

## **Salt Culture: Method of Production Conservation Preservation and Development of Salt Farms in the Coastal Regions in Central Thailand**

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**Abstract:** Salt production in the coastal areas of Central Thailand is an important cultural heritage. Salt farms in Central Thailand are currently facing many obstacles. The difficulties in salt farming come from advancements in technology and commerce, which have raised the cost of salt farming and lowered the price of salt. Traditional salt communities in the past have had to abandon their salt farming culture. The community district or Tambon of Klong Dan is in danger of losing their indigenous knowledge in salt farming and the community of Sahakorn Bahn Rai have abandoned and lost their salt culture together. Only the community alongside the Thonburi and Pahktoh road in the district of Bangkaew still continue their salt traditions and production. Methods of conservation, rehabilitation and development of salt culture that have been applied successfully in the district of Bangkaew are the continuous promotion and support of salt production within the community, support and development of transforming salt products and packaging development, creating other alternatives and diversifying other ways to utilize salt in other areas and support from the Central government in supporting the indigenous culture of salt production. The most important method in the conservation, rehabilitation and development of salt culture in modern times is the strength of the community. When the community is united and strong, so is their culture heritage and ways of life.

**Key words:** Salt, culture, manufacturing, conservation, development

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Salt occurs naturally in many parts of the world as the mineral often referred to as halite. Halite comes from the Greek word Halos, meaning salt and for 1000's of years has been mined as a crystalline rock or lithos halos-rock salt (The Maldon Crystal Salt Company Ltd., 2008). Salt, sodium chloride, touches the lives more than any other chemical compound. Salt or salt-derived products are ubiquitous in the material world and the very cells of the bodies swim in a saline solution. We take for granted the salt crystals that make the foods safe and palatable and we give thank for salt's lifesaving properties, when applied to slick winter roads. Most are unaware of the 14,000 known uses for salt, how it's produced and the success in ensuring the environmental compatibility as it provides the foundation for the quality of the lives (Salt Institute, 2008).

Humans have used salt since the prehistoric period. It is theorized that about 1,000-10,000 BC, there were salt manufacturing communities producing rock salt and table salt near the coastal regions. Salt was very important to the livelihood of humans to an extent that the Bible describes the value of salt compared to human

values, Ye are the salt of the earth (The Holy Bible, 1995). There have also been comparisons that salt means, longevity, strength, trustworthy and intelligent (Kurlansky, 2002).

In several parts of the ancient world, salt was scarce and therefore, was very expensive in those areas. The weight of salt would be used as payment where the value depended on the weight of the salt. Salt was used as payment during the Roman Empire. Roman soldiers were usually paid in the form of salt instead of money. The world salary is derived from the Latin word Salarium. The term Salarium itself derives from Sal and can best be translated as salt-money (Zimmermann, 1996). Salt is also an important ingredient in flavoring food that humans have long used in every household. Normally, salt is used to add flavor and preserve food such as vegetables, meat and fish, which are popular foods in Asia (Srioon, 2004). The most common method of preserving marine life was in fact to lay fish and other animals out on the beach or on special platforms to dry in the sun. Salt played a vital part in the preservation of fish by the removal of water, thus, delaying putrefaction since water is required by all agents and processes leading to protein spoilage (Butcher, 2004).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Salt culture:** Method of production conservation preservation and development of salt farms in the coastal regions in Central Thailand is a qualitative research with the aims of identifying the origin and history of past and present salt cultures in coastal regions in Central Thailand so that a development strategy for conservation, rehabilitation and development of the salt heritage of Central Thailand can be understood. Field research and data analysis was conducted throughout May 2007 to July 2008.

Three communities in Central Thailand was selected for this research. They are the community of: Tambon of Klong Dan in the district of Bangbo in the province of Samut Prakarn. The area was selected because the salt culture and customs within the community are on the verge of extinction and in danger of being lost forever. In the past, the sub-district was a well-known community of salt farms. Modernization has erased most of the salt heritage. There are only two salt farms left in the province. Sahakorn Bahn Rai sub-district of Pan Tai Norasing, district of Muang in the province of Samut Sakorn. This area was selected to study the disappearance of salt culture. In the past, the community was very famous for its salt and everyone in the community back then made their living through salt farms. There are currently no salt farms left in the community. The communities alongside the Thonburi-Pahktoh road in the district of Bangkaew. This area was chosen to study how traditional salt customs and salt production have continue to flourish and withstand modernization and the industrial trends. Salt farms along side the roads and highways are abundant and is the main livelihood of the communities in the area.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Salt culture in Central Thailand:** Thailand has many major sources of table salt production in the river Basin in Central Thailand. The history of salt in the coastal area of Central Thailand is presumed to have started in the early Ayutthaya period with the oldest salt community in Central Thailand located at Laem Phak Bia Amphoe Ban Laem Phetchaburi province. Evidence of salt culture in this community existed during the historical city of Nakhon Si Thammarat in Southern Thailand. It is theorized that the salt culture in Central Thailand evolved from the Chinese because the Chinese were producers of salt before Thailand. Salt production soon afterwards found its way to the coastal communities where the conditions were ideal such as the areas in the province of Samut

Prakan, Samut Sakhon and Samut Songkhram. Table salt or table salt production became the local indigenous knowledge of the coastal communities and the custom has continuously been passed on from generation to generation.

Salt production in the coastal areas of Central Thailand is an important cultural heritage and can be classified into two major types. Salt culture can be divided into material culture and spiritual culture. Material culture comes from the tools created for salt production, which were innovative, unique and symbolized the technological advancements and knowledge of the local people. Spiritual culture comes from the rituals, traditions and beliefs that accompany salt production or salt harvest. The rituals, traditions and beliefs in making salt are very similar but minimal compared to other agricultural occupations such as rice and crops. The ceremonies and beliefs associated with salt culture are relatively few. Rituals involved in salt culture is separated into: Pitee Raek Na or Plowing ceremony and Pitee Tum Kuan Na or Ritual to encourage the harvest.

### **Salt production methods and manufacturing difficulties:**

Salt production or salt farming requires large areas of land and requires expertise in management, product transformation and paddy selection. Land that is ideal for salt production must be close to the coast, the area must be flat, the area must be close to sea level, the dirt or soil must be of clay and be able to retain good levels of water. When, the area for the salt farm has been chosen, next will be the task and process of condition the land. The conditioned land must then be converted into paddies with sturdy banks or dykes to sustain water. The production of table salt requires a combination of several techniques, which comes from the local indigenous knowledge of the people. Table salt is derived from sea water or brine that is irrigated into the paddies and left to evaporate in the sun. The sun evaporates the water out of brine leaving only the concentrated salt crystals. The more concentrated the brine, the more salt. The continuous process of irrigating sea water and evaporation increases the thickness of the salt layer until adequate for harvest. When the salt crystal reaches the desired thickness, the farmers will transport the salt for storage elsewhere and dry it once more before selling. Salt farming can only be done during the drought period, which is approximately, from November to April of every year, where sunlight and wind are optimal.

Table salt farms in Central Thailand are current facing many obstacles. The difficulties in salt farming from advancements in technology and commerce has cause some communities to abandon their salt farming culture.

Two communities from the three salt communities included in the research have stopped producing salt and their traditional salt customs. The community district or Tambon of Klong Dan is in danger of losing their indigenous knowledge in salt farming and the community of Sahakorn Bahn Rai have abandoned and lost their salt culture altogether. Only the community alongside the Thonburi and Pahktoh road still continue their salt traditions and production.

The factors that pushed the salt culture in the community of Tambon Klong Dan to the verge of collapse is the slump in price of salt and the structural change of the landscape, where the Sukhumvit road was built and changed the province of Samutprakarn into an industrial zone. The government's policy of promoting industries in the coastal regions have caused the construction of many factories and changed the lifestyles of the local community to prefer factory jobs and other occupations. These are important factors that have contributed to the decline of salt culture and the disappearance of salt communities.

The salt culture in the community of Sahakorn Bahn Rai has disappeared due to the low price of salt, difficulty in labor that requires many individuals to collect the salt crystals and the lack of cooperation in land usage amongst farmers. The salt culture of the community has completely vanished and replaced with shrimp farms.

Salt culture in the community alongside the Thonburi-Pahktoh Road in the district of Bangkaew in the province of Samutprakarn is still continuing after over 100 years. The salt traditions have survived many obstacles, but the majority of families within the community still continue their heritage. The factors that have contributed to the community's success in preserving their cultural heritage are the price of salt in the district of Bangkaew is higher, state and private sector promotion of salt production and knowledge transfer courses for salt farmers. Globalization and modern commerce have created modern obstacles to salt production such as the price fluctuation of salt, most of the salt paddies are rented land and modern generations have more choices in occupation to choose from and do not want to pursue their parent's careers in salt production.

**Methods of conservation, rehabilitation and development of salt farms:** To rehabilitate and conserve the salt traditions in the community of Bahn Klong Dahn can be done by creating a community center to distribute salt production knowledge, organize salt production courses into the local curriculum so that the general public and local youths are given a chance to study and partake in

their ancestors heritage. The government should contribute to the conservation in the community's salt culture seriously.

Methods to rehabilitate the salt culture in the community of Sahakorn Bahn Rai is to include and have community members participate in the rehabilitation process and government support is very important in the recovery of the community's salt culture.

Methods of conservation, rehabilitation and development of salt culture that have been applied successfully in the district of Bangkaew are the continuous promotion and support of salt production within the community, support and development of transforming salt products and packaging development, creating other alternatives and diversifying to utilize salt in other areas and support from the Central government in supporting the indigenous culture of salt production.

## CONCLUSION

The salt culture of communities in Central Thailand consists of various community institutions; such as family, traditions, beliefs and lifestyles, etc. These institutions play an important role in linking each other together. The relationship and combination of the roles each institution has on each other has created a unique cultural identity called salt culture. The methods of producing table salt from the past to present has changed according to the surrounding environment and social situation. Some salt communities couldn't adapt to the changes and their salt customs have been devoured by trends of modern society. But some communities have found ways to cope with the changes of globalization and adapted themselves in line with modern society. The most important method in the conservation, rehabilitation and development of salt culture in modern times is the strength of the community. When the community is united and healthy, so is their culture, customs and ways of life.

## SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Related organizations and institutions such as the general public, department of agricultural extension, ministry of education, administrative leaders and local community leaders should be aware of the importance of conserving, restoring and development of the community's salt culture. The community, private and state sector must take serious actions such as the establishment of salt learning centers, salt culture should be incorporated into the local curriculum and the establishment of a local agency to support the professions of salt production.

The perseverance or disappearance of salt communities in other provinces in Thailand should be researched and documented. There are also many other Central Thailand salt communities along the river basins that have disappeared and the history and origins of all these disappearance or preservation should be documented to provide a clearer picture and database that will help in the conservation, rehabilitation and development of existing salt communities so that the salt culture heritage can be sustained for future generations. Government agencies and private organizations should seriously research on the development of a more efficient salt production and other ways and products to utilize salt.

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