Vision as an Interactive Practice: Focusing on the Influences of Global Tourism on the Moken “Sea Nomads”

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Abstract: From 1957 to 2007, Thailand has seen its tourism industry expand by roughly 325 times to current numbers of more than 14 million annual tourists. During these 50 years of rapid growth, studies show how hill tribes have been objectified by the “tourists’ gaze” in a unilateral way. Absent from these studies has been a treatment of the inverse, namely, minority groups’ “vision” when interacting with tourists.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between minority groups and tourists in the Andaman Sea region in Thailand by focusing on the vision of the Moken “Sea Nomads”. Beginning with the Surin Islands being declared Thailand’s national park in 1981, adjacent islands and coastal areas along the Andaman Sea were registered as marine national parks. As a result of this change in regulation, the Moken’s foraging activity and nomadic movement has been restricted causing them to settle in the Surin Islands. This has not, however, deterred them from keeping their tribal ways as they continue to fish and gather whenever they can break free from the national park’s “eye” of supervision. Legally speaking, fishing in national park waters is prohibited, but there exists an unwritten rule between the Moken and state officials that allows for their fishing during the southwest monsoon season when tourism is discouraged. Although national park staff verbally order the Moken to refrain from fishing activity, the Moken continue to conduct their sea harvest, albeit away from the purview of the authorities.

By contrast, the northeast monsoon period is a time of heavy tourism during which the Moken are strictly prohibited from fishing. Similar to Thailand’s national park system, the Moken have adjusted their lifestyles to take advantage of tourism. Tourists find enjoyment from gazing at the Moken in their villages and watching sea creatures. While tourists observe the Moken, the Moken use this opportunity to sell their wares. Moken women profit from tourism by watching tourists and observing their money
habits. Then, they sell those souvenirs that attract the greatest attention at high prices. Meanwhile, Moken men help tourists “visualize” ocean life through snorkeling. While they point out popular sea creatures to tourists, they also cast their vision toward the sea for later foraging.

Although it cannot be denied that there exists an unequal political-economic balance of power between minority groups and tourists, this relationship should not be considered as anything static. The minority group is not objectified in a unilateral way by tourists. In order to understand the politics between these two groups, the interactive and dynamic relationship that vision plays must not be forgotten.

**Keywords:** Thailand, “Sea Nomads”, Moken, Vision, “Tourists’ Gaze”, Fishing Activities, Global Tourism, National Park