

## **The Procedure of Management and Preservation of Archaeological sites in *Thung Kula Rong Hai* Community in Northeast Thailand**

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**Abstract:** There are three conservation groups that are actively working to conserve archaeological sites in *Thung Kula Rong Hai* in Northeast Thailand. They include The Department of Fine Arts, Private Organizations such as The Lek-Prapai Viriyapan Foundation and local conservation groups. There are over 7,253 archaeological sites in Thailand but only 2,098 locations are registered. Government organizations are plagued with inefficient processes and red tape causing inefficiency and misunderstanding with the local community. Recently, they have started delegating conservation responsibilities to local centers. The Lek-Prapai Viriyapan Foundation has been a model example for conservation efforts and respected by locals in the preservation of Thai cultural heritage. Their success comes from supporting local community conservation projects and ideas by always including local opinions and supporting projects initiated by the local community. Community members in the past didn't have knowledge of archaeological sites and proper training. But education and conservation projects and activities have raised the public's awareness of the importance of preserving their own cultural heritage. Simple tasks such as cleaning, planting trees and flowers, guarding, minor maintenance and construction of proper sanitation were unanimously accepted. Communities have also integrated traditional cultures and ceremonies centralized around archaeological sites to nurture love and unity within the community. Local villagers were more attentive and responsive to conservation efforts from both government and private organizations once they realized the benefits that can come from preserving and maintenance of local cultural treasures.

**Key words:** Procedure, management, archaeological sites, *Thung Kula Rong Hai*, Northeast Thailand

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Thung Kula Rong Hai* Plain is a vast prairie located in the center of Northeast Thailand. The name *Thung Kula Ronghai* means The plain of the crying *Kula*, which is a referral to the *Kula* ethnic group who were nomadic merchants that migrated into the region in the early 17th century (Mingkwan, 2008). The plain measures 150 km from east to west and has a width of about 50 km. The total area of about 7,500 km<sup>2</sup> covers communities in 5 provinces, 10 districts, 79 sub-districts and 1,048 villages. It is a vast land connecting the Province of Mahasarakham, Roi-et, Surin, Srisaket and Yasothorn (Rattana, 1982). *Thung Kula Rong Hai* is a land rich in historical background and many agricultural communities. It is the home of many ethnic groups such as Khmer, Laotian, Sua, Phu Thai and Thai I-San. *Thung Kula Rong*

*Hai* is also the famous source of Thai Fragrant Rice or *Khao Hom Mali* (Watcharin, 2008). The Khmer ethnic group was the most prominent and advanced in construction and currently provides the region with rich resources of archaeological excavations, which reflects the dominance of Khmer influence in Northeast Thailand.

There are currently 7,253 archaeological sites in Thailand in which 2,098 of these sites are registered with The Department of Fine Arts. About 491 registered historical sites are located in Northeast Thailand. These Ancient sites have weathered hundreds of years of nature and human abuse and are in need of urgent preservation and restoration before they become permanently dilapidated (The Department of Fine Arts, 2001). Many people assume that the maintenance and repairing of archaeological sites is duty of The Department of Fine Arts. But there are numerous archaeological sites and

The Department of Fine Arts alone can't fulfill the entire task. Recently, they have decided to decentralize responsibilities to local Administrative Organizations and rural groups. Local communities will be responsible for campaigning and persuading community members to participate and care for local archaeological sites. Many of these organizations and local community members are still not certain, which actions or methodology will best benefit their community. Many have very little knowledge and training and some are not qualified at all. There are disagreements on many levels in regards to Planning, Management and conservation techniques. Villagers have limited understanding of performance and efficiency. Community leaders aren't positive that they are capable or that the responsibility is within their scope of research.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research area and method:** This research is based on qualitative research. Primary data was obtained from field research by means of survey, observations, interviews, group conversations and workshop. Secondary data was gathered from document analysis of local and international resources of archaeological site's preservation, restoration, development and management by government and private organizations. Research instruments and tools included observation forms, interview and group conversation and workshops.

The important factors for choosing research location include: Locations that are directly influenced by Khmer culture. Sites that are regarded and respected by local communities in *Thung Kula Rong Hai* Plain. Locations that are registered as archaeological sites of Thailand by The Department of Fine Arts (2000).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Important Archaeological sites located in *Thung Kula Rong Hai* include *Pra Sat Ku Ka Sing*, *Ku Pone Wit*, *Ku Pon Ra Kang* located at *Ku Ka Sing* village. *Ku Pra Kona* is located at *Ku Pra Kona* village, *Sra Ku* Sub-district in *Suwannaphum* District. *Ku Kan Tha Nam* is located at *Ku Kan Tha Nam* village, *Yang Kam* Sub-district in *Pon Sai* District. *Ku Muang Bua* is located at *Maung Bua* village, *Muang Bua* Sub-district in *Kaset Wisai* District.

**Amphur Ponsai (Pon Sai district):** *Kan Tha Nam* village in *Tha Nam* Sub-district, *Yang Kam* sub-district in *Amphur Pon Sai*, Roi-Et province is the location of the archaeological sites named *Ku Kan Tha Nam*. It was constructed in the 18th century Buddhist Era and

designated to be used as *Arokaya SaLa* or Public clinic or Health center. The Architectural style is similar to *Bayon* with influence from Buddhism of the Mahayana Sect.

**Amphur suwannaphum (Suwannaphum district):** The community of *Sra Ku* village Moo 12 *Sra Ku* Sub-District, *Suwannaphum* District, Roi-Et Province is the location of the archaeological site of *Ku Pra Kona*. The site served the purpose of a *Thevelai* or God's dwelling. It was constructed in the 16th century Buddhism Era with sand stone and brick. It has an architectural style of *Pa Puan* Angkor Wat style with influences in Hinduism sect of *Tree Mu Ra Ti*.

**Amphur Kaset Wisai (Kaset Wisai district):** The community of *Ku Ka Sing* village, Moo 1 *Ku Ka Sing* Sub-District in *Kaset Wisai* District in Roi-Et province is the location of the archaeological site named *Ku Ka Sing*. The purpose of the site was to be a *Thevalai*, which was constructed between the 16-18th century Buddhist Era with sandstone and laterite. The site is crafted with *Pa Puan* Angkorwat and Bayon style architecture with influence from Hinduism sect of *Sai Wa.Ku Muang Bua* is located in the community of *Muang Bua* village, Moo 1, *Muang Bua* Sub-district, *Kaset Wisai* district in the province of Roi-Et. The archaeological site is a *Thevalai* and constructed in between the 18-19th century Buddhist Era by using laterite and sandstone. The sites architectural style is identical to *Ku Ka Sing*. *Ku Kra Don* is located at the village of *Wat That* in *Nai Muang* Sub-District, *Kaset Wisai* District in Roi-Et Province. The historic site was constructed in the 18th century Buddhist Era with sandstone and laterite. The site served the purpose of a *Thama Sala* or public rest area. The architectural style of the site resembles *Bayon* with influences in Buddhism of the Mahayana Sect (The Department of Fine Arts, 2000).

**Conservation in Thung Kula Rong Hai:** Currently, there are 3 organizations or groups that are responsible for the revitalization and conservation of archaeological sites in Thailand. The first group is The Department of Fine Arts, which is directly responsible. The second are Private Organizations, which are engaged in specific archaeological preservation projects. The last are local community groups.

**The department of fine arts:** According to the 2nd Thai Constitution of 1992, the responsibility of The Department of Fine Arts include preserving, protecting, maintaining and conservation and development of Thai national heritage, local culture, indigenous knowledge,

archaeological artifacts and sites. Each of the processes and procedures must not be neglected. Every step must be in order and strictly followed except for emergency situations. There exists at least 7,253 known archaeological sites in Thailand, but The Department of Fine Arts has only enough resources to look after 2,098 locations. One hundred and eighty nine archaeological sites are located in Bangkok. Central Thailand has 521 registered sites. Eastern Thailand has 138. Southern Thailand has 255 and Northeast Thailand has a total of 504 archaeological sites. Complicated and outdated procedures have caused inefficiency in conservation projects. The lack of resources and efficient procedures has caused The Department of Fine Arts to belatedly rescue archaeological sites during emergencies and natural disasters.

**Private organizations:** Private organizations play an important part in the development of archaeological conservation in *Thung Kula Rong Hai*. Private groups are more efficient, more responsive and operate by the use of a private budget. Procedure and management process in the conservation and preservation of archaeological sites are not as numerous and restricted as those of Government Institutions. Action plans are predefined and direct. Local communities respect and admire private organizations because they include and give importance to local villagers and community opinions before taking any action. The most prominent private organization that is actively engaged in the preservation of archaeological sites in *Thung Kula Rong Hai* and throughout, Thailand is The Lek-Prapai Viriyapan Foundation. The foundation has a good track record of conservation and is famous in many communities.

**Lek-prapai viriyapan foundation:** The Lek-Prapai Viriyapan Foundation was established in 1996. Objectives of the foundation include, study, research and compiling of culture data in local communities throughout, Thailand. The foundation supports local communities to preserve and disseminate knowledge on history, society and conservation of local cultural treasures in Thailand for the general public. Local communities are encouraged to setup their own learning centers or local museums, while the foundation will support academic knowledge, museum management training and secure appropriate finance.

The foundation is always engaged in explorations and data collection of historical, archaeological, local indigenous knowledge, fairy tales, local legends, tribal rituals and belief, local fauna and local medical remedies. The knowledge collected was obtained from credible sources, monks, traditional healers and local

philosophers. The foundation also arranges meetings and seminars so that local philosophers and knowledgeable individuals from different communities can meet. The main purpose of the meetings is the exchange of ideas and purification of knowledge, which will breathe livelihood in the indigenous knowledge and local cultures elevating the purified facts to modern standards and social acceptance. These meetings and the knowledge gained afterwards will provide an alternative and supplement modern understanding and practices. The Foundation also publishes brochures, newsletters, magazines and books to promote cultural awareness. Brochures are produced to promote specific cultural and archaeological updates, while bi-monthly newsletters are published to communicate to the public on updates on archaeological digs, finds and conservation topics. Published books are generally social sciences and related to vanishing cultural heritage and treasures. The foundation maintains that the books are easy to read and not too extensive because they are targeted at youths in local communities throughout, Thailand. Surveys are also undertaken throughout, Thailand to identify what books and texts are needed in distant schools and villages in arid and isolated communities. Books from the foundation and other publishing houses will be gathered and provided to the village's library or school (Lek-Prapai Viriyapan, 2008).

Lek-Prapai Viriyapan Foundation has a long history of supporting local communities in setting up their own museums in the villages and temple areas (Paritta, 2003). The foundation has been successful and is an inspiration for the people who live in that community in which they initiated a process of conservation of local archaeological sites. With the support of community leaders they started a process of the maintenance of archaeological sites by setting up conventions where community members could express their opinions and then search for a method of practice. Working groups would be selected from people within the community and their responsibilities defined and distributed.

**Community groups:** Preserving archaeological sites by the local people is the good way to expand knowledge and understanding about the archaeological sites. They will afterwards realize the importance that the community will receive from the many benefits that archaeological sites can bring. Cultural treasures and historic sites should be directly in the care and management of the local community because community members reside near the sites and can effectively care for and keep guard of the area. This can only be possible when the community recognizes the value and benefits of their cultural treasure (Anukun, 1999).

Similarities were discovered in other researches in the study on the co-operation of people for cultural treasure preservation in local community in *Suratthani* Province in Southern Thailand. Local community members at first didn't have knowledge about ancient sites or ruins, so they were not interested and did not give it any importance. Most were only interested in their daily routines and occupations. Afterwards the location was intruded upon and shops and houses were built around the area. These groups did not keep the area clean and the archaeological sites were neglected and ruined. Eventually they had destroyed the beautiful scenery of the *Chaiya* Pagoda resulting in fewer and fewer tourists. This affected the local tourism and economy. Local community leaders and prominent members of the village then started and campaigned to promote knowledge, create activities and conveyed conservation messages to community members to realize the importance of preserving archaeological sites because they are valuable to their own community in the future. After continued promotion and dedication, local community members finally understood and realized that they were responsible to watch out for their own cultural treasures. They became more attentive and cooperative with government officials and conservation organizations to preserve and protect *Chaiya* Pagoda. Eventually tourism returned to the community. *Chaiya* Pagoda today is a model example of how archaeological sites can be successfully maintained, managed and preserved by the local community. The outcome had provided economic benefits and increased income from selling local products to tourists (Pichai, 2002).

Local communities have used traditional cultures, rituals and religious ceremonies to promote and nurture public awareness and reiterate the community's conscience of preserving their historical sites and culture. Ceremonies and rituals such as, paying homage and consecrating archaeological sites, Holy water blessings for people and historical sites and the ordainment of Brahmins, Monks and Nuns so that local members of the community can utilize their free time towards meditation and the study of Dharma. These cultural activities have given local people and youths a chance to participate together uniting the community by using the archaeological sites as centralized symbols of association for all community members.

### CONCLUSION

The Government has limited resources but has many complicated restoration and conservation process that can't keep up with the maintenance of over 7,253

archaeological sites throughout, Thailand. Change and development is needed to modernize the procedures. Restoration knowledge and know-how must be transferred to local authorities and organizations that are in the vicinity of the sites where it is more efficient and sustainable.

Private organizations have provided important conservation methods and techniques, which have been successful in many areas. There close relationships with the local community's have enabled the creation of new ideas that have benefited in the restoration and conservation process. Private organizations are aware that by providing proper knowledge to local communities and by supporting conservation projects initiated by the local communities will help them to understand the benefits and advantages of cultural treasures, which they will nurture love and cherish and pass on to the next generation.

Local communities in the past did not have in-depth understanding about the benefits and importance of ancient archaeological sites. They neglected the Ancient ruins and in some cases illegally invaded the grounds to vandalized and steal. The Department of Fine Arts and local authorities have used the law on numerous occasions to control the situation but there still exists a very large gap in conservation efforts to fulfill. The reality is that The Department of Fine Arts doesn't have enough human resources to effectively guard and protect the rich historical sites in Thailand. Education and Modernization has raised public awareness and brought change to the situation. More and more people are becoming aware of the importance and benefits that can be received by revitalizing and protecting local cultural treasures.

Public awareness has been elevated through, the broadening and understanding of archaeological site's historical background and importance in modern times. The ongoing progress had been started by delegating responsibilities to local organizations and local communities to be in charge of their own local cultural heritage, which has brought pride, sensation and ownership within the community. Many volunteers are eager to be a part of the process. Village philosophers and local leaders are in support and have promoted the villagers to help each other conserve local cultural treasures. This has raised the villager's awareness and attention in conservation activities and they willingly offered assistance with compassion and love.

Preserving archaeological sites in communities in *Thung Kula Rong Hai* have been successful because the conservation and restoration process were initiated by local community members. Meetings were arranged, organized and a solution that would best benefit the community was sought. Work teams were assigned for

appropriate duties and cooperated with other conservation networks that were taking part in archaeological preservations. Procedures for preserving archaeological site were mostly in agreement with the opinions of community members. Practices were consent as long as they were simple and easy to follow. Complexity and academics were not favored principles. The people in local communities prefer day to day responsibilities that don't interfere with their day jobs. The activities that are commonly accepted are cleaning, sweeping the floor, standing guard to prevent theft and vandalism. Other responsibilities include checks and simple maintenance of structures and landscape by planting beautiful trees and plants and the construction of toilets and public rest areas. The most important tasks is offering good-understanding and transferring the knowledge of the Historical background and importance of the archaeological sites for local community members and to visitors.

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