

# On the Thai Monarchy

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I would ask for your indulgence and forgiveness if I, an expatriate, misinterpret any aspect of King Rama IX's royal projects and the unique nature of the King's relationship with his subjects. My first introduction to the concept of the Thai monarchy occurred in 1954 at Yale graduate school where I studied the theory of Thai monarchs throughout history: first as the King of Righteousness, the Great Elect; followed by The World Conqueror, World Turning Monarch; then the Devaraja and, finally, the present approved concept of the King as a Dhammaraja, ruled by the Dharma and possessing the Ten Kingly Virtues. However, no such academic knowledge could have prepared me for the dynamic role King Rama IX was to play during his reign as the moral center and the soul of the Thai nation.

I came to Thailand in late 1955 to undertake a year-long ethnographic research study in a small village in Ubon Ratchathani. A few months later I was able to join thousands of the King's subjects in greeting him as he was making the first up-country visit of his reign, with hundreds more to follow during the succeeding decades. At the grounds of the Ubon provincial center, the King, accompanied by the Queen, talked to his prostrated subjects as he stepped on white cloths placed at his feet. These cloths, imbued with his sacred essence, were later placed on residential alters as objects of devotion. This experience in Ubon gave me the first inkling of the depth of loyalty, devotion and awe in which the Thai public held the King. The 19th century essayist, Walter Bagehot, referred to such "mystic reverence" for a monarch as "imaginative sentiment" which Thais have stretched to new levels in relation to their beloved King Rama IX.

The royal projects have played a significant role in positively impacting the livelihood and well-being of the people of Thailand. Thousands of projects were royally initiated in such diverse fields as health, environmental protection, access to water, flood control, irrigation, alternative cropping and efficient use of forest areas. Although I have not had the opportunity to observe these projects in the field, I have read and edited hundreds of pages describing them in detail. It is clear that His Majesty studied and undertook research as how to overcome the difficulties facing his subjects prior to initiating these royal projects. He then monitored and evaluated the projects during and after their implementation. Thus, the beneficiaries of these projects were inevitably drawn closer to their King, while always accepting that there was space between the sublime and celestial presence of the King and the mundane world. Those positively helped by these projects came to believe that their relationship with their King was a

crucial element in defining their personal identity as a Thai and in enhancing their self-worth and self-confidence.

This connection and the sense of personal identity relating to King Rama IX's role are often misunderstood by foreigners. This is perhaps not surprising, as those outside of Thailand have little frame of reference given their often quite different and often antithetical history, culture, core values and appropriate behavior and practices. It is difficult to explain to outsiders in any meaningful way such Thai concepts as karma, the Dharma, merit, charisma, Devaraja and the bonding relationship of the King and his subjects while nevertheless preserving a reserved distance between them. I have endeavored, over the past six decades, to try and bridge the chasm of misunderstanding in regard to these elements and, in so doing, increase understanding and decrease the often negative judgmental reactions of those beyond Thai shores.

As to His Majesty's side of the relationship with his subjects, it is the Thai belief that the King, on assuming the throne, does so due to a surfeit of karma amassed during past lives. Such good karma is the result of manifold good deeds beneficially undertaken with compassion. Similarly, a certain level of *barami*, or charisma, of reserved power, would inevitably be his. However, dharma and *barami* in Thai terms are not static but rather are dynamic. Thus, King Rama IX, by his meritorious deeds, as evidenced in his myriad royal projects, measurably enhanced his positive karma. At the same time, his charisma was dramatically heightened over time by his moral probity and his adhering to the Ten Kingly virtues as he graciously undertook his royal projects with integrity, fairness, honesty, benevolence, compassion and perseverance. It was his ever-increasing boundless charisma that enabled King Rama IX to gain the cooperation, support and acceptance of his royal project initiatives on the part of both the bureaucracy and the affected public. At the same time, his counsel, advice and critiques on issues affecting the well-being of the Thai body politic were accepted and acted upon.

As for the King's subjects, I would suggest there has been a constant effort over time—sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously—to draw closer and identify with the King and, thus, feel under his protection. The strategies to do this have been manifold. One could, for example, do so by observing and participating from afar in reverential awe as arcane ceremonies and rituals were performed in all their majesty and mystery. One could also wear certain colors identified with the King to pay homage to him on his birthday, when he was ill and on his recovery. One could also pay tribute to and honor the King by dedicating lectures, concerts, performances, book publications and sports events in his name. All of these efforts on the part of his subjects drew individual Thai citizens into the King's orbit, closer to the luminance of his nimbus, his halo. Thus, one would come under the protection of the King and under the welcomed shade of his nine-tiered umbrella. This sense of identification, even from afar, helps explain the father-child identity relationship of the King and his subjects. This connection is reified in Father's Day being celebrated on the King's birthday.

The above explanation of the abiding loyalty and reverence of the Thai people and their inexorable twinning effort—however partial, however limited—may help explain the wearing of black for one year and the intensity of their mourning, as the King who,

in Thai terminology, ascended into heaven on his passing. I would suggest that, in both life and death, many of the King's subjects in their cultural subconscious viewed him as a Devaraja descended from the gods in heaven. Thus, although King Rama IX is no longer in this mundane world, he lives on in the hearts and minds of his subjects. He remains an integral part of each individual Thai identity and of the Thai national identity. It may be expected that more than a few Thais will develop future strategies to assure that they will continue to remain under King Rama IX's protection and beneficence.