

The Meta-Narrative of Peasant Religious Conversion (A Case Study of the Baha'is Community In Thailand)

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Abstract

This paper examines Baha'i movement and resistance forms affecting religious conversion in Thailand particularly Yasothon province in the northeast, where the agricultural sector is the main staple of local people's income. Instead of choosing Buddhism, the majority religion in Thailand, local people in Yasothon have welcomed the Baha'i faith for several decades beginning during cold war period. This paper focuses on the narrative of local culture in Yasothon and tries to analyze the story of religious conversion from Buddhism to Baha'ism. Reflecting on ethnographic research, the author will provide theoretical and methodological concepts in perceiving the phenomena that happened among peasant communities. This paper also aims to expand the picture of local political movement and resistance that is developed by the poor working in agricultural areas and describe the social and cultural life, gender roles, and the class struggle in Yasothon in which people politically involve and engage with two religions, Buddhism and Baha'ism.

Keywords: Baha'i, Buddhism, Peasantry, Peasants, Yasothon, and Thailand.

Context

During my fieldwork, I lived in Yasothon – Northeast and in Bangkok at the time the military coup was happening on May 22, 2014. Long march and demonstration from “red” shirt groups, who are mostly from lower middle class including peasants, were against the Thai royal army to defend Yingluck and Thaksin Sinawatra family. The Red Shirt Group is a class-based movement where peasants invest in Thai political development. “The Red Shirts is the unofficial name given to the protest movement known in Thai as *naew ruam*

pra-cha-thi-pa-tai to tan pa-det kan haeng chat, translated as *The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship* (UDD)".¹ Prime Minister Yingluck Sinawatra, who is Thaksin Sinawatra's sister, has become a powerful figure for poor people and socialist activists in Thai political movement. However, I argue that Thaksin played important role toward Thai political movement. He has risen from a lower-class family . He and his relatives are successful to develop monopoly business in 1980s-1990s.² In addition, "Thaksin overtly targeted the poorer rural voters of Thailand in order to get electoral support. When he turned to politics in the late 1990s, he adopted a populist program, and deliberately asked rural voters what they wanted out of government".³ As an influential businessman and politician, Thaksin is charismatically popular as a leader to stand behind the poor and peasants from rural areas especially northern part of Thai. This point of view, Thaksin's charisma well-known as "new reformer" of Thai government, was extraordinary. Weber stated that charisma leads to the authority of leadership. Weber emphasized the word charisma itself as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he or she considered as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities".⁴ I have perceived, in some villages of Northeast including Yasothon where I collected data, charismatic leaders play their role not only in political insitutions but also in religion, education, and social organizations and movements.

¹ James Buchanan, "Translating Thailand's Protests: An Analysis of Red Shirt Rhetoric", *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6 (1) (2013): 61.

² Tim Forsyth, "Thailand's Red Shirt protests: popular movement or dangerous street theatre?" *Social Movement Studies*, 9 (4), (2010): 461-467; in Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* 3rd Edition (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Justin S.M. Taylor, "Max Weber Revisited: Charisma and Institution at the Origins of Christianity," *Australian e-Journal of Theology* 19 (3) (2012): 195-208.

Baker and Pasuk (2014) have described that by the early 20th century, paddy had become the major export crop and the major source in Siam (Thailand). The enlargement of agricultural sectors reached out northeast region where now Yasothon is part of the province. It obviously indicates that the poorest households in agricultural sector in Thailand are among Isan people including Yasothon. Male and female peasants shared work on the land to grow paddy in villages where Siam was overwhelmingly an agricultural nation. Later before 1980 when the expansion of agricultural land increased outputs of the economic income, agriculture dominated the economic income for the villagers (peasants) in Yasothon. Although agricultural sector generally decreased, the Thai royal government considered Yasothon as a potential province to produce paddy. In contrast with the mass production of paddy, agriculture and peasants in Yasothon are frequently identified with the poor area in term of income. In the early 1990s, industrial and service sectors came to dominate the Thai economy instead of agricultural sectors, and this has caused poverty in agricultural sectors which belong to the peasants.

Peasants in Yasothon are attached to the Buddhist monks. During my fieldwork, I have seen Buddhist monks walking around villages every morning to take rice, foods, and other things. Villagers believe that when they devote and share wealth to Buddhist monks in the morning they will gain more blessings for their cultivation. This circumstance can be understood as part of religious merit in Thai Buddhist traditions especially in Northeast. Villagers and peasants in Yasothon rely on Buddhist monks for the economic prosperity when they share food with the monks. Regarding merit-making, Tambiah stated that villagers deal with the merit of present and future life in two aspects:

First it is said that one's fund of merit accumulated in this life will ensure a rebirth blessed with happiness, prosperity, and

wealth...while merit making is thus given ideological direction interims of somehow immunizing the the consequence of death and ensuring a prosperous rebirth.⁵

When peasants are in time of scarcity before the harvest, they usually leave the village for urban cities like Bangkok to work for short time. At harvest seasons, peasants return to the village. As for the youth from Yasothon, most of them live in cities like Chiang Mai, and Bangkok. Some of them study at universities. After graduation, they work in manufacturing or industries and other public services. The story of Yasothon is closely connected to the story of migration of villagers to the capital city, Bangkok. They believe that they can earn more income than working as peasants in the village. By migrating to urban areas, they will have a better life and return home in glory.⁶ Thus, the decline of agricultural sectors has shifted to developmental industries in Thailand where urban migration of the villagers allies with economic demand, consumption, identity, and social pride. People in Yasothon mostly go to work in the city, Bangkok, and build family there. They do not live in the village because farming no longer brings high income compared to manufactories.

The change of villagers in Yasothon relates to the development of manufactories and global industries where everyday social life also changes. The industrialized world is defined by Giddens (1991) as organizational power associated with the emergence of modern social life. Thus, according to Giddens, modernity produces certain distinct social forms. He also stated that modernity must be understood at an institutional level which regulates social order such as “how shall I live”, “how to behave”, “how to eat”, “how to wear

⁵ Chansamone Saiyasak, “The Meaning And Significance Of Merit Making For Northeast Thai Buddhists”, Unpublished paper at the PhD Colloquium on 4-8 Sept. Evangelical Theological Faculty, Belgium: Heverlee-Leuven. 2006.

⁶ Funasashi, Kazuo, “Farming by the Older Generation: The Exodus of Young Labor in Yasothon Province, Thailand (Transformation of Agriculture in Northeast Thailand)”, *Southeast Asian Studies* 33 (4) (1996): 625-639.

clothes”, and many other things.⁷ Modernity lies behind social, cultural, and economic changes in the global society. Such a system penetrates all economic aspects including social and economic life in rural areas like Yasothon. Modernity transmits rapid economic development and massive manufactories around Bangkok. It stimulates migration of labor in Yasothon Province and changes in agriculture and rural areas in that region.

However, to maintain agricultural sector, since the rule of King Bhumiphol, Thai royal government has attempted to make sustainable agriculture in order to keep economic income for rural families. For a small-sized farmer, there are restrictions on information (the existence and benefits of sustainable agriculture), capital (primary investment), and technology (soil management and agricultural techniques).⁸ The farming system in Yasothon consists of Buddhism and local beliefs in maintaining nature. On the one hand, farming program initiated by the Thai royal government aims at technological expansion, capital and industrial goals. On other hand, Buddhist organizations concerning with the nature prefer organic system of farming which contradicts the program of Thai royal government. Interestingly, in Yasothon and other areas of Northeast, there are several farmer organizations deal with religious forms and customs led by monks and religious activists to resist elite groups that manipulate social and economy welfare. Social and religious ideology reflects the ideas and acts that fulfill several functions of resistance movement in a modest way where the poor stand together with monks and social activists in Northeast to protest agricultural policy related to tax, price of paddy, to name a few. During 1970s, peasants’

⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991),9-14.

⁸ Piyawan Suksri et al., “Sustainable Agriculture in Thailand: An Evaluation on the Sustainability”, Ethanol Production, Digital Asia Discussion Paper Series, Digital Asia Building: Regional Strategy Design Platform, Digital Asia Regional Strategy Research Center, 2008.

revolts in Thailand denoted a new transition of democratic government. At the time, there were several demonstrations and long marches supported by educated people such as students, activists, religious groups including monks, and scholars. They supported the peasants to earn justice. Many were killed by the military. Thai population lived in the rural villages and worked as peasants during this period. Political issue in the mid 1970s was partially explained by the material issues of tenancy faced by the peasants. “The broader agricultural context in which the tenancy struggle acquired significance was one of long-standing difficulties faced by peasants”.⁹ This means the peasants have not been recognized to have their justice, and this has happened until current situation. The massacre in 1973, 1976, and following 1992 repeated the story of violence faced by peasants and activists. Everyday peasants face similar problems such as local tax, monopoly price of seeds, and tenancy.

The story of peasant revolts in 1970s affected the shift and system of agricultural sectors in Yasothon as well as peasants’ life. As mentioned before, in the current circumstances, the young generation from peasant families in Yasothon does not follow farming profession. The way of resistance movement happening in peasant families is modesty, from being farmer to joining labor market by having higher education. To some extent, the resistance of peasant families is engaged with social and religious movement to protest Thai government policy on agriculture and farming. Dealing with resistant theory, in his work on everyday forms of resistance, James S. Scott argued “Everyday forms of class resistance from the more typical forms of political conflict which dominate the historiography

⁹ Tyrell Haberkorn, *Revolution interrupted: peasants, students, law, and violence in northern Thailand* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 8.

of the peasantry and other subordinate groups".¹⁰ Resistant types of peasants in Yasothon deal with soft actions instead of confrontation ones. What peasants and subordinate people conduct is to reduce political risks because their agenda is to gain justice wisely. In this sense, religion plays a role in soft resistant movement by subordinate people.

Durkheim found relation between anomie and resistance as social consciousness. Likewise, religion as social integration according to Durkheim is a basic attribute of society that can support anomie affecting social resistance.¹¹ The relevance of Durkheim's view on anomie in Yasothon is to perceive such social experiences interpreted into responses of subordinate people towards political relation of monarchy domination from Thai royal government. It also means that if Buddhism has failed to maintain social integration in Yasothon, it can be 'anomie' for people who try to resist monarchy and military regime. According to my survey, some peasants left Buddhism and chose Baha'i because they have consciousness to have freedom to express ideas. Therefore the Baha'i provides education for human rights and freedom to gain justice and equality. After becoming Baha'i, farmer families send their children to the Baha'i school. After being educated by the Baha'i teachings, many of them migrate to cities such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Ayutthaya in order they have better life.

Local Belief, Buddhism, and the Baha'i Arrival in Yasothon

The Northeast region of Thailand is well-known as Isan including Yasothon. Isan people speak a different dialect from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Southern Thailand. Hence, the dialect of

¹⁰ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 34.

¹¹ Michael Johnsen, *Personality Change Resulting from a Religious Conversion Experience*, PhD diss., Graduate Faculty of Texas Tech University, 1986, 256.

Isan differs from the various dialects of Laotians in Laos in this respect. Isan people consist of culture, rituals, belief, and cosmology. Most of Isan live nearby their farmland; and this produces their local belief and religious rituals. "Many of the Northeastern Thai continue to practice their traditional ethnic religions particularly for important rites of passage. They combine Buddhist teachings with folk religious practices, seeking help through the worship of spirits and venerated objects."¹² Isan culture and ritual concern with symbols which describes Isan cosmology as local belief such as rice, eggs, water, fire or smoke and blood.

There are two types of rituals that correspond to the two 'religions' of the village so called: *saasana phut*, the Buddhist religion, and belief in spirits (*thuu phi*) or local traditions/customs (*watanaa haw*), what is referred to as the 'Spirit Religion'. Intermingled with these two aspects is a third element, *saasana phaam*, literally the Brahmin religion.¹³

In Isan, people believe in several myths and they are divided into various kinds. There are myths that explain nature or natural phenomenon, such as creation myths, rice myths, solar and lunar eclipse myths, and rain myths. There are also myths that explain the origin of culture heroes, and myths of ancient places.

Rice is the staple food of the Thai, and rain is the main factor in growing rice, and light affects the growth of all that lives. In Thai myths, there are stories telling that rice, rain and light came from supernatural beings that granted these things out of compassion for human beings. If human beings did wrong and did not worship the supernatural beings properly, they would be punished and would suffer from drought. The stories like this appear in rice myths, rain

¹² http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15460/TH accessed on February 9, 2015.

¹³ Stephen Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls: Gender and Cosmology in an Isan Village in Northeast Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2005), 4.

myths and the solar and lunar eclipse myths.¹⁴

There are several local beliefs held by Isan society to reveal their life and culture. Sparkes mentioned that those are called *khwan* (life essence), *phi* (spirits), and *thaeaeen* (gods or forces of nature). According to Isan folklore, those three segments signified human life attached with the material body, cosmology, and spirits. Human's body stays on the earth where it has life essence. When the physical and material body is influenced by the evil spirits, the body will be weak and will eventually die. Spirits or the so-called *phi* conspire with the space, nature, and specific environment. When people die, their spirits (*phii*) can bother and threaten people. Because they respect spirits, in order not to be threatened by spirits (*phii*), most of Isan places provide "house of spirits". I found "house of spirits" in almost every place such as forests, malls, groceries, houses, holy places, and rice fields. The last segment of Isan local belief is gods (*thaeaeen*) that represent the nature such as rain, rice, the earth, and the sky.¹⁵

Isan belief system seems to combine ancient tradition and Buddhism. They continue to practice local and indigenous beliefs from ancestors while adopting Buddhist teachings. This shows that religious syncretism also appears in Isan. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz mentioned religion as a cultural system.¹⁶ *The Interpretation of Cultures* clearly states that symbol, acted in actions, can be found in both culture and religion. Therefore I have perceived what Geertz's theory about religious symbols and culture in Isan where people express their daily activities through rituals. In the discourse of symbolic or interpretive anthropology; a symbol has a meaning of social action, practice, an object, pattern of sounds, and

¹⁴ Poramin Jaruworn, "The Roles of The Buddha in Thai Myths: Reflections on The Attempt to Integrate Buddhism into Thai Local Beliefs," *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities*, Special Issue 9. (2005): 15-26.

¹⁵ Sparkes, 4.

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation Of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 314-423.

ceremony. The goal of interpretive analysis is to spell out the implicit or unstated presuppositions, implications, or “meanings” (the goals, values, and pictures of the world) that make this or that action, practice, object, or pattern of sounds intelligible to members of some culture or interpretive community in some specific context.¹⁷ This concept of symbol even leads Geertz to conceive of culture as a text. This strongly indicates that any form of ritual action can be seen as a kind of religious behavior.

Catherine Bell’s work arguing for understanding ritual as an object and a method has inspired something of a style of scholarship on the American academic scene.¹⁸ Bell undertakes such an analysis about ritual in two ways: first, through a critical reading of how the notion of ritual has been used in the study of religion, society, and culture; second, through an attempt to carve out an approach to ritual activities that are less encumbered by assumptions about thinking and acting and more a disclosure of the strategies through which ritualized activities do what they do. Back to the story of Isan, the local beliefs and Buddhism are mixed together behind social and cultural harmony. In addition, Buddhism adopted elements from different cultures especially Hindu culture. During the early period, the expansion of Indian culture to Southeast Asia was remarkable. Almost every aspect of life of Southeast Asia had been Indianized (Hinduized) and it was deeply-rooted for centuries. Indeed, “Buddhism reemerged as the state religion in different parts of Thailand after the dissolution of the powerful and large Hindu Khmer Empire which ruled mainland Southeast Asia from the early ninth to the mid-fifteenth century”.¹⁹ I found the artifacts of Buddha statues

¹⁷ Richard A. Shweder, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 154 (1) (2010):90.

¹⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Perspective and Dimensions* (UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

¹⁹ Denise P. Leidy, *The Art of Buddhism: An Introduction to Its History and Meaning* (London: Shambhala, 2008), 269.

in Isan different from those in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and other parts of Thailand. The image of the Buddha of Isan people reflects their local beliefs.

Figure 1²⁰



Meanwhile the Baha'i faith was introduced to Isan during the Cold War era and targeted oppressed and subordinated peoples such as the peasants. The 1961 visit of Shirin Fozdar was very influential in the Northeast. She met Thai royal family to introduce the Baha'i faith and asked permission to help poor people (peasants) in Yasothon by building the Baha'i school. In 1964, regional spiritual assembly were being set up. The first national spiritual assembly of Thailand was formed from four local spiritual assemblies placed in Bangkok, Ubol, Chiang Mai and Songkhla. Firaydun Mithaq wrote in Baha'i history in Thailand that Shirin Fozdar was a very devoted believer who, despite her advantage age, had consecrated her life to the service of the

²⁰ Buddha statues in Isan were combined by Hinduism symbols. Taken from author's picture collections.

Baha'i faith and had earned an eminent position in the establishment of the Baha'i faith in Thailand. She was not only a teacher for the Baha'i people but also a mother of young pioneers who were from India, Sri Lanka and Persia living in Thailand. It is said that Shirin Fozdar sacrificed her life by teaching the Baha'i faith and her enthusiasm made her to move in several places of Southeast Asian countries especially Thailand and Singapore until she and her close friends were successful to establish the Baha'i spiritual assembly.²¹ Since Shirin Fozdar's first visit to Thailand, the Baha'i faith spread rapidly especially in rural society, including among children and women.

Religious Conversion: The Shift from Buddhism to Baha'ism

The Thai political bureaucracy has not been stable in the past few decades. This country has the highest rate of coups amongst Southeast Asia countries. In addition, political instability in rural areas triggers new movements as religious and social reactions to economic inequality problems. Recognized as a developing country, Thailand's political circumstances affect economic growth. The Asian development bank (ADB)'s survey during military coup in the mid of 2014 said that "Political gridlock and street protests that culminated in a military takeover of the government in Thailand in May damaged business and consumer confidence in the first half of 2014".²² Although Thailand has made remarkable economic progress at 8-9% per year during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the economic gap between the elite and the poor in Thailand is completely striking. The World Bank reported in 2013 that poverty in Thailand was a rural phenomenon with over 80% of 7.3 million poor people living in rural areas such as Northeast including Yasothon. Income inequality and

²¹ Sukhum Abashakun Faridian, "Pioneering Recollection Part One: Historical information about the development of the Baha'i Faith in Thailand," *Baha'i News* (353), 20 August 1960, Thailand, 1960, 33.

²² <http://www.adb.org/countries/thailand/economy> accessed on February 16, 2015.

lack of equal opportunity have persisted. The problem of poverty in rural areas is because the benefits of economic success have not been shared equally between Bangkok and the rest of the country.²³ According to Milanovic, an economist from The World Bank, income inequality involves “low of motion” which means for every force there is an equal and opposite force or reaction. He took China as an example where the economic growth globally increases in the past years. “The arguments against global inequality and in favor of some redistribution or help for the world’s poorest are inextricably linked with the democratization at the global level.”²⁴ The problem of democracy in Thailand increases potential problem of economic inequality between elite groups living in urban cities like Bangkok and oppressed people in rural areas like Yasothon. The division of labor in Thailand determines economic inequality in the society. The table below describes that poor people who do not have higher education background usually have less salary and they mostly work in agricultural sectors.

Table I²⁵

²³ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/overview> accessed on February 16, 2015.

²⁴ Branco Milanovic, *Worlds Apart: Measuring International and Global Inequality* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 149.

²⁵ The Labor force survey in Thailand. 2014. <http://web.nso.go.th/> accessed on February 16, 2015.

Industry	2013			2014	
	June	July	Aug	June	July
<i>Total</i>	39.07	38.57	38.20	38.38	38.49
1. Agricultural	14.16	13.97	13.92	13.60	13.21
- Agriculture, forestry and fishing	14.16	13.97	13.92	13.60	13.21
2. Non-Agricultural	24.91	24.60	24.27	24.78	25.28
- Manufacturing	6.32	6.44	6.14	6.27	6.49
- Construction	2.21	2.17	2.03	2.22	2.12
- Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	6.04	5.98	5.83	5.70	6.19
- Transportation and storage	1.16	1.11	1.12	1.22	1.19
- Accommodation and food service activities	2.58	2.41	2.48	2.47	2.55
- Financial and insurance activities	0.55	0.54	0.50	0.51	0.49
- Real estate activities	0.15	0.20	0.15	0.15	0.15
- Public administration defence and compulsory social security	1.59	1.59	1.58	1.62	1.62
- Education	1.13	1.10	1.13	1.16	1.12
- Human health and social work activities	0.61	0.58	0.70	0.65	0.66
- Other service activities	0.71	0.61	0.63	0.82	0.74
- Others	1.86	1.87	1.98	1.99	1.96

I started this part by describing Thai political circumstance as well as economic inequality in Yasothon to relate to religious transformation and conversion. How Thai Buddhists embrace the Baha’i faith is my primary concern. Lewis R. Rambo (1993) paid close attention to understanding religious conversion. For him, religious conversion must be understood as social, cultural, personal, and religious system. He also added that economics, politics, biology, and so forth must be taken into account to understand religious conversion. The religious conversion and transformation in Yasothon could be understood as political actions of oppressed and poor people when social and economic inequality persisted. Rambo, in understanding religious conversion, divided conversion into several types: apostasy or defection, intensification, affiliation, institutional transition, and tradition transition.

Apostasy or **defection** is the repudiation of a religious tradition or its beliefs by previous members. Apostasy is included in the typology because the dynamics of loss of faith or of leaving a group

constitute an important form of change, both individually and collectively. **Intensification** is the revitalized commitment to a faith with which the convert has had previous affiliation, formal or informal. **Affiliation** is the movement of an individual or group from no or minimal religious commitment to full involvement with an institution or community of faith. **Institutional transition** involves the change of an individual or group from one community to another within a major tradition. **Tradition transition** refers to the movement of an individual or a group from one major religious tradition to another.²⁶

In religious conversion, firstly, religious converters may feel doubt or start to question their recognition and acknowledgment of anomalies in their previous religion that results in crises to their own faith. I found that several Buddhist people in Isan, especially youth groups, are bored with the political and economic domination by Thai Royal Buddhist government. Political and economic domination of Thai government together with the history full of coups, human violation, socio-economic inequality has traumatized oppressed people in Isan. While the Baha'is faith came to stand with the oppressed people such as peasants in Isan (Yasothon) to liberate them from social, gender, and economic inequality. Through social movement, the Baha'is came to visit peasants and oppressed people not only in rural areas but also in urban areas. The arrival of the Baha'i alone in Isan becomes more promising to shift paradigm of religious dogma, which is Theravada Buddhism. Baha'i people are generally very active in social activities and movements. They are very progressive people to voice new religion in the global world. Gradually the Baha'i faith has attracted more converts. Furthermore, religious conversion can happen for any reason, and it could be rational, spiritual, or ideological reason.

In response to these crises, religious converts generally do

²⁶ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1993), 12-14.

not renounce the paradigm that has led them into crisis. They may lose their previous belief and consider alternatives. Their previous belief was treated as an anomaly and it calls questions to their mind. Furthermore, they feel that their previous religion is no longer relevant with their expectation. "Then, all crises close in one of three options: Firstly, they are able to handle the crisis-provoking problem and all returns to "normal" or to their original religion. Secondly, the problem resists and is labeled. Thirdly, a new candidate for paradigm emerges, and a battle over its acceptance ensues these are the paradigm wars".²⁷ Once when a transition from the former to the alternate paradigm is complete, the converts change their view of the field, methods, and even goals for their religion. Before presenting theories of religious conversion, it is helpful to define conversion. The following are three typical ones (Johnsen, op. cit. 1986 et. 6-8, Clark 1958, Christensen 1965, Galanter, 1982):

1. Religious conversion is that type of spiritual growth or development, which involves an appreciable change of direction concerning religious ideas and behavior. Most clearly and typically it denotes an emotional episode of illuminating suddenness, which may be deep or superficial, though it may also come about by a more gradual process.²⁸
2. The religious conversion experience is defined as an acute hallucinatory episode occurring within the framework of religious belief and characterized by its subjective intensity, apparent suddenness of onset, brief duration, auditory and sometimes visual hallucinations and an observable change in the subsequent behavior of the convert.²⁹
3. Conversion is a process by which a person comes to adopt an all-

²⁷ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), 84.

²⁸ W. H. Clark, *The psychology of religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 191.

²⁹ C. W. Christensen, "Religious conversion in adolescence," *Pastoral Psychology* 16 (1965):18.

pervasive worldview.³⁰

In the same direction, it has also been proposed that religious conversion may be understood in terms of self-realization within, for instance, humanistic tradition.³¹ By applying this view, conversion is perceived as a spiritual transformation process that includes a positive change in one's meaning system, values, goals, self-definition, and overall purpose in life.³² In this case, conversion is taken to reflect a healthy form of personal development,³³ which may stimulate transition to a higher stage of religious development.³⁴ More generally, in accordance with the perspective of the hierarchy of needs,³⁵ it has been proposed that religion and spirituality correspond to, and satisfy, not only deficiency needs³⁶ (i.e. safety, esteem, love) but also self-actualization needs.³⁷

Interestingly, Canon F. W. B. Bullock in a work noted different

³⁰ M. Galanter, "Charismatic religious sects and psychiatry: An overview," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 139 (1982): 1540.

³¹ J. T. Richardson, "Psychological and psychiatric studies of new religions", In *Advances in the psychology of religion*, ed. L.B. Brown (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 209-223.

³² R. F. Paloutzian, "Religious conversion and spiritual transformation: A meaning-system analysis," in *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*, ed. R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 331-347.

³³ W. E. Conn, *Christian conversion: A developmental interpretation of autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist, 1986).

³⁴ J. W. Fowler, *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

³⁵ A. H. Maslow, *Motivation and personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

³⁶ C. D. Batson, and E. L. Stocks, "Religion: Its core psychological functions," in *Handbook of experimental existential psychology*, ed. Greenberg, S. L. Koole, & T. Pyszczynski, 141-155 (New York: Guilford Press, 1995). K. I. Pargament, and C. L. Park, "Merely a defense? The variety of religious means and ends," *Journal of Social Issues* 51 (2004): 13-22.

³⁷ Coralie Buxant, "Research for the Social Scientific Study of Religion," in *Contemporary conversions: Compensatory needs or self-growth motives?* (Université catholique de Louvain, 2009), 3-4.

meanings of religious conversion. According to Bullock,³⁸ “religious conversion, without any further definition or limitation, may mean many different things. In the broadest sense, it may mean some kind of a change, no matter of what nature, in a person's religious experience; and in the narrowest sense, it may mean a religious change of a particular kind, accomplished in a particular way by methods so stereotyped that an almost automatic result is secured; or, of course, the phrase can mean anything between these two definitions”.³⁹

Related to the motif of why some people may commit religious conversion, Bainbridge gives two alternative sociological theories to explain religious conversion, which are strain theory and social influence theory.⁴⁰ According to strain theory, people join a religion in order to satisfy conventional desires that unusual personal or collective deprivations have frustrated. In other words, in joining a religion, the person adopts an ideology about life that transforms deprivation into a virtue. According to social influence theory, people join a religion because they have formed social attachments with persons who are already members and because their attachments to nonmembers are weak. As Bainbridge himself remarks, a combination of both of these theories is probably the best explanation and the Lofland/Stark (1965) conversion model encompasses both of the theories.⁴¹

³⁸ F. W. B. Bullock, *Evangelical Conversion in Great Britain 1696-1845. St. Leonards-on-Sea* (Sussex: Budd and Gillatt, 1959).

³⁹ Owen Brandon, “Some Theological Problems in Relation to Religious Conversion”, *The Churchman* 74.2 (April-June) (1960):101-109.

⁴⁰ William S. Bainbridge, “The Sociology of Conversion”, in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony & Samuel Southard (Religious Education Press, 1992).

⁴¹ Keishin Inaba, “Conversion to New Religious Movements: Reassessment of Lofland/Skonovd Conversion Motifs and Lofland/Stark Conversion Process,” Research Center for Human Sciences (ReCHS), Faculty of Human Development, Kobe Universit, 2004, 2-4.

The concept of religious conversion itself is not unknown in Southeast Asian society. Throughout recorded history, Southeast Asia has been the place where great world civilizations have been fighting for influence, one of which, is by converting people's belief and faith. History has shown that India, China, Islam and the West have come respectively to the region in terms of political, cultural, economic, and religious expansion. In turns, "Indianization," "Sinicization," "Islamization" and "Westernization" have been the inextricable part of Southeast Asian history. Approaching the shift, conflict and interaction among these civilizations must be interesting. During the early period, the expansion of Indian culture to Southeast Asia was remarkable. Almost every aspect of life of Southeast Asia had been Indianized (Hinduized) and it was deeply-rooted for centuries. Islam then came to the region and relatively replaced all Hinduized things by converting the Southeast Asian people at that time.⁴² According to Glock & Stark's view, experiencing deprivation may motivate people to join other religious groups.⁴³ The Baha'i faith, which was introduced to Isan and Buddhist society, has influenced religious and social movement. People in Yasothon converted to the Baha'i faith with different reasons. Therefore, the shift from Buddhism to Baha'ism in Yasothon shows social, political, and ritual transition of the society. "Conversion provides the experience that marks a threshold between one state of life and another".⁴⁴

Conclusion

This study has shown that peasants living in Yasothon

⁴² Moeflich Hasbullah, "King, Identity and Islamization: Psycho-social Aspects of Religious Conversion in Southeast Asia In the 15th – 17th Centuries," *TAWARIKH, International Journal for Historical Studies, ASPENSI* 1(1)(2009):1-2.

⁴³ C.Y. Glock and R. Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), 17.

⁴⁴ Christopher Lamb and Bryant. M. Darrol, *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (New York: Cassel, 1999), 75.

experience not only social and cultural changes but also religious transformation and conversion. I argue that through social and educational development in peasant community, the Baha'i movement affects religious conversion. Religious conversion in Isan can be understood as the shift of paradigm from Buddhist to Baha'i, and this situation has changed Isan people in expressing their religious belief and rituals. For rural peasantry in Yasothon converting to Baha'i, this faith is beneficial to overcome economic, political, and social oppression. Thus, the Baha'i development in Thailand tries to express liberation theology as the ideal form to increase followers. Baha'i, along with its theology, delivers gender equality in which women may have the same position with men in many aspects and it greatly impacts the level of education to support the family's economic growth. Typically constrained by the limited resources, Baha'i projects primarily focus on exploring new models of social change that encourage individuals, communities and institutions to develop cooperative methods of participation and decision-making. There are six main development processes that form the basis of action pattern by Baha'i communities around the world,⁴⁵ including Thailand. These six processes are embedded in Baha'i Santitham School in Yasothon. The Baha'i Santitham School is purposely located in the district with various systematic and deliberate actions and missions to eliminate poverty within the society and sustain education for all people. The foremost agenda is to educate women. One of the school's tangible actions is to charge very low fees to enable the poor children to obtain education so that they can liberate themselves from illiteracy, untrained and unskillful behavior. The final aim is to diminish poverty and liberate people from their constraints. By promoting education, Baha'i faith gains more and more people in the area, making it the densest Baha'i population in Thailand. In this context, Baha'i liberation theology has freed its adherents from any

⁴⁵ <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-8-1-2.html>, 31 March 2013.

economic and cultural constraints by promoting equal education for all people and not limited to economic and social status-quo. At least, in my recent research findings, there are some important notices. Rural and poor people in Yasothon considered the establishment of Baha'i indirectly reduced local beliefs, myths, and the spirit of ancestors since Baha'i tries to rationalize its teaching in term of modernity. To some extent, Baha'i teachings liberate peasants from economic suffering by promoting education among Yasothon people. In summary, the coming of Baha'i along with the purpose of liberation from economic inequality and poverty could slowly and possibly eliminate local beliefs such as the spirits of ancestor as indigenous identity of religiosity among rural people in Yasothon .

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