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COURT BRAHMANS OF THAILAND AND THE CELEBRATION OF THE BRAHMANIC NEW YEAR

The Evidence of the People of Ayudhya (Kham Hai Gän Chão Grung Gao), a history of that kingdom, first mentions a royal installation ritual in a myth of kingship. Formerly, a Rṣi performing austerities near a lake came upon a boy child lying in the heart of a blooming lotus with divine ornaments beside him. Realizing that the child was a person of great merit, the sage prayed for a miracle in the form of milk flowing from his finger. With this divine nourishment, he raised the boy to manhood and by ritual sprinkling consecrated him king over the people. The chronicle goes on to report the installation of King U Thong (U Thong) whose consecration was performed by Brahmans imported from Benares to carry out the installation ceremony according to authentic ritual. In another history, The History of Siam (Phra Rāchaphongsāmadān Krong Sayām), Brahmanic rituals of consecration of cities and kings occur regularly in various reigns from the beginning of the Ayudhya period onward.

In these chronicles of Thailand, as in Cambodian inscriptions, the role of Brahmans in the monarchy is shown to be vital. In the process of expanding and maintaining their kingdoms against ritual sovereigns, constructing and administrating new cities, consecrating protective deities, establishing religious cults that support monarchical ideologies — in short, in war and in peace — kings have to depend on the knowledge and expertise of Brahmans who are chaplains and ministers, as well as doctors and court poets. Although their roles have diminished or been taken over by non-Brahmanic ritual and religious personnel — Buddhist monks and village elders — the significance of the rites has not entirely changed but is subsumed under unnamed, or renamed, categories of rituals often performed without an awareness of their Brahmanic origin. Even before their advent into Southeast Asia, Buddhism and Brahanism in India have existed in the same cultural continuum sharing precepts and practices that are the foundation of their differences. It is natural, therefore, that the same religions in Southeast Asia are not always neatly separable. Yet, there are differences between the two religions that the centuries have not reconciled. These differences, muted by mutual respect between both religions, are seldom displayed. The seams of contradiction, however, are nowhere more
evident than in the person, and everyday life, of the royal Brahmans who are charged with the performance of public ceremonies.

Some of the most visible and elaborate rituals are connected with kingship — the royal person, and the welfare of his family members. In the broadest sense, rituals performed for a king differ only in degree, not in kind, from those of commoners. The Vedic royal consecration, the Ṛṣajśuya, for example, consecrates a man who has strength and dominion over others, but who is a common sacrificer, a yajamāna.⁵ Epic and medieval texts emphasize the king's being a portion of the divinity of Viṣṇu, but theologically speaking not only kings but commoners and, indeed, the entire universe are materially emanated from god.⁶ Medieval theism, particularly the bhakti movements, urges ordinary men to be reabsorbed in the divine through devotional contemplation.⁷ In this sense, the divinity of kings is a differentiated status in political rather than philosophical and religious terms. In the latter perspectives, the essential form and idea of rituals do not differ qualitatively for kings and commoners.

Why, then, are Brahmans necessary for rituals connected with royalty when similar rites performed for commoners do not require the officiation of Brahmanic priests? The retaining of court Brahmans in royal rituals, in contrast to their dispensability in commoners' rituals, indicates not only an ideological importance of Brahmanism for the monarchy, but also the wish to make manifest symbols of kingship and a well-defined conceptual sphere constituted by these symbolic forms in the case of a royal person but not in the case of a commoner. In royal ceremonies, Buddhist-Brahmanic polarities are displayed with splendor, and functional differences between the two religions alone do not suffice to explain the coexistence of two sets of rituals and their corresponding concepts. Each religion has a theory of kingship and supporting legends that might have been employed to the exclusion of the other. The explanation for and the manner of their coexistence must be sought elsewhere in addition to their complementary functions, if, indeed, these functions are complementary.

Although Buddhism is the state religion of Thailand, and Brahmanism has long diminished in religious and ritualistic significance, the culture carries complexes of ideas and practices that cannot be clearly identified as belonging to one or the other sectarian tradition. The real situation does not conform to textbook descriptions of doctrines. It is the real situation that we wish to describe, in the forms that have emerged from cultural interactions, with reference to scriptural sources that have sought to prescribe these forms in their ideal states.

The best place to begin our description is the Brahman Temple of