

## An Application of Isan Local Indigenous Knowledge in Suppression of Social Disputes

<sup>1</sup>Somchai Wanlu, <sup>1</sup>Songkhon Chantachon and <sup>2</sup>Boonlert Rachote

<sup>1</sup>Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture, University of Maha Sarakham,  
Muang District, Maha Sarakham 44000, Thailand

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani Ratchabhat University, 85 Sathollmark Rd,  
Warinchamrap Ubon Ratchathani 34190, Thailand

**Abstract:** All urban and rural communities in Thailand have strong beliefs in religion. The belief in religion can be considered as cultural philosophy with practices and trust in spirits, rituals and exorcise. The use of local cultural philosophies must also be used with local indigenous knowledge of the community. Traditions and customs of Isan communities is a blend of Thai Lao cultures. The livelihood of local Isan communities still adhere to Heet 12 and Khong 14 traditions which are celebrated and practiced throughout the year. These traditions are intertwined with the communities in regards to social, economic and cultural disputes. In the past and present, desisting disputes between individuals within the community have been tried by first using traditional and local cultural means of mending and reconciliation. Tradition, Culture, village rules, beliefs, vows, superstitious rituals and the teachings of Buddha were first applied to social and economic arguments. Desisting social disputes by means of mercy, compassion and responsibility, sacred rituals, vows and sincerity is a practical method that can be applied to modern cases. The main obstacle in adapting Heet12 and Klong 14 traditions to modern problems but still needs legal backing and sufficient human resource training in rural communities.

**Key words:** Isan, northeast Thailand, local indigenous knowledge, justice, suppression

### INTRODUCTION

Culture or people's lifestyles of people in the modern era have rapidly changed. Globalizations has directly effected human existence. These kinds of effects can be identified in 2 groups. This first group is conservatism. People in this group would like to remain consistency of the old culture. The second group is the group that would like to change and adapt to the new main stream or modern ways. People, who belong to this group think and do in a new way which is different from the first group. They rely on new culture. That is the reason why there is a problem or dispute between the old culture and the new culture. To adjust or fulfill the cultural gap, there should be some kind of application. It should be Isan local indigenous knowledge application in a large community where there are a lot of people. Isan local indigenous knowledge has been used to desist and suppress social disputes from the fracture between the old culture and the new culture needs to be studied and analyzed as well as Isan tradition and especially Isan lifestyle since they sometimes cause social, economic and cultural issues.

The study of the application of Isan local indigenous knowledge in the suppression of social dispute aims to investigate the history and the desisting social dispute of Isan people, to study a current status and problems in using the Isan local indigenous knowledge in desisting social dispute and to study an application of Isan local indigenous knowledge in desisting social disputes. In other words, it is to study the history, procedures in desisting social dispute and the current status which causes social dispute. It, then, is to apply Isan local indigenous knowledge in desisting social dispute.

In the past, the ancestors of Isan moved from Vientien, Lao PDR and settled down in the areas of the northeastern region. This area was located nearby fertile water resources and there were many kinds of animals, plants and fruits. Most of all, it was the area that could not get flooded. The general status back then was very simple. People lived simply and insisted on their valuable customs which were called Heet 12 Klong 14. These customs were considered their proud local indigenous knowledge about the 12-month traditions. As a matter of fact, Isan people did not have many disputes, because

everyone in the community strictly insisted on using Heet 12 Klong 14 to desist or stop disputes. If there were any problems or disputes, people used Heet 12 Klong 14 to stop the problems. The procedures consisted of several factors such as the leaders, rituals, ceremonies and scripts or words said in the ceremony. The leaders composed of the seniors of the village or community, Jao Kote is the oldest or most senior respected member of the family (Chwuangchum, 2008), Tao Jum, Mo Soot, Mo Pee and Mo Tam. The ceremony started off with calling litigants into the meeting, the leaders trying to get them compromise, warning or advising them, getting them to apologize and forgive each other and leading them into a ritual ceremony. The scripts said in the ceremony were promises, apologies, warnings, curses and prayers (Buasri, 2005). This was an example of an Isan lifestyle which relied on Heet 12 Klong 14 which they have carried on until now.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study in a cultural qualitative research collecting data by preliminary survey, structured and non-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observation, related activity participation, group discussion, in-dept interview and workshop. The data is categorized into the document category and the image category and, after that, analyzed and reviewed regarding to the purposed.

The study area is covered 3 provinces in the Northeastern Thailand or Isan. There are 2 villages surveyed in each province which makes 6 villages altogether. The first 2 villages in Ubonratchathani province are Pa-Aow village in Pa-Aow sub-district in Mueng district and Yang Noi village in Koh-Ae sub-district in Khueng Nai district. In Yasothorn province are Sri Tan village in Sri Tan sub-district in Pa Tiew district and Khum Poon village in Na So sub-district in Kudchum district. The last 2 villages in Roi-Et province are Kud Namsai village in Kud Namsai sub-district in Panomprai district and Nong Muen Tan village in Nong Muen Tan sub-district in Ardsamart district.

#### **RESULTS**

The result of the study shows the old custom or culture of Heet 12 Klong 14 which is a valuable Isan tradition. The traditions of Heet 12 and Klong 14 are directly influenced by Buddhism teachings and beliefs which not only can provide a path to enlightenment but can also be used to resolve social disputes. The candle festival of Ubonratchathani province, the rocket festival of Yasothorn province and Boon Pravet of Roi-Et

province are good examples of the cultural application with tourism. This also benefits for economy and culture conservation. The village-fund establishment, the cattle bank establishment and the rice bank establishment are results from Boon Koonlan (the tradition of making merit to worship rice in the first lunar month). The village surrogate in Nong Muen Tan village, the village committees in nearly every village are applied into today's process of judgment. The study definitely encourages people to apply Heet 12 Klong 14 or Isan local indigenous knowledge in desisting social dispute. For instance, Boon Khao Saak (the tradition of making merit for dead people in the middle of tenth lunar month), Boon Khao Pradubdin (the tradition of making merit in the middle of the ninth lunar month) and Boon Khao Jee (the tradition of making merit in the middle of the third lunar month) are applied with Father's or Mother's day, because these days are official holidays to pay respect to the elderly. Phook Siew (the ceremony of making friends) and Bai Sri Su Kwan (a ritual ceremony that is arranged for welcoming guests or as consolation to people) are traditions arranged to welcome the comers and to strengthen relationship. The study also shows results from applying the Isan local indigenous knowledge in desisting social dispute. People using such wisdom in desisting social dispute live happily in the community. In contrast, using the official laws may cause conflicts, dislike and sorrows in the community. Therefore, Isan local indigenous knowledge should be encouragingly applied into practice of desisting social dispute, or at least preserve in the community for the new generation.

**Heet 12:** Heet 12 is a Northeastern Thailand or Isarn word for the Central Thai word of Jareet which means custom or tradition. Heet 12 are Northeastern Thailand traditions which are celebrated for each month of the year according to the old Thai calendar. It also means the 12 traditions of the year in central Thailand. The traditional Thai calendar starts with the first month in December which is referred in Isarn as Duan Ai or First month. For every month there will be a monthly tradition of cultural celebration. Most of the traditions held are mainly Buddhist traditions. While, the remaining customs have incorporated Buddhism rituals or concepts for merit making. The many Heet traditions in Northeast Thailand are an important factor that helps preserve the social structure and keep the community together. It also, is a tool for promoting unity within the community by the participation of celebrating the traditions or Boon.

Boon Khao Gum is celebrated in the first month or Duan Ai (December). Boon Khao Gum is a period when Buddhist monks retreat and confine themselves to

resenting their sins in sanctuary. Buddhist worshippers during this period will devote themselves to making merit at temples and monastery's. It is also the start of harvest period where farmers and friends will help each other harvest rice crops, make fermented fish and start their storage of food for the coming year.

Boon Koon Larn is celebrated during Duan Yi (January). During the celebrations, Buddhist monks will be invited to give ceremony in the village square or central clearing where rice harvests would be dried in the sun. Buddhist worshippers would also provide food offerings and make merit. After lunch, the monks would provide holy water to the presented harvest, food and rice storage houses' to provide grace and prosperity. The first harvest is then stored in rice houses and the first batch or lot of rice is offered to the temple.

Boon Huan, Boon Khao Jii is celebrated during Duan Sam (February). During this period villagers will offer grilled sticky rice cakes and rice harvest gathered from the community to monks. The offering of collective rice harvest is also called Boon Pratai Khao Pluek.

Boon Pawaet or Boon Prawetsandorn is celebrated during Duan Si or forth month (March). Rituals performed include the sacred sermons or Thet Mahachart or The sermons of the greatest reincarnation of Buddha. Villagers will gather food and offerings to Buddhist monks and listen to sermons. Followers who have received 13 rounds of sermons will receive everlasting merit and have a prosperous afterlife. Merits will also be provided to deceased relatives.

Duan Ha or the fifth month (April) is the celebration of Boon Songkran. Villagers will bath Buddhist statues and relics in holy water. And pay their respects and homage to their parents and elders that are still alive. Rituals of Bai Si Su Kwan are performed to provide merit to deceased relatives.

Duan Hohk or the sixth month (June) is the celebration of Boon Bang Fai or Bang Fai festival. This is the period is also the same period of Buddhism holiday of Wisaka bucha. Traditions and customs are celebrated as the start of the rainy season and villagers will perform merit making ceremonies and light rockets into the air to worship Phraya Taen to ask for abundance of rain fall to provide prosperity for the year's harvest.

Duan Jeht or the seventh month (July) is the month for celebrating Boon Sumha or sometimes called Boon Berk Bahn. The tradition involves the cleaning of their house and homes and invite Buddhist monks to perform sermons and merit making. Rituals to evict evil spirits and ghosts are performed and sacred holy water is sprinkled throughout the house. Villagers will start their planting of rice sprouts and prepare their farms and fields.

Duan Paed or eighth month (June) is the month for celebrating Boon Khao Pansa where the community will provide cleansed cloth washed with fresh rainfall and offer them to Monks. The participation of receiving sermons is participated throughout the month.

Duan Gao or ninth month (July) is the month for celebrating Boon Khao Pradub Din. The tradition is a ritual to pay homage and respect to the earth and soil for providing all sources of livelihood. Traditionally food and meals would be buried in the soil and earth. But in modern times it has been changed to burying fertilizers and nutrients in the soil instead. In several communities the ritual is practiced by the placement of food and deserts under large trees. Belief is that the spirits of deceased loved ones will be released to roam freely during the ninth month and that they will receive the food placed in the ground or under large trees.

Duan Sib or tenth month (September) is the month for celebrating Boon Khao Saak and the receiving of sermons. Villagers will make offerings of food and meals to Monks. After receiving sermons and merit makings, the villagers will hang offerings of food on tree branches, bushes and under trees to provide final offerings of food to wandering spirits. The ritual is in belief of providing food to deceased relatives that were released during Duan Gao and to send the wandering spirits that it is time to go back to the spirit world.

Duan Sibet or eleventh month (October) is the celebration of Boon Oog Pansa. Villagers will present offerings of food and make merit during the mornings, while the evenings they will offer flowers, incense and candles to temples. They will also offer cloths for monks to make robes and merit making rituals and provide offerings of food to monks after the last day of Wan Oog Pansa in the evening.

Duan Sibsong or twelfth month (November) is the month for celebrating Boon Khao Mao and Boon Katin. The tradition is celebrated by providing offerings of Pha Trai or the 3 pieces of cloth used for making the 3 types of clothing for Buddhist monks. Funds and charity will also be offered to provide new clothing and funds to monks. Numerous festivals such as river boat racing and floats along rivers and streams.

**Klong 14:** Klong 14, also called Kong 14 are social and governing rules that all citizens must abide by. Klong 14 rules are more restricted than Heet 12 traditions and are comparable to law for all citizens. If Klong 14 laws are violated, then the guilty would be punished accordingly to his social status. There are 3 types of Klong 14 which is divided according to the person's status. Klong 14 that teach administrators, Prince and Kings. Klong 14 for Buddhist Monks. Klong 14 for ordinary citizens.

**Klong 14 for ordinary citizens:**

- Crops and foods after harvest should not be consumed immediately. The harvest should first be offered to the Buddhist Monks to make merit
- Do not be greedy and avid. Do not commit fraud, be selfish or be rude
- The community should build temple walls together and help each other build walls for each house. Towers of worship should be built on all four corners of the village and at each household
- A person's feet should be cleaned before entering the house
- When it is a Buddhist Sabbath day which is on the lunar calendar of 7-8-14-15 day, the people must pay homage to the house's Khon Sao (furnace), ladder and door
- A person's body and feed should be cleaned, bathed and properly dressed before sleep
- When it is Buddhist Sabbath day, the people should make offerings of flowers and incense to Buddhist monks. Wives should pay respect to their husbands
- When it is the 15th day of the lunar calendar, the people should invite Buddhist monks to their house to perform merit ceremony and receive food offerings from the host
- When providing food offerings to Buddhist Monks, the people should not keep the monks in waiting. During offerings the people should not be wearing shoes or sandals, should not be carrying umbrellas or wear head cloths. They should not be carrying children or carry any types of weapons or touch the monk's food vessel
- When Buddhist are confined to temples and monestary's during resentment period, the people should provide offerings of flowers, incense and candles
- When Buddhist monk's are about to pass, the people should kneel and pay their respects and homage before engaging in conversation
- Do not step on the shadows of Buddhist monks
- Do not provide leftovers to Buddhist Monks and to husbands. If this crime is committed, then the guilty will be committing great sin in this life and the next
- When it is Buddhist Lent day, Oog Pansa, Songran, the people should refrain from intercourse or else their children will become stubborn and hard to teach

Social problems consists of administrative conflicts and family troubles. Indigenous knowledge used to desists these arguments included provincial legislature, laws of the village in which the responsibility rests upon

appointed village committee and judges. The obstacles of applying local indigenous knowledge to desist these problems are due to the limited understanding of the law of villagers, village leaders and mediator. Village laws are not enforced and are not law binding. Mediators have limited knowledge of law and lack incentives to perform their duty.

Economic problems include conflicts in harvesting, produce production, commerce, consumption, Health and Sanitation problems. Local indigenous knowledge that was applied to help reconcile include His Majesty the King of Thailand's policy of a sustained economy and the creation of local community organizations to strengthen the community. The obstacles that have dampened the effect of local indigenous knowledge's application to solve economic problems include the lack of knowledge of villages in understanding the correct knowledge and application of sustained economic policy. Communities also lack efficient leaders and funds and have to rely on the government to control prices.

Cultural problems include conflicts in training, education, beliefs, religious practices and rituals. Solutions in dissolving these problems were dealt with by applying the beliefs and traditional customs of Heat 12 Klong 14. Traditional celebrations were also used along with the preservation and Buddhist moral standards. Meditation was also applied to create peace in the individual and to create harmony within the society. Beliefs and practices in Buddhism have provided a time tested guideline to the desisting of conflicts between individuals and organizations in the past and present. Modernizations and Globalizations have created a gap and discontinuity of local traditions and customs. Moral beliefs and practiced of past generations have not been passed on effectively to new generations which has created inefficient leaders to convey good moral principles of the past to the new generation.

**The benefits of using indigenous knowledge and customs to desist conflicts of interests and arguments:** Research studies have revealed that the application of Indigenous Knowledge and local customs to desist arguments simple and non complicated application. It is a fast, cost efficient method and is an uncomplicated process that both sides of the arguments all know and are well familiar with. When problems are resolved it created unity and forgiveness among both sides which resembles the good heritage that has been passed down through the generations and is a presentation of respect to elders and village committee and recognition of the communities trust and laws. The desisting of arguments by using local indigenous knowledge is very similar to the judicial process and

fundamentals of courts and modern judicial systems. The process undertaken by local village committee members and mediators are very similar to the judicial responsibilities and principle of court judges. The basic principles that are required to effectively carry out these tasks include viewpoint, experience and competence (Patayakoon, 2005). Mediators must have sufficient knowledge of the fundamentals involved from both sides in order to successfully come to a conclusion or agreement that both sides will honor. The desisting of arguments is considered a judicial process that is an important option in the creation of unity and reconciliation in Thai society (Uaumnua, 2005).

**Disadvantages and obstacles in using indigenous knowledge in desisting arguments:** The use of using local knowledge and customs in desisting arguments and conflicts is at current, only upheld and respected in rural communities. There is currently no legislature to uphold the ruling of community council and no reinforcement of punishment. There are no legal measures to support local community justice processes which have caused plaintiffs not to abide to the ruling or punishment. There is only the verdict of the community. Many times the mediator or committee members lack the knowledge of modern laws and current legislatures. Local community members still lack the knowledge of a correct and proper process of carrying out the rulings and do not know how to determine the correct amount of fines or punishment. Many mediators are only equipped with the local indigenous knowledge of cultural traditions and customs.

**The benefits of desisting social disputes by the court of law and modern legislature:** Modern legislature and court of law is widely accepted and is of international standard. Judicial processes are well defined and are in accordance to current social situation and popularity. Verdicts are upheld and are mostly respected by both sides. The guilty are punished and the prosecutors are protected by law and awarded with compensation and protection by the courts.

**The disadvantages of modern judicial process and legislature:** Research studies have revealed that the majority of citizens still do not understand many legislatures and find that modern laws are confusing, complicated and costly. The verdicts are sometimes handed down with different standards and are not in accordance to traditional customs and cultural values. Many times the outcome of the process has created frustration and anger among both sides and there is no reconciliation. Modern judicial process lacks humanity

and creates hatred. The guilty are punished and sometimes locked away from society and the possibility to reconcile is taken away and the opportunity for local communities to help them realize their wrong doings is prohibited which is a negative for creating unity within the community.

## CONCLUSION

Many urban communities have strong beliefs in religion. The belief in religion can be considered as cultural philosophy with practices and trust in spirits, rituals and exorcise. The use of local cultural philosophies must also be used with local indigenous knowledge of the community (Pattana, 1999). Most of the people living in Isan still hold true to their beliefs in Buddhism and Animism. Traditions and customs of Isan communities is still a blend of Thai Lao cultures. The livelihood of the locals still hold fast to Heet 12 and Khong 14 traditions which are celebrated and realized throughout the year. These traditions are intertwined with the community's social, economic and culture. Heet 12 is regarded as an original local indigenous knowledge. In the past and present, desisting disputes between individuals within the community have been tried by first using traditional and local cultural means of mending. Tradition, Culture, village rules, beliefs, vows, superstitious rituals and the teachings of Buddha were first applied to social and economic arguments. The belief of Isan communities is identical to human beliefs in self healing, where belief can sometimes cure illnesses and solve problems similar to placebo. Desisting social disputes by means of mercy, compassion and responsibility, sacred rituals, vows and sincerity is a practical method that creates harmony as is evident in many modern situations such as elections where candidates make sacred vows and participate in rituals to show their pureness.

## SUGGESTIONS

Thai society in the past used to peaceful and pleasant. Conflicts and disputes were resolved with charity and the realization of mutual dependencies among each other. Currently, all disputes and arguments have steadily moved to courts and higher levels of the judicial systems. Disputes and conflicts of interests have created distrust among the community. Courts are currently the only resort that individuals depend upon and trust

Modern Thai societies are currently in a state of conflicts. Several aspects of democratic privileges are not stable but the power of courts and judges are still widely respected and regarded by the majority of people. There

still exists alternative measures of desisting arguments and conflicts before reaching judicial systems. Other options such as reconcile and conciliation is an important initial process in preventing arguments which must have a mediator that is fully aware of the situation and understand the conflict between the contestants. The most appropriate mediators are community members, village philosophers and community leaders.

Judicial institutions and organizations should be in support of the development and application of local networks and centers of indigenous knowledge in desisting disputes and arguments. Provincial courts in all regions especially in ISARN should apply indigenous knowledge in desisting disputes before the argument reaches judicial process. Legislature in village and rural communities should be exercised by local judicial centers which will help lower the burden of municipal courts.

Mediators should be trained in the process of desisting arguments by using local indigenous knowledge of Heat Klong decency. Reconcile and conciliation rituals should be performed to kindle both parties and receive benediction from respected elders and also make pledges not to offend each other in the future. Further studies, should be support to study the framework of how indigenous knowledge can be applied and adapted to modern judicial process. Extended research should be continued to examine the benefits and disadvantages of

applying local indigenous knowledge in desisting disputes. There should also be research studies into the possibilities and development of legislature on the appointment of local village judges and how the judicial system in villages should be funded.

#### REFERENCES

- Buasri, U., 2005. Restorative Justice: Paradigm Shift in the Thai Criminal Justice System, Bangkok, pp: 142. ISBN: 9749666712.
- Chwuangchum, P., 2008. Rabohb Jaokte Nai Choomchon (The Jaokte System in Communities). <http://www.thaipeace.org/JK.doc>.
- Pattana, K., 1999. You May Not Believe, But Never Offend the Spirits. Spirit-Medium Cult Discourses and the Postmodernism of Thai Religion. Ph.D Thesis University of Washington, United States of America, ISBN: 0599236752.
- Patayakoon, S., 2005. The Development of Public Prosecutors, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand, pp: 11. ISBN: 9746666681.
- Uaumnuaay, J., 2005. Jaokote = Managing Conflict in I-san Culture, Humanities and Social Sciences: The Faculty of Humanities and The Social Sciences, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thonburi, Thailand, pp: 34-39.