C H A P T E R   I I

THE THAI SOCIAL STRUCTURE :

INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY

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Introductory

Thai society is relatively simple because of non-
existence of rigidified caste, class or clan system and for
the most part, ethnically, geographically and culturally
homogenious. Thai social structure is organized on the basis
of superiority-inferiority considerations pertaining to age,
occupation, neighbourhood and religious piety.

Thai society can be viewed as a large and relatively
similar mass of village communities of peasants administered
by a small official hierarchy drawing authority from kingship.
In a village there are essentially five social units - the
nuclear family, a loosely defined laterally oriented kindred,
the nation-state and to a less extent the village temple and
school - which demand and toward which villagers express some
continuing psychological commitments.[1] Thai rural society is
remarkably homogenious throughout the country with its social
patterns mostly based on the primary economy of agriculture.
However, it lacks rural landlord gentry of any form. Its
representative type is the small freeholder operating on his
own farm.

On the other hand, the Thai urban society particularly in
Bangkok-Dhonburi and other provincial capitals is more complex
with cultural and social patterns resting on the secondary
economy, e.g., industry, commerce and services and related
marginally to the rural society. It is here that mobility and
finely graded social status which characterize Thailand are
most clear. At minimum, five criteria of status have been
noted : economic standing, political power and connection,
education, outlook on life and family background.[2] In various
permutations and combination they determine the social status
of the urban community.

By way of interaction between the rural and urban
organizations Thai society can be divided into two broad
classes, namely, the rulers and the ruled. The former are made
up of the king, the nobility and stratified hierarchy of
officials, comprising less than 10 per cent of the total
population. The ruled who constitute at least 90 per cent of
the populace are composed of peasants, labourers and
servicemen. From this point of view the structure remains as
in the earlier times. A new class of the nouveaux riches or
the middle class, consisting of businessmen, commercialists
and industrialists is emerging particularly in the urbanized
area. The nouveaux riches are of crucial significance to the
modernizing of Thai economy, but they are mostly foreigners
by blood who have controlled the country's economy.

In addition, the Buddhist Order constitutes a separate
or at least a semi-separate class of the society. Males from
all levels of secular society move in and out of the Order.
Young men traditionally spend a short time in it but can also
make a career of the monkhood.

Besides, there are Chinese in Thailand estimated around
three hundred thousand. They play a significant role in the
country's economy both at home and abroad. The Chinese as a
group have, however, a limited impact on Thai society. Here,
it is noteworthy that there is a steady process of absorption
of Chinese at different class levels of Thai society.[3] Added
to this are the other sizeable alien ethnic minority comprising
the Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Ceylonese, Japanese and
Westerners who also occupy a special niche in the urban economy.
There are also ethnic tribes of relatively primitive people
spread out in the more remote regions of the kingdom. Some
of these occasionally come into conflict with the Thais, but
otherwise they do not impinge as such on the Thai society in
general. Some Burmese groups live along the western borders.
There are Malay speaking Muslims in the four provinces of the
south who were only recently involved in political disturbance.

These social structural components are organized around
a series of status and role-sets in the familial, political,
economic, religious and educational activities which are based
on the Thai normative order, i.e., norms and values. In this

cultural and institutional environment, a Thai is born and
bred and lives his whole life course. The normative structure
provides him with direction and destination, and defines the
social world of the Thai.

Values and Attitudes

Social values are of primary importance to understand an
on-going social process as they are choice-preferences relevant
to maintenance or change in a social system. They are also
considered as the primary connecting element between the
social and cultural systems. As in any social system values,
beliefs and attitudes legitimize and explain Thai behaviour
patterns.

Clyde Kluckhohn defines values as a conception, explicit
or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic
of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection
from available modes, means and ends of action.[4] In a word,
values denote choice-preferences or what Charles Morris calls
"preference behaviour".[5] When confronted with opportunity to
choose between alternative courses of action, an actor will
choose one course in preference to others. These definitions
stand close to the Buddhist complex doctrine of Bun (Pali :
Punna) or merit on the basis of which in Thai society a
behaviour pattern is meaningful individually and socially.

Other relevant concepts are those of Bāb (Pāli : Pāpa) or
sin and Nirvana (Pali : Nibbana) or salvation. Jointly they
all work to legitimize modes of action both individual and
collective. Of these, merit could be considered as the focal
value and subsumes the attainment of all the other.

Merit is a value important to both monks and laymen
alike. Merit and demerit or sin (ethical norms), especially
the former, constitute the major ethical notions by which the
Thais conceptualize, evaluate and explain their behaviour in
relation to the value system. Merit must be understood on the
background of the doctrine of Karma (Pali : Kamma; Thai : Kam),
the Buddhist law of cause and effect, or more precisely, the
Buddhist modification of the Hindu doctrine of Karma. This
law states that every act has some ultimate and associative
reward or punishment either in this life or in the next life
as expressed in the following quotation : "Our merit is the
result of what we do, say and feel. The good that we may do
and the reward that we may receive is merit (bun). Evil choices
and punishment they bring is demerit (bab)."[6] Merit ideally
means to be rid of attachment and to have purified mind that
results in insight and happiness. From Thai point of view, all
actions are either bun (meritorious) or bab (demeritorious).
All actions in accordance with Buddhist teachings (Sanskrit :
Dharma; Pali : Dhamma; Thai : Tham) result in merit. Merit is

right behaviour and a goal in itself, resulting in feelings
of security, consolidation and well-being.[7]

The value of merit has both an individual and a social
aspect. Buddhists view the workings of Karma as deeply
personal. An individual must make his or her choices in life
and receive his or her subsequent rewards or punishments as
individual. He or she has to work out his or her own salvation.
This personal emphasis appears in the written tradition and
in daily life, viz.,

> "By oneself is evil done,
>
> By oneself one suffers,
>
> By oneself evil is left undone,
>
> By oneself one is purified". — Dhammapada[8]

> "By deeds, vision and righteousness,
>
> By virtue, the sublimest life –
>
> By these are mortals purified,
>
> And not by lineage and wealth".
>
> — Majjhima Nikaya, iii, 262[9]

While only an individual can acquire and possess merit, the
means for doing so is very largely cooperation with other
individuals in social situations of patterned role relationships.
The Buddhist doctrine of Karma plays a significant role in Thai
society. For the Thais, high status, notes Kahin, is a sign
of good kamma and meritorious worth. If someone in a higher

higher position loses his status it is thought that his kamma

has been used up and he has not sufficiently replenished it

to counterbalance bad kamma from the past. After all, religion

ordains that a man's fate is a matter of his responsibility and

his position is a matter of his personal relationships with

other individuals.[10] These behaviour patterns which are

meritorious are highly valued while those which are otherwise

are strongly disapproved.

Almost all the students on Thai society, such as, Ruth

Bonedict,[11] John Embree,[12] Eliezar Ayal,[13] Herbert Phillips,[14]

Kenneth Landon, [15] David Wilson[16] and Robert Mole[17] are agreed

that amongst Thais there is quite an emphasis on pursuit of

self-interest and minding one's own business when it comes to

the matter of action. There is little commitment or obligation

toward other individuals or institutions. There is also a lack

of persistence, regularity and discipline. They are egoistic

and self-centred but also mild, hospitable and non-violent.

They are not much socially minded, that is, they are not

joiners. They are of an easy-going or "sanuk" (not serious)

nature. This has a basis in the Hinayana form of Thai Buddhism.

Thai outlook on life and their world view is significantly

determined by religio-ethical concepts. As Ayal puts it : The

Thai Weltanschauung was by and large represented by Theravada

Buddhism. It emphasized the primacy of personal values and

thus fortified individualism. Few commitments or obligations

for the furtherance of social goals were expected or provided

for. While one's status was determined by achievement rather

than through ascriptive norms, it was the manipulation of

other human beings rather than creativity which counted.

"Choei" and "Sanuk" militated against the extreme commitment

and the sustained hard (and often unpleasant) work required

for the establishment and operation of modern industrial

undertakings. The Thais value highly those who are quick to

take advantage of opportunities when these present themselves,

but seldom would they take the trouble to create such opportu-

nities, or cooperate with others in such an endeavour. The role

- of merit-making as a kind of investment reduced the incentive

for economically productive investments. As for political

motivation to action, the Thai feeling of loyalty to the

Government was more of the nature of passive obedience than

of active loyalty. Embree describes Thai culture as "loosely

structured", meaning thereby that a considerable variation of

individual behaviour is permissible.[19] The Thai seems

determinedly autonomous. He carries the burden of social

responsibility lightly. Within a structure of social

obligations and rights, he is able to move and respond to his

personal and individual inclinations without suffering any

pangs of conscience.[20] In contrast to Japan, Thailand lacks

neatness and discipline, and in contrast to Americans the

Thais lack respect for administrative regularity. They lack

industrial time sense.[21] This characteristic flexibility of
individual behaviour and personal avoidance of regimentation may be
called "Thai individualism" in contrast to individualism in the
western sense. Thus attitudes such as "Mei Pen Rei" (It doesn't /
matter), "Sanuk" (Take it easy) are characteristic of Thai culture.
Thai conformity is typically short-lived and uncertain. It is based
more on the desire to please others than to behave morally- a disti-
nction usefully suggested by Bert Kaplan.[22] Thus mutual obligations
are recognized, they are not allowed to burden one unduly.
Reciprocal rights and duties are not strictly observed.
Chandruang writes how his father had left for the city for
further education despite his mother's opposition and on his
revisit later he begged for her forgiveness which she gave.[23]
In another family in Bangkok, a governmental official had
left his family to marry another woman and the first wife
looked after the children. One of her sons, also married, had
left Bangkok for political reasons, leaving his small son with
the grandmother. In his place of exile he married another
woman. When informed of this development, the mother and
sisters were not surprised; and one sister remarked, "He always
liked to have a lot of women around him."[24] Similarly, Prince
Chulachakraponse when he brought home a Russian wife, faced
opposition from his mother who upbraided her son and refused
her daughter-in-law's status. A year later, however, she
softened and did receive the foreign daughter-in-law.[25] Embree
points out how the Thais, unlike the Japanese, do not allow an

obligation of loyalty to a chief to take precedence over
other considerations. This one may often see a man prominent
in one political group today join forces with the leader of
the different group tomorrow if circumstances so warrant.
Several of Premier Phibun's opponents of 1947 were his
political allies in 1948.[26]

A word that indicates an important part of the Siamese
character is the word "Samuk". In its simplest aspects, it
means "fun-loving" or pleasure-loving". The word also means a
"deep interest in something, momentarily, to the exclusion of
all else". The Siamese are a pleasure-loving people, as is
shown by their ready laughter. The people they like are those
who make them laugh and feel happy. Siamese remarked that they
respect those who make them laugh. They enjoy a show, a dance,
a game, a trip to some near or distant point. To travel is
definitely "sanuk". The idea of "sanuk" carries even into
religion. A group of Siamese attended a Christian Church
service for the first time. They remarked, after leaving the
church, that the service was not "sanuk" and that they could
not come again. When they were asked if Buddhist service was
"sanuk", they said that it was. Their religion not only
provided a method of worship, but also a system for satisfying
the social needs of the group. The temple is the focal point
of the community, the centre around which resolve the religious
rites, the picnics, the plays, and the other amusements of the

people. The religious year has days for boat-racing, sports, games, trips to holy places, shadow shows, and festive parades. So even religion becomes "sanuk".[27]

A few other typical attitudes of the Thais are as follows: Mei Pen Rei, "it does not matter" indicates "Thai politeness"; an apathetic response or lethargic license to please others; Choei Choei indicates a state or an attitude with multiple forms such as simply being quiet or silent, feeling strongly about a situation but expressing nothing, assuming an attitude of indifference or non-involvement; Kreng Chai implies the feeling of effacement and humbleness, involving the desire to avoid embarrasing others or causing others to trouble themselves; Chai Yen denotes cool heart or sang froid or self-control; and Yim stands for always smiling. All these are reflections of the basic personality structure of Thais.

In regard to learning Embree remarks that Thais are not much interested in going abroad for the love of learning, but rather in order to earn a degree at foreign universities. Many of the returned Thai students enter politics or try to manage an import-export company or better still obtain a government appointment overseas. The returned Thai student by and large does not wish to join the lower ranks of a body of other Thai scholars and scientists to build up a strong university or a research centre. They try somehow to exploit the prestige

value of foreign residence so as to obtain a pleasant post.
The net result is that there is no well-manned Thai university
or scientific centre in the country today despite the
generations of Thais who have studied at the world's best
universities.[28]

The intellectual performance of the Thais remains a big
question mark. Hardly does a name of a Thai scientist or
scholar figure out on international boards for advanced
learning in arts and sciences. In a word, the Thais lack the
requisites to build scientific and technological culture for
want of suitable attitudes, dedication and commitment.

Thais as a people prefer relations with a patron who will
demand only virtual conformity in return for providing prebends
and protection. They try to avoid conflict and escape from
these situations which are likely to give rise to firm
commitments or cooperation. They select interpersonal relations
with an eye on the likely reciprocal demands. They strongly
believe that if a man happens to have a chance, he should
seize upon it. They speak in praise of success more in terms
of seized opportunities than in terms of carefully planned and
executed (i.e., developed) contractual achievements that
are fulfilled.

Finally, in spite of all the formidable cultural and
social inhibitions to the contrary, Thais easily lose their

temper. For many the only way out of conflicts characteristic
such interpersonal relations is through violence against
society, against other persons and alternatively against
themselves (isolation). These characteristic patterns have
evolved and crystallized for over the centuries.

How does such a loosely integrated social structure
continue to function and meet social demands? Phillips
comments that Thais get things done in a pleasant way even
while their conformity to standards is rarely above the
minimal.[29] Obviously, there are structural defects in such a
system. Activities which require communal cooperation or large
scale organization such as, political or economic at the
national level, are either not carried out or are effected only
with extreme difficulty as at the present juncture.

Wales points out that in spite of many such structural
defects there are three outstanding aspects of Thai national
character that are unique and foremost both socially and
politically : "Love of National Independence," which in the past
has enabled them to weather the gravest political storms and
maintain their autonomy alone among the nations of Southeast
Asia; "Toleration", both of the religions and of customs of
foreigners who have ever enjoyed the hospitality of their
friendly land; and "Power of Assimilation", which led them
in earlier days to adopt those features of Indian and Khmer
culture that they found best suited to their needs, and which

characteristic may well stand them in good stead during the present transition.[30]

Socialization Process

The basic socialization process through which a Thai child is inducted into his culture and society subsumes four types of ethically good behaviour (Brahmavihara), which bring merit to a person, improve his status and lead to an ideal fraternal life in society. The four ideals of Brahmavihara are as follows :

1) Metta (Benevolence) involving the love for humanity as well as a generalized willingness to be kind and helpful.

2) Karuna (Sympathy or pity) involving the desire to help those who have fallen on bad days and the willingness to sacrifice one's own advantage or happiness for others.

3) Mutita (Sympathic joy) referring to the capacity to rejoice in the good furtune of others at least to remain free from envy of other's good fortune.

4) Upekkha (Neutrality or equanimity) implying the neutral state of mind avoiding involvement in other people's disasters in such a way as to make them worse. It means remaining neutral in disputes, especially when Metta and Karuna are not appropriate.[31]

Second to these universal moral norms are the basic moral standards as found in the moral textbook "Sombat Phu Dee" (Characteristics of a Good Person) used in Thai public schools for instruction in morality. Here are some of its dicta or behavioural commandments.

1. Do not touch any person in a disrespectful way.

2. Do not try to act in the same way as your superior (meaning simply "Know your place").

3. Do not be concerned with your own confort before the confort of your superior or women.

4. The good person is one who tries to behave in an honest way.

5. Do not make loud noises when people are working.

6. Do not spit or clear your phlegm or yawn in public.

7. Do not gobble your food or scatter things on your plate or chew loudly.

8. Do not sit or walk carelessly or abruptly against other peoples.

9. Do not touch or horse-play with people who are your close friends.

10. If you are a superior, you should always look after the comfort of your inferior.[32]

All these moral standards are transmitted to youngsters through family members especially a mother, through monastic activities and public schools. They are a sage advice rather than mandatory obligations or divine commandments.

As in all societies, the family is primarily responsible for basic socialization amongst the Thai. Thai children in their younger days, are treated with a degree of indulgence, permissiveness and considerable flexibility.[33] Instruction is by repeated example rather than enforcement. Respect follows age, and children are taught to respect their elders. The first thing they learn is to wai (pay obeisance by folding hands together at forehead) to the elders and to the Buddhist monks. Symbols and gestures of respect from lower to higher status are the very stuff of actual relationships between persons, which the children are to learn. They are also impressed with subtle and gracious forms of politeness which are such a notable features of Thai personal relations.

The similar treatment by and large runs its course later in secondary socialization in institutions such as schools, universities, temples etc. As a result the Thais seem determinedly autonomous and carry the burdens of social responsibility with ease. They lack regitimation in their life-style. They are self-confident with an awareness of their own worth and a recognition that their position in life is completely their own responsibility.[34]

The Religious Order

Religion provides a fundamental basis for the individual's sense of identity and socialization, especially during the early years in life. It is generally agreed that religion, particularly Buddhism is at the centre of Thai culture pervading all respects of daily life.

The prototypical Buddhist Order is organized on the basis of Buddhist precepts (Sila) and differentials of sex, hierarchical merit and vocation. On the basis of sex it, on the one hand, comprises Bhikkhus (monks), Samaneras (male novices), both officially ordained and lay Upasakas or male followers. The other division consists of Bhikkhunis (nuns), Samaneris (female novices), both officially ordained and lay Upasikas or female followers on the other.

In regard to hierarchical merit and rituals the Buddhist Order has the following rank order : Bhikkhus (monks), Bhikkhunis (nuns), Samaneras (male novices), Samaneris (female novices), Upasakas and Upasikas. However, unlike Sri Lanka in earlier years Bhikkhunis and Samaneris are not to be found in Thailand. Instead there are Chee (woman devotees) whose status in Thailand is not equivalent to that of Bhikkhunis and Samaneris who have to be officially ordained, and thereafter to observe many precepts.

On the basis of vocation, the Thai Buddhist society is divided into sacred monkhood and secular laity. The former are subdivided into Aranyavasi (hermit monks), Kamavasi (village monks) and Samaneras (novices) whereas the latter are subdivided into devout Upasakas and Upasikas or lay devotees including Chee and ordinary Upasakas and Upasikas or householders. They represent different life-styles or levels of Buddhist vocation. The religious precepts serve to define the duties of each vocation. Corresponding to these vocations are a series of hierarchially graded precepts : five for ordinary householders, eight for devout householders, ten for monastic novices; two hundred and twenty-seven for ordained monks and an additional four for ordained hermit monks.

Vocation refers to a way of life with a specific ritual role, viz., merit-making (Tambun) and meditating (Bhavana). Tambun is the primary concern of ordinary householders, ordinary village monks and novices while Bhavana is specialization of hermit monks and lay devotees.

From the modern administrative standpoint, the social structure of the Thai Buddhist Order (Gana Sangh Thai) is very distinctively defined. The king is not the actual head of the Order. The active head of the Order is the Supreme Patriarch or Somdej Phra Sangharaj in monastic terms. He is appointed by the king on the advice of the Ecclesiastic Executive Council

of the Order. This is a Council of Elders named "Maha
Therasamagama". The council is governed by the Buddhist Order
Act 1962 and constituted from amongst the senior monks with
the rank of Somdej Phrarajagana. These are the professional
monks of different wats through the kingdom - mainly the wats
of royal status. The head of the Order is an appointment for
life.

At present Thai Buddhist Order is divided into two main
schools : the Mahanikaya (the Traditional School) and the
Dhammayutikanikaya (the Reform or Puritant School). King
Monkut (Rama IV) of the present dynasty as founder of the
Dhamayutika School successfully instilled a scholarly and
philosophical spirit into Thai Buddhism. The Mahanikaya school
is the traditional one with a widespread following throughout
the kingdom. The Dhammayutika school has fewer members than
the Mahanikaya school : the ratio being 1 : 35. However, it is
popular with the royalty and nobility. The differences between
the two schools are not doctrinal. They mainly concern matters
of discipline. Both schools share a common head or Somdej Phra
Sangharaj at the top of the Order, who may be appointed from
either of the schools. However, they have separate heads at
other levels after the Council of Elders down to a wat or even
a village wat.

Except the Maha Therasamagama or the Council of Elders,

the structure of the Order considerably corresponds to the geographical organization of the governmental bureaucracy at least down to the district level. At the lower levels, however, the correspondence frequently ceases. From the administrative standpoint the power structure of the Buddhist Order and its relation to the secular order will be discussed later under polity.

Thai Polity

Another category of the socialization in Thai society is political socialization. The Chao-Nai (patrimonial) attitudes based on the traditionalistic sakdina system are still prevailing in the guise of bureaucracy and government service. Membership in the bureaucracy is viewed and valued as a way of life and source of status, wealth and authority.[35] To a Thai, bureaucratic position is a legitimate source for a quick money making. Hardly is wealth thought of in terms of hard work and efficient management. Thais do not value work as virtue in itself as Chinese or Vietnamese do.

In Thailand the political power is organized in favour of centralization. The seat of the power is concentrated in the capital cities as evidenced by the country's history. The capital city of Sukhodaya was, for example, the seat of the political power in the days of the Sukhodaya kingdom. Whenever

the capital city had been captured in war, the whole kingdom
immediately fell without further resistence. The same appears
applicable to modern Thailand and Bangkok, the present capital
city of the kingdom, becomes a concentration of political,
economic and cultural power. Bangkok is apparently identified
with Thailand and vice versa.

Thailand has failed to absorb the political model based
on the western party system which was introduced in the country
in 1932 by the European-educated junior officials. Therefore,
in reality the Thai polity retains its traditional structure
of a centralized national state with only nominal and vaguely
defined political relationships outside the capital city.
Political culture of Thailand is still dominated by the
principle that the government is like our father, we are like
its children and the people look to their government as a
source of gentle benevolent concern.[36] Mass political
participation is rather passive. Personal relationships based
on patron-client or superior-inferior principle play a
significant role in shaping political activities. Political
authority is patrimonial. Officials are compensated for their
services as the prerogatives or prebends of the public office.
Their power is generated and maintained not by political
sagacity over limited terrein in constant competition, but by
membership in a bureaucratic structure owing allegance to a
sovereign of a national state.[37] They are not accountable to
the people at large.

The Thai patrimonial authority was based on the traditional bureaucratic system of "Sakdina" grades which with certain changes continues as the governmental bureaucracy. The political structure of this kind is termed "Bureaucratic Polity" by Riggs. Such an administrative apparatus is its own decision-maker with no provision from an outside agency. Officials consider themselves above and apart from the public and in no way accountable to it, freely pursuing their own interests as they see fit.[38]

Since the post 1932 coup the kingdom of Thailand has functioned formally under a constitutional monarchy.However, exercise of actual political power and authority is vested in a small group of military officers who manipulate the political power by means of coups, whenever there is a fractional division amongst them.

The king, in spite of the fact that he has been shorn of any real political power, retains his function as an important symbol of identity for the Thai people. He remains more or less a source of authority. The Thai kingship has many facets. The king is at once a semi-divine being, to be addressed and referred to in absolute terms reserved specifically for the royalty. He is also the father to his people. A portrait of the present king is to be found in the most ramshakle farm-houses in the remotest parts of the country. Often the

portrait is placed on or near to Buddhist alter or, by the side of a picture showing a famous Buddha image or an eminent monk renowned for his spiritual powers.[39]

The 1932 coup resulted in the establishment of limited monarchy and an elected parliament. The British model of parliamentary system was tried out in which the constitutional monarch exercises executive authority under binding advice of Council of Ministers (Cabinet), responsible to the legislating parliament. Judicial authority is vested in the duly constituted courts. However, the constitution has been through seven revisions after military coups. Presently the country is under the latest permanent constitution passed by the National Legislative Assembly (consisting of nominated members – minimum 300, but not more than 400 as per the Interium Constitution 1976)[40] and signed into the country's effective law by King Bhumipol in December 1978. Thus the concept of Devaraja or divine king has been slowly and gradually replaced by the theory of secular constitutionalism of the Western type. The decision-making centre has shifted from a handful of royal princes to a professional middle class, especially the military middle class. In spite of a change of hands political culture essentially remains the same, as originally instituted by King Rama V on the basis of politics of administration, though readjusted and expanded.

The politics of administration can be understood as
follows. At the centre there are 14 ministries and offices
with ministerial status, viz., the Office of the Prime
Minister, Ministries of Interior, Defense, Finance, Foreign
Affairs, Agriculture, Education, Public Communication,
Commerce, Justice, Public Health, Industry and Cooperatives
and the Office of State Universities. Under each ministry
there are departments which are subdivided into divisions and
sections.

For purposes of administration, Thailand is divided into
71 changwads (provinces), each being further divided into
amphurs (districts), each of which in turn is divided into
tambons (communes) and further mubans (villages) as the
smallest units. A changwad and an amphur are under direction
of Phu Varajakarn Changwad (a governor) and Nai Amphur (a
district officer) respectively. Both are career civil servants
appointed by the centre. They are assisted by subordinates with
specialized functions representing various departments at the
centre. The heads of a commune called "Kamnan" and of a village
"Phu Yai Ban" are not civil servants. They are elected by
popular vote subject to the approval of the district officer.

Parallel to this secular structure, there is the
administration of the Buddhist Order which is run by the Order
itself. A line between the two is clear enough but the

separation is not total. The appointment of the qualified
monks to different offices are made by the Order itself. The
Department of Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Education
helps the Order to run their offices effectively.

The Village Community

The main social unit for social existence as well as local
administration in rural Thailand was and continues to be the
village community (Muban). The village headman (Phu Yai Ban)
is elected by the villagers on the basis of popular vote and
subject to the approval of the District Officer. He is assisted
by one or two deputies (Phu Choi) elected in the same manner.
Their term of office is of four years duration. The post of a
village headman often goes to a respected and substantial
landowner who can show ability to represent the village
interests. He shares the village leadership with other village
elders who are well-versed in religious matters, astrology,
traditional medicare, story-telling, including monks -
especially the abbot of a village wat.

There are more than 42021 villages in Thailand at present.
More than four-fifths of the country's population are villagers
who live on their land. They practice a relatively simple and
stable kind of agriculture and grow a large quantity of rice.
Their staple food is rice. In general Thai villages are based
on agricultural occupation with the exception of those in the

south and the coastlines who are engaged in fishing, mining
and rubber plantation. Major characteristics of a village are :
a simple nuclear family, a loosely defined kindred, a village
temple or wat, a village school and a village administration
representing state authority. These impose some continuing
psychological commitments and obligations upon the villagers.

In rural Thailand, status differentiations are not clear,
nor can they be judged on the basis of a rigidified caste,
class, or clan system. The most important personal goal
recognized and open to all in rural society is acquisition of
religious merit which gives status. Everybody has an access to
a village temple or wat for merit-making. Government service
or position is another mode of acquiring status for a few more.
Among them only teachers are to be commonly found. However, in
a village these positions are limited. Individual possession
of wealth and land have not yet been translated into sharply
defined social differentiation. Wealth differentiations seem
to play a minor role. Status differentiations in non-urban
Thailand are individualistic in nature, that is, they are
dependent primarily upon individual qualities and achievements.
They are not ascriptive.

Within the village, social relationships are based
primarily on loose kinship, neighbourhood, proximity and
membership in a few groups that exist beyond the family. Next
to the family are reciprocal work groups. They are informally
organized on the ground of local proximity. This is especially

true in large villages. Neighbours irrespective of their
class level organize together for cooperative activities,
such as, planting, harvesting, house-construction and so on.
They do the same in order to undertake the maintenance of
the wat, the village schools, roads, and canals. They similarly
join hands for wat ceremonies or funerals. The village members
address each other by personal names or by assumed kinship
terms. In the village there are no sharply defined professional
groups, nor political parties and the like.

There is a Thai folk saying, "Pienkin Ha-ngai, Pientai
Hayak", which means, "Trickery and flattery can give friends
who are common and numberless; but a sincere friend, who will
stand by in need for a whole life time is rare indeed". On the
basis of such ideals of friendship, "Pientai Hayak", friendship
groups are found in the rural areas for mutual exchanges. The
friendship associations or cliques do occur particularly among
those who have grown up together. Friendship cliques may also
be based on mutual interests and activities, such as, drinking,
gambling, card-playing, cock-fighting or mutual economic aid.
Such friendship developed by age grouping is quite important
to Thai villagers, because it is later helpful in business and
possibly for government contacts.

Attached to a village is a wat or Buddhist Order considered
as a formal group. A wat is found going hand in hand with a
village. A village needs a wat and vice versa. A village

Buddhist Order is generally composed of a headmonk or abbot,
professional and contemporary monks and novices, and sometimes
a nun and a templeboy.

The second formal group in the village is a temple joint
committee of laymen and monks, an organization limited in
function but usually having high prestige. The committee may
be appointed by the wat abbot or it may be a self-constituted
group of village leaders willing to accept responsibility for
certain wat affairs. It looks after wat funds, directs and
supports any activities which concern not only the wat affairs
but the village as well. Members of this group are frequently
men who are ex-monks who command deference and respect. They
are not paid either in kind or in cash for their services.

A few words may be said about village leadership, already
touched upon. Usually a headman, elders and monks play an
important role in the leadership of a village. The village
headman, elected by the villagers, cares for his village
affairs, such as, maintenance of order and peace, and settlement
of various disputes in the village. On the other hand, he is
the representative of the villagers who present village
interests before the government, and on the other hand, acts
as a government official, translating the governmental
programme into action in the village. He is paid a monthly
stipend of Bht. 120 (about US $ 5.00) from the government.
He presides over the village council consisting four or more

members elected from the village itself. He works in cooperation with the abbot of the village wat and acts as a secretary to a wat committee. The elders play a leadership role on account of their age and experiences. Their significant role is councelling at village and wat committees. The role of the monks in a village is not only sacred but also a secular one. It is a village temple that people come together and experience a sense of village membership.

Besides, a public school teacher also plays a leadership role in a village. He is expected to impart to the young villagers with modern education and also represent a village school at the District Office.

Villages vary in size. Generally they may have fifty families at minimum or four hundred families at maximum. In the latter case a village is divided into wards (Mu) for administrative purposes. For example, Ban Wangchai and Ban Nampong in Khonkaen Province are divided into three and two wards respectively. The size of a village is correlated with regional variations in soil fertility, with availability of irrigation water, population density and such other factors.

Practically the villages on the river or canal side have been the most important to the Thai peasant. The river or canal has all along furnished the essential water for wet-rice farming and has also provided the only feasible communication

and transportation. During the past fifty years, the railways and roads have steadily progressed, yet water-ways still constitute main system of communication and transport for a rural community in Thailand.

At present a new kind of economic activity has come into practice in villages.This refers to the village market which is either a seasonal or a rotating one. By and large the larger and strategically located villages are found operating the morning market. Most villages do not have such market, but help to support a central market often located in semiurban areas. It appears that this seasonal or rotating village market system has paved the way for a fixed market centre for the nearby villages. Here transactions on the basis of money-economy are gradually replacing the traditional barter system. It seems now to have paved the way for modern economy.

The Economy

Agriculture has all along been the foundation of Thai economy and remains the primary source of their wealth. Rice is the primary crop and also the staple diet of the people. The basic productive unit in agriculture has been the small family farm geared to self-sufficient domestic subsistance in the first instance. Methods remain traditionalistic, and though the yield is relatively high, it is obtained through lavish use of hand labour, characteristic of oriental rice agriculture.

According to Ingram, a large proportion of the population,
estimated at 84 per cent, is engaged in rice-centred agricultu-
ral sector of the economy. Indeed over the last fifty years
the country has become one of the world's largest rice
exporters, emphasis being on volume rather than on variety.[41]
Second only to agriculture in bulk employment but more prestige
is government service. About half a million government
employees are engaged in this kind of service in Thailand.[42]
Commerce and industry are mainly operated by foreigners,
especially the Thai-born Chinese.

Agricultural land is by and large individually owned
throughout Thailand. Though the size of holdings varies from
region to region,[43] nowhere in the country as a whole is the
pressure on land comparable with that experienced in some other
Asian countries. The typical Thai family is thus basically self-
sufficient in terms of labour force used and food produced.
Furthermore, the typical peasant cultivator aims primarily to
produce sufficient rice to support his family and only when
their needs are satisfied, does he sell the surplus.[44] The
tendency in areas of substantial rice surplus, particularly in
the Central Region, is for the household to live on its own
rice, supplemented by fish and vegetables gathered from the
lush countryside. Any other goods such as cloth, meat, tools,
animals and luxuries are bought with cash from the proceeds of
the sale of surplus rice.[45]

On the other hand, the towns as well as commercial and growing industrial centres are important sectors for governmental service and commercial/industrial enterprises. No more than half a million of urban residents are engaged in government service, which is considered the most prestigious form of employment. The rest are engaged in commercial/ industrial activities and other services, such as, labourers, hawkers, taxi-drivers, ferrymen, servants and so on. The industrial and commercial enterprises are almost completely dominated by alien ethnic groups, namely, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Westerners. The so-called money-economy is carried out by the groups of business-minded people of foreign origin and at times jointly with some Thais. To this extent the Thai economy is neither self-reliant, nor self-sufficient.

There are two principal occupational categories in Thailand, namely, the primary one of farming and a secondary one of statecraft. The other secondary ones are the military, the artisans, the labourers, the commercialists and the industrialists. All these latter are expected to be so organized that their interests and their actions do not oppose the proper performance of those engaged in statecraft. This is especially true of military.

The Family

The basic socio-economic unit in Thai society is a family. As pointed out by Phillips,[46] de Young[47] and Tambiah[48] Thai family is simple nuclear family organized around matrilocal residence. It sometimes becomes a small extended family. It consists of a father, mother, their unmarried children and perhaps one or more parents, living together in the same house or compound. As the number of family members increases, it may become a limited extended or stem family. Joint family is hardly operative in Thailand except for a few families of traditional elite or aristocracy. Table 2.1 shows types of households or families. It would be seen that the nuclear family or household is predominant in rural, provincial-urban and also the metropolitan areas. Similarly large stem-joint families exist not only in rural areas but also in the Metropolis, but are fewer in provincial-urban towns.

Nuclear - Husband and/or wife with unmarried children, if any, but at least two persons in total. Unmarried relatives at the generation level of the children or grandchildren as well as non-related persons may be present.

Stem - Husband and/or wife with one married child and/or one married grandchild and possibly other unmarried children

Table 2.1 : Showing Types of Households in Rural,
Provincial-Urban and Metropolitan Areas
in Thailand, 1969-70.

Type of household	Rural		Provincial-Urban		Bangkok-Dhonburi Metropolis	
	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
Nuclear	63.8	941	63.1	612	56.1	683
Stem	19.5	287	17.2	166	17.5	213
Joint	5.4	79	6.9	66	7.0	85
Stem-joint	9.0	133	1.2	12	3.8	46
Single	1.4	20	5.5	53	5.2	63
Other	0.9	14	5.6	54	10.5	128
	100	1,474	100	963	100	1,218

Note : The rural sample is based on a sampling fraction of $\frac{1}{2000}$ and the urban sample is based on a sampling fraction of $\frac{1}{290}$. Therefore if the urban sample is given a weight of 1, then a weight of $\frac{2000}{290}$ = 6.9 will have to be assigned to the rural sample.

Source : Adapted from Visid Prachuabmoh, et al., The Rural and Urban Population of Thailand : Comparative Profiles (Bangkok : Institute of Population Studies, ChulalongkornUniversity, Research Report, No. 8,1972), p. 15.

and grandchildren. Unmarried relatives at the generation level
of the children or grandchildren as well as non-related
persons may *be* present.

Joint - Husband and/or wife and at least one other married
or unmarried relative (usually sibling) at the same generation
level. Unmarried children or grandchildren may be present as
well as unrelated persons.

Stem-joint - Husband and/or wife with two or more married
children and/or two or more married grandchildren. Also
qualifying as stem-joint are husband and/or wife with at least
one married or unmarried relative (usually sibling) at the same
generation level and at least one married child or grandchild.[49]

At times the rural family or household may become a
limited or small extended family. Ordinarily, a new married
couple lives uxorilocally for a few years in the house of
wife's parents as members of the same house. When a child is
born to this marriage the young couple usually starts a
household of their own A change takes place when the next
sister gets married. The elder sister and her family may
either build a house for themselves in the parents' compound
or move out and live neolocally. This residential change is
usually syncronized with other changes. Economically they are
dependent on the wife's parents and also contribute their
labour to the parental farming enterprise. The wife's parents

informally transfer some land to the couple so that they can farm independently and also establish themselves as a separate household. They are supervised by their parents of both sides till the former are granted a piece of land with cattle and other needful tools for cultivation. Only one daughter or if there is no daughter, only one son will remain with parents in the household and take over the house and other attendant property. If a household has no child, it is common to take in a boy or a girl who is usually a relative as a helper in the house and fields. Adoption of a child is permitted both by tradition and law. Family name and property is inherited through father who is the head of the family. A son and a daughter equally inherit the parents' property especially land. Here it is worth noting that equal inheritence of this kind; particularly of land, between successors simply becomes dysfunctional because of further divisions in the limited areable land.

The Thai kinship terms are based on affinal relations. Within the family children address older relatives by their position in household - Pho (father), Mae (mother), Pu (paternal grandfather), Ya (paternal grandmother) etc. Siblings address each other by a given name. Thai kinship terms distinguish age differences - Phi Chai (elder brothers) and Phi Sao (elder sisters); and Nong Chai (younger brothers) and Nong Sao (younger sisters). In speaking to an older sibling, one uses the more general term, "Phi" (elder sibling); in

speaking to a young sibling on the other hand one uses his/her given name rather than the word, "Nong" (younger sibling). The husband calls the wife, "Nong" (younger one) and the wife calls the husband, "Phi" (elder one). Men are addressed by the term, "Nai" (Mr.) and women, if single, are addressed, "Nang Sao" (Miss), if married, "Nang" (Mrs.). One who reaches old age is addressed by the younger folks in special terms of respect. All the old people will be called by the kinship terms - "grandfather" and "grandmother", even though the speaker is not related to the old person. Titles of respect based on religious service and age are used with a person's given name or the term that identifies him.[50] For example, an ex-monk is usually addressed by adding the prefix, "Tid" (Pundit-Scholar) or "Maha" to his personal name as the case may be. Kinship status, as it stands, does not have much importance in Thailand as does it in other parts of Southeast Asia. Thais hardly remember names of their kin relatives beyond two generations either way. Even the family names were not in use before 1916. Only thereafter these have been in use due to the government decree to that effect. However, this too is largely restricted to bureaucratic affairs.

Following is the full list of kinship terms in use in the Thai language.[51]

Chuad : great-grandparent

  pu : paternal grandfather

  ya : paternal grandmother

  ta : maternal grandfather

  yai: maternal grandmother

  pho: father

  mae: mother

  lung: elder brother of
either parent

  pa: elder sister of
either parent

  aa: father's younger
sibling (both sexes)

  na: mother's younger
sibling (both sexes)

Phi Chai : Older male sibling
or cousin

phi sao : older female sibling
or cousin

nong chai: younger male sibling
or cousin

nong sao : younger female sibling
or cousin

luk : child

lan : nephew/niece,
grandchild

mia : wife (Bhanraya,
elegant form).

The four terms used for kinsmen in the grandparental generation are used in connection to refer to ancestors in general, viz., pu-ya-ta-yai : ancestors, forbears. Similarly, the expression luk-lan refers to descendants and junior relatives in general.

Within the Thai household the central or the head role is that of the husband. Next to him is his wife in terms of role-performance. The husband conferred with a superior status is regarded as the master of the family affairs whereas a wife is considered as his deputy owing to roles performed by each. Among the siblings greater prestige is attached to boys than to girls and to the elders than the younger.

Although the father is regarded as the head of a family and children are expected to obey their parents, the Thai family is not as strict, nor authoritarian as in Japan, China and Vietnam. Even the family precepts commended by Buddhism are milder and indeterminate. The following are the Buddhist rules of family obligations :

The duties of a husband toward a wife are : honouring her as a true life-partner, not despising her, being faithful to her, letting her be in charge of all domestic affairs and providing her with gifts and ornaments. The duties of a wife toward a husband are : organizing domestic affairs well, helping his people, being faithful to him, properly managing the valuables and property provided by him, and being energetic and industrious in all her duties.[52] The duties of parents toward their children are : providing food, clothing and shelter; forbiding wrongdoing; encouraging right conduct; giving education; assisting them in matrimony and transferring properties to them in good time. The duties of children toward their parents are : taking care of them when they are old; helping them in their work; keeping the good name of the family, obedience and trustworthiness; using their properties sensibly; and remembering them after their death by way of ritual merit dedication.[53]

These reciprocal duties and obligations are transmitted to children mostly by their mother directly or indirectly via

her husband who may be an ex-monk. She transmits them to her children as a sage advice rather than mandatory commands.

Thus one can conclude that Thai family and kinship lay emphasis on relative age within a generation and distinction between generations and sexes. Nuclear family and kindred, according to Phillips, is characterized by an overriding emphasis on superordination and subordination based on relative age gradient of each member. The most important functional factor in the organization of the family, as also all Thai social groups, is the maintenance of group coherence through dedication of superiors to the well-being of those below them, and the implicit and explicit obedience to elders by junior members.[54]

With reference to marriage pattern, it rests on the mutual choice of a couple. Subjective and personal factors like compatibility and romantic attraction determine the choice. Even literature suggests that it is nearly always based on personal choice with a few marriages arranged to cement political alliance or to consolidate property holdings. Relatively little ceremony, easy-divorce and flexibility in the residence characterize the pattern. There are no rigid rules of endogamy or exogamy acting either as specific checks or as stimuli.[55] Thai marriage pattern favours monogamy over polygamy. The latter is legally forbidden. However, in practice it does exist to an extent latently as concubinage

among the wealthy and the elite classes, especially in the
urbanized sector of social life. This is a customary practice
following the king's harem system under despotic rule of pre-
modern time. Concubinage as in Thailand is bad enough, but
substitute system of call girls in the Western societies is
worse.

A boy is supposed to marry out of his own home and into
his wife's home except for a boy who is the only son and has
to look after his parents, inherit their property and succeed
to them. A girl's role is exactly the reverse.

Marriage by love is initiated by the prospective bridge
and groom, especially by the boy. Parental consent is the
final authority in case of orthodox families. It is necessary
if either party (boy or girl) has not reached the age of
maturity. The approval of one's senior is considered desirable
whatever circumstances. Nevertheless, where the choice of the
couple does not accord with the wishes of one or both sets of,
parents, elopement provides the most common expedient. In
selecting a mate the Thais are in favour of romantic love and
parental approval. Table 2.2 indicates the criteria and
preferences by which the couple-choices are made. In this
regard religion plays a role which is secondary.

Table 2.2 : Criteria for Marital Choices by Male and Female
Respondents (based on empirical study in Thailand 1975).

Criteria	Rural (N = 190)				Urban (N = 229)			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
Love	48.35	57	37.50	27	51.72	75	41.66	35
Looks or physical appearance	1.69	2	1.38	1	2.06	3	0	0
Economic status	6.77	8	8.33	6	2.06	3	3.53	3
Educational background	13.55	16	23.62	17	17.97	26	21.42	18
Approval of the elderly people (parents)	21.18	25	23.62	17	20.00	29	19.04	16
Must be a follower of the same religion	5.08	6	5.55	6	4.13	6	11.93	10
Religion plays no part	3.38	4	0	0	2.06	3	2.38	2
Total	100	118	100	72	100	145	100	84

Theoretically and to a greater extent in practice, no
marriage is in favour of the religious background, particularly
Buddhism; nor will conversion be made on the basis of marital
status. More specifically Buddhism is very soft and mild in
this regard; it does not demand that the wife-husband-to-be
must be a follower of the same faith. A Thai Buddhist is quite
flexible or tolerante and moderate on this matter and hardly

does he or she take a hard line or raise a radical voice against those (Buddhists) who get married to those of the religious confession different from their own as shown in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3 : Male and Female Responses to Marriages of Kin Members with non-Buddhists (based on empirical study in Thailand, 1975)

	Rural (N = 190)				Urban (N = 229)			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
Completely agree	11.04	13	8.33	6	7.58	11	2.38	2
Somewhat agree	25.44	30	23.62	17	25.52	37	14.28	12
Indifferent	35.55	42	23.62	17	53.10	77	44.06	37
Somewhat disagree	21.20	25	30.54	22	11.05	16	30.95	26
Completely disagree	6.77	8	13.87	10	2.75	4	8.33	7
Total	100	118	100	72	100	145	100	84

In a rural community, a girl frequently marries at the age of 18 or 19 and a boy between 20 and 22. In city the average marriage ages are for women 21 or 22 and for men 24 or 25.[56] Thai family size is rather large but manageable. An average size of households in Thailand as a whole is between five and six persons.[57] Table 2.4 indicates the size of family in both rural and urban communities.

Table 2.4 : Size of Households in Rural and Provincial-Urban and
Metropolitan Areas in Thailand, 1969-70.

Size of household	Rural		Provincial-Urban		Bangkok-Dhonburi Metropolis	
	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
1 - 2	5.7	84	12.6	121	10.6	129
3 - 4	20.0	294	24.7	237	21.6	263
5 - 6	28.4	419	28.7	276	21.8	266
7 - 8	24.8	366	18.4	177	22.1	269
9 +	21.0	310	15.7	151	24.0	292
Total	100	1473	100	962	100	1219
Mean	6.40		5.67		6.49	

Note : For sampling fraction and weight see the Note of Table 2.1, p. 69.

Source : Adapted from Visid Prachuabmoh, et al., The Rural and Urban
Population of Thailand, op. cit., p. 15.

As shown in the above table, differences in the size of
urban and rural households are not impressive. The average size
is almost the same in Bangkok-Dhonburi metropolitan and rural
areas. Only provincial urban households are somewhat smaller.
Large households of over nine persons are most common in
Bangkok-Dhonburi, where the practice of having servants in the

household is probably more common and may be a contributing factor. Large households are rarest in the provincial urban places perhaps because servants are less common there than in the capital and fertility is lower than in the countryside.[58]

Ideally the union should be solemnized by a civil ritual, preceded by a ceremony of blessing performed by a chapter of Buddhist monks. Furthermore, according to a law which was passed in 1935 all marriages should be registered at the District (Amphur) office, but this has not yet become common practice, particularly in country areas.[59] However, the marriages are almost certain to be registered where substantial property is involved. Apparently in the urban areas and among the educated the marriages are by and large marked by both religious and civil rituals and subsequently registered at the District office.

Theoretically divorce is quite permissible and may take place by mutual consent or by court action brought by either party.[60] In practice divorce in Thailand is relatively easy and frequent and like marriage itself it often entails no civil procedures.[61] In the majority of cases marriage is not meant to create an ongoing alliance between two families, but to establish a single conjugal bond. Therefore, it is not surprising that marital breakdown should be fairly common. If a couple proves to be incompatible, it is accepted that the

parties return to their respective families. The children of
a broken marriage usually but not invariably remain with their
mother.[62] When a couple separates, each person takes back the
property brought in at marriage and the joint property is
divided equally.[63] On the average percentage rate of divorce
or separation in Thailand is 1.4 for males, and 3.8 for females
with the lowest of 0.9 for males in the urban-agricultural-based
communities and the highest of 4.9 for females in the rural-
nonagriculture-based communities.[64] The divorced can just
remarry without prejudice.

The urban upper-class family shows a great awareness of
and pride in ancestry and descent. In the royal family this
is formalized by the succession to the title through five
generations. Its structure is quite complex and a detailed
analysis on the subject is found in Wales's work.[65] After the
fifth generation among the old elites who are no longer
permitted to use the titles, the pride and position of the
family pattern are maintained by oral tradition and patterns
of livings. Some emphasis is on living in modified extended
families : the married sons and daughters share the parents'
residential compound where separate houses have been built
for them. However, this pattern is breaking at present. The
political and economic changes of the last four decades have
adversely affected the economic base of this class. As family
fortunes diminish the younger members must increasingly seek
their fortune through alliences amongst the neo-rich.

The urban middle class family is emerging from those who
are well-equiped for position or for business. For the most
part these families follow the rural pattern. A father,
mother, their unmarried children and possibly grandparents
live together in the same house either owned or rented or
allowed in government service. Married sons or daughters are
supposed to move out and establish their own residence
sometime later by some means. Again as it stands, one of them,
either son or daughter with his or her family, depending on
circumstances, is supposed to remain with parents and take
over their property after their death.

Finally, the urban lower class family is uncertain. The
people of this social class are workers, moving from place
to place in search of jobs. Thus on the whole occupation
seems to determine the family structure. Nevertheless the
family structure does not appear to be much changing from
its rural pattern.

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