'Mai Pen Rai'

A Cultural Ecology of Thailand

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Research Proposal

This research paper will apply and give evidence for culture ecology in Thailand. Each society approaches the challenges of life differently depending on the resources available to them. The relationships between people within a society, their rituals, behaviors, and religious customs can be traced to the ecology of the region that they live. The cultural ecology theory is a framework that supports the notion that a society's lifeways are shaped by the climate and environment that they are interwoven in. Thailand will be the region of study because it is a country that has never been colonized and it is an agricultural hearth that supported one of the oldest culture areas in the world. There are several pivotal factors that contribute to the cultural development of Thailand and they will all be discussed in detail in order to realistically link culture with ecology.

The Neolithic Revolution was the first time in history where surplus farming allowed large-scale societies to evolve, expand, and diversify individually. There are several Agricultural Hearths in the world, and culture groups expanded from those hearths using their own techniques, customs, and technologies derived largely from the resources found in their immediate surroundings. Rice, for example, is one of the most influential resources shaping not only the Thai culture but all of the cultures in South East Asia and Asia as a whole. The way it is cultivated should provide useful explanation to the collectivist culture traits found in Thailand.

Another cornerstone of Thai culture is Buddhism, a religion originating in India that was later a sculptor of culture across the Asian continent. Buddhist traditions and holidays are connected to season and ecology, linking even the religion of Thailand to the framework at hand.

Annotated Bibliography

Chu, Valentin. *Thailand Today; A Visit to Modern Siam.* New York: Crowell, 1968. Print.

The author focuses on the industrial development and modernization of Thailand, which has a profound effect on consumerism and food consumption. A brief history of the region and its changes are discussed throughout the book and those changes in political and economic systems effect the way the people of Thailand acquire their food, which in turn alters their cultural norms and way of life; the body of my project revolves around this concept of change.

Diamond, Jared M. Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies. New York: W.W. Norton &, 1999. Print.

Diamond's thesis discusses why Western civilization became the world's leading model of power: "History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among peoples' environments, not because of biological differences among peoples themselves." Groups who domesticated plants and animals early on gained the advantage of developing writing, government, technology, weapons of war, and immunity to deadly germs before those societies that stuck to simpler forms of subsistence, like hunting and gathering. Diamond's best selling book does not address Thailand specifically but it supports a theory that my thesis is related to: an environmental root to the development of culture.

Donner, Wolf. *The Five Faces of Thailand: an Economic Geography*. New York: St. Martin's, 1978. Print.

The Five Faces of Thailand presents and describes five separate regions and each one's own distinctive features, characteristics, problems and potentials: "Central Thailand with the rice fields, the South with tin and rubber, the North-East with cattle and kenaf, the North with teak and handicrafts, and finally Greater Bangkok, a great metropolis of Asia." This has everything I need in terms of Thailand food production, economy, people, and environment because the book focuses on the relationship between the land and the people, the economic activities' impact on the people and the land, and visa versa.

Hawkes, Peter, and Yoneo Ishii. *Thailand: a Rice-growing Society*. Honolulu: Univ. Pr. of Hawaii, 1978. Print.

"This book is an interdisciplinary approach to a society where rice production is not only an economic basis for the life of the people but has also greatly affected the history, social structure, and polity of the land." This book will be extremely helpful because of the ties it makes between social organization and the rice-growing history in Thailand. It also refers to archeological sites dating back to 1700BC that gives evidence of rice agriculture and it talks of the climate and plant life in the region throughout Thailand's long history. I need to make references to the rice-growing aspect of society in the region because rice is a huge staple and an important, if not the most important, crop grown in Thailand.

Kunstadter, Peter, E. C. Chapman, and Sanga Sabhasri. *Farmers in the Forest: Economic Development and Marginal Agriculture in Northern Thailand*. Honolulu: East-West Center Book. 1978. Print.

Slash-and-burn agriculture is widely used in many areas of Thailand; the authors of *Farmers in the Forest* give specific descriptions showing the range of variation in the types of shifting cultivation and the repercussions these agricultural practices have on the people and environment. Social and ecological elements of these land-use applications are included in the text as well as descriptions of traditional systems and their adaptations to population growth and increasing effects of globalization. This book also gives descriptions of settlement patterns, lists of major subsistence and cash crop plants, land acquisition, and labor opportunities within northern Thailand. My project needs all of this information to support the thesis.

Wyatt, David K. Thailand A Short History. New Haven [Conn.: Yale UP, 1984. Print.

A Short History of Thailand focuses on empires, politics, and social change; this information will give me a look at the people, how they live and under what kind of rule. David Wyatt gives us a clear understanding of who the Thai people are, the long standing relationships Thailand has with its neighbors, and how the Thai government evolved into its present form. This entire history can be incorporated throughout my project.

Goss, Jasper, and David Burch. "From Agricultural Modernization to Agri-food Globalization: The Waning of National Development in Thailand." Third World Quarterly 22.6 (2001): 969-986. Academic Search Elite. EBSCO. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.

"This paper focuses on agriculture and the role of the state in the shift from national development to globalization." The beginning of the paper dissects the beginnings of Thailand's modern agricultural sector, prior to the state-sponsored diversification of agriculture, then the authors discuss shifting state responses to agriculture in the context of several political and historical social forces. Finally, agrifood exports emerge and the growth of agribusiness, along with the conclusion that explains the significance of the government's involvement in the national development project and the globalization project. A significant portion of my project will focus on the effects that globalization has on the people of Thailand, specifically on how it has changed their food production and consumption; this reference covers that subject specifically.

Taechangam, Sunard, Utumporn Pinitchun, and Chanida Pachotikarn. "Development of nutrition education tool: healthy eating index in Thailand." Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition 17.(2008): 365-367. Academic Search Elite. EBSCO. Web. 9 Feb. 2011.

The Healthy Eating Index for Thais was constructed as a tool to assess the nutritional quality and dietary status of the Thai population and monitor changes in their food consumption patterns. The Thai Nutrition Food Guide has recommendations for a healthy diet and this index measures how well the Thai people conform to its dietary

suggestions. According to the scores the index produced, the diets of most Thais need improvement, which encourages the promotion of nutrition education in order to improve the population's overall diet quality. This index and the measurements it provides will help explain the actual Thai diet in a quantitative manner.

Resor, Cynthia Williams. "Food as a Theme in Social Studies Classes: Connecting Daily Life to Technology, Economy, and Culture." Social Studies 101.6 (2010): 236-241.

Academic Search Elite. EBSCO. Web. 9 Feb. 2011.

This paper aims to connect economic, technological, and cultural trends to the everyday life of students through studying their diet. "Food can serve as a course-long theme that helps students comprehend the essential connection between personal actions and national or international trends and develop skills of critical analysis." The students in the study learn about their diet by identifying their food choices and, more importantly, the reasons they make those choices. The students then examine the affects that technological advances of the Industrial Revolution have on food production, preservation, and preparation. This study focuses on a small sample of students but its findings can be reflected on a larger scale and I plan to apply the findings to the progression of the food ways that exist in Thailand.

Smitasiri, Suttilak, and Sinee Chotiboriboon. "Experience with Programs to Increase Animal Source Food Intake in Thailand." Journal of Nutrition 133.11 (2003): 4000S-4005S. Academic Search Elite. EBSCO. Web. 11 Feb. 2011.

I thought it would be interesting to incorporate this paper into my project because it discusses a specific part of the Thai diet and the government attempts to change it. Programs are being put into place to increase production, accessibility, and consumption of animal food sources, milk and beef in particular. The authors note that Thailand is indeed, recognized to be 'food self-sufficient' but adds concern about the amount of calcium and animal food product consumption. "Overall production of fish, egg, chicken and pork has been adequate; and only beef and milk products need to be imported." To improve access for the poor, the National Poverty Alleviation Plan has been implemented since 1981. In terms of consumption, the Royal Thai government has promoted overall nutritious diets, but does not have national programs to promote animal source foods specifically, except for milk. Programs to increase milk, fish and micronutrient consumption are highlighted. Also, future programs and research are discussed."

Outline

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Map of South East Asia

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

(Maps.com: Thailand Physical Map)

Introduction

Cultural ecology is the study of how a society adapts to its environment. Culture ecology views society's customs, values, and means of interaction as developed based on the way they use the resources within the region in which they dwell. Cultures are not solely shaped by ecology but it is a primary mechanism influencing cultural development. The purpose of this research project is to explore culture using the cultural ecology approach; more specifically, I will apply culture ecology to examine what influence Thailand's natural environment has had on its socio-cultural development.

Thailand will be used as the prime example in this report for two main reasons: it is an agricultural hearth, an original site of large scale cultural development, and it has largely maintained its cultural identity by being the only South East Asian country not colonized by any European powers. Colonization was a process that destroyed cultures around the world through either cultural assimilation or overt genocide of the native populations. Thus, finding a rich cultural region that avoided this process is a rarity to study. Thailand is also still a developing nation in transition between its traditional economic structure and the new structures created through the process of globalization. Trade, transportation, and communication networks connecting all regions of the world have been changing traditional cultures on a global scale, but Thailand has enjoyed centuries of independence and the freedom to join or deny those networks, adding to its desirability as a region to study.

The Kingdom of Thailand is a newly industrialized country located in the center of South East Asia with a total land area, slightly larger than Spain. Buddhism is a large source of qualities and characteristics within the Thai culture because it is practiced by

95% of the roughly 60 million people living in the country and it has been the dominate religion for thousands of years. Thailand is a culturally rich country containing a combination of over forty different ethnic groups living in a variety of diverse geographic climate regions. There are lush tropical rain forests, mountains, expansive foothills sprawling from the Himalayas, plateaus covering the eastern portion of the country, scattered river valleys, and the agriculturally rich central plains (McNair). The country is located in the tropics and experiences a wet monsoon season, a pleasantly cooler winter, and a hot dry season. This cycle is ideal for the wet-rice agriculture that is prevalent throughout the entire country.

Thailand has been referred to as 'the rice bowl of the world' because it is the number one exporter of rice in the global economy (Thailand.com). This crop is a key aspect of culture, intertwined in the history of the Thai people and its cultivation is incorporated into everyday life for Thai citizens. Rice is a fundamental staple across all regions; it is considered to be the essence of life and even the root of civilization in South East Asia. Many aspects of culture are rooted in the history of rice agriculture, such as festivals like the traditional Royal Plowing Ceremony at the beginning of each rice-growing season that has been performed for more than seven hundred years (Gomez). This ceremony displays the connection between religion and crop cultivation within the Thai culture.

The organization of subsistence practices is a monumental factor contributing to the structure of community and the values within it (Chu). Take, for example, the traditional American farmer and his family who harvest and process their crops without the need for community involvement; this is promoted by an individualistic culture where

one household or person can be self-sufficient. Manifest Destiny and the ideals developed during the American surge westward created the foundation for the American view on life: individuals can, and should, provide for themselves. On the other side of the world, the traditional Thai way of subsistence revolves around a communal participation in the harvest, it is near impossible for one family to maintain the rice fields on their own so everyone contributes. Relationships between Thai neighbors have been at a close social distance for more than just mere reasons of social interaction, those relationships have been vital for survival. Historically, the economic dependency between members of Thai communities created a tradition of food sharing and a collectivist cultural frame. The difference between individualist and collectivist cultural concepts will give reason for some behavioral traits and cultural interactions that relate culture to ecology.

The main focus in this report will be the different aspects of Thai culture that can be tied to the ecology of Thailand and its regions. Rice cultivation is the key component connecting the cultural ecology framework to the way of life in Thailand because wetrice agriculture depends on the specific climate and ecology that Thailand has and because rice is so closely tied to Thai culture.

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Cultural Ecology Theory

Cultural Ecology is a theoretical framework that explores how people tailor technology and behaviors to their environment and modify aspects of their environment to further enhance their culture. Similar environments produce similar traits but environment doesn't determine culture, rather environment shapes culture. Julian Steward is the founder of cultural ecology and he explains in his book, *Evolution and*

Ecology (1977), that this theoretical perspective analyzes the adaptations that human groups make relative to their environment.

"The ecological concept of interacting phenomena draws attention to certain general categories of relevant data. The resources, flora, fauna, climate, local diseases and their vectors or occurrence, and many other features of the environment constitute potential factors in one part of the interacting system. The nature of the culture, especially its exploitative and adaptive technology but also features of the internal and external social environment, constitutes the other part." (Steward)

The settlement patterns, technology, and land use practices that are created by societies are shaped by ecology. Fishing will be of little importance to a desert community because large amounts of water where fish are found are not commonplace in arid environments, just as agriculture is not a popular land use practice in the arctic due to the cold climate.

"As technological innovations improved man's ability to control and adjust to environments, and as historically derived patterns of behavior were introduced, the significance of both the environment and the culture was altered and the adaptive processes not only became more complex but also acquired new qualities" (Steward). As people learn to use their environment their ways of life change and in turn, the environment changes with them. Broad behavioral patterns arise within societies for specific reasons, most are behaviors that are rarely ever recognized by those who do them because they are so commonplace to them but these behaviors and traditions must originate somewhere. If it were possible to trace traditions and behaviors back through time even before the written word there would be an initial purpose. One theory behind the origin of behaviors, tradition, and ultimately the foundation of culture is the adaptation and response humans create in response to their environment.

Ecology

A common phrase used in Thailand is 'Mai pen rai', which translates to 'it's nothing' in English, and it sums up the Thai philosophy fairly well. The saying embodies the calm, carefree way that most Thais go about their day, encouraging those around them to take it easy and not worry too much. There are several possible reasons why this attitude developed here, like the long history of political freedom, or the religion that seems to put life's suffering and struggles into perspective, but it exists largely because of the friendly environment that they have lived in for so long.

The fertile soil, abundant rainfall, and a tropical climate with sunshine most of the year create a lush environment for plants and animals to thrive. Compared to places like the frostbitten Northern territories of Canada or the harsh, dry heat of interior Australia their land of abundance has made life for Thai people easier than life in many other parts of the world. The maze of rivers such as the Mekong on the northern Laotian border, the Nan and the Ping Rivers to the west, and the entire Chao Phraya River system that dominates the middle of the country from the Gulf of Thailand at Bangkok expanding to the far Northern provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai that border Burma have all been dependable sources of fish and water for thousands of years.

Aside from the occasional drought or tsunami, Thailand as a whole doesn't cope or worry about natural disasters like the countries on the Ring of Fire surrounding the Pacific Ocean that live with earthquakes or the Caribbean that deals with the annual hurricane season. There is no need for strict building codes that withstand tornadoes or earthquakes because they occur in Thailand about as often as the United States wins the world cup (never). The fortunate climate and lack of severe weather conditions allows

Thais to build fairly simple and inexpensive houses and harvest a steady crop each growing season. With little to no fear of weather and a dependable climate for crop growth the stress levels of the Thais are generally low creating a lighthearted social atmosphere. It is a peaceful and relaxed culture. Thus the ecology of their country contributes to the fun-loving and happy way of its people earning the nickname, 'the land of smiles' (Chu).

The location of Thailand is also beneficial, sitting at a crossroads between Chinese and Indian empires that are connected easily by riverboats along the seamlessly endless waterways. The Chao Phraya river system not only supplies water for the rice production in central Thailand that feeds the citizens and the export markets, it serves as a vital transportation artery from the Himalayas to the Gulf of Thailand and further South East Asian Seas. The southern peninsula provides a gateway to the Andaman Sea to the west that quickly connects the country to the Indian Ocean and beyond (McNair). The ability to transport their surplus goods in virtually every direction has been beneficial in trade for thousands of years and still helps their economy prosper today.

The rich ecology of the land also offers a plethora of edible plants like starchy roots and tubers, grains, wild fruit, fish, shellfish, birds, and mammals that are potentially available for human use and consumption depending on the geographic region at hand. Thailand has four main geographic regions: the Northeast Khorat Plateau, Northern Thailand in the continental highlands, the Central Plains, and the Southern peninsular (Chu).

Northeast

One third of the country's land area is located on the Khorat Plateau where nature is the least generous of all the regions of Thailand. The climate is arid, with occasional violent floods and the land is not very productive (McNair). Regardless of the poor agriculture conditions in this geographic region the farmers here still grow rice, tobacco, and some vegetables (Chu). These ecological conditions have made animal husbandry the dominant economic activity in the Northeast, an important contribution to the economy carried out in other regions of the country (Chu). Water buffalo was domesticated as a draft animal in Asia, closely related to the bison and the yak. Water buffalo and oxen are raised in the Northeast to later be distributed to the rice fields in the Central Plains. Elephants are also raised on the Khorat Plateau as draft animals before they head to work with loggers in the forests of the North. Animal husbandry compliments agriculture by way of fertilizer and the utilization of those strong mammals for plowing and transporting the harvest. Water buffalo, elephants, sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens are the main domesticated animals in the Northeast. Meat and dairy provide useful protein for farmers and the chores and tasks that come with tending to livestock shape the day-to-day lives of people in this region. Because the Northeast is a rural region of the country dominated by small villages and fields with only a few larger cities like Nong Khai and Udon Thani the way of life is simpler and slower paced compared to urban centers. The traditional social structure of the Northeast is comprised of many agricultural labor families.

North

The Northern region is a forest-covered mountainous landscape extending from the great plateaus of Tibet and China where rainwater begins its journey southward down the rivers that make their way through the country to the Gulf of Thailand. Teak is a highly valued hardwood tree that flourishes in this area and has been logged, with the help of trained elephants, and floated down river towards Bangkok for export (Chu). Many forests of the canyons and valleys just south of the high mountains have been cleared for lumber and agriculture. Rice as the favored crop but garlic, red peppers, and fruit orchards (among other things) are also planted in this region. Livestock occasionally becomes prey for the feared tigers, leopards, and large Himalayan bears that may roam down from the denser mountain jungles but these wild carnivores usually aim for the wild pigs and deer that inhabit the forests (Chu). This occasional attack on livestock is becoming more common as human development and deforestation degrade and eliminate these large predator's habitats (UNThailand).

Central Plains

As the water from the mountains travel south, it gives life to the heartland of Thailand, the Central Plains Region that is surrounded on three sides by mountains and the Gulf of Thailand to the south (Chu). The Plains were originally covered in lush rain forest carrying an exuberant world of plants and animals within it but humans cleared this long ago to make room for their cultivated crops (Chu). Cutting down the rainforest may seem tragic at first when we think of the current destruction of the Amazon Rainforest

but the floodplains of Thailand that once supported a rain forest are still very much alive today.

The wet-rice agriculture creates a lush environment that is very different from the past rainforest but it is an environment that sustains much life. Thousands of insects, birds like storks, egrets, ibises, water buffalo that soak in the fields to escape the heat, and the surrounding areas crawl with monkeys, geckos, and lizards that feast on the insect swarms. Over thirty species of bats coexist in the drenched ecosystem, some keeping the massive insect population of the wetlands in check while others feast on the fruit around the perimeter of the fields. The vast majority of the Central Plains rain forests are gone, but life is plentiful and even in the dry season when the land is parched the landscape is scattered with patches of vibrant, colorful flowers; wild ten-fold poinsettias, trees and vines covered with fruits and flowers of any and every color, and fragrant jasmine all thrive here. The jasmine is used throughout Thailand to make garlands that are thought to bring luck and good fortune, this is why they are often seen hanging on the rearview mirror of most taxis and placed on the small roadside shrines that sprinkle every corner of the country and (Chu). Life goes on in any transformed landscape, especially in this one that still utilizes the rich river system.

For thousands of years, rivers teaming with fish have fanned from Northern Thailand to the Gulf have depositing rich silt at their mouths creating new land at a rate of fifteen feet per year; this is why Bangkok lies twenty miles inland instead of its earlier position on the coast. The infant Bangkok Plain is the gateway to the rich flatland soils of the Central Plains and the tributaries of the vast Chao Phraya, known as the "Mother of Noble Waters" (Chu).

During the dry season the land turns brown and the rivers trickle down, sitting low in the riverbeds, evaporating under the hot tropical sun until the monsoon rains flood the country with water and life. The end of the dry season is a time filled with religious rituals and vibrant festivals revolving around the growing season. Farmers get to work in the fields with their water buffaloes (or now the tractor, sometimes referred to as an 'iron buffalo') plowing the newly dampened earth before planting the young rice plants (Chu). The rich sediment and the stampede of water from the mountains and clouds above nourish the rice patties for five or six weeks, then the fields flood with barefoot men and women who begin transplanting the beautiful green seedlings. Forty to sixty inches of rain fall on the Central Plains each year and additional water from the rivers floods the farmland to supply the rice with enough water to ripen (at least seventy inches). Thus, the entire region is flooded during the monsoon season, part of the ecological cycle that causes Thai people to adapt their lifestyles accordingly; the houses in the Central Plains sit atop stilts usually accompanied by clusters of palms and bamboos. Boats become the vehicle of transport and become a necessity for the rice harvest (Chu).

A 'water-culture' developed in Thailand because of the river's cycles and the profound seasonal monsoon rains that contribute to the tropical environment. During the day, floating markets of vendors in their small boats sell all types of goods and produce to the people traveling to and from work, school, or temple (Sukphisit). The traditional floating markets still exist today throughout the country, even seen from the freeway overpasses winding through the huge cosmopolitan city of Bangkok. Water is one of the most important resources on this earth; it is used in Thailand for transportation, irrigation, drinking, bathing, religious practices, pure aesthetics, and fishing. The main source of

protein in the national diet has historically been from fish, caught in canals, rivers, flooded rice fields, lakes, marshes, and the expansive seas that surround the southern Peninsula.

Southern Peninsula

Thailand's Southern region starts in Bangkok and extends five hundred miles down the Malay Peninsula, with the Gulf of Thailand on the eastern shore and either the Andaman Sea or Burma to the west. The year-round heat and nine month rainy season near the equator creates the perfect environment for tropical rain forests and mangrove swamps that cover the peninsula. Thousands of miles of coastline have formed beautiful beaches and islands encompassed by abundant aquatic life easily spotted in the clear water. This geographic region is exploding with life on land and at sea. Tropical fruits, orchids, bamboo, and hundreds of species of trees like rubber and coconut trees are a few economically valuable floras that can be found in the jungles. Shellfish, crocodiles, coral reefs, and a seamlessly endless supply of fish occupy the surrounding water bodies. The region is littered with beautiful islands and coves that have attracted tourists for years. This is a resource rich region where hunter-gatherer tribes like the Semangs lived in simple huts made of sticks and large tropic leaves. The Semangs wore little clothing, most likely due to the heat, and they were said to have hunted with poison tipped blowpipe darts (Chu). These people lived simply off the land with the plentiful resources offered from their environment until they were replaced by encroaching migrants. The later arrivals were from the more complex societies in the northern Thai empires, southern powers from Malaysia and Indonesia, and even sailors from India. With the new inhabitants came adaptive processes like technology and subsistence systems like agriculture that were acquired in the original region of the foreigners, thus altering the significance of both the environment and the culture.

These regions and the resources they have to offer have provided the tools and foundation of Thai culture but it is important to note that the basic traits that constitute a society are not strictly permitted and prohibited by local environment; diffusion of technologies from other cultures through trade, migration of people, and mixing or transmission of cultural heritage through the succession of generations are also explanations of how cultural traits arise (Steward). Recently, cultures around the world have been adopting many western cultural practices because western corporations and businesses continue to settle into new countries wherever a new market shows potential for profit. Globalization is a diffusion mechanism that brings cultural artifacts, foods, technology, language, and ideas; all exotic to areas that have not yet been integrated into the global market. The television is a pivotal technology that has been diffused and distributed around the world as not only material culture but also a mechanism for culture diffusion, depending on the programs shown on each channel.

Any diffusion of technology, ideology, or materials can change a people like globalization has. Globalization acts as a profound cultural monitor just as colonialism did several hundred years ago. A discussion of colonialism and its absence in Thailand will help further explain, why this region was chosen to connect culture with ecology.

Freedom from Colonialism

While the entire world was being colonized by European powers Thailand remained free; this freedom from foreign control and subsequent cultural altercation makes Thailand a unique country in world history. Every single continent except Antarctica was affected by western colonization: Africa, Australia, North and South America, Asia, and the all-powerful Europe that was benefiting from the process (Kohn).

The boarders of the countries in Africa were drawn by ruling white men who divided up regions for different European countries to control. Many wars were fought to claim sections of the continent and its rich resources. Rubber in the Congo, ivory on the West Coast, and minerals in the south were viewed as 'there for the taking' because those controlling those resources at the time of contact were viewed as savages, lesser people that needed to be converted and governed by a more superior people. Because of this deliberate division of regions with complete disregard for the indigenous tribes and groups that inhabited Africa at the time of European conquer, war and land disputes still exist throughout Africa today (Wikipedia: Scramble for Africa).

The same story can be told in the New World. North American history was written the moment English, French, Spanish, and Russian explorers 'discovered' the New World. The fertile soils in South Eastern United States that were once utilized by Native American societies like the Cherokee and Seminole were taken from the local inhabitants and used for plantation agriculture. Cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane fields planted for export back to Europe displaced entire populations with the help of disease and brute force. Fur was another resource that North America provided for European economies. Trade routes that spread from the North East coast across the entire continent

to the North West coast contributed to the destruction of native populations. The survivors of those societies were relocated to reservations and acculturated to western ways of living while their rich cultures became distant memories (Oswalt).

South America was similarly turned upside down and literally ripped open one mining sight after another until the continent's cultures were unrecognizable to the natives that once thrived there. Christianity changed the face of South America; the layout of every town is centered on a church in the central square and the Virgin Mary, or Virgin of Guadalupe, exists in virtually every household as a focus of worship and prayer. The spread of Christianity was one of the major cultural influences spread throughout the world due to colonialism, along with other common cultural staples like surplus farming, western clothing, and new technologies like the gun.

Asia didn't escape the effects of colonialism by any means: India, Malaysia, and parts of China were all British colonies, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam were ruled by the French, the Spanish took the Philippines, and the Dutch had claim to the East Indies (present day Indonesia). Each country still has characteristics of their former colonial power to this day; in Laos and Vietnam for example, delicious French bread and bakeries are not too hard to find and traffic follows the French tradition of driving on the right side of the road. One country that did escape colonization is Thailand, and even though Thai people were eventually exposed to western culture through globalization and sheer proximity to other colonized countries, the lack of complete foreign control has been instrumental in preserving their culture, unlike the ample other cultures from around the world that were either altered or destroyed. Christianity and surplus farming were not forced upon Thais. Thais maintained their traditional subsistence practices until they

chose to change/modernize, and will each of their neighboring countries was burdened with the tragedies of war Thailand remained free.

Culture

The country of Thailand was not colonized and Thai culture was spared from forced modification by western powers, leaving the ecology of the land as the primary shaper of Thai culture. The cultural of Thailand can be traced back thousands of years ago to the development of agriculture. There is evidence from around the world showing that sophisticated use of plant and animal species existed as far back as 10,000-6,000BC; this period when humans started transitioning from hunting and gathering to agriculture and settlement is known as the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution (Wikipedia: Neolithic Revolution). There are several agriculture hearths around the world including the Fertile Crest in the Middle East, Mesoamerica, the Ethiopian region in Africa, the Andean Mountains near Peru, and South East Asia. This is important to note because the development of agriculture and the ability to store food allows large groups of people to live together in the same settlement. It allows those groups to grow into large societies with populations that require political regulation and formal social structure. When those large groups of people live and interact they usually unify and identify with each other as a larger single entity or culture of people that share the same traits and beliefs; thus the basis of large-scale cultural development begins with agriculture.

One characteristic of Thai culture that stands out and makes it profoundly unique from other countries in the world is its language. The Thai language family is distinct from and has little to no relationship with other Asian language families (Wyatt). The

relationships between the Thai languages of Laos, Siamese and Shan are clearly connected and share some mutual intelligibility but other than those closes neighbors the Thai language is one of a kind (Wyatt). This unique language supports the idea that a cultural hearth grew with the agricultural hearth explained earlier.

Culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns that is transmitted from one generation to the next. More specifically shared traditions and expectations that constitute a culture include material artifacts like clothing and art, as well as more abstract entities like law, social norms, beliefs, morals, customs, and of course language. Culture is a powerful tool in a constant state of change adapting to fit the necessities for human survival (O'Neil). In its simplest definition, culture is a set of life-ways. In order to examine Thai culture through the lens of cultural ecology, a detailed profile of Thai culture and history must be provided.

Cultures can typically be divided into two categories: collectivist and individualistic. Thai culture, along with the majority of all other Asian cultures, is collectivist, emphasizing group conformity and cooperation with others. The common good is of utmost importance and any deviance from the group or any open opposition to the group is seen as shameful. Collectivism contributes to the non-confrontational demeanor of Thai people who all seem to be polite and never raise their voice in anger. Individuals in this type of culture identify with others before they act for themselves. For example, if a Thai were asked to describe themselves, a common response would be: 'I am a sister' or 'I am a Bangkok Post employee'. In contrast, someone in an individualist culture like the United States might initially respond with something like, 'I am a female' or 'I am a reporter', leaving out any affiliation with other people or organization.

Collectivist cultures often exist in places where cooperation between many people is necessary for survival, like in rice-growing societies. "All the men and women of the village join together in a communal effort, helping each family in turn with the job of sowing the rice and later transplanting the rice seedlings" (Chu). The ecology of their land has indirectly affected behavior in this instance.

As a collectivist society there is a conventional value placed on kinship groups in Thailand. Throughout Thailand there is regional variation in kinship structure but Thais can be safely characterized as adhering to a bilateral decent system with matrilocal residence for a time after marriage. The family is of utmost importance to Thai people who traditionally hold three generations of extended family in one residential household (McNair) The large family unit is especially beneficial for rice farming where group cooperation improves efficiency and crop yields. In modern times it is less common to see up to three generations under one roof, especially in large cities like Bangkok where the typical economic focus is not on agriculture. Most parts of the day are shared with members of the family, whether it be at the table for breakfast or dinner, working out on the rice paddy fields, playing futbol after work until dusk, or simply walking around the village. Thais rarely spend much time alone and rarely spend that much time inside their house, until more recently of course with advent of air conditioning, because they are very social people always interacting with members of their group. This brings up the collectivist concept of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'. Collectivists are extremely close to those people in their 'in-group', the people that they trust and depend on. The in-group members last a lifetime and are pivotal participants in each others lives. The out-group

includes everyone else, still treated with respect and interacted with but they do not hold the same profound role as those within one's in-group.

Thailand is not an ethnically homogeneous country, rather there are over forty recognized ethnic groups living within the borders of Thailand. The Thai culture did not arise from a uniform group of people; a long history of interactions and blending of neighboring cultures from Malaysia, Khmer (Cambodia), China, India, and other ancient settlers in South East Asia characterize the Thai culture as it is known today.

Nan Chao is a Thai state consisting of people from the southwestern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan who migrated south in order to escape the Mongols in 1253 (Hoskin). These agrarian people began to build clustered villages and small city-states in the North and Northeast that, after gradual settling in the region for several centuries, constituted the bulk of the Thai population. The lifestyles of Thais in the Northern parts of the country stayed constant for thousands of years until western technologies and culture were heavily integrated and embraced over the past several centuries, this slow integration can be attributed to the rural location and the lack of a national road or train system until less than one hundred years ago.

The Khmer Empire once stretched from the China Sea in present day Vietnam across the entirety of the mainland of Southeast Asia to Burma, encompassing Thailand and influencing the people that lived there. The most substantial lasting impact of the Khmer Empire that can be seen today is the artistic heritage and the fabulous architectural monuments and style that can be seen in famous historic temples like Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, both kingdoms of Thailand's past. Most structures in Thailand are made of wood, but of those monuments that have lasted since previous kingdoms, the temples are

made of materials practical for this climate region like brick, laterite, or sandstone. Bricks and laterite are both made of earth that hardens with long sun exposure (AisaRooms). Much of the classical Thai architecture can be attributed to the Khmer era with rectangular shapes, sloping roofs, and intricate carvings, all of which are incorporated to symbolize the Thai soul and spirit (AsiaRooms). The environment is a large source of inspiration in Thai architecture and artwork with the magnificent colors of the tropical landscape depicted on the ornamental exterior of the buildings and temples. The extravagant carvings of the native flowers, serpents, and birds that adorn the rooftops and entryways of large temples would not be profound characteristics of Thai art and architecture if it weren't for the nature surrounding the artists at work (McNair). India has also been a major influence on Thai architecture. The giant Buddha statues and carvings decorate the intricately decorated Buddhist temples located all over the country.

A huge cultural impact came from India where various artistic ideals, social practices and religious philosophies diffused into Thailand in the second and third centuries (Hoskin). Indian traders sailed across the Bay of Bengal to the Malay Peninsula for economic reasons, establishing ports on the shores of what is now the present day southern peninsula of Thailand and through their course of contact with the native inhabitants they spread various cultural traits of their own that appealed to the locals. Of all the ideologies and traditions that diffused from India to Thailand, Buddhism has had the most profound effect on Thai culture. The morals and beliefs that are embedded in Buddhism are apparent in the day-to-day movements of all Thai people. This religion, or philosophy, originated in India and spread throughout South East Asia creating a lasting impact on all of cultures in the region. Buddhism was first introduced and soon embraced

by the Thai nation near 700AD (Hoskin), eventually becoming one of the most important forces in Thai society and way of life. Any research of Thai culture without understanding the history and teachings of Buddhism would be incomplete.

Buddhism

'Buddha' means 'Awakened One,' the one who sees things as they truly are, or awaken from ignorance (Gyatso). Buddhism is a philosophy as well as a religion to those who follow its teachings. Buddhism encourages people to take responsibility for their thoughts, actions, and individual spiritual path (Hoskin). Compassion is the chief virtue within Buddhism and when enlightenment, or nirvana, is reached a truly awakened person would give it up in order to help others along their paths (Hoskin).

In 500BC a prince named Siddhartha Gautama was born in Northern India to a life of luxury and ease before he committed himself to a life of wandering and meditation (Gyatso). He was sheltered from most of the harsh realities of the world during his childhood until he ventured into the capital city of his father's kingdom to feed his curiosity of how the people lived. He saw sick and elderly people, and on occasion he saw a corpse; a stunning sight that left a profound impression on the young prince, changing his life's path forever. He recognized that suffering is a part of life; furthermore, through reincarnation it is part of every life, with no exceptions. Siddhartha developed a deep compassion for all those intertwined in the cycles of suffering and wished to free them from the discomfort. It was thought that only a truly enlightened Buddha had the power and wisdom to help in this way so the young prince took to the road on a quest for enlightenment (Gyatso). The day he escaped from the palace on is

spiritual journey through the countryside he had already been training in meditation for six years and already close to attaining enlightenment. He fasted and meditated and, "with this concentration he removed the final veils of ignorance from his mind and into the next moment became Buddha, a fully enlightened being" (Gyatso).

Once Siddhartha reached enlightenment he began teaching others how to attain enlightenment, freeing them from suffering through the practicing of Dharma, which has a somewhat subjective meaning often described as an ideal truth regarding one's conduct throughout life (dictionary.com). Dharma is a moral law used to eliminate ignorance from one's life because ignorance is thought to be the root of all suffering. The Buddha asked his students not to follow blindly, he wanted them to listen and then decide for themselves what they believed their true path in life should be. Without ever speaking harshly or getting frustrated he emphasized compassion and encouraged his followers to help each other along the way. The mannerisms and foundation of etiquette engrained in the Thai culture down to the simplest interactions, whether it be behavior towards strangers in passing or behavior around family at the dinner table, can be traced to Buddhism. A non-confrontational atmosphere is held in the highest regard and the concept of 'community' and 'self' are one in the same because of this ideology, similar to collectivist ideals.

Two important chapters of Buddhist teachings that develop the core beliefs within the religion are the Four Noble Truths and the Three Universal Truths. The Four Noble Truths revolve around Dharma and coping with the suffering that plagues human being. The Four Noble truths are: suffering is common to all, we are the cause of our suffering, stop doing what causes suffering, and everyone can be enlightened (Introduction to

Buddhism). Birth, sickness, old age, and death are all parts of life that are simultaneous with suffering. How we handle the pain is what matters, through the teaching of Dharma on the path towards enlightenment. The fourth truth implies that there is more than just one Buddha, rather, there are many enlightened or 'awakened ones'.

The Three Universal Truths resemble laws found in a science textbook and were developed by the Buddha after deep contemplation, they go as follows: nothing is lost in the universe, everything changes, and there is a universal law of cause and effect. The first universal truth that nothing is lost in the universe is similarly explained with the concept of the circle of life, everything is connected, matter turns to energy and vice versa through the processes naturally occurring every day; this truth is the reason Buddha and his disciples thought it wrong to kill animals (Introduction to Buddhism). The second truth, that everything changes, was explained through the metaphor of a river in constant motion, an ever-changing course. This means that our ideas are ever changing as well, so keeping an open mind is virtuous. Finally the law of cause and effect brings us to the term 'karma' meaning that nothing ever comes to us unless we deserve it and instead of fearing karma it is wise to embrace this truth and create a bright future for ourselves by doing good things that will eventually cause good things to happen to us in return (Introduction to Buddhism). This last universal truth guides and encourages virtuous behavior of all Buddhists, governing interactions between neighbors and creating an atmosphere of sharing; for example, many Thais wake up with the sun to walk to temple bearing food for those who cannot feed themselves.

The region now known as Thailand was introduced to Buddhism before the religion was divided into two sects (Hoskin). Mahayana and Theravada are the two

schools of Buddhism; the Theravada school was developed in Sri Lanka and slowly spread throughout South East Asia with the teachings of monks. This form of Buddhism further shaped the developing culture region into what we now recognize as a cohesive Thai culture.

Buddhist temples are found in every Thai settlement, whether they are massive monumental buildings constructed in large cities, humble structures the rural areas, or the small shrines that can be found along any and every road in the country. A temple in Thailand is called a 'Wat' and they dominate the landscape showing the value and importance that religion plays in their day-to-day lives. Monks, who can be identified by their shaved heads and either orange or green robes, live in small rooms on the grounds adjacent to the Wats as they study and meditate, moving through the religious rituals and monk rankings. Becoming a monk in Thailand is an act of making merit and monkhood can only be upheld by men. Young men enter monkhood to gain merit for themselves but more importantly to gain honor and karma for their mothers and sisters who cannot serve as monks (The Sangha). They tend to the Wats and the surrounding gardens and often meet and talk with tourists to learn English and help those who may ask for advice. It is very common for a young Thai boy to become a monk for several years, studying and living a virtuous life with little or no individual possessions and then once their studies are through they may return to their families or move to the city to find a job. Becoming a monk is a classic example of collectivist behavior and the following process of finding a job can quite possibly be an example of an in-group/out-group classification it the young man gains employment in a family business. In-group members will overwhelmingly feel compelled to help, or hire, members of their group over out-group members regardless of

their abilities, this is why most small businesses and shops in Thailand are family owned and operated. This is a method used to support everyone within the group, a goal of utmost importance in collectivist societies and followers of Buddhism.

Along with the virtues and behavioral patterns learned from the Buddhist religion are the festivals and holidays celebrated throughout Thailand that connect religion to the important ecological elements present in the region. Songkran, for example, is the New Years festival in Thailand held every April, the hottest month of the year in the middle of the dry season. In essence, it is the world's largest water fight spanning the entire country and some of the neighboring countries.

"Songkran is a religious festival of 'bathing the Buddha,' observed from India to China. It also marks the lunar New year for the Thais, who turn the occasion into a combination of devotional gesture, rain-making ritual, mating game, and pure, effervescent dedication to *sonouk*- which translates roughly as the joy of living" (Chu).

The water fights that now define the modern Songkran festival symbolize the Hindu and Buddhist water rituals where water was sprinkled on Buddha images and temples to cleanse the spirits (Thompson). The water is thrown and the rainy season is welcomed at the New Year in hopes to cool people from the heat and replenish the land for the next agricultural cycle. This festival is a time of merriment and flirtation for Thai youth in particular but the boys and girls are careful to never touch one another, the social norm of little public display of affection is not forgotten amongst the frolic (Chu). The Songkran festival is followed by a surge of joyful engagements and weddings until the monsoon rains arrive in early June signaling the planting season, which illustrates the interweaving of culture and ecology.

In November, at the end of the planting season when the floods have receded and the waterways are still full the Loy Krathong festival is held to pay respect to the spirit of the waters. On the night of the full moon people launch small cups made of banana leaves carrying illuminated candles to float down the waterways (Chu). This is similar to the Yi Peng Festival where the sky is littered with thousands of floating lanterns made of thin rice paper. In the Buddhist tradition, the floating lights in both these festivals are said to be symbolic of letting go of all of one's grudges, anger and defilements so that one can start life afresh on a better foot.

All of the Buddhist festivals coincide with the change of the seasons in hopes for a bountiful harvest and a prosperous life. The climate of Thailand and the resources that the environment has to offer are incorporated into these festivals and local traditions, but no resource is more profound in these holiday and festivals than rice.

Rice

The environments of each region of Thailand support rice cultivation and have been doing so for thousands of years. This grain has been growing with cultures in South East Asia since the agricultural age began, before the Kingdom of Thailand even existed. According to the Department of Export Production in Thailand, "Rice is the most important staple food for about one-half of the world's population and provides over 20 percent of the global calorie intake" (Thailand.com). Rice is eaten with virtually every meal in the 'land of smiles' serving as the main caloric contribution to the Thai diet and making rice a key component in connecting culture and ecology in Thailand. Since the first seeds were sewn rice has become a vital part of the Thai diet, economy, and way of life.

The early people of Thailand used the bountiful environment to hunt and gather in a semi-sedentary fashion for a long time before the agricultural age began with slash-and-burn techniques that supported small gardens by rivers in the dry season (Ishii). Furthermore, there is strong archeological evidence that shows that rice has been deliberately planted and farmed in Thailand since roughly 3,000 B.C. (Gomez). A remnant of a rice patty print was found in a brick in the Khon Kaen Province and ancient drawings of rice planting were discovered in the Ubon Rajathanee Province that further supports the date. The early domestication of this plant makes it a culturally important resource to Thailand and South East Asia in general.

The rice patty cultivation has been prevalent throughout the entire Asian continent for thousands of years, providing the lifeblood of societies spanning from Japan across to India and perhaps further. The evidence for Thai rice patty planting predates that of China and India, the two major culture regions and presently the two most powerful countries on the mainland of Asia (Ishii). Rice agriculture would not be possible if not for the environment and climate of the region, in fact the biggest concern for those early migrants traveling through South East Asia was the optimal location to grow rice.

Thailand, a land with plentiful river valleys and deltas, was the perfect place to settle (Gomez). Today, the country is known as the 'rice bowl of Asia', leading the world in rice exports since the 1960s and producing the best quality rice in the world (Gomez).

Central Thailand is a dominant rice-producing region but rice-growing in Thailand is not constricted to the central region by any means; in fact the earliest rice grown in the country was cultivated on mountain slopes in the hill country of the North East Khon Kaen province (Ishii). It was in these upland fields that people constructed

ridges around their fields to retain as much water as possible on a particular slope face.

The basic concept of flooding rice fields to increase yields and quality has been used in the highlands, with the help of terracing, as well as lowland rice fields (Ishii).

As rice began to be planted throughout the region technologies were developed, like terracing, canal/irrigation systems, and storage/transportation systems in order to utilize this grain to its full potential. As more communities learned to cultivate rice the behaviors, customs, and values of those people became intertwined with rice and all that comes with it. There is great value and importance attached to the resources needed to grow rice, such as water, soil, water buffalo, seasons, collective groups of people, and the grain itself.

There are many rituals, festivals, and traditions that all celebrate the crop and the environmental conditions (especially rain) needed for it to prosper. The Rocket Festival in North Eastern Thailand is held right before the first rice planting in May to call upon heavenly beings to send rain for the season (Hoskin). There are rituals for every stage of the rice-growing season from pre-planting to harvest that ease the farmers' stress and brighten their spirits. The collectivist way of life in rice-growing societies thrives on harmony and mutual support from every member to ensure an abundant harvest that ultimately brings joy and economic vitality to the community as a whole. Another famous ritual contributing to rice cultivation, as mentioned previously, is the Royal Plowing Ceremony connecting ordinary citizens to the royal family with the hopes to produce rain and a bountiful crop to support Thai farmers and the country's economy. The Thai king plays the important symbolic role of 'protector of rice farms' and during the ceremony he

scatters rice seeds from the palace's rice crop with a pair of ceremonial bulls actually plowing before him (Gomez).

Conclusion

Thailand has a unique, vibrant culture that has grown for thousands of years and truly blossomed with the cultivation of rice at the start of the Neolithic Revolution. It is an agricultural hearth region that developed an original language and culture amidst a lush, resource rich environment. The plethora of edible plants and animals along with the abundant rainfall has supported Thais throughout time, inspiring artists and architects to create material culture reflective of the landscape. The waterways have been utilized for fishing, transportation, irrigation, and when the floating markets assemble the opportunity for social interaction and trade is embraced. The tropical monsoon seasons dictate the year round activities of Thais and their religious calendar; the Buddhist festivals and major holidays revolve around the seasons and the rice patty.

The rice-cultivations practices, in turn, bring communal groups of people together and support the collectivist ideals that functionally preserve social wellbeing. The family unit that coexists together in the same household compound extends farther than the nuclear family to span over several generations because the importance of the in-group fulfills economic, as well as compassionate needs. The wellbeing of the group as a whole is of utmost importance to collectivist cultures and with this value system in place comes the collateral behavioral traditions like fulfilling one's social role within the family, whether that is to serve as a monk or to enter the sex trade. Other behavioral traditions or attitudes include the effort to sustain a calm social atmosphere with light hearted joking

and an avoidance of ill temper in order to keep peace and harmony within the group. The attitudes, mannerisms, and way of life of Thai people may exist today because of their religion or their long standing freedom but, arguably, the most profound influence and shaper of the Thai's culture and life-ways is their environment. The ecology of Thailand has influenced every aspect of culture and every facet of life.

There is currently a noticeable cultural shift in Thailand, as in the rest of the world, with the spread of western culture through globalization. Technologies like the tractor, the television, air conditioning, refrigerators, and the computer are all changing traditional ways of life and consequently traditional culture. The growth and effect that Bangkok has had on the country is changing the economy of Thailand; it is headed towards industrialization and a service-based economy and away from the traditional agricultural way of life. It is doubtful that rice production and farming in general will dwindle significantly but the economic shift is directing Thai culture away from its lasting character. Ecology may have been the initial nutrient for the growth of culture in Thailand but, as mentioned previously, new technologies perpetuate change and inevitably the effect that the environment has on culture.

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