

The Embodied Experience of Scuba Diving for Farang expatriates on Koh Tao.

Introduction to the research site

Koh Tao, or “turtle island,” is a small tropical island, of little more than 21 km², located in the gulf of Thailand, about 70 km east of the mainland. The development of *Koh Tao* as a tourist destination has been rapid and intense. Since the 1950s, when the first generation of the island’s Thai community arrived, the population has continued to increase rapidly. The 1980s brought the first travellers hitchhiking rides from the neighbouring *Koh Phangan*, and by the end of that decade, ‘western’ diving pioneers had started introducing scuba diving to the travellers. The reputation of the island’s scuba diving opportunities have grown steadily, turning *Koh Tao* in the last decade into one of Thailand’s premier tourist destinations, and the main training centre for dive students in all of South East Asia. In only a few decades of tourist development, *Koh Tao* now has a population of roughly 5000, including an ever-growing expatriate population, and receives over 100,000 visitors annually.

Unbelievably, transformative relationships, in the contexts of rapid tourism development have received only minor research attention to date. Tourism is one of several global processes that are spreading capitalist institutions and ideologies to the remotest corners of the globe.¹ The rapid development on *Koh Tao* induced from scuba diving tourism has brought remarkable economic, social and environmental changes to the island in only two decades. Socially, the increasing numbers of ‘western’ expatriates have created a new cultural group, defining themselves as ‘*farang*,’ a Thai word meaning ‘Caucasian foreigner.’ The choice and universal use of this new defining word, symbolises the basis of a new cultural and social identity. The *farang*, who largely work in the island’s dive industry, form a high percentage of the island’s residents, despite the majority working on the island illegally. This new cultural group with ideologies based both on a coherence and opposition to certain ‘western’ values, have been highly influential over the cultural forms and technologies arriving on the island.

Highlighting inadequacies in tourism literature: my research amongst *Farang* scuba divers on *Koh Tao*:

Due to time constraints my research focussed only upon *farang*, and at one dive school, the largest and most sociable on the island. *Koh Tao* presented me with a unique research opportunity. I could arrive on a remote tropical island to describe and analyse a cultural group and world that would represent the first anthropological research study on the island, akin to the first anthropologists. However, despite the *farang* cultural group only having been in existence for two decades, local processes on *Koh Tao* are not isolated from, but inextricably linked to global processes of capitalism, globalisation and tourism. It was this paradox of being local in a global world, the negative affects of such rapid and uncontrolled developmental changes and descriptions of key aspects of *farang* culture that formed the basis of my research on the island. My research results contradicted or revealed the inadequacies of many common definitions or approaches within the Anthropology of tourism.

Commonly, tourist definitions stress the key elements of ‘leaving ones home’ and for a ‘temporary period only,’ (see Smith 1989, Urry 2002). Such definitions are inadequate and fail to account for tourists who transcend such definitions by becoming residents in a place, with no definite plan to return ‘home.’ There is a distinct lack of

research relating to expatriates, yet a growing number of people are immigrating abroad. Valerie Smith famously distinguished between the 'hosts' and 'guests' involved in tourism, focussing upon the hierarchical relationships between the two groups, (1989). *Farang* arrived on *Koh Tao* initially as tourists or 'guests,' and on becoming residents have become 'hosts,' helping to create the 'host' culture in which new guests are received.ⁱⁱ Smith's dichotomy does not allow for identities that are negotiable over time, and disguises further divisions. On *Koh Tao*, the notion of 'host' is very complex and cannot only simplistically be opposed to that of 'guest.' Within the category of 'host' are competing groups, for example *farang* and Thais, whom have differing social and economic relationships with the 'guests.' Underwater also, *farang*, who are 'hosts' on land, become 'guests' in the new marine world into which they submerge.

Tim Ingold (2001) argues that the logic of capitalistic production in the 'west' has established a principal of division between the domains of work and leisure. Time is thus divided into time that makes money (i.e., work), and time that spends it, (i.e., leisure/tourism). However, in so called 'traditional' societies, what the 'west' would define as 'work' activities are conceptualised in association with social relations; like the Thai notion of '*sanuk*' or playfulness. In this sense, 'work' is not an isolated sphere, but is life; 'diving has been my life for the last 11 years,' as one *farang* said to me. Activities that are embedded in social relations, Ingold calls 'tasks.' Employment in scuba diving is akin to Ingold's notion of 'tasks', as the distinction between the spheres of work and leisure dissolve in the same passion. The conduction of daily 'tasks' as opposed to work allows *farang* to regain an awareness of the rhythms of their individual bodies and their environment initially. After awhile however 'work,' even within an industry centralised on a passion, can become just that, 'work.' Ironically, working on *Koh Tao* can be even more demanding, tiring and exploitative than their former careers back home, with longer hours and little time off. *Farang* workers precariously occupy an illegal employment status and residence on the island, ultimately susceptible to Thai immigration laws. The hectic arena of employment and politics with diving contrasts sharply with the serenity of experiences underwater, or those initially experienced on the island.

Tourism is also associated with a desire for 'escapism,' (Graburn 1989). 'Freedom thus comes to be equated with the search for romantic and exotic locations, the pursuit of pristine nature,' (Sewlyn, 1993:126). Nowhere is the image of the romantic and exotic combined more successfully than on an island: '*it conjures up an enticing image of warmth, exuberance, fantasy and romance,*' (Dann 1996:46). These theories incorporate a type of tourism that John Urry defined as 'the romantic gaze.' (2002), opposed to his collective gaze which he associated with the liminal behaviour and desire for 'communitas' that is common amongst mass tourism, (Turner 1967). These tourism types however need not occur only in isolation from each other. The lifestyle which many *farang* called '*dive culture*,' could be described as a reversion to the 'liminal' student culture of the 'west,' incorporating few responsibilities and excessive socialising, partying and fornication, whilst their experiences underwater are more akin to those relating to the 'romantic gaze.'

Cohen (1985) states that membership in a community consists in thought, rather than behaviour, through an attachment to a common body of symbols, rather than as a structural construct. Scuba diving is fundamental in the formation of a symbolic *farang* identity. Diving is the subtext upon which social meanings, understandings and amity are formed. Cohen defines community, as a referent of group and individual identity as it is the place where 'one acquires culture,' (1985: 15).ⁱⁱⁱ Ideologies in behaviour and attitude are transmitted from long-term residents to newcomers, in identity construction. Socialisation into the diving 'community' plays a significant role in forming individual identities and lifestyle choices, within a collective *farang* cultural framework. Such

identities however are continuously negotiated through social interactions, which are in essence transactions of meaning; divers do not represent a culture, but produce it.

Farang experiences underwater

Life on an island inevitably involves the sea, but the prominence on *Koh Tao* of the underwater world could not escape my research. But scuba diving as a professional or touristic activity should not just be analysed in terms of associated cultures or economics, for example, as I have already briefly surmised. The experiences underwater are what form the basis of all other analyses upon the activity. Anthropology as the study of human beings, aims to study humans in all locations and contexts, yet to the best of my knowledge I believe that my research represents the first anthropological analysis of human experiences underwater. This section of my research describes how purely visual models only are inadequate for explaining the tourist activity of Scuba diving. Not only are 'seeing' and 'participating' in scuba diving complimentary, rather than oppositional, but further I would argue that dividing the experiences of scuba diving into distinct, sensory based analytical categories can only be made in hindsight. Whilst underwater, scuba diving as an activity is but one embodied experience.

Scuba Diving to 'Gaze?'

John Urry's (2002) 'tourist gaze,' deemed the sense of 'sight' as fundamental to modern tourism, with tourists travelling to 'gaze' upon different cultures and landscapes. Urry's 'romantic gaze' I argue can be applied to scuba diving, as it is motivated by the desire for solitary enjoyment and experience. 'It is equivalent to the search for authenticity and the sacred journey to the "centre out there," (Urry 2002). It is a rediscovery of the lost forms of "travel," to have a sustained immersion and to experience the 'wild' and 'natural' environment independently. In this regard, scuba diving as a tourist activity epitomises this desire for immersion in wild nature. The oceans cover 70% of the earth's surface, yet only Scuba diving enables the exploration of small parts of the underwater world. The oceans are alive with life yet it is easy to forget that such a world exists just beneath the water's surface. Not only do divers gaze upon 'wild' expanses of nature, but also they are viewing a world that few will ever gaze upon and indeed that human beings are not evolved to inhabit. The equipment and physics behind artificially allowing a human being to breathe underwater makes Scuba diving an 'extreme' sport, with the acquisition of underwater gazes encompassing 'risk-taking,' which is a credibility sought by many partakers of the 'romantic gaze.'^{iv}

Viewing this alien world is also a serene experience, with divers describing the activity as 'quiet and relaxing.' Despite dive safety rules requiring a minimum of two divers per dive, diving was still described as a solitary experience. Due to the inability to verbally communicate underwater, all communication must be through learned sign language. The forced silence was voiced positively whilst the over-crowding of dive sites was viewed as particularly negative. Not only do large numbers of divers scare away marine life; but they also spoil the tranquil and isolated feeling of diving; a paradox whereby divers are destroying the serenity which they seek. Amongst *Koh Tao*'s professionals, diving is a time for solitude, and an escape to tranquillity from the bustle of island life. Each dive is also a very personal experience; individuals will experience their own unique 'gaze' by gazing upon different life forms, environments and by navigating differently around a site. Marine life is not static, so every dive will be different regarding marine life that can be seen, which intensifies the feelings of gazing upon a 'wild' and 'natural' environment.

Diving as an Embodied Experience.

Whilst Scuba diving could be described as an extreme form of ‘sightseeing,’ ‘gazing’ is not the only incentive behind why people dive, especially the *farang* workers who dive the same sites daily. A major criticism of Urry’s ‘tourist gaze,’ is its focus upon only the visual sense, with the neglect of all others.^v It was only in narrative reconstruction that *farang* were able to compartmentalise diving experiences into discrete senses, for example ‘sight.’ Diving is an activity that encompasses the whole body; experiences are grasped through the body’s sensory perceptions and a diver negotiates this alien world through their bodies. Diving is an embodied experience, which invokes a collaboration of the body’s senses. Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes this ‘overlap and blending of the senses’ as ‘synaesthetic,’ (in Abram 1996: 60). Synaesthesia, he designates as a primordial experience that the majority of ‘westerners’ only become conscious of ‘when their allegiance to the presumably impartial, analytic logic of their culture temporarily breaks down,’ (Merleau Ponty 1962 in Abram 1996: 61). A common situation when this return to or awakening of the senses occurs is in the presence of natural landscapes with which sensations so intensely emerge. This situation applies especially to scuba diving, which allows access to an alien and sensuous world that has been ‘submerged’ from the forefront of our consciousness. Divers find themselves alive ‘in a living field of powers far more expressive and diverse than the strictly human sphere (or land) to which (they) are accustomed,’ (Abram 1996: 65). With scuba diving, nature is not only gazed upon, but it literally ‘leapt into,’ (Bell 2002: 27).

Not only does diving induce the synaesthesia of the body’s senses, but also the perception of these senses is dramatically altered by the body’s ‘abnormal’ immersion in a watery medium 800 times denser than air. The senses feel the body’s total immersion in water, as well as a magnified reaction to temperature changes and water movements. For visual clarity underwater, sight must be through a mask. Underwater, objects appear magnified and in deeper water they are darker and less colourful, than on land, (PADI :OWDM; 1995; 69-71). Underwater, sound can be heard over much longer distances than in air, and its origin is difficult to locate, (PADI: OWDM; 1996: 72). The impossibility of verbal interaction directs a focus onto the sounds of the natural underwater environment. The occasional sound of a boat’s engine overhead is an unwelcome reminder of the world they have temporarily descended from, yet also serves as a reminder of the literal and emotional distance they have created between themselves and that world.

In the act of breathing, an unconscious act on land becomes very conscious underwater, when breathing can only be done through the mouth and water pressure makes the air breathed drier and more restrictive. The emphasis in diving upon deeper and slower breathing than on land can induce a very relaxed almost meditative effect on the body. ‘Diving is like yoga, it relaxes you the same as a one hour massage,’ (Alex). The body whilst diving maintains a horizontal position, parallel to the water’s surface. Divers are trained to achieve ‘neutral buoyancy,’ whereby the body feels ‘weightless’ and ‘floats’ in the water. Movement in the vertical axis is controlled by changing lung volume through breathing, again refocusing attention onto the breathing individual. When moving over or through environmental formations, for example a coral bed, the sensation of ‘weightlessness’ is commonly referred to by divers, as akin to being able to fly.

Scuba diving is a cultivated skill. Dive related knowledge increases exponentially with experience. Not only do divers learn to adapt to their new surroundings and bodily sensations, but they also learn to find, recognise and become

intrigued by marine life. Whilst diving, ‘western’ dualisms opposing ‘humans’ hierarchically against ‘nature,’ disappear with recognition of all life forms as being composed of the same ‘flesh,’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962 in Abram 1996; 66). In other words, humans are corporeally embedded in the living world that they inhabit and experience. ‘I feel as one with the water and its life-forms whilst diving,’ (Linda). Unlike on land, *farang* feel part of the marine world they temporarily inhabit. Yet the forced temporality of diving symbolises the potential temporality of *farang* culture on *Koh Tao*. Just as biological factors force an exit from the water; political, economic and social factors could potentially force *farang* off *Koh Tao*.

With the recognition of this shared ‘flesh,’ divers do not merely ‘gaze’ upon an exotic romanticised ‘other,’ akin to the early anthropologists, but experience an intimate interaction with marine life-forms at a very close proximity.^{vi} Akin to recent changes in research paradigms, this interaction should be regarded as occurring mutually; the marine ‘other’ is not passively gazed upon, but has equal agency and curiosity.^{vii} Divers and marine life forms in relation to each other are thereby ‘both subject and object, sensible and sentient,’ (Abram 1996: 67). The reality of interaction is in strong contrast to the portrayal of the underwater world, by nature films or Hollywood movies, as potentially deadly, in particularly relating to sharks. For example, whale sharks are attracted to the bubbles produced by diving equipment, allowing an incredibly close, yet safe proximity between the species. Equally the awareness of a ‘shared flesh’ with other sensate life forms increases desires for ecological respect and mindfulness. *Farang* collectively are particularly angered by what they regard as the mistreatment or destruction of marine life, for example killing for ‘shark-fin’ soup. Indeed, many professional divers will no longer eat seafood, despite not being vegetarian. ‘I spend my days watching marine life in their natural habitat; I couldn’t then see them on my plate!’

The ocean archetypically captures a notion of rebirth, as it is a generating force from which a diver/bather will emerge. ‘This notion of birth conceptualises water as symbolising the protective amniotic fluid which surrounds the foetus in the womb,’ (Beaudoin 1946 in Dann 1996: 46). This analogy can be even further extended in relation to the act of diving. Not only is the entire body immersed in fluid for a relatively long period of time, but also the individual only survives in this alien world by being fed air through tubes. The diver is also suspended in this ‘fluid’ experiencing serenity, quiet and a solitudinal state. Being in the womb is a state commonly likened to the ‘liminal state’ discussed in theories of rites of passage, (Turner 1969, Van Gennep 1960).

Rites of passage in diving are the transitional rituals accompanying changes in state and place. In the first rite of passage, a diver is separated from their familiar world into an altogether alien one. The ‘liminal’ period occurs underwater, when divers ‘pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state,’ (Turner 1969; 94-96). In diving this relates to the immersion in a new world and the ambiguity of the differing affects of water on divers’ sensory perceptions. Turner’s *liminars* experience anti-structure: a ‘stripping’ and ‘levelling’ of structural restraints, enabling a resurgence of nature, which in diving invokes the synaesthetic awareness of the body’s senses. The anti-structure occurs socially too, with liminars experiencing a communion or ‘communitas’ in relation to each other. In diving, this relates to the recognition of all life forms as being part of the same ‘flesh,’ and the mutual interactions that occur.

However, divers do not just experience a transition from one world to another but subjectively experience a ‘transformation,’ (Turnball 1990). Divers are fully immersed in a new world and experience an awakening of their sensory perceptions and different communications with all life forms. These experiences ‘are an “other” condition of being that is coexistent with the state of being of which (they) are normally

conscious,' (Turnball 1990: 40). Returning to the 'womb' analogy, a diver returns to the surface not only transformed but also reborn. Like a baby, a diver will move into a vertical position to emerge head first out of the water's surface. On ascent, a diver passes through areas of increasing sunlight levels, like a 'light at the end of the tunnel,' until emerging onto the bright surface where they will begin breathing for themselves once more in a world of human interaction. The watery world and their experiences in it are not forgotten on surfacing. Divers are reincorporated both rejuvenated and energised by their experience, which profoundly affects their new interactions, with both humans and the environment.

Conclusion.

In this paper I have mentioned briefly some economic, social and political aspects of the scuba diving tourism industry on *Koh Tao* to challenge many assumptions in tourist literature. However my main focus has been upon the key aspect of diving, which is the experience underwater. By analysing the experience of scuba diving using literature on tourism, embodiment and ritual, I have shown that scuba diving is an embodied activity invoking a synaesthesia of the body's senses. Whilst the 'gaze' is one aspect and motivation for scuba diving, as a discreet sense, 'sight' can only be distinguished in hindsight, and once back on land. 'Gazing' is part of the 'participatory' process in scuba diving, not isolated or in opposition to it.

Whilst my analysis relating to scuba diving may sound unique and its results too specific for transferability, I believe that this is not the case. Firstly, Scuba diving is an increasingly popular activity, as is snorkelling and all other water sports, which therefore requires research attention. Secondly, similar island communities, which have experienced phenomenal rates of development due to scuba diving tourism and hold large numbers of expatriate residents exist; namely the Bay Islands of Honduras and the Sipidan islands in Borneo, which could provide useful comparative research analyses. Thirdly, whilst scuba diving is but one tourism activity, my analyses relating to the 'gaze' and embodied experiences in nature, are transferable to many tourism activities involving immersing oneself in untamed nature and the mutual interaction between life forms.

This paper is an extract taken from a more comprehensive account of the social processes of a previously unstudied desert island community: a recently created community of western Scuba divers. I explored the paradoxical way in which those seeking to escape 'capitalism' in so doing brought its values and practises to the place they are seeking to escape to, a process whereby they often become 'third world' workers in Thai enterprises. I also explored the construction of a sense of *farang* identity, in relation to work as leisure, in opposition to their pasts, in opposition to Thai residents and in awareness of the precariousness of their own future residence on the island. External global processes, in particularly tourism, which *farang* unwittingly brought to *Koh Tao* are now having dire environmental consequences on the island and undermine the symbolically constructed community boundaries. Preservation of *farang* culture depends psychologically and economically on the preservation of the island's natural beauty and surroundings: as the island's preservation depends upon *farang*, Thai and tourist behaviour. If *farang* could carry their experiences and relationship with the underwater world whilst diving onto the land, then *Koh Tao* could see a more sustainable future.

NOTES

Commonly referred to as globalisation, see Giddens 2002)

ⁱⁱ Kohn 1997 analyses the situation on a Scottish isle where tourists have eventually become temporary or permanent residents.

ⁱⁱⁱ This phenomenon of the socialisation of identity has been researched in relation to sport. 'Participants learn to adopt the attitudes, outlooks and values common to the sport. These then become part of the individual's identity, and help to secure the sport's role as part of the developing self-image,' (Green and Chalip 1998: 280).

^{iv} For a discussion of 'risk and travelling,' see Elsrud 2001.

^v See Abram et al 1997, and Crouch 2002, for other author's criticisms of the focus upon only the visual sense.

^{vi} For an analysis of the origins of anthropology as a subject see Marcus and Fischer 1986

^{vii} See Nelson and Wright 1995, for an analysis of changes to a new research paradigm.

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