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# Residents' Attitudes toward Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival, Thailand

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## Abstract

Culture is something that humans have been practicing and passing on until it becomes a normal thing. Each region has different topographic features and social norms including cultures that must be different and preserved. Candle Festival of Ubon Ratchathani has been promoted and become a national and international tourism event by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). It has brought big revenues to the province each year. However, since the Candle Festival has been promoted and become a major tourism event for more than 30 years, there has not been a single research conducted on its tourism product life cycle. This qualitative study aims to investigate the residents' attitudes and seek the means for development of the event organization. Seventy key informants were employed. Research tools included interviews and focus group discussion. The collected data were classified according to the research aims and analyzed by typological analysis and analytical induction. The festival is thought to be very significant tourism event to the whole province because it is a source of income generation to Ubon peoples especially those who live nearby Thung Sri Mueang Field where the festival is taken place. They are willing and happy to cooperative with the provincial and private sectors to organize the festival. Some problems existed. The venue for holding the festival is too narrow and packed with local and international tourists. Cleanliness of toilets and insufficiency for service are also problems. Strong competitiveness with other provinces holding the candle festival near the capital, Bangkok and almost at the same time is very challenging. Several means for solution were given.

**Keywords:** attitude, cultural event, Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival

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## **1. Introduction**

Tradition is something that people continue to practice over a long period of time until it becomes convention and is embedded into their thinking and feeling. What a man feels or thinks he will express it to the general public with which is popular and socially accepted. Thus a tradition was born<sup>[1]</sup>. According to Sathien Gosed there are two levels of tradition: one is personal level such as birth, death, wedding, house dedication, and the like; another is collective level that general people follow which usually involves religious ceremonies. However, because each region is geographically and socially different, therefore, traditions of each place differ and are always changing even though some personal and collective identities strive to remain.

To preserve Thai cultural heritage in accordance with the definition of the modern culture, tourism has played an important role. An issue of making local traditions and cultural events the highlights of the province as to promote and attract tourists to come visit for the economic purposes has been therefore raised. Subsequently, provinces are attempting to hold their local traditional and cultural events, which are usually led by government agencies at the beginning and later request participation from private sector. Ubon Ratchathani is a province attempting to reach this goal in making one of her local cultural events called "Candle Festival" the highlight of the province since 1977. Candle Festival is annually taken place when lent arrived and people want to make merits following their tradition known as '*Tam Heed Tam Khlong*' <sup>[2]</sup>. The local residents belonging to different *wats* (Buddhist temples) would gather wax and molded it into big and small candles. Then they would be put on display in a parade and be presented as gifts to *wats* of their communities. At the beginning the wax molding process was not that spectacular, and the candles were mostly geometrical shapes such as squares and circles. This cultural event was later ameliorated by the provincial office, municipality, government agencies, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand, turning the festival from a local tradition into a cultural event as defined by Tourism Event, and it is now renowned both at national and international levels. Since then the candle festival has been promoted as an important tourism product that brings in great revenues for the province each year. Since the candle festival has been promoted as an important tourist event of Ubon Ratchathani for over 30 years, there have been but a few studies on residents' attitudes toward the festival. The result is of great value since it can be used for the development of cultural tourism and promotion of the hosts' participation in the organization of the festival.

## **2. Methodology**

This qualitative study aims to investigate product life cycle of Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival and seek the means for development of the event organization. A total of 70 key informants who had benefited from the cultural event such as hotels, guided tours, restaurants, gift shops and transport services and those who contributed to the arrangements of Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival for at least 2 years such as municipality, Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO), Provincial Office, Provincial Office of Tourism, universities, institutes and schools in the province were employed. Research tools included interviews, observation, and focus group discussion. The collected data were classified according to the research aims and analyzed by typological analysis and analytical induction.

## **3. Definition of Key Terms**

3.1 Cultural event tourism means traditional and cultural festivals with unique features that are held during a particular period of the year, which can either last for a short or long time, with purposes of local celebrations and tourist attraction.

3.2 Ubon Ratchathani Cultural Candle Festival is an annual traditional festival, which is held during the rainy season or lent in July. People and both government and private agencies representing various *wats* take part in the arrangements of carved candles preparation, parades, and procession around town, together with many other activities that will attract both foreign and Thai tourists.

3.3 Resident attitudes refer to the perceptions of the benefits and costs and impressions resulted from having a festival or the positive and negative feelings towards a festival.

#### 4. Results Conclusion

The findings are here displayed in the form of descriptive analysis. Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival started in 1903 as a very initial candle festival of the country. With the age of 114 years and national popularity, it is the biggest of its kind. It began when the local people used candles to display their faith and worship to Lord Buddha. The candles were offered to monks in order that they could light them throughout a three-month holy period of Vassa. *Tien Pansa* or candle trunk was first created by tying together bundles of small candles on a wooden splint and colored paper was covered around the candle trunk. The candle trunk was later recognized as an art form and brought into competition. The art forms of candle trunk were divided into 2 types: imprinted candle trunk or *tid-pim* whereby the candles were wrapped and decorated with patterns and carving candle trunk or *kae-salak* whereby the candles were shaped by carving. Artisans who were skillful of special forms of making candle trunks were hired. Additional activities such as dancing procession were also put into the festival. Tourism-related businesses have got involved in the event. Overall, this cultural event was divided into 3 periods as follows: 1) Buddha Worship or *Buddha Bucha*, 2) Commercial Competition or *Kaeng Kan Ngeun Tra*, and 3) Technology-based Period. According to the informants, the festival is thought to be very significant tourism event to the whole province because it is a source of income generation to Ubon peoples especially those who live nearby *Thung Sri Mueang Field* where the festival is taken place. They are willing and happy to cooperative with the provincial and private sectors to organize the festival.

Although Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival has sustained its beauty of the first-hand experience of the cultural event from the past up to present, there still have been defects existing every year that need to be solved. The venue for holding the festival is too narrow and packed with local and international tourists. Cleanliness of toilets and insufficiency for service are also problems. When it comes to tourism business, competitiveness with other provinces holding the candle festival near the capital, Bangkok and almost at the same time can be seen as a threat to Ubon Ratchathani province.

With the abovementioned problems the key informants and the research teams devised the following means for solution.

1. The winning candles should be displayed on water street or walking street for tourists throughout the year.
2. Additional activities should meet with tourist programs as requested by tourist agents.
3. Life of candle artisans should be sustained and passed on to younger generations.
4. Art forms of both imprinted candles and carving candles should be patented.
5. Cultural and traditional preservation should be promoted among tourists.
6. Public relations of the event should be promoted through online media.
7. Promotion of cultural tourism and preservation of local wisdom should be made.
8. Buddhism ways as identity of the province should be focused.

Not only seen as cultural tourism, Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival is also thought as *Dharma tourism* since there are a lot of *wats* or Buddhist temples in the country. Ubon people hold true to Buddhist values. They should be made to be more aware of the

significance of the event relating to the faith they uphold by participating in the organization of the event. This is believed to support and create the atmosphere of first-hand cultural event that the tourists can enjoy.

## **8. References**

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