



# **THE MOKEN: SEA GYPSIES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Black peoples were the first human beings to occupy the Southeast Asian countries of Thailand, Malaysia and Myanmar. A memorable experience while researching this topic occurred during my college days at the University of Iowa. I asked a Malaysian student attending my university to view a photo of a black Malaysian native. I requested he tell me something about these Blacks living in his country. This gentleman said the black natives in Malaysia are viewed similar to how Americans view the Native Americans. When Europeans initially came to America they discovered the land was already occupied by the Native Americans. Similarly, this Malaysian student said when the light-skinned Mongoloid groups initially arrived in Malaysia they discovered the land was already occupied by these Black peoples. Blacks in Malaysia are viewed as the country's aboriginal population.

Presently, the Blacks in Southeast Asia no longer occupy the land areas once populated by their ancestors. Many black groups were overwhelmed by the intrusion of the Mongoloid

populations in the region. Several black groups retreated southward. Some adopted themselves to a life on the sea.



Map of Southeast Asia.

The Moken is one such group. The Moken, a nomadic sea-going people, spend the majority of their lives on boats. They can be found in the Mergui archipelago off the coast of Myanmar. They are often referred to as "Sea Gypsies". In Thailand they are called *Chao Ley* (people of the sea) or *Chao Nam* (people of the water). In their own language their name is derived from *oken* "salt water" and *lemo* "to dip". This roughly translates into "immersed into the sea". The Moken population lingers between 2,000 to 3,000 people. Their numbers have been shrinking steadily since WWII.

The Moken shows prominent Africoid physical features. They speak a proto-Malaysian language and are believed to be related to the Jakun, another aboriginal black group in the region. According to tradition the Moken were originally a land based people. Once the light-skinned Mongoloid groups entered the region they became the victims of constant harassment and exploitation. Out of desperation the Moken took to a life on the sea. To this day they remain suspicious of strangers.

The Moken also show clear signs of intermixing with Malays and Chinese. Many of them have wavy hair and light brown skin. Western researchers have chosen to focus exclusively on this phenotype in their published studies on the Moken. Photos of the Africoid Moken types are typically excluded from works appearing in *National Geographic* and similar publications.

In Moken society both men and women go naked above the waist. They typically travel in fleets of 10 to 40 boats. These fleets villages are commonly called *kabang*. These boats are propelled with oars and rectangular sails. The life of an average Moken boat is 2 years. Upon docking, the women are busy gathering food and the men are typically involved in boat repair. Their boats are usually light, strong and capable of carrying eight or nine people. The Moken never throw left over food overboard. This deters sharks from trailing their boats. As a consequences, the boats are filled with garbage, rodents and the smell of rotten fish.

For a food source, they rely heavily on fishing with spears and gathering edible plants. They may raise a few fruits and vegetables on the islands they visit regularly. They are excellent swimmers and divers and sometimes dive for pearl oysters and sea snails which they use as bartering items. Some Moken groups have been cited using dogs to hunt pigs, deer and crabs.

Moken marriages usually occur within the same *kabang*. If a young man is interested in a girl outside his boat village he will usually make extended visits to her community and become actively involved with living and working with it. When a couple decides on marriage a group of people called "joiners" are sent on the man's behalf to the girl's village. The "joiners" make a formal request to the girl's parents. If they are successful the young man comes in person to take his bride.



A Moken boat at Surin Island, Thailand.

The Moken are very much in tune to the sea. In some areas they were well aware of the coming tsunami which struck in December 26, 2004. Many were able to avoid the heavy loss of lives suffered by the land based communities.

- "A recent study by Swedish scientists shows that Moken children see twice as well underwater as European children do. They are able to focus on and pick out small shellfish and other sea life from the rocky ocean floor that for most people are only a blur. The human eye is adaptable to function optimally in air and its focusing capability deteriorates underwater, that's why we need goggles to see clearly while swimming. The researchers found that Moken children are able to constrict their pupils more than European children, thereby producing sharper images. They were also able to effect a greater change in the shape of the eye's lens to increase visual focus (a process known as accommodation). The researchers are still unsure as to whether the ability is primarily genetic or learned, but they speculate that the environmental component plays the larger role because preliminary evidence suggest that non-Moken can be trained to improve their underwater vision."

-Heidi Schultz, National Geographic