

Unit 12 e: Thailand

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Impact of Theravada Buddhist thought on Thai society
- Adaptation of Hindu marriage rites by Thai Buddhists
- Merit making status of monastic communities
- Variety of ethnic groups--Khmer, Mon, Vietnamese, Chinese and South Asians--within Thailand
- Close ties of sangha and Thai governments
 - Status of religious minorities (primarily Muslims) within Thailand

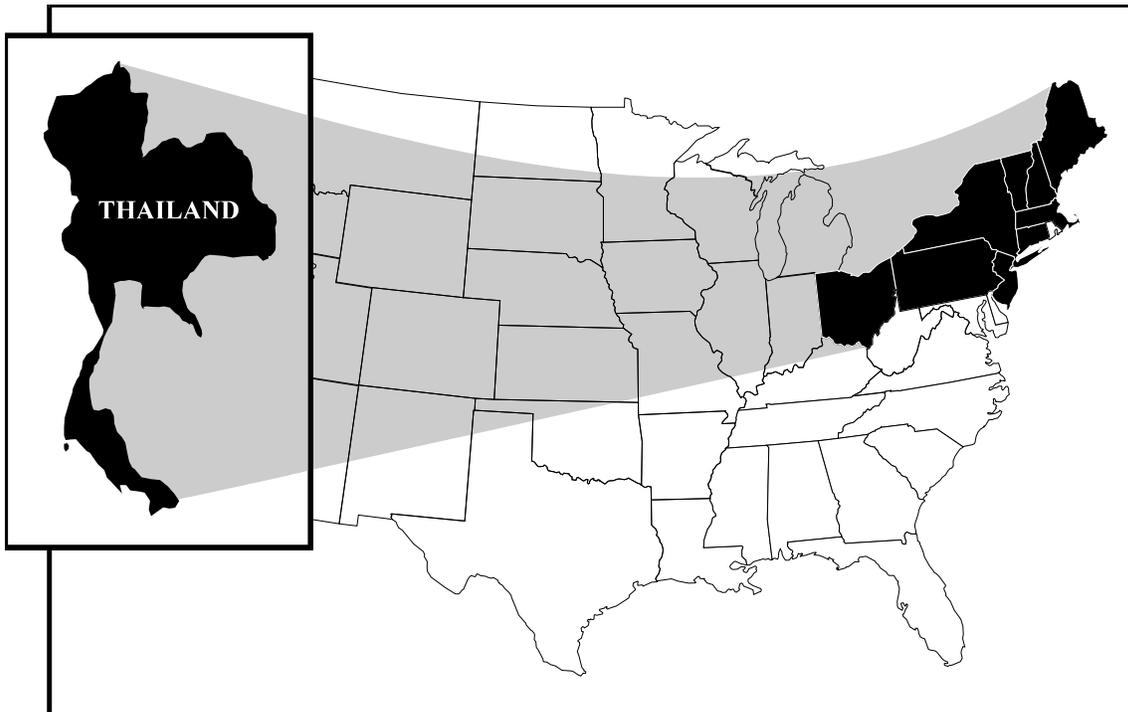
Identify

- Five Buddhist precepts
- Wat
- Chakri Day
- King Chulalongkorn (Rama V)
 - Emerald Buddha

Realize

- Importance of merit making in Thai Buddhist culture
- Prevalence of spirits in the Thai worldview
- Appeal of monastic community--whether for lifelong stays or short duration--to Thai people
- Practice of Islam in some of Thailand's southernmost provinces
 - Causes, effects and preventive measures taken toward prostitution in Thailand

Thailand



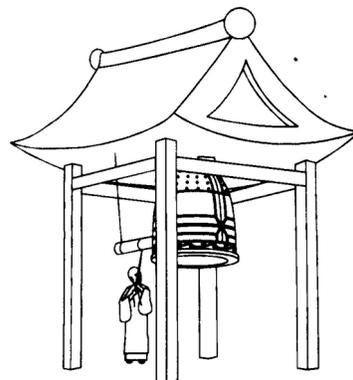
<u>Population</u>	60,271,300
% under 15 years	23%
<u>Commo</u>	
TV	1:17
Radio	1:6
Phone	1:36
Newspaper	72:1,000
<u>Health</u>	
Life Expectancy	Male 65/Female 72
Hospitals	1:604
Doctors	1:4,327
IMR	36:1,000
<u>Income</u>	\$5,500.00 per cap
<u>Literacy Rate</u>	89%

1. Religious Groups

a. Buddhist (95%) Theravada Buddhism

(1) Merit making "The acts that bring merit are, in principle, those that conform as closely as possible to the ethical demands of the Noble Eightfold Path. Acts that support the brotherhood of monks are also included.

Consequently, providing material support, e.g., food, to the members of the sangha, showing them deference, underwriting and participating in certain ceremonies, and supporting the construction and maintenance of the wat (what--Buddhist worship center) have come to be the chief methods of gaining merit.



The powerful ethical content of the Noble Eightfold Path is reduced to five precepts or injunctions. The laity are expected to refrain from the following: taking life, stealing, lying, engaging in illicit sexual relations, and drinking intoxicating liquors.

Thai Buddhists--like many followers of other religions--select only a few of the Buddha's teachings to guide them. Many Buddhist principles, while not actually practiced, are venerated as ideals." (Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are from the Library of Congress Country Studies/Area Handbooks--Thailand.)

(2) Improvement

"What is hoped for is an improved condition in this life or the next.

In Thai thinking, the ideas of merit and demerit so essential to the doctrine of karma are linked linguistically to those of good and evil; good and merit are both bun; evil and the absence of merit are bap. The Theravada idea of

karma (and the Thai peasant's understanding of it) charges the individual with responsibility for good and evil acts and their consequences. Thai do not rely solely on the accumulation of merit, however gained, to bring that improved state into being. Other forms of causality, ranging from astrology to the action of spirits of various kinds, are also part of their outlook."

(3) Spirits

"The world of the Thai villager (and that of many city folk as well) is inhabited by a host of spirits of greater or lesser relevance to an individual's well-being. Although many of these are not sanctioned by Buddhist scripture or even by Buddhist tradition, many monks, themselves of rural origin and essentially tied to the village, are as likely as the peasant to accept the beliefs and rituals associated with spirits."

(a) Phi (pee) *"Most important are the spirits included in the rather heterogeneous category of phi, thought to have power over human beings. The category includes spirits believed to have a permanent existence and others that are reincarnations of deceased human beings. Phi exist virtually everywhere--in trees, hills, water, animals, the earth, and so on. Some are malevolent, others beneficial."*



(b) Ghosts *"The ghosts of persons who died violently under mysterious circumstances or whose funeral rites were improperly performed constitute another class of phi; almost all of these spirits are malevolent."*

In contrast, the ghosts of notable people are said to reside in small shrines along the roads and are referred to as "spirit lords." They are often petitioned in prayers and can enter and possess the bodies of mediums to give oracles.

Among the more important of the spirits and ghosts is the evil phi pop (ghoul spirit), which, at the instigation of witches, can enter human beings and consume their internal organs."

(c) Chao (jou-oh) "Another category consists of the chao (guardian spirits), of which perhaps the most important is the chao thi, or guardian of the house compound (an alternative name is phra phum). Fixed on a post in the compound of most houses in Thailand's central region is a small spirit dwelling. Food offerings are made to the chao thi on the anniversary of the spirit's installation in the house, on New Year's Day, and on other special days. The spirit is told of the arrival of guests who are to stay any length of time, of projected journeys by members of the family, and of births and deaths. The spirit's intercession is also sought during illness and misfortune.



Other spirits protect gardens, the rice fields, and the wat. The spirit of the rice field is worshipped only once a year, at the beginning of the rice planting; the Rice Goddess receives offerings when the seedbed is to be prepared and when the harvest is ready. The Mother Earth Goddess often receives offerings at transplanting time."

(4) Hindu incorporation "In addition to the rites dedicated to an assortment of spirits either regularly or as the occasion demands, other rites intended to maximize merit for the participants are practiced. The Buddha prescribed no ceremonies for birth, death, and marriage, but the Hindu rites, which were adopted by the Thai people, entail the participation of Buddhist monks.



The ceremonies, which are held at home rather than in the wat, have no scriptural sanction. The monks limit their

participation to chanting the appropriate Buddhist scriptural texts or to providing holy water."

(5) Monks and nuns "In spite of a long tradition of monkhood in Thailand, the great majority of males did not become monks. Those who did usually entered in their early twenties but did not necessarily remain monks for a long time. During the three-month holy season Khao (Phansa), sometimes referred to as the Buddhist Lent, monks go into retreat, and more attention than usual is given to the study of dharma.

In the mid-1980s, Thai male civil servants were given three months leave with full pay if they spent the Lenten period as monks.



It has been estimated that the proportion of temporary monks during this period varies between 25 and 40 percent of the total. The motivation for monkhood of such short duration is complex, but even the temporary status, for those who are unable or unwilling to commit themselves to the discipline for life, brings merit, not only to the monk but also to his parents, particularly to his mother.

(Some Buddhist women live as nuns, but they enjoy lower status than monks do.) Whether temporary or permanent, a monk in principle is subject to the 227 rules of conduct embodied in that portion (basket) of the Tipitaka devoted to the sangha."

(a) Appeal of monasteries "Aside from the religious motivation of those who enter and remain in the sangha, another inducement for many is the chance to pursue the contemplative life within the monastic community. Other reasons in modern Thailand include the opportunity for education at one of the two Buddhist universities and the chance, particularly for monks of rural origin, to gain social status."

(b) Monk piety *"Thai villagers expect monks to be pious and to adhere to the rules. Beyond that, monks are expected to provide services to individual members of the laity and local communities by performing various ceremonies and chanting appropriate passages from the Buddhist scriptures on important occasions. The presence of monks is believed to result in the accrual of merit to lay participants."*

b. Chinese religions *"Most Chinese, however, consciously retained the mixture of Confucian social ethics, formal veneration of ancestors, Mahayana Buddhist doctrine, and Taoist supernaturalism that was characteristic of the popular religious tradition in China."*

To the Chinese community as a whole, neither organized religion nor theological speculation had strong appeal. There were some Chinese members of the sangha, and most large Chinese temples had active lay associations attached to them. It was estimated in the 1980s that there were about twenty-one Chinese monasteries and thirteen major Vietnamese monasteries in Thailand."



c. Islam (4%)

"The practice of Islam in the 1980s was concentrated in Thailand's southernmost provinces, where the vast majority of the country's Muslims, predominantly Malay in origin, were found."

The remaining Muslims were Pakistani immigrants in the urban centers, ethnic Thai in the rural areas of the Center, and a few Chinese Muslims in the far north. Education and maintenance of their own cultural traditions were vital interests of these groups."

Syncretistic "Except in the small circle of theologically trained believers, the Islamic faith in Thailand, like Buddhism, had become integrated with many beliefs and practices not integral to Islam. All but a very small number of the mosques were associated with the Sunni branch of Islam; the remainder were of the Shia branch."

d. Christianity "During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Portuguese and Spanish Dominicans and other missionaries introduced Christianity to Siam. Christian missions have had only modest success in winning converts among the Thai, and the Christian community, estimated at 260,000 in the 1980s, was proportionately the smallest in any Asian country.

The missions played an important role, however, as agents for the transmission of Western ideas to the Thai. Missionaries opened hospitals, introduced Western medical knowledge, and sponsored some excellent private elementary and secondary schools. Many of the Thai urban elite who planned to have their children complete their studies in European or North American universities sent them first to the mission-sponsored schools."

Variety "A high percentage of the Christian community was Chinese, although there were several Lao and Vietnamese Roman Catholic communities, the latter in southeastern Thailand. About half the total Christian population lived in the Center. The remainder were located in almost equal numbers in the North and Northeast.



More than half the total Christian community in Thailand was Roman Catholic. Some of the Protestant groups had banded together in the mid-1930s to form the Church of Christ in Thailand, and nearly half of the more than 300 Protestant congregations in the country were part of that association."

e. Hindu/Sikh

"Other religions represented in Thailand included Hinduism and Sikhism, both associated with small ethnic groups of Indian origin. Most of the Hindus and Sikhs lived in Bangkok."



2. Ethnic/Racial Groups

a. Thai (89%)

b. Other groups (11%)

(1) Highland, or Hill, Peoples



"Commonly included among the highland people were the ethnic groups living in the mountains of northern and northwestern Thailand in the area known, because of its illegal opium production, as the "Golden Triangle."

Until the 1970s, the Thai central government tended to regard these groups chiefly as opium cultivators engaged in illegal activities. Since that time the highland minorities, through their own efforts and government-organized crop substitution projects, have become involved in the legal market economy of the country.

Among the larger groups of highland people were the Karen (Kariang, Yang), Hmong (Meo, Miao), Mien (Yao), Lahu (Mussur), Akha (Kaw), and Lisu, or Lisaw."

(2) Khmer (kah-mehn) *"Two groups of Khmer could also be distinguished--long-time inhabitants of Thailand and more recent arrivals. Theravada Buddhists and wet-rice cultivators, the Khmer spoke a language of the Mon-Khmer*

group and were heirs to a long and complex political and cultural tradition. If long-term resident Khmer and Khmer refugees were both included, there were perhaps as many as 600,000 to 800,000 Khmer living in Thailand in the 1980s."

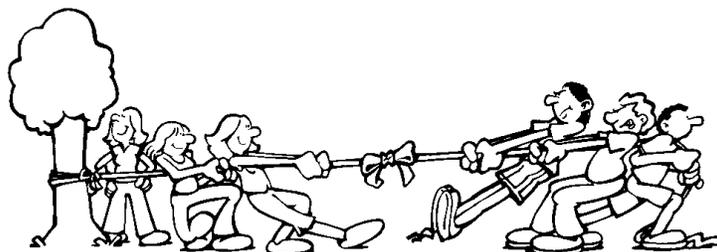
(3) Mon (mahn) "Perhaps the first Theravada Buddhists in Southeast Asia, and the founders in the seventh century of the kingdom of Haripunjaya near present-day Chiang Mai, the Mon greatly influenced the development of Thai culture. Mon architecture dotted the North, where a number of temples were still inhabited by Mon monks in the 1980s."

(4) Vietnamese "In the mid-1970s, the number of Vietnamese in Thailand was estimated at between 60,000 and 70,000, most of them in the Northeast."

(5) Chinese "The largest number of non-Tai peoples were the Chinese. In 1987 an estimated 11 percent of the total Thai population, or about 6 million people, were of Chinese origin, which meant that Thailand had the largest Chinese population in Southeast Asia. Assimilation of the various Chinese communities was a continuing process. Chinese were encouraged to become Thai citizens, and in 1970 it was estimated that more than 90 percent of the Chinese born in Thailand had done so."

(6) South Asians "In 1979 the Ministry of Interior estimated that there were 60,000 Hindus and Sikhs in Thailand (0.13 percent of the total population.)"

3. Gender Issues



a. Abuse "Domestic abuse continues to be a serious problem affecting the welfare of many women; reliable reports indicate that domestic abuse crosses all social

classes." (Unless stated otherwise, quotations which follow come from the Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996--Thailand, U.S. Department of State.)

b. Prostitution

"Prostitution, although illegal, flourishes and is deeply ingrained. Estimates of the numbers of women and children engaged in prostitution vary widely because of temporary sex workers and the migratory nature of prostitution. Reliable nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) estimate the number of adult female prostitutes at around 250,000."

(1) Causes and effects

"Prostitution exposes women to a number of human rights abuses, as well as a much higher risk of contracting AIDS. Some women are forced into prostitution, although the number of such cases is difficult to determine."



Incidents of coerced prostitution most commonly involve women who are not ethnic Thai from hill tribes or are from neighboring countries; the number of such women entering the country to work as prostitutes continued to rise. Because they cannot speak Thai, and are considered illegal immigrants, these women are particularly vulnerable to physical abuse, confinement, and exploitation."

Some women are lured with promises of jobs as waitresses or domestic helpers, but are then forced to work as prostitutes. As illegal immigrants, these women have no right to legal counsel or health care if arrested, and this group is not protected under new regulations concerning illegal alien workers."

Human rights monitors believe that the majority of those who engage in prostitution are not kept under physical constraint, but that a large number labor in debt bondage. Brothel procurers often advance parents a substantial sum against their daughter's future earnings, often without the consent of the young woman involved. The women are then obligated to work in a brothel in order to pay back the loan. On the border with Cambodia, procurers provide women and girls as young as the age of 14 who were trafficked from Vietnam or China and live under slave-like circumstances in Cambodia.



Observers believe that their illegal border crossing for the purposes of prostitution is accomplished with the complicity of local officials."

(2) Preventive measures "During the year, the Government stepped up efforts against prostitution. In August the Government endorsed an operational plan against commercial sex services, calling for such measures as further compulsory education, more vocational education, an enhanced public information campaign, and professional training, especially of teachers and health care workers. In addition, under the Chavalit Government, the Labor Permanent Secretary chairs a Committee for Protection and Vocational Development aimed at combating prostitution."

Retraining "The Government and NGO's have already established vocational training and education programs to combat the lure of prostitution for young Thai women and their families. As a result of the strengthened national antiprostitution policy, the Government is expanding these programs, which are part of a 5-year program that started in October.

Despite occasional highly publicized raids on brothels, however, the Government has failed to enforce effectively laws against prostitution, and, in many cases, brothel operators bribe local government representatives and police. There continue to be credible reports of involvement by some corrupt police, military, and other officials in trafficking schemes."



(3) Legal status *"Until recently, prostitutes were considered criminals, whereas brothel owners, procurers, and clients were not subject to criminal statutes. A new law passed in September further criminalizes those involved in the trafficking of women and children for the purpose of prostitution or slave labor."*

c. Equality *"Women generally have equal legal rights, but inequalities remain in domestic law. Women generally have access to higher education; more than half the university graduates are women."*

4. Conflicts



"International disputes: boundary dispute with Laos; unresolved maritime boundary with Vietnam; parts of border with Cambodia in dispute; maritime boundary with Cambodia not clearly defined." (CIA 1996 Country Factbook)

5. Holidays/Festivals (The following material, adapted from Holidays, Festivals and Celebrations of the World Dictionary, compiled by Sue Thompson and Barbara Carlson, [Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1994], is instructive.)

a. Bun Bang Fai (Boon buhng fi, Rocket Festival, April-May)

- Rain ceremony predating Buddhism, intended to bring good crops

b. Chakri Day (jhah-kree, 6 April)

- National holiday remembering Rama I's enthronement in 1782. Rama I founded the Chakri Dynasty, which continues--though without an absolute monarchy status--to this day.
- Rama I moved the capital from Thon Buri, across the river to Bangkok

c. Chulalongkorn Day (jhoo-laah-luhg-gohn, 23 Oct)

- National holiday remembering King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), who ended slavery and brought reform.
- Rama V and Anna Leonowens are the subject of the book Anna and the King of Siam and Broadway musical, The King and I.

d. King's Birthday (5 Dec)

- National celebration honoring birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, symbolic chief of state since 1950.



e. Loi Krathong (loi krah-tohng, Usually mid-November)

- Festival thanking Me Khongkha, Mother of the Waters
 - Paper boats with lighted candles and flowers are launched, symbolizing a washing away of the sins of the year past

f. Magha Puja (mah-KAH boo-chah, Feb full moon)

- Buddhist celebration of ordination of 1,250 monks in Rajagrha, India by Gautama Buddha
 - Temple sermons, chants, and merit-making activities take place on this day

g. Queen's Birthday (12 Aug)

- Celebrates Queen Sirikit's birthday

h. Songkran (13 April)

- Traditional New Year
 - Merit-making activities take place, with water sprinkled on Buddhist images and captive birds and fish are set free

i. Tod Kathin (tahd kah-teehn, Sep-Oct)

- Robe offering month marking the end of the Buddhist Lent
 - Begins the pilgrimage season wherein adherents go to temples and bring food and gifts (new robes) to monks

j. Kow Pun-sah (Waso) (Jun/Jul-Sep/Oct)

- Three month period when monks remain in monasteries to study and meditate