

An Ethnographic Study of Dessert Culture in the Tenth Lunar Month Festival

Singhanat Nomnian^{a*} and Stefanie Pillai^b

^aResearch Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University,
Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

^bFaculty of Languages and Linguistics/Cultural and Heritage Centre,
Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author. Email: snomnian@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Consumption practices related to desserts can be based on and influenced by many factors, including religious and spiritual beliefs, local wisdom, traditions, politics, economy, and sociocultural identities of communities. This article presents research findings on a group of special desserts used in the Tenth Lunar Month Festival in Nakhon Si Thammarat province in southern Thailand. The study drew upon ethnographic fieldwork related to the production, consumption, and use of these traditional desserts in ceremonies during this festival. The findings reveal that the community's positive perceptions, values, and attitudes, as well as the evolving practices related to these desserts are linked to their sociocultural spirituality, way of life, and local economy. Recently, there has been a concerted effort to revive and maintain the festival and its related dessert culture through public and private partnerships. In addition, there is a need to support local tourism and local businesses in integrating cultural events, so that this festival and the dessert culture will continue to be sustained and appreciated by generations to come.

Keywords: cultural beliefs and practices, dessert culture, merit-making, Tenth Lunar Month Festival, southern Thailand

Introduction

Food and its practices underpin and influence the linguistic and sociocultural identities of people in terms of beliefs, traditions, and

ethnicity (Reddy and van Dam, 2020). In addition, as Fieldhouse (2017: xxi) points out, “from a religion standpoint, food is also a culturally and spiritually powerful substance that shapes human relationships and understanding of the world and is at the heart of human interactions with the divine.” People’s religious identities are often linked to the way in which food must be prepared, such as a particular way of slaughtering animals, and what they are forbidden to consume (e.g. pork and alcohol for Muslims). However, these associations may also be at a personal level, where people choose to consume only particular types of food, for example, for health reasons, or concern for the environment. Food is also associated with people’s cultural and national identity. Such food loyalty suggests that food is more than just food, and is associated, perhaps in a more complex way than we realize, with diverse cultural elements at different levels (e.g. personal, religious, ethnic, cultural). In Indonesia, for instance, Muslims have a tradition of eating *ketupat*, glutinous rice cooked in woven coconut leaves, symbolizing forgiveness and blessings during the *Eid Al-Fitr* festival, which follows a month of fasting from dawn to dusk (Rianti et al., 2018). This point is echoed by Sarma et al. (2020: 1), “the tradition of preparing ethnic foods not only garners creativity but it is also a bridge that connects the sociocultural, spiritual, economic and way of life of the concerned communities.”

The present study was motivated by curiosity about this interrelationship between food and sociocultural identity. It focuses on an important festival in Thailand, the Tenth Lunar Month, known in Thai as *Sat Duean Sip* [สารทเดือนสิบ].¹ This event takes place throughout Thailand as well as in Buddhist communities in Laos and Cambodia, and is of special significance in southern Thailand, especially Nakhon Si Thammarat. One of the most ancient cities in Southeast Asia, it is situated on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula on the Gulf of Thailand between the Indian Ocean region and the South China Sea, making it

¹ The Thai word *sat* is derived from the Pali word, *sart*, meaning an autumn festival. In northeast and northern Thailand, a festival known as บุญข้าวสาก is held to feed the spirits of the ancestors, but the specific features are different from each other and from the one described in this article.

an ideal location for trade and commerce. Nakhon Si Thammarat, often simply called “Nakhon” by its residents, derived its name from the first ruler of the city, “Phra Chao Si Thammasokarat,” meaning “a majestic city of a virtuous king,” (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2020: 7). Nakhon Si Thammarat was an Indianized state influenced by Hindu culture, as well as a commercial hub on the East-West trade route (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2020). The province is home to 1.5 million people, and has been named by the Tourism Authority of Thailand as one of the most popular destinations for tourists 2018 (Kaewrat and Janta, 2021).

According to Virunanont (2020), the Tenth Lunar Month festival was influenced by the Hindu ritual of Preta Phli, in which people make merit for their deceased ancestors. The Sanskrit word, *preta* (*pret* in Thai) refers to a hungry ghost, or in some contexts, a particular kind of ghost or spirit with a large stomach and a small mouth, who is always hungry.

The festival involves merit-making to pay respect and to show gratitude to deceased ancestors, and is also considered a time for family reunions because Nakhon people currently living throughout the country tend to return home during this festival. Merit-making practices are believed to enhance the quality of a person’s next life. According to Meebua (2017), beliefs about karma, heaven, hell, and spirits provide the base for the Tenth Lunar Month Festival. According to the law of karma, those who perform good deeds will have a good after-life in heaven or in subsequent lives in the human realm, whereas those who sin will suffer the karmic consequences in hell. People who make merit during the festival believe that the souls of their ancestors are released from hell to visit their relatives on earth.

Merit-making for this occasion includes the preparation of vegetables, dried meat, and other daily necessities, but the most important items are five traditional desserts: *khanom la*, *khanom phong*, *khanom di sam*, *khanom khai pla*, and *khanom saba*. These desserts are considered to be the mediators between descendants and ancestors, which bring meaning to life after death.

Although there have been a number of studies related to this festival (Ganwiboon, 2014; Meebua, 2017; Phraatikan Amnony Sappanyo (Thonggen) et al., 2020; Ponjamnong, 2017), there is a dearth of information on the link between dessert culture and sociocultural spirituality, the community’s way of life, and the economic value of this festival. This article is intended to fill that information gap.

Conceptual Framework

The Tenth Lunar Month Festival, originating in agricultural society, has meanings related to respect for spirits, the influence of Brahminism and Buddhism, the community’s way of life, local people’s beliefs, religion, history, economy, and society (Phraatikan Amnony Sappanyo (Thonggen) et al., 2020). The conceptual framework of dessert culture in this festival is, therefore, linked with these meanings (Figure 1).

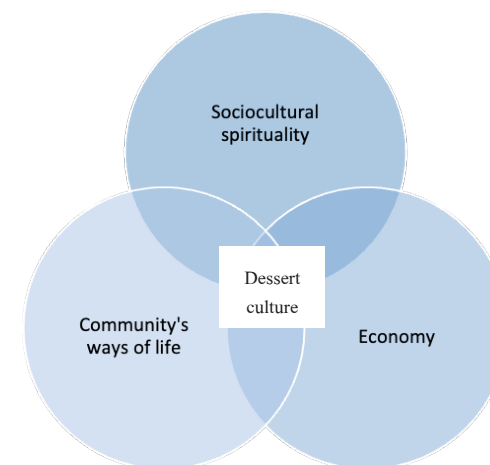


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of this study

Sociocultural Spirituality

The practice of *dana* or giving is an integral part of merit-making, and one way to give is through food offerings. The five key desserts represent a form of local wisdom that acts as a past-to-present link to the way of

life and traditions inherent in this community, which include doing good deeds in order to have peace in this life and the next (Ponjamnong, 2017).

The people of Nakhon Si Thammarat feel that the festival cannot be abandoned because it is considered a most crucial time to welcome the returned spirits of their ancestors who come to appeal to them to make merit. By bringing food to the temple, the people express their respect for and gratitude to their ancestors. It is believed that, if they do not follow these traditions, they will not be happy or prosperous in the future.

Based on a synthesis of religious influences from Brahmanism and Buddhism, the festival is now rooted in the hearts of Buddhists in southern Thailand. Local people of Nakhon Si Thammarat consider themselves to possess the following qualities: gratitude to their ancestors, love for others, being united, having a strong belief in Buddhism, and the desire to conserve their culture for future generations (Kamlangkuea and Numun, 2017).

The Community's Way of Life

Mongkolpanich (2014) examined the sociocultural relationship between the Thai Ministry of Interior and local communities concerning the development of the Tenth Lunar Month Festival from 1977 to 2007. The study divided the evolution of the festival into three phases. During the first phase from 1977 to 1993, the state and communities determined the distinctive characteristics of the festival, which was then revived and promoted as the cultural symbol of the province. The focus then moved to the promotion, conservation, and restoration of historic sites in the province in compliance with government policy (Mongkolpanich, 2014). In the second phase from 1994 to 1998, which marked the decline of Buddhism in local communities, the local administration and the communities tried to identify new features for the festival. The third phase from 1999 to 2007 focused on promoting the conservation of Nakhon Si Thammarat folk arts and culture (Mongkolpanich, 2014).

Drawing upon Ruengmak (2019), dessert culture can be said to express the socio-psychological values of the community through the cooperation of people in all activities, and by their showing gratitude

to ancestors in remembering their virtues. The festival also promotes the image of the community as one that is unified, and it reflects the beliefs of the community in terms of devotion to ancestors. The desserts used in this festival are symbolic representations of society, traditions, rites, and important mechanisms for maintaining various peace, harmony, and order in society.

Economy

The Tenth Month Festival in Nakhon Si Thammarat was first held in 1923 at Na Muang main grounds in order to raise funds to build a club for civil servants (Mongkolpanich, 2014). Phra Phattanawik Chamroon (Uan Phattanawik), who was the president of the Sri Thammarat Club, and Phraya Ratsadanupradit, the governor, co-organized the event, which consisted of stalls and various entertainment shows over a period of three days and three nights. In 1992, the provincial organizing committee moved the venue to Somdet Phra Srinagarindra 84 Park (Thung Tha Lat). The festival, recently declared as an official regional holiday in the south, is held during the fourteenth to fifteenth waning-moon nights in September. The festival not only reflects the beliefs and practices of the local people, but it also plays a significant role in promoting Nakhon Si Thammarat's economy through heritage tourism (Kamlangkuea and Numun, 2017).

Although the festival has taken place for decades, it has been modified and transformed to include various activities via touristic promotional tools and public relations to generate income for people in the community (Phra Anupong Thapalo, 2018). The modification of activities in the festival was in response to the government's policies in the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021), which supports cultural tourism in terms of traditional activities, local culture, and the unique identity of the community. These activities, in turn, can help to promote valuable resources, and create jobs to distribute income among local people. Preserving traditions along with supporting unique creations can enhance urban development both economically and socially (Phra Anupong Thapalo, 2018).

Research Methodology

This study employed ethnography as a research methodology because, as Freedman (2016: 139) explains, this qualitative approach “offers a means for close examination of cultural phenomena” which allows researchers “to represent the studied phenomenon the way it is manifested in the field.” Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out by the first author in the period September 11 to 20, 2020. In this study, like that of Valadares Teixeira and Ribeiro (2013), various data collection methods were used. The triangulation of these qualitative methods was integrated into a multifaceted methodological approach that contributed substantively to this study. The three key data collection tools are described in the following paragraph.

First, participant observation was used, together with descriptive field notes and documentation of activities and events in the form of video recordings and images. This included attending parades and rituals, and visiting the Klong Hoirak community in Pak Phanang district, where the main desserts were originally produced and distributed to the public, and the public markets where these desserts were sold. Second, to find out more about the beliefs and practices about the desserts used in the festival, community members were interviewed. Local entrepreneurs were also interviewed about how the festival supplemented their income, while the views of academic and cultural experts of the festival were also sought. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Finally, to learn more about the festival, the first author visited the Nakhon Si Thammarat National Museum, which archived narratives and images of the festival. In addition, materials about the festival that portrayed the events over the years were also collected from local communities.

All ethical protocols related to fieldwork research and permission to use the various sources of data were approved by the Institutional Review Board, Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University (IPSR-IRB) (COA. No. 2020/08-350).

Ethnographic Perspective of the Tenth Lunar Month

The rituals and practices related to dessert culture in the Tenth Lunar Month Festival which were explored through an ethnographic lens provided a picture of the extent to which dessert culture plays a role in the sociocultural spirituality, economy, and community’s way of life. Field notes based on the ethnographic study yielded the following information:

Receiving the grandparents: First waning moon of the tenth lunar month (Thursday, September 3, 2020)

“Shopping day,” the 13th waning moon of the tenth lunar month (Tuesday, September 15, 2020), for buying food and other desserts.

Mrap หน้บ procession 14th waning moon of the tenth lunar month (Wednesday, September 16, 2020)

Sending off the grandparents: the 15th waning moon of the tenth lunar month (Thursday, September 17, 2020)

According to Buddhist beliefs, parents, grandparents, and other relatives who have passed away will be allowed to meet their living relatives on earth on the first day of the waning moon of the tenth lunar month and return to their afterlife dwellings on the 15th day of the waning moon of this lunar month. Therefore, there are two periods of merit making. Most people prefer to make merit on the 15th day or the day of sending off the grandparents because it is more important. However, there will be some families who will make merit on both days.

These practices are consistent with what Nelson (2008: 307) points out as a “longstanding emphasis throughout East Asian Buddhism on venerating one’s ancestors and petitioning their spirits ... for health, prosperity, and safety.” Thus, the rituals related to merit-making provide a spiritual bridge between the living and the dead in families. Since such rituals will be carried out by many families during these dates, these rituals and the underlying beliefs upon which they are grounded help to preserve the community’s religious and spiritual beliefs as well as pass on behaviors, such as acts of filial piety, from one generation to the next (Nelson, 2008).

Sociocultural Spirituality

As previously mentioned, beliefs and practices of food culture of the local people are inherent in five key desserts used in the festival. The word *khanom* (ขนม in Thai) means “dessert.” The five desserts are the following: *khanom phong* (ขนมพอง) meaning “puff pastry,” *khanom la* (ขนมลา) meaning “net dessert,” *khanom khai pla* (ขนมไข่ปลา) meaning “fish roe dessert,” *khanom saba* (ขนมสะบ้า) meaning “patella dessert,” and *khanom di sam* (ขนมดีซำ) meaning “ancient Thai holed-coin dessert.” Information obtained about these five desserts is presented in Table 1, while Figure 2 to Figure 6 are photographs of the desserts (all photographs were taken by the first author).

Table 1 Five key desserts used during the Tenth Lunar Month Festival in Nakhon Si Thammarat

Name of the dessert	Ingredients and cooking process	Representation of symbolic beliefs and practices
<i>Khanom Phong</i>  Figure 2 <i>Khanom Phong</i>	Made from glutinous rice that has been soaked in water overnight. After it is steamed and cooked, it is placed in a circular mold and dried in the sun. When the rice is dry, it is deep fried until it floats in the oil.	<i>Khanom phong</i> symbolizes the raft used by the ancestors to cross the ocean because the dessert is spread like a raft that can float on water and be ‘ridden’ by the deceased across the ocean.
<i>Khanom La</i>  Figure 3 <i>Khanom La</i>	Made from rice flour and mixed with glutinous rice flour, it is kneaded with sugar and sprinkled with shredded flour on a lotus leaf pan, resulting in a large, soft, cloth-like dessert. It is also made as a crispy roll to serve market demand.	<i>Khanom la</i> resembles a large woven silky cloth that can be folded into one piece. The deceased can ‘wear’ this garment during their journey back to the after-world.

Table 1 Five key desserts used during the Tenth Lunar Month Festival in Nakhon Si Thammarat (cont.)

Name of the dessert	Ingredients and cooking process	Representation of symbolic beliefs and practices
<i>Khanom Khai Pla</i> (also called <i>khanom kong</i>) (ขนมกง)  Figure 4 <i>Khanom Khai Pla</i>	Made from roasted green beans finely milled, kneaded together with sugar, and molded into an oval shape that resembles fish roe. It is then coated in flour and deep fried.	<i>Khanom khai pla</i> looks like jewelry because its oval shape resembles bracelets, bangles, and rings. The deceased can wear this ‘jewelry’ to beautify themselves.
<i>Khanom Saba</i> (also called <i>Khanom Ba</i>) (ขนมบ้า)  Figure 5 <i>Khanom Saba</i>	Made from glutinous rice flour mixed with rice flour and steamed sweet potato, the mixture is then kneaded together and formed into round, flat balls that are tossed in white sesame seeds and deep fried.	<i>Saba</i> balls are considered toys for playing and entertainment because they look like patella balls that were used in a popular game in the past. The symbolism here is that the deceased can entertain themselves during their journey back to the after world.
<i>Khanom Di Sam</i>  Figure 6 <i>Khanom Di Sam</i>	Also known as “ <i>Khanom ru</i> ” (ขนมรู) or “ <i>Khanom cho hu</i> ,” (ขนมเจาะหู) it is made from ordinary rice flour mixed with glutinous rice flour and kneaded with palm sugar. The dough is shaped like a donut with a hole in the middle. These are then deep fried in oil until they are golden-brown crispy on the outside but soft inside with the essence of palm sugar.	<i>Khanom di sam</i> symbolizes silver pawns because it resembles shell-like chips that were used in the past before coins were created. The deceased can ‘use’ them to buy things they need during their journey back to the after world.

These five desserts are mainly used in a layered container known as a *mrapp* (หมัปรับ). *Mrapp* is a Southern word, corresponding to the Standard Thai word *samrap* (สำรับ) meaning a set of dishes put on a tray.² The contents in each layer are shown in Figure 7, while Figure 8 shows *mraps* that have been prepared for the festival.

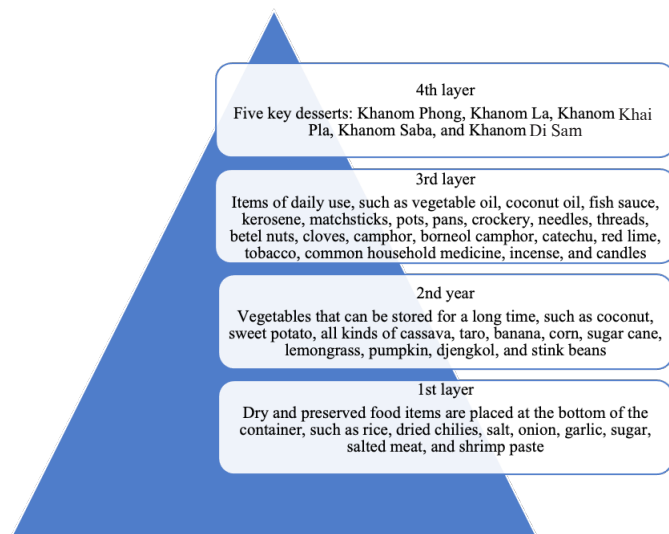


Figure 7 Layers of *mraps*



Figure 8 *Mraps* prepared for merit-making

Family members gather at a temple close to their home or the temple where the bodies or bones of their ancestors are buried to offer the *mraps*. The family believes that these items will be consumed and used by their deceased ancestors and relatives when they return to their world. Banknotes are also placed on top of the *mraps* to make merit and at the same time to support the temples.

The Community's Way of Life

The following findings draw upon ethnographic fieldnotes from the visit to the community in the Pak Phanang district. According to Jankrajangjaeng and Phuetchum (2020), Thais of Chinese descent in Pak Phanang district still adhere to the Confucian concept of gratitude; and thus, they show gratitude to their parents and ancestors through many festivals, including the Tenth Lunar Month. The desserts that are central to this festival, therefore, have become significant in their way of life. The community has passed this local wisdom from generation to generation not only as a means of preserving this cultural practice, but also as a family business (Figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9 Making *khanom la*



Figure 10 Making *khanom di sam*

The rituals of the festival started on the 13th waning day of the moon, which is considered the shopping day (the day that families buy food to be prepared for the merit-making ceremony) and thus, the preparations

² Ratchada Lertmanatchai, retired lecturer in English at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani and Mahidol University and native of Yala province. Communication via Facebook Messenger, 29 September, 2022.

began on this day. At local markets on the morning of September 15, 2020 (Figure 11) people could be seen buying and selling these desserts.



Figure 11 Local market in the morning

On the morning of September 17, 2020, the final, yet major, ritual called “sending the grandparents day” was observed. There was a merit-making ritual in the early morning as local people gathered at temples to offer food to the monks and to pray for their ancestors. They also brought *mraps* with them as a way of expressing gratitude to and respect for their ancestors before they left the human realm to return to their ‘world’ (Figure 12). The set of five desserts was placed alongside other kinds of food to be given to the monks.



Figure 12 *Mrap* offerings inside the temple

After the monks had finished chanting, the villagers performed an ancient ritual called *Tang Pret* (ตั้งเปรต) (meaning, “setting the hungry ghosts in place”) which was carried out to distribute and share food and desserts to wandering spirits that had no relatives. These desserts were placed outside the temple compounds as offerings and put inside the temples for the spirits of deceased grandparents and relatives to ‘eat’ (Figures 13 and 14).

Then, the human *ching pret* (ชิงเปรต, meaning “the snatching hungry ghosts”) would snatch the food from the spirits in the hope that they would receive good fortune and luck for themselves and their families. Thereafter, people attending the festival would jostle in a friendly manner to snatch the sweets, which they believed would bring merit and good fortune.



Figure 13 *Tang Pret* at a wall outside the temple

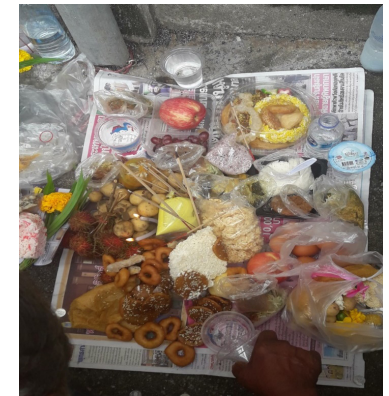


Figure 14 Food for *Tang Pret*

At some temples, a long pole is erected for those who are brave enough to climb and snatch the food set at the top, which is entertaining and exciting to watch.

Economy

The *pret* parade (Figure 15) from Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan to Ratchadamnoen Road to the main grounds in the city of Nakhon Si

Thammarat took place on September 15, 2020. The *pret* are considered to have been released to the human realm during this festival to receive merit from their families and relatives. A similar practice occurs in Laos where on a particular night during the *boun ho khau padab din* (literally the placing of food parcels on the ground as merit making) festival, ghosts are freed from hell (Ladwig, 2012a).

During the parade in Nakhon Si Thammarat a variety of horrifying *pret* puppets representing those who committed various wrongdoings while they were alive were on display. Parents often bring their children to come and watch the parade to teach them to be good people. This is an implicit way to inculcate morality and ethical behavior among the young and to pass on the concept of “the Buddhist evolutionary scale of karma” (Ladwig, 2012b: 99).



Figure 15 Pret Parade

The *mraps* procession in Nakhon Si Thammarat took place on September 16, 2020. All the offerings were arranged in the shape of a stupa with the five desserts decorating the top of the *mraps* which were displayed in a procession (Figure 16).



Figure 16 A procession of *mraps*

Local people participating in the merit-making ceremony joined a procession carrying the *mraps* to Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, the main Buddhist temple of Nakhon Si Thammarat (Figure 17). Listed by UNESCO as a tentative World Heritage Site in the cultural category on June 21, 2013, this temple with its distinctive bell-shaped chedi, is the focal landmark of the festival (Figure 18).



Figure 17 Local people taking *mraps* to Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan



Figure 18 Phra Borommathat Chedi

The colorful procession (Figure 19) in 2020 attracted both residents and tourists. Other activities were also held, such as a trade fair, exhibitions, and cultural performances. Traditionally, the celebration is held at the Nakhon Si Thammarat city hall, Wat Na Phra Mahathat, and Suan Somdet Phra Si Nakharindra (Tung Tha Lad).



Figure 19 Mrap procession

Findings from the Interviews

Key informants were interviewed, including cultural experts, the director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) of Nakhon Si Thammarat, teachers, and entrepreneurs. They shared their views regarding the dessert culture represented in the Tenth Lunar Month in relation to the socioeconomic impact and cultural preservation.

Socioeconomic Impact

Local people believe that the Tenth Lunar Month Festival empowers and drives their practices and can have a socioeconomic impact, as illustrated in remarks below. A cultural expert stated,

The Tourism Authority of Thailand uses the Tenth Lunar Month Festival as a selling point for local entrepreneurs who are able to produce and sell desserts. Some desserts are sold all year round. The One Tambon, One Product (OTOP) program helps the community with the packaging as a way to promote marketing for these desserts (Damsri, 2020).

Similarly, the director of the Nakhon Si Thammarat office of the TAT, pointed out, The Tenth Lunar Month Festival is a continuation of traditions. TAT has taken such beliefs to promote various in cooperation with the Tourism Business Association and the Hotel Association to organize a special package for tourists who come to stay in Nakhon Si Thammarat province during the period September 10 to 30, 2020 (Tantiniyom, 2020).

Local dessert vendors also gained the benefits of the festival amid the Covid-19 pandemic as these desserts were popular among tourists and local people elsewhere in Thailand (Figure 20). One informant explained:

The making of desserts in the 2020 Ten Lunar Month Festival created jobs in the community. The economy has been growing

despite the Covid-19 pandemic. These desserts will be delivered to Bangkok for sale (Somying [Pseudonym], 2020).



Figure 20 A dessert entrepreneur

Some desserts, such as *khanom la* and *khanom phong* can be consumed all year round as their ingredients last longer than the others. Thus, they can be produced and sold to the wider public at any time.

However, the commercialization of the festival, including desserts, needs to be approached with caution. There have been some changes in the festival for commercial and entertainment reasons through marketing communication that has the potential to misinterpret and ignore the essence of cultural values (Meebua, 2017). For example, there has been an increase in the number of activities and festival duration to promote tourism by extending the original three days and three nights to 10 days and 10 nights to attract more tourists (Phra Anupong Thapalo, 2018). Moreover, some forms of entertainment organized during the festival were considered inappropriate for merit-making and created a negative image of the city (Meebua, 2017). In fact, Howtragool (2017) suggests that the festival should emphasize knowledge, Buddhist teachings, and spiritual values rather than entertainment and businesses.

Cultural Preservation

The relationship between the festival and the community's beliefs and sociocultural practices was explained by local cultural experts. As one informant pointed out,

These desserts reflect the wisdom food preservation of our ancestors as they are easy and convenient for the deceased to take back to their "world." The festival is a way for relatives and friends to participate in activities together (Thammachat, 2020).

Ruengmak (2019) suggests that the festival period can be a good opportunity for the family to disseminate and share cultural knowledge with the youth, thus helping to preserve these local traditions. A vocational teacher in food and nutrition, echoes this idea stating,

The Tenth Lunar Month Festival is inherited from ancient times. It should be preserved. As a teacher, I try to cultivate the local wisdom of the dessert-culture through local food courses. I employ an experiential learning method, which allows each student to make different types of desserts (Somchai [Pseudonym], 2002).

Similarly, in the words of a university lecturer, Educational institutes can integrate the Tenth Lunar Month Festival into their courses on Nakhon Si Thammarat studies. Such courses have already been offered at primary and secondary school levels. Education helps create sustainability of local wisdom and cultural knowledge among youth (Damsri, 2020).

Collaboration with local communities, entrepreneurs, tourism network representatives, tour operators and guides, private sector tourism agencies, and the TAT in particular, can promote Nakhon Si Thammarat as a creative tourism city (Sumethokul et al., 2020). At the festival in 2020, there was an exhibition of the five desserts (Figure 21) that were being made fresh on site for the public. Local visitors and tourists could observe the cooking process and taste the desserts.



Figure 21 Thai Desserts Exhibition Banner

This article, similar to Kamlangkuea and Numun (2017), has shown that the Tenth Lunar Month Festival has not only promoted heritage tourism, but has also portrayed the religious, spiritual and collective nature of the local people. This suggests that research on food culture can be one of the ways to preserve historical and sociocultural identities of the communities. In the words of a cultural expert who was interviewed, “Dessert culture of the Tenth Lunar Month is important for the people in Nakhon Si Thammarat as it represents our identity, history, and culture. I would like to see more research in this area” (Pongpanich, 2020).

Conclusion

This article explored the dessert culture in Nakhon Si Thammarat’s Tenth Lunar Month Festival through an ethnographic lens. Based on Buddhist and Brahmanical beliefs and practices, this local festival is culturally unique with its traditions and rituals, including those related to five desserts. The beliefs and practices in the lives of the people are interwoven with the afterlives of their deceased ancestors. The

elaboration of traditions from ancient times which have been passed down from generation to generation is evident in the present religious and cultural traditions of the festival.

This study examined the extent to which dessert culture plays a role in the sociocultural spirituality, economy, and way of life of the community via the key practices of dedication to deceased ancestors, and the rituals and practices which emphasize the collective values of good behavior, filial piety, and the concept of karma. The study also shows that there has been an effort to maintain and revive the festival through cooperation between public and private partnership by not only conserving this long-running tradition, but also promoting local tourism and businesses that can integrate religious, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions in the hope that this festival can be appreciated and sustained by many generations to come.

Further research on the community’s sense of being, belonging, and enjoyment of festivals can potentially offer new perspectives on cultural food beliefs, practices, and identities in the near future.

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