

*Cultural Appropriation or Cultural Legacy? Brahmanical Ceremonies of  
Tri-yumpawai and Tri-pawai in Bangkok Revisited*

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Sally E. Merry (1998) observes that cultural appropriation as a way of adopting a cultural product with local meanings and practices where one group takes the existing cultural form from one social group and integrates it into another social group with a dissimilar set of meanings and practices. I agree with Sally when she says,

“...the anthropological understanding of ‘culture’ has shifted from a ‘reified notion of a fixed and stable set of beliefs, values and institutions’” to a ‘flexible [collection] of practices and discourses created through historical processes of contestation over signs and meanings’ (1998: 577).

Culture is thus seen as knotted to the structures of power defined by the dominant group that exercises control over certain cultural meanings (Tsosie 2002; 311). Similar is the case of Thailand. The appropriation of Indian cultural forms by the former kings of Thailand has been used to continue the dominance and control over the general population.

Jackson in his study notes that although Thailand (Siam) was politically independent, it was subject to legal, economic and cultural pressures internationally. This placed the country into a colony-like relation with the imperial West. He observes that

Hybridity<sup>1</sup> is ‘a defining feature of the Thai cultural history and contemporary Thai culture for both elite and popular. He notes that appropriating from geopolitically powerful and prestigious was a central strategy to legitimize local political rule. This helps them to be in a position to fight victoriously against the borrowed civilizations. (Jackson, 2008, p. 154)

Siam was situated at the crossroads of economic, political and cultural influences coming from older regional powers. The rulers thus adopted the strategy of selective cultural assimilation and refashioning them in the image of powers that preceded them historically. This allowed the rulers to claim their rule over the ethnically diverse population. Cultural links and tributary relations were drawn with India and China (dominant powers of pre modern Asia) thus creating a hybridized Hindu-Buddhist image. The two countries see themselves as the originating centers of universal cultures. Jackson observes Thai imagination of foreignness being linked with the greatness and adoption of signs of that greatness being enhancing the local power (Jackson, 2008, p 155-156).

There was however a re-orientation away from India and China and towards the West. This was due to the European encroachments into China and British colonization of India. The two former greatness’s thus could no longer be imagined as geopolitical power and cultural authority and were thus abandoned. The Siam rulers had to find a new vision to justify rule locally that meant a shift towards the West. (Jackson, 2008, p, 159) This began under the reign of King Rama IV (1851-68) and intensified under the rule of King Rama V (1868-1910). Jackson explains that the name *Siwilai* was given to the foreign idiom of ‘civilization’ that was a strategy to rule in the image of

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<sup>1</sup> Hybridity is a post colonial concept developed in 1990s used by theorist to describe cultural identities that emerge from the cultural contacts of major and minor cultures. In this study the focus is on the Thai Buddhist (major culture) and their contact with Hinduism (minor culture) and the creation of the culture which is neither one and nor the other. <sup>308</sup>

the West during the era of absolute monarchy. Siamese institutions and practices were refashioned along with Western lines and were thus part of being *siwilai*. Jackson's study makes it clear that the Thai authorities have adopted the identity of the dominant powers of their times throughout their history. The rulers appropriating and negotiating with the outside powers placing themselves in privileged position thus shape the history.

Even though there was a move towards the West elements of Hinduism still remained in Siam even today. The Bureau of the Royal household still performs the royal rites like the coronation of the king, oath of allegiance, swing ceremony (Tri-yampawai) and the Royal Ploughing ceremony. These rites are performed by Brahmins of the Thai court based on the doctrines of Hinduism. The Phra Rajapitee Sibsong Duean<sup>2</sup> or the Memoir of Rituals in a year also suggests that most royal rites derived from Hindu beliefs. This paper aims to explore the historical appropriation of Hindu beliefs system by the kings in Thailand and also attempts to show that this appropriation is more of a cultural legacy at present being carried forward by the general population. The first section of the paper gives an account of the presence of Hinduism in the region and the changes that have been brought about in the religious aspects by the kings in different eras. The later part of the paper focuses on two royal ceremonies, Tri-yumpawai and Tri-pawai, which are less known and are conducted on a much smaller scale compared to other royal ceremonies.

Historical evidences suggesting the influence of Hinduism in Southeast Asia, includes historical records of Southeast Asia and the ancient sculptures. With the ancient statues of deities and other religious symbols, it is generally assumed that Hinduism was brought to the Southeast Asia's mainland (Suvarnabhumi) through maritime commerce crossing from the Gulf of Bengal to Malaya Peninsula. In the First and Second Centuries, while Brahmins and Buddhist monks from South Asia arrived in Southeast Asia, they brought their culture to the region as well, including languages and religions. Hinduism had been particularly influential and become the ground for cultural structure in Southeast Asia.

The Khmer ruler for political reasons with the succession of King Jayavarman to the throne in the 9<sup>th</sup> century adopted the concept of Devraja after declaring independence from the Kingdom of Java and the unification of Khmer Empire. The Devraja (god-king) concept made the king divine, as he is associated with Siva. Siva Lingam was created and Brahmins were considered to be the guardians of Siva-lingam and the king. This allowed Hinduism to become part of the monarchy and political institution. Additionally the coronation ceremony was also conducted under the concept of Devraja and many kings were named after Siva. Temples dedicated to Hindu gods were also found and were supported by the king. In the Khmer empire, kings gave importance to Hinduism even when they may not believe in the same sects resulting in the emergence of several Hindu sects. However they were much in favor of Saivism that views Siva as the greatest and the source of Devraja concept. The Hindu concepts in Siam were spotted especially in the Kingdom of Sukhothai (13<sup>th</sup> century) even when Hinduism was on a decline and Buddhism was widespread by this time. The Sukhothai kingdom was independent from the Khmer Empire and the concept of

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<sup>2</sup> "The Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months of the Year", an essay written by King Rama V regarding the royal rites related to Brahmanical and Hindu beliefs.

Devraja was less influential. However the belief system still existed as being inherited from the earlier powers. Even with the adoption of Buddhism by the kings, several Hindu rituals were still performed including the coronation of the king and the oath of allegiance. Brahmins conducted the court rituals and were acting as teachers of the kings as well. Several archeological inscriptions like in in Sri Chum temple are an evidence of the presence of Hindu temples in the Sukhothai kingdom where Brahmins were appointed as caretakers. The Royal Ploughing ceremony, marking the beginning of the rice-growing season, also began during Sukhothai era. The ceremony still continues to be observed today with a cultivating ceremony and a ploughing ceremony where Brahmins chant sacred hymns as part of the ceremony (Misra 2010: 13).

After the defeat of the Khmer Empire by Ayudhya invaders in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the Ayudhya kingdom was formed. The citizens migrated from Khmer capital city to the Ayudhya kingdom including the Brahmins of the Khmer court. Khmer Hinduism thus was highly influential and the concept of Devraja was introduced to the Ayudhya court empowering the king. The Ayudhya court adopted the political system and the Hindu philosophy. Royal rites continued to be performed to internalize the concept of Devraja among general population. Ramayana was seen as the cornerstone of the religious literature and importance was given to the Vaishnavism sect. The kings were thus seen as the avatar of Vishnu and the kings were named after characters in Ramayana such as Rama. This was different from the Devraja concept under the Khmer Empire where the king was seen as part of Siva instead.

In the early period of Rattanakosin era (1782 onwards), King Rama I instructed Brahmins that had fled to other cities after the fall of Ayudhya Kingdom, to return to the court and work to restore court traditions, customs, and rituals. Initially, these Brahmins primarily travelled from Sukhothai, Ayudhya, Petchaburi, Nakhorn Sri Thammarat, and other southern cities. After the establishment of Bangkok, the Brahmin Temple was found, which consists of the Hall of Siva, the Hall of Ganesh, and the Hall of Vishnu. Moreover, the Giant Swing was constructed in 1784 as a site for royal Triyumpawai -Tripawai ceremony upon the request of Prah Kru<sup>3</sup> Sitthichai to King Rama I (Laomanacharoen 2006: 47). Prah Kru Sitthichai (Kra Tai) was a Sukhothai Brahmin specializing in Brahmanism. Tri-Yampawai is a Brahmin New Year and is observed to welcome the visit of Siva on earth in accordance with the Saivism beliefs. In Saivism sect, Brahmins are considered civil servants of the king. The ceremonies are part of the twelve annual royal ceremonies, a literary work of King Rama V. Although the performance of the swing ceremony was discontinued in 1934, the Giant Swing is still the site for the performance of the Brahmin rites.

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<sup>3</sup> In Siam, Thai Brahmins were often appointed as Prah Kru. It is believed that the title itself was coined to glorify them. Prah Kru Sitthichai here was a member of Naliwan Brahmin group, one of the three Brahmin groups in Siam. Naliwan Brahmins often performed rituals regarding elephant such as ritual of elephant hunting, ceremony for elephants to bring health and fortune. These are rituals and ceremonies requiring Brahmins with specific knowledge of superstition. Given that elephants represent the sacred symbol of king's power and were used in wars, these Brahmins are thus important for the performances of any rituals related to elephants. <sup>310</sup>



พราหมณ์นำลิ่วนโสดชิงช้า ภาพถ่ายเก่าสมัยรัชกาลที่ 5 ในทราวบพิศักราช (ภาพจากหอจดหมายเหตุแห่งชาติ)  
*Naliwans swinging the Giant Swing in the reign of King Rama V (Old Photo)*

. Naliwans (Brahmins) swung the Giant Swing in the reign of King Rama V (Old Photo from National Archive). Source: Laomanacharoen, Siripoj. "Giant Swing". Brahmin Temple – Giant Swing. Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2006: pp.66.

Although King Rama I supported Hinduism, he placed restrictions over non-Buddhist worships, animal sacrifices, worship of Siva-lingam, and black magic in the kingdom. Also, Siamese people were not permitted to become Hindu. These prohibitions were enacted under the law (Kam-Aek 2007: 28-29).

Later during the reign of King Rama IV, besides local Brahmins, Indian Brahmins had migrated to Siam. Significantly, royal rites were re-adjusted by the king ordering the incorporation of Buddhist rituals into the Hindu rituals. For example, Brahmins conducting the ceremonies of Triyampawai and Tripawai in the Brahmin Temple must also perform the worship of Lord Buddha and Emerald Buddha in Wat Phra Kaew.

The Memoir of Rituals in a year compiled by Rama V (1868-1910) lists the two festivals as being held in the second month of lunar calendar to welcome Siva visit on earth that lasts for ten days. King Rama V also describes the Tri-yumpawai being originally held in the first month but to avoid the high water levels of water (causing inconvenience in traveling) in the first month, the event was observed in the second month instead. He mentions that the worship of Siva (Tri-yumpawai) should be carried out on the day of the waxing moon, as Siva is perceived as a good god. Vishnu, on the other hand seen as a god of punishment, should be worshipped (Tri-pawai) on the day of the waning moon and the worship should be less joyful and just a routine worship when compared to Siva's.

### **The origin and observance of Tri-yumpawai**

Tri-yumpawai is assumed to have derived from Tiruvempavai festival in Southern India dedicated to Siva, held in the second month of lunar calendar. The ceremony will be held on the seventh day of the waxing moon in the morning and the ninth day

of the waxing moon at night. Moreover the Swing ceremony is held in Thanjavur Temple and the Temple of Madurai on different days. The Triuvempavai ceremony continues to be performed in the southern parts of India but has become a worship of the Nataraja form of Siva instead.

The Tri-yumpawai and Tri-pawai ceremonies continue to be conducted at the Brahmin temple near the Giant Swing. The old Giant Swing was replaced with a new one in 1920 during the reign of Rama VI and was renovated yet again in 1947 and 1970. In 2006, a new Giant Swing made of teak was raised and His Majesty the King presided over the ceremony along with Her Majesty the Queen and HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. In the past, the giant swing was an important part of the Tri-yumpawai celebration that was grandly organized with three groups of four Naliwan Brahmins rode on the giant swing. However today the two ceremonies are performed on a much smaller scale. This happened after the military coup in 1932 when there was a change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. The influence of Hinduism in kingship declined and many Hindu temples under royal patronage were badly affected. The court's budget for royal rites was cut due to the economic depression. As a result the swing ceremony was called off permanently except for the indoor rituals that continue today.

In an observation of these royal rites in February 2013, the ceremony is attended by a number of enthusiastic worshippers dressed in white, wanting to be part of this Royal Brahmanical ceremony. The court Brahmins visit the King and the royal family members to present the offerings for the ceremony. The belief is that these two royal ceremonies are performed to bring blessings and wealth to the royal house. Unlike other royal ceremonies like the Coronation day and the Royal Ploughing ceremony, none of the royal family member is physically present at the Tri-yumpawai and Tri-pawai ceremonies, but is presented with the offerings to be made to Hindu gods during the ceremony. The people attending are the self-defined Buddhists who do not have the knowledge of the ceremonies conducted but are attending, as they want to be part of a highly sacred royal rite. Mr. Aey, a bank officer, has been joining the ceremonies annually for the past 8 years but is not aware of the meanings associated with the rites. For him joining these rites is a way to show respect to the royal family and to the Hindu gods. Moreover the Brahmin temple, where the ceremony is conducted, is open to public only once a year during the Tri-yumpawai and Tri-pawai ceremonies. Joining these ceremonies thus is the only opportunity for Aey to enter the inner halls of the temple and be closer to the deities present in the inner halls, otherwise not possible throughout the year.

Children in traditional hairstyles also attend the tonsure ritual marking the end of the Tri-yumpawai (Brahmin New Year). The children's heads are shaven indicating the rites of passage from child to adulthood. The ritual each year is presided over by the Raja Guru Bidhi Sri Visudhigun and the Buddhist monks. Buddhist monks are invited on the last day of the ceremony where alms giving ceremony is conducted and the monks will also give the Buddhist sermons. The ceremony is highly syncretic in nature with Brahmins giving alms to the Buddhist monks as part of a Brahmin ceremony.



Babies having their first haircut at the Brahmin temple as part of the ceremony.



Monks giving sermons at the Brahmanical ceremony

Cultural appropriation take different forms in the society such as religion and spirituality turned into a business, symbols appropriated and used in arts and paintings, or the knowledge of traditional healing practices used for marketing, etc. The two ceremonies revisited in this paper were appropriated by the rulers to legitimize their rule over the general population. As time went by, the move was more towards the West. Therefore these ceremonies became less important and thus less elaborate than in the past. Even though these ceremonies of Tri-yumpawai and Tri-pawai are of less importance to the rulers, people at the surface level still continue with the legacy by actively participating in the rites.

Religious appropriation is increasingly evident today since spirituality is not a private possession anymore. Michael York sees globalization, capitalism, and the increasing

immigration as the ways of bringing awareness of possible religious options to individuals. The information age allowed easy access to information thus providing knowledge of the existence of different spiritual practices (York 2001: 361). As individuals become increasingly aware of these spiritual options they also tend to make healthy use of them for personal benefits thereby encouraging the commodification of the same. Globalization leads to heterogenization as well as homogenization as the foreign people, goods and customs are brought in closer contact with local cultures. The local cultures contrast with the foreign and all individuals involved must find this position in this process. Individuals and communities cannot avoid encounters with other cultures (Warburg 2009, 286).

### **Conclusion**

Cultural appropriation is a defining feature of the Thai history. The appropriation was done by the rulers at different periods of time for political and social reasons. The religious aspects of dominant powers were adopted and refashioned in ways that can legitimize the power of the rulers over the subject. One dominant power of its time was South Asia that had a long presence in the Southeast Asian region and therefore influences of the Indian culture are much evident in this region. With the colonization of India and the emergence of the West as a dominant force, the move was towards the West in an attempt to be *siwilai*. In doing so, several aspects of earlier religious appropriation were dropped for political and social reasons in the name of nationalism. This paper has attempted to explore the two royal ceremonies that were of great relevance to the kings but has slowly lost its popularity overtime. The ceremonies are now conducted by the Brahmins of the royal court in the presence of a comparatively smaller audience than in the past. The participants are regular visitors participating annually to witness the ceremonies that they consider as sacred. The actual scene of the ceremony is highly syncretic with self defining Buddhist joining a Brahmanical ritual wearing white cloths that are generally worn in Chinese rituals. These participants can be defined as rather hybrids as they practice Buddhism and Hinduism and mix the elements of the two together creating a hybrid form of religious belief system. Although the ceremonies are of the Brahmin tradition appropriated and refashioned by the rulers over the past, the traditions have been maintained and observed by the local Thais. Therefore it can be concluded that the two ceremonies were part of the cultural appropriation that is observed by the people at the surface level.



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