

The spirits, the stars, and Thai politics

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Nine months after the coup of 19 September 2006, popular support had ebbed away and many pronounced the coup a failure. In Chiang Mai, two generals from the coup junta, and the wife of a third, sat dressed all in white under a three-legged arch decorated with banana plants, sugarcane, coconut fronds, gourds, candles, incense sticks, and offerings of food. A sacred thread was strung from the peak of the arch around the heads of the three participants who sat with clasped hands while learned monks from sixteen wat in the city chanted for two hours in the Burmese style.

The participants were Air Chief Marshal Chalit [Phukphasuk] (head of the air force), Admiral Sathiraphan [Keyanon] (head of the navy), and Sasini, wife of General Winai [Phattiyakul] (head of the National Security Council). The army chief, General Anupong [Paochinda], was reluctant to attend in person but sent the deputy chief of the First Army as his representative. Conspicuously missing was General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. He had been present during several earlier visits by the coup group to this shrine, and his absence was significant.

The rite was arranged by Warin Buaviratler, universally known as ‘Hon Warin’ meaning ‘Astrologer Warin.’ He is possibly the prime example today of a political astrologer. Thaksin and Pojaman Shinawatra had counted among his clients for some time. But around 2005 his clientele became increasingly dominated by men in uniform.

Warin had identified General Sonthi as the reincarnation of a general in the service of King Taksin at the time when Taksin rescued Siam from disaster following the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. This meant that General Sonthi was destined to save the nation yet again in his new incarnation. Astrologer Warin predicted that Sonthi would rise to become army chief, and reportedly carried out ceremonies to make this even more certain. This was an ambitious prediction given that no Muslim had become army chief before, and that Sonthi was not first in line. However in October 2005, Sonthi was appointed. Subsequently Astrologer Warin predicted there would be a coup and, according to some reports, chose the 19 September as being an astrologically auspicious day for the event.

Warin also predicted that General Sonthi would enter politics at the next elections. Indeed Warin’s role in this project went beyond prediction. In early 2007, another of Warin’s clients, Kajit Habananda, president of One-Two-Go budget airline, founded the [Rak Chat] Love-the-Nation Party to serve as the vehicle for General Sonthi’s political career. But the party disappeared after a One-Two-Go plane crashed on landing in Phuket. Warin himself then registered a [Rak Chat Thai] Love-the-Thai-Nation Party, with several of his clients as members. According to some reports, Warin was in line for a ministerial post after Sonthi’s expected rise to the premiership.

But then something happened, and the astrological fortunes of the military junta took a sudden dive. The chanting ceremony was held to “correct the karma” (*kae kam*) and “sustain the fortune” (*sueb chata*) of the generals. But Sonthi’s fortune was in special trouble because some enemies had been attacking him with supernatural forces – possibly by subjecting a wax image of the general to maltreatment. Sonthi did not attend the rite in Chiang Mai because his fortune was already beyond rescue. And of course, as we now know, his political career was never launched.

Warin predicts events by plotting the movement of the planets in the usual way, but this is not his only technique. He is also a spirit medium. He channels the spirit of an ascetic named Kewalan who formerly lived in the Himalayas. The generals’ chanting rite was held in the Hall of the Reverend Rishi Kewalan, where Warin holds regular mass ‘karma-correcting’ and ‘fortune-sustaining’ events which attract enthusiastic crowds from Chiang Mai and elsewhere.

Because of his association with General Sonthi and his prediction of the coup, Warin became very famous. He had a personal guard of Special Forces troops. Visitors to his shrine were subject to security inspections. And his movements were kept secret.

Warin is not alone. Several astrologers have made political prediction into a personal specialty. The Thai press interviews them for their opinions. Some talk regularly on radio. A few appear on television talk shows. In early 2007, the King Prajadhipok Institute, whose mission is to upgrade the quality of Thai politics, held the first-ever national seminar on politics and astrology.

Of course this is not new; but there does seem to be a definite correlation between periods of military rule, and upsurges of interest in supernatural influences on Thai politics.

In 1991, the last coup before the recent one, the junta fixed the exact day and minute for the coup by consulting Kengkiat Jongjaipra, a famous astrologer of the time. A few weeks before General Suchinda [Kraprayun] made himself prime minister, his wife Wannee told the public, ‘I dreamt of flying by myself over mountains and forests for a long distance and time. That meant I’ll fulfill all my wishes and be happy for a long time. And this will apply to my husband. In the dream I flew for a long distance so his government may last for even ten years.’ After Suchinda’s government lasted only seven weeks, Wannee went to see a monk in Wat Boworniwet who consulted her husband’s astrological chart and decided he needed to change his name to Bhumichai, ‘land of victory,’ which he adopted for a time.

Another member of the 1991-2 junta, ACM Kaset [Rojananil] went to a Chiang Mai temple and paid 100,000 baht to a medium who pasted nine squares of gold leaf with Kaset’s astrological sign on his forehead, bathed him in sacred water, and gave him a talismanic piece of wood.

Further back, General Thanom also consulted the stars regularly. Thanin Kraivixien, who became prime minister after the coup in 1976, was possibly better known among the

public as an astrologer, rather than as a high court judge. General Sarit [Thanarat] had several astrological advisers; and many senior government officials took to visiting the same astrologers to seek advice. Both the coup attempts of 1981 and 1985 were scheduled after astrological advice.

When General Chavalit [Yongchaiyuth] became prime minister in 1996, his wife Khunying Louis went everywhere clutching a toy elephant wearing a wedding dress, diamond pendant, and ear-rings. She explained that her spiritual advisor had told her she must carry this at all times to protect her husband against evil forces, and sustain his time in power. The Khunying also spent a lot of time and money propitiating Rahu, a deity famous for causing eclipses by trying to eat the sun or moon, but also potentially fearful in other ways.

[And a few weeks ago, a day after General Chavalit was appointed deputy PM, Khunying Louis appeared at the Elephant Kraal in Ayutthaya and performed a “fortune extending” rite with a live, pink-tinged baby elephant.]

But of course, political interest in astrology and supernaturalism is not confined to those in uniform. One of keenest recent adherents has been Thaksin Shinawatra.

At the time of his rise to power, Thaksin called on the services of Phra Issaramunnee [from Wat Thammawihari, Phetburi,] but this relationship was broken when the monk was revealed to have replaced the Honda which Thaksin bought him with a Mercedes, and to have also acquired expensive scuba-diving gear, high-powered telescopes, a jacuzzi big enough for five, and a girl friend. Thaksin turned to Phra Wichit Suthakan of Wat Thammikaram, Lopburi, who was especially good at predicting election results. This monk introduced the idea that such predictions had a margin of error, just like statistical estimates. He foretold that TRT would win the 2005 election with 424 seats, plus or minus 10. He added that Thaksin had the perfect facial features for a national leader, “a tiger forehead and lion nose,” and predicted that the Democrats would not return to power for 20 years.

It’s worth noting that Thaksin’s astrological birth chart is quite remarkable. By the western method, five of the planets fall in one house – Venus, Pluto, Moon, Sun, and Mercury. This is very rare. By the Thai method, three planets are in a single sign – Sun, Moon, and Mercury. Astrologers agree this signifies an exceptionally strong and self-confident personality, and a remarkable life.

Thaksin was interested not only in the rather passive business of prediction, but also the more active side of bringing spiritual forces into play in order to influence the course of history – especially when he was under threat. When his premiership was threatened by the Corruption Commission’s suit on concealing his assets, he fought back with legal argument (“honest mistake”) and attempts to suborn the judges, but also put efforts into rallying spiritual forces on his side, by organizing simultaneous prayer chanting in 108 wat.

When public opinion began to shift against him in 2004, he made many visits to Burma, perhaps more than any other Thai prime minister. While one main reason may

have been promoting his satellite business, he also visited a famous Rangoon seer known as “ET.” Her party trick to prove her exceptional powers of insight is to reel off the serial numbers on banknotes in her clients’ pockets.

When things got even worse for Thaksin in 2006, he was told by an astrologer (who was also a senator, Boonlert Pairintra) that the problem lay in the planet Mercury. Up to then, Mercury had aided Thaksin’s spectacular rise to wealth and power, but in early 2006 it was eclipsed by Rahu.

But that was not all. In March 2006, Thaksin announced that his enemies “are using all kinds of means to try to destroy me, including black magic and the supernatural.” They had been maltreating photos and doll-image. “But don’t worry, I have talismans and various Buddha amulets with me to ward off their magic.”

Obviously this was not enough, as his situation continued to worsen. And this was when Newin Chidchob started to play a role.

Newin was not one of Thaksin’s early supporters. In fact, he was one of the very last to hold out against absorption into TRT, finally joining only just before the 2005 poll. Thaksin’s support has mostly been stocked on the LIFO principle, last-in first-out, meaning his late adherents were the first to peel away. The big exception has been Newin, the late adherent who has become one of his closest aides. Newin seems to have brought two skills which attracted Thaksin. The first was vote-buying. Newin was tried for vote-buying and escaped only on a narrow technicality. At the 2005 polls, he was sent to the south to organize wholesale vote-buying with money distributed through the government machinery. (It failed after local Democrats taped the proceedings).

Newin’s second talent is that he is Khmer. In the Thai imagination, Cambodia is a source of great spiritual power, and Khmers have access to powerful techniques. Newin has never claimed any special expertise, but the image clings to him because he is Khmer. When he was arrested after the 2006 coup, he claimed his captors had stripped him down to his underwear before releasing him near his home. The army did not deny this accusation, but explained they were looking for his amulets. They had been told by a senior officer to take away his amulets in order to destroy his power.

In 2006 Newin escorted Thaksin to temples all over the north and northeast. Newin also reportedly arranged several propitiatory rites including being walked under an elephant. A practitioner named Pan who had performed rites to boost the careers of Newin and his father (now speaker of the house), was also enlisted to help Thaksin, including a rite where Pan placed his foot on the client’s head. Apparently Thaksin underwent this ceremony twice.

On 19 May 2008, nineteen pieces of statuary were damaged inside the Phanom Rung complex in Buriram. Heads were knocked off eleven nagas; a Nandi bull, two singh lions and a guardian were damaged; and a lingam was moved a substantial distance. Suspicion immediately arose that some supernatural ritual had been held. Local villagers brought in a rishi from Khorat to divine what had happened. He seems to have been a

Gucci rishi as he turned up in a rather natty mock-leopard skin number, with a bevy of assistants equally elegantly attired. He divined that six men had been responsible, and that their actions had been an attempt to scare away the guardian spirits that give protection to the monument. From the published pictures, it is difficult to work out the symbolic content of the desecration. The range of different acts of damage suggests a general attempt to create disorder. Most of the damage seems to have been done to heads, and especially to mouths.

Phanom Rung is a Khmer monument, and is located in Buriram, the home of Newin Chidchob. It soon emerged that, shortly before the vandalism, Newin had been allowed to perform some rituals inside the complex with the help of Brahman priests. Thaksin had just returned to Thailand and the political tension had risen sharply. Newin had again escorted Thaksin on a tour of 99 wat in the northeast to muster the spiritual forces on Thaksin's side. According to the theory, Newin's rite in Phanom Rung had been designed to draw on the exceptional spiritual force of this ancient site; and the later vandalism had been an attempt to disrupt these forces.

But if you have a broader, longer view of history, the desecration at Buriram is part of a much more complex story.

The tale starts over two centuries ago at the foundation of Bangkok. There was a sacrificial event at the erection of the city pillar. Such ceremonies draw on old beliefs about the spiritual force vested in the earth. The sacrifice is required to placate these spirits so they offer their protection to the realm. Unhappily, a green snake slid into the hole along with the offerings.

This has been the cause of difficulty for the realm and ruling elites ever since, requiring propitiation of those gods who have the power to combat this sort of misfortune. Two gods were recruited for this role. The first is the "flower Brahma." In Hindu mythology, while Vishnu was lying asleep on a serpent, a lotus flower sprouted from his navel. Brahma was incarnated in this lotus, seated in a position of deep meditation, and went on to recreate the world. In India, the idea of a "flower Brahma" seems unknown. But in the Thai adaptation, the phrase means a meditating Brahma of special power – enough power to recreate the world.

The second god is Vishnu, or Narai in the Thai tradition. During the churning of the sea of milk to create the life force for the world, he stands at the very centre, imperiously directing the whole event with his four arms. As with the "flower Brahma," this is an image connected to the power of creation.

Now fast forward to early 2006. Thaksin has just sold his company. PAD has just been formed. The demonstrations are building to their first climax. Thaksin has called an election. The Democrats have resolved to boycott. In effect, the current fight over Thailand's democracy is building to its first climax. In this tense situation, on the night of 21 March 2006, the statue at the Erawan shrine was smashed by hammer blows. The statue had been created as the guardian for a hotel, but it had evolved into something much more—an unofficial guardian spirit of the city. And of course, the image is Brahma. In this interpretation of the event, the destruction was not the work of some crazed vandal

but a deliberate attack on an image associated with protection of the city and the monarchy, an attempt to disorder the spiritual forces in advance of a disputed election only two weeks away. The story of the crazed vandal was a cover-up.

And the Buriram vandalism is part of the same story. Perhaps the most famous sculpture at Phanom Rung is a lintel which includes both the deities which counter the problems created by the snake from the time of the city's foundation. The lintel depicts Vishnu reclining on a serpent and contemplating the recreation of the world. It also depicts the moment that the "flower Brahma" is incarnated in a lotus sprouting from Vishnu's navel. In this interpretation, the vandalism was an attempt to disrupt the spiritual forces only weeks ahead of the first court rulings against the Shinawatra family.

More recently, there has been another incident around the powerful sites in the city. On 29 October 2008, Sondhi Limthongkul told the audience for the PAD stage and the ASTV broadcast that he had taken a group of ladies to daub the base of the equestrian statue of King Rama V with used sanitary napkins. Sondhi explained that this act was designed to counter attempts to sabotage the power of the statue to protect the nation.

There are lots more examples, but that's enough. Our point is that politicians pay a lot of attention to astrology and other methods of predicting events. They also invest time and money in calling on supernatural forces for benign and malign intent. Why? At least four reasons. First, announcing astrological predictions of coming events is a way of preparing people to accept them, and not to oppose them; second, sometimes predictions are a way of giving people assurance that things will get better; third, ceremonies like the 'fortune extending' rites are a way to increase their own self-confidence, and to warn or threaten their enemies; fourth, they are a way to pass messages; for instance, just yesterday, a famous astrologer announced that Thaksin's star-chart has strong death associations from mid 2009 for at least 7 years. Now that's a message.

Now we now want to investigate why the spirits and stars can play these roles. We will look first at astrology, and then at *saiyasat* or supernaturalism.

Astrology

The continuing authority of astrology in Thai politics derives from royal tradition. In the past, astrological prediction was used for all important political events such as initiating reigns, cremating past monarchs, launching wars, founding temples, and raising city pillars. The court tried to establish a monopoly on high-quality astrological prediction. If you have exclusive rights on the technology to predict the future, that is a very important form of power.

How to establish such a monopoly? First, become the exclusive importer. The astrological system used by the Ayutthaya court was imported from India or Sri Lanka. So too were the Brahmans who staffed the astrology department.

Second, accord the practitioners high status. At Ayutthaya, the post of Chief Astrologer counted among the seven or eight chief ministers with the highest *sakdina* ranking.

Third, make sure it is difficult for others to copy. The Indian Jyotisa system, which plots the movement of planets against a background of stars, requires highly complex calculations (the slide shows the calculation for one planet, Venus). In addition, the techniques for interpreting the results are intentionally baroque. The position of each planet within a house is subdivided into minute movements. The relative positions of two or more planets add further planes of meaning. External associations with natural elements are brought into play. In short, the methodology was made deliberately complex and arcane in order to require expertise that only the court could command.

Other forms of prediction were also largely a court monopoly. Warfare depended on astrological prediction, but also on portents found in nature – particularly cloud formations, the phase and appearance of the moon, and so on. The Tamra Phichai Songkhram, the manual of the arts of war, devotes much more space to these techniques of prediction than to weapons, battle formation, and tactics. Again, the science is highly complex and hence exclusive.

There are many simpler systems of prediction in use. Some depend on the intersections of the lunar and solar calendars. Some depend on simple associations, such as between days and colors, or between times of day and certain activities, which have been codified into lists which can be looked up in manuals like Phrommasak. Today, monk astrologers often use these simpler systems, and probably this was true in the past. But they clearly could not rival the complexity and hence the assumed value of full-blown Indic planetary calculation.

After 1932, the royal astrological department ceased to exist. But there was a revival with the new reign. Astrologers are still employed to determine timings for key activities by the court. A manual originally prepared for the court in 1923 by An Sarikabut using new methods of calculation, was republished in 1965 and presented to the King. So was another manual by Acharn Suriya-arak, printed in 1969.

The Astrological Association of Thailand has the queen as patron and is located inside Wat Boworniwet, the wat where the king ordained. It currently has 6,000 members, and offers consultancy services and training. There is another Astrological Foundation of Thailand under the patronage of the Supreme Patriarch.

But the court no longer has a monopoly. The methods are now in the public domain. The manual originally prepared for the court in 1923 can now be bought over the counter. Thep Sarikabut (? son of An, compiler of the 1923 manual) wrote extensively on astrology and saiyasat in the 1960s and 70s. Every newspaper has an astrological column, and there are many specialist magazines. Computer programs are available to facilitate the calculations. Indeed, you can plot your own planetary chart by filling in a form on the net.

But the complexity which the court astrologers introduced into the business of interpreting the chart still allows for exclusivity. The market has become segmented by both specialization and quality. Some astrologers focus on family and everyday matters.

Others claim expertise in reading the implications for business. And a few have tried to develop the potential of the market for political prediction.

The fact that astrology was so closely associated with political power in the royal past has ensured its continuing appeal to politicians. The military, who ran Thailand for fifty years after the ending of the absolutist era, took up astrology in earnest. Indeed it is almost impossible to find a prominent military politician who did not publicly associate himself with astrology, or was an astrologer himself (Prem may be the exception).

Naturally enough, this tradition has passed on to the civilian politicians of the modern era. Thaksin is the prime example. He patronized several astrologers. He gave them gifts. He deliberately talked to the public about this in his speeches and radio shows. His public claims about astrology were one part of his efforts to build a public image as a powerful political leader.

Saiyasat

But the limitation of astrology is that it is passive. Of course interpretations may vary, but the planets are where the calculations indicate. If people want to “improve” the fortune dictated by the stars, they need some other technique. If politicians want to enhance their power and improve their prospects, they need other methods. Many political astrologers offer other services in addition to casting astrological charts. As noted, Astrologer Warin is also a spirit medium, and hosts chanting ceremonies and other rites which do not predict the future but try to change it.

This takes us into the world of *saiyasat*, the usual word today for supernaturalism in general, based on a Pali root meaning ‘superior expertise.’ While astrology draws its status from its association with royal power, *saiyasat* draws its power from its association with Buddhism.

To understand this, we need to delve back quite a long way. Saiyasat is a complex mix of beliefs that have come together in a rather unique way in the Thai tradition.

Three thousand years ago in India, the authors of the three Vedas, the basic texts of Hinduism, decided to compile a catalogue of the folk beliefs they hoped to supplant. This Fourth Veda, or Atharava Veda, is a list of methods for influencing the world, mostly through formulas and magical objects. Many of the verses are about gaining protection from disease, wild animals, evil fellow-humans, and other threats. Some are about inducing love. The scope of the catalog, and many of the methods, can be discerned in *saiyasat* to this day. The Thai pronunciation of Atharava, *athan*, has become a *saiyasat* word meaning protection, particularly for a city, palace, or house.

Another old Indian belief was that mastery over the self – through ascetic practice and self control – delivers mastery over nature—the ability to perform supernatural acts. According to some traditions, the Buddha practiced these methods to achieve enlightenment, but outlawed them as general practice among his followers on grounds

they were too dangerous. Yet some carried on this tradition, often in semi-secret sects. In many Buddhist cultures, this movement developed into tantric or esoteric sects, outside mainstream Buddhist practice. That seems to have been the case in Cambodia. But in Siamese tradition, these practices were not sidelined. The Lankan reformation in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries, and the Mongkut reforms in the nineteenth, tried to suppress this tradition but without success. Forest monks who often practice extreme asceticism and claim supernatural ability are an integral part of the Thai tradition. Thailand today is littered with ‘magic monks.’

A third part of the mix are spirits. Across Southeast Asia (and indeed in most of the world) people believe that spirits of the dead act as protectors for places and people. Again, reform Buddhism failed to suppress this tradition. Instead, in folk belief, souls that are between incarnations may find themselves stranded in this world, where they have exceptional powers. Thailand teems with many different forms of such spirits, some which are benign and can be invoked for help and protection, and some which are malign and can be directed against enemies.

The fourth part are the Indic gods (Indra, Siva, Vishnu, Brahma) which Southeast Asia imported and turned into something rather like the local spirits – divine forces that intervene in the world.

Saiyasat has brought all these things together : the old 4th veda belief in incantations and magic objects; the belief in mastery over the self delivering supernatural ability; and the active role of the spirits of the dead in the world of the living. Adepts, through learning and self-discipline, can direct spirits and in other ways influence the natural world through incantations, powerful objects, and other devices. The main purposes are for protection from various threats, and inducing love, but the techniques were also developed for warfare so there is an aggressive side.

The best example of the merging of different traditions into saiyasat are *yantra* or *lek yan*, magical designs which primarily deliver protection. Originally these were simple geometric designs for aiding meditation. But in the Siamese tradition they have become much more elaborate designs incorporating not only magical geometry, but images of spirits, deities or powerful animals; mnemonic forms of the kind of incantations found in the 4th veda, written in Pali script; and magical sequences of numbers written in old Khmer. They have to be prepared by an adept under disciplined conditions, and activated by further chanting. But then they serve the purpose of transferring the masterful powers of the adept onto the new owner. They can be tattooed on the skin, written on shirts or bandanas or rings, or inscribed on amulets [like takrut]. A hundred years ago they were very widely used.

In the last fifty years they have been replaced by the Buddha amulet, which is much more suitable to the modern lifestyle.

But these amulets, and the yantra that preceded them, are evidence of the very widespread grip of these beliefs, and their close association with Buddhism. A very high

proportion of the services that Buddhist monks supply to their clientele is in fact *saiyasat* – including blessing such amulets, conducting ceremonies for building a house or opening an office (which is *athan*), or matching horoscopes of lovers.

In the past, the court patronized *saiyasat* as well as astrology. Much of the manual of the Arts of War is a catalog of high-end *saiyasat*. The idea behind the city pillar goes right back to the 4th Veda. King Mongkut invented a new protective spirit, Phra Sayam Thewathirat, for the nation. King Bhumibol patronized the forest lineage of Acharn Mun Purihatto. Until the early nineteenth century, the Defence Ministry had a department for manufacturing and distributing protective devices. Though the department has since disappeared, many military commanders take on the responsibility personally. To this day, police assigned to the insurgency-wracked far south are given amulets and cloths inscribed with yantra.

But unlike with astrology, the court could never get a monopoly on *saiyasat*. It has always been an unruly tradition. Many of the rebels in late Ayutthaya were practitioners of *saiyasat*. So were the holy-men rebels in Isan around 1900.

Not surprisingly, the state is often anxious to get *saiyasat* under control. In the Three Seals Law, there are provisions outlawing aggressive uses of *saiyasat*. King Taksin issued a royal order threatening the guardian spirits of the city with exile or execution by magical means if they failed to expel evil spirits from Thonburi. In the 1784 Miscellaneous Laws of King Rama I there are several clauses outlawing malicious use of spirits, love philters, and other *saiyasat* techniques.

These old legal measures made an important distinction. Employing *saiyasat* for defensive purposes which do not impinge on other people is fine; but using *saiyasat* with malicious intent—to cause causing harm or damage to other people—was a criminal offence.

That distinction has carried through into the unwritten law today. It's fine for a Buddhist monk to bless amulets, or bless the first pillar of a new house, or carry out chanting rituals to avert danger. Manufacturing Jatukam amulets in an aeroplane in a desperate attempt to improve their market value is also fine. Even cursing evil-doers is marginally acceptable, and it has become standard practice to burn chilli and salt to curse vote-buyers or even tyrannical prime ministers. But aggressive practices are condemned. The way they are condemned in current practice is to label them as “Khmer.”

There is no evidence that Khmer *saiyasat* is more malicious than Thai. In this usage, “Khmer” is just a Thai word meaning “nasty.” Many Thai believe Khmer adepts are good at love charms, and putting spells on enemies.

So Newin Chidchob is imagined as someone who can bring the “nasty” side of *saiyasat* into political play in order to aid Thaksin. Phanom Rung has become a focus because it is a Khmer site which lends itself to these nasty practices. In Sondhi Limthongkul's imagination, all the magical protective sites of the kingdom are under

threat because of “Khmer adepts” sneaking up behind the Emerald Buddha, and creating a magical wall around the Equestrian Statue so these powerful images cannot protect the monarch and kingdom—presumably against the demon Thaksin.

Conclusion

Let us sum up. Both astrology and *saiyasat* are “about power.” Being able to predict future events, or to time important events at auspicious moments, is a form of power. For great events that affected whole kingdoms – such as wars – accurate timing was critical. Similarly, the ability to influence events through supernatural forces is a form of power. Practitioners of astrology and *saiyasat* claim to be able to do things which most people cannot.

These practices have great prestige because of their historical association with monarchy and religion. The kings were able to impose something like a monopoly on high-end astrology, and they advertised this monopoly as part of the public display of their authority. They also tried to control *saiyasat* though this was much more difficult. *Saiyasat* flourished because rulers and reformers failed to end the Buddhist monkhood’s deep involvement with these practices – right down to the present day.

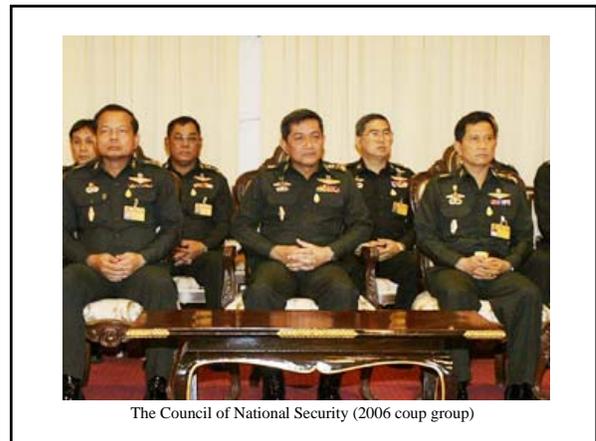
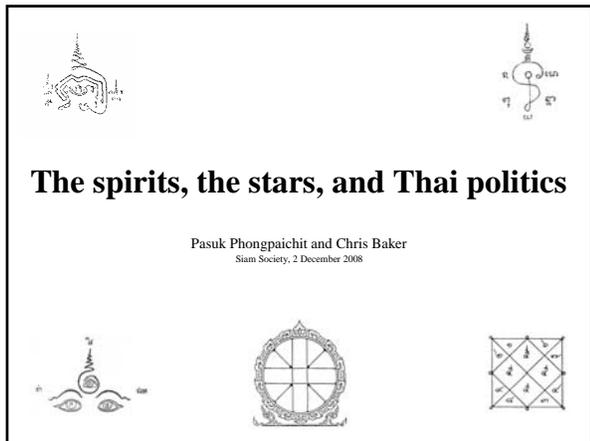
Today, access to these practices has become democratized. But the association between these practices and the exercise of political power has not been weakened. After the end of the absolute monarchy, the new military rulers took up astrology with enthusiasm. The civilian politicians who succeeded the generals have been no different.

The democratization of access to these practices means it is more difficult to establish an exclusive claim. This has created a niche for practitioners who claim such specialism or rare expertise. Perhaps the best example is the Rangoon sage, ‘ET,’ who became very popular with Thai generals and prime ministers precisely because they were almost the only people who had the opportunity to fly over and see her. Others like Hon Warin have had to work hard at establishing his expertise – by such devices as claiming special knowledge of the past lives of Thai generals in the era of King Taksin; and by making some predictions which proved true. Similarly, politicians of Khmer origin such as Newin have been accredited with special expertise in aggressive *saiyasat* as a result of ethnic prejudices.

In the end, the survival of these beliefs has a profoundly anti-democratic aspect. Generals who command a nation’s armed forces, and businessmen with assets in billions of dollars, are reluctant to accept that politics are moved by the sentiments of the people rather than the influences of the stars and spirits over which they can claim some special control.

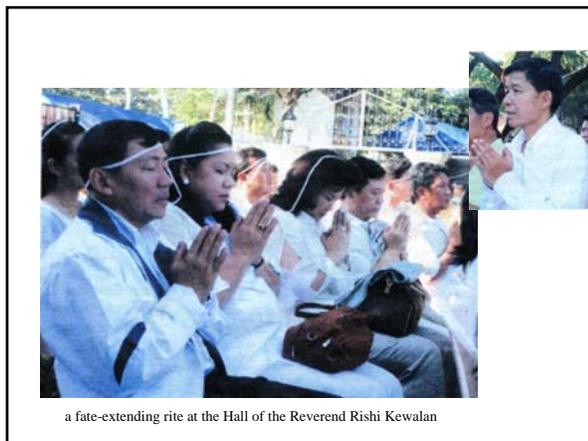
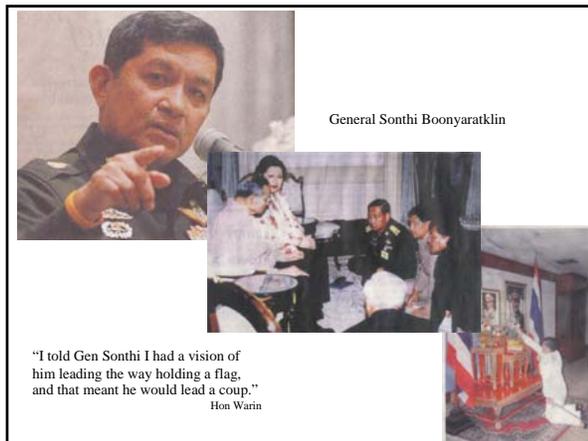
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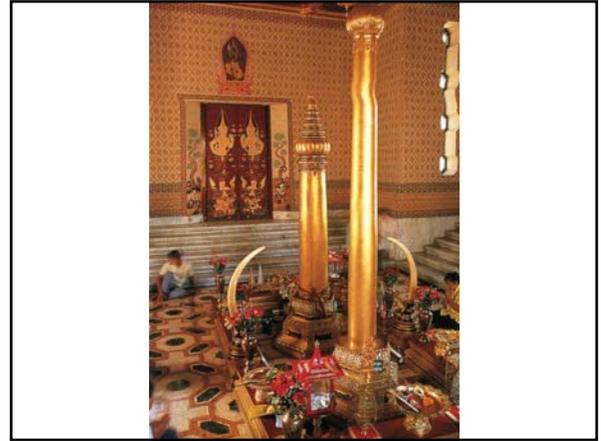
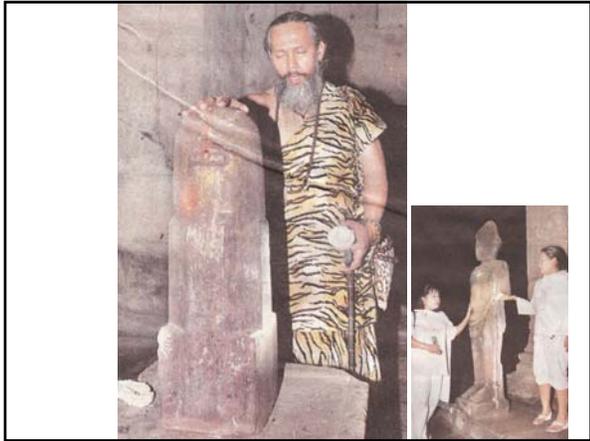
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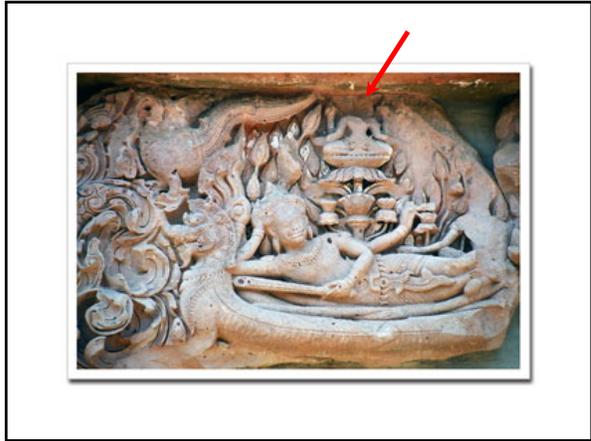
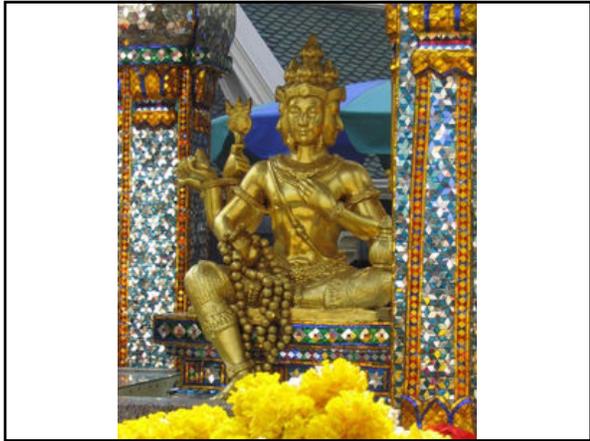


The Council of National Security (2006 coup group)










“For many years past, the powers of many sacred things including the spirit of the city pillar, the Equestrian Statue of King Rama V, Phra Sayam Thewathirat, and the Emerald Buddha, have been suppressed by evil people using magic.

Evil-minded people allied with some in the Royal Household Bureau to allow a Khmer adept to go behind the Emerald Buddha and take away the stone that emits protective power.

I must thank the women of the PAD because they took sanitary napkins from menstruating women and placed them on the six points [around the Equestrian Statue of King Rama V]. Experts said that the spirit adepts were furious because their magic was rendered ineffective.”

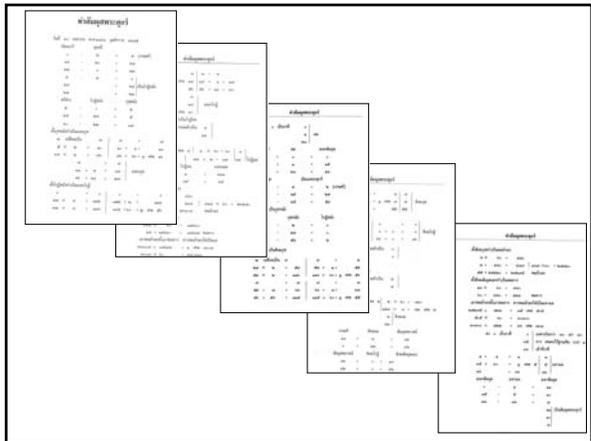
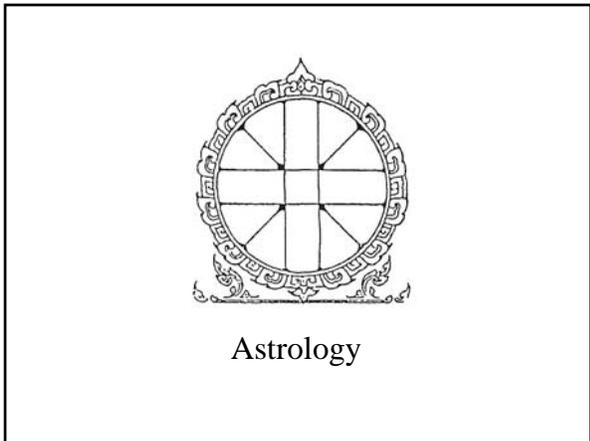
Sondhi Limhongkul, PAD stage, 29 October 2008

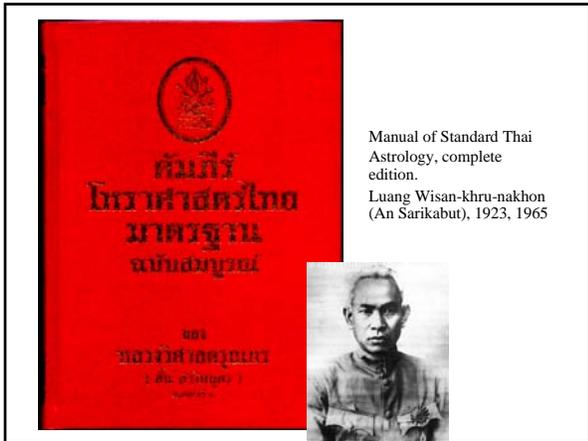




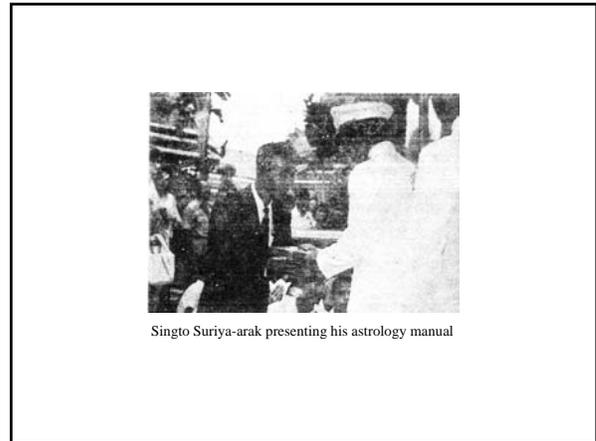

Why political astrology?

- to prepare people for events
- to give assurance
- to increase self-confidence
- to intimidate enemies
- to pass messages

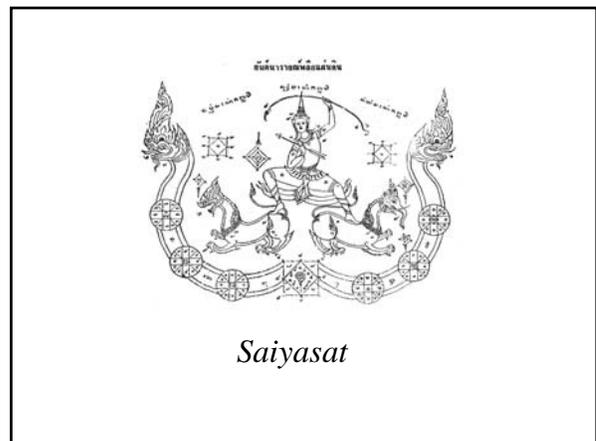
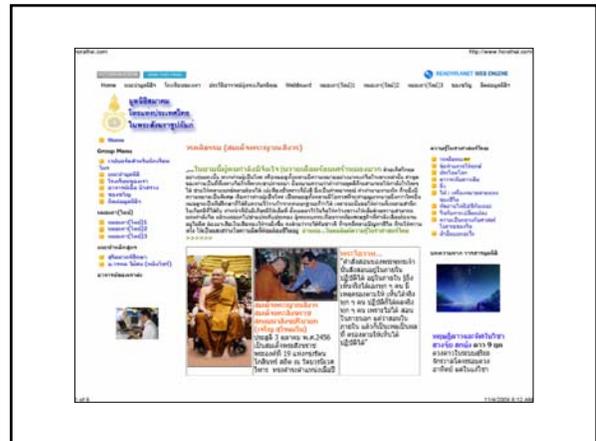




Manual of Standard Thai
Astrology, complete
edition.
Luang Wisan-khru-nakhon
(An Sarikabut), 1923, 1965



Singto Suriya-arak presenting his astrology manual



Saiyasat



Atharva Veda text

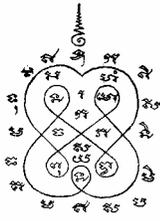
Indic gods (Indra, Siva, Visnu, Brahma)

Local spirits of the place and ancestors

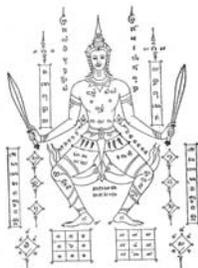
Self-mastery: asceticism, supernatural power

Atharva Veda: protection, formulas, devices

ยันต์ชะไมตาบอด

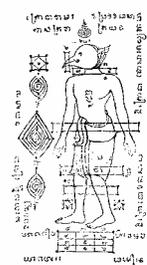


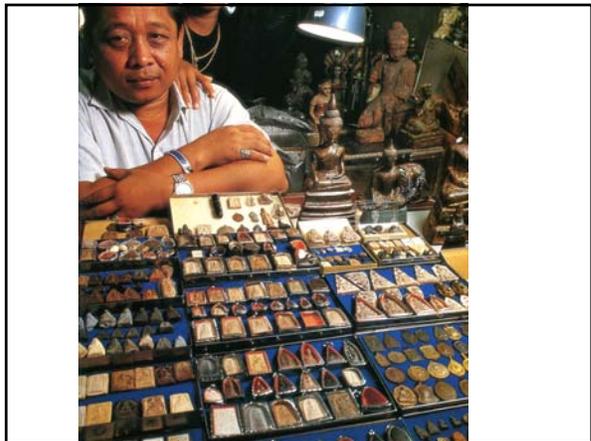
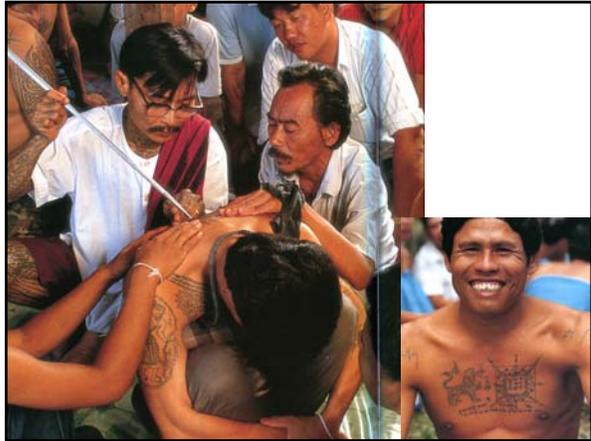
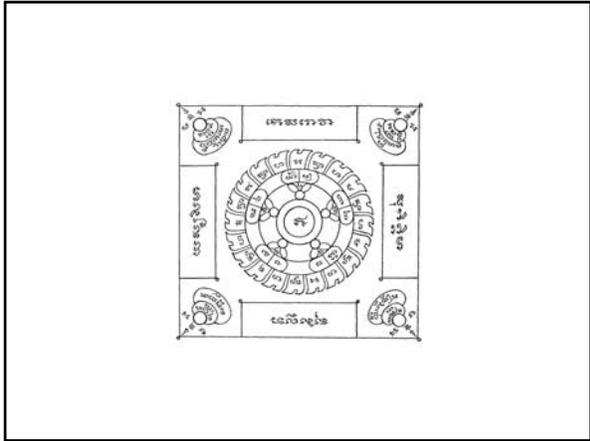
ยันต์มหาเศรษฐี



ฉบับของ อภ. ส. ธรรมศักดิ์ ๑๗๕

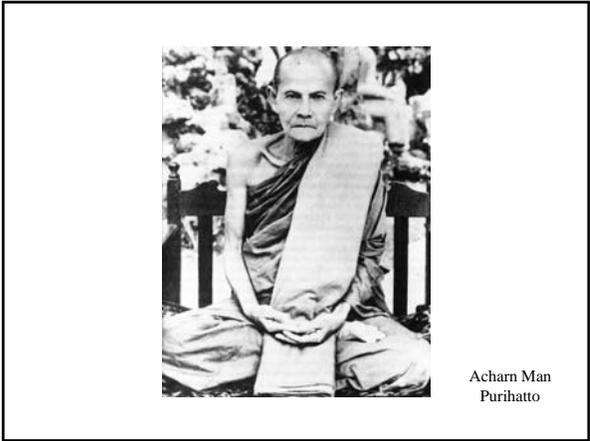
ยันต์กาฬใหญ่







Phra Sayam Thewathirat



Acham Man Purihatto



Soldiers posted to the far south displaying amulets issued by their commander, 2004

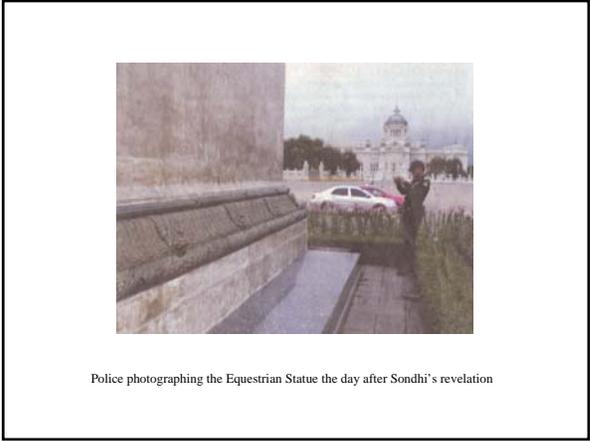


Pi bong, pi pa, and pi sat have created great trouble for the citizenry and caused the death of many public servants, while the guardian spirits and deities of the city failed to expel these evil-intentioned spirits. As there is no law to cover this matter, henceforth if the guardian spirits and deities fail in this duty they face punishment of being expelled from the city or being executed by *wetmon* (magic).

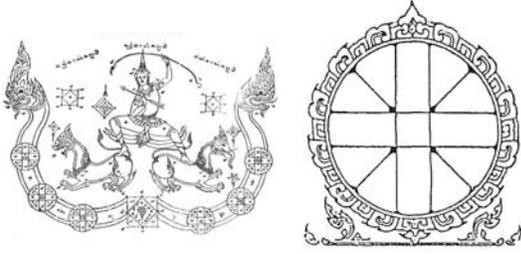
Legislation by King Taksin of Thonburi, perhaps 1771



Jatukam fever reaches new heights
The Lions Club of Nakhon Si Thammarat took Jatukam-Ramathep fever to a new high yesterday. The club put monks on board a special flight of One-Two-GO airlines to make the pilgrims while the plane was circling over the southeast.



Police photographing the Equestrian Statue the day after Sondhi's revelation



Conclusion

Thank you

