

Thailand: Traditions of the Household, Temple Fair & Court

A potter works at home in Maha Sarakham Province, Northeast Thailand. Potters in this village produce unglazed vessels for the local market.

Photo by Richard Kennedy



by Richard Kennedy

Many Americans become acquainted with one aspect of Thai culture when they eat at one of the hundreds of Thai restaurants that have opened in American cities over the past two decades. These establishments have enriched American cuisine at the same time that the Southeast Asian community has enriched the ethnic composition of our country, and they offer Americans a glimpse of Thailand quite different from the images wrought by the Vietnam War or, earlier, by the ever-popular Broadway hit, "The King and I."

There is of course much more to Thai culture

than its food. For several millennia, Thailand has been a crossroads of Chinese, Indian, and other regional cultural traditions. This history is reflected in the diversity and complexity of modern Thailand, a predominantly Buddhist nation of over 58 million people located in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia. It has been a challenge

This program is produced in collaboration with the Thailand Office of the National Culture Commission with support from Esso Standard Thailand Ltd., Jim Thompson Thai Silk Co., Ltd., J.H.W. Thompson Foundation, Thailand Education and Public Welfare Foundation, the Education and Public Welfare Foundation – Thailand, and the Smithsonian Institution International Exchanges Program.

for the Thailand Office of the National Culture Commission and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies to organize a Festival of American Folklife program that represents the cultures of this complex society with only 75 traditional artists. A partial solution has been to focus on three arenas of Thai cultural life – the household, the temple fair, and the royal court – where food, along with performance genres and crafts, serve to define what is uniquely Thai.

The geographical area now known as Thailand has been settled for over 10,000 years. Archeological evidence at Ban Chiang in Northeast Thailand confirms the practice of rice cultivation perhaps as early as 4000 B.C., bronze production as early as 3000 B.C., and some of the earliest examples of textiles and pottery in world history. The linguistic evidence is speculative but points to a presence first of Austronesian (present-day Indonesian and Polynesian)-speaking peoples, and later, of Austroasiatic (Mon and Khmer)-speaking peoples who settled throughout Southeast Asia over several millennia B.C. In the first millennium A.D., Mon and Khmer peoples, influenced by Indian civilization, established the first organized states in the region. The extent of the 7th-century Mon kingdom of Dvaravati in the Chao Phaya River basin remains unclear; however, the power of the subsequent Khmer kingdoms that centered around Angkor Wat in present-day Cambodia is well documented. The influence of these empires and of the peoples whose ancestors built them is still felt in modern Thailand.

Most people in contemporary Thailand speak a language which belongs to the T'ai family. These languages are closer in structure to Chinese than to Khmer or Indonesian. Although some aspects of the origins of T'ai-speaking peoples are still subject to debate, most scholars seem to agree that they came from an area in southeast China, where many T'ai speakers still live. These immigrants probably came to central Thailand in the first millennium A.D. while the Khmer empire was flourishing. With the decline of the Khmer empire, T'ai speakers established a central Thai kingdom based first at the capital of Sukhothai and then farther south at Ayutthaya. With the destruction of

Ayutthaya, a city of 800,000, in 1767 by Burmese troops, the capital moved southward again, and in 1782 a new dynasty, the Chakri, was established in Bangkok. The present monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, is the ninth in the line of Chakri rulers.

Thailand remained independent throughout the 19th century and served, in part, as a buffer between the French in Indochina and the British in Burma and Malaysia. To retain this independence the Chakri kings had to give up some of their territory to the European powers. Khmer and Lao lands went to the French, Shan and Muslim lands to the British. By the time the constitutional monarchy was promulgated in 1932, the borders of present-day Thailand had been established. As



Temple fairs occur throughout Thailand to celebrate the Buddha's birthday, the anniversary of his teachings, the founding of the temple, and other community and national events. Photo courtesy Royal Thai Embassy

with most nation-states, these borders cut across ethnic and linguistic communities.

Twentieth-century Thailand is generally recognized to be divided into four regions, Central, North, Northeast, and South; each has its distinctive dialect of Thai. Central Thai, however, is the standard language used in education and broadcasting. Although over 85 percent of the population of Thailand have, to varying degrees, learned to speak and read central Thai, a majority of the



people speak a different dialect or even language at home. Approximately 50 percent speak Northern or Northeastern Thai, a sizable number of people speak Khmer or Mon, while nearly 11 percent of the population are ethnic Chinese. Four percent are Muslim, who live mainly in the South and speak Jawi, a form of Malay. Groups of Sino-Tibetan-speaking tribal people (Hmong, Karen, Lahu, and others) live mostly in the Northern mountains and comprise less than 1 percent of the population.

The cultural diversity of the country has been a subject of concern since the 19th century and especially after the constitutional monarchy was established in 1932. Among attempts by nationalist, and particularly anti-communist, movements to unify the country were a series of cultural mandates promulgated from 1939 to 1942 under Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram. The best known of these changed the name of the nation from Siam to Thailand. Siam primarily named central Thailand, and the government wanted to confirm the broader geographical boundaries of

A troupe performs lakhon chatri, a dance-drama reflecting many of the aesthetics of court dance. They often perform in temples in Phetchaburi Province. Even though courtly in appearance, the stories for the dance come from the Buddhist Jatakas and are full of risqué humor, satire, and buffoonery. Photo by Richard Kennedy

the state. Although the term *thai* actually means “free,” it also resonates with the T’ai language family and establishes a close association between all T’ai speakers and all Thailand.

Later mandates discouraged individual identification with the four regions and encouraged the teaching of the national language, Central Thai. The subsequent teaching of Central Thai has helped to unify the country, but regional identity has remained alive, without apparent detriment to the nation-state.

Earlier in the century, King Rama VI had proclaimed three pillars of the state – nation, Buddhism, and monarchy – an ideology of national unity like that of state monarchs of his day.



A procession of courtiers are accompanied by musicians as they enter the compound of the Grand Palace in 1930. Photo courtesy Thailand National Archives, Department of Fine Arts

These pillars have continued to guide state formation and development. The Festival program on Thailand chooses a different triad – “Household, Temple Fair, and Court” – and explores three arenas of Thai life in which distinctive aspects of the nation’s culture are manifest.

Home and family remain important anchors in the lives of Thai people as they do in the lives of many people in rapidly changing societies. Most ceremonies for birth, marriage, and death, which often employ Hindu rites and include the participation of Buddhist monks, take place in the house. And many of the deeply rooted craft traditions of Thailand – weaving, metalwork, and even the production of instruments and masks for various performance traditions – are still conducted at home, using skills and knowledge passed down within family and community. In the Household Area of the Festival one can find these home-based traditions, and a narrative stage for discussing the changing cultural traditions of the country. These discussions will include demonstrations of rituals that are most often done at home and have roots in animist traditions.

Many public events, including fairs, take place at a local religious institution called a *wat*. A *wat*, sometimes misleadingly translated as monastery, is found in almost every village, and provides a

home and school for monks, as well as a center for family, community, and national celebrations. It also can provide a temporary shelter for homeless persons and, in the city, for newly arrived immigrants.

Seasonal celebrations held in the *wat* include the annual temple festival, the Rains Retreat during which young Thai men for a brief period take their vows to be monks, the Buddha’s birthday, and the anniversary of the first teachings of the Buddha. The temple fair (*ngaan wat*) is an opportunity for the community to meet, buy food and small items including Buddha amulets, and see performances by local dance-drama troupes. Funerals are also sometimes held in the *wat* compound and may include music and traditional performances such as the puppet theater. The Temple Fair Area at the Festival will attempt to recreate the feel of a *wat* celebration with large shade umbrellas and displays. Mural painters and gilt artists will decorate a temple wall nearby where kite makers and lacquerware artists demonstrate the skills of temple fair crafts. Nearby a stage will host puppet theater, *lakhon chatri* dance-drama, and *mo lam* singing.

In selecting “Court” as the third arena of Thai culture, the Festival may appear to have departed from what some consider the class base of folk-life presentations. However, those familiar with

Thailand agree about the pervasive and ongoing influence of the monarchy and its culture on the region up to the present day. This influence affects and is intertwined with the cultural lives of most Thai people.

For example, Cambodians and Lao people, as well as Thais in the United States, most often choose to make dance and music traditions of the court part of their cultural identity; these traditions are developed as their community's representative art, which becomes the cultural inheritance of American-born children. This cultural choice is not surprising when the meaning of the monarchy, especially in present-day Thailand, is understood.

King Bhumibol continues to be a symbol of national unity. He has selectively stepped in to solve political controversies with the approval of a vast majority of Thai people. The king is a symbol of Thai Buddhism despite the strong influence of the Khmer language and of Hinduism in much of the language and ritual of the central Thai courts from the 13th century onwards. The refined artistic traditions of the court reflect the complexities in the region, and the king embodies their successful and meaningful integration.

There is an enduring artistic exchange between court arts and village traditions. The artists of the court and their traditions have continued to come from villages throughout Thailand – weavers from the Northeast, dancers from Cambodia, ceramics from Thai-Chinese potters. H.M. Queen Sirikit perpetuates this close relationship through her sponsorship of the SUPPORT Foundation, which

Richard Kennedy is the co-curator of the Thailand program at the 1994 Festival of American Folklife. He previously was the curator of the Hawai'i ('89) and Indonesia ('91) programs at the Festival and concurrently is Chairperson of South Asian Area Studies at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center.

has been active in reviving local craft traditions and assisting in the development and distribution of products to supplement the incomes of thousands of village women.

The same close interrelationship that exists between court and village is also found between temple and household. Throughout the Festival program the audience has an opportunity to see these connections. A mask maker working at home fashions *wai khru* masks used ritually by performance troupes, monkey masks for a court *khon* performance, and toy masks given to children at home and sold to tourists at a temple fair. A Pu Thai weaver in Kalasin or a Khmer weaver in a small Surin village weaves cloth for everyday wear, silks for wear at the annual temple fair, and fine silk sashes for others to wear at court. The *lakhon chatri* drama troupe appears at a temple fair in courtly finery but soon begins to make fun of ancient ways and modern predicaments.

Traditions of the home, the temple fair, and the court have been interwoven throughout Thai history.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Cummings, Joe. 1992. *Thailand, a Travel Survival Kit*. Berkeley: Lonely Planet Publications.
- Ekachai, Sanitsuda. 1990. *Behind the Smile: Voices of Thailand*. Bangkok: Post Publishing Co.
- Keyes, Charles F. 1987. *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*. Boulder: Westview.
- Klausner, William J. 1981. *Reflections on Thai Culture*. Bangkok: The Siam Society.
- Reynolds, Craig J. (ed.). 1991. *National Identity and Its Defenders, Thailand, 1939-1989*. Clayton, Australia: Monash University.
- Warren, William. 1989. *Thai Style*. Singapore: Times Editions.
- Wyatt, David K. 1982. *Thailand: A Short History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.