

Thailand- Uniquely Original Culture

By Ms. Poonam Kanwal

punamkanwal@gmail.com

Abstract

For hundreds of years, much of Southeast Asia endured colonial rule. Countries such as Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia were colonized by the British, French, and Dutch respectively. However, one country that didn't suffer colonialism, despite enduring wars and territorial changes is Thailand. Colonizers influence the culture of the countries they rule. Researching the culture of a country that was "Land of the Free" and built most originally from its inhabitants and immigrants from the neighboring regions was intriguing and worthy of being covered by JAACL. Being the second most tourist visited country in Asia and the eighth-most in the World (World tourism organization report) and the sixth most culturally rich country in Asia (Forbes list 2020). Studying Thailand's culture was totally justified.

Keywords

Thailand, culture, tradition, Buddhism

Thailand: Uniquely Original Culture

The formal name of Thailand is the Kingdom of Thailand (*Ratcha Anachak Thai*), which means "Land of the Free" (*Prathet Thai*). The people of Thailand are indeed free-spirited but carry strong culture and traditions. The term for citizen(s) is Thai (singular and plural). Thai nationalism is summed up by the expression "King, Country and Religion.". The Thai people have originated in the southern Chinese province of Yunnan. Around 3600 BC the Mon, Khmer, and Tai tribes migrated from southern China but only the Tai set up Thai cities, starting in northern Thailand. The Mon and the Khmer tribes migrated to Myanmar and Cambodia respectively.

Cushioned on its west and northwest by Myanmar, north, and northeast by Laos, south, and southeast by Cambodia, with China and Vietnam brushing through from some parts of its outskirts in the north and east, Thailand tails down to lend a limb to Malaysia on its south.

It has the Andaman sea and The Gulf of Thailand to its south. The influences to its original culture are from China, India, Myanmar (then Burma), and other Southeast Asian countries.

Thailand's military has a history of intervening in politics and has seized power twelve times since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Until 22 May 2014, Thailand was run within the framework of a constitutional monarchy, whereby the Prime minister is the head of government and a hereditary monarch is head of state. The judiciary was independent of the executive and the legislative branches. Following the coup d'état of 22 May 2014, a military organization called National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) had taken over administration. The 2019 Thai general election was held in Thailand, installed the coup leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha as prime minister.

The most important influence on Thai culture has been Buddhism. Hinduism has also made important contributions to Thai culture, close links between Thailand and India can be seen in art, literature, and many of the country's customs. The cultures of nearby Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and China have also played an important role in forming the traditions of Thailand, as have indigenous belief systems such as Animism (attribution of a living soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena).

Thailand comprises 94.6% Buddhists, 4.3% Muslims and 1% Christians. Theravada Buddhism is followed in Thailand. This emphasizes attaining self-liberation through one's efforts. Meditation and concentration are strongly believed to be the way to enlightenment. The ideal road is to dedicate oneself to full-time monastic life, that abstains from all kinds of evil and accumulates all that is good and purifies one mind. When a person achieves liberation, they are called a 'Worthy person' – an Arhat or Arahant. Thai Theravada Buddhism is supported and overseen by the government, with monks receiving several government benefits, such as free use of public transportation.



Image 1: Buddhist Monk

Buddhism in Thailand is influenced by traditional beliefs regarding ancestral and natural spirits. Most Thai people install spirit houses, miniature houses outside their dwellings, where they believe household spirits live. Food and drinks are offered to these spirits to keep them happy. If these spirits aren't happy, it is believed that they will inhabit the household and cause chaos. Spirit houses are found in public places and on the streets of Thailand, where the public makes offerings.

Influences from the Indian Brahmanic religion and Mahayana Buddhism are present in the Thai folklore. The Indian Brahmanic religions were religious ideas and practices among the Indo-Aryan peoples of northwest India and the western Ganges plain of ancient during the Vedic period (1500-500 BC). Mahayana Buddhism is about bodhisattva (the 'enlightenment being') as being the ideal way for a Buddhist to live. This is a way of selflessness living; it is a deep wish for all beings, no matter who they are, to be liberated from suffering.

The latest land use ratios in Thailand are as follows (2011 estimates):

Agricultural land: 41.2% (arable land: 30.8%, permanent crops: 8.8 %, Permanent pasture: 1.6%). The forest: 37.2%, Others: 21.6%. It has the fifth-largest amount of land under rice

cultivation in the world and is the world's second-largest exporter of rice. Rice is being cultivated there since around 3,500 B.C.



Image 2: Rice Plantation

Thai language, also called Siamese, spoken, and literary is the language of Thailand. The spelling of Thai names, places, and words sometimes varies. The Thai language has its script, the sound interpretation can be a judgment call or a matter of opinion.

Traditional Thai clothing is called *chut thai*. Worn by men, women, and children. *Chut thai* for women usually consists of a *pha nung* a blouse, *pha chung hang* or is a lower-body, wrap around cloth and the *pha biang*. The *pha Biang* is a long piece of silk, about a foot wide, draped diagonally around the chest by covering one shoulder which its end drops behind the back. *Chut thai* for men includes a *pha chung hang* or pants, and Raj pattern shirt, with optional knee-length white socks and a *pha biang*.

Thai cooking emphasis lightly prepared dishes with strong aromatic components and a spicy edge. Traditional Thai cuisine loosely falls into four categories: *tom* (boiled dishes), *yam* (spicy salads), *tam* (pounded foods), and *gaeng* (curries). Deep-fries, stir-fries, and steamed dishes are derived from Chinese cuisine.

Thai architecture has traditional structures comprising of Religious structures and Secular Structures. Religious structures that were built and patronized by the royal families of

Thailand, display extensive ornamentation and intricate details. Most of the temples built were dedicated to either Buddha or various Hindu Gods. Secular Structures include constructions that are not related to any religion and include mostly traditional Thai houses depicting its architecture. Evolving over the years the basic idea continues to be the same. It would depend upon the materials used and above all, superstitious beliefs. It was vital to have a guardian spirit house along with the residence to keep the evil away. Modern Thai Architecture has one of the most captivating constructions in Asia. With soaring skyscrapers and huge multi-storied malls, Thailand has entwined modernity and tradition in its establishment.



Image 3: Grand Palace, Bangkok

The top ten festivals of Thailand are Water festival (*Songkran*), Ghost Festival (*Phi Ta Khon*), Lantern Festival (*Yi peng*), Rocket festival (*Boon bang Fai*), Buffalo racing festival (*Wing Kwai*), Lopburi monkey banquet, Vegetarian festival, Wonderfruit music and arts festival, Chinese New year, Candle festival.

Thailand is indeed a wholesome amalgamation of traditions that syncs well with modernization.

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