

# บทบาทของพิธีกรรมแบบดั้งเดิมในการสืบสานทางวัฒนธรรม และการท่องเที่ยวในหมู่บ้านผู้ไทย

## The Role of Traditional Rituals in Cultural Maintenance and Tourism in a Phu Tai Village

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษาการปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างพิธีกรรมแบบดั้งเดิมและการท่องเที่ยวในหมู่บ้านผู้ไทย อ.หนองสูง จ.มุกดาหาร ในการสืบสานพิธีกรรมแบบดั้งเดิมที่ส่งผลต่อการสนับสนุนการท่องเที่ยวและการจัดการมรดกวัฒนธรรม การวิจัยนี้ใช้การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ เก็บข้อมูลทั้งปฐมภูมิและทุติยภูมิ รวมทั้งการเก็บข้อมูลภาคสนามในด้านประวัติศาสตร์บอกเล่า การสังเกตการณ์ การสัมภาษณ์ และการบันทึกภาพ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ชุมชนผู้ไทยมีความเข้มแข็งทางวัฒนธรรมในการสืบสานพิธีกรรมแบบดั้งเดิม ชาวผู้ไทยตระหนักว่ารุ่นลูกหลานของเขาควรเข้าใจและภาคภูมิใจในวัฒนธรรมผู้ไทยและอัตลักษณ์ของตน นอกจากนี้ควรเปิดโอกาสให้ผู้อื่นได้เข้าใจวัฒนธรรมผู้ไทย ชาวผู้ไทยได้จัดการชุมชนให้เป็นแหล่งท่องเที่ยววัฒนธรรมผู้ไทยที่ดึงดูดนักท่องเที่ยวด้วยพิธีกรรมแบบดั้งเดิม นักท่องเที่ยวต่างชาติชื่นชมมรดกวัฒนธรรมผู้ไทยในแนวคิด “ความสำคัญทางวัฒนธรรม” ที่ให้คุณค่าทางด้านความคิดของมนุษยชาติที่ร้อยรัดประวัติศาสตร์ สังคม และความงามของวัฒนธรรมผู้ไทยเข้าไว้ด้วยกัน

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the interaction between traditional rituals and tourism in a Phu Tai village at Nong Sung district, Mukdahan Province. It aims to investigate how the maintenance of traditional rituals can contribute to promoting tourism and cultural heritage management for host communities. The data collection used a qualitative research approach, drawing on both primary and secondary sources. The field research included oral (local) history, field visits, observation, interviews and photography. It was found that the Phu Tai community feels strongly about preserving traditional rituals. Phu Tai people realize that the younger generations should understand Phu Tai culture and appreciate their identity. Moreover, they think that their culture should provide an opportunity for others to understand them. They are now managing their community as a tourist attraction with traditional rituals. It is considered to be authentic or traditional and thus is more likely to attract visitors. They admire Phu Tai cultural heritage according to the concept of “cultural significance” in determining information regarding culture that can be applied in field studies of human values and ideologies that embrace historical, social, and aesthetic values.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, traditional ritual, cultural maintenance, cultural significance, tourism, Phu Tai

## **1. Introduction**

Numerous ethnic groups have lived in what is now Isan or Thailand's Northeast since before the beginning of the Siamese Kingdom. Some of these groups went there to escape internal disturbances elsewhere or to seek new land suitable for cultivation. Others were forced to move there from their Lao homeland by the Siamese. The Phu Tai in Mukdahan Province migrated to Siam (Thailand) in the early Rattanakosin era ( 19<sup>th</sup> century).

They have maintained their identity to the present in spite of the rapid economic and urban development caused by globalization. The revolution in information technology, known as mass culture and mass media and the problems associated with them have brought about cultural changes to every ethnic group in Thailand.

Nevertheless, the Phu Tai villagers have not responded passively. At present, they are concerned that modern development is not always good or suitable for them in their daily socio-cultural context. They are aware that tourism and development have great impacts on cultural identity. They realize the value of their heritage and the importance of heritage management, conservation and preservation.

The main goal of cultural heritage management is to conserve both tangible and intangible heritage for succeeding generations. Conservation refers to the processes of looking after cultural heritage so as to retain a culture's meaning for its members. Thus, conservation should be included in all heritage tourism activities since it helps preserve the authenticity and identity of cultural heritage.

It is fortunate that some Phu Tai leaders have become more aware of cultural heritage conservation. They are trying to gain cooperation from among all involved stakeholders, including community villagers, government agents, members of the private sector, and tourists. In the end, Phu Tai villagers are learning to develop their village through sustainable development for tourism.

## 2. Goals and objectives

The broad goals of this study are as follows:

- To study Phu Tai history, society, religion and cultural contexts in order to assess the significance and value of its cultural heritage,
- To study the roles of traditional Phu Tai village rituals,
- To analyze factors facilitating the survival of Phu Tai culture.

## 3. Scope of study

The study area covers Noan Yang villages Moo 1 and 2, Noan Yang sub-district, Nong Sung district, Mukdahan Province. This study examines Phu Tai cultural heritage and values, and the relationship between the importance of maintaining traditional rituals and tourism during the Songkran festival.

## 4. Research methodology

The research method adopted in this study is a combination of a literature review, interviews, questionnaires and on-site participant and non- participant observation.

The various steps may be summarized as follows:

- Documentary research studied secondary source data in order to understand the background of the case study.
- Field research was used to understand social interactions.
- Survey, investigation, and photos of the site were used as backup.
- Participant and non-participant observation of the *Kong Bun*, *Fang Hoob Fang Hoi*, *Bun Phawet*, and *Bun Bang Fai* rituals— previously

held at different times but recently incorporated into the *Songkran* festival—to observe interactions between stakeholders involved with cultural heritage.

- In-depth interviews with key informants such as government officers, local leaders, local people, and tourists were employed to learn their viewpoints and knowledge about the structure and operation of tourism management.

- Questionnaires and data collection through interviews with tourists were used to understand tourist viewpoints and their appreciation of Phu Tai rituals.

- Assessment of the importance of Phu Tai cultural heritage and values for the Phu Tai.

- Analysis of the consequences of adaptation of Phu Tai people in terms of tourism management.

## **5. Conceptual framework**

### **5.1 Cultural heritage**

In examining the term “cultural heritage,” we should note that “culture has come to comprise ways of life such as history, civilization, wisdom and technology which continuously survive as the national identity and embody the spirit and soul of the people” (Nikom Musigakama and Weeranuj Polnikorn Maithai, 2000: 16). “Culture” also includes lessons learned on how to live in social harmony. This harmony is related to the environment as well as to the achievement of happiness. Culture is subject to change, reflecting the fact that is necessary for people to adjust their lifestyles in this ever-changing world.

Heritage, as Aplin (2002:14) has noted, “is passed down over many years within a family, social group, or nation and is thought of as belonging to all its members.” Heritage implies a gift for future generations and benefits for the community. According to Siriporn Nanta, “Heritage is our legacy from the past what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations” (2000: 6). Retention of heritage depends on a person’s background, life experiences, personality, and a group of people with a common socio-economic, cultural or ethnic background.

This study focuses on intangible cultural heritage, as defined in the Convention adopted by the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session of the General Conference of UNESCO. This heritage includes the practices, representations, and expressions—“as well as the associated knowledge and the necessary skills that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.” Intangible cultural heritage, which is sometimes called living cultural heritage, covers the following domains:

- Oral traditions, expressions and language;
- The performing arts;
- Social practices, rituals, and festive events;
- Knowledge and practices about nature and the universe;
- Traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003)

An assessment of cultural significance is the key step in the process of cultural heritage preservation. This study employs an assessment of the significance of cultural heritage and values as developed by ICOMOS Australia (1999) in its Burra Charter for Places of Cultural Significance. This statement defines the basic principles and procedures of conservation for all kinds of places such as monuments, archeological sites, houses, gardens, villages, and even whole districts or regions. Moreover, it includes all conservation

and management processes ranging from definitions, principles, and cautions to knowledge skills and techniques, values and processes.

Cultural significance is a concept that helps estimate the value of heritage in order to make a statement of significance, which helps lead to understanding the past or enriching the present, and which will be of value to future generations. Cultural heritage can have one or more of the following values:

**Aesthetic value, which** includes aspects of sensory perception for which criteria can and should be stated. Such criteria may include consideration of the form, scale, color, texture and material of fabric, and the smells and sounds associated with the place and its use.

**Historical value** encompasses the history of aesthetics, science and society, and therefore, to a large extent, underlies all of the terms set out in this section.

**Scientific value** depends on the importance of the data involved, its rarity, quality of representativeness, and the degree to which the place may contribute further substantial information.

**Social value** embraces the qualities for which a place has become a focus of spiritual, political, national or other cultural sentiment to a majority or minority group. (ICOMOS, 1999: 12)

## **5.2 Ethnic tourism**

Usually, ethnic tourism is associated with general cultural tourism, but Wood (1984) makes a clear distinction between the two. While cultural tourism combines exposure to a culture in an indirect way, ethnic tourism

combines first-hand experience with the practice of another culture to provide tourists with more “intimate” and “authentic” experience.

### **5.3 Impact of tourism**

Tourism is often considered a viable option for community development that can improve an economy without compromising environmental resources. However, there is evidence that tourism can have negative effects on the quality of life of a people, especially in its social and cultural aspects.

The most immediate concern regarding increasing tourism is the effect of overcrowding. Rosenow and Pulsipher (1979) describe a tourism development in St. George, Utah where poor planning and growth management led to the loss of identity and local culture. The result is a town with few distinguishing features and little remaining of its unique setting and history.

### **5.4 Sustainable tourism**

Past tourism has had both negative and positive impacts. Tourism without planning or good administration and management can be a catalytic factor causing the disappearance of cultural heritage. According to Rosenow and Pulsipher (1979), the disappearance of a culture's heritage is an indication that poor planning and growth management have resulted in the loss of identity and local culture.



## 6. Results of the study



Map of Isan

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isan>

Most Phu Tai in Thailand's Northeast (Isan) were moved into Thailand as war refugees beginning in the early Rattanakosin era (the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Under King Rama III's foreign policies, Phu Tai were moved to the right bank of the Mekong River, where they sought new settlements suitable for cultivation (Suwit Thirasasawat and Narong U-pun quoted in Somjai Damrongsakul, 2002: 6). At present, most Phu Tai live in the following provinces: Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan, Kalasin and Udon Thani.

According to the migration legend of the Phu Tai in Noan Yang village, they moved from Muang Wang and Muang Kham Or in what is now Laos during the era of King Rama III. The first place settled was Nong O Yai village, followed by Nong O Noi (currently Noan Yang) village. Both villages have rituals that are closely linked to the history of the Phu Tai, which refer to the connection between the people and the land through their ancestors.

### 6.1 The significance and values of Phu Tai Cultural heritage

The following statement of cultural heritage significance for Phu Tai in Nong Sung District, Mukdahan Province is proposed following the Burra Charter guidelines:

*The Phu Tai originated in Muang Thang in Vietnam. They have since settled in Vietnam, Laos and the Northeast of Thailand. The Phu Tai in Mukdahan Province, Thailand, migrated into these new areas because of King Rama III's foreign policies and sought new settlements suitable for cultivation.*

*Generally, the Phu Tai maintain their culture and uniqueness through beliefs and ceremonies passed down from their ancestors. They have their own items of historical value accumulated over time since the early Ratanakosin era, reflected in the aesthetic beauty of their houses, temples, costumes, and handicrafts. In addition, the Phu Tai have significant social value as an ethnic community, a minority group among multiple minority groups, such as So, Lao (Thai-Lao), and Vietnamese (Thai-Veit), which is reflected in the good relationships among all these groups. The integrity of the Phu Tai historic, social, religious, spiritual, scientific, and aesthetic characteristics has established a unique identity for this community and it represents a significant cultural heritage worthy of preservation and conservation.*

**Phu Tai Cultural Heritage**

(Source: Author's pictures)



Phu Tai elder



Making merit



Phu Tai performance



Making merit in the wihan



Phu Tai healer (Mo yao)



*Tung* (banners) in the wihan



Phu Tai wihan



Phu Tai handicrafts



Bun Phawet procession

## 6.2 Phu Tai tourism

Because of the popularity of their cultural heritage, Phu Tai villages are thought of as viable tourist attractions for visitors. The presentation of Phu Tai cultural community heritage should be promoted as a new ethnic-tourism destination during the Amazing Thailand campaign because of what Wood (1984) would have called its intimate, authentic experience, consisting of the elements listed below.

- The Phu Tai ethnic group has its own cultural significance and values:
  - a) historical values that illustrate the authentic lifestyle, customs, culture, and traditions which are still alive;
  - b) social values that are the core strength of the local community which lead to its use with a focus on spiritual and cultural sentiment among minority groups;
  - c) religious and spiritual values which reflect the norms, traditions, ceremonies, taboos, prohibitions, and rituals as part of their way of life;
  - d) scientific values that reveal Phu Tai wisdom as reflected in the traditional techniques of Phu Tai weaving and temple design;
  - e) aesthetic values that refer to the characteristics of Phu Tai vernacular architecture including the ritual atmosphere.
- Phu Tai cultural heritage evokes the sense of an authentic ethnic traditional way of life in Thailand's Northeast.
- The Phu Tai ethnic group offers a unique experience because of the culture's tranquil and natural atmosphere, cultural environment and people.

## 6.3 Adaptation of Phu Tai rituals in the *Songkran* festival

Phu Tai tourism is well known in Renu Nakhon district in Nakhon Phanom Province, where the people demonstrate their way of life through traditional performance, costumes, language, etc.

In the Phu Tai village in Khok Kong subdistrict of Kuchinarai district, Kalasin Province, the rural development program has turned the entire village over to Phu Tai village tourism, which has caused conflict of interest among some Phu Tai villagers. If tourism development is to be available as a long-term economic strategy, these concerns must be addressed, and the resource base must be protected in the process.

**6.3.1 Phu Tai rituals in the contemporary world**

*Bun Phawet*, which involves a number of rituals centered on recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka* (or *Wetsandon Chadok*), traditionally is held annually during the dry season in the fourth month of the Tai lunar calendar (March). Phu Tai villagers perform a ritual to provide enough rain needed for the upcoming paddy planting season.

In maintaining their culture, Phu Tai villagers wish for their relatives to return home for the long *Songkran* festival, or Tai New Year, which is held in mid-April. They have adapted Phu Tai rituals by changing the date of the *Bun Phawet* ritual. The ritual is practiced over three days, along with others, including the *Kong Bun*, *Fang Hoob Fang Hoi*, and *Bun Bang Fai*. Visitors are Phu Tai relatives and tourists who come to make merit during the *Bun Phawet* ritual.

Traditional rituals & dates	Contemporary rituals & dates
1. <i>Kong Bun</i> (fourth month / March) 2. <i>Fang Hoob Fang Hoi</i> and <i>Bun Phawet</i> (fourth month / March) 3. <i>Bun Songkran</i> (fifth month / April) 4. <i>Bun Bang Fai</i> (sixth month / May)	1. <i>Kong Bun</i> 2. <i>Fang Hoob Fang Hoi</i> and <i>Bun Phawet</i> 3. <i>Bun Songkran</i> 4. <i>Bun Bang Fai</i>

} *Songkran* festival  
(13-17 April, 2010)

## **Songkran festival (13-17 April 2010)**

**April 13-15, 2010**

*Bun Songkran* serves to strengthen family and community bonds, spread a spirit of good will, and get the New Year off to an auspicious start. It is also a time to pay respect to elders and ancestors, showing gratitude for what they have done.

### ***Bun Songkran***

(Source: Author's pictures)



Pouring lustral water over the monk  
(Phu Tai *Bun Songkran* at Khum Khiyang  
village, Kalasin Province)



Pouring scented water on the elder's  
hands and asking forgiveness for any  
wrongdoings in the past year. After  
that, the elder gives blessings to  
relatives.

**April 15, 2010**

On the afternoon of the first day, the villagers carried a pallet of consumer goods in procession to their temple. This ritual, known as *Kong Bun*, involves a person's making of merit to his or her ancestors with many consumer goods. Relatives from other villages made merit with their own goods or money along with the major sponsor to the owner of the *Kong Bun* at the temple in the evening.

### **Kong Bun**

(Source: Author's pictures)



(1)



(2)



(3)



(4)

1-4 Making offerings to the ancestors

### **April 16, 2010**

On the morning of the second day, Phu Tai people presented consumer goods to the monks. Subsequently, they joined in the *Fang Hoob Fang Hoi* rite, which is held in only two Phu Tai villages— Nong O Yai and Noan Yang— with in the temple area. This animistic rite is carried out to re-enact an old belief reflecting the Phu Tai worldview by displaying a dependency on their ecological as well as socio-cultural environment, through spirit worship. In this ritual, they manifested propagation through wooden symbolic genitals. During the celebration, participants wore costumes made of many pieces of fabric sewn together, with black faces because they represent the spirits.

**Fang Hoob Fang Hoi**

(Source: Author's pictures)



Villagers dressed as "Phi Pa" or forest spirits



Participants



Audience



Tourists



The Leader of the ritual "Mo Yao" contacts the spirits to the village oracle



Offerings to the spirits



Wooden symbolic genitals



Pouring lustral water over the crowd



Returning home with offerings that have been blessed



In the afternoon, the Bun Phawet procession started from the school and ended at the temple. Phu Tai people joined in by holding on to a long cloth scroll on which was painted scenes from the *Vessantara Jataka*, the story of the previous life of the Buddha. Following this, villagers went to the paddy field to join *Bun Bang Fai* ritual which is a reference to Thaeen (a rain god in the folklore of several Tai groups) in which rockets are fired as part of the rain-making rite.

**Bun Phawet**

(Source: The author's pictures)



Phu Tai temple



Bun Phawet announcement



Phu Tai procession



Tambon Noan Yang  
Administration  
Organization officials



Tourists



The parade of women  
elders carrying the *Bun  
Phawet* or *Vessantara  
Jataka* scroll



Carrying the scroll into  
the wihan



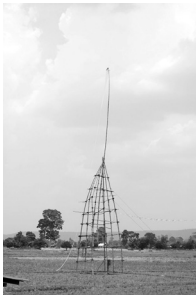
Hanging the *Vessantara*  
*Jataka* scroll



Joining in merit-making

### ***Bun Bang Fai***

(Source: Author's pictures)



The longest *tung* (banner)



The rain-making rite



### **April 17, 2010**

More merit-making took place in earnest on the third day of *Bun Phawet*. It began with a visit to the temple to make offerings of cooked food to the monks. The pious remained on to listen to the monks' recitation the story of *Vessantara Jataka* all day and into the night.

This *Bun Phawet* festival, together with the *Kong Bun*, *Fang Hoob*, *Fang Hoi* and *Bun Bang Fai* rites, demonstrates an effort to strengthen social

ties among the Phu Tai villagers of the same village as well as those of the neighboring villages. These rituals are intimately connected with Phu Tai villagers; their functions are to provide and ensure happiness and prosperity.

Because these rituals are an intangible cultural heritage, they must be preserved by community members as they practice and manifest its forms. If the rituals are still alive - if the people practice them and they remain vital and sustainable with a supportive community, they can be essential in safeguarding the cultural heritage.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Phu Tai rituals are not fixed in a form that remains constant forever. They must be adapted to fit the contemporary community. Authenticity is about protecting value for the community. It allows for healthy change while conserving value so that villagers can adapt certain rituals according to the contemporary needs of the community.

Phu Tai community participation involves a number of people. For example, the consent of community leaders is required, consultation with lead cultural practitioners must take place, shared decision-making on strategies and tactics of safeguarding the cultural heritage must occur, and so on.

Moreover, this community appears in the TV program, "*Phan Sang Rung*," a famous documentary show about ethnic groups. The community also cooperates with the Tambon Administration Organization of Noan Yang which supported funding for the Bun Phawet ritual.

Thus, the protection, conservation, and management of cultural heritage must begin at the local level. One of the key successes of sustainable development is to enable the local community to understand, appreciate, care for, and be aware of the value of their own heritage. Another important way of creating community support is to raise community awareness.

This awareness is combined with a sense of heritage and belonging through education, training and human resource development. Thus, the local community should be informed of the importance of its own heritage, recognize it, and address the issues in order to be able to actively participate in the decision making process.

### 6.3.2 Ethnic tourism in Phu Tai villages

According to the questionnaires and observations of the Noan Yang villagers' *Bun Phawet* ritual, visiting tourists (mostly women aged between 21 to 30 years old) were given recommendations about the festivities by villagers' friends and relatives or academic scholars. The villagers treated them with hospitality, but they could not take them back to sleep in the village because their relatives had come to stay as well. Thus, tourists had to reserve rooms at a resort near the village.

From the 70 questionnaires, the findings reveal the impressions and of appreciations of Phu Tai culture as follows:

1. The way of life is simple;
2. The traditional temple is beautiful;
3. The *Bun Phawet* ritual hasn't changed;
4. Phu Tai people are hospitable, informal and united;
5. Tourists admire the preservation and conversation of Phu Tai

culture, the way of life, the traditional Phu Tai temple, and rituals.

Other opinions

1. Phu Tai people should protect and conserve Phu Tai culture for the next generation;
2. Phu Tai people should promote their culture to other ethnic groups;
3. This Phu Tai village should be a model for other communities;

4. Phu Tai villagers should not expect so much from tourists but rather should appreciate their own culture.



Neighboring villagers



Answering the  
questionnaires



Visiting her hometown  
with her family

(Source: Author's pictures)

## **7. A trend of sustainable tourism development.**

Tourism development should respond not only to the needs of tourists, but also the communities serving the tourists, particularly concerning the conservation of the communities' cultural identities. The local community is the direct stakeholder of tourism resources. If these resources are conserved in a balanced way, they will draw the attention of visitors and bring benefits to the communities.

In essence, cultural heritage management is a part of a carefully planned, managed and controlled tourism that serves and enhances heritage conservation which can be sustained in the long-term. Also, it helps to maintain the quality of life of the Phu Tai while providing an experience that will allow visitors to understand and appreciate Phu Tai cultural heritage and respect Phu Tai culture in an era of globalization.

### Cooperation

(Source: The author's pictures)



The role of elders in safeguarding Phu Tai cultural heritage



The role of local authorities in supporting the *Bun Phawet* festival



The role of television in promoting Phu Tai rituals



Accessible transportation



Academic scholar



Tourist

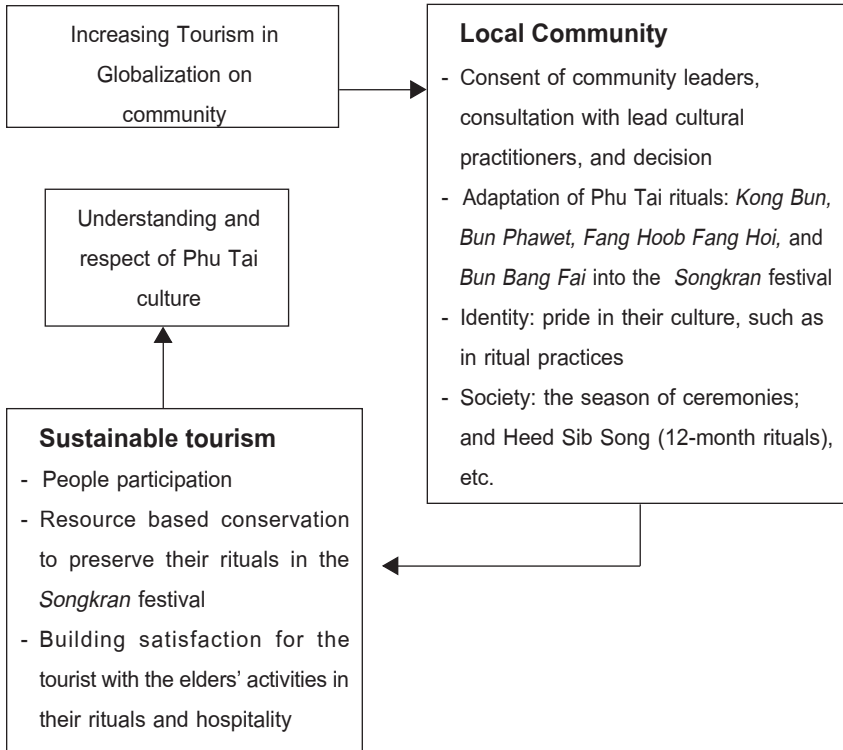
From this study, it has become clear that Phu Tai villages have the potential to conduct sustainable tourism development that would be responsive to the needs of the Phu Tai people and their way of life and the demands of tourists. This development impacts on both the owner and tourists through the learning together. Sustainable tourism is a new solution reflecting the culture of the local community, particularly the important roles of elders in conserving cultural heritage through traditions in their village. Such development should be based on the village's capacity and ability to conserve its environment and identity.

However, today most governments in Southeast Asia focus on using tourism to make money. Dr. Akin Rabibhadana, a leading Thai anthropologist after completing a study on the impacts of tourism on the Bang Fai festival, concluded,

*"...culture will continually change as the society and the beliefs of the people change. Tourism may be just one factor contributing to change. Tourism in itself neither harms or helps the culture: it is how we deal with it that matters. If we are willing to do everything to our culture – modifying it, changing it, making it falsely more spectacular in order to attract tourists – then we would damage our culture. We would be prostituting ourselves and selling culture for money from tourists' pockets." (Akin. 1992)*

It is important that civil society activists and academics in major tourism destinations equip themselves with knowledge about the impact of tourism and participate in the process of tourism planning and monitoring. In the case of the Phu Tai group, other ethnic groups can share their experiences and learn from one another. The way in which these ethnic groups may benefit from tourism depends upon the creation and exchange of knowledge and the level of public participation in tourism planning and monitoring.

## 8. Conclusion



This study demonstrates that there is a positive connection between the maintenance of traditional rituals on the one hand and successful tourism promotion on the other. Local community has awareness of cultural heritage management and of sustainable tourism. In addition, local community involvement will create learning and experiencing process and will instill a consciousness of value and significance of cultural heritage of the village, which will lead to satisfaction, lasting impressions and strengthening of the local community.



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