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## **I\_SAN CULTURAL TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN THE MEKONG FRONTIER**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Abstract---The northeastern region of Thailand or I-san has its territory connecting to the Mekong River which is an important river within the Greater Mekong Sub-region. I-san is a good strategic point that can promote local and international tourism and also shows its potential growth continuously. This research aims to examine I-san cultural tourism management in the Mekong frontier using a qualitative approach. To collect the data, a structured interview is used to interview the key informants regarding I-san cultural tourism in Loei, Nong Khai, Mukdahan, and Ubon Ratchathani provinces. Data were analyzed by content analysis. It founded that most cultural tourism was dealt primarily with the way of life of the local community which is unique and diversified. Besides, there were some destinations that are difficult to access, some facilities are still inadequate, most of the hotels are small and medium-sized, and there were only some communities that set up tourism activities. As a consequence, I-san cultural tourism in the Mekong frontier should be promoted from relevant parties in order to establish the strength within the community.

Keywords---I-San Cultural Tourism, Mekong River, Way of Life

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) is another important tourist destination of most travelers. At the moment, there are substantial numbers of tourists travelling to this region. With a greater number of tourists, it is a good opportunity to develop tourism in the northeast region as it is an important connecting point that can link tourism with the neighboring countries. Because of the outstanding location and its boundary connected to the Lao People's Democratic Republic, it shows the potential of tourism development in this region.

Moreover, the area has a rather outstanding and diverse culture and possesses unique identity in terms of language, food, architecture, way of life, and other ethnicities which is a cultural heritage from learning, experts' experience and then they become the local wisdom of I-san. But due to lack of promote cultural attractions [Sudthitham, 2003], lacks the leadership to develop the tourism potential of the area to be sustainable. Contribute to cultural tourism in this area is not sustainable.

Culture and cultural heritage is a new type of tourism development where the tourist destinations as well as its activities play a crucial role in attracting the tourists and visitors [Cooper et al., 2008]. In addition, cultural tourism encourages tourists to have a genuine experience and take part in the activities of the local community which is rarely seen in the daily life [Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009].

I-San area on the banks of the Mekong frontier is another important strategic point where tourism can be developed. This area possesses a high potential for cultural tourism; however, it has not yet been well-developed. The study of cultural tourism types of I-San area on the banks of the Mekong frontier will help to better understand the potential of cultural tourism in various aspects. Such information gained from the study will be used to develop cultural tourism in the region in a sustainable manner. In addition, the concept of sustainable development is passed on to a whole tourism industry; that is, tourism will be managed according to the carrying capacity of the nature, community, tradition, culture, way of life of the local residents, environment and its tourism resources of the tourist destinations.

Cultural tourism is a form of travel covering all aspects of tourism that a human can learn the way of life as well as the thoughts of others [McIntosh, 1990]. I-San cultural tourism, therefore, is traveling to the tourist destinations in order to observe the way of life and the thoughts of the local community. Such study aims to learn and appreciate its identity as well as its beauty of the local culture, build a friendship, knowledge, understanding, and appreciation towards the cultural identity of the community creating less impact to the people, culture, and environment. At the same time, the local community, the owner of the culture, can benefit from tourism in terms of social, cultural, and economic contexts.

To enable I-San cultural tourism a form of tourism that helps to develop regional tourism sustainably in the mentioned contexts, the development is to be based on the concept of cultural tourism as well as its sustainable development in order to yield the maximum efficiency and effectiveness to the I-San cultural tourism.

This research aims to examine I-san cultural tourism management in the Mekong frontier by elements of tourism [Buhalis, 2000; Jittangwattana, 2005; Sitikarn et al., 2006; Sangchey, 2007], including attractions, accessibilities, amenities, accommodations, activities and ancillary services.

## METHODS

The present research is qualitative-oriented. The procedure of the research is illustrated as follows:

### **1.1** *Scope of the study*

The researcher limited the scope of the study by selecting only 7 provinces in the Mekong River based on the information from the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, include Loei, Nong Khai, Buengkan, Nakhon Phanom, Mukdaham, Amnat Charoen, and Ubon Ratchathani. Two major criteria used to arrive at the chosen research areas are 1) It is a province in the Mekong River based on the information from the Ministry of Tourism and Sport 2) It is a province that has more than 1 million tourists in 2010 based on the statistics of Thai tourists separated by province in 2010 from the Department of Tourism, the Ministry of Tourism and Sport. To meet the set criteria, therefore, four provinces are chosen as research areas for the present study including Loei, Nong Khai, Mukdaham, and Ubon Ratchathani provinces.

### **1.2** *Populations*

The population for the present study is stakeholders are as government and private officials involving in tourism in research areas.

### ***1.3 Key Informants***

The researcher determined 20 key informants; that is, government and private officials, academicians, community leaders whose life are involving with I-San cultural tourism. They are having either academic or administrative position concerning tourism development in the chosen research areas, to arrive at the desired key informants by the purposive sampling technique

### ***1.4 Instruments and Data Collection***

A structured individual interview is essentially applied with the key informants by following the guidelines for an interview to collect the data. Such guidelines for an interview are developed based on the concept of cultural tourism and sustainable tourism development.

Data collection is the primary data from the key informants in the chosen research areas while the secondary data were collected from relevant documents and earlier researches. The researcher analyzed and synthesized the collected data by using content analysis.

## **RESULTS**

The results of the research related to I-San cultural tourism is illustrated as follows:

### ***1.4 The role of organizations related to I-San cultural tourism in various perspectives***

#### ***1.4.1 The policy of I-San cultural tourism management***

The organizations related to I-San cultural tourism takes different roles in developing cultural tourism of the areas. With regards to the attractions development, the Province Office of Tourism and Sports is a major organization in developing the attractions, facilities and amenities. In addition, it provides training about tourism management by the community in order to arm the local community effectively with the knowledge about tourism development which will create additional jobs as well as revenue to the community. The Province Office of Tourism and Sports is also a major organization to set up the tourism development strategy of the province. There are some supporting agencies working closely with the major ones in promoting tourism activities. For instance, the Provincial Administrative Organization sets up the budget to develop the attractions in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and Sports in order to check its readiness of the tourism products and do marketing with the Tourism Authority of Thailand, promotes the tourist destinations to do more marketing. The Community Development Provincial Office encourages the local community to do a souvenir shop.

In addition to the governmental sectors, the private sector also plays a crucial part in promoting cultural tourism. To develop I-San cultural tourism effectively, it is therefore essential to coordinate with several organizations taking different but important roles in tourism development in terms of economic, social, cultural, as well as environmental perspectives.

### ***1.5 Cultural tourism along the Mekong Frontier***

#### ***1.5.1 Attractions***

Most of attractions along the Mekong frontier are involved community's ways of life, cultural, traditions and religious beliefs such as Kaw Pun Nam Jaw (Thai vermicelli eaten with soup and entrails), Tam Dong Dang (Papaya salad with vermicelli called Dong Dang which are bigger than vermicelli), morning glory and bean sprouts. The attractions and unique culture as follows in Figure 1

1.5.2 *Accessibilities*

Getting access to some attractions are difficult. Somewhere have good access routes and somewhere have bad routes, any signs are not clear, there are least amount of transportation such as bus and van does not get to the attractions.

1.5.3 *Amenities*

Facilities are insufficient in some attractions. Lack of good service and clean in restaurants. The organizations that related to develop facilities do not focus on development. Somewhere were developed the facilities were not suitable the attractions that called “disgraceful visual” such as the toilets eclipsed the attractions, parking area unsuitable for tourists, it so far from attractions.

1.5.4 *Accommodations*

There are many and various accommodations in this area. Almost, there are medium and small accommodations which are all types of hotels, apartments, resorts and homestays but the problems was undercut the price of each other therefore the related organizations which are responsible entities will be control their price to the same standards to reduce conflict in the business, and to be fair to all tourists in the target group.

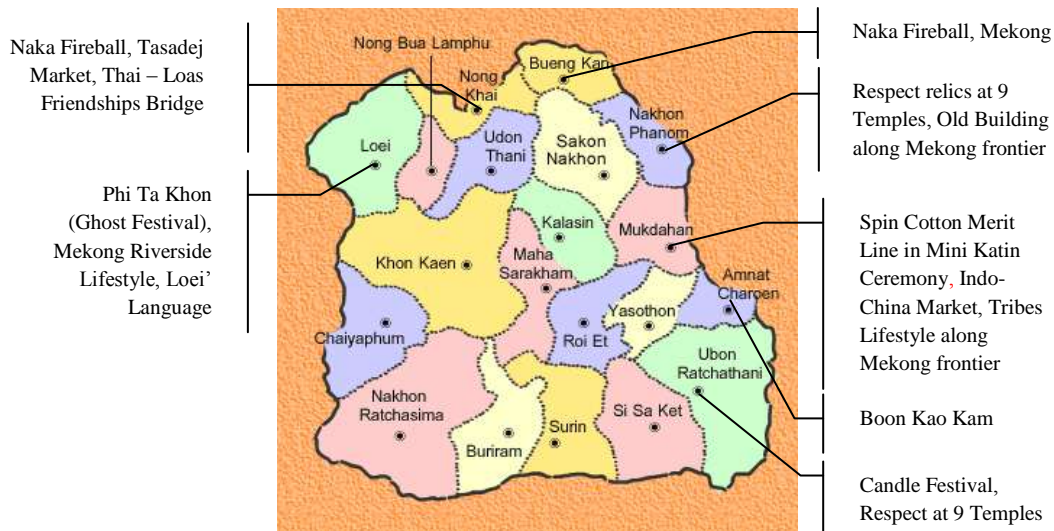


Figure 1 – Cultural of each area

1.5.5 *Activities*

There are many and various tourism activities in this area, particularly the cultural and traditional event that held in every season. Such as in the homestay; “Bai Sri Su Kwan” (small welcome party for tourists), traditional cooking, local dancing, made the local souvenir; “Pa Mak Klon” (the cotton ferment with mud), made organic rice, made herbal compress, etc., visitors can participate in the activities, have the knowledge and experience from the cultural tourism activities.

### *1.5.6 Ancillary Services*

Each of which will require the availability of a space and understanding about the tourism management. Whereas, currently the community to lack of leader and the group to manage their tourism. However, the organizations are involved have to support with the integration of the community, assist them by sale tour program and bring tourists to travel in the community. Encourage staff to have a better understanding on cultural tourism in the community.

### *1.6 Problems and Limitations of I-San Cultural Tourism Management*

In most cases, the problem is about "people" for instance;

- Lack of coordination between organizations in a systematic coordination with other organization, seemed quite irrational conflict between the organizations and communities.
- The local people have not knowledge about tourism, still have a traditional way of life and do not know how to welcome tourists, have not good welcome presentation format and cultural tourism system.
- Cultural tourists are niche market.
- The local authorities lack a budget for supporting tourism and continuity.
- Allocation of the revenue generated from tourism irrational. The community leaders and members do not understand their own roles.

### *1.7 The Promotion and Development of I-San Cultural Tourism in Mekong Frontier*

- More researching about cultural and tradition studies of region.
- Invite the mass media and public relations to tour in this area.
- Encourage community is equipped to handle tourism community.
- Find organization to serve as a mentor to the community. Encouraging people in communities to manage their own cultural tourism.
- Find appropriate activities to promote tourism community with neighboring countries.
- Provide training to educate the local people. Survey the community where attend to manage their tourism and invite community representatives to study in other attractions and monitoring the implementation.
- Exploring religion and way of life area and extract features and at the right time inherit the existing activities and create new activities to attract tourists.
- Training local guides that are fluent in the story of tourism and recreation activities during the trip.

## **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK**

Entities related to I-San Cultural Tourism in Mekong frontier, role in the development of different both the development of tourism, marketing and public relations, economic and income, social, environment, arts and culture should be more collaboration between organization more relevant to the management of cultural tourism in Mekong frontier, to achieve objectives and make the society is a cultural heritage conservation [Tran & Nguyen, 2004].

Most types of attractions in Mekong frontier are traditional culture [Hughes, 2002; Sigala & Lessie, 2005; Smith, 2009] such as the arts and crafts, tribe village, cultural festival of indigenous, traditional languages and rural lifestyle. In order to get enjoyment gain a better understanding of the local culture. On the basis of responsibility and consciousness to preserve the heritage and values of the environment. Local community participation in tourism management cultural sights, each with a unique culture and diverse lends out cultural tourism is creating a career

and income to the community consistent with the findings of Pimsen et. al. (2002) studied cultural tourism potential of the community to produce a product for tourism.

The accessibilities should improve every vehicle to be able to travel more easily accessible sites.

The amenities in the attractions should improve to secure the tourists, signs for warning the tourists, tourist service center and developed potential of local guide and a sufficient number of tourists.

The accommodations should have a sufficient number and variety. The operator should improve service and price standards and do not take advantage from tourists.

The activities should have variety. Tourists can do and have more knowledge, experience and impression.

The ancillary service should be managed by the community to be strengthened. Ready to be welcomed into the community, to recognize the importance of tourism, to preserve the cultural traditions of the community and develop community to progress more.

The result of Bamrungjitt et. al. (2006) offers to potential and concurrently communities in cultural tourism can extract features to sell to tourists. But there are some that should have been improved, such as the accessibilities, facilities in tourist attractions. While Pinsri et. al. (2007) suggests to developed and improve potential of cultural tourism attractions and can be used as a selling point for tourism-oriented culture. Furthermore, development of cultural tourism in Mekong frontier need to achieve in this area, more tourists every year, communities and related organization have receive benefit from tourism whereof the community must be strengthened to be creator and benefit the most and consistent with the study by George (2010) found that community-owned sites have been disparities in the benefits from tourism, so tourism development of the local community is both the creator and the real owner should get benefit.

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