

From Praying for Rain to Rocket Festival: Reconstructing Social Memory among Villagers in Northeast Thailand

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Abstract

Northeast Thailand, also known as Isan, is home to an annual rocket festival, known as Thai as *Bun Bang Fai*, which is held in several provinces, including Yasothon, Kalasin, Nong Khai, Mahasarakham and others, in May or June. The festival includes parades of floats decorated with traditional motifs and dancers in traditional costumes, folk bands, food stalls and rocket competition. As far as the object of the festival is concerned, some scholars disagree about its original function in historical memory and argue that many people have a misunderstanding of it. Consequently, this study aims at examining the vein of the Rocket Festival's formation, changes and reconstruction from the perspective of social memory.

Keywords: social memory, cultural reconstruction, Rocket Festival, praying for rain, Northeast Thailand

บทคัดย่อ

ภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทยหรือที่รู้จักกันในชื่อภาคอีสานเป็นถิ่นของประเพณีบุญบั้งไฟ ซึ่งมีการจัดขึ้นเป็นประจำทุกปีในหลายจังหวัด เช่น ยโสธร การสินธุ์ หนองคาย มหาสารคาม และจังหวัดอื่นๆ ในช่วงเดือนพฤษภาคมหรือมิถุนายน ในเทศบาลบุญบั้งไฟ จะมีการจัดขบวนแห่ที่ตอกแต่งด้วยลายแบบดั้งเดิม ขบวนพ้องรำในเครื่องแต่งกายตามประเพณีของท้องถิ่น วงดนตรี การอกร้านขายอาหาร และการประกวดบั้งไฟ สำหรับวัดที่ประดิษฐ์ของประเพณีบุญบั้งไฟนั้น นักวิชาการยังมีข้อถกเถียงเกี่ยวกับหน้าที่ดั้งเดิมในความเชื่อทางประวัติศาสตร์และเสนอว่าบั้งไฟมีความเชื่อที่คล้ายเคลื่อนอยู่ บทความนี้ จึงมุ่งศึกษาและอธิบายถึงการก่อเกิดของประเพณีบุญบั้งไฟ การเปลี่ยนแปลง และการผลิตใหม่ของบุญบั้งไฟจากแนวคิดความเชื่อทางลัทธิ

คำสำคัญ: ความทรงจำทางสังคม การผลิตใหม่ทางวัฒนธรรม เทศกาลบุญบั้งไฟ พิธีกรรมขอฝน ภาคอีสาน

Introduction

In recent decades, social memory and cultural reconstruction have become topics of general discussion as well as of academic research. For examples of the latter, see Crumley (2002), Fentress & Wickham (1992), Gans (1992), Halwachs (1992) Kammen (1995), Le Goff (1992), and Olick & Robbins (1998). Although customs and folklore originate in traditional society, they undergo dynamic processes and continue to adapt as modern culture permeates the villagers' daily life through multiple channels, such as mass media, transportation, trade, tourism, etc. Folklore and customs are beginning to process cultural reconstruction, make selective innovations and combinations through the interaction of multiple cultures and insert some useful content into their inherent culture. In fact, the process has become one of "social memory reconstruction."

To research social memory in the reconstruction of folklore and custom in an Isan context, the researcher selected the Rocket Festival in Wiang Khuk sub-district, Muang district, Nong Khai province as a case study, using interviews and participant observation, with emphasis on oral and textual history and comparative analysis. The study articulated the development of the Rocket Festival as the process of villagers' social memory reconstruction. The meaning of the rituals, which can be traced back to earlier animistic practices, has become unclear at present as the traditional appeal of praying for rain is no longer strong. Folk legends have become semiotic systems as episodes in the festival parade. Subsidiary rituals have been integrated into the festival, but its original function of praying for rain has been replaced by broader cultural aspirations. The symbolic behavior of sending rockets off into the sky has become the highlight of the villagers' entertainment. Moreover, local government is playing an increasingly important role in developing the festival through the promotion of

tourism and reshaping the social memory of local people. Modernity, entertainment, arts and other social functions continue to be strengthened in the festival along with cultural reconstruction of social memory. In this milieu of continuity and change, memory and loss, cultural identity, rural flavor and authenticity are taking a back seat.

Methods and material



Figure. 1 Wiang Khuk's location

Source: Improved from http://www.oocities.org/nk_tour2000/nongkhai/image/nk_map.jpg

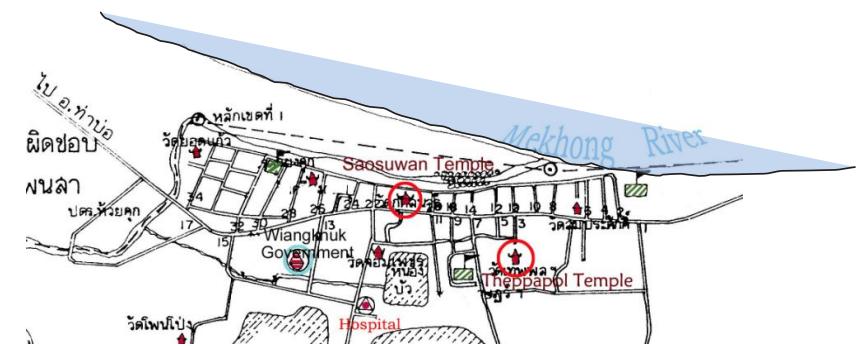


Figure. 2 Part of Wiang Khuk subdistrict

Source : Improved from Wiang Khuk Subdistrict Municipality, 2014

The fieldwork of the study was conducted in Wiang Khuk sub-district¹ in the northwest part of Nong Khai province, adjacent to the Mekong river, opposite Laos. The festival has both a long history and unique features there. The parade and rituals are held in June every year, organized by the village committee and local government. In addition, a group of spirit mediums has joined the float parade, which is different from the festival in other places in Isan. Thus, the Rocket Festival in Wiang Khun was suitable for studying the social memory of folklore and customs. Through follow-up fieldwork about the development of the festival from 2010 to 2016, the study examines changes in the festival and reconstruction of social memory of villagers.

Interviews and participant observation were adopted in the study. Participants and spectators of the festival were interviewed as key informants according to different age groups, with 10 people aged 21-30; seven people aged 31-40; eight people aged 41-50; five people aged 51-60; and five people over the age of 61. The study took into account primarily the fact that the informants experienced different traditional culture factors about the festival owing to different periods in which they lived, resulting in differences when they constructed social memory about the festival. Key informants' qualifications were as follows. First, they lived in Wiang Khuk as local residents and knew something about the history of the village. Second, they had roles in some part of the Rocket Festival. Third, they had diverse occupations and educational levels. Participant observations focused mainly on the periods of preparation for and participation in the festival from 2010 to 2016.

Results and Discussion

Through fieldwork about the Rocket Festival, from its origins to its current status, the study demonstrates that social memory plays an

¹ Wiang Khuk sub-district, Muang district, Nong Khai province consisting of eight villages, village No. one, two, three, four and seven are along the river in zonal distribution. They have no clear boundary among them and are dense in population. Villages No. five and eight are located along both sides of the sub-road which leads to the local government office. Village No. six is far away from other villages, located at the end of an L shaped sub-road. In 2015, there were 1,760 households, 6,112 people. There are three important temples in the village.

important role in the historical construction of the festival. Its modification and adjustment comprise the process of reconstruction of villagers' social memory. The original animistic appeal concerned with praying for rain has been forgotten. Folk legends about the festival are not known by most of the young generation, and appear only as symbols, but the elements of the parade have been retained.

Local elites as authorities play an important role in enhancing functional memory about the Rocket Festival in the region. Their efforts emphasize the form and function of the festival and aesthetic demands of everyday life to pursue a collective identity. The positive intervention of government reinforces the emphasis on form, style and scale in order to cater to tourism, which weakens the authenticity of the content of the Rocket Festival as a folk event, but ensures planning and scheduling. The behavior of local government largely influences the villagers' social memory of the festival.

Historical construction of social memory about the Rocket Festival: The original social memory of praying for rain

Through the ages there has been a significant relationship between the rice yields and local rainfall. The Thai New Year or Songkran in mid-April, which occurs during hottest, driest time of the year, is followed by the rainy season, which is the best season for farmers in Thailand to plant rice. Although Thailand is in the tropical monsoon climate zone, in fact, sufficient rain does not always fall in a timely manner in Isan. Traditionally, when the weather was still hot and dry and rain had not fallen steadily for more than two weeks after Songkran, villagers would hold an animistic ritual for rain known in Thai as *hae nang maew*. The process of praying for rain included three key elements. The first one is a female cat in a cage. Among domestic animals, cats are most afraid of water, and hate being drenched. Thus, people think cats may be the incarnation of the drought, and that drenching the cat may bring out the compassion of the rain deity, so it would rain soon. The second element is a parade through the village in which villagers

would sing and dance or make a lot of noise. The third one is coarse, or even obscene behavior with obvious sexual connotations similar to what is found in ancient fertility rites.

The ritual of praying for rain has been in existence for a long time in Isan. According to its animistic features, its history is longer than the appearance of the Rocket Festival. But the purpose and form of both are somewhat similar in four respects. First, both are intended to bring rain. Second, a parade of singing and dancing often appears in the ritual. Third, there also sexual overtones related to land fertility. Fourth, the time for holding the ritual is very close to the Rocket Festival. Although there is not sufficient evidence to view it as the origin of rocket festival, the ritual of praying for rain continues to appear in the festival parade as a performance.

According to the above description, the rain ritual may be the original source of praying for rain. But villagers combine it with construction of the legend according to their needs in daily life, and the entertainment components have been enhanced in their social memory along with the development of rural society. The original rituals and appeals for rain are overshadowed by entertainment, parades, music and aesthetics.



Figure 3 (left) The hae nang maew in the Rocket Festival parade.
(right) The parade is no longer to pray for rain but for entertainment.

Oral memory in the Rocket Festival

Oral memory as an historical type of social memory is the manner through which people preserve and transfer experience, customs, history

and tradition by word of mouth, or evaluate the behavior and norms with the help of verbal public opinion. Folk beliefs and rituals to be passed down often rely on oral memory, which also strengthens the construction of folk beliefs and rituals. In general, some legends highlight the miracles of deities in order to indicate the correctness and utilitarian purpose of their worship, while others explain the reason for beliefs and rituals. These legends are seen as subsidiary folk beliefs superficially, but in fact, their integration tends to enhance the vitality of folk beliefs and rituals. During the Rocket Festival, folk legend as the important cultural part of praying for rain becomes the dominant factor reflected in the parade. *The Myth of King Toad*² is related to the ritual of setting off rockets. It explains that the reason that rockets are fired into the sky is to remind Phaya Thaen, King of the Sky, of the treaty agreement he made with the Buddha in the latter's incarnation as King of the Toads, to give rain to the ground. The rituals of praying for rain are important in all religious festivals, because they are performed by farmers to ensure rain, so that the crops may grow and give a plentiful harvest. In prehistoric times, people believed spirits existed not only in humans, but also in animals, plants, rocks, mountains or rivers. In fact, they feared the power of nature, so people used animistic practices when the rain didn't come in time. When we trace the origin of rain-making rituals, we find they originated in animism and evolved into more advanced rituals. The King Toad is an incarnation of the Buddha, Phaya Thaen is the King of the Sky and Phaya Naga is a water deity. *The Myth of King Toad* has eliminated elements of nature worship which consisted of animistic thinking, and is closely related to the Buddhism practiced by the Thai people.

² Mr. Rattanachai, who is more than 60 years old, told the story during the interview in 2010. The main contents are as follows: the King of Toads (Phaya Khang Khok), as an incarnation of the Buddha in a previous life, preached sermons that drew humans, creatures and sky-dwellers away from the rain god (Phaya Thaen), who became angry and did not provide any rain for seven years, seven months and seven days. The King of the Nagas (the personification of the Mekong river) did not adopt the advice of the King of Toads, declared war on the rain god and was defeated. After that, the King of Toads declared war on the rain god, and with the aid of termites, venomous scorpions, centipedes, and hornets, he won. The rain god then promised that the rain would fall on the ground when rockets were sent off the sky at the end of the hot, dry season. According to the story, rockets were not to threaten the rain god, but to remind him of abiding by his treaty with the King of Toads.

Another folk legend, *Phadaeng and Nang Ai*, appears in Rocket Festival parades. Each village must choose a young couple who ride on a figure of a white horse to represent Phadaeng and Nang Ai. Phangkhi as the son of Phaya Nak also rides a horse and is dressed like a prince in the parade, followed by Phadaeng and Nang Ai. At the same time, the activity is fun and interesting because of beautiful folk legend.



Figure. 4 Rocket Festival parade in Wiang Khuk in 2012, displaying the main characters found in the local legend; (left) Phadaeng Nang-Ai, (middle) Pangkhi, (right) the King of Toads

Obviously, villagers have always demonstrated and strengthened the symbols related to the Rocket Festival through oral collective memory.

Reconstruction of social memory about the Rocket Festival

Connerton (1989: 17) refers to social memory as “an informal account which indicates something of our origins.” The Rocket Festival results from the social memory of villagers, who combine folk legend with the parade, which is continuously remodeled and developed. During the process, the form of the parade has been constantly reinforced, but the connotations of the Rocket Festival have gradually been forgotten. Villagers in Wiang Khuk forgot rather than remembered the origin of the Rocket Festival, but they strengthened the form, which they still remembered. In the 2010 festival, the scene of animistic rites for rain was reproduced in the parade, as two farmers carried a metal cage containing a cat, while another farmer occasionally poured some water on the cat’s head. This became a reenactment of the original ritual. During the course of research, five people aged 51-60 and five others

over the age of 60 were interviewed. They all knew that the ritual of drenching the cat to pray for rain was an old tradition. But eight of them did not view the ritual as the prototype of the Rocket Festival in their memories.

In the parade, some young villagers would be chosen to act as Phadaeng, Nang Ai and Phangkhi. The youths viewed it as an honor, were willing to join the parade, and became the most beautiful part of it. As for knowledge of the *Phadaeng and Nang Ai* story, Mr. Rattanachai (Ratanachai, 2010), who was over the age of 60 at the time, could tell the whole story; however, in the group aged 21-30, eight people could not, and two knew only the general outline. Most people focused on the form of parade, attracted by the beauty of the floats and the excitement, and neglected the ritual’s original significance and the connotation of the festival’s components.

The integration of “subsidiary rites”

As a popular festival, the core of praying for rain should have an important position in the Rocket Festival’s development along with the factor of entertainment. But the original ritual has not been handed down, while subsidiary rites have been added throughout the ceremony. The subsidiary rites in Wiang Khuk are somewhat different from those in other places. They consist of the following: spirit mediums³ hold a ritual of supplication at 9 o’clock in Wat Saosuwan on the day before the parade in order to seek happiness and avoid misfortune and illness. The next day they take a sacrificial offering to consecrate the ancient tower at Wat Theppon and set off small rockets at 10 o’clock. Then, they form a group to join the parade. Their performance is different from that of other groups; for example, a spirit medium brandishes a knife in front of her and then stabs her belly. After the performance, they go back to the temple, release the deity from her body, and then disperse.

³ Some villagers believe that their bodies are possessed by a supernatural spirit in Wiang Khuk and so they form a deity group to participate in the parade of Rocket Festival.

The study indicates that praying for rain is not a major component of the subsidiary rites. The appeal has deviated from the original request for rain to extend to numerous other wishes: felicity and happiness for the entire region, successful movement of whole parade, safe lighting of rockets, avoidance of calamity in the village and so on. Interviews in 2014 with local people about the relationship between subsidiary rites and the Rocket Festival gave the following information. Mrs. Putisen (68) (Putisen, 2014), a woman of the spirit medium group who had participated in the parade when she was young, said that a group of deities appeared in the Rocket Festival parade in Wiang Khuk, and addressed the spirit medium and asked to be part of the parade. This activity was held only in Wiang Khuk, and not in any other place in Isan because there were many deities in Wiang Khuk. Members of the spirit medium group agreed with her request. When other participants and spectators were interviewed, ten people aged 21-30 did not know the history of spirit mediums and five people aged 31-40 thought that the group of spirit mediums appeared only in recent years. Thus, there are numerous inconsistent statements and attitudes about the spirit mediums. As Connerton (2000:3) notes, differences in past memories may be so great that members will not be able to share experiences. Intergenerational exchanged are hampered by different series of memories.



Figure 5 (left 1) In the morning, the gathering of spirit mediums (Chao Thep) at Wat Saosuwan on the day of the parade. (left 2,3,4) In the afternoon, spirit mediums joined the parade and showed their movement during the parade.

Although Mrs. Putisen (Putisen, 2014), tried to relate the deity group's activities in the festival together through her narrative, according to her statements, the rite is not related to praying for rain. Particularly, the time attributes of ritual held by the deity group are inconsistent with the Rocket Festival. To a large extent, subsidiary rites have been introduced into the Rocket Festival according to other villagers' opinions, and then remain in the social memory of local people.

For the integration of subsidiary rites in the festival as mentioned, we found that government officials had no strong opinion regarding the participation of the spirit mediums. In 2010, before the parade began, the host introduced the parade group of every village to the spectators, but he did not mention the spirit medium group. After the leader of the group reminded him, the host sought advice from the contest judges and government officials and then introduced all the groups again, including the spirit medium group, but claimed that they performed only when they could take part in the parade. As a consequence, they were placed at the end of the parade. Thus, although the local government had no clear attitude regarding the spirit medium group, they still had great influence on reshaping the social memory of the local people based on the discourse of the local government. The deity group continued to appear in the parade and gradually became a necessary part of the festival.

As Mr. Promsiri who worked in the local Education Department said, "Thailand is a Buddhist country with a tolerance for diverse beliefs so there has not been much intervention in folk beliefs. First, folk beliefs in local society, being the result of local people's spiritual and cultural self-selection, should have some reason to exist and be inherited. Second, local people themselves could have the ability to distinguish the phenomenon; after all, we now have higher education in a civilized society, and our lives are not much affected by folk beliefs. Third, the purpose of the spirit medium's group in holding the ritual is to bless the whole region, to pray for the prevention of disaster, ensure villagers' security, and prevent accidents in which rockets or firecrackers hurt the villagers. These are the results of our local government in supporting

civil activities. Since the ritual does not have a negative impact on the whole event, we would not interfere with it too much." (Promsiri, 2010) Thus, the attitude of local government will more or less influence the existence and spread of subsidiary rites.

Identity and Orientation: Content and form of the festival

In folklore activities, authority figures play an important role in organization and coordination; they come primarily from other social, non-governmental groups. Local people view them as authority figures in the festival because they have influence on the villagers. They can enhance their own cultural capital through their cultural, social and moral qualities, acquire the semiotic capital with which to delegate their identity and reputation, and their public behavior can benefit from shaping the social memory of folklore and customs.

There are three groups of such local authority figures during the preparation of the rocket festival. The first group is the art elite; they provide many artistic works for the floats and guide villagers to complete the float decorations. The second group comes from the intellectual stratum, such as teachers working in primary schools. It is important to access the teachers' abilities and reputations to participate in service as their responsibility apart from teaching in school. Villagers respect their ideas about the festival and follow their organization and coordination. The third group consists of Buddhist abbots. As spiritual authorities, they have a positive impact on the development of the festival.

In Wiang Khuk, trans-women form a special group that is good at making the *ngan baitong*.⁴ Local people generally feel that trans-women have greater artistic talent than others in the areas of performance, art and crafts. In addition, Mr. Chaiyasaeng, age 42, as part of the art elite, brought many new ideas to make *ngan baitong*, and taught other villagers in 2010. Mrs. Janchai (age 51), a teacher, organized villagers to decorate the floats with vegetables and leaves. As a result, the villagers all respected and trusted them because they made the whole village gain

⁴ *Ngan baitong*, banana leaf art sculpture, is a form of art made by folding banana leaves.

more honor. Phra Akathammo (56 years old), the abbot of Wat Yod Kaew, who in 2010 had been a monk for 28 years, often collected some patterns, and then led the villagers in decorating the floats. He used the time after preaching to do cultural explanations for the festival (Chaiyasaeng, 2010; Janchai, 2010; Phra Akathammo, 2010).

All of the above people addressed the issue that villagers would acquire a collective identity through preparing and participating in the floats. Obviously, these elites played an important role in enhancing the functional memory of the Rocket Festival. Through their efforts, many villagers voluntarily joined the activities and contributed their efforts. Such behavior had a greater social function and enhanced the social memory of the festival. The activities integrated the resources of each village, strengthened villagers' cooperation, enhanced interpersonal relationships, and increased community harmony through the endeavor of authority figures. This is also an old educational method handed down from generation to generation in order to let children learn devotion, patience and methods of solving problems through participating in the festival, and then pursue a collective identity.



Figure 6 (left 1) The ancient stupa (chedi) at Wat Theppon indicates the long history of Wiang Khuk. (left 2) The spirit mediums (Chao thep) were greeted on the way back to Wat Saosuwan by some villagers. (left 3) The worship of the Buddha ancestors by the leader of deity members who dresses as a man, in front of Wat Theppon, (right) After the last rite, the rocket competition could formally begin.

Orientation of government discourse

Although according to the legend, the Rocket Festival originated in the ritual of praying for rain, it has developed into an event that is more like a carnival. Now, because of government discourse, the official characteristics and the entertainment aspects of the festival have been strengthened, aimed at developing tourism and the local economy. It is also an important local cultural event to improve the image of local government. In fact, through the participation of the Culture and Education Department, the local government is able to achieve positive intervention in the Rocket Festival.

In 2010, the Culture and Education Department of Wiang Khuk municipality began to carry out detailed planning and assignments for the festival, including the float parade and comprehensive competition of float decorations on the first day and the rocket launching competition on the second day. The local government allocated 20,000 baht to each village as pre-investment funds. The village that won the first prize in the float competition would get a 70,000 baht award. Because of the support of the government funds, the villagers put more money and energy into preparations. When the festival was held, the local government dispatched 84 public employees, including police, to direct traffic and ensure the safety of the activities. Moreover, at the beginning of the parade, the local government leaders also presented an opening address and stressed that local tourism could be promoted considerably by holding the festival.

In fact, the purpose of government coordination is mainly to develop tourism and increase local economic benefits. When the Rocket Festival is held, many people hear about it in the news and come to watch the parade, and vendors set up stalls in the surrounding area. Without good coordination by the government, the activities would get out of control. In addition, the Culture and Education Department hosts the entire program of floats and performances and provides trophies and other prizes to stimulate the enthusiasm of villagers to participate in the parade and relieve the economic burden of every village. Through the

positive intervention of local government, the Rocket Festival in Wiang Khuk has become a large event and has attracted sizeable participation in recent years. The local government has changed from a service role to that of leader and decision maker. But from another point of view, the Rocket Festival has changed from a spontaneous activity to one that is organized and purposeful, thereby losing its original intention, which has been lost in the social memory of local people.

Since the Rocket Festival is rooted in agricultural society, the time at which it is held is important. In the past, the festival was often held on the day of the full moon of June for about two days. Now, because tourism is taken into consideration by some local governments, the time of the festival is often changed or adjusted in some places. For example, in Yasothon province, it was held on 8-12 May in 2015, and 13-15 May in 2016, neither of which was a full moon day. Fortunately, for the past eight years in Wiang Khuk the festival has been held on the full moon day, which is in accord with the time of the traditional festival. The local government in Wiang Khuk assures the time aspect of the Rocket Festival.

Local government has gradually played a stronger role in deciding the content and form of the festival. In fact, the positive intervention of local government has made it safer, but its cultural content, such as origin, legend, and ritual have been neglected. By catering to tourism, the local government could weaken the authenticity of the customs.

It is obvious that government has played an important role in reshaping the social memory of the villagers regarding the Rocket Festival by making it into an official activity for the tourist economy rather than a living aspect of folklore in the village.

Conclusion

Memory does not belong only to individuals; there is also a kind of memory called "social memory." Images, memories and knowledge about the past are transmitted through ritual. In the process of historical

construction, text and social memory jointly organize the construction of history, but scholars like to view the text as a prior object of interpretation.

The development of the Rocket Festival demonstrates the process of reconstructing villagers' social memory. From the perspective of the historical development of folk belief, the ritual of praying for rain was in a dominant position in the early phase of social memory; the villagers sought the mercy of the rain god through this kind of ritual, so they entertained the deity so as to solve the problem of having sufficient rain for rain for the crops. The local villagers reconstructed the ritual of praying for rain according to legends and other social factors, and eventually developed the Rocket Festival of today. The origin of the ritual has become unclear and the appeal of praying for rain is no longer strong; subsidiary rites have been integrated into the festival and become part of it, but they lack the function of praying for rain and pursue broader cultural aspirations. The symbolic setting off of rockets into the sky remains according to some legends, but the focus is now on entertainment rather than meaning. During the reconstruction of social memory of the festival in contemporary times, the stratum of authority enforces the function of collective identity. Local government plays an increasingly important role in developing the festival by reshaping the local people's social memory about it.

All of these factors have further affected the social memory of the villagers. The modern construction of the festival has been adapted to promote economic tourism and has ignored the significance of the original rural flavor and authenticity. Thus, it deviates from free and conscious development, and affects the reconstruction of social memory about the festival.

In contemporary society in Isan, social memory is obviously and sustainably reconstructed in the Rocket Festival, but the event should not lose its original characteristics, folk meaning, authenticity and rural flavor. How to recover the authenticity of the festival is an important issue that both scholars and government officials face at the present time. Consequently, modernity, entertainment, arts and other social

functions continue to be strengthened in the Rocket Festival along with cultural reconstruction of social memory. However, this researcher recommends that cultural identity, rural preferences and authenticity also be strengthened or returned through the cooperation, coordination and guidance of scholars, government, local authorities and art elites in the local community.

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