

# Maritime Landscape and the Rock Art Traditions at Lanta Bay, Krabi, Thailand

## ภูมิทัศน์ทางทะเลและวัฒนธรรมศิลปะบนหินในอ่าวลันตา จังหวัดกระบี่ ประเทศไทย

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### ABSTRACT

Several Rock Art sites were discovered and partially studied in southern Thailand, especially in Phang Nga Bay. Fewer are known further south, in the coastal area along the Lanta Bay and in the Trang and Satun provinces. This article provides preliminary results of surveys conducted in 2021 on caves located in the coastal zone and offshore in Lanta Bay as part of the Thai French Archaeological Mission that focuses on the maritime landscape and exchange networks. The project is done in collaboration with communities in Ko Lanta, amongst which are the indigenous maritime people called “Urak Lawoi.” This participatory approach shed new light on the potential rock art traditions this region possesses, and on the relationship between landscape and rock Art. The rock art may correspond to landmarks for navigation, especially along exchange routes linking the bay to Phang Nga, Phuket, Krabi, Trang, Satun, and Malaysia, and/or form part of rituals undertaken during successive sequences of use by various local and foreign groups. This project also focuses on the special relationship between local groups, and especially the Urak Lawoi, developed with hills and caves, in particular on islands.

### บทคัดย่อ

ภาคใต้ของประเทศไทยมีการค้นพบและศึกษาแหล่งศิลปะบนหินหลายแห่ง พบว่าส่วนใหญ่อยู่ในบริเวณอ่าวพังงา จังหวัดพังงา ส่วนทางใต้ตามแนวชายฝั่งอ่าวลันตา จังหวัดกระบี่ ลงไปจนถึงจังหวัดตรังและสตูล ยังมีรายงานค้นพบแหล่งค่อนข้างน้อย ในบทความนี้ จึงได้นำเสนอผลลัพธ์เบื้องต้น จากการสำรวจบริเวณอ่าวลันตา ใน พ.ศ. ๒๕๖๔ เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของโครงการโบราณคดีไทย-ฝรั่งเศส ซึ่งมุ่งเน้นเพื่อศึกษาภูมิทัศน์ทางทะเลและเครือข่ายการแลกเปลี่ยนทางทะเลในแถบทะเลอันดามัน ด้วยวิธีการมีส่วนร่วมกับชุมชนกลุ่มต่าง ๆ ในพื้นที่เกาะลันตา โดยเฉพาะชาวอุรักลาโว้ย

ทำให้ทราบถึงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างภูมิทัศน์กับวัฒนธรรมศิลปะบนหินในพื้นที่ โดยพบว่าแหล่งศิลปะบนหินมักปรากฏอยู่บนเกาะที่มีตำแหน่งที่ตั้ง ที่มีความสอดคล้องกับการเป็นจุดสังเกตในการเดินเรือทางทะเล และอยู่ในเส้นทางแลกเปลี่ยนทางทะเลที่สามารถเชื่อมต่อไปยังอ่าวพังงา ภูเก็ต กระบี่ ตรัง สตูล และประเทศมาเลเซีย และมักปรากฏอยู่ตามเกาะที่มีการใช้พื้นที่ในการประกอบพิธีกรรมของกลุ่มต่าง ๆ ทั้งภายในและภายนอก อีกทั้งพบว่าภูมิทัศน์รูปแบบต่าง ๆ เช่น ถ้ำ หรือเนินเขาบนเกาะ มีความสัมพันธ์กับชาวอุรักลาโว้ย ในด้านวิถีชีวิตและความเชื่อที่มีต่อสถานที่ต่าง ๆ ในอ่าวลันตาด้วยเช่นกัน

**Keywords:** Rock Art, Urak Lawoi, Sea People, Lanta Bay, Community Archaeology | ศิลปะบนหิน, อุรักลาโว้ย, ชาวเล, อ่าวลันตา, โบราณคดีชุมชน

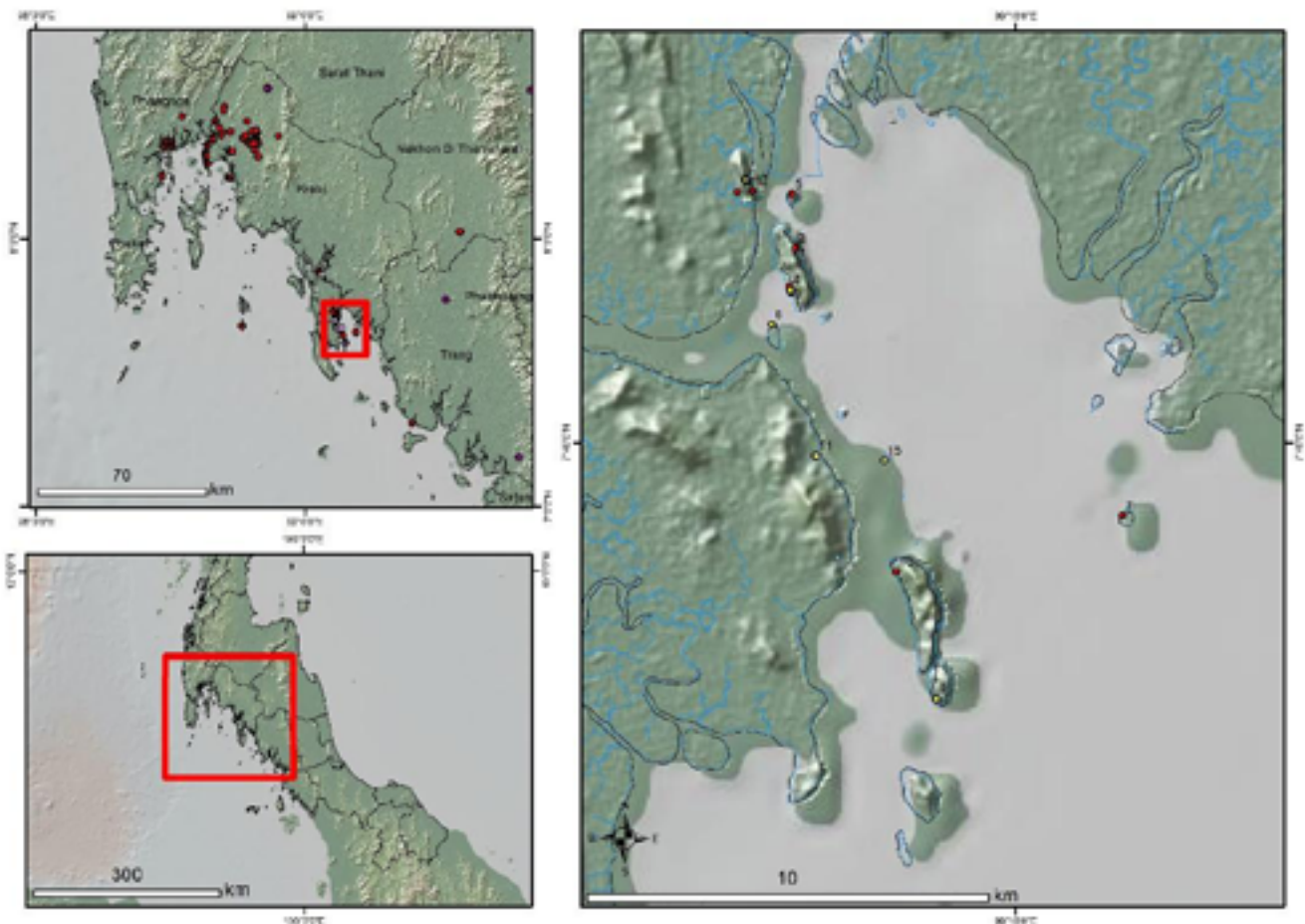
## INTRODUCTION

Rock art is widespread throughout Thailand. More than 200 sites are documented mostly in Northern Thailand (Tan 2019). Among these, about 30 sites are multi-periods in Southern Thailand. In the Thai-Malay peninsula, until now, except for the Phang Nga Bay rock art, most rock arts were found inland. The rock art sites in Phang Nga Bay can be indirectly dated to 5,000 to 3,000 years ago according to the shell specimen's dating of the limestone outcrops by geologists. The representative sites of this area are exemplified by Leam Fai Mai, Leam Chao Le, Tam Chao Le, and Phi Hua To Cave. Fewer are known further south, especially in the coastal area along Lanta Bay.

This article provides preliminary results of surveys and interviews conducted in 2021-2022 in the coastal zone and islands in Lanta Bay as part of the Thai French Archaeological Mission, which focuses on the maritime landscape and on exchange networks (see also Bellina et al. 2021). The project aims to document local networks and the different maritime groups that formed part of the port-polities hinterland. It focuses on coastal areas and islands that have been little considered when reconstructing local networks and exchanges. These areas have been visited and used by various maritime groups for centuries and represent archives on past and current groups as well as on exchange networks. The project is a participatory project and is done in collaboration with communities in Ko Lanta, among which are the sea people called “Urak Lawoi” (UL).

The Urak Lawoi are sea people who may have been involved with trading polities of the Kedah region in the past and who moved to southern Thailand about 500 years ago. They have a great knowledge of the region and its past events. The question we initially raised was: What are the relationships that these sea people have with hills, caves, and rock art? Some researchers (Rotchanarat 2019) raised the possibility that some of the depictions showed parallels with some of Urak Lawoi rituals.

This article will focus on the newly found rock art in this region of Krabi and provide an overview of the results of the participatory work. This preliminary work combining archaeological and ethnographic methods emphasizes the potential for documenting and promoting past and current cultural traditions.



**Fig. 1** Map showing the location of southern Thailand, Phang Nga Bay, and Lanta Bay. **Source:** map prepared by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2023

## Methodology

Archaeological Survey is conducted with a focus on caves offshore and their rock art. The images acquired through DSLR cameras have been processed with Metashape and enhanced with DStretch to facilitate their interpretation and classification. Interviews are conducted either with individuals or with several members of the three communities of Ko Lanta using the Participatory Mapping Method. This is a means to have maps produced by local populations in conjunction with academics (Cormier-Salem and Sané 2017). It is a bottom-up approach to science and a means to collect local histories to help interpret heritage remains. It is also meant to help local communities to be incorporated as active subjects in the registration and interpretation of their cultural heritage, as well as in the defense and management of it. Interviews are conducted either with individuals or with several members of one of the three communities of Ko Lanta using this method in the fieldwork from 6 to 8 June 2022.

## Maritime landscape in Ko Lanta

Surveys in Lanta Bay led to the discovery of eight rock art sites located on small islands or in coastal hills in the mangrove. They can be found in different locations such as caves, cliffs, and rock shelters. The new rock art sites can be considered newly discovered sites in the Ko Lanta area, Krabi, Thailand.

The rock shelter and cliff at Ko Ra Pu Le can be seen from far away. There is an area that can be a location for boats to moor. There is a short walk along the cliff to the hall where the pictographs are painted on the rock walls. There is also a rock shelter at Ko Ra Pu Phang where we found the tripod



pots lying on the ground with the painting on the cliff where the boat can be ported and walked up to the rock shelter.



**Fig. 2** The cliff view from afar of the east side of Ra Pu Le Island. *Source:* photo by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2021

Several caves are scattered around Ko Ra Pu Le, Ko Talabeng, and Ko Ra Pu Don. They are formed by the erosion of waves hitting the limestone to make it into a slight hollow concave or cave hole. This cave was most likely formed during a time when the sea level rises above the present sea level. The open cave at about 5-7 meters above sea level and the cave is positioned on the northeast-southwest line. You must port the boat into the rocky area in front of the cave and climb up. In high tide, it is easier to enter than during low tide.



**Fig. 3** The landscape of Ra Pu Phang Island where we found the painting on the cliff. *Source:* photo by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2022

The coastal dune at Klong Jak is located on the east side to the north of Ko Lanta Noi. A creek flows down from the mountain called Klong Jak in the south of the plain area, flowing past a small beach down to the sea. Traces of digging for beads are found throughout the area. From the survey, it was found that a little piece of pottery was on the surface. At the mouth of the creek, a piece of red glass bead was found on the beach. When looking out from the beach in the east direction, you will see Ko Phi in front as an important landmark.



**Fig. 4** Ra Pu Don Island which found two colored paintings located on the east and west sides of the island. *Source:* photo by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2022



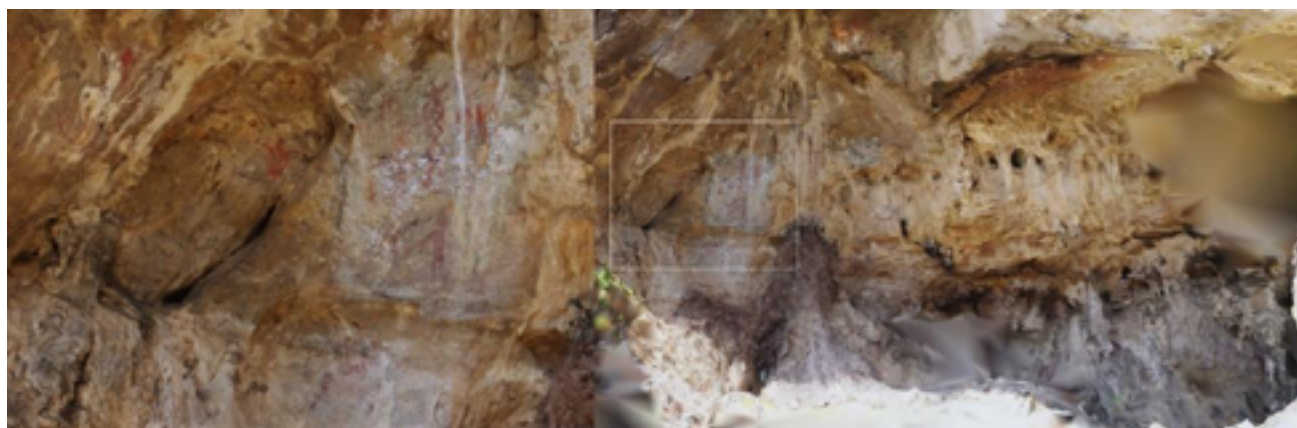
**Fig. 5** Kurong Island which found red colored paintings located on the north-west side of the island. *Source:* photo by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2022



## Rock Art Sites in Ko Lanta

### *Ko Ra Pu Le*

The pictographs are on a large cliff on the east side of Ko Ra Pu Le. It can protect from the sun, rain, and strong wind during the southwest monsoon. Approximately ten paintings are found 2-3 meters above the ground, but the best-preserved image is the Turtle. The unique figure is a solid human, possibly similar to the shaman image found at the Phi Hua To Cave in Phang Nga Bay (Sarikabutara 1987). This shaman is a unique motif in Krabi and southern Thailand. They appear to be human figures with two protrusions emanating from the head, possibly some headdress. The human form and the ship can be easily distinguished by digital optimization. The abstract image looks like a fish. Other pictures are overshadowed by mineral deposits or deterioration of the rock surface. There are caves on the west side of Ko Ra Pu Le. We found traces of a looted pit dug into the ground covered by pottery, human bone, and skull fragments. In another cave next to the south, above the entrance was found a red painting of a fish inside the cave found a fragment of a possible dug-out canoe.



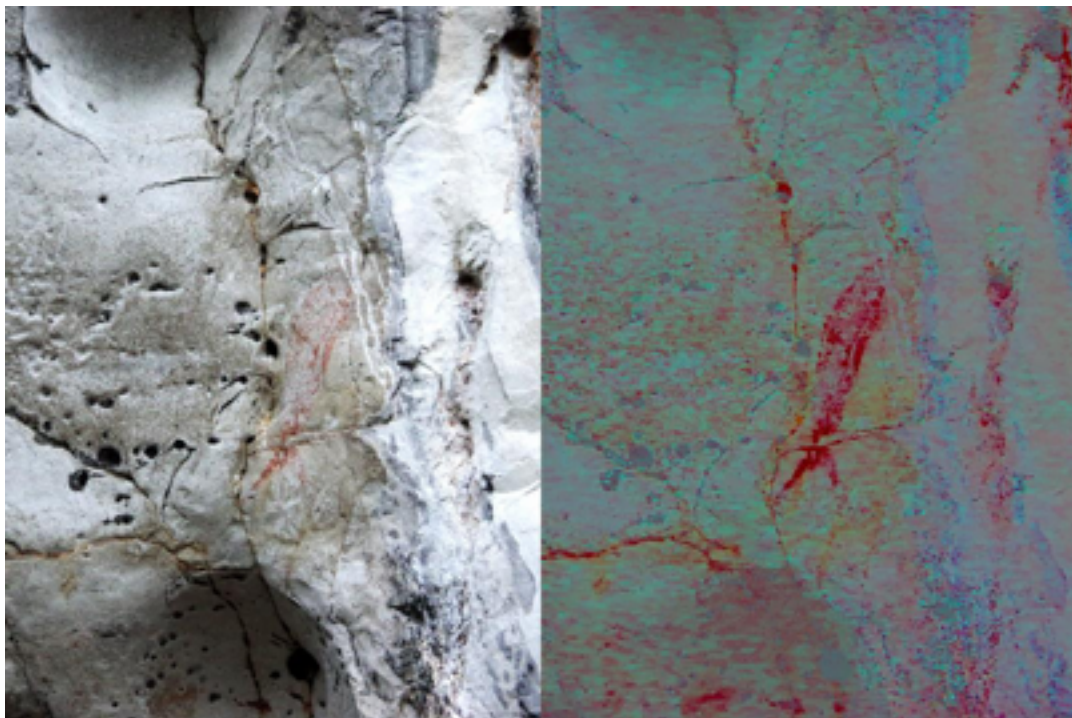
**Fig. 6** The figures on the cliff on the east side of Ra Pu Le Island. *Source:* photos by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2021



**Fig. 7** The unique figure such as a turtle, a human with a head-dresser, and a boat with the human on board. *Source:* photos by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2021



**Fig. 8** The figures of human at Ra Pu Le (left) and Pi Hua To cave (right). *Source:* photo by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2021

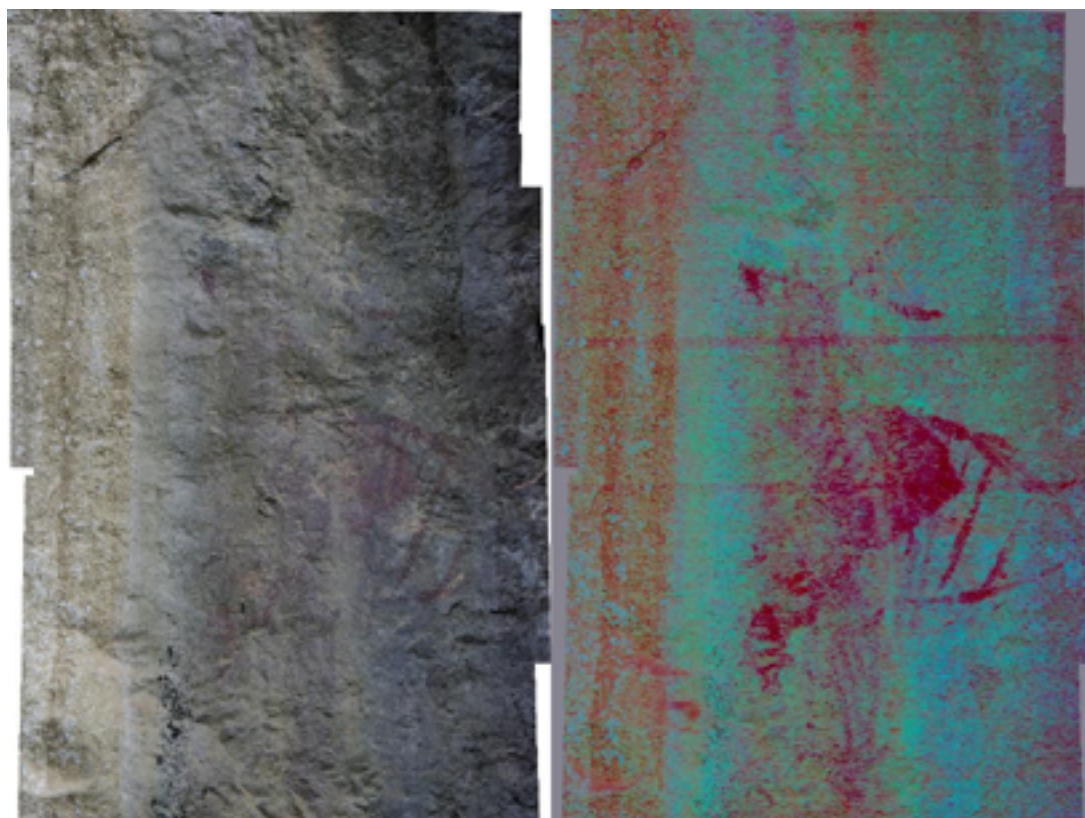


**Fig. 9** The figure of fish at the southwest side of Ko Ra Pu Le (left) and the enhanced version (right). *Source:* photos by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2021



### ***Ko Ra Pu Phang***

The rock shelter is suitable for long-term living. They can provide good protection from the wind and rain during monsoon season and have a reasonably sized flat floor for 4-5 family members to use as a shelter and for various purposes. We found ordinary potsherds, earthenware with red slips, corded-mark, tripod legs with corded-mark, shells, and animal bones. The color painting is a sizeable animal-like on the cliff facing the sea which can walk up to a rock shelter. The painter might want to signal that it is the entrance up to a rock shelter uphill.



**Fig. 10** Possible animal figure at Ra Pu Phang Island. **Source:** photos by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2021

### ***Ko Ra Pu Don***

While visiting the numerous caves and cliffs on Ko Ra Pu Don we found two colored paintings located on the east and west sides of the island. The color technique is divided into two-tone colors: red-brown and black. On the east side, it is a solid red line and a black boat with a line technique. On the west cliff, we found a red-brown color painting above the entrance in front of the narrow cave. It was a line drawing in red-brown that looks like a fish. Inside the cave, on the wall above the cave entrance, several color paintings were found at various points around them, which were red-brown and black. Most of the images are in a faded condition that cannot be identified. There is one image that is outlined in black and drains the reddish-brown color inside. It is assumed that the image is a bird. The other cannot be identified because it is in a rather degraded condition.

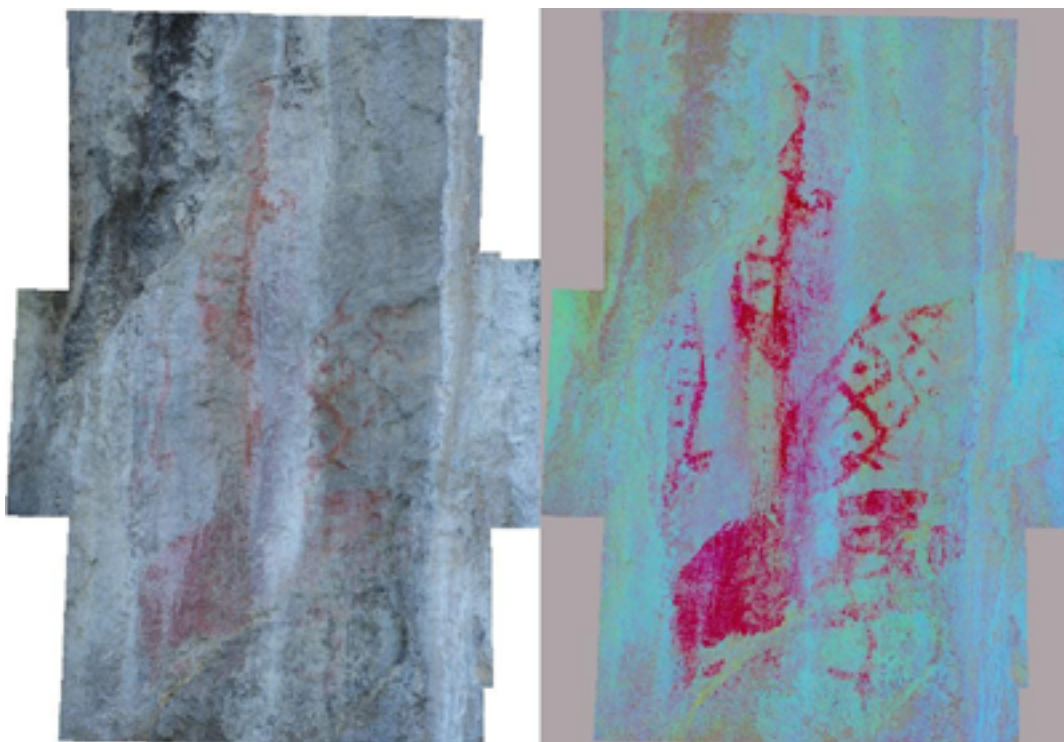




**Fig. 11** The small cave with the figure of fish on the top of the entrance and other figures in the cave at Ra Pu Don Island. *Source:* photos by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2022

### ***Ko Kurong***

There is one figure on the west side cliff of this small island that can be seen from a far distance. It is a red image line technique. It is possibly a fish to reflect the relationship of people with the marine animal or it could be a sign of a fishing area near this island.



**Fig. 12** The figures of fish with unique decorative patterns at Kurong Island. *Source:* photos by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2022

### ***Ko Talabeng***

We found a red painting on the west side cliff. It is in such a light color condition that cannot be identified. It is assumed that the boat figure with a line pattern technique.



**Fig. 13** The figures at Talabeng Island are in faded condition. *Source:* photos by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2021

### **Participatory Mapping**

Although still in their preliminary stage, interviews, and participatory mapping with the three main social groups, the Chinese community, the Thai-Malay, and the Urak Lawoi, provided insights into their different knowledge of the territory, oral stories, their interactions, and respective role. The locations of the different groups reflect ethnic differentiation going along a distinct ethnic division of labor. Each group also has a different sense of history, of temporality, and of marking events that can be materialized in the landscape. These differences are clearly reflected in the maps and in the oral histories.

The focus groups interviewed representatives of the Chinese, Thai-Malay, and Urak Lawoi communities. For the Chinese representatives two ladies (Wannaphon Engchuan and Jintana Engchuan) in Si Raya. The Thai Malay is represented by three men at Ko Por (Aeat Yamae, Kasem Hantalay and Don Lamnga). The Urak Lawoi communities are represented by men (Somjit Talayluek, Deaw Talayluek, Supin Talayluek, Perawit Talayluek) and a woman (Phannapha Talayluek) at Sangka-Ou school, Ko Lanta. The interviews mainly provided information on history, toponyms, ritual practices, and economic activities.

### *Chinese community interviews*

Early Chinese communities settled in Ko Lanta during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), with a community in Ban Tae Laeng, Lo Yai Sub-district, Lanta Noi Island. They gradually moved to Ban Si Raya, Ko Lanta Yai, about 111 years ago (Si Raya, from Malay, originates from the arrival of King Rama IX in 1957). Originally, the area of Ban Si Raya was called Lan Tat, some called Lan Ta or Lan Tak, and then distorted to Lanta. The word “Lan Tak” originated from the fish-drying area in the backyard. “Lan” means yard, courtyard, or patio. “Tak” means dry or drying. “Lan Tak” means the place for drying fish in every backyard of this village. In the Si Raya community, there is an important Chinese shrine named the Sam Tong Ong Shrine. The story is about this shrine where one day, a floating piece of wood appeared near the village. This wood looked like a figure of three gods so they established the shrine where they found this figure. The figure represents three brothers which themselves represent the Chinese communities in Penang, Lanta, and Tha Rue, Phuket.

Most of the Chinese economic activities in making coals and trading rice from Thap Thieng and Kantang. Products from Ko Lanta include salted fish, dried shrimp, dried coconut, and dried sea cucumber. Charcoal production is located at several points in the mangrove forest in the central island (Ko Klang) area. Ko Lanta Noi and Ko Lanta Yai, such as Ban Khlong Yang, Ban Bo Nae, Ban Ramat, and Ban Ra Pu, are primarily located in mangrove forests as an essential raw material and far from the community.

### *The Thai-Malay interview*

The early village settled on Ko Por in Nai Ban around 200 years ago. Then the population increased until around 1987. The original name of Ko Por is “Pulo Du Por” which means the island is shaped like a human figure. The port area between Ko Lanta Yai and Ko Por, now called Tha Kang, covers the area from the northern cape to the western bay. From Laem Liga to Tha Kang used to be the dwelling place of the villagers. Next to the east of Cape Liga, it is called Laem Ung (Leam means cape, Ung, a type of bee-like insect). The descents of Ko Por community originated from a Phatthalung to a man named Khun Samut, who married to a Urak Lawoi woman and came to live on the island from around 100 - 200 years ago. Most of the names of places on Ko Por are in the Urak Lawoi language, such as Laem Lika, Laem Ung, etc. On Ko Por, next to Laem Ung, it is called Ao Nai Ban (Ao Nai Ban means village in the bay). East of Ko Por is a bay called Lo Biba. On the shore is another village. As for the west coast, next to Tha Kang Port, is called Loh Wo or Wo bay, and further south is called Loh Ra Mat. Next to the southern end of Ko Por is a cape. There is a channel to walk to the cape, called Laem Mea-rah.

The main product of Ko Por in the past was coconut, which was made into dried coconut to sell or exchanged with rice and sugar at Bo Muang, Trang, and Kantang. In the past, there was also farming on Ko Po in the lowland near the houses in Loh Biba, Tha Kung, Loh Lamat, and Ban Toh Tam Pia. At present, farming on the island has been suspended about 10 - 20 years ago. The people of Ko Por have learned rice farming from people in Ko Lanta Yai, such as Ban Jae Lee, Thung Yee Peng, etc. They also exchanged dried fish for rice. They mentioned Urak Lawoi, who lives on Ko Por for a temporary short stay in the monsoon season. The water source on the island is an essential factor in setting up a village. There are 11 wells in Ko Por. During the dry season, water was insufficient. Therefore, they had to draw water equally to solve the problem.



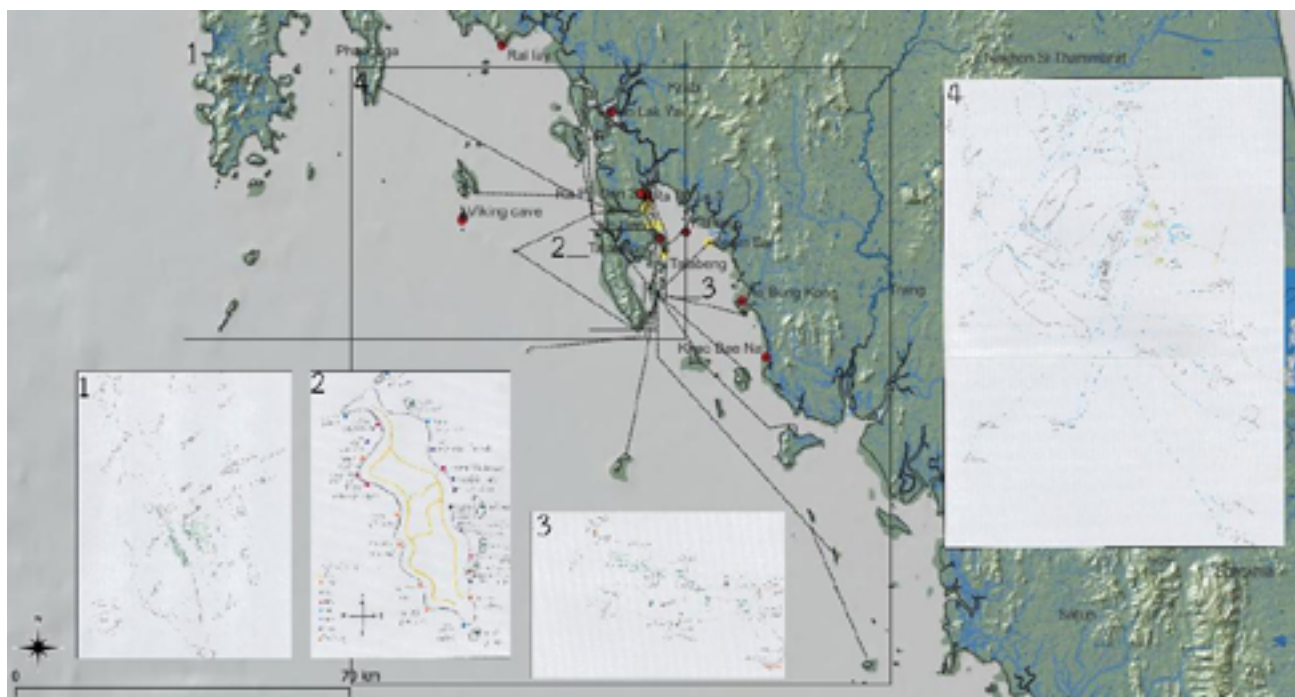
The maritime routes from Ko Por to various locations depend on the wind direction and season. There are several main routes. It depends on the destination and the reason for traveling. Most of them are fishing and exchanging goods. They also have boat routes to access the island or the canal way. There will be a main channel that will be used during low tide. There is a marked stick embroidered in line and the experiences of the older generation to navigate.

### ***The interview with the Urak Lawoi communities***

The interview is about the places where they have been settled, landmarks, sacred places, and the cemetery on Ko Lanta. There is history, settlement, folklore, maritime activities, and social economics. The Urak Lawoi communities settled in Ko Lanta about 400 years ago. Then, during the Second World War, some of them were moved to Ko Lipe from Ko Lanta. The maritime routes in the past sailed to Myanmar and Malaysia. For example, the people of Ko Adang would sail between Langkawi islands. There will be relatives to come and find each other. Ko Adang people will bring fish to sell to Langkawi and repurchase fish sauce and rice. On the Burmese side, they have been to Ko Song for work. Navigation relies mainly on observing the wind direction with knowledge and experience in sailing. During the fourth lunar month, they will be able to travel easily because the wind is not strong. So, they can travel anywhere. There will be outings on various islands such as Ko Rok, and Ko Ngai. They will take the children to the island, camping on the beach, and teach them how to make a living on the island.

The cemetery and village are separated but not very far from each other. Most will choose the area by the sea. For the deceased to hear the sea, most burials have coconuts for rituals. They will pour coconut over the coffin. The descendant will eat the coconut. When burial, a coconut tree is planted to signify the descendant's return to the ceremony in April.

They traded through merchants at the Si Raya. The main products are fresh seafood such as fish, shellfish, and shrimp. Then, they dried and sold them to the three-mast boats to Penang Island. Sometimes there will be a particular order, such as a special type of shell, mother-of-pearl. Sea turtles are considered food offerings in the rituals of the Urak Lawoi people. In the past, turtles were sometimes eaten as offerings to ancestors for ceremonies. There are forbidden animals such as whales and sharks. There are also forbidden places, landmarks, and holy places. Most are not prohibited from entering but will be a place to worship, such as entering these places to pay respect to the place.



**Fig. 14** The map of Lanta Island and nearby drawn by the local communities: Thai Chinese (1), Urak Lawoi (2), and Thai Malay (3 and 4) with a digitized map in GIS in the background. **Source:** map prepared by Sorathach Rotchanarat, 2023

## DISCUSSION

Three main types of information emerged from these interviews. Some may be useful to integrate with the context of an archaeological and heritage community program there.

The first type of information concerns the territory, the places suitable for settlement, and where these groups conduct their economic activities. Each group provided stories about their origin, and how they chose to settle in Ko Lanta. Each described the territory concerning their labor/specialization and how they interact with other groups for these activities. The UL also mentions places that are forbidden and places for rituals. Some information may be used to elaborate some sort of ‘predictive model’ (Shoocongdej 2020) to locate ancient economically or ritually important locations.

The second type of information concerns navigation (sea routes, winds, places to settlers) and exchange networks of interest for archeologists and historians. Lanta Bay and its islands provided shelters for boats and were midway along what used to be a vivid-trading route until the 19th and early 20th c. Different routes can be used according to the winds and islands as places to settlers. The local knowledge of navigations, winds, and resource locations may also clarify some of the rock art motives and their distribution in the islands.

The last set of information concerns the local groups’ absence of links with archaeological remains and the UL avoidance of caves. None of the groups spontaneously mentioned them during interviews. However, we know that they are visited as remains left on the floor of these caves indicate.

Beyond a possible form of reluctance, the negative answers given by our hosts could also be understood as reflecting a tendency to avoid the caves, for various reasons, religious or more pragmatic - forbidden access as part of the National park’s regulations or due to the birds’ nest economy under the control of armed groups.

It also certainly emphasizes the absence of a direct cultural and historical link between the occupants of the caves where rock art has been found (with estimates varying between 5000 - 2200 years BP) and the current Urak Lawoi population.

However, certain prohibitions and speeches about the presence of a dangerous character in certain caves and in those where shells accumulate could represent indirect evidence of the avoidance of ancient remains. The head of the UL community said that “Exploring caves was not part of the UL culture. They are afraid of Lok Suwei, a spirit looking like a small size human, with long hairs and a strong smell, living near caves and piles of shells. They said this kind of spirit has a tool to chop the shells. It is a black shining stone.” This local mythology may correspond to the lost memory of past encounters, of previously occupied places.

## CONCLUSION

We are currently integrating data from interviews, but we will need more time to verify the information obtained. It is possible that some of the rock art may correspond to landmarks for sacred places, and navigation, especially along exchange routes linking the bay to Trang, Satun, and Malaysia, and/or form part of rituals undertaken during successive sequences of use by various local and foreign groups.

Although the project is still at an initial stage, our two fieldworks indicate that archaeologists, social anthropologists, and local indigenous communities can learn and benefit from this integrated work. From the point of view of the academic disciplines, the groups’ knowledge provides new frameworks to locate and interpret ancient remains and historical events, enriching historical reconstructions. Methodological developments are other expected outputs of this collaboration, in the field’s indigenous archaeology and here of sea nomadism too. Subsequently, a better knowledge of these groups may allow for replacing them in a broader historical narrative. From the local groups’ perspective, the valorization of their knowledge, traditions, and enriched history, may contribute to their empowerment (Sustainable Development Goal 10).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Fine Arts Department for supporting the French Archaeological Mission in Peninsular Thailand, and the Institute of Research for Sustainable Development for financially supporting this initial project. Many thanks to the director, the head of the archaeology unit, and the colleges at the 12<sup>th</sup> Regional Office of Fine Arts Department, Nakhon Si Thammarat for supporting this fieldwork. We would like to thank the people in Ko Lanta for their kind collaboration in this participatory project.



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