

## Balancing the foreign and the familiar in the articulation of kingship: The royal court Brahmans of Thailand

Nathan McGovern

*Scholars of Southeast Asia have for several decades moved away from theories of 'Indianisation', in favour of theories of 'localisation'. So far, however, there has been little attempt to apply the methodological shift from Indianisation to localisation to an important living relic of the prime agents of older Indianisation theories: the royal court Brahmans of Thailand. In this article, I examine the history of this still-functioning Southeast Asian Brahmanical institution, with respect both to evidence of its ties to India and to the ways it has been 'localised'. I argue that it is best understood as a local articulation of kingship, negotiating a necessary tension between the foreign and the familiar in royal ritual.*

Hidden away behind a fairly nondescript gate along the square between Wat Suthat and City Hall in Bangkok lies, unbeknownst even to most Thai people, a 'Brahman Temple' (โบสถ์พราหมณ์: *bōt phrām*) that serves as a home to the 16 royal court Brahmans currently in the service of the King of Thailand. This Brahman Temple has three small sanctuaries, dedicated respectively to Śiva, Gaṇeśa, and Viṣṇu. More conspicuously, there stands outside of the temple walls, directly in front of Wat Suthat, a giant red swing that was once used as part of an important Brahmanical ceremony and continues to serve as a symbol of the city of Bangkok. The Brahmans themselves are Thai men of various ages who come from lineages recognised as being 'authentic' and who have 'ordained' as Brahmans so as to serve in the royal court. They are to be distinguished from those Brahmans who serve more recent Indian immigrant communities in Thailand, such as the Tamil community at the Sri

Nathan McGovern is Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: [mcgovern@uw.edu](mailto:mcgovern@uw.edu). I would like to thank, first and foremost, Nanda Raksakhom, who acted as my field research assistant in Thailand. I would also like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which provided the funding for me to undertake much of the research for this project, including a trip to Thailand to observe the *Trīyampawāi-Trīppawāi* ceremony in 2014–15. I also thank Brandon Dotson, who by hiring me as a member of the 'Kingship and Religion in Tibet' Project at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München gave me access to these funds, and who provided important theoretical insights that helped to formulate the argument in this article. In addition, I would like to thank Michael Jerryson and Justin McDaniel for their critical comments on drafts. Finally, I would like to thank three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Maha Mariamman Temple (Wat Khaek Silom). Royal court Brahmans are nevertheless descended from lineages that migrated from India many centuries ago; their ancestors intermarried with Thai women and became fully acculturated in Thailand. What this means is that, while they have passed down Indian texts and mantras from their ancestors and are able to recite them, the Thai Brahmans of today are not able to speak any Indian languages and are not considered 'Indian' as more recent immigrant communities are.<sup>1</sup> They are, in every respect, 'Thai', to the point of considering themselves Buddhist and in some cases ordaining temporarily as Buddhist monks, as is customary for young Thai men, prior to ordaining as Brahmans.

The early study of Southeast Asian history in the West was dominated by theories of 'Indianisation', a term popularised especially by the renowned Georges Coedès,<sup>2</sup> which grew out of the sense on the part of Western scholars encountering Southeast Asia for the first time that the region holds an enormous cultural debt to its neighbour, India. In more recent decades, Indianisation has been criticised as simplistically portraying Southeast Asia as a more-or-less passive recipient of a dominant Indian culture that drove the entire development of Southeast Asian civilisation, especially the rise of the first Southeast Asian states.<sup>3</sup> The most obvious methodological critique of Indianisation is that it tends to deny any agency to Southeast Asians, implying that their culture, as H.G. Quaritch Wales put it in the case of the Thai, 'is mainly borrowed from India'.<sup>4</sup> Yet attempts to take into account the distinctiveness of Southeast Asian cultures within the Indianisation framework have proven problematic, insofar as they tend to posit a false dichotomy between 'local' and 'Indian' elements in Southeast Asian culture and thus drive a search for indigenous elements, which are considered to be 'primordial'.

But this emboldened sense of Southeast Asians' agency in the development of their own history and culture still leaves open the question of why Southeast Asians were so willing to adopt Indian cultural forms and how elements and agents of Indian culture, such as Brahmans, got there in the first place. Some scholars have almost entirely denied the role of Indians in this process; Michael Vickery, for one,

1 It should be noted, however, that this is in part a recent development that is a product of immigration from India and the adoption of Western ethnic categories during the colonial period. There is evidence that in the past Brahmans as such were considered a distinct ethnic group, or ethnic groups. The early nineteenth-century work of historical fiction *Nāng Nopphamāt* (นางนพมาศ), in a long list of ethnic groups (ภาษา) supposedly present in Sukhothai, lists several Brahman groups: *เรื่องนางนพมาศ หรือ ตำหรับท้าวศรีจุฬาลักษณ์ ฉบับหอพระสมุดวชิรญาณ* [The story of Lady Nopphamāt, or the text of King Si Culālak, Wachirayān Library Edition] (พระนคร: หอพระสมุดวชิรญาณ, 2457[1914]). Likewise, Brahmans are included as one of the ethnic groups (ภาษา) depicted in a series of paintings at Wat Pho: Kanjana Suwanwong, 'Ways of life, rituals and cultural identity of court Brahmans in Thai society: A case study of Bangkok Devasthan Botsbrahmana' (MA Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2539[1996]), p. 55.

2 Georges Coedès, *The Indianized states of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968). The term Coedès originally used in French was *Hindouisation*, but given that it was translated into English as 'Indianisation', the concept has entered English-language scholarship as such.

3 See Craig J. Reynolds, 'A new look at old Southeast Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, 2 (1995): 419–46, for a good overview and critique of theories of Indianisation.

4 H.G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese state ceremonies: Their history and function* (Richmond: Curzon, 1992 [1931]), p. 4.

has argued that most of the 'Brahmans' in Southeast Asia were actually native Southeast Asians who studied in India and then returned to their native lands claiming higher status.<sup>5</sup> More nuanced are the theories of Ian Mabbett and O.W. Wolters, both of whom see the whole problem of Indianisation as developing out of a false dichotomy between India and Southeast Asia, which at one time, to Southeast Asians at least, were seen as contiguous parts of a single 'world'. Mabbett has argued that, aside from some differences lent by the Bay of Bengal, the Indianisation of Southeast Asia should be seen as an extension of the same process known variously as 'Sanskritisation' and 'Brahmanisation' in India — taking into account, of course, all the difficulties and subtleties involved in those terms as well. In other words, Southeast Asia did not interact with a monolithic 'India', but rather was part of a much larger process of cultural diffusion taking place *within* India just as much as outside it.<sup>6</sup> Wolters, on the other hand, focusing specifically on pre-Angkor Cambodia, argued that Indian culture came mostly in the form of 'news' via maritime trade, and that the ancient Khmer came to think of themselves as living and operating in an extended 'Hindu world'.<sup>7</sup> Extrapolating to other Southeast Asian contexts, Wolters argued that as Southeast Asians received 'news' through which they came to think of themselves as operating in broader 'worlds' (Hindu, Chinese, Christian, etc.), they made use of foreign vocabulary, literary motifs, and the like to speak to local concerns in a universal framework, a process he called 'foreign materials fading into local statements'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this turn to the local in the study of Southeast Asian history, as well as a shift from a paradigm of 'Indianisation' to a paradigm of 'localisation', has dominated scholarly discourse in the last three decades.

Given the important role that Brahmans once played in debates over Indianisation, however, it is surprising that the model of Indianisation has not been re-evaluated, and its replacement 'localisation' has not been tested, using one of the only living institutions of Brahmanhood remaining in Southeast Asia today: the royal court Brahmans of Thailand. While a coterie of court Brahmans has only recently been reconstituted in Cambodia after the expulsion of all court Brahmans under the Khmer Rouge,<sup>9</sup> and the Brahmans of Burma have lost their courtly relevance since the abolition of the monarchy by the British,<sup>10</sup> the royal court Brahmans of Thailand perform ceremonies for the royal court to this very day and

5 Michael Vickery, *Society, economics, and politics in pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th–8th centuries* (Tokyo: Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco; Toyo Bunko, 1998), p. 59.

6 Ian W. Mabbett, 'The "Indianization" of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the historical sources', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, 1 (1977): 143–61.

7 O.W. Wolters, 'Khmer "Hinduism" in the seventh century', in *Early South East Asia: Essays in archaeology, history and historical geography*, ed. Ralph B. Smith and William Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 427–43. This view is corroborated by Alexis Sanderson, who documents the impartation of a *Śaiva* significance to local places in Sanskrit and Khmer inscriptions in 'The *Śaiva* religion among the Khmers Part 1', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient* 90, 1 (2003/04): 349–462.

8 O.W. Wolters, *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian perspectives*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, Cornell University, 1999), 63.

9 On these so-called *baku* of Cambodia, see Olivier de Bernon, 'A propos du retour des bakous dans le palais royal de Phnom Penh', in *Renouveaux religieux en Asie*, ed. Catherine Clémentin-Ojha (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient [EFE], 1997), pp. 33–58.

10 On the Burmese Brahmans, known as *punna*, see Jacques P. Leider, 'Specialists for ritual, magic, and

trace their lineages back to Indians who emigrated to Siam in the Ayutthayā period or earlier. Although the Thai court Brahmans were studied just prior to the abolition of the absolute monarchy by Quaritch Wales,<sup>11</sup> this study, like his study of Siamese law and government,<sup>12</sup> was flawed by a reflexive assumption that everything Thai was to be explained in terms of Indian precedents, no matter how strained the evidence. Sporadic short studies of the Thai Brahmans have appeared since, but have either used them to reinforce a flawed model of Indianisation or else have simply not addressed their implications for the nature of Indianisation.<sup>13</sup>

In this article, I will use the case of the Thai Brahmans to re-evaluate ‘Indianisation’ insofar as it applies to the central Mae Nam basin and peninsular Siam during roughly the last 500 years. I will argue that while there is firm evidence that the Thai Brahman lineages originally came from India, and that Indian origin is crucial to their potency as ritual specialists, the actual role that they play and have played throughout history, both in practice and in discourse, is largely determined by indigenous concerns, as the more recent ‘localisation’ paradigm predicts. Rather than appealing to a regional propensity of Southeast Asians to ‘localise’ foreign materials, however, I will argue that the Thai Brahmans are characterised by an interplay between the foreign (Indian) and local that is to be explained as crucial to the practice of kingship, the service of which is indeed their *raison d’être*.

In order to advance this argument, this article is divided into four parts. First, I will explain what facts about the Thai Brahmans can be (and have been) used as an argument for Indianisation. This will include a brief synchronic overview of the Thai Brahmans, followed by a more in-depth discussion of their most important annual ritual ceremony, the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi*, which preserves the most conspicuous evidence of their ‘Indian’ character. In the second part, I will look at the evidence for reconstructing the history of the Thai Brahmans, which, although scanty, does indeed point to origins in South India during the Ayutthayā period. In the third part, however, I will turn to local perspectives on the Thai Brahmans. I will investigate four

devotion: The court Brahmins (*Punna*) of the Konbaung kings (1752–1885), *Journal of Burma Studies* 10 (2005/06): 159–202.

11 Wales, *Siamese state ceremonies*.

12 H.G. Quaritch Wales, *Ancient Siamese government and administration* (New York: Paragon, 1965). For a critique of Wales’s Indo-centric interpretation of the Three Seals Law, see Michael Vickery, ‘The Constitution of Ayutthaya’, in *New light on Thai legal history*, ed. Andrew Huxley (Bangkok: White Orchid, 1996), pp. 133–210.

13 Priyawat Kuanpoonpol, ‘Court Brahmans of Thailand and the celebration of the Brahmanic new year’, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 33, 1 (1990): 21–51; Amarjiva Lochan, ‘The *Brahmanas* in Thai society: A sociocultural study of the Indian legacy’, paper presented to 2nd Annual Asian Fellows Conference, Bangkok, 1–2 July 2002; S. Singaravelu, ‘Some aspects of South Indian cultural contacts with Thailand: Historical background’, in *Proceedings of the First International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Studies, Kuala Lumpur, April 1966*, vol. 1 (Kuala Lumpur: Rajiv Printers, 1968), pp. 21ff; Penny van Esterik and John van Esterik, ‘Royal style in village context: Translation and interpretation of a Thai tonsure text’, *Asian Folklore Studies* 39, 1 (1980): 63–78; Annick Lévy-Ward, ‘Rites hindous de consécration d’un roi bouddhiste en Thaïlande’, in *Les apparences du monde: Royautés hindoues et bouddhiques de l’Asie du Sud et du Sud-Est*, ed. Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Marie Louise Reiniche (Paris: EFEO, 2006), pp. 225–63. One of the most methodologically innovative pieces of work that touches, if only briefly, on the Thai Brahmans, is a short article by Justin McDaniel that argues that all examples of supposed ‘Hinduism’ in Thailand are actually more Buddhist than Hindu — ‘This Hindu holy man is a Thai Buddhist’, *South East Asia Research* 21, 2 (2013): 303–21.

indigenous accounts of the Thai Brahmins' origins and show that their Indian origins became less important in Thai discourse over time, to be increasingly replaced by shifting indigenous concerns. Then, in the fourth part, I will present four pieces of evidence that point to an important role for indigenous (or at least non-Indian) concerns in the shaping of the Brahmins' ritual role in the Thai court. Finally, in the conclusion, I will argue that theories of kingship developed by Clifford Geertz and refined by Maurice Bloch help to explain the interplay between the Indian and indigenous aspects of the Thai court Brahmins in discourse and practice.

### The Thai Brahmins as agents of Indianisation

Historically, Brahmins served a variety of functions in Siamese royal courts, but today their function is purely ceremonial. The most important of the ceremonies they perform is the *rājābhīṣeka*, or consecration of a new king. This function points to the reason why they were brought to Thailand in the first place: Southeast Asian statecraft has long called for a 'proper' consecration to legitimise a king's rule, and Brahmins have been seen as integral to the performance of a proper consecration ritual. In addition to this, Thai Brahmins also perform a variety of annual ceremonies in their temple in Bangkok. These annual ceremonies, known in Thai as the 'Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months' (พระราชพิธีสิบสองเดือน) have been described at length by King Chulalongkorn in Thai and by Quaritch Wales in English.<sup>14</sup> Of these ceremonies, the most important, both for scholars and for the Brahmins themselves, is the *Trīyampawāi-Trīppawāi* (ตรียัมปวาย-ตรีปวาย), an elaborate 15-day festival celebrated during the second lunar month, which falls between December and January in the solar calendar. I had the opportunity to observe this 15-day festival when it was performed from 27 December 2014 to 10 January 2015. Since the *Trīyampawāi-Trīppawāi* was already described in some detail by Chulalongkorn and Quaritch Wales, as well as more recently by Priyawat Kuanpoonpol,<sup>15</sup> it will suffice to provide a short description of the festival before turning to its significance for tracing the history of the Thai Brahmins.

The *Trīyampawāi-Trīppawāi* ceremony is, as its name suggests, actually two ceremonies performed in succession known respectively as the *Trīyampawāi* and the *Trīppawāi*. The *Trīyampawāi* is a ten-day ceremony performed from the early morning hours of the sixth day of the waxing moon to the first day of the waning moon of the second lunar month (December–January). Its purpose is to invite *Īśvara* (*Śiva*) down to earth, provide him with daily offerings, and then send him back to heaven. The *Trīppawāi* is a shorter but analogous ceremony dedicated to the god *Nārāyaṇa* (*Viṣṇu*). It is performed from the evening of the first day of the waning moon to the morning of the sixth day of the waning moon and likewise involves inviting *Nārāyaṇa* down to earth, providing him with daily offerings, and then sending him back to heaven. The rituals surrounding the daily offerings to either *Īśvara* or *Nārāyaṇa* are identical on each of the 13 core days of the overall ceremony, but there are special ceremonies at the beginning of the *Trīyampawāi*, the end of the

14 The best general overviews of these ceremonies are, in Thai, พระบาทสมเด็จพระจุลจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว, พระราชพิธีสิบสองเดือน [The Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months] (พระนคร: กรมศิลปากร, 2496[1953]) and, in English, Quaritch Wales, *Siamese state ceremonies*.

15 Priyawat, 'Court Brahmins of Thailand'.

*Trippawāi*, the transition between these two ceremonies, and certain other points within the 15-day cycle. The most well-known of these special ceremonies is the Swing Festival, which until it was abolished in 1937 due to several fatal accidents, was celebrated on the seventh and ninth days of the waxing moon and served as the public face of the otherwise mostly private and sparsely-attended *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi* ceremony. During this festival, a representative of the king was appointed to play the role of Śiva, who was understood to dwell on earth during the *Triyampawāi*, and observe as teams of four men swung from the giant swing just outside the Brahman Temple and one of them attempted to catch a bag of coins suspended from a pole with his teeth.

### Evidence of Tamil origins in the Thai *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi*

The very name of the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi* festival points to an origin in the Tamil-speaking region of South India — *Triyampawāi* is a corruption of Māṅikkavācakar's *Tiruvempāvai*, and *Trippawāi* is likewise a corruption of Aṅḍāl's *Tiruppāvai*. These two texts, both collections of *bhakti* hymns written in Tamil, form an interesting pair because, in spite of the fact that the author of the former is Śaiva and the author of the latter is Vaiṣṇava, the two are quite similar and are often thought of as going together. In both sets of poems, the author takes on the voice of female devotees of either Śiva or Viṣṇu, who speak to friends and their chosen Lord about the vow they have taken during the Tamil month of Mārkaḷi, which corresponds to the second lunar month in Thailand, when the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi* is performed. This vow, known as the *mārkaḷi nōṅpu*, is an ancient and originally non-sectarian Tamil tradition in which unmarried girls would take a vow to bathe and pray every day before dawn for the duration of the month, the belief being that the fulfilment of this vow would ensure good marriages.<sup>16</sup> Although the Thai festival does not involve any such vow taken by young women, the *Triyampawāi* and *Trippawāi* do retain their respective sectarian affiliations as Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, and they bear some striking resemblances to two Tamil sectarian festivals that are celebrated during the month of Mārkaḷi, as we will see shortly.

The next important clues to the Indian origins of the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi* are the Tamil hymns used during the rituals performed in the Brahman Temple in Bangkok. In the 1960s, S. Singaravelu made recordings, with the assistance of the head Thai Brahman, of three hymns sung during the ceremony and found that all three hymns were taken from the corpus of Śaiva *bhakti* hymns composed in Tamil, with components from the first *Tirumuṟai* of Campantar, the seventh *Tirumuṟai* of Cuntarar, the fourth *Tirumuṟai* of Appar, and the *Tiruvempāvai* of Māṅikkavācakar.<sup>17</sup> The attributions of the first two of these hymns have been verified textually by John Ralston Marr,<sup>18</sup> who did an extensive study of the Tamil hymns found in the collection of Brahmanical texts at the National Library in Bangkok. He also found a few other Tamil *bhakti* hymns among the collection, including verses

16 Norman Cutler, *Consider our vow: An English translation of the Tiruppāvai and Tiruvempāvai* (Madurai: Muttu Patippakam, 1979), p. 1.

17 Singaravelu, 'Some aspects of South Indian cultural contacts with Thailand', pp. 22–3.

18 J.R. Marr, 'Some manuscripts in Grantha script in Bangkok', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 32, 2 (1969): 281–322.

from Māṅikkavācakar's *Tiruvempāvai* and Āṇḍāl's *Tiruppāvai*. Marr gives an extensive orthographical analysis of these Tamil texts, and he finds that, aside from those that are written in Thai script (presumably for the benefit of Brahmans who know only Thai),<sup>19</sup> the texts are written in two scripts, which he calls Ordinary Grantha and Decorative Grantha. The first, he says, is closer to South Indian Grantha,<sup>20</sup> while the second shows affinities with the Khmer script.

Although the *mārkaḷi nōṇpu* is an old Tamil tradition attested as early as the late first millennium in the poetry of Āṇḍāl and Māṅikkavācakar, and possibly even earlier in the *caṅkam* literature,<sup>21</sup> the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions in the Tamil-speaking region of South India have created their own sectarian festivals in the sacred month of Mārkaḷi. The Śaiva festival, known as the *Tiruvāturai*, is celebrated as the centrepiece of the liturgical year at the great temple of Citamparam, and it bears the closest resemblance to its Thai counterpart. Like the *Trīyampawāi*, it is a ten-day festival that involves the nightly recitation of the *Tiruvempāvai*.<sup>22</sup> Also like the *Trīyampawāi*, it culminates with a parade of the god's image outside the inner sanctum and a ritual bath of the deity, which many devotees consider to be the culmination not only of this festival, but of the entire ritual year.<sup>23</sup> Although these broad similarities are enough to demonstrate a common tradition between the Tamil *Tiruvāturai* and the Thai *Trīyampawāi*, there are other, more subtle similarities that I think show that the relationship between the two is quite close. The first involves the role of the king. In a throwback to the time when the Cōlas controlled much of South India and used Citamparam as the centrepiece of their temple cult, the celebration of *Tiruvāturai* today ends with a 'royal audience', in which the divine image is taken into the Rāja Sabhā, the old Cōla royal audience hall — a practice reminiscent of the royal audience the divine images used to receive during the parade on the last day of the *Trīyampawāi*.<sup>24</sup> The second subtle similarity involves the images used. Citamparam is well known for its image of Śiva in the Nāṭarāja, or 'dancing Śiva' pose, which was celebrated quite vividly even as far back as the late first millennium

19 Quaritch Wales (*Siamese state ceremonies*, p. 55) writes that some Brahmans could read the texts written in 'an Indian character', but none of them speak any language other than Thai. The same is true today, although some of the younger Brahmans have been sent to study in India. One whom I spoke to said that he had studied Sanskrit, Hindi, and Tamil, although he found Tamil quite difficult, and was not very successful in acquiring any proficiency in it.

20 Quaritch Wales (*Siamese state ceremonies*, p. 56) reports that he showed the Grantha texts to L.D. Barnett, who was of the opinion that the script is Pāṅṭiyan and dates to no later than the middle of the 13th century. Marr ('Some manuscripts in Grantha script', p. 303) notes that the texts at the National Library are fairly new, one of them being dated 1875.

21 The *caṅkam* literature makes reference to a *tainīrāṭal* vow taken by girls to bathe in the month of Tai. It is possible that the shift from Tai to Mārkaḷi came about due to a calendar change. Cutler, *Consider our vow*, pp. 5–8.

22 Paul Younger, *The house of dancing Śivan: The traditions of the Hindu temple in Citamparam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 54–5.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 62–3. The timing in the two festivals is slightly different: Whereas in the Thai festival, both the parade and the ritual bath are celebrated in the evening of the tenth day, in the Tamil festival, the parade is on the ninth day and the bath in the morning of the tenth day. The Tamil form of the parade is also slightly different in that the image is pulled on a chariot, while in the Thai parade it is (or rather was in the past) carried on a palanquin.

24 Younger, *The house of dancing Śivan*, pp. 63–5.

by the Nāyaṃmārs.<sup>25</sup> Its use of the Nāṭarāja image was so well-established by the thirteenth century that an attempt to bring Citamparam more in line with the practice of most of Śaiva temples of the time, which centred on the ‘purer’ worship of the *liṅgam*, succeeded only in adding a *liṅgam* shrine, not in removing the Nāṭarāja altogether.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the Īśvara temple in Bangkok’s Brahman Temple is dominated by anthropomorphic images of Śiva, rather than *liṅgas*, and Quaritch Wales reports that the central palanquin in the parade on the last day of the *Trīyampawāi* in 1931 carried a large image of Śiva Nāṭarāja.<sup>27</sup> T.P. Meenakshisundaram even reports that he found an image of Māṅikkavācakar in the Īśvara temple,<sup>28</sup> although it does not to my knowledge play a prominent role in the *Trīyampawāi*. All told, I think we have compelling evidence that the Thai *Trīyampawāi* and the Tamil *Tiruvāturai* are two branches of the same Śaiva festival tradition.

By contrast, the great Vaiṣṇava festival during the month of Mārkaḷi, known as the *Adhyayana Utsava* or ‘Festival of Recitation’, bears far less resemblance to the analogous Thai festival, the *Trippawāi*. This Tamil festival lasts for 21 days and is celebrated in most Śrīvaiṣṇava temples, but most fully in the most important temples, such as Śrīraṅgam. The first 2,000 verses of the songs of the Ālvārs are recited over the course of the first ten days, then the 1,102 verses of Nammālvār’s *Tiruvāymoli* are recited over the next ten days, and finally the last 1,000 verses of the Ālvārs’ poetry on the twenty-first day.<sup>29</sup> The emphasis is thus clearly on Nammālvār, who is regarded as the model devotee, and whose salvation is re-enacted in the culminating ritual on the twenty-first day.<sup>30</sup> This festival nevertheless seems to be related to the Śaiva *Tiruvāturai* insofar as it takes place during the month of Mārkaḷi and involves parading the image of God through the streets and a daily recitation from the *bhakti* saints. Its lack of similarity to the Thai *Trippawāi* (aside from the belief that God descends to earth for the duration of the festival)<sup>31</sup> is even understandable given that the whole *Trīyampawāi*-*Trippawāi* ceremony — as well as the Thai court Brahmans themselves — has a clear Śaiva bias, and the five-day *Trippawāi* appears to be designed merely as a perfunctory Vaiṣṇava counterpart to the Śaiva *Trīyampawāi* that dominates the festival.

### Reconstructing the history of the Thai Brahmans

Now that we have seen clear evidence that the current practices of the Thai Brahmans preserve elements with a clear (and idiosyncratic, given the otherwise Theravāda context) Indian origin, what can we say about the history of the Thai Brahmans and their possible origin in India? Unfortunately, tracing the history of

25 Sharada Srinivasan, ‘Shiva as “cosmic dancer”: On Pallava origins for the Nataraja bronze’, *World Archaeology* 36, 3 (2004): 432–50. Srinivasan actually argues on archaeological grounds that the use of metal images of Nāṭarāja arose even earlier, under the Pallavas.

26 Younger, *House of dancing Śivaṅ*, p. 17.

27 Wales, *Siamese state ceremonies*, p. 251.

28 T.P. Meenakshisundaram, ‘Tiru-p-pavai, Tiruvempāvai in South-East Asia’, in *Proceedings of the First International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Studies*, p. 19.

29 Vasudha Narayanan, *The vernacular Veda: Revelation, recitation, and ritual* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 116–17.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 128–9.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 119.



the Thai Brahmans is complicated by a variety of factors. To begin with, documentation of Siamese history prior to the foundation of the current capital at Bangkok ('Rattanakosin') in 1782 is sorely lacking due to the massive disruption of Siamese institutions with the sack of the old capital of Ayutthayā by the Burmese in 1767. In addition, there is a lack of documentation even for the early Rattanakosin period because modern bureaucratic norms were not adopted until the reforms of King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868) and his son Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910). Finally, the Brahmans themselves, at least in the present day, do not show much curiosity in their families' long-term genealogies, in spite of the rhetorical importance of genealogy to their claims of authenticity.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the extant evidence confirms that Brahmans have been present within Tai polities, especially those of Siam, for many centuries, and that at least some of them came from South India, as the evidence provided by the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi* would suggest.

Although there exists no firm evidence of the origins of the Brahmans nor the specifics of their rituals prior to the Ayutthayā period, we can be confident that Brahmans of some sort were a part of religious life in the earlier Tai kingdoms north of the Chao Phraya river basin. The *Cāmadevivaṃsa*, which recounts the mythical origins of the northern city of Haripuñjaya, contains frequent references to Brahmans and their connection to royalty.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, there is abundant evidence for the worship of Hindu gods in Sukhōthai,<sup>34</sup> as well as a contemporaneous inscription that mentions Brahmans specifically in connection with the royal consecration of Dharmarāja I.<sup>35</sup> The presence of Brahmans and worship of Hindu gods is not surprising given the influence of Angkor, but there is no firm evidence for where Brahmans in Sukhōthai came from or what exactly they did.

The picture becomes somewhat clearer in Ayutthayā beginning in the sixteenth century. According to the Portuguese historian João de Barros, writing in 1563, so-called 'Klings' from the Coromandel Coast in India were popular in Ayutthayā for their skill in astrology and divination.<sup>36</sup> Later, in 1638, Jeremias van Vliet, a representative of the Dutch East India Company, reported a detailed story of how the Brahmans, and their Swing Ceremony, first came to Ayutthayā over a hundred

32 There is one notable exception to this. Brahman Tran Buranasiri (ตรัณ บุรณศิริ), comes from a Brahman family that traces its lineage back to a Brahman named Siriwat (ศิริวัฒน์) who served at the court of King Nārāi in the late 17th century. Because no one in his family has served as a court Brahman in the over 200 years since the fall of Ayutthayā, he was required to offer extensive genealogical proof of his lineage before being accepted for ordination. He has provided me with a copy of this information in the form of a family tree that stretches back to the 17th century Brahman Siriwat. Family trees for other Brahmans that have been constructed on the basis of interviews stretch back only a few generations. See Kanjana, 'Ways of life, rituals and cultural identity', pp. 151–203.

33 Donald K. Swearer and Sommai Premchit, *The legend of Queen Cāma: Bodhirāṃsi's Cāmadevivaṃsa, a translation and commentary* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 87–8, 94, 120–21, 132.

34 See M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, *Hindu gods at Sukhodaya*; English version by author and A.B. Griswold (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1990).

35 Supapron Paikaew, 'Status and role of Brahmans at the Court of King Rama I (1782–1809)' (MA thesis, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok, 2006), p. 30.

36 Donald F. Lach, *Southeast Asia in the eyes of Europe: The sixteenth century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 529.

years earlier from a kingdom called ‘Rammaradt’ on the Coromandel Coast.<sup>37</sup> A very similar story of Brahmins coming to Ayutthayā from ‘Rāmarāt’ (รามราช), via the city of Nakhòn Si Thammarāt in what is now southern Thailand, is found in the *Chronicle of the Brahmins of Nakhòn Si Thammarāt*, a Thai text that dates to about 1735.<sup>38</sup> The famous early nineteenth-century Thai poet Sunthorn Phu uses the same word Rāmarāt to describe the Brahmins that he says are his ancestors.<sup>39</sup> Although what exact location ‘Rāmarāt’ refers to in India is unclear,<sup>40</sup> the Tamil influence on the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi* ceremony, as well as Van Vliet’s assertion that it is found on the Coromandel Coast, strongly supports a location in or around modern-day Tamil Nadu. A likely origin for at least some of the Thai Brahmins is the island of Rameshwaram, which is found between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. John Crawford, a representative of the British governor of India, reported in 1822 that the ancestors of the Brahmins in Bangkok came from that island five generations earlier, which would have been during the Ayutthayā period.<sup>41</sup> Corrupt versions of the name Rameshwaram are found in descriptions of Brahmins in Thai sources from the early Bangkok period, including an inscription at Wat Pho.<sup>42</sup> Finally, Michael Wright has argued that certain peculiarities of the Brahmins and their temple in Bangkok, in particular the presence of two Śiva *lingas* in the main sanctuary, are similar to features found in India only at Rameshwaram.<sup>43</sup>

There are few written Thai sources from the Ayutthayā period itself to provide clues to the practices of the Brahmins at that time. One important source is the

37 Jeremias van Vliet, *The short history of the kings of Siam*, trans. Leonard Andaya, ed. David K. Wyatt (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1975), pp. 65–8.

38 The most accessible version of this text is the second printing, *ตำนานพราหมณ์เมืองนครศรีธรรมราช* [Chronicle of the Brahmins of Nakhòn Si Thammarāt] (นครศรีธรรมราช: ศูนย์วัฒนธรรมภาคใต้ วิทยาลัยครูนครศรีธรรมราช, 2525[1982]). See David Wyatt, *The crystal sands: The chronicles of Nagara Sri Dharmarāja* (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, Cornell University, 1975), pp. 52–6, for a description of the text and a synopsis of the story in English.

39 V. 239ab: เป็นถิ่นฐานบ้านพราหมณ์รามราช / ล้วนโคตรญาติย้ายย้ายฝ่ายวงศ์. See Sawanee Nivasabutr, trans., *Journey to Petchburi: A poem by Sunthorn Phu* (Phetburi: เพชรภูมิการพิมพ์, 2013), p. 204.

40 If we assume for the sake of argument that the Van Vliet account is more correct in placing contact between Rāmarāt and Siam during the reign of Rāmāthibodi II, thus around the turn of the 16th century, then the most prominent ‘Rāmarāja’ that comes to mind in connection with South India is not a kingdom, but a person: Rāma Rāja (or Rāma Rāya), a generalissimo and de facto king of the Vijayanagara kingdom who led it to defeat by a coalition of Deccan sultanates at the Battle of Talikota in 1565. Is it possible that the Thai word Rāmarāt originally referred to Vijayanagara, using the name of its last great ruler, Rāma Rāja? There is a chronological issue: Rāma Rāja did not become de facto ruler of Vijayanagara until 1542, after the death of Rāmāthibodi II of Ayutthayā in 1529. It does not seem beyond the realm of possibility, however, that a kingdom could be referred to by the name of a ruler. Indeed, Van Vliet refers in his writings more than once to a ‘Cotopsia’, ‘Coptochiae’, or ‘Cotop Tsia’ that has diplomatic relations with Siam — *Van Vliet’s Siam*, ed. Chris Baker, Dhiraravat Na Pomerberja, Alfons van der Kraan and David K. Wyatt (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2005), pp. 88, 144, 170. This word probably is Qutb Shahi, which was the ruling dynasty of the Deccan Sultanate of Golkonda. See note 54.

41 John Crawford, *Journal of an embassy from the governor-general of India to the courts of Siam and Cochinchina* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), pp. 183–4, 228–31.

42 Quoted in Supapron, p. 54. More complete quotation in Kanjana, ‘Ways of life, rituals and cultural identity’, p. 55.

43 Michael Wright, ‘พราหมณ์กรุงเทพฯ มาจากไหน?’ [Where do the Bangkok Brahmins come from?] in *ฝรั่งวิชาการ* [Southeast Asian *farang*] (กรุงเทพฯ: มติชน, 2542[1999]), pp. 199–206.

*Dvādaśamāsa* (ทวาทศมาส), a poem from the reign of King Nārāi in the late seventeenth century that describes the ceremonies of the twelve months of the year through a metaphorical panegyric to a female lover. It refers to the *Trīyampawāi* ceremony by name, and includes a brief description of the swing ceremony.<sup>44</sup> An equally important source is the Three Seals Law, which contains extensive information on Brahmans and royal ceremonies in a section called the ‘Palatine Law’ and on the ranks of Brahmans in the ‘Hierarchy Law’.<sup>45</sup> While it is likely that some of this information dates to the Ayutthayā period, Michael Vickery has pointed out that the Three Seals Law was recompiled and likely modified by Rama I, especially in these two sections, after the fall of Ayutthayā.<sup>46</sup>

There is little evidence for the history of the Brahmans in Bangkok prior to the reign of Rama VI in the twentieth century, when the family of the current head Brahman was first appointed to that position. Almost all of the Brahmans currently in royal service have family ties to southern Thailand, and although I am unaware of any contemporaneous written evidence, it is generally understood that Brahmans were brought to the new capital Bangkok from southern Thai cities by Rāma I, who built the current Brahman Temple and the Giant Swing and restored the royal ceremonies. One story holds that this was done at the instigation of an old Ayutthayā Brahman nicknamed ‘Rabbit’, who first asked Rāma I to build the Giant Swing.<sup>47</sup> Where exactly the Brahmans for Rāma I’s court came from is less than clear, but the Thai historian Prince Damrong reported that in the early Bangkok period, there were three groups of Brahmans, one from the southern city of Nakhōn Sī Thammarāt, one from the southern city of Phatthalung, and one (which subsequently died out) from Cambodia.<sup>48</sup> Given that, in the *Chronicle of the Brahmans of Nakhōn Sī Thammarāt*, southern Brahmans of the late Ayutthayā period claimed common origin with those in Ayutthayā from a place called ‘Rāmarāt’ in India, it seems likely that there was some sort of continuity in lineages and traditions between the old Ayutthayā court Brahmans and the new coterie of Brahmans reconstituted from the south for use in the court at Bangkok. These continuities are confirmed, in part, by the continuing role of the Tamil-derived *Trīyampawāi* ceremony in Bangkok, with its authentic if corrupt Tamil *bhakti* texts, in spite of the fact that there appears to have been no renewed importation of Brahmans from India by the new dynasty. The exact nature of the continuities

44 โคลงทวาทศมาส [Khlōng Thawāthotsamāt], v. 156–61.

45 กฎมณเฑียรบาล (Palatine Law), sections 139–173; ตำแหน่งนาพลเรือน (Hierarchy Law), section 19. A translation of the relevant sections of the former can be found in *The palace law of Ayutthaya and the Thammasat: Law and kingship in Siam*, trans. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, Cornell University, 2016), pp. 108–30.

46 Michael Vickery, ‘Prolegomena to methods for using the Ayutthayan laws as historical source material’, <http://michaelvickery.org/vickery1984prolegomena-rev.pdf>, pp. 7–10, 15. Baker and Pasuk, however, have argued that Rāma I’s hasty revision of the Ayutthayan laws makes it unlikely that significant alterations were made; Baker and Pasuk, *The palace law of Ayutthaya and the Thammasat*, pp. 58–9.

47 Kanjana, ‘Ways of life, rituals and cultural identity’, pp. 95–6. This story is also recounted in *จดหมายเหตุการบูรณปฏิสังขรณ์ เทวสถาน สำหรับพระนคร* [Record of the restoration of the Devasthāna for Bangkok] (กรุงเทพฯ: เทวสถาน สำหรับพระนคร, 2557[2014]), p. 17. I thank Phra Mahārāchakhrūphithī Sī Wisutthikhun for graciously giving me a copy of this book.

48 สมเด็จพระนารายณ์รัตนาธิบดีวงศ์, *สาส์นสมเด็จ* [Royal letters], vol. 1, 2nd ed. (พระนคร: กรมศิลปากร, 2516[1973]), p. 270, cited in Kanjana, ‘Ways of life, rituals and cultural identity’, p. 65.

between the southern Brahman communities and the old Ayutthayā court Brahmans, however, is unclear. The genealogy of only one Ayutthayā Brahman family, that of Siriwat (ศิริวัฒน์), a Brahman in the court of King Nārāi in the late seventeenth century, has survived, and none of the ‘southern’ lineages that dominate the present coterie of court Brahmans appear to be related to that lineage. Moreover, when a member of the Siriwat lineage decided a few years ago to become the first in his family to ordain as a Brahman in the over 200 years since the fall of Ayutthayā, he faced some suspicion from the other Brahmans because he traced his lineage directly back to Ayutthayā, rather than to the south.<sup>49</sup>

The current state of the coterie of Thai Brahmans is largely a product of the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932. The Brahmans’ role as government ministers had already been diminished by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernising reforms, especially King Mongkut’s decision to separate the roles of court astrologer (โหร: *hōn*) and ceremonial priest (พราหมณ์พิธี: *phrām phithī*), thus reducing Brahmans to the latter role and removing them from direct advisory service in the palace.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, they remained until the Revolution privileged members of the nobility; the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and the Brahman’s reduced status reportedly led some to resign in disgust and return to their ancestral homes in the south. At that same time, the new government reduced the number of court Brahmans to a mere five, many of the royal ceremonies were discontinued, and the resident Brahman community around the temple slowly dispersed. Although the neighbourhood around the Brahman Temple was permanently transformed, and the Thai Brahmans do not have the same status and role that they had prior to the Revolution, Rāma IX, the late king Bhumibol Adulyadej, did restore some of the discontinued ceremonies and increased the number of official Brahman positions to nine.<sup>51</sup>

### Local histories of the Thai Brahmans

Although reconstructing the history of the Thai Brahmans is made difficult by the lack of evidence, it can be equally fruitful to examine the way in which Thai sources treat the origins of the Brahmans and how these narratives changed over time. I will examine here four such sources, in chronological order, and show that there was a tendency to push the Thai Brahmans further into the past and into ever more mythical locations. That is, whereas earlier accounts retained important historical details tying the Brahmans to a particular time and place in India, later accounts lost interest in these details and instead resorted to legendary tropes in the service of emerging myths of Thai nationhood.

We have already looked briefly at the two oldest of these sources, those of Van Vliet and the Brahmans of Nakhōn Sī Thammarāt, since they are the only two that give plausible clues to the origins of the Thai Brahmans in India. A third dating

49 Personal communication, Brahman Tran Buranasiri.

50 Personal communication, Brahman Tran Buranasiri.

51 Kanjana, ‘Ways of life, rituals and cultural identity’, pp. 98–9. Although there are currently sixteen ordained Brahmans in Bangkok, there are only nine ‘official’ positions, i.e. with a civil service rank and government salary. The rest are generally younger Brahmans who must wait for their fathers to vacate their positions.

from just after the fall of Ayutthayā gives a less detailed and more fanciful origin for the Brahmans in Benares. The fourth and final source dates from the early nineteenth century and does away with any attempt to trace an Indian origin for the Brahmans whatsoever, instead subsuming them into an imaginary tale of Siamese origins in the ancient kingdom of Sukhōthai.

The first source is the story recounted by the Dutch representative Van Vliet from 1638. Although this source as it comes down to us is in a European language, both David Wyatt and Michael Vickery have convincingly argued that Van Vliet composed his history of Ayutthayā from indigenous oral and possibly written sources;<sup>52</sup> thus, we can consider it to be a reflection, however imperfect, of an indigenous account of Brahman origins from the early seventeenth century, the earliest in fact to have survived. According to Van Vliet, during the reign of Rāmāthibodi II (1491–1529), there was a king in India who had the same name and title. This king ruled a kingdom that Van Vliet calls ‘Ramaradt’ and places specifically on the Coromandel Coast, thus within the area of modern-day Tamil Nadu. The king of Ramaradt, considering it an insult that the Siamese king would consider himself his equal by taking the same name, tried by several stratagems to assassinate him. When all of these assassination attempts failed, the king of Ramaradt became convinced that the king of Ayutthayā was a supernatural being and sent him two Brahmans to serve him by casting spells and to ‘make the game of *schoppen* or *schongelen* known in Siam and to establish it there’.<sup>53</sup> *Schoppen* and *schongelen* are Dutch words for ‘swinging’ and therefore appear to refer to the Swing Ceremony of the *Triyampawāi*.

While somewhat fanciful (it involves soldiers flying across the Indian Ocean), this account contains some realistic elements. The Brahmans are said to have come from a fairly specific, and not otherwise prestigious, part of India, namely, the Coromandel Coast, in the not-so-distant past, that is, the reign of Rāmāthibodi II (1491–1529). Moreover, Van Vliet cites this legend not simply as a curiosity, but as an explanation for a continuing relationship between Siam and ‘Ramaradt’. He reports that this gift of Brahmans and their ritual implements laid the groundwork for a trade agreement between the two countries that continued to his day.<sup>54</sup>

The second indigenous account of the origin of the Thai Brahmans is found in the *Chronicle of the Brahmans of Nakhòn Sī Thammarāt*, a letter from the Brahmans of that southern city to the king of Ayutthayā, dating to about 1735, in which they ask for a restoration of what they claim are ancient privileges granted to them by previous kings of Ayutthayā that they allege are being infringed upon by local elites. Key to

52 Michael Vickery, ‘Review of Jeremias van Vliet, *The short history of the kings of Siam*’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 64, 2 (1976): 207–36; Van Vliet, *The short history of the kings of Siam*, p. 4.

53 Van Vliet, ‘The short history of the kings of Siam’, in Baker et al., *Van Vliet’s Siam*, p. 212.

54 Interestingly, although the king of Ramaradt appears to have been Hindu, given his name and gift of Brahmans to Ayutthayā, Van Vliet specifically says that the trade that commenced between the two countries was carried out by Muslims. In another work, he reinforces this Muslim connection by referring to Ramaradt as ‘Rammaradt Cotopsia’. This ‘Cotopsia’ is most likely a Dutch rendering of ‘Qutb Shahi’, a Muslim dynasty that ruled one of the five Deccan Sultanates, centred at Golkonda, from 1518–1687: Warangkana Nibhatsukit, ‘Trade-related groups in Ayutthaya society, 1629–1767’ (PhD diss., Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 2005), p. 162. What relationship there would have been between this Muslim dynasty and a (presumably) Hindu king ruling a kingdom called ‘Ramaradt’ is unclear.

this claim of ancient privileges is a story of their origins, found at the beginning of the letter, that is strikingly similar to the story recounted by Van Vliet 100 years earlier, but contains some key differences. Most importantly, it places the gift of Brahmans in the reign of Rāmāthibodi I, the semi-mythical founder of Ayutthayā, in the mid-fourteenth century, instead of the fifteenth to sixteenth century reign of Rāmāthibodi II. According to this version, there was, during the reign of Rāmāthibodi I, a kingdom in India (at an unspecified location) called Rāmarāja ruled by a king named Rāmāthirāja. When he learned that there was a king in Ayutthayā with a similar (in this case not identical) name, he was, unlike in the Van Vliet version, pleased from the very start, considering himself and the Siamese king to both be incarnations of Nārāyaṇa. He therefore sent divine images, Brahmans, and Brahmanical ritual implements to Ayutthayā as a sign of his friendship.

At this point the story deviates from the Van Vliet version again, such that the Brahmans sent from India to Ayutthayā are shipwrecked by a storm near the southern city of Nakhòn Sī Thammarāt. This is followed by a long series of negotiations between authorities in Nakhòn Sī Thammarāt and Ayutthayā, together with miracles manifested by the image of the god Nārāyaṇa that had been sent from India. As a result, two communities of Brahmans are set up, one in Ayutthayā and the other in Nakhòn Sī Thammarāt, with certain privileges being granted for the southern community by King Rāmāthibodi I of Ayutthayā.

A comparison of this account of the Thai Brahmans' origins to Van Vliet's earlier account reveals divergences that are easily explained in terms of their different purposes and perhaps simply the time that had elapsed since Van Vliet had written his. To begin with, the Nakhòn Sī Thammarāt version serves the particular polemical purposes of a southern community of Brahmans, and thus is at great pains to link the southern Brahmans to a prestigious Indian origin and to the Brahman community in Ayutthayā, of which Nakhòn Sī Thammarāt was a vassal. Although there is insufficient evidence for us to reconstruct the 'actual' history of the southern Brahman communities, it is very possible that they were quite old and did in fact exist when Van Vliet wrote his history of Siam. Van Vliet's Ayutthayā-centric account of the southern Brahmans would not have needed to make any reference to Nakhòn Sī Thammarāt. The other significant changes found in the Nakhòn Sī Thammarāt version, namely, the initial friendliness of the king of Rāmarāja toward the king of Ayutthayā, as well as the shifting of the entire story back 150 years to the semi-mythical reign of Rāmāthibodi I, may have served to flatter its intended Ayutthayān audience with a more harmonious story of Ayutthayā–Rāmarāja relations, dating back to a safely mythical (and thus dynasty-transcending) era. It may also simply reflect a change in the way the popular account of Brahman origins was being told in Siam in general in the time since Van Vliet, away from idiosyncratic historical details and toward simple, legendary accounts of origins in service of a grander narrative of Siamese greatness.

This latter trend is borne out by the third and fourth indigenous accounts of the Thai Brahmans' origins. The third account is found in the *Chronicle of Ayutthayā*, a history of Ayutthayā that was written at the command of the Burmese court after the sack of Ayutthayā in 1767 on the basis of testimony from Thai war captives. In this version, like the second, the Brahmans came during the reign of Rāmāthibodi I, but no mention is made of the idiosyncratic particulars of their ceremonies or their origin

in southern India. Instead, the first Thai Brahmins are said to have been a gift from the 'King of Benares' so that Rāmāthibodi I could carry out his royal consecration.<sup>55</sup> This places the Brahmins directly in the service of the founding glory of the recently fallen Ayutthayā, with a prestigious origin in the well-known city of Benares.

The fourth and final account is found in the story of Nāng Nopphamāt (นางนพมาศ), a daughter of a Brahmin in the old Thai city of Sukhōthai, before the founding of Ayutthayā. This story, which includes a detailed description of royal ceremonies, is often cited erroneously by Thai authors as direct contemporaneous evidence for Brahmins in Sukhōthai. But as Nidhi Eoseewong has shown, this story is actually a modern text, akin to a historical novel, that was written in Bangkok between 1817 and 1835.<sup>56</sup> This story not only dispenses with the details of the Brahmins' origin in South India and the particulars of their ceremonies; it makes no attempt to trace the Brahmins back to India at all. Instead, it simply projects in detail the practices of nineteenth-century Brahmins and life in early Bangkok in general back onto the ur-kingdom of Sukhōthai. As such, it plays a part in the increasing construction of the myth of the Thai nation with its origins in Sukhōthai, which nineteenth-century Siamese scholars and royalty dubbed the 'first' Thai kingdom.

Looking back over these four local accounts of the Thai Brahmins' origins, we see a consistent trend. In the earliest accounts, as legendary as they may be, there is attention paid to the idiosyncratic historical details of the Brahmins' coming to Ayutthayā. In the earliest account, their coming is placed specifically in the reign of Rāmāthibodi II, and their origin is placed in the South Indian kingdom of 'Rāmarāja'. Rāmāthibodi II lacks the prestige of his namesake Rāmāthibodi I who founded Ayutthayā, and Rāmarāja appears to be an actual active trading partner with Siam, rather than a well-known kingdom or city of prestige in India such as Benares. Subsequent accounts push the Brahmins' origins back in time and do away with idiosyncratic historical details, in favour of mythical origins that serve the greater glory of an evolving Siamese narrative. In the final version, the Siamese narrative turns in on itself completely, eliminating the Indian origin of the Brahmins as an unnecessary detail and thrusting the Brahmins back into a mythical Siamese past in service of an emerging narrative of the Thai nation. This overall trend suggests that there is much more to the Thai Brahmins than their Indian origins. In order to understand their role in Thai history, we must contextualise them locally and understand them not synchronically, but diachronically.

### Indigenous features of Thai Brahmanical practice

So far we have seen that the contemporary practices of the Thai Brahmins do indeed bear evidence of Indian origins, and that the historical evidence points to an origin in South India, possibly in part on the island of Rameshvaram, sometime

55 *The chronicle of Ayutthaya*, trans. Tun Aung Chain (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2005), p. 24. For a clear explanation of the relationship between various 'testimony' texts from survivors of the Burmese war, see Chris Baker, 'Before Ayutthaya fell: Economic life in an industrious society', *Journal of the Siam Society* 99 (2011): 72–80.

56 Nidhi Eoseewong, *Pen and sail: Literature and history in early Bangkok*, ed. Chris Baker, Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, Craig Reynolds et al. (Bangkok: Silkworm, 2005), pp. 229–32.

during the Ayutthayā period. In this respect, the Thai Brahmans serve as exemplars of ‘Indianisation’. Nevertheless, emic accounts of their origins show a chronological trend away from their Indian origins and the particularities of their foreign Indian practices, and towards indigenous, Siamese concerns. This can be taken as emblematic of an opposite, indigenising trend, the phenomenon of ‘foreign materials fading into local statements’ that Wolters spoke of in his theory of ‘localisation’. It thus calls into question the hegemony of any ‘Indianisation’ the Brahmans may be considered to have been agents of, and encourages us to focus more on the agency of native Southeast Asians — among whom we should count the Brahmans themselves after the first couple of generations as they intermarried with Thai women and lost the ability to speak in Indian languages.

Indeed, even the intriguing links to South Indian *bhakti* provided by the *Trīyampawāi-Trīppawāi*, which have garnered the most scholarly interest in the Thai Brahmans, may mask deeper ways in which the practices of the Thai Brahmans have been driven by local, rather than Indian, concerns. As we saw in the first section, this festival is named after two collections of Tamil *bhakti* hymns, and hymns from those collections are chanted during the festival. In addition, the Śaiva *Trīyampawāi* portion of the ceremony is the same length and celebrated at the same time in the lunar calendar as the Tamil Śaiva festival known as the *Tiruvāturai*. But the similarities do not go much deeper. To begin with, the Vaiṣṇava *Trīppawāi* has no clear Tamil precedent, and as I suggested above, it may have been deliberately added in Siam as a complement to the Śaiva *Trīyampawāi* — perhaps at a time when there were Vaiṣṇava Brahmans who needed to be incorporated into the predominantly Śaiva coterie of court Brahmans. Even if we confine ourselves to a comparison of the Thai *Trīyampawāi* to the Tamil *Tiruvāturai*, however, the actual content of the ceremonies, aside from the recitation of certain *bhakti* hymns, is quite different.<sup>57</sup> For example, there is a peculiar ceremony during the *Trīyampawāi* in which three boards (นางกระดาน: *nāng kradān*) are lowered into the ground for a few days, with the belief that this brings cooler weather. These boards are carved respectively with the images of (1) the sun (พระอาทิตย์: *phra āthit*) and moon (พระจันทร์: *phra can*); (2) the earth goddess Dharāṇī (นางธรณี: *nāng thoranī*), who in Buddhist mythology wrings water out of her hair to wash away the armies of Māra on the night of the Buddha’s enlightenment; and (3) the goddess Gaṅgā (พระคงคา: *phra khoṅkhā*).<sup>58</sup>

There is even reason to believe that the Swing Festival itself is in part a local innovation. There are certain Indian traditions of swinging, but although Van Vliet reports that the Brahmans sent from Ramaradt taught the Siamese how to swing, there is to my knowledge no swinging tradition in India comparable to the festival once celebrated in Bangkok, in which teams of men swing at great heights in order to catch a bag of coins with their teeth. Some Thai scholars believe that this game was developed specifically in Ayutthayā, since there is no evidence that even the swing in Nakhōn Sī Thammarāt was used for a game of this nature. In addition, Sujit Wongthet has noted that the Thai word for the Swing Festival, *Lō Ching Chā*

57 For a description of the *Tiruvāturai*, see Younger, *The house of dancing Śivan*, pp. 54–67.

58 Quaritch Wales, *Siamese state ceremonies*, pp. 250–51.



(โฉิ่งซ่า), appears to come from the word used by a minority group, the Karen, for the first lunar month, when the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi* was originally celebrated.<sup>59</sup>

Other rituals performed by the Thai Brahmans show even less evidence of a direct origin in India than the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi*. One important function that Thai Brahmans played in the pre-modern court was in placing a curse on water that was then used in a ceremony to exact fealty from the king's servants and vassals. The idea behind the curse was that if the person drinking the water broke the oath, the cursed water would kill him and send him to hell.<sup>60</sup> I am not aware of any Indian precedent for this ritual, and in fact, as Michael Wright has noted, the *Ōnkān Chaeng Nām* (โองการแช่งน้ำ), an extremely old text used by Brahmans in pronouncing the curse, has the curious feature of using almost exclusively words of Tai, rather than Khmer or Sanskrit, origin.<sup>61</sup> And although there is no obvious Indian precedent for the water oath, a Chinese text written in 1216 that describes a state called 'Zhen Li Fu' (真里富) in the area that would become Ayutthayā mentions a similar ceremony, in which disputes were settled by the disputants drinking water cursed by monks and seeing who could 'stomach' it.<sup>62</sup>

Another important ceremony officiated by the Brahmans is the 'First Ploughing Ceremony', known in Thai as the *Raek Nā Khwan* (แรกนาขวัญ). It is performed to this day, with the participation of the royal court Brahmans, annually during the sixth lunar month (March–April). In this ceremony, a representative of the king performs a ritualised 'first ploughing' of the fields in order to ensure a good harvest. It appears that this particular royal custom was once commonplace throughout Southeast Asia; in the past it was performed in Burma, and it is still practised today in Cambodia.<sup>63</sup> One of the key pieces of evidence that Quaritch Wales considers for an 'Indian' origin to this ceremony is actually from a Buddhist source, the Pali account of the Buddha's life in the *Nidānakathā*, in which the Bodhisatta spontaneously attains the first *jhāna* while observing his father perform a royal ploughing

59 Sujit Wongthet's article and other articles questioning the Indian origins of the Swing Festival are found in a hard-to-find pamphlet entitled โฉิ่งซ่า: พิธีกรรม ดึกดำบรรพ์ ของ สุวรรณภูมิ ไม่ใช่ พิธีพราหมณ์ ขมพู ทวีป [Swinging the swing: Ancient ceremony of Suvarṇabhūmi, not a rite of the Brahmans of Jabudvīpa]. I thank Dittarat Tiprat for providing me with this pamphlet.

60 On the water oath, see Michael Wright, *โองการแช่งน้ำ* [Ōnkān Chaeng Nām] (กรุงเทพฯ: มติชน, 2543 [2000]), and จิตร ภูมิศักดิ์, *โองการแช่งน้ำและข้อคิดใหม่ในประวัติศาสตร์ไทยลุ่มแม่น้ำเจ้าพระยา* [Ōnkān Chaeng Nām and new ideas on Thai history in the Chao Phraya river basin] (กรุงเทพฯ: ฟาเดียวกัน, 2547[2004]).

61 Wright, *โองการแช่งน้ำ* [Ōnkān Chaeng Nām], pp. 99–100.

62 O.W. Wolters, 'Chen-li Fu: A state on the Gulf of Siam at the beginning of the 13th century', *Journal of the Siam Society* 48, 2 (1960): 2. Interestingly, even in modern times a similar 'water oath' has been observed being practised by Shan people in Maehōngsōn province in northern Thailand as part of a tattooing ritual; as part of the ritual, the person being tattooed takes an oath to follow certain precepts, and to enforce this oath he drinks water administered to him by the tattoo specialist that will cause him to go insane if he breaks the oath; Nicola Tannenbaum, 'Invulnerability and power in Shan cosmology', *American Ethnologist* 14, 4 (1987): 696. I thank my student Alex Rose for serendipitously bringing this article to my attention.

63 The practice of the ploughing ceremony in Burma is mentioned by Leider, 'Specialists for ritual, magic, and devotion': 175; on the continuing practice of the first ploughing in Cambodia, see Paul Fuchs, *Fêtes et Cérémonies Royales au Cambodge d'Hier* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991), pp. 48–9.

ceremony.<sup>64</sup> Another very clear precedent, also considered by Quaritch Wales,<sup>65</sup> is found in the ploughing ceremony of China, performed since at least the Han Dynasty, in which the emperor would plough the fields at the beginning of the growing season.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, even when there are likely ‘foreign materials’ involved in the practices of the Thai Brahmins, we need not restrict ourselves to a ‘Hindu world’ in explaining them, as their Brahminical identity might suggest. First, Chinese influences on ancient Thai customs, even in the realm of the supposedly ‘Indian’ Brahmins, should not be discounted. Linguistic evidence shows that the Tai-speaking peoples had their origins in the region between northern Vietnam and Guangxi province in China.<sup>67</sup> Michael Vickery has made a convincing argument that the Tai peoples’ early contact with China led them to imitate its structure of government; he notes close parallels between the structure of Siamese government found in the Three Seals Law, more northerly Tai administrations, and that of the Ming Dynasty. Of particular interest for our purposes, Vickery notes that the Brahmins are organised in the Three Seals Law in a dual structure whose hierarchy parallels the Chinese censorate, and who, like the Chinese censors, were responsible for judicial duties. After 1380, the Chinese censorate had two censors-in-chief, two vice censors-in-chief, and four assistant censors-in-chief. This is paralleled in the Three Seals Law by two Brahmins with the title Phra Mahārājaguru, two with the title Phra Rājaguru, and four with the title Palat.<sup>68</sup>

Second, it must not be forgotten that the institution of the royal court Brahmins of Thailand evolved in an overwhelmingly Buddhist context. If the Southeast Asian practice of the Royal First Ploughing Ceremony did find inspiration, even in part, from India, this inspiration can in fact be explained without recourse to the ‘Hinduism’ of the Brahmins, since the Buddha’s father in the Buddhist *Nidānakathā* may have acted as a model for ‘proper’ kingship. The Thai Brahmins’ ceremonies often include overtly Buddhist elements; for example, during the last days of the *Trīyampawāi-Trīppawāi*, the Brahmins invite monks from nearby Wat Suthat to feed them, in the same way that ordinary Thai Buddhist laypeople would. When I asked the Brahmins if they considered themselves Buddhist, most said that they did and pointed out that it is not uncommon for Thai Brahmins to ordain as Buddhist monks in their youth, prior to ordaining as Brahmins. The current Head Brahmin (Phra Mahārājaguru) gave me

64 *The story of Gotama Buddha (Jātaka-nidāna)*, trans. N.A. Jayawickrama (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2002), pp. 76–7.

65 See Quaritch Wales, *Siamese state ceremonies* (pp. 256–64), which presents the evidence for both an Indian and a Chinese origin, but comes down in favour of the former because the ceremony is associated with Brahmins.

66 For a description of the Chinese First Ploughing Ceremony, see Derk Bodde, *Festivals in classical China: New Year and other annual observances during the Han dynasty, 206 B.C.–A.D. 220* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 223–41.

67 James R. Chamberlain, ‘The origin of southwestern Tai’, *Bulletin des amis du royaume Lao* 7–8 (1972): 233–44; cited by Michael Vickery, ‘The Lion Prince and related remarks on northern history’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 64, 1 (1976): 359.

68 Michael Vickery, ‘The Constitution of Ayutthaya’, <http://michaelvickery.org/vickery1996constitution.pdf>, pp. 50–56. As his source on the Chinese structure of government, Vickery cites John L. Bishop, *Studies of governmental institutions in Chinese history* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

perhaps the most straightforward response to my question about his religious identity: 'Yes, I am a Buddhist. And I am a Hindu Brahman. I'm both.'

### **Conclusion: The tension between the foreign and the familiar**

We began this examination of the Thai Brahmans with what seemed like a classic case of syncretic Indianisation: Tamil Hindu Brahmans inserted into a Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asian context. What we have ended up with is a picture that is far more complex: Indian Hindu Brahmans, yes, but also fully Thai Brahmans, who fulfil roles and duties determined by local concerns under a wide variety of influences, including Chinese. I have already suggested that there was an 'indigenising' influence that has acted on the Thai Brahmans, running counter to the 'Indianising' influence inherent to the Brahmans themselves.

But perhaps we can nuance this model a bit. After all, the history of the Thai Brahmans is, aside from the first generation of Brahmans who came to India and the ritual technologies they bequeathed to their descendants, entirely a Southeast Asian history, rather than an Indian one. What we need is not a theory of 'Indianisation', which emphasises historical actors (Indians) who play a distinctly minority role in the historical processes under consideration, but rather a theory of Southeast Asian history that explains the role, however materially small and symbolically large, that foreign elements might play. What role, in other words, have Brahmans as (mostly rhetorical) agents of foreign ritual technologies played in the local history of Siam?

The trend in scholarship on Southeast Asia in recent decades, spearheaded by Wolters, Mabbett, Vickery, and others, has of course been in precisely this direction, toward local histories and flipping 'Indianisation' on its head through theories of 'localisation'. But every particular case still raises the question of why: Why was the need felt to make use of foreign elements to address local concerns? This question is especially pressing in the case of the Thai Brahmans, who are doubly 'foreign' in not only coming originally from India, but in representing an institution, scriptures, and set of ritual technologies quite distinct from those of the Indian system more familiar to Thai people, namely Buddhism. I would argue that the key to the answer to this question is kingship.

Scholars of Southeast Asia will of course be familiar with the work of Clifford Geertz, who developed in the course of his work on Bali the concept of the 'theatre state', a state in which power is articulated in the form of public spectacle.<sup>69</sup> Insofar as pre-modern Siam can be considered to have been a 'theatre state', or as having incorporated some of the characteristics thereof, Brahmans would certainly have played a key role in the 'spectacle' of royal power. Their annual cycle of rituals provided the backbone of royal spectacle; even more potently, their administration of the 'water oath' cemented the power of the king of Siam over his vassals, and their performance of the *rājābhiṣeka* actually created royal power by transforming a non-king into a king. As ritual specialists, the Brahmans' job was quite simply to assist the king in articulating his power through spectacle, as the concept of the 'theatre state'

69 Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

predicts. But this leaves a key question unanswered: Why Brahmans? Why, in other words, was it necessary to import Brahmans from India with unfamiliar (i.e., Tamil *bhakti*) ritual technologies to perform a series of spectacles that were, as a whole, determined locally? Why not simply use local ritual specialists?

An answer to this question is suggested by the critique of Geertz's 'theatre state' offered by Maurice Bloch in his study of the royal bath in Madagascar.<sup>70</sup> Bloch argues that Geertz over-emphasises the 'otherness' and self-referentiality of royal rituals. Although royal rituals are indeed constructed to be spectacles that set the king apart from his subjects, they are constructed out of the rituals of ordinary life. This is because, while the king must set himself apart from his subjects in order to articulate his power over them, he must also do so in terms that are comprehensible to his subjects. There is thus an inherent tension in the articulation of royal power. It must simultaneously be articulated in terms comprehensible to the subject population and be unique so as to mark the king's distinction from them. If a king's spectacle is too ordinary and familiar, he will appear like an ordinary person, rather than an extraordinary person with power over everyone else. If, on the other hand, his spectacle is too foreign, too unusual, it will be incomprehensible to his subjects and mark him as an outsider.

This tension explains the unusual mix of Indian and local traditions found in the history of the Thai Brahmans and renders the whole question of 'Indianisation' moot. Brahmans were brought to Siam, as they were to other Southeast Asian kingdoms and indeed South Indian kingdoms as the subcontinent itself was Brahmanised, because their foreign ritual technologies could be used to set the kings who employed them apart from their subject populations. The early accounts of the Brahmans coming to Ayutthayā recorded by Van Vliet and the southern Brahmans emphasise the unique relationship that the king of Ayutthayā had with a foreign king, which allowed him to acquire Brahmans in the first place. The very fact that only the king had access to these exotic ritual specialists was itself a powerful expression of his power.

On the other hand, if the Indian Brahmans had formed a closed community, maintained the purity of their Indian traditions, and refused to accommodate in any way to the local culture, their rituals would have seemed bizarre and incomprehensible to the populace. Thus, we find that many of the rituals the Brahmans performed, such as the Water Oath and the First Ploughing, appear to satisfy local concerns, rather than solely conform to a 'Hindu' norm. Even the *Triyampawāi-Trippawāi*, which has clear roots in the Tamil *Tiruvāturai*, has been modified in various ways over the centuries to accommodate local concerns. The vicissitudes of history have left us with too little evidence in most cases to reconstruct the exact sequence of events by which royal rituals were formulated and reformulated to maintain the balance between the 'foreign' and the 'familiar' necessary to make them effective. Almost certainly, the boundary between 'foreign' and 'familiar' would have changed over time as originally foreign rituals became localised and familiar, requiring new importations of foreign elements to maintain the proper balance.

70 Maurice Bloch, 'The ritual of the royal bath in Madagascar: The dissolution of death, birth, and fertility into authority', in *Rituals of royalty: Power and ceremonial in traditional societies*, ed. David Cannadine and Simon Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 271–97.

The Thai Brahmins, to conclude, are neither agents of Indianisation nor victims of indigenisation. They are, and have been for most of their history, Thai historical agents participating in the articulation of Siamese royal power. While they were originally brought from India to Siam to set the king apart, their job has consisted to a large extent of performing rituals that are familiar to the local population and make sense within the local cultural world. Although their 'Brahminhood' sets them apart, they are in every appreciable sense Thai: They speak Thai, they intermarry with other Thai people, they even ordain as Buddhist monks as young adults. Indeed, the centrality of being Thai to the potency of the Thai Brahmins is set in stark relief by the development of a sizeable immigrant Indian community in Thailand in the wake of British colonialism. Although there are any number of authentic Indian Brahmins residing in Thailand who could potentially be employed in royal ritual, this is a function that only the Thai Brahmins can fulfil. Only time can tell how the delicate balance between the foreign and the familiar in the articulation of Thai kingship will be maintained in the future as the Thai Brahmins continue to become an ever more naturalised part of Thai, rather than Indian, culture.