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## *State and Religious Ideology in Nineteenth-Century Thailand*

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In Thai society, the monarchy has owned special status for a long time. An influencing factor which had an impact on the perception of the monarchy in traditional Thai society is religious concepts of kingship. This paper studies the use of religious concepts to support royal legitimacy in nineteenth-century Thailand and its changes.

### *1. Conceptions of kingship*

Traditional conceptions of Thai kingship generally are divided into three frameworks. The first is the *paternalism* or the king as a father to the people. This is the purest and most ancient form of kingship of Tai people. It was established in the late thirteenth century. Subsequently, the adoption of Theravada Buddhism saw the blending of the benevolent principle of paternalism with Buddhism.

The second framework is Buddhism: the *dhammaraja* or a king of righteousness. This framework is a widely accepted ideal of kingship among Thai monarchs and has been used politically throughout all Thai kingdoms. According to this framework, the king is broadly regarded as the *cakravartin*<sup>1</sup> and the *bodhisattva*.

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1. Sanskrit: cakravartin; Pali: cakkavatti; Thai: *cakkraphat*; Burmese: *setkyamin*. *Cakravartin* is compounded from two words: *cakra*, a wheel or circle, and *vartin*, one who turns or abiding in. Stanley L. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Conception of Universal King and Its Manifestation in South and Southeast Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1987), 1.

### *The cakravartin*

The *cakravartin* is a mixture of Buddhist and Hindu concepts. The *cakravartin* (a universal king) means a ruler who sets the wheel of *dharmma* rolling and rules over the world through kingly virtues; another meaning came from a militaristic ideology, in which a ruler proved his power through warfare.<sup>2</sup> In Buddhist belief, the *cakravartin*, Lord Buddha and bodhisattva are regarded almost equally because their great qualities are rare in the real world.<sup>3</sup>

### *The bodhisattva*

In a Theravada Buddhist society like ancient Thailand, the king was regarded as the *bodhisattva* who blessed people with peace and fertility. It is accepted that a king was full of *barami*. This word has two meanings. Firstly, *barami* is understood as karma or Buddhist merit. In the Buddhist concept of karma, a man becomes king because of his highest merit in a previous life. In Thai tradition the king is the only person who holds Buddhist *barami*. Thus, one of the most essential duties of Thai monarchs is Buddhist patronage to accumulate and increase his virtue in the present life in order to be a *bodhisattva* in his next life.<sup>4</sup> The second meaning of *barami* is charisma which earns people's respect and admiration, including fear. This charisma can be held by common people such as monks, scholars, and political leaders.

The third is the Hindu framework. Although the Thais were already Theravada Buddhists, the Hindu framework of kingship, called the *devaraja*, from Khmer Angkor which emphasized the divine element of a monarch was adopted into Thai society in the fourteenth century. Forms

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2. J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 60, 123–128; Stanley L. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 102–111; Sunait Chutintaranond, “Mandala, ‘Segmentary State’ and Politics of Centralization in Medieval Ayudhya,” *Journal of the Siam Society*, 78, no. 1 (1990): 89–100.
  3. Tambiah, *World Conqueror*, 96 and Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship*, 60.
  4. Criag J. Reynolds, “Buddhist Cosmography in Thai Intellectual history,” in *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 205–206.

of court etiquette and Hindu-Brahman rituals from ancient Khmer were applied to represent royal divinity. These practices placed Thai monarchs behind a wall of taboos. For example, people were not permitted to look upon the king's face and to address the king's personal name. Because of their divine elements, Thai kings had power of life and death over their officials and subjects.

However, there were different elements between Khmer and Thai kingship. That is, the belief of divine kingship in Thai tradition was a mixture of Buddhism and Brahman-Hinduism in which the Buddhist influence was stronger than Hinduism. Thus, the king's supreme authority was limited by Buddhist kingly virtues.

It can be said that the Buddhist conception of kingship is the most important factor which influenced special status of Thai king. The notion of Buddhist *barami* was a resource of legitimacy of Thai kings. Religious concepts and culture were utilized as political tools to support and represent royal authority, divine element, and the virtue of the king. Religious and cosmological writings were also applied to arrange social and political stratification in which the king was at the center and the top of the kingdom.

## *2. The relationship between state and religious ideology*

### *State and religious ideology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries*

In 1782 a new dynasty, the Chakri dynasty, was established. At the beginning of the new kingdom, the political situation was unstable. Also, the new king, Rama I (r. 1782–1809) was not royalty, but he came from the noble class. Thus, he applied religious ideology to legitimize his authority. Many activities of Rama I reflected the relations between religious ideology and politics. For instance, from the point of view of moral legitimacy, the personal virtue or *barami* of the ruler was promoted. Rama I portrayed his reign as one of restorations. He announced the restoration of *dhamma* which meant the restoration of justice, peace and order. Rama I issued laws emphasizing morality to represent his image as

a religious philosopher and as a *bodhisattva* who bestowed moral teaching upon his people. In each regulation, Rama I cited religious principles and his status as the *bodhisattva* to endorse his secular laws.

A contemporary religious writing interpreted the ascension of Rama I as the restoration of *dhamma* from the previous period of *athama* or “without *dhamma*.”<sup>5</sup> Three outstanding works of Rama I which confirm the restoration of *dhamma* included the Tripitaka restoration of 1788, the composition of a cosmological work, Traiphum, and the law code revision of 1805. The Traiphum of Rama I emphasized the central role of the king and the state in maintaining a hierarchical, Buddhist moral order. It also expressed familiar Southeast Asian aspirations of world conquest, in other words, the concept of *cakravartin*. Practical use of this notion was made during military campaigns.<sup>6</sup> Besides stressing religious and cosmological ideologies, Rama I emphasized his secular accomplishments, such as, the protection of the kingdom and taking care of people. He also revived the religious and secular rituals of the old kingdom, Ayutthaya (1350–1767), to restore the sacred image and cosmological legitimacy of the monarch. Also, the revival of ancient rituals promoted the king and the new kingdom as the descendant of the Ayutthaya kingdom. This helped to support the natural legitimacy of the king.

Religious concepts of kingship were also utilized to legitimize secular affairs of the state. For instance, Thai kings applied the concept of *bodhisattva* in taxation. According to this notion, the king was the *bodhisattva* who was collecting merit to become Lord Buddha in his next incarnation. Paying tax to the king was interpreted as the support of the king’s making merit. The *devaraja* concept was quoted in taxation. Because the king was regarded as a semi-god, his command carried the same degree of authority as commands given by Lord Buddha and gods. The subjects must follow royal commands. The state thus claimed the authority of taxation. It can therefore be said that Thai monarchs applied concepts of kingship to govern people, possess legitimacy and privilege.

5. Lorraine M. Gesick, *Kingship and Political Integration in Traditional Siam, 1767–1824* (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1976), 111.

6. Reynolds, “Buddhist Cosmography.”

### *Changes in State and Religious Ideology in the mid-nineteenth century*

In the early nineteenth century, Thai kings emphasized being *bodhisattva*. One of the most important duties of the king was teaching *dhamma* to all inhabitants of the kingdom to avoid sin and create/build merit. Then, in the mid-nineteenth century there were many changes in the relations between state and religious ideology.

#### *a) A starting point of changes*

The mid- nineteenth century in the reign of Rama IV or King Mongkut (r.1851–1868) was the starting point of changes in the use of religious ideology in politics. This change came from several factors, namely, Western imperialism, modernization, and internal politics both lacking political power of the king and political influence of powerful noble. Modernization and diplomacy were the responses to Western imperialism, while the expression of royal dignity was the response to internal challenges. Both internal and external factors had an effect on the use of religious ideology in politics which can be seen from changes in the image of the king.

The first change in the king's image is from a divine king who emphasized the magical and supernatural rites of Brahman priests to the defender and supporter of Buddhism. The king represented him as the *dhammaraja* rather than being the *devaraja*. It can be stated that because the majority of Thai people were Buddhists, Rama IV's use of Buddhism was a part of his effort to appeal to the public. Also, because of his diminished political power, he relied on Buddhist *barami* to advance his dignity in the eyes of ordinary people and no longer just the court. He always referred to the Buddhist concept of kingship to demonstrate his virtue as the highest ruler of the kingdom. In his relationship with common people, Rama IV incorporated "paternalistic" elements into his image. He emphasized his image and role as the source of justice and his care for the people's well being.

Another new image of Rama IV was that of the modernizing king. This image is the response to Western influence and Imperialism. Also,

civilization, considered as a new world order,<sup>7</sup> influenced Rama IV's thought. Rama IV wished to make Siam a civilized nation on par with the West. He considered Westernization necessary for Siam's independence. New attitudes toward civilization were demonstrated throughout his practices. Old rituals and old beliefs were changed. Moreover, Western knowledge attacked traditional Buddhist cosmography. Rama IV rationalized Buddhism to be "true Buddhism"; and in 1868 the king predicted the appearance of a solar eclipse by using Western knowledge and instruments to calculate in accurate detail to prove his knowledge and credibility.<sup>8</sup> The accuracy of this calculation by using modern knowledge of astrology might change the king's image to be what Thongchai called "a modern *cakravartin*."

### *b) A period of considerable change*

The use of religious ideology to strengthen the Thai state and monarchy changed significantly during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V (r. 1868–1912). This change was influenced by imperialism and colonialism. Rama V and the modernizing elite had thought that Siam's survival in the modern world involved the preservation of the king's dignity according to standards of Western civilization. Thus, their desires were an adoption of Western civilization and modernity to "civilize and modernize" themselves, to maintain the prestige of the dynasty and of the Thai king, and to be equal to Westerners.<sup>10</sup> In this period, the monarch's image was transformed to be a modern and civilized king who was full of benevolence as dhammaraja and as the father of people.

Many changes and practices based on Western notions and Western modes of life were practiced. Maurizio Peleggi's study shows that the investment of Rama V's court in royal paraphernalia, arts, architecture, and public rituals by following European culture was to

7. Thongchai Winichakul, "The Quest for 'Siwilai': A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam," *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (August, 2000): 533, 539.
8. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 102.
9. Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 57.
10. Thongchai, "The Quest for 'Siwilai,'" 533–534.

represent civilization and modernization of the royal elite, to enhance their self-confidence and to convince themselves of being modern<sup>11</sup> and to promote the “public perception of the Chakri dynasty as a member of the world royalty.”<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the king’s image as a human ruler was emphasized. Many activities brought the king and his people close together. The king’s provincial tours and his excursions around Bangkok’s boundaries made him well recognized by his subjects. News and other activities of the king were much publicized in newspapers. Numerous pictures of the king were published through postcards and newspapers. Furthermore, the development of transportation, especially railway networks, encouraged people in remote areas to offer an acknowledgement and appreciation of the monarchy.<sup>13</sup> It was the first time that people in remote areas could own the king’s picture and feel close with their king. As a result, the monarchy increased in popularity; however, its mystique was reduced partially. The king’s personal affairs were displayed to public eyes and some taboos began to lose their mystique, for example, the people were not only permitted to look upon the face of the king, but pictures of the king and royal family members were advertised and picture postcards were written on by senders and were stamped.<sup>14</sup> Although these might be seen as the reduction of the divine element, the king succeeded in his new image as a modern, civilized, and benevolent king.

Also, the old concept of *cakravartin* was attacked and was changed forever. This is because of territorial conflicts with Western powers which had an impact on the cosmological outlook and practices of the Siamese court. The old concept of unfixed boundaries, based on concept of a universal king, was replaced by Western “geography” and the concept of the “map.” These had become powerful conceptual instruments of the transformation the old concept of pre-modern overlord and tributary relationship. This also meant that the old concept of the universal

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11. Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 2–3.

12. *Ibid.*, 31.

13. Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 57.

14. Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, 70–71.

monarch was decreased. However, what the universal monarch lost was replaced by national sovereignty through administrative reform and centralization. The modern nation-state had gained its power through control over a bounded national territory and sovereignty.<sup>15</sup>

Rama V's success in centralization made him rule over the kingdom. It was the first time in Thai history that the king's power was absolute in practice. Royal dignity had continuously increased, with the king presenting himself as the focus of his people's unity and symbol of the country's greatness and glory. Rama V was regarded as a benevolent and modern king. His court became an elegant court by adopting European modes of life.

### *Conclusion*

In the traditional period, religious concepts of kingship had deep influence on Thai politics and on people's perception of the monarchy. Since the mid-nineteenth century, traditional conceptions of kingship had changed because of internal politics and Western influences. These caused changes in public images of Thai kings. The king's image had been transformed into that of a modern and civilized king who was accessible to his subjects and ready to provide aid based on the Buddhist theory of kingship. This transformation was an exercise in state-making in general and in kingly state-making in particular.

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15. Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 95–107; Day, *Fluid Iron*, 104–105.

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