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

by

Christopher Court

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.
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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).1 They consist of two groups known to the Thais as Chao Koh Thae/ (/cha: w kô? thé:/ 'real islanders') and Thai Mai (/tha:j mài/ 'new Thais').2 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 70-110.3 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.4 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.5 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 Klaa-Thalay "brave the sea" (น่าข้ามทะเล), 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. 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 contoids, vocoids and pitches which I noted.  

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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 contoids, 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:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{p} & \text{t} & \text{c} & \text{k} \\
\text{ph} & \text{th} & \text{ch} & \text{kh} \\
\text{b} & \text{d} & \text{j} \\
\text{m} & \text{n} & \text{ŋ} \\
\text{s} & \text{h} \\
\text{l} \\
\text{w} & \text{j}
\end{array}
\]

Vocoids and vocoid glides noted:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{i} & \text{i}: & \text{ɪ} & \text{u}, \text{u}: \\
\text{e} & \text{e}: & \text{ɛ} & \text{o}, \text{o}: \\
\text{a} & \text{a}: & \text{ɑ} & \text{ɔ}: \\
\text{aj} & \text{ua} & \text{ow} & \text{iaw}
\end{array}
\]

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 [lúan] ‘(?’) in [niʔûn lúan] ‘young coconut’ and the personal names [khìaw (< Thai?), nán, tû:, bìŋ, nāŋ].

Word list:
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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. 8 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:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Malay (CK)</th>
<th>Malay (TM)</th>
<th>Land Dayak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>sâ?</td>
<td>sâ?</td>
<td>sa-satu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two</td>
<td>thûa?</td>
<td>wâ?:</td>
<td>dua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three</td>
<td>talôj</td>
<td>kalôj</td>
<td>taruh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>four</td>
<td>pâ : t</td>
<td>pâ : t</td>
<td>ēmpat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>five</td>
<td>lemâ?</td>
<td>(CK), TM</td>
<td>lima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>six</td>
<td>nâm</td>
<td>(CK, TM)</td>
<td>ēnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seven</td>
<td>ujû?</td>
<td>dujû?</td>
<td>tujoh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eight</td>
<td>wolôj</td>
<td>walôj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nine</td>
<td>chawâj</td>
<td>sawâj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ten</td>
<td>ch(a) pôh</td>
<td>pôh</td>
<td>sa-puloh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eleven</td>
<td>chapôh cê</td>
<td>ploh cê : t</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>twelve</td>
<td>chapôh thûa</td>
<td>ploh wâ?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>twenty</td>
<td>wâ? ploh</td>
<td>(TM)</td>
<td>dua-puloh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thirty</td>
<td>kloj ploh</td>
<td>(TM)</td>
<td>taruh-puru?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forty</td>
<td>pâ : t ploh</td>
<td>(TM)</td>
<td>ēmpat-puloh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fifty</td>
<td>mâ? ploh</td>
<td>(TM)</td>
<td>lima-puloh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sixty</td>
<td>nam ploh</td>
<td>(cf. Mal.</td>
<td>ēnam-puloh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 nba [‘bring’].” 1922 : (163). This is very common field experience.
seventy       ju? ploh (cf. Mal. tujoh-puloh)
eighty       wâlõj ploh
ninety       sawâj ploh
a hundred     ana: tôh (cf. Mal. sa-ratus)
a hundred and one ana: toh cé: t (cf. Mal. sa-ratus satu)

Other vocabulary:
afternoon       we: la: (cf. Thai/we: la:/‘time’)
bathe           wên wi: n (CK) âe: n âe: n (TM)
be in a place    wên
big             da?
bird            kicûm (TM)
boat            kabâ: ë (W. kabang)
buffalo         kâ: bâw (cf. Mal. kârbau)
cat             miaw (cf. Thai/me: w, miw/)
catch           ëap (cf. Mal. tangkâp)
chick           nâ: t manôk
chicken         manôk (TM) (cf. Mal. manôk)
child           ja'nâ: t, anâ: t (TM) (W. chanat)
clock           na: lika: (cf. Thai id.)
cloud           la: tâ: dê: t ëin
coconut         ni?ôn (TM) (cf. Mal. nyiôr)
curry, hot (spicy) chaw baj pôdeh (cf. Mal. pôdeh, pôdas)
day             a'Ìôj (W. aloi) (cf. Mal. hari)
dog             ?ô? (TM)
drink           ëam (CK) ?am (TM)
duck            a'da:
eat             ëam (CK, TM) ?am (TM) ëam cô: n (CK, TM)
far             na: nôt (TM)
female human being minaj (TM) (W. binai)
fire            pôj (TM) (cf. Mal. api, Land Dayak epuy)
fish            ka: n, eka: n e: ka: n (TM) (cf. Mal. ikan)
flower         do: k bûja? (TM) (cf. Thai dô: k ‘flower’
                Mal. bunga id.)
food             cô: n (CK)
foot            ka: kâj (cf. Mal. kaki)
go
hand
have
he
house
hot (spicy)
human being
I, me, my
leaf
left hand
little (not much)
long
male human being
moon
morning
much
near
night
no
not
not have
palm thatch
pig
question tag
right hand
sea
shirt
short
sky
small
sun
that
this
today
tomorrow

kaw (TM) (W. lakow)
nan (TM) (cf. Mal. tangan)
nä?
?a: cåw
må:k, omå:k (TM) (cf. Mal. rumah)
 pdoeh (cf. Mal. pdoeh 'to sting')
manût (cf. Thai manût, Mal. manusia)
ji:; cf: (TM) (cf. Mal. aku) (W. cho-i, chi)
du?on ?ew (cf. Mal. daun pokok)
kö: lój (cf. Mal. kiri)
habit (cf. Mal. habit 'finished')
bu: chûj la: ták
ka: näj
bu: lân (cf. Mal. bulan)
kichâw (TM)
dahûn
nan: ? (TM)
ka'mân
há?
háh (CK, TM)
pin há?
ka: 'jâñ (cf. Mal. hajang)
babûj (cf. Mal. babi)
ka? (CK, TM) kâh (TM) (cf. Mal. kah)
wa: nân (cf. Mal. kanan)
?âw, ka?âw (TM) ta?âw (W. t'aw)
baji: (TM) (cf. Mal. baju)
bu: chûj balûj
e: m(a)' ta: mî?
bu: chûj
ta?lôj (cf. Mal. (ma) ta-(ha) ri)
ki:
ni:, lân (?) (cf. Mal. ini, That/ni:/)
a'lêj ni: (TM) (Mal. hari ini)
khî: chá:w (TM) (W. chichow) (cf. Thai/chá:w/ 'morning')
tree  
?ew (classifier pokon) (probably same as ka?ew ‘wood’ q.v.) (cf. Mal. pokok hayu)

trousers  
na: phlôw, ka: kiŋ (TM) (cf. Thai/kaŋke:ŋ/)

water, juice  
wi:n (CK) e:n—en—aen (TM) (cf. Mal. ayer)

wood  
ka?ew (TM) (cf. Mal. kayu)

year  
takôn (TM) (cf. Mal. takun)

yesterday  
lî:j but (W. bubut)

yon  
tûp

you  
bî?eŋ (TM) (W. bi-ing)

young coconut  
nî?ûn lûaŋ

Other words:

Numeral classifiers accompanying nouns:

lûj  
for people

poh  
for birds

lam  
for boats (cf. Thai/lam/ ‘idem’)

pokôn  
for trees (cf. Mal. pokok, pohon)

Personal names:

male – thî?; khîaw; mê?; tû?; mà?in;

female – nàn; bîŋ; tû;; nā: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  
ñaپ  
ka:n  
‘Go and catch fish’
go  
catch  
fish

?am  
en  
ni?ûn lûaŋ  
‘Drink the

drink  
water  
coconut  
milk of a young coconut’
Questions:
(Omitted subj.) + Verb + Q. part.
Are you going?

kaw kâh
kaw + verb + Q. part.
Are you going?
go Q.

‘Are there any buffaloes at your house?’
omâk bi?en
omâk + bi?en
house you

Noun phrase:

Noun + Noun

nâ:t manôk ‘a chick’
child fowl

Noun + Pronoun

omâk bi?en ‘your house’
house you

Noun + Det.

alôj ni: ‘today’
day this

Noun + Numeral + Classifier

manût wa? lûj ‘two people’
human two class.

being

kicûm kloj poh ‘three birds’
bird three class.

ew wa? pokon ‘two trees’
tree two class.

Noun + Adjective

en dahûn ‘much water’
water much

en habît ‘little water’
water little

Verb Phrase:

Verb + Object

jam eka:n ‘eat fish’
eat fish
ŋáp  ekaː n  ‘catch fish’
catch  fish

Verb + Verb + Object
kaw  ŋáp  kaː n  ‘go and catch fish’
go  catch  fish

Position of the negative in the verb phrase:
(Omitted subject) + Verb + Negative
kaw  hāh  ‘I’m not going’
go  not

Subject + Verb + Negative + Object
ciː  nam  hāh  ekaː n  ‘I’m not eating fish’
I  eat  not  fish

Typologically interesting features:
1. The position of the negative particle in the verb phrase.
7. The fixed pitch patterns of certain words: e.g. [lūañ] in [niʔun lūañ] ‘young coconut’ and [nǎn, biŋ, and nāːŋ] (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,\(^9\) it is obvious that the Moken of Southern Thailand deserve more attention from ethnologists\(^{10}\) 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 Moken Language*,\(^{11}\) 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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\(^{10}\) 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.
REFERENCES


