

Candle Traditions: Conservation and Management Model for Public Relations in Order to Promote Cultural Tourism in the Government Sector, Private Sector and Communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province

Suchart Suwanvong¹, Pisit Boonchai¹ & Somkhit Suk-erb¹

¹The Faculty of Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District, Kantarawichai District, Maha Sarakham Province, Thailand

Correspondence: Suchart Suwanvong, The Faculty of Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District, Kantarawichai District, Maha Sarakham Province 44150, Thailand. E-mail: tanin9911@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This is a cultural qualitative research that examines the *tien pansa* candle festival in Ubon Ratchatani Province, Thailand. The aims of the research were to study the background and appropriate management of the *tien pansa* candle festival and develop a conservation and management model for public relations in order to promote cultural tourism in the government sector, private sector and communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province. The research results found that the festival is based on the long-standing custom of offering candles as a method of worship. There were found to be six reasons for the strength of the candle festival in Ubon Ratchatani, which were: a) Ubon Ratchatani is a Buddhist city that has more temples than any other city in Thailand; b) the local people are particularly philanthropic and intelligent; c) the city itself was built on the area of *dong-oo-peung*, which has a number of important resources used in the *tien pansa* celebration; d) the Ubon Ratchatani people pay special attention and care to the homage of the Buddhist Triple Gems; e) Ubon Ratchatni is home to skilled artisans in all branches of the fine arts; g) the festival adheres to the founding principles of worship and respect, with the intention of promoting the Buddhist religion. Despite this, there are a number of problems with the current management of the festival, not least the shift of emphasis from worship to financial gain and the influence of Western culture and technology. The research concludes that the best solution to these problems is to increase local community participation in the management of the festival.

Keywords: Ubon Ratchatani, candle, festival, participation, management, conservation, community, public relations

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is an industry that is continually improving and greatly aids the economic and social situation of the country and generates an income so that the nation may progress. Tourism also plays a role in developing communications structures, including sale and investment. When the country is in an economic crisis, tourism plays an important role in generating income and can help the economy recover quickly (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2012, p. 1)

The continual challenges to global tourism have multiplied and are an important impulse for tourism in Thailand. These impulses are appraised by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which estimates the numbers of tourists choosing sustainable tourism holidays in relation to the total number of global tourists. From the data collected by the UNWTO it was found that international tourism in 2012 had increased 4% and the number of people travelling abroad totaled 1,035 million people. This is a higher figure than predicted by the ten-year policy of 2010-2020, which suggested that there would be a 3.8% increase. Tourism in the Asia-Pacific region had increased the most, with an increase of 7%. This agrees with the data of The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), which predicted that the number of foreign tourists to Asia-Pacific would increase by 6% in 2013. When compared with previous years, the region that has increased the most is Southeast Asia, which has seen an increase of 8%. Tourism thus has an important role in the development of economy and society in different countries (Department of Tourism, 2013).

The current trend among tourists is to travel to areas that have a different culture to their own including lifestyle, history, fine arts, ceremonies and local traditions. These are good selling points for cultural tourism. Therefore it is necessary to place importance on cultural tourism management so that it is suitable. The management should not have an influence on the culture nor change it. This agrees with the research of Surachai Wankaew (2002, p. 35), who concluded that development and management of tourism must reveal the value of the original culture in the area. Outsiders must not change anything in the culture they are visiting, which should be conserved and promoted to allow for the greatest generation of income possible.

Ceremonies in the different areas of Thailand reveal the distinct and unique identity of the local people, their lifestyles, their beliefs and the ancient wisdom from which they are derived. These are an important cultural draw for international tourists and must be preserved. For this reason, combined with the importance of tourism to Thailand, a national agenda was outlined on the 17th April 2009 to instruct the Ministry of Tourism and Sports to define long and short term development strategies. Thus the 2012-2016 National Tourism Development Plan was created with the objectives to increase continual tourism in Thailand in order to increase its earning potential, quality and lasting development (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2012, p. 1).

The Isan region is an area of huge natural and social variety in the Northeast of Thailand. It is an area that boasts a variety of interests for tourists, including natural resources, ancient communities and unique traditions. It is also home to a number of ethnic groups, which increases the cultural diversity of the region. The traditions of the area clearly reveal the links between the ancient and the modern communities, despite the dangers posed by globalization (Jamrik, 2000, pp. 8-9). These dangers include the dilution and mixture of different cultural traditions and threat of replacement by traditions from cultures in other parts of the world (Wankaew, 2002). Modern society is different from that of the past as the technology and developments of societies are transferred internationally and the consumption of new cultures has an effect and influence on the culture of the consumer. Cultural diffusion is thus an effect of globalization and poses a threat to the traditional culture of Isan.

The culture and customs of Isan are especially important, as the local people continue to respect and incorporate them in their daily lives. These traditions have a strong association with Buddhism. There are fifteen locations in Isan that can meet the needs of the international tourist and have a high potential for tourism in the area, one of which is Ubon Ratchatani Province, specifically its Candle Festival. The Candle Festival of Ubon Ratchatani is a program that corresponds to the aforementioned policies of the government to promote the cultural traditions of the locals to international tourists, as well as the provincial strategies to generate income for local communities from tourism. The festival has a long history and is named *Tien Pansa*, which is a bio-cultural symbol for the people of Ubon Ratchatani and is based on the foundations of Buddhist concepts. The candles used in the festival are not only to provide light but also demonstrate the progression of the local community, local lifestyles and cultural identity. The festival is an opportunity for local communities to unite and participate in a shared experience (Na Ubon, 2002).

The reason why Ubon Ratchatani has hosted such a magnificent festival as *tien pansa* for such a long time is that the provincial city has more temples than any other provincial city in Thailand. There is also a high concentration of senior and famous monks, while the local people are particularly philanthropic and intelligent. The city itself was built on the area of *dong-oo-peung*, which has a number of important resources used in the *tien pansa* celebration. These include fertile beehives and royal palace bureaus that are able to create candles from the beeswax. The Ubon Ratchatani people also pay special attention and care to the homage of the Buddhist Triple Gems.

The format of the *tien pansa* candle festival is now more impressive than ever and attracts many more tourists than the past. This has a positive effect of the local economy. There are parades, beauty pageants and candle competitions. There are rules and methods for scoring the candle competition that are suitable. The length of the festival is three days, beginning around the full moon of the eighth lunar month. The first day is the opening of the festival and the second day marks the revealing of the candles and their female 'companion', while the third and final day is reserved for the candle procession and parade.

However, there has been recent evidence of technology being used to replace local natural resources during the festival, causing changes to the make-up of the ceremony. There are also changing attitudes towards funding for the ceremony and new businesses have been established who see financial gain as the founding principal of the ceremony. The concepts surrounding worship have also been transformed. The government has the largest role in the organization of the ceremony, with help from the private sector but the local people do not play a part (Aneksuk, 2001). In 2012, Ubon Ratchatani Rajabhat University evaluated the festival and concluded that developments were required in cleanliness, car parking, area division, traffic, toilets, duration, safety,

refreshment services, waste disposal, service officers, viewing areas, lighting, tourist service points, indigenous performances and ticketing prices. Also, the research of Jirawan Kawila (2001, pp. 1-2) and Bragawpsiri Pakdeepinit (2007, p. 2) indicated that the interest of tourists was drawn by local identity and the obstacles to the tourists were accessibility, lack of information, lack of parking, lack of local English language proficiency, lack of seating and toilets. Also, the research of Wiwatnchai Boonyanupong (2001, p. 1) concluded that the mixed indigenous history was a unique identity of the local community and a good example of local inheritance that must be treated with due importance. The problem surrounding this was the lack of reception area and information center for tourists.

Given the primary researcher's position and role as a member of the organization council for the candle festival, the research team had been aware of these problems for some time. Therefore they were interested in studying the conservation and management model for public relations at the candle festival, in order to promote cultural tourism in the government sector, private sector and communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province. The overriding objective was to solve the problems with the organization of the ceremony so to ensure its successful continuation in the future and presentation to the world audience.

2. Research Objectives

This research, *candle traditions: conservation and management model for public relations in order to promote cultural tourism in the government sector, private sector and communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province*, had three primary research aims, which were: a) to study the background of the *tien pansa* candle festival in Ubon Ratchatani Province; b) to study appropriate management of the *tien pansa* candle festival in order to promote cultural tourism in the government sector, private sector and communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province; c) to study a conservation and management model for public relations in order to promote cultural tourism in the government sector, private sector and communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province.

3. Research Methodology

This investigation, *candle traditions: conservation and management model for public relations in order to promote cultural tourism in the government sector, private sector and communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province*, used a cultural qualitative research method. This research began on the 1st July, 2012 and was completed on the 25th July, 2013.

3.1 Research Content

The content of the research was chosen in accordance with the pre-defined research objectives. Regarding the first aim, to study the background of the festival, the content included the context of Ubon Ratchatani Province, the history of the *tien pansa* candle festival, the candle-making methods and the beliefs surrounding the candle festival. Regarding the second aim, to study appropriate management, the content included the management of candle-making, the candle parade, dance postures in the candle procession, music used during the candle procession, safety and traffic management, management of other performances and the sponsorship of the *tien pansa* candle festival. Regarding the third aim, to study a conservation and management model, the content included a process model, establishment of a learning and knowledge center for the *tien pansa* candle festival, raising of awareness, inheritance of local wisdom, development of the candle procession, creation of trade, knowledge management and planning of information.

3.2 Research Area

Ubon Ratchatani was selected as the research area due to its reputation as a host of the *tien pansa* candle festival, a national symbol, and the worldwide renown for the beauty and intricacy of the candles presented during the festival. Aside from this, Ubon Ratchatani is an important Province in Thailand and has been home to an ancient culture that has been dispersed around the region. The candle procession was first held as a cultural tourist attraction in the province in 1977. The festival also has a unique form of management and is broadcast around the world. There is also development of green tourism to ensure that the festival remains sustainable, up-to-date, innovative and trusted by tourists.

3.3 Research Population

One-hundred and fifteen individuals were selected by purposive sampling technique as informants for this research. The key informants were twenty management heads in the planning and organization of the *tien pansa* candle festival. The casual informant group included the Ubon Ratchatani Deputy Provincial Governor, the Ubon Ratchatani Assistant District Officer, the Chief Municipal Officer of Nakhon Ubon Ratchatani Sub-district, the Deputy of the Ubon Ratchatani Provincial Administrative Organization, three education officers at Nakhon Ubon Ratchatani Sub-district, three engineering officers at Nakhon Ubon Ratchatani Sub-district, three public health

officers at Nakhon Ubon Ratchatani Sub-district, three directors of municipal schools, fifteen local community councilors in the Nakhon Ubon Ratchatani Sub-district area and fifteen candle artisans. There was a total of forty-five casual informants. The fifty general informants consisted of twenty members of the general public, twenty domestic Thai tourists and ten foreign tourists.

3.4 Research Method

Information planning was divided into four stages: (stage 1) research and analysis of problems; (stage 2) planning; (stage 3) implementation of plans; (stage 4) evaluation. The investigation used documentary study and field research to gather information. The tools used for field research were basic survey, participant and non-participant observation, structures and unstructured interview and focus group discussion. Data collection was conducted and categorized according to the three research aims: a) to study the background of the *tien pansa* candle festival in Ubon Ratchatani Province; b) to study appropriate management of the *tien pansa* candle festival in order to promote cultural tourism in the government sector, private sector and communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province; c) to study a conservation and management model for public relations in order to promote cultural tourism in the government sector, private sector and communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province. Results were validated using a methodological triangulation technique and is here presented as a descriptive analysis.

4. Research Results

4.1 Background of the Tien Pansa Candle Festival in Ubon Ratchatani Province

The area of modern Ubon Ratchatani and its surrounding provinces was first inhabited by local indigenous people, who are now referred to as *Ka*, *Suay*, or *Kuay*. These were people of Mon-Cambodian origins and their beliefs and culture were inherited by future generations in Ubon Ratchatani. The origins of the candle festival were to mark the beginning of Buddhist lent, *Vassa*, a period of three months when monks must remain inside the temple grounds. This was honored by the donation of candles.

Ubon Ratchatani is one province in Northeastern Thailand with a strong belief in the merit of worshipping with candles and light. Since 1792, households in the area of *dong-oo-peung* worshipped with candles (*dong-oo-peung* is the area upon which modern-day Ubon Ratchatani stands). Candles are revered objects that are used in the process of worship. The reason that the *tien pansa* candle festival has been able to develop is due to the local belief in *heed sip song*, the notion shared by Isan people of intense worship once a month for the course of twelve months). This and the belief that worship with candles generates added merit value. It is now common for people to worship by offering candles, food and toiletries to the monks and candles are especially needed for the monks to light in the temples during the three-month *Vassa* period. The first *tien pansa* candle ceremony came about when the local Buddhist people gathered small candles together and tied them to a wooden axis. This was then wrapped and decorated with colored paper to create a *don-tien*, or candle trunk, and is referred to as *tien-mad-ruam*.

In 1952, the art of candle creation and *tien pansa* was revived and separated into two styles: *mad-ruam-dit-lai* (wrapped and adorned with patterns) and *dit-pim* (adorned with print). Nowadays, there are three styles of candles: original (wrapped and decorated), candles decorated with print and carved candles. In 1957, the national *geung-puttakarn* festival was organized across the country to celebrate the lifetime of the Buddha and *tien pansa* candle worship in Ubon Ratchatani received increased sponsorship for both the procession and the females accompanying the candles. In 1967, candle competitions in the area were stopped due to unhappiness with the previous year's judging and results. During this year, the contests were missed by the locals, causing them to organize a bigger and more impressive competition in 1968. As a result, 1968 was the first year that carved candles were entered into the competition. In 1976, the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) was invited to observe the festivities and from 1977, Ubon Ratchatani has held the important and impressive *tien pansa* candle festival, with parades, beauty pageants and candle competitions. From this official starting point, many foreign tourists have visited the province to admire the beauty of the festival, which has caused the *tien pansa* candle festival to become a symbol of Ubon Ratchatani.

There are six reasons why the candles of Ubon Ratchatani are so impressive and elaborate: a) Ubon Ratchatani is a Buddhist city that has more temples than any other city in Thailand; b) the local people are particularly philanthropic and intelligent; c) the city itself was built on the area of *dong-oo-peung*, which has a number of important resources used in the *tien pansa* celebration; d) the Ubon Ratchatani people pay special attention and care to the homage of the Buddhist Triple Gems; e) Ubon Ratchatani is home to skilled artisans in all branches of the fine arts; g) the festival adheres to the founding principles of worship and respect, with the intention of promoting the Buddhist religion.

4.2 Appropriate Management of the Tien Pansa Candle Festival in Order to Promote Cultural Tourism in the Government Sector, Private Sector and Communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province

The areas of management at the *tien pansa* candle festival that were found to be appropriate were the management of candle arrangement, management of the *tien pansa* candle procession, management of dance postures for the *tien pansa* candle procession, management of procession music, safety and traffic management and the management of other performances. The sponsorship of the *tien pansa* candle festival from the government and private sectors uses the 4M management resources: man, money, material and method.

There were a number of problems found with the development of the festival. The presence of local tourists has had a negative influence on the conservation of the traditional practices. The local people have lost their strength of belief in using candles for worship and thus the practices of the festival are not repeated in everyday life, causing the festival to be less and less a reflection of local lifestyle. Additionally, there is a lack of skilled artisans, which has a knock-on effect to the community participation at the festival. The increased emphasis on economic gain has seen a larger business representation in the sponsorship of the festival. This has caused a decrease in local community participation. In turn, this will affect the local knowledge of the festival and cause reduced numbers of local artisans with the skills to produce the candles. The candles themselves are not created for the purposes of worship, rather created to win prizes. Also, the temples themselves create the candles, rather than the community members, which is against the original objectives of the festival. There is an emphasis on funding to enable the temples to hire skilled craftsmen. Those communities without sufficient funding will feel inferior at the competition, causing them to refrain from entering in years to come. There is no local identity to the candles that are produced. The candle procession itself is good and incorporates the local wisdom of Ubon Ratchatani in its style and dance postures. However, the opening ceremony and the procession itself are too long because of the need to wait for the chairman and the high number of candle entrants respectively.

Given these problems, the researchers and the members of the local community involved in this research were able to devise a number of solutions, as follows: It is important for the essence of Ubon Ratchatani to be revealed at the ceremonies, including religiosity, cleanliness and obedience to the rules; The host of the festival must be good and the signs and advertising must be adapted; Youth must be encouraged to attend the ceremony, which in turn must focus on worship and respect; There must be events to promote conservation of the local folk wisdom, including candle carving instruction in schools; The budget and sponsorship for the candle creation process must be increased; The performances are a real draw for foreign tourists and their importance in the festival must be increased; There are three groups of people who are clearly responsible for the festival: the government, the private sector and the local community; The value of the Ubon Ratchatani lifestyle must be made clear to the younger generations by creating displays of old pictures of the area, incorporating past lifestyle into the stage performances and using locally produced fabrics for costumes; The shows and parades must begin at six o'clock in the evening; The community members must be encouraged to enter the candle competitions for pride and satisfaction, rather than awards; Competition judges should be impartial and must provide clear sets of rules for the competitors; Prizes must be awarded in groups based on cost of candle creation, so to give encouragement to those communities and temples with small budgets; The categories of candle must be increased to include a category for ancient candle styles, so to conserve the former wisdom of the province. Isan (Northeastern Thailand) patterns must also be revived and incorporated into the candle designs; artisans must also provide drafts for the judges so that they may study them before the competition; there must be production of large wrapping specifically designed for the candles.

The problems discussed above could cause the local customs and traditional art culture to disappear from Ubon Ratchatani society. With the implementation of the suggested solutions and education for the youth to highlight the value and importance of these customs and traditions, they may be allowed to continue on as part of the heritage of the future generations.

4.3 A Conservation and Management Model for Public Relations in Order to Promote Cultural Tourism in the Government Sector, Private Sector and Communities of Ubon Ratchatani Province

4.3.1 Conservation Model

The conservation model refers to the creation of structures so as to define various strategies. These include a process model, establishment of a learning and knowledge center for the *tien pansa* candle festival, raising of awareness, inheritance of local wisdom, development of the candle procession, creation of trade, knowledge management and planning of information. These strategies must be varied and conform to the theory of cultural diffusion.

4.3.2 Public Relations Management Model

The public relations management model refers to the public relations for local people and includes communication between the people, institutions and organizations in order to create understanding, belief and good relationships. This will allow the institutions to meet their aim of public relations planning in four stages: (stage 1) research and analysis of problems; (stage 2) planning; (stage 3) implementation of plans; (stage 4) evaluation. During stage four, evaluation will lead to implementation and application of strategies to promote public relations using a variety of media sources, including literature, internet advertising, telephone, television and social networks. This will enable the accurate promotion of cultural tourism, which is tourism to increase visitor knowledge in lifestyle, history, art, customs and traditions of local people. For this model to succeed it is imperative that participation and influence of the local communities is increased to equal or exceed that from the government and private sectors, despite the disparity in sponsorship contributions.

4.3.3 Green Tourism at the *Tien Pansa* Candle Festival in Ubon Ratchatani Province

The elements of green tourism, or clean tourism, identified in this study include maintenance of the attraction standards and sustainability, development of personnel, creation of balance, preparation for changes, use of technology, use of suitable innovations, management image and strong belief among tourists. This is in accordance with the theory of cultural diffusion.

5. Discussion

Using Alfred Kroeber's theory of cultural diffusion, it can be concluded that the *tien pansa* candle festival in Ubon Ratchatani is a strong culture. Kroeber stated that the concepts and behaviors of one culture will move to other human societies over time. Weak social cultures will accept stronger social cultures from elsewhere. The fact that the candle festival in Ubon Ratchatani is the largest in the country and that it has not been diluted by other festivals from the surrounding area, leads to the conclusion that *tien pansa* is a strong culture (Kroeber, 1940).

The findings of this research are in agreement with the results of Sakchai Utito (2007), who discovered that the concepts behind the creation of candle designs for the *tien pansa* candle festival are based on local lifestyle, religious beliefs and ancient wisdom. The background of the festival identified from the surveys and interviews in this research also agreed with the study of Busaba Kitijantaropat (2008) into the management of the *tien pansa* festival for participation in inheritance of traditions in Ubon Ratchatani. Kitijantaropat recognized the importance of the candle for worship among the local communities and its significant role in ceremonies of offering for over one hundred years.

Problems found with the candle festival included the growing influence of foreign culture. Since the increase of foreign tourists after the official inauguration of the 1977 *tien pansa* candle festival, there has been a greater visibility of Western culture in Ubon Ratchatani. This is visible in the use of modern technology during the festival and has had an influence on the attitudes of the local people. Nowadays, there is less emphasis placed on the creation of the candles for worship and more emphasis placed on the gain of awards and prizes. This is a further example of Kroeber's cultural diffusion, yet one in which the candle festival is the weaker culture being diffused by the stronger social model from the West (Kroeber, 1940). For the candle festival to remain in the future, it must provide a benefit to the younger generations. Following the study of Yuwat Wuttimetee (1993), it is clear that for this benefit to be realized there must first be increased community participation in the management of the festival, rather than the heavy influence from the government and private sectors in relation to their higher financial sponsorship of the event. The idea that community participation is the key to enhancing public relations so that they promote cultural tourism in has been explored by a number of scholars, including Wiwatnchai Boonyanupong (2001), Orawan Panet (1998) and Brateep Boonjaeng (2003). The investigations of these three academics similarly highlight community participation as imperative for the success of cultural conservation and sustainability.

With the implementation of the model for conservation and management of public relations for the *tien pansa* candle festival in Ubon Ratchatani Province, Thailand, the customs and culture of the local communities in the area will be preserved. If community participation is increased, the candle festival is publicized using a variety of broadcasting avenues and the management of the festival is improved to solve the range of problems met by this research, then the future generations will inherit a beautiful, rich ceremony that reveals the essence and history of the Ubon Ratchatani people.

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