

# Royal Thai Air Force's Folklore: A Case Study of Traditions and Rites of Navaminda

## Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy

คติชนบทการอากาศไทย กรณีศึกษาประเพณีและพิธีของ

โรงเรียนนายเรืออากาศนวมินทกษัตริยาธิราช

Primrata Jantarachotigul

พริมรดา จันทร์ชาติกุล

Sqn.Ldr., Ph.D., Department of Humanities and Social Science, Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy.

E-mail: primrata@rtaf.mi.th

**Received:** June 29, 2020

**Revised:** August 31, 2020

**Accepted:** September 1, 2020

### Abstract

This article aims at examining military traditions and rites of the Royal Thai Air Force in order to see the military folklore by focusing on the case of the military education and training institutions of the Royal Thai Air Force. The Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy (NKRAFA), which is one of the main pillars of the air force, is responsible for producing air force personnel. Based on the study of military traditions and rites of the above mentioned unit, it can be categorized into two main types: tradition and rite to instill into air cadets the sense of being soldier and rite of passage. Further, it found that the folklore of Thai air force personnel plays an important role to construct their identity as well as their consciousness of being Thai air force personnel.

**Keywords:** Royal Thai Air Force's Folklore, Military Folklore, Tradition, Rite, Identity

### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งพิจารณาประเพณีและพิธีของกองทัพอากาศในฐานะคติชนบท โดยเฉพาะในสถาบันการศึกษา และการฝึกทางทหารของกองทัพอากาศไทยซึ่ง โรงเรียนนายเรืออากาศนวมินทกษัตริยาธิราชเป็นหนึ่งในสถาบัน หลักของกองทัพอากาศที่มีหน้าที่ผลิตกำลังพลของกองทัพอากาศ จากการศึกษาประเพณีและพิธีในสถาบันดังกล่าว พบว่าสามารถแบ่งออกได้ ๒ ประเภท คือ ประเพณีและพิธีที่ปลูกฝังสำนึกรักความเป็นทหาร และประเพณีและพิธีการ เปลี่ยนผ่าน นอกจากนี้คติชนบทการอากาศไทยยังมีบทบาทสำคัญในการประกอบสร้างอัตลักษณ์ของทหารอากาศ ไทยและการสร้างสำนึกรักความเป็นทหารอากาศไทยด้วย

**คำสำคัญ:** คติชนบทการอากาศไทย คติชนบท ประเพณี พิธี อัตลักษณ์

### Introduction

As Alan Dundes once explained that “folk” can refer to “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is-it could be a common occupation, language, or religion-but what is important is that a group have some traditions that it calls its own” [1]. Further, Dundes illustrated that, people define or present their identities through folklore. All the myths, rituals, food, or even

costumes are cultural materials used to express group identities that make a specific group different from the others.[2] Hence, Identity is closely related to folklore. Likewise, The Royal Thai Air Force is another group of “folk” who construct their identity employing their own “folklore.”



**Figure 1:** Air cadet, Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy, 2020

The Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy of the Royal Thai Air Force’s main goal is to educate both occupational and militaristic knowledge. They are also meant to construct the “identity of the Royal Thai Air Force” and inspire the sense of being an air force personal, which would perfect the process of training and educating air cadets comprehensively. It is evident that there are several types of the Royal Thai Air Force’s folklore such as legends and narratives, traditions, rite, and songs. [3] Among these folklore, traditions and rites are the data closely related to the construction of identity of air force soldier. Therefore, this article aims to collect these traditions and rites, and to study the relationship between folklore of Royal Thai Air Force and the identity of air force soldiers.

Moreover, there are some researches on a topic similar to this study including Sandels (1983) [4] and Eliason and Tuleja (2013) [5]. The research conducted by Sandels [4], entitled “The Doughboy: Formation of a Military Folk”. It explored how military ideals and values were instilled in civilians who had registered with the U.S. Army using rules, traditions, rites, and other practices. Similarly, a book titled “Warrior Ways: Explorations in Modern Military Folklore” by Eliason and Tuleja [5] shed light on the modern folklore of the U.S. Army through the soldiers’ perspectives and experiences. However, these articles emphasized on the United States Army, as it explored the instilment of militancy in civilians who applied for the U.S. Army, using traditions, rites, and other practices. It is obviously clear that the biggest difference between the U.S. and Thai Army, which will reflect in this study, is the bonding to the trinity law of “Nation, Religion, and King.” This sense does not exist in the U.S. Army at all due to the root of believes and social structure of the country.

This article comprises of four sections. The Royal Thai Air Force’s folklore and traditions and rites of Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy will be initially explained, followed by folklore and identity of the Royal Thai Air Force personnel. After that, the conclusion will be presented in the final section.

## Royal Thai Air Force Folklore

Folklore of the Royal Thai Air Force consists of various folkloristic data including legends and narratives, sacred objects, traditions, rites, songs, and militaristic customs that shared and transmitted among Thai air force personnel. Examples of such legends and narratives are the legend of the Tiger guardian spirit or “Chao Pho Suea” and the narrative of an instructor pilot named “Aoun” or “Khru Aoun”. Examples of sacred objects are the amulets called “Jatukam Ramathep” (Neua Fah Maha Setthee Model), amulets that were specially consecrated on an F-16 aircraft flying at supersonic speed. Moreover, the statue and the shrine of Tiger guardian’s spirit, located at Flying Training School, serve as a remarkable example of folk beliefs held by the air force personnel. Meanwhile, the examples of songs are anthems of Royal Thai Air Force such as a song entitled “Sakkayaphap Neua Khob Fah” or “Sky-high Efficiency”, as well as other cheer songs. Example of militaristic customs is the practice of “Lod Soom Krabi”, which means passing through the sword arc. Such practice is performed at the wedding ceremony of the Royal Thai Air Force personnel who graduated from Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy, in order to publicly announce the acceptance of his wife into the air force society. Example of Royal Thai Air Force personnel folklores are shown in the Table below.

**Table 1:** Royal Thai Air Force folklore

Type of Folklores	Name of Folklores	Fieldworks
<b>1. Legend and Narrative</b>	1. A Legend of Tiger guardian spirit or “Chao Pho Suea” 2. The narrative of an instructor pilot named “Aoun” or “Khru Aoun”	Flying Training School
<b>2. Sacred object</b>	1. The amulets called “Jatukam Ramathep” (Neua Fah Maha Setthee Model) 2. The statue of Tiger guardian’s spirit	1. Royal Thai Air Force Bases 2. Flying Training School
<b>3. Tradition and Rite</b>	1. <i>Traditions</i> 1.1 The “Drills for the Badge of the Royal Cypher” 1.2 The “Short Sword Drilling” Tradition 1.3 The Garrison Cap Tossing Tradition 1.4 The Night Banquet called “ <i>The Night of Chaiyapruek</i> ” 1.5 The Farewell night of the graduating class called “ <i>Missing Don</i> ” 2. <i>Rites</i>	Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy

Type of Folklores	Name of Folklores	Fieldworks
	2.1 The Ceremony of Taking the Oath of Allegiance to the Royal Colors 2.2 The Ceremony of Trooping of the Colors of King's Guard 2.3 The "Short Sword Awarding" Ceremony 2.4 The Promotion Ceremony 2.5 The Duty and Skill Emblem Decoration Ceremony 2.6 The Commander Emblem Decoration Ceremony 2.7 The Wing Decoration Ceremony or " <i>Chaiyapreuk Wing</i> " Ceremony	
<b>4. Song</b>	1. <i>The Anthems of Royal Thai Air Force</i> 1.1 "Sakkayaphap Neua Khob Fah" song or "Sky-high Efficiency" 1.2 "Dae Ther" song or "For you" 1.3 "Arlai Dorn" song or "Missing Don" 2. <i>Cheer Songs</i> 2.1 "Air Force Air Cadet" song 2.2 "We come from Don Mueang" song	1. Royal Thai Air Force Bases 2. Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy
<b>5. Militaristic custom</b>	1. Passing through the sword arc or "Lod Soom Krabi" 2. Air cadet's special code	1. Royal Thai Air Force Bases 2. Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy

#### Traditions and Rites of Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy

Apart from the Royal Thai Air Force folklore, traditions and rites of Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy have many interesting features. Since they relate to the construction of militancy and they express the transition between stages of life of Air Force personnel. Tradition and rite of Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy can be divided into two main types: The first type is tradition and rite to instill the sense of being soldier. The second one is tradition and rite of passage, as illustrated in the table below.

**Table 2:** Traditions and Rites of Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy

Type of Traditions and Rites	Name of Traditions and Rites	Organizers	Participants	Purposes
<b>1. Traditions and rites to instill the sense of being a soldier</b>	<p>1. The Ceremony of Taking the Oath of Allegiance to the Royal Colors</p> <p>2. The Ceremony of Trooping of the Colors of King's Guard</p> <p>3. The Drills for the Badge of the Royal Cypher Tradition</p>	<p>The official institute: The Royal Thai Air Force</p>	<p>1. New air cadet personnel</p> <p>2. New air force personnel</p>	<p>1. To instill militancy of the Royal Guard</p> <p>2. To instill loyalty to the nation, Buddhism, and monarchy</p>
<b>2. Traditions and rites of passage</b>	<p>Stages of life of air cadets</p> <p><u>1. The initiation of new air cadets:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The “Short Sword Drilling” Tradition</li> <li>- The “Short Sword Awarding” Ceremony</li> <li>- The Night Banquet called <i>“The Night of Chaiyapruek”</i></li> </ul> <p><u>2. First year of air cadets:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Promotion Ceremony</li> </ul> <p><u>3. Second year and third year:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Promotion Ceremony</li> <li>- The Duty and Skill Emblem Decoration Ceremony</li> <li>- The Wing Decoration Ceremony or <i>“Chaiyapruek Wing” Ceremony</i></li> </ul> <p><u>4. Fourth year or the most senior year:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Promotion Ceremony</li> <li>- The Commander Emblem Decoration Ceremony</li> </ul>	<p>1. Royal Thai Air Force</p>	<p>Air cadet</p>	<p>1. To mark the passage to a new stage or status</p> <p>2. To congratulate those who passed military training</p> <p>3. To express recognition</p> <p>4. To assign a new duty</p>

Type of Traditions and Rites	Name of Traditions and Rites	Organizers	Participants	Purposes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Garrison Cap Tossing tradition</li> <li>- The Farewell Night of Graduating Class called “Missing Don”</li> </ul>			

The first type is the traditions and rites to instill the sense of being a soldier, which include the ceremony of Oath Taking and Trooping of the Colors of Royal Thai Air Force. The Trooping of the Color ceremony is a ceremony featuring all three branches of the armed forces to celebrate the birthday of the King of Thailand and pledging the loyalty of the Royal Thai Armed Forces to the monarch, normally taking place in the Royal Plaza, Bangkok. [6] Such ceremony is regarded as a state ceremony that is considerably significant to Royal Thai Air Force. The ceremony emphasizes the role of Royal Thai Air Force as one of the militaristic institutions. Likewise, it plays an important role in the instilment of militancy of the air force personnel who swear their loyalty to the nation and monarchy and fulfill their responsibilities with honesty.

In addition, the ceremony of Trooping of the Colors has several symbolic elements that convey messages of the militancy of the air force personnel. For instance, the Royal Colors is the symbol of the King and the blue uniform symbolize the Royal Thai Air Force personnel who serve as the King's guards. The Oath of Allegiance to the Colors initially begins with:

*“I, (name of the oath taker), am willing to sacrifice my life for the freedom and peace of the country.*

*I will preserve religion and morals.*

*I will honor and protect the glory of the King.*

*I will obey and execute the orders of my superiors dutifully.”*



**Figure 2:** The Ceremony of Taking the Oath of Allegiance to the Royal Colors, 2016

Another tradition is called the “Drills for the Badge of the Royal Cypher” Tradition. The emblem refers to the royal cypher of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, which consists of the initials of the name and title of His Majesty the King. Moreover, the word “drilling” in this context does not literally mean “unearthing the sign from the ground”. Rather, it metaphorically refers to the process of hard-level trainings that must be endured and undertaken by all new air cadets.

After passing these trainings, new air cadets are eligible to earn a badge of the royal cypher of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, which can be used as a symbol of the Air Cadet King’s Guard. Hence, the “drilling tradition” is the process that aims to inspire pride in cadets, based on their own achievements. Likewise, this tradition also instills the sense of responsibility in protecting the King and instills the sense of loyalty towards monarchy.

It is distinct that the rituals performed by the official institute: The Royal Thai Air Force is in order to infuse the desired characteristics into the new air force personnel. The ritual itself is where the folk takes its role. The relationship in the ritual is as if passing down the heart and soul of the duties down to another generation making high risky missions easier to be acceptable as they look holy. Thus, the main purpose of this tradition are to enhance the physical strength, stamina, endurance and durability of the new students in order to become effective members of the corps called the Air Cadet King’s Guards and Air Force Institution, whose main responsibility is to watch over the king’s safety and sovereignty including national security.

The second type is the traditions and rites of passage, which indicate the promotion of air force personnel to a new stage or status. The traditions and rites of passage further serve as a means to honor the accomplishment of cadets in becoming the air force personnel. Indeed, this type of traditions and rites can be categorized according to the stages of life of the cadets. The first stage is the initiation of new cadets, in which the traditions and rites of this stage include “Short Sword Drilling” Tradition, “Short Sword Awarding” Ceremony, and Night Banquet or the so-called “*The Night of Chaiyapruek*”.

In the first year, air cadets will participate in the Promotion Ceremony. In the second year and third year, air cadets will partake in the Promotion Ceremony, Duty and Skill Emblem Decoration Ceremony, and Wing Decoration Ceremony or “*Chaiyapruek Wing*” Ceremony. The rites of passage for fourth-year cadets include Promotion Ceremony, Commander Emblem Decoration Ceremony, Garrison Cap Tossing Tradition, and the farewell night of Graduating Class called “*Missing Don*”. Don is a short word for the area called “Don Mueang”, which is where Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy is located.

The “Short Sword Drilling” Tradition is similar to the Drilling of the Badge of Royal Emblem tradition. It aims to instill pride in the air cadets who had endured advanced and tough trainings held by their seniors. The goals of this tradition are to earn a sword, which symbolizes Thai air cadets, and to express the recognition of new air cadets. During the ceremony, senior student commanders will create certain situations to test the moral and physical

abilities of new cadets. For instance, a tradition in which new cadets are ordered to run around the ground for the total number of rounds equivalent to the number of their class year, in order to test their physical strength.



**Figure 3:** The “Short Sword Awarding” Ceremony, 2019

Other ceremonies that indicate the passing of air cadets to a new stage include Promotion Ceremony and Badge of Duty and Skill Decoration Ceremony. Such ceremonies mark the passage of air cadets as they are entitled to become senior air cadets, group leaders, and commanders, respectively. In addition, these ceremonies contain some symbolic elements pertaining to militaristic seniority and chain of command, such as the sign of year number and the sign of the section’s leader. Another symbolic element is the skill emblem that signifies the prowess of its owner.

Alternatively, the traditions for fourth-year or senior cadets are related to the aspect of graduation, which include Celebrating traditions for Graduates, Garrison Cap Tossing Tradition, and the farewell night of senior air cadets called “*Missing Don*”. The garrison cap of the RTAF personnel is a symbolic object that signifies the status of an air cadet. When the cap is released from one’s hand, it shows the separation of a graduating senior from his final-year air cadet status. These traditions serve as a separation process that marks the separation of being an air cadet, while highlights the inauguration of being a commissioned officer.



**Figure 4:** The Garrison Cap Tossing Tradition, 2017

### **Folklore and Identity of the Royal Thai Air Force Personnel**

The traditions and rites of the Royal Thai Air Force serve as an instrument that creates awareness of the self-identity of air force personnel. Such awareness is achieved by defining the sense of being the Royal Thai Air Force personnel, in order to answer the questions of who they are and what their positions are in the Thai armies. The representation of identity at an individual level and social level emphasize the difference between oneself and the other, which further highlights their identity. The analysis illustrated that the traditions and rites of Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy lead to the construction of the identity of Royal Thai Air Force, as well as the instilment of militancy in the air force personnel. The identity of Royal Thai Air Force can be separated into two aspects. The first one is the identity of “a warrior who is loyal to the nation, religion, and monarchy.” This identity is shared with other branches of army. It is constructed from traditions and rites include the Ceremony of Taking the Oath of Allegiance to the Royal Colors and the Ceremony of Trooping of the Colors.

The second identity is the identity of the “Sky protector”. This identity is unique to the Royal Thai Air Force. It is constructed from traditions and rites of passage. The air force personnel define themselves through traditions and rites in order to convey their identity as the sky protector with the ability to fly like an eagle and the unity with the aircraft and the sky. Such self-definition indeed creates the awareness of self-identity by connecting the air force personnel with the mission of protecting the sovereignty of Thai sky and the place of operations of the air force personnel that differs from other branches of army.

### **Conclusion**

This article aims at examining military traditions and rites of the main pillar of Royal Thai Air Force in order to identify the relationship between military folklore and the military identity.

It is founded that Royal Thai Air Force is one of the groups in the society that creates and inherits its own folklore. The folklore of air force personnel comprises of various types, such as legends and narratives, songs, and military traditions and rites that play a significant and interesting role, especially, the role of creating the identity of Royal Thai Air Force and instilling awareness of being the Thai air force personnel. As for the construction of identity, it is found that the identity of Royal Thai Air Force encompasses the identity of a warrior who is loyal to the nation, religion, and monarchy, which is shared with other branches of army. In addition, the identity of Royal Thai Air Force also includes the identity of a warrior who takes the role of a territorial sky protector. Further, according to the analysis, the folklore of Thai air force personnel does not only play an important role in constructing the identity of air force personnel. Rather, it also plays a central role in constructing the consciousness of being the Thai air force personnel.

According to the Bible, "The heaven for height, and the earth for depth, and the heart of kings [is] unsearchable." (Proverbs 25:3 KJV). The same belief exists in Thai's sense as well but deriving from the faith of Buddhism. The Thai Air Force then has to protect the sky in both physical territory and abstract terms. In Thai's

sense, the sky is not just the sky but it is considered the firmament which closely deals with the structure of the present heavens and Earth. The firmament is the place where the holy angels and the king live. The Air Force personnel, hence, equals to God's protectors in this sense. They need to be a lot more durably than normal men and also conform to the roles of Thai Air Force army that the country expects.

### References

- [1] Dundes, Alan., The Study of Folklore. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965.
- [2] Dundes, Alan., “Defining identity through Folklore”. Folklore Matters. Edited by Alan Dundes. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996: 1-40.
- [3] Primrata Jantarachotigul, Folklore and the Construction of Military Identity: A Case Study of Military Education and Training Institutions of the Royal Thai Air Force, Dissertation of Philosophy of Folklore, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, 2562 [2019] [In Thai].
- [4] Sandels, Robert, “The Doughboy: The Formation of a Military Folk”. American Studies Journal. 24 no.1, pp. 69-88, Spring, 1983.
- [5] Eliason Eric, A. and Tuleja, Tad, eds., Warrior Ways: Explorations in Modern Military Folklore. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2012.
- [6] Bangkok Post Learning. “The Trooping of the Color ceremony” [Online]. Available: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/meaning/Trooping+of+the+Colours>. [Accessed: June 22, 2020].