

# **Ethnohistoriography of Koh Samui: Change and Adaptation in a Tourism Period**

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This thesis is in the late stage of development, as it started in July 2004. It is an Ethnohistoriography of Koh Samui, which involved 12 months of fieldwork, February 2005-February 2006, on Koh Samui, Thailand.

The main focus of this research is to produce a historiography of Koh Samui through a contextual analysis of discursive change on living process, change in economic organization and social institutions in a period of tourism development. In other words, it is about recognizing and perceiving tourism development as a cause of Koh Samui history.

It is important to note that this research adopts a historical approach, whereby history as a discipline aims to reconstruct the uniqueness of the event rather than making a general law (Evans 2002; Jordanova 2000; Meyerhoff 1959; McCullagh 2004; Tower 1988). Therefore, in paraphrasing Towner's words into this context, this study of the history of Koh Samui aims to understand the change of Koh Samui over tourism time. The case study 'will contribute to a dynamic model or concept of the role of tourism in societies in general' rather than 'to develop a more general concept of society' (Tower 1988: 51). The thesis sets out primarily to examine the experience of life on a small island in Thailand in coping with mass tourism development and the response to the rapid and overwhelming social changes exerted by such development. Moreover, the work intends to provide insight into the relationship between change and tourism development as seen by the locals themselves, a perspective which is often overlooked in studies of tourism development. However, although the results are specific, the research model, theoretical concern and methodology can be applied to researching those *living with tourism* elsewhere (Tucker 2003).

There is no doubt that the growth of world tourism has not only impacted on destination areas, but also on the academic community. Tourism has brought about a huge interest from diverse backgrounds and with different interests, amongst academics and business practitioners, resulting in a variety of tourism studies in the areas of 'economic development, social impact, stakeholder conflicts, environmental degradation and political control' (Smith 2004: xv). Moreover, various literatures in areas such as sociology, anthropology, geography, economy, development studies and environmental studies have been conducted on issues of tourism and community (Cohen 1996; 2000; 2004; Hall and Page 2000; Picard and Wood 1997; Shurmer-Smith (eds.) 2002; Tucker 2003; etc.). However, unlike with anthropology, sociology and geography, for example, the study of tourism has not been a central object of analysis in the field of history.

As this thesis is about reconstructing the history of Koh Samui, tourism is viewed as a major force of Koh Samui transformation in time as well as in space. It is shown that the present is built on the past as the future will be built on both past and present. Therefore, this thesis is an account of the contemporary history of Koh Samui occurring over the tourism period. The academic contribution addresses not only the lack of knowledge on the relationship between tourism and Koh Samui in historical depth, but the work will also be a new way of integrating history and tourism.

There are of course certain amendments that have to be made to the methodological procedures of history when it is applied to tourism studies. For this research, the way to fill the gap between historical discourse on one hand and the way of ordinary life through tourism's experiences on the other, in attempting to understand the relation among place, people, cultures, tourism and the dynamics of time, requires its own distinct type of fieldwork. Therefore, when it comes to the study of change within destination areas in terms of cultural change and cultural contact of local community and tourism, rather than taking a historical approach, an anthropological perspective will be adopted as the research method (Jordanova 2000; Nash and Smith 1991; Tucker 2003; Macleod 2004). The research employs the methods of fieldwork on a contact and interaction basis with informants, and participation observation in reconstructing local lives over time. This particular method bridges the gap between 'past' and 'present' subjects by applying the 'negotiation' method of collecting, analyzing and interpreting texts in the study of tourism.

Clearly, a historical perspective will illustrate the change through tourism development over time. Anthropological respect will also provide an understanding of social practices in the tourism context (Nash and Smith 1991). The two types of methodology are thus not contradictory, but complementary since anthropology also perceives 'the oral and written accounts' as part of the collective memory (Jackson 1987: 3). They operate at different levels of interpreting to be sure, but are both equally essential to understand socio-cultural change in the local setting. Combined, these approaches help to discover the social integration and cultural change in a given locale over time.

In order to avoid cultural relativism as commonly acknowledged in most ethnographic studies, the analysis offered here is based on the researcher's observation and experiences. This approach has enabled the researcher to develop an enhanced understanding of the local subject and the challenging that they confront. This thesis views the relationship between locale and tourism in a space and time paradigm, the assumptions which Macleod (2004: viii) emphasizes as '[a] longitudinal research project, is a particularly good way of enabling the researcher to appreciate the breadth and depth of tourism's influence on a community.'

Koh Samui is similar to Pattaya and Phuket in terms of its attractions for tourists – sea, sun and sand, as well as nightlife entertainment. As tourism continues to grow, Koh Samui may potentially become a victim of its own success. However, the change and adaptation of locals towards tourism on Koh Samui do not necessarily agree with the views of outside academic experts. To achieve the writing of Koh Samui's tourism history is to focus on the issue of change and continuities that transform it. It also focuses on geographical landscapes and tourism structures that developed. It includes emphasizing the continuity of economic interaction and cultural transformation. Rather than looking at Koh Samui through an evaluation view of sequential change in association with tourism, it is more constructive to perceive of change as a process of constant adaptation throughout the tourism period of Koh Samui's history. This adaptation to tourism development is in accordance to Maiava (2001) observation that people are capable of learning, adapting and coping with change within their own environmental and socio-economic conditions. The locals are clearly not passive receivers of change that tourism has brought. Rather they respond to the development as necessary, they adapt and select transformations that fit their needs. Moreover, locals do not just adapt to opportunities as they arise. They also create opportunities in keeping with their needs.

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