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**RICE AND MILK IN THAI BUDDHISM:
SYMBOLIC AND SOCIAL VALUES OF BASIC FOOD SUBSTANCES**

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Introduction

Both rice and milk are food substances that sustain life and religion in Buddhist Thailand. Rice is unambiguously of central importance in both subsistence and symbolic systems in Thailand. Milk, however, is more ambiguous in both systems. Both substances are used to nurture, maintain, and support children and monks. The verb expressing this action is liang (to nurture, bring up, care for, tend, support, maintain). The idiom for nurturing children and monks, then, is liang dek, to raise a child, and liang phra, to support a monk.

A complex set of beliefs and tradition, both ancient and modern, influence the foods that people consume daily. Food symbolism is an important part of how people order their world, providing them with a set of references for distinguishing acceptable foods from unacceptable foods in specific cultural contexts.

Cereal foods may be separated out for special elaboration and provide key symbols in an ideological system. For example, an early domesticate in a region, such as wheat in the form of bread in the Near East, corn in Meso-America, and rice in Southeast Asia, may provide lasting metaphors in both everyday life and esoteric doctrine.

This paper explores the meaning of rice and milk in cultural historical context, based partly on the ideological definition in the texts of Theravada Buddhism. Since food exchanges communicate to both participants and observers, they can be used to analyze social relationships. Using rice and milk as the two primary food substances, I will define the food transactions between mother and infant, and monk and layman in Central Thailand. Finally, I will draw out and make explicit what is being communicated in both contexts. The paper concludes with a warning against assuming that ideology explains food choices.

The community referred to in this study is a large rice growing village located in Uthong district, Suphanburi province, west central Thailand. Fieldwork on village religion was conducted from July 1971 to January 1972, with some additional visits in the spring of 1974.

The Meaning of Rice

It is difficult to exaggerate the central position of rice as a means of satisfying hunger (cf. L. Hanks 1972). Colloquially, "hungry" in Thai, translates as "hungry for rice," and other foods such as noodles or bread do not leave one full or satisfied. A common form of greeting in both rural and urban contexts is "have you eaten rice yet?" Acquiring the best grade of rice is a necessary validation of a household's social status. Skimping on quality or quantity of rice servings identifies a person as particularly cheap. The whitest mill polished rice is valued much more highly than the more nutritious hand milled rice. The highly polished white rice is more aesthetically pleasing and has prestige value since the more nutritious but less attractive hand milled grains are fed to prisoners, soldiers, and pigs (Sharp 1953:276). Even the poorest of villagers keep a special pot for cooking rice, never using it for other purposes.

Rice is an important component of studies on folklore and myth in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Attagara 1968; Tambiah 1970; Josselin de Jong 1965; Endicott 1970). For example, the myth of the origin of rice reflects certain Buddhist values. In the mythical past, glorious large grained rice with the fragrance of cow's milk, grew spontaneously. A single grain could satisfy human hunger. From this point in time there was a progressive deterioration in the size, fragrance, and yield of rice, to the present time where rice alone cannot satisfy hunger but must be eaten with other foods. This deterioration in the quality of rice parallels the decline of religion and morality, and is reflected in the rituals which must be performed to insure an adequate harvest.

Religion supports rice production by providing rituals to remove bad luck and bring necessary rain. Since rice, like humans and some animals, has a soul (*khwan*), regular offerings to the rice goddess (*Mae Prosob*) and the guardian spirits of rice fields are necessary. These rituals, performed in rural agricultural communities, depend for their efficacy on the royal ceremony of the first plowing performed by the king in Bangkok. In addition, the annual cycle of Buddhist ceremonies is closely interwoven with the cycle of rice cultivation (cf. Tambiah 1970:153). Although the calendar of Buddhist holy days is fixed, ceremonies are emphasized or de-emphasized depending on the local agricultural cycle.

Rice yields are a good indicator of the state of society and the status of the individual. Rice shortages denote a society out of balance with cosmic forces. Traditionally, such national calamities would reflect directly on the person of the king as the primary accumulator of merit in the country. On the level of the individual, a good rice yield is evidence of a good merit store, and a poor yield, a poor merit balance.

The symbolic importance of rice is reinforced by reference to rice in Buddhist preaching. Weekly services, annual ceremonies, and private household merit-making activities provide opportunities to listen to sermons and stories that often use analogies from rice farming to clarify their parables. (See particularly *The Questions of King Milinda* [Rhys-Davids 1963]). The simile of good acts becoming as fruitful as a rice field communicates clearly to farmers sowing and harvesting their rice crops. In the *Traiphumi-katha*, a cosmological treatise that provides the basis for sermons and stories, there are many references to a "super rice" that grows by itself without having to be planted or milled. "Super rice" cooks perfectly when set on a certain stone, and all condiments appear magically. In a perfect Buddhist society where everyone practices Buddhist morality, the rewards include perfect and abundant supplies of rice.

The Meaning of Milk

Aversion to animal milk in its natural state is much more common in the world than the reverse. The exceptions are areas that have a long history of pastoralism such as East Africa, Europe, Central Asia, and northern India (McCracken 1971). To understand the meaning of milk in Southeast Asia, we must consider the historical process of Indianization, and the potential influence of Hindu ideology in the area. Milk is defined as a sacred and purifying substance in the Vedic tradition, where cow's milk is identified with *soma* and *amrita* (the elixirs of life), and can ward off sickness, old age and death (Bosch 1960:60). The more concentrated the elixir, the more potent it is thought to be. Diluting the milk decreases its quality of purity. Pastoralism was not developed in Southeast Asia, and available animals were not milked. In the late seventeenth century, Persian traders wrote that . . . "although there are many cows and buffalos in Siam, the natives will not milk them and extract butter. Because of their religion they consider these foods sinful" (O'Kane 1972:156). In order to provide butter for the Iranians, the Siamese King ordered his peasantry ". . . to milk the cows and buffalo and extract butter and oil from the milk." The peasants were aghast at the king's tyranny and oppression, accusing him of "confiscating the food of young calves" (O'Kane 1972:157).

However, Wheatley records the extension of ceremonies requiring sacred cattle, milk and butter into the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Angkor Wat and Pagan in the eleventh century (Wheatley 1965). Khmer epigraphy also suggest that fermented milk products were used in the proto-Khmer kingdoms (Wheatley 1965:586). There is extensive evidence for the association of milk and religious ritual in the Indianized regions of Southeast Asia, despite the lack of pastoralism in the subsistence systems of the Hindu-Buddhist states.

If milk was a sacred and purifying substance in India,

it was the opposite in China where cow's milk was not regularly utilized by adults or children. Traditionally, milk was viewed as a noxious substance (Chang 1977). Although dairy products in the form of cheese or fermented drinks were easily digested by individuals physically intolerant of lactose, they were not culturally acceptable to most people through most of Chinese history (McCracken 1971; Chang 1977). Southeast Asia, influenced by and interacting with both Indian and Chinese populations for several centuries, exhibits ambivalent attitudes toward dairy products. In the hill regions of Southeast Asia stretching from India to China, animal milk is viewed as an unclean, revolting substance likely to cause nausea (Simoons 1968:192). But cattle are ritually important to most groups in the hills. Cattle sacrifices are the basis for feasts of merit that validate a person's status in this world and improve it in the afterworld.

In the lowlands, belief in the purity of milk products may be related to the retention of certain Brahmanic rituals associated with personal life crises (birth, tonsure pre-ordination, marriage) in rural communities and in royal ceremonies (Quaritch Wales 1931; P. Van Esterik 1973, 1980). Lowlanders, then, probably had religious motivation for the consumption of milk products in the major Hindu-Buddhist centers, but such ideas were not shared by the hill groups and soon ended in the mainland (Simoons 1968:157). There is an ongoing discussion on whether this can be explained best by lactose intolerance in the local populations or by ideological and cultural factors (Latham 1974:156-161).

The symbolism of milk derived from Indian ideology is expressed in the Buddhist canon. In the rules of monastic order, dairy products are singled out as special foods, and prohibited to monks who should not crave superior foods. In the *Patimokkha*, (rules of monastic order), recited bimonthly by all monks, this admonition is repeated: "These are the following superior foods, namely ghee, butter oil, honey, molasses, fish, meat, milk and curd. Should any bhikku (monk) who is not sick having asked for such superior foods for his own use consume them, it entails expiation" (Nanamoli 1966:56). These dairy products are viewed as medicines and are given to sick monks after the midday fast.

Like rice, references to both human and animal milk can be found in canonical and non-canonical Buddhist texts. For example, production of butter and curds from milk is used to clarify a difficult point of doctrine in *The Questions of King Milinda* (Rhys-Davids 1963). Other stories, such as Sujata's presentation of rice milk at the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment, emphasize the qualities most admired in milk products, richness, sweetness, and concentration. The milk she used was obtained by feeding the milk of 500 cows to 250 cows, and so on down to feeding the milk of 16 cows to 8. "This working the milk in and in . . . was done to increase the thickness and sweetness and the strength-giving properties of the milk" (Warren 1969:72). In other texts, the Buddha confirms that mother's milk is greater

than the water in the four seas. But generally, references to cow's milk are much more common than references to mother's milk.

Food Transactions

We have defined some of the ideological dimensions of rice and milk in Southeast Asia. We must now determine whether these values are cognitively salient in the minds of individuals choosing these foods. One way to understand food beliefs is to examine contexts where food is exchanged. Rice and milk are used to support both infants and monks in the rural community under study. The symbolic code underlying both exchanges may reveal similarities in the way infants and monks are treated. The symbolism may also have implications for the most beneficial distribution of food resources in these communities.

Mother-infant

Infants are, of course, totally dependent on adults for food and security. In rural Thai communities, the nutritional and social needs of infants are met by breast-feeding. In a sample of 177 households in a village in Uthong district, most mothers reported breast-feeding all their children with no supplements of cow's milk or infant formula. A few mothers made use of sweetened condensed milk or powdered milk to supplement their breast milk. Children were weaned at varying times depending on the mother's subsequent pregnancies. According to the mother's recall of the age of weaning, the most preferred times of weaning were two years (18% of children), eighteen months (14%), one year (12%), three years (6%), four years (3%), and five years (2%). The remaining mothers said they weaned their infants whenever they discovered they were pregnant. Three older mothers reported that they breast-fed their youngest children for ten years because they were sickly.

Lactation failure is almost unknown in this community. Dietary restrictions for nursing mothers are not so onerous as to discourage breast-feeding milk (cf. Hanks 1963; Hauck 1959). Potential problems of milk supply are alleviated by the villager's tradition of drinking a vegetable soup (gaeng liang, nurturer's soup). Women receive social support and assistance from close female relatives or friends in the first three days of an infant's life before their own milk supply is established. For the first breast-feeding, mothers may give their infants to a "good nurturer" (one who liang di) to teach their infants to breast-feed, since they do not feed their infants colostrum. The rejection of colostrum is widespread in Asia and elsewhere, and is a serious problem since colostrum provides important protective factors to the newborn (cf. Ferro-Luzzi 1974). The "good nurturer" is not usurping the mother's place, but setting a proper habit so that the mother and infant will form lasting bonds. The woman retains a special relation to the child

she breast-feeds, and gains merit for her act of loving kindness. Infants are nursed or fed whenever they show any signs of discomfort. The center of family attention, they are indulged totally until a second child arrives, when indulgence and mother's milk are abruptly transferred to the newborn.

There is, however, an indirect expectation of return for her provision of mother's milk. The youngest daughter may be breast-fed for a long period of time to "draw" her to her mother. To repay her mother, she remains in the parental household to care for her parents in their old age. Her husband, then, resides with her and they inherit the parental house. But a parallel rationalization for extended breast-feeding may be made for sons. A man is ordained as a monk partly to pay his mother back for her care. Sponsoring a son's ordination is one of the best ways for a mother to gain merit. Texts recited at the pre-ordination ceremonies emphasize that by ordaining as a monk a man may pay his mother back for her breast-milk. Prolonged breast-feeding may create a debt that the child must repay later in life. Hoskins writes that one often hears Vietnamese "telling their toddlers that they must not nurse for too many years or they will build a debt they cannot repay" (Hoskins 1976:133).

Although fresh animal milk is not available in most areas of Thailand, powdered milk products and sweetened condensed milk are available at rural stores for families with substantial cash income and the desire to express their superiority over other villagers by emulating what they view as modern, urban, life styles. In addition to the television set, and electric rice cooker, these few families laud imported tonic drinks such as Ovaltine and Milo made with sweetened condensed milk. These drinks are also given to toddlers and school children. The sweetness of the milk products identify them as rich and therefore nutritious to the villagers.

Infants may also be fed rice-milk, the cooking water from rice, at a very young age. This product, too, is thought to have special properties. The Buddha lauds rice-milk:

Tenfold, O Brahmana, is the merit attached to rice-milk. In what way is it tenfold? He who gives readiness of mind; rice-milk when it is drunk removes hunger; dispels thirst; sets right the humors of the body; purifies the bladder; and promotes the digestion. (Rhys-Davids & Oldenberg 1881:5)

Rice milk, mashed bananas, and often a rice gruel are fed to infants almost from birth and mothers have a real sense of accomplishment when an infant can consume rice. Consumption of rice signifies that the infant is maturing.

In the Vedic tradition, the first feeding of solids (annaprasana) was ceremonially marked (Basham 1959:160), and

although other rites such as tonsure ceremonies were adopted in Thailand, the first solid meal is not ritually marked (possibly since solids are introduced at so early an age).

To summarize, it is human milk rather than cow's milk which bonds mother and child. According to village women, mother's milk draws a child to its mother and encourages a child to have a mind like the mother; cow's milk would encourage a child to have a mind like a cow, with connotations of slowness and laziness. Sweetened condensed milk, is lauded for its richness and thickness and viewed as a special food. Finally, rice water combines the purifying properties of rice and milk and is treated like milk because of its white milk-like appearance.

Monk-layman

Buddhist monks residing in village monasteries are dependent on the contributions of the laity for their existence. But monks and laymen are clearly in two separate worlds, linked in part by food exchanges. These exchanges are characterized by formality, distance, and impersonality. The ideal offering is from a layperson with good intentions to a monk who is not personally known to the layperson.

The laity supports the monkhood through donations of rice. Substantial merit accrues from the donation of rice fields to a temple complex. Although the monks cannot work the land, others provide the labor, making merit for themselves, and providing a continuous supply of rice to the temple for feeding monks and distributing to the poor. Opportunities to maximize merit and resources are available only to wealthy individuals with substantial resources. With ample food supplies, the wealthy demonstrate to the community their substantial merit; with those same food supplies, they can gain even more merit by supporting the monks and the less fortunate in the community, a synergistically beneficial advantage over their poorer neighbors.

Cooked rice, presented in an attractive bowl, is offered to monks every Buddhist holy day (4 times a month), usually by the woman of the household. The food is not requested by the monks; rather the monks offer the laity a chance to make merit. Raw rice is presented to monks on important Buddhist festivals such as the beginning and end of the rains retreat, the traditional New Year celebration, and for sermons preached after twelve o'clock when the monks are fasting.

Raw and cooked rice are the forms most commonly offered to monks. But rice in other forms is important on ritual occasions. For example, rice mixed with sweetened condensed milk or with coconut milk and sugar is the basis of sweet rice desserts important for Brahmanic rites of passage such as birthdays, tonsures, marriages and pre-ordination rites. These brightly colored treats are offered to guardian spirits, as well as to the monks who come to preach and to

the Brahman practitioner. The hard, dried rice on the bottom of the cooking pot is used in house building rituals.

Funerals are events that require substantial financial investment on the part of laity. In addition, the laity are extremely dependent on the services of monks on these occasions. Puffed rice is a variant closely associated with death. Tambiah cites an informant who said that "death is like puffed rice which can't be planted to grow again" (Tambiah 1970:156). Puffed rice without sugar is strewn on a path following a funeral procession. Puffed rice with sugar is offered to the spirits of the dead to keep them satisfied. Ancestors are especially recalled at the half point of the year in September in the ritual called sat (Pali, sarada, autumn). At this time, the dead ancestors are honored in the fields, the house compound, and at the temple; again with offerings of puffed rice and sugar.

In 1928, the King revived a royal version of this ceremony, combining the idea of a first fruits harvest festival, and offerings to spirits of the dead. At this ceremony, puffed rice is mixed with corn, sugar, milk, and coconut to make a rich concoction called "heavenly rice" (Quaritch Wales 1931:232). Brahmanic in origin, the celebration was observed in the royal court every year, and in less elaborate form in provincial centers. For example, in a community close to the former royal capital of Ayuthaya, villagers carried out a modest version of the royal ceremony, complete with vats of heavenly rice prepared with canned sweetened condensed milk.

To summarize, rice is the primary food substance presented to the monks by the laity. However, milk is viewed as a special food that can be given to monks when they are sick. Like infants, monks became more dependent on laypersons in this condition. In the community under discussion, monks accepted drinks made with ice, fruit flavor, and sweetened condensed milk well into the afternoon. The villagers emphasized that these were special foods with medical properties, and their consumption was not a lapse of monastery discipline. Moerman points out that cans of imported sweetened condensed milk are considered objects for religious giving, and a material expression of Buddhist piety (Moerman 1969:148-9). Milk, then is a public symbol of a healing substance that retains its Indian meaning from its association with auspicious rituals.

Comparing Transactions

We have seen that both rice and milk are important in Buddhist ideology and in food transactions between mothers and infants, and monks and laity. What further comparisons can be made between these two transactions? Do these food substances carry the same symbolic value in both contexts?

Superficially, the contexts are dissimilar. Newborn infants are clearly dependent on adults, primarily their

mothers, for protection, food, and life itself. Monks are males above age twenty one, healthy, with no physical deformities.

Yet, the similarities between the two categories have not been lost on the Burmese who claim these riddles come from the Jataka tales (tales of the former lives of the Buddha):

One is ill-treated by the other, and yet does not hate him. Who can it be? One always gives to the other, but the other squanders what is given and still asks for more. Who can it be? (Spiro 1976:415)

The first refers to mother and infants; the second to laymen and monk.

Neither monks nor infants do any "work," and both must be totally dependent on others for their survival. Others assume the financial burdens, the protective functions, and the responsibility to provide food and services to them even before they are requested. Parents (particularly mothers) and the laity (particularly women) accept these burdens, even if it means depriving themselves. Support is freely given to infants and monks without their asking and, as a result, individuals in both categories exist in complete security, totally provided for. In their total dependency on others, monks and infants are in the same structural position (cf. Spiro 1970:342).

In addition, both monks and infants may appear to have an over-riding concern with self and lack of concern for the needs of others. This is a developmental inevitability for immature infants, but monks may also be viewed as primarily concerned for their own salvation, and not for the salvation of the laity. Tambiah writes that the "ethic of non-action and contemplation is the ideal way for the monk" (1970:92). Recently monks have become involved in community development work, and it remains to be seen how the laity will accept the monks' more active role.

In both cases, the food exchanges are only indirectly reciprocal, but the giver -- the mother and the layperson -- have some expectation of future return. In the case of the parent, there is an expectation that their children will care for them in their old age, and make merit for them both before and after the parents' death. Children are taught very early in life that they owe this to their parents.

The relation between monk and laity is more complex. On one level, there is an implication of direct reciprocity -- provision of food in return for ritual services. This obligation to provide spiritual services is expressed in an exposition in the Buddhist canon: "Render help in return by spiritual gifts to lay people who always support you with material gifts" (Tambiah 1970:67). On the other hand, well intentioned giving with no expectation of reward results in merit increase for the donor. The monks are a "field of

merit" for the laity and not dispensers of merit.

The indirect and ambiguous nature of the reciprocity in both transactions may well be apparent to Thai Buddhists. Both food exchanges are emotion-laden, and may be tension-filled and problematic. If monks were in the secular world, they would look extremely greedy and break every convention of Thai hospitality. The rules of the monastic order emphasize the limits that monks should place on themselves in their food habits. Elsewhere in the Buddhist teachings there are references to the need to avoid gluttony and set limits on food consumption, and meditating monks may focus on the idea of the repulsiveness of food. In a study of Sherpa rituals, Ortner suggests similar tensions with regard to the Sherpa monk's acceptance of gifts: "The monk's unprotesting acceptance of anything given him may fuel, at some unperceived level, the Sherpa occasionally expressed notion that monks are even greedier than lay people" (Ortner 1978:178). Spiro records similar ambiguity among Burmese laity who fear that monks must be greedy, and points out the real paradox arising from the constant giving of food to monks: ". . . the greater his rejection of worldly goods, the holier the monk is deemed to be, but the holier he is, the more lavishly he is supplied with worldly goods" (Spiro 1970:414).

The paradox is also apparent in mother-infant interaction. The more the mother feeds an infant, the stronger is their mutual attachment. The greater the attachment of mother to son, for example, the harder it is to give him up to the monkhood -- but the greater the merit accumulation for the mother. And in old age, when parents expect their children to reciprocate by caring for them, parents should be beginning to detach themselves from social bonds, renouncing those they are closest to, and preparing for death. These paradoxes, expressed through food exchanges, emphasize real and significant problems in Thai social life.

Conclusion

Rice and milk, as emotion-laden substances forming the basis of these food transactions, carry heavy symbolic loads. This comparison of rice and milk as nourishment for monks and infants indicates that Buddhist ideology may inform food choices in Thai rural communities. More extensive fieldwork would be necessary to demonstrate how cognitions about the supply, preparation, and consumption of food relate to the actual utilization of food in that cultural context.

Acknowledging the existence of food ideology does not imply that cultural beliefs are the primary determinants of food choices. Clearly the ideological basis for food choice is only one potential causal factor, along with socio-economic factors, for example. Exclusive emphasis on ideological factors without attention to the ecological context could lead to nutritional policies that emphasize educa-

tional efforts to "change" people's cultural beliefs about food rather than programs to increase people's access to food (cf. DeWalt & Pelto 1976; DeWalt et al. 1980).

The popularity of sweet milk tonics, the merit accruing from extended breast-feeding, the preference for highly polished white rice, the rejection of colostrum, and self-control to avoid gluttony are all food beliefs and practices that could best be explained by a research strategy integrating both ecological and ideological variables. There is no need to oppose these positions as many anthropologists have (cf. Ross 1977; Harris 1979). Rather, the task at hand is to develop methods of study that can relate ideological and ecological variables to food choices in particular settings. An important step in that direction is Laderman's discussion of the symbolic and ecological approaches to food avoidances in Malaysia (Laderman 1981). If Buddhist ideology does inform food choices it must also inform the analyst seeking to understand the cultural context of food in Thai communities in order to improve the nutritional standards of individuals.

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