‘Leadership in a Bangkok Slum: An ethnography of Thai urban poor in the Lang Wat Pathum Wanaram Community’

Alan R. Johnson
OCMS, Ph.D
July 2006

ABSTRACT

This research uses an ethnographic approach to study leadership, viewed broadly as social influence processes, in the Lang Wat Pathum Wanaram slum in Bangkok, Thailand. The purpose of the study was to develop a cultural account of how leadership is perceived and practised both within the community itself and in its broader relations with the state. Previous research on leadership in Thailand has tended to be either descriptive and lacking a theoretical base, or focused on verifying Western generated theory among highly educated subjects. This research was designed around the theoretical frameworks of attribution theory, implicit leadership theory, and cultural models, all of which are sensitive to issues of culture. Systematic data collection was used to establish baseline sociolinguistic data and then interview and participant observation data were added to establish a series of models and key concepts. The analysis explores the configurations and interrelationships of these models and concepts, and examines how they are utilized in social action. The research findings include the Thuukjai Leader Model (TLM) representing an implicit leadership theory of culturally preferred leadership in the community, the trustworthy (chuathuu) leader who exhibits a constellation of behaviours related to TLM giving and task behaviour, the Sakdi Administrative Behaviour Leadership Heuristic (SABLH) that affects both leader practice and follower perception, and the role of groups made up of primarily horizontal relations in task accomplishment. Community leaders also relate to the state, which brings both development and the forces of eviction. The community cannot simply be seen as playing the client role to the state-as-patron. Instead both a public and hidden transcript can be observed, and everyday forms of resistance are practised as state views are modified, rejected, or resisted in various forms.