

Data collection for the development of cultural protected area and for solving Moken statelessness, Surin Islands, Phang-nga Province

Abstract

In the past, the Moken are an ethnic group that lived their lives on the islands and coastal areas of the Andaman Sea. In the dry season they lived in boats, gathered fish, sea animals, seashells, etc. to exchange them for necessary items. When the rainy season approached, they stopped traveling and built shelters in the bay to shelter from the wind. During the rainy season, they often went to the forest to make use of trees to build houses, make boats, and gather forest food.

Because the Moken migrated frequently in the past; in addition, the communities were often located on islands far from the mainland, that is why they were far away from government services. Most of the Moken have no nationality; as a result, many are without basic rights. After the tsunami of 2004, the Moken became more visible. There are many agencies, both public and private, to help in various fields. Including the application for legal status. Up to the present, there are still a number of Moken who still do not have Thai nationality. The obstacles come from language barrier, the remoteness of communities, the difficulty and high cost of travelling to shore especially during the monsoon season, few or no witnesses who certify the birth, cultural way of counting and recognizing kinship which is different from what we are used to; moreover, the local office is understaffed and unable to continuously focus on the Moken nationality work alone.

This project developed work process of providing assistance to the Surin Islands Moken in terms of legal status. The purpose is to solve the problem of statelessness and create human security for the Moken. The work requires the cooperation of many parties as partners in the network. namely government agencies, NGOs, academics, and communities. The first phase of the project lasted 5 months, from 1 April - 31 August 2022, and the second phase lasted 4 months, from March 1 to June 30, 2023.

During the second phase, there were 2 visits to Khuraburi District in Phang Nga Province.

The first visit (11-18 March 2023), was an operation whereby 30 Moken people travelled ashore by boats, and at the local registration office, request forms were processed by relevant authorities, some of whom travelled from Bangkok at the request of the working group.

The second visit (7-11 May 2023), was again a joint operation, this time with the Institute of Forensic Science and other partners in selecting the Moken people for DNA testing to prove their blood relationship. The Khuraburi District Registration Office gave legal opinions and suggested for consideration of the aforementioned Moken list. A multi-sectoral working group travelled to the Moken village of Surin Islands and collected samples for DNA proofing as well as collected additional personal details for future legal request.

This project reflects the work carried out in multi-sectoral manner. The most important lesson is frequent consultation and finding mutual solutions for difficult and complex problems. In this instance, there are government agencies, NGOs, academics, and the community that worked together. Community coordinators who are ready to provide information on language, cultural and personal issues are very important. Another important lesson is the need for outreach approach -- if the responsible agencies/authorities can go to the target area to accept applications for Thai nationality directly from local people, it should greatly reduce the burden of expenses and travel time. In addition, the responsible agencies/authorities can listen to the problems and needs of the people in the area and able to meet the needs in an appropriate manner.