

SMALL GROUPS, BIG CELEBRATIONS

We've all grown up in different places, and we all have different traditions that we love. Rachel reminds us that it's important to celebrate and share those traditions that make us who we are.

Celebrating far from home

Celebrations can be traced back thousands of years, commemorating things like the beginning of a new yam harvest season. Humans love to enjoy and observe important milestones and to party. However, celebrations vary throughout the world, depending on ethnic, religious, and social groups.

As much as we want everyone to join in our merriment, that isn't always the case. We might even find ourselves by ourselves, left to celebrate alone. Maybe that has been your situation, or maybe you've been able to be part of a small community that works to keep the traditions alive. That may be the case with many in Thailand.

Thailand, being a predominantly Buddhist nation, has no shortage of religious celebrations. However, Thailand is also home to millions of non-Buddhist residents. Those who have moved to Thailand also bring a bit of home with them—practices unique to their cultures and beliefs. One particularly special month is April, when we see an amazing number of observances taking place around the world, like the conclusion of the Passover and Vaisakhi. Some of those celebrations and celebrants have found themselves in Thailand during this time.

Living in a country that you're not originally from or where you are a minority can pose problems like finding a favorite or necessary ingredient for dinner. Because the world is made up of an astounding variety of cultures, beliefs and practices, one might be left feeling hungry, both literally and spiritually.

Despite this, people throughout the years have found ways to continue doing what they need to do in order to maintain their sense of self or spirituality. One of the most common ways people find themselves holding on to tradition is through food. And what is a celebration without good food? Although Thailand has amazing food and some well-stocked markets, getting what you need when you need—or want—it can be difficult if you're not Thai. On practicing Islam in Thailand, one Bangkok mom relates:

"One of the difficulties I face as a Muslim in Thailand is finding good restaurants that serve halal food in the vicinity of central Bangkok.

'Halal' is Arabic for 'permissible', and halal food refers to food that Islamic law permits Muslims to eat. For example, we cannot eat pork and its by-products—think anything from bacon to gummies. We can eat other meats like chicken and beef, but they

have to adhere to the strict rules of slaughtering, which are not always followed in non-Muslim countries. So, picking a restaurant when I want to eat out for a change can be cumbersome in Bangkok at times.

Fortunately, living in non-Muslim countries since I was 18 has taught me to try and enjoy most seafood and vegetarian and vegan food as well. In fact, sometimes I prefer them more than meat options. And since a halal diet is similar to a kosher diet, in the absence of halal options, we can eat kosher food."

This skill of improvisation and making the best of what is offered helps with the Muslim observance of Ramadan. Ramadan is a celebration that includes fasting, praying and reflection. At the end of the observance in April this year, there is a big feast, 'Eid-ul-Fitr', where families get together to enjoy delicious halal meals. This adds to the sense of belonging.

The importance of celebrating

But why? Why should any effort be put into keeping something alive when you may not even be around those who share your beliefs?

The word 'celebrate' signifies something of importance. Whether religious praise or a commemoration of



sorts, the idea is to enjoy an important event, one that holds value to a person. Core values are what make a person who they are, so to forsake these values may mean forsaking oneself. To let go of what made you who you are, for the simple fact that you moved to another country, may prove unfavorable.

Now, it's one thing to adjust bad habits or grow into a better version of you, but when moving abroad, it's so important to remember and pay homage to those things that created the parts of you that you love. One mother who practices Catholicism and observes Lent—concluding in the first week of April this year—states:

"I was born in a predominantly Catholic country. It's been ingrained in me. I married a non-Catholic, but our child was baptized Catholic. He comes to church with us as it is important to us for our child to see we go to church together as a family. Living in a different country doesn't change my beliefs. It's actually harder sometimes, inconvenient actually. Especially while raising a child in a foreign country. But we do our best."

Lent is important as it symbolizes Christ's passion and death for us to be saved, and He has continued to save me. I believe it was my faith, and doing the work, of course, that

has saved me from lots of situations in my life."

Grounding yourself and meditating on the 'why' will allow for a stronger connection to your beliefs and allow you to remain steadfast, despite where you find yourself.

Observing an event close to your heart while abroad can be challenging for the simple fact that you may not have the opportunity to celebrate with those you used to celebrate with. This may make it difficult to keep up the practice or pass it down to your children, especially if they are surrounded by those with varying practices. A Christian mother shares her experiences being away from home:

"Being in a country that is not your home will always pose a challenge, like missing loved ones, especially when there are special events that you would have hoped to celebrate with them."

The most important event that my family and I look forward to right around this time—this year in April—is remembering the death of Jesus Christ and what this event means for us all. So each year I set aside time to make sure that I can participate in a worldwide campaign to invite others to celebrate with millions of others around the world. It's not always

easy because this means finding the courage to approach people at every opportunity to invite them to join in this most important event."

Sharing our celebrations

Sharing is such an important feature with many of these celebrations. As the mother stated above, it is not just about her but how she shares this important event, even with strangers. Sharing can be helpful for those who may be feeling lonely in their home away from home. Even if someone may not hold the same views and beliefs, it's always nice to gather with others to observe important events. It's also worth mentioning, getting together doesn't have to entail renting out a huge banquet hall and catering for hundreds of people. Events and celebrations can take place wherever and however you feel appropriate.

Most observances can be held in the comfort of your home. Even if it isn't a big religious event, one can find a holiday or special day to just be happy and have fun. These days, there is no shortage of national and international observances that can last anything from a day to a full month.

One special holiday that I personally understand the importance of is Cesarean Awareness Month, which



is held in April. Like myself, many moms have gone through a C-section. It wasn't until verbally asking that I found out C-sections were more common than I had thought; the CDC (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) says 32% of US-based births in 2021 were C-sections (1). So for those who have gone through this process, take this time out to talk about it. Open up about your experience and the emotions that came with undergoing a C-section. Treat yourself and your scar to a photoshoot, a new outfit, whatever makes you feel great about the amazing process you endured.

The point is to celebrate something that makes you who you are. And for those who are looking for something lighter, some fun April holidays include World Party Day or Big Word Day. Try not to give in to floccinauncinihilipilification (2), as the point is to have fun on these days.

Some of these celebrations require very little prep, and some require a few steps before completion. Again, the point is just doing what you can, where and how you can do it.

However, some celebrations have so much history and culture behind

them that you can be drenched in the festivities. This includes one of Thailand's largest and most popular celebrations: Songkran festival. Many people outside Thailand understand it as a fun time when everyone wanders the streets with water guns and face powder.

However, Songkran is more than partying hard for several days. Songkran's practices highlight the importance of cleansing oneself for the upcoming year. This act of cleansing or spraying water is particularly helpful during one of the hottest months in Thailand. I remember my first year in Thailand, not really knowing much about the festival and spotting a mother with her young child sporting a mischievous smile. Before I even knew what was happening, I was SOAKED. Despite getting lost during my walk, it wasn't all bad because the water had kept me pleasantly cool.

For Thai Buddhists, Songkran is more than a chance to drench foreigners; it's also a time to return to hometowns and spend time with family. Check out BAMBI Magazine's April 2022 article 'Songkran: A Festival Soaked in Tradition' for a short but in-depth explanation of all that is included with the festival. You can even learn some

new Thai words to put into practice while spending time in Thailand during this period.

All in all, no matter where you find yourself in the world, keep your celebrations alive. Remember why you do it and who you do it for. One of the best things to do is prepare ahead of time. Preparation or understanding what will be available or even who will be available for your celebration can greatly decrease stress levels. And remember that it's okay to ask questions; it's okay to research why your neighbor may or may not do something during a specific month. The takeaway is to continue doing what you need to honor your culture in a foreign land, while also understanding and respecting those around you.

Photos from Canva.

About the Author

Rachel Ofo moved from the US to Bangkok in 2016. She has a daughter, whom she loves dragging around the city on various adventures. In her free time, she enjoys reading, watching movies, and trying new restaurants. She also enjoys being out in nature with her daughter. She looks forward to her time with BAMBI.



References

1. CDC (2023) Births – Method of Delivery. [cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/delivery.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/delivery.htm)
2. *The habit of seeing something as worthless or unimportant*