Waves of change
Traditional religion among the Urak Lawoi, sea nomads of Ko Lanta, Thailand

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Abstract

This essay is the result of a field study in Ko Lanta in Thailand, during October-December 2009. The purpose of the study was to document the traditional religion of Urak Lawoi and to analyze in what way their life and beliefs have changed during the last 20 years.

Urak Lawoi is the name of one of the sea nomadic ethnic groups who lives along the shores of Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia. They are spread on many of the islands in the Andaman Sea archipelago and Ko Lanta is the main settlement. Ural Lawoi is regarded as the indigenous people of the island and they live there as a minority with Muslims and Thai-Chinese.

The traditional religion of Urak Lawoi is built upon the animistic belief of their ancestors. The religious leader and link between the spirit world and the humans is the To Maw. The family bonds are strong in the Urak Lawoi community and the elders play an important role in life and after death, when they can keep on watching out for their offspring. For the living it is important to do the rituals and ceremonies in the right way to obtain good luck and avoid bad luck.

In the last 20 years Ko Lanta has experienced a tremendous process of change caused by the increasing tourism. The conditions of the Urak Lawoi and their way of life have dramatically changed. The modern society with money economy, new technical solutions and a rationalized large-scale fishing has rapidly changed their way of life. The tsunami catastrophe, and the following attention from help organizations and missionary activities, has escalated the process. The traditional religion and culture of the Urak Lawoi is still present on the island but it is declining and changing under the influence of the constant pressure from other interests.

Keywords

History of religion, anthropology of religion, Thailand, Andaman Sea, Ko Lanta, Urak Lawoi, sea gypsies, sea nomads, Chao Ley, Thai Mai, animism, tourism, tsunami, spirit.
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose

Out of a coincidence I started to read about Ko Lanta and soon I stumbled over some short descriptions about the sea gypsies living on the island. They were said to have an animistic belief and they had lived in peace with the Muslims and the Buddhists on the island for hundreds of years. I tried to find out more about their religion but I discovered they were really not much written about them at all. It seemed like this group of people was regarded to be too trivial and irrelevant to do studies upon. So when the opportunity to do field studies in Asia came clear I didn’t need much time to decide to do it about Urak Lawoi. As they live as a minority on every island where they are settled it is interesting to learn more about their religion and culture, and how they have been able to keep it solid. In this essay I have tried to focus on the present, to describe their religion and the way they believe. I have also tried to capture the process of change and the impact from different actors, and how these changes affect their beliefs.

1.2 Background

The Urak Lawoi is regarded as the indigenous people of Ko Lanta (Granbom 2007:36) but their origin is uncertain and disputed by many. Some information tells that they were a part of a big tribe, “the Dyak” which moved from Borneo in Indonesia, up through the Andaman Sea. (ILRSELA) Hogan (1972:218-219) claims that they origin from the Celebes, a mountain island in southeast Indonesia. According to some of my informants their origin is the island of Sumatra in Indonesia. One informant, Anon Changnam (Interview 091101) told me a story that he heard from his grandparents about how the Urak Lawoi people used to live as Muslims on Sumatra but then left Sumatra and Islam and turned to Andaman Sea and started believing in the nature instead. The Urak Lawoi people then used to live in the straight of Malacca in areas that have since become a part of Malaysia. (ILRSELA) According to information from the Sea Gypsy Cultural Centre in Sangkaou (SGCCS) the Urak Lawoi people left Kanungn-ray, in the Kedah range in Malaysia about 500 years ago, and headed for the Andaman Sea and Ko Lanta.
It is really difficult to get a hold of when all these assumed travels and journeys should have occurred. To get a structure of the history of religions around the Andaman Sea it is possible to divide the time line into three different periods. The prehistoric age, the animistic age, and the Islamic age. The Islamic age starts when Islam begins to dominate the Andaman Sea, around 7-500 years ago. (http://history-world.org/islam7.htm). A wide guess is that most of the oral history descends from the last 7-500 years and that the Urak Lawoi during this last period settled down on many of the islands of the Andaman Sea. According to Granbom (2007:37-38) and my informant Non (Interview, 091101) the Urak Lawoi today live in settlements on Ko Lipe, Ko Bulon, Ko Adang, (Satun province) Siehre island, Sapum, Ban Nua, Laem La, Rawi beach (Phuket province) Ko Jum, Phi Phi Don and Ko Lanta (Krabi province)

Information from ILRSELA tells that the Urak Lawoi people first settled down on the east coast of Ko Lanta, in the villages of Bonae and Hua Laem. The Urak Lawoi people are often described as a shy and timid people (Hogan 1972:312) and maybe that’s the reason why they moved away from their first settlements when Indian and Chinese people arrived to the east coast. (SGCCS) During the last 100 years more and more people have settled down on Ko Lanta. A lot of them were Muslims who made their living out of fishing, coconut and rubber plantations. (Granbom 2007:36) About hundred years ago the first settlement in Sangkaou was done. (SGCCS) Somewhere around this time the people in Bonae had to move from that location to settlements around Saladan in the north (ILRSELA). In 1969 the Queen granted Urak Lawoi land in Sangkaou and in the Paansa y area of Saladan (SGCCS). These areas are the main locations for Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta today.

The Urak Lawoi people usually described as strand dwellers (Hogan 1972:215) a semi nomadic people who is regarded as good seamen, skilled fishermen and excellent divers (Wongbusarakum 2002:87). They are described as timid (Hogan 1972:213) and they sometimes shoves an aversion towards authorities (Granbom 2007:89) and shyness to foreigners (Hogan 1972: 213) and sometimes with a low self confidence and shame of their cultural heritage (Granbom 2007: 73). Granbom (2007:94) claims that the modern society integrates them as poor Thai people with a disappearing cultural identity.

Today the people are known under many different names, Chao Ley, Thai Mai, Sea gypsies, Sea Nomads and Urak Lawoi. When they describe themselves they use Urak Lawoi, Sea
Gypsies or just Gypsies. Urak Lawoi is the name of the people and sometimes the name of the language they speak. The religion or belief system of Urak Lawoi has got no name; it just seems to be a natural part of the traditional Urak Lawoi culture. According to some of the informants they don’t consider their belief as a religion at all.

1.3 Problem framing and questions

The purpose of this field study is to describe the traditional religion of Urak Lawoi and to examine the changes in their religion and way of life due to influence of the tourist industry and the tsunami catastrophe in 2004. I will with this essay try to answer the following questions:

- What role and function does the traditional religion have for the Urak Lawoi today?
- In what way has the entry of the tourist industry affected the traditional religion and culture?
- How does Urak Lawoi interpret the tsunami catastrophe in 2004 and how has it affected their belief?
- In what way has the traditional religion developed and changed the last 20 years?
2. METHOD AND MATERIAL

2.1 Planning

The material I present in this essay is based on observations and interviews from my field study on Ko Lanta. It felt natural to choose a qualitative method to approach the problem framing. Qualitative methods like observations, gives the scholar opportunity to attend and experience genuine situations. In-depth interviews give much information from the informant and they give the scholar possibility to do follow up questions and find wider patterns. Still the qualitative interview also comprehends substantial consequences of the context, but the recorded version is discontextualized (Kvale:1997:147). To avoid misinterpretations and to capture “more than the words” my plan was to be prepared to take all kind of notes, like reflections and accusations (Ryen:2004:69), while I was doing the interviews. I realized beforehand that my approach in the contact with the people and Urak Lawoi attitude towards me as a “farang” (white foreigner) might effect the interviews and the information. The understanding of their culture is coloured by my own cultural pre-understandings. Another problem was the fact that I was dependant on interpreters. With an interpreter you get another layer (or barrier) of cultural or personal constructions.

In the plan I made before my departure I pre-structured a lot of the work out of structures I got from the lectures of methods in Uppsala (090826-090828). I wanted to have a distinct structure and time planning for my study. If something unexpected would occur (which often is the case) I would at least have something to recast. I also planned what kind of categories I wanted to Interview and what kind of ceremonies I needed to attend. The three categories I chose were:

1. Religious leaders (the To Maw)
2. Young people (15-30 years old)
3. Old people (more than 50 years old).

I also wanted to have a balanced gender aspect of the informants.

Out of this planning I made guides of interview questions with standardized questions phased to my chosen interview categories. I tried to design the questions so they where both thematic and dynamic (Kvale 1997:121). My standardized questions were not meant to be followed strictly, they were more meant to serve me as a red line while conducting the semi structured interviews.
During a field study it is hard to separate the important information from the unimportant. Things that might seem meaningless can in a later phase turn out to be important information. Therefore my plan was to take notes of everything I saw and experienced during my observation. For sudden happenings I had a notepad in my pocket and later on I transferred everything into my field diary. For the same reason I bought a camera to be able to take snap-shot pictures of everything that might be something. All photos in this essay are, except when noted, taken by the author.

2.2 To establish contact

I arrived to Ko Lanta Friday the 23rd of October and chose Klong Nin beach as my headquarter because it is located in the middle of the island, between the two areas with Urak Lawoi settlements in north and south. I immediately started to seek connections in the Urak Lawoi villages. Within a week I had met most of the important persons who during my stay could help me with contacts, such as interpreters or as informants. Everything went quite smoothly in the beginning but after two weeks I discovered that people were very busy on Ko Lanta during the tourist season. I planned five different interviews with three different interpreters and just one of them really was carried out. Both my interpreters and my informants had to cancel due to the circumstances of work. In the time between the pre-booked interviews I tried to spend as much time as possible in the Urak Lawoi settlements to get my face familiar to the inhabitants. I anticipated that the people might be shy, as they are described that way in the literature (Hogan 1972:213), or that they might have become a bit tired of the attention (Gustafsson, Uppsala, 090828) they got after the tsunami catastrophe in 2004. In contrast to my notions almost everybody I met was frank, curious and outspoken. I met a lot of people during this visit and in addition to the interviews I had a lot of informants who just looked at pictures, and gave me the names and information in Urak Lawoi language. Though none of my results are relying on just their information. Those short conversations have had more the purpose to verify names and places.

2.3 Interviews

In the major interviews I used a tape recorder so I wouldn’t risk losing any information. In those interviews I could have full focus on my informant (and my interpreter) and always be prepared with additional questions or to write down notes. Some interviews came more
spontaneously and the situations didn’t allow me to arrange a recording. In those interviews I took notes which I wrote out fair immediately afterwards. Then I often had a chance to ask additional questions to the person if anything was unclear.

During my fieldwork I used three different interpreters for five of the interviews, and I made nine of the interviews myself. It is always a risk to use interpreters because a lot of the information might get lost or distorted in translation. In some cases the interpreters gave the answers by themselves and in these situations I tried to be persistent to get the informant’s point of view. When I made the interviews myself I had better control over the situation, but it might also have an impact on the result to have eight English-speaking informants from a population where very few speak English. The small group of English-speaking people was in the same range of age and had tight connections with the tourism which most certainly had affected their way of life and belief. Still their answers showed that this was not the only parameter that affected their statements. Anyhow, in my situation, interviews with all the English-speaking I met was the only way to get enough interviews, as all the people able to interpret where very busy during my stay.

After a two weeks when only one out of five scheduled interviews really has been realized I started to book interviews every day to make things happen. During one critical period I had a hard time to stay in contact with and to schedule and reschedule my interpreters according to the changes in the situation. Luckily I found some new contacts the last two weeks who were able to help me with the missing information.

### 2.4 Observations

Besides the every day observations I made in the Urak Lawoi villages on Ko Lanta, I had the privilege to stay with a family in Sangkaou between 11th and 17th of November. One of my contacts, a restaurant owner outside Sangkaou, put a remarkably human effort in introducing me to the family and to engage my reliability. In my planning I had a wish for this kind of arrangement but with the short time I had to establish contacts it didn’t seem likely. Nevertheless this week gave me the opportunity to really observe the daily life in the village and to take part in the family life. I could spend the days just walking around in the village, visiting the spirit houses or communicating with the fishermen when they were working on their
boats. No one of them could speak any English but it still gave me a lot of information and facts about their situation and way of life.

I left Ko Lanta on the 9th of December. All and all I stayed for almost seven weeks on the island, and that was enough get some answers to my questions, but it is way too short to get a deeper understanding of the people, the culture and the belief system of Urak Lawoi. According to my plans and my expectations of this field study, I must be pleased with the outcome. I had 14 proper interviews with ten different people, I stayed one week in an Urak Lawoi family and I had small pieces of information from a dozen of other informants. I couldn’t stick to just my chosen categories of informants, but on the other hand I had a larger number of in-dept interviews than I expected. The only disappointment with the study is the number of in-depth interviews than I had expected. The only disappointment with the study is the fact that I didn’t get the opportunity to attend any of the main ceremonies. Due to personal reasons I couldn’t make my journey in time for the Boat floating festival in October, and November-December is really the low season for ceremonial activities. My descriptions of the big ceremonies are therefore only based on the facts from my informants, information from the Sea Gypsy Cultural Centre in Sangkaou and literature. Without any private observations it is a kittle task to make any conclusions about the way the ceremonies might have changed.

2.5 Informants and anonymity
In the contact with new informants I have tried to be frank and clear about the purpose with my study. As I have used a tape recorder in my main interviews it gave me the opportunity to be formal in the beginning of the interviews. I gave the informants all facts about my study and my essay as I told them why I needed to use a tape recorder. In a few cases some of informants wanted to be anonymous when they discussed controversial subjects and it in some cases my informants asked me to leave out a bit of the information they had told me. In these situations I obliged their wishes, as it didn’t affect the argumentation or the result.

2.6 Previous research
There is not much written about Urak Lawoi. There are just a few books that describe the Urak Lawoi people on Ko Lanta. There are some articles and shorter descriptions as well but almost nothing about the religion. Most of the literature has worked as references and not as
sources of information. My main sources have been from two books; David W Hogan *Men of the Sea: Coastal tribes of south Thailand’s west coast* (1972) and Ann-Charlotte Granbom’s more up-to-date; *Urak Lawoi: Sea Nomads in the Andaman sea* (2007).

Hogan, missionary and linguist, travelled in the Andaman Sea in the 1960 and 1970s and made a brief summary of the Urak Lawoi people. Since he was a linguistic he put most of his effort in documenting and analyzing of the language and Urak Lawoi is only one of the tribes in the Andaman Sea he wrote about. The book describes the religion and the ceremonies the way it looked 30-40 years ago. Hogan’s documentation has therefore been valuable to me as an important view of the situation before the entrance of the tourist industry. I found out that a lot of things have changed during these years according to religious practice, impacts from other religions and in reproduction of the To Maw knowledge.

Swedish anthropologist Granbom has got her focuses on Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta in her writing. She looks upon the whole life situation for the people and especially the changes that the tourism and the modern world have caused. The information in the book is mostly out of her field studies on Ko Lanta 2002-2004, but she has also complemented the book with some supplement notes about the situation the years after the tsunami. Granbom writes about the pressure and exposure from the modern world that Urak Lawoi living under and how it has turned them to adopt the culture of the Thai majority. Her conclusion is that they are integrated in the Thai society as poor Thai people. In my own research I came to the conclusion that they are integrating to the cost of their own religion, culture and lifestyle, but not with the low self-esteem they had before the tsunami.

The information in these books gives me the opportunity the compare the situation before influence of tourism, and the situation just before the tsunami with the situation today. It was interesting to let my informants verify the old information, to see what is still current and what has been lost or changed. My problem framing and focusing on the religion and the process of change felt both relevant and linked to their previous research. Finally I have used a resent essay by Jägerberg/Mayr; *Homes for souls - the sea gypsies’ religious identity and their attitudes towards Christianizing*, as reference and source. The essay has a rash description of the traditional religion and focus more on the missionary activities after the tsunami, but as I discovered that these activities had such a huge impact on the situation the information became very relevant.
2.7 Disposition

This essay is compiled in seven chapters. The Introduction offers purpose, problem framing, questions and background information of the Urak Lawoi. The second chapter gives a description of method, chosen categories, literature and previous research. In chapter three I present the ethnography of my field study. Beside a short presentation of the sites of my study, it contains descriptions of the traditional religion of Urak Lawoi, a presentation of their main ceremonies and their animistic belief in the ancestors. Chapter four deals with the process of change due to influences from tourism, the modern world and other religions. In chapter five I make analysis out of my questions. Chapter six is a short summary of the results and the last chapter is a listing of the sources of information I used for this essay.

To Maw Marasi and the author.
Photo: Narathon “Nas” Hongthang
3. ETHNOGRAPHY

3.1 Introduction to the ethnography

In this ethnography I will start to describe Ko Lanta and the Urak Lawoi settlements. I will then give an account of their traditional religion and the To Maw culture. I will describe their belief in the ancestors, the places and ceremonies for worshiping them and how they experience the spirits. At last I will try to describe the influence from tourist industry, the effects and aftermaths of the tsunami and the impact from other religions. The last chapter is about how my informants look upon the future, out of their situation today.

3.2 Ko Lanta and the Urak Lawoi settlements

3.2.1 Ko Lanta

(Map of Ko Lanta Appendix 1)

Ko Lanta is the name of two islands in the Andaman Sea, Ko Lanta Noi and Ko Lanta Yai. Ko Lanta Yai is the largest one of them, and the home of the Urak Lawoi people. The island is approximately 30 km from north to south, and it is about 2-3 km across. In the middle of the island small ridges of mountain and jungle and plantations cover the area. The west coast is almost one long beach, just divided by some small mountain ridges running out in the sea. On the east side the mangrove forest and the jungle dominates the coastline and terrain. Lanta old Town is the old centre point of the Ko Lanta situated on the east side of the island. The new touristic centre Saladan is located on the north tip of Ko Lanta.

The Urak Lawoi locations on Ko Lanta are situated in the north around main centre Saladan, in the villages of Klong Dau, Nai Rai and Tobaleou and in the south in the villages of Sangkaou and Hua Laem. The villages are not the same, they show wide variations of styles of houses, construction, standards and locations.
3.2.2 Sangkaou
The village of Sangkaou is located almost on the southern tip of Ko Lanta. This is the only village with only Urak Lawoi families. The people live 30 km from the tourist boom around Saladan and are still mostly fishermen, even if many of the young people work in resorts, hotels or with tour boats for tourists. Sangkaou is seated by the sea and surrounded by jungle and close to the Lanta National Park established in 1990. World Visions orange project houses, built after the tsunami, dominate the village. The village is divided into four areas.

1: The spirit house of Kunnamdam
2: The spirit house of SGCCS
3: The spirit house of Raja Siridyan
4: The spirit house of Ausangkaou
A: The spirit stone of Kunnamdam
B: The spirit stone of Oune

The road through Sangkaou in the southerly direction.
3.2.3 Hua Laem

Hua Laem is a widespread definition of many settlements between Sangkaou and Lanta Old town. The Urak Lawoi settlement is seated near Lanta Hospital, just some kilometres from Lanta old town, by the sea. In this part of the village Muslims, Chinese and Urak Lawoi live together in different areas, still side by side in the little settlement. The houses are more traditional and simple constructions out of wood and concrete. Hua Laem is considered the oldest Ural Lawoi settlement on Ko Lanta.

3.2.4 Klong Dau

Klong Dau village is seated outside Saladan on the mountainside of the road. The settlement is located some distance from Klong Dau beach with moorage for their long-tail boats and two grave settings. Mostly Urak Lawoi lives in the village but also some Muslims. The buildings on the mountainside are simple shacks made out of wood and roof cover panel. Hotels, shops and a new church on the hillside are surrounding the village.

3.2.5 Nai Rai

Closer to Saladan, not so far from the beach is the village of Nai Rai located. Hotels and resorts surround this village. Some of the buildings are project houses made after the tsunami and some are simple constructions. Others are concrete houses of good standard.

3.2.6 Tobaleou

Near the pier of Saladan, on the other side of a tiny wooden bridge the ceremonial centre for Saladan is located. This settlement only has a history of a few years and the buildings are simple constructions on stilts in the mangrove forest by the sea. According to my informants
the population in this village consists of somewhere around 50 inhabitants, but many fishermen in Klong Dau and Nai Rai still keep their boats at this place.

3.2.7 Population

The population on Ko Lanta consists of Thai-Chinese, Thai Muslims, a tiny community western people and Urak Lawoi, all with their respectively cultural identity. I couldn’t get a figure of the numbers of Urak Lawoi inhabitants since they are not registered as Urak Lawoi. According to Granbom (2007:43) the Urak Lawoi population was around 900 in the middle of the 1990’s. According to the authorities on Ko Lanta 449 inhabitants lived in the Urak Lawoi village of Sangkaou in December 2009, but I couldn’t get any further information about the population at large. Out of the information I got from Granbom (2007:43-44) 632 Urak Lawoi persons were staying around Saladan in 2004. The evaluations of my informants are that Hua Laem got around 75 inhabitants. Out of this rough figure my guess is that the total number of Urak Lawoi inhabitants on Ko Lanta is somewhere around 1150. With a total number of inhabitants of approximately 28 000 in the district of Ko Lanta (http://www.statemaster.com/-encyclopedia/Ko-Lanta) the Urak Lawoi represent ca 4% of the population.

3.3 The traditional religion of Urak Lawoi

The traditional culture and religion of Urak Lawoi is based upon their animistic belief in their ancestors. The human reality is linked to and dependent on the contact and relations to the spirit world. The spirits are present in the daily life and are able to guide and help the people. Much of people’s effort is focusing on gaining good luck and avoiding bad luck out of the rituals directed to the ancestors. The whole social system of the Urak Lawoi people is based upon their tight bonds to the family members. The elder is supposed to look after the younger and when they die they keep on caring for their offspring. At the same time the spirits wants attention from the living, they need to be invited and honoured in different ceremonies, and they still want to have their favourite clothes, food and drinks after their death. If some ritual is done in the wrong way or at the wrong time it means bad luck.
3.3.1 The To Maw culture

The most important person for the religious beliefs of the Urak Lawoi people is the To Maw. To Maw is Thai for “spirit” and “people”. The To Maw is the link between the spirit world and the Urak Lawoi people. He can be seen as a doctor or a medicine man (Granbom 2007:44). Hogan (1972:216) calls him witchdoctor or Bumol. The To Maw is the only person who can contact and talk to the spirits, and understand their messages and signs. He has a spiritual, ceremonial, medical, and advisory roll in the Urak Lawoi community. When I asked Surerat “Aew” Songcheep (Interview 091203) about how they contacted the spirit world she referred to To Maw ritual when he contacted the spirits to distribute the heave-offerings.

– Have a plate, have one candle, have one guide (To Maw) [...] look into the fire of the candle and [...] he knows.

Out of this contact the To Maw can get answers from the spirits about sick people, about the future or about any other matter. Usually there is one great To Maw in each area of Ko Lanta, and then he might have a few or many other To Maws to help him. Some of the “right hands” only have one certain ability, others have many, Aew told me.

3.3.2 Medicine man

When I asked my informants what the To Maw could help the people with they all started telling about his role as a medicine man. Even if the new times have brought new ways of treatment at the hospital, the To Maw function as a village doctor is still present. So when somebody gets sick, they go to the To Maw and he tells them what to do. Sometimes the To Maw tells them to go out in the jungle and get some herbs to eat. For other illnesses or situations he could advice them to avoid some of the food, or he could tell them to sacrifice something to the spirits. Sometimes he makes some kind of medicine for his patient.
Anon “Non” Changnam (Interview 091101) from Nai Rai explains:

– [...] like a cup [...] put some water [...] ant that water is treating, like a medicine, like a serum or something. That’s like he speaks with the [...] spirits, and then it becomes like a medicine.

According to Hogan (1972:216), this shamanism practice was “sometimes” evoked and the health clinic and governmental hospitals was becoming “increasingly popular”. With that picture from 35-40 years ago one could easily expect that the To Maw function as a medicine man should be gone by now. But in general people still seem to go to the To Maw first if they get sick. But there is a difference between young people and elderly. Most of the young people around Saladan said that they go to the hospital first and to the To Maw if they didn’t get better. They told me that some of their parents still go to the To Maw first, and that their grandparents always did. People around Sangkaou, no matter to their age, still go to the To Maw prior the hospital. None of the informants disapproved the idea of the To Maw as a medicine man, it was clear that this was a real thing for everyone. The people, who reject him out of their Christian belief, did that because of their choice of religion, not because they didn’t believe in his capacity.

3.3.3 Good luck

The To Maw is also the person who leads the ritual when a person, family or many families are worship the boat fairy. This celebration is similar to the ceremony that all Thai people do with their boats. In Thailand there’s a common and universal belief that the boat fairy stays in the fore of the boat and that that part of the boat is sacred. For some reason this matter seemed to be more important when they are fishing than when they are working for tourists. The fishermen also have their rituals for luck when they go out on the sea. My informant Non (Interview 091119) told me that he use to go to the To Maw who gives him some betel nuts to sacrifice. He uses to drop the first one in the sea near the grave setting in Kaw Kwang where his ancestors are buried. The other nut he brings to sea and drops in the water in the area he is about to do the fishing. The struggle to preserve good luck and to get rid of bad luck reappears in many of the rituals and ceremonies and must be seen as a central component of the belief.
3.3.4 Fortune-teller

Another issue for the To Maw is to predict the future. People go to him and ask questions about their chances to get luck in fishing. Some want to know the presage for crab fish, prawn, squid etc. Others come to get a prediction about their business or about the tourist season. My informant Aew runs one of two restaurants near Klong Dau Beach, owned by Urak Lawoi. Before the tourist season starts she goes to the To Maw and asks if the business will be successful the coming season. She also wants to know in what day they should open the restaurant to get good luck.

3.3.5 Love drugs

In earlier years it occurred that the To Maw made a love drug when a person was unhappy in love. The To Maw made a magic serum to pore into the drink or the food of the object. According to some informants this never happens now days but it was common 20 years ago. Some informants told me that they still did like this in some of the Urak Lawoi settlements in Phuket but not on Ko Lanta. When I asked people around the age of 20 about this they just laughed and said it was a long time ago, like something their parents or grandparents did. But to people just a little bit older the matter was more serious. Paranee “Pae” Boonme (Interview 091205) told me the story about one of her sisters’ marriage 30 years ago. The family had found a man for her and she just said no. But then she agreed to eat half of the medicine that the To Maw had made, because she thought it wouldn’t work. But after that she couldn’t think about anything else than this man and now they are married. Pae made the conclusion that the To Maw fooled her sister with his powers. In marriages the To Maw performed a certain ceremony when the bride and the groom drank water prepared by the To Maw. Today some Urak Lawoi still got married in the old way but according to Non (interview 091119) people get married in the Thai/Buddhist way too.
3.3.6 To become a To Maw

To become a To Maw you have to get the knowledge from another To Maw. All the informants agreed that you have to study and learn for many years. Usually the old To Maw informs the rest of the group who will be the next To Maw (Granbom 2007:88). At the same time it looks like anybody who think he or she has got the knowledge can perform, at least some of the To Maw tasks. When I spoke to Pae (Interview 091205) about the different To Maw persons around Saladan she ranked them and called them; Number one, number two and so on. Some of them she described as a helping hand to number one, and others she described as “copies” without any real knowledge.

To Maw Boden (Interview 091205) confirmed that picture.

– Normally one area has one To Maw, like Nai Rai have one To Maw.

Boden said that he learned the To Maw duties from his father, and that the persons who become To Maw early discover that they have some kind of ability to help sick people. But it is difficult to be the To Maw and it takes a lot of time. The To Maw must go to the spirit house many times a year and he has many obligations. If he doesn’t live rightly he can loose the ability to be the link between the humans and the spirits. If a child steps on the pillow of the To Maw or if his head touches a pair of pants he will risk losing the magic. There seemed to be many different situations when a To Maw had to be aware of the danger and avoid failures. Non (Interview 091119) thought that this is one of the reasons why not any young people don’t want to be students for a To Maw; it is a big change in lifestyle and its not interesting for the young today.
The To Maw is always a he, even if my informants told me it was possible for a woman to become one too. No one of the informants could explain why no women still had not become To Maw. Pae (Interview 091205) had some kind of explanation when she talked about women’s periods and about that they are unclean and can’t attend any ceremony during that period. She knew many women who have had certain abilities to help, but they had never become To Maw.

In the time of my field study they had three To Maw replacing the old To Maw Sicken in Sangkaou who died some years ago. None of them was able to do everything that To Maw Sicken used to take care of, so they had divided the obligations to three persons; To Maw Marasi, To Maw Godjem and To Maw Lokoj. One informant told me that this was the first time in Sangkaou that this had happened. According to To Maw Marasi (Interview 091114) the people select the next To Maw. They pick the one that they think is best for the village and the people. In this new situation the people have chosen to pick three.

In the north part of the island, To Maw Boden seems to have the same problem. When I met him he didn’t have any student or young people who wanted to learn, and he’s getting old. Boden himself had eight children but none of them wanted to follow in his footpaths. For some reason he couldn’t go out and seek for new aspirants, they had to come to him by themselves, to seek the knowledge.

3.4 Main Ceremonies

First, there seems to be a big variation of the names of the ceremonies that Urak Lawoi is performing, and they mix the languages and names themselves. Younger people prefer the Thai descriptions and the elderly still uses the Urak Lawoi words for the ceremonies. To be uniform I have decided to name the ceremonies in English, but I have also tried to seek the original Urak Lawoi name (and translation) of it to get a better understanding.

3.4.1 The Boat floating festival

In Urak Lawoi the ceremony is called Paladja in Urak Lawoi but I couldn’t find out the meaning of the word. The ceremony is called Loy Rua in Thai, and that is the most common name together with the more tourist adapted Sea Gypsy festival. The Boat floating festival (or
Boat Releasing Ceremony) takes place twice a year in May and October, and last for two or three days (Hogan:1972:216). According to Ploypim “Pri” Changnam (Interview 091118) the ceremony nowadays starts with a walk of all the people from the villages of Klong Dau and Nai Rai. They walk and dance their way to the village of Tobaleou where the ceremony takes place the first night. The To Maw is the one who’s leading the work step by step and the one who knows how to invite the spirits to the ceremony (Boden, Interview 091205). Some of the men go out in the jungle and cut down a Zalacca palm to make a Plajuk (or Bajak) boat out of it. (Hogan 1973:216) On the second night they move to Hua Laem where they finish the building of the boat. They put statues carved out of wood representing the ancestors in the boat alongside with food, drinks, hair-clippings, nails etc. The children rub their bodies with puffed rice and put it in the boat (Hogan 1972:216). The rituals are meant to oblige the ancestors and to send away all the “bad luck” for the villagers. (Hogan:1972:216) During the festival they build Gaju Padak (the wood that protect) crosses and after the boat is sent to sea they put up the crosses in the villages to prevent the evil forces and bad luck to re-enter the village (Hogan 1972:217). When the boat is sent to sea a party starts with a lot of dance and music called Ramana, where people sing about forgiveness of wrongdoings. The belief is that the boat is going to Kanungniray, the place where all ancestors’ spirits reside (SGCCS). Out of an article in Phuket Magazine (Lennie: 20061130) I found some information about the present situation. The article describes the situation during the festival while the elders are performing the old traditions the young ones dance to popular Thai music, staying in nearby houses to watch television instead. But as I didn’t have the opportunity to attend the boat floating festival I can’t confirm this gap between the generations.

3.4.2 Restoration ceremony to the sea spirit

Poya is the Urak Lawoi word meaning “food preparation” according to my informant Pae (Interview 091208) The belief is that since their fishing takes so much life from the sea, they have to give back some food to the sea spirit, sometimes called Toohut Lawoi (SGCCS). The sea spirit guards all living in the sea and to oblige it and be able to get a successful fishing the ceremony takes place just after the boat floating in May and marks the beginning of the monsoon season. In this ceremony the To Maw makes a small raft out of bamboo and leaves. Sacrifices like drinks, foods etc. are placed on the raft and send it out to sea. If it falls over it means bad luck, if it manages to sail away it means good luck.
3.4.3 The recovering ceremony

The recovering ceremony when a sick person has become well again has got many names. I couldn’t get the Urak Lawoi name from any informant, and I couldn’t get the Urak Lawoi name; Paniai, which Granbom (2007:52) refers to verified. (Wish also could have been a matter of my poor pronunciation.) My informant Aew talked about Plapai Niai when she referred to the ceremony. The Thai name of the ceremony is Kaebon. The To Maw precedes this celebration and it is a thanksgiving ceremony to the spirits when somebody has recovered from illness (Granbom:2007:52). When I met Pae and To Maw Boden they showed me how the To Maw does a ceremony with a plate with offerings (often a Davod Sire leaf, shell paste tobacco and a peace of beetle nut). The To Maw puts a candle on one side of the plate and then he invites the spirits to come and get the heave-offerings.

3.4.4 Lucky party for the house

Kanori Roma in Urak Lawoi means “bring luck” and “home” or “house”. Though The Thai name Tambon ban seems to be the most common. According to my informant Aew they celebrate this one year after a building has been finished, and then every year the same month they have the lucky party for the house. The To Maw put some red cloth under the ceiling or on a pillar and sacrifices to the spirits to get good luck for the house and family.

3.4.5 Cleaning the grave

The Urak Lawoi word for it Patat Jirai means “Cleaning” and “make new area”. The Thai word for the ceremony is Teng Pleo. This ceremony takes place on each Urak Lawoi grave setting in the Andaman Sea, on different dates (Granbom 2007:52). My informant Pae told me how people bring the food and drinks that their ancestors used to like to the graves. Then the To Maw makes the ritual with the candle to call for the spirits and make sure that they have arrived. Then they all join together with their dead relatives in a big party with food and drinks (Granbom 2007:52). The belief is that if they are happy then their ancestors will be happy too.
3.5 The worshipping of the ancestors

3.5.1 Spirits and ghosts

The Urak Lawoi people live with the belief of the spirits of their ancestors. The spirits can affect their situation and help them with the things they want. The Urak Lawoi families have very tight bonds to each other in the families and to the other people in the village. They want to stay together and they dislike the idea about living somewhere else but with the rest of the family. The parents and the grandparents take care of the family and the way Urak Lawoi believe that the ancestors keep on doing this after their death.

My informant Aew put it like this:

*We believe like [...] (our) grandparents, if they’re dead, before we stayed together in (the) family [...] they [...] can help, take care of [...] everything, and if they’re dead [...] also they can take care [...] give a good feeling.*

Some people get contacted by the spirits in their dreams. In these situations they usually want something. They can be asked for warm clothing, favourite food or they might want to see their offspring dance the traditional *Rong Ngeng*. Then the children or grandchildren have to oblige their ancestor’s wishes with assistance from the To Maw.

According to some of my informants the spirits are around all of the time and are watching and helping them in their lives. Pri (interview 091119) told me that the spirits were all around, and that she had one in her own house, but she didn’t know who. There was a big variation amongst the informants in the way that they experienced the spirits. Some of them felt the spirits around them all of the time, some said that they sometimes felt there presence like a cold shiver in the back of their neck or a feeling in their heart. Others met them in their dreams and some of them could tell different stories when they have actually seen or heard spirits.

Non told me a story from back when he was a child, living in the village of Klong Dau:

– *So that time me and my sister we eat [...] together [...] and nobody (else was) in my house [...] only my sister and me. [...] then I heard something like (snore) [...] I listened in my room, it (was) in my room! I just ran (away) with my sister. Then my uncle asked me if I called them, called them like “Please come and eat with us”, and I told him.*

– *No I didn’t call them. That’s why!*
After that he always invites the spirits of his and his girlfriend’s relatives to come and eat with them before every meal.

Some informants described it more like a feeling or a belief. Po Taleluk (Interview 091205) in Hua Laem told me that he just felt good when he made his sacrifices and wishes by the spirit house in Hua Laem during the Boat floating festival twice a year. Pon Taleluk (Interview 091127) in Sangkaou said that he didn’t feel or imagine the spirits in any way, but he was still convinced about their presence. Pae (Interview 091205) looked more to the consequences when I asked her about the presence of the spirit world:

– *If you do the right things, good things happen, if you do wrong you will get bad luck, I see it all the time!*

Many of the rituals are in the cause of getting lucky, and to avoid bad luck. To protect the villages from evil forces, the people put up *Gaju Padak* crosses during the Boat floating festival (Hogan 1972:216-217). The cross is made out of wooden sticks its about 2.5 metres tall and has got fringes on top and in both ends of the horizontal stick. My informant Pon told me about the Gajo Padac crosses and why they put them up.

– [...] is not concerned about good luck [...] protect from bad things [...] like evil. The crosses are most often put up along the shore but they can also be placed in the jungle outside the village or beside a house. But they don’t have to be put up in every village. Around Saladan I found a few in Tobaleou but I couldn’t find any crosses in Klong Dau and Nai Rai, and when I asked Non (Interview 091119) about it he told me that the important thing is that they are present in the area, near the spirits home, and to the sea nomads around Saladan that is the spirit house in Tobaleou.

– *Bad ghosts cannot come into the village, to make something bad, that is our belief.*
Idjm Taleluk (Interview 091104) from Sangkaou, said that the crosses protected the village from bad spirits:

– You know [...] like Halloween.

It’s been hard to get a grip on what these ghosts or evil forces were about. Some of them had to do with the relation a person had to the ancestor, the memory they kept of him or her. One informant said that if you felt afraid it was a ghost otherwise not. The way people pass away also seemed to be important to the situation after death. Non (Interview 091119) told me about the road outside his house in Nai Rai:

– [...] this road have dead people, and when you walk at night [...] you feel them.

There seems to be a difference between spirits and ghosts too. Or maybe the ghosts are the same as the evil that is threatening the people, and which they try to shot out with the Gajo Padac crosses. Both parallel dimensions, the human and the spirit, are in instant contact with each other. The human actions are under observation from the spirit world and the spirits (good or bad) can take actions against the humans if they’re misbehaving. The To Maw with his knowledge is the only one who can fully understand the messages from the spirit world. He is the link or the bridge of understanding between the two parallel worlds. Still there seemed to be a distinction between the bad luck that could appear if they performed some of the rituals wrong or forgot to do them and the evil that could strike them from the outside.

### 3.5.2 The Spirit house

The place where people go to give heave offering to the spirit is the spirit house, or the Rumah Dato’ in their own language. Rumah is the word for house and dato’ is the word for spirit. People go the spirit house during the day, on special occasions or celebrations and bring food, drinks, cigarettes, pieces of fabric, betel nuts, candles etc. to the altar. During my field studies on Ko Lanta I noticed there were big differences between the different spirit houses in the activity. Some of them were in use every day and in some of them nothing happened during my seven weeks on the island. I asked about the reason but nobody could give me an answer.

The big spirit house in Tobaleou seemed to be well used. One of the informants told me that he had asked Tobaleou for a daughter, and promised that if he got one he would sacrifice
three pig heads. When he finally got her, he went back to Tobaleou with the pig heads as he had promised. It is the To Maw who delivers/links the sacrifices to Tobaleou or to any other spirit.

In the south part of Sangkaou, Aumalek, the spirit house is called Dato’ Kunnamdam, after an important ancestor. The people have put up a small spirit house on a little hill between the houses and the sea. Pon showed me the house and later he told me about Kunnamdam. The Kunnamdam dato’ is the only spirit house he visits in Sangkaou because Kunnamdam protects the people in his part of the village, Aumalek.

– The people around Aumalek respect Kunnamdam, and Kunnamdam only care about that area. [...] about the people in Aumalek.
The spirit of Kunnamdam is also present in a big rock beneath the little hill, on the shoreline to the sea. On the other side of the little beach Pon showed me another rock where the spirit of a dead fisherman is present. The spirit stone of Oune. According to Hogan (1972:216) this places with supernatural powers are called Kramai, but I couldn’t get that term verified from anybody, and nobody could tell me another name for the phenomenon. I asked what one needed to think about near such a place and Pon told me that one has to pay respect. When I asked him what happened if one did something disrespectful, he answered:

– You get sick and maybe you die.

The spirit house in Hua Laem was more detailed than the small ones in Sangkaou. The house had two levels and four statues were laying on one of them. The roof was decorated with the white bird Bulong Puté that is said to have the ability to calm storms. (Hogan 1972:218-219). The spirit house in Hua Laem only seemed to be used during the Boat floating festivals twice a year. During my seven weeks on the island nothing were added or put away from the house. When I asked Po who lives close to the spirit house about it, he told me that he just went there during the boat floating ceremony and that the other people had small spirit houses they used at home. I noticed that the use of these “Thai styled” spirit houses (called San phra phum) placed on a pole, was very common outside Urak Lawoi houses around Saladan in the north, but not as common in Sangkaou. When I asked people if this really was the same as a Rumah dato’, they said that it was, and when I asked if it was a Buddhist thing, they just said “same, same”.
The Thai spirit houses are a part of an old animistic belief still present in Thailand who has integrated with Buddhism. The use of them is very common and you can find spirit houses outside every Buddhist house in Thailand. ([http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/spirit-house.html](http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/spirit-house.html)). People worshiping spirits in a way that is very difficult to separate from the way Urak Lawoi do. The only difference I could find was that in Thai spirit houses they worshiping the spirits of the house, or the spirit of the garden etc. and not their ancestors as Urak Lawoi do. Thus in contrast to Hogan (1972:216) I found that the Urak Lawoi houses do have small spirit houses and I also saw spirit shelves in a lot of the homes I visited. This matter could be a fallacy from Hogan or, more likely, an integration into the Thai culture the last 35 years. It might also just be a way for the Urak Lawoi to fit in with the Thai majority and get an easier life as Granbom (2007:73) points put in her book.

Another way of paying respects to the spirits is to bring a Nijaj Badji to the dato. Nijaj is “to give something away” and Badji is “good” in the Urak Lawoi language. A Nijaj Badji is made out of a wooden branch; the bark is removed, and then is attached arrows of wood or Styrofoam on the thin branches in the top. Finally it is decorated with some pieces of red and white cloth. I found one at the northern spirit house in Sangkaou one day and, one informant told
me that parents had put it there because their child was sick. A *Nijaj Badji* is similar to the
*Giraj Badji* (or *Giraj jublai*) you can find beside almost every grave in an Ural Lawoi grave
setting.

### 3.5.3 Grave settings

When people die they get buried in some of the five grave settings on the island. The graves
are always near the sea. It is important for these former sea nomads to be buried near the sea
so “they can hear the waves from the sea” (Granbom 2007:63). They bury the body in the
sand and after they build a roof (*balaj*) over it. At the burial ceremony they bring drinks, food,
cigarettes and candles to the grave and place it by the foot of the grave. By the head (and
sometimes by the foot) of the grave they place a stone and a *Nijaj Banji* (with looks similar to
the *Giraj Jublai*).

I noticed that the newest graves often were just a covered with a blanket, some wooden sticks
and an umbrella over the head of the dead. It seamed a little strange due to the information
that said that it was very important that the ancestors was taken care of in their graves (Gran-
bom 2007:63). On some of the new graves the blankets were torn apart and the umbrellas
were broken. So the last week of my field study I went to the grave setting in Kaw Kwang
near Nai Rai with Pae (Interview 091206) to sort it out.

When an Urak Lawoi person dies they will be kept at home and within two or three days the
body is buried in a thin wooden coffin at the grave setting where his or her ancestors rest. It is
important the body lays with the head to the north and with the feet to the south. Then they
mark the head and the foot of the grave with logs or natural stones. An Ural Lawoi never has
their bed in this north/south position because they don’t want to “sleep like the dead”.

In the grave setting of Kaw Kwang I found three new graves with just an umbrella and
blankets. Pae told me that this was natural because that they couldn’t build anything over the
grave until 99 days or one year had passed after the funeral ceremony. If they did it meant bad
luck. When the roof is built the put the one or many *Giraj Badji* beside the grave which they
have to change every year, to get lucky. The offspring goes to the grave and honour the
ancestors on the Cleaning of the grave (*Patat Jiri*) ceremony every year.
The grave setting in Kaw Kwang was the last one that I visited on Ko Lanta and it is a bit different from the others. It seemed like there were a lot of influences from other religions in this particular grave setting. First of all the graves were not just traditional, there were four Buddhist funeral monument (stupa) there as well, and some of the graves had Chinese styled paper money stacked in the sand of the grave. Some of the graves even had flowers put down in the front of the grave like in a Christian cemetery. Pae told me one story about one of the graves where the people had decorated the grave in a new way with flowers all around. Shortly after the children got sick and the To Maw had to go there and to it the right way, the way that the spirits could recognize.

3.5.4 Spirits or gods

It is difficult to decide if the traditional Urak Lawoi religion contains any gods because it is almost impossible to know what my informants meant with the concept “god/gods”. Tobaleou for example is according to some information the spirit of the first Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta. (ILRSELI) Some of the informants called him God and some called him king of the spirits. Tobaleou has got he’s own statue in the big spirit house in the village of Tobaleou. All the
informants are unanimous about his name and his power. He’s the one they ask for luck, children or good fishing. But when I asked about the other two statues by his side, a man and a woman, I got different names and different explanations. Some said they didn’t know anything about their names or status at all. The man on Tobaleous left side was called Toblataj, Toadam, Toakohberatai or Nilo depending on what person I asked. The woman was called Toborong, Dara Sitibina, Toidab or Nime. I discovered that it was the situation with the statues in Sangkaou and Hua Laem as well.

In Sangkaou there were three statues in the big Spirit house of Au Sangkaou. The one in the middle is Raja Siridyan and according to To Maw Marasi the women on his two sides are his wives. According to To Maw Marasi the story behind the statues is that sometimes “long time ago” big Banjam trees were on the location. The people in the village burned down the trees and then everybody got sick. Then Raja Siridyan came to the To Maw in a dream and told him they must build a spirit house on the wasted ground. When the spirit house was finished and they celebrated and danced, everybody got well again. According to information from Jägerberg/Mayr (2006:14) the deceased To Maw Sicken, spoke about three gods in Sangkaou that were about to become statues. Yan (Siridyan?), Tohara and Sigilui. But they where said to be two men and one woman, like in Tobaleou.
To Maw Boden told me that Raja Siridyan is something he called “protector of the island”, but I couldn’t get it verified from any informants in Sangkaou. To Maw Boden spoke a lot about the protector of the island, or just “the island” but he didn’t say any name. He told me that he used to contact this spirit/spirits every year to get luck for the people on the island.

The four statues in the Spirit house of Hua Laem are even more confusing. Po who lived some 200 meters from it didn’t have a clue and not even To Maw Marasi know their names, To Maw Boden called one of them Toblataj, but he didn’t seem to be sure. He said that it sometimes was not that easy to get any information about anything from another To Maw because the answer could be:
– You should know, you’re the To Maw.

It seems that the names of each spirit or statue are not that important. Every family has got their own set up of ancestors, and it is them that people seems to put most effort in. They have got different “kings of spirits” in the different areas, and sometimes different in the same area (Sangkaou). And according to To Maw Boden the names of the spirits in Tobaleou; Tobaleou, Toborong and Toblataj are just nicknames anyway, because it is dangerous to use their real names. Only a To Maw can know the real names.

None of this information corresponds with the tuhat besar de’ atas (Great god above) that Hogan (1973:218) clamed that most of the people knew about before.

3.5.5 The moving of the Tobaleou shrine

One of the earliest settlements for the Urak Lawoi people was at Bonae on the east side of Ko Lanta, only some kilometres from today’s Saladan. People were living in the village of Bonae and there are some traces left after an old grave setting (ILRSELI). But the most important thing with Bonae was that the Tobaleou shrine was seated at that place. Tobaleou is said to be the first Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta (ILRSELI) and today he is still regarded as the “king of the spirits” around Saladan. There is a lot of information and stories about the moving of the Tobaleou shrine. Pae and Boden (Interview 091205) told me their version of the story. Some 40 years ago the Chinese people who owned the land wanted them to move away the shrine to another place. This is the start of a bitter dispute between different persons and groups in the
Urak Lawoi community around Saladan. Their disagreement was basically about where they should move the shrine and how they should do it. To Maw Boden’s father, To Maw Dohin, wanted to move the Tobaleou shrine from Bonae to Nai Rai, and he said to the others that he was able to do it, but they disagreed. Before he died he said that if they moved the shrine after he’s death, he wouldn’t go back and make it all right. Then he got his sons and his daughters to promise not to take part in any ceremony at the new place.

The disagreement continued until the government offered Urak Lawoi a piece of land in the mangrove national park just by the pier in Saladan. The people who had different opinions still hadn’t found an agreement. Some wanted Boden to move the shrine but he turned them down, so one in the other group went to Bonae and did it. In 2003 was the shrine moved to the village Tobaleou, and a wooden bridge was build through the mangrove (Granbom 2007:86). The people also got promised\(^1\) to have the place as a ceremonial place during the Boat floating festival. The result of this disagreement is that the family of To Maw Boden still not attending the boat floating festival at Tobaleou because they are afraid of bad luck, accidents and the fact that they are stuck to a promise made to one of their grandfathers.

\(^1\) The promise was not as good as it sounded, and for four years they had to remove all the buildings after the Boat floating festival, and build them up again for the next. They did so for four years and then they got the permission to have the buildings there permanently.
4. Waves of change

4.1 Entrance of tourism and the modern world

1990 The first tourist resort is built in Kaw Kwang beach on the north of Ko Lanta. The same year the Lanta National Park was established in the south tip of the island (Granbom 2007:67). After that the tourism and the numbers of resorts, shops and tourist facilities have increased rapidly on Ko Lanta. In 1996 Ko Lanta Yai got a ferry connection from the mainland (Granbom 2007:55). Three years later the island had electricity (http://krabi.com/lanta7.htm), 2001 they got telephone wires connecting the island with the rest of the world (http://krabi.com/lanta7.htm). Around 2004 the island had between 150 and 170 resorts (Granbom 2007:55), The habitation of Saladan, the main village of Ko Lanta Yai, has grown exceptionally. Today all the jungle is gone and new houses, hotels, stores and resorts surround the Ural Lawoi settlements of Nai Rai and Klong Dau.

4.1.1 The battle of the beaches

Another side of the tourist industry is the fact that the beaches and the land near to the beaches became valuable. Some land Urak Lawoi used to stay on they could no longer use because of new hotels, restaurants and bungalows. Some sold their land (cheap) after pressure from people who wanted to buy. (Granbom 2007:60-61) Today the situation has stabilised but conflict is still present between the interests. When I visited the Kaw Kwang grave setting with Pae (Interview 091206), she told me that the big hotel Kosta Lanta was about to close the road to the grave setting. To get to the graves we had to walk through the car gate of the Kosta Lanta hotel, some 20 meters on the road to the car park and then take a narrow road on the other side of the fence.

Today the three grave settings and one restaurant is the only remaining Urak Lawoi presence on Klong Dau beach. The people have moved and live in the villages of Klong Dau and Nai Rai a bit away from the beach, their boats and the sea.

4.1.2 Rules and regulations

The To Maws I met all lived in nice houses, probably much nicer than they could ever dream they would do 20 years ago. Things should be as good as ever but that is not the case. They are worried about the rapid changes and what is happening with their lifestyle, the culture and the Urak Lawoi society. To Maw Marasi was more pleased before he tells me. Now days he
lives next to the national park in Sangkaou and is not allowed to go out fishing in the sea outside or grow weeds in the jungle, nowadays they are much more dependant on money.

– We not happy, now we have to buy everything. Before we could plant rice in the mountains. Nobody came to control […] and we don’t have to buy rice […] but now we have to buy everything […] sometimes money is not enough.

Lanta National Park was established in 1990 on the southern tip of Ko Lanta and covers 134 km2 of the sea archipelago of the Krabi Province (Granbom 2007:67).

4.1.3 The large scale fishing industry

Granbom (2007:65-57) writes about the problem with the clash between the Urak Lawoi small-scale fishing and the large-scale commercial fishing industry. In comparison to Granbom I find that this matter has a huge importance for the people in the south. Pon from Sangkaou told me that the fishing was getting poorer and poorer. Ten years ago they could still get a lot of fish from the sea. Now days the usual income out of one day fishing is as low as 200-300 bath (approx 50-75 SKR). Some days they get nothing and they still have to pay for the gasoline. People around Sangkaou were more worried about the decline in fishing than the people around Saladan, and the reason for that is maybe that the people in Sangkaou are more dependant on that income. People in Saladan get most of their salaries from the tourism. The people in Sangkaou are also more affected by the regulations in the national park. They can’t do any fishing at all south of Ko Lanta where the Marine National Park area is located.

To Maw Marasi in Sangkaou puts it like this:

*Before 20 years ago [...] we have no [...] tourist. We lived here only gypsy. Everything easy. We could go to sea. We could go everywhere. No people, no national park [...] we could come to jungle [...] make a boat. But now, if we go to the sea, go to fishing [...] we cannot go near.*

My Thai informants described Urak Lawoi as a peaceful people who doesn’t want to interfere with others and especially with the government. They like to live “from hand to mouth”, (Granbom 2007:76) and to stay together in the villages. Like Marasi claimed, before they could get all they needed out of the sea and the jungle. Today they are dependant on the money economy.
4.1.4 A new way of life

The modern world gives them a lot of opportunities but also a lot of restrictions, rules and regulations. It therefore seems to be the most frustrating part for these sea nomadic people. Nowadays, Non told me (Interview 091101) they have to get a driving licence for the long tail boats, and soon there are going to be regulations of permits and insurances to do tours with tourists. Still in this new situation they are dependant on the money of the tourist industry, and for the youth, the tourist season is more important than the fishing. The biggest problem for Pri from Nai Rai was to manage through the tourist low season. She wanted the tourist season to last the year around if it was possible.

To Maw Marasi also sees the risks with the input from the culture of tourism. 

– Normally culture [...] gypsy culture [...] but now the young boy and girl [...] they’re [...] not a part. They [...] like they live [...] from another culture. They come by tourism.

The young people are more positive about the modern times. They think it is good that people now days get opportunities to do other things than to be fishermen. The tourist industry makes it possible for them to work on speedboats, do tourist tours with their long tail boats and to work at shops, restaurants, resorts and hotels. Many of the young people I met in Sangkaou worked for the tourist industry as well. But they didn’t want Sangkaou and Hua Laem to become another Saladan. They thought their villages were calmer and offered a better life than Saladan. Aew pointed out another angle of it to me. She thought the situation in Saladan was better because they had more input from the outside world. She thought it was a good thing that so many tourists from different nationalities came to Ko Lanta. And she thought that it was good for Urak Lawoi that people from the outside got to know the Urak Lawoi culture. To Maw Marasi on the other side of the island had, at least one positive view of the tourists.

– I think they’re OK. People can know how we are living [...] problems [...] they know gypsy people more.

On the maps of Ko Lanta today, Sangkaou is marked as a Sea gypsy village with a Sea Gypsy restaurant (which does not exist). One of the Christian organization World vision projects tended to supply Sangkaou with kayaks for people to rent. The Sea Gypsy cultural centre (shortened SGCCS in this essay) was set up by a private donator (Lennie Phuket Manga-
zine:20061130) just beside the road inside Sangkaou. The centre consists of some small buildings and holds information about the history and origin of Urak Lawoi. The centre was planned to be a non-profit institution with direct involvement of the Urak Lawoi elders to help preserve their culture by teaching the youth to learn their traditional arts and crafts and Rong Ngang music. (Lennie Phuket Magazine:20061130). It was also meant to give Ural Lawoi the possibility to sell arts and craft to tourists. The loss of tourists after the tsunami catastrophe and lack of investments stopped the project. Today nobody seems to take care of it and the tourist who find their way to Sangkaou on their rented motorcycles just take a quick drive through the village and disappear. The Urak Lawoi don’t seem to be entrepreneurs by nature and therefore haven’t got the ability or the knowledge to make money out of the stream of tourist that passing by. Granbom (2007:94) makes the conclusion that the Urak Lawoi have no real influence over the tourist development, and they are with few exceptions excluded from the benefits.

4.1.5 Influences from the TV-media

Granbom (2007:83-85) writes about the influence of the TV-media and the new western standards it brought to Ko Lanta. As early as in the late 80’s the children around Saladan learned that it is not “normal” to be naked in front of the other sex (Granbom 2007:71). As the influence of tourism has been greater in the north is not surprising that Urak Lawoi around Saladan have absorbed more of the western culture than the people in the south. The people around Saladan also live closer to, interacts and communicates more with outsiders. One interesting matter is that Hogan found the Urak Lawoi people in Klong Dau and Nai Rai more integrated with the local Thai community, than any other Urak Lawoi community 35-40 years ago (Hogan 1972:224-225).

Pae (Interview 091205) spook a lot about the new times and the new values that were developed around Saladan by the influence of tourism and the modern society. People want to choose and think individually. They get a lot of input from the tourist world and from TV.
– Now days a lot of girls get pregnant in the age of 15. It didn’t happen before [...] you got the new gypsy mentality and the old gypsy mentality. Its really hard to unite people these days to do something for the Urak Lawoi community [...] everybody is so independent.
4.2 The tsunami and the aftermaths

4.2.1 Tsunami facts and thought

The tsunami catastrophe of 2004 caused Ko Lanta great material losses. Boats and buildings got destroyed along the coastlines if the island. However, just around 20 persons were killed on the island. Only a few of them is said to have been Urak Lawoi.\textsuperscript{2} In my interviews I always asked about the reason of the tsunami. I wanted to know if they saw the catastrophe out of their religious belief or if they just looked upon it in scientific terms. And if so, what was the reason for the tsunami and the lesson to be learned from it?

The younger people could explain the geological reasons for the tsunami. Nobody referred to anything supernatural. But To Maw Marasi told me that one of the tales on the island had been about the seven big waves that were to come. After that I heard this story a couple of times from different people in different ages. Another opinion was that the tsunami was meant to “make clear”. One informant said:

– \textit{If you build to high, or dig to deep you’re not good to the nature and then the nature will react.}

To the elderly people there seemed to be something about a punishment from nature through the wave. When I asked To Maw Boden about the seven waves he just laughed and said:

– \textit{If tsunami comes back, one is enough; it going to make Ko Lanta finished!}

Maybe he meant that there were enough bad things going around for one final punishment from the nature.

\textsuperscript{2} I have not been able to find any official statistics of the number of victims caused by the tsunami, on Ko Lanta. Information on the Internet says everything from 10 up to 30. According to my informants and Granbom (2007:6) only “a few” Urak Lawoi where killed.
4.2.2 A new self esteem

Ko Lanta didn’t suffer as bad from the damages from the tsunami as a lot of other places even if people died and houses and boats were destroyed. When the help organizations started to work with this area the indigoes people suddenly got a lot of the new attention. In the means of getting compensated materially Urak Lawoi was well recognized and with the recognition of their culture a new kind of self-esteem has developed. To me people don’t seem to be as shy as they were described before (Hogan 1972:213) and everyone I met was very interested in answering questions about their culture and religion. Just a couple of years ago Granbom (2007:95) described them like follow.

“They are ashamed of this before outsiders, with whom they try to erase their identity”

I asked Non (Interview 091101) in Nai Rai about how they looked upon them selves and who the other groups looked upon them and he answered:

– Ten years ago the Muslims and the Chinese thought that Urak Lawoi was dirty [...] they don’t look down on Urak Lawoi anymore, its because Urak Lawoi got new clothes and work.

The question is if this new self-esteem is the result of an adoption to the Thai culture and a slow eradication of their own.

4.2.3 Aid and mission

The new attention, new groups attended their areas and the new projects have meant a lot of changes for the people. A lot of different organisations were involved and a lot of projects were running. Some of them were staged by the UNDP with the aim to develop the villages of Hua Laem and Sangkaou (UNDP et al: Water management) to give them better and safer water supply. Some project came out of private donations and aimed to preserve and inform about the Urak Lawoi culture. The Sea Gypsy Cultural Centre in Sangkaou was one of those projects. Christian organisations offered boats, houses and even work. Some informants (who wanted to be anonymous) claims that some of the Christian organisations “bought souls for boats”. This information fell outside the range of my study and the time was too short to verify. The fact is that at least 50 people in Sangkaou, where the Christian organizations were most active, have become Christians.
4.3 Impact from other religions

The people on Ko Lanta have lived together for ages with different cultures and different beliefs without any aggressions or bloodshed. The Thai Chinese, the Muslims and the Urak Lawoi people have shared the island with parallel cultures during a long period. But when the tourist industry started to exploit the island around 1990 and more people from the outside came the situation changed. Hotels and Thai people from outside the island surrounded the Urak Lawoi settlements around Saladan and the influences from their new Buddhist neighbours increased. After the tsunami in 2004 Christian organisations started to work with projects focused on Urak Lawoi. Today a lot of the Urak Lawoi calls themselves Buddhists (Jägerberg/Mayr: 2006 16-17) and about 60 have converted to Christianity.3 I asked To Maw Marasi if it mattered that the people in Sangkaou nowadays have different religions.

– It doesn’t matter, there’s not […] something important for us, only the culture of the gypsy. (If) they’re happy, they’re happy.

Many of my informants didn’t regard their own belief as a religion. Maybe that’s the reasons why they don’t seem to look upon other religion as a threat against their own culture, and therefore they do nothing to protect it. The Urak Lawoi don’t have any rules that forbid them to believe in different gods or to take part in religious ceremonies. The attitude towards other religions is more that people can believe what they want to believe if it is good for them. Still some people indicated that there might be different opinions below the surface.

The Urak Lawoi people don’t seem to look upon other religious practices or rituals as false. According to the stories my informants told me they accept every other source of supernatural power. But they still deal with their own spiritual world and they have to stick to the old traditional rituals otherwise their ancestors might not recognize them, and that can bring bad luck. Other forces from religious powers can still harm them. Pae (Interview 091208) told me a story about a situation when an Urak Lawoi man had walked into a Muslim heave-offering by mistake and got really ill. The To Maw had to call for help from a man in Phuket because he couldn’t deal with the Muslim magic.

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3 According to my observations (the field study diary) and information from different informants.
4.3.1 Islam

Islam is the biggest religion on Ko Lanta. According to different sources of information the Muslim population is somewhere around 85-90%. Still it seems that the impact from the Muslim religion and culture is absent. The rules and regulations of Islam don’t seem to attract the Urak Lawoi people at all. I asked Pri what she thought about Islam, and she answered:

– Cannot eat pork [...] don’t have time (to pray) five times a day [...] and one day can not eat anything! (Ramadan).

She told me about people who have met a Muslim partner and for that reason converted to Islam, and other people told me the same story. They didn’t know anybody who has converted out of belief.

Even if the Urak Lawoi don’t seem to be too attracted by the Muslim culture Urak Lawoi and the Muslims lives peacefully side by side in many places on Ko Lanta, and that has been the situation for hundreds of years. In the village of Hua Laem in the south of Ko Lanta the Urak Lawoi people, the Chinese and the Muslims have shared their village life for ages, without any trouble. When I asked my informant Po about the how they cope with the situation he just smiled and said:

– We’re like a big happy family!

Still there are some interesting connections between the two groups. My informant Non (Interview 091101) told me at story about how the old people have said that the Urak Lawoi people used to be Muslims when they lived on Sumatra. When they moved north they changed and started believing in nature instead. In the Spirit house of Kunnamdam in Sangkaou, Aumalek, they never sacrifice pork because this ancestor was a Muslim (Pon, Interview 091127). And some of the families in Nai Rai never sacrifice pork, or bring pork as a gift to the grave setting because of there Muslim ancestors (Pae, Interview 091205)

One Muslim informant from Klong Nin told me about people who had come from Malaysia to turn Chao Ley back to Islam again. He said that they had brought clothes and other gifts. I

4 I couldn’t get any official statistics from the authorities on Ko Lanta. The information I got from my informants, from guided books and from Internet says everything in between 85 and 96%. As Urak Lawoi probably represents 4% (see chapter 3.2.7) and Ko Lanta has got a Buddhist community the number of Muslims can’t be larger than 90%.
don’t know if this was just a rumour because none of my other informants had heard anything about it.

4.3.2 Buddhism

The Buddhist religion and culture have been a part of Ko Lanta for a long time. Especially around Lanta Old Town, with a large Chinese population it has been present. The old Buddhist Temple in Lanta Old town was built about 100 years ago and a new bigger temple was built some just some years ago. The Buddhist usually don’t spread their belief like missionaries so according to the people I met, no Urak Lawoi have converted to Buddhism. But it is really hard to know anything about it because their belief systems is so close you can’t divide them easily. If you want to become a Buddhist and still perform the Urak Lawoi ceremonies that works well with the Buddhist belief. If you want to stay in the Urak Lawoi belief system and still do the Buddhist rituals it works well with the Urak Lawoi belief. You don’t really have to choose or change, you can do as you please, according to both sides. Non (Interview 091101) put it like this:

– The Buddhists believe in nature like us, we are very much the same.

Aew in Nai Rai is daughter of a Chinese Buddhist father and an Urak Lawoi mother. She still considers herself as Urak Lawoi, and as a Buddhist at the same time. She goes with her father to the Buddhist temple and her mother to the To Maw. She thinks the Urak Lawoi religion and Buddhism are very near, and she doesn’t have to choose between them. Pae (Interview 091205) told me that nowadays when it is sometimes hard to find a To Maw who can perform the ritual when somebody wants to hand something over the dead ancestor, they can go to the Buddhist monk. He can perform another ritual and help Urak Lawoi people to deliver things to their ancestors. Granbom (2007:95) claimed that the Urak Lawoi didn’t go to the temple 7-8 years ago, but according to my informants some do it regular nowadays, at least in Saladan. A Buddhist informant said that the Urak Lawoi people in Sangkaou and Hua Laem never went to the temple in Lanta Old Town. But he also said that the Buddhist monk in Lanta Old Town used to educate the students in the school in Sangkaou every Friday. I don’t know how this effected their belief or if the purpose was to convert the children to Buddhism. There is also a pre-temple building in Sangkaou, with a big statue of Buddha statue that is supposed to be a real temple in the future.
4.3.3 Christianity

After the Tsunami catastrophe in 2004 many help organisations started to rebuild Ko Lanta. Some of them were Christian organisations and they started to work in areas where the Urak Lawoi people had their settlements. The Christian organisation World Vision gave boats and built a lot of new houses in Sangkaou. Some informants claimed that some of the Christian organizations were buying souls for boats but I didn’t get it confirmed, and I didn’t get any information about on what terms these houses in Sangkaou were distributed. On World visions webpage one of the mission statements is to: “partnerships with Churches to contribute to spiritual and social transformation” (http://www.worldvision.or.th/about_mission_eng.html)

When I visited Sangkaou in December 2009 the Christians there were about persons (11-13% of the population) in Sangkaou.

The results of this change didn’t seem to have any direct consequence for the Urak Lawoi community in Saladan. According to the Christians they could still attend some of the traditional ceremonies but not take part in any pagan activities. When I asked them about what they did when somebody died they told me the Christians were supposed to be buried in the graveyard in Trang on the mainland.

One of my informants told me about the way some Christian organisation had worked in Saladan, when some of Urak Lawoi where baptised:

– You have to promise that you’re sure of become a Christian and [...] not be gypsy again, you can not go back, if you go back something will happen to you!

I didn’t get their information confirmed either and it is hard to say from just one statement if these missionaries were using the Urak Lawoi belief in bad luck, to force them to make a final conversion. The Christian Mission Centre Lanta is built just behind the village of Klong Dau. Every Sunday a community of 60 people meet in the church. According to the Christians I spoke to, these 60 only included people from the Urak Lawoi community. To Maw Boden had a private opinion about the impact from the other religions.
– Go to Buddhist is OK, go to Chinese is OK, go to farang is OK, but not Christian because they want gypsy to change a lot. If you go merry to farang, Buddhist, Chinese you can do what gypsy does, but when you go to Christian you cannot.

The matter of the impact of Christian organisations seemed to be a bit touchy, because I was told that people didn’t want to offend each other, and as they knew I was staying with a Christian family I Sangkaou for a period most people would not criticise the Christians when they were talking to me.

Finally it seemed to me there was a difference in the belief between the Christians in Sangkaou and the Christians around Saladan. In Sangkaou they seemed to be convinced believers and they lived as Christians full time. When I asked them they knew clearly what they could attend according to their Christian belief. Around Saladan the Christians seemed to be “a little” Christianized still doing the old practices. Tipnipaa “Ec” Songsamut (Interview 091203) told me her mother use to go to both the church and the To Maw. In Saladan some of the informants told me that many had become Christians “on the paper and not by heart”. As long as the Christian leaders from Phuket or Trang was around they behaved as they were supposed to as Christians. But when they left they did the same things as before. But To Maw Boden was worried about this attitude too.

– When they die they wont know which way to go, its dangerous to just play around.

4.4 The Future

When I asked my informants about the future, what will happen the next 20 years, there were big differences between the ages, and the people from north and south of the island.

The elderly people didn’t see much good with the situation and the things they thought would happen. They worries was mostly about the fishing, and about new projects that would force them to move away or to change lifestyle. The young people around Saladan in the north seemed to be more integrated with the rest of the society and tourist business. They didn’t see the future all in black and they didn’t talk as much about the fishing. Some of them were more concerned about how to avoid a low season in tourism so they could work for salary the whole year around. But all of them said frankly that in a few years time very few would be able to speak and understand their own language. Some of them said that it was going to disappear in just 3-5 years. The young people in the north still believed that the Urak Lawoi
culture could survive, and thought that 20 years from now they would still be staying together and that they were still holding on to their culture.

Every year To Maw Boden in Na i Rai use to perform a ritual to get god luck for the whole island. This season he thought it is going to be for the last time. Boden is getting old and he is afraid that he will do something wrong and instead of good luck for the island cause damage. Pae tried to explain it:

– If he make good [...] luck come to him, if he make something wrong [...] very bad luck to him, very bad.

This last time, he’s going to ask the island if there is something wrong between them, and that it shouldn’t be angry on the gypsy people because they don’t know what they are doing. He will ask the island to be angry of him instead. The situation really seemed to worry Boden. He told me that he was sleeping badly almost every night because he worried so much about the future. And after he has stopped to “make good for the island”,

– If nobody can do this (ritual) it’s going to turn really bad within three years.

But he couldn’t say in what way.

In conformity with Granbom (2007:30) I found that the change of life style was greater for the people in the north, due to the expansion of the tourism. Pae (Interview 091205) talked a lot about the new gypsy mentality around Saladan. Everybody’s acts individually, people want to choose a new way of life, new habits, new thoughts even a new way of eating. The children just understand a little of the Urak Lawoi language and in school they only learn Thai and nobody has got time or interest to learn the To Maw culture.

The brief picture I get from my interviews is that there is a change in progress on Ko Lanta, but it looks different in the two main areas. In north they have had most input from tourism, money economy, media and that, alongside with intern conflicts it is tearing the sea nomad society apart. In the south they are more traditional, still under influence from new regulations, poor fishing, and the Christian mission but more united. To Maw Marasi in Sangkaou can see the change but he also knows what he wants:

– We’re changing, not [...] culture but [...] lifestyle. And the language, before everybody could speak gypsy. But now they cannot speak.
We don’t change culture; we don’t want to change culture. We don’t want a gypsy to change their culture!

And even if the people around Saladan regard the people in Sangkaou as “traditional” and “uneducated” they still agrees that the Sangkaou area got more of the traditional culture and religion intact. They also see that they at least try. To have three To Maw in Sangkaou can be a sign of decline but it can also be seen as an effort and an ambition to carry the To Maw culture and the religion into the future.

When I asked To Maw Marasi about what will happen the next 20 years he answered:
– No more gypsies anymore!
He said it with a laugh but it still might say a lot about the feelings many of the elderly are dealing with when they look into the horizon, waiting for another wave of change.
For the young it is easier to adapt to the new, but there are also the ones who carries the Urak Lawoi culture and religion into the future. The remaining question is in what shape it will be?
5. ANALYSIS

The traditional religion and culture of Urak Lawoi is still present on Ko Lanta. The Too Maw culture is still an important and the To Maw still carries the role of medicine man, ceremonial leader and fortune-teller. But the culture is rapidly changing under the impact of the tourist industry, missionary activities and the modern civilization. 20 years ago Urak Lawoi were fishermen who lived an easy life on the beaches of Ko Lanta. Today they are still fishermen but the decline of the fishing, and a modern lifestyle, have made them very dependent of the tourist industry and the salary they get from it. Some of them live in concrete houses or houses built up as tsunami aid projects surrounded by hotels outside Saladan. Some are still living quietly in the south, mostly out of fishing. Some have integrated themselves to the Thai society and live more like Thai people and some still live with their old culture and belief. Whatsoever they all still regard them as Urak Lawoi and there self-esteem seems to have increased a lot due to the recognition they have had after the tsunami catastrophe. They still stand united as one minority people and they have kept their cultural heritage, but in comparison with Granbom (2007:93) I found it is falling apart, and the process seems to accelerate.

The negative material and human affects of the tsunami catastrophe in 2004 have been tremendous. On the other hand the loss of boats and houses soon got compensated by help project and a new attention of the Urak Lawoi culture have given the people higher self esteem. But the interest for the Sea nomads also brought new Christian interests, who want to turn the Urak Lawoi to Christianity. People suffering from the tsunami catastrophe were in the need of houses, boats and work, and possible to help in return of conviction. The unethical missionary tendencies that Jägerberg/Mayr (2006:22-23) suspected some years ago are not confirmed by this essay, but nor disproved. Many have turned to Christianity in just few years time, and one consequence is an accelerating disintegration of their culture and unity. The sympathetic fact that the traditional Urak Lawoi culture do not put up any walls against other beliefs or religions leaves them unprotected from influences from new beliefs and the waves of modern culture. When people turn to Christianity they can’t take part in some of the old ceremonies. They will be buried in Trang on the mainland instead of the old grave settings on the island, and therefore it is a risk that the bonds the other Christians get stronger than the bonds to the Urak Lawoi people in the future. These people cannot take an active part in the biggest Urak Lawoi ceremony, the boat floating festival because of their new belief. Because of the dispute concerning the moving of the Tobaleou shrine some of the families from Nai
Rai do not take part of it either. In the long run these matters might impair the unity and the traditional religion and culture. If the To Maw culture keeps fading others might turn more and more to Buddhists and see themselves more like Thai people than Urak Lawoi, especially when the children no longer speaks the old language. In this category there might be many who get modern in a secular western way and just simply lose interest for the old culture and religion.

Granbom (2007:59) saw a strong tendency for the Urak Lawoi society to split up when they entered the “modern world” during her field studies and my impression is that it is a continuing process. The significant differences between the northern and the southern area points in that direction. The thing that still seems to keep them together is the families and the fact that they still are very tied to each other by the family bonds. No matter if they have turned to Christianity or become modern, they still live side by side like they have always done. The family might be the solid ground and saving island to make it possible to build the future Urak Lawoi society upon. It is not going to look like the old one and the religion and culture might change and get more and more shattered but without some kind of unity in the Urak Lawoi identification their cultural heritage might just vanish and disappear.

My conclusion is that Urak Lawoi is integrating more and more with the Thai society but it has negative consequences for the unity and their traditional way of life. The long-term consequences can be separation of the group and a transformation and fusion of their culture and religion with the Thai-Buddhist culture. The remains of the traditional Urak Lawoi religion might be absorbed and turned into a local variety of Buddhism. 20 years from now Urak Lawoi will probably still be celebrating the Boat floating ceremony but it might just be a Sea gypsy festival for the tourists.
6. SUMMARY

The traditional religion of the Urak Lawoi still plays an important part for the Urak Lawoi people. Even if some of them do not regard their belief as a religion, most of the people still live with the old beliefs and traditions. The To Maw is still an important person for the people and he is still used as the connecting link between the humans and the spirits of their ancestors. Most of the people attend the traditional ceremonies and the Urak Lawoi stands as one distinguished cultural group on Ko Lanta. But this picture is rapidly changing due to the changes that come out of the entrance to a modern society. People get new influences and live more independently.

During the last 20 years of growth of the tourist industry, their life situation and way of living is constantly challenged by new regulations and influences from the government and the by the tourist industry. The tsunami in 2004 does not seem to mean that much to the people in a religious decoding. Except for some old stories about the 7 waves that were about to come, most of the people refer to geologic explanations. But the results of the tsunami became an accelerator of the changing process. When the wave swept away houses and destroyed boats it also put the Urak Lawoi people in spot of a new attention. The new attention brought a new interest for their traditional culture and religion. This have changed the way that the Urak Lawoi people do look upon themselves in a positive way. The catastrophe also brought Christian help organisations that wanted them to turn to Christianity. A lot of Urak Lawoi have turned to Christianity the last few years and it might risk shattering the people in the long run.

The last 20 years the traditional religion has faded in intensity and value for the people. It still plays an important part but people seems to turn more and more to hospitals than the To Maw, more to individual choices than to the traditional. The To Maw culture itself is declining and has got a hard time to reproduce itself. The traditional religion has also turned more into a variant of Buddhism. The impact from other religions from the tourist industry, from the increasing population and missionary activities puts the traditional beliefs under a constant pressure. The waves of change have rapidly eroded the culture and religion of Urak Lawoi.
7. REFERENCES

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Sangkaou 09-10-31
Tobaleou 09-11-01
Nai Rai 09-11-01
Klong Dau 09-11-01
Lanta Old Town 09-11-02
Tobaleou 09-11-03
Sangkaou 09-11-04
The southern grave setting on Klong Dau beach 09-11-05
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Rawai, Phuket 09-11-07
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Tobaleou 09-11-10
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Hua Laem 09-11-12
The grave setting outside Sangkaou 09-11-13
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Tobaleou 09-11-18
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Nai Rai 09-11-30
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Appendix 1
Map of Ko Lanta