RITUAL SOVEREIGNTY IN SIAM: ROYAL SCRAMENTS AND BRAHMANICAL LITURGIES IN AYUTTHAYA AND RATTANAKOSIN

Saran Suebsantiwongse

Faculty of Music, Silpakorn University, Bangkok 10170, Thailand

Corresponding author: parlinito@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Although Thailand's population is predominantly Buddhist, many customs and traditions are deeply rooted in the Vedic rituals of ancient India; the rites of passage and associated rituals known in Sanskrit as *saṃskāra*s, which are performed in the Thai court, clearly demonstrate this fact. The Indic *saṃskāra*s are sixteen in number, comprising ceremonies to mark different stages of one's life: from birth to death. Similarly, the courtly ceremonies of Thailand have the same functions, but they are also conducted for the benefit of the population and are not limited to the personages of the court. Moreover, Brahmanical rituals utilising Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava hymns from south India namely the Tiruveṃpāvai and Tiruppāvai are also carried out, thus suggesting that Hinduism once played the central role in the socio-religious backdrop in the kingdom. The sources of these rituals, both courtly and public, can be found in *The Royal Ceremonies of Twelve Months* written by King Chulalongkorn who expounds them in great detail. Apart from outlining the significance of rituals and connecting them to the courtly protocols of the Ayutthaya period, Chulalongkorn provides glimpses into the 19th-century royal ceremonies. In the present era, these rituals can still be observed in the palace and are officiated by the court Brahmins who claim ancestry from the early Indian diaspora in the present-day Thailand. Besides presenting the history and practices of Thai Brahmins, this paper also aims to compare the royal rituals with the Indian *saṃskāra*s. Additionally, it aims to highlight the role of Brahmins in the Thai court and how their sacred liturgies ordain the king with the ritual sovereignty in exchange for the royal patronage that supports their livelihood and sustains their existence.

Keyword: Vedic; kingship; Hinduism; Brahmanism; ritual

Introduction

Dubbed by Cœdès (1968), a renowned French historian, as the "Eldorado of the Far East" where its rivers once contained copious amounts of gold, the area known as Suvarnabhūmi or Suvarṇadvīpa has long been a subject of debate. Cœdès is of the opinion that Suvarṇabhūmi reached from the east of the Ganges River - in the area around the Bay of Bengal to present-day Cambodia. It is widely believed that the gold rush attracted waves of Indic migrations to the region as early as the 2nd century CE. Apart from gold, the aims of these journeys were to trade spices, perfume and precious garments, which the travellers took back to sell in India as well as to meet the increasing demand of the Romans who had a taste for luxury goods from Southeast Asia (Singhal, 1969). Consequently, trade brought in Indic cultures and religions. Through archaeological evidence, such as temple remains and religious artefacts, it is believed that Hinduism and Buddhism came to the area roughly around the same time but flourished in different civilizations and periods. Many excavations of Dvārāvatī sites located in present-day Thailand, have unearthed substantial evidence of Buddhist influence, especially through religious objects such as ritual utensils and statues of both Buddhist deities, some bearing Sanskrit inscriptions dated to the 5th century CE. Similarly, a pre-Ankorian iconography of Sūrya (sun-god) also dated to the 5th century CE, which bears a distinctive tunic, short boots and a sash, demonstrates the influence of Scythian Brahman culture from the Middle East (Cœdès, 1968). Nevertheless, it must be noted that Suvarṇabhūmi, Dvārāvatī and the ancient Khmer Empire are not synonymous. Suvarṇabhūmi disputedly denotes a massive area that makes up most of present-day Southeast Asia, while the latter two are periods/civilizations that flourished in the area covering parts of modern-day Thailand and Cambodia which, in turn, formed a part of Suvarṇabhūmi.

The influx of people of Indian origin including Buddhist monks and Brahmins into Suvarṇabhūmi is sometimes referred to as "Indianisation", "Brahmanisation" and "Sanskritisation"[1] (McGovern, 2017). Some scholars

[1] The term was first used by M.N. Srinivas in *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford, 1952). Staal states that 'it is used to mean a process by which a lower caste attempts to raise its status and to rise to a higher position in the caste hierarchy' by means of adopting vegetarianism, teetotalism, the worship of "Sanskritic deities", or by engaging the service of Brahmans for ritual purposes. The term can also apply to ritual and custom, to ideas and beliefs, or to the pantheon (see Staal 1963, 261).

even express the opinion that Southeast Asia was an extension of India. Wolters (1979), for example, argues that the ancient Khmer people believed that they were living in an extended "Hindu World". Moreover, Cœdès states that the early Indian Brahmin settlers were the Śakabrāhmaṇas (descendants of Scythian people) who appear in the early Khmer iconography and epigraphy. Vickery (1998), however, expresses the idea that Brahmins in this region were Southeast Asians who studied the Vedas in India and returned to their native shores to claim a higher status, the writer, therefore, rejects the concept of Sanskritisation. As far as present-day Thailand is concerned, there is no evidence to support the local Brahmins being either Indian or native. But Hindu inscriptions evidently suggest that Brahmanical rituals were practised extensively. The most notable set of inscriptions comes from the 11th century Sdok Kok Thom Temple in Sa Kaew District in the east of Thailand near the Cambodia border. Some scholars consider the Sdok Kok Thom inscriptions to be among the most important inscriptions of the Khmer Empire[2] as they provide an account of twelve kings, going back to Jayavarman II in the 8th-century CE (Cœdès, 1968). They additionally give an account of nine generations of Brahmins from Śivakaivalya, a priest to Jayavarman II, to Sadaśiva who appeared to be in charge of constructing the temple during the reign of Udayādityavarman II. The inscriptions also revealed the rise of the *Devarāja* cult, in which the king is regarded as the divine incarnation of God Śiva or Viṣṇu. According to the inscription: in order to attain this godly-status, however, the king must undergo rituals described as *Vināśikhā Tantra* and must keep a *liṅga* and perform rituals regularly to maintain his powers (Goudriaan, 1985). Thus, like their counterpart in India, Brahmins were indispensable in the pre-modern Southeast Asian courts; their presence and expertise were required to consecrate and perform rituals for the monarch who used them as means to attain legitimacy and the mandate to rule. This process is often referred to as 'ritual sovereignty' as expressed by Geertz (1981) and Stein (1989), who suggest that public displays of rituals performed by priests were tools to create political legitimacy in the kingdoms of Bali and Vijayanagara.

After the fall of the Khmer Empire, Hinduism became the minority religion as subsequent kings adopted Buddhism as the main religion, but some

[2] Also covered a large part of the present-day Thailand.

Hindu rituals continued to be practised alongside Buddhist rituals from the Sukhothai period in the 13th century CE until the Rattanakosin period. As we will see in this paper, these courtly rituals, too, are still being used to demonstrate ritual sovereignty well into 21st century Thailand.

Siamese Brahmins

There is no literature referring to Siamese Brahmins prior to the Ayutthaya period. But there are a handful of literary sources that speak of them and their activities, from the Ayutthaya period onwards. Three texts written between the 16th and 18th centuries, namely the *Chronicle of João de Barros* (1563), the *Chronicle of Jeremias van Vliet* (1638), a poem on the Royal Ceremonies of Twelve months named *Dvādaśamāsa*, and the *Chronicle of Brahmans of Nakhon Si Thammarat* (1735) and the Chronicle of Ayutthaya (1767). In the 19th and 20th centuries, five works mention Brahmins: the story of Nāng Noppamāt, a poem by Sunthorn Phu – *Journey to Phetchburi*, a British report of 1822[3], a report by Prince Damrong and the *Royal Ceremonies of Twelve Months* by King Chulalongkorn (McGovern, 2017).

According to Prince Damrong, there were three groups of Brahmins: from Nakorn Si Thammarat, Phattalung and Cambodia. Phaikaew (2006), however, suggests that there were four and names their branches. The first group is the Horācārya Brāhmaṇas who belonged to the *Ṛgveda* branch and served as official court astrologers. Their main duty was to calculate auspicious times (*muhūrta)* for royal ceremonies. Adhvaryu Brāhmanas of the *Yajūrveda* branch are the second group of Brahmins at the court. They performed various recitations in both Thai and Sanskrit for royal and other religious ceremonies. The same duty was performed by the Udgātha Brāhmaṇas from the *Sāmaveda* branch. The last group of Brahmins, known as Brahman Brāhmaṇas of the *Atharvaveda*, conducted religious discourses and assisted other Brahmins in the palace rituals. Interestingly, the same groups of Brahmins are mentioned in early Vedic texts such as the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* and the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*. The priests served in various rituals including the *Rājasūya* rituals, which include the

[3] John Crawford, a British official, reports that the ancestors of Siamese Brahmins came from the island of Rameśvaram five generations earlier.

main coronation ceremony and sacrifices that would enable the king to achieve a god-like status and, therefore, the legitimacy to rule. As Brahmins generally follow the Vedic precepts ethically, socially and ritually, it can thus be inferred that the rituals that are carried out by the Siamese court Brahmins have roots in the Vedas, although some may have been influenced by Buddhism.

In the Rattanakosin period (1782 CE to the present day), three groups of Brahmins are recorded and the branches of the Vedas seem to have been lost. The first are the Vidhi Brāhmaṇas who are Śaivas and serve as the main priests at the Grand Palace. They conduct or assist the monarch in the performance of various royal ceremonies and hail from a Brahmin lineage of Nakorn Sri Thammarat, an ancient port where ships from India used to make stopovers before journeying on to other countries in Southeast Asia. Horācārya Brāhmaṇas from Sukhothai lineage are the second group. They perform the same duty as official court astrologers as their ancestors did. The third group is the Vṛddhibāṣa Brāhmaṇas[4] from the Cambodian lineage. Their duties are to take care of the elephants and to perform rituals related to elephants such as the *pūjās* (worship) enacted before the capture of wild elephants and during the training in preparation for the animals' employment at the royal court (Kamaek 2007).

Nowadays, Thai Brahmins are not categorised according to the branches of their Vedas or activities as that knowledge seem to be lost or not applicable to the modern world. Instead, they can be identified by their surnames: Sivayabrahman, Thavornbrahman, Chandrabrahman, Raksabrahman, Vedbrahman, Devaratna, Senakalpa, Shankhabrahman, Sucharitkul, Charusena, Chueabrahman, Vindubrahmanakul, Sirivadhanakul, Singhaseni, Svastivedin, Rangsibrahmanakul, Nagavedin, Ratnabrahman, Bhavanganang and Buranasiri[5]. Men born with these last names are entitled to be ordained as Brahmins and must prove that their ancestors were Brahmins. According to my interview with Tran Buranasiri (personal communication, January 2016), he became an official court Brahmin priest after some three hundred years. He traced his genealogy to

[4] *vrddhi* = old, rearing, increasing (of animals) + *bāṣā* = language of, in charge of or it could be interpreted as the Brahmins who speak the old language, i.e. Khmer or Sanskrit.

[5] See www.devasthan.org/board_main.html.

a Brahmin from Vārāṇasī who worked in the court of King Narai (r. 1656-1688 CE) in the Ayutthaya period, only after that he was allowed to be ordained. Nevertheless, most Siamese Brahmin lineages today are hailed from the south of Thailand, hence this maybe why most Brahmanical rituals seem to have more south Indian influence; it is widely believed that the Coḷa navy stopped at a port in southern Thailand before spreading the Indic culture in pre-modern Thailand, Cambodia, Java and the Malay Peninsula. Brahmins in modern-day Thailand are led by the Rājaguru, Chavin Rangsibrahmanakul, they operate from their temple known as the Devasthāna situated at the centre of the Rattanakosin island, close to the Grand Palace. Young Thai Brahmins from the aforementioned last names who aspire to be ordained are trained by the Rājaguru and senior court Brahmins, mostly by observing and assisting with rituals. A few years ago, the Śaṅkarācārya of Kañcīpuram invited a few Thai Brahmin boys to study in India, but due to major differences between Indian and Thai liturgies, the boys were not able to apply what they have learnt from India into the Thai context.

The Royal Ceremonies of Twelve Months

Perhaps due to the decline of Hinduism, no manuscripts concerning Brahmanical rituals from the pre-Ayutthaya period have survived to the present era. Even literary sources from the Ayutthaya period do not give a detailed account of Brahmanical customs and liturgies. However, the most reliable source on these rituals can be found in the book *The Royal Ceremonies of Twelve Months*[6] by King Chulalongkorn (1853-1910 CE) of the Chakri Dynasty who gives a detailed personal account of the Brahmanical rituals performed in the Siamese Royal Court. Most of the names of the rituals mentioned by the king have been changed to Thai names, while a few have retained their original Sanskrit names.

In some of the ceremonies, King Chulalongkorn does not specifically describe rituals performed by Brahmins, but it is assumed that the rituals have their roots in the Indian ones and that Brahmin priests had to be present along with senior Buddhist monks as part of the royal entourage. In his book, King

[6] Originally composed in 1887 for the Vajirajñān Library.

Chulalongkorn also mentions that, according to the *Dharmaśāstra* (law book) of the Ayutthaya Kingdom, there are compulsory ceremonies that must be performed for every month of the year. The list, however, was modified significantly by his father, the ritualistic King Mongkut (1804-1868 CE) who had been a Buddhist monk for several decades before ascending the throne. Some ceremonies were moved around and additional Buddhist rituals were interjected into the Brahmanical ceremonies by King Mongkut to attune to the religious preference of the court. Nonetheless, King Chulalongkorn elaborates on rituals with varying lengths; I suppose it depends on how much he knew about them as well as the availability of material he had at the time as many rituals were already discontinued before the Rattanakosin period. In this paper, I select a number of important rituals, which the king provides with substantial background material and adequate personal observations, at the same time, I omit those, which are of lesser importance or vaguely described.

The first month (December) consists of the royal boat ceremony, which takes place straight after the monsoon season to ward off floods. This ritual was considered to be very important during the Ayutthaya period as the city is essentially an island surrounded by rivers. For the ceremony, the king and his family were dressed as gods and sailed on a royal barge, believing that owing to their presence the water level would decrease and avoid running over the rice fields. This ceremony was discontinued during the Rattanakosin period as the capital city was moved to the present site – Bangkok, which is closer to the sea, and hence floods are no longer a threat to the city's welfare.

The combined Tiruveṃpāvai and Tiruppāvai festival (Figure 1) is the grandest of all Brahmanical rituals in Thailand; the two component festivals are named after the Tamil hymns. In Tamilnadu both ceremonies are celebrated in month of Mārkaḷi (December-January), but are never celebrated together in one place as they belong to different sects. In Thailand, however, the two festivals were originally celebrated in the first month, but they were moved to the second month (January) by King Mongkut in the Rattanakosin period. Tiruveṃpāvai takes place first and is dedicated to Śiva. The ceremony commences with the opening of the door to Mount Kailāsa when Śiva is invited to stay for the entire duration of the 10-day festival. Tiruppāvai dedicated to Viṣṇu, is next celebrated for another 10 days, but on a smaller scale as Viṣṇu, contrary to Indian belief, is

considered to be the "destroyer" of evils as seen in the mythologies connected to his *avatāras* (incarnations); consequently, his rituals must be performed in secrecy. The festival culminates with the "Swing" ceremony (Figure 2) in which a large wooden plank is worshipped along with the sun, the moon, mother earth and the river goddess, Gaṅgā, before being fixed with ropes, hung on poles and mounted by a Brahmin, known as *nālivan*, and a court official. The Brahmin represents the *nāga* while the court official, standing in for the king, represents Śiva: this corresponds to the mythological story attached to the swing ceremony. The story recounts the bet between Śiva and Pārvatī in which the latter doubts the stability of the earth. Śiva proves his point by asking a *nāga* to stretch itself between two trees while he successfully stands on it on one leg as the *nāga* swings about. The imagery of the ritual can also be identified with the image of Nāṭarāja, which represents the cosmic dance of Śiva. Furthermore, the myth also resembles that of the *sumudramanthana* (the churning of the milky ocean) when the gods and the demons battle over the elixir of immortality. The combined festival is the living proof of the Indian/Vedic heritage in Thailand as the priests, although unaware of the meaning, chant the Tamil hymns composed by two of the most celebrated of Tamil saints: Mānikkavāsagar[7] and Āṇḍāḷ[8], with distinct melodies unique to Thailand. Although the Tiruveṃpāvai and Tiruppāvai ceremonies are still performed today, the 'Giant Swing' ceremony was abolished in 1935 as it was deemed too dangerous for the participants who occasionally fell off.

In fact, McGovern (2017) suggests that Tiruveṃpāvai is similar to the Tiruvāturai festival celebrated at the fame Nāṭarāja temple at Cidambaram during the same month. Hence, I suspect this is why the Rājaguru (personal communication) believes that his ancestors came from Cidambaram. Further, it may also explain the presence of a few Coḷa period bronzes of Śiva Nāṭarāja and his consort, Śivagāmasundarī at the Devasthāna and the south Indian undertones in many of the rituals.

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[7] One of the 63 Śaiva saints, Mānikkavāsagar is a Śaiva poet/saint who wrote *Tiruvācakam*, a Tamil hymn dedicated to Śiva. He lived in the 9th century CE.

[8] Known for her intense bhakta (devotion) to Viṣṇu for whom she composed the celebrated *Tiruppāvai*, Āṇḍāḷ, who was active in the 8th-century CE, was a daughter of a prominent Śrīvaiṣṇava saint, Periyāḷvār. She is believed to have attained liberation by merging with the image of Viṣṇu at Śrīraṅgam. She was later canonized as one of the twelve *āḻvārs* (saints) of Śrīvaiṣṇava.

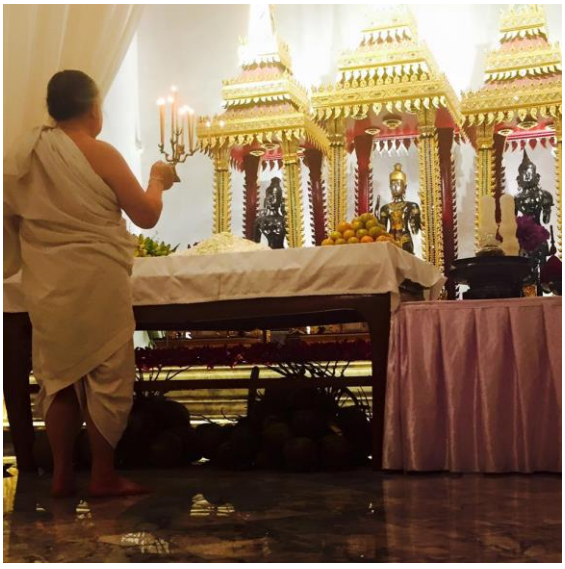

Figure 1: Thiruveṃpavai-Tiruppavai Ceremony, Devasthana, Bangkok
Photo: Saran Suebsantiwongse

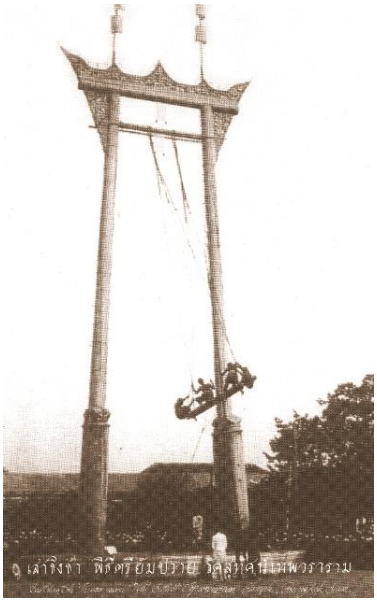

Figure 2: An Early 20th Century Photograph of the Swing Ceremony in the Tiruveṃpāvai-Tiruppāvai
Source: National Archives of Thailand

King Chulalongkorn, however, does not mention another ceremony by the name of *puṣyābhiṣeka*, which according to the *Chronicle of Ayutthaya*, also took place in the second month. The chronicle touches on this ceremony briefly. It says that a *maṇḍapa* (pavilion) is erected and decorated with flowers of seven colours after which the king is invited to sit on the throne and sacred water is then poured over him. In texts such as the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, Bṛhatsaṃhitā* and many *smṛtinibandha* texts (compilations on polity), the *puṣyābhiṣeka*, also known as *puṣyasnāna* and *saṃvatsarābhiṣeka*, is described as the re-consecration ritual that the king should perform every year in order to renew and strengthen his authority and sovereignty. This ritual is a strictly Vedic one and its presence in the chronicle confirms the Vedic precedent in pre-modern Thailand.

There are two festivals in the third month (February). The first being the 'field-burning' ceremony which is no longer practised. It used to take place just before the rice planting season when fire was set on the fields to clear them in preparation for planting in the sixth month. The other is the Mahāśivarātri, which is undoubtedly Indian in origin, but is no longer practised in public by the royal priests. According to the account given by King Chulalongkorn, the ritual seems to have been very similar to the Indian one: the *liṅga* is bathed with a continuous stream of water while various other offerings are made.

The fourth month (March) has only one ritual and that is related to exorcism. King Chulalongkorn thought it had originally come from Sri Lanka; according to his account, the royal family would witness fireworks, artillery displays and 108 gun-salutes aimed at keeping evils and misfortunes from the country.

During the Ayutthaya period when the country was frequently at war with its neighbour, Burma, King Chulalongkorn says that the ceremony of the fifth month (April) played a very significant role as it is the ceremony in which the men of the army pledge their allegiance to the king by partaking of the holy water in front of the throne. King Mongkut, who had kept the ceremony in the same month, combined the ceremony with the annual worship of his newly invented deity, Siam-Devādirāja, the protector of Siam.

Perhaps second in importance only to the Tiruveṃpāvai and Tiruppāvai, the royal ploughing ceremony is celebrated in the sixth month (May). King Chulalongkorn states that literary works from the Sukhothai Kingdom relate that the ceremony was conducted exclusively by the Brahmin priests, acting as farmers and ploughing the royal field with blessed seeds and other auspicious offerings in the presence of the king. After the ploughing, bulls were allowed to wander the fields and eat the offerings; according to the type of offerings they ate, the Brahmins then forecast the weather conditions and the amount of agricultural produce for the coming cycle.

In the 19th century CE, King Mongkut once again introduced a Buddhist ceremony consisting of prayers by the monks into the ploughing ceremony. Furthermore, for the sake of convenience, instead of letting the bulls loose, he decreed that a tray containing the seven types of offerings, consisting of unhusked rice, grass, sesame seeds, green beans, water, and wine be brought to each of the bulls for the prediction. The local tradition dictates that if unhusked rice or corn is eaten by the bulls, it means that agricultural produce such as rice will be plentiful for that year. If green beans or sesame seeds are eaten, it means that animal fodder such as grass will be in good supply. If the bulls eat grass or drink water, it means that food and meat products in general will be easily available. Finally, if the bulls drink wine, it means that there will be a great deal of foreign trade and transportation will be convenient.

The seventh month (June) is reserved for the ceremonial bathing of the king's feet by the courtiers. King Chulalongkorn states that this ceremony has not been practised since the fall of Ayutthaya in the early 18th century CE and that the Brahmins of the Rattanakosin, when asked by him, did not know anything about this ritual. I feel that the model of this ritual may have been influenced by the Guru Pūrnima festival, also known as Vyāsa Pūrnima, which occurs on the full moon day in the month of Āṣāḍha (June-July). This is the day when gurus (teachers) are worshipped by their students who wash their feet (*pādapūjā*).

The eighth month (July) rituals consist of purely Buddhist ceremonies to mark the commencement of the Buddhist Lent period, such as merit-making donations to the monks and the moulding of the royally sponsored wax candle. Although these rituals seem to have nothing to do with the Brahmanical tradition, it is noted that the Buddhist lent occurs at the same time as the *cāturmāsavrata* (four-month vow) performed by *sanyāsīs* (monks) in India when they took a vow to stay in one place for four months during the monsoon season. In pre-modern India and South-east Asia, candles may have been needed most by monks during these months due to the aforesaid restriction. Hence the rituals in the eighth month may have had their roots in the Hindu tradition, and have been gradually transformed over the passage of time.

The Tulābhāra ceremony is part of the ninth month (August) and is clearly rooted in the Indian tradition in which the king weighs himself on a scale against offerings such as gold or rice and donates these to the temples in an amount equal to his weight. This ritual is mentioned in many *smṛtinibandha* texts (political digests), most notably in the *Rājadharmakāṇḍa* of the *Kṛtyakalpataru*. There is no discussion about this ceremony by King Chulalongkorn and he only mentions that in the Ayutthaya Kingdom, the king and queen used to 'kick' the scales before giving the donation to the Brahmins and that the ceremony would end with a grand celebration. Another ceremony taking place in the ninth month is the Varunaśāstra. King Chulalongkorn elaborates on this extensively. He expresses the opinion that in the Sukhothai period, this ceremony was a strictly Brahmanical one, celebrated annually for rainfall and plentiful crops. In the Rattanakosin period, this ceremony became mixed with elaborate Buddhist rituals, but these were celebrated separately though performed for the same goal. King Chulalongkorn states in his work that according to the Royal Gazetteer, the Varunśāstra ceremony is not celebrated annually in the Rattanakosin era; it is done when drought prevails and was performed most often during the reign of his father, King Mongkut.

The tenth month's (September) ritual is called the Bhādrapada ceremony. The Brahmins used to perform *prāyaścitta* (atonement for sins) during that time after which they cooked *madhupāyasa* (sweet porridge) and offered it to the gods. King Chulalongkorn remarks in his book that this ceremony was a purely Brahmin ritual later adopted by the followers of Lord Buddha during his lifetime. Siam's Bhādrapada ceremony is likely to have its roots in India's ancient Pavitrotsava ceremony during which the Brahmins also perform penance.

The eleventh month (October) is reserved for the royal boat competition ceremony. The competition would start after the king had performed a ritual to the river. The twelfth month (November) has a similar ritual to that of the eleventh: it occurs on a full moon day when the king would make offering to the river goddess by floating baskets made with banana leaves and containing flowers, incense and candles on the river. Additionally, lanterns would be lit for the worship of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva as soon as the Pleiades were spotted on the horizon. There is no doubt that this ritual has been influenced by the Indian Krittika Pūrnimapūjā as the mode of worship is quite similar and it takes place on exactly the same day.

Some of the aforesaid ceremonies of twelve months are also recorded in the form of mural paintings, namely at Rājapradit Temple in Bangkok (Figure 3) and Senasnārām Temple in Ayutthaya (Figure 4). Paintings in both places were commissioned during Rāma V's (King Chulalongkorn) reign, but the central royal figure appearing in the scene is of Rāma IV (King Mongkut). According to the Arts in Thailand Database (www.sac.or.th), it is believed that the Bangkok paintings were commissioned before the Ayutthaya images. It must also be noted that the Rājapradit Temple was constructed by the royal command of King Mongkut who made it his personal temple, and King Chulalongkorn probably wished to glorify the reign of his father who was instrumental in bringing back and restructuring the royal ceremonies of twelve months by commissioning paintings.

Figure 3: Mural Painting Depicting the Swing Ceremony in the Tiruveṃpāvai-Tiruppāvai, Rājapradit Temple, Bangkok
Source: Thai Heritage

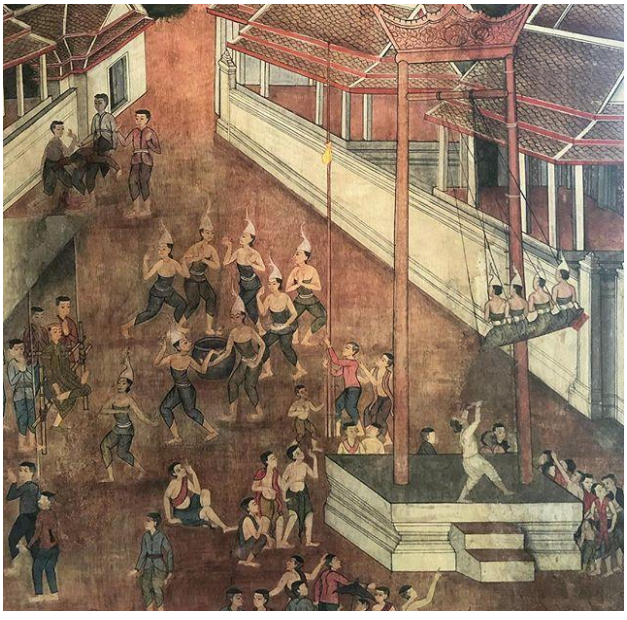

Figure 4: Mural Painting Depicting the Swing Ceremony in the Tiruveṃpāvai-Tiruppāvai, Senasnārām Temple, Ayutthaya
Source: Tirote

Royal Sacraments

Beside the monthly rituals, the Siamese Brahmins also perform *saṃskāra*s (sacraments) rituals for the king and the members of the royal family. The performance of the *saṃskāra*s also attests the fact that the Vedic heritage is prevalent in the country as the rituals undoubtedly have their roots in the Vedic *ṣoḍaśasaṃskāra*s[9] (sixteen sacraments). Not all sixteen *saṃskāra*s, however, are performed in the Siamese court and we know that from the Ayutthaya period until the present day only three *saṃskāra*s, which are always performed by the Vidhi Brāhmaṇas, usually take place.

The first is the tonsure ceremony (Figure 5), a very important ceremony in practice up to the beginning of the 20th century when the princes and princesses, aged between 11-13, were dressed in the full royal attire, accompanied with royal regalia and paraded on a golden palanquin before the turf, which had been kept with them since their birth, was cut by the king to mark their coming of age. The ceremony is somewhat a mixture of the two Hindu *saṃskāra* rituals namely the *cūḍākaraṇa* (tonsure ceremony), which signifies the beginning of the child's cycle of hygiene and cleanliness (Pandey, 2013) and the *upanāyaṇa* (sacred thread ceremony), which marks the child's entry into formal education (Prasad, 1997). Nevertheless, the *yajñopavīta*, or sacred thread is not worn by the princes of the Siamese court during or after the ceremony.

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[9] *Garbādhana* - Pre consummation rites which purify the parents
Puṃsavana - Rites for the carrying mother
Sīmānta - Prenatal rite for the protection of carrying mother and her womb
Jātakarma - Natal rite purifying the newborn
Nāmakaraṇa - Naming Ceremony
Niṣkramaṇa - Exposing the infant to outside world
Annaprāṣana - First Feeding of solid food
Caula - Tonsure
Karṇavedhana - Piercing the ears
Akṣarābhyasa or *Vidyāraṃba* - Beginning of Education
Upanāyana - Opening the eye of wisdom. Lit. bringing near the Guru, scripture and God. Investiture of Sacred Thread.
Vedārambha - Initiation into the Vedic Education
Keśānta or *Rituśuddhi* - Whole body Shave for boys or Nuptial rites for girls
Samāvartana - Convocation or Completion of Education
Vivāha - Marriage
Anthyeśti - Funeral Rites.

In the late 20th century, due to the decline in the number of royal offspring, and to wars and economic crises, the grand tonsure ceremony was discontinued. In the present day, however, the royal family still performs a form of tonsure ceremony when the baby prince or princess is two or three months old (Figure 6). In the ceremony, the king pours a few drops of holy water from the *śaṅkha* (conch) onto the baby's head before cutting some hair from the baby's head. The baby is then placed in a cot and is serenaded by a Brahmin who chants mantras as he rocks the cot by pulling the cord connected to it.

Figure 5: 19th Century Royal Tonsure Ceremony During the Reign of Rāma IV
Source: National Archives of Thailand

Figure 6: 20th Century Royal Tonsure Ceremony
Source: National Archives of Thailand

Although not a part of the *ṣoḍaśasaṃskāra*s, the *rājyābhiṣeka* (coronation) is one of the royal Siamese sacraments and is performed by the Vidhi Brāhmaṇas as part of the coronation ceremony. On the day of the ceremony the king is bathed with sacred water on a specially prepared platform before being dressed in full royal attire and ascending the throne. The Rājaguru, who is the head of all the Brahmins in the country, offers him a bael leaf (*bilva*) which the king places behind his right ear. The king is next offered holy water in his hand and, after he has sprinkled a few drops on himself, the Rājaguru presents him with the grand tiara, which the king then places upon his own head as the ceremony reaches its climax. Like its Indian counterpart, the *rājyābhiṣeka* is perhaps the most significant ceremony for the entire kingdom as it legitimizes the new king's rulership after which he is seen as the *devarāja*, is eligible to use the title "Rāma"[10] and is fit to use the nine-tired white umbrella that signifies that he is the conqueror of all the eight directions. According to Quaritch Wales (1992), the Thai coronation ceremony is in fact the modern representative of the rite of the Vedic *Rājasūya*[11] described in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* and the *Aitreyabrāhmaṇa.*

The last royal *saṃskāra* that involves Brahmins is the royal funeral. After the death of the king, the Brahmins are invited to perform a series of *bhūmipūjā* (ritual to appease Mother Earth) on the spot where the grand funeral pavilion is to be built. Subsequently, they are summoned again to perform a *pūjā* to the sandalwood tree, which will be cut to make an outer wooden urn as part of the fuel for the cremation of the king's body.

After a year of funeral preparations, the body of the king is paraded in a multi-layered urn on a golden chariot pulled by soldiers and led by a senior monk. The Brahmins follow the urn and let their hair down in a dishevelled state, with their necks bent to show grief. The record from the Ayutthaya period compares the Brahmins in the king's funeral procession to grieving angels, who descend to earth to mourn the loss of the monarch.

[10] All Thai kings of the Chakri Dynasty have Rāma as their official title. The present king, Vajiralongkorn (r. 2016 to present) is Rāma X.

[11] A royal consecration ceremony involving many types of sacrifices to establish and maintain the monarch's sovereignty.

Conclusion

From historical records, oral tradition and the account of King Chulalongkorn, we learn that the Vedic tradition from India arrived in pre-modern Thailand more than a thousand years ago. After Thai kings embraced Buddhism, Brahmanical liturgies were adapted, continued and integrated with Buddhist ceremonies and were grouped as part of the *Royal Ceremonies of Twelve* Months from the Sukhothai era to the present day. King Chulongkorn's literary work and artistic commission, which feature the ceremonies, demonstrates the king's interest in the ancient rituals and, thus, underline the continuous significance of Vedic culture in the socio-religious life of the Thai court, despite being somewhat disguised in the shadow of Buddhism. As a matter of fact, King Chulalongkorn remarks that 'it was possibly due to Buddhism's tolerance of other faiths that the Vedic tradition has survived'. The modification of the centuries-old Vedic ceremonies, nonetheless, came with a price. Many rituals, both private and public, lost their originality and some disappeared over the course of time.

According to my own interviews with the Rājaguru (personal communication, January 2016), his forefathers came from the famous Nāṭarāja Temple of Cidambaram in Tamilnadu; I argue that this is maybe why the Tiruvempāvai festival, which McGovern (2017) suggests has its root in the Tiruvāturai festival, seems still to be celebrated more significantly at the Devasthāna than the others. The Rājaguru said that the Brahmins had to adapt for the sake of their own survival. In fact, most profess that they are Buddhist as well as Brahmins. Male Brahmins are allowed to marry non-Brahmin women and they can choose their own diets, but as for the Rājaguru himself, he is a vegetarian. As Buddhists, it is a prerequisite that the Thai Brahmins are ordained as Buddhist monks before their formal entry into the royal priesthood. Their ritualistic texts, too, are laced with Buddhist mantras; this is seen in the contemporary ritual manuals such as *Phrapaenee Thai* and *Brahmājāti*: Hindu mantras are always preceded by the Buddhist invocation of the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha). Finally, funerals of Brahmins are held according to the Buddhist tradition.

On the positive front, it is interesting to observe how royal patronage plays a pivotal role in determining the course of ancient rituals, which have roots

in the Vedas and how they have gradually been transformed since the arrival of Hinduism, mixed with the local animistic beliefs, absorbed into mainstream Buddhist practice and have finally become unique rituals that do not exist elsewhere. The coronation of Rāma X on May 4, 2019, for example, demonstrated that Brahmanical liturgies play the central role in the consecration while the accompanying Buddhist rituals were focused on merit-making. The king was mostly guided by the Rājaguru through series of rituals including the *rajyābhiṣeka*. Finally, after having heard the secret portion of Tamil hymn from the *Tiruvācagam*[12] (with the sound omitted from the live broadcast) that calls for the gate of Mount Kailāsa to be opened, thus acknowledging that the king is god-incarnated, the king then received the crown and all the other royal paraphernalia from the hands of the Rājaguru.

It is, therefore, as shown in this paper, evident that the propagation and the survival of Brahmins in Thailand and their liturgies are dependent on royal patronage, and similarly, the royal institution is dependent on Brahmins for rituals that confirm the divine legitimacy of the rulership. Together, they form a mutual and reciprocal cooperation. Hence this is why Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that has a functional indigenous Brahmin community since no monarchies still exist in other countries. The relationship between the king and the Brahmins in Thailand also resonates the concept of "theatre state" put forward by Geertz (1981) who proposes that the royal power in Bali is essentially expressed in the form of public rituals performed by the priests. As monarchs of a majority Buddhist country, Thai dynasties could have obtained the legitimacy to rule through Buddhist rituals alone, but instead Brahmanical rituals still thrive to the present day. I argue that this is because Brahmanical rituals and sacraments, which the mass of people view as colourful, unusual, extraordinary and sometimes mysterious, can visually and audibly articulate the ritual sovereignty in a more powerful way than Buddhist ceremonies, which are performed frequently and are limited in terms of variety and ritual spectacle. The key to the survival of the Siamese Brahmins also depended on their ability to adapt and transform - 'acting as Brahmins and living as Buddhists' as I call it, earns them a special status and privilege in Thai society where they are respected by the public and favoured by the monarch.

[12] A collection of Tamil hymns by Mānikkavāsagar used in the Tiruveṃpāvai ritual.

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