

**A FLEETING ENCOUNTER WITH THE MOKEN  
(THE SEA GYPSIES) IN SOUTHERN THAILAND:  
SOME LINGUISTIC AND GENERAL NOTES**

by

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During a short trip (3-5 April 1970) to the islands of King Amphoe Khuraburi (formerly Koh Kho Khao) in Phang-nga Province in Southern Thailand, my curiosity was aroused by frequent references in conversation with local inhabitants to a group of very primitive people (they were likened to the Spirits of the Yellow Leaves) whose entire life was spent nomadically on small boats. It was obvious that this must be the Moken described by White (1922) and Bernatzik (1939, and Bernatzik and Bernatzik 1958: 13-60). By a stroke of good fortune a boat belonging to this group happened to come into the beach at Ban Pak Chok on the island of Koh Phrah Thong, where I was spending the afternoon. When I went to inspect the craft and its occupants it turned out that there were only women and children on board, the one man among the occupants having gone ashore on some errand. The women were extremely shy. Because of this, and the failing light, and the fact that I was short of film, I took only two photographs, and then left the people in peace. Later, when the man returned, I interviewed him briefly elsewhere (see f. n. 2) collecting a few items of vocabulary. From this interview and from conversations with the local residents, particularly Mr. Prapa Inphanthang, a trader who has many dealings with the Moken, I pieced together something of the life and language of these people. The latter aspect was of particular interest to me as a linguist. This paper is in no way a finished piece of scientific research, either ethnological or linguistic, but I offer it for two reasons. Firstly, no-one seems to have studied the Moken of Thai territorial waters, and secondly we seem to have here, as late as 1970 and long after indications of its imminent demise (see, e.g., Le Bar et al. 1964: 264) a substantial survival of their indigenous culture.

I was able to subject the boat to only a cursory and unpractised examination. The most striking thing about it was the "bite" out of the bow and stern of the boat, which "serves for front-steps and back-steps to the house" (White 1922 : 42: this feature appears very clearly in the illustrations there and in Bernatzik and Bernatzik 1938). Also immediately evident was the fact that the sides of the boat were made not of planks but of slender shafts of wood. These, it was explained to me, were shafts of the zalacca palm (*mai rakam*). The roofing was of palm fronds sewn together. Amidships there was a charcoal stove of the cement bucket type common in Thailand. The vessel was fitted with an outboard motor. But for the motor and the fact that it had a "modern" stove and not a stone hearth, the boat seems to correspond exactly with the description by White (1922 : 41-47) and Bernatzik (Bernatzik and Bernatzik 1958 : 28). Thus the basis of the craft was a hollowed tree trunk with built-up sides (boats of similar construction were found in the region by the Bishop of Beritus in 1662 [Hutchinson 1933], and they are not exclusive to the Moken [Kerr 1933]). The floating household consisted of a man, his wife and his sister, three children and a dog.

The Moken are called *Chao Lay*/cha:w le:/ 'sea people' (Southern Thai = Standard Thai *chao thalay*/cha:w thale:/) by the local Thai population. I did not hear the name *Chao Nam* reported by Seidenfaden (1967 : 113).<sup>1</sup> They consist of two groups known to the Thais as *Chao Koh Thae*/ (/cha:w kóʔ thé:/ ชาวเกาะแท้ 'real islanders') and *Thai Mai* (/thaj màj/ใหม่ใหม่ 'new Thais').<sup>2</sup> Only the

- 1) "These people call themselves Moken or Mawken, and are known to the Burmese as Selung, Selong or Selon" (Le Bar et al. 1964 : 263). I did not collect their own name for themselves. Related groups on the Johore coast and Singapore Island are known as Orang Laut or Ra'yat Laut by the Malays. The Chao Koh Thae man (see below) gave the word for water as [wi:n]. This agrees with the form of the word in White's Lbi (1922 : 158) dialect spoken around Victoria Point and on St. Matthew's Island. The other form of the word which I collected, viz. [e:n], is not mentioned by White.
- 2) The Chao Koh Thae man, whose name I did not collect, was interviewed at the home of Mr. Prapa Inphanthang of Tambol Ban Pak Chok on the island of Koh Prah Thong, Amphoe Khuraburi, on the afternoon of Saturday 4 April. The Thai Mai were interviewed in their village of Thung Nang Dam, Tambol Amphoe Khuraburi, on the following Sunday morning.

former group now leads a nomadic existence, the Thai Mai having settled in one or two coastal villages, and adopted a Thai surname (see below).

The Chao Koh Thae man informed me that his was the only boat to come across from Koh Surin, an island about 30 miles to the west in the Indian Ocean. He said that there were another twelve or thirteen boats moored at Koh Surin. Allowing for two or three boats elsewhere in these waters, this would give a total of about fifteen or sixteen boats. With six or seven people on each boat, we could estimate the population of this nomadic community to be in the range of 70-110.<sup>3</sup> As for the population of the Thai Mai, the figure of 300 was given to me by the Palat Amphoe in charge of King-Amphoe Khuraburi, Mr. Boonyock Sanguan-Asana, who conducted a survey among these people in 1969.

The Chao Lay are more daring navigators than the local Thais (venturing out into the ocean) and this fact is reflected in the surname adopted by the Thai Mai (see below). A Chao Koh Thae boat will typically contain a man and his wife and children, and if they have a married daughter she and her husband may also live in the same boat.<sup>4</sup> They take drinking water from the land and keep it in jars, but they bathe in sea water. They are said not to wash the hair on their heads, so that their hair is malodorous. Women frequently expose their breasts. In the rainy season the Chao Koh Thae come ashore, build temporary dwellings with palm thatch roofs, and renew the *rakam* wood in their boats, or build new boats.

The Chao Lay are said by the Thais to have "no religion" but to believe in spirits.<sup>5</sup> They do however have wedding ceremonies

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- 3) In the census of Burma of 1911, White's method of computing the numbers of the elusive Moken was to "multiply the number [of boats] seen [fleeing] or reported to be [fleeing] anywhere, by five. Seven might be a truer average" (1922 : 195).
  - 4) This information from Mr. Prapa Inphanthang of Tambol Ban Pak Chok on the island of Koh Prah Thong. It conflicts with White's statement (1922 : 203-04) that young people live with the groom's parents until they strike out for themselves by building their own boat.
  - 5) This accords with Bernatzik and Bernatzik 1938 : 36, 1958 : 30 and Bernatzik 1954 : 248.

with dancing, and it is said that they have ritual fire dances ("like Africans") in the twelfth lunar month, to bring them good fishing in the coming year.

The Thai Mai represent a somewhat assimilated version of the Chao Koh Thae. Living ashore permanently they bathe in fresh water, build smaller boats and attend Chao Koh Thae fire dances as spectators rather than participants, although some might join in after a few drinks. Some of them send their children to school. They have all taken the surname Klua-Thalay "brave the sea" (กล้าทะเล), which consists of Thai words but so far as I know was an invention of their own. Some first names may still be unassimilated and Chao Koh Thae (see below).

The language of the Chao Lay is clearly a member of the Indonesian language family.<sup>6</sup> White (1922) mentions various dialects, and in fact the Chao Koh Thae and the Thai Mai whom I interviewed represented two different dialects: (see f.n. 1 above and word list below). The language has a strong tendency to monosyllabism through optional omission of the first syllable of disyllabic words (a tendency also present in colloquial Malay and many Indonesian dialects). Some of its monosyllabic words may not be of Indonesian origin since they appear to have a fixed tone (see below).

My linguistic interviews were very brief, scrappy and unstructured. I had about half an hour with the Chao Koh Thae at Pak Chok, and about an hour with some Thai Mai at Ban Thung Nang Dam. Some of the words collected from the Chao Koh Thae differed from the corresponding words of the Thai Mai (see list below). Unless otherwise noted, forms cited were collected from Thai Mai informants. Those collected from the Chao Koh Thae are marked (CK). The words are in rough "field-note phonetic" transcription, and I will first give a chart of the contours, vocoids and pitches which I noted.<sup>7</sup>

6) It is placed in the "family tree" under the name of "Selung" in Schema 1 of Haudricourt 1962.

7) IPA symbol conventions are followed for vocoids and contours, except that a raised "h" is used to denote aspiration, and "j" and "w" are used to denote the second, non-syllabic part of diphthongs. If pitch is not noted it means that it was not recorded in my field notes. Pitch marks have the following values: "-" medium level; "/" high; "\\_" low; "^" falling; "∨" rising.

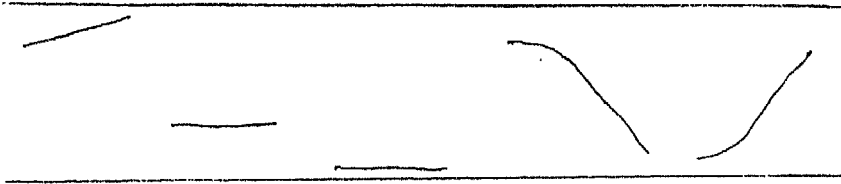
## Contoids noted:

p	t	c	k	ʔ
ph	th	ch	kh	
b	d	ɟ		
m	n	ɲ	ŋ	
		s		h
	l			
w		j		

## Vocoids and vocoid glides noted:

i,	i:	ĩ	u,	u:
e,	e:	ɤ:	o,	o:
	a,	a:	ɔ	ɔ:
aj	ua		ow	iaw

## Pitch levels and contours noted:



The above charts of contoids, vocoids and pitch elements may not be exhaustive. Suspiciously similar sounds such as [e] and [æ] cannot from my material be demonstrated to be phonemically distinct from one another. Syllable pitch seems to depend largely on the position of a word in an utterance. Thus most words were said with a falling pitch when given as single-word answers to a question. This is a common feature in non-tonal languages such as, for example, English. One or two words, however, seemed to be quite fixed in their pitch patterns under all circumstances, e.g., [háh] the negative particle, and [lǔaŋ] '(?)' in [niʔún lǔaŋ] 'young coconut' and the personal names [khǐaw (<Thai?), nǎn, tû:, biŋ, nā: ŋ].

Word list:

In the following word list variant transcriptions of many words will be found. These variations are reproduced because the transcriptions are tentative and incomplete, e.g. pitch patterns were noted mostly only on stressed syllables, and not always then. Variant transcriptions are of interest as a guide to possible allophonic alternation, and to the phonemic relevance of pitch features. Also certain possibly systematic processes such as initial syllable elision and initial consonant elision are revealed. cf. White.<sup>8</sup> In the list below "W." denotes the corresponding form cited by White. For the interest of the general reader I have appended some related words in Malay or Land Dayak.

*Numerals :*

one	sâ <sup>?</sup> (CK) sá <sup>?</sup> (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>sa-satu</i> )
two	thúa <sup>?</sup> (CK) wă: <sup>?</sup> (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>dua</i> )
three	talôj (CK) kalôj (TM) (cf. Land Dayak <i>taruh</i> )
four	pâ:t (CK) pá:t (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>ěmpat</i> )
five	lemá <sup>?</sup> (CK, TM) (cf. Mal. <i>lima</i> )
six	nâm (CK, TM) (cf. Mal. <i>ěnam</i> )
seven	ujú <sup>?</sup> (CK) dujŭ <sup>?</sup> (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>tujuh</i> )
eight	wolôj (CK) walôj (TM)
nine	chawâj (CK) sawâj (TM)
ten	ch <sup>(a)</sup> pôh (CK) plôh (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>sa-puloh</i> )
eleven	chapôh cét (CK) ploh cê:t (TM)
twelve	chapôh thúa <sup>?</sup> (CK) ploh wá <sup>?</sup> (TM)
twenty	wà <sup>?</sup> plôh (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>dua-puloh</i> )
thirty	kloj ploh (TM) (cf. Land Dayak <i>taruh-puru</i> )
forty	pâ:t ploh (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>ěmpat-puloh</i> )
fifty	mà <sup>?</sup> ploh (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>lima-puloh</i> )
sixty	nam ploh (cf. Mal. <i>ěnam-puloh</i> )

8) "Not a few times have I had to correct my rough dictionary through having accepted, without sufficient testing, the pronunciation of a word. For example, *chi* ['I, me, my'] has almost superseded the full word *cho-i* . . . The first consonant of a word is often slurred and even dropped, so that *ba* is made to do service for *mba* ['bring']." 1922 : (163). This is very common field experience.

seventy	ju <sup>?</sup> ploh (cf. Mal. <i>tujoh-puloh</i> )
eighty	wālōj ploh
ninety	sawāj ploh
a hundred	ana: tóh (cf. Mal. <i>sa-ratus</i> )
a hundred and one	ana: toh cé: t (cf. Mal. <i>sa-ratus satu</i> )

*Other vocabulary:*

afternoon	we: la: (cf. Thai/we: la: /'time')
bathe	ʔæn wi: n (CK) æ: n æ: n (TM)
be in a place	ʔæm
big	da <sup>?</sup>
bird	kicûm (TM)
boat	kabâ: ŋ (W. <i>kabang</i> )
buffalo	kʃ: bāw (cf. Mal. <i>kěrbau</i> )
cat	míaw (cf. Thai/me: w, miw/)
catch	ŋap (cf. Mal. <i>tangkap</i> )
chick	nâ: t manók
chicken	manók (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>manok</i> )
child	ja'ná: t, anâ: t (TM) (W. <i>chanat</i> )
clock	na: lika: (cf. Thai id.)
cloud	la: tâ: dè: t ŋin
coconut	niʔûn (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>nyior</i> )
curry, hot (spicy)	chaw baj pədeh (cf. Mal. <i>pědeh, pėdas</i> )
day	a'lój (W. <i>aloi</i> ) (cf. Mal. <i>hari</i> )
dog	ʔɔ <sup>?</sup> (TM)
drink	ʃam (CK) ʔam (TM)
duck	a'da:
eat	ʃam (CK, TM) ʔam (TM) ʃam cō: n (CK, TM)
far	na: nót (TM)
female human being	minaj (TM) (W. <i>binai</i> )
fire	pŭj (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>api</i> , Land Dayak <i>epuy</i> )
fish	ka: n, eka: n e: ka: n (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>ikan</i> )
flower	dō: k buŋa <sup>?</sup> (TM) (cf. Thai dō: k 'flower' Mal. <i>bunga</i> id.)
food	co: n (CK)
foot	ka: káj (cf. Mal. <i>kaki</i> )

go	kaw (TM) (W. <i>lakow</i> )
hand	ɲan (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>tangan</i> )
have	nǎʔ
he	ʔa: cáw
house	mâ: k, omâ: k (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>rumah</i> )
hot (spicy)	pədeh (cf. Mal. <i>pědeh</i> 'to sting')
human being	manút (cf. Thai <i>manút</i> , Mal. <i>manusia</i> )
I, me, my	ji:, ci: (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>aku</i> ) (W. <i>cho-i, chí</i> )
leaf	duʔôn ʔew (cf. Mal. <i>daun pokok</i> )
left hand	kæ: lōj (cf. Mal. <i>kiri</i> )
little (not much)	habit (cf. Mal. <i>habis</i> 'finished')
long	bu: chûj la: ták
male human being	ka: nâj
moon	bu: lân (cf. Mal. <i>bulan</i> )
morning	kichâw (TM)
much	dahûn
near	naní: ʔ (TM)
night	ka'mân
no	háʔ
not	háh (CK, TM)
not have	pin háʔ
palm thatch	ka: 'jâŋ (cf. Mal. <i>hajang</i> )
pig	babûj (cf. Mal. <i>babi</i> )
question tag	kaʔ (CK, TM) kâh (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>kah</i> )
right hand	wa: nân (cf. Mal. <i>kanan</i> )
sea	ʔâw, kaʔâw (TM) taʔâw (W. <i>t'aw</i> )
shirt	baji: (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>baju</i> )
short	bu: chûj balûj
sky	e: m(a)' ta: míʔ
small	bu: chûj
sun	taʔlōj (cf. Mal. ( <i>ma</i> ) <i>ta-(ha) ri</i> )
that	ki:
this	ni:, lân (ʔ) (cf. Mal. <i>ini</i> , Thai/ní:/)
today	a'léj ní: (TM) (Mal. <i>hari ini</i> )
tomorrow	khí: chá: w (TM) (W. <i>chichow</i> ) (cf. Thai/chá: w/ 'morning')



tree	ʔew (classifier pokon) (probably same as kaʔew 'wood' q.v.) (cf. Mal. <i>pokok kayu</i> )
trousers	na: phlōw, ka: kiŋ (TM) (cf. Thai/kaŋke: ŋ/)
water, juice	wi: n (CK) e: n—en—æŋ (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>ayer</i> )
wood	kaʔew (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>kayu</i> )
year	takōn (TM) (cf. Mal. <i>tahun</i> )
yesterday	lʔ: j bùt (W. <i>bubut</i> )
yon	túp
you	biʔeŋ (TM) (W. <i>bi-ing</i> )
young coconut	niʔŋn lŋaŋ

*Other words:*

## Numeral classifiers accompanying nouns:

lŋj	for people
poh	for birds
lam	for boats (cf. Thai/lam/ 'idem')
pokōn	for trees (cf. Mal. <i>pokok, pohon</i> )

*Personal names:*

male — thʔ; khŋaw; méʔ; lúʔ; máʔin;  
 female — nã; biŋ; tŋ; nã: ŋ.

## Grammatical notes:

*The sentence:**Order of constituents:*

## Subject + Verb + Object

ci:	nam	eka: n	'I eat fish'
I	eat	fish	

## (Omitted subject) + Verb + Object

kaw	ŋáp	ka: n	'Go and catch fish'
go	catch	fish	
ʔam	en	niʔŋn lŋaŋ	'Drink the
drink	water	coconut	milk of a young coconut'

*Questions:*

(Omitted subj.) + Verb + Q. part.

kaw	kâh	Are you going?
go	Q.	

Absolute Subj.	+ Subj.	+ Verb	+ Q.	Part.
omâk bi <sup>?</sup> eŋ	kʃbaw	nă <sup>?</sup>	kah	'Are there any buffaloes at your house?'
house you	buffalo	exist	Q.	

*Noun phrase:*

Noun + Noun

nâ:t	manók	'a chick'
child	fowl	

Noun + Pronoun

omâk	bi <sup>?</sup> eŋ	'your house'
house	you	

Noun + Det.

alôj	ni:	'today'
day	this	

Noun + Numeral + Classifier

manút	wà <sup>?</sup>	lûj	'two people'
human	two	class.	
being			

kicum	klôj	poh	'three birds'
bird	three	class.	

ew	wa <sup>?</sup>	pokon	'two trees'
tree	two	class.	

Noun + Adjective

en	dahûn	'much water'
water	much	

en	habit	'little water'
water	little	

*Verb Phrase:*

Verb + Object

nam	eka:n	'eat fish'
eat	fish	

ŋáp      eka : n      'catch fish'  
 catch    fish

Verb + Verb + Object

kaw      ŋáp      ka : n      'go and catch fish'  
 go      catch    fish

*Position of the negative in the verb phrase :*

(Omitted subject) + Verb + Negative

kaw      háh      'I'm not going'  
 go      not

Subject + Verb + Negative + Object

ci :      ŋam      háh      eka : n      'I'm not eating fish'  
 I      eat      not      fish

*Typologically interesting features :*

1. The position of the negative particle in the verb phrase.
2. The aspirate series: [thua<sup>?</sup>] vs. Mal. *dua*, [buchuj baluj] 'short', etc. Possibly the presence of aspirates points to Sumatran affinities.
3. The absence of [r]: [alɔj] vs. Mal. *hari* 'day', [anatoh] vs. Mal. *ratus* 'hundred', [kæ : 'lɔj] vs. Mal. *kiri* 'left', [en, wi : n] vs. Mal. *ayer* 'water'. This loss of [r] could be due to Thai or Burmese influence.
4. The final diphthongs where Malay has -i, e.g. [a'lɔj] vs. Mal. *hari* 'day', [puj] vs. Mal. *api* 'fire', *matai* (from White) vs. Mal. *mati* 'dead', [kæ : 'lɔj] vs. Mal. *kiri* 'left', [ka : kaj] vs. Mal. *kaki* 'foot', [babuj] vs. Mal. *babi* 'pig', *kamo-i* (from White) vs. Mal. *kami* 'we', [minaj], *binai* (from White) vs. Mal. *bini* 'woman'.
5. The elision of initial syllables: [ka : n] vs. [e : ka : n] 'fish', [ma : k] vs. [o'ma : k] 'house', [aw] vs. [ka<sup>?</sup>aw], [ta<sup>?</sup>aw] 'sea', [ta<sup>?</sup>lɔj] vs. Mal. (*ma*) *ta-(ha)ri* 'sun', [ŋan] vs. Mal. *tangan* 'hand', [ew] vs. [ka<sup>?</sup>ew] 'wood'.
6. The elision of initial consonants: [ufu<sup>?</sup>] vs. [duju<sup>?</sup>] 'seven', [ʔam] vs. [ŋam] 'eat', 'drink', [a'na : t] vs. [fa'na : t] 'child'.
7. The fixed pitch patterns of certain words: e.g. [lǔaŋ] in [ni<sup>?</sup>un lǔaŋ] 'young coconut' and [nǎn, biŋ, and nǎ : ŋ] (personal names).

Whether they represent "original primitivism" or have forsaken land life and lapsed into "secondary primitivism" in flight from populations invading or harassing their original homeland,<sup>9</sup> it is obvious that the Moken of Southern Thailand deserve more attention from ethnologists<sup>10</sup> and linguists before they die out or assimilate completely. Much second-hand information about the Chao Koh Thae can be gathered from residents of Ban Pak Chok. The Thai Mai of Ban Thung Nang Dam speak a Moken dialect, so that linguistic work can be done without depending on a chance encounter with a Moken boat. Attempts should be made to locate White's Moken-English and English-Moken dictionaries, *Introduction to the Mawken Language*,<sup>11</sup> Gospel of St. Mark in Moken and other booklets on the Moken language. Of his Moken dictionaries, White says: "Probably there are about two thousand words recorded, and whole areas of language are unexplored—areas which I know to exist" (1922: 154). In 1846 a *Primer of the Selong Language* was published by the American Baptist Mission Press, which was then in Moulmein (White 1922: 132). The edition, so White was told, numbered two hundred, of which White was able early this century to find only one copy, for inspection. Even if all these works are lost, much more than they contained can still be gathered at first hand, if someone can only address himself to the task.

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9) See Bernatzik 1954: 248, White 1922: 126.

10) The pages of Bernatzik and White can scarcely be said to provide a complete ethnography. In the list of references below I have included everything that I know of which Bernatzik has written on this subject.

11) Published in 1911. A number of copies were taken by the British Government of Burma to help defray printing costs.

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