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Dual Anthems: The Evolving Roles of the National and Royal Anthems in Modern Thailand

1. Introduction

Siam BTS station, the busiest station in Bangkok's elevated rail network, is bustling with people from all around the city – office workers rushing to get home, students rushing from one tutoring session to another. Viewed from above, the people look like ants, their movements forming a chaotic yet seamless flow. Suddenly, that flow comes to a halt. The sound of the Thai national anthem echoes through the station. The vast majority of the people immediately freeze while the remaining few continue a few more steps, look around with confusion, then stop. As the anthem plays in the background, some wait patiently while others have their eyes locked on the clock hanging from the ceiling ticking towards 6:01pm.

In a typical cinema throughout Thailand, it is possible to witness a somewhat similar scene. Right before the start of the movie, a screen appears stating 'Please rise to pay respects to HIS MAJESTY THE KING, the heart and inspiration for all Thai People'. The audience members collectively place their popcorn and drinks to the side and rise. This time, it is for the royal anthem rather than the national anthem. Footage of the king travelling to remote parts of the country to help with rural development accompany the anthem. Some eyes begin to tear up while others simply look forward emptily as the anthem continues.

The national and royal anthems are regularly played throughout Thailand. While there are other countries that have both a national anthem and a royal or presidential anthem, this paper focuses on the Thai case, focusing specifically on how the shifting roles of the anthems over the past 90 years mirror the shifting prominence of the institutions they represent. Ironically, the history detailed in this paper shows that although the national anthem was intended to promote nationalism, it appears that the royal anthem has superseded the national anthem at promoting a nationalist sentiment in present day Thailand.

A comparison of the major lyrics and musical qualities of the two anthems shows that the national anthem appears to clearly express more overt nationalism than the royal anthem. This is not unexpected, and is supported by the history of the national anthem's origin, which suggests that it is a product of the constructivist approach to nationalism (from the 1932 Siamese Revolution to the Phibun era). All of the evidence indicates that it was expressly intended as a symbol to promote nationalism. However, under Sarit's premiership in 1959, nationalism in the country underwent a dramatic shift, adopting what might be called a "primordial approach" that centered around the monarchy. As a result, the monarchy and the royal anthem became increasingly central in the symbolism used to promote nationalism. This trend continues to the present day and it remains to be seen how it will continue to change under the reign of the new King Vajiralongkorn.

The constructivist and primordial approaches to nationalism referred to in this essay follow the descriptions offered by Thananithichot. Specifically, constructivist nationalism 'is a process that uses language and symbols to create, shape, and reinforce imagination' while primordial nationalism, specifically the more symbolic approach utilized here, 'holds

that ethnic groups and nations are formed based on attachments to the “cultural givens” of social existence’.¹

2. Comparing the Anthems

As the English names of the two anthems suggest, the national anthem is intended to celebrate the nation while the royal anthem celebrates the monarchy. In Thai, the national anthem is simply called *Pleng Chat* which literally translates to “Nation Song”. This name provides a clear connection between the national anthem and the concept of nation. In all three iterations of the national anthem’s lyrics (1932, 1934, and 1939), the country’s sovereignty and the citizens’ shared ancestry are highlighted. These are both messages that are common in constructing nationalism.²

On the other hand, in Thai, the royal anthem is called *Sansoen Phra Barami* which literally translates to “Glorify His Prestige”. This is an apt name given that the main theme of the lyrics is praising of the monarch while the nation is only mentioned briefly. This meant that although it was not used to promote nationalism under the constructivist approach, but became vital under the primordial approach that began in the late 1950s.

¹ Thananithichot, S. (2011). "Understanding Thai Nationalism and Ethnic Identity." Journal of Asian and African Studies **46**(3): 250-263., 252 - 254

² Cerulo, K. A. (1993). "Symbols and the World System: National Anthems and Flags." Sociological Forum **8**(2): 243-271., 244

In addition to the lyrics of the songs, an aspect not captured in the translations is the register of the vocabulary used. The national anthem is sung in a vernacular register, *pasa saman*, whereas the royal anthem is sung in the royal register, *rachasap*, a register based on Pali, Sanskrit, and Khmer used to communicate with members of the royal family or describe their activities. One could see a parallel with Anderson's argument in *Imagined Communities* regarding the role of language in creating nationalism. Anderson argues that one of the main drivers of nationalism is the shift of written texts from a privileged script, namely Latin in many European countries, to a common vernacular script.³ This is due to the ability for the majority of citizens to understand the vernacular text, allowing ideas to be shared across the nation. Applying this argument to the registers of the two anthems, it is reasonable to say that the vast majority of Thai citizens can understand the words of the national anthem, whereas only a select few know the true meaning of the *rachasap* used in the royal anthem, thus allowing the national anthem to more effectively propagate the shared message of nationalism throughout the nation.

That being said, when one hears the same song every day, the meaning of the words begins to fade away. While it is certainly possible to conduct a survey to support this claim, one could also look to the principle of semantic satiation, a psychological phenomenon

³ Anderson, B. (1991). Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London, Verso., 18

where repetition causes a word or phrase to lose its meaning.⁴ Applying this concept to the regular playing of the anthems, it is possible to see how people can start dissociating lyrics from their meaning. Furthermore, as certain words in the national anthem fade from common use since it was written over 80 years ago (for example *phathai* and *thawi*), the national anthem comes closer to the royal anthem in having sections that average Thai citizens do not understand. Thus, despite the national anthem's nationalistic message and widely approachable vocabulary, it may no longer promote nationalism as much as it once did.

Comparing the musical qualities of the two anthems, the national anthem appears to be more militaristic while the royal anthem is more nostalgic. The national anthem is in the style of a military march which, based on Varma's analysis of what is considered the first national anthem with this style, the French *La Marseillaise*, evokes a martial and revolutionary patriotic fervor.⁵ This is fitting, considering that the national anthem was composed after the revolution and the imagery in the lyrics also reflects this message. This greatly contrasts with the gentler style of the royal anthem. When comparing the harmonies of the two anthems, the most striking difference is that although both anthems have major tonality, the royal anthem features minor chords whereas the national anthem consists only

⁴ Kanungo, R. and W. E. Lambert (1963). "Semantic Satiation and Meaningfulness." The American Journal of Psychology 76(3): 421-428.

⁵ Varma, L. B. and L. B. Verma (1981). "History of La Marseillaise the French National Anthem." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 42: 583-588., 585

of major and dominant seventh chords.⁶ From a music cognition perspective, Lahdelma proposes in a study that minor chords are effective at evoking nostalgia and melancholy, characteristics that play important roles in the primordial approach to nationalism.⁷

Based on the lyrics and registers alone, it is evident that the national anthem promotes nationalism more overtly than the royal anthem does. However, this does not yet take into account the perpetually evolving context in which both anthems exist. As the context evolves, the characteristics explored here eventually cause the roles these two anthems play in Thai society to also evolve.

3. Constructivist Nationalism Post 1932 Revolution

A natural place to begin discussion of modern Thai nationalism is at the 1932 Siamese Revolution that marks a bloodless transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, the system still in place today. While it is tempting to entertain the common notion that the royal anthem served as the national anthem before the revolution, Jeamteerasakul makes a compelling claim that Thais at the time did not see it that way.⁸ As a historian, he claims that there are no Thai documents from that era that support this notion

⁶ Tonal analysis done on the official Thai national and royal anthems

⁷ Lahdelma, I. and T. Eerola (2014). "Single chords convey distinct emotional qualities to both naïve and expert listeners." *Psychology of Music* 44(1): 37-54., 44

⁸ Jeamteerasakul, S. (2004). "ความเป็นมาของเพลงชาติไทยปัจจุบัน (The Development of the Contemporary Thai National Anthem)." *Thammasat Journal* 27(1): 2-102., 5

and that this notion was made either retroactively or through a Western-centric perspective. He further argues that while Siam, as Thailand was then known, existed as a *state*, the concept of *nation state* only entered the public consciousness after the 1932 revolution.

This era of nationalism follows what can be described as a constructivist approach.⁹ Minutes from early cabinet meetings contain discussions of ministers debating the construction of the new nation state and the composition of a national anthem were on the agenda.¹⁰ The melody, which is still in use in the current national anthem, was composed by Phra Chenduriyang, the director of the “Royal Western string orchestra”, at the request of the newly established government. The lyrics did not reach its first official form until after a contest in 1934. As part of his winning entry, Chao Phraya Thammasakmontri, a senior government official, offered five points to justify his choices:

The first is that he ‘only mentions the nation directly and does not mention religion and monarch (since the monarch is already the head of the nation [head of state]) to allow the widespread use of the anthem long into the future.’¹¹ The triad of nation-religion-monarchy, *chat-satsana-phramahakasat*, has been the country’s motto since the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910 – 1925). This marks a significant paradigm shift regarding the triad. Traditionally, one would expect each element to exist as separate institutions on the same

⁹ Ibid. 1

¹⁰ Ibid. 8, 14

¹¹ “กล่าวเฉพาะชาติโดยตรง ไม่กล่าวถึงศาสนา พระมหากษัตริย์ (เพราะพระมหากษัตริย์เป็นประมุขของชาติอยู่แล้ว) ให้ใช้เนื้อได้ทั่วไป เสมอไป ตลอดไปชั่วกาลปาวสาร” Ibid., 37

plane (or even that the institutions of nation and religion are subsumed under the institution of monarchy during absolutism). However, this explanation suggests that, from Thammasakmontri's perspective, the monarchy is now subsumed under the newly formed notion of nation. Thammasakmontri's third point concerns the choice of vocabulary in the vernacular register, *pasa saman*, alluded to earlier. Here, Thammasakmontri explicitly states his goal to allow 'people of all classes and ages to easily understand [the anthem]'.^{12 13} Thus, the intentions of the content and register both align with the ideas of constructivist nationalism described by Anderson¹⁴ and Cerulo¹⁵ where in this newly constructed nation state the nation is the most salient institution, with the monarchy subsumed under it.

The challenge the cabinet faced at that time was how to make the new social order apparent to the public. This was the topic of discussion in the cabinet meeting that resulted in an announcement on February 4, 1935 regarding when, where, and how to play the royal and national anthems.¹⁶ Ultimately, it was determined that an abbreviated royal anthem should only be used in occasions intended to celebrate the king and the national anthem used in all other occasions that require an anthem (such as on the radio). Considering King Prajadhipok's abdication the following month and the fact that his successor, King Ananda

¹² “ทั้งนี้เพื่อคนทุกชั้นทุกวัยจะได้เข้าใจได้ง่าย” Ibid.

¹³ The second, fourth, and fifth points concern setting the tones in the lyrics to match the melody, using mostly correct grammar, and using various literary techniques respectively.

¹⁴ Ibid. 3

¹⁵ Ibid. 2, 244

¹⁶ Ibid. 8, 53

Mahidol, was a ten-year-old boy living in Switzerland who did not visit the country as monarch until 1938, there were rarely occasions that required the royal anthem. As Jeamteerasakul pointed out, 'this was a clear reflection of the relative importance of the nation and monarchy in those times'.¹⁷

Another major push to nationalism was during the premiership of Phibulsongkram (Phibun) from 1938 to 1944. He introduced a series of Cultural Mandates, *Rathniyom*, between 1939 and 1942, the first of which was the renaming of the country from Siam to Thailand.¹⁸ This prompted a change to the lyrics of the national anthem, resulting in Cultural Mandate 6 issued on December 10, 1939 that codified the melody and lyrics of the national anthem to its current form. The melody and main themes remain the same but the anthem was now a quarter of the original length in order to be easily memorable.

Prior to this change, there were discussions in the cabinet to include references to the monarchy in the lyrics of the national anthem so that it can also fulfill the role of the royal anthem, allowing the current royal anthem to be abolished. Cabinet members could not reach a consensus and the proposal was eventually dropped.¹⁹ One could speculate that this was due to a desire to suppress the influence of the monarchy and separate it from the

¹⁷ Ibid., 64

¹⁸ Numnonda, T. (1978). "Pibulsongkram's Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941-1945." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9(2): 234-247., 235

¹⁹ Ibid. 8, 99

constructed nation state. This is based on a parallel with the intentions behind the banning of the former King Prajadhipok's picture from being displayed.²⁰ Interestingly, similar to how the national anthem does not mention the monarchy, the new version of the royal anthem in Cultural Mandate 8 had its middle section that 'peace and security in the nation is the result of royal rule' removed, further amplifying the separation of the two institutions.²¹

Another major change during the Phibun era was the codification of rituals around both anthems. The broad guidelines offered by previous governments were transformed into prescriptive mandates: the national anthem is to be played at 8am and 6pm every day on public radio and television channels, at government buildings, and 8am every morning at state schools during a flag raising ceremony that all students attend; the royal anthem is to be played at the end of public radio and television broadcasts, before many entertainment events such as before movies and sports games, and for the arrival and departure of senior members of the royal family at events.²² The national anthem appears to have channels with a much wider scope. The audience that listen to the radio or watch the television at 8am and 6pm is much larger than the audience late at night at the end of broadcasts. Similarly, with venues, state schools are attended regularly by students from diverse economic backgrounds whereas entertainment venues are typically visited on a less regular basis and

²⁰ Ibid. 18, 244

²¹ “เขียนศิระเพราะพระบริบาล ผลพระคุณ ฐ รักษา ปวงประชาเป็นสุขศานต์” Ibid. 8, 100

²² Ibid. 8, 71

by citizens of higher economic status. Up until the end of the Phibun era, the national anthem was much more prominent than the royal anthem and as a result, played a larger role in promoting nationalism.

4. Primordial Nationalism and Resurgence of the Monarchy

The next major turning point was during the government led by Sarit Thanarat from 1959 to 1963 that saw the resurgence of the monarchy after its dormancy and relative lack of influence after 1932. In *Sacred Nationalism: The Thai Monarchy and Primordial Nation Construction*, Fong argues that Sarit's ascension to power marked a new era in Thai nationalism that saw a shift towards primordialism centered around the antiquity of the monarchy.²³ In fact, this was articulated in Sarit's letter to the king following a coup he staged in 1958 that the institution of the monarchy 'represents the nation as a whole'.²⁴ With that belief, royal rituals such as the Royal Ploughing Ceremony, *Phra Ratcha Phiti Charot Phra Nangkan Raek Na Khwan*, were revived under Sarit's premiership. Furthermore, he also 'intensified the enforcement of *lèse-majesté* laws' as well as promulgated the king's birthday as a national holiday. Through this, Fong argues that Sarit has crafted Bhumibol as a 'sacred

²³ Fong, J. (2009). "Sacred Nationalism: The Thai Monarchy and Primordial Nation Construction." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39(4): 673-696., 679

²⁴ Chaloeontiarana, T. (2007). *Thailand: the Politics of Despotic Paternalism*. Ithaca, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications., 97

nationalist', an ideal figure for Thais to collectively admire and strive to follow as role model.²⁵

Unlike other forms of nationalism, the primordial approach relies on the evocation of nostalgia.²⁶ While this was primarily achieved by reviving and curating the ancient rituals of a glorious shared past, the royal anthem itself also evokes nostalgia. Not only does the royal anthem contain intrinsic musical qualities that have been shown to evoke nostalgia alluded to in section two, but the anthem itself is also an old ritual of a bygone era. Accounts from Luang Wichitwathakan, a major architect of the Thai national identity during the Phibun era, suggest that Thais feel a sense of comfort in hearing the royal anthem every evening at the end of radio broadcasts.²⁷

Apart from the return of the royal anthem to its full form, the mandated rituals surrounding it remained unchanged since the Cultural Mandates under Phibun. Nevertheless, increased royal activity encouraged by Sarit meant increased exposure of the monarchy and hence, royal anthem. Furthermore, at some schools, students also sang the royal anthem in addition to the national anthem at the flag ceremony every morning. While this was not mandated by the government in the same way the Cultural Mandates were, it suggests the growth of the royal hegemony.

²⁵ Ibid. 22, 676

²⁶ Ibid. 1, 251

²⁷ Wichitwathakan, L. (1932). การเมืองการปกครองของกรุงสยาม (The Politics and Administration of Siam). Bangkok, Captain Bush.

With this primordial approach to nationalism, the role of the monarchy moved out of the shadows of irrelevance to its new place as a unifier of Thai citizens. As a representation of the monarchy, the royal anthem has also moved into its new role as a primordial symbol that members of this imagined community can collectively unite around.

5. The Anthems in the Present Day

Looking at the present day, the role of the national anthem remains largely unchanged since the end of the Phibun era – students continue to sing the national anthem every morning at 8am while mass media continue to broadcast the anthem to every corner of the country at 8am and 6pm daily. On the other hand, the presence and role of the royal anthem have evolved alongside that of the monarchy. The king has evolved to become a personification of the nation, reflected in the commonly heard saying that the king is ‘the center where all Thai hearts accumulate’²⁸, and the royal anthem continues to serve as a symbol for the monarchy and the king. Thus, it is possible to argue that by transitivity, the royal anthem can also represent the nation.

Following the death of King Bhumibol in October 2016, Thailand went into a year-long period of mourning. A particularly striking tribute to pay respects was when over 200,000 people gathered on *Sanam Luang*, an open field next to the Grand Palace where the body of

²⁸ “ศูนย์รวมดวงใจของพสกนิกรไทยทั้งแผ่นดิน.”

King Bhumibol laid in state, to sing the royal anthem together.²⁹ It is fair to say that a scene like this would have been beyond the imagination of somebody from as late as the 1950s. Just like the monarchy, the royal anthem has undoubtedly evolved from an almost irrelevant symbol to a symbol that citizens of the nation are collectively able to rally around.

As Thailand transitions into the reign of King Vajiralongkorn, there are some who believe that Thailand is also transitioning towards 'neoabsolutism'.³⁰ The most telling example of this is the mysterious replacement of the plaque commemorating the 1932 revolution that stated "Here, on 24 June 1932, at dawn, the People's Party instituted the first Constitution of the country, for the betterment of the nation" with a royalist plaque stating "Loyalty and love for the triple gems – everybody's heart must be pure because the King is kind; that is how the nation prospers."³¹ This change sees a powerful, yet hidden, force attempting to further portray the dependence of the nation state on the monarchy. If this trend continues, then it only takes a small leap of imagination to see the same mysterious hands also switch the royal anthem in as the national anthem of the country.

²⁹ Satrusayang, T. and A. S. Lefevre (2016). "Huge Crowd of Mourning Thais Sings Royal Anthem in Honor of Late King." *Reuters*. Retrieved December 12, 2017, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-king-mourners-anthem/huge-crowd-of-mourning-thais-sings-royal-anthem-in-honor-of-late-king-idUSKCN12M03D>.

³⁰ Grant, A. (2017). New King, Deep State: Thailand. *The Diplomat*.

³¹ Lefevre, A. S. (2017). "Removal of Thai Revolution Plaque Raises Democracy Concerns." *Reuters*. Retrieved December 12, 2017, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-plaque/removal-of-thai-revolution-plaque-raises-democracy-concerns-idUSKBN17J0HB>.

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