

AMPHAWA AND ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

 The Amphawa District area, Samut Songkhram Province enjoys a rich historical, artistic and architectural heritage. It also benefits from a cultural heritage based on the local wisdom in living in harmony with nature with the ecosystem which accommodates sea, brackish and fresh water. All this is evident through architectural characteristics of the local community, land use, livelihoods and ways of life; thus perpetuating its characteristics as a Thai water-based community. An offshoot of a field study conducted over several years, this article aims to capture the identity of the cultural heritage of Amphawa.

Keywords : *cultural heritage / Amphawa / Samut Songkhram*

DEFINITIONS

The term “cultural heritage” is defined differently. The two sources are selected here as follows. The Council of Europe defines “cultural heritage” as *“The cultural and natural heritage provides a sense of identity and helps to differentiate communities in a climate of globalization. It allows cultural communities to discover and understand one another and, at the same time, constitute a development asset”* (www.cae.int).

The UNESCO extends the concept of “cultural heritage” to include the true cultural modes of today and yesterday. The term “cultural heritage” has not always meant the same thing. Recent decades have seen the concept of heritage - much like that of culture - undergoing a profound change. Having at one time referred exclusively to the monumental remains of cultures, heritage as a concept has gradually come to include new categories such as the intangible, ethnographic or industrial heritage. A noteworthy effort was subsequently made to extend the conceptualization and description of the intangible heritage. This is due to the fact that closer attention is now being paid to humankind, the dramatic arts, languages and traditional music, as well as to the informational, spiritual and philosophical systems upon which creations are based. The concept of heritage in our time accordingly is an open one, reflecting living culture every bit as much as that of the past (www.unesco.org).

According to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, as *“the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – or living heritage – is the mainspring of our cultural diversity and its maintenance a guarantee for continuing creativity”*.

The Convention states that the ICH is manifested, among others, in the following domains:

- *Oral traditions and expressions including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;*
- *Performing arts (such as traditional music, dance and theatre);*
- *Social practices, rituals and festive events;*
- *Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;*
- *Traditional craftsmanship* (www.unesco.org).

GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Amphawa is a water-based community, stretching along the Amphawa canal and the Mae Klong river, about 18 kilometers from the estuary and 80 kilometers west of Bangkok (Fig.1). Amphawa District is not only rich in cultural heritage, it also boasts a healthy communal life. Indeed, located north of the Gulf of Thailand, it is endowed with seashore, mangrove forests, salt pans and orchards.

Amphawa literally means a mango grove which denotes a location associated with the Lord Buddha's Life as evidenced by the emblem of Amphawa Municipality portraying an elephant in a mango grove. Amphawa (formerly known as Bang Chang – means a village of elephants) has a long history as a water-based settlement documented since the reign of King Prasat Thong in the late Ayutthaya period during the mid 17th century.

Amphawa was the home town of Somdejphra Amarintramataya, the Queen Consort of King Rama I, and Somdejphra Srisuriyentramataya, the Queen Consort of King Rama II. It was once a town of residence of King Rama I and the birthplace of King Rama II (King Buddhalertla Naphalai) during the 18th century.

In the 19th century, King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) made two incognito visits to Amphawa. He notably stopped at the house of the then district officer, Khun Wichitsamathakan on the Mae Klong river, and the Amphawa Residence of H.R.H. Prince Paribatra Sukhumbandhu (son of his Majesty King Chulalongkorn and her Majesty Queen Sukhumala Marasi) on the Amphawa canalside.

ECOSYSTEM, LAND USE AND AGRICULTURE

Located in a terrain penetrated by sea water, Amphawa is subject to low and high tides in the morning and in the evening. As a result, vegetation that thrives in brackish water such as cork trees appear along the river and canals, offering a delightful environment for tourists. Moreover, nipa palms with their edible fruits provide leaves that can be used for various purposes, such as wrapping desserts and making thatched roofs while their stumps can be crafted into mosquito whisks.

As water ebbs and flows twice a day, sea and brackish water merges with fresh water; people, therefore know for a fact when to collect fresh water for their household use as evidenced by the proverb “*collect water at high tide*” which is the equivalent of “*time and tide wait for no man*”; which means that one should collect fresh water before the tide flows in; if not the water will become salty or brackish. Low and high tides are natural phenomena related to the position of the moon. In a lunar calendar, there are 15 nights of the waxing moon and 14-15 nights of the waning moon. Each night the tide ebbs and flows for a maximum of 40 minutes (Surajit C.). Fishermen observe sunrise and sunset and the position of the moon, a habit which is useful in their livelihood. Nowadays, people still catch fish using a fish trap consisting of a set nest attached to large bamboo poles where swift currents bring fish and shrimps into a net. Fishermen remove the net in the evening before high tide. They also catch fish in canals at low tide using a net attached to a bamboo pole, left under the water level and lifted to collect the catch such as snappers. The Mae Klong River is also abundant with shrimps which are an additional source of income for the people. The river and its canals are also home to water monitor lizards, an indicator of a good quality of water.

Coconut trees predominate in number and height with other local fruit trees in orchards; thus forming the landscape where wooden houses line both sides of the Amphawa canal (Fig.2). Coconut trees are versatile in their utility as every part of these palms serve multi-purposes. Their nuts are edible while their leaves can be used to make brooms, baskets with or without handles and their trunks are used for construction and decoration. Their coir can be mixed with earth and used as compost for planting trees. Moreover, local orchards also accommodate other cash crops: pomelo of the Khao Yai variety which, like lychee of the Amphawa variety, thrive well in brackish water together with rose apples, mangoes, jackfruits, longans, bananas, bread fruits, etc. The advantage of mixed fruit farming is that it provides income to farmers all year round according to the season.

Orchards in Amphawa are characterized by raised orchard beds and ditches which were probably introduced here by Chinese migrants to Thailand more than a hundred years ago (Sujit V.). Raised beds refer to the fact that earth is dug-up earth and used to make raised beds between ditches for growing trees which thus rise above the level of the ditch water. The river and canal flows into the orchard ditches at high tide and ebbs at low tide. In the late rainy season, that is prior to the dry season, farmers retain water in these ditches for use until the next rainy season (Fig.3). These orchards are also home to mangrove crabs living in small holes which can be seen dotted along the ditch mud at low tide. Several kinds of birds come to feed in the orchards.

Nowadays farmers tend to grow flower plants such as red ginger, Japanese canna, and birds-of-paradise in the shady area under large trees or in moist spots (Fig.4). These flowers are sold at the floating market; thus contributing to the local charms and colors (Fig.5).

ARCHITECTURE AND WATER-BASED SETTLEMENT

The communities along the Amphawa canal and its vicinity boast typical architecture, as evidenced by wooden row houses, traditional floating houses, traditional Thai-styled houses (Fig.6), traditional local houses in the orchards, and a school. There are 17 buildings that are restored as part of a demonstration project with 50% matching funds from the “*Thailand Cultural Environment Project (TCEP)*” launched by the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning in partnership with the Danish Government, the Municipality of Amphawa and the Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University in 2004-2005. In August 2004, the Municipality of Amphawa also revitalized its late afternoon floating market at the mouth of the Amphawa canal as requested by local people to promote tourism (Fig.7). Some of the restored buildings are used to accommodate home stays for tourists and shops, a community information center, etc. As a result, local residents can recoup the costs of restoration investment from tourism. Now, more buildings are restored solely by their owners to accommodate tourists. The building restorations not only improve the canal environment, but also increase the architectural value of the community.

- **Architecture.** Several old buildings such as temples are of historical and aesthetic value for example Bang Kaphom Temple, Amphawanjetiyaram Warawihan Temple (Fig.8), Phrayayat Temple and the building over 100 years old which now houses the Amphawa Municipality and a shrine of Guan-U God and once served as a Chinese school (Fig.9).

- **Mural paintings.** Mural paintings at Chula Manee Temple depicts the life of the Lord Buddha and His past incarnations while those of Amphawan-jetiyaram Temple, completed in 2000 portrays the life of King Rama II, his written works and the scenes of Bangkok under his reign which is unique in Thailand (Fig.10).

- **Sculpture.** The stucco works at Bang Kaphom Temple depicts the life of The Lord Buddha and represent replicas of His relics such as His footprints from various places, as well as a scene in which His last disciple, Phra Maha Gusapa arrive in time to pay the last homage to His remains and a scene where the Lord Buddha performed a miracle by thrusting his feet out of His casket (Fig.11).

- **King Rama II Park.** It was officially named as King Buddhalertla Naphalai Memorial Park, was built in 1982 in memory of King Rama II who was born in Amphawa (Fig.12). This park contains Thai pavilions, a museum housing art objects of the early Bangkok period and featuring King Rama II's life and the local history. There are also an open theatre for staging a mask dance based on Ramayana (Fig.13), a botanical garden of



Figure 1: Amphawa from satellite image (Quick Bird, 20 Feb 2005)



Figure 2: Landscape of Amphawa



Figure 3: Raised-bed orchard in Amphawa

plants and vegetations found in Thai literature and mentioned in King Rama II's works and a mixed orchard with raised beds which are typical of Amphawa.

- **The Chaipattana Garden.** This garden contains a plaza, traditional local shops built of teak catering especially for tourists. Locals can sell fruits and vegetables from their orchards and local souvenirs. Tourists can admire these orchards(Fig.14) by walking along raised orchard beds where they can see coconuts, pomelos, lychees, mangoes, etc. and the local ecosystem.



Figure 4: Birds-of-paradise flower



Figure 5: Selling flowers in Amphawa



Figure 6: Thai house along Amphawa Canal



Figure 7: Amphawa floating market



Figure 8: King Buddhalertla Naphalai statue at Amphawanjetiyaram Temple



Figure 9: Amphawa Municipality building when it was a Chinese school

WATER TRANSPORT, FLOATING MARKET AND WAY OF LIFE

Although water transport in the river and canals have dramatically dwindled as more and more roads were constructed over the past 40 years, people along the river and canals still communicate by water, using public boats. They still have their own boats but use them less often than they did formerly. Monks still paddle to receive food from villagers in the

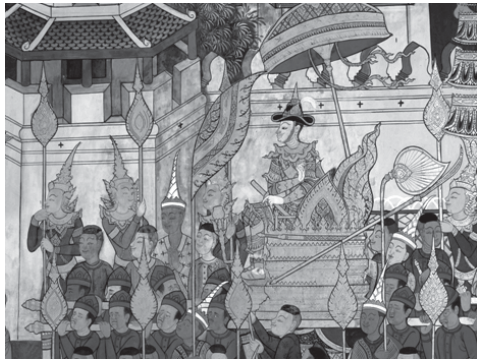


Figure 10: The mural painting at Amphawanjetiyaram Temple



Figure 11: The stucco of the Lord Buddha at Bang Kaphom Temple



Figure 12: King Buddhalertla Naphalai Memorial Park



Figure 13: Ramayana masked dance



Figure 14: Chaipattana Garden



Figure 15: A monk goes by boat to receive food donations

morning(Fig.15). Villagers still buy ready-made food and groceries (vegetables, fruits, fishes, meat and herbs) from boat vendors at the pier in front of their houses (Fig.16).

Today, the late afternoon floating market in the Amphawa canal is held on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Most of the goods sold are foodstuffs. People in Amphawa are famous for their culinary and confectionary skills as reflected through thai-style fried noodles, noodle soup, rice and curry, grilled river prawns and squids as well as Thai desserts (Fig.17) especially



Figure 16: Serving dessert along Amphawa Canal

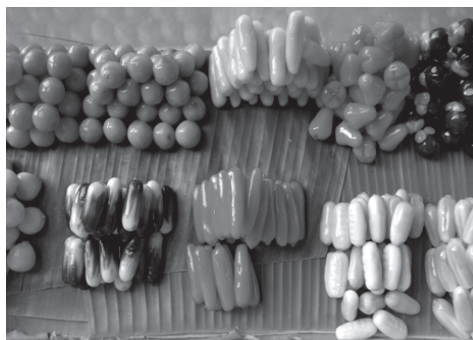


Figure 17: Thai desserts in Amphawa



Figure 18: A water borne procession of monks to receive food donations



Figure 19: Loy Krathong Sai in Amphawa



Figure 20: Benjarong Ceramic



Figure 21: Making souvenirs from coconut shells

those made from coconut including those referred to by King Rama II in his poems and fruits such as pomelos, rose apples, mangoes, bananas, oranges and flowers, not to mention handicrafts such as baskets made from coconut leaves, decorative birds crafted from coconut. Moreover, shops along the canal also sell multi-colored overglaze enamel ceramics (*Benjarong* in Thai) and other souvenirs, with a motif of temples, fire flies, paintings depicting local scenes , etc.

Children can be seen swimming and diving in canals while adults bathe and do their washing along the banks. People still use water from the canals to clean their house floor and water plants. They often sit together along the canal and use canal side areas as a community meeting place; thus attesting to the fact that their life is very much associated with the water.

CULTURE HERITAGE

The cultural heritage of various forms embodies the Amphawa's identity, they are:

- **Water-related social practices for food donation.** Apart from food donation to monks everyday on important occasions such as on the anniversaries of their Majesties the King and the Queen or during important festivals, locals often take monks by boat to receive food donations in a festive atmosphere (Fig.18).

- **Loy Kratong Festival.** On this occasion people float their tiny boats or baskets on the 15th night of the waxing moon of the 12th lunar month(November). These little boats are fashioned from banana leaves on the eve of the festival. They are decorated with joss sticks, candles, flowers and small coins are put in them. People light joss sticks and candles before floating their boats on the water. Through this gesture, they pay homage to the Lord Buddha's footprint at Nammatha River. In addition, people often prepare their little boats by cutting up banana trunks into 1-foot long sections. These sections are then taken off by layers, the sheaths of which are removed one by one to serve as little boats. Joss sticks, smeared with latex are stuck on these boats and left to dry on the eve of the festival. These boats are floated one after another in a large number; thus contributing to the festive spirit for the children. This tradition has now been revived to its old splendor. The fact that these boats are floated in succession gives rise to the expression of "*Krathong Sai*" (little boat floating in a long succession) which makes a beautiful spectacle under a full moon, much to the delight of both children and adults (Fig.19).

- **Traditional handicrafts.** There are 2 categories :

- (1) Multi-colored overglaze enamel ceramics "*Benjarong*" some of which were decorated with gold applications. This ceramics were developed in the Ayutthaya period with motifs of deities in adoration, mythological beings, half-bird, half-lion, etc. The outer background surface of the ceramics is black while their inner surface is green. Under King Rama II, these ceramics came in different colors and designs such as lions, garuda, flowers. At present, a number of well-known local master artisans still perpetuate this craft (Fig.20).

- (2) Handicrafts made from coconut shells. There exist varieties of coconuts. A traditional soprano fiddles, fashioned from a large coconut shell, produces a high-quality sound. People also craft coconuts or their shell to make utensils such as spoons, forks, lanterns, souvenirs for tourists as well as toy birds, fire- flies or other animals (Fig.21).

CONCLUSION

Amphawa's cultural heritage both tangible and intangible ranges from ancient monuments to living heritage of various forms: architecture, works of art, orchards, traditional irrigation systems, local traditions and customs, all of which are closely related to water-based communities and constitute the cultural identity of Amphawa which is, in turn, is influenced by its geographical features, ecosystem, local wisdom and culture as well as its Thai ways of life. However, this legacy is subject to environmental changes and passage of time. As a result, each period of time reveals its own characteristics, meaning and values.

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