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This Life: Stranded sea gypsies

02:56, 25 November 2012 by Patrick Butler



Moken children on a boat. Photo: Patrick Butler

In the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, the survival of the Moken people was among the most remarkable stories to attract the attention of the international media.

Drawing on their unparalleled knowledge of the sea that fateful morning, the Moken lost only one elderly member of their community to the catastrophe.

"We saw the water pull out and we ran up to the hill. I would not allow the children to go down to swim or bathe. And we stayed there for two days and two nights. From far away we could see the big wave coming, and it swept everything away."

Such is the simple recollection of Leah, one of the oldest women in a community of 80 Moken families living off the southern coast of Thailand. The Moken, or Sea Gypsies, are an ancient community of around 6,000 maritime nomads scattered along the coast of south-east Asia from India to the Philippines, Burma, Thailand and beyond.

However, the attention they generated following the tsunami has done little to stem the dissolution of their culture, such has been their desperate fight for survival.

Where they originally come from is unknown, though some speculate they are of Polynesian descent. Their language is unlike any other and has yet to develop a written form.

Until about 20 years ago they lived with little interruption and almost entirely at sea as hunter gatherers, believing in the spirits of the sea and those that inhabited their boats. They would come on to land only occasionally to trade some of their produce or to bury their dead.

Increasingly, Moken communities throughout south-east Asia have been forced to live on land following an increase in arrests by Burmese authorities for fishing in their waters. Diminishing environmental resources have also contributed to the dissolution of their maritime lifestyle. Mirroring the plight of their extended community throughout south-east Asia, a group of 80 Moken families has begun living on a tiny island off the southern coast of Thailand called Got Lao, which is just an eight-kilometre walk from the Burmese coastline when tides are low.

When Fr Joe Maier, co-founder of the Mercy Centre in Bangkok (see *Magazine*, 1/4/2012) first encountered the Moken on Got Lao after working for over 40 years in urban slums, he was shocked at their standard of living.

"They were literally starving to death," he says. "There was nothing to eat. One in five women died in childbirth. The children had no energy to run or play. They didn't even recognise basic foods such as bananas. There was no concept of how they should live on dry land. It was horrible."

The Mercy Centre was founded in 1972 to educate children living in Bangkok's poorest slum district, Klóng Toey. Educating more than 50,000 children in its 40-year history, the centre used funds partially



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made up of Irish Aid money to build and maintain suitable housing for the Moken community on Got Lao.

The present village stands on stilts over the edge of the island due to a dispute about legal ownership of the land. A deal - allegedly struck between officials years ago - is stopping the Moken from being able to build on a safer area inland until the courts decide who legally owns the island.

Until this can be resolved a cluster of wooden shacks stands just high enough above the water line so that they won't flood. Litter is an ongoing problem as older members of the community find the concept of rubbish disposal difficult to comprehend, given they have never had to consider such things in the past when living on the sea.

One shack on the edge of the village, facing inland, has become the nerve centre of the community, serving as kindergarten, communal kitchen and help centre run by Mercy Centre staff who visit daily, bringing food supplies from the mainland with them.

Bustling with more than 40 voices below the age of seven, children from as young as three are taught how to count in their own language, Moken, as well as in Thai and English. They are also shown the basics of the Thai alphabet.

In the kitchen, women are taught how to cook using a variety of ingredients which are new to many of them. In a corner of the classroom a television plays a Thai-dubbed DVD of Alvin and the Chipmunks.

Working in such close proximity to the community for the last four years, Fr Maier has been given a unique insight into the integrated belief system of the Moken, and has witnessed their gradual adaptation to their surroundings.

"In the early days when someone took their photograph, the people wondered how the person could be free again if their image was on a piece of paper. They didn't understand the difference. They would ask how the person could be freed."

Twice a week they pray to their sea gods as well as to Buddha and to Jesus. They ask their ocean spirits for permission to fish in their waters as well as to apologise for any hurt they may have caused them. Some have interpreted the tsunami and other natural disasters as punishment for not showing enough respect to the sea.

For Leah, the village elder who reacted so courageously to the tsunami, life for the children here does not compare to her own upbringing nearly half a century ago on the boats. Poignantly, as the only midwife in the community, she acts as a surrogate guardian to all the children she helped bring into the world.

Singing a Moken lullaby she learned as a little girl, Leah recounts for the children in the kindergarten a story about a mother trying to put her hungry child to sleep. The fire the mother lit is fading, and the hungry child continues to cry. Unwilling to leave her child alone, the mother waits until it sleeps before she can go out in search of food, hoping her absent husband will come home from the boats prosperous. Interrupting her song to dry her eyes, Leah explains how she was overcome at the thought that many of the children listening could not understand her. Already the language and culture she has lived with all her life is disappearing faster than it can be saved.

Adjusting to living on land has led to an inevitable loosening of their ties to the sea. Two rotting boats grounded on the shore are all that visibly remain of their once unique maritime lifestyle.

Measuring about ten feet long, these kabang were once occupied by single families with designated areas for bedding, cooking, fishing and private time among adults. It is hoped that money can be raised to not only preserve the two hulks, but to launch them again for the children to see how their ancestors lived. Considerations around how to begin preserving the culture can now only be addressed by the Mercy Centre staff as their priorities until recently have concerned improving the lives and livelihoods of the community.

Obtaining basic entitlements for the Maken on Got Lao has been difficult. The Thai government has recently issued a number of identity cards which is a significant step in the painfully slow process of obtaining full citizenship.

"They are entitled to nothing. They were born on the sea, so they have no automatic right to citizenship. This has been one of the many problems we've had to deal with," says Fr Maier.

Part of this process was aided by the now-deceased Queen Mother of Thailand, who bestowed the Moken with the universal surname which translates from Thai as 'fishermen'.

Self-sufficiency is not yet possible until legal ownership of the island can be settled. Even then, should the courts find in their favour, teaching the Moken to cultivate the land will be an enormous undertaking given the now redundant expertise of the once sea faring community.

At dusk, women and children squat along the shore picking cockles, the only source of food apart from supplies brought from the mainland. The small morsels of meat taste sweeter when eaten raw, they say. Health complications from this type of food, however, include tapeworms. At the time of my visit to the island, I watched a seven-inch tapeworm being pulled out of an 18-month-old boy.

While the community negotiates an awkward footing between the

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ancient and modern, two children sharing a book on the floor of the kindergarten is perhaps the surest sign of hope for the survival for the Moken, though what will remain of their culture in another decade remains uncertain.

Undoubtedly, they will be compelled to further integrate with life on the mainland and its ever increasing demands. They need turn no further, however, than to their collective surname to affirm their once sole dependence on the sea.

This article was funded by the Simon Cumbers Media Fund, named after the Navan-born journalist who was murdered in Saudi Arabia in 2004

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