



A draft copy of  
**Andaman Sea Gypsies:  
their origins and  
culture**

by  
Sumroeng Choeychuenjit

**Tsunami Aid Watch** is a programme of the Southeast Asia Regional Office of Heinrich Boell Foundation, in co-operation with Southeast Asia Consult and Resource Co., Ltd.

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# Andaman Sea Gypsies: their origins and culture

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## **Krabi Declaration on Sustainable Post-Tsunami Rehabilitation**

The participants of the forum would like to extend their gratitude and heartfelt thanks to all individuals, communities, national and international groups, parties and organizations for the help and aid they have provided for the individuals and communities affected by the tsunami of December 26<sup>th</sup> 2004. We hope that they will continue to give us unwavering support during the remaining task of long-term rehabilitation. The tsunami has left Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, the Maldives and other countries with devastated coasts, shattered communities, economies and hundreds of thousands of people in need of support. This destruction was, however, only the initial direct impact of the tsunami disaster. The ensuing aid efforts were part of just the first phase of tsunami rehabilitation.

Nine months have now passed since the tsunami and in most affected areas treatment has been delivered to the wounded and basic shelter is available for the surviving victims; in many cases the boats and fishing gear needed for livelihood restoration of the fisher folk have been provided; the remaining tasks are ready to be overseen by restored community structures and local administrations. The situation can, thus, in most instances be described as approaching stability. However, it is a far cry from being normal.

The tsunami recovery now enters a second phase of transformation that is the recovery from a disaster into a more permanent and functioning economic and social set-up, i.e. the mitigation of the secondary tsunami impact. While the aid to rehabilitate from the initial direct impact of the tsunami was characterized by speed and efficiency, the recovery support effort needed for the indirect impact recovery must strive for long-term effectiveness and sustainability. Taking into account livelihood, economic recovery, disaster management, issues of land and housing for the displaced, the landless, women, children, gender issues as well as migrant labor problems. In order to achieve this, a number of measures are urgently needed. Based on past aid delivery experience we therefore ask the international community and supporting NGO's and GO's to mobilize all available resources to:

- Ensure that the long-term rehabilitation of the tsunami affected area is based on definitions of fairness, justice, sustainability and stability as perceived and defined by the tsunami affected communities and individuals;

- Develop the secondary tsunami recovery support into an opportunity to address and solve pre-tsunami problems that have been worsened and/or exposed by the disaster;
- Deliver assistance and support in an accountable and transparent form that ensures participation of those affected in planning, implementation and execution of long-term rehabilitation programs;
- Establish – a vitally important point - a proper, honest and forward-looking information system and data-base on the tsunami disaster for the use and to the benefit of its affected individuals and communities, independent of nationality, race or religion;
- Initiate an aid-tracking system / mechanism to avoid the misuse of aid-resources or its appropriation for something other than aid purposes;
- Ensure that the remaining rehabilitation becomes a stepping stone for further development of the affected areas leading to better conditions than before the tsunami disaster.

If the international community, governments and civil societies help to continue with the tsunami recovery support based on the conditions given above, the tsunami disaster itself can be turned into an opportunity for development that is in line with sustainability needs and economic progress of all mankind. We believe in the strength of cooperation, coordination, openness and solidarity in times of need.

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## **Preface**

This publication presents the myths and some of the stories that accompanied the Sea Gypsies on their centuries long migration from the Celebes sea to the Andaman islands of Thailand and Burma. As well as a window on to their current predicament after the 2004 Tsunami, along with their present living conditions as a contrast to their rich history of exploration across today's Indonesian archipelago.

TAW's programme in looking at the Tsunami rehabilitation process with its positive and negative dimensions, needs to take into account the fact that some of the communities impacted by the Tsunami do not fall into the group of people that can easily be categorized and therefore helped by bureaucracies used to dealing with a recognizable culture and behavioral structure.

Some aspects of the Sea Gypsies way of life are quite unique and it will take a great deal of flexibility on the part of government departments plus international and local NGO's to find an appropriate means of sustainably helping them in the long term.

We hope you will find this publication both informative and enjoyable as an introduction to a community of people both mysterious and misunderstood, whilst providing useful material for those people involved in the Tsunami rehabilitation process.

Finally, I would like to thank the author, Khun Sumroeng Choeychuenjit, and Save Andaman Network (SAN), for all their help in producing this publication.

Chiang Mai, October 2007

**Karl H. Segschneider**

Director of the Tsunami Aid Watch programme

## Introduction

In today's world the Morgans<sup>1</sup> (sea gypsies) traditional way of life is quite unusual, sailing on that part of the sea which constitutes their territorial waters to catch food. This is not so different in principle to many ordinary people's ways of life in the cities, who have to earn a living in order to feed themselves. But living in a city is a very different lifestyle and may include significantly different goals as well.

I think to myself how short this study trip is when compared to the long journeys of the Morgan ancestors. Going all the way back as the legends tell us to their origins, when Ken the transgressor, was ordered to be exiled at sea. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of time and the interference of the monsoon season, this visit just could not bring as many of the stories of the great sea nomads to the attention of the world as I would have liked.

In spite of that, what inspired me to embark on my journey to visit the Morgans is a strong desire to reveal as many of the mythic stories about the origins of the human race as possible. Stories that contain sources of experience, wisdom, and traditional heritage need to be communicated to successive generations, from culture to culture, until they are included into and form part of what we call 'civilization'.

## Discovering Morgan roots

Amidst a seemingly endless body of water only the great ocean exists, between turquoise water and the bright blue sky the waves roll on reflecting the dazzling sun rays. Some days white clouds linger in the sky on sunny days, other times massive dark plumes rule the air full of rain. No matter how dreadful or delightful the sea is at any given moment, you can always find a group of the once nomadic seafaring folk called sea gypsies or Morgans on the ocean, driven by their unbounded spirit to roam from place to place on the high seas. More often than not answers to the questions about who they are and where they are going lie purely in the realm of myth. The Morgans are like a pod of whales traveling in the pursuit of their dreams, the faded memory of their roots can only be surmised.

Even anthropologists are unable to definitively identify the origins of these sea nomads. Despite the fact that historical evidence does not support it, some propose that Morgan ancestors came from Africa before adjusting to their way of life on the Ocean. Others have stated the possibility that before

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<sup>1</sup> We (the TAW editors) chose the terms Morgan and Morglan to transcribe the Thai word (มอแกน) for the Andaman Sea Gypsies in this publication. In other contexts the words 'Moken' and 'Moklen' are also frequently used, meaning the same groups of people.

living on the water, the nomads survived the ice age and traveled down overland from Mongolia to the Shan state of Myanmar (Burma), while there are even claims they migrated from the coasts of India to the islands of the Nicobar Archipelago then continued heading to the Mergui Archipelago in Myanmar. In spite of all these theories at the moment no one is able to identify which, if any, of them is right.

A number of ethnologists, however, point out that perhaps 5 or 6 centuries ago, most of the sea gypsies had their origin in an as yet unidentified area of the Pacific Ocean. Jacques Ivanoff, a French historian and sociologist, who continued his father's study into the Morgans' way of life, came up with a theory according to which the Morgans are classified as a Malaysian littoral ethnic group that once lived in the Pacific.

The Malaysian littoral ethnic group is divided into two sub-groups known as Malay Nomads and proto-Malay Nomads. Currently, there are approximately 30,000 of these people living on the sea, from the Southeast to the Northwest covering an area of about 3,000 km in length. It is believed that the place they began their journey was somewhere in the Celebes Sea near the Moluccas islands (*Malukul*) ending in the Tanintharyi area of Myanmar.



Map 1: The Moluccas (*Malukul*) islands (shaded bright green) of Indonesia

Looking at a map of Indonesia, we can use it to follow the journeys of the Malaysian littoral ethnic group along the ship routes of the Banda Sea and the shores of the Sulawesi Islands. They went via the Java Sea and traveled through the Strait of Malacca which is located between Malaysia and the Sumatra islands, in order to extend their journey to the Andaman Sea, an area encompassed by the Indian Ocean.



With the purpose of establishing clear cut ethnic boundaries, Ivanoff himself produced the border lines that divide the Pacific and Indian Oceans into 3 separate parts. The first part is made up of the territory of the islands of the Mergui archipelago of Myanmar. This is settled by various ethnic groups, i.e. Morgan, Orang Sireh, Orang Lout Kappir, Uraklawoi, and Orang Lonta.

The second section is located around the islands of the Riau-Lingga Archipelago, in the southern part of Malaysia. This section harbors the groups Orang Kuala and Orang Selat. The latter is divided into four sub-groups; they are Duano, Saku, Barok and Galang.

The third part is located in the Celebes Sea (*Sulawesi*) of the Pacific Ocean where the Philippine and Indonesian boundary occurs, surrounded by three main islands, i.e. Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Mindanao. This area is known as the homeland of Bajos and other ethnic groups.

From the Andaman to the Celebes Sea, or from Northwest to the Southeast, the three parts approximately cover an area the length of 3,000 km. Where the Indian and Pacific Oceans intersect is where the home of the Southeast Asian sea nomads lies. Indeed, the Southeastern area also covers many islands that lie in the area of the Banda Sea. The sea nomads from the Andaman came from the Celebes Sea area and at first were bound for the Java Sea. They later continued their journey to the Strait of Malacca along the shipping routes. The homeland of these nomads is located between the latitudes of 14 degrees north and 8 degrees south.

From the Lingga Archipelago, the Morgans sailed through the Strait of Malacca to Penang, a distance of 600 km. With the help of the Northeast monsoon winds, they continued north toward the islands of Adung, Leepae and Tarutao in Satun province Thailand. After that, they sailed across the sea toward the provinces of Trang, Phang Nga, Krabi, Ranong and eventually the islands of the Mergui archipelago in Myanmar.

The original reason why Morgans started living as seafarers lies in the mythic past. No documentary evidence is available to help identify where they originally came from. However, there is a story to the effect that the Morgans' original ancestor was Sibian, the Queen of a far away island, who suffered from a broken heart. The Queen married a man named Gaman, a handsome Muslim Malay. However, Gaman was enamored of his young sister-in-law Ken. The love triangle came to an end when Queen Sibian decreed that Ken had transgressed a taboo. Outraged, Queen Sibian ordered Ken to be forbidden to dwell on land and so cast her into the sea. The Queen announced her sentence in Proto Malay saying "*lomo Ken*" which means 'immerse Ken into water'. Ken was exiled in a boat hewn from a single tree log in accordance with the Queen's wishes.

An interesting connection to the sentence passed and spoken on Ken, decreed by Queen Sibian is that the name Morgan, when translated, means 'immersion into water'. This is the epic story that began the links between Morgan men, their boats and the sea.

Morgan names vary depending on their location. The Morgans that live in permanent villages on the coast call themselves Morglan or high ground Morgan (*Morgan Don*). Another group of Morgans that live on the sea and visit small islands prefer to be called 'sea living people' (*Chao-lay*) whilst the name 'water living people' (*Chao-nam*) has a derogatory sense to it and so should be avoided.

Since ancient times, Morgans have been making their living and wandering the ocean. Undoubtedly, in time the Morgans came to accept the sea as their home, with the islands that rise up out of it as so many rooms for them to use. They perhaps sailed on the sea for up to 8 months of the year, whilst the rest was set aside for living on the islands, especially during the monsoon season. It is difficult to calculate the precise time that Morgans began leaving behind their nomadic lifestyle and started settling on land because they still spent most of their time at sea, except the Morglans who established permanent villages which can be identified by their history of land use or use of natural resources.

However, these indicators may not be effective enough because the Morglans still tended to move from place to place. What encouraged them to move on might be, for instance, plagues or natural disasters; and when all these problems had ended, return to their old haunts. The relocations are analogous to moving from room to room in the same house, but all the rooms (*islands*) have the same multi-purpose use. For example, when bedrooms become too hot to sleep in, they will move to sleep in other rooms.

Therefore, we can only say that the traditional nomadic Morgan culture, making their living and enhancing their social ties covered an extensive area that could vary depending on where the wind and the waves took them.

### **“Just as for ordinary people, food is a necessity for Morgans”**

The case of Koh Lao Nok, Tambon Paknam, A. Muang, Ranong province

“Can you believe that sometimes some people here have not eaten any food for a couple of days?” asks Kanjana sadly, a wholeheartedly committed worker from NGO Action Aid, whose eyes glow with a deep intensity when delivering these words to me.

I nod in response and look at a dish of rice I had just finished. “Some families share a dish of rice together and need to ask for more food from a neighbor if necessary” she goes on. “Children here frequently walk along the coastal

beaches taking a handful of cooked rice with them in the hope they will find some small shellfish to be cooked there. The grilled sea shells are delicious to eat when no other option is available". Something difficult to say sticks in my throat after she finishes this statement, all the information she passes on to me is from real day-to-day experiences gained throughout the one year she has been working in the area. Trying to temper my uncomfortable feeling, the only way I can carry on is by just making light of all this poverty, by saying "Umm... At least this is a real sea food grill?"

Looking at the empty dish that I have just finished, I recognize that there is very little rice left. Shifting my gaze from the plate in front of me I see there are a number of children walking past, each carrying 5 liter water filled containers on their heads, with one hand on the canister and the other to carry a plastic bag full of wild mangoes. As they walk on, a middle age woman stops them and quietly takes a mango.

While strolling along the beach, I run across a scene where a group of women are walking to a small boat carrying things like rice, wild mangoes and dirty old bottles of water. I am aware that they go in hopes of gathering some shell food. Minutes after first observing them they are out to sea, another woman, apparently an outsider, paddles around to sell various edible odds and ends; each item is contained in a small package. Her arrival attracts and draws elders including men who are returning from a long day at sea to buy one or two items of those goods. Some children look on with wistful eyes because they cannot afford to buy anything.

Suddenly a clear memory of a reddish-haired girl I saw recently comes to my mind. She risked being hurt by walking along the beach scattered with broken bottles and sharp pebbles. I was fearful she would be injured; but she was quite indifferent to the situation. This proved to me how empty stomachs condition behavior. Starvation is more threatening than those dangers created by the sharp edges of broken bottles or stones.

Only two days before, I had met Kanjana and her friends; Or, Nuy, Yarch, Lek and Ple at The Children's Care Foundation. We sat for a long time discussing a mixture of the ongoing problems that existed there, from small trifling things to the big issues such as garbage, potable water, health, sanitation, the environment, land title deeds, identification cards and issues to do with nationality. At first sight these problems may sound irrelevant to the basic needs of the Morgans but when considered carefully these difficulties inevitably relate to their quality of life.

As if there were not enough problems at hand, when the Tsunami disaster of the 26<sup>th</sup> December happened, it brought in a huge influx of aid from many quarters. At the same time some diseases returned that we believed had been already eradicated, such as Asiatic cholera. It is back and now widely spread again in Morgan communities with many people in hospital.

An even more severe problem now is that some of the Morgans have been attacked by pirates despite the fact that they live in poverty. These are some of the problems that Kanjana and her friends have been witnessing throughout their year of work here.

It was quite striking when I first arrived and found that nearly everyone here was suffering from skin diseases. The diseases were so serious that some of the elderly had rashes that made it look as though their skin had been scalded with boiling water, some girls needed to have their hair shaved off. As an outsider it was shocking for me to see, but I realized that for them the rashes were not so disturbing when compared to the other problems.

At midday, the sun is burning and as it gets hotter and hotter, I can smell the sea along with the gentle ocean breeze. Many young girls I met this morning are amusing themselves by playing at chasing each other on the dirty beach.

In a small shack, some elderly people sit staring at the horizon as if they are waiting for somebody to come back from the sea. They might be waiting for their children who just wander, sailing around within their familiar territory or for those who sometimes take the risk of going out beyond the Thai frontier. No matter where it takes them, their fishing trips and journeys are only for the food necessary for daily life. The ones who return from the sea may bring their relatives food or, in the instance they are laboring on boats, money to maintain their families.

As long as Morgans still need to find food to fight against their worst enemy hunger, other problems will seem much smaller. The most important duty for everyone here is helping to find nourishment for daily life. No one here knows how long this will go on for or who can help them find a way out of this struggle.

### **From ancient hunter to capitalism's prey**

Before the establishment of modern states and their boundaries, traveling by sea meant that Morgans were able to sail to places like India, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and the many islands that make up the Indonesian archipelago, hunting sea creatures for food and engaging in commerce for the other things they needed. Their way of life reflected their close connection with the sea and they mostly lived off it and had knowledge of the sea currents, tides, seasons and all the varieties of sea-life. One could say they were expert fishermen and would never have to face starvation because of it.

As the years passed, a change that negatively impacted the Morgans occurred, as the abundance of natural resources gradually decreased

because the capitalist economy had expanded to and influenced every part of the planet, including the Morgans own world.

The distinctive qualities of the Morgans, endurance and a capacity to sail in the face of strong winds and rainstorms, have led to them being treated as second class citizens. They are unfairly employed in gathering items for consumer markets of which they have little knowledge. They have become easily exploited by, for instance, being forced to use explosives in gathering fish which endangers their lives.

“One day I was sent to sea to bomb schools of fish but unfortunately my left arm was injured by the explosives being set, afterwards my employer ran away” recounted Parenet, a Morgan man. Despite still having an uninjured right arm, his left is partially missing with wounds that cause him, when he looks at it, constant emotional suffering. He now has to struggle for his living on the high seas for rest of his life. His friends all still work at sea with explosives and are in constant danger of being killed by them, or seized and arrested by the marine police. They are distraught and in despair that they are at such a low point in their lives, many believing that this is retribution for all the prey they have killed. Once they used to be honorable fishermen but now they feel themselves to be victims of the capitalist system.

For Morgans to survive the onrush of changes wrought by the modern world, it is essential that new generations of Morgans learn about their history and their traditional relationship with nature, along with the changing values that increasingly affect new developments around their communities. It is crucial to enable Morgans to ask for the appropriate government support that will assist them in leading more prosperous lives. This should include dealing with the issues of illegal workers, human rights and territorial waters, since they now belong to two modern states, Thailand and Burma.

The situation of the Morgan Parenet has been reported in the general press many times but it is not seen to be dramatic enough to interest outsiders. However, his community is suffering a dreadful fate over its health, economy, Human Rights and education. A solution to this situation will not happen without the interest of concerned social organizations and NGO's; it really needs an effective intervention and good coordination from every sector of the country, since they are Thais like us regardless of the lack of ID cards.

### **Morgan self-view through the camera lens**

At midday of June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2004 at the provincial cinema in the town of Ranong, there was an unusual atmosphere when a large crowd of Morgans mixed with visitors from Bangkok as well as government officials, teachers and their students, together with volunteers from nearby areas. The Morgans came from Thabtawan of Phang-Nga's Takua Pa, Bahn Tungdab of Kuraburi

district, and most of the Morgans from Koh Lao of Ranong's Muang district. Everyone was there to see a feature film on the Morgans. Inside the movie theatre were many retail shops selling paintings, giving away drinks and offering information.

This event of the 'Morgan Short Movies project' of Action Aid might have been the first opportunity for many Morgans to see a movie at a cinema in town. They received a warm welcome from the hosts and volunteers of the event who mostly came from Bangkok. Besides this, they were happy to be treated in a respectful way by the group of young people there, greeting them with a *wai* then taking them to their seats as honored guests.

Before the film was shown, there had been an opening ceremony where an official of the Provincial Security Development Office was invited to speak. The ceremony had opened when a little boat with brightly lit candles was launched into the sea. As soon as this was over, an MC invited the participants to come up to the stage and show off and mimic Morgan demeanor and play question games. This pre-film activity brought a great deal of fun to the occasion along with an awakening of their curiosity for more self understanding.

The first short film to be shown was called 'Morgan, right?' produced by the Green Team. The plot of the story was about a homosexual man receiving a picture postcard about Morgan villages from one of his friends from Koh Lao and set off for the Morgan village seen in the postcard. First he dropped by Koh Pra Thong thinking it was the one in the postcard. But his expectations were turned upside down due to the realities of what he encountered compared to what he had seen in the postcard and expected to find.

The 'Morgan, right?' film made many of its audience laugh a lot and feel sad at the same time, thanks to the talented star of the film and Koh Pra Thong's supporting cast of villagers, particularly Aunty Keab who later to her amazement became a star.

The second film was about the reality of the Morgan way of life at the present time in Thabtawan village of Takua Pa District. It told a story of Kobang or Mister Mongkol Harn Talay who had to his great fortune lived a very happy life in the bosom of his family. The scenes of the sea and of the town were set dramatically against each other and so was the self sufficient way of life.

And the last film shown was about the real Morgans of Koh Lao in Ranong presented by Mr Suparb Pramongkit. It highlighted their suffering and fate in some facets of their life.

After seeing the three films, the Morgans were able to see themselves as others saw them through their lenses and cameras, helping Morgans and

their way of life to become more accessible to people from outside their culture. Of all the films seen “Morgan, right?” was outstanding and much appreciated by the audience that day, owing to the realistic dialog and the leading actors.

The three films also created an appreciative atmosphere between the Morgans, Morglans and all the visitors by showing positive perspectives of Morgan origins, realizing the ambition of the event held by Action Aid Organization even though it was so short.

### **Old Hede: the history of Bahn Thong Khed Thong Toh**

In the evening of one rainy day, after a monsoon storm and sea waves had been battering the coast line of the village for a couple of days, old Hede Hahnthalea was talking to the author. “At the beginning of this village we lived altogether at *Thong Khisi* said the head of the local rites and ceremonies for the spirits of Bahn *Thong Khed Thong Toh*, now known as Thabtawan village. *Thong- Khisi* itself started as a mine called *Rong Khisi*, which later developed into the Cho Pong mine with lots of digging machines being used along with conveyor belts and sifting systems.”

“Previous to the mining era there used to be forests here and our home had been called *Thong Toh*. Located opposite was *Thong Kloy*, and farther away was *Thong Khimon*, on the sites over there *Na Yaow* and *Nop Pu* and up on the high ground was *Thong khed*.”

Several old villages’ names had been mentioned, before the old man let out a deep sigh as if he was remembering his younger days, names which were different to the ones used today. “In those days we had a lot of *Hua Kloy*, *Hua Monnoon* and *Hua Mon Ngew* growing in the soil. We used to feed on them”, continued old Hede, talking about the kind of food they had eaten to survive.

Thabtawan village was now completely covered with the thin fog that comes after rain. At the old man's home his wife came out and joined in the conversation to add some more details, while her husband seemed absorbed in the story being described, trying to inspire the listener's sense of his village in those days. Then the legendary story of the village began.

“Our legend has it that once, a long time ago; there was a king who wanted the lion king's hide to be laid as a blanket on his throne. To accomplish the task and fulfill his desire three thousand men were mobilized and sent off to hunt for the creature. Most of the men came from the surrounding villages, Bang Nieng, Bang Sak and Bang Lude. Joining them were the best three warriors in the area, Po Ta (uncle, grandpa, older man) Sampun, Po Ta Khu Hoh and Po Ta Moh. On reaching the shores of the ocean, they all saw a

leaf of the bo tree looking like the figure of a maiden in the sea. Those who craved for what they thought was a maiden jumped into the sea and were killed by a school of fish, though they had been told to stop their action by Po Ta Sampun. On board the ship only the three brothers and a group of their guardians were left alive and they continued on the mission and completed it.”

“They obtained the lion king’s hide for their king. But on the return journey, as they were attempting to bring its pelt to the king, a giant wave swept in and all of the guardians who kept watch on the skin were washed away in all directions into the depths of the sea. Eventually the three brothers found themselves beached in three different places where today you will find the commemoration shrines for them: Po Ta Sampun’s at the edge of Bang Sak beach, Po Ta Khu Hoh’s at Bang Nieng beach and Po Ta Moh’s at Bang Lude (*Bang Moh*), where they are now regarded as venerated places by the Morgans.”

This fable has been told from generation to generation by Morgans. It is now impossible to know, if it has any truth in historical fact. But there would have been a moral lesson underpinning the story in some way.

The second story about two Morgan ancestors called Smi and Kuning was eagerly presented at about 3 pm when the last rain of the day started to pour down. It began with a challenge between Smi and Kuning who were in competition for the hand in marriage of Mother Khao. Smi lived at Bahn Nahm Khem, while Kuning lived at Khao Lampi. They both challenged each other in the Saba shooting competition. The game started with Smi taking shots at and hitting all ten hung Saba but Kuning missed them all. As a result, Mother Khao was sent to marry and live with Smi at Bahn Nahm Khem. This story was told just to talk about and describe the leisure activities the people of those days had and could share, and about the story of Mother Khao who has since developed a mythological status amongst Morgans.

Old Hede with his wife sitting beside him was now reminiscing joyfully about the history of his village, whilst waving his arms around. “Prior to the period of mining hereabouts, there used to be a dense forest. Then, mines started to appear here and there and were used by local villagers as air raid shelters during World War II. Later on, they started farming in paddy fields due to the food shortage. They continued to live in this way until the Thabtawan Hotel was established in the neighboring area.”

According to his account, the villagers began to move to the nearby sea to get away from the mining site. Then the paddy fields gradually disappeared and along the sandy beach coconut tree orchards began to grow to replace the old forested area. “Furthermore, around Bao Rai village or old *Thong Khed* rubber and palm trees were introduced and begun to be grown by many villagers while palm and rubber orchards of some investors advanced

into the area. Even today, as you can see, you are surrounded by rubber tree plantations.”

As the old man was telling the story of his village, his face reflected alternately with faint smiles to go with his memories of the old days and anxious eyes regarding the present situation. It seems that now hardly anyone speaks of *Thong Khed* or *Thong Toh* whose memory is now hidden by Thabtawan village, whose name is comparatively well-known because it is the name of the first hotel located in Thabtawan alley. Soon after the arrival of the Thabtawan hotel, the village in which the hotel is situated was named Thabtawan by the government. And the old name plate of Bahn Nai Tung was left standing, ignored, on a small street outside the village.

It had just stopped raining and nearby the sandy ground was overflowing with rain water, the monsoon wind blew and waves periodically crashed onto the beaches drowning out the voices of any visitor. The unusual wind was bringing up and spreading new white sand onto the beaches that made some of them look better. New shops, bungalows and resorts have mushroomed in the post-tsunami period. The feeling of grief seemed to have lessened its hold, as if the rain were about to cease and a new brighter day was about to take its place. Just like when we have to be prepared for changes to life in relation to nature, and all of us have to be prepared for that.

### **Changing times at Bahn Bon Rai Nai Thong**

Aunt Larb is the best known housewife in Bahn Thong village because she is the one who is on the front line serving special guests of the community from any organization that arrives there. She is a social activist, too, who gets involved in actions no matter where they take place, even in Bangkok (such as the Free Trade Agreement protests).

The location of her house is significant because she lives near the Child Center and the Dome grocery shop where important visitors drop by to receive her warm welcome. “Here, where you are standing, is called Bahn Nai Thong, where coconut trees were once grown in orchards to replace the local paddy fields. When I was young everyone lived here in a friendly way”. As the details were recounted, her face was turning bright like mushroom blossoms. “She likes to travel and has been to every part of the country (Thailand) and is really fond of seeing places”, confirmed a young volunteer devoting himself to the Tsunami affected areas.

Pointing to a village up on the hill opposite her place, about 2 kilometers away, she said, “They worked on the plantations, so their village was called Bahn Bon Rai. It once used to be a source of food for all Morgans and Morglans from different islands in the post World War II period.”

The traditional rites in the community vary; ancestor spirit worship, supernatural beliefs, the forest, paddy fields and the sea that have existed all around them for so long have all had their impact. The Morgans value the preservation of the natural world very deeply. The ancient rites were a combination of several kinds of accumulated experiences, local wisdom and a concept of sharing responsibility for the world with nature. Aunt Larb was one of the community leaders to perform the rites. "She was believed to be the medium for Po Ta Sampun", added the volunteer.

Meanwhile, Aunt Larb mentioned that many people questioned why Morgans and Morglans celebrated their 10<sup>th</sup> Month Festival by sitting on the ground around the square to ask people for alms. Aunt Larb replied in a gentle voice that it was part of their tradition to remind them of and pay respect to their ancestors. It was regarded the most important event for Southern Thai citizens. Some also saw Morgans from the Surin Islands who wished to join in the event arriving by boat.

In fact, this event was held for all the generations of Morgans to experience Thai ancient traditions as being worthwhile enough for them to begin to adapt them for their own. The Morgans and Morglans did alms begging because their ancestors had encouraged them to do it. Whether this is right or wrong, this kind of event can show to the Morgans the Thai spirit of generosity by sharing and giving things to them.

As for the land issue, she said that land had never been sold outside the family for many generations but given out to family members who inherit it to help set up their new lives. Whilst saying this, she recognized that there were many conflicts still in the court of law. There were the conflicts generated between the villagers and the land developers who had tried to claim rights to the land by referring to their claims originating from the time of the mining era concessions. This is a problem that causes the villagers here a lot of worry; as the villagers do not know much about the laws relating to the land.

There was one case in an area behind the village which was a large open space without plantations of any kind. It had been used as a fishing boat park for a long time, before it was unfairly claimed by a developer one day. He put up a land ownership signboard and enclosed the area with a barbed wire fence. His actions urged the villagers into action to save and protect the land, where they now collectively grow trees there for the next generation.

In some people's eyes Aunt Larb might be not much more than a link between the community and outsiders or a medium for ancient spirits and her previous generations, which in these modern days may not seem very significant. In fact, anything that helps the community to continue living with the differences between the the world of spirits, the supernatural and the modern world of technology and materialism in a balanced way, is essential.

## **One day at Bahn Thabtawan**

Walking across the village tarmac road in the afternoon on bare feet to a big house on the other side that was now rented as the organizations' network center, Rong was told to fetch a lawn mower from the house next to Dome's grocery shop by the center's Financial Department officer. His response was only a nod as he streaked off for it, along the street under the hottest heat of the mid day's sunlight. With a black and glossy complexion, this giant-like figure full of muscles seemed as though he were a warrior from the old days.

He was an example of the Morglans unique physical appearance, particularly in his facial characteristics and was easily recognizable by others. He was also very helpful and could please almost everyone by getting things done right and satisfactorily. "Never ever been a word of complaint about him" added the financial officer.

In the community developer's eyes he was highly regarded as a very nice assistant and coordinator for some aspects of local affairs concerning the center's projects. He was unmarried in contrast to many friends of his age who were already trapped in the world of great burdens; he did not care about that, although at the present he was raising pigs for a living, sponsored by the community developer.

It has been said that Morglan people are not hard-working enough, but Rong and the other Morglan men and women who start to work very early in the morning prove that the saying is not true. Their jobs consist mostly of independent employment, building, working at hotels and resorts or catching seafood. They never mind much about what kind of work they do and are possessed of admirable qualities like honesty and perseverance.

The harsh light of the sun was not fading, neither was Rong's energy, "Banc hasn't got any lawn mowers, ma'am" said Rong to the officer. "So can you go and look for the other one at her house behind, would you? Fetch it if you can get it." Without delay, he jumped across the street towards the other side.

## **Morgan children at Malteser, Billy and the Four Region Slums Communities**

One evening, as a gentle breeze was drifting off the sea, Tom and some of his Morglan friends who were about his age went cycling along the tarmac road just behind their village, through the coconut plantations and the still standing dead pine trees. Not very long after, they reached a pine tree range at the edge of the coast. As the sun was setting, they hurried to get back to their homes which lay beyond a village nameplate that read Ni Thung; then they turned towards Bahn Thabtawan off to one side of the highway. They never ever paid any attention to the village's name plate.

Tom used to hear his mother, aunts and cousins call the three communities in the local area after their benefactors: one, built of identically bamboo-woven walls, the **Four Region Slums** (after a Thai NGO The Four Region Slum Network), **Billy** (after Willi Kothny, the Olympic swordsman, who founded an association called Willi hilft) to commemorate a kind and gentle foreigner who donated his own financial support to build it and **Malteser** (after an international NGO), for the other community nearby to remind the dwellers of an international organizations' support for them. The children became used to calling those communities by these names in the same way that Bahn Thabtawan is called after the Thabtawan Hotel and Thabtawan alley.

Tom was studying at a school not very far from where he lived. In the evenings after school classes, he had an additional class with some university student volunteers at the Child Center. They took good care of the children's welfare with all kinds of aid, comfort and toys to play with. Some times they set up educational/entertainment camps and organized games and took them on community excursions to trace their historical roots. While participating in the camps they came face to face with materialistic ideas that communicated a powerful message tempting them into what is called 'civilization' or 'modernization', by copying the fashionable dress of their foster brothers and sisters, the volunteers. Tom and his friends really enjoyed being at the camps, since they learned much about the traditional and modern ways of life. It was hoped that, as time passed, they would be able to sort them out and pick the one best suited for them.

In the next 5 years Tom will finish his primary school study and perhaps be continuing in higher education. By then, the villages might have changed their names to the ones familiar to people and our world further advanced in its technological progress. However, it is still hoped that reminders of the traditional way of life can be kept alive for the kids with the help of the older generation of Morglan people, including old family lineages and communal rituals as well as the activities from the camps and practical guidance from the Children's Center.

No matter what modifications take place in the community, may their Morglan spirits and souls never change. Let us wait and see how brave their hearts will be in the face of the ever transforming materialistic world, one thing we can do as outsiders is to give them support and hope that the magic emanating from their ancient ancestors' spirits is enough of a guard to them all.

## The Po Ta Sampun annual celebration: Tapowonda

At a spot by a large pine tree on the edge of Bang Sak's beach, stands a robust but small sized sacred shrine that might be mistaken for a public rest-house by outsiders. In fact, this site is the heart and soul of Thabtawan Morgans' ancient ancestors' spirit gathering, holy Po Ta Sampun. There are two other holy halls in nearby villages, holy Po Ta Khu Hoh hall at Bang Nieng and holy Po Ta Moh hall at Bang Moh, Bang Lud being its alternative name.

The Po Ta Sampun ceremony is specially performed by a venerated person from the community called Father (*Por Mor*). 4 wooden pillars covered in cooking oil are made in different sizes, of which the tallest one is reserved for the father to climb up. When the ritual starts, the Father gives permission to the Po Ta Sampun mediums to behave as if they were animals representing a large snake (*Naga*), a tiger, a common snake or a bird with the appropriate animals' sounds.

Then the Father makes a sprint for the tallest oily post to climb up, followed by the others (usually 3 or 4 in number, but not more than 5 in any year). All of them perform the same action: They climb up to reach the top of the pole; unfasten their white cloth robes to use as a way of tying themselves to the top of the pillar; then taking the flag fastened to the top, twirl it around their heads three times, and then slide back down the pole to the ground in one movement, where the event participants have to catch them safely; otherwise there could be some bad luck or unpleasant events occurring in their village. An unsuccessful attempt could send the animal-like mediums scurrying off into the woods or even repeat the pillar climbing again. When the ritual is over, they would all be taken to rest on prepared bamboo beds to recover their normal states of mind.

The annual ritual celebration of holy Po Ta Sampun is held every fourth month of the year in woods close to the village. In some instances this might not be possible, so the sixth month is an option to be used instead. Food and other items prepared for the event; grilled chicken, sticky rice, handmade bamboo cooked rice, a local alcoholic drink, incense sticks, candles, popped rice, incense (*Kamyarn*), field tortoises, Piper betel (*Makplu*), and some pink edible lime (*Poon*) to be presented to the holy spirits are traditional to the ceremony.

The worshipping might take a whole night from very early evening until not later than 5 am the next morning. Later on that day Father commences the *Wonda* spiritual rite for 3 houses each day. Preparing for the rite the house host cooks grilled chicken and boils field tortoises in the woods behind the house. The cooked offerings have to be put on beds outdoors. Under the beds are placed the remains of chicken feathers and tortoise shells as evidence. The collection of offerings include *Ki Kwang* sweetmeat, bamboo

cooked rice, and some simmered red sugar for the meal as well as sticky rice, cooked tortoise and alcoholic drinks.

In addition there are some wickerwork baskets with ceramic and *Kha Por* leaf bowls inside. Once placed, it was not allowed to change their positions in any way. Father, during his chanting performance, did not allow the offerings be eaten, until they were thrown aloft (for the audience). But then they were eaten up in a very short time. The ceremony continued on very loudly, especially when Father cried *Wondae*.

### **To the mountains from the sea: Tracing the history of Tabpla's Morglans**

One grey day, when we were making home visits, an old Morgan man called Sa Navarak told me about a destructive disaster he experienced long ago in his life. The damage was so bad that a big tree was broken in half. Then his father had moved onto the highlands of Mount Lampi. However, it was not quite clear what kind of disaster the old man was talking about. It might have been a dreadful storm, "surely it had to have been some kind of natural phenomena", I said to myself.

By that time, Sa Navarak was pointing to a bamboo-woven-walled house on brick foundations and said that was the home he had lifted onto its base himself. The other house close to it was the one that friends had made for him. In fact, he had two houses but the latter was built by support groups. Fixed on its front gable was a symbol of the support organizations that helped to build it.

"Hey...why don't you two come in and join in eating my *Ka-Eu* seeds", shouted another old man from a distance. He was sitting down enjoying the fried *Ka-Eu* seeds with his grand son. As we approached them, old Sa asked me to try some. So I picked up a piece of wood and used it to crack one open to get at its inside, "If I knew you were coming I'd have prepared a fine dinner for you, as we set off for the sea to catch fish every day", the old man expressed with regret. After that, we left them for the house next door.

We'd visited 5 or 6 homes so far, grocery shop. "Have a drink?" asked old Sa and I shook my head in reply. He went on telling his story after a glass had been filled with an alcoholic drink. "My father was Indian-Indonesian and he was really fond of drinking, he got married with my mother who was a Morgan."

When he had finished his drink, we left the bar and strolled along by the rubber tree plantations to appreciate the view of the Mount Lampi range which lay high up in front of us at a great distance. The foothills of the mountains were becoming cloaked in a white thin mist. We were passing the

evening with a leisurely walk when we met with a group of 4 or 5 family men walking and riding on their bikes heading for the community harbor. They spoke to Sa Navarak about something and he said to me. "We have been asked to help them with a broken down boat engine."

As night was falling and the moon about to come up, I walked together with my companion towards Talungjak harbor. There, a holy shrine was positioned with two flag poles on each side, together with a single storey hut which was used by fishermen to take a rest in and keep their fishing gear safe. Fishing boats were anchored there; and one of them did not work because of a faulty engine which needed to be removed for repair.

During a conversation between two men swimming in the water, whilst working on the broken engine, I heard the word *Kabang* a lot, which I later found out was a type of boat. Taking out the boat engine with a *Kalak* (a type of jack) was difficult work for everyone, since it was very heavy; a few minutes later and coming to our aid appeared two more fishermen who had just returned from the sea.

After the removal of the boat engine we continued on our way to visit at his home to have a dinner that had already been prepared by his son, Tu. The dinner was prepared with a curry bought from the local evening market and some boiled edible seashells. Sitting around the dining table with Tu, and his father, old Sa, I was given a bit of a shock by a shriek emanating from an argument between two men with a limpet growing business. However, I could sense the friendly atmosphere on the tones of voices between them, even though they were having a very loud argument. This was definitely a meal that could not be bought at a restaurant.

When dinner was finished, old Sa showed me his ID card. It read 'Mr. Sa Navarak born in 2478 (Buddhist calendar). And his address was 29/5 Moo 8, Tai Muang, Phang Nga's Muang district. By now, he had to be 71 years old. In spite of that age, he really looked stronger than many men my age; evidenced by the help he gave to his neighbor in helping to repair the boat engine earlier that evening.

There was still something on his mind that he had tried so far unsuccessfully to talk about. Through his sighs, my sense told me it could be about his daughter's death on the day of the Tsunami or that his son in-law was likely to change his old religious beliefs, his orphaned grandson's future and the expensive cost of living and so on. These worries were expressed through his sighs, reflecting his suffering.

Continuing on, he told me about the local people's occupations and how most of them were rubber tree plantation workers and palm growers. Old Sa was one of the latter with his own small plantation. Others traditionally considered themselves fishermen, shellfish businessmen, and fishery

business owners. Meanwhile, some had been determined to work with *Chams* - outsiders whose origins were not Morgan - in nearby villages or towns. Once old Sa and his son used to be employed as building workers but they gave it up and returned to their homes and the sea.

That night I went back to the community housing for the NGO members founded by Chote (Wichote Kraithep), a social development worker from the Wildlife Fund Thailand. Sleeping there meant following the regulations set up for everyone wanting to stay; visitors could have a night's sleep and talk about things in the community sitting room. As old Sa and I were taking our bedding to the hall of residence, Tu arrived and wanted to speak to me about the next day's plans. We agreed that old Sa and Tu would take me to sea with them but in a separate boat; I was told to get onboard the motor boat belonging to Tu as old Sa would leave in his paddle boat.

### **Later next morning...**

By the time I got up, at around 6 am, Tu said that his father had gone out already and I had to go with him. The implements for catching fish and crabs such as sharp axes, gallon containers for the crabs caught and a bottle of fresh water were already on the boat. We set off at around 8 am moving by narrow canals through a dense mangrove forest. It was low-tide so we could just manage to wade through the muddy fields along the canals that lead to a main stream. There, Tu showed me a fleet of boats called *Plete* that were donated during the post tsunami recovery; looking at them with the sun shining in my face they appeared to be painted light blue.

Direct sunlight was so difficult to endure that I tried to keep myself in the shade of the mangrove trees. I could see that this was a perfect environment for all the tiny sea animals; shrimps, shells, crabs and fish. The trees also grew in a thick wood that could protect the village from the power of a tsunami's disastrous wave. Thanks to the dense mangrove forest, the village was not as hard hit as many had feared at the time, yet countless sea animals were destroyed by the waves.

The sides of the canals where the dense mangrove trees grew, was metaphorically, a gold mine for the Tabpla villagers. The mixture of vegetation and mud was a place where sea animals of all kinds could lay and hatch their eggs safely, forming a shelter where the food chain was able to exist in a perfect natural ecosystem. Tabpla village could have disappeared from the map of Thailand if it had not been saved by the mangrove trees. The local fishermen here are aware and very conscious of the importance of the mangrove forests and rarely did I see traces of deforestation, only signs of preservation over the entire area.

I was taken on board one of the *Plete* boats to sail past several different fish ponds and dense mangrove forests, until we reached somewhere close to the mouth of Tablamu gulf. There was a very beautiful view of Nok island far

off in the distance. On my right hand side and just behind me was Mount Lampi with a slight mist covering its peak. The picture of the Morglan going about their business catching fish in perfect harmony with the beauty of nature fascinated me.

I kept alert with my attention ahead when the boat engine slowed to stop and floated toward the entrance of the mangrove forest. During the way through, small branches of mangrove trees were cut away to clear our path. Various types of sea plants in different colors were to be seen. Tu also showed me a tree called *Boon* from which the bark was used to dye fishing nets. I looked at the tree in excitement, realizing that I should have known that there would be a greater variety of trees in the forest besides the mangrove.

When Tu realized that he had only caught two brown and green *Khi Kai* crabs he shook his head in despair and disappointment, after having returned them to the sea as they were not the 'black' crabs that he had wanted. Later we paddled our boat to the other side of the mangrove forests where he hoped he could catch what he wanted. When he caught some 'black' crabs in the *Yong* device; he put them in gallon containers and took them to the boat, before he began to tie them skillfully with a string, as though they were thieves being seized and handcuffed by the police.

"This is a *Mo* crab", Tu said pointing to a black crab looking like a stone in motion. We proceeded from *Yong* to *Yong* by *Plete* boat paddling in between using the engine. I saw a creature on a tree which I was later told was known as a *Nam Prik* shell. To think! Shellfish not only live in the muddy water but could live on trees as well, amazing! After collecting crabs from all the *Yongs* we saw that we only had twenty black crabs, not a very good catch for the day. Tu said this might be due to the tides.

Before returning through the mangrove water canals, we had stopped at Tu's fishing ponds which were under construction and we dropped off ten blocks of foam which were given to him by his friend, Chote. As I was looking at the view of the mangrove forests and the sea, the crabs were attempting to escape from their imminent fate; I had an uncomfortable feeling that I would not want to eat seafood any longer, since I could feel the fear of being hunted for food by a predator in the guise of a human.

I could liken the captured crabs to Morglans who used to evacuate from the sea during disasters to settle in the mountains, only to return to live on the sea once again when the dangers had passed. It seemed that the volume of natural resources was under threat when some city capitalists had attempted to claim local land for their own benefit. In light of this, one might question how the Morgans can continue to live in harmony with their natural resources and use them wisely and at the same time conserve them for the next generation.

## **The treasure in water and soil: Morgans who work on plantations**

Today the Morgans and Morglans of Surin and Lao Islands are still living off the sea, although some from Surin Island are determined to earn a living from the tourism industry. However, unlike those from Lao Island in Ranong Province, they have been dependent on the sea and boats for a long time. A few of them, however, are exploited and tricked into working for greedy investors by illegally fishing for schools of fish with explosives.

In contrast, Morglan people at Bahn Tabpla and Thabtawan villages have been using their natural resources well since World War II. With Tin being a natural resource they were once rich in. At first the tools they used for the mining were just hand-held agricultural weeding implements. Later mining boats were brought in to work off the coast, along with heavy mining machines on the shore, which were developed to sift the ore containing the tin.

So much has changed now from the past, when locals could make a good living by mining minerals. The mining industries were all controlled by investors, most of whom were Chinese who directly managed their businesses with the locals, including Morglans as their employees. When the mining phase ended, the concession areas were still under the strict controls initiated by the same investors. They changed and used the land for specific purposes and discouraged local participation in decision making.

Aunt Larb told me that it was during the post World War II period, when Morglans started to learn how to cultivate their land following a shortage of food supplies. Mostly they worked on farms near the sea or on nearby hills. Deforestation started to impact the locals and new methods of farming contributed to new beliefs and traditions for the Morglan people; ancient spirit worshipping and the fond belief that tortoises are related to a natural means of getting rid of pests and weeds. These new ceremonies were all related to making Morglans' lives better. While Morglans knew how to produce food from crops for themselves, Morgans knew very little about this. However, they still made a living by gathering food in the forest and the sea.

Another detail I learned on my walk with old Sa in Tabpla was that much of the area had been used to grow coconut, rubber and palm trees, when the land speculators first arrived. One section of land behind Tabpla used to be a field belonging to Ni Thung village. But it now had changed to a coconut orchard belonging to an investor.

As the numbers of Morglans had been increasing, they refused to sell their land to speculators and only shared it with the children of the family. Most of the lands belonging to investors were the areas granted by the government as mining concessions. Even though Morglans had more experience in living on the land, they still had very few businesses for managing the natural

resources on it. However, on the sea this was very different. The sea was an element the Morglans still felt at home in. Efficiently preserving its resources was second nature to them, understanding that their future well-being was dependent on how they farmed the sea and appreciating the fact that their forefathers had dwelled there in the past.

### **Changes brought about by the Tsunami tragedy**

Money and valuables used to be of little interest to the Morgans while they continued their traditional way of living. They lived simple, sufficient and happy lives together, unexposed to greed and selfishness, displaying only hospitality and sympathy. They knew little about how to cultivate the land, since they were used to living off the sea for centuries.

At Lao and Surin islands, Morgans were unfamiliar with growing rice and vegetables and there had never been any traditions related to harvesting. The only culture they had, concerned the sea, fishing boats and the winds. They also possessed a great ability to read the moon and stars and knew when to go to sea to catch certain species of fish and other sea animals.

The Morglans of Thabtawan and Tabpla villages are the only group to have used the land a lot since the crisis of World War II and the following recession. For the Morglans, this was not a sustainable way of life. But when the crisis ended, they adjusted their livelihood with other kinds of work bringing in good wages, so that they were able to afford some necessary and sometimes even luxury items.

10 years before the Tsunami of 2004, a flood of capital investment along with tourists and speculators came into their community and recklessly changed their traditional livelihood. From then on money became much more influential in their lifestyle, this was apparent when they sold tourists souvenirs and received a lot of money from them or the way they were determined to work for commercial fishing interests.

The more money they could make, the more luxury items the money was spent on, soft and alcoholic drinks as well as cigarettes for instance. Their eating habits changed and addiction to alcohol, smoking, energy drinks, gambling along with trafficking concerns also became an issue as problems grew that their traditional culture was not used to dealing with.

The Tsunami of 2004 left genuine poverty in its wake, as a massive amount of natural resources were completely destroyed. More than that, the Morglans' ability to earn an independent living was undermined. They could have regained what they had lost for so long; strength, self-sufficiency and a recovering of a lost traditional lifestyle, but for the past 10 years hotel and resort businesses had been increasingly taking over their way of life.

Shortly after the Tsunami, the Thai government allocated some financial support to the affected areas, so that they could resume their enterprises. Some people thought this was a good development, but not others, who had learnt their lessons in having lived an unfamiliar lifestyle that was vulnerable to natural disasters, leaving them in a difficult situation afterwards, especially if history were to repeat itself.

### **Cham – A double-edged sword for Morgan culture**

'*Cham*', '*Sam*' or even '*Siam*' is a word derived from Siam (Thailand) and is widely used by Morgans/Morglans as a nickname for Thai people and visitors coming from the cities. A long time ago ancient Morgans were nomads, sailing on the high seas in boats called *Kabangs* and contact with people from outside their group was rarely made. During the modern era of 'Globalization', '*Chams*' and Morgans started to make more contact through the increase of individual travel. Among those who started to travel more regularly at that time were merchants, fishermen, government officers, researchers, community development helpers, and tourists. Things started to change as people traveled more often and commerce as well as their cultures began to spread and exchange with one another.

Far off Sapanpla harbor in Ranong's Mueang district, is located a small island called Lao Nok which can easily be reached within half an hour's journey by a long-tailed boat. Much farther away off shore there is another island called Surin where contact between '*Chams*' and Morgans used to be limited. But when the tourism industry arrived and National parks were established, '*Chams*' and foreigners started to arrive as tourists.

Other groups of people such as government officers from the Department of Forestry, merchants, shop owners, resort owners and enterprise investors became a cause of big changes in the Morgans' way of life; eating habits, for example, were affected. Before, they only ate traditional food. But now, all kinds of modern consumables like semi-instant noodles and colorful junk snacks have become preferable.

Local people in the two villages of Thabtawan and Tabpla, in Phang Nga province, started to have contact and cooperation in working with '*Chams*' in the Sea Mining period before World War II. Later on things began to change and they had to learn about and experience new cultures from the outside. Morgans and Morglans in the two villages started to improve their diets and looked for laboring jobs in constructing buildings. In general the jobs they had in the past working the sea mining industry changed to managing rubber plantations. In addition, they learnt to dress in more colorful clothes while in the villages on Koh Lao and Surin Island the children still ran around naked.

After the Tsunami disaster, we saw an array of all kinds of aid; emergency help, rehabilitation projects, monetary compensation along with venture capital support from several support organizations, groups, foundations and educational institutions from around the world. The help was so great that it would have swamped the Andaman shore if it were physically able to be touched. However, not every victim received some form of aid.

Along with the aid came the '*Chams*'. They were mostly land development volunteers, charity workers, religious volunteers, donors, researchers and disaster developers from different parts of Thailand, as well as from many foreign support organizations. They worked generously and did many useful things for the disaster victims. However, due to the limitations of time the roots of the Morgans' traditional culture and their language were not easily accessible and were too difficult to understand for the aid movement. Since all the aid work had to be done immediately, the aid organizations had to learn a lot of valuable lessons in a short time.

The aid movement affected the Morgans' traditional way of life partly because most of them stopped being self-sufficient and started to rely on the help given by the aid organizations, while a few of them continued to live in their old self-sufficient way.

After the Tsunami, '*Chams*', especially those working in the field of community development, saw an opportunity to exploit the Morgans by opening shops that sold wasteful or unnecessary things, such as liquor, cigarettes, energy drinks and junk snacks, all likely to create bad habits among the Morgans. Some '*Chams*' coordinated links between Morgans and aid supporters but failed to provide enough participation for local people. The material help given was not distributed to everyone equally. Sometimes local people, though, were able to get supplies through the illegal distribution of aid. A few of the '*Chams*' were caught in a series of corruption incidents involving the storage and selling of black market items.

However, this issue was problematic for the Morgans themselves, because they were uncomfortable in bringing the issue up as some '*Chams*' had been helpful in the coordination of aid distribution. The moral debt that emerged between the '*Chams*' who were well behaved at the beginning of the aid operation and the Morgans prevented them from openly complaining about the situation. Furthermore, '*Chams*' had begun to distribute aid through a credit system to the Morgans who were fooled into thinking that this was a favor to them, even though the aid came from donations provided free by outside agencies. The only thing they felt able to do, was to accept the situation and say nothing.

On the surface, the fact that '*Chams*' volunteered to help Morgans in their time of need seemed very 'generous', however, the issue worth reflecting on here is, who really benefited from the situation. Where was the point of

balance in aid provision benefit? and how can we alter such dilemmas in the future for this kind of situation? The fact that Morgans always kept silent on this sensitive issue meant that 'Chams' jumped to the conclusion that this was acceptable to these people. Finally, it is hoped that in the passing of time, the situation and the lessons learnt from it will prevent repetitions of this from happening in the future.

### **Ideological conflicts between new religions and ancient beliefs**

Today's Morgan culture and way of life conforms in many ways to their ancestors' traditions. Consequently Morgans still have great respect for the natural world all around them and continue to live their lives, depending on the things that nature provides. Respect for nature is embedded in their traditional belief system as seen in most of their age-old ceremonies and rites such as those for launching boats, the *Lorbong* Pillar ceremony and the worshiping of the spirit house of *Po Ta* and a festival for Morgans called the *Tapowondae* rite. These community activities are representative of the ancient way Morgans relate to nature.

To get a clearer picture of this, it is recommended that one should go and visit Thabtawan and Tabpla villages where you can see and appreciate the authentic Morgan way of living in harmony with nature, derived from the unspoiled mangrove forests, paddy fields and communal forests that surround the villages. In contrast to the communities on land are the islands at Lao and Surin where most of the primitive community rites are focused on the sea. There, there is a spirit house symbolizing the deep respect for their ancestors called *San Po Ta* (The sacred spirit house of *Po Ta*) which stands right in the sea located in front of Lao Nok village.

After the Tsunami, a tremendous wave of aid provision replaced the disastrous one at Lao island or Lao village. The communities received a great deal of aid and donations; aid for the relief of emotional and physical suffering. This came from several support organizations. Among them were the religious groups. Most of them worked under the funds provided by various foreign nations. The aid provided many new houses, fishing equipment and student grants. A church building was erected (May 2005) to enable community singing and religious rituals, including baptisms as well as to teach young children languages. This kind of aid was provided for free while some other aid organizations donated semi-circular funds that meant that half of the money given needed to be repaid. A number of Morgans converted to Christianity in order to get aid as a quid pro quo. However, for some of them this occasion was used to embrace Christianity for real. The religious groups also set up some educational services for children. At first this was accepted and appreciated by the community, since it was believed that the teaching activities emphasized secular subjects. However, later on

people found out that the education was mainly for the proselytization of Christianity.

When the religious organizations arrived on the scene, there were many Morgans who still needed support for their health and livelihoods. Some issues around the area of human rights were also outstanding. These new kinds of organizations' response to some aspects of their needs worked very well, especially in providing the materials needed for daily life. The things provided sometimes seemed too much, clothes for children, for example.

The results of interviews done by aid organization officers stationed on Koh Lao in the middle of 2005 showed that some Morgan people still believed in *Ta* and *Yai* spirits. In other words, their ancestor spirits belief held strong even though some had been converted to Christianity for almost a year. This showed that the roots of ancestor worship amongst the Morgans were still very strong and that the ancient beliefs ran very deep. Two forces were in conflict. One was the new religious organizations who accomplished their role quite impressively; especially in helping the Morgans improve their quality of life. The ancient beliefs were another, fulfilling the Morgans' desire to worship the spirits from long ago. Today the ancient beliefs of the Morgans still have a strong hold over the communities, even in the face of our fast changing society. This created uncomfortable inner conflicts that made them feel vulnerable.

The scenario playing out then was seen thus: while some made the decision to change to the new religion, others did not (because they would rather follow their old beliefs and traditions). All in all, an attempt to foster a harmonious relationship between the Morgans' traditional way of life relating to nature and the current situation with Christian conversions should be the appropriate policy.

### **Inner ideological conflicts at Tabpla**

The answer to the question 'Which organization are you from?' that greeted any new aid worker arriving in Tabpla village was not as simple as it sounded. The response enabled the aid worker to obtain a place to stay in the charities' housing to which they belonged. Questions like this could be heard throughout Tabpla village which had become divided into a number of different groups. This was a result of the separate approaches by the many independent development organizations and religious support groups, involving different methodologies, theories and implementation of the aid provided.

One old man from Tabpla said "They [the charity organizations] offered new boats, fishing equipment and also some money when the NGOs cooperated". However, when new houses, schools and community buildings were

reconstructed, they all came in different styles with signs and posters attached to show the names of the aid groups that built them. It also appeared to the Morglans that to receive aid from these religious organizations' it was necessary for them to follow some practices that were contrary to their ancient beliefs and traditions.

“When receiving a lot of money, they bought a pick-up truck” cried the same old man in offering another example about the individuals who had got so much money in financial aid that it could be spent for things other than their immediate needs. This created an unhelpful desire in others for the money that seemed to be on offer for those, who were willing to cooperate. However, in the end many felt that their ancient faiths and their own dignity stopped them. Some of the community's elders felt disappointed when they realized that their descendants were going to become Christians and abandon their Morgan beliefs. No one in the community was able to tell which way of life was the better – the traditional or the modern Christian one. However, before the decision about which was the better option the unity among the community members was undermined and lack of community coordination and togetherness in their activities became apparent.

Finally, it is believed that time can heal all wounds and this religious conflict that has erupted between members of the Morgan community is no exception, given the prevailing strong bond of kinship that underpins Morgan beliefs. Hopefully, it will not be shattered by outside religious influences no matter how effective it is. But we cannot know what will happen in the future if the deep-seated traditional values of the Morglans are diminished to the degree where it can be further undermined by outside spiritual values. This could be a serious threat to Morglan culture including communal intolerance between the different religious followers, unless the next generations can be inspired to a sense of identity, when they learn and acknowledge the great value of their ancient roots.

### **Surin islanders (Surin Morgans)**

The Surin islands are located in Koh Pra Thong of Phang Nga's Kuraburi district, about 37.28 miles off shore. They are the best known Morgan islands; the islands have two Morgan settlements. The village locations are at the edge of dense tropical rain forests; farther towards the ocean are the mangrove forests with fresh water streams flowing into the sea, containing a variety of biological species and natural abundance. It makes these islands essential to the local eco-systems. In 1981 the Department of Forestry of the Thai government officially declared the Surin islands a National Park which includes the whole 135 kilometer-square area covering five islands of different sizes, with the two biggest being the North and South Surin Islands.

Many centuries ago, Morgan ancestors migrated to the Andaman Sea and established their first settlement on Marid Island in today's Burmese territorial waters, Burma has over 800 islands scattered throughout its length all the way down to the Surin and Similan Islands in Thai territorial waters. They lived most of time in house boats called *Kabang*, and on calm days these boats were taken out to sea in order to earn a living. When it came to the monsoon season which lasted about 8 months a year (May – December), they took shelter along the coastal beaches and made the Surin islands their permanent home.

Not only is the eco-system important but also the anthropology of the Morgans. The following is a record of every facet of their culture: livelihood, beliefs, tradition, society and local wisdom. The beauty of sea, coral reefs and simple ways of living that can be found on Surin Island has attracted and fascinated a great number of tourists from around the world who flock there to experience it. The high season starts from November to May and all tourists receive a warm welcome.

People can visit by catching a passenger boat at Kuraburi's wharf for the North Surin islands. Ordinary ferries take 3 – 4 hours to arrive; but less than an hour and a half for speed boats. The large numbers of visiting tourists have caused a change in their livelihood and eating habits; mentioning as some examples energy drinks and the use of luxury items, plastic products and foam that is very unfriendly to environment. These kinds of things were brought in by the tourists. Some think it is not fair for the tourists to be blamed because they were only visiting for the purpose of appreciating the beauty of nature. However, others think some strict rules and regulations from the government should be put in place to preserve the Morgan culture. Again others feel there should not be any rules to limit the potential scope for local Morgan livelihood.

In this world everything changes, and the livelihood of the Morgans has now been transformed. But it might take some time, before it can be seen whether these changes will be beneficial for them or not.

### **Morgans: Tourism, the national park and concerned organizations**

Since 1985 when the first National Park officer came to the area, the volume of tourists has been increasing considerably, particularly during December to May. The National Park once conducted an opinion poll to find out the visitors' attitudes towards the tourist locations around the area. The result of the survey found that over 90 percent of people came for pleasure and to see the beautiful coral reef, 10 percent to rest and relax and to appreciate the surrounding nature as well as to study Morgan livelihood. No one answered that they wished to see what the sea nomads looked like. It is probably a good idea for people not to come just to see what sea gypsies

look like, as though they were strange creatures in a zoo. It is important to treat them as citizens with equal rights to anyone else in Thailand.

Morgans do not know instinctively how to preserve their natural resources. They often become involved in tourism businesses such as being employed as speed boat drivers on tours; or in trading sea shells like conch. Nowadays, the Park has prohibited this kind of exploitation. But we can see the principle of demand-supply economic theory here, since the beautiful conch shells are rare, they are very valuable. Hence, tourists desire them a great deal.

The change has affected Morgans so much that they are worried by their new consumption behavior. An experienced Swiss researcher, Marcello Cartolano from the Myeik Archipelago Project (Research and Integrated Development), expressed his concerns about the case. He thinks it is a very interesting case study for a Morgan group consisting of 3 generations: old, mid and new generations respectively. Some of the younger generation never see *Kabang* boats or catch fish themselves. But many young adults know how to dress fashionably. We are not trying to prevent something called 'civilization' or 'urbanization' but just to point out something called 'self-esteem' and 'self-awareness'. It would have been better if a school subject was taught that is directly related to their cultural background replacing an unnecessary subject.

This is just the view of the author who is an outsider with a certain amount of experiences and lessons gained in different social contexts. Since the community member is so close to the problem they sometimes miss the harmful affects that the changes have, with the consequence that their traditional way of life is becoming weaker and more fragile day by day.

A non-Morgan woman who has devoted herself to social work for decades is Ajarn Narumon Arunothai. One issue she raised was about the habit that Morgans have of begging. She argued that most tourists who arrive in colorful and stylish dress are often assumed to be wealthy by native Morgans. When they are asked, tourists give them things like alcoholic and fizzy drinks, cigarettes and junk snacks which resulted in the endless behavior of begging which eventually changed their eating habits. Morgan children are now addicted to whatever the tourists give to them, such as junk snacks and soft drinks. However, the tourists also bring the Morgans a livelihood. Tourists come to enjoy themselves and to see the Morgan way of life, whilst Morgans raise their standard of living from tourism with the National Park managing the situation.

A team from the Andaman Pilot Study Project of the Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University has been working in the study target area since 1993 and have collected local views from a Morgan group on the topic 'How Morgans Look to the Future'. They have formulated a proposal to submit to the Department of National Parks. The details are as follows:

## **Requests made by Morgans**

'Making a living with conservation work on Surin Island'

For a long, long time, Morgans have lived peacefully and happily with their traditional way of life. But that situation has changed. The Morgans' traditional livelihood is going to vanish from their lives. Working within the regulations set by the National Park, has left the Morgans with only enough resources to get by day to day, but not enough for anything else since the cost of living is so great nowadays. Given the situation outlined above, the Morgans need the relevant government offices to come to their aid with vocational support in order to prevent Morgans from having to work against the strategies of the National Park. We would like the Park provide vocational support in the following ways:

- motorized long-tailed boats,
- garbage collecting,
- trekking and sea diving,
- handiwork.

During the six months that the island is closed during the monsoon season, Morgans would rather be raising fish in netted enclosures than collecting rare conch shells and other things to sell to tourists. So we would like to be a part of the effort that conserves natural resources in order to provide for our future.

Kong Klatalae, September/2002

An organization located on the North Surin islands is the Marine Species Conservation Center. Unfortunately it does not receive much funding. With its few staff it has little power to implement its programs efficiently. However, the center has attempted to inform Morgans about the elimination of destructive forms of fishing, coral collection and turtle hunting. There is a primary school established since 1995 for all Morgans to become literate. In 1997 vocational schooling was offered for everyday use. The school is a branch of Koh Prathong School. It provides free milk for children from the Office of Primary Education, Kuraburi. It has teaching aids and some sports gear donated by tourists. The school encourages its students to get to know their original culture as well as attempting to upgrade the quality of Morgans' lives by means of the education offered.

The situation with local administrative organizations is that their staff are not stable. The government officers working there are frequently ordered to change jobs and even move to new areas. A result is a lack of efficient

continuous cooperation. Moreover, their attitudes towards the locals are predominately negative as they disapprove of the independent nature and identity of the Morgans. 10 years ago the Phang Nga provincial administrator visited the Surin Islands and discussed ID cards for them with local administrators; it took many years until they were able to get them. Recently only another 200 Morgan citizens have received ID cards of their own.

Since outside organizations and tourists have intruded into Morgan communities, the regulations and conditions set for them changed considerably, and their means of livelihood, hence, changed. In the past, they used to travel and live at sea in freedom. Now they are reluctantly living under the control of an outside administration. Apart from the changing situation in their communities, the natural resources they depend on become scarcer each year.

Nevertheless, life must go on; and as more authority and concerned organizations come to the islands; this means more and more regulations. Raising tourists' consciousness on many of these issues is another necessary task and Morgans themselves have a responsibility to improve the quality of their life together with the preservation of their cultural heritage.

### **Kabang boats: The source of Morgan livelihood**

Living on the sea meant that the Morgan way of life has relied on the *Kabang* boat as an indispensable necessity for traveling, as house and shelter, a place for their children to be born and the old to die. Today there are no more of these boats left in existence. So the Andaman Pilot Study Project from the Social Research Institute of Chulalongkorn University decided to build a replica in cooperation with a group of Morgan boat builders. The project recorded the process of making a *Kabang* boat.<sup>2</sup>

A *Kabang* boat has its own distinctive appearance with a noticeable pronged bow and stern. The pronged sections protruding at the bow and stern are very useful as aids to go onboard or disembark. Embarking into the boat from the side is not very easy as its sideboards are made from Rakhm wood which is not strong enough to support a man's weight.

Anthropologists have stated that a *Kabang* boat is considered symbolic of a human being; this is why parts of the boat are named after human anatomy stomach (*Lae-kae*), cheek (*Ta-bin*), neck (*Tu-koh*), shoulder (*Ba-hoy*), ribs (*Tabing*), for example. In this way, the Morgans bring their boats 'to life', presumably as part of a traditional belief that is highly significant in the

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<sup>2</sup> Pictures and a description can be found on the website for the Andaman Pilot Project, [http://161.200.28.201/Andaman/en/way/moken\\_ship.htm#whatis](http://161.200.28.201/Andaman/en/way/moken_ship.htm#whatis)

Morgan spiritual world. Morgans also strictly follow the traditional types of wood and tools used in building the boats.

To cut down the selected trees Morgans use *Lalad-chaeb*, a type of vine that functions as a rope to tie up and pull the large logs/timbers used for building scaffolds. The first tree to be cut down is *Ka-e Pa-o*, a wild tree that grows over 25 meters in height. But before the tree is able to be cut down, a wooden scaffold must be made in order to ease the tree being cut down to fall into the correct position. A local jack made of wood and rope (*Kula*) is brought in to facilitate this operation. Axes are used to cut off the bark to prevent the wood from rotting and to make the exposed trunk surface neater. There are many places marked to show where the logs are to be carved, to get the boat just right in the correct size and shape.

When flat wooden plates are made, they take thin ropes that are dipped in water containing ground charcoal and stretched tight to mark the lines for the right shape and size and the correct length of the future *Kabang* boat's keel. They make zig- zag lines to show all the parts to be carved. Wood carving in a zig- zag pattern can ease wood scraping for the smoothing process afterwards.

Next an *Adjai* (a cutting tool that has a thin arched blade set at right angles to the handle) are used to hollow out and smooth the hull. Then the partly finished *Kabang* boat is pulled away from the site where the tree has been cut down to a beach behind the village, where it is floated in the sea and towed by a long tailed boat through the shallows and beached. Pulled up on to the beach in front of the village, it will be decorated as the next step in the process.

In order to smooth the wood on the inside of the new boat a *Lamae* (a hand held tool) is used. The boat has to be turned upside down for heating the wooden surface on a special platform. Heating the wood helps the grain to soften and become more flexible. First, the bow and stern are securely tied to prevent wood from splitting and even causing danger to the workers. The boat will be turned over again to continue the softening process and the widening of the hull, which has to be done equally on both sides. The builders drill through the hull to check they have maintained an even thickness, while it is being cut and smoothed. Again and again the boat is examined and checked to make sure it maintains its right proportions and balance until it is finalized to its optimum size, weight and shape. This process is repeated until the job is finished. Then the two sections of the bow and stern are furnished. The next part of the process is to make the planks that will fit onto the hull.

Once, the Morgan used zalacca wood to fit onto their hulls, but nowadays hardwood planks are preferable because of their durability. One trunk only yields two planks; and the Morgans start by cutting the log into two pieces,

which is made into planks three or four fingers thick. After this is complete, the planks are hauled out of the forest to be smoothed and finished with a *lamae* tool. Six planks in total are fitted to the new boat; which then looks almost completed. *Pado* or ribs are fitted to hold the planks together and to strengthen the hull, and then smaller planks for the deck have to be made. The hull is caulked to make it waterproof and the walls of the living quarters are made from woven bamboo. Pandanus leaves are used for the roof and a wooden rudder is attached with a few oars. The last thing to be done is to equip the boat with an outboard engine. Then it is ready to be launched.

The Morgans are particular in selecting wood to build their *Kabang*. For example, if the *Kabang* is made from knotty or rough wood, then the owner will get a rash resembling the wood. The timber's size and shape are psychologically important to a boat's owner. Morgans make every effort to search for tall, straight trees without branches, or at least very few of them. Before cutting down the chosen trees, they perform a ceremony to ask for permission to cut down the tree from the guardian spirits, which is considered a very important ritual in boat making.

In the process of *Kabang* boat building, collaboration among the neighbors along with the conservation of natural resources is very obvious. They know how to manipulate the heated, softened wood and the relationship between the proportion and structure of the boat, and even how to select the best tools and trees by size and type. Rarely if ever a substandard boat is to be seen. These building skills have been handed down through many generations, accumulated by trial and error until the perfect design was developed, able to sustain long journeys through rainstorms and long days of hot sun. It seems from the evidence that a *Kabang* boat is almost unsinkable, unless confronted by a severe storm.

Apart from the *Kabang*, there is another type of boat, regarded as a derivative of the *Kabang* which is called a *Chapan*. The *Chapan* is smaller in size and used only for short distance trips as a runabout, especially when there is an emergency. For the sea gypsies *Kabang* and *Chapan* boats are indispensable for living at sea and can be compared to the vehicles used in towns and cities like motorcycles and cars. But in one way they are very different. Cars and motorbikes can be obtained with money, but the boats only come with a lifetime of accumulated building skills, including local intellect and cooperation amongst neighbors. However, making a new boat today is not as easy as it was in the past because it is no longer allowed to remove trees from the national forests, unless formal permission is given from the Department of National Parks.

## **Lorbong Pillar celebration: a mainstay of Morgan forefathers' spirits**

Every year on the full-moon day of the fifth month, there is the celebration of *Lorbong* Pillar, the mainstay of the lineage spirit worship. The event is very significant for the Surin island Morgans who are defined as the last remaining group of ancient tribal sea nomads. This might partly be due to the sea acting as a barrier to the influence of more modern cultures from outside.

However, there are two anthropologists, Marcello Cartolano and Mrs. Narumon Arunothai a researcher from Andaman Pilot Study Project, Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, who have studied the Marid Morgans in Burma for 6 years and have been familiar with Surin Morgans since 1993. They have both been involved with explaining the Morgans' traditional culture and local wisdom to the outside world; in order for us to comprehend better how Morgans live in harmony with nature.

Historically, the Morgan culture has relied heavily on natural and supernatural beliefs, in ghosts and spirits for example. *Lorbong* Pillar worship is a good example of the old belief that the natural world is governed by guardian and ancestors' spirits; So Morgans would never dare destroy nature out of fear of those supernatural powers.

There was the case of a young mischievous boy who had been tempted to throw a glass bottle at the top of a pillar; not very long after that he started to get pains in his stomach. It was believed the punishment would get worse in the fifth month of the year and it needed to be alleviated by performing a spiritual installation rite.

Marcello Cartolano once cited that the spoken language was not a Morgan dialect but ancient Malaysian; and that spiritual communication appears to be at various levels, the highest being prediction of the future and the commonest the exorcism of dangers.

Prior to the day that the *Lorbong* Pillar rite (the pillars of the ancestors) was conducted, four straight trunks were set up and prepared by finely carving the four faces of *A-Bab*, *E-Boom*, *Tehma* and *Yatoi*, richly decorated with colorful seashells of all kinds. *Tehma* was the daughter of *E-Boom* and *E-Boom* was *Yatoi's* wife. Morgans also constructed a joss house characterized by a raised floor with wooden gable in the front. Inside the house were placed two plates of offerings; one holding desserts made from sticky rice flour and popped rice. Another contains fried flour resembling animal forms; small fish, star fish, a dog and a turtle.

All the activities took place at the edge of Chongkhad Bay, South Surin Island, opposite the rear beach of the National Park in North Surin Island where there used to be the old Morgan community, as it was the most sheltered place to live with a nearby fresh water pond. When the National

Park representatives had come to negotiate a land purchase to establish an office for the Park, Morgans there had to move to Zyene and Bond bay to make new settlements. At present, these two villages have a population of about 200 people. This number is regarded as being quite small when compared to the population of the Marid Morgans of about 2,000 people.

Attending the *Lorbong* Pillar installment rite in 2003, Chakapan Khangwan, a documentary journalist wrote, "As 3 large boats are heading to the site with Morgans from Bond and Zyene bay on board, a group of middle-aged spiritual conjurers, Aunt Mesia, *Po Ta Sale*, Aunt Muki, Aunt Dor-Ah, a few old ladies and a drum player were sitting solemnly in the front of the Holy Pillars, ready to commence the installment rites. At sunset they began to sing the songs of praise merging with the rhythms of the drum strokes. Aunt Mesia who I saw in a very light hearted mood in the afternoon started to make a prediction by placing an open hand fan on someone's head then taking a look over it."

"The event continued on in this way until I saw a crowd of young children in a circle, suddenly things became very strange. Frail old aunt Payeh who was approximately 80 years of age was dancing wildly around; suddenly she fell down unconscious onto the sandy ground. Another thin old lady with a red cloth around her forehead sat on the ground with crossed legs, her head rapidly bobbing up and down with the palms of her hands slapping her knees. *Po Ta Doo Nung*, Aunt Muki and Aunt Mesia were singing songs to one another in high and low tones that sounded like hymns. Aunt Dor Ah with a light blue cloth resting on her shoulders was sitting down and shaking, then standing up to do wild jerking dances along with others who were doing the same. The deeper the darkness, the faster and louder the drum was beaten, and the lit candles glowed ever brighter".

"The performance carried on in total darkness as if it was completely cut off from the outside world, nothing could be seen of the National Park, no tourists were around and all that could be seen were the group of spiritual mediums with their relatives. The beach where the rite was being performed became the archetypal meeting place between the world of human beings (this world) and the spirit realm (next world)".

"I was mistakenly thinking that things would return to normal, when I heard Uncle Doo Nung stop singing, then grasped for a pillar and started to climb up. The pillar, I thought, was not standing firmly enough to hold his whole weight but that did not matter to him at all. After climbing up he was standing proudly on the top of two pillars, managing to point to the others with an accusing forefinger, muttering to himself and sitting down crossed-legged on top of one pillar. Shielding his forehead with one hand, he looked intensely into the still night".

“To avoid the noisy atmosphere, I walked away trying to recall what some Morgans had once told me about this holy event. First thing I heard was that it would be unforgettable. It was 10 years earlier than this *Lorbong* festival. A huge crowd of Morgan people from all over such different places like Burma had stopped work to attend the event that had lasted 3 days with a large number of ships anchored at the beach front”.

The sense of sacredness of the *Lorbong* pillar ceremony does not seem to be as intense as in the past. “In the old days, we made offerings for local deities with cooked turtle and served cooked porcupine shells, sea leeches, barnacles, oysters and fish to those attending. But now it is prohibited by the Park to catch sea turtles; and chicken has been suggested instead”, said one elderly Morgan. The head of the Park officers said he had asked Morgans to stop taking sea turtles into the ritual performance, even if they and their ancestors’ spirits preferred them. Hawksbill and green turtles were preferred because they were large enough to be cooked for meals.

Since the change in the traditional offerings, the numbers of Morgans attending the event have dwindled and this prohibition might partly be to blame for a lessening of Morgan spiritual values. However, as long as the *Lorbong* worshipping rite still exists, the Morgans will be watched over by their ancestors’ and other supernatural spirits and powers, because the relationship has a mysterious spiritually valuable connection, unquantifiable by science, difficult to decode and more meaningful than today’s modern technology. Only those who are affected by it can perceive and touch the sacred power themselves.

## **Conclusion**

In order to have a good understanding of the value and meaning of the lives of others, one needs to take time to bring personal experiences, viewpoints, visions, thoughts and beliefs together to interpret and decode everything that is later written down. I hope that what I have written will help those, who have not seen these things, to gain a better understanding. I have made an effort to link the beauty of living a peaceful life among human beings, nature and the supernatural to pointing out from where and how it was derived and to where it may go in the future.

In the eyes of some city people, Morgan culture is quite difficult and mysterious to understand. However, there is still a great deal of mythology, beliefs and culture that is hidden and waiting to be unveiled and discovered. It is a shame that some of this disappeared when Morgans opened their arms to welcome modern civilization from the world outside. Ill-mannered visitors generated a negative change in their consumer habits, whilst knowing very little about their simple way of life. Although all things change in time, it is still crucial that the Morgans learn how to adjust themselves to

current fashions. In parallel with the explicit acknowledgement and inclusion of their origins and roots, a new generation of Morgans in particular will hopefully be able to withstand outside cultural currents to stand on their own two feet in a sustainable way.

This study would not be complete if it did not have supportive data and good advice from the following people: two ethnography scientists, Ajarn Narumon Arunothai and Khun Aknee Moolmake, a group of Lanna authors and an observer of the *Lorbong* ceremony Khun Chakapan Khangwan (a documentary journalist). All those mentioned offered me a great deal of help in learning Morgan ways. In addition, there is a group of social workers who have shared their lot with local Morgans on various Andaman Islands. They have given me useful information, opinions and expressed real insights resulting from their visits that provided much practical help in my seeking access to the Morgans. Though they did not know it right away, everything they gave to me was invaluable.

My experience derived from researching into the way Morgans and Morglans live their lives should serve as a starting point for further exploration. Their history is very long, surviving the tides and even tsunamis, so we cannot really know how far they have journeyed. Parts of their history might be forgotten or incorrectly remembered, but the impression I have from this study trip is of something I could not find anywhere else. If life is about freedom of travel for Morgans, then I am a lucky man for having shared that freedom for a short while.

Faithfully yours

Sumroeng Choeychuenjit, September 2006

## **Attachment**

### **References**

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Academic article, Andaman Pilot Study Project, Social Research Institute,  
Chulalongkorn University.

Khun Aknee Moolmake: มาเพื่อบอกรักอันค้ำมั้น

Khun Chakapan Khangwan: Sarakadee Magazine: Vol. 220 June 2003

### **Names and addresses of interviewees**

1. Mr. Sa Navarak, Tabpla, Phang Nga's Tai Muang district
2. Mr. Tu Navarak, Tabpla, Phang Nga's Tai Muang district
3. Mrs. Larb, Thabtawan, Phang Nga's Takua Pa district
4. Mr. Hede Hahntalae, Thabtawan, Phang Nga's Takua Pa district
5. Mr. Mongkol Hahntalae, Thabtawan, Phang Nga's Takua Pa district
6. Mr. Karlan, an officer, Thabtawan, Phang Nga's Takua Pa district
7. Mr. Anusid Kohklang, an officer, Thabtawan, Phang Nga's Takua Pa district.
8. Ms. Karnjana Eardkong, Koh Lao, Ranong's Mueang district
9. Mr. Panet, Koh Lao, Ranong's Mueang district

## **Forthcoming publications under Tsunami Aid Watch**

### **Short term research projects**

1. Operating structure of Save Andaman Network (SAN), a case study in rebuilding houses and rehabilitating the communities.
2. Operating structure of the Save Andaman Network (SAN), a case study of boat repair and community shipyards.
3. Land problems after the Tsunami.
4. The changing ways of life in Andaman's coastline communities.
5. Changed environments: Permanent effects of the Tsunami on communal ecology.

### **Long term research projects**

1. Data collection regarding land problems and solutions for Tsunami impacted areas.
2. Morgan (Sea-gypsies) ways of life and the history of Morgan land use.

### **Previously published**

1. TSUNAMI. A study on disaster response in Sri Lanka, with a contribution on the situation in Thailand by Karl Segschneider, Director of the TAW team, published in cooperation with Heinrich Böll Foundation, Brot für die Welt and medico international, July 2006
2. SCOPE-Charters. Sustainable Community Owned Professional Eco-Charters. Edited by TAW, Chiang Mai, December 2006. ISBN 978 974 88189 7 9
3. Renewable Energy Options on Islands in the Andaman Sea. A feasibility study for hybrid renewable energy/diesel systems in two Tsunami impacted communities. Edited by TAW, Chiang Mai 2007. ISBN 978 974 7093 51 3
4. Seal of Fair Recovery (SoFaR). A support tool for post disaster rehabilitation. A concept paper – Siegel „Fairer Wiederaufbau“. Zur Unterstützung des Wiederaufbaus nach Katastrophen. Ein Konzeptpapier. Edited by TAW, Chiang Mai 2007. ISBN 978 974 8266 12 1
5. Tsunami: CROSS-Effects? Christian Religious Organizations' Support and its Socio-cultural Effects on aid recipients in Tsunami Rehabilitation. A case study at Thungwa, Thabtawan and Nahm Khem villages of Phang Nga's Takua Pa district. By Pikula

Sithiprasertkula, in cooperation with Save Andaman Network, edited by Tsunami Aid Watch. Published on: [www.taw-hbf.org](http://www.taw-hbf.org)

6. 78 Weeks later: A descriptive, quantitative and qualitative summary after the Tsunami in Thailand. By Karl Segschneider and Walaitat Worakul, Edited by TAW, Published on: [www.taw-hbf.org](http://www.taw-hbf.org)
7. The Tsunami Early Warning System in Thailand, a resource book, including a synopsis of comments by Tsunami impacted communities, 30 months after the disaster. Authors: Part one: Karl Segschneider, Thiwawan Chaikao and Romlee Maeroh of Tsunami Aid Watch, Part two: The National Economic and Social Advisory Council (NESAC), Published on: [www.taw-hbf.org](http://www.taw-hbf.org)

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