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Introduction



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Thai friends, knowing of my longstanding interest in Buddhism and offbeat topics, told me in 2007 of an amulet, originally produced in southern Thailand, which had been causing excitement in the markets and the media. Discussions about the object brought wry smiles because of the large sums people were willing to spend on it. Academics were holding forth at public seminars and on television, offering their opinions about the amulet's iconography and debating the significance of its inflated value. The boom–bubble–bust phenomenon sounded like a cargo cult, Thai-style.

Associated with the amulet's origins was a policeman from peninsular Thailand. In his heyday, when many parts of the country were still remote and undeveloped, he was known to have used rather too much lethal force in going about his business. When I first heard about the policeman, I was looking for a change of direction in my work—a research project that would reward me for effort expended to understand its complexities. The southern policeman's story intrigued me, and I wondered where I could begin to find out more about him.

Villa Vilaithong, who was a research student at the time, thought I should read *The Khao Or Masters of the Science of Struggle and Buddhist Incantations: The Shaolin of Phatthalung*, which had just been published and related the history of a cave monastery sunk into a limestone hill that

rises from the plains in Thailand's mid south (Ran 2007). In residence at the monastery over many decades were senior teachers who cultivated the dark arts—what the Thai language calls *saiyasat*: arcane knowledge and practices useful to warriors and fighters of all persuasions, on both sides of the law. For the Thai expeditionary troops sent to fight in Vietnam in the late 1960s, *saiyasat* was defensive magic they considered necessary for their survival (Ruth 2012: 131–3). The Khao Or monastery had been Buddhist for a long time, but its history was replete with Brahmanic teachings and practices outside the ken of normative Buddhist activities. The campy reference in the book's title to the Shaolin monastery in China's Henan Province alluded to monks skilled in martial arts and meditation. Upon visiting the monastery later, I concluded that the idea of warrior monks was more of a marketing gimmick to promote the book than an accurate descriptor of the custodians of secret knowledge.

Deadly force as well as the rituals and knowledge to conjure it, possess it and use it effectively were themes that stood out as I turned the pages of *The Khao Or Masters* about the cave monastery and its monks. The central figure in the story is Butr Phantharak (1898–2006), the policeman from the mid south who retired in 1964 as a major general in the national police force.

At the beginning of his career, Butr Phantharak had submitted himself to rituals in the cave monastery to toughen himself physically and spiritually, and he became a lifelong exponent of the knowledge handed down to him by the monastery's master teachers. The last Thai absolute monarch ennobled him with the rank of *khun* and, by the end of his life, he had become known popularly as Khun Phan.

I decided to find out more about the legendary policeman, banditry in the mid south and magical thinking, so I travelled to Nakhon Si Thammarat, where a former student, Patrick Jory, had been teaching at a local university. Patrick had plenty of local lore to share about the policeman's deadly methods. He also told me about an amulet known as the Jatukham-Ramathep, a fount of auspiciousness that poured forth good fortune and wealth. It had been struck in Nakhon in the 1980s, and the policeman had presided at some of the key ceremonies. The amulet was named after two deities guarding the inner chamber of the Great Relic stupa at Wat Mahathat in Nakhon.

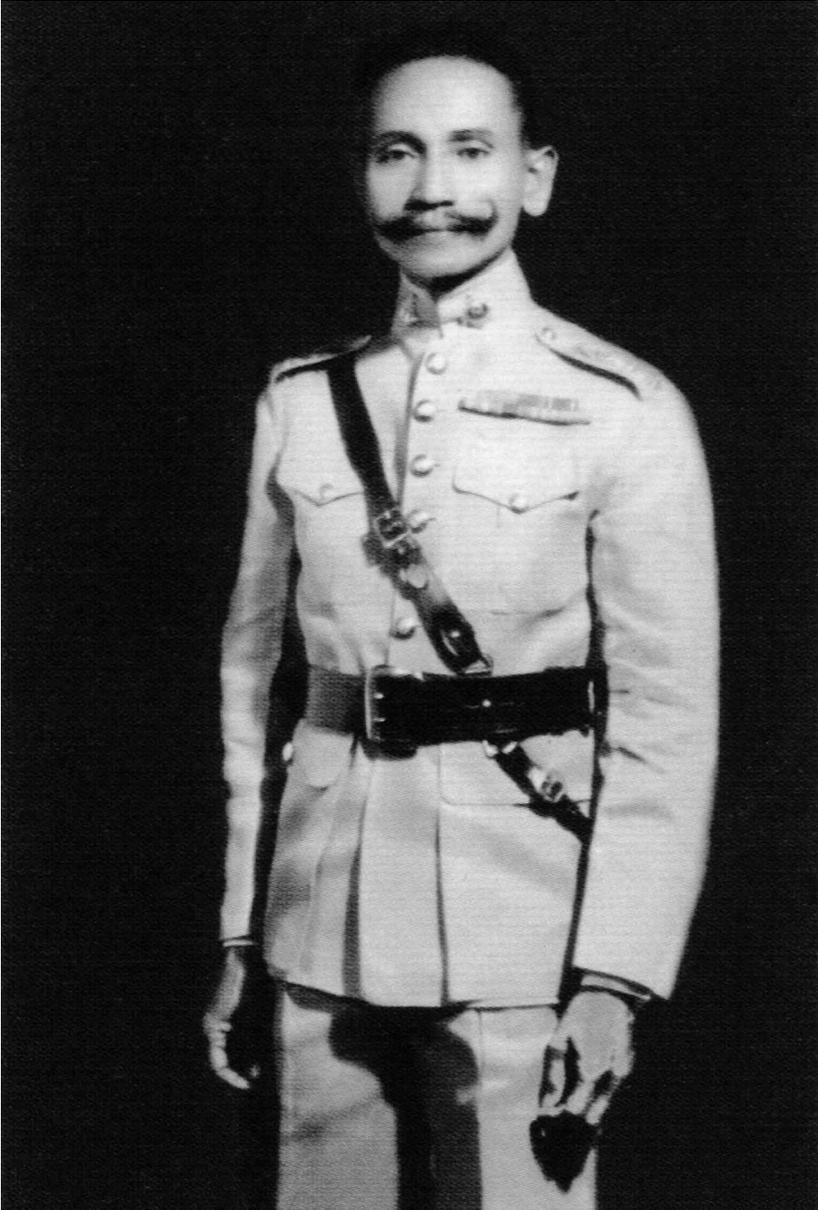


Plate 1 Butr Phantharak as a young constable

Source: Chintapati (2007: 1).

One day I was driven past a museum of the policeman's artefacts that turned out to be the home of one of his relatives. Seeing the householder standing outside enjoying a Thai sweet, I walked up with a friend for an introduction; the householder invited us inside, where I found myself standing next to a small bronze statue of the policeman. I had to ask if it was lifesize, because he was not a very imposing figure. I was to learn later that his modest height and a life-threatening childhood illness played their part as he equipped himself with the grit and guile that made him such a feared law enforcement officer.

By the end of the week, I was interviewing one of the policeman's sons, Nasan, a retired bank manager, and after a trip to the cave monastery in the neighbouring province of Phatthalung, I began to collect materials and acquaint myself with the history of the mid south where I once lived. The prospect of an extended study at first seemed dim. By the time I fell upon the topic, the policeman had already passed away and few of his peers in the police force were still alive. Outlaw adversaries survived him, and several notable ones had been ordained as monks, but I was unable to meet them. I presumed from the outset that the police archives would be closed to an academic researcher, let alone a foreign one, but biographical material was plentiful thanks to the tenacity of the southern-born writer and publisher Samphan Kongsamut, whose biographies of the policeman have gone through several editions. The policeman loved to boast about his exploits and Samphan's interviews with Khun Phan yielded detailed stories about his crime suppression in the provincial police force. Samphan was not the only southerner to write about Khun Phan. Southern writers, teachers and academics also had much to say about the mid south's environmental history, political economy and ancient heritage. My visit to the mid south took place only a year after the policeman's death, and authors were scrambling to publish their accounts of his life and the story of the amulet. Thai books of regional interest have limited print runs; once they sold out, they would disappear from the market. Their availability in the bookstores as I began my research was a bonanza for me.

The way I was coming to understand the policeman's world was haphazard, guided less by research planning than by instinct and the growing conviction that the instantiations of religion and power in the mid south—so central to the policeman's world—held significance beyond the region. The topic became increasingly compelling as I began to see connections between the policeman's life and arcane religious

practices, national and local history and protection of the sovereign body. The elements to create the necessary *frisson* that would sustain my curiosity were coming together, and questions about the policeman and his world gradually coalesced around three lines of inquiry that underlie the discussion in the following chapters. In the most general terms, these are magical thinking and risk, history writing and the mid south and policing and the sovereign body.

Magical thinking and risk

The first line of inquiry that occurred to me after I read the absorbing account in *The Khao Or Masters of the Science of Struggle and Buddhist Incantations* has to do with how Butr Phantharak handled the risks inherent in his line of work and how he coped with fear and uncertainty. His beliefs and practices, which I loosely refer to as the dark arts favoured by warriors and fighters, were aimed at protecting himself from danger. This magical thinking is encoded in applied sciences of prognostication and protection that offer guidance on timing and shape everyday decision-making in Thailand, not only for police, but also for soldiers, criminals, businesspeople, politicians, agriculturalists, university students and householders. The policeman could protect the realm only if he could protect himself; to that end, he became a specialist in this knowledge, which he began to acquire when he was an adolescent. Equipped with this knowledge, he behaved at times like a folk Brahman, a shaman. The applied sciences of prognostication and protection are not unique to the Thai world but exist in variant forms elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Ancestor worship, healing rituals, homage paid by villagers to mountain spirits, astrology and rituals that promise to make the body invulnerable are common in the region's cultural landscapes and date from prehistoric times. Transcultural religions such as Buddhism, Islam and Christianity took root and thrived in these landscapes (Ileto 1999: 194).

Khun Phan was an agent of the emerging nation-state and—with other novice policemen recruited to the force—its armour of coercion as it expanded from the central plains and pushed into principalities and petit kingdoms in the countryside, replacing local lords and chiefs with appointed officials. In the early 1930s, at the beginning of his career, Khun Phan lost no time in visiting the cave monastery in Phatthalung to partake of its special knowledge. More than once in his lifetime he

was renewed with a ritual bath to fortify himself spiritually, mentally and physically. He aimed to attain a degree of invulnerability. He would become 'a man with a tough hide' (*khon tai nang niew*), as the Thai saying goes, impervious to blades and bullets. For him, these beliefs and practices were a resource, a mother lode of potentialities on which he could draw to keep himself safe in life-threatening situations as he went about his duties. In rituals conducted by these same master teachers and their disciples, some of Khun Phan's outlaw adversaries had also been initiated into the dark arts. Warriors need protection and arming themselves with invulnerability techniques is as important as carrying a gun or wielding a knife. Given the lethal measures he employed to apprehend outlaws and criminals, the policeman needed invulnerability to protect his body just as he would rely on his police badge to warrant his actions as an agent of the state. He did not act with impunity (Haberhorn 2018: 4–5). Police procedures and directives made him accountable for his actions and he was disciplined more than once for exceeding his orders. His authority was provisional, subject to community, political and institutional constraints. The search for invulnerability to protect his body and his dedication to protect the sovereign body converged in his character throughout his police career.

Butr Phantharak, who later became Police Major General Khun Phantarakratchadet, was credited with 62 'kills' by gunshot either by his own hand or at the hands of police under his command (Wira 2001: 185–7). Some of the details in the accounts of these events are grisly and not for the faint-hearted. Tattooed on the knuckles of his hand were the consonants of the Thai word for executioner (*phetchanakhat*): if he fired a bullet at an outlaw, death was certain; if he threw a punch and it landed on his opponent, that person would be driven insane.¹ Whether grasping a pistol or fighting bare-fisted, his hands were offensive weapons, and he killed his first adversary by squeezing the life out of the man. Magic was another weapon at his disposal. As his career progressed, he became adept in the knowledge imparted to him at the cave monastery by the master teachers who were wizards by another name. An age-old relationship connected the policeman's willingness to take a human life and his knowledge of magical objects and powers. Marcel Mauss pointed out that, in many societies, executioners use spells and charms to capture thieves and catch demons. Magicians are executioners; executioners are

1 Nasan Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 27 September 2009.

magicians (Mauss 2010: 37). By the same token, their social roles are interchangeable. In Melanesia, the chief of the clan possesses spiritual force (*mana*), and by means of this interchangeability, magicians can exercise political authority. The policeman was known in his hometown and the surrounding districts for his knowledge of the magical arts as much as for his lethal methods in catching criminals.

Policemen and the rural masculine types with whom they associated in the first half of the twentieth century were risk-takers. Encounters between desperate men fighting for their lives could lead to injury and death. The scars on Khun Phan's body were traces of the violent skirmishes in his past when he played with danger in the pursuit of thieves, kidnappers and outlaws. His willingness, even eagerness, to place himself in physical danger hints at something deeper than dedication to his job. Risk has its own charm and carries a valence of desire; the word charm in English derives from the Latin *carmen*, meaning incantation, and indicates attraction (Svendsen 2008: 73). Risk and fear can excite erotic desire.

Policemen—and for that matter the bandits they pursued—can be foolhardy by inviting themselves closer to the action for the thrill of it. They need to hedge against risk, and they do this by anticipating what may lie ahead. By means of ritual and semiotic wizardry, human action can be coordinated with the dynamics of an external order: the movements of the planets, the hidden forces of nature, the metaphysical laws of the universe and the powers latent in the conjunction of time and place. A word associated with the calculation of a propitious time to do something means beat or rhythm (*jangwa*). Time contains rhythmic beats that must be identified and obeyed, and timing is the key to successful human action. Wearing amulets, inserting talismans under the skin, inscribing the body with tattoos, divining, calculating horoscopes and ritual cursing were all methods of warding off adversity and misfortune. The practical sciences of prognostication—divination, numerology, astrology, palmistry, the interpretation of dreams and omens and deciphering signs on the body such as moles—are deployed to face up to risks, uncertainties and unpredictability in life (Reynolds 2015). Time and place need to be auspicious (*mongkhon*)—a keyword in the culture that has an Indic etymology (Pali, *maṅgala*).

Arming oneself for possible injury or death is the physical side of protection. The mental and emotional side involves keeping fear in check with self-belief. The sciences of prognostication offer practical reasons to

be confident about making decisions as well as clues to auspicious places or times to perform a particular action. Magical thinking is an outlook on the world that has long been an interpretative problem for anthropological theory. Reason struggles against unreason in trying to understand other cultures, and one is tempted to present the beliefs and practices of these cultures as superstitious, confused or wrong (Shweder 1984: 29). Richard Shweder's research concerned judgements about personality, but his conclusions suggested ways to understand the magical thinking evident in Khun Phan's career. The policeman drew on a repertory of magical practices that emboldened his self-belief. These magical practices and his mastery of occult knowledge also equipped him with ways to bluff his adversaries. If he could frighten, outwit or deceive an adversary, he need not risk injury or death.

Episodes in his career show that he was as much a performer of magical thinking as he was a believer in it. He once captured a murderer by fooling the man into thinking that the dead could speak. He instructed the family of the deceased to prepare the corpse of their kinsman in a space enclosed by a sacred thread. On the appointed day, Khun Phan arrived in the white attire of a religious practitioner and leaned over the corpse to ask in a whisper for it to identify the murderer, who was watching the ritual from the sidelines in a crowd of curious villagers. 'I know who it is, I know who it is,' shouted Khun Phan, and the terrified murderer ran from the crowd into the arms of the police.²

Beliefs and practices that constitute the empowering body of knowledge of *saiysasat* are found in the religious systems of other Tai peoples, including the Shan, and they are also found in other mainland Buddhist cultures. For many decades, anthropologists working in Myanmar have studied cults of the *weikza*. Sometimes translated as magician, wizard or sorcerer, the term derives from the Pali *vijja* ('possessed of wisdom'). In modern standard Thai, *wicha/vijja* has come to mean a body of knowledge, and it is the word for school curricula or academic disciplines. It is also the word for magical arts. The *weikza* in Myanmar are intermediaries who channel esoteric empowerment. They deal in metal-based alchemy, death-enactment rituals, longevity practices, astrology and the use of dreams and visions (Crosby 2014: xxii). Through their behaviour, meditation skills and expertise in the magical arts, they

2 Bunsong Chamnankit, Interview with the author, 24 September 2009.

aim to live until the next Buddha, the Maitreya, appears in this world. The *weikza* cults are popular with Burmese people, but they dwell on the margins of the Buddhist practices and beliefs sanctioned by institutional authority. It is not that these practices have no foundation in Buddhism. Steven Collins, after asking ‘what kind of Buddhism is that?’, points out that many Pali texts are concerned with alchemy, esoteric drawing (*yantra*), spells (*mantra*) and medicine (Collins 2014: 225). Beyond the saving knowledge of the Buddha’s teachings, all methods available must be deployed to conquer demons and the evil they incarnate and cause.

Religion and magic have been put through the critical wringer by scholars in anthropology and religious studies; the boundary between the two is constantly shifting and subject to challenge. The Burmese characterise the *weikza* phenomenon ‘as being different from and superior to common rationality’ (Rozenberg 2015: 44–8, 63). Invulnerability techniques—in which the Thai policeman became a specialist—might also be characterised as superior to common rationality. The workings of these techniques are deemed effective even if they cannot be divined. The techniques may be effective because they cannot be divined.

The policeman grew up amid a tangle of religions—animism, Brahmanism, Buddhism—found in everyday practice in Thailand that has challenged the hierarchical impulses of Thailand’s ruling elites as well as the analytic skills of anthropologists. When King Chulalongkorn’s administrators, many of them his brothers and sons, travelled to the far reaches of the kingdom to implement administrative reforms in the late nineteenth century, they discovered unfamiliar beliefs and practices they regarded as superstitions. The magical thinking that shocked these Bangkok officials was as empirical and logical as science; it just worked from a different set of assumptions and principles that the modernising elite feared.

History writing and the mid south

Khun Phan was born in a district of Nakhon Si Thammarat, the most populous of the four southern provincial circles (known as *monthon*), which were created by the new administrative system in the late nineteenth century (Porphant 2017: 231). His first postings were in Songkhla and Phatthalung, and he had tours of duty in other provinces on the Malay Peninsula, including provinces in the deep south: Songkhla, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun. He also served in the central plains, the

lower north and in Bangkok, where he had a stint in the Department of Immigration. When he was little more than 30 years of age, he was in one of the last groups of government officials to be ennobled by the absolute monarch. Wherever he was posted, he spoke central Thai language with local people, but his mother tongue was southern Thai, and he felt most at home in the mid south of his birth. After he retired from active duty in the early 1960s with the rank of major general, he became a dignitary called upon to preside at local festivals and rituals. His popularity was exploited by the Democrat Party, which enlisted him in 1969 to run for a seat in parliament. He won the seat, but the army conducted a coup in 1971 and the parliament was abolished. His brief foray into national politics ended when he lost an election after 1973 as a candidate in M.R. Kukrit Pramoj's Social Action Party. In 1987, he was a key figure in the identification and consecration of an amulet struck to raise funds for the renovation of Nakhon's city pillar. After his cremation in early 2007, the value of the amulet inflated wildly until the bubble burst, and hopeful investors in the asset lost their money.

Khun Phan's career in the police force, his working methods and his expertise in martial arts were similar to how soldiers and police elsewhere in the country conduct themselves and augment their authority by drawing on religious beliefs and practices. He was one of many agents of law enforcement and administration who fanned out across the country as the Thai state extended its infrastructure to remote regions. He served no fewer than 12 national police chiefs; during and after World War II, he worked closely with some of them. At first sight, the environmental and geographical distinctiveness of the lakes district on the Malay Peninsula, which lies across ancient trade routes that brought Buddhist and Hindu artefacts, monks and priests to the mid south, would seem to render him a unique figure. Yet his story has broader implications for Thailand's modern history, so the second line of inquiry raises questions about the relationship between the mid south and the royal centres to the north. Was the policeman's story local, regional or national? The challenge was to write about him as both a southerner and a generic figure in Thai police history, who aided and abetted the making of the Thai nation-state.

Khun Phan belonged to an early cohort in the fledgling police force as the Thai state filled in the map mandated by treaties with France and Great Britain in the first decade of the twentieth century. His secondary education at a prestigious monastery school in Bangkok, his attendance at the police academy in Nakhon Pathom and his postings in the capital

and other provinces, where he acquired his reputation for tough policing, familiarised him with beliefs and practices that were morphing into a national culture. Elements of this national culture included traditional martial arts, knowledge of the classic poem *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* and Buddhist and Brahmanic beliefs and ceremonies. Officers and civil servants born and raised in Bangkok might be posted to the provinces, where they served out their tour of duty pining to return to the cosmopolitan capital of their birth. Khun Phan, by contrast, was a provincial man appointed to duties wherever he was needed and who returned to the mid south at every opportunity. His final appointment, until he retired in 1964, was chief of the provincial circle at Nakhon Si Thammarat. These loops into the capital and out, and his postings elsewhere in the country and back to the south, were communicative. He mediated an exchange of cultural and social information between the centre and the south. Butr Phantharak, a local boy born in a tiny remote Nakhon village, made good in a national institution.

In the first millennium, the policeman's Nakhon was a commercial hub connecting Chinese ports with the Indian Subcontinent, Sri Lanka, the Middle East and the Western Orient. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Nakhon Si Thammarat was designated an independent principality in recognition of its hegemony over 12 satellites—smaller centres (*mueang*) that included some Malay centres in the deep south. That number—matching the 12 signs of the zodiac and the Chinese 12-year animal cycle—gave Nakhon's ruling lords a sense of overlordship in a mini-kingdom. Empire would be too grand a term for their ambition. Nakhon had its own chronicle, as did the nearby satellite states of Phatthalung and Songkhla, which occupied an environmental niche around the lagoons and brackish lakes of the mid south. Nakhon's local rulers chafed under the overlordship of Ayutthaya and, later, Bangkok, and rebelled many times against demands for manpower to bring smaller vassals to heel or to defend against Burmese invaders. When the Kingdom of Ayutthaya broke apart after the Burmese invasions in the eighteenth century, an army from Thonburi was needed to crush the rebellion in Nakhon and force it to submit (Davisakd 2008: 75). Not until the government restructure of the late nineteenth century was Nakhon finally subordinated, its local rulers replaced and, over the years, reduced in status as the new provincial framework was gradually implanted.

Thai historical writing has been dominated by preoccupations with royal centres and with Bangkok, the seat of the national government and the royal base of the Chakri dynasty since the late eighteenth century. As the reign of the ninth Chakri lengthened to 70 years (1946–2016), monarchy and heroic kingship crowded out other historical topics, particularly for the twentieth century, as political historians puzzled over the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932 and tried to explain why the event had never yielded constitutional, multiparty democracy free from interference by the monarchy and the army. At critical junctures in the twentieth century, military leadership—always autocratic, often repressive and sometimes supported by the Crown—intervened to stymie the development of a more liberal political system. The unholy alliance of military and monarchy has also affected the study of the country's past by overvaluing royal accomplishment, creating myths about the kings and undervaluing regional histories.

From time to time, the power of the gun has been used to fasten this myth in place by means of the lese-majesty statute that constrains public comment by politicians, academics, public intellectuals and writers. Lese-majesty is a libel law that criminalises speech defamatory of the incumbent monarch and the institution of the monarchy (Streckfuss 2010: 105–6; 2011: 21–5). Over the half-century to 2009, lese-majesty cases grew from a mere handful to 164, 82 of which were adjudicated (Streckfuss 2011: 34). Long ago it became impossible within the country to hold the institution of the monarchy up to serious scrutiny in Thai language. Generations of Thai students have grown up not knowing any criticism of the king (Jory 2011: 555). Even comment about kings from premodern times has raised the charge of defaming 'the supreme institution'. In October 2017, the public intellectual Sulak Sivaraksa was accused of lese-majesty for questioning the accuracy of an elephant duel between King Naresuan and a Burmese ruler in the late sixteenth century. A few months later, prosecutors decided not to pursue the case, and the charges were dropped (Katz 2018).

Outside the country it is a different story. So dominant is the royal national ideology—buttressed by reverential sentiment for King Bhumibol, the ninth Bangkok king, who died in October 2016—that critical history in foreign languages has, since the military coup of September 2006, become narrowly focused on attacking the royal national narrative. What Hong Lysa observed more than a dozen years ago is still the case today: '[E]very self-respecting historical study in the English language, particularly those

on the fifth reign, has since the late 1970s framed itself as a critique of the dominant royalist narrative' (Hong 2007: 189). With the assistance of a large palace establishment and collaborators in public institutions and the private sector, King Bhumibol, the revered and activist monarch who reigned for seven decades, restored the reputation of the monarchy after its nadir in the 1930s, when absolutism ended and the seventh Bangkok king abdicated. The king's deft use of the media and his influence in state institutions and public life lifted the reputation of all monarchs to the point where authoritarian regimes have been able to deploy the lese-majesty statute to sanction public statements about Thai kings past as well as the incumbent. Benedict Anderson's statement that royalism 'persists in a curiously antique form in contemporary Siam' has long been out-of-date. King Bhumibol's reign had another four decades to run from the time Anderson wrote and the monarchy only became stronger and the military more dependent on it (Anderson 2014: 27).

Thongchai Winichakul, in a series of publications, has dissected the royal nationalist ideology that underpins the historiographical myth and proposed that historians themselves have come to believe the myth and accept it as truth with all its distortions and errors (Thongchai 2011: 21–2).³ His 2016 collection of Thai essays, *The Real Face of Royal Nationalism as it Affects Thai History*, promised to expose the truth behind the myth by borrowing from Jit Poumisak's 1957 radical history, *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* (Reynolds 1994; Thongchai 2016). The myth stands on two legs. First, although Siam/Thailand was pressured by the Western imperial powers who imposed extraterritorial treaties that placed Asian subjects under foreign courts, the kingdom was never colonised. In the Paknam incident of 1893, French gunboats moored near the Grand Palace in Bangkok, and Great Britain and France soon moved to secure the borders of their colonies in eastern Burma, northern Malaya and western Cambodia by seizing vassal states that had paid tribute to the Siamese suzerain. As Shane Strate, who studied with Thongchai, has put it, these 'emasculating encounters' humiliated Siam and rendered it a disabled victim (Strate 2015: 6). Critics of the myth that 'Siam was never colonised' have proposed various terms to describe Siam/Thailand's real colonial condition: neocolony, indirect colony, semi-colony and cryptocolony—a suppressed, disguised form of colonialism (Thongchai 2011: 29). These labels that counter the royal nationalist ideology animate

3 The earliest statement by Thongchai on the idea of royal nationalist history was Thongchai (2001).

discussions in foreign classrooms, but in the vernacular it is unimaginable that the kingdom in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries could have been colonised, even though the extraterritorial treaties fragmented Siamese sovereignty and placed some of it in the hands of Western imperial powers.

In the frame of nationalist ideology, it is impossible to ‘think’ of Siam/Thailand as colonised directly, indirectly or even partially because Thai monarchs saved the country from this ignominy by skilful diplomacy. Heroic kingship is the second leg of royal nationalist ideology that underpins the myth. Through the centuries, Siam/Thailand’s monarchs fought wars against foreign aggressors to liberate the Thai people and keep them independent. Court historians in the early twentieth century turned the royal chronicles into moral stories of national independence; at the same time, the histories of autonomous kingdoms and formal vassals came into the possessive care of the centralising government in Bangkok (Thongchai 2011: 36, 38). In the process of saving the country from Western colonialism, according to this critique, the Thai monarchs created a colonising state that subordinated smaller centres and brought them under Bangkok’s unitary rule: ‘Reform’, says Thongchai, ‘is merely a euphemism for Siam’s imperial conquests’ (Thongchai 2011: 30). And he is not alone in advancing the idea that Siam was a coloniser. *Subject Siam*, the title of Tamara Loos’s 2006 study of the Siamese court’s treatment of the southern Malay territories on both sides of the Siam–Malaya border, captures with clever wordplay the double identity of Siam as a subject of Western imperial will and as a subject active in its own expansion.

From the late nineteenth century, the emerging Siamese nation-state swallowed up independent principalities such as Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south and the kingdoms of Chiang Mai and Nan in the north. Chiang Mai enjoyed its own tradition of kingship that was intact as late as 1860, until British imperial power and the Siamese monarch collaborated to end the autonomy of the north. The princes of Chiang Mai and Lamphun came into conflict with the British Government over timber rights by granting concessions to British and Burmese concessionaires who then claimed extraterritorial rights. The issue was resolved by the Anglo-Thai Treaty in 1874 that allowed the Bangkok Government to adjudicate disputes in the north (Chaiyan 1994: 19). Annexation by the Siamese Government was swift. In less than 15 years, the Bangkok Government and the British Government were acting jointly as colonial powers in the north. Whereas in 1860 the Siamese foreign minister admitted to the

British consul in Bangkok that Chiang Mai was a sovereign state with its own laws—different from Siam—by 1874, the king in Bangkok could declare that Chiang Mai was a dependency that belonged ‘to us’ (Iijima 2008: 43, 46). The theme of internal colonialism—the state’s push into territory populated by non-Thai peoples and governed by local lords—has never had traction in Thai historical writing. In the royal nationalist myth, it is anathema to think of Siam under the Chakri monarchs colonising territories in the same manner as, say, the settler societies of the New World that pushed through frontiers in South Africa, America and Australia to dispossess indigenous peoples of their lands.

What follows from Thongchai’s stringent critique is that a transition to alternative frames or plots—at least in forms acceptable for school textbooks and research funding by Thai Government institutions—has been halted in its tracks by the myth. A people’s history or a history of the peasantry or urban labouring classes inspired by Marxist approaches has never materialised. The long, continuous story of republicanism in the kingdom’s political history is forever deprived of oxygen, unable to respire in an atmosphere full of royal birthdays, death days and annual celebrations of the dynasty’s achievements (Jory 2015: 115). Thai historical writing has been slow to throw off the shackles of chronicle history, the story of royal accomplishment. While ‘chronicle’ (*phongsawadan*) is no longer the word for history as it was in the late nineteenth century, a mentality of chronicle history survives today in a history that privileges royal deeds. Even the country’s fledgling electoral democracy is a royal project. By resolving the political crisis in 1973 that shook the country and brought down a military junta, King Bhumibol managed to reinvent the monarchy as a symbol of democracy (Jory 2011: 539).

It is as though the ‘birth of Thai history’, in the title of Thongchai’s manifesto, has been the death of Thai history as we see it today. Yet this polemic, while it is not off the mark in important respects, has its own distortions and omissions. The master paradigm has an elitist feel and it targets the popular imagination informed by TV dramas, novels and films rather than by what academic historians write. To be sure, there are many kinds of academic history, and some history carries the imprimatur of official history that may be researched and written by formally trained historians. Many academic historians who publish in the vernacular work around the legal and institutional constraints created by the lese-majesty

statute and write with nuance as they chip away at the royal nationalist narrative. Not every history book sold in Bangkok is about a Thai king, nor is it a vanity biography of a businessperson or a police or army officer.

Historians have foraged for topics that lie outside the frame of the royal national narrative and do not explicitly threaten it, leading to the proliferation of social histories such as studies of sport and recreation, Bangkok's night life and demimonde, tourism, regional banditry, rebellion of the poor in a Bangkok Chinese community and public health and sanitation.⁴ The mentalities and class biases of elite thinkers have been brought into sharper relief (Saichol 2014). As Thailand became more urbanised and consumer-oriented, notions of public space and private space have been radically transformed, leaving modern people with a kind of social amnesia. A Thai historian studying sanitaryware explains how city dwellers today have no memory of how people of yore once defecated in family groups in the fields and forests, chatting with one another while doing so (Monruethai 2002: 335–52). Much of this research is publicly available in MA theses submitted to Thai universities, and many of these studies have been published as monographs. Thongchai gives little credit to this body of scholarship on the grounds that 'historians themselves believe the myths [about royal nationalist ideology], taking them as truthful knowledge' (Thongchai 2011: 21). Yet innovative works manage to slip into the marketplace, such as the study of the ninth king's 'royal projects' that was cleverly marketed with a photo of King Bhumibol on the cover dressed in his ceremonial robes for his 50th anniversary on the throne in 1996. An anecdote made the rounds that customers bought the book for their personal collections about the royal family unaware that the critique inside the book's covers exposed the social engineering and propaganda behind the royal projects (Chanida 2007).

A few of Thongchai's citations are in the vernacular; the majority are in English. His view is from a geostationary satellite hovering high above Thailand that takes no account of how historians based in Thailand have flourished within the strictures of royal-nationalist ideology. The task of dismantling royalist and court-centred narratives and creating new narratives—a challenge thrown down in lively academic debates following the watershed event of 14 October 1973—is not advanced by restating the problem in slightly different language. The problem remains the

4 Innovative works include Patravadi (2006); Wirayut Sisuwannakit (2006); Davisakd (2007); Sithithep (2012); Wirayut Pisamli (2014); Walailak University (2017).

same—namely, how to pry chronicles and archives away from royalist and nationalist myth-making preoccupations (Reynolds and Hong 1983: 96). Although Thailand was under military rule for most of the 1980s, new vistas on the past opened up that promised to inspire fresh historical interpretations.

Young scholars who had returned from their studies abroad to spearhead the professionalisation of the Thai academy were now in their most productive years. Among these scholars was Nidhi Eosewong (b. 1940), a historian based in Chiang Mai, whose provocative study of literary art in early Bangkok was first published in 1982. Nidhi demythologised the ruling class and exposed its ordinariness as a bourgeoisie created by commerce. Princes and nobles had become merchants and traders. Elitist literary traditions were loosened, and lively popular motifs made their way into more flexible and adaptable literary art. Aristocrats no longer compared themselves to gods; ‘springs of realism’ and ‘humanistic thinking’ appeared in their creations (Nidhi 2005: 119, 131). Even the life of the Buddha came to be written in a more down-to-earth way. During the reign of the fifth Bangkok king (1868–1910), the sacred was reintroduced and the liveliness and intellectual creativity of early Bangkok gradually turned into a pretentious, derivative literature that became ‘a lifeless corpse’ that students were forced to study (Nidhi 2005: 146). Nidhi’s history was not so much national or even dynastic, as the story of a class. His approach, informed by the Marxian preoccupations of the previous decade, had an economic edge: the bourgeois class was created by its materialist needs and tastes.

Another returned student inspired by the vitality of the mid-1970s was Chatthip Nartsupha (b. 1941), an economic historian who looked to the village and the countryside for historical insights and a historical narrative separate from the dynastic. Chatthip’s best-known and most influential book was *The Thai Village Economy in the Past*, first published in 1984 and later translated into English (Chatthip 1999; Reynolds 2013: 2, 7–9). For Chatthip, the village was able to stand up against the dual powers of the state and capitalism owing to its self-reliance and its capacity for sustainability. During the second phase of his work, which began around 1990, he saw the village as an institutional site for rebuilding and renewal through the concept of community culture. His ideas of the village’s capacity to self-strengthen and defend itself against the inequalities of capitalist development drew criticism from both anthropologists and economists who faulted him for misunderstanding the modern village

that was not, and never had been, a standalone autonomous institution. Thongchai, who faulted Chatthip for contributing to a pernicious form of cultural nationalism, saw him as an example of Thailand's intelligentsia who supported a 'leftist-royalist anti-democratic alliance' (Thongchai 2008: 589). In Thai academic circles, this bruising rhetoric is not for the faint-hearted. Yet Chatthip's studies of the village—extended by Chatthip himself and his students to regional economies—was never merely academic. Like Nidhi and many others of his generation, Chatthip was engaged in a political project—one inspired by concern for the deleterious consequences of capitalist development on social life and by the new thinking that had emerged in the 1970s about economics and social structure (Reynolds 2013: 17–18).

Following the May 2014 coup, Somsak Jeamteerasakul (b. 1958), the most iconoclastic historian who lived through the mid-1970s, took refuge in France after he was threatened physically. Somsak's focus has always been on the monarchy, its history and, by means of its proxies and loyalists, the influence it has exerted over the historical record. Along with many others, he has also been an unrelenting critic of the massacre at Thammasat University on 6 October 1976. In a collection of expurgated articles in newspapers and news weeklies published as *History Invented Just Yesterday*, a polemical work without footnotes or bibliography, Somsak 'demolished the façade that the modern Thai monarchy was democratic, above politics, and the king a paragon of Buddhist virtue'. His goal was to insert his arguments into the mainstream of modern Thai historical writing (Jory 2011: 554–5; Somsak 2001). Thongchai, in his 2011 manifesto, does not mention Somsak's contribution to understanding how the ninth Bangkok king made himself a democratic monarch—an odd omission considering the two men have been the most outspoken Thai historians in exposing the royal nationalist narrative. They were imprisoned together as members of the 'Bangkok 18' after the military overthrew a popularly elected government in October 1976. Somsak's 'history invented yesterday' and Thongchai's royal nationalist narrative have become massive, immovable objects that stand in the way of histories that might achieve more than the privileging of royal initiative and deeds.

Alternative approaches to the royal nationalist narrative emerged from the upheavals of the 1970s, when the Thai education curriculum was reformed and decentralised. The education plan of 1978 integrated local studies into the national curriculum, and the Thai Government began to relax its oversight of local cultural identity. Regional and local

histories proliferated in the 1980s with the dispatch of Bangkok-trained historians to staff new universities that sprang up in the provinces, where academics were encouraged to study and celebrate their own histories. They were assisted in that effort with funding from the tourism and nostalgia industries (Thongchai 1995: 110–13). In the boom years of the 1980s through to the first half of the 1990s, the Thai economy globalised and became more exposed to international markets. Trade—measured as exports plus imports between 1982 and 1994—increased from 54 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) to 89 per cent (Baker and Pasuk 1996: 75). As the economy became more diversified and employment in manufacturing increased, financial institutions branched into the provinces. Between 1988 and 1995, the number of bank branches outside Bangkok rose by 40 per cent, from 1,500 to more than 2,100. Business and industry associations such as chambers of commerce, while fostered by the state, developed a degree of autonomy upcountry and began to exert political influence from the provinces (Hewison and Maniemai 2000: 209; Ockey 2000: 80). Provincial capitalism gave local businesspeople the wherewithal to become involved in electoral politics, and ethno-regionalist consciousness backed by real resources began to draw Thai tourists to the provinces. Community memory of ancient principalities was revived with the central government’s blessing.

Some of the provincial wealth during the late 1980s and early 1990s was directed to local heritage. In the case of Nakhon Si Thammarat, which archaeologists have called Nakhon Si Thammarat-Tambralinga in recognition of the predecessor state that arose in the first millennium, researchers in educational institutions have benefited from this decentralisation. Most recently, the central government has been pushing to have Wat Mahathat put on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage list—a campaign that has been received locally with ambivalence and even resistance, given the disruption that would occur to the everyday rhythms of a provincial town (Brawn 2018: 156–8). During Thailand’s economic boom in 1987, the Jatukham-Ramathep deity was conjured out of Nakhon’s ancient past and caused a stir in the amulet markets around the country. Local history is by its nature not big-paradigm history, as its specificity constrains comparison with other locales and other regions. As an innovative alternative to national history, it would seem doomed, because it always ends up subordinated to the narrative of the nation’s biography. In the 1970s, many conferences on local history were held in upcountry colleges

of education, but ‘nothing much came of them’, observed the international historian and public intellectual Charnvit Kasetsiri: ‘[T]he participants were limited and seemed unable to get away from the usual dependency of the “local” on the “central”’ (Charnvit 2015: 34).

This statement has long been out-of-date. So-called local history has evolved from being dependent on the centre and the change has been driven both by the central bureaucracy and by the enterprise of upcountry regional centres and communities. The Thailand Research Fund, a national grants body established during the boom-time in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War, and whose funding is weighed towards natural and medical sciences, has supported local and regional projects. In the case of the mid south, it funded the first academic study of Butr Phantharak’s life and it has funded a study of southern character through the culture of bull-fighting—a sport popular with gambling farmers that has lessons about masculine prowess (Akhom 2000; Wira 2001). Academic standards in regional universities have risen and universities willingly dispense funds for conferences from their modest budgets. In August 2017, Walailak University in Nakhon sponsored a conference on murder, crime and lawlessness in the south that attracted social scientists and research students from around the country (Walailak University 2017). Regional and local researchers pondered whether or not there was a disposition to crime and violence specific to the southern part of the country and, if so, what would explain it.

Many authors writing on the south and its outlaw culture are not, strictly speaking, scholars; they are not formally trained as academics. They make their living as journalists, traders or schoolteachers. Their popular histories may be produced in a particular historical moment, such as the numerous accounts of Butr Phantharak’s life and the origins of the Jatukham-Ramathep amulet that appeared around the time of his cremation in February 2007. Those histories gave the Jatukham-Ramathep deity a pedigree by surrounding it with fact and myth about its creation in the late 1980s. Academics in Bangkok universities do not rate these popular histories very highly and are disposed to dismiss them as unprofessional, even parochial, because they fail to pass tests for rigour and accountability. Yet in my explorations of Butr Phantharak’s life, I have found the work of popular historians invaluable in providing angles of vision unavailable elsewhere. Local and regional authors, whether they are popular or academic, write about their native land with insight and passion. Their books contain social truths that illuminate community

life and thought obscured by the royal nationalist narrative that is only about the dynasty at the royal centre. After all, ‘the centre’ is relative. Every place—any place—can be a centre and, in this book, the mid south, especially Nakhon Si Thammarat, with its eclectic and heterodox religious culture, is the centre. For Police Major General Khun Phan, Phatthalung as well as Nakhon Si Thammarat, the province of his birth, defined the centre of his cosmos.

A centre is not isolated, it is not apart. Nakhon Si Thammarat and its 12 satellite ministates had long enjoyed commercial links via global trading routes that stretched from coastal China to the Indian Subcontinent and beyond. As an entrepreneurial hub, Nakhon Si Thammarat from time to time successfully challenged the suzerainty of the kingdoms of Ayutthaya and Bangkok on the central plains. Over the centuries, the mid south’s exposure to Brahmanism and Buddhism placed Nakhon Si Thammarat in the same cultural field as kingdoms to the north, and the history that surfaces in the policeman’s life in the following pages is no less a history of the country.

Policing and the sovereign body

The third line of inquiry that emerged from my early reading and conversations posed questions about policing, sovereignty and the task of government to maintain law and order and protect citizens. Butr Phantharak acted on the authority of the state, yet at times he carried out his duties as though his pursuit of his adversaries was a personal matter. In the first half of the twentieth century, the mid south and many other parts of the country were frontier societies. The writ of government throughout the kingdom was weak, giving the police discretion in carrying out their orders. Details from Butr’s career indicate that he saw himself as a protector of the rule of law. The bladed weapons he carried with him—the Malay dagger (or *kris*) and a sword wrapped in red cloth—were emblems of an earlier, premodern sovereignty in the Thai and Malay worlds. Until just before Butr’s police career began in the 1920s, the army had performed the principal role of internal peacekeeping, but as the police force grew in the early twentieth century, it too developed a sense of entitlement in protecting the sovereign body.

The police force is charged with keeping public order and, as part of political society, the police are integral to the state's responsibility for carrying out what is one of the primary functions of government: protection of the population. Making laws, punishing criminals, declaring war and peace and a host of other functions are required to maintain the safety of people and their 'contentments of life', as Thomas Hobbes put it (Skinner 1999: 2). Gramsci understood political society to be those parts of the state—the police and the military—that lawfully exercise a monopoly over weaponry and the use of lethal force. He called political society 'the armour of coercion' that affords protection for the people (Gramsci 1983: 263). Defence of the land—be it the realm, the nation-state, the district or the village—requires not only diplomacy, but also coercion and the occasional use of lethal force. In practice, political society enjoys no such monopoly on the use of lethal force; witness the extrajudicial killing, armed militias in failing states and gangland violence found everywhere, even in so-called advanced democracies. Military and police together as 'the armour of coercion' is germane in the Thai case, as senior officers in the military and police have often changed places, moving from one service to the other as circumstance required.

The armour of coercion comes alive in the Thai term for government, *kanpokkhrong*, where *pokkhrong* means to cover or to shield. *Pok* means to shield and *khrong* to cloak or cover, or sometimes to possess. *Khrong* can also mean to wrap around or enclose, as when a monk dons a monastic robe to cover his body. A similar idea about the function of government and its officials to protect is the softer metaphor *pok raksa*, to look after or care for. The country's rulers are referred to in Thai academic language, if rendered literally, as 'those who shield' (*phu pokkhrong*). External threats to the sovereign body—be they enemy states or foreign ideologies such as republicanism, democracy or communism—were internalised in the elite consciousness from about 1900 as harmful to the body politic. The first line of defence in protecting the people and the Thai body is to throw up a shield and deploy lethal force if necessary.

The other element relevant to protecting the Thai body politic is kingship. Rulership in Southeast Asia has a deep history of connection with divinity. In premodern times, the king was a divine medium, an intermediary between the earth-god and the human community who possessed powers that assured the fertility of the land and all that it produced. Soil and stone from time immemorial had absorbed the generative properties of the earth, and cults developed that divinised the stone and clumps

of earth. The belief systems that grew around these cults, particularly in relation to the custodial protection of land and property, were shared by peoples in China, India and parts of Southeast Asia (Mus 2011: 24–5). One of the popular epithets for the Thai king, ‘lord over land’, contains the word for soil (*din*). Water used in the ceremony of drinking the oath of allegiance from premodern times to the present day was scooped from the kingdom’s waterways and brought to the royal centre for consecration. Officials then drank this water and pledged their loyalty to the sovereign before taking up their provincial posts. In the reverse direction, the king’s body acquired a material presence throughout the country. During the long ninth Bangkok reign, parts of the king’s body—his nail clippings and his hair—were dispersed physically and ritually to all provinces in images of the Buddha that served as spiritual shields against the communist insurgency. In defending his kingdom with sacred stuff, the godly king protected his own body that was at once here, there and everywhere.

Thailand’s bounded territory, portrayed as a living organism, as a human body, took on graphic form when I was teaching secondary school during the mid-1960s in Krabi, which was then a very remote province with rudimentary infrastructure and intermittent electrical power. One weekend, teachers at the school were bused out to the beautiful beach at Ao Nang—as yet undiscovered and untouched by international tourism—for a retreat to discuss the year’s activities. The time came for the geography teacher, a lanky guy with an earthy sense of humour, to demonstrate his trick for planting an image of the country’s map in the kids’ minds. He turned sideways to the audience, placed his right foot on a crate, propped his right hand under his chin and proceeded to show how Thailand’s shape on the map resembled a human body. His head was north-west Thailand, with its centre in Chiang Mai. His rump was the north-east, with its largely Lao population, and he threw in a few barbs about the country bumpkins who lived there. The Malay Peninsula was the ambulatory appendage. Alas, this body had only one leg; the other had been lost in a war with the Burmese. Traversing vertically from the north through the centre of the body was the alimentary canal, the Chaophraya River. At the top of the digestive tract the watershed deposited nutrients to the floodplains below and, at the bottom, in the watery lowlands where Bangkok had grown into the giant conurbation it was even in those days, the wastes drained into the Gulf of Thailand. This was the excretory system of the organism. Delivered deadpan to the upcountry audience, this description of Thailand’s body was met with much hilarity by the

teachers who shouted out earthy details of their own. Years before the arrival of television let alone the internet, and decades before economic booms and globalisation, what secondary student sitting through this geography lesson could ever forget this cartoon figure of Thailand's map? Although the embodiment of the country was both graphic and funny in this geo-body, it could never be the subject of earthy humour in the solemn ceremonies conducted by Brahmins for the real-life king far away in his Bangkok palace.

The idea of the sovereign state, whether it be a kingdom or a nation-state, as a body, an organism, is instantiated in Malay culture that reached as far as the mid south. The policeman Butr Phantharak had Malay ancestry, although it is impossible to be precise about what this heritage might account for in his beliefs and practices. In the trophy photo taken by his son, the handle of a *kris* protrudes from his waistband, and he could boast of a personal collection of the daggers—an emblem of Malay sovereignty. In the Malay world of the deep south where he sometimes worked, spirit mediums known as *bomoh* treated the body as a realm in distress, and in their healing rituals they practised a form of statecraft. A sick body and its 'provinces' were a disaggregated kingdom, 'a realm in chaos' that lacked harmony. The healing rituals aimed to restore the body's wholeness and thereby its sovereign integrity (Kessler 1977: 318–19). It would then be able to 'govern itself'. A kingdom whose subjects were preyed upon by bandits and criminals was unwell. Suppressing crime returned the sovereign body to a healthy state. From this perspective, Khun Phan's policing was restorative.

The realm as a corporal entity has a long lineage in European political thought, made memorable by Kantorowicz's study of the king's two bodies in medieval and early modern English texts. In Christendom, the spiritual and secular powers were united in one person, bishop or king. This union of the religious and the secular is portrayed in the frontispiece, by Abraham Bosse, of *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes, published in 1651. The crowned head of state is holding the bishop's crosier in his left hand and the sword of justice in his right. In this memorable and celebrated image, the upper torso and the thick arms contain the bodies of citizens, but this collective of bodies is an artificial unity. The body politic does not create the state; rather, 'the people' exist only through having a sovereign (Skinner 2007, 2016). 'A certain spiritual capacity' was attributed to the sovereign king as an emanation of the consecrating rites that transformed the ordinary human being into a monarch (Kantorowicz 1970: 44).

The king was human by nature but divine by grace. Early in the history of this double identity, he was material-mortal as well as immaterial and immortal, foreshadowing the later transformation of the king's two bodies: the human body and the body politic. Church and State were distinct, but they created hybrids by borrowing from each other and exchanging insignia, symbols, prerogatives and rights of honour (Kantorowicz 1970: 193). As time passed and the State became more corporate and legal, its theorists continued to exploit the aura of religion as well as its thought and language. The State was eventually set as a 'body' over the Church 'body' even as the State helped itself to the supernatural and transcendental values claimed by the Church (Kantorowicz 1970: 207–8).

The bishop in Christendom stood in a very different relationship to the English sovereign than the Buddhist Sangharaja did to the Thai king. For one thing, the tensions between the two were fewer for the most part. Some scholars have argued that the ninth Thai king at the end of his life approached incarnation as a *bodhisattva*, a virtual god-king (Jackson 2010; Jory 2016: 180–5). Thai royal language describes the king's body, actions and speech by asserting that the king is a special being, a *bodhisattva*, a merit-filled creature in the same class (*ong*) as monks and Buddha images. When Christian missionaries in Thailand translated the Judaeo-Christian Yahweh, they chose Thai *phrajao*, a term that appears in many of the king's honorifics and epithets—for example, 'lord of the land' (*phrajao phaendin*) or, as the Marxist historian Jit Poumisak expressed it, 'lord over land'. If *phrajao* is translated back into English, it can be not a deity but merely 'revered lord'. Over the seven decades of the ninth Bangkok reign (1946–2016), military and civilian governments contrived an alliance with the sacral monarch—the 'revered lord'—to become his defender and agent, a move that protected both parties. The monarch needed protection from democrats and socialists and the army needed the monarch to acquiesce in its naked ambition. Did the monarch have a choice? The army was the one institution, and not a democratic one, capable of setting the institution to one side and pushing the king off his throne.

This book is a biographical study of a particular policeman, whose name meant, literally, 'pledged to protect royal power', and of his origins in the mid south of Thailand and his social world through most of the twentieth century. Police can be treated in ways other than the functional as agents of the state. We can ask, what *is* police? Must police be understood only as acting on behalf of some authority, such as government or the state, or can

police be understood in some other way? These questions are ontological. They are about police as a state of being, an analytical category that can be interrogated. The criminologist Beatrice Jauregui (2016) puts the matter differently by asking about ‘police life’ and how it acquires (or loses) ‘moral virtue or instrumental value’. She pursues this line of questioning after her conversations in Uttar Pradesh, India, reveal how police officers rationalise ‘the fraught relations between means and ends in their work’. The officers are authorised to use state-mandated violence ‘as needed’, exposing them to the risk of harm and possibly death (Jauregui 2016: 65, 88–9).

Here I can address such questions briefly by recalling an idea of Giorgio Agamben’s that ties sovereignty to policing by proposing that the police—contrary to what public opinion might think—do not merely fulfil an administrative function by enforcing the law. The police are ‘the place’, Agamben says, where violence and right are contiguous with the sovereign. Violence and right touch the sovereign.⁵ Thus, Agamben continues, the figure of the sovereign and that of the executioner have in common an ‘intangible sacredness’. The enemy or adversary is branded a criminal and excluded from ‘civil humanity’ (Agamben 2000: 104–5). As Butr Phantharak delved deeper and deeper into the mysteries of magical knowledge and other methods for arming himself mentally and spiritually, this policeman with ‘executioner’ tattooed on his knuckles, this very mortal man who had been wounded more than once in the line of duty, grasped the regalia of rule, the symbols of intangible sacredness. In so doing, he assumed the privileged rights and capabilities analogous to those of a sovereign. It is in keeping with his character that Butr should mimic some of the actions and symbols of royal sovereignty from a time when monarchical power was absolute.

In light of Agamben’s words, Gramsci’s term for the police and the military, ‘the armour of coercion’, is too superficial to describe the relationship between the police and sovereign power. The sovereign power does not execute its enemies and adversaries through the police as its agent. The sovereign power executes because it *is* the police, and vice versa. Seen from this perspective, Butr Phantharak’s conceit of showing off the weapons of sovereignty—the sword of the Buddhists and the *kris* of the Malays—was

5 My thanks to Luigi Tomba for pointing out that Agamben’s focus in this piece is to argue that the Gulf War and the Holocaust must be understood as police operations (Personal communication, 3 October 2016).

no mere affectation, but a sign of violence fused with right. In Thailand after the coup of 22 May 2014, the military and police collaborated in arresting political dissidents, including those accused of lese-majesty. Agamben's link between the sovereign and police is instructive here. By charging people with criminal activity and detaining them in army camps, the military's primary function of defending the kingdom became blurred with policing.

Butr Phantharak was an executioner. He prided himself on his right and his ability to take a human life, and on more than one occasion when he exceeded his orders or disrupted cosy relationships between lawbreakers and local officials he was transferred to another part of the country. To carry out his duties, he shared community beliefs in powers exceeding the human. That much is apparent from the stories he told. In his pursuit of outlaws and criminals, he acquired enemies and, for his own protection, he armed himself physically, mentally and magically. His reputation—performed as much as earned—made him a person to be emulated (*ton baep*), in the words of one southern scholar.⁶ The communities in the mid south, which called for his return when criminality reached crisis point, saw him as a resource who could reinstate order and justice, however roughly delivered. If police violence was necessary to achieve these ends, the community saw it as a 'positive provision' that solved a problem (Jauregui 2016: 92). His life story has contributed to the ruthless reputation of the Thai police and, in this respect, he was no different from police in other lands and other jurisdictions whose violent, sometimes morally questionable, interventions are authorised by the state.

In the chapters that follow, I want to draw the reader into the policeman's world by sketching a portrait of this complex man against the background of his homeland in Thailand's mid south. Episodes in his life and elements of his persona are manifest in political authority in Thailand today, especially when that authority wears the uniform of a soldier or a police officer. Butr surrounded himself with an aura of apprehension by cultivating a persona, a representation of himself that exceeded his actual person. His effectiveness as a police officer sprang not only from his skills, but also from uncertainty about what he was capable of doing, including the taking of human life if circumstances warranted it. In imagining

6 Kasem Jandam, Interview with the author, Ai Khiew, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 17 November 2017.

the policeman's world, I am reminded of what Quentin Skinner said in explaining Thomas Hobbes's view of human nature. In the war of all against all, 'you are constantly liable to sudden death' (Skinner 2007). Khun Phan knew the precarity of police life from his early days as a constable. He was regularly exposed to sudden death, as were his adversaries on the other side of the law—a fact of life that both sides took for granted. Aware of what could befall him in his policing operations, aware of police expendability and the provisionality of his authority, he protected his body with weapons and practices that emboldened him to carry out his duties efficiently and effectively in a way that would ensure his own survival as well as the subjugation of the lawbreaker he was confronting.

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