



The Urak Lawoi' of the Adang Archipelago, Thailand

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I. Introduction

On December 26, 2004, the coast and islands of Thailand's Andaman Sea were heavily impacted by the area's first tsunami in recorded history. These areas, home to formerly sea-nomadic peoples such as the Urak Lawoi', Moken, and Moklen, not only suffered the loss of lives, homes, and communities, but their fragile, traditional ways of life were further threatened. Much of the aid targeted to these areas reflects a goodwill interest in restoring livelihood to these communities. For such projects to be culturally sensitive and locally appropriate, however, requires an understanding of the inhabitants' traditional culture and ongoing dilemmas.

The Adang Archipelago, which has been home to approximately 880 people of the Southeast Asian minority group Urak Lawoi' for the past century, was minimally affected by the tsunami itself. But the community faces the same challenges as most other formerly sea-nomadic communities in Thailand, including the Urak Lawoi' that have inhabited the Lanta and Phuket islands for centuries, and the Moken of Surin island. Public awareness of these people is very low, and little information exists about them. In a 2004 survey of visitors to the Adang Archipelago, 60 percent of the foreigners knew about the Urak Lawoi' before arriving, while this was true of only 33 percent of

Thai visitors. Nearly half of the Thai tourists learned only after arriving that the Urak Lawoi' have their own, separate language and culture, and one in four learned this only because of a survey question.¹

Given the rapid pace of modernization and globalization of the market economy, traditional cultures worldwide run a great risk of disintegration, taking with them potentially valuable local knowledge. It is hoped that this volume will help raise awareness of the Urak Lawoi' people, their culture, and the challenges they face in conserving their traditional ways of life so naturally tied to the environment of the Adang Archipelago and the sea.

1. UNESCO and NOAA 2005: 79



Photo 1: Urak Lawoi' boys playing in the sea (Courtesy Ralf Obergfell, www.ralfobergfell.com)

“Even if I have to die at sea, it will be all right as long as my children can study”.
(Urak Lawoi’ father with two years of schooling, who said he felt uneducated and inferior)

are becoming increasingly available to them, there is a gap in basic services such as health and legal care. The public health station is staffed by one official who offers limited medical care. Residents still depend largely on traditional alternatives such as midwives and medicine men.

F. Changing ways of learning and knowledge

Rapid changes in the Adang Archipelago have completely changed Urak Lawoi’ traditional ways of learning. For generations, children learned what they needed to know as families traveled together during *bagad*, foraged for food, and lived at different sites in the archipelago. Rather than formal or informal lessons, young people observed and put into practice what they saw in the context of daily activity in the local environment. Information was passed on orally – the Urak Lawoi’ language has no written form – and certain types of information resided only with particular members of the community. It was traditionally common to see men over the age of 30 telling stories to a group of two to five children at a time.⁶² Other knowledge and skills, such as diving and navigating the underwater geography, could be acquired only through intense, regular practice.

Urak Lawoi’ indigenous knowledge can be very profound. They developed highly sensitive awareness of tides, currents, lunar cycles, local wind and wave patterns, and seasonal changes that were needed to be successful on foraging

and fishing expeditions. Through observation and practice, they learned the habits of local marine species and how best to use them. Their language has more than 20 names for different types of sea cucumber that can be eaten or used as medicine. They list at least six different kinds of giant clam used as food, although scientists have identified only three types in the area.⁶³ The Urak Lawoi’ name six types of winds in addition to the standard northeast and southwest winds, each with unique characteristics and effects on the sea, travel, and fishing. Knowledge embedded in the practice of certain activities is reinforced in others such as in place names, stories, and songs.

With the loss of *bagad* and their semi-nomadic lifestyle, the Urak Lawoi’ no longer have opportunities for everyone in the family to experience learning at different sites around the archipelago. Elders’ role as the transmitters of local knowledge and traditional skills is fading rapidly as contemporary activities are different.



Photo 72: Urak Lawoi’ father and son
(Courtesy Ralf Obergfell, www.ralfobergfell.com)

62. Anthropology and Sociology Department, Songkla Teacher College, September 1992.
63. Chantrapomsyl 1996.



Photo 74: Urak Lawoi' showing a sea urchin to a Westerner (Courtesy Brendan Carroll)



Photo 76: Urak Lawoi' children in the age of globalization (Courtesy Thanit Bootpetcharat)



Photo 75: Bathing before the tap water system was installed (Courtesy Ralf Obergfell www.ralfobergfell.com)

Meanwhile, the sudden increase in visitors to the formerly remote archipelago has brought all of the Urak Lawoi' into close contact with cultures and lifestyles from the developed world. Nearly half of the tourists surveyed in 2005 noted changes to the Urak Lawoi's traditional way of life as the most significant cultural impact of tourism.⁶⁶ The Urak Lawoi' have contact with visitors from wealthy Western societies at resorts on Lipe, which are located right next to their villages, on the taxi/tour boat, and at the restaurants. Some have developed friendships with, and even married, visiting Westerners.

The Urak Lawoi' language is still spoken at home, and more than half of parents surveyed want their children to go into fishing or tourism and stay on Lipe.⁶⁷ Yet, in many ways, the community is becoming less and less distinct from mainland Thais. The ease of travel, availability of cash, and other forces of globalization have given them – especially the young – aspirations that are not unlike those of urban Thais. The Urak Lawoi' do cling to certain comfortable traditions that might be considered primitive by outsiders. But they have proved very adaptable and willing to change in ways that help them adjust to and survive in new circumstances.

66. UNESCO and NOAA 2005: 79.
67. UNESCO and NOAA 2005: 58-59