

Komi ' Thai Values Survey

"Values are beliefs about what is desirable"

(Komi 1990, 23). Komi thinks that the quest to understand a national character must focus on values. These values form a part of the cognitive blueprint that leads to action. At the core of a world view are evaluative ideas about what is right, good, desirable, how life is and how life should be lived. "Values are the core conceptions of the desirable within individuals and society" (Komi 1990, 34). Childhood is the time during which the world view is communicated and learned. The values are activated in attitudes, behavior and feelings about things. But, these values are dynamic because the experiences and choices of the individual reinforce or change the values, often unconsciously. Values are implicit assumptions about life that are usually not examined by individuals or societies, much like the foundations of buildings. They are also not necessarily in harmony. The inner tension of conflicting values gives all cultures depth and complexity. But no culture can be unified and discernible without shared values. The Thai share many values with resulting behavior so that we can talk about "Thainess" as different from "Chineseness." But, even here, different segments of the society rank the importance of these values differently, according to Komi's survey.

Komi understands values as a relatively stable part of a culture. Various social institutions reinforce

and cultivate values. The powerful in a society are concerned to maintain the status quo, so seek to preserve certain values.

There are two kinds of values, terminal and instrumental. Terminal values are the desirable end results in life, such as to become rich or famous, or to have a long and easy life. Instrumental values relate to the means used to seek the desired ends. Instrumental values would be things like hard work, self control or deference to others. Values are standards that operate in judgments about what is and what ought to be.

#### Examination of the Nine Value Clusters

Based upon the results of her surveys, Komi organized the 20 terminal and 23 instrumental values into nine value clusters listed in order of importance. The nine value clusters are as follows

1. Ego Orientation
2. Grateful Relationship Orientation
3. Smooth Interpersonal Relationship Orientation
4. Flexibility and Adjustment Orientation
5. Religious-Psychical Orientation
6. Education and Competence Orientation
7. Interdependence Orientation
8. Fun-Pleasure orientation
9. Achievement-Task Orientation

These nine value clusters are Komin's interpretation of how the survey data about the terminal and instrumental values can be put into relationship with each other and into an order that reflects how the Thai ranked them (number 1 being the strongest and most important value, decreasing in strength to 9). There were other values in the survey that ranked still lower.

### 1. Ego Orientation

It is very important to be oneself, independent and free. Kulick and Wilson write, "the Thai starts by seeing the human world as a world of particular individual persons" (Kulick and Wilson 1992, 66). The Thai do not see themselves primarily as part of a group, not even a family. The Thai have a deep sense of pride and dignity, and they cannot tolerate criticism or any violation of the self. This may even extend to others related closely to oneself, like one's wife or parents. Foreigners at first might not grasp the depth of this issue beneath the smiling Thai exterior. Many of the violent outbursts in Thailand spring from an offense to the sensitive ego (saksii). Many Thai fear revenge from others who might be ego offended. Therefore, they take great care not to offend another's ego.

The high value of the ego is supported by the importance of saving face, avoiding criticism and the importance of consideration (kreangjai). All of these values attempt to guard the other's ego while preserving

one's own. The rule for all Thai interactions is to preserve the others ego or face (Komi 1990, 162). The importance of self is seen in how easily the Thai can react to mild criticism or a social slight. Often the offense is carried in the heart for years as passive resistance and bitterness. They cannot tolerate any violation of the ego.

The Thai world view at its root holds self as an individual in a sea of others. This, on the one hand, seems to be at odds with Buddhism which denies that the self exists and is seeking to escape self-awareness. The preoccupation with self among the Thai is what the serious Buddhist is trying to escape through enlightenment. But, to the ordinary person the path to enlightenment is so difficult that most do not even try. They have a vague hope that their good karma will outweigh the bad and that in the next life they might advance. Yet, aspects of Buddhism reinforce these individualistic perceptions because it emphasizes that only the individual can save himself. The Thai have a saying that one can only rely on oneself and must help oneself. There is little sense of congregation or group. Religious activities are seen as a private and individual matter that are done to help oneself.

A non-religious way to look at this concept of the individual in a sea of others is to observe the crowded streets of Bangkok at noon. Pouring out of the large banks are women with the same print for a blouse and the same material for a skirt. With a closer look, one will notice

that the styling is different for each skirt and blouse. This same phenomenon can be noticed at other businesses and companies. The common material identifies the individuals with a company. The individual styling affirms their uniqueness. So, people dress in a uniform and yet there is an individual statement of personality.

The Thai are not egalitarian but feel that some persons are more **valuable** and have more intrinsic worth than others. Buddhism, and to a greater extent Hinduism, contributed to the idea that not all egos are equal. The person with "**bunwassana**" (positive karma) will be born richer, smarter, more beautiful, and higher up the hierarchy. He or she will have lighter skin, a cool personality and easier work. The person with little worth will be born ugly, **dull**, **stubborn** and subject to greater misfortune than others. He or she will have darker skin, a **choleric** personality and **do** manual labor. The only way to know one's worth or value is to understand one's place in the **hierarchy**.

The classification of **desirable** and undesirable tends to be very **black** and white. Therefore, many Thai people grow up feeling inferior because they may be **hot-hearted**, ugly, dark and have a low social status (about 80 percent of the population). Most seem to feel this way about themselves anyway because almost no one measures up to the ideal. Parents talk openly about the worth of their children. They choose favorites based on their assessment

of the "bunwassana" (karmic value) of a child. There seems to be an inner sense among the Thai that it is right to respect the "good" people and okay to be unconcerned for the "bad" people. After all, they are that way because of karma.

There are no equals but everyone is either an "elder" or a "younger." "Parents of twins . . . carefully train the younger to obey the older" (Sharp and Hanks 1978, 49). The Thai words here do not just refer to age but to status. The person with higher status is always elder, even if younger in years. Again referring to clothing, uniforms are widely used throughout the government, in schools and many businesses. The uniforms exhibit indicators of rank. The uniforms help the individuals understand their hierarchical relationship, their status and role in the context of others.

Mulder summarizes the impact of ego orientation this way, the "individual centered society logically results in a highly unpredictable social process, characterized by a short time perspective, pragmatic and immediate social arrangements and inter-individual uncertainty" (Mulder 1977, 615).

## 2. Grateful Relationship Orientation

Reciprocity of kindness is highly valued as the means to pleasant and mutually beneficial relationships. The basis of the patron/client relationship is this

reciprocity. Komi notes that in the rural areas this value is more important (where it ranked first) than in Bangkok (where it ranked fourth). Kindness received obligates a person to respond thankfully and with some form of service, gift or allegiance that appropriately demonstrates that the kindness received has been recognized. "How a Thai behaves to another person depends on the previous history of mutual services or obligations between them" (Kulick and Wilson 1992, 67). In Mulder's safe inner world this is felt as loyalty, and demonstrated in caring and sharing. But in the outer world it is felt as a debt, and demonstrated in a presentational show of respect and pragmatic responses. What is difficult to understand (by those of with different values) is that many of the young girls in prostitution, some even sold by their parents, feel they are demonstrating this positive quality of reciprocal gratefulness, by sending their earnings home!

Mulder's inner world of grace is responsive. Namely, the ego receives kindness and the proper response to kindness is to be grateful and return kindness. The inner world of grace has no punishment for failure, only acceptance. Karma will take care of punishment. If kindness is not returned, the initiators of the kindness will gradually withdraw from the relationship.

However, in the outer world of power, the inferior ego must initiate interaction. It is the world of "do good to receive good." Failure to do good could have many

negative results if powerful people or spirits are offended. For example, the ordinary Thai are wary of the police and will avoid them if they can. But, if they have to relate to the police, they will be very polite and deferential, they will dress very well, they will be very controlled. They feel at a disadvantage with the police and seek to present themselves well. This is part of doing good. The author has even seen people greet the police with an offering of money as a way of doing good to receive good.

Gratefulness as a response to kindness and favors is the basis of meaningful relationships. Showing kindness and favors appropriately is the means used to build relationships in the hierarchy (Holmes and Tangtongtavy 1995). When there is a positive relationship these values are felt as a psychological bond. But if kindness is abused it reduces the relationship to simple transactions of power with no bonding.

### 3. Smooth interpersonal Relationships

The Thai value surface harmony. They smile and are friendly to insure that they have pleasant interactions. They tend to be non-assertive to protect the social pleasantness. While some point to this as a fruit of Buddhism, Komi suggests that these values are not religious since Thai Muslims and Christians have these same values ranked the same way. The key ideas are cool heart (jai



using a non-present third party to make a point. They also make liberal use of gossip as indirect criticism. They will agree in front of the important people with no intent to comply with or implement the idea.

Because of the emphasis on individuals and hierarchy, there is a great deal of jealousy. Individuals are unhappy when others get ahead of them or get something they want. Jealousy leads to plots and schemes to pull others down. So, while many are hesitant to say anything negative about another person to their face, they are not reluctant about gossip behind the back. A small group of Thai might be talking about another in the most malicious way but if that person suddenly entered the room, surface harmony would be immediately maintained with warmth and gracious smiles.

The successful personality in Thailand has a "soft" presentation (Komi 1990, 193). Positive emotions are expressed while negative emotions are felt but not expressed. Good leaders according to a Thai saying are, "soft on the outside and firm on the inside."

#### 4. Flexibility and Adjustment Orientation

The Thai are high context people and want to be responsive to situations. They do not like long term commitments because it conflicts with this desire to be spontaneous. They live in the present. The past is not very important. The future is not the focus. The present

is. The negative side of this trait is that they are non-committal and opportunistic. The positive side is the readiness to respond to situations, what Shin calls spontaneity (Shin 1989, 94). The Thai are not crisis oriented (Lingenfelter and Mayers 1986, 71) and do not like to plan long term or prepare for crises but to be responsive to the flow of events.

Flexibility and adjustment means adjusting to the demands of relationships or the opportunities, not to principles. People are more important than principles or systems. Thai politics are full of quick shifts of a political party or people within the party as the circumstances warrant the changes and realignment. This was an important necessity historically for the Thai given the instability of their neighbors. Law is viewed as a tool made by the powerful to control the powerless as needed. Relationships and context affect the application of the law. Money can change the context and relationships very fast! Thus, corruption is rife. Komi sees this as a factor in why law enforcement hardly ever works.

Morals are situational. Morals are not bounded sets but fuzzy sets determined by the context. When Prime Minister Chatchai's government was overthrown in 1991, the people initially applauded the military instigators. This was because the general population felt that his government was *too corrupt*. Everyone expected some corruption but there is an acceptable limit to corruption and the general

population felt that Chatchai's cronies had gotten too rich! The general population later turned against the military instigators when they went beyond the acceptable limits of corruption.

This flexibility value is reflected in the non-ideological nature of the Thai. They view strong ideological commitments as a threat to the social fabric. Social relationships are a more significant factor than principles, rules, policies or agreements.

##### 5. Religious-Psychical Orientation

Religion is not the most important value in Thai life but it is important and Komi ' survey results indicate that it becomes more important as a person grows older.

Religion is ritual. The rituals provide psychological benefits. One Thai Buddhist, when asked why they went to the temple replied, "It makes my heart comfortable." This seems to be the main focus of Buddhist practices for the Thai. Komi notes that Thais are "this worldly" in their religious orientation and that this is contrary to strict doctrinal Buddhism that seeks liberation from this world (Komi 1990, 214).

Another aspect of religion is karma. Komi points out that karma is used as the explanation after the fact for troubles. The author was once in a bicycle accident. As he was lying on the ground, an old lady told him that his karma had caught up with him. This seemed very odd comfort to the

author, especially when the accident was not his fault!

Komi believes that the appeal to karma in these situations is a defense mechanism against personal responsibility. The Thai see misfortune as the result of karma. They see good fortune as the result of luck, not hard work or ability.

Komi points out that almost all Thai are superstitious and involved in various kinds of practices: fortune telling, palmistry, astrological readings, vows to spirits, charms, exorcisms and black magic. This extends from the planting of certain kinds of trees near their homes or the hanging of mirrors on their houses, to the collecting of Buddha images. The Thai view of the spirit world is much like the Thai view of the world of people. There is a hierarchy. One wants to stay on good terms with these beings by giving appropriate honor. Magic, amulets and other ritual means are used to manipulate the spirits for one's own benefit. In some cases magic ritual will be used to get revenge on an enemy. The spirits thus become a kind of patron and the person a client. If people do not get what they want from a given spirit they can and will seek to patronize another one. If they get what they ask for, they are obligated and had better pay up or the spirit will punish them. It should be noted that the spirit world is focused on this life issues not on ultimate truth or salvation. Komi points out that very few Thai are interested in the pursuit of nirvana. The animistic side of Buddhism appeals to the Thai quest for power.

## 6. Education and Competence Orientation

In Thailand, knowledge is not sought for its own sake but for the sake of advancement and social lift. Degrees are to be gained for the sake of ego enhancement in the society. Education is a means (instrumental value) not an end (terminal value). Komi points out that the symbols of education are what is sought (Komi 1990, 227). Form is what is important, not content or ability. One of the scandals in the Thai political world in 1988 was the exposure and temporary embarrassment of many high level political leaders who had gotten bogus degrees from a defunct university in the Philippines. They sought the degrees for status enhancement.

There is a noticeable ethnic difference here (Holmes and Tangtongtavy 1995, 29). The Thai with a Chinese background value education and hard work more. They tend to see diligence as a desirable character trait that leads to success. They work very hard to give their children the best education they can.

The traditional role of the educated was in the government bureaucracy (Wyatt 1984). But as more opportunities for education have become available, the Thai government cannot absorb all the educated. This is causing some shifting in the status value of education and the reasons to seek higher education. Generally, degrees from

outside of Thailand still have greater status value than those from within Thailand. The Thai want the prestige of education and recognized competence. But, because they have a very low value toward achievement, motivation for education comes from the increased status of the self.

#### 7. Interdependence Orientation

The Thai often joke about how they do not do well at team sports. They recognize that they have a problem sacrificing their individual egos for the good of the team. They like individual sports and feel that they can excel as an individual but have a hard time with interdependence. "Thais relish their freedom, and are disinclined to place their lives in the hands of a group" (Kulick and Wilson 1992, 78). Groups are not valued as groups but for the social benefits and networking of individuals which a group might provide. Thus, groups tend to form and dissolve easily. The quality of the interpersonal relationships are important, the task is always secondary. Interdependence is not a highly held value although it is sometimes a necessity, especially among the poor farmers.

Hanks notes that the word for family in Thai is better understood as household. In all households there is a key person around whom all the relationships revolve. This patron/elder must manage the affairs of the household for the benefits of each individual in order to maintain their allegiance and help. The household can be very loose

with new people entering and/or people leaving at will. A child is easily given to an older aunt or another household, or a young person might join a household easily when they go into the big town to study. Many marriages are common law arrangements because, if a marriage is registered, then when they stop being married they would have to get a divorce! It is more convenient not to register in the first place.

The direction of relationships is up and down, not across. Groups are not composed of equals but have a hierarchy even in a very relaxed atmosphere such as a friendly game of soccer. Groups such as labor unions lack cohesion and discipline as each person tends to "go it alone" with management. Because the Thai farmers have not been inclined to long-term cooperative groups, the Chinese/Thai rice merchants have profited. The low ranking of this value has serious consequences for the Thai churches, where brotherly love and mutual helpfulness are essentials and may take time to develop.

#### 8. Fun and Pleasure Orientation

Thailand has been known as the "land of smiles," a stereotyped image that comes along with the much-talked-about myth of the Thai being easy-going, enjoying the everyday routine pleasures of life with a happy carelessness, not letting troubles touch them easily, viewing life as something to be enjoyed not endured, and would not do anything that is not *sanuk* (to have fun, to enjoy oneself and have a good time). They are easily bored or *buua*, not because of having nothing to do like Westerners, but because the repetitive activities they are doing are not *sanuk*. They therefore lack the "stick-to-it-ive-ness" or the serious commitment and sustained level of hard (and often unpleasant) work, which is essentially required

for the success of industrial undertakings. They are generally lethargic, lazy, inaggressive, and fond of having fun and leisure.

Empirical data show that most of this myth are not true. It catches only the outward presentation of the "fun" and the "lightness" approach of the things of the Thai. (Komi 1990, 233)

The author's own observations would confirm that the Thai are willing to work very hard at many unpleasant tasks. But in reacting to a stereotype and myth has Komi ranked this value to low?

The value orientation toward fun and pleasure, and the willingness to hard work should not be confused. Hard work is perceived as a necessity and not as a desirable aspect of life. Values relate to desirability, according to Komi . People seek work that has fun, pleasant social interactions. According to Komin's data, Bangkokians and government workers, rank fun and pleasure more highly than rural people. Situations where there is open conflict, unpleasantness and serious tension among people are avoided by the Thai.

It is remarkable how, even hard working people, will move into relaxed fun very quickly. It should be noted that the word, "work" in Thai is also the word for party. The hard, back breaking, traditional work of rice planting and harvest was endowed with this "fun" Thai quality by songs, special meals eaten together, drinking and flirting.

"Sanuk" or fun is the tension outlet for the Thai and functions as a kind of counter theme to the sensitivity



of the ego orientation of an individual Thai (Mulder, 1994). Sanuk is carefree amusement with congenial companions in which there is no criticism, blame and confrontation. The Thai want almost every activity to have this quality.

The Thai meal is also a part of relaxation and enjoyment. Eating is not just the food but the occasion to relax with friends and enjoy life. The Thai like convivance, comfort and fun. They like relaxed and enjoyable social relationships. Sharing food and eating together is an important part of enjoying life. Komi ranks this value cluster too low in the author's opinion. This value is very important in the social and group activities of the churches.

#### 9. Achievement Task Orientation

Achievement is attributed to luck and "bunwassana," and misfortune to karma. Thus, hard work toward achievement is not encouraged. The author was intrigued by an unusual bumper sticker he saw one day. It said, "Do not trust in luck or bunwassana for fortune. Work for it." The author asked a Thai church leader to explain this bumper sticker. The leader affirmed that it was a counter-culture statement.

As was noted in the discussion on education, the Thai are not highly motivated toward education for its own sake. Motivation comes from the increased status of the

self. This is because the Thai have a very low value toward achievement, and attribute success to luck.

Being ambitious and hardworking were consistently ranked low in Komin's survey. However, Komi points out two groups who regard this value more highly. "Thai businessmen who ranked it [being ambitious and hardworking] the nineteenth, and highest of all Thai groups was the Thai of Chinese descendants who ranked in the thirteenth" (Komi 1990, 242). But, generally, Thai are much more concerned about social relationships than achievement. Many Thai achieve many tasks that they want and need to do. But the low ranking reflects that other values are stronger and more prominent in determining behavior.

This is seen by the response to the question, "How do you motivate the Thais?" by Holmes and Tangtongtavy.

. . . of the many factors that can influence particular individuals in the Thai work force, five are especially significant among a wide range of people. Those factors are: money, security, company image, personal prestige and workplace atmosphere. (Holmes and Tangtongtavy 1995, 71)

Achievement for the Thai usually relates to ego, status enhancement and the interpersonal dimensions of reciprocity and fun.

#### Summary

There are several key elements to the Thai world view. Hierarchy is one element. The assumption is that social position reflects a person's karma. Power is another element in this world view. All persons and beings have