

Songkran

The Thai New Year

By Ruth Gerson



The splashing of water on others is a popular way for young people to celebrate the holiday.

Songkran, the Thai New Year celebrated in the month of April, is a major holiday in Thai culture. The three days of celebrations embrace the rites of spring, family gatherings, acts of purification, and the popular water-splashing revelry. It is the time when people try to make a fresh start by cleaning their homes and burning old refuse in an act of getting rid of bad luck.

The name Songkran was derived from Sanskrit, literally meaning 'the sun is moving in the zodiac' – in this case from Aries into Taurus. Songkran is believed to have originated in India where the festival of Holi is still vigorously celebrated today.

The holiday's focus is on purification, when people clean not only their houses but also sprinkle lustral water on Buddha images, both in their home shrines and in temples.



People sprinkle lustral water on the Phra Sihing Buddha traditionally taken out of the National Museum during Songkran.

however, this festival lasts up to a week and is lavishly and recklessly celebrated. There, the Buddha image is taken out on procession in a much more elaborate fashion than seen



Sand chedis are built in temple compounds, especially in the north.

Gentle sprinkling of water is also performed in Thai families to honour elders. Traditionally, young people pour water over the hands of their parents and grandparents, bring gifts and receive blessings in return.

Although it was once a lunar holiday, Songkran is now a fixed date on the Thai calendar celebrated from 13 to 15 April. This was done for the convenience of the population to accommodate the changing times. In the northern city of Chiang Mai,

in Bangkok. Ahead of the Buddha image is the Songkran Queen, who is chosen from the young women of Chiang Mai. She rides the mythical animal that symbolises the year to come.

In the streets, the traditional sprinkling of water turns into dousing by the bucketful, but nobody seems to mind. On the contrary, people often welcome some cool relief in April, which is the hottest month of the year. The water-throwing also perpetuates the old belief that if one walks around soaking wet, it is a hint to heaven to send down rain, an element of prime importance in the agricultural regions of Thailand. Rain-inducing festivals follow Songkran throughout the dry season.

There is a tradition which has a strong Buddhist influence and is practised on the second day of Songkran. Originally a northern Thai custom, people bring small buckets of sand to the temple and form these into sand *chedi* (stupas). The *chedi* is a sacred place and evolved from the ancient earth mounds where the ashes of the Buddha were kept. In the past, a coin or a small Buddha image was placed in the sand *chedi* in an attempt to emulate the original stupas in India.

However, today's sand *chedi* are beautifully decorated with colourful streamers and banners. They are also a practical replacement of sand which may have clung to devotees' shoes and was removed from the temple.

Today's Songkran celebrations attract people from many countries who join in the fun and revelries with the Thai people. In the privacy of the home, the quiet and dignified ceremonies of paying respect to parents and grandparents continues, as it does in schools and temples where teachers and honoured monks have scented water poured over their hands in the age-long customs of Thailand.



Songkran parades take place all over the country; this one is in Northeast Thailand.

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Photos courtesy of the author