

Monk development experts: Using traditional knowledge to manage community development by monks in Isan

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Abstract – *This investigation, monk development experts: Using traditional knowledge to manage community development by monks in Isan, is a qualitative study with three primary aims: To study the background of community development by monks in Northeastern Thailand, to study the current state of community development by monks in Northeastern Thailand and to outline a set of guidelines for community development by monks in Northeastern Thailand. The research area for this investigation was purposively selected and was composed of nine communities in Northeastern Thailand. Results show that monks have been involved in community development since Buddhism first arrived in North-eastern Thailand and their role is now primarily separated into three areas: Faith, knowledge and practice. The results of this investigation can be considered by local temples, communities, government institutions and individual monks when deciding how to manage and administer community development by monks in Northeastern Thailand.*

Keywords – *Community development, management, monks, traditional knowledge.*

INTRODUCTION

Monks have an important role that is closely tied with society and the community. Members of society are taught by monks, who relate the sermons of the Lord Buddha and direct people on a path of happiness and righteousness [1]. Monks are the individuals who train people in the fundamental principles of society [2], [3]. They are acknowledged by society as having a positive influence on morals and behaviour [4]. The foundations of North-eastern Thai society are intertwined with principles of Buddhism, which lends to a disposition of respect towards monks and the Buddhist faith [5]. Monks occupy exalted positions in North-eastern Thai society and their advice is treated with the utmost reverence [6].

This attitude towards monks has been continuously inherited from the past. The public assumes responsibility for the basic needs of clergymen, whose duty it is to act as role-models for the laity. One way in which monks continually develop in Thailand is by enrolling on further study courses at higher education institutions [7]. However, a combination of neglect from the general population [8], negligence from individual monks and the general current of globalization has led to a decline of the genuine status

of organized religion despite a superficial continuation of the high level of public reverence [9].

One reason monks became such an integral part of society is the central position of temples in the community [10]. This is because temples were used as the location for a variety of activities. Now there is a decline in temple use as a multipurpose location, so monks have been affected. Yet, in order to address modern failings of Buddhism, researchers must examine a wider set of deeper problems, not only those directly visible with monks and temples. Pisit Boonchai and Songkoon Chantachon identified four problem areas in North-eastern Thai society that permeate every aspect of life: economy, society, education and health [11]. Banpot Weerasai has shown that monks have tried to address the first three of these problems by providing vocational education in the community, organizing courses to help those with social problems and founding temple schools [12]. Temples continue to organize a number of activities throughout the year to instruct and guide communities in appropriate, religious and ethical behaviour. Tuithaisong found that monks have traditionally been known to adapt and react to community problems [13]. However, there is criticism that monks are not attuned to modern society. With

this criticism in mind, this investigation was designed to highlight ways that community development by monks can be managed more effectively.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This qualitative research has three primary aims: To study the background of community development by monks in North-eastern Thailand, to study the current state of community development by monks in North-eastern Thailand and to outline a set of guidelines for community development by monks in North-eastern Thailand.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research area for this investigation was purposively selected and was composed of nine communities. The research sample was purposively selected from these communities and was composed of ninety individuals. These were divided into three groups: Local government, community and religious leaders (key informants, n=24), related officials and monks (casual informants, n=45) and academics and interested members of the clergy (general informants, n=21). The number of informants in each group was determined by the number of officials responsible for each position in the research area. Temples and the surrounding communities were selected on the basis that they were situated in the research area, were led by monk development experts and had a development strategy. From these criteria, nine development experts from nine temples were selected as case studies:

1. Phrakhru Wiriya Thammakun - Pa Muang/Jang Harn Temple Community, Roi Et Province
2. Phrakhru Pothi Wirakun - Pothitaram Temple Community, Roi Et Province
3. Phrakhru Wimon Sangworakun - Pa Mettatham Temple Community, Roi Et Province
4. Phrakhru Sriyat Sopit - Sri Sawat Temple Community, Maha Sarakham Province
5. Phrakhru Siriprayati Sopit - Sawang Waree Temple Community, Maha Sarakham Province
6. Phrakhru Batchim Woranugool - Dao Dueng Temple Community, Maha Sarakham Province
7. Phrakhru Thammawongsa Jarn (Suk Sukano) - Klang Kalasin Temple Community, Kalasin Province
8. Phrakhru Pathom Thammalakkitt - Pathom Kesaram Temple Community, Kalasin Province
9. Phrakhru Siripat Sopon - Sawang Tai Temple Community, Kalasin Province

Data for this investigation was collected from document study and field research. Data collection tools used in the field were basic survey, participant and non-participant observation, formal and informal interviews and focus group discussion. All data was validated using a triangulation method and categorized according to the three research objectives. Data were then analyzed with both analytic induction and typological analysis techniques.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Monks have been involved in community development since Buddhism first arrived in North-eastern Thailand but their position as community development leaders was cemented by the national social and economic development plans, inaugurated in 1961. These changes came into full force as the first university dedicated to educating monks was established in 1963 and the first specifically assigned cohort of development monks was sent to improve rural areas from 1973 to 1976. These numbers were boosted by monks returning to the Northeast from further study courses in Bangkok. The government took a more active interest in religion-driven development from 1984. In 1986, there were many problems in the region, including a severe drought, which further boosted the numbers of monks interested in helping and conserving North-eastern Thailand. This wave of interest was formalized by the government's 'Green Isan' program of 1987, designed to relieve the pressures caused by a continuous period of drought. The numbers of monk developers were increased further still during and after the economic crisis of 1997 and they also became heavily involved in the national war against narcotic drugs in 2003.

The work of monks in the early stages of the development programs largely involved road improvements, so that villagers could better communicate with others in the area. There were also initiatives to improve water sanitation and drainage. Monk developers also used their expertise in gardening to improve local kitchen gardens and help residents become self-sufficient. These also enabled communities to grow traditional herbs, which helped the monks create remedies to cure minor ailments and health problems. Other projects influenced or instigated by the monks were development of public spaces, establishment of community shops, foundation of local banks and savings funds, and creation of crèches for local workers. These were in addition to educational programs to combat drug abuse, enhance

occupational knowledge, encourage recycling and promote sustainable, organic farming methods.

The current state of community development by monks in North-eastern Thailand

In most areas, development work is performed by a participatory team of monks, benefactors and beneficiaries. People cooperate and communicate in all stages, from planning, to implementation, to evaluation. The individuals with the highest level of administrative power are abbots. Responsibility is then apportioned according to the traditional temple hierarchy. The human resources are divided into groups, namely general administration, finance and work management. The duties of each individual regarding temple maintenance are divided and delegated, including care of the temple buildings and toilet maintenance. If certain individuals are found to be neglecting their duties, the council will hold a meeting and instruct the offending party to undertake further religious training to improve their disposition and sense of responsibility. Orders and requests can be received externally from local government officials and leaders. The temples are always developed firsts and once they are at an acceptable standard, monks turn their attention to the wider community.

All physical developments must be agreed upon by the temple council and local community and, if any alterations or improvements are made to existing buildings, they must conform to traditional architectural styles. The surrounding environment is the principle concern of developers, especially cleanliness, designation of zones and planting of trees and flowers. The temples are responsible for raising local awareness, participation and discipline by creating local training centres on temple grounds. These centres are also to teach local residents how to live a sustainable life according to the principles of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's Sufficiency Economy. As part of this, the centres train local people in skills useful for the pursuit of supplementary income, such as gardening, raising animals and caring for local wooded areas and wildlife.

The monks help the local community by dedicating donations to certain causes and organizing awareness-raising events on certain special days throughout the year. They also support youth exercise campaigns, fight against the abuse of drugs and alcohol and encourage good family relations. The donations made by monks to the local community are primarily for education, occupational assistance and public amenities. The monks try to educate older people in

the importance of sanitation and personal healthcare and host annual health checks for the elderly. Regular advice and announcements are made by the monks. Additionally, monks organize pest control to reduce the number of the local mosquito population and thus reduce the risk of dengue fever in the area. These activities are all in addition to the basic work of the monks as religious messengers and teachers who encourage the community to participate in annual religious festivals and uphold Buddhist traditions.

Guidelines for community development by monks in North-eastern Thailand

All development work carried out in and around the temple area must be planned in advance with the cooperative participation of all parties. This is to ensure that all parties agree with and are dedicated to successful completion of the development work. Temple organizations and individual roles should be clearly defined so that there is no confusion over personal responsibilities. All allocation of work must pay adequate consideration to the abilities and skills of each individual so that they are assigned to appropriate tasks. Monks must be taught how to adequately make and keep documents, especially documents detailing work orders and requests. All monks should have a sense of their position and act as role models in the community.

It is important for traditional knowledge to remain an integral part of community development. For this reason, project leaders must be knowledgeable in local culture, customs and traditions. They must also know about the methods and styles of temple architecture so that development suggestions are all within the correct parameters. There must be sufficient opportunity given to all involved personnel and local community members to express their opinions of projected and completed developments in order for all concerns to be heard and understood. The surrounding environment of the temple and community must be kept clean and orderly and sanitation and health projects are an important part of monk developers' duties. Monks should encourage development of occupations and supplementary occupations so that people in the community may live according to the principles of the sufficiency economy. Monks must continue to raise awareness and combat drug and alcohol abuse and all practices that threaten community harmony and do not adhere to Buddhist doctrine.

Ultimately, monks must not forget their primary role and must concentrate on ensuring the temple is

fully developed and functional before focusing on the local community. Monks are Buddhist messengers and teachers and this must be the primary objective of helping the community, so that they can raise awareness of Buddhism among young people, encourage more temple-goers and promote religious festivals and customs throughout the year. In this way, monks are key to the success of religious inheritance and the continuation of community lifestyle in North-eastern Thailand.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The longevity and importance of monks as community developers can be explained by Bronislaw Malinowski's interpretation of functionalism [14]. Malinowski considered culture to be a response to the basic human needs of food, accommodation, clothing, rest, exercise, growth and reproduction. As communities in Isan have always required growth and development, there has always been a position for the monks to fill. Somkit Pengudom goes further by saying that monks are afforded a lot of stability given their position [15]. Community members have respected the status of monks and passed that respect on through the generations, which allows monks to adopt an exalted and influential place in society. The government and local institutions do play a bigger part in the development of community infrastructure than the past, by improving transport and telecommunications networks. Even though more advanced developments can be made to offer solutions to community problems, none are able to sympathize and empathize with the people and local mentality as well as fully trained monks. Consequently, the position of the monks in promoting faith, morals and ethics in the community remains. Their role has been separated into three areas by Phramaha Chusak Noisantiya: Faith, knowledge and practice [16].

The method and process of community development and administration by monks has not changed a great deal over the years. This is largely due to the role of monks being based upon Buddhist scripture. The developers must follow and abide by a set of precepts and morals that make radical change difficult. Having said this, the local society is changing and is not restricted by the same set of ethics. As a result, monks must respond to external lifestyle changes in order to continue fulfilling their role as effective community developers. The researchers have considered this problem and feel the best way to address the difference between the traditionalism of the temples and the modernity of the

larger community is by ensuring greater integration. Monks must be more involved in community activities and community members must be invited to participate more in the running of the temples. This concept requires further research but its principle is in agreement with the findings of Arunrat Wichienkiaw [17].

In order to prevent their role in community development from decreasing, monks may increase the frequency of their sermons and seminars in the community. By spreading understanding of Buddhist ethics, they can make young people realize the value of monks in society. This is especially important given their increasing redundancy in the development of local infrastructure. In fact, monks can show initiative and creativity by using the new infrastructure in the community as a means for increasing their presence. By employing the Internet and community radio, monks can transmit their teachings on a wider scale and make their efforts more efficient [18].

SUGGESTIONS

The results of this investigation can be considered by local temples, communities, government institutions and individual monks when deciding how to manage and administer community development by monks in North-eastern Thailand. The research team would also like to recommend two areas for further research, which could help supplement the findings of this investigation. The two areas for further consideration are: 1) the role of monks in developing Thai communities outside the North-eastern region; 2) ways to integrate community members and monks in participatory development of communities according to the self-sufficiency economy of King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

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