

## Guidelines and Methods for Conservation, Revitalization and Development of the Traditions and Customs of Nyah Kur Ethnic Group for Tourism in the Province of Chaipayum in Northeast Thailand

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**Abstract:** Nyah Kur or Chaobon ethnic tribes are the descendants of Ancient Mon-Kmer people that are located in small communities in the Provinces of Petchabun, Nakorn Ratchasima and Chaipayum. The locations of their villages in deep jungle and mountainous regions between Northern Thailand and Northeast Thailand have in the past isolated and allowed their cultures and preserved their traditions. But modernization has currently erased many lifestyle practices and many local customs. Traditionally, Nyah Kur are Animists and practice spirit and ghost worshipping. Traditional rituals and beliefs that are still practiced and remembered include Pah ReRe singing celebrations, Karn Hae How Dohk Pueng or Bee's wax castle parade, Traditional foods, clothing, the worshipping of sacred spirits of Phee ban Phee Ruan tradition and Nyah Kur's traditional language or Jungle language. Promoting tourism by displaying traditional culture of Nyah Kur lifestyles can be incorporated with eco tourism of the beautiful natural eco systems surrounding villages especially in Chaipayum Province. Methods of promoting tourism such as home-stay, culture tours and sale of handicrafts are important methods that will help preserve Nyah Kur's ethnic culture but the Nyah Kur's themselves must also value their cultural heritage by practicing and promoting their local traditions and lifestyles to the younger generation. To create a successful tourism industry the government must allocate resources such as funds and training to ensure that tourism will provide fair economical benefits to all, preserve and promote ethnic Nyah Kur lifestyles and preserve and develop the remaining natural ecosystem.

**Key words:** Nyah Kur, chaobon, nahkur, chaipayum, Northeast Thailand, Isan, conservation, revitalization

### INTRODUCTION

Nyah Kur ethnic people are the remaining descendants of ancient Mon Khmer ethnic tribes during the historic Dvaravati Period. the Nyah Kur are known in Thailand as Chaobon, which is derived from the word Chao Khao, which was a translation of the English word Hill Tribes used by the British Colonial in Burma (Mckinnon and Bernard, 1989). Nyah Kur tribes were numerous in ancient times and lived throughout current Day Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. It is believed that the Nyah Kur share similar cultures with the Kuy that is they rely upon agriculture and have strong beliefs in Animism and Buddhism (Lebar *et al.*, 1964). The Nyah Kur people are a remnant of the ancient Mon-Khmer Empire and are the only Mon-Khmer people group in Thailand whose

language is mainly Mon influenced and is more closely related to ancient Mon than is the modern Mon language (Simmin, 2008).

Modernization, Migration and integration of cultures have devoured many distinct cultures and traditions of local Indigenous tribes of Southeast Asia. What remains of Nyah Kur ethnic tribes are small village communities in the Province of Petchabun, Nakorn Ratchasima and Chaipayum in Northeast Thailand or Isan. Nyah Kur villages in modern times are a mix of Ethnic Nyah Kur and Thai-Lao families living together in peace. Most of the descendants contribute the survival of their distinct cultural identity to that fact of geography where they chose to migrate and build villages hard to reach areas. Their selection of the locations in deep jungle and mountainous areas has given them the freedom to practice

their cultural traditions and preservation of their heritage for 1000s of years. Globalization and modernization are encroaching and endangering the ethnic cultures of Nyah Kur tribes. Many distinct customs have already disappeared and remain only in the memory of elders such as Nyah Kur's written language. Many of the cultural traditions have not been passed on to the next generation because many youths have left the villages to find work and accommodations in urban centers. Current trends and discontinuity of cultural handover is pushing the current generations of Nyah Kur youths to seek employment in urban centers and to value pop culture.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The goals of this research include the study and research to identify the traditions and culture of Nyah Kur ethnic group for the purpose of development towards tourism in the province of Chaiyapum and to also develop guidelines to preserve the unique ethnic tribes' cultural and traditional customs. Document analysis and research provided supplementary data. Primary Data was obtained from field research, which included field studies in the Provinces of Nakorn Ratchasima, Petchabun and Chaiyapum in Northeast Thailand. Questionnaires, Survey, Observation, Seminars and Workshops were the tools applied to collect and record data. A total of 63 individuals were included in the research area from, which 7 villages were surveyed and studied. Quality Research methods were applied throughout the research and Descriptive Analysis was applied to comprehend the final data. The research was undertaken from October 1, 2007-July 5, 2008.

## **RESULTS**

### **Nyah Kur history and cultural traditions**

**Pah Re Re traditional celebrations:** Pah Re Re is a relaxing Nyah Kur social event that unites the community and provide entertainment by incorporating songs filled with lyrics of love, caring reflecting the livelihood and unity of the community. The celebrations are carried out by songs and poetic lyrics from the male and female sides. The language used in the past was traditional Nyah Kur or what they refer to as Jungle language, but currently there are many words that are influenced from Thai-Lao and modern words. The male and female sides will take turn making gestures and exchanges. Songs and lyrics contain messages of love, honor, concerns and care such as asking about the health of the opposite sides and their family's well being. The celebrations are mostly performed at night or during the day when there is a

gathering or celebration. In modern times many villages celebrate Pah Re Re during the nights of Songkran or Thai water festival. Villagers would celebrate Songkran during the day and then at night after 8 pm gather at the temples or village center and celebrate Pah Re Re. Pah Re Re songs in modern times are a mix of traditional jungle language with verses in Thai-Lao and modern proverbs and slang. Sometimes the villagers would be invited to perform Pah Re Re traditions at government centers during important festivals and events in Nakorn Ratchasima Province.

### **Karn Hae Ho Dok Pueng (bee wax flower traditional parade):**

The tradition is a joyful parade to present bee's wax to the local temple or monastery within the village. In the past, bee's wax would be gathered from natural forest resources and formed as a collective tower of flowers and decorations. The parade is believed to bring prosperity to the family, village and provide fortune and progress for their livelihood. It is widely believe that the parade originated from Lao where Laotians celebrate by parading bees wax tower throughout the village with the central temple as the end destination where the wax castle would be presented to the Abbot. The purpose of the parade was to pay homage and respect in belief that bees provided everything to their lives and provide the temple with sources for making candles. The parade would be held on the same day as Songkran water festival. In modern times many villages do not perform the parade anymore because they considered the parade to be outdated and that they are no longer hunters and gatherers and that the forest has disappeared. Not all villages perform the parade on an annual basis, but instead the parades are rotated to different communities that take turns hosting the event.

**Language:** The Nyah Kur language is Austroasiatic language family of the Monic branch. Nyah Kur ethnic tribes used their native language, which is referred to as Pasa Dong or Jungle Dialect. Nyah Kur elders have passed on the Nyah Kur native language by speech without writing. The Nyah Kur language has no written tradition (Diffloth, 1984). But many elders from the sub district of Taboh have seen inscriptions of their language on animal hides in the past. Authorities have confirmed that written examples of Nyah Kur's language did exist at the Sub-District Management Center of Taboh in the District of Mueng in the Province of Petchabun. The text were inscriptions on animal hides preserved by the local authorities for future Nyah Kur's grandchildren but were eventually lost. Most of the Nyah Kur villages today speak Thai and Lao. Only the elders speak the Nyah Kur

language and several villages do not have anyone left who can speak the language at all and have had to invite elders from other villages to teach on an hourly and weekly basis to preserve the dialect.

**Beliefs and rituals:** The majority of the Nyah Kurs' are now mainly Buddhist, but they also worship spirits ghosts and some are Christians. Ghosts that are widely worshiped include Jao Paw Kun Dahn and Jao Paw Samian, which are sacred figures that have supernatural powers. If there is any wrong doing or strange phenomena to the individual, family or village, the Nyah Kur will rely on the worshiping of Jao Paw Kun Dahn and Jao Paw Samian to correct the wrong doings of man or spirit, which is behind the cause. Currently most worships today are in regards to favors and wishes such as, They will worship the sacred figures so that their children or grandchildren may be exempt and don't have to be recruited into the Army, or that their relatives may enter a good university or find a good job. Other spirits that are worshipped include Pee Bahn (House spirits) where the ritual is performed on the lunar calendar of the 6th month and 6th night. Offerings of food and drinks will be prepared by the village master and will include 5-6 dishes of soft boiled rice, Puffed sticky rice cakes, Fried rice cakes, Black and Red rice and whiskey. Many animistic rituals and spirit worship are slowly disappearing. New generations of Nyah Kur have turned to worship Buddhism and attend sermons in temples.

**Food:** Foods and meals of ethnic Nyah Kur in the past used to come from the forest. Meals provided from jungle resources include Monkey meat and Fish. Excess food was preserved by fermenting. Regular rice and sticky rice were the main staples of carbohydrate. Vegetables were collected from the wild providing dishes of scaled vegetables eaten with chili sauces. Currently most wild foods are no longer available because, it is more convenient to purchase meats and vegetables, which come daily to the village via motor vehicle. The other reasons come from the disappearance of wild animals due to deforestation. Modern sources for food come from the local fresh markets and provided also by modern transportation. Nyah Kur prefer to cook their own meals but have adopted to the convenience of purchasing the raw materials due to the scarcity of forest resources. Scald vegetables and chili sauces are still a main dish and also a family favorite.

**Clothing:** In the past females of the Nyah Kur ethnic tribe wore Sarong and Cylinder arm blouses. Male members of the tribe wore Sarong as well and would sometimes where

a shirt. Nyah Kur Ethnic tribes in the past usually made their own clothing from cotton, which is a trade that they learned from the Thai-Lao tribe. Currently, modern clothing has replaced most traditional dresses and garments. Modern commerce and trends have led younger generations of Nyah Kur ethnic tribes to purchase clothing instead of making their own.

#### **Guidelines to preservation and revitalization**

##### **Current model of tourism in the province of chaiyapum:**

Currently there are many tourist attractions in the Province of Chaiyapum. Local tourism authorities have arranged tourism according to 3 seasons. During the summer tourism is promoted at the Beung Lahan marshes located at the Kaengkraw District and at Phu King rapids in the District of Khaeng Khaw. During the rainy season tourism is arranged at the Pha Hin Ngam national park where there are beautiful natural rock formations and at the Krai Thong national park. Both tourist destinations are located in the District of Thep Satid. During winter, tourism is promoted at the Non Kwao reservoir and Nham Prhom beach resorts where rafting and water entertainment is provided located at the district of Kaset Somboon. The Province of Chaiyapum has many other tourist attractions available due to the abundant natural attractions. To expand and promote tourism, the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Principle Municipality of Chaiyapum had initiated a survey in 2007 at the Districts of Thep Satid, Nong Pua Rawaeng and Ban Kwao in the Province of Chaiyapum and found that the areas had the largest group of Nyah Kur ethnic in Thailand. During June-August 2007, 3 Nyah Kur families were selected to display ethnic Nyah Kur lifestyles to the general public and tourists at the Pha Hin Ngam national park and the amount of tourist during that period had an increase of more than 2,000 tourists per day (Tourism Authority of Chaiyapum, 2550).

**Negative impact:** The principle municipality of Chaiyapum is the primary institution for organizing tourism in the Province of Chaiyapum and receives support from the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Pha Hin Ngam National Park and Saithong National Park. Tourism in the Province of Chaiyapum is completely controlled by these government organizations is the cause of many negative impacts such as, the local community is not involved in the planning of tourism activities. The community does not receive direct income from tourism because most organized tours just pass through the community avoiding the crowded traffic. Current tours lack responsibility and discipline. There is only one tourist destination and not enough coordination. Proper

sanitation has been neglected and there are not enough garbage bins. Many plastic bottles, bags and waste are littered among the community and rest areas. Many tourists lack the knowledge of proper eco tourism. Many come to visit by using non legitimate tour agencies and these agencies transport tourist into the national parks without registering the correct amount of people. Many times tourists will transport restricted forest resources and items out of the parks illegally. Tour guides lack standards and only serve as a contact for tours and many times do not accompany tourists into the parks and attractions. Tour guides that accompany people into the parks usually lack the general knowledge of the destination and have no understanding of the local indigenous culture and lifestyles of the local community. There are currently no restrictions on the routes to tourist attractions. Many people traveling on foot have to compete with tour buses and cars on the narrow roads and paths, putting the environment and humans at risk from accidents and pollution.

**Positive impact:** The organizing of tourism has brought self aware to the community of the importance of the natural treasures and cultural heritage, which many tourists are interested in. This awareness has caused many people to be proud of their community and treasure the abundant natural resources they have. Tourism has initiated the exchange of knowledge within the community. More and more tour guides are being led by leaders and elders in the community. Many of these elders have passed on and revived local customs and folklore to tourists and the younger generation within their community. Knowledge in indigenous tales, herbal plants, local medical remedies and cultural activities has been disseminated through tourism activities. Tourism has provided locals with extra income, supplementing household economies.

**Guidelines to improving tourism:** Contributed suggestions from individuals surveyed in the research have detailed many improvements that can be applied to tourism in the Province of Chaiyapum. Local villagers and the community within the tourist destination should be included in the planning of tourism policies and activities. Local groups such as community house wives, youth groups and the central community groups should be represented and included in the planning and implementation process. Areas for the distribution of souvenirs, local indigenous foods and demonstration centers should be created within the community. Tour guides and tour companies should arrange cultural attractions such as Nyah Kur customs and traditions

which include Pha Re Re celebrations, traditional music and entertainment, a display of traditional hunting and gathering forest goods. Tours guides should be provided with proper communication equipment such as two way radios or megaphones. Standards of the tourist ratios per tour guide should be defined and enforced. The proper ratio should be 10 tourists per 1 guide. There should be a variety of tourist destinations included in each tour, Such as arranging for tours in the national parks along with a visit to the local communities near the destination. The local district municipality should act as a center for coordination among tourism and local community organizations. Village tour guides and the District Municipality should define their roles and responsibility so that everyone is aware of their responsibility.

**Proper eco tourism guidelines:** Eco tourism should be promoted by providing new experiences which include learning processes, physical contact, appreciation of the beauty of unique cultural identity, historical importance, ethnic lifestyles, livelihood of local communities, the cultural difference among different communities is many aspects such as arts, architecture, archaeological sites, artifacts, local and historical tales, cultural dresses, local foods, beliefs, religion, tradition and festival celebrations. These cultural treasures are attractions that are important encouragements to developing strong eco tourism. The contribution of local cultural treasures will ensure a sustainable tourism industry. To make sure that there is a balance between material values and conservation of the environment and cultural heritage, there are 4 basic rules or guidelines that must be followed. Must emphasize local indigenous cultural identities. Every organization involved must take care of their responsibility to ensure the level of quality and the importance of the cultural treasures are sustained. Central government organizations, Principle Municipality, District Municipality, local community groups and Nyah Kur ethnics should unite and work together to ensure that the local villages and communities are self sustainable. Government organizations should lower their roles in the activities directly related to tourism and maintain and be responsible in enforcing policies and funding, which is accordance with the Thai Constitution. The Thai constitution #46 states that every individual within their community has the legal rights to preserve and revitalize their cultural beliefs, traditions, local indigenous knowledge, arts and crafts. Local community individuals also have the right to participate in the maintenance and benefit from natural resources and the environment within the limit of the law. The Thai constitution #289 states that local district offices is responsible for the maintenance of

art, culture, traditions, local indigenous knowledge and cultural treasures within their area. Providing maximum tourist satisfaction must always realize and respect local cultures and traditions. Local communities must be provided with just benefits and tourism must bring improvement to their livelihood and higher quality lifestyles.

The preparation of tourist attractions should be prepared and arranged to display the cultural uniqueness of the community such as culture, natural resources, good environment and historically correct. These are important factors to maintain a correct eco cultural environment. Humans depend on nature and the natural environment is an important influence on human existence. If natural and human made environments are altered, destroyed and neglected, it will create a negative impact and devastation to the nation's cultural treasures.

The Nyah Kur or Chaobon are probably the oldest Historic period ethnic group in Thailand (Monstudies, 2008). The importance of cultural tourism is to provide satisfaction to tourists and use culture to promote tourism by minimizing the negative impacts of materialism on local indigenous culture. Cultural and eco tourism can also be considered ethnic tourism due to the related dimensions between humans and the environment. The conservation, revitalization and maintenance of cultural heritage, traditions and cultural treasures are processes that involves everyone. The central government and local government organizations should not be alone in the responsibility. Local municipality, community organizations and Nyah Kur ethnics in the province of Chaipayum, Nakorn Ratchasima and Petchabun should work together to create and enforce proper tourism policies and actions.

Research studies have revealed that Nyah Kur communities express the same opinion that the central government be responsible for the preservation, conservation and promoting tourism of Nyah Kur culture. And that the central government must provide funds to tribal villages so that they can start to promote their cultural heritage. Nyah Kur elders have acknowledged that the disappearance of their cultures is also because of their own doing. They recognize that the disappearance of their own culture is because they wanted to adopt more modern and convenient ways of life. New generations have also adopted this trend and Ethnic Nyah Kur elders are afraid that if nothing is done to preserve and promote their heritage that all of the valuable traditions, customs and beliefs that have been handed down to them through the generations will forever be lost. The Nyah Kur have come to realize that there should be urgent preservation of their ethnic language. Both written and oral language of Nyah Kur ethnic tribe should be formally taught in local schools within the community. Most feel the need the

language be continued and used daily. Ethnic clothing should be worn everyday. The traditions of Nyah Kur should be celebrated regularly and rotated among the 14 Nyah Kur villages in the Province of Chaipayum.

Traditional celebrations of playing Pah Re Re should be revitalized by promoting the event in the 14 Nyah Kur villages in Chaipayum Province and that the celebrations be rotated among the Nyah Kur communities. Tribal songs and poems of Pah Re Re celebrations should be translated into Central Thai language and the original verses properly revised to preserve the original tongue of the songs. Nyah Kur language has not completely disappeared but is only spoken by elderly village members. Most new generation Nyah Kur's cannot speak or understand the language at all. Fragmented continuation of the written language has not been passed down to future generations.

Tourism authorities in Chaipayum have expressed their concerns and opinions that an annual display of Pah Re Re celebrations and Hae How Dok Pueng Parade which is a 3 days event is not financially sustainable. The situation is still problematic as long as the Nyah Kur's do not have a conscience of valuing their own cultural heritage and practice their customs on a regular basis. Promoting traditional Nyah Kur cultures and values is not sustainable in the long run if the community members themselves do not practice their cultural customs and traditions. The possibility of promoting tourism is a still a long process to go and what can be done now is to promote and nurture traditional values within the community first.

Nyah Kur ethnic tribal ways of life should be modeled and performed at the Pah Hin Ngam National Park in the Province of Chaipayum. Housing, tools and crafts should be displayed and performed so that tourists can get a chance to know and understand the daily routines of Nyah Kur's tribal lifestyles and customs. To supplement the cultural performances, there should also ethnic Nyah Kur handicrafts and souvenir from contributing Choabon tribes on display for sale within the area. Cultural Tourism should be arranged in groups so that the display of cultural life can be presented more efficiently. Other activities include home stay and traditional meals and picnics.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

**Guideline for sustainable tourism for local communities:** Tourism should be based upon the lifestyles and livelihood of each community. Basing, the purpose of tourism according to the needs and benefits towards local communities will create awareness and incentive to villagers to take care of their environment and improve their lifestyles. Local communities should be trained and

have sufficient knowledge in cultural tourism. Because the material benefits from tourism are high and usually creates selfishness. Training and proper enforcement will create a sense of responsibility towards society and themselves is the basics of a successful and efficient cultural tourism. Local communities should view tourism as a means of a second income and not abandon their occupations in agriculture. Benefits received from tourists should not be the only viewed as material gains but also as an exchange of cultures and traditions between communities. Local communities should agree on a fair and just method of dispersing income. The income received from tourism should be reinvested and circulated to hiring local labor and the sale of merchandise such as souvenirs and handicrafts. Local communities must always contemplate the impact on the environment. They must also make sure that their cultural traditions, customs and lifestyles are correctly explained and displayed for tourists.

**Guideline for sustainable tourism for government organizations and local municipality:** Cultural tourism of local communities should be carried over and included in the local municipality's work process and local government organizations in a factual practice. Involved government organizations should coordinate their efforts to support and promote tourism activities of local communities in accordance with proper cultural tourism. Develop diverse tourism activities and tourism patterns to be numerous and include many aspects of the local community's cultural heritage. Provide training and development courses to the local community groups to develop a strong and sustainable tourism industry.

**Policy for sustainable tourism:** Tourism policy should always give importance to the possible impacts to the environment and the violation of the rights of local community individuals. The tourism authority of Thailand should always perform their duty on regulating and controlling the negative impacts of tourism more than focusing on the promotion and advertising of tourism alone. The development of cultural tourism should be undertaken by strengthening local communities and the tourist attraction site's to be able to depend on themselves. Tourism activities should only be regarded as an extra source of income. Local community tourism industry can only be possible if the laws underlying the rights of the community are enforced according to the Thai constitution.

Tourism should be arranged in groups and guided to cultural destinations through the community. Nyah Kur communities should unite together to create a tourism network that can support a tourism industry. Centers for handicrafts should be created and managed by a central committee made up of representatives from each Tribal

community. Each community should contribute handicrafts and craftsmanship to the center. Pamphlets, brochures and books should be published in various languages and made available for tourists in strategic locations. Brochures and leaflets should also display the Nyah Kur's jungle language to help promote their culture. Tourist should be guided to cultural centers in different communities and provided with a chance and opportunity to taste Nyah Kur foods and meals. Eco tourism of the beautiful natural surroundings of Pah Hin Ngam national park will also benefit. Tourism should be practiced and implemented on the basis of the lifestyles of each individual community. The local communities must have a central management in place to overlook tourism, operations and finance. The community must also be aware of the effects and influence of tourism to the natural eco systems and the tribal culture of the community.

Government offices and officials should promote and support Nyah Kur ethnic groups endeavor to create a local tourism industry. The promotion of tourism should be formally handled and supported by the Sub-District Municipality. The local Sub-District office should coordinate with other state agencies and private organizations to promote cultural celebrations and cultural tourism within the communities. Training and knowledge transfers to local citizens should be provided to the communities so that they can have a better understanding of effective tourism so that they too can also help the local authorities contribute to the development. Tourism Policy should not destroy the natural ecosystem and violate personal rites in the community. A balance of profitable tourism industry and conservation of Nyah Kur's cultural heritage should be considered and implemented with conscious and awareness.

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