



ANDAMAN KAREN CRAFTS (AKC)



THE KAREN IN THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS

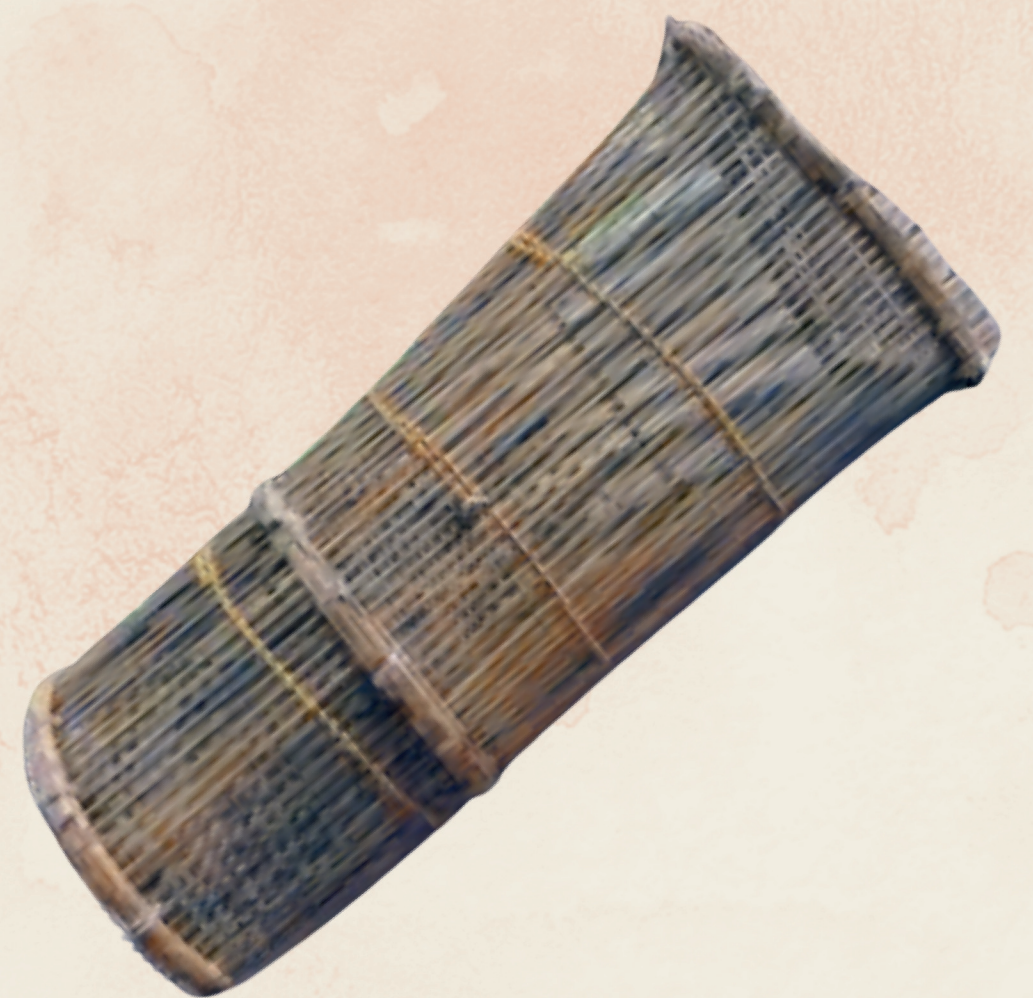
Initially belonging to different sub-groups and derived from different locations within erstwhile Burma such as Moulmein, Bassein and Hanzada, the Karen settlers live in small rural settlements such as Webi, Karmatang and Chipu in Middle and North Andaman islands. The Karen moved to the islands in the mid 1920s as labourers in forestry operations. Although a relatively small population compared to most settler groups from the Indian mainland, they nevertheless play a very important role in several important occupational niches. In addition to their role in forestry operations as well as cultivation in their homesteads, the Karen have been involved in a number of maritime occupations such as fishing, shell diving, etc. and are particularly adept at skin diving and spear-fishing. Knowledge about the sea has been a critical element in their survival. The Karen are also exceedingly skilled as boatmen and boat makers. The Karen dugout, the *bonga dhungi*, has become the main form of transportation in the islands, its superiority and stability has made it the most preferred vessel among seafaring groups.

THE AKC AND ANET

Ever since the inception of ANET in the 1970s, the multi-faceted nature of Karen knowledge and their openness to new challenges led to a unique partnership between the field researchers and the Karen community (as boatmen, field assistants, craftsmen, base-management staff and fellow adventurers). This long standing relationship and motivation within the local community led to ANET facilitating the formation of the Andaman Karen Crafts cooperative society in 2014 with objectives of local economic empowerment while reviving Karen cultural heritage and conserving local ecosystems. Although the society is predominantly women-based, its activities are beneficial for all members of the Karen community. To tackle the challenges described earlier, ANET works with the AKC and the Karen community to develop a set of initiatives that would not only lead to self-sustaining livelihood opportunities but also restore cultural connections and generate positive environmental outcomes. The priority is to conceptualise and develop initiatives that are suited to the community's own strengths and are in accordance with its existing worldviews and cultural norms.

ACTIVITIES OF THE AKC

Currently, the AKC undertakes a range of activities that not only secures modest livelihoods support to community members such as weaving, craft-making and the sale of traditional agricultural produce and products from local cuisine, but are also rethinking of rural livelihood strategies that takes into account existing challenges in resource management without missing out on opportunities such as tourism development.



Design by Vidisha Kulkarni



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