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Urban ethnography: Treasures of Thailand Gaining Rootedness Abroad

This paper has been written for the Queens Botanical Garden as a part of an exploration of the ways that plants are used as unique expressions of cultural traditions and festivals. It must be noted especially, however, that Queens, New York provides an interesting and unique locale for cultural (and ethnobotanical) research because it is distinguished by an urban "frontier" constituted by a highly concentrated cosmopolitan mélange of ethnic traditions, natural treasures and material culture. Hence, the polyethnic communities found in Queens continue to bring their language, dialects of language, rituals, spiritual beliefs, social dynamics, material practices, natural treasures, and ways of interacting with their environment to the urban North American setting in ways that demand "code-switching" and/or Creolization and hybrid forms to emerge (Hannerz 1997). It is also particularly interesting to explore how this is done among the many cultures in Queens because urban ethnographers have found both a distillation and a reaffirmation of cultural traditions (Khandewal 2001; Park 2000). While Chinese, Korean and Latino communities may predominate in Queens presently, other newer immigrant communities such as those from S. E. Asia are rooting themselves through a reproduction of their traditional practices as well. Among the smaller and newer of those communities is the one formed by immigrants from Thailand. Their growth as a community in Queens can be viewed through the practices applied to their symbolic and plant material culture. This growth may be explored through the Thai Songkran Festival held in the Thai Temple in Elmhurst. The elements of this festival event contrasts with the innovation found in abstract Thai art and Thai products. Indeed, under examination, it is evident that some of the traditions, practices and natural resources of Thailand are "creolized" for the new international urban environments and markets that are composed more and more by a cultural economy.

The Songkran (New Years) Festival in Thailand

In Thailand, the New Years Songkran Festival is attached to religious and agrarian symbols of purification, rebirth and merit. House wives clean. Worn-out clothing and rubbish are thrown out. Elders are given a bath and new clothes presented to them by youth. Live birds and fish purchased in the market are released for cosmic merit.

While Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand and much of the social life has revolved around temples, many ties to agrarian and rural cosmologies remain. Hence, there are areas of Thailand where it is still common to see Thai ancestral "spirit houses" hosting shaman's rituals and receiving incense, flowers, ribbon and/or food just as do the Buddhist icons.



An attendant of the Thai New Years Songkran Festival seeks dam, blessings or merit.

A tradition in miniature

In Queens, many S. E. Asian plants (especially jasmine and orchids) from Thailand's agrarian environment are necessary to recreate at least an essence, or a micro version, of the national Thailand Songkran Festival. On April 13th in Elmhurst, the Songkran event is held at the Buddha Thai Temple - *Wat Thavorn Vanarum* (exact location listed at the end of the document). The traditional symbolic themes of water, rebirth, purification, nature's wealth, a "blossoming" Buddha, and "filial respect" are renewed best when the homeland context is evoked through these plants, and through the material culture. The miniature sand pagodas, the traditional Thai food, dancing, beauty contests, cups of water filled with orchids, joss sticks and water fights compel people to participate and practice with these symbolic themes physically.

Interestingly, despite the occasion that Songkran is held in a new context for Thai people, the representations of water, rebirth, purification, nature's wealth, Buddha, and filial respect are more traditionally and spiritually laden than is the case in Bangkok, where youthful water antics predominate (Mydans 2001). On the other hand, Thai traditions can also appear more packaged in a temple in Queens, New York than might in be the case in the capital of Thailand. This may be due to pressures to include non-Thai attendants and/or second-generation Thai youth who are less familiar with the heritage.



Attendants of the Songkran Festival rapidly clear the space before aggressive or "religious" water fighters.

Migrating cosmology

The roots of the temple's instruction is drawn from a branch of Buddhism called "Theravada" - meaning the 'way of the elders'. However, in the contemporary Thai Songkran Festival, the respect for elders is both underscored and flipped. This is evident when young children splash their elders with water to request "cleansing" or forgiveness for mischief over the past year. Contemporary elders must condone this symbolic form of mischief with a smile to be seen as worthy of merit as an elder. And remaining central to the Buddhist cosmology, even in the temple in Queens, are efforts toward merit-making. The monks who stay in the temple for fear of stepping on creatures (the avoidance of all suffering is key) facilitate this merit-making. From the lay public, they receive alms, boon, in the form of food, flowers and water. In the cosmology of dharma (receiving back both what you deserve and what you give), the offering then gains merit, or dam, for the individual who gives it. Even second generation Thai-Americans who have become more integrated in American lifestyles, will still visit the temple on occasion for this purpose. While the Thai Songkran Festival is primarily the national New Year celebration, according to Thai philosopher Sulak Sivaraksa the symbol of water carries spiritual import that connects society, nature and spiritual forces. He writes (1992: 71);

At least once a year, we need to visit a retreat center to regain our spiritual strength so that we can continue

*to confront society. Spiritual masters are like **springs of fresh water**. We who work in society need to carry that **pure water** to flood the banks and fertilize the land and the trees, in order to be of uses to the plants and animals, so that **they can taste something fresh and be revitalized**. If we do not go back to the spring, our minds will get polluted, just as **water becomes polluted** and we will not be of much use to the plants, the trees, or the earth. (emphasis mine)*

Hence, water, nature and Buddhist themes seem to be mutually reinforcing.

At the Thai temple in Elmhurst, this cosmology may come in practical ways too. Classes in Thai language, Thai massage, flower arranging, and flower carving (where a humble carrot becomes a transcendent lotus) are available to children and adults to evoke the roots of their heritage. The temple itself, found in the middle of suburban Elmhurst, is of an ornate style that also designates this space as distinctively Thai.

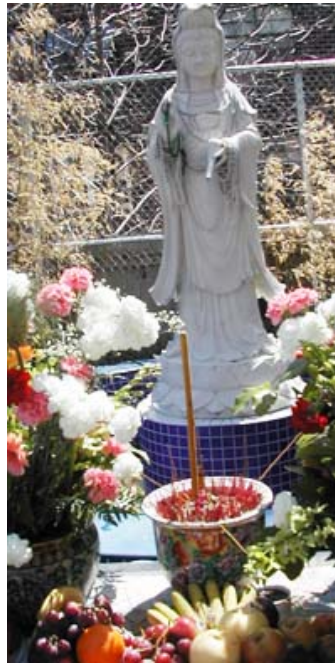


Water and orchids in small silver bowls are given to statues of the Buddha to gain dam, blessings or merit.

Migrating natural and cultural treasures

The temple itself has 20 yellow flaring hooks that peek from a purple tiled roof into the sky in an ornate Siamese and Buddhist temple style. The back courtyard is hosted by a 6-foot Kuan Yin statue which represents compassion and forgiveness. She stands in a wider pool of blue tile (which is filled with orchids during the Songkran Festival). Fortunes may be asked of her by: 1) burning three joss sticks, 2) placing them in a pot; 3) kneeling on a stool before her altar, 4) shaking a cup of sticks, 5) picking the number of the first stick to fall and 6) picking your fortune from numbered fortunes hanging in a glass case nearby.

Adjacent to Kuan Yin, is a glass case inhabited by a metal carved serpent - said to have protected the Buddha from flies and rains during his time of enlightenment. Steps descending from this case provide the base of several flower arrangements and an onyx and a gold Buddha statuette that are bathed during the festival. This display is elaborately arranged the day before Songkran. Spritely round fans of nutgrass (a swamp plant like papyrus) - *Cyperus rotundus*; Kaffir lime leaves - *Citrus hystrix* (*makrut*); red and pink daisies, white carnations and many orchids - *Dendrobium*, origin: Asia to Australia - purple, white with green stripes and yellow and red mottled - are arranged behind the Buddha. A silver bowl filled with water and orchids is placed close by for the bathing. When bathing the Buddha with a cup of water and orchid, one may ask for a blessing, for forgiveness, or for prosperity. An expectation of humility accompanies each bathing as each person bows their head and places their hands in a prayer signal, called a wai. This hand-prayer-form, wai, is also extended in a greeting of "*sawtadee bi mai*" to other elders and friends as a sign of respect. Wreaths of orchids are also worn by individuals who are in a prominent position at the temple - signaling the also the merit they have earned. Also, provided for the performance of respect, commemoration and memory are *joss* (incense) sticks. As part of many Asian traditions, these sticks are burned for the spirits of the recently deceased ancestors.



The 6-Foot Kuan Yin, found in the Temple courtyard, receives floral offerings and incense.

Moving through the crowd at Songkran, yet gaining distinction are individuals clad in traditional dress. This dress has variegated embroidered patterns and woven combinations of brilliant turquoise, green, pink, reds and yellow silk showing the Thai affection for multiple vivid colors. The saffron-robed monks are also clad in traditional dress, yet a sight of the monks is had mainly inside the temple where they stay during the spring.



Thai silk, orchids, and dramatic make-up costume the traditional Thai dance and drumming performances.

Feeding the Songkran attendants are the typical, royal and special Thai dishes. Noodles being a main feature of Thai cuisine, the spicy, peanut, vinegar, sugar and pickled vegetable noodle dish now popularly known in America as pad thai is common and ubiquitous to Thai restaurants and therefore also at the temple. These noodles are just one option amongst other red, green and yellow curry dishes spiced with coconut milk and various combinations of chiles, coriander, cumin, tumeric, basil, lime, lemongrass and a rhizome called "galangal" are typical, as is the *tom yum soup*. *Tom yum* is made from basil, chile, kaffir lime leaves zest, mushrooms, bamboo shoots and shrimp. Salads such as *yum makeua* made from eggplant, som tum from unripe papaya shreds, anchovy-fish sauce and lime, and yam taeng from half-ripe fruits and freshwater chestnuts are common as well. The following herbs are the essential spices found in most general Thai cuisine in New York (Pooket Thai Restaurant):

Sacred basil, *Ocimum tenuiflorum* (*kra-phrao*), origin: Thailand, tropics - this basil has narrower leaves than sweet basil and reddish-purple coloring. The fresh leaves are used as flavoring but it also possesses a .5 percent volatile oil, antimicrobial activity, carminative, diaphoretic, expectorant and stomachic.

Kaffir lime, *Citrus hystrix* (*makrut*), origin: SE Asia - The zest of kaffir lime leaves and the juice and peel of the lime itself are often used in Thai cuisine. The leaves and lime peel contain a volatile oil possessing appetizing properties. The lime itself, often called 'kalamansi' abroad, is well known for its musky flavor that is less sharp than the common lime juice.

Japanese Mint, *Mentha arvensis*, or *piperascens* (*sa-ra-nae*), origin: Japan - the fresh leaves contain a volatile oil that has therapeutic uses including carminative, mild antiseptic, local anaesthetic, diaphoretic and digestant properties.

Lime, *Citrus aurantifolia* (*ma-nao*), origin: tropical Asia - Lime is used as a garnish for meat and fish dishes. It contains hesperidin and naringin, scientifically proven anti-inflammatory flavonoids. Its active ingredients are also antitussive, antifu, stomachic, and antiscorbutic.

Greater galangal, *Alpinia galanga* (*kha*), origin: tropical Asia - A light pink rhizome used like ginger in spicy shrimp pastes or curries commonly used in Thai cooking as a flavoring.

Sweet basil, *Ocimum basilicum* (*bai ho-ra-pha*), origin: tropical East - Its fresh leaves are either eaten raw or used as flavoring in Thai cooking. Volatile oil content is variable according to different varieties. Therapeutic properties are as carminative, diaphoretic, expectorant, digestant and stomachic.

Lemongrass, *Cymbopogon citratus* (*ta khrai*), origin: S. India and Sri Lanka - the tender part of the bulb is used and bruised for a curry or other pastes. It contains .2-.4 percent volatile oil that is used as a diuretic, emmanagogue, antifatulence agent, and antimicrobial agent.

Chili, *Capsicum frutescens* (*phrik*), origin: Mediterranean, North America - Used to make a sambal, (a chili condiment). The therapeutic uses of its active ingredients benefit the respiratory system, blood pressure and heart. It can also be stomachic, carminative, a digestant and an antifatulence agent.

Garlic, *Allium sativum*, (*kra-thiam*), origin: Mediterranean - Garlic clove is a flavoring and a condiment in Thai cuisine. The bulbs contain .1 to .36 percent garlic oil and organic sulphur compounds. Therapeutic uses are as antimicrobial, diaphoretic, diuretic, expectorant, antifatulence and cholesterol lowering agents.

Asam gelugor, *Garcinia atroviridis* (*madan*), origin: Tropical Asia - A spice used from the asam fruit is dried and thinly sliced. These slices bring a high acid content and sour fruitiness that can be used in some salads and also in fish curries.

Others, more or less essential in Thailand but to not so common abroad are: fresh lotus; fresh water hyacinth - *Eichhornia crassipes*; fresh jasmine (*malik*) - used to scent water, tea and desserts as well as for making special jasmine luck wreaths called "pueng ma lai"; fresh cassia leaf; and peppercorns.

Other special plants and fruits common in Thailand but difficult to find in New York thus far are:

Mangosteen, *Garcinia mangostana* (*mahing-koot*), origin: Asia, S. Africa - A thick woody shell encloses several segments of exquisite white flesh, sweet yet slightly acid. The bark and skin of this fruit has been used in folk medicine to control high fever. (Periplus 1998: 22);

Sapodilla, *Achras sapota* (*ma-tueng*, *lamut*), origin: Asia to Madagascar - Appearing like a soft tan egg (sometimes also called the naseberry) the sapodilla can taste like "honey, jasmine and lily of the valley" when it is ripe. (Periplus 1998: 51);

Gooseberry, *Phyllanthus acidus*, or *Cica acida* (*ma-yam*), origin: tropical, Africa - These light yellow berries will "goose" you with their tartness. Hence, they are typically used in preserves, jams and/or are pickled;

Custard apple, *Annona squamosa* (*noi naa*), origin: Tropical America - This is a scaly green fruit (about 3 to 8 centimeters in diameter) with white fibrous segmented flesh and black seeds. The flavor is ambrosial.

Still other fruits - pomelo, pineapple and guava - can be particularly evocative of Thailand when they are dipped into a tangy *nam phrik* (shrimp, kaffir lime and chili) sauce, or simply salted (Periplus 1997: 7). Familiarity with Thai main dishes is increasing amongst non-Thai connoisseurs, but the variety of Thai desserts is likely still uncharted territory. Several are succulents that are packaged in small containers made from the earthy flavored pandan leaf - *Pandanus amaryllifolius*, origin: Malaysia (ibid: 32). A sweet shredded coconut and taro - *Colocasia esculenta*, origin: Pacific and Asia, dumpling drenched in coconut liquid is one heavenly dessert called "*buloi*" that deserves note. Others, such as the sugared tamarind - *Tamarindus indicus*, origin: Africa, pastes, sweet pumpkin squares, coconut jellies, sticky rice in banana leaves can be served with sweet syrup juices made from the red, hairy rambutan - *Nephelium lappaceum*; thin-shelled spherical dragon's eyes - *Diomocarpus longan*; and/or red, rubbery skinned litchi fruits - *Litchi sinensis*. In parts of Thailand, the latter fruits is said to be admired as so luxurious that if a male were to present a branch of its fruits to a woman the gesture is perceived to be akin to a proposition for marriage (www.Asiarecipe.com).

Synthesis of Thailand's traditions

Just as artists everywhere in the world are moving from the old traditions to new syntheses of them, Thai sculptor-artist Montien Boonma draws on traditional Thai interpretations of Buddhism, healing, S.E. Asian plants and meditation practices. His approaches show that Thai descendants (at home and abroad) can both claim their cultural roots as well as innovate in the new era. For instance, his sculptures and installations have been shown all over the world, including a recent exhibit at the Asia Society in Manhattan that revealed how the creative spirit may face modern difficulties through an active channeling of old traditions. The modern exasperation of cancer-related illnesses and death, for instance, is what Boonma pushed his creative spirit to reckon while his wife had been dying from a brain tumor. His work was an attempt to both find solace and find healing. One exhibit of this, *Arokhayasala*, meaning 'nature's breath', was a giant tower, dripping with clay

lungs that look like grape leaves. In the exhibit, while Boonma describes a concept of *ana panasati* (breathing central to healing) he places dried mint leaves, citronella grass - *Cymbopogon nardus*; rose buds; licorice root - *Glycyrrhiza glabra*, origin: Eurasia, white clover - *T. repens*, and orange peel on the installation to draw attention to how what it is we may be breathing can also possess aromatic healing and revitalizing powers.

Other sources of healing Boonma notes include plants found in East Asia such as sea holly, sickle pod, nut grass, black pepper, leadwort, and tumeric.

Further, architects and landscapers are finding renewed appreciation for the symbolic sophistication and complexity of Thailand's relationships with plants (Chaichongrak, Nil-Athi, Panin, Posayanouda, Freeman 2002). These researchers document what have been considered "auspicious" plants believed to lead to abundance (*uan*) and gain (*heng*) used and then used to "assist" the foundation of good home. In their, work it is possible to gain renewed appreciation and understanding of how the human sensation of rootedness is created through plants. For instance, in the construction of a home compound, the barks of the following symbolically important trees are placed in the hole of a house foundation: Golden Teak - *Tectona grandis*; *Cassia surattensis*; *Frangea fragrans*; the Jackfruit Tree, *Cassia javanica*; the Coral tree- *Erythrina orientalis*; the Golden Shower tree - *Cassia fistula*; *Dalbergia*; and bamboo - *Bambusa flexuosa*. Next, for a house ceremony, scented water with 9 auspicious flowers is sprinkled in preparation. These include: amaranth; marigold; jasmine; heliconia; and flowers from these the following trees - *Alotropsis gigeanta*; *Cassia javanica*; *Cassia fistula*; and *Canna indica*. After this, trees are planted to the North, South, West, and East of the home to both welcome wealth and ward off bad luck or "bad spirits". To protect a home compound: the *Mamea siamensis*; *Morinda citrifolia*; the Tamarind tree - *Tamarindus indicus*; the Bael (quince) tree - *Aegle marmelos*; *Mimusopos elengi*; Jackfruit; and both *Cassia javanica* and *Cassia fistula*. To bring wealth on the other hand, the Mango tree, the Persimmon tree - *Diospyras lotus*, and the Plumango tree - *Bouea burmanica* are planted. In this documentation, it is revealed that a home is actively created through both symbolic and technical practices applied to natural elements.

Ethnobotanical products

"Thai people borrow from everybody," says Kris Petcharawises, a second-generation Thai-America who has had four years in Thailand. Yet, some innovative or territory-specific natural products are making their way into global consumer habits as well. For instance, Thailand can be a world supplier of agarswood (incense), basil seed juice (novelty), fish sauce (*nam phrik*), tamarind candy (by Amira Brand), Sugar cane (by Chaokah brand), lotus leaves, young coconut juice, lemongrass, peanut satay sauce, asam gelugor spice, and/or jasmine (medicinal, symbolic of luck, and aromatic). In New York, Thai cooking is literally a "hot" cuisine scene with restaurants like Sea in Williamsburg and in the East village serving litchi martinis and *pad thai* under turquoise neon lights.

Conclusion

While some of South East Asia's natural heritage may not be as accessible to Thai descendants in North America, they are still the roots of both S. East Asian ecological practices and Thai cultural practices, and hence the fruits or extracts are important in Thai products distributed abroad. Mostly, this is only possible if industrial processes of standardization, innovation, packaging, miniaturization, modification and/or mass production are applied to the natural and material heritages that had been typically grown organically or hand-crafted. As a result whole new industries based on "refining" territorially and culturally important natural resources for global consumption are emerging.

Still, not all Thai traditions or Thai immigrants in Queens can wholly reproduce the natural milieu their heritage was rooted in. The predominant explanation for this is because the natural and cultural environment of Thailand is missing. Yet, interestingly the argument of globalization theorists agricultural and cultural traditions may be lost or made obsolete through globalization, as "monocultures" increase, is challenged by what can be observed on the ground. Indeed, urban ethnographers in Queens have seen both a distillation and reaffirmation of cultural traditions by new immigrants (Khandewal 2001; Park 2000).

As a result, further urban and ethnographic studies related to natural resources and cultural treasures should explore the way new contexts, and urban settings can both change and continue. Finally, an important study could also explore, through participatory cultural research and narratives, how critical it is for individuals in these communities to have the capacity to reproduce or innovate upon the roots of an immigrant culture's homeland. These roots are derived from their "biocultural diversity" (Maffi 1999). Therefore, it can continue to be an important question for urban geographers, urban ethnobotanists, anthropologists, therapists, cultural and social workers and sociologists to determine to what extent it matters if the natural resources come in modified, innovated, derived or distilled forms or not. For instance, *can important cosmological symbolism be lost when Thailand's national orchid, replaces the fresh smelling jasmine in the pueng ma lai wreaths? Does the popularity of Boonma's artistic sculptural exhibits (derived from traditional Thai Buddhist healing practices) withdraw authority from Buddhist practitioners themselves? Or, in drinking a litchi martini - how much of Thailand is actually evoked by this drink, or is that not the point?*

Exploring these and other questions are simply ways of exploring how people and cultural practices may or may not remain authentically attached to their natural heritage and roots. Hence, in the current era, where the globalized biotechnological industry is overlooking cultural practices attached to natural resources in favor of new technologically creolized natural products, individual and community pressures and demands to for these latter commodities may contribute to an obsolescence of the cultural practices that keep the values of natural sources alive in cuisine, traditional medicine, art, architecture, ritual, festival, and other home industries (Frommer 2002). As a result, facilitating access to the cultural practices and resources that continue to create value for natural resources should still be viewed as vital for biocultural diversity. Note the following Thai cultural resources in Queens that attempt to do just this:



*A young attendant of
the Thai New Years
Songkran Festival models
festive S.E. Asian dress
at the Temple.*

Thai Resources in Queens

Thai Temple

Wat Buddha Thai Thavorn Vanaram
76-16 46th Avenue,
Elmhurst, New York 11373

Thai Food

Meal Thai Cuisine

77-05 Woodside Avenue
Elmhurst, New York 11373

Sripraphai Thai Restuarant

64-13 39th Avenue
Woodside, New York 11377

Khay Tiow Thai Kitchen

83-47 Dongan Avenue
Elmhurst, New York 11373

Bangkok Food Mart

64-11 39th Avenue
Woodside, New York 11373

Thai artifacts, jasmine products and silk

Bangkok Silk

64-15 39th Avenue
Woodside, New York 11371

Thai Film and Books

Dokbua New York
83-04 Broadway
Elmhurst, New York 11373

Sawatdee Video

83-45 Dongan Avenue
Elmhurst, New York 11373

New Siam Video

64-14 39th Street
Woodside, New York 11373

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