

The Evolution of Spirituality and the Community Management in Thailand: A Case Study on the Baha'i Faith in Omkoi and Yasothon, Thailand

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Abstract

Southeast Asia is long been with the name of the Land of diversities. As long as ethnic diversities, religious diversities is also relevant to Southeast Asia especially in Thailand. This paper is emphasize on find out the evolution of a newly merged religion in Thailand-the Baha'i Faith and it's significant spirituality practices in various communities in this country. As a Theravadin Buddhist nation, manor religious such as Baha'i faith was rare discussed by the academia in Thailand, a case study on this topic will present a clear picture of unseen Baha'i communities of these two countries. The research will focus on urbanized Baha'i communities in Bangkok and Chiangmai rural counterparts in Yasothon and Omkoi, by using comparative studies of related literature and quantitative interviews to find out the similarities and differences in polarized Thai urban and rural spacers. Practically through the finding we will manage to learn the comparable success of Baha'i Faith in managing it's community in a specialized way of practice. Furthermore, more investigations will be made on Baha'i spirituality as it could be practiced to our daily lives and make contributions to our social progress.

Keyword: Baha'i Faith, Baha'i Community, Spirituality, Thailand, Religious Diversity

Introduction

Baha'i Faith^{**} or Baha'i Religion, even nowadays when we are highly exposed in a information based society, is still a new word for many people. According to Professor Moojan Momen from Department of Middle Eastern History at the University of Haifa mentioned that since it has been established in the 19th century, it gradually spread throughout the world just ranked the second most spread religion right after the Christianity (Momen: 2012). From the year 1844-1852AD the Babi Movement was raised by Bab to fight against corrupted rule of Persian Shah, he was the pre-messenger of the Baha'i Faith, he declared he is 'the Bab (literally means gate in Persian language)', a gate to the Hidden Twelfth Imam as he promised. Shortly after the persecution of the Bab and the crushed down of the Babi Movement in the mid-1850s, Baha'u'llah, a member of then day noble class, the founder of the Baha'i Faith openly announced he is "He Whom God shall make manifest," the prophet whom promised by the Bab². Most of former Babi believers therefore followed the Baha'u'llah, as the Baha'i community in Persia was

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** Baha'i Faith is one of the world youngest religions, it originated in 1863 in Persia (nowadays Iran) and the founder of this religion is Baha'u'llah. Baha'i Faith refer to the unity of the world, the unity of religions, and the unity of human race.

² Baha'i History, by Moojan Momen and Peter Smith (1993). A general survey of the history of the Baha'i Faith, including a brief overview of main events in Babi and Baha'i history. Next, a series of themes that have developed throughout Baha'i history is examined, Baha'i Online February, 1993.

growing tremendously, these conservative ministers suggested the Persian Shah sent him to exile, followed by one exile to another from Tehran to Baghdad, further to Akka-the city of prisons in Syria in 31 August 1868 and has been imprisoned for a long time until his old age. On May 1892, Baha'u'llah passed away in the outskirt of Akka. During his lifetime, despite the suffering he experienced in Persia and upon exile to Akka, he was filled with compassion and gradually won the heart of many followers.

During the early ages of Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah wrote letters to many monarchies around the world, including the Sultan of Ottoman Empire-Abdulaziz I, the Queen Victoria of England and Napoleon III. Napoleon replied Baha'u'llah's advise arrogantly, thus Baha'u'llah predicted the collapse of his Empire³, in the year 1870 in Franco-Prussia War, he lost the battle and his power has been finished by the Prussians. However, in the later period Shoghi Effendi, has been appointed as the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith by his grandfather- Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah. It was at his time, Queen Marie of Romania converted to Baha'i Faith, she kept constant contact with Shoghi Effendi, In one letter she mentioned that the teaching of Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha are great light came to her, and thus ceased the grief, inner conflicts and distress in her mind. She used the metaphor that the teaching of the Faith is like a seed deeply rooted in her⁴.



Figure 1 The exile route of Baha'u'llah from Tehran to Akka

Queen Marie of Romania is not an exception, the King of Tango January 1962 to May 2007 became the second Baha'i monarchy in the world.

After the end of Shoghi Effendi's headship, the Universal House of Justice has been put up in Haifa, Israel to coordinate with the Baha'i around the world as the Baha'i Faith's highest institution as a result of Ten Year Crusade in 1963, the agenda was ordained by Baha'u'llah, and the the main purpose was to apply democratic system within Baha'i Faith, 9 members of the House was elected by Baha'i communities worldwide.

Through spread of Baha'i Faith in the early period, Baha'i Faith has rooted in more than 200 countries around the world, especially grow rapidly in some countries in each continent such as the US, India, Germany, Chile, Uganda and Samoa, the continental house of worship has been built up to link with the religious harmony. In Asia, India had the biggest population of Baha'i with more than 2 million people, in Southeast Asia, Cambodia is a country for the significance of

³ Kenneth E. Bowers, *God Speaks Again: An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith*, p102, Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2004.

⁴ Appreciations of the Bahá'í Faith, by Dowager Queen Marie of Rumania, *Appreciations of the Bahá'í Faith*, Reprinted from The Bahá'í World, Vol. VIII, Bahá'í Publishing Committee, Wilmette, Illinois, 1941.

the growth of Baha'i Faith, in July 17th 2015, the design of the first local house of worship in the world has been designed and will be constructed in Battambang, Cambodia.

The Emerge of the Baha'i Faith in Thailand

Although when compared with the surrounding countries for example Cambodia, the growth of the Baha'i Faith and Baha'i community in Thailand is comparably slow, however, it's still a significant phenomenon to see the rise of a minor religion like Baha'i Faith in a country with uninterrupted Buddhist culture. Professor Moojan Momen argued that it was the similarities of Baha'i Faith comparing to Buddhism made it possible to be taught and rooted in Thailand⁵. The Dhamma Ethics is focus on dealing with hatred, lust and illusion, yet in Baha'i Faith Baha'u'llah says that the whole human kind is encompasses a with great affiliations⁶. In Buddhism, Maitreya Buddha (the next Buddha) was predicted to come to revitalize the up to date Dahmma at that time to human beings by Sakyamuni Buddha himself in Cakavatti Sutta. In Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah is believed as a new prophet which has been recorded in the classics of the main religions (Buddhism, Christianity and Islam), in Baha'i theology, the Buddha is considered as one of the 8 past prophets. The similarities and links of Baha'i Faith and Buddhism are in many ways.

In the early period of Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah encouraged Baha'is from Europe and North America to pioneer in the rest places around the world. 'Tablet to the Baha'is of the United States and Canada' is an important address which made by Abdu'l-Baha to the people of the United States and Canada in April 1916. In this letter he encourage the knowledgeable Baha'i teachers from the United States and Canada to go to teach the teachings of Baha'i Faith in various promising parts of the world including Siam⁷.

Hasan M. Balyuzi, a well known Iranian Baha'i scholar mentioned that Jamal Effendi was the first Baha'i teacher who spread the teaching of Baha'u'llah to Siam (now Thailand), entrusted by Baha'u'llah, he travelled East to the places Baha'u'llah haven't been to, As a travel teacher, even though he brought Baha'i Faith to Thailand but he didn't stay in Thailand for long. Mr.Sukhum Abhasakun, an senior Baha'i with Iranian background did a research on the history of Baha'i Faith in Thailand, he pointed out that the first believer who accepted Baha'i Faith in Thailand was a Karen man called Mr.Pramote [the full name can't be traced] in 1950⁸. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i Faith of Thailand was established in 1967 as a big progress of Baha'i Faith in Thailand. In 1967 His Majesty the King of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej gave an appointment to the Baha'is, these Thai Baha'is presented him a copy of 'The Proclamation of Baha'u'llah' in commemoration of Baha'u'llah's proclamation on his prophethood. The whole process was broadcast on radio, television and newspaper, the appointment was arranged in the palace and the Baha'i Faith attained prestige.

⁵ Moojan Momen, *Buddhism and the Baha'i Faith:An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith for Theravada Buddhists*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1995.

⁶ Baha'u'llah, *Book of Certitude*, p.49.

⁷ Abdu'l-Bahá / 7: Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, Tablets of the Divine Plan,Baha'i Online Library, Haifa, Israel.

⁸ Sukhum Abhasakum, *History Of The Development Of The Baha'i Faith In Thailand (1950-1967)*, a career degree program at Pacific Western University, Thailand, 1996.



Figure 2 Mrs.Fozdar and the King of Thailand

The Communities Management of the Baha'i Faith: Cases on Omkoi and Yasothon

During the pre-modern period, the country has been united under the umbrella of the Thai monarchy, people with different racial and religious backgrounds such as Thai Buddhists, Chinese, Malay Muslim, Khmer, Lao and Baha'is from different backgrounds had been identified as Thai nationals with the preconditions of be loyalty to the King (Aphornsuvan, 2003: 12). Up until now, the Baha'i Faith in Thailand consolidated in several places in Thailand both in urban and rural areas such as Bangkok, Chiangmai, Yasothon, Hatyai and Omkoi. Especially the Baha'i communities in Omkoi and Yasothon could be good examples of Baha'i community management.

Omkoi and Yasothon are geographically and economically far from the center of the country. Omkoi is a hilly town located in northern Thailand, inhabited by Karen hill tribes, the Karen people in the region believe in many religions for instance Buddhism and Christianity. And Yasothon is a small provincial capital situated on Korat Plateau in Northeastern Thailand, people in this province are mainly Buddhists and spirit worshippers. Long distance from national capital and economic hubs with limited available resources made these two places less developed in the region. In this case, foreign religions particularly Christianity and it's missionaries exposed the local people to Christianity by providing free social welfare services such as weekend school and English tutoring. A big portion of Karen people from Omkoi accepted Protestantism and Catholicism and 15 churches has been built in Yasothon province (data collected from thaichurches.org). The appearance of Baha'i Faith is late when compared with it's Christian counterparts. During the 1960s Baha'i Faith rapidly existed in Yasothon, in the end of 1964, Mrs. Shirin Fozdar, an Iranian pioneer bought a school called Arunrat Wittayakhom in Yasothon and changed the name to Santiham (literally means peace) Wittayakhom together with a 12 rai (19,200 square meters) nearby despite all difficulties in hand to support the education for women. Today, the school has a kindergarten and elementary school as well, and it remains the only Baha'i school in Thailand, students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds can study there. When turning to Omkoi, the records and information are even less, according to the historical records, in 1961 Mrs. Shirin Fozdar went to the mountains of hill tribes in northern Thailand, through her hard working many people converted to Baha'i Faith, a Buddhist monk called Phra Maha Boonsoong was one of them. In 1996, Omkoi Baha'i training center was set up with the help of the Baha'is from Chiangmai and the other places in Thailand and around the world to provide a free place to stay for the teenagers whom mainly from the Karen village in the

surrounding hills while they are studying in high school. Because of the religious background of the institution expect the students gather together to sing Baha'i songs and pray with Baha'i prayers both in the morning and in the evening. However, they are not required to become Baha'is to be able to stay there.



Figure 3 Picture wall of the Baha'i Training Center in Omkoi

In Baha'i Faith, there is no priest nor missionary as occupations, in contrast every Baha'i is considered as a priest or missionary. When Christian fathers and missionaries are planning on how to convert more local people into Baha'i Faith, the Baha'is use the power of peers and networks to have more members in. Take Omkoi Baha'i Training Center for example, many students who stayed there earlier became Baha'is, with their encouragements their juniors to study there under the influence of Baha'i atmosphere. Many parents witnessed the behavioral changes of their children in this Baha'i institute and thus started to be interested in knowing more about Baha'i Faith and some of them even began to study Baha'i Ruhi texts in the groups. The same case could be extended to Chiangmai since Omkoi is district in Chiangmai province, many students from Omkoi got chances to study in the high schools in Chiangmai, the Baha'i center in Chiangmai arranged places for these students to study freely. The efforts which proposed by Baha'i institutions in Omkoi and Chiangmai earned the hearts of many Karen youths. While talking with an Omkoi Baha'i youth called Mook Mongjan in Chiangmai, she stated briefly that even if her parents are not Baha'is, they allowed her to be a Baha'i and she firstly went to stay at Baha'i training center in case of saving budgets and also impressed by her juniors whom once stayed there. She openly expressed her gratefulness to Baha'i Faith and mentioned she is happy to be a Baha'i on account of the helps from the Baha'i communities and the merits she can apply in daily life which taught by Baha'i inspired programs. With a smiling face, she also planning to go to the Baha'i scared land in Haifa, Israel. At the same time, a girl from another village in Omkoi called Joon Kodchamon whom is sharing the same space with her in Chiangmai Baha'i Center insisted that although she studies Baha'i texts in a peer group both at her home village near Omkoi and Chiangmai for a long time she still recognize herself as a Buddhist, in spite of her Buddhist background and the time he spent in Baha'i communities, when asked about the possibility for her to be a Baha'i, her answer is she hopes to be both Buddhist and Baha'i. The flexibility of Baha'i Faith allows people to think carefully about their faiths even if they came from non-Baha'i backgrounds. In this framework, different people could gather together to use Baha'i related resources to develop themselves while making converts of people are not seen as a prominent purpose of Baha'i institutions. Instead, moral education and serving awareness are more frequently mentioned in Baha'i instructions. Moreover, another significant case could be

found in Omkoi is that girls consists most of the residential students in Baha'i training center with only four boys, such big differences represent that girls are more likely tend to be influenced by their peers to attend group works than boys.

When Omkoi Baha'i communities are more stand out in youth affairs, Yasothon, a town with totally different environments, the situation is slightly changed. As doctor Amanah Nurish from the religious studies department of Temple University argued that the rise of Baha'i Faith and Baha'i communities in Yasothon is rather a case of the transformation of peasantry.⁹ During 1980s to 1990s Thailand experienced significant changes of economic growth, together with some other newly emerged industrialized countries like Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, Thailand has been titled one of the Four Asian Tigers. The commercial and political center Bangkok encountered a totally different structural reshaping than the rest parts of the country. At the time when Bangkok expanded significantly and change rapidly from agricultural centered economy to industrial oriented economy, the rest of the country remained the vast majority of peasantry. Yasothon is a typical Isan(Northeastern Thailand) town with it's economy mainly based on rice cultivation. However this condition didn't last for long, as the time went by, the westernization and economical changes flew to Yasothon as well. The reconstruct of society could be found in many social aspects, traditionally in Buddhist societies, Buddhist temples are the centers of peasantry, the temples are places for entertainments, worshiping, group gatherings, and rituals, both Buddhism and Spirit worshiping can be find in Buddhist temples, without the strong influences of commercialism and consumerism, Buddhist temples provide people places to practices religions and balance their lives (Tambiah, 1977). In recently years, this little town started to be filled by chain stores like Tesco Lotus and seven elevens, they gradually took places of Buddhist temples and played the central roles in peoples' daily lives. The popularity of Internet and smart phones provided people more accesses to so called modern way of lives, the former collective societies of Yasothon has transformed to a more individualized society.

Since the Baha'i Inspired school of Santiham has been established in 1967 in Yasothon, the teaching of Baha'i is more or less introduced to the region, especially in the groups of children, women from lower-middle classes in the rural. The Baha'i school of Santiham gave good opportunities for the poor to be educated with low costs as Baha'u'llah taught that education is the key to develop the humanities and the moral standards of our societies (Peter Smith, 2008). Khun Sulee from the Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly in Bangkok said that the school hosts more than 700 students, and many of the current students even came from civil servants background which is different from the majority of students came from the poor families before and Santiham school earned a good reputation in Yasothon.

In a Baha'i holy text which were written by Baha'u'llah, he himself stressed that: The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High". ("Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), Sec. 81, pp. 156-7) [Baha'i Online Library]

The contributions made by early devoted Baha'i pioneers created thick educational atmospheres in one of the poorest regions namely Yasothon, these pioneers stayed for many years in the region for the sake of the progress of development and education. The way how they

⁹ Amanah Nurish, Religious Transformation And Peasantry In Yasothon(Baha'i Study In Contemporary Thailand), presented in Asia Pacific Sociological Conference (APSA), Chiang Mai University, Thailand, 15-16 February 2014.

applied Baha'i principles set good examples to those who witnessed their sacrifices and whom have been educated in Santiham school. The Baha'i idea of world citizen also are implemented in Santiham school for many years with the help of Baha'i volunteers and Baha'i communities worldwide. The parents of Sathiham students greatly noticed the importance of education in terms of life upgrading.

All in all, Omkoi case may differ from Yasothon case due to different conditions in different places, the common point in Baha'i community management and development are the commonly emphasize on the application of education including both secular and moral educations which enable the teenagers from remote and isolated Omkoi and Yasothon to gain skills and qualities to live in society. According to my research and the state made by Edward Chang, a long standing Baha'i whom based in Bangkok, many students are quite successful on their careers, tradings and family buildings after they left the Baha'i Training Center of Omkoi and Santiham School in Yasothon.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the evolution of spirituality of the Baha'i Faith in Thailand especially in Omkoi and Yasothon have solid foundations in their practical practices, dedicate works on education and focus on the development of the rural made the Baha'i spirituality have more links to ordinary people with different backgrounds. The Baha'i practice of spirituality not only exist on texts but also lively presented in daily regular practices. In addition, when talks about the Baha'i concept of communities management in the cases of Omkoi and Yasothon, the specialty of Baha'i is their sense of self-management, without the hierarchical structural obstacles, the efficiency of management is easy to be presented as an output, the earnestly implements of democratic practices in Baha'i Faith give it modern qualities to suit the fast changing societies. Furthermore, the positive effects were produced by Baha'i teachings and the Baha'i funded/inspired schooling are on the process of making better societies. Recognized as a modern religion, Baha'i Faith is doing well in integrating the teaching with a diverse world, with this promising tendency, Baha'i Faith and it's communities in Thailand and around the world will do better as the time going by as the founder-Baha'u'llha propheted in it's sacred texts.

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