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Co-opting the stars: Divination and the politics of resistance in Buddhist Thailand

Edoardo Siani

Beginning in 2020, young people in Thailand have led rallies to protest the interference of the military and the monarchy in politics. They have also condemned the role played by Buddhist discourse and court ritual in celebrating kings as divine. 'No God, No King, Only Human' reads a protest sign. Simultaneously, however, some groups of protesters have used the same 'religious' repertoire, such as the astrological tradition of the court, in their activism, turning it into an instrument of resistance. This article explores this apparent ambivalence via an ethnographic focus on divination, a long-standing central feature of Thai politics. Drawing from a decade of fieldwork conducted with diviners (mo du) and their clients from both pro-regime and pro-democracy camps, including prominent young activists, I argue that progressive individuals do not necessarily need to reject cosmological ideas and rituals deemed conservative in order to resist. Rather, many proactively co-opt them to enhance their own position in the polity, further demonstrating the inability of those in power to live up to accepted moral standards. This strategy, which builds on a Southeast Asian tradition of millenarianism, mobilises dogmatic notions including karma in support of narratives and practices of resistance.

On a sunny afternoon in July 2020, a thin, dark-skinned young man with unruly hair climbed onto a stage in front of Bangkok's Democracy Monument. Grabbing a microphone, he blurted out sharp critiques to the retired generals at the head of the government, his hoarse, strident voice crackling from small loudspeakers. Apparently impromptu, he finally took an indirect poke at King Maha Vajiralongkorn, sparking cheers from a crowd of around 2,000.¹ Two weeks later, the human rights lawyer Anon Nampa delivered a 30 minute-long speech critical of the monarchy's perceived

Edoardo Siani is an Assistant Professor at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: edoardo.siani@unive.it. Research for this article has been carried out thanks to the generous financial support of SOAS (University of London), Cambridge University, École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and Chulalongkorn University.

1 *Khaosod English*, 'Thousands join Thailand's biggest anti-gov't rally since virus lockdown', 19 July 2020, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2020/07/19/thousands-in-bangkok-rally-against-government/> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

interventions into politics.² This open defiance of royal defamation laws and related cultural taboos³ culminated with a demonstration on 10 August at Thammasat University, in which female student Panasaya ‘Rung’ Sithijirawattanukul read a manifesto demanding that the monarchy be ‘reformed’ (*patirup*).⁴ Youth-led protests soon spread nationwide. The biggest, organised on 19 September 2020 outside the Grand Palace, the traditional royal residence, attracted between 50,000 and 200,000 people.⁵ ‘No God, No King, Only Human’, read a protest slogan written in English, tentatively undoing the supposed sacrality of the Buddhist ruler.

This season of street politics, which was especially intense between 2020 and 2021, has marked the most significant iteration of generational resistance since the student protests of the 1970s. Those who rally also draw continuities from the so-called ‘Red Shirts’ (*suea daeng*) of previous years: a social movement of different demographics but similar political ideas. Mainly middle-aged women and men from provincial areas,⁶ the Red Shirts formed in reaction to the royalist military coup d’état that in 2006 overthrew the government of Thaksin Shinawatra.⁷ In 2010, they occupied in the hundreds of thousands the area of Ratchaprasong in central Bangkok for two consecutive months to demand a return to electoral democracy.⁸ Some were critical of the monarchy, the rise of the movement being accompanied by a spike in the legal cases of *lesé majèste*.⁹ As the Red Shirt protests took place in the reign of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946–2016), glorified by state propaganda as an exemplary ruler in the Buddhist tradition, their critiques shocked many. Buddhist doctrine as taught in Thailand holds that individuals with vast good karma or merit (*bun*), accumulated through virtuous actions performed in the past, including past lives (*chat*), rightly and righteously sit atop the social

2 See Prachathai, ‘Chumnum thim harry potter rong yok loek kae kot mai khayai phra racha amnat lae fang siang nak sueksa prachachon’ [Harry Potter-themed rally demands legal reforms concerning royal powers and attention to the voices of the students and the people], 3 Aug. 2020; <https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/08/88882> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

3 See David Streckfuss, *Truth on trial in Thailand: Defamation, treason and lèse majesté* (London: Routledge, 2011); and David Streckfuss, ‘Lèse-majesté within Thailand’s regime of intimidation’, in *Routledge handbook of contemporary Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 134–44.

4 Hathairat Phaholtap and David Streckfuss, ‘The ten demands that shook Thailand’, *New Mandala*, 2 Sept. 2020; <https://www.newmandala.org/the-ten-demands-that-shook-thailand/> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

5 *BBC Thai*, ‘Chumnum 19 kanya: muanchon suea daeng ruam yaowachon ruam tua lon sanam luang kaen nam yam praden patirup sathaban kasat’ [The 19 September rally: Red Shirt groups with the youth overwhelm Sanam Luang, leaders insist on goal of reforming the monarchy], 19 Sept. 2020 (updated 20 Sept. 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-54217719> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

6 Naruemon Tabchumpun and Duncan McCargo, ‘Urbanized villagers in the 2010 Thai redshirt protests’, *Asian Survey* 51, 6 (2011): 993–1018.

7 See Nick Nostitz, ‘The Red Shirts: From anti-coup protesters to social mass movement’, in *“Good coup” gone bad: Thailand’s political developments since Thaksin’s downfall*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014), pp. 170–98.

8 The main protest site was a patch of royal land, famous for its exceptionally high concentration of shopping malls. Ünaldi argues that the Red Shirts’ choice to hold rallies in the area implies an attack on a model of economic disparity that allegedly gravitates around the monarchy. Serhat Ünaldi, *Working towards the monarchy: The politics of space in downtown Bangkok* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016).

9 Streckfuss, *Truth on trial in Thailand*, p. 205.

hierarchy, their superior status indexing a heightened moral standing. Located at the apex, kings are said to possess unmatched stores of positive karma, so exceptional as to be referred to as *barami*, from *parami*, the Pali term for the perfection of virtue.¹⁰

The Red Shirt rallies of 2010 were ended with violent crackdowns by the Royal Thai Army that stained the streets of Bangkok with the blood of over ninety people.¹¹ In May 2014, another coup ousted a Thaksin-backed government, represented by the premiership of his sister Yingluck Shinawatra (2011–14).¹² Led by the former general Prayuth Chan-ocha, the junta that installed itself to power afterwards arrested and intimidated key figures of resistance. As the bulk of the Red Shirts went dormant,¹³ small pockets of activists, mainly young, staged short-lived rallies that were usually met with draconian countermeasures by the military government. These were the precursors of the youth-led rallies that began in 2020.

Scholars interpret the ongoing era of mass protests as evidence of new attitudes towards the cosmology of old. When the people donned red shirts, writes Federico Ferrara, they finally stood up, ‘sick of being told that choosing the country’s leaders is a task best left to those blessed with status, riches, or good karma’.¹⁴ Ferrara juxtaposes the activists to those who favour ‘magical thinking and nationalist mythology’, embracing ‘hierarchical world views based on superstitions of merit and karma’.¹⁵ Employing a Weberian framework, Serhat Ūnaldi identifies the emergence of the Red Shirt movement as ‘a development [that] may lead towards the rationalization of political life’.¹⁶ Andrew Johnson concludes that protesters deny ‘any special place (...) as moral power’ to notions such as *barami*.¹⁷

Writing in the wake of the coronation of Bhumibol’s son, King Maha Vajiralongkorn,¹⁸ and of the military tightening their grip on power via a carefully managed election in 2019,¹⁹ Chris Baker advances that Buddhist cosmology ‘obviously has more appeal to those at the upper levels of the social order than to those

10 Stanley J. Tambiah, ‘The galactic polity in Southeast Asia’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, 3 (2014): 505–34.

11 See Michael Montesano, Pavin Chachavalpongpan and Aekapol Chongvilaivan, eds, *Bangkok, May 2010: Perspectives on a divided Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2012).

12 See Michael Montesano, Terence Chong and Mark Heng Shu Xun, eds, *After the coup: The National Council for Peace and Order Era and the Future of Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019).

13 See Tanet Charoenmuang, ‘The Red Shirts and their democratic struggle in Northern Thailand, April 2010 to May 2015’, *Trends in Southeast Asia* 11 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016).

14 Federico Ferrara, *Thailand unhinged: The death of Thai-style democracy* (Singapore: Equinox [Asia], 2001), p. 10.

15 Federico Ferrara, *The political development of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 272.

16 Ūnaldi, *Working towards the monarchy*, p. 24.

17 Andrew Johnson, ‘Moral knowledge and its enemies: Conspiracy and kingship in Thailand’, *ARI Working Paper Series* 192 (Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2012), p. 4.

18 Kevin Hewison, ‘Managing Vajiralongkorn’s long succession’, in *Coup, king, crisis: A critical interregnum in Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Council on Southeast Asian Studies, 2020), pp. 117–44.

19 See Duncan McCargo, ‘Southeast Asia’s troubling elections: Democratic demolition in Thailand’, *Journal of Democracy* 30, 4 (2019): 119–33; Duncan McCargo and Saowanee T. Alexander, ‘Thailand’s 2019 elections: A state of democratic dictatorship?’, *Asia Policy* 26, 4, (2019): 89–106; Prajak Kongkirati, ‘Overview: Political earthquakes’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 41, 2 (2019): 163–9; Pavin Chachavalpongpan, ‘Introduction’, in Chachavalpongpan, *Coup, king, crisis*, pp. 1–30.

nearer the bottom. Religious concepts are only one input into popular mentality. Ideas rise and fall. In an era which emphasizes enrichment, getting ahead, education, progress, self-improvement, such ideas lose traction. (...) Conservative ideologues promote the “law of karma” to persuade people to accept the status quo and their place within it. But modern interpretations of merit and karma allow more room for the individual and for action within this life’.²⁰ Tom Joehnk and Matt Wheeler hypothesise a rejection of normative ideas of karma as the youth-led protests allegedly challenge ‘strained arguments [...] about fidelity to a supposedly immutable Thai culture, about the karmic merit of power, about the young needing to know their place’.²¹

These readings, some of which draw explicitly from modernisation theory, are shared by some among the young protesters who have taken it to the streets. Aware of being a force of renewal after decades of political apathy by the new generations, they proudly present as agents of culture change. Some among them proclaim to uphold a secular worldview, invoking religion’s complicity with the status quo. Some define themselves as ‘atheists’, using the English term. Like the bulk of the Red Shirts before them, others however continue to identify as Buddhist, even if they can be equally critical of institutional religion. Moreover, regardless of these identities, many young protesters make recourse to divination in their daily lives and political activism. They ask sympathetic diviners, for example, to pick the most propitious days for protest, to prescribe sacred objects (amulets and *yantra*) that may protect them in clashes with the authorities, and to organise cursing rituals (*phithi sap chaeng*) against those they refer to as the ‘elites’. Some of them are practitioners in their own right. As they use divination, a practice often associated to conservatism,²² in their activism, they openly appropriate elements from the renowned astrological tradition of the court, turning them into instruments of resistance.

Based on a decade of ethnographic research conducted with diviners and their clients in Bangkok, with this article I explore the role of Buddhist cosmology and ritual in resistance.²³ Between the coup of 2014 and the death of King Bhumibol in 2016, I conducted participant observation with male and female diviners, roadside and elite, from both sides of the political polarisation, as well as trained in the prognosticatory arts at a prestigious astrological association (*samakhom horasat*). Since 2017, I carried out more periods of fieldwork until the Covid-19 crisis of 2020, and returned to collect new data over several months in 2022 and 2023. In this last instance, I focused on young political activists and more generally on uses of divination among the youth. All the interactions with my interlocutors took place in Thai language.

Contributing to the debate on the relationship between religion and politics, I argue that ordinary individuals do not necessarily need to reject ‘religious’, so to

20 Chris Baker, ‘Buddhism and authority in Thailand in the long run’, *New Mandala*, 14 Aug. 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/buddhism-and-authority/> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

21 Tom F. Joehnk and Matt Wheeler, ‘You have awakened a sleeping giant’, *New York Times*, 17 Aug. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/17/opinion/thailand-protests.html> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

22 Kwanruen Panpeerapit and Pitch Pongsawat, ‘Khwam Samphan rawang Horasat kap Kan Tham Rattaprahan nai Kan Mueang Thai’ [The relationship between astrology and military coups in Thailand], *Warasan Mo Jo RO Phutthapanya Parithat* 4, 2 (2019): 115–32.

23 Throughout this essay, I additionally reference media articles to substantiate information about the relationships and exchanges between specific politicians and diviners.

speak, cosmologies and rituals in order to resist. Rather, they co-opt them to demonstrate the inability of those in power to live up to accepted moral standards, ultimately pushing for alternative arrangements. This strategy, which builds on a long-standing Southeast Asian tradition of millenarian revolt, has the distinct advantage of appealing to a shared morality. Even the law of karma, assumed to be quintessentially conservative, can be used in support of narratives and practices of resistance, including the irreverent, the outrageous and the illegal.

Divination across the political spectrum

Diviners are ubiquitous in Thailand. They can be women and men, lay and clerics. Some tell people's fortunes from metal tables on roadsides and the common areas of temples (*khet wat*);²⁴ others operate from home offices or make house calls to the villas of illustrious clients (*luk kha*); others still work from cafes, online or over the phone. Their services are so highly in demand that, throughout the early 2000s, Kasikorn, a major bank, dedicated an annual report to the industry. In 2005, as politics heated up, a prelude to the coup the next year, national expenditure on fortune telling, excluding related ritual services, reached a staggering 4,000 million baht (roughly 110 million US dollars), around half of which was spent in Bangkok.²⁵ The same amount was disbursed in 2020 to move all overhead electricity cables underground in some districts of the city—the fifth most expensive public project of the year.²⁶ Since the Covid-19 crisis, fortune tellers seem to have become even more in vogue, including if not especially among the youth.²⁷

Known colloquially as *mo du*, 'doctors who observe', the masters observe—that is, study and ultimately tell—people's fortunes (*duang*) by means of combining well-established disciplines (*wicha*) such as astrology (*horasat*), numerology (*wicha lek*), palmistry (*wicha lai mue*) and the reading of tarot cards (*phai yipsi*),²⁸ with intuitions

24 Justin McDaniel describes some of these at Wat Mahabut, a well-known spot for divination in Bangkok. See J. McDaniel, *The lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: Practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 179.

25 Kasikorn Research Center (Sun Vijai Kasikon Thai), 'Khon thai gab kan chai borikan mo du' [Thai people and the use of fortune tellers], Bangkok, 2005.

26 *Phasi pai nai* (Thailand Government Spending), 'Information of 31/05/2020', Digital Government Development Agency, <https://govspending.data.go.th/dashboard/1> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

27 Niranut Malaengphu, 'Chiwit "say mu": kan naphue sing saksit nai yuk sethakit "khvam rew sung"' [Life of the *mutelu* people: Worshipping the sacred in the era of an 'accelerated' economy], *The 101 World*, 12 May 2022, <https://www.the101.world/mu-teluh-and-hyper-economy/> (last accessed 30 July 2022); Thanyarat Khotwanta, 'Khon run mai yang chuea rueang duang yu mai? Yuk samai thi mai nae non lae kan toep to khong turakit say mu' [Do the new generations still believe in divination: The era of uncertainties and the growth of the *mutelu* business], 26 May 2022, <https://thematter.co/social/youth-ans-horoscope/176098> (last accessed 30 July 2022); Nutwaree Titwattanasakul, 'Mutelu kap khon run mai: sayyasat mai baeng jenerachan' [*Mutelu* and the youth: Magic makes no generational difference], *The Matter*, 26 July 2022, <https://thematter.co/social/young-thai-and-mutelu/181331> (last accessed 30 July 2022); Nophasin Samkaewjaem, 'Horasat: Thammai khon yuk mai thai khao ha mo du mak kua jittaphet' [Divination: Why the new generations in Thailand consult with diviners more than psychologists], *BBC Thai*, 15 July 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-62181983> (last accessed 30 July 2022).

28 According to Rujikarn, the most popular divinatory disciplines today are palmistry, followed by Thai astrology, *lek jet tua* (a simplified form of astrology based on the lunar calendar), tarot cards and feng shui. See Rujikarn Sanont, 'Pajjai Choeng Sahed Thi Mi Ithiphon To Jetana Choeng Phruetikam

attributed to their embodied ‘spirit guides’ (*ong/khru*), a recurring feature in divination worldwide. As in other societies, in addition to making forecasts, Thai diviners provide practical advice for customers to improve their chances of success and avoid misfortune.²⁹ Strategically concealed and revealed to circumvent accusations of superstition,³⁰ they cater to an assorted clientele. Behind the scenes, seasoned businesspeople consult them on prospective investments; celebrities on how to expand their fan bases; white-collar workers on making a career move; labourers on securing better wages; and students on passing entrance exams and finding their soulmates. In short, anyone with something to gain or lose has reason to seek out the perfect diviner. That includes actors on the right and left of politics.

From the last Siamese absolutist king, Prajadhipok (r. 1925–35), to Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram (1897–1964), a key member of the People’s Party, the collective that forcefully brought about constitutionalism in 1932, and his rival, General Sarit Thanarat (1908–63), instrumental in restoring the primacy of the Crown, prominent leaders in the twentieth century notably consulted with diviners. Masters offered predictions on electoral outcomes and overthrows, as well as advice on the propitious days and times (*roek*) to promulgate constitutions, announce candidacies and stage coups.³¹ Politicians also had diviners select jewellery pieces that aligned them with the celestial bodies, and car licence plates and phone numbers that responded to the tenets of numerology. Some leaders, it is said, had their names changed on the advice of these specialists, each letter of the alphabet having specific magical properties. It is rumoured that some even underwent plastic surgery—be it the removal of a tiny mole—so as to attract followers as per the principles of Chinese physiognomy (*ngo heng*).

Diviners’ influence over politics continues well into the new millennium. The former general Prayuth Chan-ocha, Thailand’s mercurial prime minister for two consecutive terms after the 2014 coup, makes no secret of seeking out notable masters. Early in his premiership, he refused to work in Government House until 9 a.m. of the 9th day of the 9th month, an auspicious time, and on the condition that furniture in the prime minister’s office was first replaced on the advice of a feng shui (*huang jui*) master.³² Prayuth also patronises the Chiang Mai-based diviner Warin

Khong Phu Chai Horasat Nai Prathet Thai’ [Casual factors affecting the behavioural intentions of astrology service users in Thailand] (PhD diss., Ramkhamhaeng University, 2016), p. 286.

29 See Victor Turner, ‘Religious specialists’, in *International encyclopaedia of the social sciences*, vol. 13, ed. David Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 440.

30 On the uneasy relationship between astrology, science and the category of ‘superstition’ in Thai history, see: Nerida Cook, ‘A tale of two city pillars: Mongkut and Thai astrology on the eve of modernization’, in *Patterns and illusions: Thai history and thought*, ed. Gehan Wijeyewardene and E.C. Chapman (Canberra: Australian National University, 1992), pp. 276–309; Sikkha Songkhamchum, ed., *Phrajomklao Phayakon: Khwam Yon Yaeng Khong ‘Dasarat’ Kab ‘Horasat’ Nai Sangkhom Thai Samai Mai* [King Mongkut predicts: Tensions between ‘astronomy’ and ‘astrology’ in modern Thailand] (Bangkok: Illumination, 2019).

31 Chalidaporn Songsamphan, ‘Supernatural prophecy in Thai politics: The role of a spiritual cultural element in coup decisions’ (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1991).

32 ‘Sin sae nae Prayuth prab huang jui hong tham ngan soem duang kreng khuen’ [A *sin sae* advises Prayuth on adjusting the feng shui of his office for greater prosperity], *MThai News*, 10 Sept. 2014, <https://news.mthai.com/politics-news/381494.html> (last accessed 30 Oct. 2019); ‘Prap phumithat ron

Buawiratler, who hinted at predicting, if not helping plan, the coup of 2006³³ as well as the premier's ascension to power.³⁴ He publicly reproached Warin when, in 2015, the latter forecasted that the junta would remain in power for three more years, contradicting public reassurances of a short-lived military government.³⁵ In 2019, Prayuth additionally hired Phanuwat Phanwichatkun as his personal Chinese seer (*sin sae*).³⁶

Challenging commonplace associations between divination and right-wing conservatism, the ousted prime minister Thaksin, popular for policies hailed as beneficial to previously neglected provincial electorates,³⁷ also consults with diviners. He employed Phra Issaramuni, a fortune-telling monk (*phra du duang*) from a monastery in Phetchaburi province, eventually switching to Phra Khru Wijit Suthakan from Lopburi when the former disrobed over financial and sexual scandals.³⁸ In addition to local talents, Thaksin sought out the renowned Burmese female master Swe Swe Win, better known as E.T. (sometimes spelled E-thi).³⁹ Afflicted by infirmities that endowed her with trademark 'alien' looks, E.T. served the Thai *crème de la crème* until her sudden death in 2017. As is common, she was consulted simultaneously by Thaksin and some among his military adversaries. In the grand scheme of things, after all, politics has little to do with parties and ideology. Far more important for the conservative leader and the rebel who wants to change things is seeking empowerment by means of exploiting the rules of a shared Buddhist cosmos.

Indeed, at least some among the leaders of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, the formal branch of the Red Shirt movement, whose memorable speeches sparked an interest by their grassroots supporters in the workings of an electoral democracy,⁴⁰ made recourse to diviners. Before the 2014 coup, they consulted with a clairvoyant monk from the Northeast and occasionally their in-house

rab nayok rathamontri khon thi yisib-kae [Adjusting the environment for welcoming the nineteenth premier], *Voice TV*, 22 Aug. 2014, <https://www.voicetv.co.th/read/115105> (last accessed 30 Oct. 2019).

33 See Thomas Fuller, 'Thais look to the supernatural', *New York Times*, 28 Dec. 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/29/world/asia/29iht-ghost29.html> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

34 Jitsiree Thongnoi, 'Prayut, the fortune teller and the ghost of the guru', *Bangkok Post*, 13 Sept. 2015, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/690736/prayut-the-fortune-teller-and-the-ghost-of-the-guru> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

35 'Prayut tells fortune teller to drop crystal ball', *Bangkok Post*, 7 Apr. 2015; <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/520923/prayut-tells-fortune-teller-to-drop-crystal-ball> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

36 See Thairath. 'Nayok tang sin sae prajam tua tham nai yu yao paed pi' [The premier hires a personal *sin sae*, predicts he will stay on for eight more years], 5 Sept. 2019; <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1652745> (last accessed 30 Oct. 2019).

37 Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: The business of politics in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2004), pp. 8–9.

38 Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, 'The spirits, the stars, and Thai politics', lecture given at Siam Society, Bangkok, 2 Dec. 2008; *OK Nation*, 'Ajan nuay wat khangkhae tham nay nangsaoyinlak chinawat nayok rathamontri khon thi yisip paet' [Master Nuay of the Bat Temple makes predictions to Ms Yinluck Shinawatra, the 28th premier], July 2011, <http://oknation.nationtv.tv/blog/print.php?id=728570> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

39 'Myanmar mystics give supernatural help to Asia elite', *Bangkok Post*, 23 June 2013; <https://www.bangkokpost.com/print/356541/> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

40 See for example, Saowanee T. Alexander and Duncan McCargo, 'War of words: Isan Redshirt activists and discourses of Thai democracy', *South East Asia Research* 24, 2 (2016): 222–41.

brahmin (*phram*),⁴¹ Sakraphi Phrommachat. In March 2010, Sakraphi famously cursed the conservative prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva by pouring litres of blood at the headquarters of his party, the Democrats, and the gates of Government House.⁴² An Oxford graduate and suave orator, Abhisit himself is not indifferent to divination. Until recently, the British-born politician even supported the activities of an astrological association, personally bestowing diplomas in fortune telling on new graduates.

These ‘big people’ (*phu yai*) aside, divination thrives among the ‘small people’ (*phu noi*) of Thai politics, including the younger and more progressive. Sirawith ‘Ja New’ Seritiwat, a former activist, now a politician with Pheu Thai Party, who led several demonstrations after the 2014 coup, is the son of a tarot card reader. Chatting over a glass of iced milk tea at the tables outside Thammasat University in 2019, he told me that, especially after being assaulted by unknown men in black the same year—an episode that nearly cost the loss of his right eye—he consulted his mother, Patnaree Chankit, about the risks of his political engagement. Other activists seek advice from Patnaree, who at one point was charged with *lesé majeste* herself.⁴³ They ‘visit her discreetly’ (*aep aep pai*), recalled Ja New with a smile, due to fears that other progressives might label them ‘superstitious’ (*ngom ngai*). Ja New lamented that people supportive of his cause turned their noses up at protests that drew from folk cursing rituals (*phithi sap chaeng*). Also in 2019, a friend of his, charged with sedition, opened up about consulting with Ja New’s mother. He explained to me that he felt compelled to have his fortune told as a worsening political environment made life ‘uncertain’ (*mai nae non*).

When the youth-led rallies erupted in 2020, some big-name diviners such as Luck Rekhanihet ‘Fanthong’ and Fongsanan Jamonjan hurried to demonstrate their support for the monarchy.⁴⁴ Several pro-democracy masters, however, have since provided their services free of charge to protesters. Mo Back, a Bangkok-based astrologer popular among left-wing politicians and academics, offers readings to activists who worry about their safety. At volatile moments, he posts predictions about the course of the protests on social media, highlighting the likelihoods of coups and

41 To locate brahmins (*phram*) within Thai Buddhism, see Justin McDaniel, ‘This Hindu holy man is a Thai Buddhist’, *South East Asian Research* 21, 2 (2013): 191–209.

42 Salisa Yuktanan, ‘Ritualizing identity-based political movement: Challenging Thailand’s political legitimacy through blood-sacrificing rituals’, *Michigan Journal of Asian Studies* 1, 2 (2012): 89–110; Erik Cohen, ‘Contesting discourses of blood in the “Red Shirts” protests in Bangkok’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43, 2 (2012): 216–33; Eli Elinoff, ‘From blood, cast in cement: Materialising the political in Thailand’, in *Political theologies and development in Asia: Transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration*, ed. Giuseppe Bolotta, Philip Fountain and R. Michael Feener (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 72–5.

43 ‘Ja New’s mother cleared of *lesé majeste*’, *Bangkok Post*, 22 Dec. 2020; <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2039459/ja-news-mother-cleared-of-lese-majeste> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

44 *Phujatkan Online*, ‘“Mo luck fanthong” sathaban yang khong yu tam duang mueang khrai kit plian plaeng tham lay ja mi an pen pai’ [Mo Luck Fanthong: The monarchy will live on as per the national horoscope. Something bad will happen to those who think about changing or destroying this], 17 Aug. 2020; <https://mgronline.com/onlinection/detail/9630000083976> (last accessed 15 July 2022); ‘“Hon fongsanan” chi jitjai khon thai theung yangrai ko aw sathaban’ [The astrologer Fongsanan: No matter what, the heart of the Thai people want the monarchy], *The Nation Online*, 4 Nov. 2020; <https://www.nationtv.tv/news/378804325> (last accessed 15 July 2022).

crackdowns. The female diviner Karaket from Chiang Mai, in addition to likewise serving left-wing politicians, academics and protesters, writes opinion pieces on her popular social media channels, where she explores linkages between planetary movements and national politics.

Young individuals proficient in divination have become prominent activists in their own right. The grandson of a sorcerer (*mo tham*) from the Northeast, Attapon Buapat, better known as Khru Yai,⁴⁵ now a Move Forward Party politician, climbed the ranks of the protest movement by incorporating rituals in the rallies—initially, he tells me, at the request of fellow activists. Khru Yai, who makes a living by tutoring provincial schoolchildren (more remunerative than divination in his view), always wears a trademark orange or brown piece of clothing—his lucky colour in Thai astrology—and recites incantations (*katha maha amnat* and *katha maha niyom*) devised to charm audiences before stepping onto protest stages.

The Bangkok-based activist Phromson ‘Fah’ Virathamjari, who is well-versed in Thai astrology, leads the protest group Ratsadon Mutelu, ‘People of the Supernatural’, which aims to promote the use of supernatural lore in social struggles. His organisation of pro-democracy rallies revolving around the performance of magic has cost him dearly, including charges of *lèse majeste* as well as prison time.⁴⁶ Another prominent figure who has spent several periods in jail,⁴⁷ Sam Samaet, learned the dark arts from his mother, a Cambodian national proficient in the much-feared (in Thailand at least) Khmer tradition. In 2022, he donned the clothes of a dead woman, the mother of a fellow activist, to stage a cursing ceremony against the elites. The perfect day and time for the ritual, he tells me, were divined by Cambodian specialists, who looked into the future by sprinkling drops of their own blood into a pot filled with water on which floated animal bones.

Less famous activists with knowledge of divination, professional and amateur, debate ritual strategies for countering the establishment online. In 2020, students and alumni of Thammasat University, historically linked to activism, brought up these issues in the *Facebook* group, ‘Mahawithayalai thammsat lae kan mutelu’ (Thammasat University and Supernaturalism), while the hashtag, *#muteluphueaseriphap*, ‘supernaturalism for freedom’, trended on *Twitter*. In early 2021, users of *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Instagram* set up pages such as ‘*Hon Ratsadon*’ (the People’s Astrologers) for such discussions to take place within shared interest groups. Capturing the moment, Panadd Tempaoboontkul, a young female artist equally passionate about democratic change and divination, produces politically themed tarot

45 ‘Attapon Buapat: Aromkhan khong pho mo mai mi khatha rueang siriath khon khru yai sangkhom siang khuk’ [Attapon Buapat: The sense of humour of the shaman without special powers, and the serious stuff of Khru Yai, who risks being jailed], *Way Magazine*, 13 Oct. 2020, <https://waymagazine.org/interview-attapon/> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

46 Karoonp Chetpayark, “Ro dai yiam lae ro san metta ploy fah” khuy kap mae khong fah phromson theung khwam wang nai kan prakan luk’ [‘I am waiting to visit him, and I am waiting for the compassionate court to release him’: A conversation with Fah Phromson’s mother on her hopes for his bail], *The Matter*, 8 May 2021, <https://thematter.co/social/not-forgotten-fah-promsorn/142476> (last accessed 15 July 2022).

47 “‘Saem Samaet’: 96 wan khong nak su phu mai yom phae kap wirakam lan paet khong kathoey nay ruean jam’ [Saem Samaet: the 96 days of the warrior who will not give up with the many issues of gay people in prison], *TLHR*, 12 Feb. 2022, <https://tlhr2014.com/archives/40445> (last accessed 15 July 2022).

cards, which she hopes will become ‘part of the repertoire of resistance of the new generations’.⁴⁸

Taken as a whole, the protests took momentum in a period characterised by an increasingly overt use of divination by the youth. Previously, as argued by Peter Jackson, religious practices deemed ‘unorthodox’ tended to be hidden from sight, relegated to the private domain.⁴⁹ To elude stigmatisation, these young users and practitioners identify as belonging to the ‘*mutelu* lineage’ (*sai mu*), *mutelu* being an endearing and fashionable neologism designating the supernatural.⁵⁰ Many among them revisit and adapt existing practices and cosmologies in a bid to distinguish themselves from previous generations, also by means of incorporating elements from ‘Western’ and other cosmopolitan traditions. In this respect, they operate in continuity with a divination scene where innovation has long been the order of the day, and creativity has political implications.

Making political cosmologies

Sleekly defined by Stanley J. Tambiah as a ‘framework of concepts that treat the universe or cosmos as an ordered system’,⁵¹ cosmology plays a crucial role in divination, providing the theoretical backbone for the masters’ narratives and practices. Diviners in Bangkok tend to ensure that such cosmology is distinctively Buddhist. As they address epistemological questions related to their practices, for example, they associate one’s psychic faculties to the powers of the *virtuosi* in the Theravada canon, implying exemplary conduct.⁵² While acknowledging—and in fact stressing—the foreign origins of the divinatory disciplines from astrology to feng shui (exoticism contributing to their allure), they likewise subject their oracular narratives to a moral framework that is sanctioned by Buddhist doctrine.

As they predict revivals and declines to clients, they typically invoke the law of karma (*kot haeng kam*) as a universal principle of causation supporting the idea that every action (*kan kratham*) bears fruits (*phon*), with moral deeds resulting in good fortune, and immoral in misfortune.⁵³ They may attribute clients’ current successes to good karma or merit (*bun*), and explain downfalls by alluding to negative karma (*kam*). Depending on their distinct divinatory disciplines and personal abilities, some pinpoint precise actions performed in past lives as the cause (*sa het*) of clients’ circumstances in the present.

48 Sudarat Phromsimai, ‘Jetjamnong chokchata prachathipatai: an rueang rao thi son wain ai phai tharo kan mueang chabap thai political taro’ [The fate of democracy: Reading the secret story of the political tarots], *a day*, 2021, <https://adaymagazine.com/thai-political-tarot/> (last accessed 15 June 2021).

49 Peter Jackson, ‘The Thai regime of images’, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 19, 2 (2004): 181–218.

50 Suphitha Narawong, ‘Kamlai mutelu: faeshan rue khwam chuea’ [Mutelu bracelets: Fashion or belief?], *The 101 World*, 2019, <https://www.the101.world/amulet-bracelet/> (last accessed 15 June 2021).

51 Stanley J. Tambiah, *Culture, thought, and social action: An anthropological perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 3.

52 See Craig J. Reynolds, ‘Magic and Buddhism’, in *The Buddhist world*, ed. John Powers (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 343–6; and David Fiordalis, ‘On Buddhism, divination and the worldly arts: Textual evidence from the Theravāda tradition’, *International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 15 (2014): 79–108.

53 See Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, *Karma: An anthropological inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

Karma also serves as a framework from which to devise coping strategies. Diviners usually suggest that clients perform ad hoc rituals at specific temples (*wat*) or shrines (*san*) to achieve desired goals via the accumulation of new merit. This consensus aside, they disagree about which meritorious practices are best for which ends. Drawing from education, work, independent readings, exposure to mass media, and more generally ‘life experience’ (*prasopkan chiwit*), as many among them say, they merge textbook Buddhism with their personal understanding of cosmic processes. Geniuses of creation, they ultimately produce unique prescriptions for clients to turn what Charles Keyes dubbed a ‘moral universe’ to their advantage.⁵⁴

A female tarot card reader operating from a roadside night market once recommended that a lovelorn client offered two long noodles at a nearby shrine, symbolising two partners in a lasting romantic relationship. Outraged, a male competitor labelled this ‘silly’ (*ngi ngao*) and ‘ineffective’ (*mai mi prayot*). Should clients acquiesce, some masters offer to intervene directly in their fates via karma-corrective rituals (*phithi kae kam*)—a practice condemned by others as ‘black magic’ (*sat muet*). Eccentricity, so to speak, is a feature of the street diviner as much as the elite practitioner. Some colleagues still giggle recalling that Khunying Louis, the third wife of former-general Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, Thailand’s prime minister during the financial crash of 1997, was said to carry a pink elephant doll in a wedding dress on the advice of a renowned master.⁵⁵

Creativity transcends one’s political affiliation, the ‘conservative’ innovating as much as the progressive. As is well known, Buddhism in Thailand showcases an inclusivist pantheon featuring national figures like past kings, ‘Hindu’ gods (*thep*) like Vishnu and Shiva, Indic hermits (*ruesi*) who live in caves, and Chinese bodhisattvas (*phra phothisat*) like Kwan Yin.⁵⁶ Diviners may count any of these celestial beings—at times more than one—as their spirit guides. The famed astrologer Suriyan Sujaritpalawong, better known as Mo Yong, for example, channelled the god Ganesha until his sudden death in jail in 2015, while locked up for *lesé majeste*.⁵⁷ Warin, soothsayer to the generals, a conservative himself, snubs mainstream deities as his spirit guides. He instead channels Kewalan, a Himalayan ascetic unknown outside his circle of disciples (*luk sit*) and possibly invented by himself.⁵⁸ A palmister in his 60s who supports pro-democracy movements includes Satan (*satan*) in his Buddhist cosmos, invoking him in cursing rituals against the military.

54 Charles F. Keyes, ‘Economic action and Buddhist morality in a Thai village’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 42, 4 (1983): 865.

55 See Pokpong Junwith, ‘Lok si mon khong phon ek chavalit yongjaiyuth’ [The dark world of General Chavalit Yongchaiyuth], in *Lok Khwam Khid Khong Pokpong Junwith* [The inner world of Pokpong Junwith], 2014, <http://pokpong.org/writing/chavalit-and-econ-crisis-1997/> (last accessed 30 Oct. 2019).

56 For different approaches to this diversity, see: Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the spirit cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Pattana Kittiaras, ‘Beyond syncretism: Hybridization of popular religion in contemporary Thailand’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, 3 (2005): 461–87; McDaniel, *The lovelorn ghost*.

57 See Tyrell Haberkorn, ‘Putting the National Council for Peace and Order on trial’, in Chachavalpong, *Coup, king, crisis*, pp. 311–12.

58 ‘Hon kho mo cho fanthong prap kho ro mo sethakit rathaban phang’ [Diviner of Council of National Security is confident that change in Council of Cabinet the economy will spell economic disaster], *Thairath*, 3 July 2020, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1880929> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

This cosmological innovation can result in unexpected takes on power. Take the sensitive—one would imagine—debate about the status of monarchs: whether they are human or divine. Jackson writes that, by virtue of their supposed unmatched merit, Thai kings are known as *thammaracha*, monarchs who rule according to the Dharma; *thewaracha*, god-kings; and *sommuttithep*, ‘virtual’ or ‘assumed’ gods.⁵⁹ At the tables of diviners, these labels are open to debate. A master in his 60s, militant leftist in his youth, now critical of the monarchy, claims that all kings are invariably gods (*thep*) or at least ‘virtual gods’ (*sommuttithep*). People born that high, he reasons, must necessarily have the unrivalled *barami* of celestial beings. In contrast, a conservative diviner who in the early 2000s affiliated with ‘hyper-royalist’ movements⁶⁰ states candidly that gods (*thep*) do not manifest themselves in flesh and blood; that ‘supposed gods’ (*sommuttithep*) do not exist; and that kings are in fact ‘ordinary people’ (*khon thammada*), even if they do possess more merit than anybody else.

Daena Funahashi argues that, in the years preceding the 2014 coup, pro-regime Thais mobilised Buddhist cosmology in support of a hegemonic project. Suggesting superior karma, they cheered the exclusion of opponents from participatory politics by arguing that only the morally-upright possessed the wisdom necessary to vote.⁶¹ A female pro-democracy master I interviewed exploits the same cosmos to produce a subtle critique of the late King Bhumibol’s reign. Making direct comparisons between the casting of one’s vote at the ballot box and the transfer of one’s positive karma to others (a practice especially common for the ill and the dead),⁶² she claims that, in his final years, the elderly and ailing monarch was kept alive—and in power—thanks to the merit (*bun*) that oblivious citizens surrendered to him in state-organised rituals.

The correlations between merit and participatory politics this master highlights were originally present in religious mythology. Tambiah notes that Mahasammata, the name of the first king in the Buddhist story of creation, translates as ‘acclaimed by many’ or ‘the great elect’ as he was supposedly enthroned by popular will.⁶³ State forces during the reign of King Bhumibol exploited this scriptural precedent by promoting the modern idea of ‘*anek nikon samoson sommut*’, a king whose power is bestowed to him by the people.⁶⁴ In an exchange with foreign journalists,

59 See Peter Jackson, ‘Markets, media and magic: Thailand’s monarch as a “virtual deity”’, *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* 10, 3 (2009): 361–80.

60 See Thongchai Winichakul, ‘Thailand’s hyper-royalism: Its past success and present predicament’, *Trends in Southeast Asia* 7 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016).

61 Daena Funahashi, ‘Rule by good people’, *Cultural Anthropology* 31, 1 (2016): 107–30.

62 See Scott Stonington, *The spirit ambulance: Choreographing the end of life in Thailand* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), p. 23.

63 Stanley J. Tambiah, ‘King Mahasammata: The first king in the Buddhist story of creation, and his persisting relevance’, *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 20, 2 (1989): 102.

64 See for example, Chris Baker and Pasuk Pongpaichit, *A history of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 241; Thawi Surarithikul, ‘Rabop phrachathipatai an mi phra maha kasat song pen pramuk (8) [Democracy with the king as head of state (8)]’, *Siamrath*, 26 Dec. 2016, <https://siamrath.co.th/n/6903> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021); Narupon Sataporn, Theerat Saengkaew and Thanet Panhuaphai, ‘Kansueaksa wikhro kan ang hetphon korani kan sang khwammai rueang kamnoet prachathipatai thai’ [An analytical study of arguments explaining the birth of Thai democracy], *Manutsayasad Wichakan* 24, 2 (2017): 243–59.

the monarch himself raised the possibility of being dethroned should he displease his subjects.⁶⁵ The same discourse, now appropriated by a rebellious diviner, serves a narrative of resistance.

After Fredrik Barth's work on what he dubs 'cosmological variation' among the Mountain Ok of New Guinea,⁶⁶ anthropologists problematise understandings of cosmology as singular, unchangeable, and shared *in toto* by 'a people'.⁶⁷ '[W]e need to approach cosmology not in a static, bounded, and self-reproducing sense but as being in a state of perpetual becoming and re-creation,' asserts Bjorn Bertelsen.⁶⁸ Scholars working on Thailand, too, emphasise the role of agency as different constituencies tackle cosmological matters. Patrick Jory argues that peripheral elites 'support' the *Vessantara Jataka*, a sacred text deemed significant in propagating court cosmology, instrumentally, so that they can 'take advantage of the same concepts of authority and thus threaten the control of the Bangkok kings'.⁶⁹ Among these cosmological concepts is the very idea of *barami*, which Jory treats as hegemonic in the Gramscian sense. Katherine Bowie shows that rural subjects, on the other side, engage critically with the same scripture, producing vernacular interpretations that double as critiques of the court.⁷⁰ She contends that Jory 'presumes a top-down flow of political opinion-formation without a full consideration of the perspective of the peasantry'.⁷¹ An ethnographic focus on divination suggests that actors 'from below'—not only rival elite groups—also mobilise cosmological ideas from court culture in support of their visions of a more just polity. This way, rather than advancing competing moral frameworks, they put forward competing claims for morality within the same karma-governed universe.

Appropriating *barami*

Political actors, whether leaders or dissenters, do not go to diviners asking for 'power'. That would be in bad taste if not taboo, the generic term for power, '*amnat*',⁷² carrying a certain moral ambiguity.⁷³ They rather inquire about ways to achieve specific goals, eliciting the maternal or paternal benevolence of the masters. Depending on the level of trust and intimacy, questions may be more or less direct. While some prepare sets of issues to discuss in advance, others open up only if impressed with the practitioners, who begin their sessions by speaking impromptu

65 Baker and Pongpaichit, *A history of Thailand*, p. 241.

66 Fredrik Barth, *Cosmologies in the making: A generative approach to cultural variation in Inner New Guinea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

67 Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad, eds, *Framing cosmologies: The anthropology of worlds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

68 Bjorn Enge Bertelsen, 'Maize mill sorcery: Cosmologies of substance, production, and accumulation in central Mozambique', in Abramson and Holbraad, *Framing cosmologies*, p. 215.

69 Patrick Jory, 'The Vessantara Jataka, barami and the bodhisatta-kings: The origin and spread of a Thai concept of power', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16, 2 (2002): 62.

70 Katherine A. Bowie, *Of beggars and Buddhas: The politics of humor in the Vessantara Jataka in Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017).

71 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

72 For more on Thai notions of power, see Yoshifumi Tamada, 'Itthiphon and amnat: An informal aspect of Thai politics', *Southeast Asian Studies* 28, 4 (1991): 455–66.

73 Jackson, 'Markets, media and magic', pp. 363–4.

(‘*thak*’ in parlance) to win them over. A small number remain silent throughout (much to the frustration of diviners). Politicians can make precise requests: the best colour and shape for a party logo, the preferred start date and time for a campaign. In addition to inelegant, asking for ‘power’ in their case would be too vague, abstract, unproductive. Diviners and their clients, it must be understood, are very pragmatic people.

In fact, morality and pragmatism intersect at the masters’ tables, power being a by-product of Buddhist virtue. In Bangkok, diviners typically recommend that clients ‘build’ (*sang*), ‘increase’ (*phoem*), or ‘top up’ (*soem*) their stores of *barami* to achieve desired goals.⁷⁴ Disambiguating the link between *barami* and worldly success, a teacher at the astrological association where I trained elaborates that *barami*’s essential faculty is the magnetic attraction (*dueng dut*) of followers (*phu tam*). These, he explains, will offer money, popular legitimacy and favours to a leader—all essential resources in modern politics.

The masters’ usage of *barami*, a term primarily associated with kings, to designate commoners’ stores of merit, may appear odd. Indeed, in addition to designating the perfection of virtue in the Theravada canon, *barami* is linked to the specific ten virtues (*thotsaphit ratchatham*), sometimes translated as ‘royal virtues’, which are supposedly mastered by those kings who follow the exemplary path of the Buddha.⁷⁵ In contemporary everyday parlance, however, *barami* has additionally come to designate the extraordinary karma of notable lay individuals such as upright statesmen, teachers, business tycoons, and parents. When asked how exactly the term should be used, my interlocutors disagree, personal inclination clearly playing a pivotal role in determining who is worthy of the honour. ‘What constitutes authentic *barami*, who has the authority to make these judgments, and how to adjudicate between the competing criteria and evaluations advanced by different individuals, groups and institutions, consequently, is an unresolved—but fundamental—dilemma,’ asserts Erick White.⁷⁶

Diviners’ especially loose usage of term may be located within a long-standing strategy whereby ordinary individuals or collectives appropriate the idioms of sovereign power of kings. In pre-modern Buddhist Southeast Asia, extraordinary merit or *barami* was deemed fundamental for kings to achieve and maintain hegemony in the

74 How to do so without engaging in demerit (*tham bap*) is again open to debate—hence the endless cosmological speculations, contentions, and reciprocal accusations of meddling with superstition and black magic.

75 The ten perfections are: charity (Pali, *dana*), ethical behaviour (*sila*), liberation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*panna*), effort (*viriyā*), patience (*khanti*), truth (*sacca*), resolve (*adhitthana*), loving kindness (*metta*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). For the historical linkages between the concept of *barami* and Thai kingship via the idea of the ten virtues as presented in the text of the *Vessantara Jataka*, see Patrick Jory, *Thailand’s theory of monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the idea of the perfect man* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016); for a critique of how the ten birth stories of the Buddha-to-be presented in the *Jataka* are often associated in a too-straightforward manner with the 10 perfections, see Naomi Appleton, *Jataka stories in Theravada Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta path* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 12. On public relations campaigns during Bhumibol’s reign on the ten virtues, associating them to his persona, see Christine Gray, ‘Thailand: The soteriological state in the 1970s’ (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1986), pp. 91–126.

76 Erick White, ‘Possession, Professional spirit mediums, and the religious fields of late-twentieth century Thailand’ (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2015), p. 245.

region.⁷⁷ Before the adoption of modern concepts of sovereignty, multiple lords (*jao*), big and small, co-existed within the same borderless land, competing over manpower rather than territory.⁷⁸ The balance of power between their respective spheres of influence was said to be directly proportional to the levels of good karma of each, subjects feeling naturally attracted to the more virtuous. Within this model, individuals who lacked royal blood were free to join the competition for sovereignty if they could gather a large enough following. Peripheral diviners, whether lay or clerical, routinely did so. They first prophesied natural disaster and famine—cosmic signs of a king gone rogue—and next presented themselves as ‘men of merit’ (*phu mi bun*) in their own right, suggesting greater moral stature than the man on the throne.⁷⁹ The more successful led insurrections, met by violent repression by existing centres of power such as Bangkok.⁸⁰

Supporting this political model was the idea, prevalent to this day, that merit can be both lost and accumulated. As distinct from contemporary expressions of the

77 See Robert Heine-Geldern, ‘Conceptions of state and kingship in Southeast Asia’, *Far Eastern Quarterly* 2, 1 (1942): 15–30; Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

78 Tambiah, *World conqueror*.

79 Writing about the prophetic texts of Northeastern Thailand and Laos, Peter Koret explains that prophecies in the Theravada literature are typically formulated on the premise of a world in crisis. See P. Koret, ‘Past, present and future in Buddhist prophetic literature of the Lao’, in *Buddhism, power and political order*, ed. Ian Harris (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 154; See also Betty Nguyen, ‘Calamity cosmologies: Buddhist ethics and the creation of a moral community’, PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014.

80 See John B. Murdoch, ‘The 1901–1902 “Holy Man’s” rebellion’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, 1 (1974): 45–66; Yoneo Ishii, ‘A note on Buddhist millenarian revolts in Buddhist Thailand’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 6, 2 (1975): 121–6; Charles Keyes, ‘Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai society’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 36, 2 (1977): 83–302; Constance M. Wilson, ‘The holy man in the history of Thailand and Laos’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28, 2 (1997): 345–64; Suwit Theerasawat, ‘Kabot phu mi bun Isan 2445–6’ [The Holy Men’s Rebellion of Isan 1902–03], *Silpa Wattanatham* (2006), pp. 83–95; Patrice Ladwig, ‘Millennialism, charisma and utopia: Revolutionary potentialities in pre-modern Lao and Theravada Buddhism’, in *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 15, 2 (2014): 308–29; Michael Adas, *Prophets of rebellion: Millenarian protest movements against the European colonial order* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Ian Baird, ‘Millenarian movements in southern Laos and north eastern Siam (Thailand) at the turn of the twentieth century: Reconsidering the involvement of the Champassak Royal House’, *South East Asia Research* 21, 2 (2013): 257–79; Chatthip Nartsupha, ‘The ideology of holy men revolts in Northeast Thailand’, in *History and peasant consciousness in South East Asia*, ed. Andrew Turton and Shigeharu Tanabe (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1984), pp. 111–34; Paul T. Cohen, ‘Buddhism unshackled: The Yuan “holy man” tradition and the nation-state in the Tai world’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, 2 (2001): 227–47; Kwanchewan Buadaeng, ‘Khuba movements and the Karen in Northern Thailand: Negotiating sacred space and identity’, in *Cultural diversity and conservation in the making of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China: Regional dynamics in the past and present*, ed. Hayashi Yukio and Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy (Kyoto: Kyoto University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 262–93; Ansil Ramsay, ‘Modernization and reactionary rebellions in Northern Siam’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 38, 2 (1979): 283–97; Tej Bunnag, ‘Khabot phu mi bun phak isan ro so 121’ (The Holy Men uprisings in the Isan region, 1902), *Sangkomsaat Parithat (Social Science Review)* 5 (1967): 78–86; Katherine Bowie, ‘The saint with Indra’s sword: Khruubaa Srivichai and Buddhist millenarianism in Northern Thailand’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, 3 (2014): 681–713; Alan Strathern, ‘Thailand’s first revolution? The role of religious mobilization and “the people” in the Ayutthaya rebellion of 1688’, *Modern Asian Studies* 56, 4 (2022): 1–34.

Hindu caste system, while karma determines individuals' social status at birth, in the Theravada cosmos anyone may improve their circumstances through the accumulation of new merit—a possibility within this lifetime, not just the next. Welcomed by the underprivileged, this assumed instability of karma has always meant bad news for the powerful. As per the principle of impermanence (*anitja*), the latter may fall from grace at any moment should they fail to remain diligent in the practice of morality, prompting a rival to replace them.

An older diviner who makes political forecasts for newspapers explains to me that, when leaders act for the common good, they produce new merit, resulting in increased *barami*, popularity and political longevity. On the contrary, when they privilege self-interest, they spoil or damage (*sia*) their *barami*, estrange followers, and shorten their period of rule. The idea that leaders' *barami* may wane prompting the waxing of a rival constituency continues to run in the background to some divinatory practices that characterise the youth-led protests. A young astrologer, for example, advises activists on the best days to join the rallies by monitoring the fluctuations in King Maha Vajiralongkorn's levels of *barami*, which are indexed, in his opinion, by the sequencing of lucky and unlucky planetary alignments in his horoscopic chart. The master claims that the days in which the king's *barami* decreases are auspicious for the activists and their cause.

Immoral leaders who remain in power regardless of their bad deeds are said colloquially to 'eat old merit' (*kin bun kao*), that is, resting on their laurels, their authority being bound to collapse once the negative karma catches up. A master critical of the Prayuth administration reasons that even the retired generals must have at least some *barami* left to be able to command an army and form a government. This does not prevent them from acting immorally at present, however.⁸¹ Their *barami*, he insists, will run out at some point, prompting 'the people' (*prachachon*), understood as a comparatively more moral collective, to finally rise to power. Unfortunately, it is difficult to tell exactly when that will happen, for the karma of individuals is unknown.

Like the prophets of pre-modern Southeast Asia, only some audacious diviners imply that they know. Abrupt falls from power serve as leitmotifs for prophecies (*kham thamnai*) that, now as in the past, are whispered in times of crisis.⁸² The youth-led rallies themselves came into being as one such narrative swept the kingdom. Attributed to the diviner E.T. and in circulation among Red Shirt groups since at least 2014, this predicts that, as the result of a crisis, 'those in power will have nowhere to go' (*khon mi amnat ja mai mi thi pai*) and 'the people will be great' (*prachachon ja yai*).

81 This view resonates with attitudes towards gangsters (*nakleng*). Keyes notes that 'although villagers see the behaviour of a *nakleng* as immoral, bringing demerit as a consequence, they also see the successful flaunting of dominant values as signifying the possession of intrinsic power of an almost magic quality, a quality that is assumed to be a product of merit from previous lives'. See Charles Keyes, 'Economic action and Buddhist morality in a Thai village', *Journal of Asian Studies* 42, 4 (1983): 860; see also Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2007), p. 340.

82 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 332–5. Scott invokes Gramsci's notion of hegemony in a similar vein to Howe in his essay on cosmology and power in Bali; see Leo Howe, 'Rice, ideology and the legitimization of hierarchy in Bali', *Man*, New Series 26, 3 (1991): 445–67.

The latter sentence resembles the closing line of a poem (*klon paet*) authored by a student activist in 1973, and replete with prophetic symbolism: ‘when the skies become golden, the people will be the greatest in the land’ (*muea thong fa si thong phong amphai prachachon yom pen yai nai phaendin*).⁸³ On stage, protest leaders (*kaennam*) repeat the same lines like a motto, if not an incantation.⁸⁴ The mindful repetition of words by the virtuous, explain diviners, can make them come true.

Again like the millenarian uprisings of old, the youth-led protests erupted at a time of calamity brought about by the Covid-19 emergency. This was aggravated in Thailand, according to the activists, by an incompetent state administration. Phanuphong ‘Mike’ Jadnok, the man with unruly hair who first poked at the monarchy on stage, comes from Rayong province, theatre of a scandal surrounding the government’s alleged poor management of the crisis.⁸⁵ During the massive protest rally of 19 September 2020, Phra Panya Seesun, a monk from Pattaya, a seaside town severely affected by the decimated tourist industry, took to the stage like a prophet. Reading from a smartphone, he recited a sutra with a sense of foreboding over the fate of kings and kingdoms no longer aligned with the Dharma:

At a time when kings are unprincipled (*atham*), state officials will become unprincipled. When state officials are unprincipled, brahmins and rich people will become unprincipled. When brahmins and rich men are unprincipled, the people in the city and the countryside will become unprincipled. That is how things work among humans. If those who govern behave immorally, the whole population will become immoral. If a king behaves immorally, the entire population will suffer.

Protesters from the Northeast, historically linked to millenarianism, explicitly associate the uprising with those of the old ‘men of merit’ (*phu mi bun*).⁸⁶ The art scholar-cum-activist Thanom Chapakdee, who sadly passed away in 2022, saw this continuity as vital for the future of Thai resistance. The son of a village sorcerer (*mo tham*), Thanom collected oral histories about millenarian movements in his native Northeast, setting up art performances in sites where their followers were slaughtered in the hundreds by the Bangkok authorities. His goal was that the people

83 Vanat Putnark, ‘Muea thong fa si thong phong amphai prachachon yom pen yai nai phaendin: chuan an paed kawi nipon phuea chiwit’ [When the skies become golden, the people will be the greatest in the land: Let’s read the poem for life], *The Matter*, 21 Feb. 2020, <https://thematter.co/social/8-thai-politic-poetry/101493> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

84 Phensupha Sukkhata, ‘Kawi sipracha “Visa Khanthap” jao khong wakthong “Muea Thong Fa Si Thong Phong Amphai Prachachon Ja Pen Yai Nai Phaendin”’ [The poet, Visa Khanthap, author of the people’s great poem, ‘When the skies become golden, the people will be the greatest in the land’], *Matichon SudSabda*, 29 Oct. 2020, https://www.matichonweekly.com/column/article_363900 (last accessed 1 Feb. 2022).

85 ‘Thong thiaw rayong phang phinat hae thon jong rong raem risot 90%’ [Tourism in Rayong in crisis with 90% of hotel cancellations], *Daily News*, 14 July 2020; <https://www.dailynews.co.th/regional/784774> (last accessed 15 June 2021); ‘Prachachon kangwon tahan iyip khrob khrua sudan tham covid-19 rabad mai’ [People worry that Egyptian soldiers and Sudanese family will cause a new wave of Covid-19], *Thai PBS News*, 19 July 2020, <https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/294711> (last accessed 15 June 2021).

86 Saowanee Alexander, ‘Sticky rice in the blood: Isan people’s involvement in Thailand’s 2020 anti-government protests’, *Critical Asian Studies* 53, 2 (2021): 228.

would not forget. As in the past, the recasting of those in power as immoral may ultimately pave the way for new sovereigns to emerge.

Co-opting court ritual

The morning after the monk read the sutra, nine key protest leaders—an auspicious number in Thailand, linked to the nine planets/stars (*duang*) of court astrology and the related planetary deities—performed a ritual in front of the Grand Palace. Surrounded by a crowd of protesters, at the centre of the ceremony was Khru Yai, the activist who always wears orange. Clad for the occasion in the white robes of a brahmin, the ritual experts-cum-astrologers at the court,⁸⁷ he chanted prayers into a microphone, while the other leaders pressed a plaque into a block of fresh concrete in the royal parade grounds.⁸⁸ ‘This country belongs to the people,’ recited the plaque. ‘It is not the king’s property as they have deceptively told us.’ The nine activists ended the ritual with a curse, semi-farcical yet so venomous that local newspapers refused to print it in full. Intoned in unison, the spell condemned whoever would remove the plaque or order it removed to afflictions ranging from a diminished social status to sexual impotence.

The ritual was a pointed response to the recent disappearance of a similar plaque, originally installed in 1936 by the leaders of the People’s Party who had brought an end to absolutism. In April 2017, the early days of King Maha Vajiralongkorn’s reign, some realised that this plaque had been replaced by one compelling the citizenry to worship kings of the current Chakri dynasty. Remnants of red candle wax, a common substitute for sacrificial blood, I found on the site indicated that the replacement had taken place within a religious ceremony. In addition, police officers’ menacing responses to people who asked about the 1936 plaque hinted at the complicity of state agents in its removal.⁸⁹

Shedding light on the episode, some astrologers believe that the original plaque of 1936 was not merely symbolic, but rather part of a complex ritual strategy devised by the People’s Party to counter the *ancien regime*. Still visible next to the Grand Palace is a gold-painted log erected by the first Chakri king on the advice of the royal brahmins. Known as the ‘city pillar’ (*lak mueang*), this was an essential requisite for securing sovereign power. The time of its installation, selected on the basis of astrological considerations, was meant to determine the birth of the Bangkok kingdom as well as its fortunes.⁹⁰ Specifically planted in the royal parade grounds on 21 April 1782 at 6.54 a.m, the pillar aimed to tie the new kingdom to the House of Chakri.

History is silent as to whether the French-educated leaders of the People’s Party consulted with astrologers, but masters including the pro-democracy diviner Karaket

87 Nathan McGovern, ‘Balancing the foreign and the familiar in the articulation of kingship: The royal court Brahmins of Thailand’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48, 2 (2017): 283–303.

88 Panasaya ‘Rung’ Sithijirawattanakul, a female leader, joined her male counterparts on stage only after they had recited key prayers, as prescribed by gendered religious taboos.

89 Jonathan Head, ‘The mystery of the missing brass plaque’, *BBC News*, 20 Apr. 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39650310> (last accessed 21 Mar. 2021).

90 B.J. Terwiel, ‘The origin and meaning of Thai “city pillar”’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 66, 2 (1978): 159–71.

regard the plaque they installed in 1936 as a rival city pillar disguised as a ‘modern’ monument. They claim that the celestial alignment at the moment of its installation favoured ‘the people’ (*ratsadon*) as opposed to the monarchy. This would entail an appropriation of court astrology and royal ritual by commoners. Implicit to the reading offered by these astrologers is the idea that court divination, previously used to preserve sovereign power with the palace, can be co-opted by collectives from ‘below’ to secure the same power with the citizenry at large. In other words, to interpret the plaque of 1936 as the city pillar of the people means acknowledging the possibility that court divination might equally be used in support popular as opposed to monarchic sovereignty.

Just like their predecessors of the People’s Party, the 2020 protest leaders did not disclose whether astrologers selected the best time for their plaque. Ambivalent by design, their ritual is open to interpretation. Some activists who wish to disassociate themselves from divination called it a bluff, intended to scare the credulous men in power. Sympathetic diviners hurried to do their calculations, however. Writing on social media, a master complains that the protest leaders had been careless, as the time of the ceremony was in his opinion detrimental for the movement. Another pro-democracy astrologer counter-argues that the ritual replicated a tactic of resistance dating back to the Kingdom of Sukhothai (thirteenth–fifteenth centuries). He explains that, at the time, a rebellious diviner sought to overthrow the existing king by installing a rival city pillar: the planetary alignment chosen by the rebel, inauspicious to the monarch, being comparable to that of the ritual of 2020. This astrologer states that, back in the Kingdom of Sukhothai at least, the ruling lord fell from grace, and a fairer sovereign rose to power.

Dismissing all speculations, Khru Yai tells me that he did not select the time for the ritual, which was organised at the last minute. He nevertheless argues that the ceremony was ultimately efficacious because both leaders and the crowds of protesters were ‘genuine’ (*jing jang*) and ‘determined’ (*tang jai*) as they pronounced the sacred formulas (first a mandatory *chum num thewada* and later one of his invention), imbuing their words with potency.

Unfortunately for him, state authorities removed the plaque within 24 hours of its installation.⁹¹ In February 2021, Khru Yai returned to the royal parade grounds to perform yet a new ritual at the actual city pillar—the ‘heart’ (*hua jai*), as he calls it, of the nation. As violence escalated around him, fellow protesters clashing with the police, he attempted to co-opt the very deities (*thewada*) that have supposedly guarded it since the first Chakri reign.⁹² Without mincing his words, Khru Yai demanded that the celestial beings themselves make a choice, once and for all,

91 An instant monument to resistance, the plaque was resurrected in infinite protest memorabilia, from stickers to keyrings. ‘Mut khana ratsadon: Rong phu banchakan tamruat akhon ban rabu tamruat yuet mut wai pen khong klang triam song phisut lakthan’ [People’s Party Plaque: Deputy Commissioner of the metropolitan Police declares that police removed the plaque for the collection of evidence], *BBC Thai*, 21 Sept. 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-54230538> (last accessed 1 Feb. 2022).

92 *Phujatkan Online*, ‘Kaen nam prakat chai chana tham phithi san lak mueang samret yaek yai klap mop yang tok khang paraboet ko kuan jao nathi jep’ [Leaders announce victory in carrying out ritual at city pillar and leave rallies, while some protesters remain to throw explosives hurting police], 13 Feb. 2021, <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/964000014559> (last accessed 1 Feb. 2022).

as to whom they wish to protect. It is either ‘the monarchy’ (*jao*), or ‘the people’ (*ratsadon*).⁹³

Conclusion

Social scientists working in contexts worldwide challenge the thesis, as put forward by Weber and later elaborated through modernisation theory, that humanity will necessarily move away from ‘religious’ beliefs along its path to modernity. As argued by Thailand expert, Tomas Larsson, in ‘the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s, it was assumed that secularisation was a precondition for political modernity as well as a historical inevitability. Scholars today have abandoned both these preconceptions in favour of the view that there are multiple viable modernities and that religion is not going away.’⁹⁴ A growing literature focusing on Asia and Thailand shows that modernity itself—technological advancement, capitalism, and state ceremonies—produces ever new kinds of enchantment, including in the most ‘secular’, so to speak, nations.⁹⁵ Regardless, accounts on political change often present groups advocating greater liberties as agents of an inevitable push away from the practices and cosmologies of ‘old’. This line of narrative eclipses, from the pages of the academic literature at least, ordinary individuals who adopt the same practices and cosmologies to resist.

A focus on divination in Thailand demonstrates that actors of all political colours, classes and age groups resort to ‘religious’ practices and cosmologies in their political activity. These individuals do not simply refuse to change. On the contrary, they are extraordinarily cosmopolitan and approach cosmology with enormous creativity. If they persist in invoking assumptions such as the law of karma in political discourse, it is because these continue to offer useful tools for assessing leaders’ actions, at times even supporting calls for their removal. Erroneously depicted as the monopoly of the status quo, such ideas can serve multiple agendas, including the aspirations of a modern citizenry.

Thai protesters’ open co-option of cosmological notions, conservative in nature perhaps, such as *barami*, and of astrology-based rituals originally associated with the court, further demonstrates that resistance does not always need to be articulated in antitheses to narratives of entrenched power. At times, ideas and practices apparently devised for hegemonic purposes can be appropriated by collectives from ‘below’ to advance, legitimise and possibly enhance competing claims to sovereignty. As recited in the manifesto of the Ratsadon Mutelu protest movement, ‘the stars are the same across the universe, they do not belong to either royals (*jao*) or plebeians (*phrai*)’.

93 Kanban Kanmueang, “‘Khru Yai Khon Kaen’ prakat nam ratsadon mung na san lak mueang’ [Khru Yai from Khon Khaen announces he will lead the people to the city pillar]”, 13 Feb. 2021, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JINrOLg9HCs> (last accessed 1 Feb. 2022).

94 Tomas Larsson, ‘Secularisation, secularism, and the Thai state’, in *Routledge handbook of contemporary Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 278.

95 Bolotta et al., *Political theologies*; Peter Jackson, *Capitalism magic Thailand: Modernity with enchantment* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022).