



## The Dynamics of the Thai-So Ways of Life in Kusuman District, Sakon Nakhon Province

Benjapa Kaithong<sup>a\*</sup> and Sekson Yongvanit<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Development Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University

<sup>b</sup>Department of Social Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University

\*Corresponding author. E-mail address: benjapa.k@bu.ac.th, benjapakaithong1981@gmail.com

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to study the changing ways of life of the Thai-So ethnic group from 1844 up to 2014. The purposive sampling technique was used for selecting 42 key informants. The research instruments were semi-structured interviews. The whole data were analyzed by content analysis technique. The findings pointed out that the Thai-So ways of life could be divided into five periods. Each period was based on real events generating turning points in the Thai-So ways of life in Kusuman district. That is to say, there was no evidence indicating the changing ways of life of the Thai-So people in the formative period of Kusuman district (1844–1939). Nevertheless, their ways of life began to change during the war period (1940–1960) and changed more and more during the 1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> national development period (1961–1983). It was also found that their ways of life were brought into the new economy, society and culture in the transformation period (1984–1993). Namely, they turned themselves into a market-oriented mode of production, sought non-agricultural employment and migrated to work at the industrial Estate Authority and oversea. Finally, their animistic beliefs were regarded as their strongest point, but those beliefs were gradually replaced by the logic belief of Buddhism during the period of opinion leader and informative society (1994–2014). Further analysis revealed that those driving forces – such as the growth of infrastructure, transportation facilities, the development of a large scale market, agriculture innovation, modern medicine, the arrivals of cash crop, the phenomenon of labor migration, and mass media were regarded as the cause of the changing ways of life in 3 dimensions: economic, social and cultural aspects.

**Keywords:** Thai-So Ethnic Group, Ways of Life, Kusuman District

### Introduction

Thailand has the distinction, among Southeast Asian countries, of never having been colonized. Neither has it suffered civil war nor the racial conflicts that have—at one time or another—plagued other countries. Besides, it has been mentioned for its geographical diversity, in particular that of the northeast region (Thailand Overview, 2015). The northeast region is located on the Khorat Plateau; set away from the rest of Thailand by the Phetchabun range; by the smaller ranges of Dong Phrayayen and Sankampaeng and from Cambodia by the Phanom Dong Rak. It is regarded as the biggest and most populous region of the country (National Statistic Office Thailand, 2015).

It has always been considered as a problem area with a low per capita income, poor soils and erratic rainfall. Nevertheless, it is a very interesting region of transition with a multiplicity of ethnic groups of different origins, languages and habits. The predominant ethnic group comprises of Tai-Lao speaking people while non-Tai speaking people can be classified in eight groups such as; Phu-Thai, Yo, Seak, Kha, Kaleung, Kaui, Khmer and Thai-So. Ethnology studies in the northeast region of Thailand claimed that the Thai-So people had still kept their uniqueness and identity among the rapid changes in the economy, politics and socio-culture (Suphon, 1990; Kania & Kania, 1979; Mongkoltham, 2010). As a consequence, the previous researches relating to the ways of life of this ethnic group were



reviewed. It was found the previous researches could be categorized into two groups as follows:

In the first group, the previous researchers conveyed the Thai-So ethnic group's identity or uniqueness through 3 issues namely (1) Thai-So legend and people, (2) migration pattern to Thailand, (3) cultural ways of life (Prince Kromphraya Damrong, 1906; Seidenfaden, 1943; Kania & Kania, 1979; Wongprasert, 1981; Suphon, 1990; Schliesinger, 2000; Wongthes, 2004, Mongkoltham, 2010). This is explained below.

### 1) Thai-So Legend and People

According to the Thai-So ethnic group's legend, Poo-Lang-Chang, Khun-Cak, and Khun-Can, the ancestors of the Thai-So people, were brave warriors and capable of journeying in the big jungle. They lived in a Paradise called Muang-Tan. Regrettably, it was not suitable for them. They made a decision to live in the Human World for a while until Human Beings appeared through a kind of fruit known as "Nam-Tow-Pong." The Thai-So were the first ethnic group to leave Nam-Tow-Pong, followed by Thai-Dam, Laos, Phu-Thai, Kha and other ethnic groups. After they were born, they had to journey to the magical lake known as Nong-Hi. All the ethnic groups, with the exception of the Thai-So ethnic group, took a bath in the lake. As a consequence, their outstanding appearance is dark-skinned or dark brown to reddish with coarse black hair. The Thai-So ethnic group was categorized as Austro-Asiatic. They had physical characteristics very similar to Lao people. They were of small size and dumpy in shape, their height being between 1.40 to 1.60 meters. Their faces were oval in shape, with small noses, flattish at their tips. Their lips were of a bluish dark color but of equal size. Their body hair was short, soft, and black in color. The pupils of their eyes were black while the whites of their eyes were white, tending towards yellow.

### 2) Migration Pattern to Thailand

Originally, the old homeland of the Thai-So ethnic group was in Tapon and Sepon towns, Thakhek district of Khammuan province, in the present Lao People's Democratic Republic. Their migration from Laos to Thailand is divided into two periods. In the first period, around 1816, some of their tribe members moved to the Northeast Region of Thailand, during the reign of King Rama II, by walking to and crossing the Mekhong River at the Kaeng Kabao Point. The second migration period took place during political conflict between the Siamese and Vientiane, during the reign of King Rama III, in 1827. A history of Thailand claimed that Lao troops, led by Prince Anu, began their invasion from Vientiane to Champasak and eventually acquired Nakhon Ratchasima. The Siamese responded with vigor. Siamese armies advanced on Vientiane in May and in October 1827 they captured Prince Anu along with his royal relatives. During this important event, the Siamese moved all the population, including the (Kha) So people, across the Mekhong River to the northeast region of Siam. The majority of the Thai-So ethnic group is, at present, located between the large inland lake at Nong Han in Sakhon Nakon province and the Mekhong River, as well as on the slopes of the Phu Phan range and along the Songkran River.

### 3) Cultural Ways of Life

#### 3.1) Belief

It was a fact that the Thai-So culture was similar to that of other ethnic groups in the northeast region of Thailand, yet there were a few differences, namely, their culture emphasized on animism, supernaturalism and myths to a greater extent than that of the other ethnic groups. They strongly believe in the spirit of community (*known as Mahesak*) and a universal earth spirit associated with the forces of nature. The universal earth spirit can be found



everywhere, in the rice fields, in the forests, rivers, streams, and in the trees. They also honor and care for the spirits of their ancestors. Offerings to these spirits are common rituals. That is, a large container was filled with rice wine or an appropriate substitute. Long bamboo straws were used for drinking. As for the ritual of the spirit of community, it was held during the third lunar month, along with an animal sacrifice. They strongly believed that if they did not worship the spirit of community and their ancestral spirits, they would encounter many problems, sickness and eventually death. The above beliefs were often incorporated into Buddhist ceremonies.

### 3.2) Language

The So language is a non-tonal and unwritten language belonging to the Mon-Khmer group of languages. Nevertheless, it has gradually vanished since the First Nationality Law of 1912, during the reign of King Vajiravudh. This law's main objective was to put forward an idea of Thai-ness based upon a shared national heritage of the Thai language. Since the 1930s, Thai language, as the primary language of instruction in school, has been used in state compulsory education. In addition, government policies announced that Thai language was regarded as the standardization of the national language during the 1950s–the 1980s. As a result, non-Thai languages, including the 'So' language became subordinate to Thai. However, they had still used their language to communicate within their family and community. Nowadays, 'So' language is spoken by approximately 70,000 people in Thailand and 80,000 people in Laos.

### 3.3) Housing and Consumption

Typically, a Thai-So village was built in virgin forest, on the ridge of a hill. The houses were built on wooden poles, some five or six feet off the ground. They were singlestorey only. The kitchen was

located to the rear of the house. Their houses had only one room, a small section of which was partitioned as a home for the ancestral spirits. As for the consumption, their ways of life depended on completely on subsistence agriculture. Namely, they cultivated rice, gourds, melons, Indian corn, bean, pepper and so forth. Surpluses were sold and the rest was for the consumption of the grower's household throughout the year.

### 3.4) Costume

As for Thai-So costume, the costume of Thai-So women consisted of a sarong and a dark blue cotton vest with long sleeves while, at home, they did not put their arms in the sleeves which were tossed up over their shoulders. They wrapped their hair in a chignon style and covered it with a head cloth. Traditionally, men were attired in a loincloth of cotton and also a dark blue vest with long sleeves. On festive days, Thai-So men would wear a white Burmese styled long shirt and bind a silken scarf around the hips. At the same time Thai-So women would wear a sarong decorated with different motifs and a broad silk scarf crossing the upper part of the body. For ornamentation, the women adorned themselves with bracelets and earrings made of silver, copper and brass while the men did not use any personal ornaments. Traditionally, the men would tattoo their legs from the knees to the thighs. Some of the women also would tattoo their stomachs and wrists with patterns of flowers.

Thai-So identity is not only described through these 3 issues, but it is also reported in other findings. These are, labor exchange, a bartering tradition, and agriculturalists still existing in the ethnic group. They used the So language for communicating within their family and community. Their culture—such as myth, animistic belief, ritual and tradition—was



strictly passed on from generation to generation. It also contained unique characteristics that only existed in their ethnic group. For instance, they respected seniority as important; they still trusted their own ethnic group to a greater extent than they did other ethnic groups. They had always isolated themselves away from other ethnic groups. Therefore, it was not surprising that the findings within the first group indicated that their ways of life did not change and some communities had continued to be a closed society.

Conversely, some researchers, in the second group, discovered that the Thai-So ways of life were likely to change in some parts. Namely, Varangrat's research (1998) compared the ways of life between the Phuthai ethnic group and those of the Thai-So ethnic group. His findings identified that the Phuthai ways of life changed in aspects of economy, health and medicine, language, folklore, arts and crafts and society whereas the Thai-So ways of life changed, in particular, in terms of society. That is, the Thai-So teenagers were highly likely to listen to radio, watch television and watch mobile cinema to greater extent than to listen the So folklore from their parents or grandparents. Similarly, Burasit (2009) found that, at present, the Thai-So ways of life had changed. They changed their house building style from traditional houses to concrete. They changed their occupations from being agriculturalists to being employees in Bangkok. They changed their attributive costume from traditional costume to fashion. They opened their minds to marriage with outsiders. Ultimately, the So language was gradually replaced by I-San language and Thai language.

Based on the above review of literature, the Thai-So ways of life had still controversial issue among the researchers. That is, some researchers claimed that the Thai-So people had still preserved their ways of life while the rest of them were opposite.

Their studies utilized cross-sectional descriptive analysis; as a result, their findings had no dynamic. Therefore, it was considered a good opportunity investigate the dynamics of the Thai-So ways of life. It also discovered what are driving forces led to the changing ways of life. In order to achieve, the study aimed to investigate the following objective.

### **The Objective of the Study**

To investigate the pattern of the changing ways of life of the Thai-So ethnic group from the formative period of Kusuman district in 1844 up to 2014 in Kusuman district of Sakon Nakhon province.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative method was used to fulfill the above objective of the study. Four issues—area of study, participant, instrument and procedure, and data analysis—are broadly explained here.

#### **1. Area of Study**

Kusuman district was chosen as a result of four criteria. Firstly, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2015) mentioned that Kusuman was an historical site of the Thai-So ethnic group of Thailand. Secondly, almost 90 per cent of the villagers had remained as part of the Thai-So ethnic group. Thirdly, they used 'So' language for communicating within their communities and families. Fourthly, their culture was still passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, this area was regarded as being representative of and providing a picture of the changing ways of life of the Thai-So ethnic group.

#### **2. Participant**

The purposive sampling technique was used to seek key informants leading to answer the objective of this research. 42 Key informants comprised of

Buddhist monks, spiritual leaders, local scholars, village elders, head of village and villagers (see the name list of participants in page 17–19). These people were chosen because they had been born in, and stayed in, Kusuman district and were living in Kusuman district for at least 25 years. Consequently, these participants were able to provide accurate information about the history of the Thai–So ethnic group, including their ways of life.

### 3. Instruments and Procedure

Semi-structured interview was designed to seek out the data concerning the Thai–So ways of life from 1844 up to 2014. They were conducted among the key informants in Kusuman district, Sakhon Nakhon province, Thailand. The interviews took place from May 2012 to August 2013. Participants were interviewed in person by the researcher asking a variety of questions. The questions could be adjusted according to how the interviewee responded and could offer probing and follow-up questions in order to stimulate the interviewee's responses. Each interview was approximately fifty minutes in length. The location of the interview was determined by each participant. All interviews were audio-taped. The material was used to generate transcripts.

### 4. Data Analysis

All data were analyzed through a 3-step process of (1) decontextualization (identifying and coding segments or units of meaning in the data), (2) subsequent recontextualization (categorizing and thematically assembling a segment with other segments that deal with the same topic), and (3) synthesis.

## Results

Based on content analysis, the Thai–So ways of life could be divided into 5 periods. Each period based

on real events that generated the turning points of the Thai–So people in Kusuman district. All findings are presented below:

### 1. The Formative Period of the Thai–So People (1844–1939)

The ways of life of the Thai–So ethnic group were tied to the diversity of the ecology. Particularly, the forest seemed to be their 'fresh market' where they could seek out their food. The village elders in Kusuman district said that, in the past, the forests surrounding the area had been very fertile. They could seek out the four necessities for life from within the forest and from the water sources around the village. They knew the places and the times to collect mushrooms, bamboo sprouts, fish, wild animals, herbs, thatch, cogon and wood for making poles. They also knew a suitable place to grow cotton, chili, cucumber, gourd, pumpkin, etc. they knew where wild animals were abundant and how to prosper in living there.

In order that the Thai–So ways of life, in this period, could easily be understood, K. Voragun (personal communication, May 7, 2013) narrated that,

*"...Between January and February, they discovered land for cultivating which was not located far from their farmland. Subsequently, it was cleared by burning. A couple of months later, they could begin to cultivate farm crops such as gourds, melons, Indian corn, beans, peppers and so on. At the start of the rain season, around May, the Thai–So people began planting rice. The most popular type grown throughout Kusuman district was sticky rice. They used growing methods that they had learned from their ancestors. When the level of the water in the rice paddies was sufficiently high enough to kill the weeds and produce rice seedlings, the field was ploughed by buffalo, for the first time. A few rice paddies were sown with rice*



*plants. The remaining paddies were ploughed for a second time when the rice seedlings were two months old. The rice seedlings that had begun to grow were separated, pulled out, tied into bunches and the upper part of their leaves cut to reduce plant transpiration. The rice transplanting season came to an end between June and August. Some people spent their days raising cows and buffaloes in the hills while others spent time cultivating farm crops. Some spent time collecting their food in the forest – that is mushroom, bamboo, and so on while others spent time doing activities with their family. In late October and early December, the rice was harvested and the grain removed from the stalk...”*

The above narration identified clearly that their ways of life depended completely on subsistence agriculture. However, selling and buying occurred in the Thai-So ethnic group over a long period of time. The trade routes of the Thai-So ethnic group were Nakhon Phanom market in Muang district and Tha-Uthen market in Tha-Uthen district, Nakhon Phanom province. Both of these places were important points for traders coming from Laos, South China, and Vietnam and for other ethnic groups living in Sakon Nakhon, Mukdahan and Nakhon Phanom provinces. This was also the center for a wide variety of new products—that was food, cloth, construction equipment, kitchen equipment, agricultural products, dried foods, fish preserved with salt and so forth. Especially, forest products were available for sale there while the main product of Kusuman local city was exclusively rice (J. Voragun, personal communication, August 20, 2013).

During December, the caravan of rice traders in Kusuman district took place. They stored their rice in the barnyard, the surplus being sold. The head of village in Kusuman district played a significant role as the person appointing the villagers who had rice to sell. When the caravan of rice traders arrived in

Nakhon Phanom market and Tha-Uthen market, buying and selling took place together with an exchange of information. It was found that the conversations among buyers and sellers related to current events of the time. For instance, ‘the French began their colonization of Vietnam’ or ‘Nakhon Phanom became a United States military base during the Vietnam War.’ After the end of the rice trade, new products and outside information flowed into Kusuman district. Certainly, the wide variety of experiences from the trade route became the source of storytelling, within their community, that was passed on from generation to generation (J. Pairatsong, personal communication, October 3, 2012).

Consequently, their ways of life, in this period, were still tied to a subsistence economy. Also, their communication existed purely through oral communication as a personal media. Nevertheless, there was no evidence that the Thai-So ways of life had changed before Field Marshal Pibul Songkharm declared war on Britain and the United States on December 21, 1941.

## **2. The War Period (1940-1960)**

Before the Thai-So people in Kusuman district entered into the war periods, their life was peaceful. That is to say, they worked on paddy farming, sought out food in the forest, raised a buffalo or cows on the hill and wove cloth in the space under their houses. Regrettably, a tragedy spread out all around the world. It was WWII. This war journeyed into Thailand after Field Marshal Pibul Songkharm declared war on Britain and the United States on December 21, 1941 (Jayanama, 1967; World War II, 2015). Certainly, not only did the ways of life of the Thai people change, but it also embraced the Thai-So people in Kusuman district. B. Yaibangkaew (Personal Communication, July 16, 2013) described that,



*“...There were two events. The first event was the flow of WWII information, through the head of the village. As such, we would have dinner before the sun set. Bonfires were put out. Everyone had to sleep in a tree as they were not permitted to sleep in the house. The second event was the arrival of outsiders. We saw a lot of soldiers. They rode on horses. The elders and my parents prohibited us from seeing and talking with outsiders. We did not know the reasons but we followed their commands. Apart from that, an Indian man came to our community as a son-in-law. His occupation was as a clothes seller...”*

After the end of the Second World War, Thailand was transferred into the Cold War era, resulting from the conflicting political ideologies between capitalism led by United States and socialism led by the Soviet Union. The declaration of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was the significant variable generating the extremely close relationship between the United States and Thailand. During that time, communism was highly likely to spread into the Northeast Region of Thailand. As a consequence, the United States Air Force (USAF) established bases in Korat, Udon, Nakhon Phanom and Ubon, together with infrastructure development (Gebhardt, 2015).

The above events are according to the narration of the village elders in Kusuman district. S. monk (personal communication, 10 July, 2012) described that,

*“...In that period of time, the foreigners (both white and black people) were building a road. The foreigners employed the villagers to carry soil in baskets, for leveling the road surface. We received the wage of 25 satang per basket. There were a lot of villagers who joined in this work...”*

A few months later, all the villagers were very excited when public transportation arrived in Kusuman. The bus travelled between the capital of Sakhon Nakhon and the capital of Nakhon Phanom. The bus did not use oil but had charcoal as fuel. It was called “Rod Tan.” The cost of a bus ticket was 3 baht. Around 1947, radio appeared at the Kusuman School. Three years later, battery powered television came to Kusuman. In 1952, Thai-So people ate mackerel transported from Eastern Thailand.

Even though the modern media—such as radio and battery powered television—arrived into Kusuman district, it was concentrated in particular groups of government officials and merchants. Consequently, the majority of the Thai-So people still received the news and information from their head of village. Traditionally, the head of village transmitted the news by hitting a bamboo canteen as the signal for the start of a meeting. The sound of the signal could be heard approximately 7–10 kilometers away. When the Thai-So people heard it, they knew immediately that there was to be a meeting. After the end of their evening meal, they would walk to their leader's house to listen to the news and information that their head of village received from the local government or sub-district headman (T. Yaibangkaew, personal communication, June 12, 2013; P. Nuengtong, personal communication, July 10, 2013).

The above findings were interpreted to suggest that the Second World War was the starting point of the change in the ways of life of the Thai-So people in Kusuman district. This was because they were drawn into the world situation. The cold war led to the renovation and expansion of non-asphalt roads. It also embraced the arrival of outsiders, Rod Tan, and radio. Besides, it was also revealed that their ways of life



were likely to change greatly, in the national development period (1961–1983) as explained below.

### 3. The 1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> National Development Period (1961–1983)

According to reference materials, the National Economic Development Plan, launched in 1961, was regarded as the significant variable leading to the changing ways of life, not only of the northeasterners but also the Thai–So people. Its implication resulted from the Vietnam War in 1959 and the expansion of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the Northeast Region. Therefore, it was not surprising that the arrival of millions of U.S. dollars was able to improve the economy, transportation, and communications. The most important project was the system of ‘friendship highways’, linking most districts and sub-districts to towns (Encyclopedia of Nations, 2015). Unquestionably, at this time the non-asphalt road in Kusuman district was expanded and renovated to become an excellent road. A few years later, the bus, using charcoal for fuel was replaced by a diesel bus along with the emergence of a petrol station known as “Pum–Sri–Kom.” Although the transportation in Kusuman district was modern, the thoroughfares of the peripheral villages still remained as dirt tracks, suitable only for carts. In 1963, the government officials encouraged the villagers to build non-asphalt roads through their belief of Buddhism – through a ceremony of presenting robes to the Buddhist monks at the end of Buddhist Lent. In the 1980s, non-asphalt roads connected every village in Kusuman district, but there was no public bus service. Therefore, the Thai–So people, living in the peripheral villages, had always walked into Kusuman district to get on the public bus; the lucky ones had bicycles but most of them had to walk. K. Voragun (personal communication, August 20, 2013) said that,

*“...When transportation between Kusuman district and the peripheral villages was linked to highway No. 22, from Udon to Sakon Nakhon and to Nakhon Phanom, the traditional barter economy was gradually replaced by cash transactions. This was due to the arrival of Chinese traders and Vietnamese refugee’s from the Vietnam proxy war. They started out with very little, but being shrewd businessmen, it was not long before they became Kusuman’s wealthiest citizens. In approximately 1973, the rice trade of the Thai–So people at Nakhon Phanom market and Tha–Uthen market in Nakhon Phanom province came to an end as a result of the establishment of a rice mill in Kusuman district. A couple of months later, the number of local shops increased rapidly, together with new products—that is modern medicine, sweets, clothes, matches, gasoline, paper, pencils, material for school and a range of other basic consumer goods...”*

Besides, the Thai–So people were highly likely to access modern media such as radio, mobile cinema, television, newspaper and sound public address. Interestingly, it was found that radio achieved popularity because it was new entertainment that reached out to every age group and brought about the emergence of two new stations being Radio Broadcast Station 909 Sakon Nakhon and Radio Broadcast Station Kor Wor Sor 3 of the Royal Thai Army. There were a wide variety of programs namely entertainment, government lottery, international news, national news, local news, news commentary, religious programs, educational programs, sports news and agricultural features. However, the entertainment programs, especially radio dramas, were the most popular. Moreover, further findings reported that the mobile cinema, known as ‘movies to sell drugs’ was as popular as the radio. It seemed to be a window that touched their lives with many stories broadcast on to





canvas. They liked it because they had never seen a motion picture or actors on a canvas screen before. They had never seen handsome actors and beautiful actresses and never been aware of modern medicine such as pain killers, cough medicine, stomach tonics and so forth (N. Khumtissri, personal communication, April 28, 2013; T. Napong, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

After the road was constructed, transportation, rice trade, local shop, new products and modern media came to Kusuman district. It was found that their ways of life changed dramatically. That is, their bartering traditions were gradually replaced by cash transactions. They began to associate with outsiders along with their exposure to outside information. They began to use modern medicine and new products. Nonetheless, further findings revealed that the arrival of cash crops was another period that made the Thai-So ways of life change.

#### **4. Transformation Period (1984–1993)**

Although infrastructure development had stretched into Kusuman district, the Thai-So people's agriculture was still dependent on the rain conditions. They cultivated rice, gourds, melons, Indian corn, beans, peppers and so forth. Surpluses were sold and the rest was for the consumption of the grower's household throughout the year. Nevertheless, the Thai-So ways of life gradually changed after the launch of the agricultural extension policy. It was found that a large number of government officials and merchants journeyed into the Thai-So villages, bringing about the introduction of new rice varieties along with chemical fertilizer, pesticide sprays, wheel plough's and the E-tan farm tractor. Additionally, they persuaded the Thai-So villagers to cultivate cash crops after the end of the rice harvesting season (L. Chaichaung, personal

communication, August 22, 2013; C. Chaiwong, personal communication, August 24, 2013).

With regard to the villagers' interview, it revealed that the tomato was the first crop brought into the village by a trader. He, additionally, guaranteed the price of a tomato at 2 baht. However, there were conditions attached for growing the tomatoes—that was the villagers had to buy tomato seed and fertilizer from the trader. The majority of villagers accepted these conditions because they were keen to increase their earnings. In the first year, the yield was good, as was the price. In the following year, the price dropped from 2 baht to 1.50 baht and then from 1.50 baht to 50 satang. The tomato price continued to fall until the trader stopped buying altogether (S. Yaibangkaew, personal communication, August 1, 2012; T. Yaibangkaew, personal communication, June 12, 2013; S. Voragun, July 19, 2013).

A year later, tobacco was introduced into the Thai-So villages of Kusuman by government officials from the Thailand Tobacco Monopoly (TTM). In the early period, this did not become widespread because the villagers had lost money from tomato plantation. Nevertheless, some Thai-So villagers were interested in this cash crop because the TTM supported the production factors, namely tobacco seed and fertilizer. It would also buy all of the tobacco production at a guaranteed price. T. Yaibangkaew (personal communication, June 12, 2013) stated that,

*“...I felt relieved because the government officials followed the production process of tobacco from the beginning of the cultivation until harvest...”*

After a few years, tobacco plantation had become widespread together with the arrival of other, new cash crops such as potato, chili and rubber trees.



After the Thai-So people had turned to the cultivation of cash crops, it was found that they were also likely to change their cultivation from a wide variety of plants to monoculture. A labor exchange within the Thai-So village was replaced by the employment office. Their relationships with outsiders were likely to develop in a positive way. Interestingly, an increase in their household income became the driving force that made the Thai-So people access modern media such as radio and television. The use of modern media led them to purchase other electrical equipment such as fans, refrigerator, cooker, iron, kettle etc. In addition, they began to use motorcycles, build modern houses and dress following fashion fads (A. Poonpherm, personal communication, July 17, 2013).

Not only was cash crop plantation regarded as the significant driving force leading to an increase of household income, but it also included labor migration which became an important method of earning money. With regard to the key informant's interview, M. Voragun (personal communication, August 20, 2013) stated that,

*"...In 1952, the Thai-So men began to seek greater experience through employment in Nakhon Phanom. Mostly, we perceived the information regarding work from my relatives. Eight years later, we worked not only in the neighboring provinces, but also in Bangkok and Samutprakarn provinces. During that time, the Thai-So monks played the significant role for the Thai-So people's labor migration because they were the first group in Kusuman district that lived in Bangkok. They received the opportunity to study the Lord Buddha's teaching at Yannawa temple, Bangkok, as a result, they had an accommodation. Hence, those who were interested in work in Bangkok and Samutprakarn province would gather in groups of approximately 3-4 persons and travel to Yannawa*

*temple. When they arrived, they stayed around a week, waiting for work..."*

After the damage in southern Thailand, caused by Typhoon Guy during November 1989, the demand for labor increased dramatically. It was found that the Thai-So people began to emigrate into many provinces of the southern region. S. Mongkul (personal communication, June 2, 2013), who had experience of Surat Thani province, southern Thailand, reported that,

*"...The brokerages contacted the leader of the village, seeking workers. Mostly, the jobs were relevant to rubber plantations. I was interested in this job due to the free travel, accommodation and food. The labor rate was 55 baht per day or 1,500 baht per month. When the time for rice cultivation was ripe, I came back to my village..."*

A few years later, a recruitment agency persuaded Thai-So people to take work in Bangkok and at the Industrial Estate Authority in Nakhon Ratchasima, Rayong, and Samutprakarn. In 1992, seasonal migration in Kusuman district rose dramatically. It was found that, after the end of rice harvesting, a large number of those of working age migrated into the urban areas to take up temporary work. The popular employment was in construction while, the sugar cane harvest had gradually become more popular during 1996 and 1997. Nonetheless, at the present time, it is found that a large number of Thai-So people are likely to work in construction, to a greater extent than in any other jobs (U. Khumnongkun, personal communication, October 29, 2013).

Not only was national migration regarded as a phenomenon in Kusuman district, but it also embraced international migration. In the 1980s, international labor migration had begun to spread into Kusuman



district, though very few Thai-So people were interested in working overseas because of the high cost of the brokerage fees demanded by job seeking agencies. In addition, at that time nobody in Kusuman had succeeded in international migration. Regardless, in 1986, some Thai-So men made a decision to take a chance and go abroad. This was due to a broker's plausibility. For instance, once working overseas you could earn your own money. The first destinations for the Thai-So workers were the oil states of the Middle East, especially Saudi-Arabia. Hardly any of the villages in Kusuman district had any international migration, but up to now, Thai-So people from Kusuman have emigrated to Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Singapore (R. Kasamplom, personal communication, July 18, 2013; A. Poonpherm, personal communication, July 17, 2013; S. Yaibangkaew, personal communication, November 15, 2013).

Although Thai-So men are now more likely to work overseas, the numbers are lower than for national and seasonal migration. At the present time, it has been found that national and seasonal migration in Kusuman district continues to increase. The main cause of this migration was relevant to the amount of agricultural land available. Some had no land or had sufficient land only for rice cultivation for family consumption. Most significantly, the villagers saw the examples of other, successful, migrant workers. Labor migration was regarded as the starting point for integrating the Thai-So people into a new economy, society and culture (B. Surasiran, personal communication, July 28, 2013). It was found that they changed the main source of their income from farming or animal husbandry to labor migration or seasonal migration. Their occupations changed from agriculturalists to become employees in Thai companies. The family's decision making role changed

from male to female. The Thai-So women's role changed from housewife and agriculturalist to becoming an employee in an entertainment business and in tourist destinations. Their behavior changed from not voting to voting. In parallel, the proliferation of news and information available in the mainstream media reinforced the modernization and urbanization. Hence, it was not surprising that their attributive costume changed from being traditional costume to following fashion fads. They changed their marriage values from marriage within the So communities to intermarriage with other ethnic groups, Lao's and Thais. The Thai-So teenagers changed their values from wedding ceremonies to a couple living together before marriage. Their house building changed from Thai-So tradition to modern style. They were highly likely to use luxury goods such as a Japanese motorcycle's or pick-up trucks and electrical appliances. They started to consume prepared-food, vegetables and goods which were brought in from the city. Ultimately, the So language, that reflected their identity, gradually disappeared as they began to blend it with the Isan and Thai language.

#### **5. Period of Opinion Leader and Informative Society (1994-2014)**

Although the phenomenon of labor migration had drawn the Thai-So people into a new economy, society and culture, their culture, emphasizing on local supernatural beliefs, had been strictly passed on from generation to generation. It was a fact that the spirits were part of the Thai-So ways of life. Spirits were present within the family, in the community, in the rice fields, in the forests, rivers, streams, and in the trees. That is to say that everywhere in nature there were spirits. In addition, the power of beliefs—such as black magic, white magic, and mystery—had been indoctrinated into the Thai-So ethnic group, from



ancient times. However, some Thai-So beliefs gradually vanished, resulting from the arrival of a Buddhist monk, known as Luangpor Hong.

Luangpor Hong became regarded as the center of the soul of the Thai-So people in Kusuman district. His Dhutanga austerities in 1992 were the starting point that made some Thai-So beliefs vanish. In this session, I present Luangpor Hong's interviews as follows:

*"...In 1992, I began my Dhutanga austerities from Photipaisan temple into the Graveyard at Kokmoung village of Kusuman district. After I reached this place, I considered that this place was quiet and suitable for tranquility development, based on the four foundations of mindfulness. When I asked for alms, it was found that most of the Kokmoung villagers offered food to me while listening to my preaching. This preaching seemed to be the 'candle light' that brought the Kokmoung villagers into the Buddhist faith. They began to carry water into my dwelling and, at the same time, villagers from other places came to Kokmoung to listen to Tripitaka and to develop their mediation practice. The more the faith increased, the more religious places—such as a pavilion at a temple and a Dhamma retreat—were constructed. Ultimately, the villagers established the Sirimongkol temple and invited me to live there, to be at the center of the soul of the Thai-So people..."*

After he saw the carcass of a cow, which was to be used in a ritual to worship the spirit of community, he made a decision to eliminate this ritual. He talked to the spiritual leader asking *"Please call the head of Kokmoung village to meet me."* Before the head of the village and villagers met him, he prepared coffee, tea and snacks for them all. At the same time, he stated *"I would like to participate in the worship of the spirit of community. Would you mind whether or*

*not we use meat bought from the market to worship the spirit of community?"* The head of village answered that the ritual had traditionally been practiced from ancient times. If there was no animal sacrifice, the Kokmoung villagers would meet with misfortune. He confirmed that there would be no misfortune occurring in the Kokmoung village.

When the ritual of the spirit of the community was due, the villagers brought meat at the market in order to worship the spirit of community. Everyone, both in their village and neighboring villages, came together to see what misfortune resulted from the changing of the ritual of worship of the spirit of the community. After the ritual passed, nothing happened. A few years later, the ritual was gradually changed from offering meat to fruit. Also, the animistic beliefs in the Thai-So villages were decreased. For example, the belief's regarding the worship of the rice field, forest, river and stream spirits gradually vanished from the Thai-So village. Moreover, they became more likely to believe the advice of a medical doctor than that of a shaman. Nevertheless, some villagers attempted to blend the shaman's beliefs with the medical doctor's advice.

Not only did the Buddhist monk, as an opinion leader, play a significant role in changing some beliefs, but also the spread of non-traditional media, internet and satellite television, came about. From 2010 onwards, the internet started to emerge in Kusuman district, but it was not widespread. This was not only because the use of the internet needed computer skills but it also required a computer with broadband internet connection. However, it was found that the Thai-So teenagers and those under 25 years old were greatly interested because they had the opportunity to study how to use internet in their school. In addition, the frequency of internet use was likely to increase because of the spread of internet cafés and Wi-Fi in



the public areas such as temples and schools. In the future, this kind of media will be the most influential on the Thai-So teenagers, leading to their changing ways of life in many aspects. Especially, the myths, beliefs, rituals and traditions, passed on over a very long time, may be lost in the future. Furthermore, satellite television has become widespread within the peripheral Thai-So villages. It was revealed that they installed satellite dishes because it improved their viewing and sound quality. Also, they can access a wide variety of television channels and programs such as edutainment, local documentaries, musical variety, public relations channels, lifestyle, home and food, cartoons, Thai soap opera and other entertainment channels. Interestingly, the proportion of entertainment programming was likely to increase to a greater extent than that of news and knowledge. The proliferation of urban-center game shows, talk shows, music and sitcoms was also likely to increase rapidly. Therefore, the arrival of non-traditional media was another variable that reinforced the modernization of the information age.

### Discussion

The article's findings showed that the Thai-So ways of life had changed which were not congruent with the previous findings in the first group. This is because the previous researchers claimed that the Thai-So people had still preserved their ways of life well. That is, traditional housing, labor exchange, traditional bartering, traditional costume, So language, culture and unique characteristics had still existed within this ethnic group (Prince Kromphraya Damrong, 1906; Seidenfaden, 1943; Kania and Kania, 1979, Wongprasert, 1981; Suphon, 1990; Schliesinger, 2000, Wongthes, 2004, Mongkoltham,

2010). However, the researchers, in the second group, reported the likelihood of change in the ways of life of the Thai-So people. Varangrat's research (1998) found that the Thai-So people began to change in the aspect of society. Similarly, Burasit (2009) revealed that they changed house building, occupations, costume, and language. Therefore, the findings of Varangrat (1998) and Burasit (2009) were congruent with the article's findings.

According to the article's findings, it was found that their changing ways of life could be studied through 5 periods. Each period was based on the real life events that generated the turning points of the Thai-So ways of life in Kusuman district, Sakhon Nakhon province, Northeast Thailand. Regarding the findings for each period, it was found their ways of life were likely to begin to change during the war period (1940-1960) and more and more during the 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> national development period (1961-1983). It was found that they began to be exposed to a variety of news and information, not only from within their villages. They began to associate with outsiders. They began to use mass-market products such as gasoline, toothpaste and dry batteries. They were very happy to receive the new entertainment options presented via radio and mobile cinema. Also, they were interested in the arrival of television and sound public address. Most importantly, they changed themselves to become market-oriented in their mode of production and moved towards non-agricultural employment in the transformation period (1984-1993). During that time, it was found that they moved into monoculture-being the cultivation of tobacco or chili while they ended their tradition of barter. They changed their ways of dressing from traditional costume to fashion fads. They became more open minded and began to marry with outsiders. Ultimately, their animistic



beliefs, especially animal sacrifice to worship the spirit of community, were replaced by the logic of Buddhist beliefs during the period of opinion leader and informative society (1994–2014).

In order to be easily understood, I, as a researcher, attempted to categorize their changing ways of life through 3 dimensions. (1) Firstly, their economic ways of life were changed. For instances, they changed from a subsistence economy to a market-oriented mode of production. They accepted agricultural innovation in cultivation. They had a wide variety of occupations such as; famer, gardener, laborer and employee. Cash transactions became a necessary variable for their livelihoods. Consequently, it was not surprising that the bartering tradition and labor exchange gradually vanished from their society. (2) Secondly, their social ways of life were changed. For instances, they changed from using handicrafts to using mass produced products. Their traditional housing was replaced by concrete and modern houses. The relationship between the Thai-So people and outsiders became gradually better. Interestingly, they were satisfied with their new entertainment, especially television and radio while the storytelling from grandfather to father and father to child gradually disappeared. (3) Thirdly, their cultural ways of life changed. That is, animistic beliefs gradually decreased while the logical beliefs of Buddhism increased. Also, they were likely to go to see a doctor at the hospital to a greater extent than to see 'Mo Yao' (shaman). Ultimately, their traditional costume disappeared as they became interested in the fashion fads.

Further discussion pointed out that their changing ways of life had resulted from these driving forces – that is the growth of infrastructure, transportation facilities, the development of a large-scale market, agricultural innovation, modern medicine, the arrivals

of cash crop, the phenomenon of labor migration and mass media.

### Conclusion and Suggestions

The above findings pointed out that the changing ways of life of the Thai-So people could be studied through 6 periods as follows: (1) In the formative period of Kusuman district (1884–1939), there was no evidence that the Thai-So ways of life changed. However, it was found that their ways of life changed (2) in the war period (1940–1960) – that is, the Second World War was the starting point of their changing ways of life because they were drawn into 'world' situations. The cold war led to the renovation and expansion of non-asphalt roads. It also embraced the arrival of outsiders, Rod Tan and radio. (3) In the 1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> national development period (1961–1983), it was indicated that the Thai-So ways of life changed the most. Modern transportation brought outsiders into Kusuman and took the Thai-So people to the outside world. The findings also reported that government officials and traders came to Kusuman district. Especially, the traders were the main driving force that generated the emergence of the rice trade, along with the rapid increase in the number of local shops. (4) In the transformation period (1984–1993), the arrivals of cash crop was the driving force leading them into the market-oriented mode of production. Although they did not rely on the market, it gradually changed their production from a subsistence economy to market economy. Likewise, the labor migration was the starting point for integrating the Thai-So people into the new economy, society and culture. (5) In the period of opinion leader and informative society (1994–2014), a monk, as an opinion leader, influenced the change in the Thai-So beliefs, especially animal sacrifice to worship the spirit of



community. Additionally, he was a mediator who drew modernization from the outside world toward Kusuman district. Besides, further analysis pointed out that driving forces emerging in each period had the cause of the changing ways of life in the dimensions of economy, society and culture.

Further analysis pinpointed that the changing ways of life had resulted from these driving forces—that is the growth of infrastructure, transportation facilities, the development of a large-scale market, agricultural innovation, modern medicine, the arrivals of cash crop, the phenomenon of labor migration and mass media. Especially, the arrival of mass media had played the significant role in changing their ways of life. Although mass media was of interest to the anthropologists, it had never been brought into the study. I, as a communication researcher, realized that mass media were regarded as an agent and index for national development. Nowadays, we find ourselves living in a media-dominated environment where newspaper, radio, television, satellite television and internet envelop us on a daily basis. Consequently, many communication scholars hypothesize that media exposure/use is a crucial cause of attitudinal and behavioral change (Rosengren, 1983; Windahl, 1981; Becker, 1976; Blumler and McQuail, 1969; Garramone, 1983; Greenberg, 1974; Hur and Robin, 1981). Additionally, there were many researches that confirmed this hypothesis. For instances, Jung, Arya, & Viswanath's study (2013) found that those who read newspapers, watched television, and listened to radio; were likely to gain HIV/AIDS-related knowledge and use a condom during sexual intercourse. Similarly, Asekun-Olarinmoye, Asekun-

Olarinmoye, Adebimpe, & Omisore (2014) found that those who spent more time watching television and using the Internet were more likely to be sexually active. Besides, Mahmoud, Klimsa, & Auter (2010) reported that internet use had an influence on the user's attitude toward using commercial websites. Tesunbi and Nwoye (2014) revealed that the students of the American University of Nigeria, who read newspapers, were likely to be involved in political action. Ultimately, Jamal, & Melkote (2008) pinpointed that Kuwaitis who watched Al-Jazeera satellite television during a typical day had their trust in the government decreased. The previous researches, referred to above, confirmed that media use affected not only attitudes but also behaviors. Therefore, this research project presumes that media use has been the significant predictor that affected the changing ways of life of the Thai-So ethnic group. The effects of media use on the changing ways of life of the Thai-So people will be studied in future research. Hierarchical Stepwise Regression Analysis will be used for investigating which kinds of media use affect the changing ways of life of the Thai-So ethnic group.

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**Table 1** Name Lists of Key Informants

No.	Key Informants	Gender	Age	Social Status	Date of Interview
1	Luangpor Subin	Male	85	Buddhist Monk	10 July 2012
2	Luangpor Hong	Male	62	Buddhist Monk	16-30 October 2012
3	Luangpor Adul	Male	60	Buddhist Monk	3 May 2013
4	Jan Voragun	Female	97	Spiritual Leader	20 August 2013
5	Sanan Yaibangkaew	Male	47	Local Scholar	1 August 2012
6	Som Yaibangkaew	Male	62	Local Scholar	5 August 2012
7	Narit Khumtissri	Male	50	Local Scholar	28 April 2013
8	Konsigha Voragun	Male	78	Local Scholar	7 May 2013
9	Vilai Neungthong	Male	40	Local Scholar	11 July 2012
10	Samsong Mongkul	Female	45	Local Scholar	2 June 2013
11	Somsri Kasapom	Female	66	Village elder	15 July 2013
12	Ban Yaibangkaew	Female	82	Village elder	16 July 2013
13	Ain Yaibangkaew	Female	79	Village elder	18 July 2013
14	Jinda Pairatsong	Male	75	Village elder	3 October 2012
15	Thongarin Napong	Male	76	Villager	30 October 2013
16	Tuk Yaibangkaew	Female	45	Villager	11 November 2013
17	Kasam Yaibangkaew	Male	38	Villager	12 November 2013
18	Surin Yaibangkaew	Male	36	Villager	15 November 2013
19	Samai Varakun	Male	36	Villager	1 December 2013
20	Kamkaen Vorarat	Male	55	Head of Village in Nonghoynoi	2 December 2012
21	Thedsak Yibangkaew	Male	53	Villager	12 June 2013
22	Prasomg Nuengtong	Male	42	Merchants, Napho radio's DJ and owner Internet Cafe	10 July 2013
23	Vilai Pholhasa	Male	50	Famer and gardener as well as the Thai-So radio'DJ	18 July 2013
24	Vijit Praladsu	Male	49	Famer and gardener as well as the Thai-So radio'DJ	18 July 2012
25	Suwakhon Pholhasa	Male	42	Famer and gardener as well as the Thai-So radio'DJ	18 July 2013
26	Lampai Chaichuang	Female	57	Government official of district agricultural extension office	22 August 2013
27	Pratwat Thapsaeng	Male	42	Government official of district agricultural extension office	23 August 2013
28	Chatchai Chaiwong	Male	42	Government official of district agricultural extension office	24 August 2013
29	Suriya Kansamut	Male	45	Government official of district agricultural extension office	25 August 2013
30	Anuchit Surasaeng	Male	28	Merchants and shop owner: Satellite Television	25 August 2013



**Table 1** (Cont.)

No.	Key Informants	Gender	Age	Social Status	Date of Interview
31	Uthin Khumnongkun	Male	55	Government officials of Kusuman post and telegraph	29 October 2013
32	Phong Phaengchai	male	49	Police General	30 October 2013
33	Phadungsak Rayurat	Male	35	Government Official of Kusuman School	26 October 2013
34	Kitidat Surasiran	Male	27	Merchant	27 October 2013
35	Amphon Poonpherm	Male	60	Head of Village in Kokmoung Village	17 July 2013
36	Ramlee Kasamplom	Female	66	Villager	18 July 2013
37	Sombat Voragun	Male	62	Villager	18 July 2013
38	Raeng Vorangang	Female	32	Villager	19 July 2013
39	Samai Vorangang	Male	42	Villager	19 July 2013
40	Suthai Boonkang	Female	30	Villager	25 July 2013
41	Jan Voragun	Female	92	Spiritual leader	27 July 2013
42	Bunchai Surasiran	Male	50	Merchant and shop motorcycle	28 July 2013

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