

A quest for survival

Written by
Maria Padget
Photography
by Cat Vinton

THE SEMI-NOMADIC MOKEN HAVE JOURNEYED THROUGH THE ANDAMAN SEA FOR MILLENNIA. THEY TRAVEL LIGHTLY ON LAND AND SEA, TAKING ONLY WHAT THEY NEED AND LEAVING NO TRACE. YET THEIR WAY OF LIFE IS JEOPARDISED BY AGGRESSIVE ASSIMILATION POLICIES THAT THREATEN THEIR FREEDOM AND CULTURE.

OPEN AT THE MOUTH TO RECEIVE FOOD, round at the belly and open at the rear to expel waste, the kabang boats of the Moken symbolise an ownership of nothing and a clear message to pirates through the centuries, we have nothing to steal. For the Moken, or sea gypsies as they are sometimes known, a semi-nomadic tribe living in the southern waters of Thailand and Burma, the kabang is emblematic of their whole way of life.

According to their own creation myth, the Moken are destined to spend a life at sea with no possessions and to take only what they need. At its heart, Moken identity is defined by being an outsider.

Historically, the Moken have lived eight to nine months a year on their kabang, punishment - according to the myth - laid upon them by the Moken earth queen Sibian who was betrayed by her sister Kèn and her husband Gaman the Malay. Expelled to a life at sea, the kabang symbolises this original sin and serves as a reminder of the impossibility to enrich themselves.

However, as with all good myths, there is light to be found in the dark. While the Moken's lack of interest in accumulating wealth or even official employment led them to be perceived as lazy over the centuries by the British, Thais and Burmese, for the Moken this lack of attachment was exactly what enabled their freedom which they valued above all else.

Little is known about their origins, but it is believed the Moken descended from migrant Austro-nesians who set sail from southern China around 4,000 years ago. Around 3,000 Moken live amongst the 800 islands of the Burmese Mergui Archipelago and another 1,000 Moken to the south in the Thai waters of the Andaman Sea. Historically they would have travelled back and forth, but their journey is changing.

Tat and Sabai are typical of most Moken in that they cannot tell you their age. Their best guess is that they are around 50. They have sustained their nomadic lifestyle in the waters around the Surin Islands on Thailand's Andaman coast, longer than most though theirs is not an easy life by any stretch of the imagination. Six of their ten children did not survive, a familiar story in a culture with 50% child mortality, a statistic compounded by lack of money for medical treatment and a life on the fringes of society.



Tat spear fishing off the kabang.

Tat and Sabai have provided for their family through hunter-gathering, taking only what they need that day. Oral storytelling and a transfer of knowledge from the elders to the next generation have sustained the Moken culture. Tat passes his fishing skills down the generations to his sons. He can read the water, wielding his spear from the bow of his boat and with a flying leap secure dinner for the family. Like all Moken children, his young sons could see clearly underwater from an early age, a phenomenon that is not unique to the Moken but rather developed through the hours and hours spent in the sea. This quality is not retained through to adulthood, so Tat improvises with homemade goggles when he freedives to collect sea cucumbers and other treasures from the seabed.

For families such as theirs, the nomadic existence is not been a lonely one. There is no word for goodbye in Moken - it is understood that paths will cross again. There is a coming together of communities, a moving apart to go to sea, and a coming together again. It's a way of life that has survived for millennia.

Yet the Moken's ancient heritage has long teetered on the brink of survival. They have lived through the era of pirates, raids, and slavery. They have resisted the British, who eventually abandoned the Moken to exploitation at the hands of the taukay or traders. The Japanese have made them work in tin, gold and silver mines. Despite surviving such pressures, today's authorities pose the greatest threat ever.

The Moken can no longer travel freely or even hunt without the threat of fines and detention. Permits and identity papers are required simply to leave their allocated settlement, something that these stateless people can rarely provide. Fishing is largely prohibited in their traditional hunting grounds, depriving the Moken not only of their source of protein but also of their trading potential. Traditionally, the Moken have traded fish and sea cucumbers for rice and other basic needs.

Many campaigners believe the authorities are sacrificing the Moken's rights in preference for commercial fishing trawlers that wreak huge environmental damage. While they are being forced from the sea onto



Au Bon Yat, a village of settled Moken on Mu Ko Surin.



For Moken children, learning to fish is a life skill that is taught early.

“THERE IS NO
WORD FOR GOODBYE
IN MOKEN - IT IS
UNDERSTOOD THAT PATHS
WILL CROSS AGAIN.”

the land, they are effectively rendered stateless. The Moken use the tides to tell the time of day and the day of the week. So it is no surprise that they have no papers declaring their entitlement to ancestral lands, no documentation to prove their birthplace and therefore their nationality. Time and again they lose land to big developers, further forcing them away from their seasonal homes.

The declaration of the Surin Islands as a national park in 1981 - Mu Ko Surin National Park - signalled the beginning of the end of freedom of movement for the Moken in Thailand. Despite receiving assurances from the sympathetic Thai princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn that the Moken could stay, their status has remained unofficial within a bureaucracy that swings to the whims of whoever is in charge at that moment. The primary aim of the park was to protect the flora and fauna with scant regard for indigenous people. Their hunting and foraging was restricted and perhaps most devastatingly of all, a logging ban prevented them from felling the sacred trees required for the building of the kabang. The ban is still in place today and there are less than a handful of traditional kabangs left today.

The significance of this cannot be overestimated. The life of the community revolves around the kabang. This is where the family lives, hunts, eats. Families travel together as part of a flotilla of kabang. It is the gift from the new bride's family to her groom. The whole community comes together, from the shaman who finds the tree that consents to be cut to the elderly who help the married couple refine and complete their boat. The boat symbolises freedom.

In recent years, Tat and Sabai have made the painful decision to settle in Au Bon Yat, a Moken village within Mu Ko Surin. Sabai was born on a kabang and their life together has been spent at sea. They have held out the longest, but Sabai's failing eyesight combined with a dwindling number retaining the nomadic lifestyle and increased harassment mean life on the water is untenable, even to this tenacious family.

Against the odds, a delicate harmony existed in the national park for several years, with the Moken sharing knowledge on the corals and the marine life with both park officials and tourists. The expertise was respected and the park staff and the Moken rubbed along together well enough. Over time, this equilibrium has dissipated as life on the kabang has become increasingly unfeasible. The Moken have subsequently been split between a settlement near the park headquarters that essentially serves as a tourist attraction, and a larger settlement on the other side of the island where evidence of the harsh realities of daily life such as rubbish, unemployment and rudimentary services at best would not upset paying guests.

Today the Moken are faced with what appears to be a stark choice of assimilation or alienation. Moken living in slums communities in Phuket speak of being the lowest of the low in the social order with Moken children shunned by other children at school. For many children, the desire to integrate into Thai culture is understandably compelling. They do not want to be seen as different, low class. Yet this desire to assimilate creates its own widening of the gap between the generations.



Life on the kabang, under the light of a full moon on the Andaman Sea.



On board the kabang, Tat and the boys eat berries collected from the jungle, dipped in sugar, while Sabai prepares hot coals for cooking. ° The day's catch - ready to cook

More Moken are now going to school, something unheard of until recently as the skills deemed most important were best passed down the generations. The opening of the first school for Moken children on Surin in 2005 was hardly auspicious. The curriculum offered little respect for their old customs and very low ambitions for their future. Thai teachers often did not turn up and turnout was low, due to lack of structure, lack of trust and language barriers. Today it is a different story, in no small part due to Khaeng, a remarkable young woman who was the first Moken to graduate from university.

As well as teaching in Moken and Thai, Khaeng encourages the children to love their culture and to celebrate their history. Khaeng's story is one of success against multiple odds. Bullied and humiliated at school, and with enormous sacrifices made by her parents to their nomadic heritage to financially secure her education, it wasn't until she reached university that she felt some of the stigma against her lifted – and then only because her fellow students knew nothing of the Moken.

Parents can now see that the options of constant persecution at sea and living in the margins on land are no options at all. To have wider horizons, Moken children will need to forge their own future and in a land-based society, they will need to be equipped with new skills.

According to French anthropologist Jacques Ivanoff, who has spent decades living with the Moken, just as his father did before him, the process of assimilation seems to be equally complex but not as bleak in Burma. This may be in part due to the myriad of other communities that are also considered outcasts and low class in the Mergui Archipelago. Inter-marriage between the Burmese and the Moken is

“MOKEN CHILDREN WILL NEED TO FORGE THEIR OWN FUTURES AND IN A LAND-BASED SOCIETY, THEY WILL NEED TO BE EQUIPPED WITH NEW SKILLS.”

common and their skills and resources are integrated. Children of these unions are accepted and Moken knowledge of the sea is acknowledged and respected.

Ivanoff believes that as great a threat to the Moken of Thai water, as the centuries-old persecution by the authorities, is the more recent phenomenon of the well-intentioned living museum. In this, tourist authorities, NGOs, filmmakers and curious backpackers are all complicit. Tourists come to gape at the Moken and take photos, treating the Moken as mystical beings following the avalanche of attention they have received in the past decade or so.

On the 26th December 2004, life changed irrevocably for the Moken just as it did for so many others. Unlike most others, the Moken knew exactly what was coming before the tsunami hit. There is a Moken legend recited around campfires of the Laboon, “the wave that eats people”, which is brought by the angry spirits of ancestors. Before it comes, the sea recedes. Then the waters

flood the earth, destroy it, and make it clean again. The Moken noticed that not only was the sea acting strangely, but also the animals. Their traditional knowledge saved them and many others who they persuaded to follow them to higher ground.

As a result of this remarkable story, the Moken officially made the big time. They became the subject of CBS's 60 Minutes, their faces were on the postcards and their settlements featured in the Tourism Authority of Thailand marketing brochures. But while the tourist authority was publicly celebrating their ancient wisdom and cashing in the tourist dollars, they were simultaneously eroding their way of life by restricting their movement and destroying their traditional livelihoods.

Ivanoff observes, “Here, development manifests itself in its most hideous form, as some take advantage of feeding off the Moken's decomposing culture, instead of going towards the new Moken society that adapts and integrates itself.”

Yet Ivanoff is confident that the Moken will adapt and survive – indeed they always have. Today there are glimmers of hope. 30 years after the concept was initially developed with Ivanoff, community-based tourism has

come to Surin. Andaman Discoveries has partnered with the local Moken to train guides, pay a decent wage and contribute to a community fund. The Moken guide tourists around their home, sharing their expertise from boat building to the rich marine life of the clear waters. Their knowledge is valued and their skills are not lost. It is small steps – the Moken still don't own anything, have no rights to the land that they live on and are at best in a transition period. But it is one that Ivanoff believes will continue to their benefit.

“The cycle of life, death and ethnic survival is a struggle that is repeated again and again, a cycle that is Moken life, itself enclosed in a grandiose setting, which gives it all its beauty. Moken society always manages to return to what it offers most to the world: an alternative, a vision of what could be, because the nomad is free, equal, generous, clever, volatile, elusive.

“The first writings on them in 1826 declared them to be irretrievably lost... and yet here they are, alive in a perpetual, joyful and exhausting collective catharsis.” °



Tat wears hand-made Moken goggles to catch fish. The Moken can hold their breath under water longer than almost any other people on earth.