

บทความวิจัย (Research Article)

ท่ามกลางปูชนียสถานของไทย:  
การสักการะชัยชนะแห่งสมเด็จพระนเรศวรมหาราชในสังคдумยุทธหัตถี  
Among the Thai Pantheon:  
Worshipping King Naresuan's Victory in Elephant Duel

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ครอบคลุมແร่ำມุนทางศาสนาของการรำลึกถึง พิธีกรรม และความเชื่อของรัฐและปัจเจกชนในภายในบริบทแวดล้อมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการสักการะสมเด็จพระนเรศวรมหาราชและชัยชนะทางการทหารที่ยิ่งใหญ่ที่สุดซึ่งเกิดขึ้นในช่วงที่มีพระมหาอุปราชของพม่าในสังคдумยุทธหัตถีในเดือนกรกฎาคม พ.ศ. 2136 ในวัฒนธรรมไทยนั้น ความเป็นกษัตริย์อยู่ในฐานะกิ่งเทพ และผู้คนจะจดจำความสำเร็จอันยิ่งใหญ่ของกษัตริย์องค์นั้นเมื่อเสด็จสวรรคต นอกจากนั้นผู้คนมามาด้วยเชื่อว่ากษัตริย์ผู้ยิ่งใหญ่จะมีพลังเหนือธรรมชาติ เป็นสื่อกลางให้ความช่วยเหลือเพื่อประโยชน์สุขแก่ผู้ที่ร้องขอผ่านพิธีกรรมสักการะการถวายเครื่องเช่นไห้ว หรือการบนบานศาลกล่าวด้วยเหตุนี้กษัตริย์ผู้ที่มีชื่อเสียงมากที่สุดจะเป็นที่จดจำของผู้คนมามาด้วยยังมีอิทธิพลต่อผู้คนเหล่านั้นทั้งในและประวัติศาสตร์และรัฐศาสตร์ และที่สำคัญไม่น้อยไปกว่ากันคืออิทธิพลที่เกี่ยวข้องกับพลังเหนือธรรมชาติซึ่งควบคู่กันไป บทววนี้เริ่มต้นด้วยการอธิบายແร่ำມุนทางศาสนาของการสักการะโดยรัฐและสังคมพลเมือง หลังจากนั้น จึงเข้าสู่การอภิปรายความหมายแห่งการสักการะทางศาสนาในบริบทของวัฒนธรรมศาสนาของไทย รวมถึงบทบาทที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการศึกษาศาสนาไทยในปัจจุบัน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในส่วนที่เกี่ยวกับข้องกับสถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์ การอภิปรายนำไปสู่หัวสรุปว่าการศึกษาศาสนาไทยมีความจำเป็นที่จะต้องได้รับการจำแนกประเภทและสร้างมาตรฐานใหม่

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(Received: 19 April 2020; Revised: 22 May 2020; Accepted: 23 June 2020)

## Abstract

This study covers the religious aspects of governmental and independent commemorations, rituals and beliefs, surrounding the worship of King Naresuan and his greatest military achievement, his victory in elephant duel over the Burmese crown prince in January 1593. In Thai culture kingship is a semi-divine state and after death the greatest kings are remembered for their historical achievements but they are also believed to have supernatural power to intercede for the benefit of people who ask for their aid by performing rituals of paying respects, giving offerings and the promise of future gifts. Thus the most famous Thai kings have both a historical-political memory and influence and an equally important concurrent supernatural influence. The article first describes religious aspects of official governmental commemorations and of Thai civil society. It then enters into a discussion on what this religious worship of a king's military victory says about Thai religious culture and where it is placed in relation to current scholarship on Thai religion, especially in relation to Thai royalty. This discussion leads to the conclusion that previous scholarship on Thai religion needs reclassification and standardization.

**Keywords:** Naresuan, Animism, Commemorations

## Introduction

In Thai culture kingship is a semi-divine state and after death the greatest kings are remembered for their historical achievements but they are also believed to have supernatural power to intercede for the benefit of people who ask for their aid by performing rituals of paying respects, giving offerings and the promise of future gifts. Thus the most famous Thai kings have both a historical-political memory and influence and an equally important concurrent supernatural influence. This article covers the religious commemoration, rituals and beliefs in the worship of King Naresuan's victory in elephant duel over the crown prince of the Burmese Pegu Empire in January 1593. Other events in the life of King Naresuan are celebrated, especially his declaration of Thai independence from the Burmese Empire. However, the elephant duel victory was the event that sealed Thai independence and indeed was key in the subsequent downfall of the Burmese Empire. This article does not discuss these historical events or their authenticity. Given that this is a Thai story, the article takes for granted the story of King Naresuan as presented in the Thai version of history. The goal of the article is to better understand Thai religion and culture specifically in the case of King Naresuan and his military career, and by extension other deceased Thai kings and Thai religious belief and practice in general.

The study begins historically with the presentation of a state religious ceremony conducted at the presumed site of the elephant duel during the royal visit in early 1914 by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI). The religious aspects of the printing of commemorative stamps and a banknote are presented followed by the various official religious ceremonies conducted during the construction of three commemorative monuments directly related to King Naresuan's victory in elephant duel: (1) in Suphanburi, province; (2) at the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters in Bangkok; (3) in the Kanchanaburi province, here the monument ostensibly commemorates King Naresuan's passage through the area in 1599, but in reality the site is claimed to be the true site of the elephant duel. The presentation of the findings from fieldwork conducted at the three main monument sites follows the historical overview. A discussion and conclusion section introduces the argument that polytheism better describes Thai religion than the standardized tripartite system of Buddhism-Brahmanism-animism.

## Research Objectives

Three main objectives have been set: (1) Study the religious worship of King Naresuan's victory in elephant duel in stamps, banknotes and particularly as it is related to the two main (and one pretender) monuments dedicated to the elephant duel. (2) Catalogue the specific religious beliefs and practices of Thais in regards to King Naresuan's victory in elephant duel including the believed aid King Naresuan can bestow on his worshippers. (3) Critique existing scholarship in English on the classification of deities in Thai religion and introduce polytheism as a better concept to describe Thai religion than the concept of animism.

## Sources and Methods

Review of books and publications on the building and commemorations of the three main elephant duel monuments and other commemorations of the elephant duel. Review of sociological and anthropological works on Thai religion and particularly in relation to Thai kingship. Fieldwork conducted within a general socio-anthropological framework. Fieldwork included thirty random sampled anonymous semi-structured ten minute interviews with visitors worshipping at the monuments. Conducted six in-depth random sampled anonymous semi-structured interviews (duration: thirty to forty-five minutes) with visitors or people responsible in some way for a monument site. Narrative description was used for the presentation of the findings. Causal Narrative with some process tracing is used in data analysis and comparing the study findings to existing scholarship on Thai religion. Comparative method was applied to Thai

religion and ancient Roman and Mediterranean religion to draw out similarities of explanatory value.

For this study religion is defined as: acceptance of the existence of non-empirical (subjective experience rather than objectively provable) beings, forces, and states and the beliefs, practices and experiences in relation to those beings, states, and forces.

## **Results: Worshipping King Naresuan's Victory in Elephant Duel**

Around the world, in government commemorations, remembrances, celebrations of victory and the like there have always been a religious component to the ceremonies. Niels Mulder nicely summarizes the basic Thai religious ritual performance and this closely matches the rituals and ceremonies presented in this article – “The ritual of invocation is always the same: one first pays respect and makes a small offering of burning incense in order to attract attention, then one states one’s wish and make a vow, and finally, after being granted one’s wishes, redeems the vow” (2000: 19), the process is reliable and predictable (Mulder, 2000: 20). The researcher will add that for rituals involving larger groups of people, as general practice an offerings table (*to mūbūchā*) is laid out in front of the statue or stupa being worshipped.

### **Early State Commemorations**

The Thai state sponsored the main commemorations of King Naresuan's victory in elephant duel which include images on stamps, a banknote, and two major monuments. Barend Terwiel explains that King Culalongkorn (Rama V r.1868–1910) had a series of ninety-two paintings and poems made all inspired by the Royal Chronicles (2013: 31). A painting of the elephant duel was made. The elephant duel was recognized as an important part of Thai history, but it is unclear if it had yet been singled out as such a defining moment of that history. Nearly fifty years later the elephant duel appeared in a set of murals depicting the life story of King Naresuan painted in the *wihān* (*vihāra* – gathering building of a Thai temple complex usually housing the main Buddha statue) of Wat Suwan Dararam in Ayutthaya. The largest mural and most prominent mural is that of the elephant duel. These murals were painted during the reign of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925-1935) being completed in 1931 (Aphiwan, 2013: 74). I have found no mention is made of the types of religious ceremonies that were most likely performed in the process of painting these murals.

### **Stamps**

Several Thai postage stamps were released during the 1950s coinciding with a series of 400<sup>th</sup> anniversaries in the life of King Naresuan. The first set commemorates the anniversary of

King Naresuan's 400<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1955. A series of five stamps was issued depicting Naresuan on his war elephant in combat position, thus a commemoration of the elephant duel.

The very next year in 1956 another set of four stamps each depicting a stupa was issued to commemorate the commencement of the restoration of the claimed original Don Chedi elephant duel stupa in Suphanburi province. Then there is a gap of nearly thirty years before in 1984 a stamp was printed to commemorate Royal Thai Armed Forces Day. The stamp depicts King Naresuan combat ready on elephant back (copying the elephant duel monument in Suphanburi). King Naresuan floats over and dominates images of modern Thai military equipment.

The final stamp commemorating the elephant duel, that the researcher is aware of, came out in 1992 to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the elephant duel. This stamp reproduces the mural at Wat Suwan Dararam mentioned above.

In terms of a religious component to the issuance of these stamps, in a telephone interview with a representative of Thailand Post (*praisanī thai*) conducted in June 2019, the Thailand Post official said that normally for stamps depicting Thai royalty Thailand Post representatives perform a standard Buddhist religious ceremony (*phitī tāng sāsanā*) honoring the particular King or member of the royal family to be represented on the stamp. The ceremony involves monks chanting, merit making, and remembrances of the royal grace bestowed that particular royal (Thailand Post 2019). However, because the first two sets of stamps were issued over sixty years ago, the representative could not state definitively what was done then.

### **Banknotes**

The Bank of Thailand issued one series of banknotes depicting the elephant duel. The banknote has an image of the monument to King Naresuan at Suphanburi. The banknote is a 100 Baht bill of the 12<sup>th</sup> series of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX r.1946–2016) banknotes issued on 6 April 1978. In an email exchange, a representative of the Bank of Thailand explained that in preparation to make banknotes honoring Thai kings, visits are made to memorials of the kings. Thus for this 100 baht banknote series with the representation of the King Naresuan monument at Suphanburi, representatives of the Bank of Thailand travelled to the Suphanburi monument and performed a ceremony to pay respect and wish for blessings (*phitī būangsūang*) (Bank of Thailand).

### **Medallions (*rīan*)**

Medallions commemorating Thai kings, famous monks, and various deities are produced in large numbers in Thailand and there are a number of King Naresuan medallions. Medallions

with a depiction of some representation of the elephant duel are usually produced in conjunction with some special occasion at one of the monument sites in Suphanburi or Kanchanaburi. These medallions do commemorate the historical event; however, at the same time, as with most Thai medallions, they act as amulets (*phra kruāng*). Official venders sell several types of King Naresuan medallions at the Suphanburi and Kanchanaburi monument sites. At the Buddhist temple complex at the Suphanburi monument site, monks sell a diverse selection both in depiction and price.

### **Religious Rituals and the Construction of the Elephant Duel Monuments**

Two major monuments commemorate the elephant duel while a third ostensibly commemorates King Naresuan's passage through Kanchanaburi province on an invasion of Burma: (1) the 1959 monument built in Suphanburi province at the site of a ruined stupa that Prince Damrong Rajanubhaph declared as the original stupa said to have been built by King Naresuan to commemorate his elephant duel victory; (2) the elephant duel monument built at the new Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters in 2004; (3) the monument in Kanchanaburi province officially commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Naresuan passing through Kanchanaburi province on his way to invade the Burmese Pegu Empire in 1599, but popularly claimed to be the site of the original elephant duel and commemorative stupa.

The construction and opening of these monuments included religious rituals at key moments. The first religious ritual performed in connection with these monuments was in 1914 when Prince Damrong read out a declaration during the visit to the site by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI r.1910–1925) to the newly discovered alleged stupa in Suphanburi province. In Damrong's biography of King Naresuan, the appendix has the story of the discovery of the stupa and the text of the religious ritual. The ritual being performed is a worshipping and asking for blessings (*phitī būangsūang*), and the title of the text Damrong read out is "Announcement of Offerings to the Gods" (*prakāt sangwēo thewadā*). First Prince Damrong called the gods of the heavens and the god protectors of the jungle and the stupa to listen to his speech on the career of King Naresuan. In his closing remarks, Damrong invokes the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha along with the gathering of gods at the stupa to give well wishes and prosperity to the people of Siam (Damrong, 2012: 150-154). A decision was made at that time to renovate the stupa and build a monument to King Naresuan. This plan would have to wait forty-five years before being realized in 1959 with the completion of a new stupa covering the ruined original stupa and a monument to King Naresuan mounted on his war elephant.

Religious rituals were performed throughout the process of constructing these monuments. Many of these rituals are noted in information panels at the monument sites, program booklets of the events, anniversary commemoration booklets, and in books on King Naresuan. A sampling of the major ceremonies follows. All major construction projects need a foundation stone and in Thai tradition this is an astrological chart engraved in stone set for the time and date of the ceremony (*silā-rūk* - literally ‘auspicious-time stone’). The time and date to begin work must be auspicious according to Thai astrology. The ceremony for the laying of the foundation stone for the Suphanburi monument was held on 25 January 1956 and chaired by a deputy prime minister with the then *Sangka nāyok* Somdet Phra Wanarat representing the Sangha (Somchāi, 1984: 430, 432; Worawut, 2010: 21). The foundation stone for the Kanchanaburi monument was placed by Princess Sirindhorn (Worawut, 2010: 69; Information Panel Kanchanaburi) while the foundation stone for the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters monument was anointed by the *Sangha-raja* in 2002 and then laid on site in a ceremony led by a top general of Thai army. At the foundry where the casting of the statues is done, rituals of worship and offering (*būangsūang*) were held when the statues for both King Naresuan and the elephant were completed. Exactly at what point in the final construction these rituals took place is not clear. For the Kanchanaburi statues one ritual was in preparation for moving the statues from the foundry to the monument site (Information Panel Kanchanaburi). The next important ceremony is when the statue on King Naresuan is placed on the neck of the elephant statue at the monument site. At the Suphanburi, the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters and the Kanchanaburi sites the ceremony was called ‘ceremony of respectful invitation’ (*phitī anchōen*) (Somchāi, 1984: 434; Warawut, 2010: 75 and Information Panel Kanchanaburi, respectively). At Kanchanaburi the ceremony is also termed ‘installation ceremony’ (*phitī praditthān*) (Informational Panel Kanchanaburi). The final major ceremony in each case was the opening ceremony. Each opening ceremony was presided over by a high ranking member of the royal family: 1) King Bhumibol for Suphanburi on 25 January 1959; 2) Crown Prince (now King) Maha-Vajiralongkorn for Kanchanaburi on 18 February 2003; 3) Queen Sirikit for Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters on 29 June 2004.

In the researcher’s companion article to this one (see author), the researcher presented the political side of such rituals as legitimizing acts for the government that built them. Here he wants to emphasize that for many if not most of the participants, there is a real religious devotional aspect involved in these rituals of worship along with whatever political meaning that may also be present.

### **Contemporary Rituals of Worship at the Monuments**

All three monuments are popular places of worship, but because the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters monument is on a government installation and the area itself is not attached to King Naresuan historically, it receives far less visitors than the Suphanburi and Kanchanaburi monuments. Thai military personnel working at the headquarters are the primary worshippers. The most important ceremony conducted at this monument is the Thai Armed Forces Day (*wan kōngthap thai*) celebrations. Beginning in 1959, 8 April had been Thai Armed Forces Day. In 1980 the date was changed to the date of the elephant duel because of the significance of that event, but because of an error in calculating the lunar calendar to solar calendar the date was put at 25 January. This error was corrected in 2006 when the date was changed to the correct 18 January. The Thai Armed Forces hold several ceremonies on this date, the most important being the one held at Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters in front of the King Naresuan elephant duel monument and a ceremony held at the Suphanburi elephant duel monument. These ceremonies include the standard religious rituals of offerings and wishing for blessing, though far more elaborate.

Speaking with a pair of Thai army generals at the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters a few years ago, they gave the researcher the copies of booklets and programs produced for the opening ceremony and as general histories of King Naresuan. These publications served as references for this article. The generals explained that while the monument is open to the public, the majority of people who come to pay respects and worship are soldiers, sailors and air force personnel. They might come individually for personal affairs such as promotion or in groups if a unit has a more than routine assignment to carry out. Here, the generals said, the rituals are with *phrāhm* (Thai polytheist priests, from Sanskrit/Pali: *brāhmaṇa*, see below for further elaboration); Buddhist monks are not involved.

#### **At the monument in Suphanburi**

In 1959 an entire commemorative complex honoring King Naresuan's victory in elephant duel was opened in Suphanburi province. The monument complex is quite large, it contains a Buddhist temple and monastery, a primary and secondary school, and the main commemorative features of a monument to King Naresuan mounted on his war elephant and a new stupa built over the ruins of what is claimed in some quarters of Thai society as a stupa King Naresuan had himself commissioned to be built to commemorate the elephant duel (for a complete overview of the controversy surrounding the site of the elephant duel and supposed original stupa see author). The stupa constructed over the ruined stupa was built large enough

to allow people to enter and walk around the enclosed original ruined stupa. Located about two and a half hours from Bangkok visiting the site makes an easy daytrip and the same for people living in other neighboring provinces. The site has a nearly continuous stream of visitors with weekends and holidays naturally being the peak time when visitors number in the hundreds. During the workweek twenty to thirty people trickle in during the morning hours and through the lunch hour with nearly no one visiting in the heat of the afternoon. In the evenings after work, people may also stop by. Visitors come to see the monument, the stupa, the displays inside the stupa, and worship and ask favors of King Naresuan. The site for worship is directly in front of the monument. The majority of people perform the simple Thai *wai* (pay respect) ceremony of lighting a candle and incense sticks. Placing the candle on the stand, making a wish while holding the incense and then placing the incense in the receptacle in front of the monument. Also available for paying respects are garlands and small, cheap in price and quality, ceramic roosters. The garland is laid out or hung on a stand with the rooster being placed on a stand in front of the monument. The candle, incense, garland and rooster can be purchased on site next to the monument for beginning at 20 twenty baht and increasing depending what is bought and the size of the rooster. The whole process of buying and paying respect takes only a few minutes. Worshippers typically ask (*khō*) or make a wish (*atithān*) for a blessing or boon. Most people ask for career and money help, but interviewees said that Naresuan can help with health or other problems. Inside the new stupa, there is a small altar in front of the ruins of the original stupa where visitors can also pay respects. A small shop sells King Naresuan paraphernalia including amulets. The Buddhist temple also sells amulets and there is a better selection of amulets. Other activities at the monument include sports teams conducting ceremonies or athletes simply jogging around the monument to ‘connect’ to the power of Naresuan, Buddhist ordination parades come to the monument to circumambulate it and remain a bit playing loud music and dancing. The monument is a local site of supernatural power.

The largest event is the yearly two week (give or take a day or two) fair held in January coinciding with the 18 January anniversary of the elephant duel. A large event, the fair puts on a nearly nightly light and sound show that reenacts King Naresuan’s life and climaxes with the elephant duel.

### At the monument in Kanchanaburi

As a general statement, the religious practice at the Naresuan monument in Kanchanaburi province is the same as that at Suphanburi. The site also has a small museum displaying weapons and equipment found at the site indicating a battle had taken place there, and panels provide information on the building of the monument. A steady trickle of visitors comes through on weekdays, though somewhat less than Suphanburi, but increasing to match the hundreds of visitors on weekends seen at Suphanburi. Weekend visitors frequently arrive by bus with organized tours. Kanchanaburi city and province are a popular places to visit and this helps increase the number of visitors to the King Naresuan monument. Most Januaries a fair is also held here, though substantially smaller in size and shorter in duration than the one in Suphanburi. Ostensibly built to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Naresuan's passage through the area to invade Burma, locals and a large part of Thai society at large hold this site as the true site of the elephant duel -and the original stupa. Thus a great many people come to the site to worship believing it to be the site of the elephant duel. While lighting candles and incense and laying a garland in front of the monument is de rigueur, most people also visit a nearby small building enclosing a shrine with small statutes of King Naresuan, his brother and successor Ekathotsarot, and elder sister Suphankanlaya as well as containing equipment for spectacles (replica spears, swords, costumes, etc.), smaller statues of Naresuan and elephants, and several elephant skulls. In front of the building are many statues of rosters from small to enormous, and large private ceremonies are held here rather than in front of the monument. This shrine building is located near the small stupa claimed to be the original elephant duel stupa. Near to this shrine-building is a small very well kept typical Thai spirit house/shrine dedicated to the 'first soldiers' (*thahān ēk*) of King Naresuan. Locals and some visitors at the Kanchanaburi monument claim of hearing voices and sounds of ghost of soldiers, elephants and horses.

Interviews at both the Suphanburi and Kanchanaburi sites show visitors believe that King Naresuan is now a god (*thēp*, *thēwā*, *thēwadā*) who is protector of Thailand. It is believed that the magnitude of the importance of the elephant duel victory increases both the magnitude of King Naresuan's power of protection and of the blessing one can request from the god Naresuan. Some believe that his spirit (*winñān*) descends into the monument to interact with worshippers, others that he can interact from heaven. The first belief matches Stengs' findings that at the King Chulalongkorn equestrian statue the king's spirit enters the statue on Tuesdays evenings (2009: 86), the Thai is not given but the researcher assumes *winñān*. Despite

the importance of the monuments for worship, many visitors also said that one can make offerings and ask for blessings at home.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The contemporary religious beliefs and practices in worshipping King Naresuan's victory in elephant duel and the King Naresuan cult in general are the same have been practiced by Thais for as long we have records. Concerning modern scholarship, the researcher's findings fit into the general body of literature on Thai religion (see the definition of religion page 4; Buddhism is included in Thai religion) and in particular on the monarchy, animism, and prosperity religions (see Jackson, 1999a, 1999b; Kirsch, 1977; Kitiarsa, 2008, 2012; Mulder, 2000; Stengs, 2009; Swearer, 1995). However, the researcher does have disagreements with some of the findings in these scholars' works and for this discussion the researcher has chosen to critique the use of 'animism' and terms such as spirit, saint and angel for description and categorization of deceased Thai kings and introduce his contention to use the concepts of polytheism and gods.

### Analysis: Animism or Polytheism

A prominent topic in Thai religious studies (and in Theravada studies in general) is the role of animism, and also Brahmanism, in Thai 'popular' religion (see the works listed in the paragraph above). In sum, while the researcher finds the description of the individual phenomena generally well done; the analysis of animism is flawed in terms of (1) using the term itself and (2) in the terms used in translating and categorizing Thai religion and supernatural beings. The researcher posits that classifying Thai religion in terms of polytheism offers greater descriptive clarity and analytical insight into Thai religion than the classic tripartite categorization of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and animism. Polytheism as the worship of multiple gods in a hierarchical pantheon encompasses all three of these components. The problem with restricting many beliefs and practices of Thai religion to animism is that it constrains and diminishes deified Thai royalty to ancestor spirits rather than the gods they have become. Gods differ from spirits in autonomy and power. Gods generally are not bound to a single location, are more powerful, and more beneficent – think of a god of the forest compared to a tree spirit within the forest.

The researcher has found works treating ancient Mediterranean polytheism, and Roman polytheism in particular, useful in understanding the dynamics of polytheism and thus Thai polytheism. The researcher thinks too often Western notions of polytheism are influenced by Greek or Norse mythology with their larger than life stories and thus there is a failure to realize

that many polytheisms are not like that. Following the ancient Roman philosopher Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BCE), Jan Assmann presents Varro's tripartite division of the religious world: (1) Cosmic theology (*theologia naturalis*): the deities cooperate in creating and maintaining the world. Human participation supplements the divine action with ritual action; (2) cultic-political dimension (*theologia civilis*) "The pantheon is an assembly of town lords and temple owners, headed, in some cases, by the god whose temple is in the capital [...]" ; (3) stories of the gods (*theologia fabularis*) "personal or biographical aspect of the divine world" (2004: 18-20).

All of these dimensions shed light on Thai religion, but the researcher only has space to tackle one of the facets and that will be the second 'cultic-political' dimension. The Thai pantheon indeed consists of town and local deities and spirits headed by the god of the capital which is King Chulalongkorn. Irene Stengs' description of the cult of King Chulalongkorn conforms this (see Stengs, 2009). King Chulalongkorn, King Naresuan, and King Thaksin comprise a supreme triad of Thai royal gods. These and other royal deities fit the Roman descriptions of their gods as citizens using the "language of interpersonal civic obligation to explain the actions and ambitions of cult" (Adno, 2010: 60). The researcher puts forward that King Naresuan is nearly the Thai god of war, and for the Thai military he certainly is; though admittedly, the researcher has never heard a Thai say this. The Buddha overarches these deities, and the researcher is in agreement with Kitiarsa in that the Buddha is the supreme deity–god of Thai polytheistic religion (2012: 23-25).

Thais themselves (confirmed by the interviews the researcher conducted) call these royal beings 'gods' – *thēp, thēwā, thēwadā*. And while 'deity' is frequently used, there seems to be aversion to simply saying 'god'. Thai royal gods are not spirits or ghosts (*phī, phraphūm, nāngmai, nāngfā*, etc.); they are gods as defined above. 'Gods', in contrast to 'spirits', presents an accurate description of the gods Chulalongkorn, Naresuan, and Thaksin, as well as other supernatural beings in the Thai Pantheon. Given this, I take issue with the characterization of Thai gods as 'spirits' in the work of scholars of Thai religion. For example, the title and content of Irene Stengs book on King Chulalornkorn (see Stengs, 2009) does not use 'god' and 'deity'. The title has King Chulalongkorn as [...] the "Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class" (my emphasis). Further Stengs explains that Thais in general believe that King Chulalongkorn was "reborn in a heavenly realm as a guardian angel (*thep, thewada* or *deva*)" (2009: 84). These terms and concepts, saints and angels, are inappropriate because they have not been divorced from their monotheist roots (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic). There is a difference in kind between

God and saints and angels that is not found between the gods, goddesses, spirits, demi-gods etc. of polytheism. In addition, a saint is known for religious accomplishments, and while Thai kings must be good Buddhists, they are deified because of political and/or military-political accomplishments not religious ones, and while some scholars use saint to describe religiously accomplished people in general, thus a Hindu rishi or Buddhist *arahant* are ‘saints’, for this to be possible the reverse must also then be true; yet, no scholar (or Christian) would call Saint Mary or Saint Christopher, Rishi Mary or Arahant Christopher – the concepts are fundamentally different. To reiterate, there is a fundamental difference of kind between God and angels, in polytheism and Buddhist cosmology there are differences of degree and not kind; thus angels and *thēp*, *thēwā*, *thēwadā* cannot be synonymous as there is no God in Thai religion. Just as it is not possible to call the angels Michael and Gabriel gods, it is not possible to call Zeus and Poseidon angels – this is an abuse of concepts and categories – for the same reasons it is not possible to call Kings Chulalongkorn and Naresuan angels; thus, using ‘saint’ and ‘angel’ is a gross misuse of concepts for describing Thai religion whether for translation, categorization, or conceptualization. King Chulalongkorn, King Naresuan and King Thaksin are neither saints nor angels, they are straightforwardly *gods*. More commonly the word ‘spirit’ appears for translation and categorization of *thēp*, *thēwā*, or *thēwadā* in many scholarly works in English. Examples include, Stengs title of a sub-section in her book which states “A pantheon of spirits” (2009: 148). Peter Jackson has a monograph titled “Royal spirits, Chinese gods and Magic monks” (1999b) and he uses “divine being” for *thēp* (1999b: 266). Kitiarsa in his book “Mediums, Monks, and Amulets” calls deceased royals both deities and spirits (see Kitiarsa, 2012). An example of imprecise and inconsistent terminology for academic work comes in Kitiarsa classification of supernatural beings in Thai religion – the titles of four sections on supernatural beings are (1) “Indian gods and goddesses”, (2) “Chinese deities”, (3) “Royal spirits”, and (4) “Local guardians and other tutelary spirits” (2012: 26, 27, 28, 29 respectively). Within the “Royal spirits” section he also calls the deceased Thai kings “deities” (2012: 29). The descriptions of the phenomena in all these sections is quite sound, but what distinguishes these gods, goddesses, deities, spirits and local spirits to justify this terminology? What exactly warrants the use of each term? In my estimation the use of such terminology and the concepts they express both misrepresent and diminish Thai religion.

### Conclusions

The building of monuments to King Naresuan and his victory in elephant duel was never simply about historical commemorations or political ideology, it was a true expression of Thai

Polytheist belief and practice. Within Thai polytheist culture kingship is a semi-divine state. No surprise then that King Naresuan and his victory in elephant duel have become not only the stuff of legends, but also the stuff of religious devotion. Whether printing commemorative stamps and banknotes, making medallions or building state sponsored monuments, Thai religious belief and practice were prominent and integral parts of the each process. Private citizens whether individually, with family and friends, or in organized tours make visits to the elephant duel monuments, certainly for historical remembrance, but mainly to worship and ask for blessings.

The worship of King Naresuan and his victory in elephant duel conforms to the general descriptions in scholarly works on Thai religion. In that sense, this article reinforces much of the work done on Thai religion in its descriptive form. However, in terms of analytical method and theory I find the categorization, terminology, and analysis off the mark. The classic tripartite categorizations fails. The scholarship produced over the last several decades produced excellent description and some valuable insights; however, it provides neither an accurate understanding of the emic experience nor an accurate etic explanation of the phenomenon. The conceptualization of Thai religion, and the researcher argues the same for all Theravada Southeast Asia, must begin within the framework of polytheism which provides a more exact conceptualization of Thai religion from which analysis can begin.

## **Suggestions**

### **General Suggestions**

Thai religion although seemingly similar has many variations and I recommend that documentation of Thai religion increase with an emphasis on the specific beliefs and practices of the worship of Thai Kings.

### **Suggestions for further studies**

Re-categorizing Thai religion from animism to polytheism questions the standard scholarly tripartite division of Thai religion into Buddhism-Brahmanism-animism. Though this tripartite division is seemingly standardized, future studies are needed to investigate its descriptive accuracy and analytical usefulness in order determine whether another categorization, I suggest polytheism which dissolves the standard tripartite division, better represents Thai emic religious understanding as well as providing a better scholarly theory on religion in general.

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