

Local Ethnic Museum: Administration for the Conservation of Indigenous Knowledge in Central Thailand

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Abstract

Local ethnic museums were developed from conservation efforts led by community leaders, monks and teachers. The local museums were used as learning centers, reminding people of their origin and realization of their own culture. Many museums face similar problems such as problems in human resources where staff are mostly community members who have volunteered to help in the conservation efforts of their heritage. Local ethnic museums and their caretakers lack the driving force and confidence to propel their establishment into a true community center for learning and tourism destination. The lack of funding is also a major problem where the community is the only source of funding because the museums have not been fully funded by government agencies and not continuously supported by local organizations. Most museums have artifacts on display that are mostly static. There is also inconsistency among the items where in some categories there is only a single item, while others are too identical and numerous. Development of local ethnic museums must be embarked on in order to survive and prosper in the age of Thailand's industrialization. Development efforts were initially started by conservationists such as Abbots of Buddhist temples, local school teachers and academics that acknowledged the value and knowledge of local ethnic heritage. Establishing local ethnic museums will help create and diffuse the knowledge of cultural heritage and will help newer generations to learn and cherish their traditions. It will also help individuals to understand the livelihood of their ancestors so that

they can apply the knowledge and lessons in their current life. The collection of artifacts must also be consistent with scientific processes in regards to the indigenous knowledge of ethnic communities.

Keywords: Local, Ethnic, Museum, Administration, Indigenous Knowledge

1. Introduction

Material items made by humans are evidence to the existence of their culture and society. Artifacts reveal the past changes of society from a simple livelihood towards a more complex technological driven nature. Collecting and preserving artifacts is therefore a refusal to accept the ending or death of what once was, to inherit the knowledge of their existence and to capture or store the history and indigenous knowledge forever in a time capsule (Boonyakiat, 2003). The accumulation of artifacts is an activity that is important to the development of human society and culture. Humans have a natural behavior in collecting and accumulating material items and they are motivated or inspired by many factors. Some collect artifacts due to the sentimental value that it provides while others collect artifacts to remind them of the past or because of nostalgia. Some collectors are motivated by the fact that artifacts are rare, exotic and expensive and some use their collections to raise their social status or try to portray their higher level of culture to others (Chantarot, 1999). Another reason for collecting artifacts is for the sake of knowledge development and to utilize it as a tool and evidence of the past experiences that has led to innovations in society of each era.

The conservation and preservation of cultural heritage is a process or activity in the inheritance of local ethnic culture so that it is preserved and maintained for younger generations. The preservation and learning from the past provides an understanding of the history of the community, region and society as a whole. The preservation or continuation of ethnic heritage doesn't mean that society will return to past circumstances but it is about understanding the past so that the future can be undertaken with more confidence. Inheriting the cultural knowledge and traditions of past generations doesn't require the actual practice of the traditions, but requires awareness and understanding so that people understand their own heritage which will promote conservation efforts and create innovations based on conservative foundations (Liorungruang, 1998). One form of conservation is the creation of local ethnic museums with the purpose of preserving local ethnic culture of the community in subjects of their history, origin, livelihood, community environment, natural environment, ethnic background, creations and innovations from past to present and to make future predictions.

The purpose of this research is to 1) Study the development of local ethnic museums in central Thailand, 2) study the problems and obstacles of established local ethnic museums in central Thailand and 3) To suggest an effective administrative guideline for local ethnic museums.

2. Research Area and Methodology

This qualitative study aimed at: 1) examining the development of local ethnic museum in Central Thailand; 2) investigating the problematic condition of local ethnic museum in Central Thailand; and 3) exploring local ethnic museum administration for the conservation of the indigenous knowledge of ethnic communities. The research sites included: The Folk Museum at *Wat Fang Khlong* at Nakhon Nayok province; *Pan Thanom Museum* at Petchaburi province; and *Wat Ban Muang Folk Museum* at Ratchaburi province. The research tools consisted of an interview form, an observation form, a group discussion form, and a seminar workshop form.

Fieldwork data were obtained from 75 informants. The data were checked for their accountability with triangulation technique, analyzed according to the given objectives, and the results of the study were presented in analytical format.

3. Research Results

3.1 Development of Local Ethnic Museums in Central Thailand

The movement of creating local ethnic museums started first in Europe in the 18th century and fully materialized in the 19th century. European ethnic museums were created due to the impact to European society being affected by the industrial revolution. Another factor that contributed to the creation of local ethnic museums was the rising role of middle class Europeans. Examples from conservationists such as *Arthur Hazelus's* collection of local ethnic culture led to the creation of the *Scandinavian Folklore Museum* and the ideology spread to educational institutions who conducted research studies in understanding and documenting the local history of communities which led to the creation of many local ethnic museums in Great Britain which started in 1911 and in The United States of America in 1929. This led to the reproduction of the environment and historical setting of local communities and created a collection of local artifacts for the study of *folkloristic*, community history and ethnology which spread from Europe, Russia and to Japan.

The first local ethnic museum in Thailand is the *Wat Ban Muang Folk Museum* which was established in 1992 through the cooperation of the community leaders, conservationist at Banpong district and from the help of academics. Anthropologist and archeologist *Srisakra Vallibhotama* was conducting field research in nearby communities around Banpong and noticed that the members of the local community communicated through ethnic Mon and also noticed that the abbot of *Wat Muang* temple had collected a surmountable amount of ethnic Mon scriptures and text imprinted on Talipot Palm leaves and also had a detailed community history recorded in books made from the pulp of Siamese rough bush or *Khoi* tree. With the help of another academic, *Pranee Wongthet* and with support from villagers, they established the earliest documented local ethnic museum at the temple. The museum served as an example for others to follow and was a positive note with community members who volunteered to take care of their artifacts with pride and love in their indigenous culture (Vallibhotama, 2000). The *Wat Ban Muang Folk Museum* provided an example for other conservationists to follow because it provided an answer for rural communities to preserve their ethnic culture and provided confidence and support to abbots and community leaders to follow suite.

Many local museums initially faced obstacles in establishing their museums due to the lack of knowledge in administrating and lacked correct scientific processes. Early solutions relied on asking for help from regional government offices. Government agencies responded by providing academic support but could not provide sufficient public funds. The lobbying efforts of *Srisakra Vallibhotama*, *Pranee Wongthet* and other academics opened up topics on archaeology, humanities and guidelines to create local ethnic museums in the academic circle which sparked the birth of local ethnic museums throughout Thailand.

Local ethnic museums in central Thailand provide many services and play many roles to the local community such as, providing a non-formal education system for the community, a location where actual artifacts can be observed and studied, induced awareness and education from the community environment, promoted the analysis of ideas and real life applications, provided knowledge and understanding of culture through material observation

and provided a more decisive and accurate understanding of culture. Another important role that local ethnic museum provides is to promote awareness and love of their ethnic origin and community because the knowledge from local ethnic museums provides community members with their history and how the community became to be through the indigenous knowledge of ancestors and from the struggles and experiences of their elders. Local ethnic museums also support sustainable tourism and helps encourage local and foreign tourists to experience the rich cultural history and heritage of their community which helps to create understanding and encourage the exchange of ideas between individuals with similar and different ethnic backgrounds.

The origin of the local ethnic museum of *Wat Fang Khlong* started in 1997. The museum is located at the temple of *Wah Fang Khlong* in the Pakphli district in Nakhon Nayok province and is utilized as a learning center of the ethnic *Thai Phuan* indigenous knowledge. The local ethnic museum of *Pan Thanom* was established in 1998 and located in the sub-district of Nongprog in the province of Phetchaburi and utilized as a learning center of ethnic *Thai Songdam* indigenous knowledge. The *Wat Muang Folk Museum* in Petchaburi province was established in 1992 and provided services as a learning and conservation center for ethnic *Thai Raman* or Mon indigenous knowledge. All these museums were established because of the changes to Thai society brought upon by the competitive nature of Thailand's industrialization which altered the values of individuals who neglected their cultural heritage. The expansion of industries led to social decay and to the end of large extended families to isolated single family homes. Many community members lost the love for their local community but conservationist united together to create a central location to store and recall their past. Local conservationist started out their collection by asking for donations of cultural and memorable items from community members and diffusing the knowledge and experience of past generations through cultural objects to community members and also to interested individuals from outside. The knowledge gained from the exhibits portrayed the livelihood, culture and traditions that have been lost, forgotten and neglected. The main purpose of the conservationist who established and diffused the knowledge of past generations is to preserve the community's way of life and memory of their ancestors so that future generations can observe and learn about their own valuable history.

The exhibition of ethnic indigenous knowledge of local museums in this research follow the same format where the tribal origin is displayed by portraying their relocation into Thailand and categorizing daily house hold items, clothing and language. Each category has a description and written details about their indigenous knowledge and accompanied by comparisons with their historic origin. The format of each museum is consistent with one another which is consistent with Boonutid (2002) where the distinctive features of local ethnic museums is the portrayal of daily community lifestyles of their ancestors with details on the daily livelihood of the community, the occupations of their ancestors, religion, beliefs and relationships or social structure of the community of forbearers.

3.2 Obstacles of Local Ethnic Museums in Central Thailand

Many museums face similar problems such as problems in human resources where staff are mostly community members who have volunteered to help in the conservation efforts of their heritage. Most of these museums lack dedicated staff such as scholars and proper curators that well established museums have. The lack of professionalism of the museum administration has created an underdeveloped museum and exhibition. Local ethnic museums and their caretakers lack the driving force and confidence to propel their

establishment into a true community center for learning and a profitable tourism destination. The lack of funding is also a major problem where the community is the only source of funding. This is because the museums have not been fully funded by government agencies and not continuously supported by local organizations. Most museums have raw materials or artifacts on display that are mostly static and there is no circulation of new artifacts to refresh the exhibition. There is also inconsistency among the items where in some categories there is only a single item, while others are too identical and numerous (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Spontaneous display of artifacts (left) and well organized exhibit (right).

The museum administration also face obstacles where there is a lack of cooperation among staff, limited cooperation between local museums, a low level of awareness within the community and minimal contact with external organizations. The fact that most local ethnic museums are staffed with voluntary individuals is an administrative challenge towards the efforts of the conservation of their ethnic heritage which is consistent with Nuansri (2009), where local ethnic museums in rural areas around Bangkok face the same challenges and most individuals who have volunteered for the post have inadequate experience and lack knowledge in proper museum administration. Museum funds continue to plague local ethnic museums because they were not provided with public funds from local and central government agencies on a consistent basis. This is consistent with Tassakorn (2003) where government agencies are inconsistent in their efforts of funding of museums throughout Thailand. The displayed artifacts are also inconsistent and lack scientific format leading to poor care and poor maintenance.

3.3 Administrative Guideline for the Conservation of Local Ethnic Museums

Development of local ethnic museums should follow the suggested guidelines in Figure 2, where the administrators of local ethnic museums should promote the development of the museum's staff with training so that they know and understand their ethnic background. Administrators should also create a network of cooperation with other ethnic groups from other provinces in Thailand.

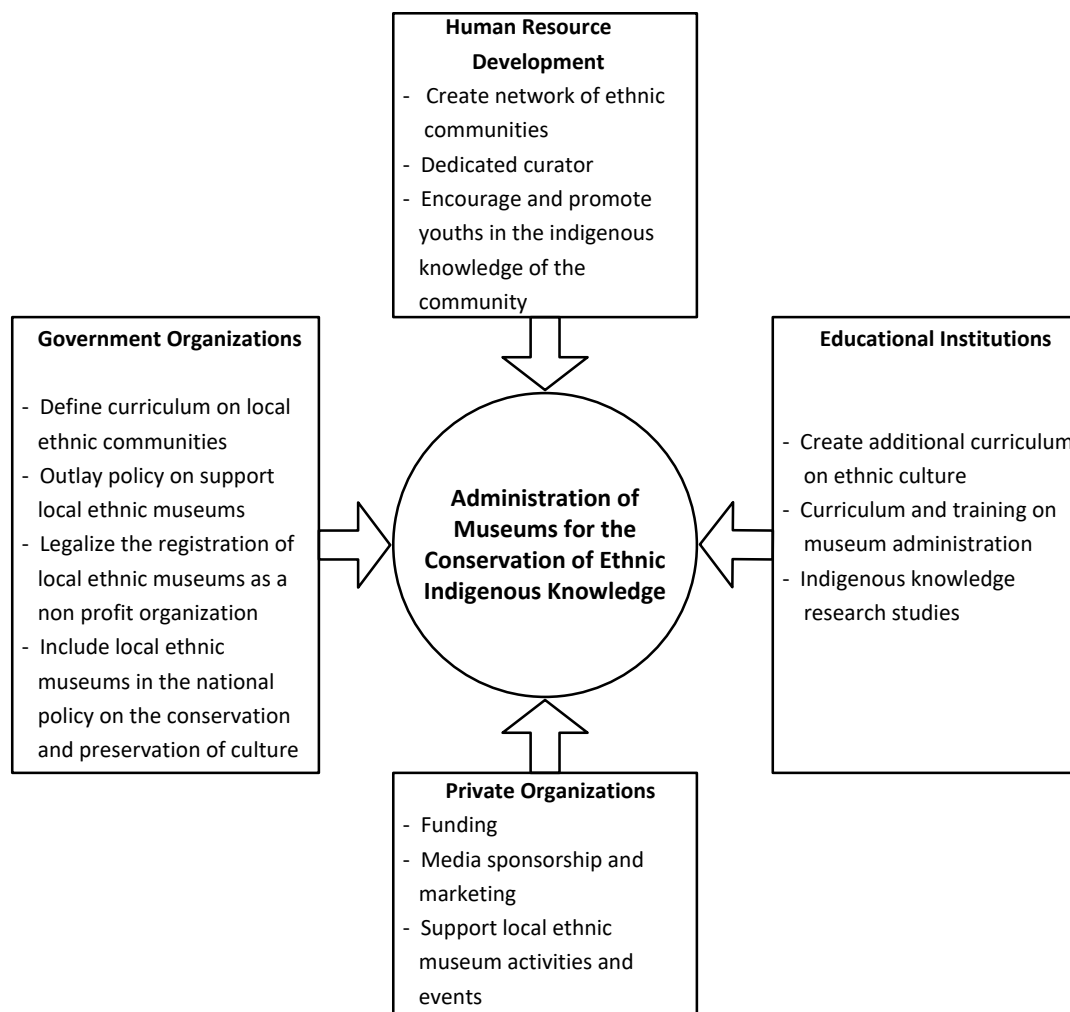


Figure 2. Administrative Development Guideline for the Conservation of Local Ethnic Museums

The knowledge management should include field studies and trips to observe, learn and exchange ideas and experiences with other ethnic groups and if possible, conduct studies and knowledge transfer at their ethnic origin. Youths and children should be taught and trained on how to become curators which will also contribute to their cultural inheritance. The purpose and objective of the museum should be clearly defined with short and long term goals written down so that it can be presented as a properly documented project proposal and qualify for public funding. Cultural items and artifacts should employ technology in their exhibitions such as using multimedia. Artifacts on display should be rotated, rearranged and coincide with traditional celebrations and should also include photo exhibits. Administrators of the museum should organize activities around festivals and important traditional events and work with the local community in establishing the knowledge of the museum into the educational curriculum for local schools within the vicinity. Managers must also work with community leaders and members to create cultural awareness. The administration of local ethnic museums must make it a priority to organize and promote museum activities during important festivals and traditional celebrations (Figure 3). They should also lobby for national recognition where local schools must implement courses on the indigenous knowledge and customs of their community and support local ethnic museums as learning centers in every community where community members can learn about their ethnic origin and language.

Museum academics should be provided with the opportunity to extend their knowledge base and exchange experiences with others by inviting scholars from other institutions in conservation projects to help develop the museum. Scholars included in the invitation should have backgrounds in related fields that is consistent with the museum and should come from all circles of the society such as academics, local philosophers, from the public sector, private sector, from the local community and from regional education institutions.



Figure 3. Songkran festival exhibition at *Wat Ban Muang Folk Museum*

Training of staff can simply be organized locally and should be extended to field studies and trips to their ethnic origin. Knowledge training for local ethnic museums should not be confined to just their own indigenous knowledge but other topics such as training on public relations, service, communication skills, secondary languages and also have a good understanding of non-formal, informal and public education systems. In order to accomplish the comprehensive training, a network should be established between other local ethnic museums and conduct an exchange of field studies, knowledge and experiences between participants, lecturers and scholars. Funds for local ethnic museums can be supplemented through admission fees and the sale of indigenous knowledge books, pamphlets and souvenirs. These are just some suggestions related to merchandise that are directly related to the museum, but there are also many other items that are commercially plausible such as foods, drinks and locally produced handicrafts. Charging an admission fee is a valid action and consistent with Ruangchan (2005) which confirms that the majority of visitors are willing and glad to pay entrance fees. The amount that should be charged should be determined by the museum's administration.

The display of indigenous ethnic knowledge should be interchanged with different types of exhibits such as a photo exhibition, special showcase during important traditional dates and celebrations. The special shows should also include live demonstrations, cultural performances and lectures by curators, invited scholars and local philosophers. The rotation of museum exhibitions has proven successful in other regional museums such as local ethnic museums in northern Thailand which is in agreement with Ongkrutraksa (2000) where special shows and displays of cultural traditions increased viewers satisfaction. Cultural displays and ethnic shows should be encouraged, organized on a regular basis and the action is encouraged by the Department of Cultural Promotion as a necessary method that promotes awareness, conservation but should be consistent with the traditional activities of the community. The display and demonstration of the daily and celebrated ethnic activities is consistent with

Vallibhotama (1971) where the essential elements of local ethnic museums should be the display of ethnic culture and not just the display of ethnic items. The factors that will determine which items should be displayed is determined by the availability of ethnic materials within the community. Items that no longer exist in the community can be sought after in other locations or provided with an alternative such as photographs, multimedia shows, pictures and portraits. All these items can be combined to provide viewers with a full picture of the ethnic culture of the museum. Educational scholars and local philosophers should be encouraged and invited by the museum in the development and quality assurance. The opinions and recommendations of specialist will help maintain the quality assessment of the museum's service and extend the cooperation and networking between local ethnic museums, private and public organizations. The cooperation will lead to further research studies in the conservation and revitalization of local ethnic culture and create a more detailed picture and information that can be used in future development plans and sustainable inheritance of ethnic indigenous knowledge.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study showed that local ethnic museums were developed from conservation efforts led by community leaders, monks, teachers and academics. They had gathered the objects of cultural value, keeping them for knowledge dissemination to community members as well as people from other communities. The local museums were used as learning centers, reminding people of their origin and realization of their own culture. Development of local ethnic museums must be embarked on in order to survive and prosper in the age of Thailand's industrialization. Establishing local ethnic museums will help create and diffuse the knowledge of cultural heritage and will help newer generations to learn and cherish their traditions. It will also help individuals to understand the livelihood of their ancestors so that they can apply the knowledge and lessons in their current life. The purpose and role of local ethnic museums is to be a collective display of historical records and artifacts that are related to human culture, about their community and about the environment. The exhibit and artifacts should be selected carefully and must be consistent with the conservation of local ethnic culture and portray the facts, knowledge and value of each artifact (Jaroenpoj, 2006). The collection must also be consistent with scientific processes in regards to the indigenous knowledge of ethnic communities.

5. Suggestions and Recommendations

Successful administration of local ethnic museums requires participatory action from the community, schools, from district and provincial administrative and from public and private organizations. In order to achieve this goal, it is important that local ethnic museums should first create a network of cooperation with each other and then expand the network to external organizations. Future research topics should include guidelines to promote local ethnic museums with cultural tourism, development of ethnic network on provincial and national levels and topics on the application of display technology for museum artifacts.

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