

## Taboo and Health Behavior of Mahout in Elephant Biosphere of Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic

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**Abstract** The In-Depth Interview was done with 5 leaders of mahouts (Elephant Charmers). The content from qualitative research was analyzed to construct the 97 items for quantitative research. Factor analysis was used for determination the component factors of health behavior of the Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Thailand. The survey research, questionnaires were used for data collection from 530 Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Surin Province of Thailand. Data was analyzed exploratory factors analysis and group discussion. The objectives of this research were to study health autobiography, taboo and health behavior of Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in elephant biosphere of Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic, and to analyze component factor of health behavior; propose ways to improve health behaviors of mahouts and their families in Thailand. The results of the research were as the followings. The health autobiography and health behavior of 5 Elephant Charmers (leaders of mahouts), key informants in both Thailand and Laos, aged 81-89 years, known as "Mhor sa-diang", "Mhor Sa-dum" and "Kru-ba-yai or Ti-yai" were found in 5 aspects of health; Physical with well-being, Emotional with good temper, Social with the leadership, Spiritual self-reliance and Intellectual with good memory. They were the leaders of community rites. They could raise warm and strong families by being careful, proudly, practicing in the taboo and the principle of Buddhism without exploitation. They lived consistently with the Sufficiency Economic Philosophy. The taboo of mahouts in elephant biosphere of Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic were the same as in daily activities; such as, eating, sitting, walking, sleeping, worshipping "Pa Kam" spirits and practicing the dharma. They were even more strict in their daily lives during the wild elephant round-up. The factors analysis, the five components related to health behavior of Elephant Charmers, mahouts, and their families in Thailand included 1) The procedure and food for health, 2) The family relationship, 3) The strict practice in morals and the principle of Buddhism, 4) The credibility leadership, and 5) The generosity and non-exploit.

**Keywords** :Taboo/ Mahout/ Elephant Charmer/ Health Behavior/ Elephant biosphere / Thailand / Laos PDR.

### 1. Introduction

Many years ago, mahouts (Elephant Charmers) who used to go to catch the wild elephants in a deep forest. Almost they were Kuis who lived in Thatoom district, Surin province, Thailand and Champasak province, Laos PDR. It was said that the ethnographic history people of both countries were the same ethnic group that they have moved from one area to

others since the past to the present. They spoke in Kui and Laos language and were believed in Buddhism. Those people had ability to catch the wild elephants to train as the domestic elephants. Elephants were fed for the house working assistants and some were sold if it is unnecessary (Fine Arts Department, 2007). The Elephant Charmers (leader of mahouts), mahouts and their families both of countries had the same taboos strictly duration of hooking elephants was spent at least 2-3 months or longer, for safe, fortunes and getting lots of elephants. Unfortunately, if they did wrong from taboos, they would be punished from the family's guardian spirit and the ghost of ancestors. This might be harmful to Elephant Charmers and mahouts; they might get harmful by elephants or tigers, illness, or they could not get any elephants (Panurut, et al.,1996). These were believed and accepted from generation to generation by Elephant Charmers, mahouts and family since nowadays. Nevertheless, the elephant's owner or the mahouts were not Kuis, but they would be learned the way of taboos as strictly as possible for happy family both of owner and elephant (Sodesiri, 1972).

Hundred years ago the wild elephant has been catching for long time. Right now, both of Kuis in Surin Province, Thailand and Champasak Province, Laos PDR stopped to catch the wild elephants due to laws and the border situation problem between Thailand and the kingdom of Cambodia since 1960, while in Laos PDR was stopped to catch elephants since 1986 (Untanon, 2011). Due to these problems, it was caused the Elephant Charmers could not promote at the high level of position as well as in the past. All Ma, Mhor Ja, Mhor Sa-diang, Mhor Sa-dam and Kru-ba-yai (the leader of the mahout or almost senior mahout) or Ti-yai (in Laos PDR) were decreased by the time changing, getting old and the old age passed away. According to the participants, it was found that almost Elephant Charmers were healthy for all aspects of mental and physical health, society, intellectual health in term of living long life, trustable and leadership. If the Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families could not follow the taboos as carelessness, drinking alcohol, smoking, ignored in five precepts and so on; they would be killed by tuberculosis disease, Aids disease and accident increasingly. Especially, since January, 2012 it was found that the mahouts and the family were affected by the tuberculosis disease more than 10% (Kom-Chat-Luek, 2012 : 20<sup>th</sup> February). It is interesting to researcher to study the autobiography health history of taboos and health behavior of mahouts in the biosphere of domestic elephants in Thailand and Laos PDR. The elements of taboos were analyzed whether they relate to the health behavior of the Elephant Charmers, mahouts, and their families in Thailand. From the study, it could be divided into five elements for health as follows: it should be followed the way of mahouts; it should be the policy proposal to develop the leader of Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Thailand and it should be applied to use in over all other people.

The Document and Literature review about this research were 3 issues 1) Concept and the Related Theories 2) Health status of the Elephant Charmer, mahouts and their family and 3) Research Review including concept and theories of Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy (Office of National Economic and Social Development, 2010), Holistic Health in the way of Buddhism, (Prayuthto, 1996), Epidemiology (Beagle, Bonita and Kjellstorm, 1993), Survival of Fittest (Darwin, 1952), Historicalism (Boas, 1940), Diffusionism (Kroeber, 1963), Ethnographic Research (Geertz, 1973), and Health Belief Model (Janz, Becker, 1984, Suwan, et al., 1991, and Tonsakul, 2000).

The research was applied by the conceptions and related theories as follows:

In the life style of Elephant Charmers to apply Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy.

Moderation in the way of life; Approximately, Enough not much and no few, Not to exploit our self and the other, To put one's faith in the reason and good immunity and Must support by the knowledge and merit (Office of National Economic and Social Development, 2010). At present the Elephant Charmers had what kind of the life style. The development theory, the theory of personality development by Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson span of age were integrated together. Their development were dynamic, if they are not mature that will have an effect on personality development in the present and the future. The identities of individual causality from personality development, to have knowledge of Elephant Charmer's personality development, are important. These were the guidelines for studying the health autobiography. Moreover, the Ethnographic Research was applied. The Ethnographic was a branch of anthropology culture to aim at the cultural description, especially, at the culture from the original ethnic group (Geertz, 1973) This will be the method and guideline of Ethnographic Research in the original ethnic group. "Gui" identity and wisdom were useful for social development. Charles Darwin. 1952; In the Survival of Fittest the Darwinism that is to say "Plant and Animal were difficult, every life to go up double and every life adjust to fight to be able to stand on one's life." (Darwin, 1952, and Burney, 2000). The elephant Charmer, mahout and their families and elephants were adapting to live. Context of the elephant Charmers, mahout and their families in the culture and behavior to study with historicalism. Study the culture from the past to the present by observation, it was conducted by material and situation with time and place (Fine Arts Department 2007, and Rewdang, 2010).

According to, observations and the interviews from the sub-district promoting hospital in Surin Province about the health of Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families it was found that the Elephant Charmers (mahout's leaders) were quite good in health but some mahouts and their families were concerned by spending life careless as too smoking and drinking; elephants were, sometimes, got accident by cars. At the Elephant Study Center, it has been promoting on the title of "Take Me Home Project" and "The Kingdom of Elephants Project" since 2006-2012; there were registered by 215 elephants. So, those people were health checked by the doctors; it was found that they were affected by the tuberculosis completely, while elephants were not found yet. At the Champasak province, Lao People's Democratic Republic, it was not found these problems, because Laos might not know about this problem, less of elephant's populations, and rich natures of land.

Regarding to the health report of Thatoom hospital issued on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2009 by chest x-ray of 142 mahouts; it was found that there were 16 mahouts who were affected by tuberculosis; because the result of x-ray found an abnormal of lungs (Thatoom hospital, 2012 : 14<sup>th</sup> February). Later, on 24<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2012, it was rechecked again by the doctor Manoon Leechawengwong, the chairman of Siriraj drug-resistant tuberculosis, research foundation, under Her patronage of Princess Galyani Vadhana Krom Luang Narathiwat Rajanakarin, had said that by participating for "the new mahouts should be cared on healthy elephants" of the zoo organization under the His majesty patronage of Adulyadej King, had worked cooperative with Surin hospital and other related organizations to find the germ of tuberculosis which it could be affected to elephants at the Elephant Study Center; the results of chest x-ray of 140 mahouts was found that 13 mahouts or almost 10%, a rate higher than normal, were affected. Normally, it should not be more exceeded than 1%. Therefore, the state of situation was concerned in the transmission to both mahouts and elephants (Kom-Chat-Luek. 2012 : 20<sup>th</sup> February). Moreover, the health report of Thatoom hospital, the diagnostic health results of mahouts and their families was found that there were 24 people who were affected by abnormal lungs; they were closely watched by doctors to diagnose about phlegm. There were only 6 people who did not go to get the diagnosed health on the date appointments. So, elephant villages, Ban Krapo, Thatoom district, and other elephant villages in Chumponburi district, Surin province could be similarly affected by the tuberculosis disease higher than other areas. It was found, nevertheless, that the Elephant Charmers's health was not found any illness with tuberculosis or other diseases even they were between 81-84 years old.

Therefore, it is interesting to study on health autobiography, taboos and health behavior of the Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in elephant biosphere of Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic, and to analyze component factor of health behavior of the Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Surin Province, Thailand. In order to accomplish to the health promotion for Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families to check up their health and elephant's health at least once a year, they must have knowledge and understanding and awareness to look after themselves and their elephants to save from different contagious diseases such as tuberculosis and AIDS. Moreover they can prevent themselves and their elephants from those infectious diseases with integration of leadership, moral, religion belief, taboos and local wisdom to conserve environment and ecosystem development for their life quality.

## 2. Objectives

1. To study the health autobiography, taboos and health behavior of the Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Surin province, Thailand and Champasak province, Laos PDR.
2. To analyze component factor of health behavior of the Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Thailand.
3. To propose ways to improve health behaviors of the Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Thailand.

## 3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative research with In-Depth Interview was used for data collection from In-Depth Interview form with 5 Thai-Lao Elephant Charmers (leaders of mahouts) in Surin Province, Thailand and Champasak Province, Laos PDR.

3.2 Quantitative research was survey research with questionnaires that constructed from content analysis of qualitative research. The questionnaires contains 97 items that use for data collection from 530 Elephant Charmer's families, mahouts and their families in Surin Province of Thailand. Data was analyzed exploratory factors analysis.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 In-Depth Interview

The results of In-Depth Interviews with 5 Thai-Lao leaders of mahouts in Surin Province, Thailand and Champasak Province, Laos PDR were the followings.

1) It was studied by four healthy autobiographies of Elephant Charmers in Thailand; there were two Mhor Sa-dum, males, 81 and 82 years old, one married (spouse was 78 years old), one widower; their educations were grade four; right now they are living in Ban Ta-klang, Ban Krapo, Krapo sub-district, Thatoom district, Surin province. Once, they used to catch 16 wild elephants when they were 14 years old; and again when they were 20 years old, they got 10 wild elephants respectively. And other two Mhor Sa-dieng were males, 81 and 84 years old, one married (spouse was 78 years old), one widower; their educations were grade two and four respectively; right now they are living in Ban Cokekung and Ban Krajaow, Krapo sub-district, Thatoom district, Surin province. The health autobiographies of all were healthy.

2) It was studied by one health autobiography of Elephant Charmer in Laos PDR, it is called "Ti-yai" or a great teacher (Kru-ba-yai); he was 89 years old, his spouse was 79 years old, lived in Ban Papo, Patumporn district, Champasak province. He was healthy also.

It was found, therefore, that five Elephant Charmers both Thailand and Laos PDR were healthy including physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health. They were ritual leadership in communities. They were living with the philosophy of sufficiency economy, good memory, happiness, self-esteem, warm families, carefulness, taboos practices, Buddhist teaching practices, and avoiding from any gambles. So they have been happy since right now.

3) Taboos of the Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Thailand and Laos PDR.

Many years ago, both Thailand and Laos PDR had similar taboos or rules for practices strictly during catching wild elephants 2-3 months or longer. Those might be affected to their health in eating ways. According to the Buddhist disciplines has been prohibited for 10 kinds of eating meat prohibitions; they were elephant, horse, human beings, snake, Bengal tiger, leopard, tiger, lion and bear. The other taboos in eating prohibitions due to leaders of mahouts practices; they could not eat ant, honey, egg, duck, any entrails, shell and completed in rice eating should not be remained.

For self-practice site, he could not tread on a head of elephant, could not smoke or drink on the neck of elephant, could not sing a song, could not use village language, use only wild or Pakam languages, call a elephant's name representative individual name, could not tease each other, could not mimic each other, could not pick a flower up to put at ears, could not pick a wood from other taken already, could not sit cross-legged, could not talk during sleeping, could not rest a hand on the forehead, sexual misconduct, could not talk with strange women in the forest, could not talk with non-relatives at home, could not sit under or cross the stairs, could not steal something from someone (it would be strictly mistaken in taboos, morals, laws if he stole a hook or a chain).

For health site, it would not allow in sweeping and cleaning house, hair cut, nails cut, dress more beautifully, put face powders, throw things into the house, hit children, go to see the nightlife and so on. It was obviously seen that some taboos were caused by illness, spread out some diseases to others such as skin diseases, gastrointestinal diseases, infected by the virus, diseases of the respiratory system especially tuberculosis which was available in elephant villages. Almost taboos, however, were good affected into health behaviors, happiness and longevity finally.

4) Health behaviors of the Elephant Charmers in Surin province, Thailand and Laos PDR;

Due to the studies it was found that there were five Elephant Charmers both Thailand and Laos PDR, were healthy consistent with taboos, morality and Buddhist principles including eating ways, sleeping, exercises, diseases prevention, behavioral illness, healthy mind, mental and emotional controls, reliability and leadership.

### 4.2 Survey Research results

The questionnaire was used to collect data from 530 Elephant Charmers's families, mahouts and their families in Surin Province of Thailand. Then the factor analysis was used for component determination. There were 5 components were constructed as presented in table 1.

**Table 1.** Components of Health Behavior of 530 Mahouts and Families in Surin Province of Thailand

Components	Number of Variables	Weight
1) The procedure and food for health	20	0.722-0.358
2)The family relationship	14	0.637-0.515
3) The strict practice in morals and the principle of Buddhism	17	0.953-0.433
4) The credibility leadership.	8	0.932-0.518
5) The generosity and non-exploit.	8	0.969-0.955

From table 1, the finding illustrated that the component 1: The procedure and food for health had loading weight between 0.722-0.358, component 2: The family relationship had loading weight between 0.637-0.515, component 3: The strict practice in morals and the principle of Buddhism had loading weight between 0.953-0.433, component 4: The credibility leadership had loading weight between 0.932-0.518, and component 5: The generosity and non-exploit had loading weight between 0.969-0.955.

## 5. Discussions

According to this study, it was found that the health autobiography of taboos and health behaviors of five Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Thailand, and Laos PDR, were healthy because they followed taboos and health behaviors, consistent with the element analysis and the multiple regression analysis were as follows: 1) the practices and healthy foods, 2) the family relationship, 3) strict in morality and following the Buddhist principles, 4) credibility and leadership, and 5) generosity and do not exploit together, which was consistent with the 10 national healthy regulations and 6 healthy principles of the Ministry of Health (Health Education Division, 1998). They lived consistently with the Sufficiency Economic Philosophy (Office of National Economic and Social Development Plan, 2010).

It was said that five components were promoted by health due to the ways of the Elephant Charmers which it could be made suggestions to related organizations to support Elephant Charmers, mahouts and their families in Thailand that it could be applied to general public properly.

Due to the Elephant Charmers were healthy because there were many reasons such as carefulness via all activities, followed taboos and Buddhist principles strictly, meditation practices, always good mood, be not stress, healthy foods (fish, vegetables and fruits by nature / organic food), live in good environment, working daily routines; commanding elephants, feeding elephant's foods, and so on. These activities could be supported their health automatically. The Elephant Charmers and mahouts spent their life more with elephants than their families. Then they had plenty of time to practice or reviews things under a big tree. Both mahouts and elephants were happy surrounded with good environment at that time. Many years ago, populations were increasing, the needs of places to live and doing agricultures were commanding; these reason why many trees and forests were cut and destroyed. Right now it is seen that many mahouts take elephants to earn some money in the city, immigrate to many big cities around the country. Mahouts, families and elephants suffer from foods for both owner and elephants, money for supporting their families. These problems are caused mahouts and elephants to be ill and more stress. Some mahouts could not follow the taboos traditionally. So they drink alcohol, smoking and go out at night places; some are drug addicted. They are became risk situation in getting some diseases. Recently, the report of healthy checking from the hospital was found that almost 10 percents of mahouts were infected tuberculosis. Mahouts and elephants were injured from the accident increasingly by day. These problems could be careless and did not follow taboos and the Buddhist principles as well as in the past. Therefore, the taboos related to health behaviors could be applied and could be the guideline drawing back to the past. And then their life would be got benefits from the study surely.

## 6. Recommendations

The results of this research were taken into group discussions by 24 connoisseurs (knowledgeable people) getting the suggestions to improve the health behavior development; such as, Food safety, Food quality, Food security, Healthy behavior, Family development, Practicing in Taboo and the principle of Buddhism. The Leadership training and Ecological development for the Elephant charmers, mahouts and their families in Thailand and apply with the general public for future generations; were recommendation to the governor of Surin province, Zoological park organization "Elephant kingdom Surin province", Surin Provincial Administrative Organization "Elephant study center Surin province", Surin Provincial Public Health Center and the other related organizations were that they should implement the developed action plan under the His majesty patronage of Adulyadej King, Surin provincial local administrative organization and other

related organizations. It would be realizably taken the His majesty ways on the philosophy of sufficiency economy and effective strategies into "understanding, reachable and developing" to perform effective integrations and participation as well as possible and support for further research on Multidisciplinary Research for health development on the people and domestic elephants in Surin province.

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