

RICE, THE GRAIN OF CULTURE

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Introduction

For more than half of humanity, rice is life. It is the grain that has shaped the history, culture, diet, and economy of billions of people of Asia. Many of them sleep on rice straw, drink rice liquor and offer rice to their gods. The growth stage of the rice crop marks the passage of time and season. In the languages of China, Japan and many others, the day begins with "morning rice" and ends with "evening rice." In this part of the world, rice is not just a cereal; it is the root of civilization.

In Thailand, rice is the essence of life. It permeates all aspects of the life of people from all walks of life. Rice is in music, particularly folk songs. It is in various forms of the arts – from poems to paintings to sculptures. It is in tradition, folklore, ritual and even language. For most of us, life without rice is simply unthinkable. Yet rice is almost always taken for granted. As societies become more affluent, they are becoming less attached to rice. The rich rice cultural heritage is fast disappearing, and we need to do something before there is nothing left to preserve.

This paper discusses some of the more significant aspects of the rice culture of Thailand, and describes some projects of the Thai Rice Foundation that is designed to preserve this rich rice cultural heritage.

Rice, an Ancient Crop

From archeological evidence, based on the print of the paddy (unmilled rice) in the ancient bricks discovered from Ampur Non Nok Tha in Korn Kaen Province, rice has been planted before 5,500 years ago (around 2960 b.c.). This is even earlier than in China (around 2737 b.c.) and in India (around 1957 b.c.). Furthermore, drawings of ancient people at Pha Taem in Ubon Rajathanee province that date back to 6,000 years ago show rice planting, water conservation, and various types of foods produced in a rice farm such as fish, prawn, crab, and some domesticated animals such as cow, buffalo and chicken.

Since then, rice cultivation has spread all over the world. Rice grows happily in tiny fields along the Khyber Pass, beside Lake Balaton in Hungary, and along the Murrumbidgee River in New South Wales. And with all that rain, the plains of Spain turn out mucho arroz, the basis of that famous rice dish, paella. But, on the world scale, these are the exotic rice harvests, destined to be made into rice puddings, or thrown for luck at weddings, "a custom," says the encyclopedia, "clearly of Eastern origin." Of everyday, run-of-the-mill rice, ninety percent of the world's crop is grown in Asia.

Over the centuries, rice has shaped the landscape, culture and character of the Asian peoples. Look behind the sweeping beauty of the terraces of Bali and Banaue and you

will find societies whose customs and rituals are inextricably tied to the rice they grow. Wherever the crop has been planted, festivals, traditions, rituals, and languages celebrate its importance. Even for those for whom rice is an everyday sight, something magical – more like spiritual -- still radiates from the depths of the green fields.

Thais, thought to be the world's first rice cultivators, carried rice with them wherever they went during their early migrations throughout Southeast Asia, South Asia, and China. In fact their sole concern, when choosing land on which to settle, appears to have been whether or not there was enough water to plant rice. The vast river valleys and deltas, known today as Thailand, suited this purpose so well that the Thais finally organized themselves into a single nation here nearly a thousand years ago.

Established by a people who seem to have a spiritual connection with the grain, Thailand seemed destined to become the rice bowl of Asia. Thailand has led the world in rice exports since the 1960s, and the quality of Thai rice, according to the perception of many discerning Asians, is considered the best in the world.

Rice Rituals

Rice is the only crop that Thai farmers arrange to give 'blessings' at every stage of its life, from planting to harvesting. It is done to boost morale and reduce worries, with the hope that the produce will be abundant and will ultimately bring joy, happiness and stability to the farmers, their families and the community as a whole. Thus, the various rituals of rice are closely related to both the communal way of life and their religious beliefs. They emphasize the need to live together in harmony and to be mutually supportive. In addition, such rituals also play an important role on the village economy that involves rice production, distribution and exchange. Some examples are the following:

- *Rituals for rain making.* They aim at requesting the power that be to bless the lives of the farmers so that they be free from harm and/or calamities and achieve prosperity throughout the year, and more specifically to ask for rains before they prepare the land for planting and also throughout the crop season. Varying forms of the Rain-Pleading Ceremony are practiced in the northeast, primarily because it is a rain-fed rice area (i.e., nonirrigated area). In the north, the rituals are more for giving offerings to the Water Spirit, who protects water sources, so there will be enough water throughout the cultivating season. This ceremony is a chance for all farmers who depend on the same water source to get together and discuss the work before their operation starts.

- *Rituals for protecting the rice crop.* These rituals mark the end of transplanting. They give offerings to ancestral and wandering spirits to ask them to protect and nurture the rice crop towards a plentiful harvest. They also pay homage to Mae Posop, the Rice Mother, to gain protection of the rice fields throughout the whole season.
- *Rituals for bountiful harvest.* This is done to show respect to 'rice' in order that the harvest will be abundant and so that both farmers and their animals will be free from harm during the harvesting process. The rite is also a thanksgiving ceremony to Mae Posop, as well as an apology if she was disturbed during plowing, planting and harvesting. In some cases, it also celebrates the completion of all the hard work for the current crop and to wish for a plentiful harvest in the next crop.

Rice Goddesses

In most rice-growing countries of Asia, the spirit of rice resides in the Rice Mother or the Rice Goddess. In Indonesia, Dewi Sri is the rice mother and goddess of life and fertility. She is the best loved and most worshipped Hindu deity. She is everywhere, from everyday rituals -- such as putting pinches of rice along the edges of fields to keep evil spirits and animals at bay -- to grand temple celebrations with elaborate offerings of dyed rice paste, the Balinese fervently honor their Rice Mother.

In Thailand, the Rice Goddess is Mae Posop. Mae Posop and the Balinese Rice Goddess, Dewi Sri, are treated in similar ways -- respectful and protective. Just as mothers give food and milk to their children, so Mae Posop gives her body and soul to everyone.

The birth and life of Mae Posop appear in the legend and folklore of all regions of the country. There is evidence indicating that the image of Mae Posop was designed at least 700-800 years ago, although that has essentially remained unchanged until today. From the way Mae Posop is portrayed (the way she sits and the way she dresses, for example), it is generally believed that she is a local goddess in contrast to most others that were taken from India. The thing that is interesting about Mae Posop, both in terms of art and her dominance as the rice goddess, is the way she is presented in all paintings and statues: that is Mae Posop always hold a rice shaft or several rice shafts in her hand.

Mae Posop is the goddess who is the protector of rice. Thai people, since ancient times, believe that rice is important for their survival. Farmers in particular will hold various rituals that demonstrate their deep respect and gratitude to Mae Posop, at varying stages through out the growing season, from land preparation to panicle initiation to harvesting. They believe that that would bring them prosperity and wealth.

Whoever tills and cultivates the soil ought to worship the Rice Mother, for she will endow him/her with health and wealth. Whoever does not worship her will suffer as a consequence. He will be emaciated by hunger and sickness, and harassed by poverty. A man who is careful, whether in reaping, threshing or pounding paddy, and does not allow any grains to be scattered over the ground, will be happy and wealthy. If no care is taken and the paddy is allowed to be trodden over or disturbed by animals, or left over in a damp place, the Mother will be angry and leave the careless owner. That person will then be unlucky in his occupation.

At the panicle initiation stage, which is considered to be equivalent to Mae Posop being pregnant, offerings of bitter fruits (limes and lemons) and mirror are made. It is believed that the pregnant Rice Goddess craves bitter fruits and, as she is at the peak of her beauty, she would enjoy admiring herself in a mirror. Offerings are carried to the fields by women, as the Rice Goddess is shy and would be frightened away by men, which would ruin the crop. No loud noises are made in the rice field. When the rice ears begin to form, the rice plants are looked on as infants, and women go through the fields 'feeding' the flowering rice with rice pap, just as they would a baby.

At harvest time, it is traditional for Thai farmers to designate certain heads of rice as the Rice Mother. These are cut with a small knife concealed in the hand, so as not to scare the fearful rice spirit. Once this has been done, the rest of the rice can be cut with other implements, ready for a celebratory harvest dance. At one time, reapers in the field conversed in a special form of speech that would be unintelligible to the rice spirit, so that it had no warning of the impending harvest knife. When harvest comes, Mae Posop is thanked and her pardon asked for reaping the rice. The rice is then cut and carried to the threshing floor. A woman goes back to the stubble and collects some of the fallen rice grains and places them in a little basket. She takes some straw and makes a doll from it (no more than the size of her hand). Settling it in among the rice grains, the woman calls to the rice soul to come and inhabit the doll. The basket is then carried back to the granary, where it is installed with ceremony.

Old people, especially country folk, used to tell their children while taking their meals of rice and condiments to give special consideration to the rice as an act of respect to Mae Posop, the Rice Mother. When raising the hand to place a spoon full of rice into the mouth, a person must be careful not to let any rice fall on the floor as such an act is deemed bad manners. Moreover, one must not step over any grain of boiled rice that has fallen on the floor or on the ground. At the end of the meals, young children are taught to thank the Rice Mother with a 'wai' (the Thai gesture of respect made by raising the two hands joined together).

When referring to the Mother or to the paddy and rice, no impolite and obscene words are to be used. Any rice which is found wanting in boiling and deficient in quality may not be criticized unless a pardon from the Mother has been obtained beforehand. If one is to make a remark that the boiled rice has a musty, disagreeable smell he/she ought to say “I beg the Mother’s pardon, the rice is hard and unpalatable” or “the rice is smelly.”

When feeding animals either with paddy or rice, whether in a raw state or boiled, it must not be heaped or poured on the ground but be placed properly in a vessel. Failure to do so or allowing the paddy and rice to be scattered and strewn on the ground is an act of disrespect to the Mother. She will be angry and leave the person who is so disrespectful.

Stealing rice or paddy is deemed a very unlucky act that nobody should ever dare attempt.

Rice and the King



The influence of rice is not only felt at the level of ordinary citizens. It also prescribes the roles and responsibilities of government leaders including the King and members of the Royal Family. The word 'king' in Thai (or Kasat) means the owner and ruler of the land, whose duty is to protect the farmland from dangers and calamities. Thus, an important role of the Thai kings has always been the 'protector of rice farms,' so that their subjects can continue to enjoy the fruits of the land and to sustain their lives and well-being from one generation to another.

One of the most colorful annual events in Thailand is the Royal Plowing Ceremony, which has been held for more than 700 years. This ancient Brahmanical rite is held in the public ground in front of the grand palace in Bangkok, during the sixth lunar month (around May, as the regular rice-growing season approaches) to produce bountiful crops and boost farmers' morale. The two main activities in the Royal Plowing Ceremony are (a) the rite to predict the amount of rainfall and the bounty of the harvest in the coming season, and (b) the actual plowing of the field by Lord of the Festival (Phraya Raek Na) with a pair of ceremonial bulls and the scattering of rice seeds from gold baskets carried by four Nang Thepis (fair ladies). These rice seeds come from the rice crops grown in the Palace. At end of the formal ceremony, spectators rush to the ceremonial field and pick up the sacred rice grains to take home for planting or for keeping as hallowed items.

His Majesty the King attaches great importance to the Royal Plowing Ceremonies and had attended the ceremony for many years. In recent years, he has delegated the Crown Prince to attend the ceremony on his behalf.

Rice as Food

Rice has been the staple food of the Thai people from ancient time. Thais eat both glutinous and non-glutinous rice, prepared as meals, as snacks, as desserts and as drinks. Outlined below are the many manifestations of the importance of rice as a component of their food.

- *The phrase Kin Kao (consume rice):* Rice is so central to Thai food culture that the most common term for 'eat' is 'kin kao' (consume rice) and one of the most common greetings is 'kin kao laew reu young' (have you consumed rice yet).
- *The many ways of consuming rice:* Numerous ways of consuming rice have evolved over time, from the normal way of cooking rice to boiling to steaming and to grilling in bamboo. Also evolved are the many different sizes and shapes of 'rice pots,' which are dependent on the particular way that rice is cooked. Rice is generally eaten with varying kinds of 'dishes,' made of meat, vegetables, and other condiments, which are appropriately and generically called 'Khap Kao' or literally translated as 'with rice.' This has also resulted in having many different designs of containers where rice and the meat/vegetable dishes are placed before serving.
- *Rice, a food not to be wasted:* Since childhood, Thais are taught not to waste rice. Thus, a number of ways of cooking techniques have been designed to recycle leftover rice. Any rice remaining after a meal must not be thrown away, but must be put on the top of new boiled rice in the cooking pot. As an alternative, it may be dried in the sun as dried boiled rice "kao taak," which is generally used as ready food by country folk while traveling on a long journey. In former times, soldiers in the battle-field brought Kao Taak as their provisions so they had no need to make a fire for cooking which endangers the troop in the battle field. Drinking water after a meal of Kao Taak also helped the soldiers feel full for a long while because the rice crackers expanded after absorbing water.

Crust of rice sticking to the bottom of a rice pan or rice pot is eaten as Kao Tang. When it is fried and sprinkled with sugar and coconut flakes, it becomes a dessert (or Khanom) called Kao Tang Tod, a favorite family snack commonly given to the children as a reward for their help in the kitchen chores.

Kao Tu is another khanom, which is prepared by grinding dried leftover rice, mixing it with heavy syrup and ground roasted rice grains before shaping this into thick coins. Kao Tu has a very sweet smell as it is smoked with fragrant candle, kenanga and jasmine.

Rice in Music

Folk songs can be related to the stages of rice farming, from the beginning of the rice-growing season until after harvest. When rains of the wet monsoon came, plowing and sowing could get underway, but if the rains were delayed, the farm folk would put a cat in a creel and parade it around the village to ask the gods for rain. This song is sung by a leader who is answered by a chorus, and usually begins with “Oh Mistress Cat ...” and ends with “and the rain comes pouring down, and the rain comes pouring down.” The lyrics contain coarse language repeated again and again, and when the parade arrives at each house in the village, the owner splashes water on the cat. It is believed that the cat, an animal that hates water, placed in a creel, a basket for aquatic animals, and the coarse language act as a secret method that will induce the gods to send the rain.

Such simple ceremonies accompanied as they were with merry making bespeak the optimistic outlook on life and the world that so typified traditional agrarian society.

And when the rice is ready for harvest, the owner of the field to be harvested first would prepare food for the neighbors, who would come to help cutting, binding, and carrying the sheaves of rice. Exchanging labor among themselves like this, the farm folk moved from field to field until they had brought in the harvest of everyone in the village.

To relieve their weariness as they bent over to cut the ears of rice, the farm folk would sing “harvest songs” back and forth to one another, and when they took a break from work or when the harvesting was done, they would sing and dance holding sheaves of rice in one hand and sickles in the other.

When the rice had been harvested, there was still the work of threshing and storing the crop. To lighten their labor on the threshing floor, farm folk would sing to one another songs in parts like “turning the straw,” “sifting the rice,” and “gathering the grain.”

After all the work of the harvest had been completed, the farmers saw that the sweat of their brows had been transformed into rice in the granary, and with their cares and worries at an end, they gave themselves up to joyous celebration.

With the passage of time, rural life has changed just as life in all other segments of society. All sorts of machinery have appeared in the fields. And farm folk have adapted the new ways. Happily, though, despite all the changes, many Thai farmers still have a place for songs in the open fields.

Preservation of the Rich Rice Cultural Heritage

This century has seen more changes in the world than any other time in history. The advent of electronic communications has made all geographic and cultural borders permeable, with nations eager to adopt the traits of others. In such an atmosphere Thailand's cultural past is endangered, and with it the many traditions that make the country and its people so unique. Traditional lifestyles give way to newly introduced comforts, while Western music, food and dress mesmerize and overwhelm the Thai people, particularly the young.

There is no doubt that rice is still an integral part of the lives and well-being of Thai people. But with science and technology and globalization becoming more and more a part of their lives, most of the rice tradition, belief, and local wisdom have already disappeared and what remains is likely to follow suit. This is understandably so. As people have become more sophisticated over the years, they tend to shed those ancient beliefs that no longer have a place in their lives. Occasionally, when an ancient custom is remembered, it is treated as a superstition or it becomes part of an accepted ritual.

The importance of rice and its culture must remain with the Thai people. Thus, it is very important that all Thais – young and old alike -- should be made aware of the history of rice and its impact on the country's economy, political, social, culture and tradition and how it has become an integral part of our lives and of the societies in which we live.

A key mandate of the Thai Rice Foundation is the preservation of the rich rice cultural heritage of Thailand. Projects and activities of the Thai Rice Foundation related to the preservation of the Thai rice culture are outlined below:

- The workshop on "Rice Culture and Thai Society in the Future" was held on 7 February 2000, involving about 40 participants who are professors of anthropology and sociology from various universities, rice scientists, and the media.
- Immediately after the end of the February 2000 Workshop, the Rice Culture Working Group, comprising of rice cultural workers from such universities as Chulalongkorn, Kasetsart, and Mahidol, and from the Office of the National Cultural Commission – all of whom are committed to preserving rice culture in the country -- was established. One of the projects of the Rice Culture Working Group is the publication in May of the book, "Rice, in Arts and Cultures." It is the first of the series of rice publications that the Working Group plans to publish.
- The Rice Garden will be established at a public park in Bangkok to educate the general public about rice and its culture. It involves a simulated rice field showing rice plants of different varieties and at different growth stages, and a Rice Information Hut where basic information and news on rice are displayed. A structured rice-walk

program will be held during weekends or upon request. Rice cultural programs, including a demonstration of rice-based food from different regions of the country, will be arranged periodically.

- The Thai Rice Foundation, with relevant organizations in the country, will develop a Thai Rice Culture Exhibit for the Asian Rice Culture Exhibit, which will be held during the 2002 International Rice Conference, Beijing, China, in September 2002. It will be featured along with similar exhibits from other Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, India, Japan, and the Philippines.

Preservation of the rice culture in Thailand is a gigantic task that no one institution can do alone. It must be undertaken as a concerted effort of both public and private organizations and also of people from all walks of life.

Interested parties who wish to join in and/or provide support to these activities should contact:

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