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Sacred Nationalism: The Thai Monarchy and Primordial Nation Construction

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ABSTRACT *A sociological reading of Thailand's monarchistic legacy is employed to identify cultural themes and practices of nation construction. It is demonstrated how, after the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, royalist networks of Thailand's first constitutional king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, reinforced the staying power of his rule and the institution of constitutional monarchy with primordial themes. The themes functioned to sacralise the nation as rooted in a glorious past as well as legitimise the king's place and continued relevance in Thai politics. Within this context, primordial simulacra derived from the Siamese empire, Buddhism and rekindled royal ceremonies from antiquity were reassembled for nationalistic purposes. As a result, the sacralising of the Thai nation has rendered the king a sacred nationalist, a type of nationalist that synchronises the real and ethereal to construct nation, a process that elevated the country's traditional authority system to respond to the undesirable consequences of twentieth century modernisation.*

KEY WORDS: Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej, monarchy, traditional authority, primordialism, nationalism, Max Weber

A popular conception about Thailand is that the state, never colonised by European powers, has long been one of the more democratic countries in the Southeast Asian region. Nationalist sentiments aside, Thailand also has the dubious distinction of having experienced 18 military *coups* or attempted *coups* since absolute monarchy ended in 1932 with the overthrow of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII). In September 2006, yet another military *coup* purged the popularly-elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from power, followed by two subsequent ousters of Thaksin-aligned prime ministers Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat. Therefore, a popular question frequently posed by non-Thai specialists is how the current Thai king, Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), the world's longest reigning monarch, has attended to these political crises for over six decades.

Although many scholars have tried to explicate Thailand's complex internal political terrain, there has historically been a high degree of self-censorship insofar as how scholarly research has approached the issue of monarchical power. There are two reasons for this. The first revolves around how the monarch has been

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constructed by Thai nationalists to be a transcendental figure that is “above” and “beyond” politics, a quasi-divine figure that embodies virtues purportedly not found in the corrupt world of Thailand’s participatory politics. The second related reason revolves around how the country’s nation and historical construction occurs in secretive monarchical institutions where political manoeuvres are kept from the public, “helped by the fact that royal actions were above public criticism” due to the country’s enforcement of *lèse-majesté* laws – laws that prohibit any criticism of the monarch and members of the royal family (McCargo, 2005: 506). Analyses of Thailand’s political terrain, once derived from simplistic binaries, such as military regime versus civilian government, authoritarian versus democratic and so forth, are now confronting more courageously the powers of the monarch and the institution of monarchy.

It is arguably less complicated to observe external or geopolitical forces that shape the dynamics of the Thai nation. International relations scholar Daniel Lynch (2004: 341) undertook this task, concluding that by the 1990s Thailand had evolved into a gatekeeper state that manages “flows from the international to the domestic realms but do not act obsessively to protect an imagined national essence,” and that the country has succeeded in situating itself in the neoliberal world system “with relative alacrity.” Moreover, Lynch argues that Thailand’s embrace of the free market will make it pivotal for spreading democracy in the entire Southeast Asian region. This status is unlike *guardian* states, such as China and Burma, where cultural and social institutions are configured to protect a national “essence.” For Lynch, evidence can be seen in the level of Thailand’s development when compared with countries that are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of which Thailand is a member. Indeed, Thailand’s economic experiences have successfully ensconced a national bourgeoisie in the primate city of Bangkok to attend to matters of finance, banking and trade (Brown, 1994; Lynch, 2004). Yet, were observers to subscribe to Lynch’s view, acknowledgement has to be made to one important concession put forth by Lynch himself: “Perhaps motivated to reclaim a position of *moral* centrality gatekeepers sometimes feel compelled to try to socialise authoritarian holdouts into global culture” (Lynch, 2004: 359, italics added). Lynch is aware that an economistic view overlooks the immense authority possessed by old culture as it is reproduced symbolically to sometimes synchronise, more often to contest, a participatory and technocratic modernity. From Lynch’s concession, I propose that Thailand is indeed a guardian state that protects itself from threats, but less from tangible military threats than ideological ones.

In Thailand, the highly effective royalist narrative that vote-buying plagues the country’s participatory politics serves to undermine its efficacy, even though these notions may be exaggerated in scope and depth, at least in more recent times (Somchai, 2008; Thongchai, 2008). None the less, many Thais and conservatives in the Thai intelligentsia question the “legitimacy of the election as a trustworthy means to democracy” (Thongchai, 2008: 27). As such, the monarch and royalist authorities’ distaste for electoral politics “have successfully undermined electoral democracy in the name of ‘clean politics’ ... paving the way for monarchists to ... maintain control of the democratic process” (Connors and Hewison, 2008: 5). Royalist historiographers have succeeded in constructing the narrative that the authority of monarchy is “democratic and that the king is on the people’s side in

their struggle against military rule and against corrupt governments” (Thongchai, 2008: 23), otherwise the country risked becoming “Thailand Company Limited where money is everything and everything is money” (*The Nation*, 7 September 2005, cited in Ukrist, 2008: 131).

Max Weber (1978), one of the few *fin de siècle* sociologists to explore the sociological type of monarchism, pointed out that this form of authority, what he termed “traditional authority,” will give way to “legal authority,” or authority derived from rationalised bureaucratic structures linked to industrialised society. For Weber, sacred themes of lineage, divine mandates and royal kinship employed and embodied by traditional rulers, whether kings or sultans, will become outmoded methods of administering and configuring society as it moves toward modernisation. However, such a Weberian discourse applied to read Thailand would immediately encounter a paradox: Thailand’s highly revered king and the institution of constitutional monarchy – an institution weakened since its transition from absolute rule in 1932 – has enjoyed a remarkable resurrection under King Bhumibol. The current king and his supporters have succeeded in entrenching a cosmological worldview and view of nation by embodying what it means to be “Thai.” All this has occurred under the guise of an ostensibly weakened constitutional monarchy and alongside its seemingly modernised and efficient civilian participatory politics. Here Weber’s analysis immediately reveals a blind spot: by exploring increasing rationalisation and bureaucratisation of authority systems on a continuum from pre-modern to modern, he failed to analyse traditional authority’s employment of symbolic and cultural simulacra to reinforce its staying power, preferring to focus on its bureaucratic anachronisms instead.

This contradiction was broken with McCargo’s discussion of how King Bhumibol’s staying power is due to a “network monarchy” that relies on political groups led by “good men” who marginalise “formal political institutions and procedures” (McCargo, 2005: 501). McCargo’s analysis begins in 1973 and concludes with Thaksin’s premiership, before he was ousted by a *coup* in September 2006. Focusing on royalist proxies and Prem Tinsulanonda – former prime minister and current president of the Privy Council – along with the latter’s connections with the palace, McCargo outlines the machinations by pro-royalists to maintain the staying power of the monarch. A year after McCargo’s article was released, Paul Handley’s (2006) *The King Never Smiles* followed, generating much controversy among Thai royalists and conservatives. Handley’s use of extended journalism, along with Hewison’s (2008) extended analyses of royalist manoeuvres that underpinned the 2006 *coup*, made visible the still influential roles of the monarch and royalists in contemporary Thai participatory politics. Hewison, Handley and McCargo draw conclusions suggesting that the staying power of Thailand’s monarchy and its networks enables it to rein in the country’s participatory politics so that they are not mutually exclusive from royalist imperatives.

My discussion attempts to add to the aforementioned scholars’ rich analyses: I ask readers to consider the influences of monarchistic networks at an earlier epoch of Thai nation construction. This earlier period includes the few years leading to Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat’s ascension to power in 1957, finally ensconcing his rule via a *coup d’état* in 1958. Under Sarit, primordial themes, or themes that constitute the building blocks of nations, were evoked to generate for the monarch and monarchy a

rich, sacred and mystical link to a glorious, Buddhist and imperialistic Siamese past. By making visible the cultural content of monarchy and how the monarch embodied its themes in this period, I hope to explain how the monarchy and its royalists have co-existed with Thailand's participatory politics, beyond the interpersonal machinations and manoeuvrings focused upon by McCargo. This task is important, for I hope to discuss how a royally assembled history of a sacred past affectively offers a transcendent cultural essence to many Thais, a process economic officials and civilian politicians have not come close to harnessing.

Primordialism and the Sacred Nationalist

Pro-royalists resurrected the primordial foundations that would eventually streamline the legitimation of King Bhumibol's rule. Influences were provided by royalists such as Khun Wichitmatra. His work *Lak Thai* (1928) was a derivative discourse, as post-colonial scholar Partha Chatterjee would describe it, of Sinologist Terrien de Lacouperie and missionary W. C. Dodd (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005; Chatterjee, 1986). The latter documented a variety of Tai languages in southern China when he travelled the region from his residence in Thailand's northern city of Chiangmai. Dodd's 1923 work, *The Tai Race*, pointed to seven mass migrations the Tai undertook from the southern Chinese province of Yunnan. Wichitmatra extrapolated from this well-intentioned but now largely discredited work to construct the Thais as a race. Another contemporary of Wichitmatra, playwright and historian Luang Wichit Wathakan, amplified Thainess in his important play *Lu'at Suphan* (Barmé, 1993). In the play, Wichit conflated Thai racial characteristics and martial traditions as constitutive features of a Thai nation, with a people that were "courageous, loyal and prepared to make sacrifices in the face of extreme danger" (Barmé, 1993: 122). Wichit would later play an important role in ideologically mentoring Sarit and shaping his nationalism (Thak, 2007). Others, such as royalist historian and administrator Prince Damrong Rajanuphap, wrote of Thai dynastic history, noting King Bhumibol's Chakri Dynasty as descended from the traditions of Sukhothai, a thirteenth century city-state many historians credit with establishing the foundations of the Siamese empire (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005; Handley, 2006).

By the late 1930s, the royalist camp was regrouping from the end of absolute rule. They included junior and senior princes, such as Prince Rangsit Prayurasakdi and Prince Dhani Nivas, along with nobles, privy councillors and personal staff. During the period of Bhumibol's reign, as Michael K. Connors (2007: 128) notes, the "God-like status of Bhumibol was ... something he and hundreds in the palace and other agencies have contrived to create." By the middle of the twentieth century, Sarit's efforts in reviving the sacred royalism of Thailand took on greater momentum when King Bhumibol was allowed to establish his legacy as a sacred nationalist. For Thak Chaloemtiarana (2007), Sarit's legacy as a "paternal despot" continued long after his death in 1963, leading up until 1973 when yet another military man, Thanom Kittikachorn, who had been entrusted with the maintenance of Sarit's nationalist ideological system, was overthrown in a student-led uprising. Even so, as can be seen in the 2006 *coup*, Sarit's legacy lingers on in the process of Thai nation construction.

As a sociologist, my intention is not to base my discussion on a historical exegesis or comprehensive historiography. The discussion of the staying power of King

Bhumibol and the monarchy will be based on reading cues from a condensed historical account of twentieth century Thai monarchism. Themes and narratives that are intended to be subscribed to by the Thai population will then be analysed for their primordial capital. At the conclusion of the discussion, I hope to provide speculative considerations for the sociological type of a sacred nationalist. Sociological types – deliberately limiting concepts – do not entirely derive content from historical specificities or peculiarities of facts. Political scientist and Weberian scholar Susan J. Hekman (1983: 125) notes that sociological types are “to some extent, ahistorical,” generated as a result of cautious extrapolations drawn from a broader range of historical tendencies (Kaplan, 1964; see also Linbeek, 1992). Additionally, sociological types have utility for colligation – the process of employing the types across a more expansive historical continuum for the purpose of illuminating a “significant narrative” (Walsh, 1976). Thus, making visible how Sarit and royalist networks constructed the king’s cult of personality through primordial themes is a process by which we are able to simultaneously situate network monarchy as a sociological type *before* the temporal parameters set forth by McCargo, as well as position it to consider the efficacy of network monarchy for Thailand’s next monarch, a task to take place in the closing sections of my discussion. Indeed, from such a master narrative, or meta-narrative, emerges “the grand overriding stories in which we are historically embedded, such as stories of the nation, progress, [and] decadence” (Suny, 2001: 868). Thai identity then, is formed within this broad universal discourse of available meanings, “related to the historic positionings of the subjects involved, which are themselves constituted and given meaning by the identity makers” (Suny, 2001: 868). Insofar as how one can ascertain the cultural energy possessed by the monarch and monarchy, an illumination of primordial simulacra is required.

Edward Shils (1957) introduced the term “primordialism” to refer to social bonds that members of society believe naturally persist over time through ethnic kinship, ancestry, culture, history and nation. The usefulness of Shils’ term lies in how it does not denote what *is* about the cultural group but what it *appears* to be. This important perspectivism situates notions of reality borne not from the manoeuvring of the elites, but from how the populace – aware or unaware – accept the outcome of the manoeuvres. Daniel Bell (1975) grounds ethnicity in its primordialised context by noting its pre-industrial basis that, only with the rise of industry, became tangentially intersected by economic and class interests – a context relevant to how the king and the institution of monarchy have engaged their public in ways that “are consciously (or subconsciously) designed to invoke a premodern past” (Jory, 2001: 209). The people’s convictions of primordialism, according to nationalism and ethnicity sociologist Anthony D. Smith (1991: 43), lends greater weight to how a nation’s essence can be derived from “time immemorial” even after a “prolonged slumber.”

Proponents of primordialism, such as Steven Grosby (1996; 1994), Paul Brass (1991) and, to a certain extent, Pierre Van Den Berghe (1996), acknowledge people’s beliefs in the nation as inextricably tied to the land, territory and material and symbolic culture. The populace is thus primordial when all participate in the larger society by learning about its heritable objects: language, non-material and material culture and collective consciousness, all of which incite emotions and powerful feelings within the cultural group. Moreover, the affective depth of such beliefs

transcends structural factors, finding its rootedness in glorified “distant epochs” (Smith, 1986: 6). This process of constructing nation, according to historian Ronald Grigor Suny (2001: 892), “cannot be reduced to a mistake, a self-deception, or false consciousness.” My discussion of the primordial supply of the king and monarchy strives to explain how Thailand’s traditional authority relies on a revived and reproduced cultural essence for legitimating its authority, a “most effective motive for obedience because it ensures a stable structure of domination” (Hekman, 1983: 133).

Other scholars counter with the view that primordial themes are harnessed by political entrepreneurs to exploit nationalist sentiments for their own elitist ambitions. These political entrepreneurs realise that romance, timelessness and mysticism of nation are but mere instruments, an imagined community assembled by the nation’s historical fragments that have been dispersed across time (Anderson, 1991; Chatterjee, 1993; Smith, 1986). In this view, harnessing cultural features of nation is employed to organise a constituency for acquiring cultural and political resources, which in turn requires influencing and/or controlling the state (Anderson, 1991; Banton, 1994; Hutchinson and Smith, 1994). Given these manoeuvres, the nation and its ties to the populace are therefore hardly natural and the state not entirely altruistic (Smith, 1986). As such, instrumentalists, such as Smith (1986; 1991; 1998) and Cohen (1969), criticise the primordial discourse because it employs teleological cues to naturalise the nation as a means for organising peoples. Primordialism is conceived as containing socially-constructed nationalist properties that are activated by political entrepreneurs in their machinations to acquire and maintain power.

Yet, when one analyses the consequences of Thai monarchy politics as it unfolds on the ground, the lack of discernment between whether kinship ties leading to nation are a primordial given or a social construction, is ultimately irrelevant. From the perspective of Thailand’s royalists, the functional significance of primordial themes in assembling the nation is that the general population *believe* its endowed transcendental and mystical qualities. The reason primordialism can be linked to the staying power of King Bhumibol and its networks, beginning with the regents Prince Dhani and Prince Rangsit, followed by General Sarit, is due to its ability to assemble primordial simulacra compiled from Thailand’s discursive cultural and historical terrain. The primordial simulacra can then be made visible to constituencies by the state, functioning as a supply of dormant nostalgia that can be rekindled to amplify the merits of the nation. Indeed, Benedict Anderson’s important work, *Imagined Communities* (1991) and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Inventions of Tradition* (1983) address how states have employed rich symbolisms to construct a sense of nation with immutable and timeless symbolic features, supplemented with what Suny (2001: 871) describes as “military bands and postage stamps” that “have so much work to do.” Thai royalist articulations of primordialism intimately orbit instrumental articulations, making a clear distinction between those who instrumentally employ its magic and those who reify it difficult. In this regard, “ethnicity is *both* primordial *and* instrumental” (Van Den Berghe, 1996: 58).

True to Geertz’s observation of primordialism, the monarchy has mastered the art of legitimising royal rule by augmenting its overpowering and “ineffable” quality to maintain bonds within the nation (Geertz, 1963: 109) – or if one were to adopt a postcolonial view of nation construction such as Thongchai

Winichakul (1994) – maintaining bonds within a nationalised *geo-body*, from which its actors view ties to blood, race, language, land and religion as given. King Bhumibol is the supreme ambassador of such a discourse. As we shall see, primordial themes are successful because they affectively grant for “significant sectors” of the Thai population a chronology based on relations of descent that reinforce a common ancestry, a repository of shared memories, differentiating elements of a common culture, an association with a homeland and a sense of solidarity (Smith, 1991: 21). The king’s embodiment of the Thai nation evokes rich insights given by Weber that ethnicity is a cultural repository of blood relationships and shared political memories. Weber viewed ethnicity as a non-rational (not irrational) collective and was aware that there need not be an objective basis to its ties. However, when “these ties are lacking, or once they cease to exist, the sense of ethnic group membership is absent, regardless of how close the kinship may be,” a condition that would be, from the perspective of Thai elites, anathema for the nation (Weber, 1978: 390).

Selecting Sarit’s tenure to illuminate the agendas of an earlier royalist network was inspired by Nidhi Eosewong, who identified three eras in Thai nation construction. Each era contained an exigent national crisis that forced its nationalist historiographers to redefine the nation. The first era followed the 1767 sacking of Ayutthaya by the Burmese; the second era, the 1893 “Paknam Incident” that saw French gunboats threaten Bangkok and eventually resulted in the loss of the Siamese kingdom’s Laotian territories to France. Most pertinent for our discussion: the third era that began with Sarit’s 1957 ascension to power in the midst of domestic political strife. Thak (2007: 92) notes that Sarit’s *coup* was a pivotal moment in Thai history since it ushered in a “new political system that endured until recently,” an era that for Thongchai (2008) resulted in a “new” monarchy. In all three eras, nationalist narratives engaged in reflexive examinations of the weaknesses and threats that culminated in the events. Jory (2003) notes that for Nidhi, two centuries of Thai historiography have constructed the Thai essence as one shaped by periodic threats posed by outsiders.

That said, attempting to locate democracy in Thailand is a precarious political and ideological endeavour because Thai royalism conceptualises democracy with the king as head of state (Connors, 2007: 128). Yet, to conceptualise democracy as a system without traditional authority reflects a Western-centric evolutionary, linear or stagist reading of nation construction. Marx, Weber and Walt Rostow took for granted evolutionary stages in their analyses of economic systems, authority systems and take-off states, respectively. Their efforts have, in turn, fostered debates as to whether an Asiatic society is feudal, patrimonial, pre-modern or modern (Jacobs, 1971: 525). Marx, with India’s colonial context under examination, and Weber, with both India and China’s religiosity and its concomitant institutions under comparative scrutiny, exemplify the modernist perspective where the dynamics of human development are subsumed into neat categories; for example, Marx’s Asiatic Mode of Production or Weber’s view that traditional authority systems will segue into legal authority systems because “everywhere bureaucratization foreshadows mass democracy” (Weber, 1978: 226).

Weber’s choice to discuss legal authority first in his seminal work *Economy and Society*, was due to his embeddedness in the modernity of his time, allowing him to systemically assess in hindsight. For Weber, legal authority is “a specifically modern

type of administration” where other systems can later be contrasted to it (Weber, 1978: 217). In the second volume of *Economy and Society*, Weber noted how bureaucratic rationalisation

has been a ... revolutionary force with regard to tradition ... It *first* changes the material and social orders, and *through* them the people, by changing the conditions of adaptation, and ... the opportunities for adaptation, through a rational determination of means and ends (Weber, 1978: 1116).

Weber’s stagist view generates evolutionary distance, however. The concept of network monarchy thus closes the evolutionary distance between Thailand’s traditional and legal authority systems. Moreover, the relative instability of Thailand’s twentieth century participatory politics – ostensibly an authority system that, for Weber, evolved from the traditional authority system in ways that foreshadowed “mass democracy,” has instead produced many civilian governments led by autocratic leaders, with the iconic Thaksin Shinawatra being the most recent.

Having cautioned against analysing Thailand in a stagist manner, we also need to move beyond employing the binary of whether the country is non-democratic or democratic, lest we assume *a priori* Thailand’s development trajectory to be that of modernisation. Thongchai (2008: 13) assumed this when he noted that “democratisation in Thailand is fundamentally about the transition from absolute monarchism,” yet he later concedes that “an election does not equal democracy,” finally adding “in retrospect, it is not quite clear what democracy means to Thai people” (Thongchai, 2008: 25, 28). Thongchai, working on the binary of whether there is or is not democracy, would have done better simply by attending to democracy as a variable given that the monarch and monarchy, the military and politicians, all have their own democratic narratives that have surfaced in different periods of Thai history. The polemics about whether patrimonial rule is destabilising the pre-modern/modern binary yields less insight than what German historian Karl Wittfogel (1957) – predating post-modernist critiques of a linear or evolutionist account of history – had already noted about patrimonial society: that it is not a stage in a universal, linear theory of social evolution but one that is its own agent of historical unfolding across time.

By moving beyond a stagist reading of Thailand based on simplistic binaries, my goal is to demonstrate that the staying power of the Thai king is a function of material and symbolic culture that effectively harnessed historical, sacred and emotive capital of the Thai nation. To accomplish this task, we must conceptualise King Bhumibol as a dedicated and committed nationalist. The processes of rendering him sacred and transcendental, however, have camouflaged any discourse that explicitly identifies him as such. As a stoic master of understatement and political entrepreneurship, he accommodated royalist military men, such as Sarit, to bureaucratise and institutionalise royalism without ever abandoning his trump card: the capacity to work with royalists to generate mysticism, aura and most importantly a primordial connection to a glorified history that would have remained elegiac. King Bhumibol’s monopolisation of the moral high ground has allowed the institution of monarchy to thus exist in parallel with Thailand’s participatory politics.

Thailand's Traditional Authority System

Many social thinkers are familiar with Weber's important discussions of authority systems. Thailand's traditional authority contains key diacritica noted by Weber, such as the ruler deriving power from tradition, further sanctified by "age-old rules and powers" that have been "inviolable from times out of mind" (Weber, 1978: 226, 1117). Weber contrasted this with the legal authority system where power emanates from elected leaders that are then appointed to positions in a rationalised bureaucracy. Power in the traditional authority system thus stems from the ruler's lineage to a primordial and frequently dynastic past and not from, as in the legal authority system, the political position that prescribes power irrespective of lineage. Loyalty to the traditional leader is based on a personal deference that reflects the "relations of the administrative staff to the master" (Weber, 1978: 227). Traditional rulers are legitimated in two ways: (a) "partly in terms of traditions which themselves directly determine the content of the command and are believed to be valid within certain limits that cannot be overstepped without endangering the master's traditional status" and (b) "partly in terms of the master's discretion in that sphere which tradition leaves open to him" (Weber, 1978: 227).

Weber (1978: 231) presciently notes that in patrimonial rule, a type of traditional authority, the military becomes the "personal instruments" of the ruler. Since Sarit's tenure, the Thai military has indeed increasingly shifted toward supporting royalism. By 2006, the loyalty of the military was ensured. In the months before the overthrow of Thaksin, former prime minister and Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanonda, an important organ of the monarchy that will be discussed shortly, employed a horse-racing metaphor to remind the military that their loyalties were not to government but to the king: "the elected government was merely a jockey assigned to ride the horse, but not the owner of it" (Thongchai, 2008: 30). Soon after, "taking up Prem's call" to oust Thaksin and his government, Third Army Region Commander Lt-General Saprang Kalayanamitr announced "he would die for the king in his fight against Thaksin" (Hewison, 2008: 204). Weber's prescience can be much appreciated in this matter since he argued that traditional authority "places serious obstacles in the way of formally rational regulations, which can be depended upon to remain stable and hence are calculable in their economic implications and exploitability" (Weber, 1978: 239).

King Bhumibol ascended the throne as an 18 year-old constitutional monarch in 1946, after the mysterious shooting death of his brother Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) who had become king but not yet crowned. Born on 5 December 1927, in Brookline, Massachusetts and schooled during his childhood in Lausanne, Switzerland, the king's lifelong maturation included decisive manoeuvring through court intrigue, the Phibun Songkram military regime's dismissiveness of his royal status and a variety of other political episodes that at times endeared him to the military, at times to the civilian government. Not yet five when the People's Party – a contingent of non-royal army and naval officers and politicians in the civilian bureaucracy – along with sympathetic civilians brought an end to absolute monarchy, little did the king know that he would one day witness even more dramatic episodes of Thai history unfold under his watch (Handley, 2006). Spending much of his childhood in Switzerland with Ananda, the young Bhumibol loved fast cars,

engaged in hobbies like photography, jazz music, sailing and skiing in the Alps. Neither he nor his brother demonstrated, at the time, any deep interest “in the culture or politics of their homeland” (Handley, 2006: 66).

Thailand had just emerged from World War II by the time of Ananda’s 1945 return to the country as a monarch. It was a country that had to redefine itself from its vacillating stance during the war. Initially in support of Japan during Field Marshall Phibun’s first tenure from 1938 until 1944, the country then entered a liminal period as successive prime ministers attempted to position Thailand in a post-war period where allied powers and the coming era of *Pax Americana* would have much influence on the country’s nation construction. Royalists, such as Seni Pramoj, also emerged to jockey for power. As a descendant of Rama II, Seni and royalists hoped for a return to monarchy where their privileges could be restored; some of their ilk included those that desired retribution since they were jailed by People’s Party-associated regimes between 1933 and 1939 (Handley, 2006).

The most dramatic event for setting Bhumibol on his path toward destiny, however, was his brother’s death on 9 June 1946, a nationally painful and sensitive incident that remains unsolved to this day. Royalists and regents who prepared the foundations for Ananda’s constitutional rule to be yet another iteration of a Buddhist king harking to the Sukhothai’s *dharmaraja* tradition – the Buddhistic orientation of righteousness, compassion and piety – now selected the eighteen-year-old Bhumibol as their new monarch: “Within hours, the bright, often smiling and joking prince, more interested in European cars and American jazz than anything Thailand had to offer, would be named king of a country in which he had spent less than 5 of his 18 years” (Handley, 2006: 76).

The coronation of King Bhumibol took place on 6 May 1950. With Queen Sirikit at his side, Bhumibol would now leave his European geographical womb behind, slowly finding his place in Thailand as the country’s head of state. His brother’s death was not the sole crisis of his tenure, however. The episodes of the bloody trinity years of 1973, 1976 and 1992 where many students and civilians were killed by various hyper-nationalist factions as well as the military and police, were only alleviated when the king, according to royalist narratives, successively intervened to save the country from unravelling. The propagandistic spin of royalist narratives continues to assert that the king is the Thai people’s stoic, interventionist and activist monarch, one who justifiably should be revered as a sacred leader. Born in 1927, the king has been Thailand’s head of state for more than six decades. He is one of the most powerful constitutional monarchs in the world today. The king is also shown to be a respected historical figure on the world stage. Even as recently as May 2006, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan presented King Bhumibol with the inaugural United Nations Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award (UN News Center, 2006), a milestone that was given huge media coverage in Thailand.

Royalist narratives also paint King Bhumibol as a renaissance monarch. He is said to be an accomplished alto saxophonist and composer. The king also holds rain-making patents for processes intended to alleviate drought conditions in rural regions (BBC News, 2003). The monarch is also acclaimed as an accomplished yachtsman and small sailboat designer (Handley, 2006). The king’s personality attributes are shaped by the royalist account in ways that render him as “great and gifted,” with the resulting glorification becoming “a powerful force in promoting the

monarchy” (Hewison, 2008: 196). As such, donations to the king and royal foundations set up by members of his family have become a means to acquire status, particularly for big businesses, as they show a link between the donor and the king; indeed, a large number of royal development projects are funded by the middle and upper classes of Thai society (Jory, 2001; Porphant, 2008; Thak, 2007). The investment branches of the monarchy based on land, banking and infrastructural development have also augmented some of the royal development projects. However, Thongchai (2008: 21) reminds us that “the truth about these projects, and their successes and failures, will probably remain unknown for years to come, given that public accountability and transparency for royal activities is unthinkable.” What is known, however, is that King Bhumibol is exceptionally wealthy: in 2008, *Forbes* issued a report titled “The World’s Richest Royals” that lists the king’s worth at US\$35 billion (*Forbes*, 2008).

Another rarely explored aspect of King Bhumibol’s staying power relates to a key royal institution, the Privy Council, and its significant role in strengthening his rule. Since its 1874 inception by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), the council has grown from including only senior members of the extended royal family, to becoming too large for its own good under King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), evolving again into a “super-cabinet of princes” under King Prajadhipok (Handley, 2008). Since the 1970s, the Privy Council has included commoners that function as a “bridge to society” (Ockey, 2005: 121). It is a secretive advisory council where, Ockey (2005: 120) claims, its members are “ordered to give their opinions, even if the opinion conflicted with the views of the monarch.” The council is, according to Montesano (2006: 6), “a low profile institution about which few Thais knew much.” Because the Privy Council could not effectively root itself after the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932, it was replaced with a Regency Council and an informal court that attended to royal matters when the young Ananda was primarily living abroad with his brother Bhumibol (Handley, 2006; 2008). It was reinstated a year after the present king ascended to the throne. The Privy Council’s strategic orientation tends toward reappointing pro-royal politicians ousted from the civilian-based parliament, that is, “losers in political struggles,” along with retired generals and judges, back into the court (Ockey, 2005: 123). It may not be a surprise that influential royalists during King Bhumibol’s youth, Prince Dhani and Prince Rangsit, concluded their careers as heads of the Privy Council.

In its current iteration, the Privy Council can “take on the informal extra-constitutional role of the monarch as well” (Ockey, 2005: 123). The staffing of the council is consistent with Weber’s description of traditional authority recruitment characteristics based on: (a) persons in relations of purely personal loyalty, such as all sorts of “favourites;” (b) persons standing in a relation of fealty to their lord (vassals); and, finally, (c) free men who voluntarily enter into a relation of personal loyalty as officials (Weber, 1978: 228). Since the 1960s, the council fostered increasingly stronger networks to Thailand’s entrepreneurs and rapidly expanding middle classes, as well as other loyalist politicians and political parties in the civilian government. These groups would ultimately constitute the strata supporting the overthrow of Thaksin in September 2006 (McCargo, 2005; Ockey, 2005). Through the Privy Council, royalists and their networks have been able to construct the monarch as apolitical and transcendent from the cacophony of participatory politics,

while simultaneously entrenching his power in the country (Morell and Chai-Anan, 1981: 271). This allows King Bhumibol to claim a “‘super mandate’ from the people, one that trumps the electoral mandates of political leaders” (McCargo, 2005: 505).

To put into perspective the kind of historical and political stimuli witnessed by a monarch that has ruled for over six decades: the king has seen numerous *coups* and attempted *coups*, constitutional changes and military machinations that have at times benefited only the despotic strongmen at the expense of the population, while during other periods benefited his own rule. He was and continues to be succoured by Machiavellian royalist sycophants who have ensured the survival of his reign and the royal family. The king continues to observe and be deeply involved in a developing and highly conflicted participatory politics that may, ironically, steer Thailand away from royalism when he passes. He has also witnessed the country endure the conflicts between political forces of the left and right and military factionalism – with acute crises of bloodshed directed against the Thai people in 1973, 1976 and 1992. The king has also seen conflict between the peasant-based communists and nationalist paramilitaries that fought in his name, ultimately proving US foreign policy proponents of the domino theory wrong, insofar as Thai nationalists are concerned, even though communism enveloped Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The king has also seen the country experience the 1997 financial crisis along with its economic resurrection. He also controversially legitimated the *coup* in 2006 that removed the autocratic yet popularly elected Thaksin, allowing another iteration of military rule and the reincarnation of the military’s formerly declining political role. During the celebrations of the king’s 60th year on the throne in June 2006, a surfeit of pomp and pageantry spanned a five-day celebration where a gathering of kings and queens from over a dozen countries attended. Tens of thousands of Thais in their yellow shirts – the birth colour of Bhumibol – congregated outside Bangkok’s Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall to see their king and queen. Even today attendees at movie theatres must stand for the royal, *not* national, anthem before the showing begins. Every evening, all Thai television channels are required to televise, for 15 to 20 minutes, the day’s activities performed by royal family members. To have achieved such power required the monarch and royalist networks to harness primordial themes that amplify the king’s sacrality.

Primordial Royalists, Themes and Practices

In the post-1932 era of Thailand without absolute monarchy, King Bhumibol, royalist networks and the ostensibly weakened institution of constitutional monarchy, was none the less still able to revitalise simulacra of historical glory to construct monarchical sacredness. The process of *explicitly* reconnecting monarchy to a glorious Siamese past is conventionally accepted to have begun under General Sarit. Sarit’s ensconced but brief rule included greater promotional activities and accommodations for royalist imperatives, setting a precedent in its sloganeering of royalty that would last long after his death in 1963.

However, to assess Sarit’s legacy we need to begin with his predecessor and ideological rival, military man Phibun who, during his second tenure from 1948 until 1957, also greatly promoted cultural revitalisation through propagandistic plays, performing arts, notions of filial piety, Buddhism and citizenship. Yet, Phibun’s

nominal support of the monarch and monarchy meant that primordial simulacra were connected to the state, not the royal family (Handley, 2006; Thak, 2007). This is not surprising since Phibun and his generational ilk, which included the left-orientated Pridi Banomyong, belonged to the People's Party revolutionaries that ended absolute monarchy in 1932. These quasi-republicans of the left and right controlled the Buddhist clergy and built new temples on their behalf, "with the resulting virtue and merit no longer accruing to the throne" (Handley, 2006: 57). People often made offerings at shrines that had representations of the king, Buddha and a constitution "sometimes placed higher than the other icons" (Handley, 2006: 57).

During the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s anti-royalist and republican sentiments strengthened as "sections of the Thai press criticized and satirized" their kings "mercilessly" (Jory, 2001). According to Jory (2001), representations of monarchs virtually disappeared from the Thai political scene between the 1930s and 1950s. These dynamics accompanied the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 and the eventual abdication of King Prajadhipok in 1935. When Bhumibol later ascended the throne, Phibun at the time felt no desire to ingratiate himself to the new boy monarch. He confined the young Bhumibol within Bangkok, while images of the monarch and his queen were banned from being displayed in people's homes and government offices (Handley, 2006; Jory, 2001). Yet the institution of monarchy was hardly stagnant as aristocrats and royalists continued to nurture the ideological legitimacy of kingship by extending the constitutional role of the monarchy throughout the 1940s (Connors, 2007). Sinister approaches were also employed: during February 1935 there was an assassination attempt on Phibun; before the year ended Pridi and again Phibun both experienced assassination attempts, which "clearly had royalist backing," while plots to assassinate both were again uncovered in 1937, followed by three royalist-backed attempts at Phibun's life in 1938 (Handley, 2006: 58).

By the late 1940s, Prince Rangsit and Prince Dhani, the latter a "scholarly recorder of royal history and ceremony," slowly revived rituals that were discontinued under Phibun (Handley, 2006: 83). Dhani had given a lecture on Siamese kingship to King Ananda and Prince Bhumibol in March 1946, when he invoked anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski:

A society which makes its tradition sacred has gained ... advantage of power and permanence. Such beliefs and practices ... will have a 'survival value' for the type of civilization in which they have been evolved ... they were bought at an extravagant price, and are to be maintained at any cost" (cited in Handley, 2006: 67).

The fact that Dhani was able to make the "Western" Malinowski fit his narrative did not preclude Dhani from criticising constitutional monarchy as a "foreign conception" and primogeniture as an "imported Western concept" that created succession problems. Later in life, Dhani continued to maintain that traditional Thai methods for selecting a monarch were, in essence, democratic because it was not "automatically governed by primogeniture" (the catch was that the king could be elected only by a grand council, not the people) (Handley, 2006: 83-4, 92).

Dhani could arguably be the most explicit instrumental employer of primordialism. Whereas Handley argues that even King Bhumibol exhibits belief systems embedded in cosmological and astrological forces, Dhani emphasised the continuation and reproduction of Brahmanic and Buddhistic rituals that “did not imply that the king was god-like” (Connors, 2007: 49; see also Handley, 2006: 253-4). For Handley, Dhani could not reconcile the mysticism of divine rule with the powerful scientific discourse of modernity. He thus “avoided the mystical issue of royal blood and dynasty” in his monarchy projects (Handley, 2006: 85). After Ananda’s death, Dhani and Rangsit became proxies for the young Bhumibol when he briefly left Thailand to continue his studies in Switzerland. Rangsit conducted the royal kathin and royal ploughing rituals, to be discussed later, on behalf of the king. Rangsit also changed the robes of the Emerald Buddha three times each year, revived Chakri Day on 6 April to commemorate the dynasty and its link to the founding of Bangkok and promulgated the October celebration of King Chulalongkorn Day (Handley, 2006). Dhani and Rangsit’s assembly and practice of primordial simulacra was fused with religion – which itself contained ideal channels for the diffusion of morality, ethnic myths, symbols and ceremonies – to construct the essence of an imperial past (Smith, 1998). Yet Dhani and Rangsit’s efforts to give tradition sacrality would later pale in comparison to Sarit’s efforts.

Although, by 1955, Phibun “extended an olive branch” to the palace and approved royal tours to the country’s destitute north-east region, some of the tours drew large crowds and increased the popularity of the king and queen, compelling Phibun to cancel tours to other parts of the country (Handley, 2006; Thak, 2007). During the late 1950s, Sarit would witness a Phibun government unable to make needed reforms, resolve a rigged election, alleviate the consequences of a detrimental drought in the north-east in 1957 and attend to a corruption scandal involving dams and timber projects. Sarit thus purged Phibun from power on 17 September 1957 and established an interim government under Phote Sarasin, with Thanom heading the Defence Ministry. Viewed as a principled individual and internationally respected, it was perhaps not surprising that Phote resigned from the *coup*-backed administration by the end of December 1957, with speculation that he “did not want to be a puppet” of Sarit’s military government (Thak, 2007: 88). Sarit then assigned his protégé, Thanom, to fulfil the role of prime minister following Phote’s departure. With Thanom still working under Phibun’s apparatus and unable to comply with demands made by members of parliament in the midst of a variety of other political developments, Thanom resigned on 20 October 1958. Immediately the paternal despot staged another *coup* – he called it a “revolution” or *pattiwat* – on 20 October 1958 (Thak, 2007). For Thak, the 1958 revolution was “instituted ... so that political concepts borrowed from the West could be reexamined and re-Thaification implemented” (Thak, 2007: 94). Sarit then sent a message to King Bhumibol, reassuring the then 30-year-old monarch that the “Revolutionary Council will never allow” the institution of monarchy, “representing the nation as a whole” to be altered (Thak, 2007: 97). He further emphasised, “The Revolutionary Council will stand firm in preserving this system ... I would like to give your majesty personal assurances that the new constitution will preserve this particular feature” (Thak, 2007: 97). By the 1960s, royal rituals “fully flourished” and were promoted with much fanfare (Thongchai, 2008: 21).

During Sarit's tenure, he and the Revolutionary Council also sloganeered the indivisibility of the king, religion and the Thai nation. Sarit's rise to power was thus acceptable to the palace since he embodied an orientation unlike the People's Party revolutionaries, civilian politicians and military men who wanted the monarchy to remain weak (Thak, 2007). Moreover, Sarit and his Revolutionary Council won over a contingent of royalists and granted manoeuvring room to the network monarchy in a manner that allowed the military to take a leading role in running the Thai state (Thongchai, 2008). Yet, Sarit's intentions and outreach toward the royal family were not entirely altruistic as he had witnessed how various princes in the network monarchy undermined Phibun. This initially made him cautious about granting royalists generous powers (Handley, 2006: 143). Yet, as his tenure progressed, Sarit's glorification of the palace and his provision of funds for the monarchy meant the paternal despot received legitimacy in return – a crucially needed validation given that he was not a popularly elected leader.

The dedication Sarit and his ilk displayed in glorifying the monarchy during the late 1950s and early 1960s was balanced with Cold War imperatives where Sarit accommodated Western economic advisors and accepted loans from the World Bank and other Western countries. Most importantly, he allied the country with the USA in a manner that positioned Thailand as a bulwark against communism. In spite of this, Sarit had no love of Western ideals (Handley, 2006; Thak, 2007). Sarit's indigenous notion of self-determination ideologically resonated with how the monarchy articulated its role as the one Thai institution that preserved the country's independence from nineteenth-century Western colonialism. Therefore, the monarchy was conceptualised as still being uniquely Thai. In spite of its periodic deviations to engage in diplomacy with England and France during the colonial era, the monarchy continued to sloganeer the need to "love the Thai nation" or *lakkanmuang Thai* (Thak, 2007: 100).

Until his death in 1963, Sarit believed that Thailand's indigenous ideals were sufficient to promote its own form of democracy since "ancient forms of Siamese government were already democratic" and because the monarch governed with the people's mandate (Connors, 2007: 49). Indeed, after overthrowing the previous government in 1958, Sarit proclaimed: "The Revolutionary Council wishes to make the country a democracy . . . appropriate to the special characteristics and realities of the Thai. It will build a democracy, a Thai way of democracy . . ." (Thak, 2007: 101). Sarit was atavistically evoking themes of monarchistic democracy pitched by Dhani during Ananda and Bhumibol's youth. For Sarit, Phibun had led Thailand down a Western ideological path, causing the country's political factions to experience "severe divisions, intrigues . . . and the desire to destroy each other" (Connors, 2007: 101). Sarit would not allow the Thai nation to embark on such a path again. His synchronising of nationalist anxieties with a sacralised king was a shrewd political manoeuvre, since Bhumibol, "fearful of communism and of anti-royal sentiment, became a strong ally of a military that now gave him the deference he required" (Hewison, 2008: 196). The cost of such a revived monarchy was that the Thai parliament would remain anaemic for many decades (Hewison, 2008).

Before his passing, Sarit had become a royal favourite (Connors, 2007). Sarit was the first prominent leader to be educated in Thailand and possessed a rooted affiliation with the country that even the king did not possess (Terwiel, 2005;

Thak, 2007). He granted increased royal control over the palace guards, bolstered the palace budget to 28 million baht in 1958 and financed the refurbishment of Chitrlada Palace where the king and queen resided (Handley, 2006: 144). Hardly a year has passed without a grand royal celebration of one kind or another (Thongchai, 2008). By 1960, Sarit had also intensified the enforcement of *lèse-majesté* laws. He also promulgated King Bhumibol's 5 December birthday as a holiday and made it Father's Day, a tradition that continues to this day. Indeed, by the 1990s, the king's now televised birthday speech had "become a ... royal ritual ... as he ... puts politicians on trial in front of the national audience ... to display ... the monarchy's place 'above' the normal realm of politics" (Thongchai, 2008: 29). The ritual serves to draw the public to "identify ... with the moral authority of the king" (Thongchai, 2008: 29). In his day, Sarit had also organised high-profile military events that bonded the army with the royal family, as in the king's dedication and unveiling of a statue of King Naresuan, the sixteenth-century Ayutthaya warrior to symbolise the Army (Handley, 2006). Both king and queen were then, as now, seen in military attire during ceremonies with the armed forces.

One outcome of Sarit's embrace of monarchy was that Buddhist themes were harmonised with those imagined for an ancient Siam, inspired by the religious ethos of the Sukhothai period (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005; Connors, 2007). Since Sarit, the king and monarchy have been able to freely cultivate notions of a pious ruler, a *dharmmaraja*, who "would bring order, prosperity and peace to the society" (Thongchai, 2008: 28). The notion of the monarch as *devaraja*, a concept that harks back to the Hindu-Khmer view of divine kingship adopted by King Trailok of the Ayutthaya, was also embraced. The syncretism of *devaraja* and *dharmmaraja* with a relational view metaphorically expressed as between father and children, or *pho-luk*, constituted Thailand's unwritten social contract between king and subjects. The *pho-luk* relational view is imagined to hark back to King Ramkhamhaeng of the Sukhothai period. Such a syncretism with all its paternalistic and religious connotations constitutes important primordial diacritica for the modern Thai nation. As a result, politicians and military men could never come close to attaining the moral high ground from where the king is primordially equipped to head the state (Swearer, 1995).

A significant factor in sacralising the king as a merciful and compassionate ruler, one that has endeared him to the population at the level of *saksit* – the level of mystical power (*sak*) and might (*sit*) – is how his sacralisation also creates the essence of *barami*, or virtuous and moral power (Nidhi, 2003). Nidhi notes, in a daring essentialisation, that this is how Thais view power: as natural and indivisible, with the king embodying all facets of this power. During Sarit's tenure and beyond, this power was articulated when the king is said to have promoted 3000 royal development projects in rural areas. Many photographs of the monarch and his queen with villagers in the country's poorest regions, trekking across hilly terrain with a camera hanging from his neck, crossing dilapidated bridges, poring over maps with officials, are used still today to show the king's concern for the welfare of the people. This "moral politics" also included scholarships, assistance offered to poor hospitals and the establishment of nursing schools. In areas that experienced natural disasters, relief and rebuilding followed, apparently supported by the king (Handley, 2006; Thongchai, 2008). The king's humanitarian efforts transformed the monarchy

into the country's "largest charitable organization" (Jory, 2001: 208; see also Handley, 2006).

Royal ceremonies also invoked and reproduced Buddhist themes to enhance the king's *saksit* and *barami*. These rituals, when performed by the king, are framed by royalists as evidence of his *dhammaraja* status. What often surprises casual observers of Thailand is that although every constitution designed after the 1932 Revolution has stipulated religious freedom for all Thais, the monarch must be Buddhist (National Identity Board, 2007). Indeed, virtually all royal ceremonies have Buddhist elements in their rituals (Nidhi, 2003). The intimate relationship between Thai Buddhism and monarchy harks back to a time when it was a "major source of ideas about kings and the relationship between rulers and ruled" (Jory, 2001: 214).

The lavish royal ploughing ceremony is one such ritual as it prepares the land for rice cultivation as well as ensuring a bountiful harvest and abundant rainfall for the annual agricultural year. Claimed to have been practised in ancient times and infused with Buddhist and Brahmanical themes, the ceremony stems from a time when the sacrality of the king was believed to influence weather patterns (Jory, 2001). During the time when Ayutthaya was the main Thai centre, it was officially performed as the *Charot Phra Nangkhan Raek Na Khwan* or the First Ploughing Ceremony (National Identity Board, 2007: 32; Thak, 2007: 212). During the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV), who spent years in the monkhood, a Buddhist dimension known as *Phuet Mongkhon* was added. Although performed by civil officials sporadically since the 1930s, Prince Rangsit rejuvenated its practice in 1949, albeit without the king presiding over its rituals. Under Sarit's tenure, however, it was revived in 1960 with the king's participation. The ceremony has since become an annual event at the historical Sanam Luang field. As the king has aged, the ceremony is now conducted by the Lord of the Harvest or the Crown Prince. Officials and participants in the ceremony, as in many primordialised royal ceremonies, wear period attire.

Discontinued under the People's Party governments, the royal kathin ceremony would be practised again by Prince Rangsit by November 1948, with rituals conducted in the king's name. Sarit revived the ceremony in 1959 with the king's participation. Usually held in October, it is an important ceremony to present robes to Buddhist monks at the end of the Lenten period (*phansa*). The ceremony's roots are again said to hark back to the Sukhothai of King Ramkhamhaeng who is said to have made Buddhism Sukhothai's official religion. During the ceremony the king ritualistically offered monks new robes. In the twentieth century, King Bhumibol performed the rites at various temples throughout the country. For temples outside Bangkok, wealthy non-royals also performed the ceremony alongside royal proxies sent by the king, while in other areas, citizens themselves performed the ceremonies. For the distant temples this strategy "pulled temples and villages into the throne's orbit" (Handley, 2006: 176). The National Identity Board (2007: 35), an institution that promotes royalist heritage, states it more charitably: "To the other temples under royal patronage throughout the country, the King would graciously delegate[s] the responsibility ... to government agencies and the private sector." Whether one refers to the romanticised Sukhothai kathin or the current iteration since its revival under Sarit, royal kathin ceremonies were designed to make Buddhist cosmology central to the monarch's sacrality as a *dhammaraja* and *devaraja* (Handley, 2006).

The 700-year history of the royal barge procession, a spectacle of approximately 50 barges festooned with mystical spirits at their bows, was initially organised for a king's riverine travel to a designated temple. Upon the founding of Bangkok in 1782, the Chao Phraya River became the route for the procession, apparently reviving a ceremony from an Ayutthaya past; the procession was mothballed at the end of absolute monarchy but resurrected again with Sarit's ascension to power. By 1959, King Bhumibol employed it as a riverine means to attend the royal kathin ceremony. When it was revived, a generation of Thais had forgotten its grandeur and, as such, "few Thais had ever seen the colourful display of dozens of long, narrow rivercraft trimmed in gold and decorated with mythical beasts, each rowed by oarsmen chanting paeans to the dhammaraja" (Handley, 2006: 169). Royalists are meticulous in conveying the ceremony's primordial content. For example, the National Identity Board website explains the history of not just the event, but even details the specifications of one of the barges, the *Royal Barge Suphannahong*, that is claimed to derive its spiritual lineage from Ayutthaya. Since Sarit's time, the ceremony is most thematically linked to Buddhism, although the procession is also staged on other occasions, such as the 2003 Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Bangkok and the king's 60th anniversary celebrations.

There are also high-profile and elaborate cremation ceremonies for royal family members. King Bhumibol and royalists performed a lavish cremation ceremony and a posthumous spiritual coronation for the late Ananda when Bhumibol returned from Switzerland in 1950, nearly four years after his brother's death. Funeral publications linked Ananda with the great Ayutthaya warrior-king Naresuan while "every act and detail of the cremation was designed to amplify both dhammaraja and devaraja identities of the king" (Handley, 2006: 108). As the public had not seen such a "large ritual . . . since the 1930s" its affective impact succeeded in reinforcing the continuity of a spiritualised monarchy in the collective consciousness (Handley, 2006: 81). The most recent royal cremation was conducted during November 2008 for the king's late elder sister, Princess Galyani Vadhana. Between 14 and 19 November, following a long official mourning period, the ceremony included the king and the royal family in a variety of carefully scripted acts of ritualistic and spiritualistic reverence. The official website for Princess Galyani also detailed a variety of events that include the lighting of ceremonial incense, giving of alms and gifts to the monks, the actual cremation and the gathering of the relics. At the conclusion of the ceremony the royal relics were transferred

in a procession of honor to the Grand Palace, to be enshrined in a golden urn, placed in a royal hall, with a royal merit-making ceremony held, while the royal ashes are enshrined at a Buddhist shrine in a royal temple in accordance with the royal tradition (Princessgalyani.com, 2008).

The royalist narrative on the Galyani's memorial website provides a historical context:

The oldest royal cremation ceremony in the Thai kingdom was mentioned in Traiphummikatha, or the "Story of Three Planes of Existence," composed by King Thammaracha I, or King Lithai of the Sukhothai period, around 1345,

with a description of a royal cremation for a deceased king (Princessgalyani.com, 2008).

The profundity and mysticism of the ceremony is then shifted toward its overall symbolism for the monarch:

In ancient Thai tradition, the monarch is highly revered as a divine king, a tradition influenced by Hinduism. The king is believed to be the reincarnation of a god. When he departs, concluding his mission on earth, he returns to his heavenly dwelling on Mount Meru, where all gods and goddesses live their eternal lives . . . Rites and rituals for the royal remains are held in accordance with age-old traditions, meant to accord honor in the same manner as when the royals lived, with the royal merit-making ceremony in accordance with Buddhist beliefs (Princessgalyani.com, 2008).

During Sarit's tenure, the royal language of *rachasap*, suppressed after 1932, was revived and advanced (Handley, 2006; Thak, 2007). The language is a fusion of Sanskrit, Pali, Khmer and Thai, supplemented by royal dictionaries that dictate the proper means to address and converse with royals. *Rachasap* effectively elevated and widened the distance between the royal stratum and the population, reproducing vertical relationships inspired by the royal culture of Ayutthaya, reinforcing the notion of patrimonial leadership with the king as the embodiment of a future Buddha (Handley, 2006; Jory, 2001; Ockey, 2005). Even during the 1932 revolt, conservative members of the People's Party, on the verge of a new post-absolutist era, delivered letters to the last absolute monarch King Prajadhipok in *rachasap* with an "air of supplication to a deity," seeking his blessing for the revolt in a manner that still exalted the king's position (Handley, 2006: 45).

Under Bhumibol's tenure, royalists and their networks reproduced Buddhist themes, primordialised ceremonies and a royal language through a beloved monarch, a process that has trumped any civilian politician's economic drives toward modernity and nation construction. As such, economic energies have limited emotional appeal and hardly any cultural depth for Thai general population. Because economic energies are territorially dispersed and "subdivide according to differences in income and skill levels," their propensity for Thai nation construction pale in comparison to a meta-narrative that includes religion, empire, warriors and kings that blur the line between the physical and metaphysical (Smith, 1991: 5). The sacrality generated by the fusion of a Buddhist and imperial discourse when channelled through the king allowed Thailand's traditional authority system to remain intact into the twenty-first century. The reassembly of the Thai monarchy since 1932, and especially following Sarit's military *putsch*, has, for all intents and purposes, succeeded by granting the Thai people an essence of nation.

Reflections on the Legacy of Primordialism

By the time of Sarit's death in 1963, the king and institution of monarchy were revived in Thai society and in the collective consciousness of Thailand's populace. Thus, it came to be that the monarch was able to bestow legitimacy on governments,

which was increasingly widely accepted (Ockey, 2005: 121). Sarit and earlier royalists left behind a legacy where state deference to royalty included perennial commemorations of royal family members or former Chakri kings, as well as special ceremonies such as the 1982 bicentennial celebrations of the founding of Bangkok, all of which continued to add depth to Thailand's primordial simulacra. By the 1992 political crisis, when millions of Thais viewed on television King Bhumibol lecturing the prostrated prime minister and military strongman General Suchinda Kraprayoon and the man the king saw as the leader of the protests against the military's political plans, Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, the king had pulled almost all of Thailand's political forces within his orbit: the military had shifted their alliance to him, Buddhism continued to be intertwined with monarchical righteousness and "Thai democracy" was constructed as contingent on a nation led by a monarch (Handley, 2006: 135). Ockey (2005) notes that this is one of the most overlooked achievements by King Bhumibol: the harnessing of monarchy, through carefully cultivated networks, that led Thailand toward a path of greater monarchistic nation construction. The institution of Thailand's constitutional monarchy is today not weaker but stronger than it has ever been: King Bhumibol ascended the throne as a vulnerable ruler, with "little institutional support," yet a "future monarch will come to the throne with the assistance of large numbers of personnel and experienced advisors with their own ability to influence the Thai state and society" (Ockey, 2005: 123). Nidhi (2003) is more cautious, conceding to a strengthened monarchy, but less certain about the infallibility of the next monarch who has immense pressure to uphold the standards of King Bhumibol.

My view is that a deeper appreciation of King Bhumibol's staying power and his strengthened traditional authority stems not only from the monarchistic networks identified by McCargo (his examination, although incisive, emphasised mostly political machinations, strategies and manoeuvres by royalists and the palace in the late twentieth century), but from monarchistic networks that have since the end of absolutism engaged in cultural construction of the sacred nationalist in its material, aesthetic and institutional forms. As a result, the primordial themes laid by the royalist networks have naturalised Thai ethnocentrism and nationalism – which begs the question: as a sociological type, will network monarchy have any colligating utility for examining the staying power of the *next* monarch? This is a critical question to which I hope to provide some cautious considerations.

At this historical juncture, with the king now well into his eighties, there is increasing concern about the country's future without their monarch. Although a crown prince awaits his time, the vast majority of the country's population has known no other king than Bhumibol. In his long reign, Thailand has emerged as a regional Southeast Asian power in spite of the social and political paroxysms that have cut into the chronology of its twentieth and twenty-first century development. Identifying *when* and *how* Thais discern monarch and monarchy from the conflation of both entities afforded them under the security of King Bhumibol's long tenure, will be pivotal in providing insight into the future of royal rule. As Suny (2001) insightfully observed, although primordialism and essentialism have succeeded in doing the hard work of reifying the nation, an unanticipated consequence could be that mainstream Thais may well forget their own authorship and agency in the

world. Additionally, unless the next monarch and royalist networks are perceived as an overarching moral force that can override, negotiate with, or directly confront the increasing cacophony of Thailand's postmodern stimuli – be it globalisation, separatist identity politics in the south of the country, attending to a resurgent Cambodian nationalism, the infusion of global humanist discourses, such as human rights, gender inequality, ecosystemic issues and the hyper-diffusion of information in humanity's newest site of narrative construction: cyberspace – the reliance on upholding a social contract revived and reconfigured during the Cold War will lose momentum, no matter the planning and Machiavellian machinations of the next king and his royalists. Lastly, Thais will soon have to recalibrate their views of nation construction given the likelihood of Thaksin's return to a country where a loyal constituency continues to sloganeer the merits of his populist leadership.

How much longer Thailand's traditional authority system can withstand being punctured by the aforementioned cultural and political diacritica remains to be seen. A final consideration assigns weight to regional and geopolitical currents outside the country since these forces have successfully equipped nationalistic narratives of fear. *Fin-de-siècle* colonial interference, subsequent permeation of Western ideologies and its influences on Thai modernists ultimately resulted in the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. It would be shortsighted to discount the capacity for future geopolitical forces, whatever they may be, to drastically overwhelm strategic planning by the country's future monarchy and its royalist networks. Were these forces to create internal crises, given how crises drastically alter social relationships and configurations (Fong 2008a; 2008b), the monarch's interventionist capacity to invoke other dormant, yet unifying, nostalgia will be crucial. Royalist historiographers have defined the staying power of the monarch and the Thai nation as one based on weathering crises that had befallen Siam and modern Thailand, most of which have their origins purportedly from outside the state. Thais inculcated with this narrative will expect their monarch, not any ostensibly corrupt prime minister, to rise to the occasion for future crises.

Thai nation construction will continue to be a process that takes place in an arena of competing narratives where the most "moral" nationalist, with a repository of primordial themes, wins (Suny, 2001). Hitherto the privilege belongs to the sacred nationalist, King Bhumibol, and his royalist networks. They continue to reproduce a meta-narrative of a Thai nation that offers the Thai population not only the hopes of sacrality, but what Cambodian scholar, Leakhena Nou (2006: 27) identifies as "indigenous perspectives of stress." Fascistic military men with their guns and tanks evoking martial glory, along with civilian politicians viewed by the Thai people as avaricious, cannot yet compete against a sacred nationalist, his royalistic networks and institution of monarchy. The resulting meta-narrative then is that a pious and righteous king has succeeded in guarding the nation from communism, fascism, liberalism and corporate capitalism. The king is father of the nation, a patron of Buddhism and one who has saved the country when the aforementioned trajectories turned anomalous for Thai society. There is, indeed, a national essence that must be protected, as royalists have alluded to perennially: were it not for the king and religion, communists, liberals and greedy politicians would have led the country to ruin. The Thai king as a sacred nationalist has thus led the nation through the flawed Utopian promises of modernity. The issue is not whether Thailand is or is not a

guardian state: for King Bhumibol and the royalists who nurtured a large cauldron of primordial depth, dispersed across the present for continuity and across time for immortality, it has *always* been.

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