

## Thai Culture

A lot has been written about Thai culture.<sup>1</sup> The first anthropological model that was widely used to explain Thailand was the 'loose structure' model by John Embree in 1950. He stated that the Thai do not have a strong sense of duty and obligation in family and social relationships, and that there is little regularity and discipline in Thai life. This basic statement has influenced the discussion about Thai culture ever since, with some scholars affirming this model, and others vehemently denying it. Phillips reinforced Embree's main conclusion, and emphasized how the individualism of the Thai results in a loosely structured society. Komin helpfully explains that the individualism described by this group of authors is not the same as Western individualism. According to her it is similar "in the emphasis on the self and the fluidity in the loyalty to others"<sup>2</sup>, but different in that Thais are much lower on four attributes that indicate individualism: a sense of separate personal identity, striving for self-actualization, internal locus of control, and principled moral reasoning.

Other scholars like Titaya discovered more structure in the villages where they did research than the 'loose structure' thesis would allow for. However, they did their research in North and Northeast Thailand, which raises the question whether these results reflect a difference between Central Thai culture and the rest of the country. In the present author's opinion this question is not given enough consideration in the various anthropological discussions on the subject. His own observations of village life in Central Thailand and Northeast Thailand lead to the thought that there might be some real and deep differences between the two.

Thai anthropologists writing on the subject deny the 'loose structure' thesis. They describe stronger interpersonal relationships and emphasize the way Thai people are dependent on each other.

In a highly influential study Mulder describes the basic structure according to which Thais interact with each other as having two core elements: *Bun* (moral goodness), that determines relationships in the group of insiders and is built on trust; and *Decha* (amoral power), that determines relationships with outsiders and is built on fear. In both settings a major concern is to find out who is the higher one in the hierarchy.<sup>3</sup>

The present author does not feel competent to take a position in the discussion outlined above. It is significant to observe that the foreigners tend to describe Thai society as 'loosely structured', whereas the Thai scholars take the opposite approach. This might mean foreign observers missed, or did not recognize as significant, the way Thais structure their social relationships.

A significant development in the study of Thai culture was the landmark research of Komin (1991). Komin is associate professor of social and cross-cultural psychology at the National Institute for Development Assistance (NIDA). She correctly stated about the various anthropological publications about Thailand:

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<sup>1</sup> The most important source for this paragraph is Sontaree Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns*, Bangkok, 1991. Other sources are John F. Embree, "Thailand: A Loosely Structured Social System.", in: *American Anthropologist*, 52:2 (1950), pp. 181-193; Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, Cambridge, 1970; Titaya Suwanjata, "Is Thai social system loosely structured?", in: *Social Science Review*, 1976, pp. 171-187; Niels Mulder, *Everyday life in Thailand: an Interpretation*, Bangkok, 1979; and Niels Mulder, *Inside Thai Society: Religion, Everyday Life, Change*, Chiang Mai, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Komin, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Mulder (1979).

...many of these data lack empirical support. Some are speculations, others are observations based on limited sources, while still others are bound by theoretical perspectives, scope of coverage and level of analysis...many still need empirical proof.<sup>4</sup>

She goes on to present her research into the value system of the Thai people. Because her research is based on surveys, it has the obvious advantage of being grounded in data rather than purely theoretical constructs.

In her study Komin identified nine value clusters that are important to the Thai, ranking from most to least important. Following is a summary of her findings.<sup>5</sup> The clusters are listed in order of importance as reported by Komin.

1. *Ego orientation*. "Thai have a very big ego...they can be easily provoked to strong emotional reactions, if the "self"... is insulted" (133). Values that belong in this cluster are face-saving, criticism-avoiding, being considerate (*kreng jai*), the last concept roughly meaning being hesitant to impose on others.

*Grateful relationship orientation*. The most important term in this cluster is *bunkhun* (indebted goodness). This "is a psychological bond between someone who, out of sheer kindness and sincerity, renders another person the needed helps and favours, and the latter's remembering of the goodness done and his ever-readiness to reciprocate the kindness" (139). *Bunkhun* must be returned continuously. It is not a simple debt; it is a lasting social relationship. This value can be exploited by politicians or other people with power. They will provide help to people, and use that as leverage to manipulate and exploit them afterwards.

*Smooth interpersonal relationship orientation*. "This orientation is characterized by the preference for a non-assertive, polite and humble type of personality...as well as the preference of a relaxed, and pleasant interaction which accounts for the "smiling" and "friendly" aspects of the Thai people" (143). Values that belong in this cluster include being caring and considerate, being kind and helpful, being responsive to situations and opportunities, being self-controlled, being polite and humble, being calm, and being contented. A very significant finding was that these values, in the literature often linked with Buddhism, are not significantly related with religion. Moreover, Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims scored the same on these values. Komin adds "the present finding is also substantiated by an early study of the effects of Buddhism on the personality traits, particularly on the dimension of "maintaining equanimity or staying uninvolved", which found there was absolutely no significant difference found between Buddhist and Christian tenth grade (M.S. 3) students in Chiangmai" (145). An implication of these values is that in the Thai context, to be successful the most important thing is not to be capable, but rather to have a "polite appearance, presentation and approach" (146).

*Flexibility and adjustment orientation*. 60% of the national sample "preferred to describe themselves as "ever-flexible" than "truly honest"...This is more so for Bangkokians, for government officials and for higher educated groups" (163). The person and the situation always take precedent over principles and systems.

*Religio-psychical orientation*. Religion is an important value to the Thai, though less so for Bangkokians, students, and the highly educated. Chapter 2.6. will be exclusively devoted to religion.

*Education and competence orientation*. Thai value education at a medium level. Education is valued more as a means of getting more prestige and more salary than it is for getting knowledge. This "indicates that the Thai people value and give importance to form more than content of substance"

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<sup>4</sup> Komin, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Komin, pp. 132-213.

(186). Thais value academic degrees more than academic competence. Because the Thai value good form and appearance so much, getting in debt to show off, or to keep in step with what is considered as 'modern', is common.

*Interdependence orientation.* This cluster of values, including 'brotherhood spirit' and 'being mutually helpful', is much stronger in the rural setting than in the cities. To a certain extent it negates the 'loose structure' thesis.

*Fun and pleasure orientation.* Thailand is often described as the "Land of smiles", with a stronger emphasis on having fun than valuing work. Komin's research found that the private sector and the lower classes valued work over fun-loving and pleasure. For Bangkokians and government officials it was the other way around. Komin's findings indicate that 'fun' is not a very high value, and is more a "means to support and maintain the more important interpersonal interaction value...the end result is the easy-going, relaxed, and superficial interaction, with limited revelation of the individual psychological depth" (192-193).

*Achievement-task orientation.* 'Ambitious and hard-working' consistently is the lowest ranked value for all Thai groups, with the exception of the Chinese Thai, who hold it as an intermediate value. Relationships are more important than work. This result is even stronger for government officials than it is for farmers. Often Buddhism is mentioned as an explanation because it advocates detachment from material goods and encourages fatalism. However, Komin shows that the Thai are "this-worldly oriented" (205), and do value material possession. But she states that the nature of achievement for Thais is different than for Americans, and that this explains the low value placed on work. "...while the Americans having task itself and professionalism as achievement goals with self assertive efforts as means, the Thai give prestige and social recognition as goals for success in life, with work and relations as necessary means... achievement in Thai is more social in nature. Also it is very rare that work alone would lead one to the Thai sense of achievement" (208).

Komin's work offers a deep insight into the Thai psyche. It is especially helpful in explaining how stereotypes like smiling, relaxing, and having fun function to serve the much deeper felt values of ego orientation and grateful relationships. For people with a more western value system, it is important to note how consistent relational values are ranked higher than values linked to work and achievement.

Some remarks need to be made. Firstly, though Komin did her survey among a cross-section of Thai society, it certainly was not a representative sample. In the first sample, 42% of the respondents were government officials and 38% were students. In the second sample, 38% of the respondents were government officials. There is clearly a bias towards the higher educated, urban, and higher income population in her samples. It can be surmised from the study that this affects the results. Komin's analysis shows that farmers, when compared with government officials, place a much higher value on being mutually helpful, being self-controlled and on being forgiving. To a lesser degree farmers also rate being caring-considerate and being grateful more highly. It is far less important to them to be independent, responsible, educated, and capable. It would be worthwhile to re-analyze Komin's data and adjust the total sample for occupation.

Second, though Komin's publication is from 1991 the research stems from data collected in 1978 and 1981. Though the deeper values in a culture normally do not change dramatically over time, it cannot be assumed that all findings are still relevant after almost 30 years. Indeed, a research project in 2005 replicating Komin's work among university students gave a radically different ranking.<sup>6</sup> Interdependence orientation and fun-pleasure orientation had risen to the first and second

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<sup>6</sup> Teay Shawyun and Krisda Tanchaisak, "Core Values of Thai Undergraduates Revisited in 2005: A Case Study of Assumption University", in: *Warasaan Wichakaan*, 12:1 (2005), pp. 71-84.

rank. Religio-psychical orientation had fallen from fifth to ninth rank, while achievement-task orientation had done the reverse. The most significant change of all is that ego orientation had fallen from the first to the eighth rank. This research suggests that the traditional Thai values of face-saving, criticism-avoiding, and being considerate have lost much of their significance in this group. This is an important change, though it is not certain whether these results would be true for the total population. Clearly this is an area for future research.

(This article is paragraph 2.5 from Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand*, 2008.)