



# EXPERIENCES OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THAILAND: LESSONS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES

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## **Abstract**

*This paper used the historical approach to overview the patterns and practices of religious pluralism in Thai context. The past research work on religious pluralism will be examined in order to find out what concepts and approaches have been used and how they could implement in reality. Most Thai people practice in Buddhism, and they do not have any conflicts with other Thai Muslims or Christian. They live peacefully and harmoniously in co-existence among different religious adherents. The case of Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim live together happily in the Southern communities will be employed and discussed using social and cultural capital analytical approach. The factors and conditions concerning with religious pluralism are analyzed more in details. The applications of religious pluralism in the study to other Southeast Asian countries will also recommend.*

## **Introduction**

In the southern part of Thailand, 3 provinces. Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat are rich in natural resources. Both Thai Buddhists and Muslims settle down in these areas since 1634. These provinces were a multicultural society area as seen by the archaeological sites, such as the mosque and temple. Therefore, both Buddhists and Muslims live in harmony

in these areas.

During the period from January 2004 to June 2013, the unrests peaked in these southern border provinces (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat) including four districts in Songkhla province. The peak figures showed the period represented during 114 months with 13,434 incidents of unrest. The result of deaths was 5,755, 2,213 (38.45%)

Buddhists and 3,394 (58.97%) Muslims and 148 (2.58%) unidentified. The injured people were 10,200; 6,024 (59.05%) Buddhist, 3,211 (31.47%) Muslim and 966 (9.46%) unidentified. (Source from <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org/node/4570> access 12 May 2014)

However, Thai Buddhists and Muslims in Sai Khao Subdistrict, Khok Pho District, Pattani Province, Thailand lived in harmony under the coexistence of cultural diversity. They have encouraged cooperative and exchange work pattern in public or community work. In 2006, Pattani Provincial government selected Sai Khao Subdistrict as the “Santisuk Subdistrict” (Peaceful and Happiness Area) after the unrest incident occurred in the area. This Subdistrict was selected as a study site for learning how they live together in harmony without any conflicts and actively take care of community security.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To study the characteristics of the Sai Khao Subdistrict that promote Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim to live in peacefully styles.
2. To analyze the factors and conditions that support religious pluralism (Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim) to construct way of life without conflicts.

## **Concepts and Theories**

### **Community Capital Theory**

Main theory used in this study is community capital. Flora, Flora and Fey, (2004) defined capital as, “Capital is any type of resource capable of producing additional resources... When those resources or assets are invested to create new resources, they become capital.” Thus, community capitals represent assets in all aspects of community life. The community capitals framework used as an approach to analyze how communities work.

The seven types of capital include 1) natural; 2) cultural; 3) human; 4) social; 5) political; 6) financial; and 7) built. The overview framework of the community capitals is as the following:

1. Natural capital refers to those assets that abide in a location, including resources, amenities, and natural beauty, the it might include parks, farm land, and features of landscape or of nature.
2. Cultural capital includes what heritages are valued, collaboration across races, ethnicities, and generations, for examples, ethnic festivals, multi-lingual populations, or strong work ethic.
3. Human capital includes the skills and abilities of people, and leadership ability to lead across differences, for examples, local leadership development.
4. Social capital reflects the connections between people and

organizations, both close ties that build community cohesion and weak ties that create and maintain bridges among organizations and communities.

5. Political capital reflects access to power and power brokers, such as access to local, county, state government officials.
6. Financial capital refers to financial resources available to invest in community capacity building, business development, and social entrepreneurship.
7. Built capital refers to the infrastructure that supports the community such as telecommunications, street, roads, water and sewers.

### **Multiculturalism Theory**

Multiculturalism is the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups, and manifested in customary behaviors, cultural assumption and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles.

According to Andrew Heywood (2017), reflects two forms of multiculturalism. They are descriptive and normative ones. As a descriptive term, it refers to cultural diversity and as a normative term, multiculturalism implies a positive of communal diversity, based on the rights of different groups to respect and recognition or to the larger society of normal and cultural diversity.

### **Research Methodology**

Qualitative research technique employed in this study. It focuses on document research and reviews of research work conducted during the past 10 years. The concepts and theories mainly based on community capitals and multicultural perspectives used for descriptive and analytical explanations the results of the paper.

### **Research Results**

The results of this study will discuss on the following three items. Firstly, the general basic information of the study area – Sai Khao Subdistrict, Khok Pho district, Pattani province was summarized. Secondly, the main characteristics of study site and discusses how these characteristics help promoting the coexistence of living together in harmony among multicultural community like Sai Khao case will be described. Thirdly, this paper aims to find out and analyze the factors and conditions that construct the living peacefully style between the Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims people in such community.

### **Basic and General Information of Sai Khao Community**

The study site (Sai Khao community) was in Sai Khao Subdistrict, Khok Pho District, Pattani Province. It is about 6 kilometers from Khok Pho District with the total area of 44,130 square kilometers or 27,581 rai. Topography of this area is

mainly lowland which is quite good for agricultural practices with partly plateau adjunct to the San Kalakiri mountain range.

The total number of households is 1,242 households, with 4,108 people, divided into 2,009 men and 2,099 women. They are Buddhists about 42 percent, and Islam about 58 percent.

The main occupation in Sai Khao District is agriculture work. The farming area was about 3,442 rai of rice product; land area about 1,256 rai, with agricultural plants such as peanut, corn; garden area about 11,506 rai, with the product of rubber, durian, long kong (lansium), coconut. *Garcinia*.

The education system consists of 2 primary schools located in Moo 3 and Moo 1; and a secondary school as pondok school (Muslim school) in Moo 6. The religious institutions consist of 1 Buddhist temple located in Moo 3, and 4 mosques which 2 mosques in Moo 1; and each one of mosque in Moo 4 and 6.

Both Thai Buddhists and Thai

Muslims are organized the social activities in Sai Khao Subdistrict as the following:

1. National Children’s Day, ICT Learning Center (January);
2. Sport Cup Competition, organized by Sai Khao Subdistrict Administrative Organization (April),
3. Wild racing and mountain biking event as well as indigenous and ancient food activities (July)
4. National Mother’s Day (August)
5. National Father’s Day (December)
6. Guan Ahroh (Muslim food making festival) (December and January)

**Timeline of Sai Klao Subdistrict**

Sai Khao Subdistrict was an old community with three hundred years of religious places. Thai Buddhist and the Thai Muslims also connected community to unite by helping to build a mosque in this Subdistrict in 1634.

In 1914, according to the Local Government Act 1914, the first leader of Chief Executive of Sai Khao Subdistrict was Muslim village head; Khun Sawak Waluakit (Che Sa Tam).

Table 1. Six villages, Tambon Sai Khao

	Population	Number of household	Male/Female
Moo 1, Ban Yai	943	275	458/485
Moo 2, Ban Luang	561	172	277/269
Moo 3, Ban White Sand House	683	264	343 /365
Moo. 4, Ban Khuan Lang Ses	758	201	347 /367
Moo 5, Ban Sai Khao	527	177	254 /283
Moo. 6, Ban Lam	337	153	330/330
Total	4,108	1,242	2,009/2,099

source: Sai Khao Subdistrict Administrative Organization Access June 4, 2012

During 1976-77, there was a big fight between the police patrol and the communist alliance in Sai Khao Subdistrict. This incident caused the villagers shocked and scared of the community insecurity.

In 1998, the Climbing San Karakiri mountainous project was organized by the villagers of Sai Khao Subdistrict and cooperative with Sai Khao waterfall conservation office and Subdistrict Administrative Organization. The purpose of this activity was to increase more income for villagers due to the era of the economic bubble burst in 1997.

In 1999, Phrakhru Thammakikosol, the abbot of the Sai Khao Temple died which making both Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims joined together in this ceremony. In addition, some Thai Muslims also showed their sympathy for the death of the abbot of Sai Khao temple.

In 2004. The villagers were empowered and transferred academic knowledge to increase community economic strengths and to be self-reliant community by Faculty staffs and students of Prince of Songkla University, Pattani campus. The project was based on Community Strengths and Grassroots Economic Development.

In 2004, there were unrest in the southern border provinces which affected on Sai Khao Subdistrict as well as the other communities, including the impacts on life and property safety. The impact also covered the relationships

of people in the community. Some villagers and civil servants were shot and bombed. This situation made the relationships among the villagers become alienated and stayed away from each other, not the same as in the past.

In 2006, after the unrest in the South occurred, the villagers formed themselves as volunteers for the security guard in Sai Khao Subdistrict. The volunteers were both Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims actively involved in this activity. Then Sai Khao Subdistrict was selected from Pattani Province to become the first Santisuk or peaceful Subdistrict.

In 2011, a cultural conservation and ancient food festival organized for the first time by villagers in Sai Khao Subdistrict. The main purpose of cultural conservation festival was for the community meeting of all ages, old people, young people and children. They learned about various cultures, traditions and traditional dishes of Muslim food, with activities called Guan Ahroh, an ancient food of Malay Muslims. Both Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims actively participated in Guan Su Chu activity from the start to finish.

The success of social activities depended on the operation and collaboration of all types of community leaders, including local leaders, both Chief Executive of Subdistrict Administrative Organization and village heads, natural leaders, religious

leaders. They supported physical work and budget, both by donations from villagers and annual budget from government agencies.

### **Characteristics of Sai Khao Subdistrict as Peaceful Happiness Community**

The first objective is to study the characteristics of the Sai Khao Subdistrict that promote Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim to live in peacefully styles. From the above information, the main characteristics are summarized as follows:

- 1. Leadership** – Religious leaders supported community potential, especially the abbot of Sai Khao Temple named Phrakhru Sri Ratanakorn, as first pioneer abbot to make tourist attraction from Sai Khao Subdistrict to the Sai Khao Waterfall. In addition, the former abbot of the Sai Khao Temple, encouraged the education promotion for Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim children in the community through scholarship funding. Moreover, village leaders, such as Uncle Prasert, former Kamnan (Head of Sai Khao Subdistrict and former Chief Executive Sai Khao Subdistrict Administrative Organization) persuaded Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim to participate in community activities.
- 2. Kinship System** - Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim emerged their strong relationships in the past from cordial and marriage relationship by cross culture activities. Some of them became close friends from the same school for such a long time. These relationships help create consistency of love and harmony especially in working together without caring about their differences in religion. Moreover, they believe to have the same ancestor and they have joined both the Thai Buddhist festivals and Thai Muslim festivals in various types of activities
- 3. Natural Resources** - The availability of natural resources in Sai Khao Subdistrict are abundance in terms of water and land quality for agricultural production. These resources provide secure occupation and reduce labor migration to Bangkok or elsewhere. It also decreases poverty alleviation and natural resource conflict management for empowerment of community strengths and self-reliance.
- 4. Communication Language** – The southern part of Thailand had their dialect that generally use to communicate with each other. Even though Muslim people use Malay language but both of Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims still use the southern dialect for communication. Although, the Muslim people speak the southern dialect in everyday life but they did not feel that they lose their identity and Malay language.

## **Factors and Conditions of Sai Khao Subdistrict as Peaceful Happiness Community**

The second objective is to analyze the factors and conditions that support religious pluralism (Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim) to construct way of life without conflicts.

**1. Social capital** – different religious group participation: There are group of agricultural product variants or bananas group started in 1986 with, 20 Thai Buddhist group members, and 2 Thai Muslims members and receive dividends per share from OTOP product sales about about 500 baht per person every month. In addition, there is a group of Garcinia and the cloth making group, with 5 members of Thai Muslim and, 8 Thai Buddhists. A saving group called one baht saving per day with 1,355 group members, 870 Thai Buddhists, 495 Thai Muslims, and totally of revolving fund for welfare benefit of 1,189,685 baht, with the total members' deposits of 1,903,882 baht. - Different religious group voluntary work: The bond support between different religions inherited from the ancestors create help from both Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim in the merit ceremony. According to the traditions of Islam and of Buddhism, both exchange candy food for each neighbor. They exchange or reciprocity of labor in the manner of sharing of

development or work, for example, working together to make dams, making roads in Buddhist temples, digging grasses at the Muslim burial cemetery. This could be called “Trust Capital” which could lead to common consciousness or public mind and will certainly strengthen Sai Khao Subdistrict.

**2. Political capital** – Equal power between different religious leaders: There is a rotation process in the position of Chief Executive Subdistrict Administrative Organization between the Thai Buddhist and Muslim leaders. If the current Chief Executive of Sai Khao Subdistrict Administrative Organization, for example, is Thai Buddhist, then the next Chief Executive will be Thai Muslim autonomically because there will be no other Thai Buddhist apply for the Chief Executive position competition. Then the rotation system is quite good practice to reduce conflicts in the leadership position among the multi-cultural community. In addition, there are efforts to share quotas for Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims in the position of Chief Executive of Subdistrict Administrative Organization. For example, if the Chief Executive of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization is a Thai Muslim then two Deputy Chief Executives of Subdistrict



- Administrative Organization will be 1 Thai Buddhist and 1 Thai Muslim.
- Capacity of various religious leaderships – the leaderships are formal and non-formal leaders in terms of religious leaders and occupational group leaders. Religious leaders consist of abbot, Sai Khao Temple and Islamic head of the ancient mosque named Bagnola or Najmudin. According to the local government structure leaders consist of the Chief Executive of the Sai Khao Subdistrict Administrative Organization and the Deputy Chief Executive of the Sai Khao Subdistrict Administrative Organization, Kamnan or Head of Subdistrict Sai Khao, and village headman of village number 1-6, informal leader or former experienced leaders and elderly leaders. In addition, there are leadership development programs in Sai Khao Subdistrict.
3. **Financial capital** – Community fund raising: Sai Khao Subdistrict raise funds from making the tiny rolled metal amulet inscribed with magic words called Narai Transforms in order to earn money for religious development purpose such as for construction of Sai Khao temples and mosques. They also devote educational Scholarship supports for both Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim students to further study at higher education.
  4. **Cultural capital** – Same language, kinship: Both Thai Buddhists and Muslims accept each other's religious differences and participate in other religious activities without any conflicts in belief. For example, if there is an event held at the temple, Thai Muslims will go to help sweep or clean up the temple. If there is a job at the mosque Thai Buddhists mobilize people to help willingly.
  5. **Built capital** – Unique identity: The main built capital comprises of a 300-year ancient mosque located at village number 4 (Khuan Lang village) to be considered as unique identity in the architecture of Sai Khao subdistrict. The ancient mosque combines the ideas and cultures of Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim with the appearance of the mosque style of pavilion. At present time, the Fine Arts Department has registered 300-year ancient mosque as an archaeological site.
  6. **Natural resources capital** – Common Property: The abundance of fertile land, forestry and waterfall for agriculture and tourism purposes make huge agricultural products and increase more income for local people in Sai Khao subdistrict.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

Refer to the first objective, the research results show that there are four main characteristics for Thai Buddhist



and Muslim in Sai Khao subdistrict to live together happily and peacefully.

Firstly, the leadership role has played actively in supporting tourist destinations such as water fall route, and higher education scholarships for students.

Secondly, the kinship system through bloodline, cordial and marriage relationships make both Thai Buddhist and Muslim work together and help each other doing religious activities well.

Thirdly, natural resources availability could be sustainable uses to uplift the quality of lives, increase income for two believers-Buddhist and Muslim.

Fourthly, language for communication for these two religious groups is southern Thai dialects that commonly uses in everyday lives. All of them especially the Muslim dare to speak Thai without any fear of losing their own identity.

For the second research objective, the research results on community capital that affect the coexistence between Thai Buddhist and Muslim in Sai Khao can be summarized as the following:

First, Social capital helps create strong ties between Thai Buddhist and Muslim in group development for example One Tambon One Product (OTOP) Group members, the group members who are Thai Buddhist and Muslim exchange knowledge and

actively becomes key point that lead to public consciousness among all participating members.

Second, Political capital shows the leadership spirits in rotation of leadership position among Thai Buddhist and Muslim by transferring the chief of Sai Khao subdistrict administrative organization (SAO) from Thai Buddhist to Muslim after the Thai Buddhist served the full term (4 years) of the Chief position. Moreover, there are a quota system for deputy chief position at SAO – one position for Thai Buddhist and the other for Muslim.

Third, Financial capital is based on the raising funds for religious development and education purposes through two main activities – the Narai Transform products and higher educational scholarship.

Fourth, Cultural capital reflects the strong kinship relations and the acceptance of different religious belief between Thai Buddhist and Muslim people. Most of them help each other during they join both Buddhist and Islam religious ceremonies or activities.

Fifth, Built capital consists of the registered 300 ancient mosque as archaeological site by the Fine Arts Department.

Sixth, Natural resource capital in terms of fertile agriculture, forestry, land and waterfall could be served for agricultural and tourism purposes.

## Suggestions

The case of Sai Khao community should be applied as lessons learnt to the other different religious communities in 2 points.

First, the community capitals such as social capital and cultural capital should be key approach for community self-identification or assessment among the different religious community.

Second, the deliberative dialogue between the two different community members should be strengthen in order to summarize the unique religious identity and create the common ideology and interests which help sustain the religious pluralism in the long term.[]

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