

# On the Coronation<sup>1</sup>

Prince Dhani Nivat

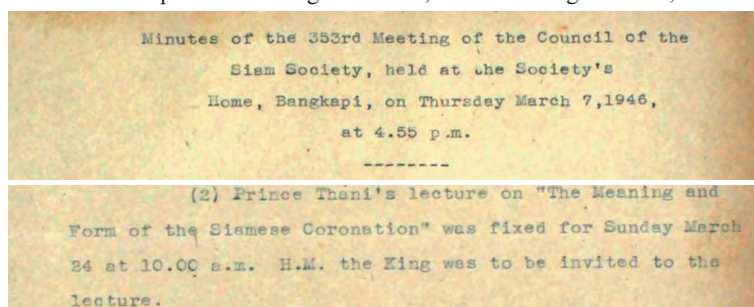
ABSTRACT—In 1946 Prince Dhani Nivat gave a lecture at the Siam Society with a short, authoritative account of the coronation ceremony and its history.

According to old Thai principles, when the king passed away, there was a meeting to choose a new king, but at first he was only the Regent until a coronation was held. Until then, the regalia were reduced; for example, the white umbrella had only seven rather than nine tiers; his orders were not considered royal commands; and so on. Hence, the ceremony usually had to be held quickly. Nowadays this is not strictly upheld.

History shows that, in the Wat Si Chum inscription of Phraya Lithai of Sukhothai, Pha Mueang anointed his ally, Bang Klang Thao, to be the ruler of Sukhothai.<sup>2</sup> I believe

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<sup>1</sup> On 24 March 1946, Prince Dhani Nivat delivered a lecture at the Siam Society on “The Meaning and Form of the Siamese Coronation” in the presence of King Rama VIII, the future King Rama IX, and the Princess Mother.



The lecture had two parts: the first on the theory of the Siamese monarchy; and the second on the coronation ceremony. Prince Dhani promptly translated the lecture into Thai, published in a cremation volume and in the Thai edition of *JSS* in December 1946 as “เครื่องบรมราชาภิเษก” *Rueang borommarachaphisek* [On the coronation]. He then published an expanded version of the first part in English in *JSS* in 1947 as “The Old Siamese Conception of the Monarchy”, but dropped the second part on grounds that “the Coronation Ceremony has been given sufficient publicity” (p. 92). This article is a translation of this omitted second part. It is not Prince Dhani’s original text, which is lost. It has been translated from English to Thai by its author, who “cut some and added some” to suit the different audience (p. 1), and then from Thai to English by Chris Baker. Earlier in 1925, Prince Dhani had been commissioned by King Rama VII to prepare an English-language description of his coronation to brief the foreigners attending (see *References* below). Prince Dhani drew on that document for this shorter version, and so has this translation. The spoken passages from the ceremony are Prince Dhani’s 1925 translations. All the footnotes here are editorial additions. Several small errors in the original, probably incurred in the transcription of handwriting, are not flagged in the notes. The names of regalia items are taken from *The Royal Coronation Ceremony* published by the Ministry of Culture in March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya and his contemporaries: epigraphic and historical studies, no 10,” *JSS* 60, 1 (1972), p. 111.

that this custom of anointment may have come from the Khmer or the Mon, as the ancient Khmer, who adhered to Brahmanism, certainly practised royal anointment. There is evidence that water from a spring on the Lingaparvata [Mount Linga], beside Wat Phu below Champasak, was used for the anointment, according to an inscription of BE 1132 [CE 589].<sup>3</sup> The Thai royal chronicles have no description of a coronation ceremony until 1732 when King Borommakot ascended the throne, and a shortened ceremony was held because there was a contest with his nephews over the succession. Authorities are unclear on whether or not the King of Thonburi held a coronation, but Prince Damrong Rajanubhab came across a document in the south, citing a royal command of his, and surmised that he would not have issued a royal command unless he had undergone a coronation. What is known for sure is that when King Yot Fa [Rama I] ascended the throne, he first underwent a shortened ceremony, and then was engaged in war with Burma (Myanmar). When that problem had passed, he established a committee, headed by Phraya Phetphichai, an official from the time of Ayutthaya, to study the procedure in detail. When the construction of the capital on the east bank of the Chao Phraya River was complete, another full coronation ceremony was held in 1785. It is understood that the form of the Brahman ceremony was fixed at this point by reference to older practice. The exception is the Pali, which was revised by King Mongkut [Rama IV]. The Brahman ceremony mentioned here means the ceremony called Opening the Portals of Kailasa, inviting Siva to come down from Mount Kailasa. It is in a language that nobody has clearly understood for a long time. King Rama VI had it examined by the Brahman Ariya, who had a degree in Pali from India. He said it was in a language used in Tantric texts, probably meaning the Taittiriya Aranyaka and Taittiriya Brahmana. But when Ariya passed away and the government acquired the Brahman Sastri in his place at the Capital Library, he contended it was ancient Tamil.

We tend to understand, following Western custom, that the important part of the coronation is the crowning, but I think in the past the important part was the ritual of anointment,<sup>4</sup> since the title of the ceremony still refers to this.

The full coronation of King Rama I in 1785 became the model from then on, with certain changes. The major changes were those authored by the King in the Fourth Reign, under which the Brahmans and Royal Pandits addressed the King in Pali, then translated into Thai, and the King responded in both languages. In this lecture, I do not have time to detail the changes, so allow me to cut to the coronation of King Rama VII as an example, while explaining what is new and what is old as I go along.

<sup>3</sup> Prince Dhani is probably referring to inscription K.365 from Wat Luang Kau near Wat Phu that mentions a royal anointment of King Devānīka at the foot of the Lingaparvata (G. Cœdès, “Nouvelles données sur les origines du royaume khmèr: la stèle de Vāt Luong Kāu près de Vāt P’hu.” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 48-1, 1956, 209-220, especially 218 n.4 where Cœdès draws a parallel with the Siamese coronation). However, this inscription has no date. BE 1132/CE 589 is a year that historians impute to the beginning of an account in the Chinese *Book of Sui* that also mentions the Lingaparvata. Perhaps Dhani confused the two references. Thanks to Nicolas Revire.

<sup>4</sup> ๑๓๒๓, *aphisek*.

Before the start of the coronation in Bangkok, there is consecration of sacred water at important shrines in all seventeen provincial circles, with the addition of Wat Phra Mahathat at Sawankhalok in Phitsanulok Circle to make eighteen. Meanwhile at Bangkok, there are ceremonies for inscribing the Royal Golden Plaque with the King's horoscope and engraving the Royal Seal of State.<sup>5</sup> At the prescribed time, there is a ceremony of setting out the water and the sacred thread<sup>6</sup> for one day, and chanting and feeding of the monks for three days, which is not greatly different from the normal custom of feeding the monks, except for invocations of the gods<sup>7</sup> held on the evening of all three days.

On the morning of the fourth day, the king under goes the Ablution Ceremony and the Anointment Ceremony.<sup>8</sup> He is then dressed in full regal robes and seated on the Octagonal Throne under the seven-tiered white umbrella. Royal Pandits and Brahmans, seated in the eight directions, offer consecrated water and blessings for victory. After circulating through all eight directions back to the east, the head of the Royal Pandits seated on the east side gives another summary. The king then proceeds to a throne on another side called the Bhadrapiṭha [Phatharabit] Throne Hall where the High Priest of Siva [Phra Maharatchakhru]—for King Rama VII this was Vamadep [Muni], who held the rank of only Phra Ratchakhru—chants the prayer for “Opening the Portals of Kailasa.” At the end of the Brahman ceremony, he addresses His Majesty first in Pali then translated into Thai:

May it please Your Majesty to grant me leave to address Your Majesty! Since Your Majesty has received full anointment and become the King of Siam, we therefore beg in unanimity to present to Your Majesty Your full style and title as engraved upon this tablet of gold as also to hand to Your Majesty these regalia befitting Your high dignity. May Your Majesty be known by that style and accept these regalia. Having done so, may Your Majesty take upon Yourself the business of government, and, for the good and happiness of the populace, reign on in righteousness!

His Majesty replies, “Be it so, Brahman.”

At this point, the High Priest of Siva presents the Golden Plaque, triple-string Brahman Girdle, items of regalia, and the Eight Weapons of Sovereignty.

According to the manuals, there are five items of regalia:

1. The Great Crown of Victory, which His Majesty takes and places on his own head. Nowadays, this is the supreme moment of the coronation. The Brahmans blow conches, musicians play music, and troops fire guns in honour, while monks beat gongs and chant prayers of blessing throughout the realm.

<sup>5</sup> ดวงพระชาตาและพระราชลัญจกรแผ่นดิน, *duang phra chata lae phrarachalanjakon*, the royal horoscope and the royal seal.

<sup>6</sup> ตั้งน้ําวงด้าย, *tang nam wong dai*, preparing the rooms and equipment for the ceremonies, and binding the areas with sacred thread.

<sup>7</sup> ประภาศเทวดา, *prakat thewada*.

<sup>8</sup> มูรธาภิเษก, *murathaphisek*.

2. The Sword of Victory, said to be the sword of King Pathumsuriwong [Suriyavarman II] of ancient Cambodia. It was a ritual sword of the Khmer.
3. The Yak-tail Flywhisk, an item of regalia considered an emblem of excellence of kings from ancient India.
4. The Sceptre and the White Elephant-tail Flywhisk, which are included among the five regalia items, but probably did not appear in old texts and were added later.
5. The Royal Slippers, an important regalia item according to ancient Indian practice. According to the Dasaratha Jātaka, an ancient origin of the King Rama story, when Prince Bharata went to the forest to beg Rama to return to rule the realm, Rama refused until Bharata invited the slippers to appear on his throne in the city of Ayodhya.<sup>9</sup>

Numbers 1, 2, 3, 5 and the White Umbrella are believed to be the five regalia items according to the Lanka texts (see *Mahavamsa*, the chronicle of Lanka, vol. 1, p. 278).

There are Royal Utensils, which are carried by pages wherever His Majesty goes; these include the Personal Sword;<sup>10</sup> the Deity's Arm Sceptre;<sup>11</sup> the Star-edged Lotus Spitoon; Royal Betelnut Set; Water Urn; and Libation Vessel.

The Eight Weapons of Sovereignty include some weapons of the gods (trident, discus, bow), and some with a historical background, such as the Gun of the Satong, meaning the gun that King Naresuan fired across the Satong [Sittang] River to kill the Burmese army commander.<sup>12</sup>

The High Priest of Vishnu [Phra Sitthichaibodi] then speaks words in presentation of the White Umbrella of State. Other Brahmans then intone prayers in praise of Siva and Vishnu in the ancient language, and also in Pali and in Thai, to which His Majesty replies:

Brahmans, now that I have assumed the full responsibility of government, I shall reign in righteousness for the good weal of the populace. I extend my royal authority over you and your goods and your chattels, and as your sovereign do hereby provide for your righteous protection, defence and keeping. Trust me and live at ease.

The High Priest of Siva responds: "I do receive the first command of Your Majesty."

This is the second supreme moment, as this is His Majesty's first Royal Command.<sup>13</sup> He pours water from the Libation Vessel and swears an oath that he will rule justly, and there is another burst of music. When the music ends, he scatters gold and silver *phikun*

<sup>9</sup> In the story (No. 461), Rama sends back the slippers to be placed on the throne and rule in his stead until his return three years later. See E.B. Cowell, *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907, vol. 4, pp. 78-82.

<sup>10</sup> พระแสงพิภททองเกลี้ยง, *phrasaeng phak thong kliang*, sword with smooth gold sheath.

<sup>11</sup> ทาน (ธาร) พระกรเทวารูป, *than phrakon thewarup*.

<sup>12</sup> In 1584. See Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *A Biography of King Naresuan the Great*, translated and edited by Kennon Breazeale, Bangkok: Toyota Thailand Foundation, 2008, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> ราชโองการ, *racha-ongkan*.

flowers<sup>14</sup> to the Brahmans. He removes certain regalia items, such as the Great Crown of Victory, and proceeds from the Maha Samokhom<sup>15</sup> to the Chakrapat Biman Royal Residence. There he receives blessings from the Supreme Patriarch and the assembly of the monkhood, who were also present during the prior three days. That is the end of the morning's ceremonies.

At midday, His Majesty dons the Crown of Victory and proceeds to the Amarindra Vinijaya [Amarin Winitchai] Throne Hall to receive blessings from the royal family, chief officials, and royal attendees. He expresses his thanks and enjoins the officials to continue in their positions.

In the past, this ceremony was not only about blessings. The heads of the six main divisions of government, namely Kalahom, Samuha Nayok, and the ministers of city, palace, treasury and lands, known as the four pillars, each presented His Majesty with the royal properties under their responsibility; for example, (in the Second Reign) the Kalahom presented the royal chariots, royal barges, weapons, and the cities under Mahatthai; the Minister of Finance presented the royal taxes and the royal properties in all the twelve treasuries; and so on. When all had been presented, His Majesty gave permission for the officials to remain in their posts and continue holding responsibility for their royal properties.

After this, His Majesty proceeds to the Baisal Daksin [Phaisan Thaksin] Throne Hall, where the inner palace offer blessings in the same way as the officials have just done. In olden times, it was the duty of Thao Worajan to present twelve lady attendants to the King, but this tradition lapsed in the Sixth Reign, and in the Seventh Reign his Majesty established his consort as queen at this point.

In the afternoon, His Majesty goes in procession to present himself as the prime protector of the religion before the monkhood in the ordination hall of Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram [the Temple of the Emerald Buddha]. He then pays homage to all the royal ancestors.

In the evening, His Majesty proceeds to the Assumption of the Royal Residence in the Chakrapat Biman Royal Residence in a ceremony that some Thais practise for housewarming. His Majesty is seated on the royal bed, receives a golden key, golden blossom of the betel palm, staff, vegetables, grinding stone, and a cat.<sup>16</sup> Royals and high officials of the inner palace offer blessings, and the king reclines on the royal bed for an auspicious length of time.

The true ceremony of coronation ends at this point (except as I explain below). But there are other rites for auspiciousness and public display in the days following. For example, royals and senior officials offer flowers, incense, and candles in homage to

<sup>14</sup> พื้กุล, *phikun*, *Mimusops elengi*, a tree whose small white flowers have a lasting fragrance. The tree is often found in *wat*. The name derives from Bakula, a disciple of the Buddha.

<sup>15</sup> Meaning the buildings at the centre of the palace complex, and more specifically the Phaisan Thaksin Throne Hall.

<sup>16</sup> In the longer 1925 text (p. 4), Prince Dhani explained: "The articles of domestic use as prescribed by local custom for a housewarming are: the cat (signifying Domesticity), the grinding stone (Firmness), the gherkin (Cool, therefore Happiness), and grains, peas and sesamum (Prosperity and Fertility)." The golden key signifies "that the King is now entrusted with the royal residences and the private treasury therein" (p. 14).

His Majesty in his status as king; His Majesty invites seniors in the monkhood to come to give sermons about the dhamma and the responsibility of an anointed king; various groups attend to offer blessings for victory. The finale of the coronation, which remains to be described, is the circulation of the city, a custom that came from ancient India and appears in various Pali texts such as Jātaka stories. This tradition was practised in India, as appears in the Agni Purana, for instance. In the past, the king made a clockwise circulation of the city to show himself to all the people. King Rama IV modified this into visiting and worshipping at important temples over one or two days.

When the President of the Society invited me to give a lecture on the coronation, I was initially not keen because I thought nobody would be interested enough to sit and listen. When the President asked again, I thought again, saw some good in it, and agreed to speak. I cannot explain what good I saw in it as well as the words written by Dr Malinowski in the book, *Science, Religion and Reality*, so I will explain my reasons with the words of the Doctor as follows:<sup>17</sup>

A society which makes its traditions sacred has gained by it inestimable advantage of power and permanence. Such beliefs and practices, therefore, which put a halo of sanctity round tradition, will have a 'survival value' for the type of civilisation in which they have been evolved.... They were bought at an extravagant price, and are to be maintained at any cost.

### References

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<sup>17</sup> In the English version, Prince Dhani explains that he took the quote from Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, p. 5. The passage appears in an article on primitive society by Bronislaw Malinowski, titled "Science, Religion and Magic", first published in 1925 in a collection of articles titled *Science, Religion and Reality*, edited by Joseph Needham. After "sanctity round tradition," Dhani omitted the phrase "and a supernatural stamp upon it."