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# **Engaging with the Heritage of Maritime Populations of the Lanta Bay: A Community-Based Archaeological and Ethnographic Project (the Lanta Bay Project, Thailand)**

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## **Introduction**

In the context of the history of Indian Ocean trade, Southeast Asia (hereafter SEA) has long been relegated to the role of a crossroad between South Asia and China through which passed foreign merchants and pilgrims. SEA early polities were seen mainly as suppliers of precious forest and maritime goods (spices, precious woods, resins, animals, ores, etc.) sought by foreign markets. Such a view largely overlooks the real structure of local political models, and in particular their multi-ethnic component which includes foreigners and the inland and maritime groups of collectors.

Among the various ethnic groups interacting with the local polity and their global networks, some were collectors specialised in specific ecological niches. Lords from the lowland port cities depended on these groups for goods that made their port polity more attractive than others to foreign merchants. It seems that there were two sort of collectors, who had a largely nomadic lifestyle, with few interactions between them: those living in the forests and those living near the shores. While forest collectors’ role in the evolution of trade has already been the subject of a number of ethnographic and archaeological studies (Dunn 1975; Junker 2002b; Morrison 2002; Morrison and Junker 2002; Benjamin 2002), this is not the case for the various maritime groups commonly referred to as sea nomads or sea peoples (Bellina et al. 2021a, b). Interest in the ancient history and archaeology of these maritime groups is recent. This change

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should be understood in the context of a series of academic shifts, some specific to SEA (Andaya 2019) while others are more global in nature such as research in the fields of globalisation and postcolonial studies which stress the need to acknowledge minorities' contributions.

The 'Lanta Bay Project' presented in this paper was initially designed to document both the ancient and contemporaneous maritime cultural landscape of Southern Thailand in collaboration with some of the ethnic groups living in this area, in particular the Urak Lawoi who are nowadays mainly settled in Koh Lanta and nearby islands. These former sea nomads are one of the two maritime populations living in the Thai kingdom (along with the Moken—who are also living in Burma). As many other ethnic minorities in Thailand, Urak Lawoi are poorer than the majority of the population and they also have been largely denied access to some of their traditional resources now under the jurisdiction of protected National Parks. Besides, many of their ritual places, like their graveyards, have been destroyed by the construction of touristic infrastructures.

If the Urak Lawoi are little regarded in contemporary Thai society and are relegated to secondary economic activities, this has probably not always been the case. Oral histories and linguistic investigations reveal that they and other maritime groups have been key players in ancient trading networks interacting with some of the political centers that controlled the Malacca strait, a major corridor for Indian Ocean trade (Andaya 2010; De Groot 2012). During that period, maritime groups fostered a highly specialised knowledge of their territory that they exploited for economic purposes (fishing, horticultural activities, birds' nests collection, marketplace exchanges, pirate hideouts), and where they performed their social and ritual activities (burials, ceremonies). The social life and representations of maritime groups of this area are, to some extent, reflected in oral traditions and in the cemeteries and cave paintings often located along the shore or in islands offshore (Blake 1996; Sukkham et al. 2017).

In SEA, the study of islands, cliffs, hills and caves has long been disconnected from the study of trade systems, even though they are part of long-established communication/navigation networks (as stopovers, navigational beacons, resource supply points). These places often constitute strong symbolic territorial elements for local communities and their identity (Bonnemaison 1981). This is all the more valid in the case of highly mobile groups such as sea nomads for whom they represent a vast network of culturally and historically significant places (Chou 2021; Ivanoff 2021).

By engaging in collaborative research with contemporary maritime populations of Koh Lanta Bay, this project aims to be beneficial for the local communities in general and for the Urak Lawoi in particular, as well as for the archaeological and historical disciplines and for heritage preservation.

This article begins with an overview of the historical background of sea nomads and trading polities in SEA, minorities in historical studies and community archaeology in Thailand. After presenting the methods implemented in this project, we summarise our preliminary results. We show how integrating contemporaneous groups in our archaeological practices can be beneficial both for the researchers and local communities, providing new interpretive frameworks and predictive models as

well as contributing to the empowerment of local populations in accordance with Sustainable Development Goals.

## Historical and Archaeological Background on Trading Polities and Sea Nomads of SEA (Trade, Symbiotic Networks)

### **The Multi-ethnic Nature of Trade and Trading Polities in SEA**

Like South Asia, SEA is characterised by great environmental, ethnic and linguistic diversity. This diversity and the fragmented nature of the environment have fostered the development of distinct socio-economic organisations as well as interdependent relationships between socially, culturally and economically distinct groups, and in particular among merchants (Dunn 1975; Headland et al. 1989; Morrison and Junker 2002) and lowland farmers (Junker 2002a; Junker and Smith 2017).

In maritime SEA, trade in historical periods was based on the interlocking of several levels of networks. Forest collectors in the interior, merchants in the lowland trading port polities as well as sea collectors developed symbiotic interactions. The forestry and sea collectors supplied the port-polity to which they were affiliated with goods from their ecological niche. In exchange, they obtained manufactured goods, rice, prestige goods or titles from the ruler of this port (Andaya and Andaya 2015; Miksic and Goh 2017). Although these groups interacted and exchanged, they preserved complementarity of lifestyles and economies. This complementarity valued and encouraged the maintenance of cultural differences, and structured the internal organisation of trading polities (Junker 2002a; Hall 2011; Andaya and Andaya 2015). Far from the Western model of territorial and centralised power, Maritime Southeast Asian polities relied on social networks and on labour control, whether obtained by alliance, marriage or raiding (Reid 1988; Junker 1999; Andaya and Andaya 2015; Gaynor 2016). These networks were composed of complementary social groups efficiently exploiting niches' specific resources (Andaya 2010; Hoogervorst and Boivin 2018). Until the emergence of nation states, sea collectors-traders also broadly referred to as 'sea nomads', were therefore fully integrated in the political structure of these trading polities.

In SEA, these polities emerged when the region became fully involved in the Indian Ocean trade from the last centuries BCE. The earliest trading polities reported so far are found in the Thai-Malay Peninsula (TMP); located a few kilometres upstream. Some of those were of cosmopolitan nature such as Khao Sam Kaeo (Bellina 2017) and perhaps Maliwan (Bellina et al. 2018). This strip of land between the eastern Indian Ocean and the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca immediately became important for trade. There, early trading polities hosted various groups of merchants and artisans possibly from various ethnic backgrounds, who came to obtain supplies

and to produce goods for trade such as ornaments and metal objects. These locally manufactured products could be exchanged with the groups of collectors, both forest and maritime ones, forming part of their hinterland (Bellina et al. 2019). In this multi-cultural social landscape, each of the groups that settled there over time permanently or seasonally, occupies a specific geographical, social and economic space. Such a situation can still be observed, at least in part, today in Koh Lanta where some of the maritime populations, known as Urak Lawoi, have settled and have developed long-term interactions with Thai-Malay fishermen, Buddhist Thais, and Chinese populations initially involved in coal production and trade. However, very little is known about their history and even less about archaeological traces that could support a better understanding of how the regional multi-ethnic networks were structured and how they included highly mobile marine populations. The Urak Lawoi have always been interacting with other groups and merchants, in particular. In the past, sea people groups were highly considered by trading polities' lords for their multiple useful skills. However, the recognition of their historic role is fairly new.

### **Historical and Archaeological Interest for Minorities and of the Sea Nomads in Particular**

This lack of knowledge is due to the rather recent emergence of sea nomadism as a subject of historical (Andaya 2019) and archaeological study (Bellina et al. 2021a). The reasons for this situation are the virtual absence of textual references prior to the modern period as well as fairly recent developments in humanities, such as the influences of globalisation and postcolonial studies that emphasise the contributions of 'peoples without history'. Both historians and archaeologists of SEA have long exclusively concentrated on the great continental civilisational centres (Angkor, Pagan, Tra Kieu, My Son, etc.), on the remains left by the literate elites (monuments, epigraphy) as well as on external sources (Chinese and colonial sources). This led to the exclusion of the study of other groups often misrepresented as pirates in the case of maritime groups. However, from the 60s the concepts of an autonomous history of SEA conceived as the action of the autochthonous populations (Benda 1962; Smail 1962) and the translation of local sources changed views of sea nomad's activities. The historians Andaya and Andaya were instrumental in making this shift showing that, until the nineteenth century, the ties between sea peoples and land authorities were very strong and mutually beneficial (Andaya 2010; Andaya and Andaya 2015; Andaya 2019). In Southeast Asian archaeology, this last decade witnessed studies on people and minorities in relation to empires or states such as Angkor, through iron production in the case of upland Laos (Évrard and Chiemsisouraj 2022; Évrard et al. 2015) or in Cambodia with the Kuay (Hendrickson, Hua and Pryce 2013; Hendrickson et al. 2017; Pryce et al. 2014). It is in this context that sea nomads' ancient history, their role in trade and ancient political developments, began to be addressed by a handful of archaeologists (Bulbeck and Clune 2003; Bulbeck 2004;

Galipaud 2015; Bellina et al. 2012, 2019; Miksic 2013). The recent emergence of this issue in archaeology also relates to the prejudices that exist against sea nomads, whose lifestyles are thought to be associated with a rudimentary material culture (Hoogervorst 2012) that would lead to ‘archaeological invisibility’ (Sopher 1977). Another reason is the diversity of economic specialisations and relations that the different groups labelled as ‘sea peoples’ may have had with the local polities. Their diversity and fluidity make it difficult for the academic world to classify them in neat categories.

### **Who Are the Sea “Nomads”?**

While sedentism and nomadism are often considered as opposite lifestyles, the archaeological and historical evidence show that they should be viewed as a continuum of a range of livelihood strategies (Évrard et al. 2013). Sea nomadism can be defined as a suite of livelihood strategies based on the exchange of fragmentary maritime resources. These scarce resources can be distributed over vast areas. They include basic commodities but also commercial goods and even luxuries that they fetch from far away. Nomadism exists because these resources can only be exploited by actors willing to conduct opportunistic trade, transporting goods between isolated ports and along non-standard routes, often associated with extra-legal activities (Bellina et al. 2021a, b). These groups exploit well-defined areas of their “sea territory,” exploiting them for subsistence but also for trade with sedentary communities (Andaya 2010; Chou 2010: 180). The sea nomads are almost exclusively engaged with the sea for their subsistence and for their occupations.

However, it is important to stress that beyond this common denominator, a wide range of adaptive modes and levels of mobility characterise the livelihood of the sea people and that they should be referred to as ‘people of the shores’ rather than ‘sea nomads’ strictly speaking. The term covers highly mobile groups living on beaches and making life of the sea as well as proper nomads, like the Moken who live a large part of the year on boats. These maritime groups include both sailing groups who were involved in long-distance trading networks, such as the Sama Bajau who operate in the eastern part of the SEA or the Orang Laut distributed at the exit of the Strait of Malacca, and estuarine and riverine groups, such as the Orang Kuala or the Duano of eastern Sumatra, who do not venture out into deep waters and whose historical role is still little known (Fig. 1).

This variety reflects the very diverse resources they exploit for trade as well as their interactions with regional states. It has thus been argued that “boat nomadism” should be considered in the light of its particular historical and ecological contexts (Sather 1997), with the caveat that the level of information on the different Southeast Asian Sea nomads’ past activities is highly uneven. As an illustration, the Sama Bajau and the Orang Laut are the historically best-known sea nomads, thanks to references in texts since there were allies to local ports rulers and forming part of the navy and the court.



Fig. 1 Approximate distribution of sea nomad groups in Southeast Asia (from Bellina et al. 2021a, b)

### The Urak Lawoi, Former Sea People and Marginalized Strand Dwellers

By contrast, very little is known about the Urak Lawoi (or Urak Lanta) (Fig. 2). This ethnonym refers to a population residing on the islands of the Andaman Sea off the west coast of Southern Thailand (mostly Phuket, Phi Phi, Lanta, Bulon, Lipe and Adang). They number approximately 6000 Urak Lawoi' in 13 communities (De Groot 2012) and speak a Malay language closely related to Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia, but they are also heavily influenced by the Thai language in their daily interactions. In Thailand, the Urak Lawoi' are, together with the Moken, also known as *chao nam* or *chao leh*, terms that literally translate as 'water people' or 'sea people' (conversely, ethnic groups from the Northern part of the country are often collectively labelled *chao khao*, people from the hills, in spite of their linguistic and cultural diversity). While Urak Lawoi are considered as sea farers historically, linguistically and culturally related to Orang Laut populations of Malaysia, they are more 'strand dwellers' than 'sea nomads' strictly speaking as they traditionally lived in villages on the beach, not in boats, like their closely related neighbours, the Moken (Hogan 1972), who are located further north in southern Myanmar and in the Isthmus of Kra in Thailand. Just as is the case for the Moken, the ancient activity of the Urak Lawoi has been little studied and most information comes from a little number of recent ethnographic accounts. The Urak Lawoi' people have no written records of their journeys and their location before they arrived in the present day Thailand, officially sometimes by the

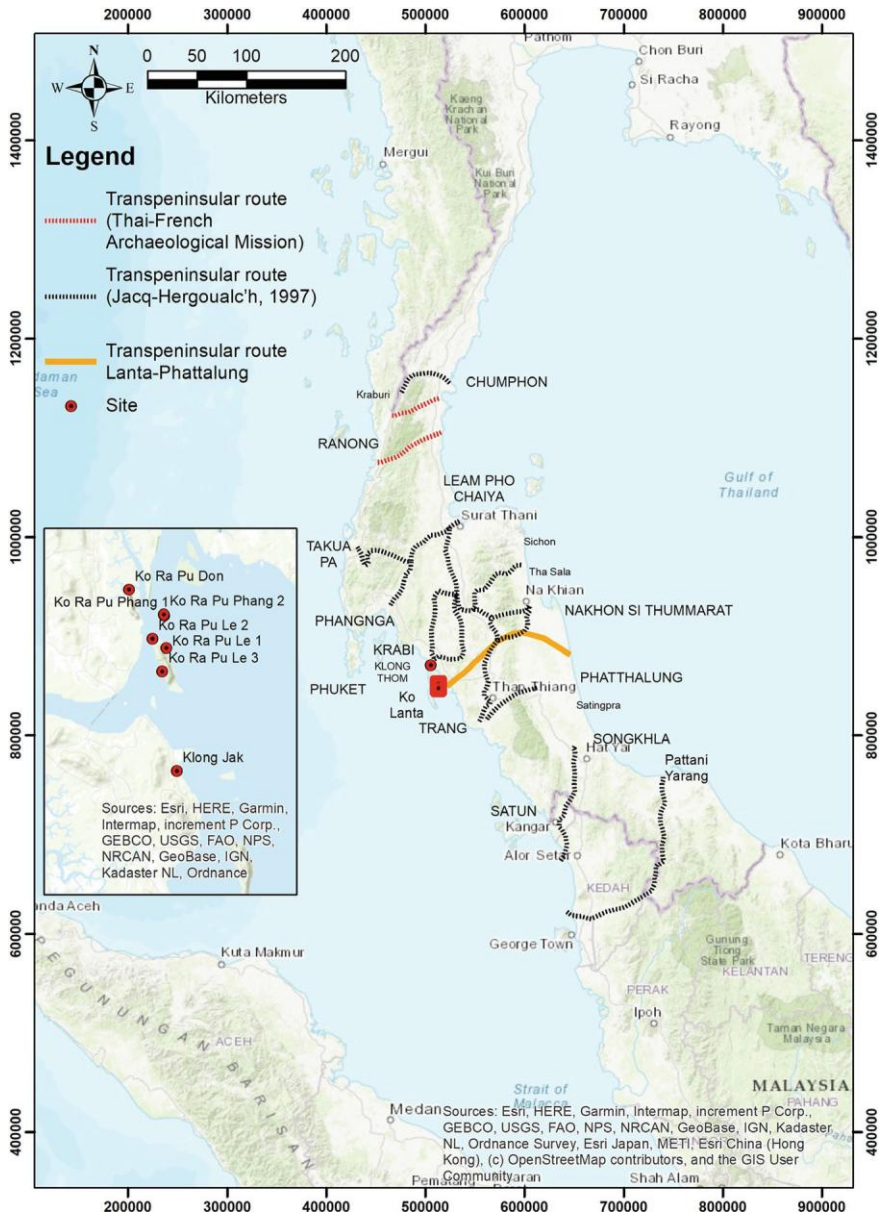


Fig. 2 Locating Lanta Bay and some transpeninsular routes (S. Rotchanarat)



turn of the twentieth century, though some authors indicate that they could have been present in Lanta since as long as 500 years (Wongbusarakum 2007). It is most likely that instead of a single migration, the ancestors of present-day peoples of the shores of southern Thailand have been travelling back and forth in the waters of the Malacca strait. During their navigation, they likely established long-term links with Malay fishermen and Chinese traders and charcoal burners.

There are different versions of their oral histories on their origin. Some place it on the island of Koh Lanta, others on Mount Gunung Jerai in Kedah, Malaysia. Mount Gunung Jerai is a major landmark for sailors approaching the west coast of the Thai-Malay peninsula. It witnessed the development of several port polities involved in the Indian Ocean trade from the first centuries CE to the 14th c. (Miksic and Goh 2017; Jacq-Hergoualc'h and Hobson 2002). The connection to Kedah that Andaya (Andaya 2010) hypothesised may have been more extensive, as linguistic reconstructions reveal. De Groot suggests that the UL were probably originally land dwellers or fishermen from Sumatra who made the choice to become semi-nomadic sometimes at the turn of the second millennium. The presence of direct loanwords from Sanskrit in Urak Lawoi language indicates that they were involved in trade and had sustained contacts with the Indianised maritime Hindu kingdom of Srivijaya. The latter was centered in Sumatra but also included a large part of the TMP from the sixth century until the thirteenth century CE (De Groot 2011; Miksic and Goh 2017). However, the main narrative retained by the Urak Lawoi themselves claims that sometimes in the beginning of the twentieth century, their people migrated from Aceh on the northernmost tip of Sumatra, via the west coast of peninsular Malaysia to the Thai islands in the Andaman Sea. The leader of this transmigratory expedition, To' Kiri, was a Muslim merchant from Aceh who took an Urak Lawoi wife in Koh Lanta. Although certainly a historic figure, he has been deified by subsequent generations of Urak Lawoi' and became one of their most revered ancestors (De Groot 2012). Few years after this historical migration, in 1910, the Urak Lawoi were "officially" recognised as being settled in the Siamese kingdom when the Siamese central power intended to secure its southern border with Malaysia. UL therefore became the 'guardians of the edges and some groups left Lanta to settle in the Adang archipelago further South. This is another illustration of the long-term interaction

between sea people and local polities.

Most research done so far on the Urak Lawoi has focused on linguistic issues, folk-lore and livelihoods. Recent studies also tackled their relationships with stakeholders such as the private sector, capitalists, government agencies, national parks, and community development agencies (Wongbusarakum 2007; Hogan 1972; Mahidol university 1974; Arunotai et al. 2007). These recent works made Thai society more aware of the Urak Lawoi indigenous group's identity and contributed to reduce ethnic prejudices towards them. However, their relations with National Park administration often remains a conflictual one, as it is the case for other indigenous groups in Thailand (Usher 2009), and directly contribute to their marginalization by rendering difficult the access to their traditional marine resources.

## **Methods: Survey, Interviews and Participatory Mapping**

This project uses traditional methods of field archaeology to locate and study potential sites of interest as well as ethnography and Participatory Mapping (PM) as part of the community archaeology project to document local stories, representations and territorial use for resource procurements and rituals among the different groups of Lanta Bay.

The past few decades saw an increase in both tangible and intangible heritage management programs in Thailand. This is illustrated by the creation of a wide variety of locally owned and managed museums across the country (Lertcharnrit and Niyomsap 2020). However, despite this general interest, community archaeology in Thailand is still a fairly rare approach (Shoocongdej 2020). Shoocongdej's on-going multi-disciplinary project began in 1998 and rapidly grew in parallel with her archaeological investigations there (Shoocongdej 2020). This program found more than 80 sites representing a long sequence ranging from the Late Pleistocene to the Late-Holocene to the present and caves hosting multi-periods log coffins (Shoocongdej 2020: 4). This region bordering the Shan state in Myanmar is a multi-ethnic one and whose culture, according to her terms, is marginal to the Thai Buddhist mainstream culture (Shoocongdej 2014). This project questioned what Shoocongdej called the nationalistic notion of 'Thai Cultural heritage' that the Thai government disseminates, and which has no sense for the many local ethnic groups present there. This community-based multi-disciplinary project is by far the most advanced in Thailand on the issues of the interplay between local knowledge and the practice of archaeology and heritage in a multi-ethnic context located on the margins of Central power. Although belonging to a very different environment to the maritime one of southern Thailand, this pioneering research provides useful parallels to the issues dealt with in the project summarised here.

### **Archaeological Survey**

When surveying to locate rock art in offshore caves, the following criteria were selected:

the general pattern of settlements in this area, with settlements most located on the eastern shores, due to the heavy winds and rains coming from the West during the monsoon. As a consequence, we focused our survey on the eastern shores of each small island we explored.

islands which toponyms and locals' cartography suggested possible sites of ritual importance or geographical landmarks that could have facilitated navigation in olden times.

small islands located near the mouth of the mangrove canals linking Lanta Bay with Krabi Bay. It was hypothesised that old inhabitants in this region, traveling

on boats, could have navigated along these canals which are well-sheltered from monsoon winds.

The classic archaeological survey combines digital documentation of the rock art by using photogrammetry techniques on the pictographs. The images acquired through DSLR full frame camera were processed with Meta shape and Reality Capture 1.2 software and then enhanced with DStretch software to facilitate their interpretation and classification.

## **Interviews and PM**

Two types of ethnographic interviews were conducted. The first ones were carried out during the exploratory phase which consisted in targeting key contacts within the three identified communities. A dozen key informants, mainly men between 45 and 70 years old from the three communities, Urak Lawoi, Chinese and Thai-Malay were interviewed.

These semi-structured interviews yielded various data and established a general background on the region and the communities. In a second phase, interviews were conducted as part of participatory mapping and involved a dozen of interviewees. This second work differs from the first in that gender and age criteria were applied in the selection of interviewees and that interviewees interacted with each other during the interviews.

The combination of archaeology and ethnography/social anthropology had already been tested by the members of the team on several case-studies, notably in Mainland SEA (Évrard et al. 2015; Évrard and Chiemsisouraj 2022) but also, in similar coastal contexts by the French-Thai Archaeological Mission in the Upper- TMP in the district of Sawi, province of Chumphon (Vallard, Bellina and Évrard 2015). In this methodology, contemporaneous communities' knowledge of the land- scape they live in and what forms part of their heritage, are considered not only as a source of information for archaeologists but, more importantly, as a heuristic tool to consider locals' perceptions/interpretations/valuations of the past. It allows archaeologists, who have sometimes been criticised for the little attention they pay to the links contemporary people have with the archaeological sites or the way they see and experience them daily (Byrne 2014), to both enrich and "decolonize" their own knowledge.

Because ULs are not isolated and interact and evolve with other local groups, in-depth interviews, participant observation were carried with the UL but also with other communities. Interviews were conducted in the villages as well as on the boats surveying archaeological remains in the islands.

Participatory mapping in archaeology is still a recent field. PM is a means to have maps produced by local populations in conjunction with academics (Cormier- Salem and Sané 2017). It is a bottom-up approach to science and a means to collect local histories to help interpreting heritage remains. For local communities, this

approach helps them to be incorporated as active subjects in the registration and interpretation of their cultural heritage, as well as in the defense and management of it. This can be an efficient way to protect sites from contemporary disturbances such as looting activities. On the other side of the ledger, archaeological studies are also enriched by incorporating contemporary perspectives and local people's knowledge into interpretations of past landscapes (Álvarez Larrain and McCall 2019).

The objectives of this preliminary fieldwork were first to prepare future larger scale participatory mapping and to find the nodal person who will make the link with the local people for future interviews. Second to work with these referent persons (perhaps 4 or 5, see below) for this first fieldwork. Finally, to tackle the issue of heritage, we addressed a series of questions revolving around two issues: resources and mobility.

We were careful with the representability of the interviewed persons (equal proportion of men and woman, generation, ethnic groups, training/profile) and of the social groups (UL teacher), Thai-Malay (boatman or headman of Koh Por and Sunee shop keeper), and Chinese (coffee lady). We also targeted the zone where we would conduct the interviews and the territory discussed during interview, here the Lanta Island and the Lanta Bay.

A series of questions were prepared to address the two selected themes which were resource procurement and circulation. As for the map, we chose to start without bringing ready-made images (printed maps or aerial photographs, etc.). Instead, interviewed persons were asked to draw by hand the area discussed during the interview. As much as possible, we tried to pay attention to the age and gender representability.

## **Preliminary Results and Discussion**

### **Survey: Rock Art**

The project located several rock painting sites previously unknown in Krabi (Bellina et al. 2021a, b). In southern Thailand, Phang Nga province immediately to the north of that of Krabi is well-known for the rock paintings found in islands and coastal area in the bay which have their own stylistic character (Blake 1996; Sukkham et al. 2017; Rotchanarat 2019). Further south in the TMP in northern Malaysia, rock art is only known in caves located upriver inland, in the forested interior (Goh et al. 2019; Tan 2014, 2019; Tan and Chia 2011). Rock art is scarcely reported between these two regions. This project contributed to fill this gap by finding rock painting that until now has been unidentified by archaeologists. Despite the site in Lanta Bay having its own stylistic characteristics, the depictions also display themes and styles that link with those in Phang Nga.

In Lanta Bay, depictions are either isolated on the cliffs and visible from the boat at sea (Koh Kulong) (Fig. 5) or grouped together in rock shelters (Koh

Ra Pu Don 3) and not immediately visible. These paintings in caves are found located in the vicinity of two channels (khlong) linking the bay of Lanta to the bay of Phang Nga. The majority of these paintings are monochrome and made with brown/red pigments. More rarely, they are polychrome, combining brown/red. Others are black and represent ships. The latter are most likely from very recent periods.

In those caves, some disturbed archaeological remains dating of different periods, can sometimes be found, some of them relating to funerary deposits. Like many places in Southeast Asia, the caves even those in islands in the Lanta Bay have been used for multiple purposes over a long period of time (Anderson 2005; Munier 1998; O'Connor et al. 2011; Tan and Taçon 2014).

Here, an overview of the caves and remains found is presented but more detailed descriptions of the rock art can be found in a Bellina et al. (2021a, b) (Fig. 3).

Ko Ra Pu Le is an island which hosts several caves. Ko Ra Pu Le 1 is a cave about 20 m inland (Fig. 4). From afar it is noticeable because of its location at the base of an exposed cliff. The shelter is 5 m deep and about 15 m long and relatively protected from the sun and the rain. The red paintings are grouped together as a single panel on the southern curve of the shelter. They include ten paintings of anthropomorphs, zoomorphs amongst which a well-preserved depiction of a tortoise, stylised depictions of fish, boats, and abstract or undecipherable designs. The best preserved anthropomorphic figure located on the upper reaches of the panel bears a resemblance to the “shaman” figure found at Tham Phi Hua To in Phang Nga Bay (Chaimongkhon and Chuthientham 1990). They date to the prehistoric period contemporaneous with the color paintings found around the Phang Nga Bay estimated to about 5000–3000 years ago (Srisuchat 1987).

Koh Ra Pu Le 2 is a small cave on the northwest side of the island. The cave opening is located about 5 m above sea level, and is northeast–southwest oriented. It has good ventilation and it is a good location to be protected from the sun, wind, and rain. Inside the cave, materials indicate its use as a journey break over an extended period of time. Evidence consists of shards of Neolithic paddle-impressed pottery, white porcelain with red paintings, shells scattered all over the cave floor, and some animal bone fragments. The cave location and configuration make it a favorable place for a stopover, especially during strong winds and rain. Koh Ra Pu Le 4 cave is located on the west side of the island. Above the entrance, in front the upper part of the wall was found the red-painted picture of a fish. Based on the evidence found in this area, such as rock art, earthenware shards, and human bone fragments, it is possible that this cave has been used as a burial place.

Located on the northern side of the island of Koh Ra Pu Phang, the shelter is 20 m above sea level, faces east, with a depth of 5 m and width of 7 m. On the surface of potshard fragments traditionally associated with the Neolithic, along with shell and animal bones were found. The cliff sides provide good shelter from the wind and rain during the monsoon season and produce a reasonably sized flat floor for four to five people to use as a shelter and for sundry purposes. At the north entrance to Koh Ra Pu Phang 1, a faded partial rock painting was found, likely to be a depiction of a fish or a sailboat. From this position one has a panoramic view of the inner Lanta Bay area; directly north is the mouth of the Yang canal (Khlung Yang).

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Fig. 3 Location of sites in Ko Ra Pu le, Ko Ra Pu Phang and Ko Ra Pu Don (S. Rotchanarat)



Fig. 4 The rock shelter forming the southern part of Ko Ra Pu Le 1. The “turtle” (1), ‘shaman’ (2) and the boat (3) are labeled (Photos S. Rotachanarat and N.H. Tan)



Fig. 5 Koh Kulong and its rock painting (Bellina and Sorathat Rotchanarat)

On the island of Koh Kulong (Fig. 5), the painting is located on a façade in the north of the island. It faces Koh Rapu Le, where several paintings on a large cliff were located on the east side. It may have been used as a shelter for boats from the rain and strong winds of the southwest monsoon.





Fig. 6 Koh Talabeng and its possible boat depiction (Bellina and S. Rotchanarat)

On the island of Koh Talabeng we found a red painting on the west side cliff (Fig. 6). The color has faded preventing any clear identification but we can tentatively suggest a boat figure with a line pattern technique.

### **Ethnographic Interviews and Participatory Mapping**

The interviews and participatory mapping exercises revealed the existence of an ancient multi-ethnic system in which the different populations maintain complementary economic and technical relationships. Urak Lawoi migrate where there are job opportunities, often using an intermediary such as a Chinese middle-man. Their economy is based on fishing, strand collecting of marine products, they grow dry and wet land rice. They do it both for subsistence and small-scale trading with Chinese middlemen called 'tauke', a trading intermediary, that different sea nomads work with such as the Moken and the Orang Laut (Lenhart 1997; Ivanoff 1989). They also are employed as workers at the tauke's charcoal kilns or tin collecting site.

The Thai-Malay fishermen also develop agricultural and market gardening activities, and even trade over small distances (Fig. 7). The Chinese populations specialise almost exclusively in trade, whether local or long-distance.

In addition to these economic specialisations, there is also a spatial differentiation of the inhabitants. While the Chinese populations mainly occupy the main street of the port of Lanta, the Malay populations settle on the foothills (or on islands such as Koh Por) and the Urak Lawoi in separate villages, often near capes. Occasionally, however, there are isolated Chinese houses in Thai-Malay or Urak Lawoi villages.





Fig. 7 Participatory mapping with Thai-Malay fishermen at Koh Por (left) and their map with sea lanes (right) (Photo Bellina)

Most of the industrial and trading activities are related to the 19th intensive development of Chinese mining activities on Phuket island and trade with Penang in Malaysia, then the nearest entrepôt re-exporting Phuket tin and supplying most of the products. This trade was characterised by the development of tight trading and family bonds between Penang and Phuket and the development of a trans-border trading community (Chinese and the Peranakan) (Khoo Salma Nasution 2009).

It is difficult to determine clearly which population first settled in the area. While both the Chinese and the Thai-Malay acknowledge the earlier presence of the Urak Lawoi, they insist in interviews that Chinese and Muslim merchants were already present when the Urak Lawoi began to sail regularly in Lanta's waters and to occupy the island's shores permanently. The island, or rather its east coast, has indeed served for a very long time as a refuge for boats (Chinese junks or Malay boats) in case of bad weather during their journeys between Penang and Phuket. The exploitation of mangrove wood to make charcoal seems to have been an important activity for the Chinese since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The main Chinese community of Lanta, in the south of the island, however, only really settled and developed in the third of the nineteenth century, as attested by the tombs located on the outskirts of the Lanta Old Town. We did not obtain such precise information from members of the Thai-Malay community, simply snippets of oral literature mentioning their gradual migrations from the northern coasts of Malaysia, the establishment of hamlets on the islands, the development of plantations and sometimes intermarriage with members of Buddhist communities.

The relatively late settlement of Urak Lawoi populations (5 permanent villages in Lanta) from the coasts of Sumatra, possibly via Aceh under the leadership of a leader To Kiri, who died in 1949, is not contradictory with a more ancient temporary presence, according to their seasonal mobilities during the dry season *bagat*, before

and during the Islamisation of the Malay Archipelago, from the 12th to the seventeenth century (De Groot 2011: 96–98). Several migration scenarios were mentioned by our interlocutors (Bellina et al. 2021a, b) and participatory mapping showed the existence of ancient place names designating temporary but regular settlements on the east coast of Lanta Island (Fig. 8). In addition, the interviewees remembered old periodic mobilities either towards Trang, with rowing and sailing boats, or towards the North, in the Klong Thom area via the mangrove canals during a festival in the 10th lunar month. Klong Thom was the place of a major port-city during the first millennium CE and is a city hosting regionally important Buddhist temples. The Urak Lawoi brought sea products (shells) and basketry and exchanged them for metal and more recently plastic objects. They also periodically went to the island of Koh Rok to offer the spirits of the ancestors the meat and shell of a turtle. Also of interest are the different market places throughout the year, some associated to rituals. Perhaps partly paralleling Ivanoff accounts on Koh Pra Thong an island in the Phang Nga province where the Moken and Moklen were meeting, the UL also mentioned islands where the different groups of sea nomads (UL, Moken, Moklen) met and exchanged for certain occasions: Phuket (Rawai), Phang Nga Phi Phi (Laem Tong) islands, and Ranong. This ancient geography has been partly erased by the process of sedentarisation imposed by the States, by the hardening of international borders and by the creation of National Parks (which has made the exploitation of the marine environment more difficult). The permanent settlement of the Chinese community in Lanta Old Town has also resulted in the abandonment of more or less permanent sites where the Urak Lawoi lived.

The Urak Lawoi have no particular knowledge or myths about the rock paintings found in the rock shelters of the islets of the bay. They are aware of similar sites in Pang Nga Bay but not in Lanta Bay and insisted that they had no particular interest in searching for them (an attitude likely reinforced by the monopoly on these caves by armed groups of swallow-nest collectors). Similarly, they have not preserved, either in their stories or in their myths, any memory of a population that would have preceded them in this region (Bellina et al. 2021a, 2021b) and they do not practice any rituals near the caves. They do, however, have stories of “magic places”, notably in Koh Talabeng and Koh Ra Pu Le. It is said that people passing by this island at night could hear noises, voices and drums, and were afraid of the area. The Urak Lawoi also say that they tend to avoid caves and stay on their boat since they are afraid of Lok Suwe, a spirit looking like a dwarf, with long hairs and strong smell, living near caves and piles of shells and using a tool made of black shining stone to chop the shell. Does this local mythology correspond to the lost memory of past encounters, of previously occupied places? The elements collected so far seem to attest to the absence of a direct cultural and historical link between the occupants of the decorated caves (estimated between 5000 and 2200 BP) and the contemporary Urak Lawoi populations. However, they also draw cartography, so to speak, “in hollow” where the sites potentially interesting for archaeologists are those that the local populations avoid. However, the sites discovered in 2021 are located at the confluence of maritime circulation routes that remained important until the contemporary period. There is thus a juxtaposition of the geography of mobilities



Fig. 8 Participatory mapping with the Urak Lawoi at Sangka U (left) and their map (right) (Photo B. Bellina)

over the long term and of archaeological sites, without necessarily being able to link them in an obvious way.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Although our results are preliminary, the data gathered during our two fieldworks indicate that archaeologists, social anthropologists and local communities can learn and benefit from this integrated work in three ways.

First, the information collected are useful to understand how the territory is organized, what are the places deemed suitable for settlement and how the groups conduct their economic activities. Each group provided stories on their origin, how they chose to settle on KL. Each described the territory in relation to their labor/specialisation but also how they interact with other groups for these activities. Chinese communities may refer to places significant for trade and industry, Thai-Malay fishermen farming and sea routes, and the UL meaningful places, either as places for ancient or contemporary settlements, resource procurement but also for rituals and places to avoid. Some of these pieces of information may be used to elaborate some sort of ‘predictive model’ (Shoocongdej 2020) to locate ancient economically or ritually important locations.

Second, important information has been collected regarding navigation techniques and knowledge (sea lanes, winds, places to shelter) as well as maritime exchange networks of interest for archeologists and historians. The Lanta Bay and its islands have for long provided shelters for boats and are midway along what used to be a

vivid-trading route in the past. Different routes were used according to the seasonal winds and topographic features of the islands. The local knowledge—shared to some extent by the various communities—to which is associated a rich oral history as well as ecological knowledge regarding sea resources and their exploitation, may also be helpful to understand some of the rock art motives and their distribution in the islands. They may have served as geo-symbols for navigation, or to indicate the location of specific resources, of markets or funerary sites (see Figs. 4 and 5).

Third, none of the information collected establishes a clear link between the population currently inhabiting the area and the archaeological sites that we have identified, although remains left on the floor of the caves indicate that they have been often visited by humans. The only evidence that may be useful for archaeologists is the tendency to avoid such places among the Urak Lawoi, either for pragmatic (armed groups of bird-nests collectors) reasons or religious representations (dangerous spirits). Ivanoff also observed similar behaviour amongst the Moken and the Moklen. He mentions the myth shared by the Moklen near Koh Prathing of a cave where a treasure was hidden and protected by a Naga. He explains this reluctance for certain places providing specific types of archaeological material such as beads due to markets and collector's pressure and rock art due to the ritual and symbolic power left by previous populations. Although maintaining interactions with other groups for their living, the Moken and Moklen would avoid remains left by previous unknown population (Ivanoff 2021). But the Moken do not avoid all archaeological remains and what is avoided or not is unclear. For instance, Ivanoff stresses that the Moken remember ancient trading ports' locations, such as the port-entrepôt of Koh Kho Khao dating of the late first and early second millennium and visit around shipwrecks (Ivanoff 2021).

As far as archaeological research is concerned, the avoidance of specific places and of caves in particular, and the stories about dangerous creatures that inhabit them, or their surroundings may represent indirect indicators that archaeologists could use to locate places of interest. This could correspond to places to which 'symbolic power' is attributed and where remains of previous populations could be found if excavations were conducted. Comparable difficulties have been encountered by several archaeologists, including Rasmi Shoocongdej in her multi-ethnic community-based project in Mae Hong Son (Shoocongdej 2020). The ethnic groups of that area migrated there relatively recently and have no sense for the heritage there. Despite this methodological issue, local knowledge of indigenous people can provide new frameworks to locate and interpret ancient remains and historical events, enriching historical reconstructions done by the archaeologists and replacing the local groups, especially "sea nomads" in broader and more diverse historical narratives. Besides, the valorisation of their knowledge may contribute to their empowerment, their ability to negotiate with the local authorities to maintain or regain their access to natural resources as well as to preserve some of their culturally meaningful landscapes such as graveyards and other ritual places. The heritage management project could therefore be as much about the archaeological remains per se as it could be about the empowerment of local groups, especially those who, like the UL, belong to the most marginalised populations of the area.

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