

## Thai Rice and Ceremony of Rice Goddess

Rice is the mainstay of the Siamese diet and economy and is always served with salads, meats, poultry, fish, and sea food. Two-thirds of the Thai people earn a living from rice farming. They produce enough not only to feed themselves, but also to be one of the world's largest rice exporters. Rice farming is the greatest single contributor to national income, provides almost half of Thailand's export earnings, and is the major support of government revenues. When one hires a servant in Siam, it is customary to supply rice in addition to salary.

Besides its economic importance, rice has a deep psychological and cultural meaning for the Thai, according to Phya Anuman Rajadhon, distinguished Thai historian and scholar of the customs and traditions of his country. When a Siamese wishes to say he is hungry, he says, &quot;Hiu khao&quot; or &quot;I'm hungry for rice.&quot; When he is eating, he says, &quot;Tan khao&quot; or &quot;I'm eating rice.&quot; Even when he refers to food in general he uses the word khao, meaning rice.

There are many rituals and ceremonies that accompany rice farming, and, while some are losing their vitality with the passing of the older generation, others are practiced today. These observances are founded on the belief that there is a Rice Goddess or Rice Mother, Mae Posop, who, if properly worshiped and propitiated, will reward the farmer with prosperity and good health. For those who deny her, only poverty and sickness will be their end. It is said that she first came to reside in the land of the rice fields from Mount Meru, the home of the Hindu-Buddhist gods. Her journey over the Seven Seas and the Seven Mountain Ranges was long and tortuous. And on her heels came the many fish which today are still so plentiful in Siamese waters.

When rice plants begin to seed, the Thai expression is that the rice becomes pregnant. This is a crisis in the life of the plant, and therefore its khwan (spirit or soul) must be strengthened. It is believed that every living thing has a khwan, man, animal, and plant. When a person is ill, the khwan flees the body. Death means that the khwan does not return. During every crisis of life - birth, puberty, marriage - a ceremony is performed to strengthen this spirit. So for the pregnant Rice Mother an offering is made of banana, citrus fruit, and sugar cane for her morning sickness. The farmer puts these foods in a bamboo basket which he hangs on a flag pole in the fields. This also serves as a warning to trespassers to keep their animals from treading on the rice plants. The farmer then takes a comb, toilet powder, and perfumed ointment and symbolically combs a rice plant, dabbing it with powder and ointment as though it were the Rice Mother herself. He prays that through his offerings the Rice Mother will thrive and not come to harm.

After the harvest, the rice missed in the reaping, representing the spirit of the Rice Mother, is gathered, with an entreaty to her to leave the field, where she may be in danger of prowling mice and birds, and to come and live in the barn instead. When the threshing is done, an offering of boiled duck eggs, sweets, and fruit is made to the Rice Mother. What rice paddy remains on the threshing floor is then put into a basket and called Mae Posop's rice. This is the spirit or essence of rice. Next a doll is made from rice straw and mixed with some of this paddy - as an image of the Rice Mother - and is kept in the barn with the paddy essence. When the sowing of rice begins in the rainy season, the Rice Mother's essence is taken out of the barn and mixed with the paddy to be sown, to insure fertility. The doll is then ceremoniously destroyed.

Even when not directly concerned with the cultivation of rice, the Rice Mother must be propitiated. At the end of a meal children often raise their hands palm to palm in thanksgiving to the Rice Mother. It is said that her ire is incurred if, when eating, one allows grains of rice to fall to the floor, or if these grains are stepped on, or leftover rice is discarded. If one wishes to criticize the way rice has been cooked, one must beg the Rice Mother's pardon first and then politely make one's complaint. When fed to animals - and it is, by the way, the main source of food for cats, dogs, pigs, chickens, ducks, cows, and buffalo - rice must be offered in a container, not scattered on the ground, for the Rice Mother's wrath may be incurred. The threatening danger is that she will leave the offender, and only bad luck will surround him without her.

## About the Author

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