

# City branding in Buriram: Khmerness spaces in urban settings



Buriram, a northeastern province of Thailand bordering Cambodia is located about 400 km away from Bangkok. Once a poor, sleepy tourist town and forgotten rice-farming fiefdom, it has developed into an economic center of Thailand during the last ten years and is positioned to become the country's hub for sports tourism. This conforms to Newin Chidchob's vision as he had expressed it in a speech in 2013:

*"Buriram doesn't have the sea like Pattaya, doesn't have mountains like Chiang Mai, so we will make Buriram to be the city of sports"<sup>1</sup>.*

Newin, 'godfather' of Thai politics, uses cash and contacts to transform his hometown into a sporting boomtown, including a football stadium and racetrack set to host the MotoGP.

About a thousand years ago, the area that makes up today's Buriram Province was ruled under the Khmer Empire and many ruins remain from that time. As for today, if one wants to discover the Khmer culture in Thailand, Buriram is the right place. Before sports defined a new identity, the city was known for ancient Khmer temples, language, tradition and culture.

Using an ethnographic approach and fieldwork stay, my research will analyse the impact of Buriram's city branding campaign and explore if and what kinds of 'Khmerness' continue to play an important role in the city. Are Khmer ways of life disappearing in contemporary urban settings, due to the rapid urbanization and transformation of the city? Where is 'Khmerness' still visible in Buriram, not only as tourist places but as a 'living culture'?



Phanom Rung Historical Park, the ancient Khmer castle which is important landmark of Buriram © Sithipong Inthanin



Chang Arena, its nickname is "Thunder Castle", is the largest club-owned football stadium in Thailand, the fifth castle of Buriram. © Buriram United

## Research question and objectives

*Where does Khmerness figure in the city branding campaign for Buriram?*

By looking at identity making of the province, a first step is to find out how Thais perceive Khmerness as well as the city of Buriram, and to analyze potential associations between them.

I also ask myself these questions:

- Does the Buriram model really serve the expectations and interests of its inhabitants - or primarily other interests?
- Who actually plays the important role in city branding in Buriram and how?
- What role does Khmerness play in the city today and how has it been changed by urbanization?
- Who lives where? - analyzing demographic change and fundamental perspectives on living together

## Methodology

These methods are used to answer the research question:

- Survey questionnaires, which lead to a more quantitative analysis. I sample, identify and interview groups of people, such as people from Bangkok, from other provinces and locals in Buriram.
- Qualitative interviews including semi-structured, narrative, and in-depth interviews for a qualitative data analysis.
- Walking methods to explore lived experiences, memories, communities and identities, and to find and look for Khmerness in urban areas of Buriram.
- Visual media, such as documentary films and travel TV-programmes about Buriram, to see in what way the city is presented.

## Reference

<sup>1</sup> "'เนวิน" ติดปีกเมืองบุรีรัมย์ ติด 1 ใน 5 เมืองที่มีนักท่องเที่ยวน่ามากที่สุด". Prachachat Business, November 25, 2014. Accessed January 31 2020. [https://www.prachachat.net/news\\_detail.php?newsid=1416856166](https://www.prachachat.net/news_detail.php?newsid=1416856166)