



# Globalization and AEC in the Context of Local Traditional Healers: A Qualitative Study of Realities in Surin Province

**Chutchawal Choowa\*, Luechai Sringernyuang, Nahtani Meemon, Thammarat Marohabutr**

## **Abstract**

The aim of conducting this study was to grasp phenomena in Surin Province regarding folk healers and traditional Thai masseurs, as well as the staff of NGOs including their awareness of preparing for the impact the following launch of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) at the end of 2015 and the advancement of globalization. This well-constructed qualitative research study was conducted using the methods of in-depth interviews, auto-ethnography, and focus group discussions. The informants were folk healers, traditional Thai masseurs, and NGO staff. The results revealed that the realities of AEC and globalization are distinctive. NGO staff members cooperated and provided more useful facts than folk healers, while traditional Thai masseurs seemed to have no interest in the topic. Folk healers and NGO staff realized that the key mission in preparation for the launch of AEC is to remind people of their own roots as individuals within the community, where being localized and self-sufficient are preferred. This is a key to viability and a factor related to the existence of traditional healers.

It is recommended that traditional knowledge and local wisdom should be revived, developed and transmitted to new generations in the community, local identity should be recreated and the use of resources should be managed properly to serve in the process of sustainable development.

**Key words:** globalization, ASEAN Economic Community, AEC, traditional healers

## **Introduction**

Globalization has brought about changes currently in the society and culture, and in the way people live their lives. As stated in

many sources, globalization enables people to approach new opportunities that affect and create diversity within the world today.<sup>1</sup> First, it is a dynamic rather than static process. Sources and individuals state that globalization has affected the world by bringing about changes that work exactly like the movement of a wave.<sup>2</sup> Second, the trend of globalization involves complex interactions between

*\*Master of Arts (Health Social Science), Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University,*

*Buddhamonthon, Nakhon Pathom 73170, Thailand*

*Corresponding author: choowa.c@gmail.com*

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and among local people and other parts of the world. Globalization also promotes a global culture adapted to and able to emphasize the attractiveness of people's core significance in a viable fashion.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there are arguments regarding globalization and the possibility that it may trigger the merger of cultures so that they will become homogeneous through globalized media companies.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, under the influence of globalization, communities are affected by global capitalism, which promotes economic development and commercialism. Consequently, people in rural areas are mentally, intellectually, and culturally dominated by foreign forces.<sup>5</sup> Heavy exposure to the outputs of academic institutions and mass media has become a major factor in villagers seeing themselves as old-fashioned and uncivilized beings, which leads to ignorance among them in the acquisition and use of valuable knowledge and wisdom from former days.

The concept and development of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) are driven by the demands of globalization, based on a variety of sources, along with a summary definition within the present study. AEC refers to the integration of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, which is planned to be launched at the end of December 2015. The purpose of AEC is to contribute to the economic benefits of all 10 members and foster unity among them. The creation of power

for this region is based upon the convergence of interests among the ASEAN member countries to deepen and broaden economic integration through existing and new initiatives.<sup>6</sup> AEC will be characterized by a single-market production base, a highly competitive economic region, equitable economic development, and full integration into the global economy. These characteristics are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.<sup>7</sup> AEC may adversely affect traditional healers in rural areas, however, as they may not adapt well to global capitalization, because it results in devaluing local wisdom and ideas, a process that would eventually weaken society. Global capitalism also enhances the conversion of ideas about traditional herbal medicine and its originality by destroying the ecosystem and biodiversity, which are the major sources of traditional medicine, through such measures as the conversion of a forest into a monocrop farm.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the latter, the commercial purposes of traditional medicine have been diverted from attention to preservation of local knowledge toward massive endeavors to utilize such products for profit. Local traditional healers would find it difficult to compete with such measures.<sup>9</sup> Folk medicine has equalized cultural diversity and meets the needs of the people within Thai society. Folk medicine is indeed a form of local knowledge, a lasting legacy which involves social costs and values. The majority of folk healers treat their patients wholeheartedly without expecting anything in return, such as payment for treatment given. The relationship or

bond between folk healers and their patients is considered “adjacent,” resulting in greater understanding between them, as well as the patient’s family members. Society has evolved from the ongoing globalization process, in which media information transmission technologies have changed the attitudes and original practices related to community living.<sup>10</sup> Despite economic regional integration, the launch of the ASEAN Economic Community is likely also to contribute to and encourage outbreaks of prominent infectious diseases. This could happen with migration or the movement of people across the ASEAN member states.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, non-communicable and related diseases are increasing in low-to middle-income countries due to population growth and aging in conjunction with economic transitions, and the resulting changes in behavioral, occupational, and environmental risk factors.<sup>12</sup> They can affect populations, especially in terms of respiratory diseases.<sup>13</sup> In the current period, modernization encourages the adoption of modern lifestyles; people are suffering from chronic diseases, such as cancer, diabetes, high-blood pressure, and paralysis.<sup>14</sup> Traditional healers, as a part of the medical community in Thailand, have earnestly contributed to solving problems related to non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, stroke,<sup>15</sup> cancer and diabetes.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, traditional healers are able to offer useful treatments and perform practices in order to prevent the common symptoms connected with such diseases and some of the chronic diseases themselves. In 2001, spen-

ding on health care in Thailand reached US\$ 3.1 billion, which has since increased annually. In 2006, it reached US\$ 3.81 billion. These costs could be reduced through community care/services or primary health care. Additionally, health care provided by folk healers in the community could also reduce costs and provide individuals with effective therapy.<sup>17</sup>

Concurrently, globalization is changing the way people process their thoughts, view the world, and live their individual lives, which specifically affects traditional customs and practices rooted in the past.<sup>18</sup> In addition, globalization can evolve and grow from every aspect of capitalism, resulting in the development of “Western values” in Asian communities. In particular, health management relies mainly on modern medicine, which then can result in the abandonment of available traditional health-care practices, wisdom, and knowledge in the community, especially among the younger generation. At the same time, traditional healers tend to be those in the older age groups. Without successors, their knowledge can be lost. As a result, the benefits from traditional healers furnished to the community are less than they should be despite the rise in illnesses. Therefore, folk medicine is an important essential part of the medical spectrum.

Tabalpria Herbal Center is the main non-governmental organization (NGO) in Surin Province aimed at developing and promoting traditional wisdom based on the concept that traditional health care and its practices can

cure people's diseases in parallel with folk healers who attempt to reduce or lessen their patients' suffering, as well as retain their own significant roles in serving communities in Surin Province.

The author of this research study has striven to gather information on how traditional healers are well aware of AEC and globalization and of the impacts of these factors in Surin Province. The study also explores the extent to which local healers understand, realize, or are aware of the various changes resulting from globalization and those expected after the launch of AEC. The purposes of this study are to obtain information on how and what local traditional healers know about AEC and globalization, as well as how they are aware of the impacts of AEC on traditional medicine, its cultural practices and knowledge, and understand how local traditional practitioners are prepared for the forthcoming impacts associated with globalization and AEC.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative research study conducted using the methods of in-depth interviews, auto-ethnography, and focus group discussions. The auto-ethnographic research method was used for this research from February to March 2013. This research method enables deep understanding of the current situation being explored through combinations of self-reflection and observation of the culture, social life, and the political situation affecting traditional healers in Surin Province.

Auto-ethnography was used to express the author's own experiences about folk healers and the specific situation of the study site. The author's personal profile marks approximately more than 20 years of working experience with folk healers, both as an NGO staff member and healer herself. Thus, in the study, the auto-ethnography method put together the experiences and information of informants like links in a chain.

As an in-depth interview is a key component of qualitative research, it is important to note that traditional healers are able offer access to individuals and their personal perspectives. In-depth interviews conducted with NGO staff member were carried out in order to seek the ways that they reflect on the research concept and offer views toward the community. Moreover, they are conducted to gain understanding of the social dimension context regarding the changes related to globalization and AEC that will impact the working areas of the community, particularly that of the traditional healers and their local wisdom.

For the focus group discussions, numerous criteria were included on traditional Thai masseurs who passed formal training as they would have high-level experience with techniques and skills needed to heal patients as well transfer knowledge and technique to others.

This research was conducted in cooperation with traditional healers connected to or involved with the Tabalprai Herbal Center in Salakdai sub-district, Muaeng district

of Surin Province, Thailand. Tabalprai Herbal Center is an NGO dedicated to the community for the purpose of development, as well as the application of religious principles. This NGO center also operates in the area of self-empowerment through interactions between Western modern technologies and ecological research.

In this study, the participants were selected from among professionals, such as folk healers and NGO staff members related to Surin or working at the Tabalprai Herbal Center or related in some other way. The participants were equally divided into groups of three, including folk healers, traditional Thai masseurs, and NGO staff members. The local specialists apply treatments in distinct ways, besides massaging and using herbs.

For the in-depth interviews, the author chose informants who had either direct or indirect connection with the Tabalprai Herbal Center. Seven traditional healers, ranging in age from 50 to 75 years, were chosen to participate in the research emphasizing a number of criteria. The traditional healers were those who had healing experience and were accepted in the community. They were from Surin and were members of a network of regional traditional healers.

For the focus group discussions (FGD), eight traditional Thai masseurs, ranging in age from 30 to 50 years, were recruited. FGD were conducted initially to obtain a better understanding of the vast changes occurring in the local society and the impacts of globalization and AEC on the community, espe-

cially regarding the problems it faced. Discussion topics varied; however, they included mainly understanding of globalization and AEC, in the context of how the traditional Thai masseurs were prepared to handle AEC and globalization. Tape recordings and logistical support were arranged throughout the FGD, which consequently led to very high-quality effectiveness research. Observation was used in this research in order to examine attentively the life of folk healers. It opened up opportunities to obtain information that otherwise might have been difficult to obtain or access. Observation enabled the author to perceive and learn about the conditions of traditional healers and their practices with regard to their patients as well as their adaptation in their community.

## Results

### Perceptions of folk healers about AEC and globalization

Based on the interview, seven folk healers knew that AEC should promote free trade, reduce import duties, and experience international trade, and it would involve various resources. However, such factors would be combined to increase bargaining power internationally with various regions and sub-regions. Some folk healers were informed that it will become more convenient to travel to other ASEAN countries and that there would be free trade without taxation. Others recognized that it would be difficult to prevent rapid changes from occurring in society along with

the advancement of technology, convenient forms of transportation, continuous socioeconomic development, and increased migration. Moreover, modern rapid communication makes the connection between people simple compared with that in the past and is now a daily practice.

### **Awareness of folk healers about the impact of AEC and globalization**

#### **Discussion of both positive and negative effects**

**Positive impacts:** First, the rapid growth of technological development has triggered better quality and speed of communication. Second, these have been useful for agriculturalists in harvesting and making things run faster than before. Third, there have been increases in the use of medicinal herbs.

**Negative impacts:** First, with regard to the depletion of natural resources in areas with an abundance of such resources and herbs, the advance of technology, in order to raise production levels and improve harvesting procedures, may cause grave losses. For example, people plow over “Ta Mok Sa Rae” (a large anthill on a field with a variety of herbs and food that could be utilized). This could lead to unhealthy lifestyles and practices, and result in chronic diseases, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. As globalization takes effect, daily life may change according to new trends, including the consumption of improper food and neglect of health maintenance. Third, there can be adverse impacts on agriculture and society. In-

dividuals in the society currently have become more preoccupied with the use of electronic devices than in the past. Do they really need them? People are often referred to as lonely creatures with no ties, lacking social participation. They spend a lot of time on maintaining their lives, becoming competitive and making personal commitments that may create problems and adversely affect the quality of life, with the reality that their physical and mental health disintegrates.

### **Preparedness of folk healers for the impact of globalization and AEC**

The folk healers indicated that they realize the importance of preparing for problem-solving. First, people should strive to the fullest in order to preserve and/or restore essential natural resources, which should be protected under copyright/patent laws. Second, the wise use of natural resources and preservation of community forests will further enable the legal preservation of folk wisdom.

### **Perception of massage practitioners about AEC and globalization**

Based on a focus group discussion with eight masseurs in total, the findings show that they did not know exactly the details of AEC and its relationship with themselves. Some of them heard about it when their children did school assignments or from comments on television programs. Nevertheless, they seemed to be uninterested in and inactive concerning the topic itself. Although they said that changes were seen clearly within

the society, they were not concerned about the impact of globalization and AEC, and they offered no information about suitable preparations.

### **Perception of NGO staff members about AEC and globalization**

Informants within this group had learned and understood well the fundamental definitions concerning AEC and globalization. They explained that AEC refers mainly to an association of 10 neighboring countries, including Thailand, the purpose of which is to provide mutual economic benefits for the whole of ASEAN, as well as in terms of counterbalancing their other trading partners. AEC will create and encourage “free trade” among the member countries, and the import and export of goods will be tax-free, with the exception of a few goods. Regarding globalization, they referred to this phenomenon as a global connection without any barrier in relaying information from one party to another. Despite the settlement of people and location of communities worldwide, people are able to recognize and become greatly affected by events that may occur rapidly. It is the result as well of efficient communication and transportation of technology within the information era. As a result of globalization, there are overlapping patterns. Globalization covers the countries of the world, whereas AEC covers only a group of countries. Moreover, they stated that the impacts of globalization and AEC are as follows:

- Rapid changes include economic,

social, political, cultural, and environmental changes. These changes bring about various events which seem to be happening within a short period of time.

- Capital and free trade focuses on competitive advantages and the ability to freely trade in goods for which they may lack experience in manufacturing, thus increasing efficiency and profitability for each country.

- Dynamic movements and development is occurring everywhere all the time.

- People can become “colonized” as a result of their beliefs and economic, educational, and cultural motivation, which can serve as tools for numerous countries to dominate others. They believe that the goal of such “colonization” is to drain the resources of the colonized countries and take advantage of them.

### **Awareness of NGO staff members about the impact of AEC and globalization**

#### **Positive impacts:**

- High technology makes connections easier. People have developed efficient communication systems to communicate easily and share information.

- Able to obtain more benefits from sharing information.

#### **Negative impacts:**

- The major ecological impact is the absence of natural resources owing to changes in the manufacturing system from rice and garden crops to rubber. Owners should prepare areas suitable for the planting of rubber trees by cutting down other trees and dig-

ging holes. However, such practices have destroyed the main sources of herbal medicine. One discussant stated that the folk healers are trying to maintain the forest and preserve the herbs, but that was not possible.

- Quality development of technology and modern medicine have decreased the importance of traditional folk healers compared with the situation in the past. This has led to a reduction in the role of traditional healers, which means that communities will lose the relevant wisdom and production system, beliefs, culture and customs. In addition, the communities will lack self-reliance in health care.

- Economic growth and marketing concepts may promote consumerism and impact people's behaviors, including their lifestyles and originality. As a result, people now tend to crave and purchase goods beyond their needs as they race against time and trends to "win." However, their life will be surrounded by acute, chronic stress and anxiety. As physical and mental health work together to enhance one's ability, they can be affected by both ideas and thoughts. If such matters are ignored, both physical and mental health will soon be destroyed. People would find it difficult to live a simple life which goes at a slow pace.

- The impact of economic changes is seen as agriculturalists change the production system into that of single plantation. This requires high production costs for buying chemical fertilizers and herbicides. If

there are natural dangers during production, this will be a risk factor for agriculture to lose even more. As farmers continue to live their lives in debt, capitalists or banks will, at last, seize their land if loans cannot be repaid.

- The main impact on the environment is related to the actions of capitalists who own land and expand their territory and in the process affect natural canals. Water is being used up and destroyed. At the same time, the agricultural production system, which uses chemical fertilizers and herbicides, has been expanding annually. This greatly affects the climate. There have been changes in weather conditions that have resulted in major changes in seasons and the bizarre "greenhouse effect."

- Education systems and public policy prescriptions which were copied mainly from foreign nations have had a great impact on local people. Everything has declined, including farming. People seem uninterested in learning about the roots of their own history. The discussants stated that the education system is collapsing as people themselves now find it hard to learn.

### **Preparedness of NGO staff members for the impact of AEC and globalization**

First, with regard to the ecological impacts, the folk healers have to seek solutions to respond against the negative impacts on the ecological system. They are the preservation and restoration of natural resources and the establishment of intellectual rights. Second, regarding the impact on the role of



folk healers, the communities have to transmit knowledge of traditional and local wisdom, as well as knowledge development from local ideology, to the new generation. Third, with regard to the impact on their behavior, in a consumer society communities need to be self-sufficient, and set up a production system for increasing their self-reliance through the production of a variety of vegetables, rice, fish, chicken, and herbals. Fourth, as for the impact on the economy, the NGO staff members said that it is very important to be localized through cooperation with the community common wealth fund. "Do not rely on funding from outside but only on the ideas of wisdom, health, forest, culture, traditions, and products in the community to maintain uniqueness in the community," said a discussant. Strengthening a community-owned public market would probably foster localization, anti-globalization and AEC. In order for details concerns AEC and globalization to be better known, dialogues in gathering together government staff members or officials, NGO staff, and the people of the community would be considered most efficient.

Another measure to enhance the preparedness of NGO staff members for the impact of AEC and globalization was suggested: that they should be conscious, learn about globalization and AEC, develop self-knowledge and get to know others. The simple form of management is primary management. If it is developed as an integration network across nations, it would lead to intellectual exchanges. This would be in the form of ex-

ternal study or optional study. Moreover, to understand and simply grasp the vast changes related to policies and technical matters of AEC and globalization, it is important to learn about their pros and cons, as they serve as essential sources of information and data. Lastly, there should be a community operations committee to provide information related to the positive and negative impacts on the community, so that people could know themselves and others better without either exciting or calming them excessively.

## Discussion

The informants' perceptions about AEC and globalization were different. NGO staff members cooperated well and provided much more useful information than did the traditional folk healers. However, the traditional Thai masseurs showed less interest as their thoughts and words revealed ignorance about this topic and some knew nothing at all about the topic.

In this study, folk healers generally were selected from adults as they have had experience in their field of work. Moreover, they have had countless conversations with patients, folk healers in other areas, NGO staff members, government officers, and other individuals with different connections. These might be the main reasons for the provision of accurate, definite answers.

The background of the NGO staff members reflects this work on both dynamic activities and ongoing processes. Most of them are people from within the area who are

settled down and work continuously. Some have set up, through their own self-reliance, production bases including for farming, and production of organic rice, plants, vegetables, fruit, and herbs. The group looked broadly and deeply at the situation depicted in the area. It was shown that, being a group with a wider view, the members looked deeply into the situation through their creative ideas, and the effects that are visible to them.

The study showed that the informants acknowledge and understand well AEC and globalization. They provided opinions that, as a community has to handle changes that come along in terms of AEC and globalization, the community should return to its roots and its uniqueness. The majority of massage practitioners in this study were young women. They focused intensely on economic and social changes; however, their occupation requires time and patient to work with the patients, which may indeed affect family relationships if there is no conversation or clear understanding.

The highest number of individuals was concerned about the ecological impacts, and those on the society and on health. By contrast, unhealthy lifestyles and the lack of healthful food were found among the Thai-Khmer ethnic group in Surin Province, which had been known for the nutritional and medicinal value of its vegetation and native foods. It is indeed essential to look through times past and recall the native ways rather than relying on external factors through the use of chemicals that may affect natural resources

and public areas. The capitalist system shapes production and involves higher costs of production but does not result in higher prices for products. In the end, bankruptcy is the only way out. The current ideas and beliefs of local individuals have changed from having the greatest respect for nature to destroying it. Based on these previous aspects, elders with local knowledge were quite expressive about the cultural traditions that then became a good way of life.

However, the community ignores and pays no attention; people lack local roots but are passionate about consumerism. Therefore, the community should coordinate to recover wisdom and its local uniqueness, such as traditional healing, growing and using local herbs and vegetables, local foods and practicing traditional agriculture. Individuals should be highly respectful of and depend on nature. Moreover, they have to know and understand about AEC and globalization beforehand.

This approach would remove the local community from the crisis that has diminished its freedom and even its sustainability.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to understand the perception of folk healers in Surin Province, as well as individuals related to both AEC and globalization, regarding their awareness and preparedness for the forthcoming impacts. The informants were divided into three main groups as follows: folk healers, Thai traditional masseurs, and NGO staff

members. The results showed that both the folk healers and NGO staff members realize and know well about the impacts and changes that are soon to come. However, the Thai traditional masseurs, once interviewed, showed that they seemed to have little or no interest in this topic, which reflects a lack of understanding about this topic.

Based on the results, the informants realized that awareness of the impacts of AEC and globalization require a focus on economics, health, behaviors, the society, culture, environment, education, and policies. On the other hand, the inherited mission of folk healers toward preparedness is to make people in the community aware of their own roots and encourage localism. That way, people will have their own identities with respect to the outstanding values of their community, such as great respect for local wisdom. This is an essential key for sustainability and the meaning behind the existence of traditional healers.

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## บทคัดย่อ

โลกาภิวัตน์กับประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนในบริบทของหมอพื้นบ้าน: การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพในจังหวัดสุรินทร์

ชัชวาลย์ ขาว, ลือชัย ศรีเงินยวง, ณัฐนีย์ มีมนต์, ธรรมรัตน์ มะโรหบุตร

หลักสูตรศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาสังคมศาสตร์การแพทย์และสาธารณสุข, คณะสังคมศาสตร์และมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยมหิดล, อ.พุทธมณฑล จ.นครปฐม 73170

ผู้รับผิดชอบบทความ: choowa.c@gmail.com

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาและเข้าใจโลกาภิวัตน์กับประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนในความเป็นจริงในการรับรู้ของหมอพื้นบ้านในจังหวัดสุรินทร์โดยใช้วิธีการศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพผ่านการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก การสรุปประเด็นของผู้วิจัยที่ทำงานอยู่ในพื้นที่วิจัยและการสนทนากลุ่ม ผู้ให้ข้อมูลเป็นหมอพื้นบ้าน หมอนวดและเจ้าหน้าที่องค์กรพัฒนาเอกชน ผลการศึกษาพบว่าความเป็นจริงของการรับรู้โลกาภิวัตน์กับประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนของหมอพื้นบ้านค่อนข้างเหมือนกัน หมอพื้นบ้านและนักพัฒนามองปัญหาได้กว้างและลึกกว่าหมอนวดภารกิจหลักที่สำคัญสำหรับการเตรียมความพร้อมรับมือกับโลกาภิวัตน์กับประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนคือทำให้ชุมชนตระหนักถึงรากเหง้าของตนเองในชุมชนและต้องหันกลับมาสู่การปรับตัวของชุมชนและการใช้ชีวิตแบบพอเพียง

การศึกษานี้เสนอว่าต้องร่วมกันฟื้นฟูสิทธิของภูมิปัญญาการแพทย์พื้นบ้านและความรู้ท้องถิ่นโดยพัฒนาความรู้จากชุมชน สร้างอัตลักษณ์ของท้องถิ่นขึ้นมา และให้มีการบริหารจัดการเพื่อการใช้ทรัพยากรของท้องถิ่นอย่างยั่งยืน

คำสำคัญ: โลกาภิวัตน์, ประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน, หมอพื้นบ้าน