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Factors Affecting the Saen Don Ta Ritual of Northern Khmer Ethnic Locals in Sawai Village, Surin Province

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Abstract

This article is a part of a dissertation on (Topic of the Dissertation). The objective of this research was to study the factors influencing the San-Don-Ta Ritual of Khmer-Thai Locals in Ban Sawai, Tambon Sawai, Amphoe Mueang, Surin Province. This research was a qualitative study using field data collection from the target groups of knowledgeable people, practitioners, and other associates. The research tools included a questionnaire, participant observation, non-participant observation, structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and group discussion. The analysis was conducted by using descriptive analytics based on the Theory of Formalism and Cultural Diffusion. The results showed that there were both internal and external factors that impacted on the San-Don-Ta Ritual of Khmer-Thai Locals in Ban Sawai. The internal factors included beliefs, adaptation, time, people, and technology. The external factors included time, people, and technology. The analysis showed that there were both internal and external factors that impacted on the San-Don-Ta Ritual of Khmer-Thai Locals in Ban Sawai.

Keywords: San-Don-Ta, Ritual, Khmer-Thai Local, Factors

Introduction

Sawai village which is a large community located in Mueang District, Surin Province is the habitat of Khmer-Thai or Northern Khmer locals using the Northern Khmer dialect (Northern Khmer people is the designation used to refer to ethnic Khmer people native to the Isan region of northeastern Thailand). Sawai village was a strategical military location where the ancient Thai royal army situated their frontline defending for Surin town. The historic evidence is the several kilometers long of moat and mound in the west of Sawai village. Sawai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (2019) recorded the historic value of the location as Sawai village was an ancient military tactical location that was now a community shrine and center for all community traditional and important events i.e., community meetings, traditional and annual ritual events, particularly the Saen Don Ta.

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The Sawai village location included archeological sites where ancient artifacts were found representing religious and supernatural beliefs. A community museum houses a collection of ancient objects representing historic prosperity and ancient cultural civilization and is now also a public learning center. Sawai village, beside its historic sites; the Khmer ruins influenced by ancient Khmer civilization found on Sawai hill, the extinct volcano and plenty of ancient objects and artifacts, there are also plenty of ancient reservoirs in all directions surrounding the village. Sawai village is a diverse community in term of traditional rituals and is well known for maintaining beliefs and traditional rituals inherited from ancestors and the most well known one is the Saen Don Ta ritual.

It is the ritual that symbolizes the high gratefulness to ancestors and inherits the traditional rituals in hidden stratagems and a philosophy of respect for taking proper care of the elderly in the family for their well-being when they are alive and after they pass away. The traditional ritual cherishes and sustains family and community solidarity and kinship reciprocity. The Saen Don Ta in Sawai village is arranged on the 14th wanning moon of the 10th lunar month annually as it is believed that the spirits of ancestors will be released to come home to visit living family members so the ritual presents sacred offerings for gratefulness in the Saen Don Ta which is the main activity in the ceremony on the day. This is, in order to show gratefulness and offering sacrifices to ancestor spirits, and the ritual would relieve all unhappiness and discomfort of the spirits, if needed, through the spirit relation practices of the ritual by relatives and family members. It is a core belief that the spirits of ancestors will bless their grandchildren and the young generation to have a successful and happy life. Also, an auspicious life in work, wealth and health. However, on contrary, if the ritual were not arranged for the offerings to the ancestors, the living family members could face evil and failure in work, and in their lives. From the above mentioned, Sawai village still holds strictly and strongly to supernatural powers.

From the interview with Mr. Chern Sukyai (interviewed 11 February 2021), the village mentor, scholar, the ritual performer or village shaman for the Saen Don Ta in Sawai village, it was found that there have been some changes in the Saen Don Ta ritual. These changes came from internal factors i.e., beliefs and way of life adjustment and adaptation, at the same time, the external factors are time duration, people and technology which forced the ritual to be adapted and even fade away in some families. These factors contributed to changes in the Sawai's Saen Don Ta tradition.

In the importance of the traditional ritual, the researcher was well motivated to study the factors influencing the Saen Don Ta ritual tradition in the northern Khmer village, Sawai Subdistrict, Surin Province to reveal the factors influencing the existing, extinct or changes in the current Saen Don Ta ritual tradition and to create new knowledge that could be used globally.

Research objective

To study factors affecting the Saen Don Ta rituals and traditions of the northern Khmer in Sawai village, Sawai Subdistrict, Surin Province

Materials and Methods

The study of factors influencing the San-Don-Ta Ritual of the Khmer-Thai locals in Ban Sawai, Surin Province was qualitative research which had the methodology as follows.

The time allocation of the research was assigned as follows: 1) studied the data related to the factors influencing the San-Don-Ta Ritual of Khmer-Thai locals in Ban Sawai, Tambon Sawai, Amphoe Mueang, Surin, Surin Province, 2) studied related research and theories, 3) in-depth study of documents, maps, and the environment of the research site, 4) visited the site to collect the data for further in-depth study, 5) assigned framework and tools for field data collection, 6) coordinated with associates in the area for data collection, 7) designed field data collection plan, studied and conducted field data collection, and 8) analyzed the data and concluded the research results.

Result

Factors affecting the Saen Don Ta traditional ritual of northern Khmer in Sawai village, Sawai Subdistrict, Mueang District, Surin Province

Internal factors: Beliefs: it was found that northern Khmer people in Sawai village still believe in the Saen Don Ta ritual which results in ethical values i.e., gratitude, harmoniousness, community relationships, and temple and Buddhist monk relationships. They believe in the Saen Don Ta ritual as well people in their society; all ages and genders are happy to participate in this important day. This is when young and grown-up family members who left to have their own families return to see their siblings and relatives to keep their relationships close, get together, like in the same old days. Ritual, thus, is the method to return gratefulness once a year, and, at the same time, living parents enjoy food and presents brought for them from their loved ones when they are still alive and do not have to wait to have good offerings when they are dead which is considered useless. Therefore, Saen Don Ta day is a happy day for parents and the elderly in families when all young people in their families come back home for a reunion while some parents whose children didn't come, felt sad and compared their situation with other families who take good care of their parents and elderly family members. The ritual is aimed at the living parents rather than 'ghost-spirit matter' for children and grandchildren who intended to see their separated siblings and relatives. Spending festive time having special meals together during a reunion occasion and sharing an apologizing moment for any dissension they had via their ancestors offering rituals created a true family, brotherhood and sisterhood atmosphere. Small children waited for special delicacies from the offerings, especially pork and poultry dishes and varieties of sweets in the offering ritual later on in the family party feast. It is because in the old days, good food was rarely prepared so delicacies from the festival like "Saen Don Ta" are a family treat. It is a different belief now compared to the past when the Saen Don Ta ritual was only the presenting of the family offerings to the passed away family members like ancestors as gratitude and for the prosperity and happiness of the living family members in case any bad things could happen to their family. Manot Phimsan (interviewed 17 February 2021) noted that even though modernization has changed many things, northern Khmer people in Sawai village are aware of the need to conserve original traditional culture from the inherited beliefs and practice traditional activities for perpetuating this graceful, traditional ritual.

Adaptation: from the research, it was found that Sawai village, in Surin is existing with racial diversity

from i.e., cross-race marriages and occupational relocation, for instance, affecting the adaptation and assimilation of new beliefs resulting in traditional and cultural ritual adjustment. This could be called the attempt to adapt to traditional codes of ritual, and to practice according to the traditional rituals of the majority northern Khmer Sawai villagers.

Factors: Time duration: from the field research, the timing is very important according to the Saen Don Ta ritual performed during the first wanning moon of the 10th. lunar month as the day when the ghosts of ancestors travel to the human world, and continued until the 15th. wanning moon of the 10th. lunar month; total 15 days. The first wanning moon of the 10th. lunar month would be the offering called 'Ben'Tooj' or Sart-lek' (small offering), after this, food from families would be offered to monks at the village temple every day until the 14th wanning moon of the 10th. lunar month. The grand offering called 'BenThom' or 'Sart-yai' (grand offering) which is the family reunion day and the morning of the 15th wanning moon of the 10th lunar month at around 4-5 a.m., young family members bring all the food to the ritual at the village temple for 'Ja Kan Jue Don Ta'. It is to assemble all the offerings i.e., plant saplings, uncooked rice and unhusked rice, dried food, sweets, garments etc. to offer to the all the ghost-spirits of ancestors together to let them take these offerings back with them to the after-life world. After the ghost-spirit ritual, food offerings are made to the village monks in the morning. After the temple ritual, the home or family ritual is performed to send the ghost-spirits of ancestors back to the after-life world at the family field or farmland. Sacred rice is also brought to the farmland to spread on the rice field as the blessing for a best and abundant harvest as the end of the Saen Don Ta ritual. It is obvious that time duration management is the core of the ritual to complete the ancient or original ritual steps. In Sawai village, some families could perform all the steps of the ritual and most of them are families with elderly members who are not so busy and others who weave at home so they have plenty of time to prepare food and go to the temple to offer food to the monks during the first wanning moon to the fifteenth wanning moon of the tenth lunar month. For families of working ages and ones who need to care for small children's schooling, they can participate only on 'BenThom' day of the ritual which is the most important day of the Saen Don Ta ritual.

People: from the study, it was found that Sawai village has a multi-race society from cross-race marriages and occupational relocation. The former are the marriages between Loas and Khmer, people, and the latter, non-northern Khmers from other provinces moving in for occupational purposes. These are the reasons Sawai village is a traditional diverse society that ancestrally inherits and holds on to the traditional beliefs and way of life and makes the interrelation between people, people to nature and people to the supernatural. The Saen Don Ta ritual is an ancestor worshipping ritual not different from Boon Kaw Sak or the 10th. lunar month merit making of the Loa-Thai race, therefore in moving into northern Khmer Sawai village, it is not difficult to accept the local ritual as their own.

Technology: from the study, it must be accepted that technology is highly involved in everyday life even in the ritual arrangement which is totally different from the old days. Formerly villagers began the ritual with cutting banana leaves and bananas from their backyard garden to pack cooked rice and banana as traditional food for ritual offerings and this is a true home cooking and family work. This still happens

but in smaller numbers of those who perform the ritual. The majority use technology particularly smart phone communication and social media platforms to access online services i.e., Line, Facebook to find ready to order and deliver instant ritual offering packages, mostly ordered by young, new generation family members to ease their parents work on ritual preparation.



Figure 1: Saen Don Ta offering ritual of Sawai village, Surin



Figure 2: Sacred Pole town shrine and Sawai Village Museum



Figure 3: Merit making at the village temple on the day before the Saen Don Ta ritual to dedicate to the deceased relatives and ancestors. Images by Parita Dhammadhonthiti

From the study of the factors influencing the San-Don-Ta Ritual of the Khmer-Thai locals in Ban Sawai, Surin Province based on the Theory of Formalism, the influencing factors could be divided into 2 types, i.e., internal factors and external factors. The internal factors consisted of 1) Beliefs; Khmer-Thai locals in Ban Sawai still held the belief in practicing the San-Don-Ta Ritual which impacted on various aspects of people's virtue, such as gratefulness, harmony, local relationships, and temple and monk relations. The locals believed that the San-Don-Ta Ritual brought people of all ages and genders together and also joy and happiness on this important day. 2) Adaptation; it was found that Ban Sawai, Tambon Sawai, Surin Province still had racial diversity which came from transnational marriage and labor migration. This created adaptation to new beliefs which resulted in adaptation to the culture and its traditions, and rituals. In other words, it was an adaptation to the regulations, traditions and rituals that the local people of Ban Sawai, who were mainly Khmer-Thai Locals, had learned and adapted for the practice of traditional rituals. The external factors consisted of 1) Time; it was found that "time" played an important part in following the complete steps of the practice of the traditional rituals. Nowadays, only some families were

able to follow every step of the ritual of which most of them were the families with elderly members who did not have to rush to work, but merely stayed at home and weaved. Therefore, the elderly had more time to prepare food and go to the temple during the 1st day of the 10th waning moon until the 15th day of the 10th waning moon. On the other hand, the families of working age with children to be dropped off at school would be able to participate only in “Ben-Thom” Day which is the most important day of San-Don-Ta Ritual. 2) People; Ban Sawai, Tambon Sawai, Surin Province had racial diversity, transnational marriage, and labor migration. For example, there were marriages between Laotian and Khmer nationals and between Khmer and Khmer nationals, and there were people who had migrated from different provinces, who were not Khmer-Thai Locals, to work in Ban Sawai. In addition, Ban Sawai had diversity in traditional rites and culture and lifestyle, however, people still held the belief of traditional rites inherited from their ancestors. This created the connection between human and human, human and nature, and human and the supernatural. The San-Don-Ta Ritual was the ritual to worship ancestors which was the same as “Bun-Khaosark” or the Tenth Lunar Month Festival of the Lao-Thai community, and when they migrated to the Khmer community in Thailand, the ritual was easily adapted. 3) Technology; the research showed that technology had a crucial role in life, and the current ritual practice had begun to use technology. In the past, when people prepared “Khao Tom”, or banana with sticky rice wrap, they would take time to cut banana leaves and bananas that they grew around the house, or they would select food ingredients that they grew around the house for cooking for ritual offerings. Unlike the past, only a minority of people would be able to do the same as before, while the majority of people would rely more on technology and order food via phone, Line messenger, and Facebook as there are full sets of accessories for the ritual for sale online. These people were found to be new generations who would purchase the accessories for the elderly to use for the worship. Acknowledgements We are very grateful to experts for their appropriate and constructive suggestions to improve this template.

Discussion and Conclusion

Factors affecting traditional the Saen Don Ta ritual of the Northern Khmer people in Sawai village was analyzed from present data and information collected through field work; observation and interviewing key informants, casual informants and general informants and could be categorized as two types; internal and external. The overall factors affecting Saen Don Ta; 1) Beliefs 2) Adaptation 3) Time duration 4) People and 5) Technology:

In these internal and external factors;

Beliefs: the belief factor which is abstract and intangible which is unable to be touched or felt from human body's senses but perceived from other things or other activities relevant from the belief of which in accordance with the research of Ahmadalzari Mukem (2016) in the title of ‘Relations of traditions, rites and beliefs influence ethnic Khmer Bon's way of life at Banjan District, Amphur Sangkha, Surin Province’. The research findings included beliefs related to livelihoods in 3 main aspects; occupation, social relationships and living conditions. Therefore the Sen Pu Ta traditional rituals are a morale, spiritual and will-power building and boosting ritual for villagers who are rice farmers to mark the changing of the season and as the sign of the beginning of the new rice farming period to prepare for the rice field working one more time related directly to the rice farmer's livelihood and those community members who

had rice farming as their main occupation. The Prasat Sang Silp Chai worshipping ritual is arranged for worshipping and dedication to ancestors of Jan villagers. This is in accordance with the research done by Phra Khru Ratanayansophit (2019) on 'Belief in the Saen Don Ta Ritual Tradition of Buriram, Buriram Province' which also found the Saen Don Ta ritual is an ancestor worshipping tradition of the Buriram Khmer performed to remember ancestors and as an apology event and family reunion occasion and a celebration of the agricultural community for peace and solidarity in living and working among people and nature. It is divided into 2 durations: 1. Ben'Tooj (Sart-lek) the day prior ritual to offering worship for ancestors by family and their relatives with other villagers who go to make merit at their village temple which is done every single day strictly during the time period, 2. Ben'Thom (Sart-yai) which takes 7 days for ancestors ghosts dedication ritual and starts with rituals at various temples to dedicate good deeds from merit making to ancestors ghosts for 7 consecutive days. It is gratefulness presenting and merit dedicating to demon or jinn to show tenderness and mournfulness who were once their guardians or the passed away kins in order to hold as a spiritual anchor. Bronislaw Malinowski believed that cultures stressed that all cultural beliefs respond to needs or have a function in some way in representing the essential parts of that culture. Radcliff – Brown described ritual belief as part of a religious system functioning in harmonize society and rituals as well as to enhance the collective mood. The major function of rituals is to cherish solidarity and consensus among society members. Sanya Sanyawiwat (1995) confirmed that belief in social functioning existed in Saen Don Ta rituals in the practice that according to the ritual offering worship to ancestors to present their respect and gratefulness. It is part of tradition to inherit and practice the old valuable rituals in addition to carrying out the underlying purposes insinuated in the ritual practices like good treatment and respect to parents, elderly people and forebearers when they are alive and pass away, and at the same time, maintain reciprocity, affection and harmony among kinship and families.

Adaptation: Emile Durkheim described people's behavior in society which is a must to study functions of social structures in relation to understanding one particular society. According to Durkheim, society should be analyzed and described in terms of functions. Society is a system of interrelated parts where no one part can function without the other. These parts make up the whole of society. If one-part changes, it has an impact on society as a whole. It is because a society is composed of various structures and each structure has related coordinated functions and if lacking any of these structures, society could fail or be disrupted leading to deterioration and decay. Any deteriorating structure would not function well and impact on other structures as a chain reaction that eventually results in the whole society being degenerated or disrupted. In reality, a society would rarely collapse completely as there is societal self-adaptation; that is, any declining society with failed or defective functions will be temporarily halted and healed or adapt functional structures to stay in good balance as before. Society will keep moving and adapting to create equilibrium; therefore, society never dies, but temporarily halts before moving on through a social dynamic. It is called the process of 'Moving Equilibrium' Niyaphan (Pholwatthana) Wannasiri (1997). Supphachok Dongsombat (2019) in the research study 'Adaptation to the Change in the Culture and Beliefs of the Community of Tamyae Village, Khaen Sub-district, Wapi Pathum District, Mahasarakham Province, aimed to understand the adaptation of culture and belief from the related documents and field work from interviewing, observation and focus groups as research tools from 61

samplings. The findings were Tamyae villagers believed in spirits/ghosts and they acquired Brahmin and Buddhism beliefs in their local beliefs. When the village and population grew, it effected the limit of the arable land. Therefore, villagers jointly make the guardian spirit's shrine to be a rice field then they moved the shrine, or San Pu Ta, to the village temple and applied the Buddhism belief mechanism. This belief mechanism pressured to move the guardian spirit's shrine from the old location to the temple and call it "Hien Ta Pha Khao". This new shrine contained the Buddha Image at the center as the Lord of all spirits. Belief adaptation in this form reflected the diversity of beliefs in their livelihoods and this also happened in Sawai village, Sawai Subdistrict, Surin Province. In the present situation as a multi-racial community from cross-race marriages and occupational relocations, more attempts to adapt to new beliefs wisely and properly were made. Cultural adaptation resulted in traditional rituals in the protocol of the rituals with new learning and adjustment in practices for the traditional rituals of Sawai villagers who are of Northern Khmer ethnicity and to compromise to be consistent with the contemporary way of life.

Time duration: Assael (1995) described the definition of lifestyles; lifestyles can be viewed from time spent in activities and what are the important things, whilst Engel, Blackwell & Mininard, (1993) gave the meaning of lifestyles as 'Styles reflect people in living including money and time spending', and the lifestyles reflected in the Activities, Interests and Opinions of people. From the mentioned-above theory, reflected time spent in the Saen Don Ta ritual of which only some families could arrange the ritual in all the steps who were mostly families with elderly members who work at home on weaving. These families have time to prepare food offerings for the making merit rituals at the village temple every day during the 1st wanning moon to the 15th wanning moon of the 10th lunar month. Families of working ages and children in school can arrange the ritual offerings only on the 'BenThom' day which is the most important day of the Saen Don Ta ritual. The ritual steps depended on the living conditions of each family but no family failed to arrange this important ritual.

People: Maithai Chaiyaphan (2014) described that people can influence social change which is consistent with the Learning Theory that focused on stimulus and response or relations between the environment and changing behavior or human behavior. This is consistent with Franz who is a German anthropologist and lecturer in Columbia University, USA, and who stressed that 'Cultural diffusion is the process in which the important characteristic is two *cultures* assimilating into each other by adapting to be consistent with the other new culture'. He also supported the concept that 'Culture could be measurable by comparing different cultures and reviewing the higher character or less dominant cultures; however, cultures are not better or worse in comparison'. Somsak Srisantisuk (2001) From the theory, connections between people to people, people to nature and people to the supernatural, the Saen Don Ta ritual is ancestors' offerings which is not different to Boon Kaw Sak or Boon Deun Sib (the 10th. lunar month merit making) performed by the Loai-Thai race and it is not difficult to adapt to for the Thai Khmer or Northern Khmer when they moved in; the ritual was arranged adapted perfectly. Perceptions in people included Information Technology -IT and how IT assists in efficient development. The perception was that IT is useful as it can reduce working steps and save time and enable efficiency and effectiveness. Also, it easy to use. Users believed it is easy to learn to use and to understand and had positive attitudes toward the system resulting in a willingness to use the technology. Nitchanan Puangniyom (2014) It must be accepted that present technology plays important roles in everyday,

including ancient rituals preparation. Formerly, villagers started with their working on food preparation from their garden yields like banana leaves and banana mixed with rice, boiled or steamed, and wrapping these in banana leaves. The offering food came from home gardens and working on the food preparation by family members as the important task which now is not as important as much as in the past. Not many families still focus on these activities at home; the young family members prefer to order by their smart phones calling and using applications or online social media platforms like Line and Facebook. Demand and supply on social media emerged to serve the ritual as well, for online shops offered them complete sets of instant ritual offerings. It is mostly the new generation who order from delivery services for their elderly family members to use in the ancient ritual ceremony. In conclusion, factors affecting the Saen Don Ta traditional ritual of the Northern Khmer ethnic people in Sawai village have both internal and external factors. The internal factors are 1) Beliefs 2) Adaptation, and the external factors are

- 1) Time duration
- 2) People and
- 3) Technology

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