

The Dynamics And Protection Of Local Culture Under Globalization On Lanta Island In Southern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to study how Lanta Islanders in southern Thailand can maintain their traditions and culture under globalization. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 30 islanders on Lanta Island and used content analysis to analyze the resulting data. The researchers found that, after the tourism boom and globalization came to Lanta Island, many foreign travelers have visited the island, causing local people to change their own way of life to support tourism. However, with government support, the local culture is still alive. The local people have maintained their culture in many ways, such as transmitting their culture to their children and mixing with Thai. We conclude that the Lanta Islanders still maintain their traditions and culture while learning about the world outside the island by adapting themselves in various ways to develop a mixed culture to live under globalization.

Keywords: Lanta Islanders; tourism; Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Globalization is the homogenization of economies around the world (Somboon, 2008); as Reiser and Davies (1994) state, globalization is meant to universalize. Globalization has spread to every region of the world and, in some cases, has affected the local culture. Scholte (2005: 17) explains that, according to some definitions, globalization is similar to Westernization or Americanization. This explains how modern social structures such as capitalism, rationalism, industrialization, etc., have been spread throughout the world. This phenomenon can destroy community decisions and local cultures.

Lanta Island is located on Thailand's West Coast in the Andaman Sea. The island has a lot of local traditions and mixed culture, originally inhabited by Sea Gypsies, fishermen from the west coast of Thailand. Sea Gypsies originated from the Nicobar or Andaman Islands, lived on their boats, and were feared as pirates. Many years ago, after Lanta Island was opened for tourism under a government policy that aimed to increase economic growth, many people from around the world began to visit, and foreigners, especially from western countries, brought culture and transferred it to the local people on Lanta Island. The island now has a wide variety of foreign residents as well. It now has a mixed culture and a long history; however, in recent years, and many local people have adapted to life under globalization, such as changing from traditional jobs to working for large companies, and many aspects of the local way of life are changing.

The village of Ban Sang Ga U on Lanta Island is a Sea Gypsy village of this Sea Gypsy. Their lifestyle has already changed to adapt to the modern world, but they still retain their own language, traditions, and ceremonies. Their belief in the supernatural and traditional spiritual worship is still influential in the community, as seen in their traditional "Loy-Rua" (Floating Boat) ceremony. The village men build a symbolic boat and place wooden statues of themselves in it, along with nail parings, hair, and popped rice. In performing this ritual, they ask for forgiveness from the sea gods for any offences they have made to the sea. It is believed that all evil is carried away in the symbolic boat (LantaHotel.com, 2010).

Before we made the decision to study the adaptation of local culture, we spent a great deal of time in 2006-2007 surveying and conducting in-depth interviews with some of the inhabitants of Lanta Island. We found that many native islanders are changing their way of life, such as by moving away from making handicrafts and engaging more in small business ventures relating to the tourism industry in order to support foreign travelers, especially Westerners. Furthermore, many travelers have brought new cultures to the island, and the native people are open-minded about adapting themselves to these cultures. This is how capitalism came to the island, as well as management with economic, night life, and so on. However, after travelers came to Lanta Island and the local people began forming businesses to support them, several issues arose, such as concerns about the loss of traditional cultural practices and the shift toward a more modern society. While Lanta Islanders still strive to protect their traditions and culture, they maintain that it is difficult to do under globalization.

As we mentioned above, studying the cultural adaptation of Lanta Islanders is an interesting issue because they live under globalization but still carry on with their old culture. Thus, the question of this study is how the native Lanta Islanders can live with their old culture under globalization.

OBJECTIVE

To study how the Lanta Islanders can maintain their traditions and culture under globalization.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the researchers selected the study area of Lanta Island in southern Thailand, located in the Andaman Sea, because the island has been developed under a government policy in support of a tourism strategy, so the island is popular among travelers from around the world. In addition, we used a qualitative method involving a fieldwork survey and in-depth interviews of 30 Lanta Islanders between June 2010 and January 2011. The researchers then used content analysis to analyze the collected data.

GEOGRAPHY OF LANTA ISLAND

Lanta Island (officially named **Lanta Yai Island** or Big Lanta Island) is located in the Andaman Sea and is easily accessible by boat from the Krabi province, Phi Phi Island, the Phuket province, the Trang province, Lipe Island, Jum Island, and many other islands. A car ferry also serves Lanta Island, passing Lanta Noi Island (Little Lanta Island) and reaching the mainland roughly halfway between Krabi and Trang.

The population here is a combination of **traditional Thai** (a mix of Buddhist and Muslim), Sea Gypsies, and a wide variety of foreign residents as well. The Swedish have a large community with several schools teaching all ages. People of many more nationalities, such as English, Germans, French, Spanish, Irish, Canadian, Dutch, Danish, and Finnish, live on Lanta Island most of the year.

Lanta Island is shown in Picture 1.

HISTORY OF LANTA ISLAND

Researchers gathered data relating to this study from in-depth interviews of many native Lanta Islanders. The history of Lanta Island is as follows.

The first islanders were the nomadic Sea Gypsies, whom the Thai people called Chao Ley, meaning fishermen inhabiting the west coast of Thailand. They arrived on Lanta Island more than 500 years ago with their unique language, matriarchal social system, and animist beliefs. The Sea Gypsies are nomadic boat people of Indo-Malay origin with a subsistence-based fishing livelihood. Today, many have been granted land, surnames, and citizenship in Thailand.

Chinese merchants arrived on the island more than 100 years ago during the revolution that saw communist ruler Chairman Mao Tse Tung take power in China. These merchants came to trading ports throughout Southeast

Asia (including Lanta Island) from Kwang Tung Island, Hai Lham Island, and the Sua Thaw area in China. Now, Lanta Island is home to three very distinct cultural groups: the Chao Ley (Sea Gypsies), the Thai-Muslims, and the Thai-Chinese. They've lived together in peace and harmony for hundreds of years in mixed communities around the island.



Picture 1: Location of Lanta Island

Source: www.ko-lanta.eu

RESULTS OF STUDY

In this study, we present the adaptation of community culture under the globalization of Lanta Island in southern Thailand. We found that tourism on Lanta Island has brought many people per year to the island, causing the transfer of culture to in the native islanders. In addition, the Thailand tsunami in 2004 also affected the people and caused cultural changes on Lanta Island in various ways.

From the economic perspective, the phenomenon of travelers coming to island has given opportunities to the native people to earn more income by continuing to work as fishermen and selling fish to restaurants at higher prices. In addition, the people of Lanta Island can earn more income by working in the tourism sector. For example, they can rent boats to travelers for excursions around the island to earn extra money.

As a result of globalization, the culture and traditions of the people of Lanta Island have been nearly destroyed by the introduction of foreign cultures. However, the Thai government at both the local and central levels, are trying to keep the Lanta culture alive by, for example arranging cultural and traditional festivals such as shadow plays (Nung Ta-Lung) and traditional Thai dramatic performances (Li-Kae), in addition to shows at resorts and restaurants to welcome travelers to Lanta Island.

In terms of social and community interaction, the researchers found that the Lanta community has shifted away from community interaction toward a more individual orientation. This means that the Lanta people have little interaction with others in their community, instead communicating and interacting primarily with their own family members. However, since the 2004 tsunami, many non-government organizations (NGOs), supported by the UNDP

and the Thai government, have tried to help the community and restore community interaction. Still, due to the recent economic and social interactions under globalization, Lanta Islanders still primarily engage in individual interaction and remain within their family units.

In addition, a significant problem on Lanta Island since the tourism boom began is environmental destruction such as trespassing in national parks and land use changes for business to support tourism, as shown in a study conducted by Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn and Naipinit (2011). This study suggested that Phuket Island has experienced a lot of environmental destruction due to trespassing in national parks and the transformation of land to resort and service business property to support travelers. In addition, land prices are increasing, encouraging local people to sell their land to capitalists and transform natural forests into resorts, restaurants, and so on. This capitalism that came to Lanta Island is affecting the traditions, way of life, and culture of the people on the island.

In the study, we found that many travelers who come to Lanta Island because they want to see and learn more about the local culture and traditions, similar to the findings of Vaitayavanich, et al. (2011), who suggested that many travelers who have visited southern Thailand and the Songkhla province prefer to visit traditional and cultural places. However, the travelers bring many international cultures to the regions they visit. Regarding the adaptation and maintenance of the community's culture and traditions on Lanta Island in southern Thailand under globalization, the researchers concluded the following:

- Muslims on Lanta Island can maintain their own religious traditions while living in the midst of those who practice other religions.
- The nomadic Sea Gypsies (Chao Lev) comprise one group that has communicated with outsiders, such as travelers. However, they lack education because the government is not concerned about them. Thus, they can stay under globalization by mixing their own culture with Western culture and transferring their knowledge, traditions, and culture to their relatives, including their children.
- The Chinese on Lanta Island still maintain some Chinese cultural features because they strongly maintain their traditions and transfer them to their family members, but today it is a mix of Chinese and Thai culture.
- Because some traditions and culture are disappearing, the Thai government encouraged the people to recover those traditions and culture and transfer the knowledge to the local people
- All cultures and traditions on Lanta Island are maintained by establishing a Lanta cultural and tradition museum so travelers can visit the museum and learn more about the Lanta culture. Then, the local government arranged cultural shows at resorts, hotels, and other tourist attractions.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we present the case study of Lanta Island because this island has been a favorite island for many years; many travelers have visited there. However, of the presence of so many visitors has also caused many problems, such as the destruction of natural resources and the changing of local culture. However, our study found that Lanta Islanders still maintain their traditions and culture, learning about the world outside of the island and adapting themselves in various ways to develop a mixed culture to live under globalization.

Local government support is the one factor that can help the local culture to stay alive. In addition, support from local business such as resorts, hotels, or restaurants in setting up cultural and traditional shows also enable the local culture to be transferred from generation to generation. However, this study shows that Lanta Islanders can maintain the local culture and traditions forever.

Finally, the researchers hope that this paper can serve as a guideline for both local and central governments and islanders in situations similar to that of Lanta Island in developing their communities with a tourism strategy while maintaining their traditions and cultures.

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