

SAMSARA: REMNANTS OF DISASTER ON THE ANDAMAN COAST

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At the height of the monsoon season, an old silver Toyota bounced back and forth down a dirt path. The wheels struggled to find a stretch of solid ground as the rain thundered on the van's metal roof. I peered outside to get a sense of my surroundings. To my left was a small collection of misty islands rising out of the dark grey sea. To my right lay a labyrinth of mangrove trees that stretched for miles before reaching the mountains. Small storm waves broke quietly onto the sand. The gloomy water looked peaceful, making it easy to forget its deadly potential. There was history here.

The small seaside village of Ban Talae Nok sits on the shore of Southern Thailand's Andaman coast. The "Village by the Outer Sea" – an English translation of its Thai name – is home to a largely Muslim population, a rarity in a country that is almost entirely Buddhist. Sadly, discrimination against Muslim groups within Thailand is not uncommon. The religious tension occurs primarily in the south, around where we were staying, due to the village's proximity to Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim country.

In the summer, the men are drawn out to sea on their long tail boats to catch jellyfish for harvest. Wielding their massive nets, these fishermen can bring in hundreds of jellies per boat with each excursion. The catch is then taken to a large wooden mechanism on the shoreline to be harvested and prepared for export. This has historically been Ban Talae Nok's largest industry. Meanwhile, the women on land weave bamboo roof shingles, mold herbal soaps, and take care of essential housework.

The town is a small, yet lively, place. The community is situated around a paved road that runs through its center, with gravel back streets shooting off from the asphalt into the adjacent neighborhoods. During the afternoon it became clear that the paved road was rarely used by motor vehicles, occupied instead by cows, carts, and children at play.

At night, the residents returned to their homes. A dense mist pushes inland from the shore and snakes through the jungle valley, smoke pours out of candle-lit windows as religious hymns echo across the street, and the evening sky turns into a dark Prussian blue as a blanket of stars coat the night.

I gazed out at the stars from the second story balcony of the home where I was living during my short stay before being summoned downstairs. After finishing a late dinner of spiced chicken, pumpkin, and rice, the owner of the house joined my friends and I outside on the patio. She was an older Thai woman, yet spoke with youth in her voice. We were able to communicate through basic translations. Using my phone, I showed her images of friends, pets, and adventures from back home. She pointed, smiled, and laughed, showing genuine interest in who I was and what my life was like back in California. I found it amazing that I could so easily connect with someone who spoke a different language, followed a different faith, and lived in a different country. We are all just people, after all. My friends and I told her that if she had any questions for us, we would be happy to answer. The first and only question she asked, relayed through loose translations, was this:

*“Why would you choose to live in these conditions when you have a comfortable life back home?”*

Looking back, she had a point. Why would anyone travel from a place where they are happy and stable to a place they have never been before? It is true that change can be uncomfortable, however change can also bring immense growth. This is especially true in regard villages like Ban Talae Nok.

As the night became darker, the wind grew stronger, carrying with it the patchy rains we had grown accustomed to during our stay in the village. From where my friends and I had sat that night, we could still hear the faint sound of small waves breaking onto the beach. No matter where you are in Ban Talae Nok, the shore is never far. However, the village’s relationship with the sea is as complex as the maze-like swamp between them. It has brought the people life by providing sources of food, pathways for transportation, and a gateway for trade, but it has also brought them immeasurable hardships.

On the morning of December 26th, 2004, the village was decimated by a tsunami. According to a survivor who witnessed the impact of the first wave, the water came higher than the trees, which were roughly seven meters in height. However, the brunt of the damage came from the second wave that hit, as its water carried the debris from the first. Out of the two hundred residents of

Ban Talae Nok, one hundred and fifty three survived. The most severe physical damage was done to the thirteen beachfront houses that were used as stay-over destinations for the fishermen during the jellyfish migrations. Ruins still dotted the sand bar as we floated past.

Tourism-based activities, such as cruises through the mangrove swamps on a long-tail boat, have become important sources of income for the community. The people have had to adapt to the spotlight put on them by both charity and travel organizations, as community-based tourism slowly becomes the new central industry of Ban Talae Nok.

Through non-profit organizations and tour companies, foreigners are welcomed into the homes of local residents, work in the workshops of local residents, and learn from the experiences of local residents.

“I am happy you are here,” our host told us, “But the only problem is we can’t speak.”

She was right. Even with the aid of our translator, we were only able to ask relatively simple questions. Our translations would not be exact, for our guide and our host spoke different dialects of Thai. However, we were able to grasp the essentials of each conversation and grew more and more enlightened as the night went on. We asked her about the presence of tourism in her village and how that has impacted her life. So far, she remarked, the industry has proven to have many benefits. Outsiders who come to Ban Talae Nok and meet the people who were personally affected by the tsunami can gain a new respect through understanding and bring the stories from the Village by the Outer Sea back home. However, tourism can also have its drawbacks, she explained.

“Everything is so much more expensive in Thailand now, but the income is still the same.” Our translator knew the numbers: “fifteen thousand baht, divide that by thirty, that’s a good five hundred.” What he meant was that fifteen thousand baht a month is a salary of roughly five hundred baht a week, equivalent to fifteen U.S. dollars.

“That’s the local income of a Thai,” he said, before quickly adding, “if you have a degree, that is.”

Well, what if you don't have a degree?

“The construction workers get approximately five hundred baht a day, but the work is not steady. You don't get a contract. Pickup trucks... In the morning you see them everywhere. They just pick up people who can work for the day. If you're lucky, you receive a project for a couple of days.”

Prices in Thailand, especially in southern areas like the resort-filled Phuket, are heavily catered to tourists. What about the local people? What about those who cannot even work?

“For villagers who don't ever work,” our host explained, “the government will pay for a Medicare-like program...when you go to the doctor you pay thirty baht as a deductible. So you pay and the government forces the hospitals to accept you.”

As we were talking, two young twins, no older than three years, ran out to the table and climbed atop their mother. She smiled, then shooed them away. The two giggled and stared at us, the foreigners, in fascination before disappearing back into the house.

“The kids on Saturday and Sunday go to study Arabic,” our host said, looking off into the night. It was getting late and nearly time to head back inside, but not before we were taught an Arabic saying:

*Alhamdulillah.*

“It's an Arabic blessing. *May God be with you.*”

The saying can hold many meanings and is used within many Thai-Muslim communities. After our brief lesson, we bid farewell and retired to our mosquito nets.

The people of Ban Talae Nok have had to be resilient and strong. Although they have had to adapt to the new and rising industry of community-based tourism, these people are making the most of the resources at hand and are steadily rebuilding their lives. It is a truly remarkable sight to see children dancing down a village road that had been demolished by a tsunami just over a decade before. The future looks bright for this vibrant seaside community.