



Traveling and Celebrating During Songkran as Super Spreading Events: A Potential Triggering Factor of the Surge of COVID-19 Cases in Thailand



Ian Christopher N. Rocha^{1,2*}, Mary Grace A. Pelayo², Chaiyasom Sammatid^{3,4}

¹School of Medicine, Centro Escolar University, Manila, Philippines

²Behavioral Sciences Department, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

³Faculty of Education, Silpakorn University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

⁴Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

Corresponding Author: Ian Christopher N. Rocha, MBA, MHSS, School of Medicine, Centro Escolar University, Manila, Philippines. Tel: +63-2-87356860, Email: rocha1750018@ceu.edu.ph

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Dear Editor

Thailand, a predominantly Buddhist country in Southeast Asia, recently celebrated Songkran, a Buddhist new year festival, on April 12 to 15, 2021.¹ Since the celebration is a four-day holiday that ends on a Thursday, many Thais extended their celebration until the weekend, making it a week-long holiday. As a result, many people from Bangkok, the country's capital, went home to their respective provinces or visited tourist hotspots to spend their week-long vacation despite the slight surge of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases in the country. The complacency of several Thais became apparent as the country had successfully controlled the outbreak in the past months.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Songkran was celebrated every April 13, typically marked by the traditional splashing of water in the sweltering summer heat and commemorated by visiting temples to pay respect to the monks and getting together with family and friends.¹ However, the annual Songkran celebrations in 2020 and 2021 were completely different from the usual and accustomed holiday activities. In 2020, the government completely canceled the Songkran festival due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Strict preventive measures were implemented during that time, and the public willingly followed due to fear of catching the contagious disease.¹ Due to the cancellation and successful implementation of strict public health protocols, the Songkran in 2020 did not cause any problem in the country's COVID-19 situation.²

In 2021, however, the government did not cancel Songkran but rather imposed banning water-splashing, powder-smearing, and foam parties. Instead, only religious practices

were allowed, such as sprinkling water on Buddha statues and pouring water onto the palms of the elderly to ask for blessings. Despite the restrictions on public gatherings, the government allowed the public to travel domestically during the holiday as long as they complied with the Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration guidelines. The Tourism Authority of Thailand even encouraged its locals to travel within the country to promote tourism. With an estimation of 3.2 million domestic trips during the week-long Songkran, many people used this opportunity to celebrate and travel outside the capital city.¹ Moreover, compounding the festivity is the revival of the nightlife spots in central Bangkok which resulted in a riskier and more susceptible situation for COVID-19 transmission.

Unfortunately, on April 14, 2021, just a day after the Thai New Year, daily new cases of COVID-19 in the country started to increase into more than 1000 cases (1,335 cases) from tens to hundreds of daily new cases before the celebrations.³ The number of cases peaked at thousands for the first time since the pandemic hit the country. Prior to Songkran, Thailand was able to successfully control the COVID-19 transmission despite being the first country in the world to report the first COVID-19 case outside China.² However, the country's COVID-19 situation changed after the event. As of May 17, 2021, the country has reported 111082 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with nearly three-quarters of the reported cases since the Songkran celebrations, indicating a new wave of COVID-19 infections in Thailand. Among the total cases, 43268 are active cases, and 9635 are new single-day cases, the highest recorded daily new cases so far.³ Health authorities are very worried about the current spike of cases since the new

outbreak is related to nightspots in Bangkok and other places in Thailand during the Songkran. Most infected individuals are young, rich, and traveling Thais who celebrated the Songkran.⁴

In addition to the arrival of the highly contagious variants of concern of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Thailand and its slow COVID-19 vaccination program due to high vaccine hesitancy among the locals with only 2.18% of its population were inoculated with at least one dose and just 1.17% were fully vaccinated as of May 17, 2021, the exponential rise of COVID-19 cases might be attributed to the scattered super spreading events (SSE) recently.⁵⁻⁷ SSE occurs when a contagious disease, such as COVID-19, spreads much faster than usual when infected individuals unknowingly spread the SARS-CoV-2 virus to the community.⁸ Some of its social characteristics occurred in the recent Songkran, such as visiting crowded places, traveling to various places, and attending public gatherings.⁹

The week-long Songkran celebrations might have triggered the surge of cases in Thailand since many traveled across the country to enjoy the long vacation and gathered with their loved ones to celebrate the special occasion. In this regard, immediate action and implementation of better public health measures are expected from the Thai government to control the recent rise of cases in the country. Lockdown on high-risk areas, social distancing, proper hand hygiene, and wearing face masks should be implemented appropriately. In addition, temporary closure of pubs, bars, and nightclubs must still be imposed to curb risky nightlife behaviors of people. Domestic and international travel must also be lessened. Additionally, the government should speed up its vaccination rollout to attain herd immunity, just like other countries did with their successful vaccination campaigns.¹⁰ In the future, government leaders should learn from this experience to prevent SSE from occurring, which in turn will possibly prevent and control a potential outbreak of contagious diseases such as COVID-19.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this article.

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