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To Address the Dust of the Dust Under the Soles of the Royal Feet: A Reflection on the Political Dimension of the Thai Court Language*

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INTRODUCTION

On June 24, 1932, a small group of middle-level military and civilian officials who called themselves the People’s Party staged a coup which brought an end to absolute monarchy in Thailand. On the day of the coup, apparently in an attempt to win over the support of the masses, a leaflet strongly denouncing King Rama VII and his House of Chakkri was distributed to the public. It not only charged the king’s government with inefficiency and corruption, but it also questioned the king’s own integrity and motives.

To this day, many conservatives with royalist leanings still regard June 24, 1932, as one of the darkest moments in the history of the Chakkri dynasty. To be sure, the wording of the first announcement of the People’s Party was taken quite personally by King Rama VII, who viewed it as being too strong and unkind. (The leaders of the coup themselves later admitted their extremity at the time and made a formal apology to the king.) Yet it is interesting to note that while the author of the document clearly intended to show total disrespect for the monarch by deliberately using plain and simple words to refer to him and to describe his activities, the writer could not free himself immediately from the tradition of the honorific language system normally required of any reference by a commoner to a royal person. Indeed, the failure on the part of its author to make the wording of the document consistently radical or disrespectful - the fact that he still used a few verb markers such as “son”, needed to turn common verbs into royal symbolization-seems to suggest that in a society in which hierarchy has always been a fundamental principle of communication and interaction, not to observe the “appropriate” speech level may be something that needs to be learned. In other words, in a new social context, one may have to learn to be “bad” or “impolite” by disregarding this principle of language communication, especially when one has hitherto regarded oneself as being naturally inferior to the royal addressee or referent.

On the very same day of the coup, after taking some key members of the royal family as hostages, leaders of the People’s Party sent a letter to the king, who happened to be away from the capital, demanding that he agree to return to reign as a constitutional monarch or else one of the princes would be invited to
take his place. Unlike the leaflet distributed to the public, it is evident that while the message conveyed is threatening in tone, the formality of the court language is fully employed in this “ultimatum”. It may be argued that, as he found no new way to properly address the person traditionally standing at the top of the prestige ladder in a changing political context, the author of this historical document had no choice but to accept the usual way of doing things. The “ultimatum” thus looks like a non-coherent statement, since it contains messages which are totally incompatible with the opening and closing statements. So in addressing the king, the following introductory remark is used:

khāo -deecháʔ-faad-laaʔ-cɔŋ-thulii-phra-báad-poa̯-klâw-pọ̯-kramɔ̇m
request-power-sole-dust-dust-excellent-roy. foot-cover-head-cover-top of the head

“May the power of the dust and dust under the soles of your royal feet protect my head and the top of my head,” or “May Your Majesty’s power protect me.”

The People’s Party thus ironically begins its threatening letter with the act of wishing for royal protection. Indeed, it begins by acknowledging the king’s sovereignty and its own submission to his power. Furthermore, since the message to the king requires royal consideration or judgment, the following closing statement is used:

khuan mî khuan lêe w têe
matter will proper not proper respect-whatever ultimately-ca
son-phrá-karunaa
up to will roy. verb marker-excellent-kindness
pròod-klâw-pròod-kramɔ̇m
favor-head-favor top of the head.

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1. The transcription and its English translation of the Thai words used in this study are taken from Kanita Kanasut Roenpitya, “A Semantic Study of Royal and Sacerdotal Usages in Thai” (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California at Berkely, 1974)
“Whether the matter will proper or not, in whatever respect, ultimately will be up to royal kind consideration.”

So, just as the introductory remark literally expresses humility on the part of the leaders of the People’s Party, the closing statement is nothing but an attempt on their part to avoid any implication of imposition upon the will of His Majesty!

In a wider perspective, the usage of the Thai language (like most Asian linguistic communities) varies a great deal according to the notions of inequality based upon social class, status, age and sex. Proper linguistic form is a rule then even among people belonging to the same class, but with other social differences. Whereas English has “I” for the first person pronoun and “you” for the second person pronoun, a standard Thai speaker can choose up to 17 different forms of the first person pronoun and up to 19 forms of the second person pronoun, depending on the degree of politeness, intimacy or role relationships and the relative status of the people involved. But quite unique among the Thais is their view that people may be roughly divided into either royal, sacerdotal or common, and strict speech usages are required whenever members of different classes are engaged in any communicative event.

Although in 1932 the tradition of court language founded upon the notion of inequality and ranking did not save the absolute monarchy from its inevitable fate, its usage in this case seems to hint, interestingly enough, that the monarch still had a certain sense of moral superiority and sacredness over his rebellious officers. But if the tradition of the court language can somehow safeguard the prestige of the monarchical institution even in this difficult time, imagine what it can do when it has become the official policy of the government to restore and to increase the prestige of the monarchy.

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This paper is an attempt to clarify the ways in which the inner logic of the Thai court language which is permeated with its Buddhist ideology operates, and how this honorific linguistic system has functioned and continues to function politically, especially at a time when the "constitutional monarchy" has to cope with new situations resulting from fundamental changes in society.

Court Language and The Development of Kingship

The development of Thai court language is, naturally enough, closely associated with the development of kingship. A simple form of court language has been found inscribed on stones dating back about seven hundred years at the time when the relationship between the people and their ruler was believed to be that of children to their father. But as the Thai court came into close contact with the Khmer, especially after the third conquest of Angor Thom around 1431, the concept of kingship based upon the father-son relationship gave way to a Hindu-Khmer concept of divine kingship. Consequently, the honorific linguistic system and the accompanying differential gestures became highly elaborated as the people were transformed conceptually from children to servants and slaves of the king who, surrounded by rituals and ceremonies, had become more mysterious, magical and remote. Today most prominent among royal expressions are loan words from languages like Pali, Sanskrit and Cambodian, which are considered more elegant than those of Thai origin.

At any rate, as the Thais had already embraced Buddhism when their court came under the influence of Khmer courtiers and Brahmans, the linking of kingship to divinity according to the Brahmanic beliefs could not be fully accepted. As the leader of the people and protector of the faith, the Thai king was regarded not as an incarnate deity, but as a future Buddha or “bud” of the Buddha. The Thai court language is thus not just any linguistic tool employed by the ruling class to distinguish themselves from the “lowly”, but a linguistic tool founded on

3. For a brief survey of the concept of kingship in Thailand please see Thak Chaloemtierana. *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Social Science Association of Thailand; Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1979) p. 175
the dominant cosmological and religious beliefs of the people. In other words, the distinctions between non-royal and royal as reflected in the use of court language are not limited to vocabulary differences alone. All the royal expressions are meant not simply to enhance the honor, prestige and dignity of the monarchical institution, but also to express the deep sense of reverence, devotion and gratitude a humble subject should have for someone who, because of his accumulated merit, was now born to be the very image of the ideal Buddha.

It is only logical that apart from loan words and other royal symbolizations, such as the use of the verb marker “son” or elements (phra and barom-excellent and supreme), the Thai court language also contains a specific set of classifiers, pronominal references, titles, and status particles. For example, the standard first person pronoun (I) used when any common speaker officially addresses the king is:

khâa-phrá-phûdha-câw
servant-excellent-enlightened-holy being

That is to say, while a speaker humbly refers to himself as the servant of the Lord Buddha, the king is metaphorically elevated to the status of the Lord Buddha. At this point it should be added that while royal usage is extended to members of the royal family (although with varying degrees of reverence according to their rank) and another honorific linguistic system is also required when a layman addresses a monk, only the king is entitled to receive the highest degree of reverence. Even a foreign monarch or the Lord Buddha, himself royal by birth,

4. The ranks which royal children may obtain at birth are as follows: (beginning with the highest)
câw-fâa Lord sky
His Royal Highness Prince or Her Royal Highness princess
phrá-on-câw excellent-elegant body-lord
His Highness Prince or Her Highness princes
môm câw T for royal descendant-lord
His Serene Highness Prince or Her Serene Highness Princess
See Roengpitya, op.cit., p.55
does not receive as much reverence and exaltation as the Thai king. The element "barom" (supreme), for example, is reserved for the King of Thailand alone.

Furthermore, in addressing members of the royal family other than the king, the queen, the crown prince and the crown princess, the speaker is required to refer to himself as "kra môm" (my head) or "Klâw kra môm" (the top of my head). These terms naturally indicate the speaker’s humility because the head and the top of the head in particular are regarded as the two most highly respectable parts of one’s body. In other words, only the highest possible part of a commoner engaged in a communication with the royal person is allowed to be mentioned. But in addressing the king (the queen, the crown prince and the crown princess), the most appropriate term a humble subject can refer to himself is "I, the servant of the Lord Buddha".

Meanwhile, since the feet are considered the least respected part of the body, logically it is the highest possible reference a speaker may make to the monarch’s physical being. But in reality, even the royal feet is considered too elevated an organ to be mentioned. So one must address not his royal feet but

"tâj-fâa-la?oɔn-thulii-phrä-bàad"
under-sole-dust-dust-excellent-royal feet

"Underneath the dust and dust of the soles of your royal feet"

Likewise, when spoken to or commanded by the king, an inferior is required to begin his response by using the following formula:

phrä-phudta-câw-khaa-khâo-râb
excellent-Buddha-holy-being-servant-ask-receive
rab-sâj-klâw-sâj-kramôm
receive-place-on head-place on top of the head

6. Roengpitya, op.cit., p.68
"The Lord Buddha (of me who is your servant), (I) politely receive (your command etc.) to place on (my) head and on top of (my) head."

In addition, a commoner is required to end his response by the following status particle:

\[
\text{phrá-phúdta-câw-khâa} \\
\text{excellent-enlightened-holy-being-servant} \\
\text{"The Lord Buddha (of me who is your) servant"} \\
\text{or "phajakhâ" as its abbreviation.}
\]

The mixture of the Thai cultural belief in hierarchy of physical parts of the body and the Buddhist belief also results in a metaphorical pronominal reference of the king as:

\[
\text{phrá-bàad-somded-phra-câw-jùu-hua} \\
\text{excellent-foot-great-excellent-Lord-above-head} \\
\text{"His Excellent Feet of Supreme Lord above my Head", which is derived from an earlier version of} \\
\text{phrá-bàdd-somded-phra-phudtha-câw-jùu-hăa} \\
\text{"His Excellent Feet of Supreme Lord Buddha above my Head"}
\]

Politically, even more important is the ready made set of phrases—including introductory and closing statements—designed to glorify the monarch and to offer him the supreme reverence in all communicative events. For example, should an inferior need to address the king, he must first of all ask for the opportunity, indirectly making an apology, by using the following formula:

\[
\text{khâa-phrá-phudtha-câw} \\
\text{servant-excellent-enlightened-holy being} \\
\text{khâo-phrá-râadcha-thaan phrá-baromma-râadcha-warookâad...} \\
\text{request excellent-royal-gift excellent-supreme-royal-excellent chance} \\
\text{"I would like to ask Your Majesty for the opportunity..."}
\]

7. Ibid., p. 128
At the end of such an address, he is then required to cite the following statement:

\[ \text{dúaj-klâw-duaj-kramôm khô-deecha?} \]

\[ \text{with-head-with-top of the head abbrev. request-power} \]

"With my head and the top of my head, may the power (of the dust under the soles of your royal feet protect my head and the top of my head)."

If he is asking for the king's favor, the following ready made introductory remark is needed:

\[ \text{khô phrá-baaramii pòg-klâw-pòg-kramom} \]

\[ \text{request excellent-accumulate virtue cover-head-cover-top of the head} \]

"May the royal accumulated virtue cover my head and the top of my head," or "May Your Majesty's accumulated virtue protect me."

If whatever an inferior has to report to the king is some thing positive in nature - be it a successful campaign, a rich harvest, or a mission accomplished - he has to resort to the following introductory remark:

\[ \text{deecha? phrá-baaramii pòg-klâw-pòg-kramôm} \]

\[ \text{power excellent-accumulate merit cover-head-cover-top of the head} \]

"Your royal power and accumulated virtue have covered my head and the top of my head," or "Your Majesty's power and accumulated virtue have protected me."

On the contrary, should it become necessary for him to inform the royal addressee of something unpleasant or distasteful, he is required to indicate in advance of its content with the following formula:

\[ \text{mâj-khuan ca krâab bankhom-thuun-phrá-karunaa} \]

\[ \text{not-proper will-prostrate (oneself) prostrate (oneself) to royalty in form royalty-excellent-kindness} \]

"It is not proper to inform Your Majesty of this."

If it is the situation in which the speaker has to inform the monarch of something done improperly or something that has gone wrong, he has to cite the following introductory remark:
phrá-rāadcha-ʔaajaa mâj-phôn klâw-phôn kramôm
excellent-royal-penalty not-go beyond-head go beyond-top of the head

And as already mentioned, if the matter reported to the royal addressee is something that needs the royal decision, the closing expression has to be as follows:

khuan mî khuan léew tîe
matter will proper not proper respect-whatever ultimately-ca son-phrá-karunaa
up to will roy. verb marker-excellent-kindness
prôod-klâw-prôod-kramôm
favor-head-favor top of the head

"Whether the matter will be proper or not, in whatever respect, ultimately will be up to royal kind consideration."

A linguistic system which demands the utmost humility on the part of a subject and presupposes the budding Buddhahood on the part of the ruler works out best in a traditionally Buddhist society under an absolute monarch. To be sure, certain kings in the past had taken upon themselves to proclaim rules concerning how their officers and their subjects should address them. Naturally a monarch on his part is not supposed to use royal expressions to refer to himself, nor is he required to reciprocate an inferior with a similar set of speech level.

POLITICAL CHANGE AND COURT LANGUAGE.

How leaders of the People’s Party, which successfully overthrew the monarchical regime in 1932, reacted to this undemocratic “culture” is rather predictable. Following the coup, many traditional festivals and ceremonies associated with the Thai monarchy were no longer observed. Then, in 1940, citing the need to eliminate any remnant of class distinction in a “democratic”

8. Worrananda Aksompong, How To Use the Thai Court Language (Chulalongkorn University Press, Bangkok, 1985) p.296 (in Thai)
Field Marshal Pibulsongkram, the then Prime Minister and one of the leaders of the 1932 coup, banned the use of all other higher versions of the word “birthday” traditionally used by people belonging to different social classes and proclaimed that the plain word “birthday” be used by all. Next, in 1942, Pibulsongkram launched a comprehensive program to simplify and democratize the Thai language - an act which may be interpreted as an indirect attack on the sacredness of the royal usage. For example, in order to simplify the spelling system, 13 consonants (out of 44 in the Thai alphabet) which originated from Pali and Sanskrit were dropped. Since loan words from Pali and Sanskrit make up most of the royal expressions, simple spelling style would turn the whole court language into something quite ridiculous. Most revealing, however, is Pibulsongkram’s remark made on October 23, 1943, concerning the annual wreath-laying ceremony, commemorating the death of King Chulalongkorn the Great (1868-1910), a beloved monarch, who was often referred to as “Phra Phúdta Cǎw Luan” (The Royal Buddha). On this occasion he said: “Instruct Radio Thailand this morning to ask people who participate in the wreath-laying ceremony at the statue of King Chulachomklao not to use the word “Phrá Phúdta Cǎw Luan”, because that would make him greater than the Lord Buddha”

The fact that Pibulsongkram’s attempt to reform the Thai language took place during wartime, when Thailand found herself fighting in WWII on the side of Japan, may account for its failure. The structure of the honorific system, like that of the whole Thai language, remains intact. When Pibulsongkram, who resigned as Prime Minister shortly before the end of the war, returned to power following the 1947 coup, he was no less anti-royalist than he had been before. But this time around his policy towards the monarchy appeared to be that of containment. While allowed to perform his role as the head of state, the present king (who succeeded his elder brother to the throne in 1946) was discouraged

10. Ibid., p. 143
from having any regular contact with the public. Before 1957, the only time that he ever visited his subjects was the trip to the Northeast in 1955. His possible influence on national affairs was therefore neutralized. Without any public exposure, the use of the court language must have been limited to very few people surrounding the king.

In 1957 Pibulsongkram himself was ousted from power by a coup led by a new generation of military leaders who had taken no part in the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy. Having no historical nor constitutional basis for legitimacy, the leader of the 1957 coup group, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, turned to the monarch for support and legitimacy.\(^{12}\) Deliberately trying to popularize the throne, Sarit encouraged the king to visit his subjects and to grant more audiences to private citizens and groups. In its earnest effort to enhance the prestige of the monarchy and to strengthen the government’s legitimacy, even traditional ceremonies that had not been in use since the days of King Chulalongkorn were also revived. As a result, the king’s personal authority in national politics has grown and expanded up to the point where he has practically become the final and ultimate source of political legitimacy. As a matter of fact, because Thailand has experienced scores of coups and coup attempts since 1932, the monarchy has become the only institution capable of unifying the people, who believe it to be the one that can best represent the national interest. Eventually the succeeding military regimes have no choice but to turn to the king for his support and advice. Even under a wider democracy, it is not uncommon to find that following major political appointments or military transfers which to

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12. Thus, on September 17, 1957, apparently in an attempt to pacify the public, Sarit stated in a press interview that "I am the Defender of the Capitol and can give orders in accordance with the law because it is phrá-baromma-rāađcha-ʔoŋkarn (excellent-supreme-royal-command) (Royal Command)" Chaloemtiarana, op.cit., p. 124. It is interesting to note that in the most recent military coup against a democratically elected government last February, the military junta also proceeded to have the king issue the "royal command" appointing them to the National Peace Keeping Committee.
be legally effective require a royal proclamations, those newly appointed politicians or officials would often put aside any criticism of their qualification by simply expressing their gratitude for having been granted

"phrá mahaa karunaa thikun"

excellent-great-kindness-great-virtue

"royal kindness"

As the king's political influence and prestige grows and more people, both officials and private groups, seek the royal blessing, the use of court language is no longer contained to only those who closely serve him. The ability to use the royal expressions correctly is now expected from any educated person. Today the definition of raacha-sàb (court language), which originally meant royal expressions, has been modified to mean polite or appropriate speech level to be used when addressing or referring to the king, members of the royal family, Buddhist monks, members of the nobility or government officials, and people with status. 13 Instructions on how to use the court language correctly are included in the school curriculum as part of Thai grammar. On this matter it is interesting to note that whereas prior to 1957 there were very few books written on or about the proper usage of the court language, the number of books dealing with various aspects of this subject has grown considerably since. A brief survey of the number of books listed under the heading "court language" at the central library of Thammasat University alone shows that at least 40 books have been published since the popularization of the throne has begun. A good of these books have been written by people who are closely associated with the Office of the Royal Household. One of these small books has run into its 10th edition!

However, it is the rise of communication technology, like television news coverage, which more than anything else has exposed the public to the usage of court language. At a certain time of the day, every radio and television station in Thailand is required to present "news" and the first piece of news to be reported is always the so-called "news from the palace". Certain state ceremonies and a few royal occasions are regularly televised and broadcast live. The correct usage

13. Aksompong, op.cit., p.8
of the honorific linguistic system in reporting such activities is considered a must. In connection with this matter, while the Office of the Royal Household has often stated that there is no need for an ordinary subject to employ court language when spoken to by the king, and that one can respond to His Majesty’s question or greeting by using ordinary words, it has never been the official policy to do away with the system altogether. In fact, government agencies, like the Office of the Royal Household, the Ministry of Education and the Department of Public Relations, all have had their share in trying to provide the general public (and especially those working in the mass media business) with sufficient knowledge on how to use proper court language. A standard argument for strict observance of the rule of the royal usage has been that even ordinary citizens should be prepared to express their reverence and loyalty to the king through the appropriate choice of words.

It should be pointed out that the focus here is on the proper usage or the know-how side of the practice, with an emphasis on tradition and appropriateness. Conspicuously missing from all the texts and manuals on this honorific linguistic system is the literal or cosmological explanation of the court language itself. It might not be too bold then to suggest that most Thai people most of the time never bother to think about the literal meaning of the royal usage. Indeed, very few people would have the occasion or reasons to reflect on the literal meaning of such words. That is to say, full understanding and appreciation of the royal expressions is not essential nor required here. It does not really matter if the subjects never actually believe that the king is on his way to be the future Buddha. Having been brought up and socialized to accept the honorific linguistic system as something right and appropriate, even the most sophisticated Thais can readily accept the honorific form, if not the literal meaning of the court language. After all, when the king “reaches heaven” (sāwannakhōd), one knows that he dies. Still, the whole tradition of royal usage - something which only those few who were born into it can practice fluently - must have contributed considerably to the aura of sacredness and purity in the person of the monarch.

14. Ibid., p. 22
15. Ibid., p. 299
16. Ibid., p. 220
Buddhist Monks and Court Language

But whereas the literal meaning of the royal expressions is not and should not be emphasized when a commoner is engaged in a communicative event with the royal person, the opposite seems to be true in the case of communication between a Buddhist monk and the king. This is evident from the fact that when addressing the king, the monk is required to refer to himself as "tàad tamâ phâab" which literally means "self-state". It should be noticed that this term differs significantly from the one normally used by any commoner because it does not express any humility on the part of the speaker nor any exaltation toward the addressee. That is the terms are rather neutral in meaning. The monk is next required to address the king as

"sômôd bôpôhid phróräadcha sômpôhaan câw"

great supreme ruler excellent royal-accumulated merits-royal (the great and supreme ruler, the excellent royal accumulated merits who is royalty) or "mahha bôpôhid" (great ruler).

Again, in using such a term to address the king, the sacerdotal speaker recognizes the significant role of the monarch and honors him accordingly, though there is nothing here which implies any humility on the part of the speaker. Moreover, a monk is also required to begin and close his speech with the king with the same word "Thawaaï-ôôä-réôôon" (present-excellent-blessings). Of course, this formula may be viewed as an expression of exaltation-but no humility is implied on the part of the sacerdotal speaker. The notions of inequality and status which must be taken into account whenever people belonging to different social classes communicate with each other is simply not relevant when a monk is involved. This is precisely because philosophically speaking monks are supposed to be on another plane removed from and higher than that of the the layman. Being a carrier of Buddhism, a monk is theoretically superior to even the monarch and does not need to express his humility towards the ruler. But in communicating with the

17. Roengpitya, op. cit., p. 49
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., pp. 51-2
Supreme Patriarch, one is required to address him as if he were a “Phrá ?on cāw” (excellent elegant-body-lord) - His Highness Prince of the monks. Moreover in the event that a member of the royal family enters the monkhood, his noble status is retained and one is required to address him accordingly. Therefore, even if the system of court language does not overrule the superiority /inferiority relationship between a monk and a layman, it, nevertheless, has a place and a role to play within the Buddhist Order.

Other Faiths and Court Language

Though basically a Buddhist society, Thailand also has a large number of believers of other faiths. With the exception of the Thai Muslims in the South, these non-Buddhist citizens seem to have relatively little problem in living with the court language. It is most likely that these people, particularly Christian laymen, have come to accept the use of royal expressions in the very same way most Buddhist Thais do-i.e., without giving any conscious thought to the literal meanings. Thus, in a poem especially dedicated to the king on his being the longest reigning monarcy in Thai history, the author, who wrote the piece on behalf of the Assumption Convent School, a Catholic establishment in Bangkok, had no problem in referring to himself as “I, the servant of the Lord Buddha”. In fact, in the poem he even wishes the king would eventually “reach nirvana”, the Buddhist ideal state. Meanwhile, in his message issued on the occasion of the royal birthday, Cardinal Meechai Kijboonchu, the spiritual leader of the Catholic community in Thailand, wisely imitated his Buddhist counterpart by referring to himself as “? âaadṭama-phâb” (self - state) and closed his statement with the expression “thawāai-phra-phoon (present-excellent-blessing)” In the message issued on the same occasion, the head of the Sikh community in Thailand not only referred to himself as “khaā-phrá-pharūṭha-cāw” (servant of the Lord

20. Aksompong, op.cit., p. 166
22. Message delivered by Cardinal Meechai Kijboonchu on the occasion of His Majesty’s Sixtieth Birthday. December 5, 1987
Buddha), but he also begins his message using the standard introductory statement of
deetchá?-fâa-la? enco-thulii-phrá-bàaad pòg-klaw pòg-kram3m
power-sole-dust-dust-excellent-royal-foot-cover-head cover-top of the head and ends it with the same standard closing expression:
dûaj-klâw-dûaj-kramom khôc-deetchá?
with-head-with-top of the head-request-power 23

The case of Thai Muslims is different. They find it impossible to knowingly observe such practices. Being a minority, religious as well as racial and linguistic, in a predominantly Buddhist society, they are very conscious of their distinct identity and have the tendency to be highly protective of it. Unlike the Thai speaking Christians, the Malay-speaking Thai Muslims strongly object to the requirement that they refer to themselves as khâa-phrá-phûdhtha câw (servant of the Lord Buddha), arguing that to do so is obviously against the most fundamental faith of their religion which, like Christianity, upholds the idea of one God.

Even to sing the royal anthem is, strictly speaking, not permissible for the Muslims because the singer is required to refer to himself as "khâa-phrá-phûdhtha-câw" and to offer to “prostrate” oneself before the king. In Islamic culture such a form of absolute submission is reserved for God alone. 24 It is interesting to observe further that in his message to the monarch on his royal birthday, the Chularajamontri, the official spiritual leader of the Muslim community who is not a priest, deliberately avoids mentioning himself in the first person. Nor is he trying to refer to the king in the second person. Moreover his message has no introductory phrase nor ending expression. It simply closes with the following formula:

23. Message delivered by Kuramagsingh Sajjadhep, Chairman of Indian Religious Coordinating Committee, December 5, 1987
Equally interesting is the Chularajamontri’s proposed solution to this thorny problem of mediating between the demand of the Buddhist government officials and the religious demand of the Muslim community. In 1982, when asked to give an opinion on the question of Muslims singing the royal anthem, he suggested that mere singing of the royal anthem was permissible as long as the singers were not “conscious” of the literal meanings of the words used. But one is certainly entitled to ask if it is possible for a person to be “consciously unconscious” of the very thing that has prompted him to put forth this kind of question in the first place. Even more ironic is the fact that this refusal to sing the royal anthem had never been a problem before. The problem arose only after the Thai Muslims, having been pushed by the Thai government to learn Thai, began to understand the deeper meaning of the royal expressions. Thus, it is very unlikely that any Thai Muslim in the South, mature enough to understand this “ruling”, can consciously force himself to disregard the literal meanings of those utterances which involve the royal person.

In other words, to demand that the Thai Muslims wilfully forget the literal meaning of the royal words they have learned to understand with great difficulty is at best problematic. This intended “forgetfulness” moreover contrasts sharply with the case of the Thai Buddhist who, speaking the language, just does not give any serious thought to the literal meaning of royal expressions. The ordinary Thai Buddhists have no political nor religious reason to push to the end the logic of the words they are supposed to say to the royal person. It is not entirely the case of the Thai Buddhist being comfortable with the cosmological foundation of the court language. The Thai Christians, who share basically the same fundamental religious beliefs as the Thai Muslims, do not feel inhibited from using royal words either.

25 Ibid., p. 194
26 Ibid., p. 193
Conclusion

To conclude, both forgetfulness and unfamiliarity seems to be involved in the long tradition of the royal usage in Thailand. First is the total unfamiliarity with the language itself which made it possible for people like the Thai Muslims in the south to participate in state or official ceremonies, showing their respect to the king with no idea of what was taking place verbally. Second is the natural forgetfulness which can only happen to the native speaker of the language. Strange though it may seem, to be born a native speaker of standard Thai probably makes it possible for one to be using the royal expressions without consciously thinking of their literal meaning. A speaker simply feels no need to conclude logically from what one is required to say to the royal person—but to treat the whole thing as a matter of formality. In addressing the monarch, a Thai speaking commoner—regardless of whether he is Buddhist, a Christian or a Muslim—would probably have to be reminded to realize that he is literally addressing the dust of the dust under the soles of the royal feet!

Then there is the deliberate forgetfulness demanded from the Thai Muslims to make royal usage nothing more than symbolic signs of respect for the monarchy. This kind of forgetfulness is, however, far from natural because, not being a native speaker, a Thai Muslim is always forced to think first in terms of literal meaning. Trying to be consciously unaware of the meanings of words is an extraordinary unnatural process.

In other words, the court language can never function the way a symbol is supposed to do if the speaker has to be constantly reminded that it is a mere symbol. It follows, then, that to demand, as state officials often do, that Thai Muslims in the south participate fully in state ceremonies or festivals which involve uttering royal expressions is equally irrational and unrealistic. Any attempt to enforce such a conformity on the part of the Thai Muslims on any ground at all is to mistake the position of court language for the very political authority itself. The system of honorific expressions, it should be recalled, originated from the actual political power of the monarchy. Once put into use the tradition of the court language has proven to be instrumental in enhancing the political prestige of the king, but it cannot, as shown in the case of the 1932 coup, substitute for
the real political authority. The rationale that strict observance of a mere symbolic action is to be expected from all subjects living tâj-rom-phrá-barom-pothi-sômpan (Under the shadow of the royal blessing) even at the expense of political loyalty is certainly a wrong rationality. After all, the Thai speaking subjects, or the most sophisticated of them, have never tried to be completely rational or logical about the implication of this honorific system. Or should one say in this case that they have been rationally forgetful about it? Once again the old dictum that politics should never be treated as a one hundred per cent matter of logic or metaphysical reason is confirmed.