

The Holistic Principles of Buddhist Communities under ‘Bunniyom’ System in Thailand*

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Abstract

This article was developed from the researcher’s thesis ‘Bunniyom’ Discourse: A Case Study of Ratchathani Asoke Community, Ubon Ratchathani Province’. More documentary research; in depth-interview with the community leader and members and male and female Buddhist monks; and participant observation in the community was required to complete the article. The study found that Samana Bodhirak, the Buddhist monk who founded Asoke community, launched the word called ‘Bunniyom’ system (Meritism) to challenge the traditional concept of merit-making and also the capitalism adopted by the current mainstream of development in Thailand. ‘Bunniyom’ system is the way of practical living according to Buddhist principles to diminish excessive desires. All Asoke lay communities throughout Thailand abide by communal consumption *Satharana Pokee* and the values of down-to-earth living, hard work and perseverance, self-reliance, and sacrifice. According to ‘Bunniyom’ system giving to others and regaining less than giving or regaining nothing means merit-making which is opposite to Thai traditional belief concerning merit-making in Buddhism. The concept of ‘Bunniyom’ system is not only in the religious area but is included in every single aspect of living in Asoke community: economy, education, agriculture, communication, and politics. Although the principles are deeply rooted in Buddhism, Samana Bodhirak stressed that ‘Bunniyom’ system is applicable to any religion that

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concerns itself with modelling a way of life which promotes both equality and harmony.

Keywords: Alternative Development, Buddhist Communities, 'Bunniyom' System, Holistic Principle

Introduction

Ever since the first National Economic and Social Development Plan, development has become the dominant discourse emphasizing that the direction of social change in Thai society occurs only by following the western development model. The discursive practice of development has been reproduced by educational institutes, governmental offices, and private organizations in Thai society and development discourse hinders local culture and wisdom with the term ‘underdevelopment’ (Charoensin-o-larn, 1999:12-13). In capitalist world systems individuals are anthropocentric and they believe human beings could master and use nature as a response to their endless needs. This perspective separates humans from nature and emphasizes that humans can understand and analyze nature with knowledge and technology. Nature is perceived as only the object and tool to attain human’s benefits. In consumerism as the pattern of capitalist ideology individuals are motivated to over-consuming and manipulating natural resources to highest profits and utilities (Hutanuwatr, 2001:10).

Development discourse accentuates the country to economic modernization, and investment growth, and industrialism. Thai rural communities are exploited by this development and from self-reliant communities they become more independent and inevitably get involved in industrialism. However, in the mainstream of capitalist and consumerist development, the Asoke Buddhist community based on non-conventional development was established upstream by Samana Bodhirak and presently there are many Asoke communities around Thailand. This article will discuss the background of the Santi Asoke community; study of the Asoke group among Thai and Western scholars to define its group’s movement; and ‘Bunniyom’ system-the way of living according to Buddhist principles as practiced by the Asokan community in key aspects of life- economic, educational, public health, agricultural, communication, and political.

Materials and Methods

Methodology used in this article is qualitative method of

data collection which was included in-depth interviewing with one Sikkhamart (female Buddhist monk); one Samana (male Buddhist monk), two community leaders, and eight community members who live in the community; participant observation; and document analysis. To conduct participant observation, the researcher lived in Ratchathani Asoke community to facilitate engagement and visited the community repeatedly over time since the researcher intimates with some community members. Observer as participant allowed the researcher to collect data and check definitions and accuracies of term and information which informants provided about 'Bunniyom' system from in-depth interviewing and documentary research while the community being studied is aware of the researcher's observation activities. Living in the community enabled the researcher to participate in everyday activities. These activities helped establishing more and more intimacy between the researcher and community members and the researcher could have an access to community members who could explain in details the meaning that such activities held for them as individuals and could replace more formal interviews with casual dialogues. The process of conducting observations at the first place was emphasized on focused observations and later shifted to selective observations.

Research Results

Origin of the Religious Community of Santi Asoke

Growing up in a large and destitute family, Rak Rakpongse or later known as Samana¹ Bodhirak is the Santi Asoke sect founder who challenged the current Thai world view preoccupied with consumerism and materialism in both secular and religious segments (Sangsehanat, 2004:275). Since the age of ten he was the breadwinner for his family and six siblings. Besides his self-discipline, he was notable for artistic capabilities and was rapidly successful in a career of TV broadcaster, song composer and author. However, he abandoned his lavish life and secular pleasures at the peak of his career; determining to study Buddha's teaching

¹ Samana is a prefix for monks in the Asoke Community instead of Phra common prefix used to call orthodox Buddhist monks after his announcement not to be under Thailand Sangha Supreme Council.

and finally was ordained in 1970 (Heikkilä-Horn, 2002:9).

His ordained life was not sweet as a nut because he was never satisfied by the lax conduct of the sangha and carried on criticizing that monks should not smoke, not chew betelnut, not eat meat, and not practice magical rites (Terwiel, 1995:6). The Sangha's integrity is degraded by increasing circumstance of ethical debasement and materialism. Even if commercialism and materialism in Thai Buddhist monasteries is escalating, the Thai Sangha's Council of Elders has not reacted with much needed reformation (Essen, 2005:9). His stinging critique of division between Maha Nikaya sect and Dhammayut sect² is also revealed since he underlines the essence more than the doctrine.

“...Those in high positions are simply of no use. They have not achieved spiritual salvation and they even misunderstand Buddhist teachings... I was not causing rift but only trying to bring the good things in both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions together once again - by going back to the fundamental teachings and practices of ancient times as I understands them (Heikkilä-Horn, 2002:4).”

He established a Buddhist center in Nakhon Pathom. In contrast with mainstream Sangha, the monks and nuns at the center were strict with the monk's disciplines as in ancient times. Besides Samana Bodhirak's critique of the Thai Sangha, he also disparages capitalism that predominates in excessive greed, competition, and exploitation causing environmental and spiritual ruin (Essen, 2010:44). Eventually in 1975 he declared independence to the authority of the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997: 44). Even if the Santi Asoke sect was rejected from the Council, its ideological influence has remained intact in Thai society. 'Bunniyom' system is considered as the optional method to

² Dhammayut (Sect of the Followers of the Dhamma) is a reform sect, smaller and stricter; they will not touch money, are not allowed to prepare their own food, ride on trolleys, or wear shoes. Maha Nikaya (Great Sect) is more lax in these matters.

withstand in financial crisis (Heikkilä-Horn 2002:21). The ideology and the associated Bunniyon community has a loyal following among the lower class and some middle class, this has been accomplished by developing a self-reliant economy, environmental conservation, and restoring Thai traditional systems. Currently, there are nine centers of the Asoke Buddhist communities throughout Thailand³ (Sangsehanat, 2004:275).

'Bunniyom' System and Holistic Way of Asoke Living

Since the National Economic and Social Development Plan in 1961 development discourse is the dominant discourse which emerged in the context of Thai society. The discursive practice is extensive in forms of lecturing, speeches, analysis, writings in public and private sectors. Growth of material prosperity is the ultimate goal of development and GDP and GNP is the indicator of capitalist economy. Natural resources are employed to serve this purpose (Charoensin-o-larn, 1999:1-5). Also capitalism and materialism expands into religious world with commercial Buddhism and adherence to wealth, ranking and prestige in monastic life.

Samana Bodhirak assailed mainstream Buddhism as mentioned in the above topic and also gave a critique of capitalism:

“...I can see that capitalist countries are suffering from the ignoring of spiritual and religious matters and they do not apply religion into everyday life. The more they seek the happiness from secular world, the more they are suffering.”

(Translated from San Asoke Journal, 2001:6).

'Bunniyom' system discourse has been created by Samana Bhodhirak for ages and the discursive practice has launched since the first Buddhist community had been founded near Bangkok, the capital of Thailand in 1970s. Therefore 'Bunniyom' system discourse was

³ (1) Sisa Asoke, Srisaket, northeast (1976); (2) Sali Asoke, Nakornsawan, central (1976); (3) Santi Asoke, Bangkok, capital (1976); (4) Pathom Asoke, Nakorn Prathom, north of Bangkok (1980); (5) Sima Asoke, Nakorn Rachasima, northeast (1990); (6) Taksin Asoke, Trang, south (1991); (7) Ratchathani Asoke, Ubonratchathani, northeast (1994); (8) Phu-pha Fa-Nam, Chiangmai, north (1995); and (9) Hin-pha Fa-Nam, Chaiyaphum, northeast (N/A).

antagonistic not only towards capitalism but also Thai orthodox Buddhism since 'Bunniyom' system or Meritism interprets 'Bun' or 'merit' differently from the mainstream Thai Buddhism. It is believed that making merit would bring happiness, peaceful life and other good things to life and would improve the economic conditions and social status during the lifetime and the next life. Moreover, objects, materials, and money is the key mode of performing meritorious deeds.

Moreover, 'Bunniyom' system proposes the Buddhist way of living against capitalism. Samana Bodhirak has applied *Satharana Pokee* established by the Lord Buddha for monastic community to all Asoke lay communities throughout Thailand. *Satharana Pokee* is communal consumption which all things belong to the community for collective living and community members labor without salary in return (Sangsuriyajan, 2011:6). In addition, 'Bunniyom' system is introduced to support and make *Satharana Pokee* sustainable. According to Samana Bodhirak, 'Bunniyom' system is the concept that one gives labor, knowledge, and capacity to society and receives nothing back or minimal benefits back. In other word, 'Bunniyom' system's core content is to practice Buddhist precepts and also help others and society to abandon desires and to gain more merit (Asoketrakul, 2006) and 'Bunniyom' system is associated with every single aspect of Asoke way of life: economy, education, public health, agriculture, communication and art, and politics.

1. Fair Economy

Concerning economics, the concept of noble profit-loss is mentioned in 'Bunniyom' economic system. This approach is contrary to capitalism because loss is gain and vice versa gain is loss according to the noble profit-loss concept. If the exchange value is less than the cost, it is noble profit; and if the exchange value is more than the cost, it is noble loss. For instance, if the cost is 10 units and it is sold at 8 units, the noble profit is equal to 2 units. Conversely, if the cost is 10 units and it is sold at 12 units, the noble loss is equal to 2 units. When the noble profit is

obtained, it means greed is eliminated while if the noble loss is acquired that implies desires and greed is enlarged. In 'Bunniyom' economic system noble profit can be classified into four levels:

- (1) Selling lower than usual market price but higher than the cost
- (2) Selling equal to the cost
- (3) Selling lower than the cost
- (4) Giving freely

Notwithstanding, the approach is not only low-cost sales, but it is also based on longer term of business to gain more noble profit (Setthabunsang, 1991:67). Bunniyom shops are established in many provinces in Thailand to apply four-level of noble profit into practice. Foods and products at the shop can be sold in lower and cheaper prices and sometimes it is free on the grounds that Asoke community members work without remuneration and some materials and products can be produced in the communities. To illustrate, Asokan people grow vegetables and manufacture organic fertilizers to employ in the communities and for sale. At National Father's Day, food is free and at '*Talaad Ariya*'⁴ or Noble market every food is only one baht.

Additionally, 'Bunniyom' economic system delineates manufacturing, consuming, and trading based on Buddhist philosophy. Manufacturing according to 'Bunniyom' system produces goods and products necessary for living, not for pampering human's pleasures and desires and not for annihilating human life, natural resources and environment. Only healthy and constructive products and services are moderately consumed. Surplus desires, greed and overconsumption waste limited natural resources and impact on society as a whole. Trading according to 'Bunniyom' system is based on seven elements (Setthabunsang, 1991:110).

(1) **Good inexpensive products:** The products sold at Bunniyom shop are qualified and sincerely cut-priced without any commercial trick.

⁴ Ariya is a term used in Buddhism and can be translated as "noble", "not ordinary", "valuable", "precious", or "pure"

(2) **Integrity:** The product price is on the basis of actual cost; therefore, if the cost is low, the selling price is low but if the cost is high, the goods price is high up as well. The shop does not take advantages of the consumer to sell popular products to get more profit.

(3) **Neatness and cleanliness:** the products and food processing conducted with clean and careful processes

(4) **Economy:** Inventory stock is checked attentively before order is placed and equipment is always maintained in top condition.

(5) **Sacrifice:** Community members work sacrificially for Santi Asoke communities.

(6) **Service mind:** The Asokan people train themselves to serve and interact with customers properly and they see this as a practice of controlling their own emotion and feeling.

(7) **Payment in cash:** In Asoke shops customers have to pay in cash only for two reasons. It reflects authentic demands and customers would not purchase goods over their financial capacities or would borrow money to buy products.

2. Comprehensive Education: Virtue, Morality, and Academic

When the Asoke communities were settled down firmly, ‘Bunniyom’ educational system is expanded by Samana Bodhirak since he identified the prevalent school system a faulty:

“We recognized that general school is not working. Students don’t study morality and they don’t know how to work. The more they study, the more they can do nothing...they are good at only academic...so we think this kind of education won’t achieve our goals and we should make our own schools.” (Translated from Wan Kheun, 2001:1)

Asokan schools called *Samma Sikkha* schools were established with ultimate goal to develop students with morality, virtue, and value of hard working (Asoke network, n.d.:1). There is no fee at school and they are

three disparate characteristics from the prevailing educational institutions as follows:

(1) Integrated instruction between communities, temples, and schools

In Asoke schools, teachers do not instruct only in the classroom, but also students are brought to expose to *Samana* (male priest in Asoke group), *Sikkamat* (female priest in Asoke group), and community members and they play significant roles as instructors as well (Samana Bodhirak, 2007:147). Asokan school system is based on participation of community, temples, and schools and education should not make students feel alienated from communities. This concept is similar to common concept of school at present in Thailand and *Samma Sikkha* schools make this concept not only theory but turn theory into practice.

(2) Instructors and students embedded with Buddhist precept

School teachers are from the Santi Asoke communities; thus they work for free, practice at least five Buddhist precepts/ five precepts of Buddhism and abstain from all vices. Being students in boarding school, they have to eat vegetarian food even outside schools, practice the five precepts and refrain from allurements leading to ruin. Furthermore, they make self-reflection on the precepts every day and once a week with priests (Paunglad, 2011:193).

(3) Combined religious and secular grading

Sammasikka schools have the motto: 'Be excellent in precepts, be skilled at work, be academic experts'. Grading system is emphasized on producing qualified graduates who are moral, capable of accomplishing work, self-reliance, self-developed, and self-learning throughout life and contribute to society. Thus the grading system in Asoke schools is 40% for virtue; 35% for skilled in work and 25% for academic knowledge and it can be seen that it is focused on morality and working more than secular knowledge. It is compulsory that *Sammasikka* students learn how to work in adverse groups of work such as working group on fertilizer and cooking

including agricultural work in the Asokan communities. If students fell in part of virtue, they have to do more good deeds (Asoke network, n.d. :1).

3. Public Health with Balanced Mind and Body

Regarding public health, Samana Bodhirak accentuated two aspects of public health under 'Bunniyom' system. He mentioned good nurturing your physical and mental health that consists of good emotion, healthy food, and sound sleep, regular exercise, fresh air, and detoxification. Buddhist alternative therapy of 'Bunniyom' system is mingled the strength points of modern medicine, traditional and indigenous healing, alternative medicine and 8 healthy ways according to Samana Bodhirak (Asoke network, 2003:1).

This concept conforms to current preventive medicine. However, another significant point he said public health staffs/agents or one who is expert on health must assist people with sincere heart not mainly concentrate on money. He also applied the Four Paths of Accomplishment of Buddhism to bring about good physical and mental health. The Four Paths of Accomplishment of Buddhism consists of being willing to work; making an effort; focusing attention on the work; and using right wisdom to estimate the work.

The first one, being willing to work is an important basis to be healthy because firstly one should realize the importance of healthiness and then the purpose will be set out clearly and prudently and put into action to overcome the illness or to live longer. After setting up the goal, it is not easy to fulfill the goal; therefore, one should persist in every method to keep healthy and should not yield up easily. The effort should couple with concentrating on the work. That means one should keep his/her attention to be healthy constantly. The last one, using right understanding or wisdom to control or estimate the work means one should always consider which behavior should be eradicated or improved to be healthy if not, one may continue the wrong path that deviates from the healthiness.

It can be said that everyday life of Asoke people complies with 7 elements of sound physical and mental health. Asokan people always

notice and focus on their own emotion so that they do not feel or express excessive emotion in anger, sadness, happiness, and amusement. However, they are optimistic and feel pleased with present time. In terms of food, they are vegetarian and do not consume strong flavored food including not eating food between meal time. Asoke people go to bed and wake up early to get enough sleep and to be ready to work with little labor-saving devices they get a lot of exercise in the daytime. About detoxification, Santi Asoke people do not consume tobacco, alcohol, and junk food and also Asoke group practices alternative medicine such as colon detox drink, Gua Sha, colon cleansing, acupressure, herbal spa and urine therapy (Asoke Network, 2003) (Klajon, 2011). Philosophy on health of Asoke group is self-health care with simple living, vegetarianism, Buddhist philosophy in leading a healthy life, food attributes, and the mindfulness of the influence of food and mind on robust life and maintaining balanced physical and mental aspects.

4. Non-Toxic Agriculture

Samana Bodhirak gives the priority to 'Bunniyom' agriculture and mentioned it is one of the fields that will rescue the nation along with the garbage management and fertilizer manufacturing which is called 'Three professions to save the nation' (Essen, 2010: 84) as he said,

“...We produce vegetables, fruits, and food that is important for human living. Food is absolutely important and Thailand is an agricultural country; however, nowadays people don't want to be farmers. They feel that this work is inferior occupation and they are derided and oppressed... ”
(Samana Bodhirak, 1992:1-2)

Bhodirak clarified agriculture and the other two careers would help Thailand from the crisis for three main reasons. Firstly, human being no matter must eat to survive and this reason can be linked with the geographical fact that Thailand's landscape and environment is fertile and suitable for agriculture rather than industry. And the last explanation is that Thai people are able to be independent and would not rely much on for-

eign investment (Essen, 2010:84). It can be said that three occupations are interlinked with full-circle management. In Waste management, Asoke communities use rubbish in the communities to make fertilizers and the fertilizers are applied to natural agriculture which grows vegetable for cooking vegetarian food to consume in the communities and the restaurants.

Santi Asoke has practiced and has campaigned for non-chemical farming for decades and its concept is hinged on three elements: not using chemical fertilizer and pesticide; using natural and biological fertilizer and microorganism; and integrated crop planting. At the first stage, the communities did not use chemical fertilizer and insecticide and later on they could produce manure composts, biological fertilizers and microorganisms to use in the communities and to sell outside the communities.

Moreover, according to Samana Bodhirak ecological farming is considered to comply with the first precept of Buddhism, not causing harm to creatures and the environment which is different from the Orthodox Buddhists that mainly emphasize on not killing living creatures. He also refers to the integrated development of natural agriculture in three dimensions i.e. (1) human resources development (2) product development and (3) marketing development. In human resource dimension, he focuses on qualitative and quantitative development and practices natural agriculture. To develop organic products, the products would be improved in quality and quantity as well to increase amount of the products enough for selling at economical prices. In marketing, manufacturers, vendors, and marketing managers would be congregated to fulfill organic farming.

5. Communication for Dharma

‘Bunniyom’ communication is another remarkable field of Santi Asoke group which practices on the basis of ‘Bunniyom’ concept. The communication channels of the group are in diverse form of media such as journals, books, cable TV, and website. This reflects that the group complies with Rosser’s new traditional movement (Sangsehanat, 2004:272) that even though Asokan group develops the communities on the grounds of traditional religion; modern technology is adopted to propagate the group

teachings.

Samana Bodhirak had preached about, had studied, had publicized the waste problem via Asokan media, and has managed the waste since 1987; nevertheless, he launched *'the project of ethical waste management'* tangibly in 2007. This project aims three objectives, namely to bring the income from the project to support the cable television of Santi Asoke called FMTV; to stimulate Asoke group of people to practice Dharma through self-disciplined of consuming resources; and to decrease the volumn of garbage with the motto 'Transform waste to merit to support FMTV'(Institute of Ethical Waste Management, 2013).

The mission of the communication is to communicate Buddha's teaching to message receivers that pleasant experiences through five senses-sound, smell, taste, figure, and touch is secular joviality and it does not endure. Whenever these pleasures cease or decline, sorrow would replace and ones have to seek for this kind of happiness endlessly. In contrary, if ones could reduce or eradicate excessive needs, desires, passions, and demands, suffering and problems would reduce or terminate and one could spend time to work or to contribute to society instead of a quest for objects to please their own desires.

The communication of Asoke group proposes to present four levels of knowledge (Chaohinfah, n.d.:13) as follows:

- (1) Knowledge: It's rational and empirical knowledge and theories
- (2) Truth: It's true knowledge especially about merit, sacrifice, taking advantages, and evil of an individual
- (3) Insight: It is the knowledge that is only individual insight such as insight to do good deeds and refrain from doing bad deeds.
- (4) Extreme truth: It is absolute truth that one derives from personal practice in the right way until desires and passions are lowered and they could identify that which attachment finishes. This kind of truth is personal insight as well.

Asoke group places importance on information; thus data and information would be selected and be considered to be constructive and positive according to 'Bunniyom' philosophy that would be innox-

ious to physical and spiritual health of receivers before broadcasting and publishing. Since Asoke communication is based on the thought that the good communicated messages could influence beliefs and behaviors of message receivers to make a better society. For example television programs would be screened for Samma Sikkha students so that the students would not be influenced by secular desires and passions

It is likely that Samana Bodhirak was used to work in entertainment industry; therefore, the strategies were set for successful communication among the community members and to the public. Ones who practice the precept such as *Samana* and *Sikkhamat* would be the first priority to communicate the message (Chaohinfah, 2010:14) because they are respectable. In addition, art and verse i.e. songs and rhymes is adopted to communicate Buddhist teaching.

6. Ariya Politics

Bhodirak proposed politics system and politician's qualification under 'Bunniyom' philosophy—'Ariya' politics. He always states that religion and politics is inevitably interlinked; therefore, politicians must work with real integrity and self-sacrifice and do not rejoice with fortune, rank, and acclaim. Religious actors would play an important role to inspect political works, as he said,

“...The representatives must have knowledge and capacity and must not be infatuated with riches, titles, praises, and secular exhilaration...It is a mistake to blame about relating religion with politics because people need to sacrifice for living together as a society in particular politicians and rulers.” (Bunniyom Politics, 2004:1-2)

Even if Samana Bhodirak accentuates qualified politicians according to 'Bunniyom' ideology, he iterates political movement and approach of Santi Asoke group adherence to democracy.

“We do work in politics and it is Ariya politics or politics with meritism. Our work in politics abides by democracy that means supreme power belongs to people and people elect the representatives to exercise the power.” (Reangput, 2001:1)

Santi Asoke group founded the political party 'For Heaven and Earth Party' in 2000. Its main policy is to develop democracy based on 'Bunniyom' ethos and to promote self-reliance communities with precepts in two courses. People must be educated to understand the nature of excessive needs and their wisdom, endeavor, and synthesis thinking is enhanced to release them from desires and passions. The ultimate goal of Ariya politics is to devastate the state power that dominates society and live together with freedom, brotherhood, peace, efficiency, and unity (Yonpium, 2004:1-2).

This condition seems to be like Buddhist utopia which people are avaricious and solitary and live in peace with higher moral. Therefore, there is no homicide, battle, exploitation, and oppression, bodily injury and property damage from bandits is eliminated (Chanthornwong, 1988:14). Since the party's foundation, no candidate had been nominated to election until the general election in 2011. In this election, only one candidate was nominated in party list election and it seems that the political movement in this ballot involves only symbolic action since the aim of the party in this election is to campaign 'vote no' to voters who are weary with corrupt politicians (Siam Intelligent Unit, 2011:1).

The Asokan group has always been political to some degree even if the group had established its political party in 2000. The party recently nominated the candidate of the general election in 2011 and had 'vote no' campaign to oppose the corrupt politicians in the parliament. (Heikkilä-Horn, 2010: 43). The crucial principle of the party is no election campaign for the candidate and the party members must behave according to Asoke way of living i.e. practicing at least five principle of Buddhism,

consuming vegetarian food, and devoting themselves to conduct political works sacrificially, industrially, and honestly. Moreover, Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, former Bangkok governor and the Member of Parliament has been the chairman of the Gong Thub Dharm foundation (Dharma Army Foundation) of Santi Asoke group. This is another factor that Asoke group is inevitable to engage in political activities and its group's political movements and supports are based on moral and ethical issues. To illustrate, the group demonstrated against the promoting drinking and gambling when the beer company was to be listed in the Stock Exchange of Thailand. Another movement is when the Santi Asoke group decided to join the anti-Thaksin rally (Heikkilä-Horn, 2010:43) which was grounded on his accusation concerning the land transaction between his wife and the government's Financial Institutions Development Fund (FIDF) (World Bank Group 2013:1) and criticism of conflict of interest in case of 73 billion baht tax-free from the buyout (Bangkok Post cited in The Regents of the University of California, 2013: 1)

According to Heikkilä-Horn (2010:40-44), Political movement of Santi Asoke group consists of four major networks which play significant role of its group political activities: ascetic group, agriculturist group, education and health care network, and political wing. The ascetic group is comprised of monks, nuns, novices, and aspirants. From community meeting to political meeting they provide guidance which is their apprehending of Buddha's teaching and likewise encourage the individual or group of people to apply the Buddhist teaching to political solution. Agricultural group is the Asoke community members in the rural areas and tends to be low-educated and Laos-ethnic origin. Agricultural issues and controversies is the main concentration of attention of this group such as issued statement against the GMO crops even if they took part in the demonstration on other political issues with Santi Asoke group as well.

Education and health care group is group of people working in education and health care services with Asoke communities. In education network, they are teachers living in the communities and some from outside communities and the number of students of Asoke schools. In terms

of healthcare group, they work as volunteer nurses and dentists in Asokan communities and also provide the services at the demonstration place. The last one is the political group from urban and rural Asoke members and people closely associated with groups and activities in Santi Asoke. They were seen from the media as essence of the Dharma Army. The politically interconnected network is disposed to be learned Sino-Thai ethnic group. Even if the Asoke group claimed that its group's political activities are based on moral ground, Asoke political movement has been always used by opposites of the Santi Asoke group to oppose and discredit the Asoke group

Discussion

Different labels are subscribed to the Asoke movement among Thai and foreign academics. Swearer (cited in Mackenzie, 2007:11) considered the Santi Asoke group as a fundamentalist movement that struggles to revert to the crux of Buddhism. Swearer mentioned the characteristics of the Asoke group matches the features of fundamentalism in four criteria: (1) the group is led by a strong magnetic leader (2) the followers discern themselves in menace situation (3) the movement is anti-intellectual, anti-ritualistic and engrosses with abparticular goal (4) the group values direct experience with plain and simple religious customs.

Heikkilä-Horn (1997) argues fundamentalism is not clear enough to explain the Asoke community. She proposed Asokan group is similar to the millenarian movement in some aspects. Santi Asoke has been derogated by the Thai Sangha Council and the group attempts to seek just and honorable treatment for itself. Meantime Thailand is occupied by prevailing accumulating material wealth and Bhodirak attempts to make a contribution to the betterment of Thai society with Lord Buddha's teaching. Rory Mackenzie (2007) opposed that Santi Asoke could not be categorized as millenarian movement on account of the self-effort to set them free from suffering and Samana Bodhirak is recognized as the teacher rather than *phu mi bun-* meritorious man.

Burrell and Dale (2002: 108 cited in Mackenzie, 2007: 164)

exemplified Santi Asoke as utopia, the same as several Thai academics namely Sombat Chantronwong (1988) Prawet Wasi (1988) and Apinya Fuengfusakul (1993). Burrell and Dale summarized six conventional characteristics of utopian movement to clarify the movement of Santi Asoke. The first one is protection. Defense in mental and physical, social, and political dimensions are offered to Asokan community member such as natural health care for the community members.

Secondly, boundaries are found in Santi Asoke. The group has definite division between utopian and non-utopian. For instance, male and female priests (*samana* and *sikkhamat*) wear distinctive colored robes from prevailing Thai monks and nuns and lay people in the communities dress Thai traditional farmer-costumes.

Thirdly, the negative characteristics of the inside and the outside: in Santi Asoke communities, organic fertilizers were produced and used for organic farming and they agitate for non-toxic insecticide alternatives. The fourth characteristic is control of the group. Austere self- abstinence and advice of the group plays an important role in maintaining orderliness, spiritual improvement, and compliance with the rule of the communities.

Pattern is the fifth feature of utopian movement. The Asokan group gives priority to the opinion of the group members and most plans and decision making are placed on will, intention, and capacity of the group. The last element of utopian based-movement is formality. Utopianism notes that rules are very important and so does the Asokan group. The formal law and regulations are constructed in Santi Asoke to perpetuate the system of the group.

Sangsehanat (2004) analyzed the Asoke Buddhist community based on an anti-systemic movement according to J.Barkley Rosser's concept of the new traditional system which the movement purposes itself as promising 'Third Way' with integrating of either a traditional religion or a traditional view of society with the use of modern technology (Rosser et al., 1999:5). There is data to support this thought because the Asoke group declared its Buddhist community as the third way better than capitalism and communism as well (Jing Sieng Fha Shu, 2002) and new

technology is employed in Santi Asoke to diffuse ethos of the group. Sangsehanat concluded the Asoke community activities are accordant with the concept of Rosser's new traditional movement due to the Asoke community adhered to Buddhism and employing modern technology.

Mackenzie (2007) pointed out the Asoke case as "an ascetic and prophetic utopia". The Asokan group is called ascetic utopia since the group established economic approach relying on Buddhism to take the place of capitalism. Prophetic utopia derives from its demand on back to righteousness and the Buddhist simplicity community. In addition Mackenzie (2007) compared and contrasted Asoke community with Christian base communities, community culture, and legalistic movement. The Santi Asoke group's features parallel the Christian communities in terms of an origin of the community. The communities were established in time of economic difficulties and they both visualized approach to alter the circumstance and to elevate spiritual development. Santi Asoke and its community turned the Bhodhirak's teaching into practice and a number of people come to visit and learn from the communities.

Moreover, instead of centralized hierarchy, they stimulate individual participation in the communities. The difference between these communities is the source of religious content. The Catholic base communities rely the teaching on the bible; meanwhile, the Bhodirak's teaching is absolute among Asokan people.

In terms of community culture, Mackenzie examined analogous philosophy of Santi Asoke group with this approach. He explained this concept was applied in the commencement of the Asoke communities in the 1970s on the basis of self-reliant communities, mainly employing physical labour, living in harmony with nature, environmental and spiritual development, and anti-capitalism. However, he claimed the original concept of Asoke community is not based on community culture because he mentioned Samana Bodhirak referred to Gandhi and Israeli kibbutz in the initial movement. I disagree with this point on the grounds that Bhodirak reinstated the Asoke communal consumption community according to Buddha's concept-*Sathrana Pokey*-a system which all things

in the community are shared and consumed together and Bhodirak claimed that this kind of practice applied in the sangha community in the ancient time.

As well Mackenzie characterized Santi Asoke that is extremely disciplinary to Buddhist precept-keeping to defeat attachments. In the communities, there is a self-correcting process through a checking precept booklet that presents it to male or female priests in the communities. This assists the Asokan lay people to behavioral and spiritual improvement with ascetic's guidance. Moreover, he claimed Asoke group matches to introversionist, world-rejecting movement, and ultimatism typology.

Juliana Essen (2010:82) called the Asoke group a Buddhist reform movement. He pinpointed the goal of this alteration is not for secular ecstasy but spiritual independence since the Asoke group deviates from the prevailing lay Buddhist practice, stating:

“In the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand, the aim is not a Western ideal-to accumulate high level of material comfort-but a Buddhist ideal- to release attachment to the material world and attain spiritual freedom.”

Harvey (2013) described Santi Asoke as a new Buddhist movement that counters capitalist and consumerisms. Moreover, he noted that the movement has been influenced by Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka. According to Bond George D. (2005:168-169), the movement has been shaped by Gandhi's non-violence (*ahimsa*) and self-realization (*swaraj*); Buddhist teachings-*Dhammapada*; and A.T. Ariyaratne's basic belief-'universally just spiritual laws'. Gandhi believed if everyone is able to assess the resources equally, non-violent society could be feasible. Buddha's teaching is adopted by Savorada, as pure mind could be the good source of individual and social peace and euphoria. Moreover, it is on the fundamental belief of A.T. Ariyaratne, the founder and president of the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, peace could be achieved through elemental universal spirituality to all religions.

No matter what Santi Asoke is labeled, the same ethos is implemented in every community and the group has proved itself for more than three decades. Among all these communities nationwide, Santi Asoke in Bangkok serves as coordinating center. Every single center organizes its own community autonomously but abides by the common practices. They live collectively, and share food and resources. In each Asoke community is comprised of three components: home, monastery, and school and they live their life in a simple form. Among lay people, they are vegetarian, and undertake at least the five precepts i.e. (1) refrain from killing living things (2) refrain from stealing (3) refrain from sexual misconduct (4) refrain from lying (5) refrain from taking intoxicants. Community people work voluntarily without payment at tasks paralleling their abilities and interests; notwithstanding, the community provides them with four essentialities for living in return (Essen, 2010:82).

Conclusion

The article features the Santi Asoke community as an alternative development based on Buddhist self-reliance and the desire to modify the current discourse of materialistic and capitalist development. The teaching of Buddhist religion is adopted as 'Bunniyom' system in economic, education, public health, agriculture, communication, and politic domains. The core economic concept of 'Bunniyom' is noble profit-loss. The loss is spiritual gain and vice versa the gain is spiritual loss. According to 'Bunniyom' commodities and services are provided only for living, not for pampering human's pleasures and desires and not for the destruction of creatures and nature. The trading of the Asokan group follows the noble profit divided into four levels: selling cheaper than usual market price but higher than the cost; selling equal to the cost; selling lower than the cost; and free of charge.

Concerning to education, Sammasikkha School was established after the community had settled down. Then the Santi Asoke group chose to reform its school system in accordance with Samana Bodhirak's vision. The Asokan school is contrary to the prevailing teaching system and

focuses on practicing Buddhist sermon and hard-working value more than academic skill. Integrated instruction between community, temple, and school is combined in the curriculum instead of only the classroom study. In terms of health care, among the Asokan people, the alternative medicine is the first priority though they do not deny the modern medical treatment. They apply the Buddha's teaching, the four Paths of Accomplishment to make balance with spiritual and physical health.

The Santi Asoke group has practiced non-chemical agriculture more than three decades in complying with the first Buddhist's precept. According to Samana Bodhirak, abstaining from killing living creatures includes refraining from meat consumption and hazardous activities to the environment. Organic farming is developed to serve vegetarian cooking for community members and organic products are produced for selling the public as well. In addition, some farmers are trained on organic agriculture to extend the Asokan green market network and self-reliant living. In the paper, the Asokan communication system was referred to as it plays significant role to diffuse the teaching of Buddha and Asoke activities for people inside and outside the Asokan group. The Asoke media is disseminated in the form of journal, television station, website and personal media. All of these are techniques used in maintaining the relation between Asoke members in the regional and central communities. It is also the communication channel for 'Bunniyom' system to general people to increase numbers of Asoke community member from faithful outsiders.

Last but not least, politics with morality is called 'Araya Politics'. Samana Bodhirak always emphasizes politics and religion appears on the same page. The representatives must practice Buddhist precept and must work hard for the public benefit, not for self-interest. When the Asoke group engages in the national political movement based on their strong view of the daily moral issues, the image of the Asoke group is affected even more by opposition political party because of the Asoke group's strong moral stand. I agree with Mouff's idea that in democratic system it is not necessary that all groups of people should have

the same thought or rehabilitation only. The 'political' as the very essence of politics is to respect and accept the existing opponents and different thinkings as well as to follow the 'rule of game'. The Santi Asoke group is an example of different thinkings that attempts to develop an alternative way of living among the mainstream capitalist development in 'the political'.

Even if Asokan practices and concepts are quite radical and idealistic; the core content of some of them i.e. education, agriculture, commerce, public health, and politics under 'Bunniyom' system could be applied or adjusted to solutions and alternatives for sustainable development in Thai society. 'Bunniyom' educational system emphasizing on practical work experience and ethics based on five Buddhist precepts could be applied and adopted to problems of didacticism and cheating of Thailand's education system. In terms of agricultural sector, organic farming should be more promoted and supportive of replacing chemical agriculture in establishing the long-term survival of major ecosystems, biodiversity, adaptation to climate change, and significant human health consequences. Moreover, the Asoke group is not anti-capitalist movement and its 'noble profit' concept could be applied in commercial market to sell inexpensive goods and to continue the business with a small profit margin. In part of public health, alternative therapeutic approach which is common among Asokan people could be combined with conventional medicine to replenish scientific and technological emphasis of conventional medicine with the treatment based on holistic philosophies. The last one, Ariya politics underlining the democratic system with moral, self-devoted and self-sacrifice politician, in my view, could be a partial solution to political crisis of Thai politics.

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