

# Urak Lawoi

of the Adang Archipelago  
Tarutao National Marine Park,  
Satun Province, Thailand



Urak Lawoi house on Adang Island







Bagad site



Making roof from rattan and nipa palm



Preparing dinner

The Urak Lawoi are indigenous people of the Adang Archipelago. Although they are often grouped together with the Moken and Moklen and collectively referred to as sea gypsies or sea nomads, these peoples in fact each have distinctively different origins, cultures, and languages.

In the Urak Lawoi language, the word *urak* means people, and *lawoi* means sea. It is generally accepted that the Urak Lawoi ethnically belong to the Malay Groups. They speak a Malayo-Polynesian language that can be considered a dialect of Malay. There is no written form for the language. In Thailand, Urak Lawoi live mainly on the coast and the islands of the Andaman Sea. Their main communities include Bulon islands, Adang Island, and Lipe Island in Satun Province; Sireh Island, Rawi Beach, Sapum Bay and Chalong Bay in Phuket; Lanta Yai, Chum (Poo) Island, and Phi Phi Don Island in

Krabi. The last names of Urak Lawoi people include Harntalee (meaning 'brave sea'), which is most common in the Adang Archipelago, Pramongkit (= fishery) in Phuket, and Taleeluk (= deep sea) in Lanta Yai.

Lanta Yai Island is referred to as the original home of many Urak Lawoi in the Adang Archipelago. To Kiri, their most respected ancestor was a Muslim traveler and adventurer from Indonesia. In the early 1900's, he was married to an Urak Lawoi on Lanta Yai Island. Because he was aware of the richness of the natural resources in the Adang Archipelago, he readily agreed when the provincial government of Satun encouraged him to bring Urak Lawoi to the Adang Archipelago so that the area would be occupied by a Thai population when new borders between Thailand and Malaysia were being established. To Kiri started an Urak Lawoi settlement on Lipe Island in 1909.



As the meaning of the name "sea people" indicates, the Urak Lawoi have centered their life on the use of marine and coastal resources and have inseparable ties to the sea. Traditionally, their houses were located on beaches where they could look out to sea and watch over their boats. For them, the sea and near shore areas are not only their main sources of livelihood, but also their home and the environment around which the core of their traditional culture has developed. The Urak Lawoi display great resourcefulness and ingenuity in sea-related activities. They are good boatmen, skilled fishermen, and excellent divers able to move freely and stay comfortably underwater for long periods of time. In the past, Urak Lawoi divers did not use any kind of equipment, except for a small pair of tailored goggles made of carved wood and glass.

Traditionally the Urak Lawoi had a subsistence lifestyle supported by semi-nomadic food foraging practices. They had permanent houses on the strand, but were nomadic in their fishing and gathering activities. Foraging made it possible for the Urak Lawoi to use a wide variety of natural resources at different sites in the Adang Archipelago and to subsist with no outside assistance. The Urak Lawoi shared local resources among themselves without a sense of ownership. Up to several months during the dry season, entire families traveled together to different foraging sites. These long-term foraging trips are called *bagad* in the Urak Lawoi language. During *bagad*, simple shelters were built on beaches where people were well protected from strong winds and from which they had an easy access to fresh water. During the monsoon rainy season, travelers returned to their houses.

To forage successfully, the Urak Lawoi require a vast store of profound local knowledge, including detailed understanding of the regional geography, weather, natural conditions of the sea and the coast, the nature and habits of the animals they harvest, fishing-and-

gathering skills, and specialized food-processing techniques. Such knowledge is best acquired and refined in the course of daily local practice. Learning is first-hand and experiential.

Traditional means of harvesting sea life in the Adang Archipelago include spears, hook-and-line, bamboo traps, and gathering in the inter-tidal zone. Urak Lawoi women commonly helped with intertidal harvesting and with after-catch processes, such as drying and salting. Among the favorite sea foods of the Urak Lawoi are certain fishes (such as flowery cod, mangrove jack, Russel's snapper long nose emperor and giant trevally), crabs, lobsters, giant clams, turtles, acorn worms, chitons, and sea cucumbers.

Boats were once the most essential and highly valued part of Urak Lawoi material culture. Each household had a rowboat of about 3 meters long, sometimes equipped with a sail, and made of locally available wood. In the past, boats were crafted by hand with simple axes, with different members of the community helping one another. The Urak Lawoi's close relationship with boats is well reflected in their *loi rua* (= floating boat), festival--the most important festival that they celebrate--which takes place for 3 days and 3 nights during the full moon of the 6th and 11th months of the lunar calendar. The Urak Lawoi use the occasion to pay respect to their ancestors and symbolically to float away their misfortune with a small ceremonial boat, constructed mainly out of the soft wood of the zalacca palm for this special purpose.

The majority of Urak Lawoi engage in animistic practices. They revere to their ancestral spirits and believe that certain places are inhabited by guardian spirits. For the Urak Lawoi, the natural and supernatural are not sharply distinguished. Till today, offerings are made on special occasions and to ask for good harvesting, and some Urak Lawoi carry a talisman to ward off bad spirits and misfortune. Others believe that illnesses can be treated by a spirit medium, locally known as *to mor*.



In terms of arts, *rammana* and *rong ngeng* are the only forms still practiced today. Both have a Malay origin and were supposedly influenced by Western Europeans during colonial times. *Rammana* is percussion music and singing, usually performed as a part of a ceremony, for example to thank the spirits for a granted wish or at the loi rua festival. *Rong Ngeng* is dance performance accompanied by singing and music of drums and violins. While it was a popular folk dance and singing in the past, today *rong ngeng* is only performed in welcoming ceremonies and at organized events.

Having resided in the Adang Archipelago for the last 100 years, over the past few decades, the Urak Lawoi have undergone rapid change in their ways of life. With the park rules and regulations, their nomadic foraging way of life has been discontinued. There are no longer any long-term *bagad* sites and villages scattered across the beaches of the archipelago. Today, the only Urak Lawoi villages are found on Lipe Island and the northeastern side of Adang Island. The intensification of commercial

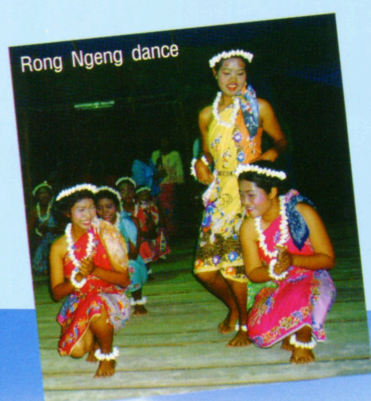
fishing and a fast growing tourism industry in the area offer alternative livelihoods that are moving the Urak Lawoi from a subsistence way of life into the market economy. New technologies, accessibility via improved transportation, and formal public education are rapidly introducing the realities of globalization, modernization, and urban aspirations.



Urak Lawoi man rowing a boat



Bamboo Trap



Urak Lawoi man making a rattan trap

Lipe Island





Because the Urak Lawoi language is strictly oral, indigenous knowledge is transmitted orally by elders who possess the knowledge or directly by experiential learning through involvement in traditional activities. Today, the environment of the Adang Archipelago, livelihood conditions and activities are rapidly changing, and it has become difficult for the Urak Lawoi to sustain their traditional culture and traditions. Support for the conservation of their traditional culture can be given by accepting their rights as the indigenous people and first inhabitants of the Adang Archipelago and re-

spectfully acknowledging that they have a unique culture. Additionally, an understanding is required that Urak Lawoi in the present generation are facing the fact that their own traditional culture is at a great risk of disintegrating and disappearing even as they are learning about introduced new cultures, and how to make decisions about adaptative and alternative ways of life that will allow for a sustainable development of their own community. The conservation of Urak Lawoi culture is a challenge in which all of us can play important roles.



To Kiri shrine on Lipe Island



Ceremonial boat in loi rua festival



Wooden figure of a turtle hunter on the bow of a ceremonial boat



Boat chase during loi rua festival



**ชุมชนหลักของชาวอุรักลาไวย์ริมฝั่งและในทะเลอันดามัน**  
**Main Coastal and Island Communities of Urak Lawoi, Andaman Sea**



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