

ON THE ORIGINS OF THE URAK LAWOI'

A response to J. Ivanoff

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Abstract

In an article in the *Journal of the Siam Society* (Vol. 74, 1986) Mr. Ivanoff maintained that the Sea People of Sireh Island and Rawai, in Phuket province, and points further south, are the outcome of inter-marriage between Moken and Malays. This article seeks to refute that assertion, advancing sociological, historical, geographical and linguistic evidence that the Urak Lawoi' people, as they know themselves, have origins independent of the Moken. It is suggested that they are essentially of Malay stock but have been distinct from the mainstream Malay population for a considerable period of time—probably several centuries. Their language and customs have been influenced by their Thai environment. Interaction with the Moken people has been subsequent to their establishing a distinct identity.

Mr. Ivanoff's article on the Moken people in the *Journal of the Siam Society* (JSS Vol 74, 1986:9-20) is to be warmly welcomed for the light it sheds on the Moken and for his sensitive treatment of this much misunderstood and much abused people. In particular he has highlighted the tensions involved in the creation of Surin Island as a National Park with the subsequent influx of tourists. Similar tensions are evident at Peepee Island in Krabi Province and at Adang Island, in the Tarutao National Park in Satun Province. The rights of indigenous peoples need to be very carefully considered. Tourist dollars cannot redeem a people's heritage.¹

Unfortunately, in the process of bringing the Moken into the light, Mr. Ivanoff has cast into shadow another much misunderstood people. Those he refers to as "*Moken-Malay*" are known to themselves as the "*Urak Lawoi'*", or in the plural, "*Lumoh Lawoi'*" (People of the Sea). In Thai both the Moken and the Urak Lawoi' are grouped together as Chao Talay (Sea People) or Thai Mai (New Thai). We wish to argue that the Urak Lawoi' have an origin quite independent of the Moken,

being essentially of Malay stock but with a separate history for some hundreds of years.

That the Urak Lawoi' are the result of Moken-Malay inter-marriage is not a new theory, having been assumed as early as White (1922:157-160). It should be noted that this is a highly ethnocentric view—both White and Ivanoff focus their attention on the Moken. It is not unusual for surrounding people to be seen as derivative but this does not necessarily represent historical fact. In any case, Bernatzik's account (1958:40-42) records Moken creation stories which give the "Orang Lonta" (sic) an independent place, alongside Moken, Malay, Karen etc. Despite the disclaimer in his last paragraph, Mr. Ivanoff seems to obscure the boundary between myth and history, frequently presenting deductions from the epic as historical fact (1986:19-20).

One further general problem before we outline the reasons behind our views. There is some logical confusion in Ivanoff's article as to whose aetiology is being presented. Ken, the progenitor of the Moken and the origin of their name, turns out to be the ancestress not of the Moken but of the Urak Lawoi'! (Ivanoff 1986:17-19).

1. **Sociologically**, the Urak Lawoi' are in contact with Malay, Moken, Moklen, Thai and Chinese communities. But, with the exception of the small group at Chalong in Phuket Province, and possibly those on Mook Island in Trang Province, they have always maintained their identity and have a strong sense of community. There is a certain amount of marriage of Thais (both Buddhists and Moslem) into the Urak Lawoi' community, but much less marriage of Urak Lawoi' out into other groups. They have no sense of being a "*hybrid*" people—all the more significant since both the components of the alleged hybrid are still in their immediate environment. At the same time they are very conscious of their strong his-

torical and linguistic links with the Malays. A significant minority can identify a Moken parent or grandparent, but with one exception the other partner is always an Urak Lawoi'. So the formula is:

Urak Lawoi' + Moken = Urak Lawoi'
 or Urak Lawoi' + Malay = Urak Lawoi'
 but not Malay + Moken = Urak Lawoi'

Of particular interest, in view of their continuing contacts with Malay Muslims and consciousness of Malay origins, are the Urak Lawoi' religious beliefs and practices. These are purely animistic (Hogan 1972:215-218). Such traces of Islam as are found are cosmetic in nature and appear to be borrowed. Only on Mook Island would a significant number of Urak Lawoi' seem to have adopted Islam and this only recently. The clear implication is that they are not lapsed Muslims but have always been animists. In fact they seem to preserve pre-Islamic Malay animism. It should be noted further that, apart from the shared animistic world view, there are few if any points of contact with Moken beliefs and practices.

2. **Historical** factors give added weight to the sociological data. If we accept Ivanoff's identification of the strangers who tried to educate the Moken as the British² (1986:19), this gives a "*terminus a quo*" of 1826 for the emergence of the Urak Lawoi' as a distinct people. This is clearly much too late. By White's time they were well known as the "orong Lawta" (sic) (1922:157-158), equivalent to Bernatzik's "orang lonta" (sic) (1958:41). If the date is correct, then Ken's lover is correctly identified as a Muslim—but this implies both Moken and Muslim lifestyle and beliefs were abandoned in a very short space of time. Nai Mae, an older man at Rawai, says his father who died perhaps ten years ago at the age of over ninety had been born in Rawai. Risiq, an old man at Adang Island, now deceased, has spoken of his grandfather as a Buginese pirate who settled in this area and became an Urak Lawoi' (Hogan 1972: 218-219). This must have been over one hundred years ago. There is thus at most two generations between the supposed date of the epic and the confirmed existence of the Urak Lawoi'. This is not nearly enough time for the emergence of a distinct people with their own customs, belief system and oral literature.

It should be noted in discussing the historical scene, that the Moken who have settled at Rawai and Peepee Island have all, with the one known exception mentioned above, come since the time of World War 2, fleeing the Japanese at first and subsequently being joined by relatives, mainly from Burma.

3. **Examining** the patterns of settlement, both currently and in oral pre-history, we obtain *geographical* reasons for postulating a southern origin for the Urak Lawoi' independent of the Moken. The Moken have moved from north to south, Rawai and Peepee Island being their southern limits (though the nomadic Moken rarely if ever venture south of Surin Island and Phra Thong Island). The Urak Lawoi' on the other hand appear to have generally moved up from the South, Rawai, Sireh

Island, Peepee Island and Sepum being their northernmost limit of settlement. That there should be some considerable interaction along the boundary is natural.

The Urak Lawoi' do not agree with Ivanoff's thesis that their origin was on Sireh Island from which they moved south (1986:15). They consistently point to Lanta Island as their original home, and their movement seems to have been radially outwards from there. This is probably the origin of the Moken name for the Urak Lawoi', namely "Orang Lonta", referring to Lanta Island. The group settled in the Adang islands are said to have been taken there by a Governor of Satul, to forestall any British claim on the islands.

On the other hand, some Urak Lawoi' legends point further back to Mt. Jerai (on the mainland north of Penang) as their point of origin (Hogan 1972:219). The absence of any trace of Urak Lawoi' in Malaysia is probably due to assimilation to the majority Muslim population, while those in Thailand, where the majority language is totally different from their own, have maintained their identity.

4. **Linguistic** studies point in the same general direction. Ivanoff wrongly states that the "Moken-Malay" (sic) speak Malay (1986:15,19). This again represents the Moken viewpoint as Moken north of Phuket Island say that the people of Rawai speak "Phasaa Khaek", meaning the Malay language. While the Urak Lawoi' language is lexically very close to Malay, it lacks much of the Malay affixation and its syntax has been influenced by Thai. To some extent it follows its own unique pattern (Hogan 1978:15-17; 1985:128-130). The average Urak Lawoi' person cannot maintain a conversation with a speaker of Malay.

A lexico-statistical survey by Sorat (1981) of the dialects of Urak Lawoi' and Moken along the west coast of South Thailand showed them to be different languages but members of the same family. He found that Urak Lawoi' and Malay are closely related, while Moken is more distantly related to Malay.

Sudarat has used phonological comparison to reconstruct Proto Orang Laut and set out the relationship between Urak Lawoi', Moken and Malay. Her study clearly establishes that Moklen-Moken and Urak Lawoi' have a common ancestry in the Austronesian family with Urak Lawoi' more closely related to Malay than the Moken dialects are (Sudarat 1984:196-202). (Moklen is a dialect of Moken found in Phangnga province and at the northern end of Phuket Island, and referred to by Ivanoff as "thai mai" (sic) (1986:15-16)).

If the Urak Lawoi' were truly the result of Moken-Malay intermarriage, one would expect to find that both the Moken language and Malay were in some way antecedent to Urak Lawoi'. This is not the case as far as Moken is concerned. Urak Lawoi' could best be described as a Malay dialect strongly influenced for some considerable period by its Thai environment.³ Of particular interest in the relationship of Urak Lawoi' to Malay is the fact that Urak Lawoi' shows virtually no trace of Islamic terminology. A recent limited survey of Urak

Lawoi' words of Malay origin has uncovered about 30 words which are ultimately of Arabic origin. None of these, however, has a distinctly Islamic religious flavour. Most are general words in common use. The only religious one is Urak Lawoi': /kramac/Malay: /kramat/ "sacred shrine, spirit of shrine". This is an animistic, not an Islamic, concept. The clear implication of these data is that the Urak Lawoi' were already a separate entity by the time Islam became a dominant influence in Malaya. Parameswara of Malacca is said to have had the help of the Orang Laut in suppressing piracy in the Straits of Malacca (c.1403-1424). While these may not have been the ancestors of the Urak Lawoi' this is still testimony to the existence in the 15th century of quite distinct Malay groupings of sea people. From one of these groupings, isolated from the mainstream of Islam, the Urak Lawoi' are in all probability descended.

Conclusion

While the Urak Lawoi' oral prehistory is rather vague and there is a lack of contemporary supporting references, the evidence given above—sociological, geographical, historical and linguistic—is sufficient to advance a tentative conclusion regarding the origins of the Urak Lawoi':

- (1) The Urak Lawoi' are of Malay origin, but distinct from the mainstream of Malay life for four or more centuries.
- (2) The Urak Lawoi' have never been Muslim, but have retained pre-Islamic Malay animistic beliefs and practices.
- (3) While there has been some subsequent intermarriage and intermixing, the Urak Lawoi' are quite distinct in origin from the Moken, whose own relationship to the Malays is in the yet more distant past.

We would welcome any further discussion on the question.

ENDNOTES

¹A recent example of the rights of the indigenous people being overshadowed by a tourist project was when a series of yacht races was organised, one of which was of yachts sailing out and around Raya Island, on the horizon off Rawai. Water police boats were busy, chasing the various Thai Mai boats out of the way of the yachts. The waters around Raya Island have been one of the main fishing grounds for the Rawai people for generations, as they go there not only for fishing, but also for lobsters and for shellfish. With the hand-to-mouth existence of these people, this tourist venture could easily have caused some of the Rawai people to go to bed hungry that night.

²1826 is the date when Tenasserim was ceded to the British (Ivanoff 1986:19), but the first recorded attempt by anyone to learn the lan-

guage and attempt to educate the Moken was not by the British but by missionaries of the American Baptist Mission. Lewis describes a primer used by them at Mergui in 1844-1846 (1960:4-18). Alternatively the legend may refer to some more informal attempt at "education" in the remote periods of prehistory.

³Since preparing this paper we have been able to read a fascinating fuller account by Ivanoff of the Moken Epic of Gaman (Ivanoff 1985), including transcriptions of important parts of the epic itself. This in no way alters our conclusions. In fact, the section dealing with the settlement of Ken and her lover at Sireh Island (1985:190) includes some very interesting linguistic observations, as Gaman (the Malay seafarer) compares the Malay and Urak Lawoi' languages. The Urak Lawoi' phrases are typically among those that would be learnt first

by a newcomer, and their reproduction is far from perfect. (In recitation form we would expect /pi diha/ not /pi dia/ for "Where are you going?" Urak Lawoi' would say /makat nasi/ in contrast to Malay [makan nasi] for "Eat rice.") Gaman says, "If we are to stay here we must speak differently." The distinct impression is of someone learning to speak a language which is new to him but already in existence. This is precisely what the Moken who fled the Japanese and settled at Rawai have done. We would suggest that, to the extent that historical movements underlie the epic at this point, it is much more likely to reflect the at least partial assimilation of an earlier generation of Moken refugees to an Urak Lawoi' community who were already clearly distinct from Malay life, rather than the first appearance of the Urak Lawoi'.

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