 100 years ago, coconut and rubber plantations became widespread in the south and later dominated the landscape.

The normal practice of land inheritance in the southwestern coast and islands, especially in the Phuket area, which later became a joke, was that landlords preferred to give productive, inland plots to hard-working sons and beachfront plots to their lazy ne'er-do-well brothers. At the time, beachfront or seaside land had no value and was seen as agriculturally unproductive. Sandy soil on a seafront property has no use except for growing coconuts. After Phuket's tourism development started in the 1970s, and tourism amenities including hotels, resorts, restaurants and related businesses flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, beachfront land became a desirable property. Then the lazy, indolent sons became richer than their hard-working brothers by selling or renting off their inherited seaside lands.

One may wonder why lazy sons have land titles while the Chao Lay, as indigenous people who have lived, subsisted and traded in southwestern Thailand for centuries, lack title deeds to land or

⁵ See Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropological Centre (<http://www.sac.or.th/databases/ethnic-groups/>).

papers to guarantee their land security. The three main reasons for this (Arunotai 2009: 58) are closely related to what was mentioned above in terms of nation-building processes:

1) **The Chao Lay traditionally do not claim ownership of the land.** Like most indigenous peoples, the Chao Lay's concept of land is very different from those based on modern law. Land is their collective habitat, foraging ground, spiritual abode, area for worship and remembrance, and there are even customary rights for land use such as plots for harvesting wild rice, rights that could then be negotiated and shared. The current legal concept of land as property and real estate alienates the Chao Lay from their original coastal and island home. In addition, the Chao Lay's frequent mobility opened up a chance and provided justification for land-grabs by outside opportunists.

2) **The sense of ethnocentrism among the local and mainstream population towards Chao Lay is so strong in certain areas that the plight and rights of the Chao Lay have been overlooked.** Ethnocentrism is based on a misunderstanding of nomadic and semi-nomadic life. The Chao Lay have been seen as rootless and homeless groups who are always on the move, so having land security should not be a big issue, as they tend to move to other areas. In addition, Chao Lay are seen as backward groups who do not contribute to coastal development and prosperity, and this is often a justification for contempt and maltreatment. Moreover, I would describe Chao Lay as peace-loving and as not wanting conflict or confrontation with outsiders. Instead of fighting, they would rather move away or flee when threatened by people who come and claim ownership of the land.

3) **The Chao Lay are a non-literate culture whereas land titles and other laws are based on literacy and official documents.** Chao Lay elders do not read or write, and they have sometimes been tricked into putting their fingerprint on legal documents they could not read. In the above-mentioned Chinese-Thai *taukay* system⁶ middlemen or merchants advanced money, food, tools or other help to Chao Lay, who were then in their debt. In several cases, they had to pay this off by moving away and giving up the land they lived on. When land disputes come to court, much if not all the weight of evidence is placed on official documents such as land papers. Oral history and community witness are neglected. In the Rawai case, the appeal was made on behalf of the community to the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRCT). In 2007 it concluded that the land paper was improperly issued and should be revoked. However, the Department of Lands insisted on the legitimacy of the document (as of 2017). The fight is continuing but once an official document such as the insistence of the Department of Lands has been issued, it is very difficult to challenge it.

Thailand's economic policy, which favors neoliberal capitalism, makes it easier for predatory practices like the land grabbing mentioned above. David Harvey called this "accumulation by dispossession", and the practices "include the commodification and privatisation of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; conversion of various forms of property rights – common, collective, state, etc. – into exclusive private property rights; suppression of rights to the commons . . ." (2004: 74). The Chao Lay's plight thus partly stemmed from a clash of cultural values. While Chao Lay culture promotes sharing, valuing relations, living in simplicity and non-

⁶ Sometimes written as *towkay*. The term derives from Hokkien Chinese meaning patriarch (Ooi 2004: 1342). Thai also adopts the term to mean Chinese, Chinese Thai, or anyone who acts as middleman or shop-owner, buying and selling to make profit. Apart from direct trade, a *taukay* often creates economic bondage by advancing money or other forms of help in order to form a dependency on the part of the people he trades with.

accumulation, and avoiding conflict, neoliberal capitalism encourages accumulation and hoarding, focuses on individual achievement and gain, promotes profit-making rather than relations, increases competition and unlimited acquisitiveness, and the use of various means to achieve a profitable target.

The current national development agenda favors neoliberal capitalism, so it has become a dominant ideology that turns land into important capital and sees the growth of the tourism industry as desirable economic boost. The land and sea that sustain the Chao Lay life and cultural identity thus become commodified and alienated from their life.

3.3 Bureaucratic system

While the Thai-isation process either assimilates or marginalises ethnic groups, neoliberalisation often justifies the dispossession of land and resources from indigenous groups who are seen as backward and economically non-productive. On the one hand, the bureaucratic system has worked to centralise the administration of politics, economics, education, and even culture, so knowledge and understanding of groups with a unique culture is lacking. On the other hand, the Thai bureaucratic system or organised administration with authority, budget and resources has no particular department or office that works holistically on the agendas of indigenous groups such as the Chao Lay. There was, however, a Hill Tribe Welfare Division in the Department of Public Welfare under the Ministry of the Interior,⁷ although some of its work has now been transferred to the Division of Social Development for Special Target Groups in the Social Development and Welfare Department, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. There are sixteen Highland People Development Centers covering twenty northern provinces. The focus on hill tribes or the highland population is not only because they make up the majority of indigenous peoples in Thailand, but also because of the political and socio-economic situation already mentioned.

The fact that Thai government's work on the hill tribes has been shifted, interrupted, and then transferred between three main ministries, starting with the Ministry of Interior, to the Ministry for Labor (and Social Welfare – the former name), to the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, clearly signifies a lack of interest in a long-term vision and policy on these ethnic groups. The work has rather been shaped by discourses on these peoples in relations to national security. First it was a discourse on drugs, then on communist involvement, as stated by Buadaeng, “The Thai state with the support from the US had seen the ‘hill tribes’ to be increasing threats or ‘problems’ for Thai society because of their opium cultivation and susceptibility to communist mobilization” (2006: 360). Later, the discourse on the hill tribes shifted to “forest des-troyers”. Buadaeng again stated that, “after the CPT collapsed in 1982 and opium cultivation was largely reduced in 1984, still some ‘hill tribe problems’ remained such as the forest destruction and the poor livelihood conditions” (*ibid.*: 381).

Furthermore, the state bureaucracy divides the complex task and delegation of the relevant power to offices or units, thus creating compartmentalisation of work. Each office or unit focuses on their mandate and adheres to rules and regulations. This silo approach, or missions and responsibilities that are narrowed and segmented by bureaucratic division of labour, makes it almost impossible to address and work on the Chao Lay situation holistically.

⁷ More detail about hill tribe policies can be found in Kwanchewan Buadaeng's “The Rise and Fall of the Tribal Research Institute (TRI): “Hill Tribe” Policy and Studies in Thailand” (2006).

The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security often considers the Chao Lay to be a marginalised group who deserve help in the form of welfare. The Ministry of Culture focuses on national culture and heritage, but there is no particular office working on indigenous peoples' cultures. The Ministry of Interior (with the Department of Lands and Department of Local Administration) has totally neglected the cultures, customary rights and particularity of the Chao Lay ways of life. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment upholds national conservation regulations and fails to see alternative ways of resource conservation embedded in indigenous ways of life. At the local level, furthermore, the bureaucratic traditions of staff rotation make it difficult to continue the good work by some able and insightful state officers.

The bureaucratic system is also associated with documents, formal and official records, and thus requires a culture of literacy. The Chao Lay's oral language and non-literacy skills carry little weight in all these. For example, an application for nationality becomes problematic from the first stage of data collection. The local administration offices are used to working reactively, when an individual comes in to fill in the form, shows the relevant official documents and gives answers in an interrogation process. For the Moken, I suggest a different approach. The staff have to visit the community, conduct a group interview and then identify the appropriate witnesses, such as midwives etc. Another example is the above-mentioned Rawai land-dispute case, where the original owner of the land document was the headman, who, due to his status and position, was familiar with the system and knew about land documentation. In contrast, the Urak Lawoi and Moken in Rawai village only knew that generations of Chao Lay have lived, worked, and held rituals here without any document and without any previous trouble or dispute.

At present there are a few young Chao Lay who have received a higher education, but they are expected to have good jobs and become more economically successful than their parents. With a tendency towards a more neoliberal individualistic thinking, these young people have less time for the community's common cause. However, after the land dispute incident in January 2016, it became an urgent necessity to bring these young people together to prepare more proof of their long and continuous occupation on the land. So three or four young Urak Lawoi came together to work on community data collection.

The Chao Lay cannot lay claim to indigenous peoples' rights protection either. Although Thailand voted for the United Nations General Assembly's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the country does not accept that there are indigenous peoples in Thailand, as it is believed that the Thai as well as many other ethnic groups have been native to this land and nearby areas since time immemorial. According to this belief, there are no particular groups in Thailand that should be categorised as indigenous peoples.

The three forces of nationalism and Thai-isation, neoliberal capitalism, and the inner logic of the bureaucratic system have weakened the Chao Lay's cultural survival. I argue that the contemporary land conflict should be understood as rooted in different modes of thinking about land, and as the government's failure to understand and protect a way of life that predates regulation and schemes to promote tourism and economic growth.

4. Chao Lay and other hunter-gatherer communities

The Chao Lay's plight is not specific to sea nomads in Thailand who are struggling to adjust to their changing world. In this paper their plight serves as a basis for a broader reflection on the situation of indigenous peoples in Thailand in the context of the country's neoliberal capitalist economy facilitated by a bureaucratic state. Apart from the Chao Lay, several other indigenous groups have experienced discrimination and marginalisation in Thailand. The most vulnerable of these at present is an ethnic group in southern Thailand who call themselves the Maniq, or better known in Thailand as Sakai or Ngoh Pa (meaning wild rambutan).



Figure 17: This photo is self-explanatory. Centuries ago, Chao Lay were among very few inhabitants around the Andaman Coast and islands, but 40 years ago they started becoming minorities struggling even to maintain their daily living. The photo shows a large tourist schooner dropping anchor not far from a small Moken village on the Surin Islands in Phang-nga province, with a Moken in the foreground slowly rowing their boat back to the community (photo: Paladej Na Pombejra).

The Maniq, hunter-gatherers who are considered the aboriginal inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula, live in the forest in southern Thailand. This extensive forest was closed to outsiders due to communist and other threats, but since the communist insurgency subsided in the 1980s the forest has gradually been cleared to make way for para-rubber plantations. Austrian anthropologist Helmut Lukas worked with the Maniq for almost a quarter of a century. He was already warning a decade ago that deforestation would lead to ethnocide for the Maniq, as their natural habitat, their primary source of subsistence, barrier to diseases, and peaceful sanctuary would all soon be gone (Lukas 2004: 12).

It was suggested that the pattern of interethnic relationships in the old days provided the Maniq with significant roles and status (Lukas, *op. cit.*, 9–15), but this has totally changed and now they are often considered an inferior group. Like the Chao Lay, the Maniq do not claim ownership over land, and they always retreat when approached or threatened by outsiders. There is less and less forest, however, for the Maniq's refuge, so they have fewer options. Hunting and gathering also yields less food and several Maniq have been "forced to work in the nearby plantations in order to get additional food" (*ibid.*: 14). It is also interesting for Lukas to observe that Maniq who remain true hunter-gatherers do not consider their sedentarised peers as part of their group, but as another category of Hamiq (them) (*ibid.*: 12).

Being increasingly dependent on outsiders for food and other necessities, the Maniq became "easily controllable semi-nomads" or "pseudo-Maniq", "who can only enter the lowest social stratum below the lowest farmers." The stereotyped image of the Maniq has occasionally been used to attract attention from those who are curious about "exotic forest people".⁸

⁸ See for example, men dressed up in red loincloths with red flower garlands and frizzy-haired wigs, pretending to be Maniq at a fruit and local product fair in the province of Yala in 2007 (from a blog by

Several academics who are concerned about the future of these marginalised indigenous groups have called for community protection in the form of culturally protected areas or reserves. As Lukas put it, “The protection of the forest means simultaneously ‘salvaging’ and ‘conserving’ the ‘People of the Forest’, but there are (still) no plans to establish reserves for the Maniq” (Lukas 2004: 12, 14).

The appeal for the protection of indigenous peoples in Thailand, especially the Chao Lay, have become louder since the tsunami incident. With the cooperation of academics, civil society groups, autonomous organisations, communities and the media, and with the support of the Minister of Culture at the time, in 2010 the cabinet passed a resolution on the “Revitalization of Chao Lay Culture” (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropological Centre 2015: 247–249). Two months later, another resolution, on the “Revitalization of Karen Culture,” was passed. Both resolutions state that Special Culture Zones need to be designated to protect indigenous ancestral domains (Arunotai 2013: 144). Several committees were set up to look into revitalisation efforts, but with political instability and frequent changes of government in Thailand the work has been disrupted. As for Chao Lay land problems, a committee has been set up to identify solutions, and the Department of Special Investigation came in to look into prominent cases such as Rawai.

The work on the sustainable protection of indigenous peoples in Thailand has been slow and faces many obstacles, mainly from the three forces mentioned above. In other words, we are not just looking for solutions to Chao Lay dilemmas, but for solutions that may succeed in changing the overall discourse on marginalised ethnic groups in Thailand. As I see it, shifting the focus from extreme neoliberalism with absolute privatisation and ruthless profit-seeking to the reconsideration of the intrinsic value of humanity and culture, peaceful and compassionate coexistence, and reforming the bureaucratic system to be more integrative and people-oriented instead of paper-and regulation-oriented would be necessary steps.

Facing the above-mentioned dilemmas and struggles, the Chao Lay have recently started to become more organised by establishing a Chao Lay network. Around 2013 the Chao Lay network joined the Indigenous Network of Thailand.⁹ Since 2007 the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples on August 9 has been celebrated annually in Thailand.¹⁰ In 2016, the theme of the World Indigenous Peoples Day in Thailand was “Land”. It remains to be seen if this growing strength of indigenous peoples’ awareness about their rights, which have been neglected and even violated in many cases, can contribute to mitigating the dilemma of the sea nomads in southern Thailand.

5. Implications for research and policy directions

The paradigm of Public Interest Anthropology “promotes change and advances knowledge through attention to the ‘dilemmas’ and ‘perplexities’ of our time” (Sanday 1998). In the face of the Chao

“Nenroon” <http://oknation.nationtv.tv/blog/singslatan/2007/09/06/entry-1>). Another example: in 2009, a district chief together with the chief executive of the provincial administration in Phatthalung attended a wedding ceremony organised for a Maniq couple in order to promote tourism there (from <http://www.sookjai.com/index.php?topic=95784.0>).

⁹ See <https://www.facebook.com/nipt.secretariat/> and https://en-gb.facebook.com/events/273095899726001/?active_tab=about.

¹⁰ On December 23, 1994, the United Nations General Assembly decided that the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples should be observed on August 9 each year.

Lay's continuing dilemma, research on this and other indigenous peoples who are struggling to maintain cultural survival and identity cannot be a purely academic endeavor. Rather it should be research that provides deeper understanding and advocates indigenous rights, informs the policy sector, especially long-term policy direction, and certainly empowers the people.

1) **Advocacy research** may be seen as one type of applied research, “specifically directed toward identifying, critiquing, and addressing imbalance in allocation of power, economic resources, social status, material goods, and other desired social or economic elements in a community, society, or globally” (Trotter and Schensul 2000: 693). As indigenous peoples' ways of life are often seen as “backward” or “underdeveloped”, their cultural rights are often neglected. Advocacy research in this context calls for public attention to indigenous issues and promotes public understanding, awareness and appreciation of true cultural diversity. There is still a disagreement on the role of anthropologists. While some would rather limit it to the academic world of knowledge and understanding, others feel that knowledge and skills could be used to direct change in positive ways (Kellett 2009: 29; Paine 1985). However, engaged anthropology has been on the rise and advocacy research has been categorised as one form of engagement (Low and Merry 2010).

With respect to advocacy research on the Chao Lay, the Chulalongkorn Social Research Institute (CUSRI) has established a website on the Andaman Pilot Project, which provides information about the Chao Lay, especially the Moken during the post-tsunami recovery period. The webpage clarifies and explains for example some misunderstandings, like the assumption that the Moken are nomads roaming around in aimless and haphazard travelling with no attachment to any land. Other attempts at advocacy research include providing relevant information to help mobilise the movement for indigenous peoples' rights, serving as expert witnesses in court cases, and the communication of research results to a wider public through illustrated reader-friendly books and booklets such as *Local Knowledge and Moken Boat Building* (Na Pombejra et al. 2006) and *Hundred Stories on the Sea-brave Chao Lay: Moken, Moklen, and Urak Lawoi* (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropological Centre 2015). The research team at CUSRI also serves on the Committee for the Revitalization of Chao Lay Culture, identifying solutions to land and livelihood problems etc. CUSRI cooperates with some media channels to provide information and news on the dilemma of the Chao Lay with the aim to explaining the situations from a more holistic perspective. Several films and documentaries, both for domestic and international distribution, have raised awareness of the issue for a wider audience, such as *Talay Thai* (Thai Seas Series – 2009 by Panorama Worldwide),¹¹ *Seven Giant Waves* (2012 directed by Dawn Poomee),¹² and *No Word for Worry* (2014 directed by Runar Wiik).¹³

There remain several challenges for advocacy research. Some information about the Chao Lay and other indigenous groups was disseminated to the public, but “getting to know” does not automatically result in “becoming appreciative.” The Moken are now well-known in Thailand and many individuals and organisations would like to help in solving their dilemma and combating marginalisation. The help is mostly limited to donating food, clothes, etc. which is sometimes

¹¹ See an excerpt at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTDhcRDSv60&feature=youtu.be>.

¹² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKeGOz7ANlk>,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHXDXOd7k3w>, and
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNrVKTa2ZCM>.

¹³ See <http://projectmoken.com/no-word-for-worry-2/>.

organised in the communities and schools on Thai “special days” like Songkran Day, Children’s Day etc. So these efforts can also be seen as another aspect of the continuation of the Thai-isation process. A small group of urban Thai, for example, joined up with a Moken family to organise trips and tours for commercial purposes, without reflecting that their clothes and behavior might have an impact in the community and that the income generation for one family creates economic inequality in the village. Most people who come with “helping hands” rarely raise the issue of the Chao Lay’s indigenous rights such as granting areas and support for semi-nomadic life or giving quotas for tree-cutting to continue their art of *kabang*-making.

Although some information is now available on the Urak Lawoi, the complexity of land disputes (and other problems) clouds public understanding about collective indigenous peoples’ rights in the legal, document-based context. Advocacy research, by contrast, has the potential to provide in-depth understanding of the indigenous dilemma and to expand the analysis to a wider cultural context by including the above-mentioned logics of “Thai-isation”, neoliberal capitalism and the bureaucratic system. In other words, future research needs to focus more on enhancing cultural sensitivity and cultural competency rather than just providing relevant information. Cultural competency must be based on critical anthropological analysis of current socio-economic and political dynamics.



Figure 18: A small hut providing information about the Moken at a village on the Surin Islands in Phang-nga has been set up by the community together with the Chulalongkorn Social Research Institute (CUSRI). It informs visitors to the village about the Moken way of life, livelihood and traditions in the context of the Surin Islands, and answers “ten most frequently asked questions about the Moken” (photo: N. Arunotai).



Figure 19-20: The booklet *Local Knowledge and Moken Boat Building* supported by UNESCO and UNDP illustrates the interplay between knowledge-skills, community relations and the natural environment in the construction of the unique *kabang*. The book *Chao Lay: Cultural Literacy* is a result of research promoting cultural literacy about the Chao Lay and has been widely distributed to the interested public (photo: N. Arunotai).

2) **Policy research** builds upon the analysis of “cultural texts” and “rhetorical devices and discursive formations that function to empower some people and silence others” (Shore and Wright 1997: 6). We have seen from the Chao Lay cases that policies on nationalism and Thai-isation gradually contributed to marginalisation of indigenous groups. The critical point are the agents with the “power to define” (Shore and Wright 1997: 14). In this case, marine nomadic and semi-nomadic livelihoods have been an unrecognised or even unaccepted form of existence to the state agents, resulting in land alienation.

As anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis, a strong advocate for indigenous peoples’ rights, stated,¹⁴ “Land is the key to the cultural and often even the physical survival of indigenous peoples” (1985: 137). Comprehensive data and holistic perspectives from anthropological research are needed to draw attention and inform policy-making bodies.

The above-mentioned 2010 cabinet resolution on the “Revitalization of Chao Lay Culture” (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropological Centre 2015: 247–249) resulted from political will as much as from relevant and up-to-date information and from a lively cooperation between a network of academic institutes (like CUSRI), public organisations (mainly the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre) and non-profit organisations (led by the Chumchon Thai Foundation). Several committees have been set up since the passing of the resolution, for example, the Committee to Solve the Problems of Land for Living Security, Livelihood Security, and Spiritual Security of Chao Lay Communities, but frequent changes in the Thai political scenery affects their status and work.

As Thailand is currently going through a “reform” period, the Commissioner on Social Aspects of National Reform requested the involvement of representatives from academia and civil society to contribute to “Recommendations for National Reform to Promote the Strengthening of Ethnic Communities: The Case of Chao Lay Communities.” The three main issues of this report are, 1) to speed up the implementation of the 2010 cabinet resolution by constituting new committees, 2) to mobilise the development of “special cultural zone” as stated in the cabinet resolution, and 3) to review and implement a “Master Plan for Ethnic Groups in Thailand” (2015–2017) proposed by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. Such recommendations were endorsed by the National Reform Steering Assembly on July 12, 2016,¹⁵ and “strengthening Chao Lay communities” became one of 38 reform issues that the government agreed to enact in accordance with the present constitution.

The fact that the Thai government (through the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security) has agreed a master plan on ethnic groups indicates a political intention for a positive and progressive policy for the protection of cultural rights and enhancing the peoples’ quality of life. Unfortunately, however, the ministry executives sidelined the plan and did not promote cooperation between ministries to implement it. Political will regarding the strengthening of ethnic communities in Thailand is thus occasionally disrupted by executives who reprioritise indigenous issues as low on the national development agenda. In addition, the also above-mentioned compartmentalisation embedded in the bureaucratic system makes work that should have been holistic rather segmented and cut off along mandate-mission lines.

¹⁴ See <https://www.culturalsurvival.org>.

¹⁵ The report on Recommendations for Reformation to Strengthen Ethnic Communities: The Case of Chao Lay Community was proposed by the Commissioner on National Reform (Social Team) with the involvement of academics and civil society (see edoc.parliament.go.th/getfile.aspx?id=655072&file=pdf).

The challenges of research focused on policy recommendations are thus to follow up with policy decisions and implementation and find leverage for a change or reprioritisation of policy relevant to ethnic groups. The cabinet resolution on the Revitalization of Chao Lay Culture illustrates that comprehensive information is important for policy moves. Although serious issues like land disputes have not been resolved, the resolution nevertheless enables several government offices to work and channel some budget for Chao Lay activities.

The future research for policy direction should also critically analyse development policy and plans – as well as the lack of policies – in spheres that directly affect Chao Lay communities and livelihoods. The above-mentioned unregulated growth of the tourism industry driven by the ideology of neoliberal capitalism, for example, runs counter to the indigenous mode of thinking about land and resources and results in communities becoming ever more alienated from their land and resources. New forms of marine tourism such as yachting and luxury cruises may position Thailand as a “Marina Hub of ASEAN”¹⁶ and promise prosperity. However, assessments should be made in order to mitigate possible impacts on the Chao Lay, local fishers and coastal communities. It is important to consider that, in addition to tourists, yachts and the prospect of income, this kind of tourism also brings about changes in the seascape and landscape, and instigates more activity in coastal areas and islands by the real-estate and construction industry among others, affecting local peoples and lives. In addition to a critical stance on tourism over-development, the topics of alternative, sustainable, community-led and other indigenous-peoples-friendly tourism approaches should be researched and proposed as an appropriate policy direction. It is important to gear development policy towards a new tourism concept that appreciates and opens up space for respectful coexistence between tourism and indigenous peoples. Several good practices have been documented and discussed by Zeppel (2006).



Figure 21: The meeting of the Committee to Solve the Problems of Land for Living Security, Livelihood Security, and Spiritual Security of Chao Lay Communities in 2016. The chair, General Surin Pikultong, a retired military officer (center), understands and appreciates the Chao Lay’s semi-nomadic past (photo: Maitree Jongkrajak).

3) Research for capacity building and empowerment. Alternative approaches to teaching and learning that are based on indigenous knowledge and “ways of knowing” is needed in order to build capacity within marginalised indigenous groups that might be linked to a positive Chao Lay identity and even pride. Comparable education approaches of advocacy and scholarship are documented for the Maori, indigenous North Americans, and indigenous Hawaiians. These examples show that “Anthropologists from many different backgrounds have formed activist

¹⁶ See “Thailand eyes Marina Hub of ASEAN status with inaugural yacht show in February” at <http://www.tatnews.org/thailand-eyes-marina-hub-of-asean-status-with-inaugural-yacht-show-in-february/>

and scholarly collaborations with marginalised peoples to promote local change, autonomy, and educational and cultural development” (Schensul 2011: 127–128). Among the Chao Lay a lack of self-organisation and the sense of inferiority internalised through the process of Thai-isation and ethnocentrism seems to linger. Action research enhances Chao Lay participation and gears research towards voicing their concerns and aspirations for the future. Within this framework, local curricula and learning materials have been developed and published. One research project created eco-cultural trails, booklets and maps, and provided training for tour-guide beginners.¹⁷

After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami a group of Moken on the Surin Islands started by reviving traditional *kabang*-building with the support from UNESCO and the UNDP. As a result, the Surin Islands community is the only Chao Lay community in Thailand that still owns a traditional boat. Ethno-botanical knowledge has been used in trail-guide development. An exhibition featuring a hut and a model boat informs visitors about the significance of the Surin Islands in the Moken context, and about the history and continuity of this people’s livelihood and culture. At the beginning of this project, the Moken were reserved and not so articulate, but through training and actual practices they have gained the skills to take visitors around and to tell their side of the story. In recent years, there have been more research projects on collecting cultural data and preparing the Chao Lay community for involvement in tourism management. As the Andaman coast and islands have been integrated into global tourism, it is challenging to mitigate its effects and to open ways for sustainable benefits for the local communities. That is, to look into community-led tourism or identify ways that tourism can be a learning experience for visitors and outsiders as well as for the community members.

Eco-cultural learning camps have also been organised for Chao Lay children to learn about their culture’s past and present in connection to the natural environment – i.e. about knowledge and interdependencies that have been lost or threatened through the forces demonstrated in this paper. One camp was organised in cooperation with marine scientists from the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources, Phuket Marine Biological Center, to inspire Chao Lay children to continue their education along the lines of their marine knowledge and skills. The challenge of research for empowerment is that while this kind of action research and activity is project-based with short timeframes and requires clear-cut planning, the work with the community needs continuity and flexibility.

Some Chao Lay leaders have joined several national networks run by grassroots and civil society, such as P-Move or People’s Movement for a Just Society; they are invited to civil-society meetings, to training workshops, and some have become citizen reporters.¹⁸ The growth and accessibility of social media is making the Chao Lay better connected, more able to express their voices, and thus

¹⁷ The Chok Madah Nature-Culture Trail and a guide booklet were developed by UNESCO, UNDP and CUSRI as a small-scale indigenous tourism package on the Surin Islands providing information about plants, animals and geographical features along the trail in relation to the Moken community and its livelihood (Tan and Vuorela 2006). See also http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/natural_science/trails/chokmadah_eng.pdf and the video “Touring with the Moken” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4N5WjRJ2kk>. In addition, the primer “Getting to Know Thai Alphabets, Moken Version”, written in the Moken language (using Thai script) with Thai translations was developed for the use in local schools with the aim to familiarise Moken children with the Thai alphabet in a Moken context, available at Museum Siam <http://knowledge-center.museumsiam.org/book-detail/5369>.

¹⁸ See P-Move Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Pmove2011/>, and an example of the production by Chao Lay citizen reporters at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKqKiPIHFRo>.

more visible to the society as a whole.¹⁹ Research for empowerment will therefore have to adapt to the needs of this growing movement. Young Chao Lay leaders can now participate or even organise their own community-based action research. It is thus important to support this kind of enabling environment to increase the number of these active young leaders.



Figure 22: “Trekking with the Moken”, an activity in a small-scale tourism package developed by the Surin Islands community and researchers, still faces several obstacles and gains little support from the National Park Authority despite its promise as an income-generating and resource-friendly activity (photo: Paladej Na Pombejra).



Figure 23: A group of Urak Lawoi on Lanta Island, Krabi Province make an attempt to organise their own touring activity. The boat is usually hired out to tourists for angling and sailing at sunset, but not for a cultural tour, so the research has been conducted to identify interesting points on the route that are related to Chao Lay history and livelihoods (photo: N. Arunotai).



Figure 24: Foreign students in the “Wildland Programs” visited a Moken village on the Surin Islands to experience “Trekking, snorkeling, and touring the village with the Moken.” The map of the village and Moken dive sites were shown to students (photo: Usa Kotsripetch).



Figure 25: Eco-cultural camps have been organised by researchers in order to promote the passing on of indigenous knowledge to young generations who can now read and write Thai (photo: N. Arunotai).

¹⁹ The Chao Lay network communicates events, issues and concerns via Facebook. “Voice of the Heart, Chao Lay”, for example, was created in April, 2017 and promotes joint administration among young Chao Lay leaders (<https://www.facebook.com/sgannews/>). The Facebook page “Chao Lay, Rawai” was set up in 2015 to spread news about Rawai and other relevant news and information on the Chao Lay and related indigenous groups (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006129810736>).

6. Conclusion

This paper has described and explained the Chao Lay livelihoods and dilemmas and situated them in the context of three forces of nationalism and Thai-isation, neoliberal-based capitalism, and state bureaucratisation. For the Chao Lay, especially those who are facing land disputes, the solutions do not lie in legal procedure but in understanding the history and contemporary contexts of nomadic and semi-nomadic livelihoods on the Andaman coast and questioning how present ownership was defined and claimed. Along the same lines, the effort for cultural revitalisation and promotion of cultural zones requires a supporting policy grounded in multiculturalism. The point of departure is an understanding of the multiplicity of “Thainess”, of communitarianism instead of individualisation and privatisation, and of collaboration and integration of work among agencies and sectors. The analysis was extended to other marginalised indigenous peoples like the Maniq, who are encountering a strong pressure to abandon their hunter-gatherer livelihood and to adopt a more sedentary life. Eventually, research for policy recommendations and for community capacity building and empowerment is as important and as much needed as pure academic research.

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