

The Dynamics of Maintaining the Status of a Forest Monastery of the Phra Achan Man Lineage: A Study of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam, Udon Thani Province¹

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Abstract

Forest monasteries rooted in the lineage of Phra Achan Man are currently confronting challenges in maintaining their natural environment and meditative space while improving interactions with adjacent villages. To explore the spatial development of forest monastery and analyze social dynamics between monks and local villagers, the study collected pilot data from forest monasteries across eight northeastern provinces of Thailand by using qualitative methods. The findings showed that Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam in Udon Thani province continued to maintain numerous characteristics of a forest monastery while pursuing its own development path. Integrating Henri Lefebvre's triad space theory with the concept of social dynamics, the study revealed that during the "spatial practice" process, the abbot assimilated the teachings of Phra Achan Man to ensure that the architectural space retained its original scale and harmonious relationship with nature. Successive abbots cultivated a mental space with Phra Achan Man's core teachings through their preaching and meditation practices, encouraging nearby villagers to meditate in the monastery. Faced with a decline in the monastic population, the present abbot disseminated the concept of land and forest resource usage by sharing agricultural land with community members to transcend their traditional merit-making and Dhamma practices. This sharing accomplished mutual assistance and reciprocity between the forest monastery and the community as well as meeting villagers' spiritual needs and the monastery's self-adjustments. A social space was formed in which secular and religious components were blended. The development model of the forest monastery provides valuable experiences for improving other forest monasteries in the northeast region of Thailand.

Keywords: forest monastery, Phra Achan Man's lineage, meditation, production of space, social dynamics

Introduction

A forest monastery² is generally viewed as a representative of calm, isolation, and distance from communities and material growth. Such monasteries are surrounded by forest, and the buildings have been

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² The Thai Forest Tradition adheres closely to the Buddha's original monastic norms of discipline. The eremitic forest tradition is seen as the polar opposite of the worldly householder (*kharawat* or *khareuhat*) and the urban and village monks (*sangha*). It is a minority reclusive vocation of worldly renunciators who have purposefully avoided mundane social interaction. In general, the renouncer abandons the organized space of home and settlement (village) in favor of homelessness and the formless wilderness. This is explicitly stated in the original ritual recitation of monk (*bhikkhu*) ordination to "wander forth out of the home into a homeless state," which for forest monks may imply a more or less permanent rejection of familial, professional, or monastic occupations. These monks considered themselves authentic *bhikkhus* in the classic definition, in contrast to the more socialized reconciliatory rural and town monks (Taylor, 1993: 9).

constructed to fit in with the natural surroundings, using local materials. People who visit immediately restrain themselves, both physically and mentally. Phra Achan Man Phurithatto (1870-1949), born in Ubon Ratchathani, was a prominent forest monastery preacher with a large number of monk disciples in Isan. After 1935, it was thought that Phra Achan Man had achieved the *Dhamma* and become an *arahanta*, or never-returned. That was considered the starting point for the creation of the forest monks' *Dhamma* dissemination team (Intarawong, 2014: 89).

The group named themselves "Forest Monastery *Khammatthana* Monks" or "*Khammatthana* Monks of Phra Achan Man's Lineage," and strictly adhere to the five *Khammatthana* and the 13 *Dhutanga* (Phramaha Bua Yannasampanno, 2019: 27). The five *Khammatthana* emphasize the mind's ability to concentrate in order to develop wisdom and understand the true essence of things. In the past, the five *Khammatthana* required forest monks to leave communities and to practice in tranquil, secluded forest areas. The 13 *Dhutanga* (Thai: *thudong*), or ascetic practices, promote patience, endurance, and letting go to strengthen the mind. In particular, the *Dhutanga* practice of staying in the forest is an important tradition for ascetic monks in Phra Ajahn Man's lineage (Phramaha Bua Yannasampanno, 2019: 128).

Indeed, with the acceleration of modernization and urbanization and the advent of the internet information age, it is not easy for forest monasteries to separate from the community and accommodate monks for meditation. The question at present is how to connect the authentic form of forest monasteries with the secular life of villagers, to find an appropriate intersection between monks' practice and villagers' merit-making in the development of forest monasteries, and to form benign interactions between them. Therefore, this study sought to identify a suitable example through fieldwork of forest monasteries in the Isan area, as well as analysis and research from the perspective of the creation and diachronic transformation of the triad space of forest monasteries, to explore a sustainable path for their development in contemporary society.

Related Literature

Other studies of similar interest have not dynamically touched on the effort to maintain or inherit the perception of forest monasteries related to space utilization and physical conditions. Most of the studies, such as Techa-amnuaywit (2013), Roslers and Thitapanyo (2020), and Meethaisong (2016), focus on the content principally related to design concepts under the seven *Sappaya*,³ (suitable conditions for religions practice) for contemporary buildings, historical evolution, and social and political issues affecting the forest monastery, respectively.

In Buddhist thinking, space is linked to the state of the mind, which refers to an intangible but perceptible state. The main point is awareness of the mind, especially according to the practice of *Vipassana* meditation, which focuses on training the mind to develop through meditation and wisdom to achieve the path and *nirvana* (Phramaha Bua Yannasampanno, 2019: 64-65, 225). The physical and mental spaces are linked together, producing conditions in that space, such as management, change, access to the area, and the establishment of shared consciousness, which leads to inheritance and maintenance.

³ The seven *Sappaya* concept, meaning facilitating conditions of suitable space and environment for prayers and practices, consists of seven factors: *Avasa-sappaya*, living in a suitable abode; *Gocara-sappaya*, living in an accessible area; *Bhassa-sappaya*, living with community members who conduct conversations that support meditation; *Puggala-sappaya*, living with personnel who conduct approachable manners for conversations on Dhamma; *Bhojana-sappaya*, being near the source of food and medicine; *Utu-sappaya*, living in a suitable climate, and *Iriyapatha-sappaya*, being surrounded by religious people and intellectuals (Phra Khemmakuno, 2023).

However, because of social dynamics, the spatial identity of forest monasteries has been interpreted differently. For example, Wongsanao and Krutthasen (2023) pointed out that forests surrounding a number of temples in Thailand have been cut down for exploitation or land use. As a result, several forest temples have turned into housing temples. Although monks in these temples still follow the traditions of forest monks, these forest temples have already lost their spatial identity. In Thai practice, the abbot in each period is the key figure in determining the form of the environment or the producer of space through management power. Lefebvre (2003) states that “space” is the result of people’s interpretation in society, and that the characteristics of the space created in such space come from the relationship between physical, mental, and social space, demonstrating that space is a part of people who conduct activities, create meaning, have roles, and are important. Space is a real concept with social dimensions and hidden power. Thus, space is more than simply physical; it also includes mental space. Space is therefore both the active and the passive, along with society. Physical changes frequently reflect societal changes and the power dynamics that drive them. Furthermore, social dynamics, such as migration, population structure changes, or cultural changes, influence the creation and destruction of the identity of space utilization, as well as the constant creation and re-creation of space through people’s actions, space use, and shared meaning-making (Lefebvre, 2003: 37). People’s perceptions of and interactions with space will be affected by environmental changes, whether in buildings or landscapes. As a result, the question of how to maintain the status of a forest monastery in the face of current societal developments while also forming successful social dynamics with villagers must be addressed.

Objectives of the Study

This study has the following three aims: 1) to investigate the physical space and area development of Wat Thom Na Ngam from 1962 to 2023; 2) to study the production of space to maintain Phra Achan Man’s core concepts at this monastery during the administration of three important abbots; and 3) to analyze the social dynamics between monks in the forest monastery and villagers, and their perceptions and experiences of its space, while maintaining the characteristics and principles of a forest monastery.

Methodology

Identify the Scale of the Study

The study collected pilot research data on the physical and environmental features of forest monasteries in Thailand’s Northeast (Isan) based on the distribution routes of forest monks in the Phra Achan Man lineage during the creation of the *Dhamma* dissemination team. The study area included the central, upper, and lower Isan regions as well as the monks’ pilgrimage routes in the past. Therefore, the forest monasteries in the selected eight provinces (Udon Thani, Sakhon Nakhon, Kalasin, Roi Et, Maha Sarakham, Ubon Ratchathani, Sisaket, and Bueng Kan) were evaluated using the following three selection criteria for keeping forest monastery status.

- 1) Practice of the main *Dhamma* principles, namely the five meditations and 13 ascetic practices, which are the strict principles of forest monks in the lineage of Phra Ajan Man.

- 2) The area must be conducive to the development of *Vipassana* meditation, with the following characteristics. It must be natural, with tall trees providing shade, serving as a habitat for many species of

animals, producing a forest-like environment. It must be peaceful, secluded, far from the community, but with enough space for monks to go out for alms. The monastery buildings should be modest, moderate, peaceful, clean, light, and in harmony with the natural environment, including using construction materials that are relevant to the local resources.

3) The behavior and activities consist of practicing the major principles of Phra Achan Man by inhabitants of the surrounding villages, as well as interaction with the forest monastery.

The Selection of the Case Study

Based on the criteria mentioned above, Wat Thom Nang Ngam in Udon Thani province was chosen as the case study for investigating the transformation of a forest monastery using the principles of Phra Achan Man and the related five *Senasana* (the five factors which make an ideal lodging place) and the seven *Sappaya*. It was founded in 1962, approximately 13 years after Phra Achan Man's passing away. During its establishment, forest monasteries spread throughout the Isan region. Wat Thom Nang Ngam has been in existence for 60 years and remains in the same state as when it was initially established. It is situated in the south of Thom Na Ngam village, 60 kilometers from the downtown area of Udon Thani province, and three kilometers from Thom Nangam village. There have been three abbots from the past to the present. The fieldwork investigated the monastery's existence and the physical changes that took place in each period.

1) Comparative studies of the monastery to determine land use features using aerial photographs from the years 1954, 1962, 1967, and 2002, surveying architectural layout and building physical characteristics.

2) Investigating the development of the surrounding community, mainly Thom Na Ngam village.

3) Interviewing relevant people, including four monks, twelve laymen, village heads, and local academicians, to collect information concerning the monastery's physical development throughout three periods (1962-2023) under three successive abbots.

Historical Evolution of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam from 1962 until 2023

Development of Thom Na Ngam Village Related to the Forest Monastery Concept

In rural Thailand, forest monasteries are inextricably linked to the villages where they are located. The villagers support the monks, and the monks' activities are deeply embedded in every part of the villagers' lives. Monks are needed to chant sutras and blessings at weddings, funerals, car purchases, housewarming ceremonies, and other events. Although forest monasteries are located far from some rural areas, local villagers regularly supply meals for the monks. Understanding the development of forest monasteries thus requires knowledge of the history of adjacent villages.

According to local history, the first group of residents from Maha Sarakham migrated to what is now known as Thom Na Ngam village around 1921. Wat Bua Rapa, constructed in 1933, was located in the community area. After 1932, the northeast experienced increased population and food shortages that were inversely related to population growth. Many people moved away from their home village to find a more stable living situation. Non-sa-ad, Udon Thani, was one region settled by these migrants for sustenance because of its agricultural appropriateness and forest, which could be used for construction. As a result, more and more people sought new land, and thus, forest land was gradually replaced by settlements and

farming regions. During this time, the government launched the First National Economic and Social Development Plan (1961-1966), which aimed to increase crop production by using fertilizers and chemicals. Consequently, agricultural land increased significantly. During that time, the First National Economic and Social Development Plan (1961-1966) and the 5-year Northeast Development Plan (1962-1966) contributed to economic growth in the Northeast, especially in Khon Kaen province, which borders Non Sung district, Udon Thani province, making this area an economic center, a place for people from all regions to come to work (Somkaun, Chumnanmak, and Narongchai, 2021; Pontip and Promphakping (2023). As a result, many young people in villages abandoned their agricultural careers to work in factories.

Wat Thom Na Ngam was founded in 1962, 41 years after the village was established. The village's topology was a mixture of flat land and rolling hills. A little creek existed, making the area ideal for crop growing and livestock grazing. As a result, villagers farmed field crops including rice, hunted animals, and harvested forest goods for their household consumption. During the early stage of the village foundation, people generally lived according to the "*Heet 12, Kong 14*" tradition.⁴ Men were commonly ordained at the age of 20 for a short period as they were key laborers of the family. At that time people owned large pieces of land as the population was still small and farming still had not encroached much onto forest land. The aerial view from 1954 (Figure 1-left) shows the village in small scale with an ordered road network.

By 1967, from an aerial photograph (Figure 1-middle), it can be seen that the village's households had approximately doubled in quantity. Later during the administration of the second abbot of Wat Thom Na Ngam, Luang Pu Sawang Opasso (1969-2005), the general societal context of that time featured the Vietnam War, economic growth from an air force base used by American military⁵, tension between the government and the Communist Party of Thailand, and development under the National Social and Economic Development Plan. Until the *Tom Yum Kung* crisis in 1997 and the expansion of mobile phone⁶ usage in rural areas throughout the country, the forest was encroached on for subsistence by growing cash crops like kenaf and cassava, and rapidly reduced in size. This varied inversely with the expansion of Thom Na Ngam village. Meanwhile, the growth of infrastructure and communication routes connected the rural and urban areas through the development of roads, radio, vehicles, and television, while the educational system expanded.

After the death of Luang Pu Sawang Opasso, the third abbot was Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak or Phra Khru Suwimon Srilajarn (2005-present), and Thom Na Ngam village grew even more (Figure 1-right). Each household now owns a motorcycle, a truck, or even a car. Communication, clustering of people, and the spread of information through smartphones have become daily common matters. Young people in the village have become better educated and have more options for their careers other than farming. Urbanization is more visible, along with less interest in religion among young people, and less frequent merit-making at temples.

⁴ Isan people have practiced *Heet Sib-Song*, a 12-month tradition based on Buddhist principles, beliefs, and agricultural lifestyles since ancient times. "*Kong Sib-Si*" is often said together with the word *Heet Sib-Song*. It is a social code of Isan people that has been a guideline for people of different statuses since ancient times. "*Kong*" means the path or guidelines that common people or monks should follow, and consists of 14 rules.

⁵ Although US soldiers were stationed at Non Sung district, few Thom Na Ngam people were employed at the camp due to poor road conditions and no transportation at that time. Many people made their living from agriculture, namely farming rice and sugarcane.

⁶ Mobile telephone service in Thailand began in 1986, initially in Bangkok and the surrounding areas. A mobile phone was relatively expensive at that time, but available numbers and signals extended to cover the entire country in 2001, 2004, and 2006. Recently, numerous mobile social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Line have begun to influence people's lives, attitudes, values, and relationships in both urban and rural areas.

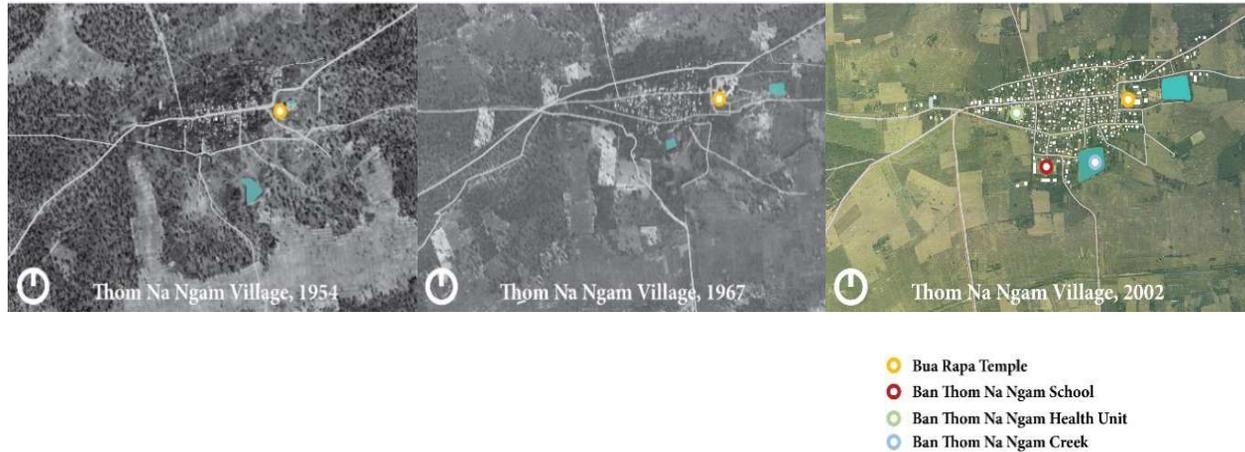


Figure 1 Maps and village layouts of Thom Na Ngam village area in 1954 (left), 1967 (middle), and 2002 (right), respectively, showing the inverse variation of forest area, farming area and village expansion
Source: Edited from aerial photography, Royal Thai Survey Department (1954, 1967, 2002)

The General Situation of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam in Three Periods and the Abbots' Lineage

1) The first period of the monastery's foundation (1962-1969). Abbot: Luang Pu Pratuang Thanuttamo.

Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam was founded during the age of the popularity of forest monasteries in Isan. One day in 1962, Luang Pu Pratuang Thanuttamo arrived alone on his journey to the foothill area at the village's end. Villagers began to have faith in him and offered to be his attendants, even though they had to go three kilometers back and forth from the village. The monastery was founded at that time on 288 *rai* of land (Figure 2) donated by a village teacher to build a place for local monks as well as pilgrimage monks from other regions to receive basic medical care. People began to rotate to ordain, resulting in the number of monks increasing to four or five.

2) Second Period: Period of Faith (1969-2005). Abbot: Luang Pu Sawang Opasso.

Before passing away in 1969, Luang Pu Pratuang appointed one of his disciples to be the next abbot, Luang Pu Sawang Opasso, also known as Phra Khru Samana Kitjatorn. According to an interview, the first half of the period was a kind of golden age for the monastery. Isan was famous throughout the country because many prominent monk disciples of Phra Achan Man lived there. During this time, Wat Thom Na Ngam was well-known among Buddhists because of Phra Achan Man's religious practices. More villagers visited to make merit and to be ordained as monks. Similarly, the number of people from outside who followed the teachings of Luang Pu Sawang Opasso increased. Most of them traveled by car from Udon Thani and nearby provinces. More than 30 monks were ordained and stayed during the Buddhist Lent.

3) Third Period: Adjustment Period (2005-Present). Abbot: Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak.

The third abbot, Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak was chosen among disciples before Luang Pu Sawang Opasso passed away in 2005. The Sangha Administration System is linked to a governmental agency. Assignment of Sangha positions has brought about prioritization of monks' orders that affects the roles and operations of various temples, as well as honors. It is a symbol of position in the administration of the Sangha and can have a significant impact on the operation of the temple, such as being a wider

public space to acknowledge the abilities and efforts of monks, creating inspiration to practice the *Dhamma* and develop the work of the monastery, as well as being a tool to help maintain the discipline of individual monks following the *Dhamma Vinaya*.

During this period, the monasteries had to adjust and be open for communities to use on different occasions. Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak initiated an occupational training program for locals in 2009, four years after Luang Pu Sawang Opaso's death. The goal was to sustain the mutually supportive relationship between the community and the monastery. A weaving program was initially offered, followed by one growing fruit trees. Although adjustments have been made to numerous activities that may benefit the villagers' economies and encourage them to participate in making merit, the number of villagers who visit the monastery has declined. Because of changes in society and the economy, the number of persons ordaining as monks has decreased to only three or four monks per year, and residents in the village have to go out to work in the inner city more often.

Laypeople who patronized the monastery in the former period became old or passed away, and now people come to make merit only on important days. As a result, there are few supporting laypeople at the monastery. Some areas such as the Meditation Training Center built during the second period were closed temporarily because there were no users.

The Production of Space in Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam and Social Interaction with Villagers

A forest monastery is characterized as an environment that promotes peace of mind and eliminates stimulus for defilements (*kilesa*) to facilitate the practices of monks in the forest lineage. This way of life is one of being alone or isolating oneself in order to observe the mind through seated or walking meditation, and mindfulness practices in various positions or methods in a forest or other remote area. Based on the three abbots' power in environmental management, the monastery's development in terms of its boundary and environment, space utilization, buildings, and architectural elements changed over three periods, as did the forest space practice and social interaction with villagers.

Original Space Status of Forest Monastery in the Foundation Period (1962-1969)

1. Boundary and living environment

Previously, the monastery was a quiet habitat for wildlife near the foothills and the Huay Sai brook, a natural stream flowing through it. According to Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak's interview in 2020, the concept of developing the area of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam in the early days, Luang Pu Pratuang determined the buildings to be only a small multi-purpose pavilion, 8 cubits (about 4 meters) wide and 12 cubits (about 6 meters) long which was built jointly by local villagers and Luang Pu Pratuang. It was sufficient to provide protection from the sun and rain and was used for religious practices and for the community to make merit and discuss the *Dhamma* on the day that Luang Pu came down from practicing meditation.

Luang Pu Pratuang spent the majority of his time in a cave on the mountain behind the monastery, practicing meditation. There were no amenities or simple housing, only rainwater for drinking and light from lanterns. Various ceremonies, including cremation, were performed in the open space in front of the multi-purpose pavilion, with wood from the forest to perform the cremation ceremony on a pyre in the traditional method. The *kutis* (abodes for monks), were small, accommodating only one monk. They were located in a secluded region where monks could practice *Vipassana* and walking meditation in peace while

still being able to wander around and visit each other. This area was free from the gaze of laypeople who visited to make merit.

2. Land use and space management

Luang Pu Pratuang did not place a priority on establishing strict standards for land use and space management, although he did divide it into two portions.

1) The entrance in the east had been cleared to provide a walkway for monks to accept alms in the morning, and a large open space near the gate was provided for lay people to come and make merit or organize outdoor cremation ceremonies. Four *kutis* in the north were hidden in forests and bushes to create a peaceful and private space.

2) Multipurpose pavilions (Figure 2-left) were located in the west, where villagers could offer food, practice the *Dhamma*, and hold religious events. The monks would stay there during Lent, and after the rainy season they went on their pilgrimage in the mountainous forest. Therefore, people sought seclusion in the monastery rather than participating in ritual practices in this period.

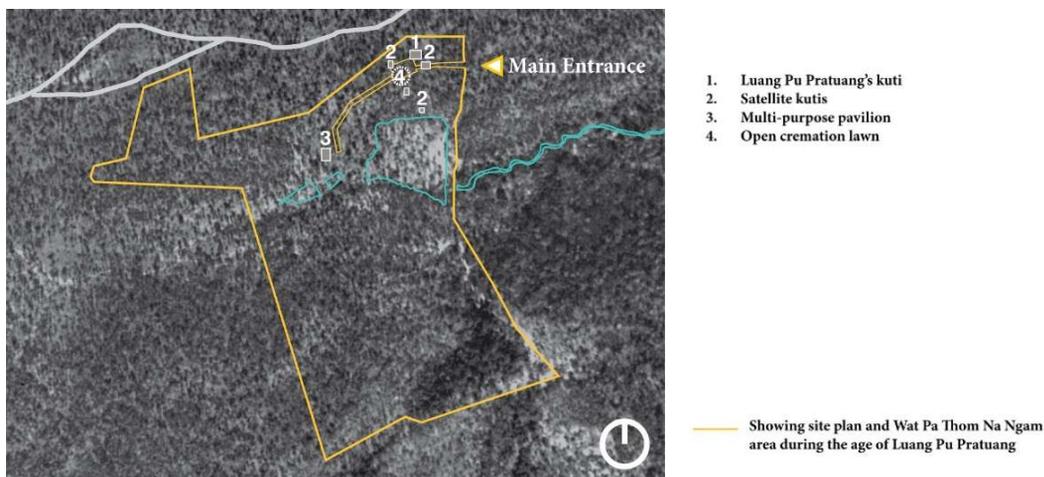


Figure 2 Layout of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam during its establishment stage in 1962, with Luang Pu Pratuang Thannuttamo as the abbot

Source: Edited from aerial photography, Royal Thai Survey Department (1962)

3. Buildings on the monastery grounds

Luang Pu Pratuang determined the building style at this period. The laborers were mostly monks and villagers. The only building that survives now is Luang Pu Pratuang's wooden *kuti* with three pillars and an elevated floor that offered protection from insects and reptiles. There is a landing for stairs. The roof was originally thatched and later replaced with zinc. The building was built with hand-sawed wood plates from the forest, linked jointed together with dowels rather than nails.⁷ The walking meditation space near the abode was located at the back. There was no clear layout, and all that was to be in a peaceful area for meditation. It should be noted that the abode of Luang Pu Pratuang (Figure 3 right) was mostly unused, as the abbot would frequently walk up the mountain and meditate in the cave there. His *kuti*, though frequently unoccupied, physically represented him during his pilgrimage while also providing a mental shelter for villagers.

⁷ Older carpenters' skills and expertise, particularly in nail-free construction. Farming and handicraft skills, such as woodwork, wickerwork, forgery, and pottery, were basic abilities required for everyday living and house building.



Figure 3 A multipurpose pavilion (left); natural stream and forest surrounding of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam during the first stage, 1962 (middle); Luang Pu Pratuang's *kuti* (right)

Source: (left and middle) Disciple Group of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam (2005).

4. The characteristics of space practice and social interaction

The Sangha practices of the forest monastery line have been performed since the first abbot, Luang Pu Pratuang, emphasized living in nature and humbleness,⁸ as seen by his meditation practices in a cave on the mountain rather than at the monastery. Construction work thus emphasized usage and the size was designed following necessity, as demonstrated by preachers of Phra Achan Man's lineage, for example, the *kuti* and the multi-purpose pavilion, preventing the monks from becoming burdened with maintenance or attachment to the construction while on pilgrimage or *Dhamma* practice elsewhere. However, the areas primarily provided spaces of meditation for monks, as well as *kuti* space, simple and compact roofed meditating pathways, and open-air meditating walkways that matched the human scale.

Meanwhile, the path to and from the village was generally a walking route because few people were coming to make merit at the temple, or they came at a time that did not interfere with the monks' practices. Overall, the natural environment and physical construction of the buildings throughout this period represented the nature of a forest monastery within the socio-cultural context of a previous agrarian culture that emphasized labor. In the context of space production, mental space was more prominent than physical space during this period. In the representation of space, the architectural space should facilitate monks' meditation practices. Interactions between the monastery and villagers were minimal in order to ensure their *Dhamma* practices.

The Changes of Monastery Space in the Period of Faith (1969-2005)

1. The boundary and environment

The boundary was increased by villagers donating, exchanging, and purchasing additional land, totalling roughly 500 *rais*. The additional boundary was located adjacent to the village's road. As a result, the main entrance moved from east to north, decreasing the walk from the monastery to the village. Aside from making merit, people came to find forest goods and hunt animals, particularly boars. Furthermore, people from the neighborhood expanded their farming along the boundary, resulting in permanent fencing around the monastery, which had previously served as an animal sanctuary and peace zone.

⁸ There is no record of Luang Pu Pratuang's birthdate. The author assumed that if his administration period was for seven years prior to his death in 1969, at that time, Luang Phu Pratuang was likely over 60 years old (born before 1907). This could have posed a challenge to his ability to go on a meditation pilgrimage in the forest as he had done when he was younger. No record is available of when he became ordained. According to the analysis, he was a disciple and was among the preachers of Phra Achan Man's line who were strict in practicing *Patipata* meditational pilgrimage, i.e., Luang Pu Khao Analayo, Luang Pu Khamdee Pakso, Luang Ta Maha Bua Yannasampanno, so the conceptual influence remained in setting the environment of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam.

2. Land use and space management

In addition to changing the main entrance, the open-area court was widened to accommodate the increasing number of ordinations. Furthermore, the *Buddhawat* space had been designated as a religious activity area. A Buddha image known as Phra Buddha Mettakhun was created and placed there, and the location became the monastery's center. This large image was constructed by Luang Pu Sawang Opasso who was inspired from his meditation. A *chedi* (pagoda), was also built to house the relics of Luang Pu Pratuang, the previous abbot. Currently, the *chedi* is the temple's largest and tallest building (Figure 5-right). The prayer hall was located in front of it. The belief was that as monks did their religious practices, Lord Buddha would function as the chairperson, witnessing all of the monks' events. The multi-purpose pavilion and another building in the middle of the water were further out and became locations where laypeople could participate in various rites.

More *kutis* were constructed along the stream and into the jungle, with Luang Pu Sawang Opasso's *kuti* in the center to keep an eye on the disciples (Figure 4). Therefore, these buildings' orientation was not required to be considered. The *kuti* cluster was viewed as the *Sangkhawat* space. The surrounding environment was considered, based on the *Avasa-sappaya* principle, in which serenity and tranquility of an abode are considered most important. This can be seen from the fact that the religious activity zone for lay people, the multi-purpose lawn, and building complex for female lay people to meditate were visibly distinct from *Sangkhawat* area.

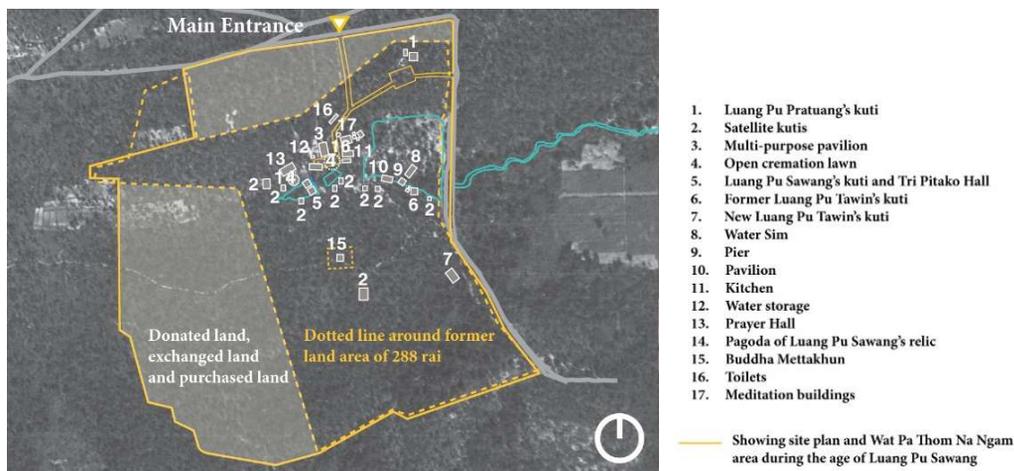


Figure 4 Area plans and areas of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam during the period of Abbot Luang Pu Sawang Opasso

Source: Edited from aerial photography, Royal Thai Survey Department (1967)

3. Buildings in the monastery

Among the increasing number of buildings such as the *kutis* during this period were some designed by Luang Pu Pratuang, who had construction skills. Examples include the new multi-purpose pavilion and his *kuti* with the meditating walkway connecting to the waterside *Tripitaka* Hall (*Ho Trai* in Thai, the library) which was built in 1986. Overall, these structures reflected the tropical climate, which is in harmony with the natural environment. Nowadays, the *kuti* of Luang Pu Pratuang, like that of the first abbot, expresses the characteristics of producing memories or mental spaces from the past through physical places. Villagers continue to pay homage to this *kuti* regularly.

In 1972, an *ubosot* or ordination hall (*sim* in local Thai) (Figure 5-center) was built in the pond following the principles of the seven *Sappaya*, hereinafter referred to as a water *sim*. Because of people's faith in Luang Pu Sawang Opasso and the forest monasteries of the Phra Achan Man lineage, the number of people wishing to ordain here had visibly increased, even though there was already a village temple, therefore further construction was required to facilitate such activities. According to traditional practice, the water *sim* must be roughly six meters away from the bank. Because the Huay Sai brook has a natural flow of water, a water *sim* was designed with that in mind. Overall, it differs from *ubosot* erected in the community in terms of size, as it is intended to be adequate for basic use without ornamental elements, and the idea behind the location selection and significance firmly adheres to the standards of a forest monastery.

Although waterworks reached the temple during this period, electricity and lighting were limited to use in the multi-purpose pavilion. All *kutis* still use lanterns. *Kutis* at the end of this time were built with cement and wood, and had a tile roof and toilets that met current hygiene standards.



Figure 5 Architectural forms and physical environment of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam (1969-2005)

Source: Disciple Group of Thom Na Ngam Forest Temple (2005)

4. The characteristics of space practice and social interaction

The second abbot, Luang Pu Sawang Opasso, was 36 years old when he became abbot for four Lent years. According to history, he learned about meditation from numerous forest monastery preachers. During the early stage of his administration, he focused on meditation methods rather than on pilgrimage to faraway places, while observing strict seclusion. Later, his practices gained more followers, including those who had faith in the sacredness, miracles, and supernatural power of lineage, and it was believed that merit-making with these monks would gain more merit, which led to an increase in the number of people visiting for both merit-making and ordination. It also had the technological benefits of more news outlets and more convenient transportation, as well as more open space for people than during the Luang Pu Pratuang period.

During this time, the interaction between villagers and forest monasteries became stronger, and the social space (representational space) attributes began to increase because of the powerful charisma of Luang Pu Sawang Opasso's own religious personality.

Although there were additional buildings on the monastery grounds, such as *kuti*, the *Tripitaka* hall, and the water *sim*, their sizes were all based on human scale, of a size and form for purely functional purposes. The use of materials was simple and not excessive. Furthermore, Luang Pu Sawang Opasso's decision to use electricity and lighting only at the multi-purpose pavilion represented his efforts to preserve stringent meditative practices and seclusion from temptations, such as radio, television, and mobile phones.

Luang Pu Sawang Opaso followed the philosophy of Phra Achan Man to develop the monastery and allow it to remain unaffected even by improved communications. His behavior also earned the respect and admiration of the surrounding villagers and devotees, attracting more villagers to meditate, and the role of the monastery shifted from primarily serving monks to appropriately serving villagers, gradually transforming its unique mental space into a social space.

The Adjustment for Monastery Space (2005-2022)

1. The boundary and living environment

The monastery's immediate surroundings are 500 *rai* of agricultural land at present, bordered by a concrete wall. More groundwater wells were drilled because of the waterworks' inefficiency from the beginning. Groundwater can also aid in circulating water in the demonstration farm plots. The electricity and lighting systems currently rely on public utilities, and shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, solar cells were installed in the *kuti* area to support the agricultural section. The monastery now owns a central mobile phone for general contact but has no regular users. Luang Pu Pratuang's *kuti*, Luang Pu Sawang Opaso's *kuti*, and a vacant *kuti* group are scattered throughout the woods and along the stream, with the meditation training building, which has been closed, being well maintained by the monks and supportive lay people. Certain *kuti* areas have been converted into offices that operate experimental agricultural plots, such as growing rice in cement wells, or for farm machine storage. The schedule for people coming to help and learn about farming is dependent on the month's holy days.

2. Land use and space management

Currently, the monastery is separated into three parts based on usage and various types of users.

- 1) *Sanghawat*, only for monks, including water *sim*, *kutis* and the meditating walkways inside the temple and between trees;
- 2) *Buddhawat*, closest to the main entrance of the temple and including the multi-purpose pavilion, kitchen, toilets, and parking ground;
- 3) *Sangha torani*, including the cremation ground, farm plots where community people can come to grow crops, the produce of which can be used for monks' consumption, personal consumption, and donation (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Layout of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam from 2005 to the present

Source: Edited from aerial photography, Royal Thai Survey Department (2002)

3. Buildings at the monastery

During this period, there has been less construction because the number of ordained monks decreased, and many of the existing huts were abandoned or transformed into alternative agricultural fields. The eaves of the multi-purpose pavilion were extended (Figure 7-left), while other buildings are primarily being maintained, as the buildings from Luang Pu Sawang Opasso's period are sufficient for use with appropriate components. Luang Pu Sawang's memorial *chedi* at the open court from the entrance was constructed continually from his period and completed in this period. Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak's *kuti* (Figure 7-right), besides being used for seclusion and meditation, is also utilized to run agricultural test plots with villagers and is located at the west end. This *kuti* is small and is designed following the *Vinaya* discipline. The roof of the *kuti* is tiled, and the design and construction are simple. The space beneath his *kuti* is used for storing farm equipment. Local resources were used in the building, such as wood planks, window casings, roof tiles, and prefabricated concrete columns. The major area on one side of the *kuti* is the walkway for meditating.



Figure 7 Extended multipurpose pavilion (left); water *sim*, not frequently used (middle); Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak's *Kuti* (right) at present.

4. The characteristics of space practice and social interaction

The value of *Dhamma* practices in the mountain cave led to increased faith among the villagers during the time Luang Pu Pratuang served as the abbot. Normally, villagers did not come to the monastery when they knew Luang Pu Pratuang was deeply focused on his meditation in the cave. During the period of Luang Pu Sawang Opasso, more people came because they believed in his practice and knew he usually stayed at the monastery rather than going on a pilgrimage or practicing meditation outside. This led to an increase in the size of the monastery's public area. To maintain the seven *Sappaya*, there needed to be a clearer distinction between the *Sangkawat* zone and *Buddhawat* zones than before.

During this period, Luang Pu Sawang did not adhere strictly to the previous forest monastery rules. He began to adapt to the times, strengthening the area's mental space with *kuti*. In terms of management, he encouraged people to grow trees and crops rather than enlarging the building area. Through such strategies, he fostered interactions with the villagers while remaining consistent with his master's principle of establishing forest monasteries to practice Buddhism.

Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak, the current abbot, continues to keep the *kutis* of the two former abbots as memorials, following in the footsteps of Luang Pu Sawang, who maintained Luang Pu Pratuang's *kuti* for mental support and as a memorial for both the monks the general public. Nonetheless, strict seclusion has been reduced over time and in different social circumstances. The target group is the

community's working-age population, rather than the elderly. In addition to preserving the original forest, they have planted more trees, including rubber trees, redwood, and fruit trees like Marian plum, guava, jackfruit, and durian. There are demonstration farm plots, such as rice planting in concrete wells, which embody the notion of mutual support and the creation of economic benefits through cooperation between the forest monastery and the community. Furthermore, the monastery encourages the community to take part in creating its natural environment to reduce the maintenance load on the monks. This allows the monks to have more time for meditation and practice.

Through such modifications, old forest monasteries have adapted positively to modern social life, allowing monks to return to secular space while also transcending secular space through their spiritual practice. Villagers might also take a break from the hustle and bustle of secular life to meditate here and earn merit. At the same time, they may preserve the monastery environment through mutual assistance and benefit, reducing the monks' workload. The social space of the forest monastery provides them with an opportunity to relax and transcend themselves.

Conclusion

Despite the community's more complicated dimensions and numerous changes, the major status of a "forest monastery" remains related to the social environment. When society develops dynamically, the forest monastery must react to maintain its existence alongside the effects of development, until there are changes in both the "physical space" and the "mental space" of monks and laypeople. The Phra Achan Man lineage has numerous disciples who have built forest monasteries in the Isan area to spread his Buddhist rituals and ideals. However, fewer and fewer retain the original form. The expansion of the national economy, policy adjustments, and the acceleration of urbanization have influenced the area occupied by forest monasteries. People, particularly young people, are no longer as strongly associated with temples as previous generations once were. Some forest monasteries in Isan belonging to Phra Achan Man's lineage have undergone significant physical alterations, due to the explosive growth of materialism and the dynamic of communication by rapid technological advancements. As a result, forest monasteries have to face more issues than do village temples.

Faced with these challenges and the impact of urbanization, Wat Thom Na Ngam not only maintains the characteristics of a forest monastery, but also creates its own development path. The Buddhawat and Sangkhawat spaces in forest monasteries differ from those of village temples, for the purpose of encouraging community inhabitants to participate in forest monastery activities. At the same time, the seven *Sappaya* are still strictly enforced, and the monastery's status is currently in place. It corresponds with the requirements of the forest monastery's original physical space while also achieving harmony between people and nature. More people from nearby villages are willing to come to make merit, resulting in a dynamic and positive interaction between the villages and the forest monastery, as well as monks and villagers. In the process of "spatial practice," the abbots' inheritance of Phra Achan Man's practice ensures that the architectural space of the forest monastery retains its original scale and form during the development process. Of course, the abbot's ability to manage the environment and his determination to adhere to the original environmental criteria are important factors.

At the same time, succeeding abbots created a mental space with a solid core of Buddhist teachings through their preaching and behavior as part of the process of "representation of space." The accumulation

of merit is mirrored in the “popularization of merit” in the monastery’s holy places, buildings, and rituals, which are believed to bring merit quickly.

Although each abbot’s socioeconomic and cultural background varied, they all maintained the characteristics and meditation of forest monasteries while adjusting to the changing times. Luang Po Suwimon Sanguansak, the present abbot, disseminates the concept of land and forest resource usage by sharing agricultural land with community members to transcend their traditional merit-making and *Dhamma* practices, which result in mutual assistance and reciprocity between the forest monastery and the community. Consequently, adjustments to the architectural space as well as social interaction with villagers improve the physical and mental space of meditation and form a social space where the secular and the religious are integrated. This development model of Wat Pa Thom Na Ngam thus provides an alternative way for other forest monasteries in the northeastern region of Thailand.

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