

## The Transition of Plumeria in Thai Society How Globalization and Consumerism Shape Local Customs

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**Abstract:** In the past, Plumeria was known as Lantom in Thailand. It was prohibited for the common man to grow this flower in their house because it was thought that it may bring sorrow and misfortune to family members. Hence, Lantom was restricted to planting in public places. Later, the associated meaning of sorrow was lessened as the artistic and aesthetic functions of Plumeria became prevalent. Plumeria was introduced into common places i.e. homes, gardens, spas, resorts, restaurants, coffee shops, and the flower's meaning significantly changed as well as it was renamed Lelawadee, which means beautiful branching pattern, in order to better align with its new functions. This paper is to explore a changing identity of Plumeria in Thai society based on the meaning, name, usage, and suitable planting places. The data regarding to Plumeria history and Plumeria in Thai people's everyday life which derived from the documents and an interview with landscape architecture was analyzed via the concepts of globalization and consumerism. The author found that the position of Plumeria was changed by global trends: a concept of landscape and an appreciation of leisure. As an object of consumption concerning its design and style, Plumeria displays signs of relaxation, chic, stylishness, Thainess, and Baliness.

**Keywords:** Plumeria; Globalization; Consumerism; aesthetic; landscape; leisure; design; style;

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### Introduction

Jean Chesneaux (1994) proposed an interesting argument about the effect of globalization in the article "Ten Questions on Globalization" in the Pacific Review journal that "globalization entails the domestication of customers, of their tastes, and of their customs". His argument lead the author to consider the effects of western cultural influence on economic and cultural phenomena in Thailand. To support Chesneaux's argument, there are numerous obvious exemplars in Thailand — the modern department store (e.g. Tesco Lotus), the iPhone fever trend, brand name addiction (e.g. Zara, Coach, La Mer, Ray-Ban), and the Starbucks coffee fever. However, there is a relatively uncommon phenomenon that has been mostly undiscovered and rarely studied by Thai scholars. This phenomenon is the cultural status of the flowering plant named Plumeria. An interesting issue is that not only did globalization through one of its components, international media, redefine the concept of acceptable consumerism which resulted in raising the number of Plumeria consumers, but it also had an effect on the identity of Plumeria.

In this paper, the author would like to introduce a research method, and then explain the theoretical framework — the effects of globalization and consumerism. After that, the history of Plumeria is revealed in order to give an overall picture of the cultural transition of Plumeria based on meaning, name, use, and suitable planting places. Lastly, the author will analyze the emerging situation of Plumeria regarding globalization and consumerism and will attempt to explain how both effects have played an important role in replacing the old customs associated with Plumeria and convincing Thai people to be familiar with and adopt the new meaning of Plumeria and use it in different ways.

### Study of Plumeria transition

This paper aims to explore the transformation of the Plumeria flowering-plant in Thai society in order to understand how globalization and its attached component, consumerism, acted upon and continues to influence Thai people in aspect of their tastes and their customs. The data was collected by two techniques:

1) review documents regarding the history and signifiers of Plumeria such as books, handbooks, magazines, and brochures, and 2) interview landscape architects about the standard of Plumeria use. To analyze the Plumeria situation in Thai society, the data was described and interpreted via Chesneaux's argument. The author would like to define 'customer' as Thai people who consume Plumeria in any manner of appreciation, use, purchase, taste, and 'customs' in terms of the values associated with Plumeria, or their beliefs about the cultural and spiritual aspects of Plumeria. To support Chesneaux's proposition, Water's notion on globalization, Baudrillard's concept of sign value, and Miles's concept of design and style of commodities were explored.

## Globalization

"A social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangement recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding." (Waters, 1995, p. 3)

The globalization process has exposed people to the contemporary world and changes to local cultures have been generally accepted as an unavoidable feature. Generally, the consequences of western influence are evident throughout three areas of social life (Ziauddin and Loon, 2007, p. 163). And, according to Waters (1995, p. 7-8), they are the economic, the polity and the culture. Of relevance to this research are (1) the economic: social arrangements for the production, exchange, distribution and consumption of goods and tangible services; and (3) the culture: social arrangement for the production, exchange and express of symbols that represent facts, affects, meanings, beliefs, preferences, tastes and values.

In this paper, the author employed the area of culture as a framework and focused on the notion of symbolic exchange. Waters (1995, p. 8-9) claimed that symbolic exchange applies in the area of globalized culture via the processes of oral communication, propaganda, advertisement, publication, exhibition, and spectacle. This kind of exchange is not attached to the specific space and time; therefore, symbols can be produced anywhere and at any time with relatively few resource constraints on their production and reproduction. Moreover, they can often claim universal significance.

Therefore, things that once made each culture unique are now being replaced or modified by things that are part of global trends, and not based on locality or individuality. By this, local culture can be customized and interfered with by a universal culture. The threats to cultural diversity and sovereignty may lead to the "end of individuality and the beginning of monoculture" (Kleeman et al., 2008, p. 343-344).

## Consumerism

"A way of life in which having, desiring, and wishing for more and more things have become significant preoccupations for late modern subjects whose identities are increasingly bound up with what and how they consume" (Smart, 2010, p. 5).

Consumerism, the consumption of increasingly more and more products to construct identity, is a significant part of the globalization process. Facilitated by communication methods, globalization assists the meaning embedded in a product to be transmitted from the global level to the local level. The most important symbol exchanged in this globalization trend is the sign value of commodities which is the core notion of consumerism.

Baudrillard (1968) argues that humans relate to commodities by four types of logic of consumption. Before the period of consumerism, there were three types of logic of consumption in the social and economic order. The first logic was called 'use value' which referred to consuming the objects according to their utility or practical operation. The second logic was the 'logic of exchange value' which meant that relations between humans were mediated with commodity or money. The third type was the logic of symbolic exchange value

where the object became a symbol and had a meaning or use for humans, or humans used that symbol to communicate meaning with others.

Subsequently, the logic of consumerism generated a new relation between human and object identified as the 'logic of sign value' or 'logic of difference', according to Baudrillard. This logic occurs when the status of the object transforms to a sign and humans use that sign to compare with another sign. The result of this logic is the differentiation between humans (Kaewthep and Hinviman, 2008, p. 464-465).

By this, the unique characteristics of the relationship between human and object consumption are not only dependent on the logic of use value, exchange value, and symbolic exchange value, but are also considerably dependent on the logic of sign value (Baudrillard, 1968 cited in Kaewthep and Hinviman, 2008, p. 463).

As a logic of sign value, a traditional symbolic object derives its meaning from an abstract and systematic relationship to all other sign-objects. (Baudrillard, 1968, p. 268). Because sign value becomes the main reason for consuming a product, the producer tries to create a product that conveys potentially a sign value; therefore, goods purchased by consumers are characterized by their hyper-reality, the image that is projected by the object and not just the function, which refers to the design and the style (Miles, 1998, p. 46).

Design has an important role in altering the way in which consumers see commodities. Designs can cast ideas about who we are and how we should behave into permanent and tangible forms. In this respect, design has an especially important role in the visualization of class position and status. The role of design is therefore not to meet human needs but to create and stimulate those needs in increasingly diverse ways. Style—the meaning people invest in design—is a new way of selling old product (Miles, 1998, p. 39-44; Forty, 1986 cited in Miles, 1998, p. 43; Barthel, 1989 cited in Miles, 1998, p. 39).

As a result, design and style have a power to raise an object's value and the price of commodities based on the meaning that customers consume from the object. Therefore, consumerism is a social and economic order that has a spiritual impact on consumers based on encouraging the human desire to purchase goods and services in ever greater amounts (Kaewthep and Hinviman, 2008, p. 462).

### **Plumeria in the Thai Context**

Plumeria (also known as Pagoda tree or Frangipani) is the tropical tree which consists of huge green leaves and bunches with groups of white, pink or yellow flowers. This plant has been introduced to Thai society from the time Thailand was known as Siam. It has been so stable and widespread in Thailand that Thai people have come to perceive it as a local plant. There is no evidence to show the exact period when Plumeria was imported to this land; however, numerous assumptions have arisen. One supposition proffers that one thousand-year old Plumeria found near PhaMuang<sup>1</sup>Pagoda reveals that it was imported into Thailand since at least the emergence of the Sukhothai Kingdom. However, there is conjecture based on evidence that shows Plumeria was brought into Thailand during the Ayutthaya Kingdom has three supporting points. Firstly, the branch of the Plumeria was the royal present of French ambassadors for Siam's king. Secondly, it appears that Plumeria arrived in Siam approximately in 1717, the middle of the Ayutthaya era, when Siam traded with the Spanish who brought Plumeria from its colony, the Philippines. Lastly, Plumeria entered Thailand in the latter part of the Ayutthaya era when some French were courtiers and grew it in the palace and temples. Yet another hypothesis is that the existence of Plumeria in Thailand started in the Rattanakosin era, not Ayutthaya, because of the obvious evidence of Plumeria as a component of the palace landscapes of Kings Rama IV and V (Akkhaneeyut, 2005, p. 176-177; Chantalao, 2006, p. 12-20; Chantarasomboon, 2003, p. 19). Even though there is no unanimous agreement about the origin of Plumeria in Thailand, there is no disagreement that Plumeria is an exotic plant.

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<sup>1</sup>PhaMuang is the name of the King in Sukhothai era.

Henceforth, Plumeria has been widespread in Thailand. However, this flowering plant was restricted to specific places which were likely to be a formal or public space, for instance, a Buddhist temple, church, cemetery, and graveyard. In early times, people believed that Plumeria was a horrific flower, and the living locale of ghosts or evil spirits (Apaisuwan, 1989, p. 231). Moreover, it referred to sorrow and/or misfortune. To avoid the misfortune of residents, rarely did Plumeria exist in Thai houses or other accommodation areas.

Gradually over time, the belief of a negative effect on a household lessened. By 2005, Plumeria was regarded as a most attractive plant (Jiramongkhokarn, 2006, p.17-18, 147-149). 'Plumeria fever' became the cause of a rise in price. The old maligned Plumeria tree which now provided a more beautiful, high value form was transplanted away from its original habitat to be grown in private gardens. At this time, Plumeria was renamed from 'Lantom' to 'Leelawadee' which means plants with beautiful style and form. Plumeria began to increasingly pervade private spaces such as home gardens, resorts, restaurants, hotels, coffee shops, and spas and became a popular flower (Akkhaneeyut, 2005, p. 179; Chantarasomboon, 2003, p. 14, 18). Thai people not only began to use Plumeria flowers and trees but they also admired its new image. Plumeria photos and paintings are now favorite patterns for several products, for example, posters, note books, and postboxes.

### **How Globalization and Consumerism Shape Local Custom**

According to the transition of Plumeria in the Thai context, globalization significantly assisted in implementing the universal trend to displace local customs in Thailand. In order to adopt the universal trend of experiencing Plumeria to Thailand, its symbolic meanings were therefore conveyed from the global arena to a local implementation via oral, visual, and experiential communication processes in several ways—communication through foreigners who visited Thailand and Thai people who traveled abroad and experienced different customs associated with Plumeria, advertisements of foreign commodities which are made to look attractive through inclusion of Plumeria motifs such as beautiful seaside resort brochures, and publications which point to Thailand as a model to be adapted for their customers' lifestyle. These (i.e. gardening, home decoration, and spa retreat handbooks) often give ideas about the use of Plumeria in private spaces and domestic dimensions.

#### *6.1 The Plumeria phenomenon in economic and cultural aspects*

Globalization affected both the economic and cultural status of Plumeria. In the economic aspect, it led to a new system interpretation from 'leave it in the temples' to commercial production. The Plumeria market has expanded due to the interest of innumerable Thai consumers and resulted in rising prices. Plumeria breeding farms that provide a variety of choices and the merchants who can provide ancient Plumeria trees to customers became successful in this business.

In addition to the aspect of economic demands, globalization played an important role in the emerging positive cultural sense of Plumeria in Thai society, in acclimatizing the Thai people to consume all things Plumeria, and in forming the new tastes and customs regarding this flowering plant.

#### *Universal trend of Plumeria*

Globalization gave Thai people a new sense about Plumeria, a shifting perspective from horrible to good similar to universal trends. A relevant example is the concept of 'landscape' which has changed the perspective of people regarding trees. That is, a tree is not just an isolated object but it is an important compositional element to enhance space. When Thai people re-imagined their concept of the modern landscape, they needed to change the predominant views on Plumeria. The superstitious view of Plumeria in Thailand was inconsistent with prevailing global trends of it being a significantly high symbolic value tree

used to create sculptural effects for outdoor spaces. As a result, the old meaning that didn't comport with the new knowledge connected to the global level gradually disappeared. The second example is the increase of the Thai people's appreciation of the concept of leisure that lead to an interest in free time activities. Plumeria's new identity enabled it to be as the new symbol signifying the leisure nature of certain industries, for example, spa services where the Plumeria is the most necessary flower in therapy procedures and is the primary contribution to a spa's relaxing atmosphere (Benge, 2000, p. 123), tourism where the Plumeria is a popular plant for decorating resting and touring places to stimulate a positive impression from tourists, and home decoration hobby which rates the Plumeria tree first for making homes attractive. When these commonly-practiced international activities were adopted by locals and stabilized in Thailand and more people began to wish for and enjoy this international lifestyle, the modified meaning of Plumeria in the context of a spa, residence, and home garden absolutely altered its out-of-date definition.

### 6.3 *The Sign of Plumeria amidst Consumerism*

This new sense apparently gradually grows with consumerism —a way of life in which Thai people continuously want and use Plumeria as an object for building up their identity. Therefore, Plumeria is a cultural commodity which is not only used based on the logic of use value (a shade tree and a relief of sickness) and exchange value (symbolic aspects of death and the spirit) but also based on sign value. The emergence of Plumeria as an object of consumption is recent; as Baudrillard notes, it is used as a cultural commodity which displays the meaning of the logic of signs.

Plumeria can convey meaning at a hyper-reality level. The most frequent sign of Plumeria is its non-stressful presence; hence, Plumeria is found in and complements places that provide a relaxing atmosphere, for instance, spa, resort, and garden. Plumeria also signifies a specific stress-free meaning in each occurrence. Plumeria conveys the meaning of a world of leisure and sign of rest and freedom from hustle if it is used in tourist accommodations such as hotel, resort, or weekend house. Similarly, it provides the sign of comfort and good-naturalness that matches with the relaxing function of the coffee shop — the modern consuming space.

Plumeria displays the signs of relaxation, peace, and ease in the spa where it has been used in several ways e.g. Plumeria flowers floating in a bathtub or in a bowl of water for soaking feet, or displayed on the reception counter for welcoming customers. Through the strategic use of Plumeria flowers, the spa's visitors can consume this sign of a high-class, slower-paced lifestyle.

Plumeria signifies an elevation of the status of the private garden and by extension its owner and provides evidence of its flexibility as a symbol. The sign of chic is displayed when it is chosen to decorate a modern garden. In contrast to a modern garden, the sign of Thainess is exhibited if this flowering plant appears in a Thai-style garden. As well, the sign of Baliness is presented when Plumeria is in a Bali-style garden.

The signs of artistry, trendiness, good taste, or stylishness are displayed on artistic gadgets with Plumeria photos and drawings. For example, the wooden postbox with inadequate a Plumeria signifier implies a trendy consumer.

These visible signs of Plumeria are the meanings which people want to consume and adopt as their own identity. Therefore, the way Thai people have recently used Plumeria is connected to what Plumeria signifies.

### *Design and style of Plumeria*

Because the meaning of the Plumeria is based on sign value and because it is an artistic object, consuming Plumeria means consuming design. The adoption of the design of Plumeria refers to the preferred shape, physical configuration and profile, as landscape architecture calls 'form', and suitable location. Generally, the

ideal characteristic of the Plumeria tree is a large and rough bole with graceful and proportionally expanding trunks. The appropriate planting places are outstanding positions such as at the entrance, near the pool, and in the man-made garden soil. Choosing the right form and position is a matter of personal selection because this kind of design is a concrete form of the consumer's taste and identity that reflects their class position and social status which differentiates one person or group from another.

Not only design, but style is another important aspect in constructing the hyper-reality state of Plumeria for stimulating Thai people to buy and consume increasingly more Plumeria. The most prevalent style that appears in Plumeria usage is the theme or style of garden. Consumerism constructs the sign value for the garden theme and globalization influences the adoption of this popular international theme by Thai people. The Plumeria contributes the social upscale meaning of chic to modern gardens while also socially signifying the Baliness of their garden. The garden style is the strategy of consumerism to persuade people to forget the old meaning and view the Plumeria according to its new look or as a commodity attached to a sense of Baliness and modernism.

Moreover, the logic of sign value—design and style—operates in adding to the value of Plumeria because the value and the price are appointed by social value. This can be seen in the 'Plumeria fever' trend which began in 2005 and continues until now. The price of Plumeria rose dramatically because it became an object of social need. Although it arguably never fulfills a customer's real need, it does support the differentiation between different consumers. The people who admire modernism or Bali gardens have to reach for this classy flowering tree and ignore the over-priced nature of this transformed symbol. Therefore, the recent dimension of Plumeria consumption is based on the correctness of its design and style which have an important role in stimulating the Plumeria fever trend in Thailand.

## Conclusion and discussion

This study explores the emerging situation of Plumeria regarding its effects on Thai society and how globalization and consumerism acted upon and continues to influence Thai people in aspect of their tastes and their customs. The author has demonstrated that Plumeria in Thai society has been transformed from a superstitious status to a positive acquisition. In the past, it was prohibited to grow this flower in housing areas because it was thought that it might bring sorrow and misfortune to family members. Then, in approximately 2005, it became attractive and proceeded to pervade private spaces and expressions such as home gardens, resorts, restaurants, coffee shops, spas, and artistic gadgets.

This transition is the effect of universal trends— notions of landscape design and leisure activities— such that concepts of globalization has been implemented to displace local customs in Thailand via cross-cultural communication and publication. In the economic aspect, globalization and consumerism have played an important role in expanding the Plumeria market in Thailand. In the cultural arena, they have convinced Thai people to be familiar with and adopt the new stress-free meaning of Plumeria and consume it according to its design and style, e.g. expression of attachment to a sense of Baliness and modernism when building up their identity and social status.

Revealing that globalization and consumerism can shape local Thai customs, the author's analysis attested to the Chesneaux argument that globalization can domesticate local customers regarding their tastes and customs. However, this is in contrast to the concept of 'glocalization' which refers to the result of globalization with unique outcomes in different geographic areas as a permutation of the global and the local (Ritzer, 2003, p. 193). Therefore, I would argue that all universal constraints may not lead to the glocalization phenomenon and exceptions should be considered. Future research may further explore the conditions which lead to the mixture of global and local customs or the total possession of local customs by global trends.

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