# RUTH BENEDICT AND THE STUDY OF THAI CULTURE

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In this paper, I place *Thai Culture and Behavior* in the context of Benedict's work and life, American anthropology, and Thai studies. The paper begins with a summary of Benedict's study and a critique of her Thai ethnography. This is followed with a discussion of its initial reception when it was first published and its later place in biographies about Benedict. Finally, I turn to my initial question of the role of *Thai Culture and Behavior* in Thai studies. Here I examine the two subsequent anthropological studies of Thailand: Embree's seminal essay, "Thailand—A Loosely Structured Society," the first field-workbased study of central Thailand, and the Cornell-Bennington Bang Chan Project. I then discuss the place of Benedict's work in more recent anthropological analyses of Thailand.

## Ruth Benedict and the Study of Thai Culture

Ruth Benedict's best-known study of a culture from afar is her *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, first published in 1946. A classic in the field, it remains in print and continues to be cited as an important contribution to the study of Japan (Schachter 2009; Kent 1996; Ryang 2002). Much less well known is Benedict's *Thai Culture and Behavior: An Unpublished War-time Study Dated September, 1943*. The Institute for Intercultural Studies in New York first published this in 1946 in mimeograph form. In 1952, the Cornell University Southeast Asia program published *Thai Culture and Behavior* as its fourth data paper and reprinted the paper in 1955. While *Thai Culture and Behavior* is no longer widely cited, it marks the beginning of anthropological studies of Thailand.

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## Thai Culture and Behavior

The Thai government declared war on the Allies on January 25, 1942. The Thai government allowed the Japanese forces free access to the country, thereby facilitating their assault on Burma. At that time, the government of the United States knew little about Thailand; consequently, it became a nation worth analyzing at the Office of War Information (OWI). While much of the OWI's work focused on supporting the war effort within the United States, there was a section on overseas intelligence staffed with anthropologists working in various government offices (Mead 1959: 351–54). Benedict was Head of the Basic Analysis Section, replacing anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer in the Bureau of Overseas Intelligence (Caffrey 1989, 318; Mead 1959, 352). It was here that Benedict finished Gorer's report on the Burmese, her study of Thailand ([1946b] 1952), and her work on Japan ([1946a] 1989), among others (Caffrey 1989: 268–71).

Benedict developed her own style of analysis for studying cultures at a distance, which integrated published materials with interviews.[1] Margaret Mead described Benedict's approach:

> Her long experience working with students, laboriously going over and over a student's unorganized notes and half-comprehended impressions, had giver her a basic technique for getting at cultural data through the medium of a second person. Her training in English literature and her intensive reading gave her a disciplined and highly sophisticated approach to published materials. And her penchant for building up a picture from fragmentary data came into play in a new way in bringing these very diverse and uneven source materials together in a significant relationship. (Mead 1974, 59)

Mead's analysis fits well with Benedict's own description of the materials and methods she used in *Thai Culture and Behavior*. The paper is relatively short, being forty-five single-spaced typescript pages in the 1952 Cornell Data paper format.[2] In addition to the foreword, it is divided into two parts and five chapters. Part 1 includes three chapters: the first, on traditional background (thirteen pages); the second, a brief chapter on religion with a section on animism (six pages); and the third, on adult life (six pages). Part 2 consists of two chapters: one on the child (eight pages) and the fifth and final chapter, "Some Thai Characteristics," which includes sections on the enjoyment of life, the cool heart, male dominance, and a summary for a total of eleven pages.

In "Traditional Background," Benedict synthesized and summarized her various sources to provide an overview of Thailand at the time. There is a brief introduction, placing Thailand and its people in historic context and delimiting the subject matter—"this study deals with these people of the [irrigated] rice lands, the Lao-Thai, living in North, Central, and East Thailand" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 2)—and a summary of Thai history. This is followed by sections on the absolute monarch, the administrative bureaucracy, and villages. Benedict noted two aspects of Thai governance that made it different from both India and China: the Thai *sakdina* system of rights to land and its product based on rank, which differentiates it from the Chinese administrative system, and the rule of declining rank. Increasing generational distance from the king meant a decline in inherited rank, until, at five generations removed, the person became a commoner. This rule distinguished Thai aristocracy from such hereditary systems as caste in India. Benedict balanced her information on the rulers with an account of villagers and villages and their semiautonomous existence, with leaders appointed from within the community, their involvement in local markets, and their relative security with only warfare interfering with community survival. Thai communities were semiautonomous since villagers owed corvée service to lords for up to four months a year. In the final section, Benedict discussed European contact and modernization. This section included a summary of recent history, trade with the West, and use of modern medicine and ended with an account of Thailand's declaration of war against the Allies.

In the second chapter, Benedict discussed Thai religion. Here she identified Thai Buddhism, belonging to the Southern or Hinayana form, as the state religion. Official ceremonies are Brahmanical, but "culturally the two [Brahmanism and Buddhism] are welded into what appears to all Thai who are not historians a consistent and homogenous whole" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 2:14). She provided a brief statistical summary of the number

of temples, monks, and temple residents. Ordination as a monk is not a lifetime commitment but rather more a *rite of passage* for men, who rarely stay in the order for life. Benedict briefly described an ordination festival and other Brahmanical festivals, such as the King's first plowing ceremony. She separated her discussion of animism from that of the Brahmanical/Buddhist practices. Animist practices are directed toward spirits of the dead, "*phi*," which is a rather narrow view of spirits in Thai life (see below).

The third and final chapter in this section concerned adult life. After a brief description of a Thai household and its members, Benedict discussed what constitutes adulthood: for men, it is ordination as a monk; for women, it is giving birth to a child and her postpartum lying by the fire. Marriage usually follows after a man spends a period of time as a monk, and Benedict provided a description of an upper-class wedding drawing on Chandruang's (1938) account. However, she recognized the differences in life goals for the upper class and the peasantry. Princes and civil servants wanted to improve their status positions and were dependent on royal favors that could be withdrawn; thus, they suffered from status anxiety. Peasants, whose social positions rarely changed, did not. Rather, they could enjoy recognition in their communities, based on their reputations as good farmers, clever poets, singers in village competitions, and knowledgeable men. Men flew kites competitively and enjoyed gambling:

> The Thai certainly do not conceive of life as a round of duties and responsibilities. They accept work and make it as gay as possible; when it is done they are free to take their leisure. They have no cultural inventions of self-castigation and many of self-indulgence and merriment. (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 24)

This description provided the background for Benedict's second, more analytical section, where she discussed the child and what she described as "Some Thai Characteristics." The discussion of childhood focused on early independence training and the general lack of gender distinctions in child-rearing practices. Benedict emphasized the importance of early childhood experiences for the formation of adult character. Thus, she reported information on child care and nursing and how both parents and older siblings enjoy the child. Children are carried straddled on the hip, and this position "never admits of the baby's passive relaxation to every movement of its carrier's body, as shawl carrying" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 27). Nursing is on demand, and this "lays the basis for his life-time lack of food anxiety" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 28).[3] Children's names are not sex specific, and there is little gender differentiation in child care. Social distinctions are

based on age and generation rather than gender, and this generational chasm is "unbridgeable, even in fantasy" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 29). I interpret Benedict's words as an indirect reference to the Oedipus complex and as a critique of the universalization of psychoanalytic concepts.

Benedict saw a connection between childhood independence training and Thai Buddhist practices. Thailand is often characterized as a Buddhist nation, and Thai behavior is explained in Buddhist terms.[4] However, Benedict does not make this claim on abstract doctrinal grounds, but rather it follows from "their [the Thai's] selection among Buddhist teachings . . . that what a person is depends on himself alone" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 28). This is a sophisticated recognition that Thai Buddhism is localized; particular aspects of Buddhist practices that fit with Thai culture are selected and emphasized.

The difference between hierarchical but caring relationships within the household and the more egalitarian but insecure relationships outside the household is made clear around three or four years of age, when a child starts playing with peers. These relationships are fun but unreliable. Benedict used the Thai term to characterize these as "play friends," *len puen*, and contrasts them with "die friend," friends who would die for you. These latter are rare, while most friends are those who will eat with you—if you are paying—and desert you if it is in their interest to do so. Since these behaviors are learned at an early age in play groups, there is little hostility when these behaviors emerge:

> Everybody knows the rules and what to expect, and the dolt—the one who got cheated—always draws a laugh. That is, laughter is directed toward the cheated, not condemnation—even moral condemnation—toward the cheater. The later has a "cool heart," sangfroid, which is one of the most admired Thai assets. (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 30)

In the final chapter, Benedict drew on the grounding of Thai behavior in childhood and child-rearing practices to discuss "Some Thai Characteristics," as she titled her last chapter. Benedict's choice of topics in this chapter acknowledged that her study was limited by the materials at hand and that informant interviews could not provide complete information. She focused on three aspects of Thai character: the enjoyment of life, the cool heart, and male dominance.

Thai enjoy life: social interaction, festivals, and religious ceremonies are all to be enjoyed. Anger is discouraged since it is seen as the prime disturber of the good life. However, according to Benedict, "this didactic counseling against anger goes with and not against the Thai grain, Siamese

by nature, are a quiet people" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 37). They tend to be nonviolent, even when drinking (Benedict [1946b] 1952: 37–38).

While Benedict had earlier described the localization of Buddhist practices to fit Thai character in a neutral tone, here she stressed how Thai practices contradict the canonical forms of Buddhism:

> Central in Gautama's [Buddha's] teaching was the doctrine that sorrow attends existence and that only from the extinction of desire can come cessation of sorrow. But the Thai have an indestructible conviction that existence is good. (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 34)

Further, "Like the Four Noble Truths about suffering and the extinction of desire, the Five Great Commandments of the Buddha have been culturally interpreted" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 34).[5] The first precept is to not destroy life. Benedict commented that "the Thai have had to exercise their facility in rationalizing this unpleasant rule for they have remained a nation of fishermen eating fish daily" (Benedict [1946b] 1952: 34–35). Similarly, concerning the second precept to not take what does not belong to you, Benedict noted that "there is plenty of theft in Thailand" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 35). Rather than emphasizing the precepts, Thai highlight merit making. Merit making does not mean doing good in general or getting along with one's neighbors:

> [T]hose merit-making acts which feature in everyone's calculations are, rather, giving food to the monks each morning, being a monk, plastering a few square inches of gold leaf on a Buddha . . . and innumerable other observances. (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 36)

This enjoyment of life is complemented by the idea of the cool heart, which means not being overly concerned about responsibility or trouble. Benedict illustrated this coolness with stories from Reginald LeMay's (1930) collection of folktales, where the morals are often expressed as it is better to go along with what other people believe since "even if you speak the truth, no advantage will come of it either to the speaker or the listeners if you are speaking against their convictions" (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 34). Having a cool heart is to go along with this situation and/or to use it to your advantage or to help people. Benedict summed up her discussion as follows:

> In situations where hierarchical status is well established, the Thai have clear and unresented patterns of behavior; where they are not, the virtues of the "cool heart" are the code provided. One is

> "cool," too, in hierarchical relations—using flattery, allowing the superior to win the game, etc. When not placed in a clear hierarchical position—one lives by one's wits and counts it as virtue to be as inventive as possible. (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 40)

Finally, Benedict discussed gender relationships in Thailand. She concluded that men are dominant, based on her analyses of folktales, proverbs, didactic stories, and games:

> The man's attitude toward the relations of the sexes is given symbolic elaboration in the national game of kite flying—which is played exclusively by men. . . . It is a "courtship" of a female kite and a male kite. The female kite is a four-sided diamond shape and goes up with a lilting motion . . . the man who flies the female kite stays in one part of the field. And his kite is not allowed to cruise. Presently another kite-flyer from another end of the field sends up his male kite. This is a much heavier kite, perhaps six times as big, in the shape of a five pointed star. It ascends higher than the female kite and cruises towards the female to "capture" it. . . . The game well symbolizes the relation of men and women. Men are not doubtful of their masculinity—which is here symbolized in the kite's size, shape, and activity . . . the object of the game is to keep a "wife" within their orbit and both male and female "flying" . . . but attacking her too closely—perhaps it would be fair to say dominating her, or possessing her, in the European sense—would mean, in the kite game, falling to the ground and being defeated. (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 43)

Benedict concluded that

> [the] psychic security which makes possible Thai cheerfulness, easy conviviality, and non-violence is grounded in a long and remarkable permissive infancy during which no disciplines are imposed either in feeding or sleep routines or in toilet training, and no attention at all paid to infantile erections or to the child's playing with his genitals. (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 44)

Mead (1974) suggested in her biography that Benedict was not interested in psychoanalytical approaches to explaining cultural behaviors. Yet Benedict's emphasis on early childhood experiences, especially on feeding

and toilet training, placed her Thai analysis firmly in psychological approaches, in which early childhood experiences shape the psychological and, hence, behavioral aspects of cultures. Indeed, Benedict's emphasis on nursing and toilet training paralleled Mead's ([1935] 1963: 40–60) discussion in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (see Sullivan 2009).

## Benedict's Ethnography and Analysis

I have quoted extensively from Benedict because her own words illustrate the material she used and the analysis she made of those materials. Drawing on folklore and games, Benedict took the themes she had discovered and expanded on them to develop conclusions about cultural patterns of behavior.

Benedict relied on previously published works. Acknowledging E. Young's *The Kingdom of the Yellow Robe* (1898), Graham's *Siam* (1924), LeMay's *Siamese Tales Old and New* (1930), Landon's *Siam in Transition* (1939), Virginia Thompson's *Thailand: The New Siam* (1939), and Chandruang's *My Boyhood in Siam* (1938), Benedict described the latter as "entirely different in character" from other works cited (Benedict [1946b] 1952, ii). The bibliography of *Thai Culture and Behavior* lists thirty-four sources. In addition, Benedict and her assistants interviewed Thai living in the United States.[6] These interviews provided information on child rearing and relationships between men and women (Benedict [1946b] 1952, iii).

Benedict's view of Thai society was limited by sources available to her, some of which have since been discredited, most notably Anna Leonowens's *The English Governess in the Siamese Court* (1874). Other texts were used uncritically, such as Earnest Young's (1898) translations of the texts used for the top-knot cutting ceremony to describe expectations and experiences of young children. One of Benedict's informants cautioned her about relying on Young's accounts since the informant found Young's discussion of kite flying inaccurate (Meesook 1943). Chandruang's (1938) autobiography is an interesting and useful account of growing up in Siam in the 1920s, during the latter part of the absolute monarchy.[7] The author's father was a provincial governor. Consequently, Chandruang's own experiences are of growing up in an elite setting and should not be generalized to the majority of the population. Nonetheless, these criticisms are after the fact, and Benedict used what was available.

The topic of animism constitutes the ethnographically weakest part of Benedict's discussion. While spirits are important, Benedict emphasized the centrality of ancestral spirits and spirits of the dead. Thai do not, in general, propitiate spirits of the dead or make offerings to ancestral spirits.

Most spirits of the dead are dangerous, especially those that result from accidental or violent deaths and deaths in childbirth.[8] The exception to this is the founder of a community who, after death, often becomes the guardian spirit of the community (Tannenbaum and Kammerer 2003). Rather than spirits of the dead, the important spirits are cadastral spirits, that is, spirit owners of house sites as well as those associated with fields and natural objects (L. Hanks 1972; Sharp and Hanks 1978; Tambiah 1970; Tannenbaum 1995; Textor 1960). Benedict's discussion of the spirits of the dead comes from an informant who was Sino-Thai; his account reflects Chinese rather than Thai cultural practices (Prathoomratha n.d.).[9]

Benedict's view also reflected the meager information about spirits in the literature. Earlier writers about Thailand did not have a clear understanding of the role of spirits and their relationship with Buddhist and other practices. Benedict's informants may have either downplayed the role of spirits and animist practices, fearing that they might be considered superstitious, or perhaps they practiced a reformed and rationalized Buddhism that did not include animist practices.

The analytical distinction between Buddhist and animist practices remains important and largely unquestioned in the anthropology of Thailand. Benedict's distinction is a reflection of the sources she used. The contrast between canonical Theravada Buddhist ideology and Thai behavior is relatively standard in earlier travelers' accounts; nonetheless, one could make similar negative comparisons between the Christian Ten Commandments and the behavior of Christians.

## Reception of *Thai Culture and Behavior*

Benedict's monograph did not receive much attention when it was first published, nor did it receive much discussion in historians' biographies of Benedict.

### *Early Reactions*

The Institute for Intercultural Studies mimeograph version of *Thai Culture and Behavior* apparently circulated within Benedict's anthropological circle. Alfred Kroeber (1948: 589–91) discussed it in his revised introductory text in the section on "empirical descriptions of national characters" in chapter 15 on cultural psychology. Kroeber compared and contrasted Gorer's (1943) study of Burmese personality with Benedict's Thai study.[10] Thai and Burmese cultures are similar in that women are in charge of the family budget and men are seen as more patient. However, they differ significantly in modal personalities: "the Burmese are relatively touchy, proud,

theatrical, and violent; the Siamese relaxed, amiable, easy in their dignity, and serene" (Kroeber 1948, 590).

Benedict had made a similar comparison in her personality and culture course that she taught in 1946–1947 (Young 2005: 236–39). Benedict saw basic similarities in cultural traits and aspects of culture that had diffused into both areas, but Burmese and Thai interpretations are totally different. For the Burmese, there is a high level of violence: men drink until insensible, and violence is associated with drinking; gambling is heavy and could result in violence; and men are insecure. For the Thai (Siamese), there is little violence: drinking makes men amiable, men gamble but not until they lose everything, and, unlike the Burmese, Thai men are secure and responsible (Young 2005: 236–37). Although she does not say so, Benedict also drew on Gorer's study of Burmese personality, which she is reported to have finished (Caffrey 1989, 269; Young 2005, 103).

Much more was known about Burma because of the British conquest and colonization of Burma. By contrast, little was known about Thailand or its culture, history, and social relations; because Thailand was never directly colonized, there were no colonial scholars. Benedict was somewhat cautious in her statements: "'in Siam there is a low rate of criminality, no record of fiestas culminating in violent brawls and no concern with criminality'" (quoted in Young 2005, 236). These contrasts between Thai and Burmese character no longer ring true as more information about Thailand has become available. Thailand, like Burma, had its history of rebellions at both elite and local levels—some of them in reaction to the centralization of power that paralleled those in colonial countries (Chatthip 1984; Keyes 1977; Tanabe 1984). And there is a similar high level of violence associated with drinking and festivals.

Benedict's discussion of male dominance was republished in *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Mead and Metraux 1953; Benedict 1953b: 382–86). However, Benedict's discussion received little attention in reviews of the volume (Cahnman 1954; DuBois 1954; Sebeok 1954; Sirjarmaki 1954; Vidich 1954; Wallace 1954).

After Benedict's *Thai Culture and Behavior* was published as a Cornell Southeast Asia Program data paper in 1952, it was reviewed in the *Far Eastern Quarterly.* However, the reviewer simply quoted the preface to the data paper itself (P. H. C. 1954). In 1955–1956, the Human Area Relations Files coded *Thai Culture and Behavior* for inclusion in the Thai Culture File (AO1) in its fourth installment. In 2000, only the Central Thai files (AO7) had been converted to electronic form. Benedict's study was not included since its scope was broader than central Thailand, and the rest of the Thai files have yet to be converted.

## Thai Culture and Behavior in Benedict's Biographies

Benedict has been the subject of a number of biographies, starting with Mead's *An Anthropologist at Work* (1959) and, most recently, Virginia Young's *Ruth Benedict* (2005). Benedict's wartime studies have not received much attention, and, because Benedict lost interest in Thailand after World War II, her study of Thailand has received even less scholarly attention.

Mead gave it a brief sentence in her collection of Benedict's work, stating that after her work on Romania, Benedict worked on Thailand (Mead 1959, 353). Mead's (1974: 58–59) biography of Benedict also mentions that the study of Thailand came after her Romanian work. Here Mead discussed Benedict's methods for studying culture at a distance.

Margaret Caffrey's biography devotes a chapter to the war years and discusses Benedict's Thai study in this context. Research in the Office of War Information provided the opportunity for Benedict to show that anthropological analyses could have useful policy implications (Caffrey 1989, 318). The Thai study is described in some detail because it was the first that Benedict had completed; Caffrey (1989, 320) discusses Benedict's other unpublished studies in a single paragraph.

Caffrey states that the objective of Benedict's report was to provide "background material to plan a program of psychological warfare on the Thai as allies of the Japanese, and for reconstruction after the war" (Caffrey 1989, 319). Caffrey (1989, 319) then provides a two-paragraph summary of the work, arguing that Benedict had moved beyond characterizing cultures in single overarching patterns. Caffrey's interpretation fits with Mead's (1974, 59) comment about methods for describing "national character in complex, highly literate cultures," which suggests that Benedict and others working on national character recognized cultural variations. Alternatively, Benedict's ([1946b] 1952: 34–44) label of these themes as "some Thai characteristics" suggests that she did not have enough information to synthesize an overarching pattern.

Virginia Young (2005: 103–13) considers Benedict's wartime studies of Thailand, Romania, Holland, and Japan as a whole, analyzing them together for insights into Benedict's work. Young (2005, 105) argues, *contra* Caffrey, that Benedict continued to find a characteristic pattern, albeit a more complex one, that reflected the culture's history as well as class-based difference. Benedict's analysis of Thailand reflected the complexities of Thailand's history and the class differences.

Judith Modell's biography of Benedict has two rather admiring paragraphs about *Thai Culture and Behavior.* Modell suggests that the "result resembled her best anthropological writings" and that Benedict was "charmed by the Siamese much as she had been by the Zunis" (1984, 270).

Modell's comment that Benedict showed her "usual awe at a distinctive, unfamiliar culture—especially one that showed such remarkable consistency" (1984, 270), suggests agreement with Young's analyses of Benedict's work.

Finally, Benedict's discussion of gender in Thailand is briefly mentioned in Lois Banner's (2003: 410, 421–22) book on Mead's and Benedict's circle.

From these biographers' perspectives, *Thai Culture and Behavior* is not one of Benedict's major works but simply one of the studies she wrote for the Office of War Information. Young is the only historian to take Benedict's monograph seriously, showing how it fits with the rest of her wartime studies. There is little controversy about *Thai Culture and Behavior*, except whether this study preceded or followed Benedict's report on Romania (Caffrey 1989, 319, 393 n. 33; Mead 1974: 58–59; Young 2005, 193). Benedict did not pursue the study of Thailand after the war. Rather, she finished her analysis of the Japanese, published as *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Benedict [1946a] 1989), and later turned her attention to Eastern Europe (Benedict 1949, 1953a).

## Ruth Benedict's Legacy in Thai Studies

Benedict's essay marked the beginning of formal anthropological studies of Thailand. In this section, I discuss its place in the early academic analyses of Thailand, focusing on two subsequent studies: Embree's (1950) "Thailand—A Loosely Structured Social System" and the Cornell-Bennington Bang Chan studies that began in 1952 (Keyes 1992, 2). I then turn to the place of Benedict's work in the current anthropology of Thailand.

### *Embree's Loose Structure*

Wanting to trace Benedict's influence on later academic writings about Thailand, I read John F. Embree's essay, which is second in the time line of academic writings about Thailand.[11] He cited Benedict's essay as "the only anthropological analysis of Thai cultural materials" and listed other more impressionistic sources, such as travelers' reports, missionary accounts, and publications by people associated with the Thai government (Embree 1950, 3 n. 1]). Embree characterized Thai society as "loosely structured," as compared to rural Japan, where he previously had done fieldwork. Some of the contrast is a consequence of the differences between rural fieldwork

in Japan and urban Bangkok immediately after World War III. This characterization of Thailand as a loosely structured society became the defining problem for Thai anthropology. What did "loose structure" mean? And how was it to be explained (Dieter-Evers 1969)?

There was considerable bibliographic overlap between Embree and Benedict. For sources about Thailand published before 1943—the date of Benedict's study—both authors shared 75 percent (eight of twelve citations). This is not surprising, given the relative dearth of published materials about Thailand. Embree made a larger comparative argument about how Thai social organization differed from that of Japan and the rest of Southeast Asia, and he drew on many topics to show that Thai social structure was loosely organized. In the process, Embree (1950) discussed lack of discipline (pp. 4–5), Thai individualism and freedom from family obligations (pp. 5–7), the "looseness" indicated by improvisational versus memorized poetry games (pp. 7–8), unreliability (p. 8), the cultural admiration for successful liars (pp. 8–9), minding one's own business (p. 9), the importance of fun (pp. 12–13), and the high value on the cool heart (p. 7). These topics and associated citations to the literature parallel Benedict's *Thai Culture and Behavior*, but Embree does not, in fact, cite Benedict beyond the introductory footnote.

It is possible to use Benedict's citations to lead to many of the quotes that Embree used to support his own argument: diplomacy—Benedict (p. 10), Embree (p. 8); lying and Reginald LeMay's (1930) folktales—Benedict (pp. 35, 39), Embree (pp. 8–9); improvisational poetry—Benedict (p. 22), Embree (p. 7); fun—Benedict (pp. 34–38), Embree (p. 12); and cool-heartedness—Benedict (pp. 38–40), Embree (p. 9), although in the latter, Embree quoted a different source, while Benedict relied on LeMay's (1930) folktales.

I am intrigued by the similarities in content and sources, and, while Embree does not cite Benedict's work for anything substantive, I find these parallels suggestive. The two works have different origins and intentions. Benedict's work was primarily descriptive, attempting to characterize Thai social life, primarily as an aid for the Allies so that they could better understand and predict how the Thai were likely to behave in a war situation. Embree, on the other hand, sought to explain the pattern of behavior he perceived. While Benedict looked for the explanation in child-rearing practices and the ways in which these shape character, Embree saw the connection between social organization and individual behavior. However, both authors were concerned with Thai character and the characterization of Thai outlooks on life rather than analyzing any particular cultural domain.

Benedict's wartime study and Embree's postwar essay provided the academic foundation for Thai studies. However, Embree's focus on loosely structured social systems rather than Benedict's interest in national character defined the central concern in post–World War II studies of Thailand. Embree's analysis is important now as part of the history of anthropology of Thailand; his theoretical argument is no longer taken seriously, and no one characterizes Thailand as a loosely structured society.

*Benedict and the Anthropology of Bang Chan*

Benedict's work was cited in early publications of the Cornell Bang Chan project and then fell into relative obscurity. The Cornell-Bennington Bang Chan project, established in 1952, was part of a larger comparative research program on the problems of change and modernization among tribal and peasant societies (Leighton 1952, 9).[12] The three senior researchers for Thailand were Lauriston Sharp, Lucien Hanks, and Jane Hanks. While Sharp did not publish much on Thailand (Sharp and Hanks 1978), Jane Hanks and Lucien Hanks published extensively on Bang Chan.[13] They were interested in both psychological anthropology and national character; Jane Hanks had studied with Ruth Benedict; Lucien Hanks, Jane Hanks's husband, trained as a psychologist.

The Bang Chan project began when Benedict's health was failing; Jane Hanks reported conversations with Benedict about the Bang Chan project, and, while they were aware of Benedict's wartime study, they did not rely on it (J. Hanks, pers. comm., January 26, 2005). While citations to Benedict's monograph appeared in some of the earlier works about Bang Chan, most were citations that acknowledged *Thai Culture and Behavior* but omitted substantive discussion of its contents or issues.

The most extensive references to Benedict's work in the literature on Bang Chan occurred in Herbert Phillips's (1966) *Thai Peasant Personality*. Analytically, he focused on Embree's loose structure argument; nonetheless, Phillips' topical concern with culture and personality made Benedict's work relevant. Because he was part of the Bang Chan project, Phillips had access to the observations and analyses of other researchers to provide the context and interpretative material; thus, he could focus on a single topic. And, unlike Benedict, he was able to do ethnographic fieldwork. Phillips cited her discussion of patterns of respect in describing Thai family life and social organization and later, briefly, in his section on observations of Thai behavior drawn for the literature on Thailand (Phillips 1966:33, 39–95). Phillips characterized Benedict's study as

> [w]ritten in the style of a 'national character' study, the essay is essentially a psychological analysis of semi-ethnographic materials;

> that is, Benedict attempted to identify and analyze whatever aspects of the psychological functioning of the Thai she could discover *reflected* in their social institutions and cultural products. (Phillips 1966, 48, emphasis in original)

Although Phillips rarely cited Benedict, his work is in many ways a systematic investigation and confirmation of the themes and characteristics that Benedict discussed. In his analysis of the naturalistic observation of Thai personality, Phillips (1966: 39–95) discussed, for example, the pleasures of social contact, the importance of social play and the place of fun (*sanuk*) within it, politeness as a social cosmetic, and the dynamics of loose structure. These topics parallel Benedict's discussions of politeness, enjoyment of life, and cool-heartedness. In the sentence completion test that Phillips developed from naturalistic observations, he addressed a constellation of issues concerning authority, dependency, relationships with others, and aggression (Phillips 1966: 143–99). In his analysis of the sentences relating to authority, Phillips (1966, 155) stated,

> The data clearly confirm the generally recognized willingness of villagers to respond positively and undefiantly to authority figures. Their response is accompanied by feelings of esteem, admiration, and often diffidence to authority figures. However, their behavioral and emotional responses to authority are not absolute: when the authority is wrong, they are most likely to ignore him. They do this, however, without in any way challenging the prerogatives of his authority or pointing to his error.

His findings recall Benedict's discussion of hierarchy and authority, summarized earlier in this paper.

The differences between Benedict's and Phillips's analyses lie in methodology and fieldwork as opposed to interviews and analyses of literature, but also in Phillip's self-conscious use of the sentence completion test to develop a more valid and reliable measure of personality. His work straddles the interest in culture and personality and the concern for an explicit methodology that could strengthen the scientific rigor of anthropological analyses.

### *Benedict after Bang Chan*

Ruth Benedict initiated discussion of Thai gender and family roles. Although these topics are still discussed in the anthropology of Thailand, here, too,

her work is seldom cited. Benedict characterized Thai society as male dominated. The subsequent essay that focused on gender in Thailand was that of Lucien Hanks and Jane Hanks (1963), who described the relations between men and women as equal. Their essay is descriptive, based on their fieldwork and experiences in Thailand, and there are no citations to any other literature about gender or Thailand. Because Hanks and Hanks drew on their fieldwork rather than on the sorts of literature that Benedict used, their conclusion about gender equality contradicted Benedict's conclusion about male dominance. Nonetheless, both Lucien and Jane Hanks seemed unaware that Benedict had written about Thai gender. This supports Jane Hanks's statement that they did not pay much attention to the Benedict piece (J. Hanks, pers. comm., 26 January 2005).

In the 1980s, the question of Thai gender relations became a hot topic, as it did elsewhere in anthropology. The debate about Thai gender concerned male dominance and the place of Buddhism as a cause and explanation (Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1982, 1984; J. Van Esterik 1982; P. Van Esterik 1982a, 1982b). Thomas Kirsch (1982, 21) cited both Benedict's discussion of familial threats to reject children (1982, 20) and her reference to a Chinese source that women dominate business. Later works, however, do not cite *Thai Culture and Behavior* except, occasionally, to acknowledge that Benedict initially addressed this topic (Muecke 1992; Tannenbaum 1999).

Life cycle ceremonies that mark important rites of passage are also connected to gender roles, and Benedict discussed what makes a person adult. For men, it is their ordination as a monk, however temporally; for women, it is the "lying-by-the–fire" after giving birth, common throughout Southeast Asia. While the practice is relatively widespread in Thailand, it appears to be limited to the central Thai (Siamese) as a rite of passage to adult womanhood. Again, there are brief discussions of lying-by-the-fire where it is relevant (Attagara 1968, 105; Ayabe 1973; J. Hanks 1963; Keyes 1984) but with no references to Benedict. These ethnographic observations confirm Benedict's account of the importance of lying-by-the-fire. Nonetheless, these more recent authors do not cite Benedict's observations about this practice in her *Thai Culture and Behavior*.

For anthropologists of Thailand, Benedict's monograph remains an obscure source, no longer available in the Human Relations Area Files and long out of print as a Cornell Data paper. Keyes's (1978) review essay on the ethnography of Thailand devotes a paragraph to *Thai Culture and Behavior* in his section on ethnography before World War II (1978, 5). Later, he described it as "the first attempt to identify fundamental premises upon which present-day Thai social life are based" and goes on to say that

"it has remained suggestive for subsequent students of Thai society and culture" while noting that Embree's essay has been more influential (Keyes 1978, 21). Keyes (1978, 38, 41, 43) annotated those sources he judged most significant and included both Benedict and Embree, among others.

## Conclusions: Ruth Benedict and the Study of Thai Culture

When I started this paper, I expected to find many citations to Benedict's work and ended up somewhat surprised at the few references to it. John F. Embree rather than Ruth Benedict served to define the topics and issues of concern for the anthropological study of Thailand. While the Cornell Southeast Asia Program published *Thai Culture and Behavior*, neither it nor Benedict's analytical perspective played much of a role in the study of Bang Chan. Yet when I reread Benedict's work, much of its content was familiar to me, based on what I had read about and seen in Thailand.

Some of Benedict's topics, such as the importance of fun (*sanuk*), have fallen out of favor in contemporary discussions of Thai character and attitudes toward life. It did appear in Phillips's (1966) analysis of Bang Chan as well as some other works.[14] The most extensive discussion of fun occurs in Mulder's (1978) analysis of Thai values and interactions, a work that strongly resembles the earlier national character studies. Tom Kirsch was interested in exploring what happened to "*sanuk*" in the analyses of Thailand but passed away before he could do so.

Other elements of Benedict's analysis made sense because she accurately presented the ethnographic reality of central Thai life. This is remarkable, given the limits of her sources. Benedict's work is not cited to support modern ethnographic observations, a consequence of its relative obscurity, its "old-fashioned" analytical style, and the lack of fieldwork-based research.

The relationships among culture and personality, initially sketched by Benedict for Thailand, drew on the complex connections among ethos, values, child-rearing practices, personality, and cultural structures. Anthropologists writing about Thailand continue to reflect this theoretical perspective, perhaps unknowingly, as it is reflected and refracted through the works on Bang Chan and taught by anthropologists who did their first fieldwork there. Because Benedict synthesized much of the early literature, I suspect that her work became general knowledge for those working in Thailand and, as such, not needing citations.

The analysis of Thailand as a Buddhist nation has its roots in the early works that Benedict drew on for her analysis. The analytic split between

practices that can be justified in canonical Buddhist terms and other practices, often characterized as animist, became a defining issue in the analyses of religion in Thailand. While it is true that most Thai are Theravada Buddhists, world religions are always transformed and localized. Buddhist practices in Thailand reflect local political, social, and cultural practices, something that Benedict recognized in her discussion of childhood independence training and the selection among Buddhist teachings that fit with it (Benedict [1946b] 1952, 28). Nonetheless, an uncritical and canonical view of Buddhism and its role in Thai social life persists in most academic writings about Thailand. Benedict, to some degree the Bang Chan researchers, and more recent analysts continue to accept the Thai elite perspective on Thai society, beliefs, and religious practices. Anderson's (1978) critique of these practices remains relevant.

I first found Ruth Benedict's study when I was a graduate student working in the Human Relations Area Files at the University of Iowa. This was 1975, and I was just beginning to study Thailand. I enjoyed reading Benedict's essay for its historical significance, both as the earliest anthropological study of Thailand as well as its connection to Benedict's work and life and the history of American anthropology. Benedict's *Thai Culture and Behavior* deserves its place in both histories.

## NOTES

I thank Dr. Mary Catherine Bateson, president of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., for permission to cite from the Ruth Fulton Benedict Papers at the Vassar College Library, Special Collections. I also thank Dean Rogers, special collections assistant at the Vassar College Library, for helping me with my first excursion into archival research. I thank Gerald Sullivan for luring me into this project and Sharon W. Tiffany for her editorial suggestions.

1. For further discussion of Benedict's methods, see Schachter (this volume).

2. All page references to "Thai Culture and Behavior: An Unpublished War-time Study Dated September, 1943," are to the Cornell Data Paper, reprinted in 1952.

3. See Sullivan (this volume) for a discussion of the role of child nursing and the formation of personality.

4. This is standard in travel as well as academic literatures. See Keyes (1984, 1987), Kirsch (1982, 1984), and P. Van Esterik (1982a, 1982b). For a critique of this approach, see Tannenbaum (1999).

5. These are actually not commandments in the Christian sense of the Ten Commandments. They were characterized in these terms by the authors Benedict referenced and, I suspect, by her informants seeking a common terminology.

6. Benedict does not specify how many Thai informants she or her colleagues interviewed. Benedict's office was in Washington, D.C., as was the Thai embassy, and I am guessing that some of the Thai were from the embassy. At least one informant, Amporn Meesok, was from the Cambridge, Massachusetts, area.

7. The absolute monarchy ended in 1932.

8. For discussions of these spirits, see Kirsch (1973, 14), Spiro (1967, 51 n. 19), and Condominas (1977: 97–118).

9. I drew the conclusion that Prathoomratha was Sino-Thai, because, according to Benedict ([1946b] 1952, 2), "His soccer team had gone down the [Malay] peninsula as representing the Chinese in Thailand [in soccer]." Since the only dated interview is 1943, I am guessing that the interviews with Prathoomratha were around that time.

10. Gorer's *Burmese Personality* (1943) is even more obscure than Benedict's ([1946b] 1952) study of Thailand. It seems to have disappeared completely from the scholarly horizon. Lucien Hanks (1949, n. 2) mentions Gorer's work in a footnote in his 1949 publication on Burmese personality, stating, "I have been unable to restudy his insights, not having access to a copy of his 'Burmese Personality' since I first read it in 1944 prior to embarking for Burma." Kroeber's access to Gorer's report also suggests that the OWI studies themselves were available to anthropologists of the time such as Kroeber, as well as to people working in the Office of Strategic Services, as Lucien Hanks did.

11. Embree ([1950] 1969, 3) worked in the American embassy in Thailand. It is not clear for how long; his first footnote simply states that "in 1947 the author was United States cultural officer in Bangkok and later in Saigon, French Indochina." His essay is based on his impressions during this time. Embree died in December 1950 in an automobile accident. At the time, he was a professor at Yale and director of the Yale Southeast Area Studies Program.

12. The other areas were India, the American Southwest, and Peru. The project in Vicos, Peru, is the best known.

13. For a bibliography of their work, see *Crossroads* (1992: 46–64).

14. A search of the Thai file (AO7) in the electronic Human Relations Area Files turned up eleven of the twenty-seven total sources that used the word "fun" or two different standard transliterations of the Thai terms *sanuk* or *sanug*. Nine of the eleven sources were published before 1980. The Thai file, updated in 2000, was accessed May 30, 2005.

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