

**Uniting Thailand:
Cultural Production and National Unity**

by

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Abstract

The main aim of this thesis is to analyze how the Thai government and monarchy have attempted to unify the different ethnic groups within the national territory into a single national culture. In particular, I analyze how history in Thailand has been produced through contemporary moral values to create a collective memory that can unify the nation around the image of the King. I discuss how this produced history and collective memory are disseminated through the Thai popular culture and manifested in images of the monarchy, thereby producing a Thai social imaginary. I then question whether this process has actually unified the nation or created the appearance of unity through directed national behaviours and through the fear of being accused of not being Thai.

The foundation of this work is based in the eight months I spent living and working in Bangkok from July 2005 to March 2006 where I engaged in daily participant observation and basic observation. In January 2008 I went back to Bangkok for two weeks to attend a conference and conduct further fieldwork. On that trip, I met with a number of academics and specialists in the area I am interested in and conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with them. I complemented my interviews with participant observation conducted in different public spaces in Bangkok and with historical, political and ethnographic accounts from relevant academic literature and popular culture sources.

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Foreword

Since I conducted this fieldwork the political situation in Thailand has become increasingly volatile, with the King and *lese majeste* (the crime of violating or offending the dignity of a reigning sovereign) increasingly being used as political tools to justify and empower political movements or even personal disputes. It is with respect to the taboo nature of this topic that I will protect each of my sources' names and gender by giving them an androgynous Thai name and will refer to them all with the same gender label. Furthermore, many scholars, journalists and activists have recently been criticized or even arrested in Thailand for making comments or "criticisms" about the King. It should be made clear from the outset of this thesis that I am not discussing, criticizing or commenting on King Bhumibol, members of his family or any of their ancestors. The goal of this thesis is to discuss the politics and culture surrounding the King. This thesis will look at the process by which the King has become an important, defining and unifying symbol of the Thai people. In short, this thesis will not analyse Bhumibol the individual, but the symbolism of the King as a manifestation of Thai unity and nationhood.

When King Bhumibol took the throne in 1946 the absolute monarchy had been overthrown and replaced with a constitutional monarchy resulting in Bhumibol's status, prestige and respect being nowhere near that of past kings. However, over the course of his reign he has been portrayed as being either directly or indirectly responsible for much of Thailand's development over the last 60 years. Consequently, Thais have come to see him in a semi-divine or patriarchal role. However, the extent of his role in the development of Thailand is not known. King Bhumibol, the ninth Rama of the Chakkri lineage, is protected by one of the strictest contemporary *lese majeste* laws in the world and, thus, no Thai or scholar who cares about his or her career is able to question the validity of what the King has done.

While I knew this topic would be uncomfortable and difficult to broach I was not prepared for the level of public sensitivity surrounding critical discourse of the King – an attitude that was amplified by the fact that the King’s sister died while I was enroute to Thailand to conduct my field work. Each person I interviewed needed constant reassurance that I would not share their name or even where I conducted my research.

One of my main sources actually had a colleague meet me at a subway station and then lead me through a series of alleys for at least 30 minutes to a building that had only two air conditioners, two rooms, a bathroom and about twenty office chairs. While this scene from a spy film may have made me nervous on most days I had the reassurance from a trusted colleague that these were “good people” and “a great source.” I met another important source at a conference center that we were both familiar with. After our initial meeting we went to a far corner of a courtyard near the conference building to a place where our voices would be guarded by hedges, the chirping and squawking of tropical birds and passing cars. Before this interview began, the source asked me if I worked with or was in any way connected to the CIA or the Thai government – a question this source would ask a number of times throughout the interview. Another source, whom I know quite well, was noticeably nervous and at times reluctant to answer any questions. Even though I told this source a number of times it was perfectly alright to skip any questions that caused discomfort, all questions were answered (although at times I was asked to turn off my recorder). Despite the fact that most people were uncomfortable and nervous about making critical observations about the way the King is represented by other people, they felt that this was an important topic that needed to be discussed.

Introduction: Discovering Thai Nationalism

Thailand is well known and stereo-typed as a place with warm waters, sandy beaches, lush jungles, ancient monuments, bustling markets, exotic foods, cheap sex and cheaper cost of living, and, as such, has attracted throngs of tourists and ex-patriots from around the world since the end of the Vietnam War. Indeed, if you were to sit in the Bangkok sky-train on any given day of the year or walk through the Chiang Mai night market, you would experience a cacophony of international voices. Common knowledge to most of these tourists and ex-patriots is that in Thailand DVD movies are very cheap – indeed, if they are an especially astute negotiator, they can buy three DVDs for the price of one rental in Canada. And if they are not aware they certainly will be as soon as they visit nearly any of the many markets throughout Thailand. What is not so well known by many tourists (but certainly by the ex-patriots) is the quality and cheap price of the Thai cinema experience: an experience that I accidentally discovered on my first weekend of my first visit to Thailand – only three days after arriving. However, for a westerner, visiting a cinema in Thailand the experience is more than just a momentary retreat into familiarity – it is, at times, a surreal experience of the Thai brand of nationalism.

That first weekend, one of my co-workers at the NGO Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM ASIA), agreed to help me navigate the Bangkok mass-transit system and take me to a place where I could purchase a cellular phone. We met on the ground floor by the portrait of the King located between the two elevator doors of the apartment building in which we both lived, walked to the *Sutthisan* MRT (subway), and as we came to the escalators that took us underground, we walked by yet another portrait of the King. We rode the train to one of busiest commercial districts in Bangkok, *soi Sukhumvit*, transferred to the BTS (sky-train) and rode it to one of the most popular tourist shopping locations in all of Thailand, MBK. As we exited the train I was instantly drawn into the gaze of the King who watched his subjects (and the visitors to his realm)

from a gigantic billboard that was rooted into the roof of a building. My co-worker walked me to the entrance, told me on which floor I could find the phones, informed me that she had to meet some friends and left me stunned and a little scared in front of what I would soon find to be the most enormous shopping mall I had ever visited. But despite the fear, my co-worker had given me a crash course in the spatial practice of life in Bangkok.

The first thing that struck me as I entered the main shopping part of MBK was the portrait of the King that hung from the fifth floor and dropped down to the second. His gaze was everywhere. After nearly two hours lost in this landmark of what anthropologist Mary Beth Mills refers to as *thansamay* – the constant striving to be “up to date” – I found my way to the entertainment floor and what would become a familiar escape from the heat and the hustle and bustle of life in Bangkok: the SF Cinema franchise (Mills 2002: 5). With its enormous digital screens, crystal clear sound, reclining seats, plentiful leg room, a floor slant that ensured the viewers would not have any of their vision blocked by fellow cinema goers, a constant flow of western films and a ticket price of only 140 Baht (\$3.50), SF Cinemas remains the highest quality and cheapest cinema experience I have ever had. What is more, SF Cinema can be found in numerous locations throughout Bangkok, always attached to a major shopping mall. Despite a price that seems inexpensive to me, for the average Thai it was beyond their everyday means – thereby demarcating the SF Cinema franchise, as with most Cinemas, as a *thansamay* place that could encourage Thais to work hard and maintain the development of the nation.

Coupled with its *thansamay* status, the Cinema is more than just a place to view a film, there are social practices that are attached to viewing a film at the cinema in Thailand. For Thais it is also a space of national production and a theatre of national performance, a place where they can see be reminded of and embody Thainess. As Abu Lughod suggests, the screen becomes a “container” for culture which encapsulates the nation in the moment of viewing, thereby linking places and people

situated within the nation through a collective social practice (Abu-Lughod 2002: 190), which in turn produces social expectations amongst the population.

Every Thai cinema franchise has its own creative homage that demonstrates its respect and love for the King. This practice was introduced in the Kingdom of Siam, just before it became Thailand, shortly after World War I, when British educated Siamese came back and began co-opting British practices of royal commemoration into traditional Siamese practices (Prachatai: April 2008). Over the period that has elapsed since its introduction, it has become a dogmatic practice for Thais going to the cinema. The audience knows that the homage is about to begin as the final teaser ends; the screen goes dark and the only sounds to be heard are the shuffling of clothes and the creaking of chairs as the audience stands to show their respect. Then the traditional anthem of the monarchy, usually played with traditional Siamese instruments, begins. For a short period of time nobody dares speak and nearly everyone is still, their eyes drawn to the screen as the images of their beloved King flash before them, each one speaking to and demonstrating his importance within the Thai nation. Despite the lack of overt movement or social interaction, Thais are engaging in a collective performance of nationhood and, in doing so, inscribing the cinema upon the Thai landscape as yet another place of commemoration for the King. For a foreigner, such as myself, experiencing this for the first time I found it to be a surreal experience.

Compared to other movie theatres in Bangkok, I found the homage that SF Cinema paid to the King spoke the loudest to his role in the federal attempt to unit the diverse ethnic groups that live within Thailand into a single Thai national culture and his role in the development of the nation into a modern, *Siwilai* (civilized), nation state (Winichakul 2000: 528).

Before the screen is lit up with images of the King, the audience experiences the familiar sound of rain hitting the ground, the royal anthem fades in and slowly images of rural Thai landscape

fades in behind a torrent of rain and slowly move across the screen. The rural images show a Thai landscape suffering from a variety of natural disasters that have hit the nation over the years. It is here that images of the King start to appear and float across the screen. Each image shows the King visiting a disaster stricken place within Thailand, walking and driving in places that most politicians and wealthy people dare not go, offering aid to disaster victims and receiving their gratitude in return. These images show the King interacting with a number of ethnic groups from the various regions in Thailand. With each image we see the King getting older and the nation experiencing increased development, until finally the rain ceases and through the clouds the sun emerges shining over a lush green valley while a great rainbow appears as a colourful and translucent bridge connecting each side of the valley. Just as the homage comes to an end an image of the King, deep in thought, appears superimposed within the sun, gazing down upon the landscape. These images and the final scene direct the national imagination and trigger a collective memory and collective knowledge of a King who loves and cares for his subjects and has helped the people to take root in the land and grow stronger, strengthening the nation and bringing together its people within a united national identity. This imagining, when combined with the act of collective standing in respect, engages the emotional, the physical, the auditory and the visual – allowing the audience to not just know and remember, but to embody and feel the King and through him their unity (Marks 2000: 2). But, how is it that the images of the King in contemporary Thailand have come to wield such hegemonic influence and have such omnipresence within the space of Thailand?

Until the mid 1800's royal portraits and images did not exist and no one but nobles were permitted to gaze upon the King. In response to the encroaching colonial powers that crept ever closer to Siam, King Rama IV began to use royal portraits as diplomatic tools to show the world that the ruler of Siam was modern and not in need of civilizing (Peleggi 2002: 45). In 1932 the absolute monarchy was overthrown and in 1939 the Kingdom of Siam was replaced with the nation of

Thailand. This transition sparked fear amongst the nobles that the monarchy would soon become extinct. After the current King, Rama IX (Bhumibol) took the throne in 1946 and finished his university education in Europe, the nobles and the young King, with the help of the United States – who sought to ensure communism did not spread in the region – and a few tactical alliances with high ranking military and political officials embarked on an image making mission to ensure the monarchy's survival. The mission sought to inscribe the monarchy upon the landscape and within the hearts of the people and to unite the diverse groups into a single national culture, with the King as its centre. This goal was empowered by the increasing strictness of the *lèse-majesté* law that instituted rules regarding behaviour and discourse concerning the monarchy. Thus, the proliferation of the photos into the homes of the population, into businesses, along the sides of streets and highways and as part of a cinema homage at once demarcates a space as Thai, inscribes the monarchy as the key component of the Thai social imaginary and creates a panoptic gaze that ensures the reproduction of a Thai national cultural performance amongst the population no matter where they are.

This thesis will be divided into four sections, with each one exploring different angles by which the Thai monarchy has influenced and become the main source of shared identity for the modern Thai nation. The goal of this approach is to show how the Chakkri Monarchy has survived the threat of colonialism in the 19th century and the threat of republicanism in the 20th century and made itself into one of, if not the most powerful, symbols of Thai national identity in the 21st century. This thesis will show how since the 19th century the Chakkri lineage has successfully defined the boundaries of the nation-state and united most ethnic groups within a Thai national culture.

The first section will show how the monarchy was able to create a form of modernity and polity that could be respected by the colonial powers and accepted by royal subjects. I will describe the historical occurrences and interactions that resulted in the Siamese Kingdom, initiating an

international image-making mission to prove to the western colonial powers that they were “modern”, “civilized” and not in need of colonization. This section will analyze how this image making project led to the monarchy utilizing portraits of the King as diplomatic tools to show world leaders who the ruler of Siam was.

The second section will look at how in the face of extinction the monarchy, royalists and King Bhumibol were able to initiate their own image making strategies. Yet, instead of proving modernity to the international community, now the monarchy was trying to prove their relevance to the population of the newly created Thailand. While his predecessors used portraits to show world leaders who was in charge, Bhumibol, with the help of government run propaganda campaigns, state education and popular culture, his images showed Thais who the central figure of the nation is. As a result most of the population of Thailand, despite distinct cultural differences, came to see the King as a semi- divine father figure and as a result he became a symbol of national unity and a key component of Thainess.

The third section will discuss how the production of images by the monarchy inscribed the King within the national epistemology, making him the basis of the Thai *social imaginary* (as described by Charles Taylor). The third section will examine how the monarchy is produced by the state through education and popular culture – specifically his portraits – and reproduced in the day to day actions and discourse of average Thais. This section will look at how the national social imaginary is able to unite most cultural, linguistic and religious groups in the shared experience of daily commemoration and demonstrations of love for the King.

Finally, in the fourth section I will discuss how history, image making and the social imaginary work together to produce a social dogma concerning the sanctity of the monarchy. This section will explain how images of the King act upon the emotions, conscience and collective

memories of Thais to create what Foucault refers to as the 'panoptic gaze' which produces homogenous effects of power resulting in the unification of most cultural groups within the boundaries of the Thai nation state into a national culture.

The Historical Manufacturing of Relevance

“The Only Shared Identity”

All my interviews conducted in Bangkok were set up by a friend of a friend, who will be referred to as Narin. I had begun communication with Narin about three months before I left for Thailand. Narin expressed interest and excitement in my topic and had contact with a number of people from the political left and right that would make good sources. Unfortunately a number of the nationalistic right wing groups, such as “The Village Scouts” and the “Red Gaur” had very few people who were fluent enough in English to sit for an interview. Despite this, Narin spent a great deal of time trying to find a group or an individual from the right with whom I could talk. Until the end of my first week it appeared futile.

My plan was to conduct interviews during my first week in Bangkok, attend the International Thai Studies Conference at Thammasat University during the first half of my second week and then do follow-up interviews and research during my final days. After my last interview, the day before the conference, I had planned on moving into a new hotel closer to the conference and then going to meet with some friends at a restaurant near Thammasat. While I was on the way to my first hotel to collect my gear I got a call from Narin telling me that I had an interview with a retired high ranking member of the Thai military (whom I will refer to as Milt) but I had to go immediately. I wrote down the directions, called my friends to tell them I would be late and took the sky train to MBK shopping mall where I hired a moto driver (motor cycle taxi) to take me to the location. Most of my experiences in Thailand had been with the middle class and the poor, but suddenly I was walking through one of the most lavish complexes I had ever seen. I had to go through two security checks before I was granted entrance and permitted to walk amongst the wealthiest people the world had to offer, each wearing clothes and jewellery that were probably more expensive than a year of my

graduate tuition. After walking past a drained Olympic sized swimming pool and tennis courts, I found my way into a covered veranda with a bar. I asked a waiter if he could point out Milt. He pointed to the far corner of the veranda by a garden where an elderly couple were sitting. I walked over and introduced myself.

Milt hardly let me get a word in edgewise. For the duration of our 45 minute interview Milt basically ignored my interview questions and rambled on at great length about the work he did and its importance. For most of the interview he gave me no usable information, save for a very short answer when I asked him about the importance of the King in the everyday life of Thais. When I asked my other sources this question, most would talk at length about the King's development projects, his musical ability, his moral guidance, his love of the people and innumerable other great things the King has done and continues to do for Thais. However, when I asked Milt, he simply said, "The King is the most important factor in Thai unity," and then continued to ramble about his work. This sentiment was shared by a very excitable Thai friend (whom I will refer to as Saichan) who, in a very fast paced discussion, asked me; "How do we believe in the same nation? What brings us together?" Before I could respond Saichan answered; "For Thais, the King is the only shared identity." However, Saichan also pointed out that as wonderful as the King is, his importance as the unifying factor of Thais has been created; an impressive feat considering the King and the monarchy were hardly known to most Thais living out of Bangkok at the time of his coronation (Bowie 1997: 87; Ungpakorn 2007: 54).

In 1932 the absolute monarchy was converted into a constitutional monarchy and at the time the power, importance and relevance of the Chakkri lineage was dwindling. Even though Bhumibol ascended the throne in 1946 it would not be until the 1960s, when the cold war spilled over into South East Asia with the eruption of the Vietnam War, that the King's importance and presence in the daily life of all Thais became known and felt (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005 xvi; Bowie 1997:

87), which in large part could be attributed to the great financial and military support the US gave to Thailand and the monarchy. How is it then that Bhumibol and the monarchy were able to maintain their existence in the face of strong political and economic opposition? How were they able to re-attain the popularity and religion-like status of such beloved Kings as Rama IV (Mongkut) and Rama V (Chulalongkorn), which had been lost in the first half of the 20th century with Rama VII's lavish and irresponsible spending habits and abuse of power (Anderson 1991: 21; Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 106,111)? Furthermore, how was it possible that Bhumibol and the monarchy were able to achieve something that neither Mongkut nor Chulalongkorn had done? How did Bhumibol and the monarchy become so beloved and influential that he is able to represent the collective Thai identity? In order to answer these questions we must go back to the origins of the Chakkri lineage and of Bangkok as the seat of their power.

Forming Sovereignty

In 1767 three armies from the Burmese kingdom attacked, destroyed and sacked the Siamese capital of Ayutthaya. Shortly after the Burmese armies returned north a wealthy merchant by the name of Phaya Taksin made himself the new king (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 26-27). Believing it to be a wise tactical and economic decision, Taksin moved the capital 80 kilometres south to a swampy region called Thonburi, across the river from the Chinese trading post of Bangkok. However, in 1782 Siamese General Chao Phraya Chakkri (Rama I) and surviving nobles from the Ayutthaya Kingdom killed Taksin and moved the capital across, what is now called, the Chao Phraya River and make Bangkok the new capital of Siam (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 26-27; Simmonds 1982: 275). Resulting from the Chakkri lineage attaining power through the murder of Taksin, I have been told by Thai friends and sources the Chakkri family is cursed and will only endure 9 reigns.

While the setting up of the Chakkri dynasty in Bangkok established the city as the capital of the Siamese kingdom, with the Chakkri family on the throne, it did not establish a nation-state nor did it establish a geographically defined and nationally bound space. Indeed, during the colonial period in the 19th and early 20th century the idea of a nation-state was still novel throughout the world and many European kingdoms or states had yet to attain such status were still coming to terms with the concept. Yet, moments such as the foundation of Bangkok have been written into Thai history books and taught in the Thai education system for nearly a hundred years, and presented as moments of national development leading to the contemporary Thai nation-state and monarchy (Mulder 1997: 44-45). These moments have been “invented” in modern national discourse to create what Liisa Malkki refers to as a “Mythico-History” in which the past has been reinterpreted in “fundamentally moral terms” to make the modern nation, social orders and hierarchies appear as natural (Ungpakorn 2007: 60-61; Malkki 1995: 54). However, this is not to say that the monarchy was not responsible for the establishment of a modern nation state. Rather, the establishment of a modern nation-state did not begin until colonial threats in the mid to late 19th century forced a reaction from the monarchy. Just as the US aided Bhumibol and the Thai government in the battle against communism, the British government aided Mongkut and Chulalongkorn with economic and military support in the development of a modern nation, after all an independent Siam made an ideal buffer with Britain’s chief colonial rivals France, in Indo-China.

One of my most important sources, Jira, told me that “it was the monarchy that had the leading role” in civilizing Siam and that it was done to prove “the country was not backwards in the eyes of the colonizers.” Indeed, during what Jira referred to as “the time of the colonizing threat” King Mongkut admitted that the people of his kingdom were “half civilized and half barbarian”, thereby influencing what prominent Thai historian, Thongchai Winichakul, has called “a mission to keep up with the times” (Winichakul 2000: 530-531). There was no idea of “state” or “nation” until

King Mongkut began his mission to prove that his Kingdom and its tributary kingdoms did not need modernization and colonization, and there was no absolute monarchy or centralized and unified nation-state until King Chulalongkorn established one at the end of the 1800's (Ungpakorn 2007: 56,58). Yet, ironically this movement towards modernization probably would not have happened when it did, without France and England's presence threatening the monarchy's sovereignty, or the monarchy's economic and political interaction with Western governments and businesses.

Previous to Mongkut's civilizing mission, the Chakkri lineage and the Bangkok Kingdom were merely the more powerful actors in a loose political and socio-economic entity referred to as *Sakdina* which included kingdoms such as Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Chiangmai (Ungpakorn 2007: 56). These kingdoms' only association, until the establishment of the Kingdom of Siam, was through continuously fluctuating trade and tributary relationships and a shared Buddhist cosmography that presented space and geography in terms of important Buddhist sites, not formal bounded plots of land (Winichakul 1994: 20-22). Today, each of the former *Sakdina* Kingdoms is a province in the Thai nation-state. Taking this into consideration, it could then be argued that it was the "colonizing threat" that initiated the Chakkri involvement in the development of a nation-state. It was this threat that the monarchy reacted to, triggering what Ana Tsing refers to as *friction*, in which "a global encounter" results in a "heterogeneous and unequal encounter" that can, and often does, lead to "new arrangements of culture and power" (Tsing 2005: 5).

Within Siam this "new arrangement of culture and power" resulted in a concept of civilization that was distinctly Siamese. The concept of civilization that was being thrust upon other kingdoms in the region was one that had developed over the centuries in Europe and therefore was not entirely compatible with Siam. However, the Siamese concept of civilization was "transcultural" because "ideas and practices from Europe, via colonialism, had been transferred, localized, and hybridized in the Siamese setting" thereby creating a new concept of civilization that the Siamese

referred to as *siwali* (Winichakul 2000: 529,538). (Incidentally, the word itself is the result of friction, as it is a transliteration of the English word “civilization”). This new *siwali* Siam was one that balanced Siamese tradition and Western modernity and Western intellectualism and Siamese ideology (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 49).

King Mongkut “issued large numbers of decrees and royal proclamations” with the goal “to guide the actions of officials and people” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 50). It was this goal that led him to fortify traditional Siamese religious beliefs and strengthen the sanctity of the monarchy. One of the most important acts of ideological fortification began before Mongkut was King and was an Abbot at a Buddhist temple (Wat). While at Wat Boworn, Mongkut saw the ideological threat that Christianity posed to the region. With the support of his family, Mongkut constructed a number of new Buddhist temples throughout Bangkok and commissioned highly educated abbots to write books that would define a Chakkri and Bangkok based interpretation of Buddhist *Sangha* that could be used to safe guard Buddhism and ensure its proliferation through the kingdom. This safe guarding of ideology would initiate the momentum that resulted in the 1902 *Sangha* act that undermined the religious legitimacy of local lords in outlying territories and created a national ideology that would and, to an extent, continues to be taught in schools (Peleggi 2008: 109-110).

While King Mongkut was safe-guarding traditional ideology he was also sending groups of Siamese intellectuals to Europe to learn about European science, transportation and political institutions. Furthermore, he hired westerners as government advisors and teachers to “set about bringing ‘progress’ to Siam” – perhaps the most famous of which is British school teacher Anna Leonowens who has been fictionalized in contemporary literature, theatre and film (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 50). In the American movie, “Anna and the King”, upon first meeting King Mongkut Leonowens refuses to abide by traditional Siamese practices when approaching or communicating with the King and throughout the film, slowly influences him to accept and even

appreciate such behaviour. While the extent or truthfulness of this representation is debatable (some people question if they even met) one thing is certain – it was during this time that Siam underwent a major transition and King Mongkut did begin to accept less traditional forms of interaction with non-royals, foremost of which was the fact that the king allowed non-royals to look at him. This change probably resulted from King Mongkut's hiring advisors and teachers, such as Leonowens, that that permitted him to gain the knowledge that in the "Western symbolic of power" portraits were an important tool of communication, power and public relations (Peleggi 2002: 45&47). While King Mongkut's use of modern technology and modern political practice represented his "mission to keep up with the times," his use of portraits represented his image-making mission to prove the success of this goal.

On 18 August 1868 King Mongkut led a group of colonial leaders to a location in the jungle where he could prove his strong grasp on modern astronomy and geography by proving the location as being optimal for observing an eclipse. King Mongkut's hard work proved successful, however it weakened him, and when he and his eldest son, Chulalongkorn, contracted malaria on the expedition, only Chulalongkorn survived, thereby becoming the next king (Winichakul 1994: 46-47). Despite the fact that King Mongkut would never rule over a geographically bounded state, his initiation of an international image-making project that included nationalizing reforms, development projects and the use of portraits as diplomatic tools laid the foundation so that his son could.

King Mongkut attempted to centralize tax revenues, issue codes of governance for provincial leaders and encouraged citizens to make judicial appeals. However, this proved difficult, considering that there was no defined state (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 50). Chulalongkorn became the first King in the Rama lineage to rule over a geographically defined and bounded state, when in 1884 he hired famous British surveyor, James McCarthy to accompany Siamese troops on a mission to define the geographic boundaries of Siam (Winichakul 1994: 121). The boundaries mapped by McCarthy

did not take into consideration ethnicity, religion or language. Rather, as Jira points out, the surveying team used geographic points, such as the Mekong River to decide who was and who was not a member of the state or as Thongchai Winichakul point out, the surveying team used “territorial margins” to codify the space that the monarchy desired to be theirs (Winichakul 1994: 125). Indeed, Jira suggests that Thais and Laotians have more ethnically in common than Thais and Hill Tribes people. And prominent anthropologist Charles Keyes notes that national boundaries failed to take into account ethno-linguistic boundaries as there are several million people who are members of the Tai language family (the language family from which Thai is derived) living in Burma (Myanmar) and Lao (Keyes 1987: 15). As with European mapping in Africa and the Middle East, McCarthy’s mapping resulted in Siam becoming, and Thailand remaining, “an ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious mosaic” with little consideration of formally established cultural boundaries (Kermel Torres 2004: 35).

Despite world leaders’ best attempts to prove otherwise, nation-states are not natural entities and are in fact, as Benedict Anderson put it, “cultural artefacts” (Anderson 1991: 4). McCarthy and Chulalongkorn’s creation of a mapped and bounded nation state has forced an un-natural amalgamation of cultural, religious and linguistic groups to share a national identity, which has resulted in ethnic and national conflict. For example, in the South of Thailand the minority, ethnic Malay Muslims have been fighting with the state for over a century – most recently, resulting in state schools being burned, public beheadings and bombings. Furthermore, as a result of the national need to appear as ancient and natural, Cambodia and Thailand have been attempting to use Buddhist cosmography to lay claim on the ancient temple of Preah Vihear which is in Cambodia near its border with Thailand. Despite over a century of conflict, the creation of the mapped and bounded nation state allowed Chulalongkorn to become the first absolute monarch and create a centralized and unified nation state. However, for this to be successful it was necessary for Chulalongkorn to be able

to communicate to both his subjects and the colonial powers that he was the sovereign. In order for him to do this, he had to embrace technology of territoriality, statehood and communication to create and disseminate knowledge of Siam as a geographically bounded nation state with the Chakkri family at its head (Winichakul 1994: 16; Eriksen 2002: 90).

Within the nation-state of Siam, Chulalongkorn put his father's Bangkok Buddhist *Sangha* into "the service of nation building" with the 1902 *Sangha* act which served as a source of political legitimization and ideological indoctrination for the monarchy (Peleggi 2007: 90,111). Mass education was and continues to be an important tool "in the establishment of standardised reifications of culture," and "mass produced accounts of 'our people' or 'our culture' are important tools in the fashioning of an ethnic identity with a presumed cultural continuity in time" (Eriksen 2002: 91). Wats and monasteries had served as places of education for villagers and with the establishment of the *Sangha* act the monarchy further put religion into the service of state formation and nation-building as that which was taught became increasingly patterned after the culture of central Thais (Peleggi 2002: 47,50). However, as anthropologist Katherine Bowie and political scientist Giles Ji Ungpakorn have pointed out, nearly 50 years after Chulalongkorn died close to 61% of rural Thais were still uncertain about the meaning of "the word 'monarchy' and its relevance in their lives" (Bowie 1997: 87; Ungpakorn 2007: 54). In part this could be attributed to the newness of the nation or a lack of mass communication technology. However, considering the success with which the monarchy was able to communicate its sovereignty to European and North American nations, I would argue that Chulalongkorn and the monarchy prioritized legitimizing themselves vis-a-vis the international community so they could then establish themselves within Siam with minimal colonial disruption.

Production of History

By demonstrating to the international community their sovereignty over the people that lived within the boundaries of Siam, the Siamese royalty and newly formed bureaucracy were left to produce a national identity that could unify the diverse ethnic groups within the kingdom and solidify their sovereignty. However, as history as shown (such as in Iraq where Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish people were suddenly united under a single national identity at the end of World War I) the attempt to unify different ethnic groups can be difficult. How then did the Siamese monarchy and government succeed where so many others failed? Did they succeed? Author Wolf Donner argues that they have and that in Thailand “various ethnic groups are generally well integrated into the society as a whole” thereby making Thailand “remarkably homogenous” (Donner 1978: 52). However, Charles Keyes suggests that “this appearance of cultural homogeneity is deceptive”(Keyes 1987: 14). This author says that the Thai census avoids asking ethnic self-identification questions and the government considers the ability to speak Thai and the practice of Buddhism to be qualities that subsume cultural variability (Keyes 1987 14,15). However, this does not answer why so many Thais, despite cultural variability, engage a collective narrative of reverence for the King.

Liisa Malkki suggests that in order to ensure a collective narrative it is necessary to produce a formulaic history that creates a repetitive historical narrative and “thematic unity” that become characteristics of a people and signify their “collective voice” (Malkki 1995: 56). Benedict Anderson suggests that it is printed media that lays the foundation for a national consciousness as it creates “unified fields of exchange and communication” which fix the “collective voice” to the state and the land it represents (Anderson 1991: 44). Printed media allows people, regardless of the dialect they speak, to share knowledge with people they may not otherwise understand. But beyond this, printed media builds an “image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” that allows people to feel a historical connection to people in different regions despite their local linguistic or ethnic

practices (Anderson 1991: 44). It was through the Sangha act and the creation of a formal and centralized state education system that the Siamese monarchy and government were able to at once engage moral power and historical precedent and disseminate their national historical narrative to the people.

Building this linguistic, religious and historical connection was of the utmost importance for the building of the Thai nation, as it linked otherwise different people in a shared, albeit, produced, historical knowledge of their nation and its ancient origins. It is for this reason that the Thai government “actively discourages” foreign missionaries from helping the Hill Tribes people with their own transcriptions-systems and to develop publications in their own printed languages (Anderson 1991: 45). In doing this the Thai government makes the Thai language the language of power that allows them to control how and what the Hill Tribes people learn and in this way ensure they remain members of the Thai nation.

In order for the Thai monarchy and government to attain and maintain their legitimacy over the nation it is necessary for them to engage a historical precedent that justifies their position of power to all within the boundaries. By having a strong grasp on historical precedent and control of its (re)interpretation, the government is able to produce the moral force required for their legitimacy. It is thus that Thailand, like most other nation-states, had to produce a historical narrative that makes Thailand and those in power to appear as ancient and natural. It is largely by virtue of the printed word and more recently electronic media, and the collective voice they produce, that historical moments become historical facts that unite the population in a collective experience. Yet, despite the government’s best attempts, in the south of Thailand it has come up against another collective voice and memory that is exemplifying the biases in the national historical production, the unnaturalness of nation-states and calls into question the success of Thailand’s attempt to unify the ethnic groups.

In the Muslim Malay speaking south, the very tools by which the Thai government disseminates the national history are seen as threats to the Malay Muslims way of life. Like British colonialists did in Canada and Australia, the Thai government has attempted to stifle the indigenous people's use of their language by having all official documents and signs written in Thai and having state schools only teach Thai. Furthermore the Thai government has a history of encouraging Buddhist Thais, through economic incentives, to move to the South. It is as a result of these state sponsored actions that Thai police, military, schools and teachers are seen as symbols of state hegemony and as attempts to destroy the ethnic Malay's culture and forcibly incorporate them into the Thai nation. While the Muslims and state officials have clashed throughout Thailand's history, since my first visit to Thailand this has resulted in many of these schools being burnt to the ground and the teachers shot, beheaded or burnt with the school by a small minority of rebellious Malays. The state can teach and the media can popularize but ultimately it is people's own conscience and practices that dictate their engagement in the national collective memory and collective voice. How then has the Thai state been able to produce and ensure a continued collective engagement of the national religion, language and history in most of the other regions of the nation, in little more than 70 years?

State Making and Image Making

In his book "Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali" Clifford Geertz points out that in 19th century Bali "the extravagance of state rituals was not just the measure of the king's divinity, which we have already seen it to be; it was also the measure of the realm's well being" (1980: 129). In much the same manner the extravagance by which the Thai monarchy presents itself and the extent to which it is accepted by the populace measures the unity of Thais. As we have

already seen, during the first half of Bhumibol's reign his influence throughout the nation was minimal. His influence and popularity as it sits today is the result of what Kanit referred to as a public relations campaign initiated by the monarchy to ensure its survival. While there are many examples of the success of this image making campaign the events that have occurred since the King fell ill in late 2007 best exemplify just how popular he has become and the extent to which he has united the nation in a shared production of respect.

When Bhumibol became ill, Thais from all corners flocked to Bangkok to join the vigil outside of the King's hospital. Many taxis' gave free rides to the hospital and people began wearing yellow shirts with more regularity (in Thai astrology each day of the week is assigned a colour and yellow is the colour of Monday which was the day the Bhumibol was born). Upon his release, the King's astrologer exclaimed that pink would be a lucky colour for the King, resulting in many people wearing pink shirts. Shortly after his release, the King and his subjects celebrated his 80th birthday with parades, re-enactment of ancient battles (including elaborately decorated and armoured elephants), Muay Thai demonstrations, and the King being driven with the Queen in his gold coloured Cadillac through throngs of adoring Thais to the Grand Palace where he gave his annual birthday speech. Those who attended the speech joined together, after the King was finished speaking, in a candle lit vigil. Weeks after this, while I was on my way to Bangkok, Bhumibol's sister died and as a result, by the time I got to Bangkok, black also became an important colour. In fact I had received an e-mail from the conference that participants should make an effort to wear black shirts while attending. Throughout Bangkok there were many shops that were dedicated to selling only yellow, pink and black shirts, many of which had the royal insignia embroidered on the left side of the chest.

It is this collective performance that Geertz refers to as the "theatre state" in which the strength of the state is dependent on the collective production and reproduction of the state

sanctioned performances (Geertz 1980: 4). While I hold no illusion that all Thais flock in lock step and perform in choreographed unison their love and respect for the King, the fact remains that the King, or at least the institution of the monarchy, in collaboration with the state has created within him the personification of “Thainess”. This definition of “Thainess” is based on Rama VII (King Vajiravudh) creation of the phrase “God, King, and Country” which was used by Vajiravudh to “create a sense of national unification, obedience and self sacrifice within the populace” (Baker & Phongpaichit 2005: 107). Nearly a hundred years after the first use of this phrase Bhumibol has become the living representation of this trinity.

Jira told me that in the privacy of home and in the company of trusted friends many Thais do not perform their reverence for the King. However, Watchara told me that in public people have to perform otherwise they run the risk of being accused of “not being Thai” and thereby become “an other within the nation.” I would therefore argue that within the public space of Thailand the mere image of the King is able to ensure most people perform Thainess and are therefore known to be Thai, while in private space, without prying eyes, perhaps not. The question then becomes: How are the state and the monarchy able to constantly remind the populace of their “Thainess” and how to perform it? While there are certainly many symbols of the nation found throughout Thailand, such as language, Buddha, food, Wats and ancient temples, none are able to embody the nation and all it means like the King can. As such I would argue that paintings, photos and other images of the King and monarchy found throughout the nation act as the most powerful tool to remind and maintain Thainess or at least direct this performance of Thainess.

Due to the reflective and material nature of photographs, people tend to trust them as representations of a moment in time as it happened. Therefore, photographs have the ability to communicate a moment in time and space as real to those who gaze upon them (Mazzarella 2005: 49-51). It was this ability to present moments and objects as real that made images effective tools for

the members of the Siamese monarchy to present themselves to the world as the sovereigns of a Kingdom. King Mongkut commissioned mostly European artists and photographers and had the images distributed to such world leaders as American president Franklin Pierce, Queen Victoria, Napoleon III and Pope Pius IX (Peleggi 2002: 45). Furthermore, these images, whether in photographic or painted form, usually presented the Siamese monarchy donning European fashion or European regalia and sitting amongst European furniture and architecture in an attempt to prove to world leaders that Siam was as modern as the West (Peleggi 2002: 50-59).

Chulalongkorn: The Founding of a Sate and the Beginning of a Nation.

Mongkut sought to end the taboo “on the vision and representation of the royal body,” but it was not until the latter years of Chulalongkorn’s rule, in the early 1900’s, that the taboo showed signs of waning. Chulalongkorn had put his image on Siamese coins and stamps early in his reign and by the beginning of the 1900’s had issued a series of post-cards with his image on them, allowing him to expand the range of his visual representation as the state sovereign beyond his mere physical presence (Peleggi 2002: 104). However, it was not enough to just have his image on coins, stamps and post cards; he had to engage his citizens so they knew he was King and what that meant. In order to show his sovereignty over the state, Chulalongkorn created Siam’s first standing military and initiated a system of conscription (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 61-62). Then, based on the European concept of race, Chulalongkorn defined a “Thai Race” based on language, ethnicity, religion, birth and geographic origins – which also became the basis for national identity in the 1913 Nationality Act (Baker & Phongpaichit 2005: 63-65). Incorporating Theravada Buddhist *Sangha* into the state education system, Chulalongkorn put the monkhood into the service of state formation by teaching civilians of their King and nation in a religious context. Furthermore, Chulalongkorn’s sought out the brilliant and sent them to European schools to learn how to become effective state bureaucrats who could overcome the influence of lords and politicians in outlying provinces (Peleggi 2007: 109-111; Mulder 1997: 13). Together, these actions ensured Chulalongkorn’s success in producing a nation-state and ensuring his sovereignty over it.

However, it was not until 1897, when Chulalongkorn made his first trip to Europe that the importance of the King was truly planted in the collective conscience of the population. Previously, only photos acted to represent the King in the West, but now the King was physically interacting with all the European royals and, save for his visits to England and France, where he was all but ignored by the highest ranking royalty, Chulalongkorn was treated as an equal and an honoured

guest. But more importantly, it allowed his subjects to see him as “a new kind of sovereign who moved among the world’s elite,” while also showing them Siam is a nation-state within the international community (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 69). Chulalongkorn would make another visit to Europe shortly before his death and after each of his visits his return was greeted with spectacular pageantry (Peleggi 2002: 113). A month after his second return, in celebration of being the longest reigning Chakkri monarch to date, Chulalongkorn held a festival at Ayutthaya that lasted nearly a week and a half (Peleggi 2002: 113). The celebrations were opened with the unveiling of “Thailand’s first ‘public’ monument”: an equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn that he had cast out of bronze in Paris. To this day, the image of Chulalongkorn donning western military attire, sitting upon a great steed sits in the Royal Plaza in the Dusit district of Bangkok, near the Grand Palace (Peleggi 2007: 184-185; Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 69). While, it has not been stated in any of the books or journals that I have read, I hypothesise that the time and place of the celebrations were tactically planned to at once show Chulalongkorn as a modern and *Siwali* King who could mingle with the international elite as an equal, but also was an important part of an ancient Siamese tradition that ruled the region.

Beyond simply having his likeness on coins, stamps and postcards Chulalongkorn would ride in an open carriage and later personally drive automobiles throughout Bangkok. During the fairs he attended he would even mingle with a select crowd (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 70-71; Peleggi 2002: 113). During these appearances, Chulalongkorn took great pleasure in having his picture taken (Peleggi 2002: 104). Following Chulalongkorn’s death in 1910, his son Vajiravudh held a jubilee celebration to commemorate the achievements of his father, which continues to this day. Indeed, a friend of mine, who is Canadian but of Thai decent, still points to Chulalongkorn as the father of a modern Siamese or Thai nation. The celebrations and festivals during the King’s lifetime and his yearly jubilee act as performances of the “modernizing elite’s accomplishments in the public

domain” (Peleggi 2002: 113). But, more than this and combined with the proliferation of his images these festivals and jubilees reveal “the final intent of shaping the public memory of Chulalongkorn’s reign” (Peleggi 2002: 113) and the images of Chulalongkorn continue to live as timeless representations of this memory.

Bhumibol: Uniting the Thai Nation

As demonstrated by Chulalongkorn, public culture is a powerful political tool that attains much of its power by its ability to infiltrate even the remotest region populated by humans. Thus pictures have found their way into nearly every home, every businesses and even along highways, streets and waterways, thereby marking off the land as Thai and the people, who bow in front of the photos as they walk by or build alters in their homes or stand in a cinema – as Thai. Thus the photos of the King act as pedagogical tools that direct how people behave, interact and move, and through these actions produce the space as Thai (see Lefebvre 1991: 26).

However, it was not a simple matter of giving the population of Thailand photos of the King and having them automatically know and revere him. The current King was not always an inseparable component of “nation-ness” (Kasetsiri 2003: 13). After the 1932 revolution that saw the People’s Party (a political party formed by Thai intellectuals studying in European universities) overthrow the absolute monarchy, the future of the Chakkri Dynasty was in doubt. This end appeared imminent when in March 1935 Rama VII (King Prajadhipok) who was living in Europe in self imposed exile declared his abdication and left the government to elect his young nephew, Ananda Mahidol, to be the new King (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 121). Resulting in an unfortunate event that could have put the final nail in the Chakkri coffin, on June 9th the young King was shot dead in his bed under circumstances that remains a mystery to this day (Handley 2006: 75). While Ananda’s death opened up an opportunity for the government to take absolute control, “the tragedy put the royal family and the monarchy in the newspapers and on the radio every day, making even people in the more detached corners of Thailand understand that the throne mattered” and resulting in the monarchy becoming more alive and essential than ever (Handley 2006: 81). While Ananda’s death was certainly a great blow to the Chakkri family his death paved the way for his younger brother and heir, Bhumibol, and his supporters, to embark on a mission to build up the

image of the monarchy and inscribe Bhumibol not only into the landscape but into the hearts of all who lived within Thailand, thereby making him a living conduit of national unity. Furthermore, it made the monarchy essential for the success of any government to attain and maintain power over the country.

While the King had attempted to engage in aid and development work since he finished university in Switzerland and permanently moved back to Thailand in the early 1950s, under the rule of Prime Minister Pibul Songram, Bhumibol's movements throughout the country were greatly restricted and he was not allowed to leave the capital (Chitbundid 2008: 2; Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 146). Pibul sought to ensure the King was little more than a figurehead, while he pursued what he called a "civilizing campaign" (Shearer 1989: 6). However this campaign would ultimately prove to be too soon for a people accustomed to a monarchy, thereby paving the way for General Sarit Thanarat to instigate another coup and take control in 1957. Instead of trying to impose a Western political model on Thailand, like Pibul, Sarit argued Western models would not work as they were unsuited to Thai conditions (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 146). Seeing how a strong relationship with the King would benefit his rule he not only allowed Bhumibol to move about the country again, but he gave him the funds to do so. General Sarit's need to find political legitimacy and Bhumibol's desire to have more power and influence in the nation resulted in an ideal partnership. By encouraging Bhumibol's encounters with his subjects, reinstating some of the King's royal duties, increasing the governmental funding to the monarchy, giving him more freedom to move about the country and increasing the power of *lèse-majesté* law, Sarit was able to attain the moral merit necessary to legitimize his leadership (Chitbundid 4: 2008; Preechasilpakul and Streckfuss 2008: 12).

With this freedom Bhumibol was able to move throughout Thailand and develop a closer relationship with government officials from around the country. Furthermore, with this new found support from the government the young King was able to initiate a number of development projects,

such as helping with farming and accessing clean water. By doing this he was able to build up his image as a father figure who cared for Thais. In addition the King began speaking on a royal radio program on the “Or Sor Radio Station” to advertise his Royal Charity projects. While Anderson would say that a nation is “imagined” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members” (Anderson 1991: 6), the King was able to enter the homes of his subjects, speak to them and give them the opportunity to “participate in joint merit making” with him (Chitbundid 3: 2008), thereby giving them the feeling of having a relationship with the King and their fellow Thais.

However, it could also be argued that without the cold war and America’s war against communism, the King’s “entrance” into people’s homes and lives would not be as welcomed. Beginning in the 1950s the Border Patrol Police were created to fight against communists and those deemed not to be Thai and in fact had little to do with the physical border of Thailand (Winichakul 1994: 170). However, it was American support of this paramilitary group in the 1960’s that gave them the training, equipment and numbers needed to enter villages and execute a propaganda campaign that ensured people in the remotest regions understood that loving the King meant loving Thailand and supporting communism meant opposing Thailand (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 149, 193). The Border Patrol police secured this sentiment of Thainess by physically and at times violently shutting down groups that questioned or opposed the government definition of Thainess. On October 6, 1976 this was demonstrated when the Border Patrol Police and other paramilitary groups entered Thammasat University in Bangkok and killed forty three students and arrested a further 3000 who were protesting the government. (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 194-195).

While images and discourse of the King’s involvement in development projects generally portray him as winning the hearts of the people and unifying the nation, his other, less spoken of goal, was dedicated to inscribing upon the landscape who and where was Thailand – and communist

Lao, Cambodia and Vietnam were not Thai. In doing this the King was not only able to produce a national Thainess but secure support from the US which continues to this day. His development projects, strengthened by his personal interaction with his subjects and movement upon the landscape, allowed him to trace the geographic, cultural and national boundaries that bounded the Thai nation. Furthermore, interacting with the various ethnic groups, he was able to at once unite the people in a shared experience and root them into the land, making them the seeds by which the nation would grow and flourish (see Malkki 1994: 56-57).

However, according to Watchara it is only in the last 20 years that the monarchy started to put a lot of energy into its media campaign. Watchara told me that the monarchy noticed how effective media could be in “projecting the king’s image” to his subjects and how it made them more attached to him. Thus, through the media, the monarchy has been able to show the King’s involvement in the development of the nation to those that were not able to see or experience it first-hand, thus making the media an effective medium by which Thais can collectively experience the King’s greatness. In doing this the monarchy has further produced a unifying historical memory and collective voice.

By rooting the people into the land, while re-producing his position as the monarch he was able to make the nation into something natural and primordial. What is more, by his taking a personal interest in the development of Thailand the King was able to make his position as the center of the nation natural. As demonstrated in the SF Cinema portrayal of the King, he is positioned as the sun that allows the growth and development of the nation, and through his actions and his words he draws in and controls the movement, discourses, economy and growth of the nation. In other words, “by being above everyone else” the King “can hold society together and sustain everything” (Taylor 2002: 102). It is through this image making mission and production of history that the King has entered the social imagination as the “king that reaches his subjects”, that takes an active role in

the development of the nation and the lives of his subjects (Chitbundid 6: 2008, Streckfuss 1995: 470). By displaying their success in photos and distributing these photos throughout the nation, the monarchy and the government are able to ensure the king is firmly integrated and a constitutive component of the Thai identity.

By rooting the king into a person's sense of self and sense of social belonging, the process of image making was able to produce, within the Thai nation, a collective need to perform gratitude. This performance of gratitude can be seen throughout daily life in Thailand. On my last visit in January of 2008, the pictures of king in public seemed to have proliferated compared to my last visit. As I walked through the streets, rode the subway, the sky train and went to the cinema, I paid special attention to how people behaved when they came upon an image of the king or a member of the monarchy. In the cinema, I saw a young man sit down shortly before the end of the homage and suffer a barrage of insults from his friends, and in the subway I saw individuals take a moment from their hurried lives to bow to portraits of the recently deceased princess. These photos and their engagement with the nation's collective memory of the king's past deeds creates a sense of expectation of social performance and behaviour within the individual, which in turn influences the individual's behaviour, movements, discourse and conceptualization of what it is to be Thai (Taylor 2002: 106). Consequently, it has become common knowledge amongst most Thais that to insult, speak against, deface or even not stand up in the cinema is not just an affront against the King, but against the self and the nation. Arguably this is a non issue for most Thais. Jira told me for most Thais the King and the royal institution are a normal part of daily life and even if someone may have critical thoughts regarding practices related to the king they usually would not enact them and would just 'go with the flow.' Jira told me that "you do it, just because we do it". Accordingly the King has firmly become the basis of the Thai social imaginary.

Navigating a Nation through the Thai Social Imaginary

Watchara suggested that there is currently a phenomenon in Thailand in which Thais are attempting to achieve a uniform loyalty for the King and fear punishment if they do not. However, Watchara was quick to point out that this behaviour is not a result of anything the King has demanded, but rather pressure from the government, the media and social discourse. In fact the King is on record as opposing punishment for “unThai behaviour”, when at his 78th birthday celebration he announced “I want them to criticise because whatever I do, I want to know that people agree or disagree”. He went on to suggest that it is the newspapers, radio and television that tell people not to criticize the King and then points out that “this is not appropriate.” And then he goes on to say that it is lawyers and politicians who decide to punish people who “insult the King” and exclaims that “punishment is not good” and that “the King is in trouble” if he cannot be insulted or criticized. He exclaims “if I cannot be violated, I am not a good man. I am bad” (The Nation: December 2005).

Yet, despite the fact that the King publically announced his desire to receive criticism, Jira pointed out no Thai would discuss such topics with people they did not know they could trust, which according to Watchara and Kanit has led many Thais to become increasingly frustrated with this demand of social uniformity. Watchara said that if people do not follow the social form of “loving the King” they can be accused of not being Thai, thereby facing social ostracism or worse. Watchara suggested that this attempt to create a national uniformity is “creating otherness within the nation.” The question then becomes: How is it possible to create and inscribe within most of the distinct ethnic groups and social actors the need to achieve and maintain uniformity, especially when it is opposed by the living representative of this uniformity?

Charles Taylor defines the *social imaginary* as the way “in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the

expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2002: 106). It is through this process that the concept of being Thai or Canadian are “facts” produced by humans and disseminated through education, media and discourse. These terms fire up the imagination and allow the imaginer to envision a landscape and through it the history and experiences of the people who lived there and helped to develop the meaning and potency of the word. As the national collective constantly uses these words in daily discourse the collective history and experience that bore the word becomes a collective knowledge that gives the word its potency and that which it labels, reality (Foucault 2004: 97, 325). Hence, these concepts render the national landscape a social space that maintains reality through the shared knowledge and collective memory wrought from the constant invocation of these concepts in daily discourse. Therefore “the mental is realized” and taken from the imagined and “transformed into the real” (Lefebvre 1991: 251). Once real, it becomes a form of social dogma.

In the contemporary Thai context this dogma positions the King, Buddha and the Nation as “three separate manifestations of the same fundamental Thai unity” (Phongpaichit 1996: 22). By making the Thai knowledge of self linked to this national trinity it encourages Thais to declare “we are all one, all tied to the destiny of the geobody of Thailand” which creates a collective knowledge that for a Thai to oppose the King is “to suggest someone would slit their own throat” (Connors 2007: 146). Thus, the Government of Thailand’s aggressive application of *lèse-majesté*, which acts to not just protect the King, but also that which the King represents – the nation, its people and Buddhism – has been accepted with little complaint from most Thais (Streckfuss 1995: 446).

While the introduction of *lèse-majesté* was done to protect the King and the monarchy, it has become a political tool used to deface or shut down opponents, stifle the media or influence what people are taught in schools. Indeed, shortly before my last visit, respected Thai scholar, Giles Ji Ungpakorn had released a book named “A Coup for the Rich: Thailand’s Political Crisis” which took

a critical look at the 2006 coup that overthrew former Prime Minister Thaksin Siniwattra. Because of the King's affiliation with the coup, this book was looked upon as being critical of the King and so only one bookstore in all of Thailand, at Thammasat University, dared to sell it. However, days after I was given a copy by Kanit, the book was banned at the Thammasat bookstore as well. As it was pointed out earlier, Saichan suggested that the King "is the only shared identity" of all the different ethnic groups and social actors that make up Thailand. Taking this into account it is easy to understand how a book that is considered to be critical of the King – even one written by a Thai – could disappear from distribution with little complaint from the average Thai. In other words, this book, as perceived through Thai social dogma, could be considered as a criticism of not just the coup and those involved, but of all Thais and Thainess itself.

Banning of media for political reasons is not an uncommon occurrence throughout the world. For instance, shortly after the twin towers came down on September 11th 2001, "Clear Channel Communications" banned nearly 200 songs, such as John Lennon's "Imagine", Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" and Cat Steven's "Peace Train" on their 1200 American radio stations (Truitt, Sept 17 2001 & Edwards Sept 26, 2001). Such banning is most likely done to help stave off negative political attention and maintain a positive relationship with sponsors and therefore could be considered a wise economic and political decision by media distributors, especially in times of political turmoil in their nations of origin. However, the problem with this type of stifling of freedoms is that it can and often does have negative repercussions on the daily lives of individuals within the nation or culture in question, as exemplified by Watchara's statements concerning people in Thailand fearing accusation of "not being Thai" if they do not adhere to Thai social uniformity. Shortly after 9/11 the media banning of songs deemed "un-American" and the relabeling of such things as French Fries resulted in a manufacturing of an American *social imaginary* which produced a social dogma that directed people to perform in a manner that would not

call into question their “Americaness”. It is in a similar manner that people in Thailand choose to behave in a manner that would not call into question their Thainess.

This national desire to ensure the sanctity of Thainess has allowed *lèse-majesté* to be executed in a manner that has been mostly accepted by the Thai majority, but has international human-rights organizations up in arms. Two examples that I feel especially demonstrate this nationalistic and political use of *lèse-majesté* are the cases of Chotisak Onsoong who in the spring of 2008 refused to stand for the cinema homage of the King and the recent government censorship of over 2300 web sites deemed to be “offensive” to the King.

When I asked why Thais feel the need to stand for the homage of the King, Jira explained that the effort and the time it takes to stand for the homage is not worth the trouble that could follow if you do not stand. This trouble was clearly demonstrated in the case of the anti-military activist, Chotisak Onsoong and his girl friend, when in early 2008 they went to the cinema in Bangkok and did not stand for the homage. As the homage began and everyone stood to perform their gratitude to the King, Onsoong and his girl friend remained sitting. Soon popcorn started flying, then a man to the right of Onsoong’s girlfriend physically attacked them by hitting them both with a rolled up film flyer. This was quickly followed with other members of the audience hurling insults and water bottles, forcing the couple to retreat out of the theatre. Onsoong called the police to report the assault; however, the man who had hit them with the film flyer responded by charging Onsoong with *lèse-majesté*. Now Onsoong is the subject of a police investigation and faces a possible 15 years imprisonment (Lloyd 2008). No word in any newspaper article I have read has been written about whether or not the man who physically assaulted Onsoong and his girlfriend have been punished.

The need for Thais to stand in a theatre is so ingrained in the Thai social imaginary that it could be called a social reflex. Jira explained to me that for most Thais this practice is so common

place that when the final teaser ends and the screen goes dark they stand without even thinking about it. This act has become such an established practice that Jira claims the act of not standing is perceived by most Thais as a confrontation to the nation. Therefore it could be argued that for those people in the theatre that attacked Onsoong, his not standing was not so much seen as “cutting his own throat” as Connors suggests but as a symbolic attempt “to cut the throat of the nation.” Thus their attack, while seen by most non-Thais as overly zealous, for most Thais was an act of national defence.

In much the same manner the government’s recent investment of 48 million Baht (1.25 million dollars) in computer technology to ensure that people in Thailand are not able to access web sites deemed offensive to the King could be seen as an act of national defence and a reassertion of the national space (Bangkok Post January 6 2009). Most of the web-sites, like Ungpakorn’s book, probably do not give a critical reflection of the King, but rather the politics surrounding the King and the royal institution. Thus, I would argue that the King is so deeply rooted in the Thai social imaginary that for most Thais, to merely read something that is critical of the King could be perceived as a symbolic act of violence against the nation and the banning of the sites and Ungpakorn’s book as an act of national defence. It is for this reason I would further argue, that most Thais are able to accept their government spending so much money on programs and censorship that stifle their freedoms and could otherwise be put to use in education, health care or development projects as strong evidence of how deeply rooted the King is in the Thai social imaginary.

In other words, these web sites, like Onsoong’s actions, did not meet the social expectations constructed from the Thai social imaginary and in doing so challenged the sense of national legitimacy produced from common social practices (Taylor 2002: 106), such as standing out of respect for the King at the cinema or writing and reading only that which praises the King. In essence it could be argued that those Thais who hurled water bottles and insults and the man who

attacked Onsoong saw his inaction as an attack on the “container” that encapsulates the nation, of which Abu Lughod spoke, or an attempt to break the link that unites the population into a nation. The web-sites that gave access to information critical of the monarchy and the politics surrounding it could be seen as an attempt to infiltrate the homes and hearts of Thais and turn them against the King, the nation and fellow Thais. The audience, the attacking man and the government officials involved in the banning of web-sites share a collective imagining of the nation and the King’s importance in it. Therefore, their actions became a metaphor of protection of the nation and the King, rendering the nation and the King’s importance real (see Lefebvre 1991: 251). Furthermore, these acts of protection mark the theatre as a place within the Thai nation and the geographic spaces “protected” by cyber censorship, as Thai. In other words the audience are not only protecting the nation and the King, but also helping to produce, reproduce and maintain the geographic space and those within it, as Thai.

As Michel de Certeau suggests, “space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function” (de Certeau 1986: 117). Therefore, it could be argued the audience’s actions, Onsoong’s arrest, the cyber censorship, and Thai book stores refusing to sell Ji Ungpakorn’s book become the operations that orient space and situate the locations of the occurrences as places within the national space. These actions and moments thereby become marks on the nation’s history, to be spoken of in national discourse, taught in school and used as points of precedence in law, thereby making Thailand function as a nation. As a result these occurrences become (social) facts produced from collective experience and disseminated through discourse, education and media (Said 1985: 90, Mulder 1997: 51), thereby becoming (social) knowledge. The places that these occurrences mark off become an idealized landscape based on collective experiences and shaped within the collective imagination of the nation and render the geography of the nation socially constructed (Said 2000: 180). However, considering the ethnic

diversity of Thailand and the fact that it is nearly impossible that the population will ever meet each other it is difficult to imagine how Thailand or any nation could remember, imagine and perform in unity.

Arjun Appadurai suggests that modern nations and the modern conceptualization of the nation demand a “homogenous people with standardized package of rights” (Appadurai 2003: 339). While Jira found the idea of cultural homogeneity offensive, since the inception of the Thai nation in 1939 the government bureaucracy has seen the sixteen ethnic groups and four language families that currently exist within Thailand as threats to the integrity of the nation and have sought to homogenize these groups and force them to live under the “standardized package of rights” (Kermel-Torres 2004: 39). This attempt is best demonstrated in the King’s image making missions and supported by the government ensuring the central Thai dialect of the *Tai* language family is the only one taught in schools. However, this attempt to homogenize the cultural groups under a single national identity and a national package of rights has not always proven successful, as demonstrated in the South of Thailand with the Muslim population. Yet, despite this, these attempts have proven mostly successful with the majority, who accept the national trinity and are demonstrated not just by the actions of the audience that assaulted Onsoong, but also by the rarity of actions such as those of Onsoong, which challenge this hegemony. How is it that this rarity can be guaranteed?

Anthropologist Neils Mulder suggests that the Thai education, like most state education systems “teaches Thai students to memorize more than comprehend” (Mulder 1997: 2). However, it is important not to reduce Thais to nothing more than mindless automatons who passively accept a hegemonic narrative. Watchara pointed out that what is taught in school is “educational disinformation” developed over the 60 years of the King’s reign. Mulder suggests that this “disinformation” is based on the belief that the kings have been ruling for a long time and that “all [the] kings have promoted the prosperity of the realm, have been the leaders in defending and

protecting the country” and thus the education is developed to constantly remind students “of the superior goodness of the Thai king and support each other in taking care of the country” (Mulder 1997: 45).

Furthermore, Kanit suggested that in the past 5 to 10 years the institution of the monarchy and the government have undertaken a public relations campaign to ensure the continuation of the monarchy after the King’s death. In fact Kanit, who has done some work in media and the government, told me that the monarchy and government spent over 50million USD, to hire the same advertising agency that helped Prince Charles to improve his image, to produce a more popular image of the monarchy. The monarchy also holds majority shares in one of the largest broadcast companies in Thailand, Siam Multimedia and Communications, and according to Kanit, has a policy “to build up the image of the King.” Considering this is one of the largest broadcast companies in Thailand it can easily reach into the Thai public and private sphere and fill Abu-Lughod’s cultural container with images of the King and further instil within the nation what it is to be Thai.

By using these two major sources of public information the government is able to influence the majority of Thais’ conception of self and the national collective, thereby creating, or at least influencing and motivating, a national imagination. It is from this national imagination that the average Thai knows how to operate and interact with other Thais. Thus I do not believe that the average Thai is any more of a “mindless automaton” than the average Canadian, American, Japanese or Egyptian. Rather, Thais, like anyone else from any social group, are performing the “normative” behaviours developed from the meeting of geographic location and historical experience in which the social group developed. As I have witnessed from observing Thai friends abroad, or talking to Thai friends who have travelled, once they are out of the sphere of their cultures’ “normative” behaviours, they will often behave in a fashion considered abnormal in Thailand. Similarly, while in Thailand young Westerners are often drawn to the popular Bangkok party street of Soi Kaouson to engage in

alcohol and drug consumption that would otherwise be considered immoral, or (usually) older Western men go to the (in)famous Bangkok red light district of Soi Cowboy to engage in illicit sexual activity with young Thai women, men, or transgendered people that is considered immoral in most cultures. I believe that these behaviours are linked with the social imaginary which is, in turn, confined within, and operates as a result of social boundaries. So then, what is it exactly that ensures the behaviour of people when they are in their nation of origin, or allows them to shed their normative behaviours when they are no longer in their nation?

The Panopticon of the Nation

On August 31 2008 Australian author and university lecturer Harry Nicolaides was arrested at the Bangkok airport on charges of lese majeste. In a short passage in his fiction book *Verisimilitude* he makes reference to an unnamed crown prince of Thailand and the extra-marital affairs he may have engaged in. In order to reduce his sentence, Nicolaides pled guilty and was sentenced to three years in a maximum security prison in Bangkok where he shared a cell with pedophiles and alleged terrorists. As soon as his sentence was passed his lawyer and brother submitted a petition to the monarchy for a royal pardon and on February 21 2009 the King granted the pardon and Nicolaides was deported back to Australia. However, before the pardon was official and he was allowed to return home he had to kneel before a portrait of King Bhumibol (The Australian Feb 2009).

William Mazzarella states that images have the ability to “focus desire and identification” and thereby help the powerful to attain legitimacy through the “earthly finitude of physical embodiment” (Mazzarella 2005: 49). Laura Marks suggests that popular culture and images have the ability to “evoke memories both individual and cultural, through an appeal to nonvisual knowledge, embodied knowledge, and experience of the senses, such as smell, and taste” resulting in what is called the haptic experience (Marks 2000: 2). Furthermore, Christopher Pinney suggests that when images involve the sacred and the beloved it engages a response he calls the *darshanic*, in which the viewer feels as if he or she is “seeing and being seen” by the sacred and the beloved, which “becomes the ground from which one’s own vision is possible” (Pinney 2004: 9, 194). In Thailand, as we have seen, images of the King have been used by the powerful to focus the desires of the nation to maintain development by playing upon the collective memory of the King’s image-making mission and the monarchy’s role in the development of the nation.

All nations include markers of national identity that define a particular territory as the nation and remind citizens of their nationality. Thailand has many such symbols. And besides Buddha, the King is the most recognizable symbol of nationality. Images of Bhumibol have come to be landmarks of Thainess, demarcating who and where is Thai. Despite the fact that Bhumibol or his representatives will never meet every individual within the nation, by existing as a key component of the Thai national imaginary images of the King become symbols of power that produce a homogenous effect of power (Foucault 1995: 202). While I fear the charge of *lèse-majesté* for making this comparison, images of the King act just like the watch towers of the prison that create what Foucault called the *panopticon*. Images of the King, like the watch tower have the ability to “penetrate into men’s behaviour” by creating the knowledge that they might be watched and might be punished for not adhering to the rules inscribed within the defined space (Foucault 1995: 204-205). Thus, just as a prison cannot fail to produce a particular type of behaviour (Foucault 1995: 266), the Thai nation not fail to produce a particular type of behaviour.

Just as with prison inmates, the nation instills knowledge in the population that allows them to perpetually reinforce their sense of identity, objectify their behaviours, influence their discourse and define their identity (Foucault 1995: 277). By combining the historical development of the nation as told through the Thai epistemology, knowledge of *lèse-majesté* and images of the King – that can now be found nearly everywhere on the Thai landscape – ensures a discourse and identity that defines the population as Thai. However, their uniform behaviour is a result of a feeling that the images have *darshanic* properties that focus the gaze of the viewers engaging them in a national *haptic* experience that ensures Thais who do not seek trouble, maintain a proper national behaviour, at least with regards to the King. This process could be described as a panoptic gaze, in which the face of the King constantly gazes upon and penetrates his people’s behaviour and produces homogenous effects of power that ensures their “proper” behaviour.

The effects of this panoptic gaze were demonstrated on my last visit to Thailand. When attending movie at the SFX cinema at MBK Shopping center I could not help but notice three loud boys in their early teens, teasing and poking each other. Suddenly, as if someone turned off a light, the homage to the King began and they stood and were quiet, with their faces glued to the screen. As the rain ceased and the sky began to clear one of the boys sat down. Immediately his friends looked down at him and one of his friends gave him a shove and pointed at the screen. He quickly stood back up and as the image of the King appeared within the sun and the boy who sat early put his hands together and bowed at the screen. Kanit had told me that many Thais, especially those from outlying provinces, are growing increasingly frustrated and annoyed with this need to stand, but do so from peer pressure. This it is not at all to say that they dislike the King or wish him ill – quite the contrary. As one of my friends pointed out, the love of the King is as diverse as the ethnic groups that make up Thailand. Thus, it is not the King or the monarchy with which people are growing frustrated and annoyed with, but, as Kanit pointed out, the government branding of the King and the forcible attempt to ensure uniform national love of the King. Near the end of my last visit a friend told me a story that exemplified this diversity.

After my interview with Milt was over, I rushed to meet with some friends for dinner and drinks at a small pub near Thamasat and the Chao Phraya River (named after the founder of Bangkok and the Chakri dynasty). During this dinner we discussed my research. As a result, one of my friends brought up the heterogeneity of love for the King that exists hidden under the homogeneous love that is seen and practiced in daily Thai life. This friend told me about a time when she went to a parade to celebrate the monarchy with her friends. Afterwards they went back to a friend's place for drinks. During this time they discussed the parade. It was mutually agreed among the friends that most of them did not actually want to go. After all who wants to stand in intense heat and humidity surrounded by thousands of people to catch a fleeting glimpse of a member

of the royal family? However, they all felt the pressure to go and be seen by people from their neighbourhood and thereby reaffirming their Thainess.

They all agreed that they “loved” the King and the monarchy, but they felt frustration about having to take time out of their lives to publically display this love, out of fear of being accused of not being Thai. In much the same way that not all Christians go to church on Sunday, or that not all Muslims go to Mosque on Friday, these individuals’ desire to not attend the parade was not out of them rejecting the King, but rather because they did not share the sentiment of some of their national peers and were content in just knowing the King was there. In essence they feared that, as demonstrated by Onsoong, their inaction could be perceived as an anti-Thai action. It is in this that the panoptic gaze is able to objectify their actions as “Thai” and position their actions as potential topics of discussion in discourse that can allow others to decide whether or not they are Thai. As Jira pointed out, “most people don’t want to get into trouble...” so they do it “because we do it.” In the end, regardless of the heterogeneity of “love” for the King that my friends claim exists among Thais, the panoptic gaze that follows Thais across the landscape and through their daily lives influences them to display a particular habitus in unity.

Conclusion

The King, as we have seen, was not always an inseparable component of nation-ness. This has been a process has been sixty years in the making. In the early years of his reign, the King traced the boundaries of the nation through his development work and inscribed his presence upon the landscape through the public commemoration of these deeds. Now in contemporary Thailand the images of the King demarcate that which he traced so many years previously and continuously re-invests his past actions within the collective memory of the nation. These images allow viewers not only to see the physical space as being Thai but also mark off a social space that is Thai. Furthermore, this creates within the Thai epistemology the constant need to monitor the self and the collective to ensure that everyone in public is performing a hegemonically approved version of Thainess. In doing this, the King or the government, depending upon whom you ask, has successfully produced a space that can be defined as Thai, thereby defining citizen requirements to the nation. Appadurai has suggested citizen requirements to the modern nation “demands homogenous people, with standardized packages of rights” (Appadurai 2006: 339). Then the question is: Is the Thai nation as homogenous as some would like us to believe?

After reading the first draft of this thesis Jira replied to this question with an emphatic “no!” Jira told me that “Thais are not homogenous” but rather are “united” in their practice of commemoration for the King. This sentiment is certainly supported by Saichan who suggested that the King is the only “true shared factor” that defines national Thainess. In a short conversation with a former Thai military leader, I was told that indeed the King and the monarchy promote Thai national unity. Each person I interviewed and all my Thai friends were quick to point out the ethnic diversity within Thailand makes it nearly impossible to achieve cultural homogeneity on a national scale. Yet the government and the national media continue to seek cultural homogeneity in Thailand through education and popular culture such as the cinema homage to the King. While the actions of

those people who hurled insults and water bottles at Onsoong may suggest a strong conformity toward the King as a national symbol, the question remains: Were their actions a reflection of the homogeneity of the nation or an expression of the panoptic gaze of the King's images and the meaning and history inscribed in them? All that can be said with some certainty is that the production of the physical space of Thailand is homogenous and real, and Bhumibol and his deeds will live on in the social imaginary for generations to come. Whether or not this translates into social homogeneity is questionable.

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