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Spectacle as Resistance: Performing Tree Ordination in Thailand

by

Kevin Brown

Trees are a recurring theme in stories about the life of Buddha. Buddha was born under a tree. Buddha received enlightenment under a tree. Somehow it is fitting that trees should play a special part in the modernization of politics, economy, and religion of Thailand, a country in which Buddhism is a "key marker of national identity".¹ Tree ordination (*buad paa*) is a unique form of performance that blurs the lines between ritual, theatre, and political protest.

In the case of tree ordination, spectacle and ritual are used as a tool for political resistance to state policies. As an example of a newly invented ritual, it provides the opportunity to study the origins of ritual. In addition, using a class-based analysis of ritual, several key aspects of this ritual are illuminated. The main participants are villagers, monks, and the King. Each of these players have different reasons for participation in and/or sponsorship of tree ordination. In addition, the symbols employed in the ritual have different meanings for each participant, the interpretation of which depends upon their position in Thai society. Finally, the motivation for holding a tree ritual may vary, depending on social position as well.

This demonstrates how political resistance can happen simultaneously on multiple levels for the various participants in a ritual. It also shows the evolution of a ritual, invented by one person, but then appropriated by different members of society for a variety of purposes. A class-based analysis reveals that tree ordination plays an important role as a tool for mediation between the royal family, the nation-state, and the people of Thailand. Through this discussion we see that spectacle is a specific type of resistance, available to both royalty and peasant alike as a weapon against hegemony.

Looking at the state apparatus in relation to theatrical spectacle is not a necessarily a new idea. E.P. Thompson writes about the relationship between spectacle and the state in his 1974 article "Patrician Society, Plebian Culture." He writes: "A great part of politics and law is always

¹ Lotte Isager and Soren Ivarsson, "Contesting Landscapes in Thailand: Tree Ordination as Counter-Territorialization," *Critical Asian Studies*, 34.3 (2002): 413.

theater: once a social system has become 'set,' it does not need to be endorsed daily by exhibitions of power...what matters more is a continuing theatrical style".² Thompson's assertion that theatre plays an important role in politics is expanded upon by Clifford Geertz in his book *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali*. According to Geertz, the spectacle associated with Court ceremonies was "the driving force in court politics...power served pomp, not pomp power".³ Geertz sees politics' relationship to spectacle as a defining quality. The state is spectacle and spectacle is the state. He goes on to elaborate on what he calls a "poetics of power, not a mechanics".⁴ By invoking the idea of "mechanics" he is claiming that spectacle is not a tool for politics by that it *is* politics.

In contrast, Katherine Bowie de-emphasizes the role of spectacle in her book *Rituals of National Loyalty*, about the Village Scout anti-insurgency movement of the 1970s in Thailand. Bowie points out that the spectacle-based arguments of Geertz is missing several elements in the analysis of ritual. First, this theory assumes that ritual takes place "within the context of a consensual society in which the people see their rulers as legitimate and the rituals as expressing shared cultural values".⁵ Secondly, Bowie points out that rituals are often viewed as something that belong to "tradition." That is, they come from a time before invention, and the fact that someone had to originally invent the ritual is hegemonically ignored by theorists and by the participants of rituals themselves. In fact, every ritual has to be invented at some point. Instead, Bowie suggests that we look for agency within the hegemony, although she admits that "although a class perspective on state ritual makes the need to consider agency clear, determining agency may not be straightforward".⁶

² E. P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebian Culture," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974): 389.

³ Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 13.

⁴ Geertz. 123.

⁵ Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 37.

⁶ Bowie 38.

Thirdly, Bowie discusses the efficacy of ritual. This reveals another problem with the Geertz model of ritual. Geertz assumes that the ritual is effective. That is, efficacy of the ritual is never brought into question.⁷ Unfortunately, Geertz does not show us evidence, and probably could not obtain evidence as to whether or not the Bali theatre-state was effective in inspiring "awe" in its participants. As Bowie points out, such historical documents would be problematic because of what James Scott, calls "the official transcript." According to Scott's viewpoint, historical documents do not necessarily reflect the truth because "records of elite activities are kept by elites in ways that reflect the class and status".⁸ Because of this problem, issues of efficacy in historical rituals may never be known. However, in the work of contemporary ethnographers working in a field where agents can be interviewed, certainly questions of efficacy are fair game.

One final issue that Bowie raises that will be employed in this analysis is the issue of what Kertzer has named the "multivocality" of symbolism, "the different meanings that a symbol may have such that it may be understood by different people in different ways".⁹ Bowie points out, very convincingly, that in the Village Scout movement, the central symbology of royalty is interpreted in different ways by different groups of people. The middle and upper class see the King as a symbol of conservatism, the status quo, while the villagers see the King as a symbol of hope for the future.¹⁰

While Bowie criticizes Geertz for overlooking complicity in participation, she also uses parts of Geertz' ideas to support her theory of a class-based analysis of ritual. She notes: "The possibility that state ceremonials play an active part in the creation of state power - in effect, a cynical effort to manipulate the cultural beliefs of the masses - lies behind Geertz's concession that the 'elaborate mystique of court ceremonial' is supposed to conceal 'that majesty is made, not born'".¹¹ Bowie goes on to adopt a method of class-based analysis put forth by Steven

⁷ Bowie 39.

⁸ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990) 86.

⁹ Bowie 43.

¹⁰ Bowie 42.

¹¹ Bowie 38.

Lukes. According to Lukes, class-based analysis should proceed from several basic questions. In fact, Lukes proposes a "checklist" of questions that need to be addressed in any analysis of ritual:

1. "Who (i.e. which social groups) have prescribed their performance and specified the rules which govern them?"
2. "Who (which social groups) specify the objects of thought and feeling they symbolize - specifically, certain forms of social relationship and activity - as of special significance?"
3. "Who exactly holds them to be specially significant, and significant in what ways?"
4. "In the interests of which social group does the acceptance of the ways of seeing operate?"¹²

Bowie goes on to use this checklist for an analysis of rituals employed in the Village Scout movement. In the case of this study, Lukes' checklist will be employed for an analysis of tree ordination in the late 1980s to the present. Through this class-based analysis of tree ordination, the complexity of multiple interests involved in the invocation of Buddhism to protect Thailand's forests is revealed. What might appear on the surface to be an effective tool of resistance may actually be already muted because of the appropriation of the same ritual by multiple interests, including other monks with different agendas, non-governmental agencies, and by the King himself.

In her essay "The Ordination of a Tree: the Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand," Susan Darlington describes in detail the process of a tree ordination that she attended in 1991 in Nan Province sponsored by Phrakru Pitak Nanthakhun.¹³ One striking thing about the ritual is that it does not just involve ordination. In the several days leading up to the event, many different activities and events are held in conjunction with the tree ordination in a festival-like atmosphere. These activities vary from traditional rituals, like the *thaut phaa paa* (the giving of the forest robes) as well as parades of offerings that villagers have brought for the monks, and

¹² Steven Lukes, "Political Ritual and Social Integration," *Sociology: Journal of British Sociological Association*, 9.2 (1975): 302.

¹³ Susan M. Darlington, "The Ordination of a Tree: The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand," *Ethnology*, 37.1 (1998): 7.

seedlings that were given for the event to be planted in the forest. Interestingly enough, the events also included brief skits. One of these was even slightly political in nature, which is a rare occasion in Thailand, a country where public political protest is often looked down upon. "The villagers acted out an incident of the forest being cut down, passing the blame from the minority hill people, to the northern Thai villagers, until it finally settled on the government for not protecting the forest".¹⁴

Many tree ordinations also involve images of Buddha. In this particular instance, a four-foot tall Buddha image was placed at the base of the largest tree in the forest. "A small Buddha image was placed in the bowl and candle wax dripped into the water while the monks chanted".¹⁵ Thus, chanting is another element of the tree ordination ritual.

In his article "Protest, Tree Ordination, and the Changing Context of Political Ritual," Nicola Tannenbaum describes a tree ordination festival in held in 1996 in the village of Thongmakhsan. Many of the experiences he describes are similar to those of Darlington. In this case, there was also an offering of candles to "The Triple Gems" (the Buddha, his teachings, and the monks). Tannenbaum also describes exhibits and presentations about community forests that were part of the event. Thus, in addition to various rituals that are associated with the festival, there were also more practical exhibits, focused on educating the villagers about the practicalities of maintaining the forest. In the final, "ordination" part of the event, "the monks chanted to extend the life of the forest. After the chanting, the monks and the lay-people fastened orange cloths to some trees and were offered lunch. After lunch the ceremony was over".¹⁶

Lotte Isager and Soren Ivarsson discuss tree ordination in their article "Contesting Landscapes in Thailand: Tree Ordination as Counter-territorialization." They describe in detail a tree ordination they attended in 2001 in Nan province. In this case, they describe the festival beginning before the monks even arrive. "A layperson presents offerings to the Four World Guardian Deities...floats are placed on a wooden structure and the deities are invited to take

¹⁴ Darlington 8.

¹⁵ Darlington 9.

¹⁶ Nicola Tannenbaum, "Protest, Tree Ordination, and the Changing Context of Political Ritual," *Ethnology*, 39.2 (2000): 122.

part in the ceremony. In doing this, the deities are informed that the forest will be sanctified through the ritual to be performed and they are called upon to help protect the forest".¹⁷ Thus, the tree ordinations also include elements that come from animist belief systems in addition to Buddhism. This type of syncretism is very common in Thailand.

According to Isager and Ivarsson, the invention of tree ordination is widely credited to a monk named Phrakhru Manas Natheepitak of Wat Bodharma in Phayao Province, Northern Thailand. "He invented the tradition of tree ordination as part of a local movement to bring an end to logging that was taking place in a watershed forest close to Wat Bodharma".¹⁸ In the case of Phrakhru Manas, the idea to hold a tree ordination came from a story told to him by a fellow villager who told him about a group of highway workers who were ordered to cut down a Bodhi tree to make way for a highway. After that day, the workers experienced a string of bad luck, which was blamed on the fact that they had cut down a sacred tree. The Bodhi tree is considered holy because of its association with Buddha, and thus the workers had performed a demeritous act and were experiencing bad luck due to evil spirits invoked by bad *karma*.¹⁹

Thus, Phrakhru Manas came up with the idea to use Buddhist symbology to protect the forest near his village. To accomplish this, he decided to use the already practiced ceremony of "ordination," which is traditionally performed on a person who is entering into the monkhood. In this ceremony the new monk is presented with his robes of the monkhood. In a ritual attended by members of the village, Phrakhru Manas began wrapping trees in the saffron robes of the monkhood. Through the use of the symbol of the robes, "Manas intended to transfer ordinary trees from the profane world to the world of holy things".²⁰

It is important to note that the association between cloth and trees is not new in Thailand. "To wrap brightly colored cloth or saffron monks' robes around trees is a long-established practice in Thailand. The practice has been used to honor trees that are considered holy, like the

¹⁷ Isager and Ivarsson 405.

¹⁸ Isager and Ivarsson 404.

¹⁹ Isager and Ivarsson 404-5.

²⁰ Isager and Ivarsson 405.

Bodhi tree under which the Buddha reached enlightenment".²¹ In *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of the Amulets*, Stanley Tambiah describes the reverence of Buddhist monk for the cloth that makes us his garments: "The religious life has the robe made of rags taken up from a dust heap for its resource".²² In Thailand, there is a long tradition of Forest Monks, or "Wandering Monks" who wander the forest from village to village, begging for food and clothing as a way to provide a "field of merit" for villagers. One common gift is to give the monks rags to wear. Often, villagers will tie these rags around a tree as an offering for a monk that might be passing by. Thus, the practice of tree ordination has appropriated a symbol from the traditional past, resulting in the appearance of a historical continuity of the ritual.

Darlington points out that these Buddhist symbols serve as a continuance of the Buddhist system, but at the same time it serves to subtly change the way that people interpret Buddhist symbols. She states, "The use of traditional Buddhist rituals...and the invocation of powerful religious symbols...serve as vehicles which simultaneously preserve religious concepts and sentiments and challenge their traditional use and interpretations in Thailand".²³ Thus, the tree ordination has a multiple effect. It preserves tradition while at the same time transforming it. In this way, Bowie's assertion that ritual is a dynamic process is once again confirmed.

So let us undertake an analysis of the symbolism employed in the ritual, and how this symbology may be interpreted in different ways by the different participants in the ritual. First, it is significant that the Buddhist robes are employed. For many, the connection of Buddhism to the forest is fairly straightforward. From a Buddhist monk's point of view, there are at least two issues involved. The first of these issues is that many monks have seen deforestation as a Buddhist issue because Buddhism is concerned with life and suffering. Darlington tells us, "The 'ecology monks' are those actively engaged in environmental conservation activities and who respond to the suffering which environmental degradation causes...The monks see the destruction of the forests, pollution of the air and water, and other environmental problems as

²¹ Isager and Ivarsson 404.

²² Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 18.

²³ Darlington 15.

ultimately caused by people acting through these evils".²⁴ A second possible reason for the monks' involvement is that Buddhism has begun to lose some of its relevancy in modern Thai society. Many of the old functions of the monks, such as education, have been taken over by the government. Thus, "Their concern is as much to maintain the relevance of the religion in a rapidly changing world of industrialization and modernization".²⁵

This co-opting of other traditions for the use in newly invented rituals does not stop at Buddhist ritual. Interestingly enough, elements of rituals from other religions and spiritual belief systems have been incorporated as well. Perhaps this is not surprising in Thailand, which is especially diverse when it comes to ritual practice. With a closer look, we see that tree ordination has incorporated syncretism elements from Buddhism, Christianity, and animist belief systems. For example, in a tree ordination ceremony in Mae Malo, the Christian notion of sacrifice was invoked to protect the trees. "The villagers from Mae Malo prayed to the Christian God and promised Jesus not to harm God's creation, the forest."²⁶ Many animistic practices are integrated as well. For example, tree ordinations usually single out the largest tree in the forest. This appeals to an animistic belief system, since trees are seen to pose a living spirit, and often larger trees are associated with the spirits of the forest. In addition, offerings to appropriate local spirits are usually a part of the tree ordination ceremony. Multiple interests and multiple levels of symbolism are constantly at play.

More recently, tree ordination has been adopted by a variety of people and groups for a variety of reasons. The most common cause has been the continuing deforestation of Thailand. Government records show that in 1961, forest was 53% of Thailand's landscape while by 1986 the figure dropped to 25%. Darlington also points out that the Royal Forestry Department's methods of determining forests are contested by Non-Governmental Organizations, who put the figure closer to 15%. "The differences between the official figures and NGO estimates are largely due to how the forest is defined. The RDF includes forest reserve lands, despite the fact that much of the area labeled as such has been cleared. They also include economic and

²⁴ Darlington 1.

²⁵ Darlington 4.

²⁶ Isager and Ivarsson 412.

productive forests, including monocrop plantations such as eucalyptus forests. Environmental NGOs rarely consider these lands as forested".²⁷

Further complicating this analysis is the fact that the Thai government has used environmentalism as a political tool in the past for removing non-Thai ethnic groups from areas that are designated as National Forests. Darlington points out: "Through their preaching, educational programs, and conservation activities, the ecology monks have influenced Thai society's view of Buddhism and, to some degree, its practice".²⁸ The practice of relocation was abandoned in 1993.²⁹ This signaled a tremendous victory for tree ordination and the environmental movement in general. Instead of being used as a rhetorical excuse for the dislocation of Hill Tribe people, the environmental movement was now focusing more on saving forests.

Interestingly enough, however, tree ordination has been used by both sides of this debate. For example, Isager and Ivarsson talk about the case of Phra Prajak Kuttajitto. In 1989, he led villagers who lived in the Dongyai forest reserve in a campaign against relocation by the government. To aid in the struggle, Phra Prajak enlisted the aid of the tree ordination ceremony. In this case, tree ordination was employed as a way to counter stereotypes of villagers as people who endanger the forest into an image that portrays how the villagers intend to protect the forest. "The tree ordination ceremony serves as a potent communicative tool to show outsiders how the villagers intend to preserve a specified forested area by sanctifying it".³⁰ As in the case of Bowie and the Village Scout movement, one can begin to see the diverging motivations of various groups to use tree ordination as a tool for diverging purposes.

Another exemplification of this divergence is a case in which tree ordination has been used for a purpose entirely opposite of the motivation held by Phra Prajak. Isager and Ivarsson discuss several historical cases of tree ordination in detail. One of these is the case of Phra Phongsak, a monk in the Chom Thong district. In this case "a dichotomy is constructed wherein

²⁷ Darlington 2.

²⁸ Darlington 5.

²⁹ Steve Magagnini, "If a Tree Falls...a Monk's Blessing for Thailand's Forest," *The Amicus Journal*, 16.2 (1994): 14.

³⁰ Isager and Ivarsson 406.

Buddhism legitimizes an environmentalist position in which non-Thai and non-Buddhist hill-tribes are classified as 'forest eaters' and to policies implying that people should be removed from the watershed".³¹ Ironically, Phra Phongsak used the tree ordination ceremony in a way that was quite contrary to the uses envisioned by its original practitioners. While Phra Prajak wanted to portray the villages as "guardians of the forest," Phra Phongsak portrayed villagers as "forest eaters."

A further analysis of tree ordination rituals shows that in more recent tree ordinations, there are several other participants. The first of these are non-governmental agencies (NGOs). Some NGOs that have involved themselves in tree ordination include the Wildlife Fund Thailand, the Project for Ecological Recovery, the Northern Farmers Network, the Northern Development Network, and the Regional Community Forest Training Center. Isager and Ivarsson point out that in the case of the Dongyai forest tree ordination, villagers involved in the conflict contacted several non-governmental agencies to help them with their problem.

Interestingly enough, after the NGOs got involved, many villagers felt pushed to the side as the differing agendas of the NGOs were brought into play, and suddenly elevated the local conflict to a national level. An example of this is described in Isager and Ivarsson, regarding a conflict in Doi Inthanon National Park "one of the most publicly contested landscapes in Thailand".³² In this case there was a disagreement between an upland village and a lowland village. After the NFN got involved, the argument escalated. It was not until both villages asked the NFN to back out that the problem was solved on a local level. Thus, the effect of the NGOs in the process was not always a good thing for the villagers. Often the NGOs push their own agendas, sometimes elevating the local conflict instead of solving it.

A more recent participant in the tree ordinations is the King himself. This royal participation shows how the interests of the elite may co-opt and appropriate a ritual for its own purposes. Nicola Tannenbaum points out that nowadays "tree ordinations are politically and ecologically correct, at least for some segments of the national polity; at the King's request, tree ordinations were part of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of his reign".³³ No longer is

³¹ Isager and Ivarsson 403.

³² Isager and Ivarsson 408.

³³ Tannenbaum 109.

the ritual solely the property of its inventor. It is now public property, and can be put to various uses, depending on the particular agenda of this particular ritual's generator. "Throughout 1996 and 1997, ceremonies were carried out in and around 150 villages throughout Northern Thailand where community forests were ordained".³⁴ Eventually, we must see that this has an impact on how much we can call tree ordination a project of resistance.

In this way, tree ordination has become connected to nationalism. Isager and Ivarsson point out that "In this manner community forests and the right of forest communities to manage local forest resources in what is considered ecologically sensitive areas are reinforced with reference to two central markers of national identity in Thailand - Buddhism and the King".³⁵ One question might be whether the villagers are using the King for their own purposes or if the King is using the villagers for his own purposes. Perhaps they are both using each other simultaneously.

In conclusion, I want to consider to what degree the spectacle associated with tree ordination might be considered "resistance." Darlington observes, "Most of the monks try to avoid explicit political statements".³⁶ However, tree ordination is one vehicle that is available to the monks as a form of political protest that is not necessarily confrontational. As James Scott observes in *Weapons of the Weak*, "most subordinate classes throughout history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity".³⁷ If tree ordination is viewed through Scottian lenses, we see that, to at least some degree, tree ordination is a "weapon of the weak."

Darlington's article focuses on the positive political impact that tree ordination is having. She calls tree ordination a type of "social activism".³⁸ In contrast, Tannenbaum questions the efficacy of tree ordination as political protest. He argues: "The King's support for tree

³⁴ Isager and Ivarsson 411.

³⁵ Isager and Ivarsson 411.

³⁶ Darlington 3.

³⁷ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985) xv.

³⁸ Darlington 1.

ordinations...marks these ceremonies as part of the national political ritual".³⁹ Isager and Ivarsson argue a middle ground, that "several political, economic, and social interests are reflected in the performance of and participation in tree ordination rituals...Performance of the ritual might therefore constitute an act of resistance against government territorialization or it might be part of a pragmatic process of land-use change".⁴⁰ Of these three stances, I tend to want to empathize with Darlington's. However, Tannenbaum's point must be reckoned with. The main problem with Tannenbaum's argument is that it is too extreme, and ultimately totalizing. The crux of the argument lays in his contention that tree ordinations end up reinforcing social differences. He claims that tree ordination, through its connection with the King, has become a ritual of nationalism, a way to stand up and say "I am a citizen of Thailand." Unfortunately, this excludes many people from non-Thai ethnic groups, because many members of such groups do not own land, and are therefore not considered "citizens." Tannenbaum states, "Unlike the feast for the cadastral spirit or the repairing-the-village/country rituals that present the village as a community of equals, these new political rituals emphasize the political and economic differences among villagers".⁴¹

To counter this argument, I think that one has to look at the way that one understands hegemony. If one takes a Marxian viewpoint, hegemony is seen as something that is created and reinforced by the powers that be. In contrast, Scott claims that this conception of hegemony "ignores the extent to which most subordinate classes are able, on the basis of their daily material experience, to penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology".⁴² If viewed in this way, tree ordinations can be seen in succeeding inasmuch as they are able to change prevailing ideology. The fact that the Thai government stopped its relocation program in 1993 is proof that, to some degree, this tool of resistance is working. In addition, we have seen people's views about the nature of Buddhism change, to where people are now more accepting of monks roles in the politically charged subjects of deforestation and industrial progress. In 1988, the Thai

³⁹ Tannenbaum 122.

⁴⁰ Isager and Ivarsson 396.

⁴¹ Tannenbaum 125.

⁴² Scott. Weapons 317.

government banned commercial logging in forests. According to the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre, in 1997 30% of Thailand's forests were deemed protected areas. By 1999, the number increased to 56%.⁴³ However, it might be too early to tell for sure. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations World Agricultural Information Centre, Thai forests have continued to shrink at a rate of .7% per year between 1990 and 2000.⁴⁴ Perhaps through more study of this phenomenon we will come to a better understanding of the resistant forces that shape hegemony, and how spectacle can be used as a very powerful tool for resistance.

⁴³ United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre. Accessed 3/28/05. <<http://www.unep-wcmc.org>>.

⁴⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations World Agricultural Information Centre. Accessed 3/28/05. <<http://www.fao.org/waicent/>>.