Presence of the King

The Vitality of the Image of King Chulalongkorn for Modern Urban Thailand
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The mass production of objects is inextricably linked to present-day saints. These objects include such items as photographs, posters, badges, and statuettes with the image of the venerated person. Regardless of the secular or religious background of the cult, portraits clearly have a potential that meets a very fundamental need of devotees. However, the common appearance of a person's portrait does not necessarily indicate sanctity or popularity, as the massive display of the leaders' images in dictatorships (e.g., Stalin, Kim Il-sung, Saddam Hussein) may demonstrate—but the power holder's display of portraits probably stems from the same particular potential of a person's image.

Portraits are, to follow Marin (1988), powers of presence. In Marin's study concerning the representation of the absolute monarchy through portraits of Louis XIV, as well as in modern forms of absolutism, the image presented is the power of the state. When studying cults that emerge independently of any state or other central institution there is an issue as to what is provided by the presence of portraits and images. Here I will address this question by tracing local concepts about the powers of the portraits of one particular Thai saint, King Chulalongkorn the Great, king of Siam from 1868 until 1910. He is the object of a nationwide personality cult that began in the late 1980s.

A MYRIAD OF PORTRAITS

To the eye, the cult of King Chulalongkorn is most manifest through the innumerable quantity of King Chulalongkorn portraits. The king's portraits are found all over the country but particularly in urban areas. Wherever one goes—offices, restaurants, shops, private homes, temples, spirit shrines, railway stations, or other public buildings—there is always an image of the king and generally as a portrait or statuette.
narrated King Chulalongkorn portraits must also be understood as components of an indivisible whole. Together they constitute the myth and hagiography of the “Great Beloved King” (phra piya maharat), an epithet actually given to King Chulalongkorn during his lifetime. However, the biographical details and deeds highlighted in the narratives recount not merely the personal qualities of King Chulalongkorn but also those that are in general indicative of a “righteous ruler” (thammarat). Such kings are said to be guided by the teachings (tham) of the Buddha and to rule in accordance with the “Ten Kingly Virtues” (thotsaphirat-chatham): charity, morality, self-sacrifice, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, nonviolence, forbearance, and non-obstruction.

The Buddha provides the exemplary background of the thammarat concept. Before reaching enlightenment he is believed to have been reborn as a king many times. Such beliefs are well within the tradition of Buddhist hagiography (Tambiah 1985:326–327, 1988:111–118). The King Chulalongkorn narratives elaborate on ancient Theravada Buddhist conceptions of kingship, yet at the same time they are incorporated in a powerful modern nationalist ideology. As ideology the King Chulalongkorn myth derives its potency, to follow Kapferer (1988:79–84), from being based on vital elements of an “ontology” shared by those in power and the general populace. In Thai Buddhist ontology power relationships are ordered in a hierarchical system, with the king at the apex. Thai nationalist ideology is founded on the intrinsic linkages between nation, kingship, and religion: the virtuous Buddhist king is the benevolent power that unites and sustains the nation (see Murashima 1988). The narratives I present here recount various components of this nationalist ideology and from these I have composed four narrated portraits. Each expresses what most Thai would consider the significance of King Chulalongkorn and they are consistent with the principal answers people give when asked why they worship King Chulalongkorn. These answers follow more or less the issues taught in standard history books at school. Yet, in contrast with the effect compulsory subject matter generally has, the subject of the king and his achievements literally gives many people goose bumps.

The first narrated portrait is “King Chulalongkorn used to visit the countryside.” In Thai there is an expression that specifically refers to the king’s visits: sadet pha phat ton, which can be translated as “a person of royal descent making an ordinary (leisure) tour or visit.” This portrait narrates how King Chulalongkorn was the first Siamese king to go into the countryside incognito to learn in person about his subjects’ needs and problems. He made these trips incognito to be certain to see conditions for himself, instead of depending only on the information given by possibly untrustworthy officials. Wherever the king went, he treated his subjects with respect. Stories recount how the king stayed with ordinary villagers, had meals with them, and even invited them to his palace (cf. Chula 1960:229–230; Stengs 2000). “King Chulalongkorn used to visit the countryside” addresses the universal topic of the fatherly king and compassionate ruler who cares for each of his subjects. Similar stories are told about historical figures like Charlemagne and the illustrious caliph of the Arabian Nights. The recently crowned kings of Morocco (Mohammed VI) and Jordan (Abdullah II) acquired instantaneous popularity from their policy to inspect their kingdoms incognito.

The second narrated portrait is “King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery” (song loek that). During his reign the king brought an end to the sakdina system, a Siamese form of slavery comprising feudalism and debt slavery. The abolition of slavery is celebrated as one of his major achievements. “King Chulalongkorn used to visit the countryside” usually takes the form of “old stories told, still good to hear.” In contrast, the narrated portrait “King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery” is often related in a manner indicating the direct relevance of this long-ago history to the daily lives of the worshipers. The following quotations illustrate this point very well. Arun, a designer of jewelry living in Chiang Mai, told me:

By abolishing slavery the king actually gave the people of Thailand a new life and that is the king’s most important accomplishment. That the king even did this is the very reason I now live in liberty (isara). King Chulalongkorn was the first king who did not give thought to his own interests, but instead thought of ordinary people. One can never be sure whether any king after King Chulalongkorn would have done the same thing.

When this achievement is presented in paintings and statues, it is generally depicted as one single momentary act, with the king, seated on his throne, surrounded by grateful, just-freed slaves. Yet it is generally known that the endeavor was difficult and hazardous. King Chulalongkorn had to deal with the conservative opposition of the Siamese nobility, the power of which depended on the sakdina system. In contrast to what happened in the United States and Russia, the narrative emphasizes that slavery in Siam was abolished without civil war. This was due to King Chulalongkorn’s ingenious policy not to abolish slavery immediately, but gradually. Having abolished slavery, Thailand became a member of the league of civilized nations (araya phratat).

“King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery” depicts the king as a very intelligent ruler with his genius being a key element of his personality. The portrait narrates the greatness of the king’s compassion (loving-kindness, metta) for his subjects, which led to the abolition of slavery despite the difficulties. Many present-day
worshippers feel that without the acts of this king they still might be slaves. For many, the feeling of personal gratitude for being “free” in this life is a major motivation to worship the king.

A popular painting, reproduced on a school poster about the achievements of King Chulalongkorn, clearly visualizes the important elements (Figure 3.1). In this painting the slaves are kneeling at the feet of the king, emphasizing the closeness of king and subjects. The artist of this composition has situated the abolition in what is clearly a rural setting. The king is standing in the middle of a humble village, his face expressing metta, or “loving-kindness.” For those who know the stories, the painting combines the narrated portraits “King Chulalongkorn used to visit the countryside” and “King Chulalongkorn abolished slavery.” The everlasting protective powers of the king's spirit in this full-color composition are visualized with the addition of a large, sepia-hued portrait of the king's face shown as if rising from the earth.

The third narrated portrait is “King Chulalongkorn saved Thailand from becoming a colony.” This portrait recounts how the king's diplomatic capacities enabled him to establish friendly relationships with influential European leaders of his time. These personal contacts counterbalanced the threats that were presented by the British and the French to independent, but powerless, Siam. Equally important were the king's efforts to show the West that Siam was not just an insignificant kingdom ruled by barbarians. The king wanted it made clear that the country was open to progress and civilization, was governed by an enlightened monarch, and was not inferior in any important aspect to the European monarchies. In fact, two journeys undertaken by the king to Europe in 1897 and 1907 can be better understood in light of these objectives. In 1997, the centennial of the first voyage was commemorated by tremendous public interest in both voyages. In the popular perspective, the two voyages have become fused into one major event or, more accurately, into a single epic recounting the king’s mission and genius. Another important aspect in the narrative is that his visits to Europe are not treated as leisure trips but rather as strenuous, worrisome expeditions. There was much at stake and it was hard for the king to leave his kingdom behind for such extended periods. He made sacrifices, giving up personal comfort and pleasures for the well-being of his subjects.

These voyages, the king's vision, and his dedication to the Siamese people form the background for the initiatives the king took toward fundamental administrative and legal reforms. These were intended to organize Siam along similar lines to those of the modern states of Western Europe. The fourth narrated portrait is therefore titled “King Chulalongkorn modernized Thai society.” This portrait unfolds itself like the table of contents of any book on King Chulalongkorn. In these books the history of the Fifth Reign breaks down into a

long list of topics on the introduction of technological innovations and the reorganization of the administrative, educational, monetary, military, and juridical institutions. This narrative of the king is repeated in the way people enumerate various concrete achievements of the king in nearly identical sequence as in the tables of contents of such books. The modernizations brought by the king fit Theravada Buddhist ideas on the beneficent powers of meritorious kings, who are supposed to bring progress and improved welfare to the kingdom.

Current veneration for the king expresses a mixture of national pride for a great diplomatic king who saved Siam's independence and of gratitude—national and personal—for the reforms and progress he brought. Next to independence and modernity, the major features of King Chulalongkorn's image arising from
these narrated portraits are those of the compassionate, self-sacrificing, Buddhist king: the righteous ruler.

The King Chulalongkorn narratives are vital enough to make the king, his achievements, and his personality important in the everyday reality of many Thai. People feel connected to this king, and in speaking of him they transfer and rework the narratives, contributing to the construction of collective memory. This formation of collective memory encompasses, to follow Connerton (1989:36–56), repetitive processes of knowledge of the past in textual forms (myth) and through nontextual practices (ritual). Where ritual is characterized by a high degree of fixation, myth or mythic material can be considered as a “reservoir of meanings,” with a large potential of variance, reworking, and reinterpretation. Just how this process of reworking of myth by individual worshipers takes place poses a significant question. Before attempting an answer to this question I will cover relevant Thai concepts on the power and supernatural qualities of Buddhist kings. These are part of the popular imagination of the Thai people about kingship.

**THE KING’S MERIT AND GRACE**

The narratives exhibit the contours of King Chulalongkorn as a “righteous ruler.” The king’s intentions and deeds as they appear in the narrated portraits testify that King Chulalongkorn ruled in accordance with the Ten Kingly Virtues. The importance attributed to the adherence of kings to the Ten Kingly Virtues is the first clue to the Thai conception of kingship and its fundamental religious nature. In this conception, adherence to the Ten Kingly Virtues is inseparable from possessing barami (grace, virtue), a “charismatic power” with auspicious qualities. Equally important is the idea of a king being a man who has accumulated so much merit (bun) in his previous lives that he is reborn to become a king. Merit and reincarnation are central concepts in Theravada Buddhism. It is a person’s “karma” (kam) that determines one’s rebirth. According to the “law of karma” every action generates a consequence. Actions in accordance with Buddhist morals will produce merit and contribute to good karma. The more merit accumulated, the better one’s karma and, accordingly, one’s rebirth. Morally contemptible deeds, on the other hand, will result in demerit (kat), which in turn causes bad karma and an unpleasant rebirth (cf. Akin 1969:11–12; Spiro 1982:67). As the king stands at the apex of Thai society, he is perceived as the person with the greatest reservoir of accumulated merit (Akin 1969:47; Keyes 1977:288).

For the Thai people the “merit and grace” (bun barami) of the king are important matters, as they believe them to influence the course that society might take as well as their individual well-being. It is generally accepted that when the kingdom is ruled by a virtuous king, his bun barami makes the kingdom prosper and its inhabitants live in happiness and peace. However, although bun and barami overlap, they are not exactly the same and are experienced differently. The idea that the merit of a king works for the good of all is based on the belief that merit can be shared and transferred. Monks transfer a share of their accumulated merit to the laity in public ceremonies and certain rituals. Laymen transfer and share merit particularly with deceased relatives or ancestors (Terwiel 1994:101–102). The extra merit deceased persons may receive in the interval between their death and rebirth through the merit-making ceremony organized by their relatives may contribute to a superior rebirth (Spiro 1982:124–125). A king is believed to have accumulated so much merit that through his compassion the merit can be shared and transferred to anyone connected with the king (Keyes 1977:287–289). Obviously, a king is connected with all his subjects and that explains the immediate beneficial effect a king’s merit is believed to exert on his kingdom and its people. This belief also implies that disaster or misfortune can be understood as a weakening of the king’s merit and its meritorious effect. Kings therefore are required to continue to make merit. In particular this takes the form of almsgiving to the Sangha and the construction of Buddhist monuments (i.e., Buddha statues, stupas, and temples), especially in times of crisis.

King Chulalongkorn is believed to be reborn in one of the heavenly abodes as a divine being, a “guardian angel” (thep, thewada, or desa). Through his compassion he still cares for the well-being of his kingdom and its inhabitants. And although this again leads to further accumulation of merit, contributing to both King Chulalongkorn’s personal salvation and to the welfare of the Thai nation, the emphasis in the cult is placed on the beneficent effect of the king’s barami. Different from merit, whose auspicious effect is unpredictable, the effect of the king’s barami is direct and can be experienced particularly in his immediate proximity. The popular use of the word barami also refers to those effects of the king’s observance of the Ten Kingly Virtues that may be experienced personally. One could translate barami in its popular conception as “grace,” since it is considered to be a perceivable aspect of majesty. This same barami may also be experienced as emanating from King Chulalongkorn’s portraits.

**THE EQUESTRIAN STATUE**

King Chulalongkorn’s most significant and impressive portrait is the equestrian statue at the Royal Plaza in Bangkok. To understand the specific position of the statue in the King Chulalongkorn cult and the role of barami, the narrative devoted to its creation must be considered. This directly involves the writings of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, one of the king’s most intimate half-brothers. The
The equestrian statue was erected in 1908 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the king's accession to the throne. The unveiling of the statue on November 11, 1908, was the high point of the celebrations and still lives on in the collective memory through well-known photographs. The series of commemorative stamps issued that day, featuring an engraving of the statue, not only has become a valued collector's item but also depictions of the stamps on new stamps, posters, or on the cover of stamp albums are part of the usual repertoire of King Chulalongkorn objects (see inset, Figure 3.1).

The account of the erection of the equestrian statue by the people of Siam, including how everyone, regardless of birth or background, liberally contributed, is widely known through the popular Sadet Praphat Ton diary of Prince Damrong and is also inscribed on a plaque on the base of the statue. Books on King Chulalongkorn typically feature a photograph of the statue—either a recent picture or one of the photographs taken during its unveiling—and a short account of how the funds were collected. Prince Damrong's quote or the text of the plaque is also commonly included. The essence of the statue narrative is that it is a present from the Thai people to their king, with the size of the funds collected indicating the dimensions of their love.

Significantly, the inscription on the plaque is the first text that referred to the king as Phra Piyarat, or the people's "Great Beloved." I have not found any direct account of Prince Damrong's role in the epitaph's origin, but the idea is commonly accepted that it stemmed from the mind of the prince. As the prince was one of the members of the central committee charged with organizing the jubilee, it is logical to attribute the plaque inscription to him. The idea to erect an equestrian statue, however, came from the king himself (Apinan 1992:15–16). The money needed was collected through the sale of occasional stamps featuring a preliminary drawing of the statue.

The idea for collecting donations at large was possibly inspired by the construction of the Albert Memorial in London, which was financed by donations from the British populace. Certainly a monument erected after a successful campaign for funds may serve to give testimony to the legitimacy of the ruler. In the Thai case it made the creation of the statue an act of formalizing and formulating the love of "the people" for their king. Unlike the Albert Memorial, which in the 1990s narrowly escaped destruction, the equestrian statue has increased in significance throughout the years. But why and for whom exactly? For worshippers of King Chulalongkorn the equestrian statue gives testimony to the unique and intensive relationship between the king and his subjects, of which the "creation narrative" is a reconfirmation.

**PORTRAITS OF THE KING**

The importance of the equestrian statue as a focus for popular sentiments for King Chulalongkorn became apparent in the late 1980s. In that period an increasing number of people came to worship the king at the statue on Tuesdays. King Chulalongkorn was born on a Tuesday and many believe that every Tuesday night at 10 P.M. the spirit of the king descends from heaven to enter the statue. In 1992 the famous movie star Bin Banlerut sparked further interest in the cult by publicly declaring (in the Thai Rath, Thailand's most popular newspaper, and on television) that he had survived a terrible car accident thanks to the protective power of a King Chulalongkorn coin (rian) that he wore as an amulet. After Bin's declaration the number of people worshiping the king at the statue increased drastically while, as my research indicates, elsewhere in the country other centers of King Chulalongkorn worship appeared. During the periods of research, thousands of people came to the statue to pay their respects to the king, particularly on Tuesday evenings but also on Thursday and Saturday evenings. The pilgrims presented offerings and asked the king for spiritual support in all kinds of worldly problems.

For an understanding of the omnipresence of the king's portraits another important aspect to the cult needs to be introduced. People explained their worship of King Chulalongkorn, almost without exception, as stemming from a need for a thi phung (a patron) or a thi phung thang chai (a mental patron). Sometimes the expressions yut nieo (a belief one can hold to) and lak nieo (a principle or a basis one can stick to) were used. These expressions indicate a need for someone who can always be turned to or relied upon. The colloquial forms used to address the king in prayers or when speaking about the king—Sadet Pho (royal father), Sadet Pu (royal grandfather), Phra Piya (beloved highness), or Pho Piya (beloved father)—demonstrate how worshippers perceive and experience their relationship with the king in terms of an intimate father-child relationship. Such perceptions, of course, are elaborations of the image of King Chulalongkorn as an accessible, fatherly ruler or as the ideal Buddhist king noted earlier.

The interpretation of King Chulalongkorn as a faithful fatherly figure explains, in part, why people long to be physically close to him. In the narrated portraits this longing is expressed in the recurring theme of the immediate presence and approachability of the king among his subjects during his life. The
abundance of portraits may be regarded as a material expression of the same longing for his presence. It is difficult to find a single worshiper of the king who does not own at least one King Chulalongkorn portrait. Among all the portraits, though, the meanings attached to the equestrian statue are more powerful than those of any other portrait. This is because the idea of the king's spirit descending from heaven into the statue makes the statue, at least on Tuesdays at 10 P.M., indistinguishable from the king. And the statue is not only embedded in the collective memory as "a gift from the people" and regarded as belonging to the people, but also the square where it is situated has become a place of the people. These ideas about the statue are important in understanding why, in terms of barami, the statue is considered to be extra powerful and why people make an effort to come to the statue to worship the king. For them King Chulalongkorn's barami emanates directly from the statue, radiating equally to everyone, leaving an immediate and lasting positive effect.

Nearly everyone making the pilgrimage to the statue brings one or more King Chulalongkorn images. The portraits are placed amidst each person's offerings and are charged or recharged with the king's charismatic power. In this way the statue's barami with its protective and auspicious qualities can be taken home or, in the case of coins and amulets, carried. This process of transfer of the king's charismatic power into the objects is comparable to the sanctification of objects (pluk sek) that takes place in consecration ceremonies (phit tham pluk sek, phutthaphisek) at temples (Nithi 1993:27). Also in such ceremonies people bring images (whether Buddhist amulets, monk statuettes, or portraits of Thai kings) to have them sanctified and charged with beneficial power. The fundamental difference, though, is that in the King Chulalongkorn cult people do not depend on expert intermediaries, such as monks (Nithi 1993:27). In a phutthaphisek ceremony, objects are sanctified through beneficial power, which is generated by monks chanting Pali formulae (khatha).

Significantly, at the equestrian statue monks are not needed to consecrate the objects—the physical nearness of the statue is sufficient. People are entirely in the position of doing this on their own, without the need for a collective ceremony. Leaflets, booklets, and tapes providing the required knowledge about offerings, rituals, and magic formulae are widely available. Nithi (1993) points to the role of such tamra (literally, textbooks or manuals) in enabling individual worshipers to establish a direct contact with the king. Because of them, he argues, people can do as well without as with spirit mediums, the usual expert intermediaries in cults. Clearly a significant dimension of the King Chulalongkorn cult is that direct access to the divine is open to all and is not controlled by an esoteric inner circle. While this observation is important, it requires a more detailed consideration of popular ideas about the relationship between the king's effigy and barami.

There is no doubt about the special meaning of the equestrian statue and its importance as a source of barami. Yet, for people who lack the time or live far away, the king's barami can also be experienced through any of his portraits. Opinions on this matter differ widely but without resulting in any conflict or schism. I spoke with people who bought King Chulalongkorn images at the statue and returned them regularly to the square but also had them consecrated in a temple ceremony elsewhere. I also spoke with people who never had their King Chulalongkorn portraits consecrated in any way but were convinced of the strength of their auspicious power only because of the king's effigy. But wherever people obtained their King Chulalongkorn objects and whether they had them sanctified at the statue, in local temple ceremonies, in spirit medium sessions, or not at all, the general opinion was that only the individual's attachment to the object and his or her personal intentions really mattered. However, the latter implies that a portrait's beneficial powers will only work for those who behave morally and work hard, as the king desires.

The need to be as close to the king as possible stems from the feeling that in this way a more direct appeal can be made to him and his barami for support in personal matters. A portrait opens up, or increases, the possibility for the worshiper to establish direct contact with the king. The equestrian statue is but one portrait through which such a contact can be established, although it is an extraordinary portrait, "shared" by the worshipers at the square. It is irrelevant that the motivation for approaching the king is purely personal and, in fact, the reasons vary greatly. I have met a good range of petitioners at the statue seeking help: students calling upon the king for help in passing their examinations, shop owners striving to increase their sales, employees needing his help to get promotions, and people seeking relief from grief or some general distress. Of course, these worshipers—and this is the case with virtually everyone who worships the king—have their own, personal King Chulalongkorn portraits. This phenomenon actually predates the weekly worshiping of King Chulalongkorn at the equestrian statue:

[The method] of paying homage to deceased kings in Siam remains to be mentioned: the setting of a photograph or lithograph of the particular king on a table, before which are made the usual offering of lighted candles, flowers, and incense. This is now a very popular custom, both in government institutions and private houses, since every Siamese home possesses at least a cheap lithograph and can thus show its loyalty in this easy and practical manner. But it is of course quite a new custom, since the making of royal portraits only came into fashion after the middle of the last century, after the belief that this was harmful to the person represented had been officially discountenanced. Indeed, the supposition that some part of
the royal "soul" (if one may be permitted to use this loose term) might possibly inhabit the portrait, would be an added stimulus to paying homage before it. It is also a modern means of expressing what remains of the worship of the living King [King Rama VII, reign 1925–1932], for whenever it is desired to honor him, especially on the occasions of a royal procession, portraits of the king set up on tables may be seen at almost every Siamese doorway along the route. [Wales 1992:173]

Wales, when speaking of "deceased kings," must be referring to portraits of King Chulalongkorn and King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI, son of King Chulalongkorn), since the mass production of portraits only started during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Apparently, contact with the divine without intermediaries was an aspect of the worshiping of kings by early in the 20th century.

In conversations with devotees of King Chulalongkorn the significance of personally owned portraits in their relationships with the king was an ever-present topic. In the following section three cases are presented to illustrate the importance of this linkage. Although the interpretation and molding of one's relationship with the king is, to a certain extent, highly personal, these relationships are also characterized by recurring themes. Here I distinguish two such themes, though there are others. The first theme is one in which certain experiences involving the king or his image occurred during an especially emotional incident or episode (whether positive or negative) in the person's life. The second theme involves the role of a material token with the king's image as proof or reconfirmation of the special relation the new devotee has with King Chulalongkorn.

SOMBUN'S TURNING FATE

Sombun's first remarks when hearing about my topic of research were "those who worship King Chulalongkorn feel desperate" and "worshiping King Chulalongkorn is a psychological thing." This made me think that he was not an active King Chulalongkorn worshiper. To my surprise Sombun (an architect and contractor) turned out to be a strong believer in the powers of King Chulalongkorn. This was not always the case, though.

In January 1991 a vendor of King Chulalongkorn statuettes came to Sombun's office. At first Sombun had no intention of buying one. But then the vendor said, "Just buy one. For you, I will make the price very low." So Sombun bought a plaster statue replica of the equestrian statue. Later he asked friends where the right place to put the statue would be, how to make an altar, and what offerings to make. Two weeks later he sold a parcel of land he had tried to sell for a very long time. This was during a time when Thailand was experiencing a real-estate boom, but he had been unable to find a buyer. Sombun said, "Thus without working I earned 100,000 baht. I immediately bought a bottle of Hennessy to present as an offering to the king." In a later conversation it turned out that Sombun and his wife had started as architects and contractors one year earlier and their business was doing very badly at the time Sombun bought the statue. Sombun said, "It was after I started to worship King Chulalongkorn that we always had enough orders." When asked about his earlier remark that King Chulalongkorn is for the "desperate," Sombun said he does not consider himself to be desperate, although he did not feel well at the time he bought the statue.

NUM'S NEW JOB

Num, a woman in her early thirties, works as an official at the Land and Water Management Department in Mae Rim, a small town in the province of Chiang Mai. Num owns a 24-carat golden medallion (lokhet) bearing the image of King Chulalongkorn, and she was eager to tell me how she became the owner.

After finishing her formal education in water management Num went to work for a private company. Her parents regretted this as they had hoped she would become a government official. In Thailand, to become a government official, one has to take an examination. The examination results are valid for two years only and it is during this period that a job in government service must be located. Otherwise, the examination must be taken and passed again. Encouraged by her parents, Num took the examination, but she could not find a government job and had to stay with the private company. Approximately two months before the exam's expiration date, she had a disagreement at her work (she did not want to tell me about the problem) after which she wanted to leave more than ever and began urgently to seek work as a government official, but still without success. Seeking help with this problem, her father consulted, without her knowledge, a spirit medium (khon seng chao). Without ever having met Num, the spirit medium told her father many things about her that were true, especially that she was a woman with many "male characteristics." Num had never thought about visiting a spirit medium, but after hearing this she felt she could trust the medium and joined her father for another visit. The medium told her that in her previous life she had been a soldier of King Chulalongkorn. As a soldier she had killed many people and the accumulated sin (bap) resulted in her rebirth as a woman. But much of the soldier in the former life had remained in her and in her heart she was naklaeng (a tough fighter). The medium told her that if she wanted a job as a government official she must pray to King Chulalongkorn, as she had been his soldier.

After the session Num turned to the king on a daily basis. She prayed: "If I really have been your soldier, then please help me now." When only one week
remained until her examination expired, she received a message that there was a position for her at the Land and Water Management Department. Because the king had fulfilled her wish, she felt she wanted to have something special of him. Portraits and statuettes of King Chulalongkorn were plentiful, but these all seemed very ordinary to her, so she did not buy one. In her new position Num made a friend who had a beautiful golden King Chulalongkorn medallion. Num never dared tell her how much she admired the medallion. Num found the medallion special for two reasons: it was made in a famous temple and the king was shown full face rather than being portrayed in profile as on most medallions.

One day Num noticed her friend was wearing a different King Chulalongkorn medallion, and she asked about this change. The friend said that it was very clear to her that it was Num who should be wearing the golden medallion and she wanted to sell it to her. Num could not believe her ears, but a question remained: how much would her friend ask for the medallion? Num dared not ask the price since she thought it would cost at least 7,000 baht, an amount she could not afford. She prayed to the king, asking that the price would not be beyond her reach and to her great surprise her friend only asked 1,000 baht. Now Num has the desired portrait and she feels no need for additional portraits. This medallion is all she wants. At home she has no portraits and no altar; she believes (naptha) with her heart. She does cross-stitched, sepia-hued portraits of the king and one small one takes her two to three months to complete. She does not keep these portraits herself but makes them as gifts for friends.

RENU'S DIRECT ENCOUNTER

On a Sunday morning many years ago Renu, now retired but at that time a secretary at the main office of Shell Oil in Bangkok, visited the weekend market (now closed) at Sanam Luang. It was a windy day. While she walked down the street near Wat Mahatat (a famous temple), a crumpled piece of paper, tossed about by the wind, danced just in front of her feet, behind her feet, and in front of her feet again. Every time she walked past it, it seemed to pursue her even faster. Finally, she stopped to pick it up and to see what was on the paper. It turned out to be a portrait of King Chulalongkorn, dressed in purple clothes. Although she never had any feelings or ideas one way or the other with regard to the king, Renu decided to keep the portrait. She ironed the paper portrait, bought a 50-baht frame, and took it to the restaurant owned by her family.

On the very same day, they hung the portrait. Later, a thief entered the restaurant. Her brother, a soldier, was standing next to the cashier. The robber pointed his gun at her brother and told the cashier to hand over all the money. But suddenly, without any apparent reason, the man dropped his gun and ran away. A few streets away he was caught and arrested by the police.

Renu later heard this story from her brother. While he was being held at gunpoint by the thief, he could see the portrait of King Chulalongkorn. He prayed to the king: "If I have to die, please let it happen in war while defending my country, but not this way." The king then raised his hand from the portrait and with an enormous power knocked the gun out of the thief's hand. The cook standing nearby had seen the king's hand, too.

This event made it very clear to Renu that it was no coincidence she had come across that particular piece of paper. The king had come to her through that portrait to save her brother. She had experienced, as she calls it, a direct encounter (prasop kantrong) with the king. Of course, the portrait is no longer housed in a 50-baht frame. Immediately after the incident it was reframed in a beautiful gilded wooden frame.

CONCLUSIONS

From analyzing the narratives of these experiences it is clear how each of the two recurring themes contributes to the persuasiveness of the stories. The initial lack of interest in King Chulalongkorn makes the associated events more notable and highlights the fact that involvement with King Chulalongkorn is not a fancy. At the same time, the initiative for the relationship is seen as coming from the king, implying that the resulting relationship is genuinely mutual. A crisis situation makes the king's intervention plausible and helps to demonstrate the beneficent effect of his involvement. The particular King Chulalongkorn portraits figuring in the stories not only serve to illustrate and confirm the personal relationships between the narrators and the king but also provide tangible evidence of each story's truth and hence provide an indispensable element in the narrative. At the same time we see how King Chulalongkorn stories and legends provide a "reservoir of meanings" (Connerton 1989:56) from which one may draw to reinterpret and to retell one's personal history in terms of a generally accepted framework. The personal stories "borrow truth" from the accepted body of stories and legends. For instance, Num and Renu's brother rightfully escape misery and danger because they place their lives in the context of defending Thailand's independence as soldiers, now or in the past. Sombun's story shows how becoming involved with King Chulalongkorn is instantly rewarded. Such individual elaborations in turn enhance and reinforce the persuasiveness of the general King Chulalongkorn myth. Exchanges of personal stories such as these are also vital elements in the spread of the cult.

These conversion stories clearly demonstrate how mass-produced portraits of the king may become objects of great personal value, not merely because they provide the presence of the Great Beloved King but, in particular, because they have become physical symbols of the king's personal involvement with his devo-
tes. Finally, these cases demonstrate how the role of the king, from a historical savior of the country to an omnipresent daily problem-solver, is refashioned by individual worshipers.

NOTES

The material for this chapter was collected during my Ph.D. field research on the cult of King Chulalongkorn the Great (Stengs 2003). The research periods were from September 1996 to December 1997 and October to November 1998. The research was funded by the Program on Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). I thank Jeroen Beets for his useful comments and Rafael Sanchez for sharing his ideas with me.

1. Siam was formally renamed Thailand in 1939 when Phibun Songkram was prime minister. The country became Siam again in 1944 under Prime Minister Pridi Phanomyong. In 1947 Phibun Songkram took over the government again and the country’s name reverted to Thailand.

2. The terms portrait and image will be used interchangeably when referring to depictions of the king in the form of painted portraits, statuettes, photographs, bank notes, coins, sculptures, postage stamps, and so forth.

3. See Akin (1969) and Brummelhuis (1995) for clear and detailed analyses of the sakdina system. This article also leaves no room to go into detail about the sakdina system or the king’s precise motivations for abolishing the system.

4. This idea is in contradiction with the law of karma, but this contradiction generally is not resolved (Obeyesekere 1968:22–26; Spiro 1982:125).

5. The 1997 catalog price for the original stamps: 90,000 baht ($2,500) for the whole series of seven in mint condition.

6. My research was partly carried out among visitors to a temple and among clients of a spirit medium in Chiang Mai (about 600 kilometers north of Bangkok). It turned out that the spirit of King Chulalongkorn approached both the abbot of the temple and the medium in 1993 for the first time. Another part of the research was carried out among a prayer group praying for the well-being of the monarchy, the nation, and the Thai people at royal monuments in Bangkok. This group began its prayer sessions in October 1993 at the equestrian statue. See Akin (1969) and Brummelhuis (1995) for clear and detailed analyses of the sakdina system. This article also leaves no room to go into detail about the sakdina system or the king’s precise motivations for abolishing the system.

7. Indicative of the importance of the statue is that most people do not use the square’s official name (Suan Amphon) but refer to the square as Lan Borommaraj Songma, “Equestrian Statue Square.”

8. In addition to traditional offerings such as candles, incense, garlands, and Thai fruit, King Chulalongkorn is offered a variety of Western products. Next to cognac the king is believed to have appreciated apples, black coffee, red wine, cigars, and Winston cigarettes. Such offerings clearly express how people associate the king with Europe and modernity. For more details on these and many other aspects of the cult see Stengs (2003).

Eva Perón incarnated one of the most fraught and important mythical icons of Latin American political history during the past century. As such, she surpassed even the prestige of her husband, Juan Perón, then president of Argentina (1946–1955). Here I neither describe Evita’s personality (already sufficiently treated in the political literature) nor analyze her role in the relations between peronismo and the Roman Catholic Church; rather, I consider her persona in relation to religious factors, stressing her embodiment of lay sainthood.

Converted into “Evita,” she played a role in the society the importance of which today is beyond dispute. She went well beyond the claims of both her apologists and detractors. Always controversial, she was at once passionate, impolite, valiant, and foulmouthed; both wildly hated and wildly loved (Luna 2000:130). Paradoxically, she fostered and provoked tremendous resentment at the same time she aroused unconditional, fanatical support. Although such extremes have occurred in other cases that one might also classify as political canonizations, the process by which Evita rose to this status was dazzlingly rapid.

She was a young woman of 27 when her husband rose to political power in Argentina (Gallardo 1995:222). When she was 33 years old—an age deemed significant by many, as it is said to have been Christ’s age at his death—she became frail and was struck down by cancer of the uterus. She died on July 26, 1952.

Half a century after this tragic moment, Evita Perón has become again a cyclonic force internationally as well as in Argentina. Stage and film productions (in which she is portrayed by the enormously popular North American film and stage star Madonna) reprise Evita’s life, including her fading success; these performances ratify renewed interest in her importance. Albeit a de-ideologized postmodern return, the revival also captures her mythical nature. Novelistic treatment—Santa Evita, by Tomás Eloy Martínez (on Argentina’s bestseller lists), and Eva Perón: A Biography (Evita: Eva Perón a Madona Dos Sem-Camisa),
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