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# Thai Tradition Cake Culture

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## Abstract

**The paper is an attempt to explore various aspects of Thai traditional cake culture in order to understand the characteristics of Thai tradition cakes and their significance in Thai cultural life. The study will focus on cake culture in both folk culture and court culture as well as observe the changes of this culture in the present time of globalization.**

In the text book on Thai Khanom, Kobkhaew Natpinit sums up the characteristic of Thai traditional 'Khanom' as follows:

1. Thai traditional (cake) Khanom are mostly made from rice, sugar and coconut.
2. The tastes of Thai Khanom are sweet and rich in coconut cream with a little bit of salty taste to enhance the flavour of coconut.
3. The colour and scents of Thai Khanom are naturally fragrant.

Fresh fragrant flowers are used to add pleasing fragrance and colour to Thai Khanom.

## The Meaning of the word 'Khanom' (Cake) in Thai

The word for 'cake' or sweet in Thai is Khanom. It is believed that the word 'Khanom' came from 'Khao Nom.' Khao in Thai means 'rice' and Nom means 'sweet.' So 'Khanom' actually means 'sweet rice.'

The oldest record of the appearance of the word 'Khanom' is in **Triphum Phra Ruang** or **Traibhumi-katha**, a Buddhist cosmology of Sukhothai period. The story is about a great king who would like to show the great merits of his queen over all the concubines in the palace. As the queen is most loved by the King and all the concubines are so jealous of her, the king has to show the whole court that it is the queen who has most merit among them.

In order to prove this, the king used 'Khanom Tom', a kind of traditional Thai cake, made from rice flour, coconut and sugar in a round shape like a dumpling, and put his precious ring inside.

The text reads:

When the concubines who had once been King Dharmasoka's favourites saw the King's great love for Lady Asandhimitta, they became jealous and talked maliciously to one another as follows:

"Our Master must think that Asandhimitta is the only woman in this world. No other woman ever occupies his mind. That is the way he thinks! He never sees us with both his eyes!"

Their jealous remarks reached King Dharmasoka's ears. The King reflected thus: "What these women have said shows them to be quite ignorant. They have spoken ill and maligned a lady of great merit. What lady can compare with the charismatic Lady Asandhimitta? They do not realize her great merit. Because they are so ignorant, I will have to make these women aware of the great merit of Asandhimitta."

One day, the king ordered 16,000 sweet rice dumplings made. When they were brought to him, he took off his ring and inserted it in one of the dumplings. He placed the dumpling with his ring on the top of the others then he called all his 16,000 concubines to assemble, and spoke to them as follows: 'Ladies, of all the sweet rice dumplings in this gold container, should any one please you, take it. Hold it in your hand. After you all have taken from the 16,000 dumplings there will be just one left. I will give the last dumpling to Asandhimitta. In one of these 16,000 dumplings I have put a ring taken from my finger, and made a wish that the lady who has the greatest merit shall take the dumpling with the ring. Each of you may now make your wish and choose one dumpling from the gold container.'

Then all 16,000 wives picked the dumplings of their choice from the gold container, but none could take the dumpling with the ring. This dumpling remained in the gold container. The King then bid the lady Asandhimitta to take it. She rose and walked gracefully to the gold container, picked up the dumplings and held it in her hand. The King then spoke to his ladies as follows: "O ladies, each of you now has a dumpling in your hand. Break it open. Whoever of you has my ring, bring it to me so that I will know who is the meritorious one."

At once, all 16,000 concubines broke open the dumplings in their hands. But none of them had the ring. Then, the King took the dumpling from the hand of the lady Asandhimitta and, bidding all the woman to look, broke it open. He took the ring from the dumpling before their very eyes.

The king, then addressed the assembly as follows: "the Lady Asandhimitta is more meritorious than you all. You did not know that she had merit accumulated from previous lives, so you criticized me for loving her. That is why I have to demonstrate her merit."<sup>1)</sup>

The story quoted above is an important evidence of the existence of 'Khanom' in the kingdom of Sukhothai which was the first capital of Thai history. Secondly, it illustrates the most traditional characteristic of Thai 'Khanom,' the main ingredients of which are rice flour, sugar and coconut which are used in making 'Khanom Tom.' Thirdly, the story illustrates the relationship between Thai cake culture and Buddhist philosophy.

The story about proving the merit of the queen so that she would be accepted and respected reflects the most traditional belief in Thai Buddhism. One of the most important aspect of Thai traditional cake culture is that 'cake' or 'Khanom' is mostly created for the purpose of celebrating Buddhist festivals or giving as offerings to Buddhist monks in order to gain merits.

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1) King Lithai, TraiBhumikatha, Bangkok, 1985

## Traditional Khanom and Buddhist Festivals

As a Buddhist society and mainly agricultural society, Thai society has a 'cake' culture that highly involves these two aspects.

Thai 'Khanom' is not only a kind of sweet or food but rather a 'spiritual' gift between a donor and a recipient. 'Khanom' is a must when one is offering food to Buddhist monks. As offering food to monks are occasions for making merit, the Khanom are particularly refined and beautiful with auspicious names.

One of the 'auspicious' names of Khanom is the word 'Thong' meaning 'gold.' These sweets are made from egg yolk and sugar and flour and have a 'golden' colour. It is believed that these 'Thong' sweets are the influence of the Portuguese cuisine from the Ayudhya period, and since then they have become a sweet menu of 'prestige' for all auspicious occasions of making merit both in the folk culture and court culture.

Apart from offering food to the monks, there are sweets made for making merits during the Buddhist rainy retreat from mid July to mid October each year. These sweets include fruits glacée of various kinds as rainy season is a season of fruits.

At the end of Buddhist lent, there is a festival of *Tak Bat The Wo* when all the Buddhists will make special sweets with sticky rice wrapped in different kinds of leaves according to the areas. The Khanom is called 'Khao Tom Pat' or 'Khao Tom Mat' and will be offered in this important Buddhist festival.

The ordination of monks is another important occasion for making various kinds of auspicious Khanom because this ceremony is one of the most religiously joyous moments for the parents and relatives of the man who is going to enter the monkhood. This is one of the religious ceremonies where one can get abundance of merits.

Apart from Buddhist ceremonies, Thai traditional Khanom is an important element in the ceremony of engagement and wedding. Various kinds of Khanom are given as 'auspicious' gifts from the bridegroom to his bride's family. The names of Khanom for these ceremonies are mainly suggestive of sweetness, charm, lasting love and stability.

Traditional Khanom is employed as an offering in the ceremony of paying respect to arts teacher (Wai Khru) especially for starting a classical music or dancing training. Similarly, traditional Khanom appears in the court ceremonies as an offering to divinities of Hinduism performed by royal Brahmins since Ayudhya period.

## Traditional Thai Khanom in Modern Culture

In the modern age of globalization, we cannot deny that there is a real threat of traditional culture disappearing or losing contact with current culture. Fortunately, Thai traditional Khanom does not face this threat thanks to the rising 'prestige' of Thai cuisine in the 'gourmet' world. Besides, there are attempts of preserving and modernizing traditional Khanom by various sectors in Thai society.

As a result, traditional Thai Khanom is enjoying a creative revival and is gaining more and more recognition internationally. Thus the 'new' generation of Thais, especially the middle class in big cities like Bangkok are giving more value to traditional Thai Khanom as an expression of 'civilized' patriotism. This

also enhances the inspirational change in the modern package and artistic presentation of Thai traditional cakes as modern products of luxury for festive seasons.

Thus we may be able to conclude that Thai traditional cake culture with its long history still has a bright future.

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