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## Folklore, Identity, and Tourism among Thai Muslims in Koh Yao, Andaman Sea, Thailand

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### Abstract

The Muslim community in Koh Yao in the Andaman Sea, Thailand, values their beliefs and practices, which align with transmitting cultural values and the importance of interdependence between humans and nature through different folklore. They inherited folklore from their ancestors, which has been preserved and sustained as their identity and treated as a tourism product that can promote Koh Yao as an interesting tourist destination. Through a qualitative research approach, the data were collected through fieldwork by employing participant and non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal that the region holds historical significance as it has been settled by various immigrant groups, contributing to forming a distinct Thai Muslim ethnic identity. The available resources produce cultural landscapes that have become a tourism area. Second, the Thai Muslims of Koh Yao exhibit a strong commitment to preserving their ethnic identity through four forms of folklore: first, oral literature, conveying information through spoken words; second, material culture, representing their physical way of life and adapting to various circumstances; third, folk traditions, emphasizing collective interactions over individual expressions or skills; and fourth, folk performing arts, exuberant performances expressing the joy ingrained in the traditions of Thai Muslims in Koh Yao. This study suggests their unique folklore portrays social phenomena and human relationships, offering captivating representations of Muslim identity. Their folklore practices could be enhanced and promoted as tourism activities by fostering collaboration across sectors while safeguarding their rich cultural heritage.

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Koh Yao in Phang Nga Bay, Thailand, is comprised of two islands, Koh Yao Noi and Koh Yao Yai, surrounded by 44 islands. Koh Yao is near three big cities: Phang Nga, Phuket, and Krabi. The island's placement on the continent's edge is one of the distinctive geographical features that contribute to the island's identity. The island is divided into various physical areas, including the mountainous region known as "Kuan", the plain region known as the paddy field, the coastal region known as the lake or sand beach area, and the Mangrove Forest Space. In addition, the islands of Koh Yao Noi and Koh Yao Yai are connected to the ocean via Phang Nga Bay and the Andaman Sea, resulting in the formation of a two-water ecosystem that is shaped by the interaction of freshwater and saltwater, which changes according to the seasons (Janthachot et al., 1999).

Koh Yao has unique narratives due to its long history, recorded in Thalang annals during the early Rattanakosin Era (1782-1851). Many foreign sources, as cited in Prahyasap and Suetai (2022), provide light on the history and geography of Koh Yao, including documents by Johannes II Van Keulen (1704-1755), Thomas Forrest (about 1784) and Phra Sarasasphonkhan (Gerini, 1905). This offers evidence that Koh Yao was an important region in the past, as it served as a destination for immigrants seeking sanctuary, which eventually led to the creation of social and cultural communities that have remained to this day. This island became an attractive place for the Malay Muslims from various places in Thailand which has been inhabited by many groups of people since Srivijaya Kingdom until later migration of Hokkien people and war victims (P. Wijitnavee, personal communication, September 20, 2022).

Recognizing the significance of the uniqueness of the Thai Muslim community, practicing their way of life, and maintaining and sustaining cultural practices and customs, especially their folklore, enables them to preserve their heritage and identity. These elements can potentially promote their culture to locals and outsiders in the context of tourism. This study examines the preservation of Muslim folklore and identity and how it could be developed as a cultural tourism product in Koh Yao Island, Phang Nga Province, Andaman Region, Thailand.

## Materials and Methods

This study investigates the environment, activities, and ways of life associated with utilizing cultural landscape resources in the region. Using a qualitative research approach, the researchers investigate how the Thai Muslims living in Koh Yao, Phang Nga Province, convey their endemic identities via various folkloric expressions. In this context, collective memory is also essential for recollecting their narrative through folklore and plays a significant role in ethnic survival (Sari, Sunarti, & Hussin, 2024). The research was conducted from August 2022 to May 2023, and it included fieldwork in the islands of Koh Yao Noi, also referred to as *Little Yao Island*, and Koh Yao Yai, or the *Big Yao Island* in Koh Yao District of the province of Phang Nga.

Additionally, the analysis in the study links the interconnections of social interactions, ethnic culture, self-presentation via folklore, and the tourism economy in terms of cultural, ecological resources, and cultural landscape. As this connection is made in terms of cultural, ecological resources, and cultural landscape, the research findings were thereby presented critically, analytically, and descriptively.



These types of folklore include oral literature, material culture, social customs, and performing arts. The wisdom of this cultural landscape lies in the connection between multiple cultures and the natural resources available in the Andaman Sea. This relationship is depicted within the context of cultural tourism. The secondary data were collected through library and archival research. The data were reviewed, and it assisted the researchers in establishing gaps in the previous research and is a reference to support the current study on Muslim folklore and identity in Koh Yao District. The qualitative primary data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Researchers conducted observation and participant observation to collect the data from the informants willing to participate in this research. It involved observing the environment, activities, and lifestyle connected to utilizing cultural landscape resources in the area. Significantly, the informants invited the researchers to observe and participate in a few ceremonies, which enabled the researchers to understand in-depth the customs and religious activities of the Muslims of this geographical region.

Interviews are an essential element of qualitative research in obtaining primary data. In-depth interviews, structured and semi-structured, were conducted with 10 community leaders, 20 religious leaders, community elders, 10 government representatives and tourism sectors, and five academics. The interviews were also conducted in group or focus group discussions, such as small group meetings, to bring together community leaders, religious leaders, government and non-governmental representatives, and academics. They were divided into two groups: Group One, five people, the local community, cultural practices, and scholars, and Group Two, 10 people, community leaders, government representatives, and tourism entrepreneurs and agencies. The primary purpose of this meeting was to gather valuable community information and folklore knowledge, as well as explore various forms and methods of presenting folklore to enhance cultural tourism offerings, ultimately benefiting the local community and the tourism industry.

Collected data were analyzed by synthesizing the aims and objectives of the study through a descriptive-analytical approach. The folklore study embedded with cultural landscape, ethnicity, and tourism as a framework has been validated and triangulated by consultations with local experts, community leaders, and cultural scholars. Therefore, research findings were discussed comprehensively to understand social and cultural manifestations through Thai Muslim folklore.

## **Results and Discussion**

Koh Yao District in Phang Nga Province has untapped tourism potential. It boasts a wealth of natural and cultural resources deeply rooted in the locals' beliefs in natural phenomena. These resources intricately reflect the way of life, customs, and traditions. The significant presence of Muslims makes the area a distinctive culture that incorporates aspects of other cultural identities. The settlement of Thai Muslims in this region is evident in its historical significance, social development, economy, wisdom, traditions, and cultural expressions, all intertwined with the abundant natural resources surrounding Koh Yao District.

Koh Yao people's ancestors traveled from the western shore of the southern towns of Trang, Satun, and others when Burma attacked the southern provinces of Thailand during the reign of King Rama I and settled in Koh Yao Noi and Koh Yao Yai (Kirana, Prayoonhong, & Halim, 2024). Some islanders believe that the Koh Yao people migrated from Trang and Satun, while others believe they originated from Trang and Satun. This is evident in their speech accents and languages, with Koh Yao Noi residents speaking similarly to the Trang and Koh Yao Yai residents speaking similarly to the Satun (Haicharoen, 2001). In addition, their surnames reflect their profession, with fishing-related surnames such as Rueng Samut, Sri Samut, Sea Land, Jit Nawee, Kla Samut, and Dam Samut for Koh Yao Noi residents. Koh Yao Yai islanders, on the other hand, have surnames associated with

agriculture, including Wong Na, Tainapreaw, Tamnadee, Tamnakla, and Plukmaidee (S. Rerengsamut, personal communication, September 2, 2022).

The settlement of the Koh Yao community initially took place in both the coastal and foothill plains. This played a crucial role in identifying the origins of the community, including the names of the places and the surnames for identification. Places, names, and surnames were often linked to the profession and the local culture, conveying the Koh Yao Thai Muslim. Additionally, people recognize the topography and natural environment as the cultural landscape (Walliphodom, 2017). The connection between the area and the environment is crucial in creating local homes and livelihoods while utilizing intelligence to adapt to the natural surroundings. This process develops knowledge and wisdom in terms of economy, social, and culture to enhance community living, known as cultural ecology. Hence, this is vital in determining the settlements' history, places' names, and other cultural aspects.

The lifestyle of Thai Muslims in Koh Yao exemplifies their ability to coexist harmoniously with the natural ecosystem. They have skillfully learned to utilize and balance natural resources within the context of their beliefs, customs, traditions, and significant religious practices that hold profound importance for their souls. Their folklore and community narratives, conveyed through myths, notably showcase their local culture's essence. Additionally, their culinary practices, infused with local characteristics and wisdom drawn from ecological ingredients, embody their cultural identity, and the traditional vernacular houses and social folk customs further reflect the distinct Thai-Muslim way of life in Koh Yao. Studying these aspects would unveil the unique identity and allure of the Thai-Muslim community in Koh Yao. These cultural assets and intellectual creations epitomize their way of life, adapting to dynamic cultural changes while staying connected to their heritage. These interactions involve human-to-human, human-to-nature, and human-to-supernatural relationships, all of which contribute to shaping a unique identity known as cultural life. This intertwines with the cultural landscape concept, forming a connection that can be harnessed for cultural tourism.

### **Koh Yao Environment, Muslim Community and Life**

According to Charoensin-olarn (2011), nature and the environment are not just pure, unique spaces but also social inventions. Koh Yao was initially a naturally raw and temporary camping area; however, while maintaining nature and environment, people occupy the area through various means, creating a unique and distinct social identity. The community's ethnicity, especially Muslims, interacts with the environmental conditions in material and non-material cultural landscapes. These cultural landscapes' origins, meanings, and values reflect the structure and cultural pattern through folklore, natural resources, and human resources, which show the uniqueness of the cultural identity. It mainly involves religion-based construction of faith and social identity and interplay with the development of the local economy. The formation of a distinct social identity among Thai Muslims in Koh Yao as a space with resources derived from nature and culture, including religion, beliefs, rituals, traditions, cuisine, attire, and practices, can be attributed to various factors, including war, government, politics, and economic conditions. The community's construction of religious artifacts such as mosques, kubor (cemeteries), religious schools, and attire has established a visible presence in the eyes of outsiders, such as visitors and tourists, symbolizing the community's important faith in religion and cultural heritage. Religion is a social institution that provides purpose for human existence by creating a connection between individuals and the supernatural ideals that are the foundation of human civilization (Coser, 1977).

In Koh Yao, Thai Muslims have adapted to the natural and social environment, and their political system is linked to the economic system through a group of influential individuals classified into four major groups: community or religious leaders, government agencies, non-governmental agencies or private agencies, tourists, and other groups. The integration of community or religious

networks is often driven by community or religious leaders, respected individuals who possess knowledge and experience in religion to ensure that their activities align with Islamic principles and community rules and help share identity among Thai Muslims. Government bodies such as district offices and sub-district administrative organizations should provide support by collaborating with community leaders under the living together concept to facilitate communal living. It is crucial to manage resources effectively to achieve a sustainable and harmonious integration of Islamic culture and the environment, eventually becoming a way of life for Thai Muslims in Koh Yao. This requires cooperation and involvement among community members and adherence to coexistence practices and rules to promote unity. Private sectors, such as organizations, entrepreneurs, and investors, are crucial in contributing and benefiting from shared resources. These resources include natural, cultural, and human resources that rely on community welfare management mechanisms. This collaboration consequently creates a sustainable income for families and communities in Koh Yao.

The economic activities navigated by the grouped community or religious leaders, government agencies, non-governmental agencies, and tourists are important sources of revenue for private sector entities, entrepreneurs, and investors who aim to contribute to the growth of the capitalist economy in the Koh Yao community. Their presence helps promote the area as a tourist destination, drawing people to admire the natural beauty and experience the local way of life. Therefore, Koh Yao is a captivating product that offers unique natural, cultural, and eco-tourism resources and activities. Rather than creating a specific Thai Muslim identity, the focus is on presenting the community's cultural identity. This allows for an exchange of knowledge and ideas across cultures in the social sphere of Koh Yao.

Intricately linked to its unique ecosystem and its inhabitants' way of life, Koh Yao's identity can be categorized based on the region's geography. First, "*koh*", the island Koh Yao, represents a way of life closely related to the social dimension of the community's identity. This identity is rooted in Thai Muslim practices and traditions such as daily activities, agriculture-based livelihoods, customs, and ritual performances, all of which possess aesthetic values that reflect the community's mindset and spirit. These practices seamlessly blend with the ecological, social, and cultural landscape of Koh Yao, creating a unique sense of cultural identity that has been transmitted across generations. This identity is deeply connected to the community's living space and can be understood as a cultural heritage preserved and passed down over time (Thongsuk, 2021). Second, "*Pa*", the Koh Yao area's lush forests nourish various creatures and the community's welfare. In addition to support from government and private organizations, it has kept the forests fertile. This has resulted in a thriving population of animals, including the distinctively named hornbills or gag birds, macaques, and mouse deer. Mangrove forests, too, have been utilized in various ways, including utilizing the woods from these forests to repair buildings. In addition, small shrimps caught in these forests are processed into krill and used for livelihood. Community leaders and members have recognized the importance of the forest as a learning center for sustainable eco-tourism. They educate interested tourists about the natural world and offer guidelines for conserving watersheds, streams, and other important resources.

Turning to the third ecological zone, "*Na*" encompasses the rice fields and vegetable gardens in Koh Yao, serving as primary food sources. The flatlands and open spaces are used for agriculture and are often located between houses or buildings. Their unique farming methods in the area are considered to be the charm of farming in the middle of the lake. Although the farming season and process are similar to those of other regions, the sea surrounding the area and the weather conditions make the product distinct in shape and taste. The community takes pride in their farming methods, and the unique taste of rice is among the highlights visitors are interested in experiencing, hence manifesting their agricultural area as an integral part of its culture. The locals try to preserve and promote their traditional methods of farming, which have been passed down from generation to generation. Lastly, "*Le*" or "*Lay*", the ocean or the sea, is a vital food source in the Koh Yao community.

This favorable geography allows for local fishing techniques, including netting, trapping, and casting nets. The fishing industry uses nets to catch anchovies, which is also prevalent, producing the well-known Ching Chang fish, a popular souvenir of Koh Yao. These activities boost the community's income and improve its economic conditions. Integral to their fishing practice, following certain beliefs and rituals from their ancestors rooted in Islamic religious principles, the local fishers rely on experiences and traditional knowledge to understand natural phenomena.

"Koh-Pa-Na-Le" can be interpreted as the connection between human society and the natural environment in the Koh Yao area. This encompasses three levels: cultural landscape, cultural ecology, and cultural life. It can be further expanded into four areas in the Koh Yao community: (1) the interplay between the geography and the ecological system of an area defines its topography, transportation, and other features, instilling a sense of attachment among its inhabitants; (2) the transformation of natural resource management and the expansion of local communities engaged in farming and fishing have a significant impact on the economy and society of Koh Yao; (3) the community's interaction and engagement with its natural surroundings create products that align with its way of life, cater to tourists, and contribute to a sustainable economic and social system; and lastly, (4) the unique features of the Thai Muslim community are highlighted in terms of their customs and behaviors that align with natural ecosystems to create products that resonate with the cultural landscape, making it an important tourism destination in Koh Yao.

Figure 2

*Tham Toh Buat Serves as a Historical Refuge and Shelter Where Fishermen Sought Solace from Stormy Winds, Preserving its Significance from the Past to the Present (Source: Fieldwork, 2023)*



### Preserving Muslim Folklore and Identity in Koh Yao

When settlers initially arrived to inhabit Koh Yao Noi and Koh Yao Yai, they recognized the excellent position for developing a colony and relied on the local crops and fisheries for subsistence. Ultimately, Koh Yao Noi and Koh Yao Yai became popular tourist destinations. The community in Koh Yao Noi and Koh Yao Yai grew substantially over time due to the development of a sense of

kinship that extended not only within the region but even outside it. This has resulted in the Thai Muslim people of Koh Yao directly developing their unique folklore and traditions.

The investigation carried out on Thai Muslims residing in Koh Yao involved studying the social context of a particular group or ethnicity. This analysis was based on ethnicity, which significantly determined one's ethnic identity, considering various social factors such as race, nationality, and cultural, religious, or linguistic backgrounds. According to Sunthornphe (2005), defining ethnic boundaries requires establishing connections among groups based on similarities or specific characteristics unique to their group, such as language, material culture, beliefs, and rituals. This process is about building relationships. Leepreecha (2022) noted that a shared sense of belonging to the same ethnic group is crucial in defining ethnic boundaries. Hence, preserving the Thai Muslim ethnicity in Koh Yao includes establishing connections within the group to gain a sense of self-awareness.

The concept of Ethnicity and Folklore by Richard Dorson (1972) was utilized to conduct this study, and the definition of folklore was incorporated into oral literature, material culture, folk social traditions, and folk performing arts. The findings of this study reveal that the Thai Muslims of Koh Yao use folklore to preserve their ethnicity and assert their identity as Thai Muslims. The presentation of folklore is a creative process that integrates imagination and communicates social identity while fostering a network among Thai Muslim groups in the Andaman region and other tightly-knit groups. Na Thalang (2005) found that folklore, defined by Richard Dorson and studied within the context of Folklore and Folklife Studies, can be divided into four categories: oral literature, material culture, folk social traditions, and folk art performances. Furthermore, these folklores reflect people's lives and values, promoting moral and ethical cultivation, unity, and reconciliation within the community, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and providing enjoyment, happiness, and fun for community members.

### **Oral Literature: Conveying Information through Speech**

Oral literature or tradition is folklore transmitted orally through speech, chanting, or singing based on memory, such as legends and folk tales. It is part of the doctrine of the way of life and is a rural product (Dorson, 1968). Literature is, therefore, significant in creating a local identity, a cultural capital that can be extended to four places related to local stories (Na Thalang, 2019). During the study, it was discovered that Koh Yao contained places whose names reflect the origins of nine groups of folklore, including stories such as Duen Pen Chan and the Toh U Sen Toh Do Mai story, as well as folk songs such as lullabies and Digia Lahu songs, as well as proverbs and riddles that convey ideas and teachings. These pieces of folklore include principles that demonstrate how to think and behave morally, guiding people's lives and behaviors in society, such as repaying kindness and acknowledging sin and discrimination. Additionally, some types of oral literature are not just narratives but also mirror people's supernatural belief systems, creating a worldview about society and the universe and indicating a person's identity in society while also establishing moral standards and explanations that lead to reasons for performing rituals (Santasombat, 2005). For instance, the story of Tok Kru Ae is a powerful precursor or representative of Islamic religious power, which impacts the lives of people in the Koh Yao area.

### **Material Culture: Physical Way of Life and Adapting to Various Circumstances**

Knowledge of the natural environment surrounding us contributes to the development of material culture. The physical elements such as mountains, forests, rice fields, and the sea provide the foundation for tangible symbols, everyday objects, and cultural artifacts, including local handicrafts like bamboo products and Toei Nham, Cher, local cuisines such as Kew Baen, Kloy with Coconut, Kew Nang, and seafood processing like Salted Fish and Ching Chang Fish. Additionally, it encompasses agriculture-based livelihoods, the traditional clothing of Thai Muslims, and folk architecture known

for building houses on level land, using raised wooden houses with an open basement for storing agricultural equipment and a spacious courtyard surrounding the house. This is in accordance with the relationship between lifestyles and the agricultural way of life that is congruent with the ecological environment and Thai Muslims' religious beliefs and traditions linked to the life cycle and local knowledge. According to Kerdsiri (2014), the residential area is vital in forming the South's unique and diverse cultural landscape, closely related to cultural ecology. The formation of community layouts and residential houses reflects the wisdom of ancestors passed down through generations, showcasing the value of nature for human benefits and the wisdom of ancient people inherited for children to learn. Although social conditions have changed, the spirit transmitted through material culture persists, serving human needs and responding to fundamental factors and social security.

### Folk Traditions: Collective Interactions over Individual Expressions or Skills

Folk or social traditions are a form of cultural knowledge that falls between oral literature and material culture. It entails a way of life passed down from generation to generation and emphasizes group dynamics more than individual expression or skill. The group members act as a means of fostering relationships, coordinating group activities, and promoting unity. It is crucial to comprehend the structure of social and cultural norms that prioritize interaction, manifesting the ethnic group's existence through their traditional and cultural characteristics (Prachuabmoh, 2004). According to Sunthornphe (2005), ethnic identity among Muslims is expressed through their relationships, religion, beliefs, learning, social and cultural practices, kinship, marriage, family ties, and religious traditions. In Koh Yao, several local social traditions are observed, including the cradle ceremony, which aims to boost the newborn's morale and prosperity. This tradition shows the importance of the newborn as if it were pure white cloth.

Figure 3

*Cradle Ceremony (Source: Fieldwork, 2023)*



The wedding tradition, also known as *Nikah*, is another example, where *Dikia* or *Lahu* songs are sung for the bride and groom, conveying knowledge about the way of life, society, duties of citizenship, nature, environment, and religious morals to newlyweds. Other traditions include boat

merit making, housewarming, and folk remedies for treating diseases. The Koh Yao region has preserved its folk social traditions by adhering to the Muslim belief system and faith that has been handed down through generations, following the norms of the society. These traditions are reflected in the interactions between individuals, between individuals and nature, and between individuals and the supernatural, resulting in ecological harmony and enhancing social cohesion. These traditions positively impact the community by fostering a sense of shared identity, strengthening morale, and promoting social unity.

### Folk Performing Arts: Traditions of Thai Muslims

Folk performing arts are performance styles that embody values, traditions, and cultures closely tied to religious principles and beliefs. They aim to impart teachings and ideas that can be put into practice. Examples include the dance performances, *Rong Ngeng*, which involve reciting verses through melody and music, and martial arts performances, *ga yong*, in the form of dancing. Certain activities and expressions of enjoyment are deemed appropriate within religious principles and cultural norms. However, they must also be performed to please the audience. Performances are, therefore, tailored to fit within the confines of tradition. The expression of art and culture can take various forms, such as singing and dancing with simple gestures and musical melodies that align with local customs.

The four categories of folklore are communicated through symbolic representation, promoting human interaction and social relations that depict symbolic beliefs. Ethnic group symbols are initially intangible but gradually evolve into tangible, symbolic representations. Rapeephat (2008) stated that “really real” is the basis of religious views as symbolic activities as part of the cultural system, aiming to strengthen the powerful reality and keeping itself from being overturned by secular experience. Therefore, the “really real” or genuine concept is encircled by a network of symbols that can convince individuals and form the essence of spiritual and religious practices, leading to rituals, essentially religious acts.

The culture of Thai Muslims in Koh Yao is a legacy passed down from their predecessors. It helps raise awareness of their ethnicity, values, language, society, and culture, impacting current social dynamics. This creates a mechanism for forming social relations, culture, and power, reinforcing their ethnic identity through symbols, rituals, original customs, and various forms of folklore. It leads to understanding their thinking and creating wisdom, expressed in building their ethnic consciousness, beliefs, and faith.

Folklore communicates this cultural capital through folk stories, performances, ceremonies, and other important traditions. According to Na Thalang (2016), the folklore of the Thai Muslims in Koh Yao has played a significant role in creating and preserving their ethnic identity. Na Thalang explains that cultural capital, which refers to a group's cultural values, traditions, and practices, can be reproduced, sold, and used to shape and maintain their identity. In the case of Thai Muslims in Koh Yao, their identity as Muslims is rooted in the basic beliefs of Islam, which shape their way of life, customs, and traditions. This culture has been created, inherited, and developed over time within the social context of the Thai Muslim community in Koh Yao. It has contributed to the elevation of the social context of the group and the area, allowing the expression of their unique Thai Muslim identity.

According to Lefebvre's concept of space (1991), creating meaning involves dividing space into three levels. Physical space refers to the tangible and visible aspects of space. Koh Yao Island is considered a stage for various actions that enable people to use different forms of value and create a network of social space. This network serves as a venue for religious ceremonies, traditions, and other activities in social building. On the other hand, mental space refers to the intangible and subjective aspects of space within the mind of individuals. This mental space reflects the cultural identity of Thai

## Muslims in Koh Yao Island.

A particular area's cultural and social products are created by the people who live there or by the community that manages and shapes its meaning. This is done by establishing appropriate boundaries proportional to the area's cultural and social norms. In other words, the people who inhabit the area define and shape their identity by establishing and maintaining the boundaries deemed appropriate to their way of life and cultural practices. This boundary-making process is integral to how people create meaning for the places they inhabit and is closely tied to the cultural and social practices that define their identity.

The creation of space is not solely dependent on physical symbols or images, but representative images can also be constructed to produce space. Thus, the product of space differs depending on the meaning attributed to it by the community. Consider the physical space of Koh Yao as a stage that represents the creation of ethnic identity: a long tradition of ethnic preservation, and a memory of being Muslim can be observed, resulting in an understanding and consciousness of shared spaces such as mosques, *kubor* (cemeteries), and local houses. These symbols represent the social significance of the space for Muslims. It has been observed that the community in the Koh Yao area constructed a village mosque as a central location for religious ceremonies and practices.

## Development of Muslim Folklore as an Identity and Tourism Product in Koh Yao

The process of constructing the identity of Thai Muslims in Koh Yao has significant implications for creating their ethnic identity and cultural ownership within the area. This includes the economic system of capitalism in the context of popular cultural tourism, which has been encouraged by government policies to promote the domestic tourism industry and generate income for local people (Na Thalang, 2019). As a result, Thai Muslims in Koh Yao have adapted and utilized their Muslim identity within the context of tourism. They have also used folklore to create an image of themselves as a Muslim community. The Long Island folklore presented to visitors, even if only a portion, is sufficient to create a distinct image as consumers always seek an authentic cultural heritage like food culture (Shahrin & Hussin, 2023). This has allowed them to present themselves to outsiders while maintaining their cultural and religious identity.

Symbols are expressed through various mediums, such as oral literature, material culture, folk traditions, and artistic performances. They serve as substitutes or objects of meaning because humans determine the process of creating meaning through images or cultural symbols that hold value and can impress tourists while also building a social network within the community. By showcasing these cultural representations, tourists can experience and appreciate the unique cultural phenomenon and social context of the people of Koh Yao. Creating representations is rooted in human cognition and depends on how we interact with the world around us, including people, objects, and events. Through these interactions, we develop mental representations of our thoughts and feelings, which can be communicated through various forms of imagery. This is accomplished through language, which encompasses more than words but includes references, images, sounds, gestures, clothing, and objects, all used to create meaning and connect different concepts. The process of linking concepts to signs is known as representation (Hall, 2013).

The concept of a commodity extends beyond just tangible objects. In specific historical periods, locations, social settings, cultures, and even individuals are commodified to reveal the moral economy that underpins the market economy. This involves transforming everyday items into marketing assets to create a selling point (Santasombat, 2005). Using the vast natural resources surrounding an area as a medium to showcase one's culture in the context of ethnic tourism has become a popular trend among nature-loving tourists and outsiders seeking adventure. This has resulted in the development of unique and peculiar cultural traditions specific to each area, which in turn has led to the emergence

of tourism management practices that cater to the demands of visitors seeking to immerse themselves in the local way of life (Na Thalang, 2019).

Representative images presented through folklore aim to promote ethnic tourism as a form of eco-tourism. The researchers collected data from local communities, tourism entrepreneurs, and relevant tourism-related organizations to create promotional materials for tourism, such as eco-tourism routes called “Forests-Fields-Sea, or Pa-Na-Lay” brochures, and food documentaries entitled “Forests-Fields-Sea: Culinary Heritage or Pa-Na-Lay: Culinary Heritage. These materials incorporate natural tourist routes that are intertwined with the cultural dimensions of the local community in Koh Yao, including storytelling, food, traditions, and traditional fishing methods. This addresses the needs of travelers seeking authentic experiences by immersing themselves in the original way of life. Hence, some locals have adapted to engaging in local tourism as their primary occupation, while some have made tourism-related activities their second source of income, creating a dual identity that blends their professional and ethnic identities.

The tourism routes for exploring natural and folklore resources are divided into the Koh Yao Yai and Koh Yao Noi islands. It is observed that tourists are interested in admiring the beauty of nature in the area and engaging in various activities on water and land. A blend of folklore elements is incorporated to present local traditions, such as place names, local food, beliefs, and traditional fishing practices, narrated by the locals. The local tour guides are called Long Lay, Loa Reueng, and Leang Loeng Chao Yao (Long Lay, Telling Stories, Stories of the Island's People). These folklore activities and indigenous information play a significant role in making tourism more vibrant, captivating, and impressive, creating a more profound impact and leaving a lasting impression on visitors.

#### Thai Muslim Identity and Its Context with Tourism

The presentation of Thai Muslim ethnic identity in the context of tourism amidst the global influence of capitalism has significantly impacted the lives of Muslims residing in Koh Yao. In response, growing interest in exploring its impacts through the viewpoints of the host community (Galletto & De Leon, 2022) has united to capitalize on its natural resources, environment, and space to adapt and create employment opportunities in the tourism industry. This has transformed their way of life, enabling them to incorporate tourism-related activities rooted in their traditions and culture. The commodification of its natural resources and cultural identity became an important agenda, as well as social ideology and geographical factors (Fuangfusakul, 2000). This effort involves the participation of government agencies, the private sector, and the public sector in promoting tourism and enhancing the social and cultural aspects of being a Thai Muslim. It manifests their concerted efforts to improve their livelihood and increase the value of their ethnic identity in the tourism industry.

Furthermore, the proliferation of technology has allowed the exploitation of natural areas for economic gain, with the state and private sector claiming these resources. This has turned the environment into a platform for various interest groups and ideological agendas. The consumption of cultural and ethnic identity has led to the area being viewed as a platform for bourgeois ideologies and identities. Consequently, the government has recognized the area's importance and initiated various projects promoting cultural and natural tourism. These activities aim to disseminate information about the area and conserve its resources, allowing the local community to utilize the area for tourism as much as possible.

The interactions between tourists from diverse ethnic backgrounds and external cultures and the members of the local community, known as *touree*, are of great importance in ethnic tourism (van den Berghe & Keyes, 1984, cited in Leepreecha, 2022). Ethnic tourism involves various entities, especially tourism stakeholders, that act as intermediaries to facilitate the interaction between tourists of different ethnicities and the local ethnic community. Scholars who study ethnic tourism

pay attention to the power dynamics among these entities. The tourism industry often creates staged scenes that showcase the traditional way of life of the local community so tourists can experience the way of life of the local villagers. Tourism also promotes and preserves ethnic identities by selling local products as souvenirs. Daily life activities and crafts, therefore, altered to the tourism demand, sometimes raising questions about the products' authenticity, quality, and the cultural significance of rebuilding them to meet the tourism demands (Leepreecha, 2022).

The government has initiated a tourism festival called "Harvest Fest: Celebrating New Rice and Fresh Catch", which aims to promote collaboration between various sectors, such as government agencies, the private sector, and the public sector. The festival is held in the Phru Nai sub-district area and involves creating agricultural areas for visitors to explore, including activities during the harvest season. The festival offers various activities and exhibits, such as technology transfer sessions introducing new production methods, public relations for alternative agricultural products, folk art performances, and traditional games like the Saba shooting competition. Visitors can also witness demonstrations of ancient practices, such as carrying rice with bamboo poles and charcoal burning. These activities serve as a source of entertainment, promote the preservation of cultural heritage, and increase awareness about sustainable tourism.

Among the attractions of the activities is the performance. The performances employ a Like Hulu style, combined with folk melodies, to showcase folklore information through songs. The performers don Thai Muslim attire, giving the performances a youth-oriented vibe. Furthermore, an additional event, "Amazing Koh Yao", was designed to encourage tourists to immerse themselves in the Muslim community's way of life in Koh Yao. This festival offers local handicrafts, agriculture, and fishing products. These activities aim to establish an artificial tradition that showcases the ethnic identity and lifestyle of the Koh Yao people by fusing their culture into Thai society within the framework of tourism. The activity does not go against their religion; instead, it selectively disregards certain identity modifications to uphold their cultural significance and values. Examples include the Muslim dress code and diverse religious ceremonies. Such measures balance adaptation in a capitalist era and preserving traditional culture.

Figure 4

*Heritage Tales: The Wisdom of Koh Yao (Source: Fieldwork, 2023)*



The findings of this study can be discussed from three perspectives: first, Koh Yao is a historically significant area with long-established communities; second, The Thai Muslims of Koh Yao exemplify the preservation of ethnic identity; and third, they present social phenomena and human relationships within the context of cultural tourism on the Andaman Coast in the Andaman Sea.

Koh Yao is a historically significant area with long-established communities. Various groups are believed to have migrated and settled here. Once settled, they created a distinct identity to declare themselves Thai Muslims in Koh Yao. With the establishment of their identity, they utilized natural resources to generate cultural products, contributing to the development of the local economy, particularly in tourism. Several scholars have studied the historical and social development of Koh Yao. For instance, Prahyasap & Suetai (2022) conducted a study titled "History and Background of the Koh Yao Noi Island Community", which revealed that Koh Yao Noi is an ancient community with connections to the history of Thalang. Another study by Haicharoen (2001) found that Muslim groups from Trang sought refuge and established a community in Koh Yao Noi during wartime, while Muslim groups from Satun settled in Koh Yao Yai. These studies, in conjunction with document analysis, community fieldwork, and local informant interviews, provide a coherent understanding of the historical background of Koh Yao, leading to consistent data findings. In addition, Nakban (2007) provides further information by mentioning the ancestral origins of Koh Yao Noi's inhabitants, stating that they trace their lineage back to the sea gypsies because the island's interior and caves bear traces of the sea gypsies' skeletal remains. However, due to external invasions and power struggles, the sea gypsies were eventually forced to leave the island. Furthermore, documentary evidence confirms the presence of the term "*Poo Leang-Pun Yang*", which translates to Koh Yao. This name has become the origin of "Koh Yao" for this beautiful island, stretching approximately 23 miles in length, 8 miles in width, and moderate height (Gerini, 1905). This evidence emphasizes the island's historical significance, as it has been recorded as a place of refuge and settlement. These pieces of information provide insights into the social and cultural development of the island's people from past to present.

The Thai Muslims in Koh Yao hold spiritual value for their souls through their cultural heritage, which is a valuable resource for cultivating moral and ethical values, fostering harmonious coexistence, and strengthening the bonds among the people in the community. Therefore, they exemplify the preservation of ethnic identity. Researchers such as Winittasathitkul and Chiramethee (Lowakun) (2015) also found that the village way of life serves as a tool that reflects the cultural values of the community, fostering strong kinship relationships, shared thoughts, beliefs, and behavioral patterns. These aspects often differ from societies that prioritize material prosperity. The story appeared in folklore; therefore, it plays the role of a mirror, helping them reflect on themselves to ensure their behavior is socially acceptable (Tsuji, 2022). The study by Jamaroon, Thongkon, and Khwanthong (2019) investigated the naming of canals and villages in Bang Sao Thong District, Samut Prakan Province, from a folkloric perspective. They found that people in the local area used folklore to name the canals and villages. The names were often inspired by distinctive characteristics, personal attributes, beliefs, or legends, aiming for easy memorization and effective communication. This folkloric naming practice in the Koh Yao area is similar to the oral literary genre of "narrative names" observed in the study, which involves various naming methods, such as associating names with topography, individuals, or significant events. The study reveals how folklore is used to preserve local identity and heritage through place names, allowing people in the community to appreciate the value of their local resources.

Folk architecture arises from learning from nature, the surrounding environment, and the physical space supporting livelihoods. They are evident in tangible forms, such as local houses that reflect the Muslim community's beliefs and way of life in Koh Yao by constructing houses closely related to the local lifestyles. Lorchai, Panin, and Kedsiri (2015) cited Oliver's (1997) definition of folk architecture as a form of cultural folklore closely related to the community's way of life, created

from locals' wisdom. This is similar to the study conducted by Khasan (2010) on the Lua ethnic community in Thailand, which found that folk beliefs and wisdom are related to the establishment of settlements, village layouts, and houses built by the community.

Local folk traditions are found to be closely linked to the principles of the Islamic religion, such as the tradition of raising the "*Plae Deuk*" (a traditional baby wooden swing) and the tradition of making merit by building boats. Wittayapak (2018) states that religion maintains the relationship between humans and the physical environment, and it is a part of human adaptation to the environment, especially in natural disasters that are beyond human control and understanding. According to Rapeephat (2008), rituals are ceremonial practices that instill religious beliefs, leading to devotion in both the real and imaginative worlds, blending into one another. The performance of religious duties allows these beliefs to manifest in the realm of humans, referred to as "cultural performance". Moreover, Chantavanich (2014) referenced Comte, Durkheim, and Weber, social theorists who discussed how humans in society come together to create and collectively understand phenomena such as religion and culture. The social theorists stated that religion is a social construct created to control people and establish a sacred society. Therefore, religion is not inherently sacred, but a human creation designed for practical purposes. When communicated, it leads to devotion.

Local folk performing arts are found to be closely tied to values, customs, and culture that are influenced by Islamic religious principles. This alignment allows the expressions of Thai Muslims on the islands to be appropriate and in line with their beliefs. The folk performing arts take the form of simple singing and rhythmic dancing, incorporating appropriate gestures and music that harmonize with local customs. Nonetheless, the songs used in the performances reflect values and ways of life, such as "*Dikia Lahu*", which is part of wedding ceremonies and plays a role in imparting knowledge to the bride and groom. In a study conducted by Phuangsombat (2018) on the role of traditional folk songs in youth gatherings at Phetchaburi Wittayalai School, it was found that folk songs play significant roles and values for the youth, although the content and messages of these roles may vary. Moreover, the traditional performing arts, known as "*Rong-ngeng*", which involves singing the *Tanyong* songs in a mix of Thai, local dialect, and Malay languages, reflect entertainment and educational aspects. It serves as a medium to incorporate teachings and present the people's way of life through song. This is consistent with Lertkobkul's (2017) study on "*Tanyong* songs in the area around Phang Nga Bay", which aligns with the notion that *Tanyong* songs serve their traditional role in *Rong-ngeng* primarily for entertainment. These songs have been adapted with Thai language lyrics to facilitate broader communication. Apart from their entertainment value, *Tanyong* songs also play roles in conveying news, providing training and education, and fostering community cohesion among the people in the local community.

Muslims present social phenomena and human relationships in the context of cultural tourism on the Andaman Coast. They convey the "representations" of "Muslim identity" through various forms of folklore that symbolize cultural values and leave impressions on tourists. Presenting their identity through folklore promotes eco-cultural tourism involving cultural activities. This is achieved through cooperation between the community, government, and private sector to benefit tourism and preserve local cultural heritage. Similar to the study conducted by Jaruworn (2015) on folklore and community-based cultural tourism at Nong Khao Village, Kanchanaburi Province, different forms of village lifestyle tourism were presented. These included showcasing the village lifestyle in a museum setting, experiencing the daily life of the villagers, presenting the village lifestyle in the form of traditional dramas and songs, and showcasing the village lifestyle through a traditional wagon parade. These village lifestyle presentations are related to the utilization of folklore to create an identity that is recognized and praised as a "cultural village", which enhances the recognition and reputation of Nong Khao Village. In line with the investigation of using innovative folklore to enhance community development, as seen in the TRF Senior Research Scholar Research Project on "Creative

Folklore: Dynamics and Application of Folklore in Contemporary Thai Society”, there are 14 sub-projects. One notable example is the utilization of local tales to enhance the worth of local products and boost tourism in the central region, as observed in the case of “Nong Khao Cultural Village” in Kanchanaburi Province (Na Thalang & Ritphen, 2015).

In this study, researchers presented the concept of creative folklore to benefit tourism, such as designing tourism routes and performance sets and promoting local cuisine. In this context, the research aimed to create added value for cultural resources through innovative approaches to tourism, as exemplified in Chantanaamchu’s (2017) study on exploring creative learning tourism routes in Kanchanaburi province. The study’s findings revealed that creative learning tourism routes are connected through three main forms: local museum tourism, geographical and historical tourism, and agricultural heritage tourism. In addition, Na Thalang (2019) discusses the application of creative folklore in the context of contemporary tourism. This is evident through the involvement of the government in tourism management at the provincial level. It aims to create a distinctive regional identity and promote local products based on cultural heritage. For instance, in 2015, the Ministry of Culture established “The Center of Thai Inspiration” to support and advise creative cultural industry businesses. This approach utilizes cultural resources to enhance the economic value and create additional value. One such example is the exhibition “Thailand Souvenirs: Decoding the Charms of Travel Mementos”, where creative folklore serves as a genuine asset in tourism. This is consistent with the utilization of woven products made from *Pandanus odoratissimus* Linn. in the Koh Yao area to create souvenirs that resonate with the context of the island. These creations contribute to establishing a unique identity that enhances the economic value and adds significance to tourism in the region.

Khiawmaneerat et al. (2018) also found that cultural tourism management involves adapting by using ethnic identity as a selling point in cultural tourism. Through “cultivating culture as a commodity” or “culture for tourism”, they effectively manage their cultural heritage to enhance tourism offerings. It can be observed that both the Thai-Muslim communities of Koh Yao and the Tai ethnic groups, which are considered socially marginalized groups, present their cultural capitals through their ethnic identities. In addition, a folklore study by Iordache and Popa (2008) on the factors promoting cultural tourism relies on three main factors: location, roles, and the influence of folklore attitudes on cultural tourism. The study found that folklore attitudes are a part of cultural tourism embedded in traditions, rituals, and various community activities that attract visitors for cultural experiences. Folklore attitudes represent the local culture that originates from material and spiritual aspects intertwined with the lifestyle of rural people, which are considered cultural commodities that create domestic and international value.

## Conclusion

The Thai Muslim community of the Koh Yao region has different sources of origin, and their unique culture and traditions have established a distinct identity in alignment with the concepts of ethnicity and folklore proposed by Dorson (1972) and contributed to promoting Koh Yao as a tourist spot. This provides value to their spiritual beliefs, the transmission of cultural values, and the importance of interdependence between humans and nature through four types of folklore: oral literature, material culture, folk traditions or social customs, and performing arts. The folklore of Thai Muslims in Koh Yao has shaped their identity and cultural reproduction, serving as a medium to understand their distinctive characteristics and ethnic identity. Their identity is synonymous with Koh Yao, rich in Thai Muslim culture, which reflects their way of life as Muslims, where Islam is the belief system. Therefore, the folklore of the Thai Muslims in Koh Yao embodies the ethnicity and distinctiveness of the community. Individuals or institutions engaged in cultural preservation should promote awareness among the locals, emphasizing the significance and instilling a sense of pride in their local heritage. Encouraging education and fostering understanding can yield academic

benefits while preserving their unique local identity. Safeguarding endangered folklore, such as local lullabies, folk songs, traditional houses, and long-tail boats from various dimensions, is crucial. The output of the study will enhance and enrich the efforts of conservation, preservation, safeguarding, and sustainability, which will benefit the community in the context of the economy through tourism. Organizations involved in cultural preservation and community-based tourism have their uniqueness; therefore, their operations are diverse and probably cause inefficiency in their management. To increase cultural and economic benefits to all stakeholders, collaborative planning and coordinated efforts should be made to enhance the value and significance of the cultural resources of Koh Yao. Tourism-related government and private sectors should utilize Thai Muslims' cultural capital; the example is the folklore in Koh Yao, which has a unique identity as a driving force to enhance and develop community-based tourism.

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This research has been approved and followed the research ethics approved by The Human Research Ethics Committee, which certifies the research project with the following reference numbers: COA NO: PKRU2565/012 and Study Code: SC2565/012.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

### **AI Disclosure**

We declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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## **CERTIFICATE OF ACCEPTANCE**

This is to certify that the Southeastern Philippines Journal of Research and Development (SPJRD), published by the University of Southeastern Philippines, has undergone through peer-reviews and accepted the article:

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The intensive review on this paper has found this article aligned with the benchmark and scope of SPJRD that also corresponds with the standards of Scopus and the ASEAN Citation Index (ACI). Hence, the article has been accepted for publication in **Volume 30, No. 1 (March 2025) issue**.

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A blue ink signature of Sajed S. Ingilan is written above the name.

**SAJED S. INGILAN**

*Editor-in-Chief, SPJRD*

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