

Todd Phapa: The Construction of Isan Identity in Northern Thailand

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Todd Phapa: The Construction of Isan Identity in Northern Thailand

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Abstract

This research examines Todd Phapa, the Buddhist tradition to earn merit with other temples/villages to which they are obligated to give back. This study focuses on people from Isan who now reside in Pang Moddaeng, Ang Thong sub-district, Chiang Kham District, Phayao province, Northern Thailand.

To understand the historical background and utilization of Todd Phapa, I employ anthropological methodologies, such as participant observation, group focusing, and in-depth interviews. I adopt the concepts of constructing identity, politics of identity, and representation of cultural identities to analyze how Todd Phapa constructs Isan identity.

As a cultural practice, I found that Todd Phapa consists of two major forms at the community level: kinship lines and Isan routes.

In terms of how Isan routes are represented among migrant Isan communities, I find that Todd Phapa represents Isan identity in two ways. The first identity is characterized by the attributes of committed Buddhism constructed to establish and sustain favorable relationships with the Lanna people (*Khon Muang*) and Lue people in their new places of settlement. Two implications thereof are: 1. the migrant group desires inclusion among the native Khon Muang and Lue people groups based on the recognition that they demonstrate the same level of commitment to Buddhism and 2. this commitment might redeem the Isan community from being observed as poor, irresponsible, and primitive. The second identity is characterized by the appreciation of Isan routes, which is constructed to be a favorable representation of the people in their places of origin. This identity was represented in their approach to Todd Phapa.

Keyword

Pang Moddaeng, Northern Thailand, Migrant Isan People, Construction of Identities

トートパーパー：北タイにおけるイサーンのアイデンティティ形成

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要旨

本稿は、仏教徒が自身の村や寺院以外の場で功德を積み、恩を受けた村人や寺院はその返礼をすべきとされる互酬的な「トートパーパー」(*Todd Phapa*) と呼ばれる伝統的仏教実践について考察したものである。本研究では、北タイ・パヤオ県チャン・カム郡アントン区パーン・モッデー

ン村に暮らすイサーンの人々を取り上げ、トートパーパーの歴史的背景およびその活用について理解するために、特定の集団への参与観察や聞き取りなどの文化人類学的手法を用いた。また、トートパーパーがどのようにイサーンのアイデンティティを形成しているかを分析するために、アイデンティティ構築やその政治性、および文化的アイデンティティの表象に関わる理論を援用した。

本調査により、文化的実践として、トートパーパーは、コミュニティレベルでの親族関係およびイサーンのルーツという主に二つの要素を持つことが明らかとなった。また移民イサーンのコミュニティにおいて、いかにイサーンのルーツが表象されているかという点では、トートパーパーが次の二つの点でイサーンのアイデンティティを示していることがわかった。

第一に示されるアイデンティティは、仏教への寄与に特徴付けられ、移住先におけるマジョリティであるランナー人 (Lanna) の人々やルー (Lue) の人々との良好な関係を構築し、維持するために形成される。これは、1. 「自分たちはランナーやルーの人々と同等の仏教的寄与を実践している」というイサーンの人々の認識に基づき、イサーン移民集団が先住のランナーやルーの集団内における包摂を望んでいるという点、2. こうした仏教への寄与によって、イサーンのコミュニティが貧しく、責任感に欠け、遅れているとみなされる状態が改善されるという点を示唆している。

第二に示されるアイデンティティは、イサーンのルーツについての認識によって特徴づけられる。北タイに移住しても彼らが、故郷においてなお、よきイサーン人として認められるために形成されるものである。

キーワード

パーン・モッデー、北タイ、移民イサーン、アイデンティティ形成

1. Introduction

Pang Moddaeng village is located in Ang Thong sub-district, Chiang Kham District, Phayao province, Northern Thailand. It is about twelve kilometers from Chiang Kham district and seventy-four kilometers from Phayao province. It is one of the thirteen villages governed by Ang Thong Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO.). There are a total of thirteen villages in this sub-district. There are three main ethnic groups of people in Ang Thong sub-district. They are divided by villages, village nos. 3, 7, 11, and 12 are the villages of Lanna people (*Khon Muang*). The only village no. 8 is that of Lue people. Other villages are those of migrant Isan people. Village nos. 6, 9, 10, and 13, generally referred

to by local people as Pang Moddaeng village, represent the first settlements of Isan people in northern Thailand. (Table 1)

Migrant Isan people in Pang Moddaeng mainly came from Roi-et, Kalasin, Chaiyaphum, Mahasarakham, and Khon Kaen provinces around 1958. There are many reasons for their relocation from northeastern Thailand (*Isan region*), such as the lack of land for cultivation due to population growth, drought, and flooding. Some emigrated in response to the Planning of National Economic and Social Development, which began in 1961. As Kanyanut (2012:3) stated in her study, some Isan people migrated to the northern part of Thailand to avoid being labeled as poor, irresponsible, and primitive due to the presence of the development project. (Figure 1)

Table 1: Villages and Ethnic Affiliation (those highlighted are the villages studied)

Source: Made by author

Village No.	Names	Ethnicity
1	Nean Samak Kee	Lao
2	Doi Isan	Lao
3	Lhai Pattana	Lanna
4	Bo Noi	Lao
5	Nhong Bua Ngean	Lao
6	Na Jareon	Lao
7	Jum Bon	Lanna
8	San Pu Lei	Lue
9	Pang Moddaeng	Lao
10	Pang Moddaeng	Lao
11	Nean Sai Klang	Lanna
12	Jum Bon	Lanna
13	Na Jareon	Lao

Pang Moddaeng’s villagers originating from several places in the region of Isan described how northern Thailand was portrayed as an ideal place to settle. Its idealization derived mainly from the stories of traveling monks, mobile traders, and soldiers, who would narrate their tales of pilgrimage, trade, and war in areas of the North. Chiang Rai and Phayao, located around the Ing and Kok rivers’ basins, had been noted for their abundance of valuable trees, fertile land, and various types of the water source. It compelled the start of the migration, some journeying alone and others relocating with their wider families.

Few studies have investigated the problems encountered by Isan people coming to reside in northern Thailand. Supakit (1996) found that settlement in northern Thailand had the potential to compromise the cultural identity of Isan people under pressure to adopt the practices of the native Lanna. Furthermore, Kayanut (2012) showed that the Isan diaspora had become marginalized as an inferior culture. Thippawan (2002) stated that moving to new places to settle down brought difficulties and limitations in adapting, especially for agricultural cultivation and retaining their cultural practices. Moreover, Kittiwon (2014) discovered that even after efforts to assimilate among the five native ethnic groups of Lanna, Lue, Yao, Hmong, and Thai-Isan, in Romyen sub-district, Chiang Kham District, Phayao province, Lanna culture dominated all aspects of public life including the traditional dress required to be worn on Fridays, the common language of education, and the language used for Buddhist chanting each morning.

Attempts to resolve these problems and conflicts with other ethnic groups have entailed synthesizing and exchanging cultural practices.

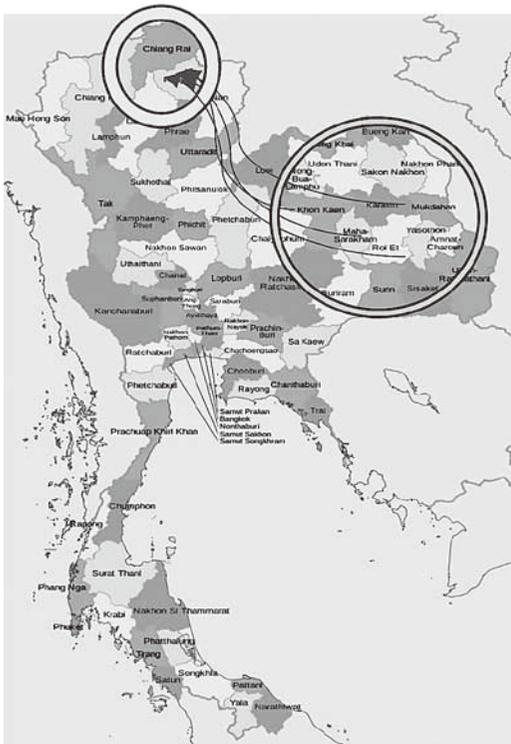


Figure 1: Routes of Migration from Isan in Eastern Thailand to Phayao province in the North

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provinces_of_Thailand, (figures over the map applied by author)

However, the Isan community has also striven to promote its unique cultural identity where opportunities have arisen (Kittiwit, 2014). Tippawan (2002) showed that in the cultivation of natural resources in their new places of settlement, Isan people have drawn on both their indigenous and modern knowledge. While the study of Supakit (1999) found that the community has tried to preserve its cultural identity, the outcomes of Kanyanut's (2012) investigation suggest that they have endeavored to manage plural identities in order to integrate with other people groups, specifically the Lanna group.

In light of the findings of these previous studies, it is important to note that the researchers were less concerned about investigating how the Isan community has maintained its kinship ties to their places of origin. In addition, these studies largely neglected a focus on the purposes necessitating the community to retain or reconstruct their cultural identity. Thus, in the current study, I am concerned with investigating how the Isan community constructs its cultural identity among the Lanna and Lue people groups. Furthermore, I have sought to find out how the community has endeavored to retain or reconstruct its Buddhist cultural tradition, Todd Phapa, to create a new cultural identity. The research has enabled me to understand how they have tried to maintain an identity representative of their place of origin and adapt it to assimilate to the culture of the people groups residing in their place of settlement.

1.1 Research questions

In order to understand how the migrant Isan community endeavors to negotiate problems of cultural identity in their place of settlement,

I will focus on the practice of Todd Phapa in seeking to address the following questions.

- 1) For what purposes does the Isan community create Todd Phapa?
- 2) In what ways does Todd Phapa define Isan cultural identity in northern Thailand?

1.2 Research purposes

- 1) To understand the conditions that the migrant Isan community experiences in its new place of settlement.
- 2) To understand the dynamics of Todd Phapa in Pang Moddaeng.
- 3) To understand how the migrant Isan community has utilized Todd Phapa as their cultural resource to improve their lives in Pang Moddaeng.

1.3 Research method and target group

This research employs mainly the methods from the fields of Anthropology and Ethnomethodology. To access data, I conducted my research in the field using three methods comprising focus group (interview with some informants in a small group), in-depth interview, and participatory observation to collect primary information.

2. Literature review

To answer the research questions and act upon the purposes of the study, I review some of the literature related to my study, organized into two categories.

2.1 The study of migrants: construction of self and identity

In this part of the literature review, I construct my study framework. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997: 37) state that

the approach of classical anthropology is less useful in contexts where people do not have a fixed identity since they have not necessarily inhabited a single place for the duration of their lives. They offer the concept of "deterritorialization," contradicting the view of classical anthropology that people, cultures, and places are bound together. The "deterritorialization of identity" is offered as a corrective to "collective identity." Furthermore, the concepts of "territorialization," "deterritorialization," and "reterritorialization" of space are proposed as alternative approaches to the construction of identity, especially pertinent to defining the identities of the homeless, refugees, migrants, displaced, and stateless people. Moreover, they recommend approaching the concept of identity as a process of "coming to be" instead of being static. (*Ibid.* 36–39)

Concurrent with the ideas of Gupta and Ferguson is Hall's (1994) work. In addition, he recommends the inclusion of the concept of "cultural identity" in the politics of representation and/or identity. He asserts that if cultural identity is situated in production and representation processes, it is always in the terrain of power relations. Also, the phases of production of cultural identity are segmented to different groups of Isan people. Thus, apply these concepts of cultural identity and "deterritorialization" to my study, then Isan cultural identity is on the constructing processes and difference between new places and places of origin.

Applying the concept of constructing identity to understand Isan self, Mill (1999) studied young Thai female migrants who work in Bangkok. She found that these young laborers tried to construct an identity representative of traditional and the modern. Concerning

the modern representation (*Thansamai self*), the young women endeavored to consume modern products and engage in activities such as shopping, dining out, and traveling (*Pai Theaw*). Their traditional self consisted of being regarded as honorable of their parents by supporting their livelihood by sending their earnings back to them in their place of origin or saving their earnings to fund a new home for their parents.

As a theoretical framework, I apply these above concepts of constructing identity, the deterritorialization of space, politics of identity into my study. I approach Isan identity as constructing process for various purposes such as assimilating or dividing with other groups of people. I employ this idea to differentiate between Isan in Pang Moddaeng and the places of origin in terms of deterritorialization. Moreover, I state constructing identity in the terrains of politics to enclose that production and representation of identity have a purpose of situating themselves in higher status.

2.2 Studies of Isan migrants in Northern Thailand

There are few studies of Isan migrants in Northern Thailand, especially the studies which focus on Isan cultural identity. Here, I took four studies that related to my topic of study to review. Kyananut's (2012) study focused on several villages in Chiang Rai province. She conceptualized Isan migrants residing in these villages as displaced Isan people, identifying the necessity of the migrant group to integrate with the native *Khon Muang* group that is predominant in Chiang Rai. Upon settling, Isan people required land for the cultivation of agriculture in order to establish a livelihood. They experienced resistance from the dominant native group as they sought to access, acquire

and cultivate land. The *Khon Muang* feared the migrants as a threat to their cultural dominance. The dominant native group then proceeded to construct Isan culture and identity as inferior to their own. The researcher also found, however, that the Isan community endeavored to manipulate the construction of Isan identity by the *Khon Muang* by forming a plural identity, which has been labeled as the 'Thai identity' and has been applied to the various groups, organizations, and networks to which the Isan community belongs. Hence, this plural identity has fostered favorable relations between the Isan community and the *Khon Muang*.

Kanyanut's work is the way to approach Isan identity as constructing and plural identity, which is various in several contexts. I agree with her that at the beginning of settling down in Northern Thailand, Isan people found it difficult to live with the *Khon Muang* as the native.

Thippawan (1996) studied Isan people in Tambon Dong Maha Wan, Chiang Rai, whom she termed 'in-migrants' or sometimes "northeastern in-migrants." She found that the research subjects had derived their beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyles from their origin in the Isan region. In addition, she identified two unique ways the Isan community adapted to their place of settlement; firstly, the "ways of natural dependency," and secondly, they endeavored to utilize traditional practices and modern technology to establish their livelihoods. Furthermore, despite the predominance of Lanna culture, the migrant Isan community has sought to preserve their traditional culture in order for it to be transferred to the new generation. However, the influence of modernity was observed to be the leading cause of a decline in traditional practices linked to their

heritage.

I agree with Thippawan that after settling down in Northern Thailand, under the predominance of Lanna culture, migrant Isan has tried to preserve their traditional cultures. However, to approach traditional cultures as the static and essential things and keep clear dividing and not compromise with the dominance of Lanna culture does not represent the real phenomenon in Northern Thailand.

Supakit (2002) studied the same Isan community as Thippawan (1996) but focused on different villages. He deployed the concept of "identity preservation" and approached the Isan people as a "minority group." He was concerned with investigating how Isan people retain their ethnic identity after migrating to northern Thailand. He found that, to preserve Isan ethnic identity, Isan people utilized a "social mechanism" to propagate Isan-specific beliefs, rituals, and dialects by community leaders and traditional community groups and organizations. He also identified the practice of "adding cultural blood" (reproducing Isan-ness) to be effective in sustaining Isan identity, manifest in Isan traditions and ritual practices in addition to performances of dance, drama, and music. Moreover, he stated that migrant Isan people had maintained communication with their kinship in the Isan region, which also serves as a primary means of maintaining their cultural identity. Further means of sustaining their ethnic identity included the significance of the "seniority system," the "process of reproducing," and "socialization."

Getting close with identity study, but Supakit's idea is similar to Thippawan; both approach identity and traditional culture as static and essentialism. When they state the term "preserve" in their studies, it seems "traditional culture,"

and "identity" are static existence or given.

Kittiwin (2014), the only reported study of the Isan community in Phayao province, investigated five different ethnic groups of Lanna, Lue, Yao, Hmong, and Isan residing together. He pointed out that these groups have lived peacefully by exchanging, synthesizing, and compromising their respective cultures. There remains, however, some conflict between the different groups as each seeks to prioritize the practice of its own culture, and the dominant Lanna culture excludes the practice of minority cultures in public settings such as schools.

I agree with Kittiwin when he states that even they are five different ethnic groups that have lived peacefully, but they have tried to prioritize the practice of their own cultures. His study applies the idea of dynamic and constructing culture and identity when he shows that five different ethnic groups could exchange, synthesize and compromise their cultures. Moreover, he illustrates the idea of politics of culture and identity in his study also, when he found that each ethnic group has endeavored to represent their cultures as superior.

About Isan migrant in Northern Thailand studies, I grab the ideas of Kittiwin and Kanyanut when they approach culture and identity in the forms of dynamic and constructing things. Furthermore, they situate Isan culture and identity in politics, which represents how Isan migrant has tried to negotiate and compromise with native. However, these studies might lack concern about keeping in touch with Isan people in their places of origin. Furthermore, in terms of Isan identity, could we place their identity in the same place between Isan in Northern Thailand and Isan in Isan region.

To beyond this limitation, I employ the concepts

of constructing identity, deterritorialization, and politics of identity to realize Todd Phapa as Isan identity. I purpose to put Todd Phapa as a case study to show how Isan people have tried to utilize their traditional culture to represent their identity to bridge them with natives and separate with Isan.

3. Todd Phapa : a definition

The original merit-making tradition of Todd Phapa involved an individual deliberately discarding a robe on the branches of a tree situated on a local thoroughfare for a monk to acquire as an item of clothing. *Todd* means to give or donate, *Pha* means clothes, and *Pa* can be translated as 'forest.' Nowadays, the tradition has evolved to embrace the offering of robes, money, and everyday necessities on artificial, ornamental 'trees.' Monks can also issue these 'trees' at a local temple to collect money or items such as books and rice for specific purposes, such as a village building project or charitable relief fund.

In Pang Moddaeng, Todd Phapa is not restricted to the festival of *Heet* 12 but can be practiced throughout the year. Todd Phapa offers villagers the opportunity of making merit at both Pang Moddaeng and Na Jareon temples. In addition, the people are permitted to offer Phapas to other communities if these villages request their support. It can be reciprocated and can therefore be observed to create social bonds between the communities. The village has organized Todd Phapa to collect funds for the construction of new buildings and sought to collect items such as Isan mats, Isan pillows, and a temple bell. Since the 1970s, they have organized Todd Phapa at least three times. The first time, they created Todd Phapa

to construct the pavilion of the Pang Moddaeng temple. The second time was for constructing the permanent main hall, and the third time was for building the bell tower at the same temple. For the current study, I will focus solely on the villagers' organization of Todd Phapa outside of the village, their visits to other villages, and even other districts and provinces. I will refer to this as "Phapa-on-tour." I will use the term "receiver" to represent the temples or villages that received Phapa (i.e., requested the donations), while the term "giver" will represent the village or temple that gave Phapa (i.e., made the donations). In enacting Phapa-on-tour, a threefold organization process is observable, comprising; 1) a community meeting, 2) the formation of a committee, and 3) creation of the collection 'trees.'

Before the commencement day of Phapa-on-tour, several community meetings take place. However, the most important meeting is the first meeting, when the village host, the key contact, requested to enact Phapa from a 'receiver' community. Following this, the host will seek to organize a community meeting by contacting the abbot of the local temple and the village leader. In the meeting, the host will inform other villagers about the Phapa, such as when and where the collection 'tree' will be set up, what items are requested for donation, and the overall purpose of the Phapa. Finally, the host must request donations to be given and try to quantify what people are willing to pledge. Those offering to support the Phapa then appoint a committee responsible for enacting the remaining organizational steps.

To formalize the appointment of the committee, the names of those selected are subsequently announced and published. The role titles of all those involved in the Phapa

are also formalized, from host to the president, support-host to sub-president, patronage-host to patronage-president, and general supporters to members. The names and titles of the committee are printed on letters of request issued to invite support for the Phapa. These letters also identify the amounts (in the case of money) that each member of the committee is expected to pledge; commonly 10,000–20,000 Baht for the president, 5,000–10,000 Baht for the sub-president, 2,000–3,000 Baht for the patronage-president, and 500–1,000 Baht for members.

The last organizational step concerns the creation of the collection 'trees' (*Ton Phapa*), which can then be placed in various locations in order for people to attach money or other specified items to them. Several days prior to the Phapa day, the *Ton Phapa* will be collected and prepared for transfer to a receiver. (Figure 2)



Figure 2: The Villagers offer the "Trees" (*Ton Phapa*) to the Monks of the Receiver's Temple

Source: Photo by author, Date: 3 Mar 2021

Villagers who wish to accompany the Phapa on tour are required to pay all transport costs involved in transferring the Phapa to the receiving community. Some villagers will prefer to make private arrangements if they wish to spend extended amounts of time with their kin residents in the receiving community or plan to visit other places during their journey. Suppose the receiving community is located in the Isan region. In that case, those intending to travel together are asked to contribute 1,000–1,500 Baht, while they must pay 2,000–3,000 Baht for travel to Laos or Myanmar. These amounts do not cover the cost of any overnight accommodation that may be required. However, priority for the accompaniment of the Phapa on tour is most often given to villagers who have kinship relations in the receiving community, with whom they will stay upon arrival. The committee will arrange transport to the receiving community (usually a bus) several days prior to the appointed day of the Phapa and will request the transport company to create an itinerary for the journey. After the appointed day of the Phapa, the villagers' return journey will encompass visits to several tourist destinations. The patronage president of the Phapa is most often expected to provide funds for food that will be required during the journey. They are usually requested to contribute 2,000–3,000 Baht by the number of villagers accompanying the tour. This money is used to purchase simple supplies such as wrapped portions of dried fried pork with sticky rice, chili paste, and drinking water bottles.

3.1 Todd Phapa Routes

There are two major routes of Phapa that have most often been organized from Pang Moddaeng. They are called the "South Route"



Figure 3: A Parade of "Trees" (*Ton Phapa*) Organized head to the Receiver's Temple

Source: Photo by author, Date: 3 Mar 2021

(*Sai Tai*) and "Isan Route" (*Sai Isan*). The South Route involves travel to provinces in central Thailand, such as Nakhon Sawan and Rayong and Chonburi provinces in the eastern region. The Isan Route involves traveling to their places of origin, including Kalasin, Roi-et, and Mahasarakham provinces. (Figure 3)

Another route that is a recent addition is cross-border travel to neighboring countries. Todd Phapa for receiving communities outside of Thailand has been undertaken at least three times since 2005, including to Keng-Tung in Myanmar, and to Champasak and Vientiane, in Laos PDR. This type of Phapa often derives from the family of the temple abbot, whose kin reside in these places.

3.2 Lines of Todd Phapa

There are two lines of Todd Phapa manifest in Pang Moddaeng. The first is "kinship line," while the second is "labor line." The kinship line concerns Phapa that is enacted through familial links in their places of origin in northeastern Thailand, such as Kalasin, Roi-et, and Mahasarakham provinces, in addition to the new places of settlement of their Isan kinships,

such as Chiang Mai, Chaing Rai, and Phayao provinces in the northern region, and Nakhon Sawan and Sukhothai provinces in central Thailand.

The labor line has been created by young laborers who have relocated out of the village to work as manual tradesmen in big cities such as Bangkok, Chonburi, and Rayong. These lines have been formed through employment-based relationships and can be reciprocal, with the village having been both a giving and receiving community.

Before analyzing how Todd Phapa is meant to the community and serves various



Figure 4: Collection 'tree' (*Ton Phapa*)

Source: Photo by author, Date: 11 Sep 2018



Figure 5: Isan pillows (*Mhon Khid*)

Source: Photo by author, Date: 9 Sep 2018

purposes, next section, I illustrate a history of Pang Moddaeng that shows when and how they had faced with the limitation and difficulty. (Figures 4 and 5)

4. A History of Pang Moddaeng

In this section, I will illustrate the origins of Pang Moddaeng, which can be divided into four main periods. The first period began in 1961 when Isan people first settled in Pang Moddaeng. The second period is characterized by the establishment of national institutions and their influence upon the community. The third period concerns the development of roads and the river as transport links necessary for initiating a village market. The last period is defined by the intensive exchange system and the beginning of the age of consumption in Pang Moddaeng.

4.1 Searching for land and conflict with natives

The first migration of Isan people to Pang Moddaeng was in 1961, led by *Sho Prasertshang* from Selabhum district, Roi-et province. As a former soldier, he had served in the North and had relayed his favorable regard for the land to his community upon returning to Isan. Later in the year, *Prasertshang* led six families, including his own, to the North, with his extended family also making the journey shortly afterward.

The second migration was led by *Sean Vaisuwan*, *Sho Prasertshang's* friend and a fellow former soldier. Journeying from Konlan district, Chaiyaphum province, he relocated to the North in 1962 and extended family. Later in the same year, *Boon Prasertshang*, an older brother of *Sho Prasertshang*, ventured to Pang Moddaeng with his relatives. *Peang Daengdongying* led the third wave of migration with his kin from

Kalasin province. A few years later, during 1964–1965, various friends, relatives, and kin followed. They migrated mainly from Roi-et, Kalasin, Chaiyaphum, Mahasarakham, and Khon Kaen provinces in the Isan region.

As newcomers searching for cultivable land, they experienced problems emanating from their community and the predominant native ethnic group residing in the land. The migrants vied among themselves for access to land, with the first person to be killed in such a dispute in 1966. Deaths from these conflicts peaked two years later with three victims but finally came to an end in 1975 when Pho Boonta was murdered, and the killer was arrested.

The conflict with the native Lanna ethnic group (*Khon Muang*) was threefold. The first dispute concerned the apparent theft of livestock by Isan people, in addition to failure to prevent their buffalo herds from hindering the *Khon Muang's* cultivation of rice and other agricultural products. The second and far more important dispute concerned access to land. The *Khon Muang* were reluctant to sell their land to the Isan migrants because they regarded the latter as outsiders. However, this conflict was resolved when the Isan community worked for the native ethnic group as laborers in their fields, which also served to demonstrate their demeanor as being characterized by hard work and patience. Finally, the *Khon Muang* agreed to sell land to the Isan migrants.

The third dispute resulted from the stereotype of Isan people as poor, uneducated, primitive, irresponsible, and uncivilized that originated with the Lanna ethnic group. This finding is also reflected in Kanyanut's (2012) study of the Isan community in Chiang Rai province, where the *Khon Muang* were observed to marginalize Isan migrants through

operationalizing these stereotypes and labeling them as inferior.

4.2 The establishment of national institutes and power exerted from central Thailand

The establishment of community-level initiatives and state institutions exerting power from Central Thailand is represented through individuals and symbols. Two temples were established by the community. The first one was the Pang Moddaeng temple, and later the Na Jareon temple. Public amenities set up by the central government include Pang Moddaeng School, which was founded in 1967, the sub-district public health care provision, and the Ang Thong Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), which was established in 1996 and has become a vital service for local peoples.

Before constructing their temple, the villagers attended Baan Doi Isan (village no. 2), situated about ten kilometers to the North, to make merit. The Pang Moddaeng temple was built in 1965 by the Isan people. *Prakrong Jampathong* (known as *Phoyai Ken*) was the first senior monk of the temple. It was established on the land of *Sho Prasertshang*, who donated his land. Villagers were required to personally undertake all the tasks involved in realizing the project—fundraising, providing labor to prepare the land, and felling the trees to make the temporary wooden pavilion (Sala). A few years later, they made Todd Phapa—the Buddhist merit-making ritual. This was enacted to raise more money from Isan migrants living in nearby districts, other provinces, and the Isan region (their places of origin) to fund the construction of a permanent pavilion, ordination hall, and bell tower.

In 1967, the Pang Moddaeng School, known

as the 'Border Patrol Soldiers' School,' was built. The villagers were required to build the school themselves within a budget provided by the central government's Border Patrol Soldiers' Section No. 75. Soldiers assigned to this section were dispatched to the area to address the threat of communism in Thailand. They prepared a vacant site adjacent to the Pang Moddaeng temple and felled trees around the area to build a temporary wooden structure with a grass roof. The first teachers for the children were border patrol soldiers. One general expectation was that they could manipulate the political ideas of students. Around five years later, in 1973, civilian teachers took up employment at the school.

The school was also representative of the power of the Thai monarchy to 'territorialize' the area through its involvement with the educational initiative of the central government. In 1969, "the Royal Grandmother" (the Royal Mother of King Rama IX) came to the village for the opening ceremony of the first wooden school building. Her Majesty then named the building as the "*Chonnanee Srisangwan*" (Royal Mother *Srisangwan*) building. The budget to construct the building was provided by the "Bumrong No. 75" section of Border Patrol Soldiers. The second building was named the "*Chulalongkorn*" building, after King Rama V.

By 1972, the villagers' livelihoods had improved to the extent that they were willing to contribute to a third reconstruction of the school building. They named this building "*Prachaban*" ('given by people') because members of the local community financed it.

In late 1971, the famous monk named *Laung Pho Man* (the well-known Maestro) went on a pilgrimage to Pang Moddaeng temple. He suggested they establish one more temple of

another Buddhist sect. As a result, in 1972, the Pha Jaruwan Wanaram temple was built, inaugurating the Dhammayut Nikaya sect in the village. Again, the majority of the funds required for its construction were raised by the villagers. After extreme flooding in 1973, the temple was renamed Na Jareon in recognition of the extensive work required to restore it.

In 1979, a sub-district public health care center (*Anamai*) was constructed in the village. Some government officers were dispatched to reside in the facility to impart general medical advice to the villagers. They offered health checks, medication and practices to alleviate illnesses and diseases, and dietary advice. The villagers esteemed this provision, citing that a local medical facility's presence helped them feel safe in the community and reduced the likelihood of death in the event of being required to travel to a hospital in the nearest large town (Chiang Kham).

In 1996, Ang Thong was established as a self-governing sub-district (SAO), having the former separated from the Nam Van sub-district. The SAO's Chief Executive was often a member of the Isan ethnic group, reflecting the majority of the sub-districts populace. Nevertheless, efforts to accommodate the interests of the native Lanna ethnic group residing in the area entailed implementing local projects created with the discourse of promoting "Isan-Lanna" relations.

4.3 Roads, the River and the Establishment of Market Trade

Pang Moddaeng became connected through the construction of roads and the nearby Ing River to surrounding settlements, with particular importance placed on the urban centers of Chiang Kham, Thoeng, and Chiang Rai. Development of these transport links

gained momentum from 1962 to 1976 with the drive to acquire more technologically advanced agricultural machinery.

In 1970 there were only minor dirt-track roads for the villagers to use for traveling out of the village by car. However, the most frequent destination of car users traveling out of the village was the urban center of Chiang Kham. Travel to Chiang Kham during this time was most often to buy or sell agricultural products, but it was also favored as a hub of public transport services to the other local urban centers of Thoeng and Chiang Rai.

Pho Boon Pasertshang created the "*Rod Kok Mhoo*" (a car that had the appearance of a cage for a pig) in 1970 as a means of public transport to Chiang Kham. The initial fare was three Baht for a one-way journey. Following this development, in 1975, *Pho Lae Phonyeam* bought a yellow Chevrolet also to provide villagers with service to Chiang Kham. Later, in 1977, *Pho Sao Patisikhung* purchased an Isuzu truck that he made available for hire by the villagers for five Baht per way. At this time, the price of gasoline was around six Baht a liter.

Unfortunately, the quality of the roads could adversely affect travel by car, exacerbated by the potential for them to become impassable during the rainy season. In this eventuality, walking became the only means of traveling from the village to Chiang Kham. Villagers saw the necessity of walking to Chiang Kham to purchase food, medicines, agricultural products, and clothes. In terms of food, they would purchase some ingredients that they were unable to produce themselves, such as salt, fish sauce, and sugar. In terms of medicines, they intended to acquire these from both the pharmacy and the hospital.

Access to some subsistent products was

required during this time. For example, they needed to buy kerosene and petrol for household and agricultural use. Furthermore, they required products to stewardship of their agricultural activities, such as hoes, spades, knives, harrows, and plows. At this time, walking to Chiang Kham to buy various items was usually a full day's trip. Normally they would leave their homes early in the morning and return in the afternoon.

Some villagers also carried their products to sell at the municipality of Chiang Kham. Several products such as rice, fish, and homemade products such as mats, silk textiles, and towels were usually carried. Rice was most often loaded into local vehicles to be transported, as it was too heavy to carry on foot. Lighter products were put into baskets and transported on foot. Mostly women journeyed to sell their products; they would stay overnight at their relatives' houses in Jum Bon village before heading to Chiang Kham municipality the following day. They would then return to the village the following evening.

In 1971, *Phoyai Chari Arunpi and Phoyai Phan Viangsamut* succeeded in building a motorboat. This innovation helped to connect the area to Thoeng municipality by way of the Ing River. The route is a distance of twenty kilometers one way. Villagers would not only travel to Thoeng municipality using the river, but also Chiang Rai province. The return journey time was three hours for a fare of ten Baht and operated only once daily, departing the village at 7:00 am and returning at 9:00 pm.

Villagers wanted to travel to Thoeng municipality by motorboat in order to trade their rice (they called this type of rice at this time "*Khao Jao Loi*" (floating rice) and fish. The rice was put in hemp sacks (called *Krasob*

Pan); each sack containing eight *Thang* (one *Thang* is twenty liters) and transported for three Baht per *Thang*. Sometimes the price was lower than this, and it never exceeded five Baht per *Thang*. The fish that they sought to sell were catfish and snake-head and cost about six Baht per kilogram to transport. As can be expected, this price was lower than a *Thang* of rice, and some small fish such as Siamese mud carp, sandfish, and perch fish cost only one Baht per kilogram to transport on the boat.

Other people sought to travel to Chiang Rai municipality, situated a greater distance from the villages, but the most developed urban center within reasonable traveling distance. The chief reason for traveling to Chiang Rai was access to the hospital, followed by opportunities to buy and sell products. However, the expensive fare of ten Baht per leg charged by local vehicle operators could be a disincentive to travel there.

4.4 The Coming of Televisions and Rise of the Modern Consumption Age

Around 1970, female vendors (*Mae Ka Hab Rei*) from Baan Don Chai, Yhuan sub-district, in the municipality of Chiang Kham, would load a variety of modern products into baskets and travel on foot for a distance of approximately 30 kilometers per day, offering their wares for sale in the villages. They usually carried small baskets of mackerels (*Platoo Kheng*), dried fish, canned fish, and instant noodles, as well as new food products that they would promote to anyone who came to buy from them. Their merchandise was sourced from Bangkok and was novel to the villagers, who delighted especially in the sea fish that they could not otherwise obtain. The products were expensive; the price of two mackerels "*Paatoo I Kheng*"

was "*Khao I Kajad*", which was equal to five liters of rice, but the villagers deemed the prices reasonable opportunities to experience new items.

About five years later, the number of these female vendors decreased because the villagers themselves opened grocery shops. There were about three grocery stores that stocked modern products sourced from outside the community in that period, but each of the shops sold the same products. Products such as ready-to-eat and instant food were introduced to the village. These foods included instant noodles, canned fish, instant coffee, and energy boost drinks. Many everyday hygiene products were also made available for them to improve their lifestyle habits, including shampoo, soap, toothpaste, and detergents. Following food and hygiene products, the grocery shops started to stock modern agricultural products such as chemical fertilizers, agricultural hormones, and pesticides.

In 1978, the first television was introduced to the village. It was battery-powered in light of electricity not yet being available in the village and was introduced by *Sanguan Ajanonesarn*, the first grocery store owner. He bought it to attract customers to his shop, and it proved to be a very successful enticement, increasing sales of his products. Customers watched boxing, Thai soap operas (such as *Baan Sai Thong*), and Thai mythologies (such as the *Keaw Nhama* and the *Kwan Pha Nha Dam*).

The other grocery shop owners, *Leas Saphrom* and *Jai Keadhom* endeavored to replicate this idea a few years later by also purchasing televisions. Villagers remarked that the grocery shops had led them to access the modern world as new products and technologies were promoted using television.

Television ushered them into the modern age of consumption with various entertainment, news, and other programs presenting the outside world.

Television also fostered the establishment of social relationships and community activities. During the 1980s, the Isan community loved to watch boxing. Around 1980, one day in the afternoon, a match was due to take place between *Khao Sai Galaxy* and a foreign boxer. On that day, all the villagers put aside their farm work and went to the grocery shop to cheer for *Khao Sai*. The Isan community refers to *Khao Sai Galaxy* as 'the fighter.' *Khao Sai's* hometown is in Petchabun (a province of Thailand in which many Laotian people have settled). His ancestors are from Luang Prabang, in Laos. The villagers admired *Khao Sai's* sportsmanship, remarking that his manner was representative of the Isan characteristic of perseverance.

Furthermore, for some villagers, *Khao Sai* represented essential Thai-ness. This phenomenon intensified on the numerous occasions that *Khao Sai* competed in international boxing competitions during the 1980s; during this time, all farm work was put aside, and in every part of the village, only a cacophony of cheers could be heard. Consequently, *Khao Sai* became a national hero and celebration of Thai identity; indeed, his professional achievements and failures determined the prevailing mood of the day.

Other products representative of the consumption age came as refrigerators, washing machines, and mobile phones. From the 2000s, when the economy of the village improved, traditional Isan music, such as *Pong Lang* (folk) and *Mhor Lam* (country), were commissioned to display in the events of *Heet 12*, and

especially the *Boon Bung Fai* Festival (the Rocket Festival).

In summary, Pang Moddaeng was settled by Isan migrants in 1961. Their settlement in an area where two other ethnic groups already resided precipitated various conflicts, including their community. The most serious conflict concerned that of the Isan community's desire for favorable cultural representation. The predominant *Khon Muang* (Lanna) ethnic group was observed to perpetuate the Isan people as poor, uneducated, primitive, irresponsible, and uncivilized.

I would like to stress that most of the social institutions established in the community were local manifestations of the power of the central state, including the school, the public health center, and the SAO. Only the two temples do not classify into this category, amenities of which the community retains control.

Regarding their experience of modernity, it is important to point out that their consumption of both consumer products and Isan-specific culture has increased following the improvement of their economic means. In the village, modernization has been generally represented by the consumption of modern products. Having the economic means at their disposal to finance consumption of the traditional culture of their place of origin has led them to commission artists from the Isan region to perform in their new locale. It demonstrates how the Isan community has been successful in reconciling a desire to embrace modernity with recognition of the traditional culture of their Isan origins and is consistent with the findings of Supakit (1996), who studied Isan migrants as the 'minority group' in a village situated in Chiang Rai province. He found that one method used to "preserve" Isan culture was to introduce

performances of traditional Isan music to display in the community. This phenomenon, he stated, appeared to be a way to "add cultural blood" (reproduce Isan-ness).

However, Supakit's findings might show only the picture of keeping the atmosphere of Isanness in the community itself. Then, the pictures of how they have related with the Isan in their places of origin and the native have not been clarified. In my study, I purpose to present how they have bridged and separate themselves from the native and Isan in their places of origin. Therefore, I will analyze through the picture of the traditional practice of Todd Phapa, which I mentioned above in section number three. Thus, in the following section, I suggest that the community can utilize the cultural practice of Todd Phapa as traditional capital to serve numerous purposes.

5. Todd Phapa as a Cultural Practice to Represent Isan Identity

The community can be observed to utilize Todd Phapa in various ways. Firstly, they have tried to use Todd Phapa as a cultural practice to intensify their long-distance kinship relations after relocating to the village. This practice contextualizes them as a displaced, alienated people group. In some cases, Todd Phapa has been utilized as a tool to strengthen their kinships in their places of origin. Moreover, Todd Phapa has been used to generate social capital, fostering social networks. This is especially evident in the receipt of Phapa obtained through links with individuals and communities established by laborers working in big cities. Furthermore, Todd Phapa as a form of cultural capital to create social capital has become a means to sustaining the practice of

Todd Phapa itself.

Todd Phapa as a cultural practice is also a means of perpetuating Isan identity. I have observed it to be utilized in constructing two types of this identity. The first concerns being identified as a committed Buddhist, which is the earliest type to be constructed and has been done so to establish relationship dynamics with the native ethnic groups, Lanna (*Khon Muang*) and Lue. There are two methods of power negotiation at work in the construction of this type. Firstly, it can be observed as a means of assimilation based on following a common religion. Nevertheless, secondly, it simultaneously has the opposite function of creating a distinction between themselves and the other ethnic groups. This negotiates with the stereotype of the Isan migrants as poor, uneducated, primitive, irresponsible, and uncivilized, conveying a favorable impression representative of committed Buddhism as they seek to serve the needs of people both inside and outside of their immediate community. This identity construction concurs with Hall's (1994: 225) argument that 'cultural identity... is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being."'. Indeed, the Isan migrants can be observed to manipulate the formation of their identity per their identified needs; and this process is continually evolving, as the community renegotiates its identity according to its changing needs:

[Identity] *is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture made within history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. ... Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no guarantee in an*

unproblematic, transcendental "law of origin." (Ibid.: 226)

Todd Phapa is predominantly reliant on kinship relations, but it is also dependent on relations formed through the common religion of Buddhism. Pang Moddaeng has been observed to utilize Todd Phapa for two distinct relational purposes. Firstly, it has been enacted as a cultural practice to foster community cohesion. Secondly, it has been exploited to establish links with outsiders, generating power relations.

Approaching from the theoretical perspective of Structural Functionalism, the practice of Todd Phapa has been noted to foster peaceful relationships and community cohesion. In the case study of "*Bun Bung Fai or Rocket Festival of Isan Peasants*," Smutkupt and Kitiarsa (1993) describe that one of the event's social functions is conflict resolution among the Isan peasants. Also, in "*Religious Ritual as an Indigenous Mechanism of Common Property Resources Management in Isan Peasant Villages*," Suriya, Pattana, Nantiya, Kasemsiri, and Rangsan (1993) found that one advantage of religious rituals (also *Phi rituals*) in Isan peasant villages is that they can function as a social mechanism to manage the limited availability of local natural resources.

6. Isan Identity as Committed Buddhism and Recognition of Roots

In my study, villagers were keen to draw attention to aspects of the local temples that were the product of their donations. A member of a focus group stated, "*...when the Na Jaroen temple needed new toilets, and we donated money... for the roof tiles of the temple, of course, that was our money... Making of the floor tiles; yes, that was also villagers' money.*"

(F.G., 16 Aug 2018)

It is doubtless that most of the budget to build the temple was mainly from the villagers. As *Mae Noi (Noi-Siang Dang)* claimed, even the land to construct it was from *Pho Sho Prasertshang*, her father who donated his land to settle the temple.

Every brick used in the temple construction is inscribed with the name(s) of its donator. Thus, I argue that the temples and Buddhism-related activities are of principal importance to the villagers. The villagers were found to harness these aspects to function in the representation of their identity:

"temple as the face of the village"... "if it is big and beautiful, it also shows how villagers are... we take care of the temple, we take care of the monks ... last year our temple roof was broken, it had many holes, then the temple committee asked us to collect money,... they estimated that it was around 400,000 Baht to purchase a new one, so they asked us to collect 1,000 Baht from each household... it was okay because it was a face of the village" (F.G. 20 Aug 2018).

"...when we have Mhor Lam (a type of Isan performances...we organize it at the temple, ... when we have festivals (Ngan), we create them at the temple, ... when outsiders come here, if they wonder where to drop/to go, they will go to the temple first... now, many temples have become the tourist places, ... we need to develop our temple..." (F.G. 20 Aug 2018).

These case studies demonstrate how the appearance of temples and the practice of Buddhism are representative faces of the villagers' identity. Furthermore, their contributions to maintenance costs of temples

and religious activities in other communities have served to publicize this favorable representation beyond the village; and a factor vital to the construction of this image has been the enactment of Todd Phapa. As described above, part of the motivation to be recognized as committed Buddhists derives from their determination to counter the local stereotype of Isan people as poor, uneducated, primitive, irresponsible, and uncivilized, perpetuated by the other ethnic groups.

The second type of identity constructed by the Isan community is defined by active recognition of the culture, traditions, and kin of their place of origin.

Supakit (1996) asserts that this type of identity cannot be constructed remotely, citing the use of telecommunications by some people as the sole means of maintaining links to their places of origin, but must involve visiting those places in order to continue to fulfill certain familial obligations. He suggests that this is an essential means for people to intensify their cultural identity. When the people visit their places of origin, it is a means of "*adding cultural blood*" to preserve their cultural identity. Somewhat conversely to Supakit, I suggest that the Isan migrants do not visit their places of origin to seek to *maintain* their "cultural identity," but to *construct* a new one within a process of 'being' and 'becoming' (see Hall, 1994: 225). A challenge for the Isan migrants is to prove themselves as respectable representatives of their homeland. A common means of enacting this is to provide origin with modern goods or helpful new technologies. However, if these are beyond their means, support in the form of commitment to Buddhist practices is an admirable alternative, as the following cases illustrate:

Goson Gamonsingthong, a 63-year-old man, was born in Phon Thong district, Roi-et province, but grew up in Jang Koe district, Chaiyaphum province. After that, in 1966, he moved to Pang Moddaeng. He remarked:

"... *in Nhong Wan Yai, Phon Thong district, Roi-et province, we are so glad that we can make merit at our place of birth, ... go to give money to the temple of the village where we were born...*" (Goson, 20 Sep 2018)

Furthermore, *Mae Toon Dannasan*, who has kinship in Nakhon Sawan province, relocated during a period of drought but decided to settle in central Thailand. Last year her relatives asked her to organize Phapa from Pang Moddaeng to support building a new main hall (*Sala*) at the temple. She promoted the opportunity to organize Phapa at the initial meeting of the community as follows:

"... *I (Mae) used to go to Phon Thong, Roi-et; it is my place of birth (Ban Kaed). I am so impressed because I can see my hometown and speak with friends from primary school. I want to go every year, ... Now we have money, but we should not forget the places of our birth. ...*" (Mae Toon Dannasan, 15 Sep 2018)

These two case studies illustrate the use of Phapa as a means to demonstrate gratefulness to the birthplace. However, a request of Phapa from a birthplace can draw potentially unfavorable attention to an individual's social status. The amount of money or specified items collected will usually be of little consequence but will still often be regarded as a measure of the individual's power in their community. Furthermore, individuals often mentioned their organization of Todd Phapa regarding whether it resulted in personal benefit or loss of funds.

They remarked that in most cases, they made a loss. However, rather than eliciting feelings of inadequacy, this outcome elicited a feeling of pride at being able to give out of an abundance of means and satisfaction at having attained a decent livelihood outside of their place of origin.

7. Conclusion

The migrant Isan people utilize Todd Phapa as a cultural practice to representing their community. They have done this largely in an attempt to address the various problems they have encountered in seeking to settle in a new home dominated by a different ethnic people group and culture (*Lanna; Khon Muang*). Todd Phapa has enabled them to:

1. sustain their *Heet 12* festival and other cultural traditions away from their places of origin
2. negotiate the stereotypes and being labeled as inferior
3. counter conflict with the *Khon Muang* and other ethnic groups present in the area of settlement.

As a cultural practice to negotiate with the *Khon Muang*, I found that they have exploited Todd Phapa in three significant ways. Firstly, they have utilized Todd Phapa as cultural capital to intensify their kinship relations in their homeland. Secondly, young Isan laborers who have worked in the big cities have used Todd Phapa to build their social capital and support their community. Thirdly, Todd Phapa, as a Buddhist tradition, is exploited in the construction of their cultural identity.

Furthermore, I identified two distinct Isan identities constructed to position Isan migrants in Pang Moddaeng. The purpose of the first one is to position themselves as

committed Buddhists in their new place of settlement in response to efforts to marginalize the community by the native ethnic groups. Seeking to position themselves as committed Buddhists has enabled them to assimilate with these groups. However, it has also functioned to portray their religious character as more devout and thus more admirable than that of these groups. The second identity is characterized by an appreciation of heritage, constructed to be conveyed in their places of origin. There are differences between the identities of the Isan migrants in Pang Moddaeng and members of the Isan ethnic group residing in their places of origin. However, the two groups are connected by kinship relations.

The findings of this study pose at least three significant implications for further research. Firstly, the constructed identity of an Isan migrant that includes the aspect of 'original Isan culture' is difficult to identify. Attention should instead be given to research investigating how migrants situate their original culture in their new places of settlement and how they sustain relationships with their places of origin. Secondly, studies should also investigate how aspects of their original culture have been institutionalized in their new places of settlement. In the case of the current study, Todd Phapa has been institutionalized through the common religion of Buddhism employing "kinship lines," "labor lines," "Isan routes," "South routes," and most recently, "cross-border routes."

Finally, I contend that if we adopt the perspective of the cultural identities of migrant people groups forming as a product of institutionalizing aspects of their original culture in their new homes, we will attain a greater understanding of how they are constructing their new identities, for what purposes, by what

authority, and related to what kinds of contexts and powers.

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