

Title : Economic, Social and Cultural Changes of Northern and Central Esarn Villages before and after the Commencement of National Economic Development Plan

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to study the northern and central Esarn communities of Thailand in the area of (1) the background and patterns of settlement of the communities under study; (2) the economic and social conditions and culture of the communities during the Pre-Commencement of National Economic Development Plan period; (3) the causes and effects of economic, social and cultural change since the enactment of the Commencement of National Economic Development Plan.

The study was done by the application of qualitative and quantitative methods. The major part of the data collected was obtained by interview of the heads of 58 households in the village of Sawathi in the sub-district of Sawathi, Muang District, Khon Kaen Province, and the heads of 54 households of the village of Dong-khum-khao in the sub-district of Pang-kwang, Muang district, Sakolnakorn Province. In addition, several persons who knew the backgrounds of the villages well, some shop keepers, ricemill owners, village headmen, and laborers who used

to migrate to work in other communities and abroad, were also interviewed.

The findings indicated that:

(1) Background and patterns of settlement: the settlers of communities in both northern and central Esarn regions were formerly residents of other densely populated areas. They migrated to settle in their present communities where more arable lands were available with less people. There were cases of migration from the central Esarn to the northern Esarn regions due to arable lands became less available in the former, while the latter had more fertile lands.

(2) The economic and social conditions during the Pre-Commencement of National Economic Development Plan: there had been similarities between the two communities under study in that they were economically, socially and culturally self-sufficient during this period, although they were also dependent on natural provisions and super-natural beings. There was little exchange of trade between the communities with other towns and communities due to their own self-sufficiency and inadequate means of transportation. The communities' contact with government had been in the form of financial exploitation, i.e. they were forced to pay the so-called help government tax, education and property taxes. They were also subject to conscript labor and cultural domination by the central government, namely to study the central dialect. Such financial exploitation and cultural domination eventually culminated in the Sobha Poltri Revolt in the village of Sawathi in B.E. 2483 (1940), but it was soon suppressed by the

government.

(3) Economic, Social and cultural change since the enactment of The Commencement of National Economic Development Plan. It was discovered that the major causes of change included 1) the rapid increase in population because of the improved and more available public health services; 2) government policies and the influence of capitalism; 3) the adoption of new agricultural technology on the part of the villagers; 4) the development of means of transportation and mass information system. The changes under The Commencement of National Economic Development Plan as cited above had in turn caused tremendous change to the economy of the communities. There were increases in the use of cultivable lands for rice and other economy crops. New agricultural technology which had been adopted by the villagers, however, made them more dependent on the state and money lenders and middlemen. The villagers found greater comfort in modern convenience such as the electric appliances, but that was at the cost of themselves getting into debt. The majority of the farmers became disillusioned with farming and many of them left to find work in the non-agriculture sector in other communities. However, there was less change in the areas of social and cultural life of the two communities. The words of the elderly still prevail among the villagers. The people still keep to their local dialect. The practice of offering annual feast to the forest-dwelling ancestor spirits was still there, and the people still adhere to the local folkways. They still believe firmly in the law of karma (action) and the next life in heaven and hells. However, the villagers'

attitude toward medical treatment in time of sickness has changed greatly. Visiting a modern medical doctor or the village health care centres has become more popular than visiting the traditional medicine man. Birth control has become widely practiced, although old habit of eating half-cooked food and drinking untreated well water still lingers on. The villagers spent more time watching cinemas and T.V. programs for enjoyment than watching the traditional dancer-story tellers. In the village of Ban Dong-khum-khao, problems have accelerated in all of the ten areas, whereas in the village of Sawathi, five areas of problems have become improved while five have become worsened.