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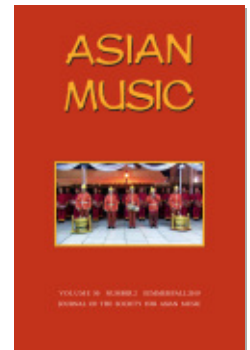
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The Funeral of King Rama IX: Mourning and the Thai State

Supeena Insee Adler and Deborah Wong

Abstract: *The royal funeral for HRH King Bhumibol Adulyadej (King Rama IX) of the Chakri dynasty of Thailand was held on October 25–29, 2017. Based on ethnographic research, we describe the sprawling and immersive character of the funeral and the national mourning that it demanded. This article concerns the five days of the official royal funeral. We offer an overview of the many kinds of music, dance, and performance featured in the funeral, with an eye to the long histories of royal performance in mainland Southeast Asia.*

งานพระราชพิธีถวายพระเพลิงพระบรมศพพระบาทสมเด็จพระปรมินทรมหาภูมิพลอดุลยเดช บรมนาถบพิตร หรือรัชกาลที่ 9 แห่งราชวงศ์จักรีของไทยถูกจัดขึ้นในระหว่างวันที่ 25–29 ตุลาคม พ.ศ. 2560 จากข้อมูลทั้งในและนอกสนาม เราได้อธิบายอย่างลึกซึ้ง และครอบคลุมถึงลักษณะจำเพาะของพระราชพิธีที่กำหนดความอาลัยจากปวงไทยทั้งชาติ แก่นของบทความนี้อยู่ที่งานภาคสนาม 5 วัน ซึ่งเราได้บรรยายถึงลักษณะของวงดนตรี นาฏยกรรม และการแสดงหลายประเภทที่ปรากฏขึ้นในงานพระราชพิธีถวายพระเพลิงพระบรมศพ ตลอดจนความสัมพันธ์ทางประวัติศาสตร์ของการแสดง ของหลวงในภูมิภาค อุษาคเนย์ด้วย

Introduction

HRH King Bhumibol Adulyadej (King Rama IX) of the Chakri dynasty of Thailand died on October 13, 2016, at Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok. He was 88 years old and had reigned since 1946; and at that time he was the longest-reigning monarch in the world. For many Thais, he was the only king they had ever known (fig. 1). A year of public mourning followed. His funeral was held just over a year later, October 25–29, 2017, in a stunning series of rituals both public and private, full of music, dance, chanting, and movement.

We offer an overview of the many kinds of performance featured in this historic event. Without question, the funeral of King Rama IX was a historic event full of extraordinary forms of music, some used only in royal contexts. It was formally titled “The Royal Cremation Ceremony of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej.” In other ways, the funeral was not a single event: it reached across more than a year and across many places, including the entire country and the Thai diaspora. Like all rituals, its beginning and end blur since the frame around it was immensely formal in some ways and in other



Figure 1. A photograph of HRH King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) given to everyone who paid their respects in the Dusit Throne Hall (source: Supeena Insee Adler's collection).

ways embedded in the practices of everyday life. We address the sprawling, immersive, and even invasive character of the funeral and the national mourning that it demanded. This article concerns the five days of the official royal funeral. We address the many kinds of music, dance, and performance featured in the funeral, with an eye to the long histories of royal performance in mainland Southeast Asia. As ethnomusicologists, we have long-term interests in the long postlife of Thai court performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. We followed this funeral closely from afar—we both live in the United States—and then on the ground: we spent two weeks in Bangkok witnessing and documenting the funeral in October 2017. This article is thus based on ethnographic research as well as interpretation and analysis of the funeral's media coverage.

This series of events defied any possibility of comprehensive ethnographic research. Royal Thai ritual is in some ways conducted publicly and grandly and in other ways is completely out of sight and beyond the reach of the common people. *Lèse-majesté* has been a statute law in Thailand since 1908 and dictates that any defamation of the royal family is punishable by imprisonment. What counts as defamation is intentionally open-ended and has resulted in everything from banning *The King and I* to silencing political protest that has little to do with the royal family. In May 2014, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, chief

of staff of the Thai army, declared a coup d'état and imposed martial law; several months later, he put an interim constitution in place and named members of his junta to the national legislature, and they promptly voted him into office as the prime minister.

The theater state is alive and well in Thailand (Geertz 1980). That is, power has long been literally performed as spectacle. The array of practices and performative arts focused on the royal court remain strongly and carefully maintained, and they were fully activated for the many months leading up to the king's funeral. Performative royal spectacle includes music, dance, clothing, special royal language (*raachasap*), elaborate choreographies of respect, and Hindu-Buddhist ritual. The theater state is most spectacularly evident in royal ritual, but the principles of the performative theater state are the foundation of most public political action and are thus not confined to royal ritual. The prime minister and his junta were quite present in the king's funeral. As Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf have argued, royal funerals always "express and influence the social order" (1979, 123). Given the history of the Thai constitutional monarchy since 1932, *lèse-majesté* as the law of the land, and the omnipresence of the royal family, all public representations of royal activities are judiciously staged and managed, and this funeral of the century was thus carefully and even obsessively planned and controlled.

We witnessed what we could firsthand and watched the rest on television. All this was part of our ethnographic method. We interviewed musicians and administrators who organized the music and dance featured in the funeral; we attended the public rehearsal for the royal procession that carried the king's body from the Grand Palace to the cremation ground; we attended the dress rehearsal at the College of Dramatic Arts for the masked dance drama performed on the night of the cremation; and we walked the streets around the Sanaam Luang (ceremonial site or royal ground) for the three days leading up to the cremation, talking with the people waiting patiently on the sidewalks, hoping to be allowed to enter the cremation ground. We made it through the official checkpoints allowing (or not) the populace into the area around Sanaam Luang. We sat in our hotel rooms and watched official live coverage of the funeral for hours on end. We pinned brooches honoring the king to our black clothes. Supeena went to the Sanaam Luang at 3:00 a.m. on the morning of the cremation and talked with the musicians, whose performances ended at dawn, while Deborah monitored real-time broadcast coverage. We accessed many people and many moments, but we did not see everything, because no one could have. We note as well that Thai scholars, performers, and cultural specialists may not wholly agree with our account or our conclusions, and we acknowledge that the stakes in royal court performance are high. We hope performers will write their own accounts of their experiences at the funeral.

Without fail, all the people involved that we spoke with said that performing at the funeral was an honor and probably the most meaningful experience they would ever have.

Royal funerals in Southeast Asia have old and deep histories, especially in the nation-states that have maintained the complex of *devaraja* traditions from Hindu and Buddhist practice. In principle, all members of the immediate royal family are given royal funerals in the Sanaam Luang. While royal funerary practices are ancient, they have changed over time while also maintaining certain elements. A small amount of research has been done on visual depictions of royal funerals (Terwiel 2016). Evidence from art and architecture suggest that Thai royal funeral practice reflects both change and continuity. The late Ayutthaya era (seventeenth–eighteenth centuries) looms large: some of the contemporary royal pomp (e.g., the costumes worn by soldiers in royal processions of many kinds) refers to the Ayutthaya or early Ratanakosin era, whether literally or imaginatively and nostalgically. Royal funerals in Thailand and Cambodia have been carefully documented. H. G. Quaritch Wales's ([1931] 1992) book *Siamese State Ceremonies: Their History and Function: With Supplementary Notes* offers detailed descriptions of royal ritual during the reigns of Rama VI and VII, when he was a foreign adviser to the court. Thai historian Nonthaphon Yuumangmii's recent book, *Royal Funeral Customs* (ธรรมเนียมพระบรมศพ และพระศพเจ้านาย), published in conjunction with the king's funeral, is a useful overview of Thai royal funeral practices (Yuumangmii 2560/2017).¹

Very little scholarship addresses the music, sound, and performance that surrounds Thai royal funerals.² We take an expansive approach to these matters, addressing music but also dance, dance drama, related theatrical forms, and the broad funeral soundscape where powerful sounds overlap, for example, Buddhist monks chanting and the aural spaces where different sonic practices converge. Given the historic importance of King Rama IX's funeral, we offer this article as a snapshot of authoritative and esoteric performance practices that were displayed on a mediated world stage in 2016–17 across television, newspapers, and social media. This article commemorates a historic event: it is not driven by theoretical questions but instead offers a glimpse of an important event that was filled with performance.

Mourning, Planning, and Preparations for the King's Funeral

News of the king's death spread quickly. In a matter of hours, many of our Facebook friends immediately changed their profile pictures to solid black as a sign of mourning; many went to temples or gathered at nearby community centers. Some who lived abroad, far away from Thailand, went to a nearby

embassy or consulate to mourn with others. Some preferred mourning quietly alone. Some did not mourn at all.

The king's body was transported by car to the Grand Palace for ritual process the next day, October 14, 2016, at 5:00 p.m., where music accompanied the king's passage to another sphere. Two ensembles awaited him: the *wong prakhoom*, an extraordinary brass/reed/percussion ensemble described in more detail later, and a Western military band that performed the king's anthem, "Sarasoen Phra Barami" (สรรเสริญพระบารมี), while cannons outside the Grand Palace solemnly fired every minute for 21 minutes (*Thai Rath* 2017).

"Sarasoen Phra Barami" was played constantly. This anthem is as well known and important as the national anthem but is completely different. It is one of several kinds of music that instantly connote and signal the king. *Sarasoen* means "praise"; *phra* is an honorific for high status or divine beings, including monks; and *barami* means "glory," implying moral righteousness. It is used to signal the king's arrival or departure from a place. A recording of it is played at the beginning of every film in movie theaters, and the audience is required to stand. During the year of ritual between the king's death and his cremation, it was played every time his body was moved, and it was even played after the cremation to accompany the distribution of his ashes to five different locations. It was one of several kinds of music that became ritual funeral music and, unlike some other kinds, was played only by a Western military wind and brass band.³

Everything that followed took place in the oldest area of Bangkok, a city established in 1782 as the capital of the Chakri royal kingdom and the authoritative heart of the Ratanakosin era. Like many Southeast Asian urban centers, it is spatially designed to radiate outward in mandala fashion from a palace and key religious sites. The Sanaam Luang, the symbolic royal heart of the city, has long been the area for royal funerals. The Grand Palace is on its southern end; the National Museum (formerly the Front Palace or Wang Naa of King Rama I's brother) is at the other end; and Wat Mahathat, the headquarters of the Mahanikai sect of Theravada Buddhism, is in between them. Thammasat University is next to the Wat Mahathat complex, and its campus was formerly part of the Front Palace. The city spirits reside in the City Pillar (Lak Müang) on the southeast corner. Most of the time, the Sanaam Luang is a large, empty, grassy field where people hang out, fly kites, or wait for the bus. When a king or queen passes away, it is always ready for its most important role as the royal cremation ground, as shown in figure 2.

Construction for the royal cremation complex began in early February 2017, when the ground was leveled and prepared. On February 27, the foundation pole for the cremation tower was set in place while a military band played the king's anthem.



Figure 2. *Lon Cut Khat Kraung Wang Khao Phüün Ruam Ngaan Phra Rachaphithii* (Screening points for those hoping to attend the royal ritual). (Source: PPTV news station, Channel 36.)

Constructing the complex of buildings involved hundreds of artisans, craftspeople, and architects. As is true in other parts of Southeast Asia (e.g., Bali), the pyre is referred to as Mount Meru, and for the cremation of a Thai king or queen, the Phra Meru is a huge, ornate building surrounded by other structures, including eight pavilions for musicians and numerous large halls for visiting dignitaries, the royal family, and the new king's merit-making rituals with Buddhist monks. Most of the personnel were from the Fine Arts Department, which is a huge government bureau under the Ministry of Culture that looks after all tangible and intangible heritage in Thailand, including archaeological sites, museums, the National Archives, and the National Library.

Korkiat Thongphut (ก๊อเกียรติ ทองผุด) was the lead architect for the royal cremation complex, shown in figure 3. Korkiat is a craftsman and artist who works at the Fine Arts Department (Jansuttipan 2017). He studied and worked very closely with his teacher, Awut Ngoenchuklin (อาวูต งามชูกลิ่น), the former director of the Fine Arts Department and a National Artist. Korkiat was a member of the teams that designed the Phra Meru for the three previous royal cremations that also took place on the Sanaam Luang, so he was very familiar with the process.⁴

Korkiat's design aligned with both cosmology and King Rama IX's life history. Any Thai king is the avatar of Vishnu, and after a king passes, he returns to the level of heaven atop Mount Meru, which is the center of all the universes. The Phra Meru is a temporal pavilion that is a stand-in for the heavens, surrounded by fantastic animals and landscapes. Korkiat's concept for the structure was based on three principles: greatness (enough for the king's glory), grandness (with a capacity for three thousand people), and alignment with traditional beliefs about the earth and universe. The cardinal directions (ทิศ) were carefully represented, with pavilions in each of the four corners of



Figure 3. Aerial view of the Phra Meru. Video still from the livecast.



Figure 4. View of the Himmaphaan forest around the base of the Phra Meru.

the crematorium guarded by four pairs of the animals of the four directions. The Himmaphaan forest (ป่าหิมพานต์) surrounds the base of Mount Meru, so Korkiat placed imaginative sculptures of the mythical creatures who live in it around the base of the Phra Meru (fig. 4). The steps leading up to the crematorium were decorated with *naga* sculptures—the mythical dragon-like serpents that represent prosperity and serve as a bridge between earth and the heavens. The main colors for this building were gray, white, and gold. The Phra Meru had nine “thrones” or levels on top, referring to King Rama IX.

The spire at the pinnacle reached high into the sky, crowned with a figure of the Garuda (Vishnu's steed). Crown Princess Sirinthorn wanted to have the king's projects included in the Phra Meru, so Korkiat and his team incorporated references to 46 of them into the site design.⁵

Meanwhile, the king's body lay in state in the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall of the Grand Palace for a year. During this time, more than twelve million people paid their respects in person. Protocol was carefully enforced: to be allowed in, mourners had to be dressed appropriately in black, Thais were prioritized over foreigners, and tourists were generally not admitted. Thais came from all over the country (and beyond) to wait in long lines for a few moments in the Throne Hall; foreign dignitaries came from all over the world to pay their respects. Supeena paid her respects in August 2017. She heard no music but remembers hearing the sounds of hammers as craftsmen worked on the Phra Meru a few hundred feet away (fig. 5). After waiting in line for six



Figure 5. Phra Meru being built, August 3, 2017. People are lined up to enter the Dusit Throne Hall in the Grand Palace to pay their respects to the king (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).

hours, she and 19 other people were admitted to the hall and, in a highly choreographed two-minute sequence, were directed to line up, prostrate themselves before the Royal Urn (*koot*) and coffin, and then file out so the next 20 mourners could come in.

While much of the ritual during this year of mourning was traditional (e.g., monks chanting sutras), the king had indicated years before his death that he wanted to be housed in a coffin rather than the Royal Urn, shown in figure 6. His mother, who passed away in 1995, also indicated she did not want to be interred in a *koot*. In Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, the bodies of kings and queens—and sometimes the supreme patriarch—have long been placed in ornate urns. Wales describes how the bodies of King Rama VI and the Cambodian king Sisowath were prepared in the early part of the twentieth century: they were bathed and then dressed in ornate silks and brocades, and a gold mask was placed over the face ([1931] 1992, 139–40). The body was then “invited” into a sitting position with the hands palm to palm in a *wai* position, and after the body was carefully tied into position with 16 strips of cotton, it was lowered into the urn. At his direction, however, King Rama IX was placed in a golden teak coffin, which was placed behind the *koot* in the Throne Hall.⁶

Music was continuously part of mourning ritual at the palace for a year.⁷ A group of special instruments played key roles throughout that year, creating ritual time and proclaiming the divinity of the king. Generically, these instruments are often referred to as either *khruang prakhoom* (วงเครื่องประโคม, instruments of proclamation) or *khruang suung* (high-status instruments), and their use in royal ritual is at least several hundred years old. The word *prakhoom* has

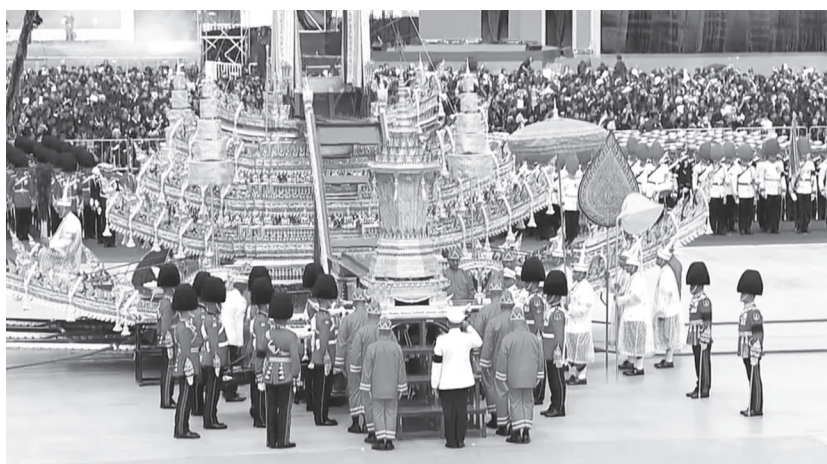


Figure 6. The Royal Urn. Video still from the livestream.



Figure 7. The *wong khrüang prakhoom* musicians playing *yam yaam* outside the Dusit Throne Hall. Left to right: *mahoorathuk*, *pii chanai*, *poeng*, *pii chanai*, and *mahoorathuk*, with Anant Sriraudom playing *poeng* and Pornchai Trinate playing *pii chanai* (photo by Thapanut Thumtheing, used with permission).

a set of related meanings, implying a sound directed toward high-status beings. *Prakhoom* sound does not come from a single direction but covers or envelops a space; it can be a fanfare or overture; it establishes ritual space and acts as a bridge between the human and sacred realms; and it is powerful and often loud (fig. 7).

Thai musician and scholar Pattara Komkam told us that *prakhoom* is related to the sound of the universe. He said that the instruments included in the *wong prakhoom* mimic sounds from nature: the *mahorthuk* is the sound of a waterfall, the *sang* is the sound of heaven (fig. 8), the *trae ngaun* is the sound of foxes, and the *trae farang* is the sound of elephants (fig. 9; Pattara Komkam, pers. comm., October 23, 2017). When they all play together, he said, the ensemble represents the power and prosperity of the universe. This ensemble signifies the special social status of the deceased by the number of drums present: the more drums, the higher the social status.

Seven instruments are regarded as *khrüang prakhoom* or *khrüang suung* and are played only by men, as described in table 1.

These instruments are grouped into two ensembles (*wong* means “ensemble”). The *wong sang trae*, or the ensemble of conch shells and brass horns, should have four conch shells, ten short horns (*trae ngaun*), and ten long horns (*trae farang*); the *wong pii chanai klaung chana*, the ensemble made up of the reed/oboe and drums, should have one oboe (*pii chanai*), one laced drum



Figure 8. Close-up of the *sang* (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).



Figure 9. Close-up of the *trae farang* (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).

(*poeng mang*), and 40 red and gold drums (*klaung chana daeng* and *thaung*).⁸ The bronze drum (*mahorathuk*) can be added to the *wong pii chanai klaung chana*, but it does not play “with” the other instruments as much as it plays at the same time, almost as if in its own sonic sphere of meaning. Its only pattern is slow, continuous eighth notes, played solemnly. It enacts the social-aesthetic principle that simultaneous sound worlds in funeral contexts enact and signal high status (Wong 1998, 125–26).

Most scholars and musicians say that these two distinct ensembles are combined to form the royal ritual ensemble used in processions (Yuumangmii 2560/2017, 153–69). The large combined ensemble is called a *wong khrüang prakhoom* or a *wong khrüang suung*. A *wong khrüang prakhoom* can be spectacularly large: one hundred *klaung chana* are gathered into an ensemble only

Table 1. The *khrüang prakhoom* ensemble

Instrument	Description	Number needed
<i>mahorathuk</i>	A bronze drum, similar to and related to the Dongson drums found over much of Southeast Asia, that is usually suspended from a wooden frame and carried by four men. A fifth man plays the drum with two padded mallets. This drum is played only for the king.	Either two or four are needed.
<i>sang</i>	A conch shell sounded with buzzed lips.	At least one is needed, though more sound better.
<i>pii chanai</i> (oboe)	A small, high-pitched quadruple reed instrument, played using circular breathing. Only a handful of musicians play this instrument in a given generation.	Although only one is played at a time, two musicians may take turns; that is, one can rest while the other plays, especially in performance contexts that are long and open-ended.
<i>klaung poeng</i>	A long, cylindrical, two-headed drum with a wooden body covered with leather lacing.	One to four are often featured, but only one is played (by a single musician).
<i>klaung chana</i> , also known as <i>klaung daeng</i> (red drum) or <i>klaung thaung</i> (gold drum)	A long, cylindrical, two-headed drum, bigger, thicker, and heavier than the <i>klaung poeng</i> . It is basically a <i>klaung Malayu</i> , which is larger and wider than <i>klang khaek</i> but painted red, gold, silver, or green.	Generally played not by trained musicians but by a group of cadets from the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School and government employees who work for the royal palace.
<i>trae ngaun</i>	A short, valveless brass horn.	At least ten are featured.
<i>trae farang</i>	A long, valveless brass horn.	At least ten are featured.



Figure 10. One of the four *piiphaat nang hong* ensembles (from the Fine Arts Department) (photo by Thapanut Thumtheing).

for the king, and all are played by cadets in bright red uniforms worn only for the king.⁹ While the *klaung poeng* is played with bare hands, the *klaung chana* is played with a single curved rattan drumstick painted black and held in the right hand.

For the one hundred days following the king's death, three kinds of sound marked the area inside and outside the Dusit Throne Hall: Buddhist monks chanting sutras, small ensembles of highly trained musicians playing traditional funeral music, and 78–100 *wong khrüang prakhoom* musicians performing massed sounds. All three kinds of sound marked the area as sacred and extraordinary. These powerful musical sounds filled the space and offered a sonic enactment of the theater state that demanded attention: they *had* to be heard. The monks were seated inside the hall and chanted for an hour at a time, six times a day or night, while all the musicians were immediately outside it. In this context, the *wong khrüang prakhoom* played a ritual series of sounds called *yam yaam* (*yam*, “to mark something or to step in place”; *yaam*, “a period of time”): they played six times every day, at the prescribed times of 6:00 and 9:00 a.m. and 12:00, 3:00, 6:00, and 9:00 p.m., signaling and establishing sacred/ritual/royal time.

The funeral ensemble called *nang hong* (a *piiphaat* ensemble with a *pii chawaa*),¹⁰ was made up of master musicians from the Fine Arts Department (fig. 10). They played funeral repertoire as follows,¹¹ just outside the Dusit Throne Hall for about 15 to 30 minutes every few hours:

- (1) “Phleng Phraahm Kep Hua Waen” (เพลงพราหมณ์เก็บหัวแหวน), shown in the notation in figure 11¹²
- (2) “Phleng Saaw Saut Waen” (เพลงสาวสอดแหวน)

- (3) “Phleng Saen Sut Swaat” or “Phleng Krabauk Thaung” (เพลงแสนสุขสวาท หรือ เพลงกระบอกทอง)
- (4) “Phleng Malaeng Pau Thaung” or “Phleng Khuu Malaeng Wan Thaung” (เพลงแมลงปอทอง หรือ เพลงคู่มะลงวันทอง)
- (5) “Phleng Malaeng Wan Thaung” (เพลงแมลงวันทอง)

The *nang hong* musicians sat outside the throne room in a nearby hall, keeping track of the activities via live video feed on a monitor so they would know when to play. In short, an impressive number of performers were on hand all day and for much of the night.

ทำนองหลัก
เพลงเรื่องนางหงส์

เพลงพราหมณ์เก็บหัวแหวน ท่อน ๑ กรมศิลปากร ๒๕๕๑

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Figure 11. Notation for a *nang hong* piece, “Phleng Phraahm Kep Hua Waen.”



Figure 12. Stores in malls featured prominent displays of dark clothing (photo by Deborah Wong).

A video example of the *wong prakhoom* ensemble in the *yam yaam* context, performed in front of the palace, can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/xHCcn9HWA18>. The drum pattern,¹³ although played for the king, is slightly different from that described by Yuumangmii.¹⁴ “Cang Poeng Phlu Poeng Cang Poeng Cang Poeng Poeng Phlu Cang” (จั่ง เปิง พลุ เปิง จั่ง เปิง จั่ง เปิง เปิง พลุ จั่ง). The “Phlu” syllable is the sound of 40 drums being struck at the same time.

While all this was taking place at the Grand Palace and on the Sanaam Luang, people outside the palace and all over the country were drawn gradually and then more intensely into mourning. Ethnomusicologist Anant Nakkong (2017) has written about the performance of sorrow and weeping during that year by people in everyday life, in popular-music videos, and in hundreds of organized events. An official year of mourning was decreed by a cabinet resolution, and civil servants were required to wear mourning attire from October 13, 2016, to October 29, 2017. The *Nation* (2017) reported, “The general public are urged to wear black clothes or appropriate clothing with a black bow pin until the night of October 29. They were also told to end the mourning and wear normal clothing [beginning on] Monday morning [October 30, 2017].” During the year, more and more of the general populace in

Thailand and abroad began to wear black or gray clothes. Stores in malls featured prominent displays of dark clothing (fig. 12). Thai immigrants in the United States followed suit, and a Thai American musician told me with resignation in the spring of 2017 that “black shaming,” or Thais criticizing other Thais for not wearing dark clothing, was more and more frequent, resulting in constant social pressure that some found a bit oppressive. In October 2017, all nightclubs and entertainment events were shuttered for the month leading up to the royal funeral. The new King, Rama X (HRH Maha Vajiralongkorn), declared that his coronation would not take place until the year of mourning for his father was over.

The Royal Processions

A grand procession to transport the king’s body from the Dusit Throne Room to the Phra Meru took place on October 26, 2017. In reality, his body was transported quietly by ambulance at night with no media coverage from the Grand Palace to the royal crematorium, but the procession took place as if his body were present in the Royal Urn. This was one of several contemporary departures from traditional practice that were common knowledge, even though the royal ritual of transporting the body—actually the empty urn—from the king’s human home (though he had actually lived in Chitlada Palace, not the Grand Palace) to his transitional abode was carefully maintained.¹⁵

The official five-day funeral featured no fewer than six royal processions that wound through the streets, around the perimeter of the Sanaam Luang, and then up to the Phra Meru. Each featured military bands, soldiers in formal uniforms, cavalry, and traditional musicians. The first official procession transported the Royal Urn from the Grand Palace to the Phra Meru—but this was preceded by a very public dress rehearsal on October 21 that Supeena attended. People with Thai identity cards who were dressed appropriately in black were allowed into the Sanaam Luang area at 5:00 a.m., and they then spent hours waiting with thousands of others on the perimeter of the area. As the sun and the temperature rose, police patrolled the area, telling people to take off their sunglasses; using umbrellas as parasols was forbidden, and some people began to faint from the heat. Bathrooms were extremely limited. People were allowed to use only small cameras and cellphones to take pictures as the parade passed; once in place, no one was allowed to move elsewhere.

On October 26, the day before the cremation, seventy thousand people were allowed into the area where the procession would take place (*Post Today* 2017). There were five designated areas where people could wait to enter: (1) the Theva Phirom Gate (for 6,500 people); (2) Tha Tian and Wat Pho (2,500); (3) the sidewalk along the Supreme Court to Phanphiphopplila Bridge



Figure 13. Entry checkpoint, with examples of improper clothing.

At the bottom of the sign are symbols of the units that received orders to participate, including the Thai Royal Army, Cannon Unit, City of Bangkok, Thai Royal Police, and Ministry of Culture (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).

(15,500); (4) the Sanaam Luang and Phra That Street (6,500); and (5) along the outside of the Royal Palace wall (20,000). Before being allowed into any of these five areas, people had to pass through one of nine checkpoints controlled by very tight security protocols, which could take hours, as figure 13 shows.

The streets leading into the Sanaam Luang were packed with tens of thousands of massed people, all dressed in black and quietly sitting on the street or sidewalk (fig. 14). We spent many hours walking through these areas and talked with people as they waited patiently. Most had been there for several days; many were prepared with mats on the ground and umbrellas to keep off the rain or sun. We asked many of them why they were willing to wait in this way. Most said that this was a once-in-a-lifetime event and no matter how hard it was and how long they had to wait, they would be there to see their beloved king sent back to heaven. Many told us they had traveled for days from around the country before getting near the cremation ground. We met four middle-aged women who had traveled together from Nakhon Srithammarat

(five hundred miles away in the south), and one simply told us, “We had to come.” Many travelers told us they had strong support from their family back home; others traveled with their relatives so they could look after one other. An older woman told us she had traveled to Bangkok from northeastern Thailand because she “loved Father” (*rak Phau*), a phrase we heard many times and saw on many signs: the king was *phau*, everyone’s father.

Food and drinks were donated for all participants. We saw hundreds of people under the Phra Pinklao Bridge helping make food in massive temporary outdoor kitchens under awnings and then delivering meals to people waiting on the streets near the Sanaam Luang. Everyone helped out without complaining. The event brought people together; their hearts were “with the one king.”

Knowing that massive numbers of people would want to attend the event, the government prepared for significant volunteerism.¹⁶ The volunteer project Cit Aasaa (จิตอาสา) organized the government’s requests for help; many people signed up for volunteer jobs and committed to work during a specific period. Cit Aasaa also coordinated volunteer activities in provinces around the country and through Thai embassies or Thai royal consulates in other countries. Most volunteers agreed to work during October 18–31, 2017. People could volunteer to help out around the royal cremation ceremony to show their love for the king and to share their kindness, skill, and knowledge in order to help



Figure 14. Participants waiting, sitting, standing, and sleeping on the street (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).

others. In all cases, volunteers had to follow specific procedures provided by the Thai government. The slogan for volunteer work was “we are doing good deeds with our hearts” (เราทำดีด้วยหัวใจ, *rao tham dii duay huajai*) to make merit for the late king (good actions that accrue and ensure a better reincarnation). They received special contact information and training prior to the event as well as special uniforms (black shirt, yellow scarf, and a blue hat) and were assigned to either purple or yellow groups. The main volunteer activities were divided into eight units:

- (1) Sandalwood flower: Responsible for providing a place where people receive and put sandalwood flowers to be burned in honor of the king and help people get in line when placing the flowers
- (2) Announcements and publicity: Responsible for providing correct information about all eight volunteer activities and providing any necessary help to all units
- (3) Fixing, building, and cleaning (work during October 3–31; blue batch): Responsible for helping clean up and taking care of all flowers and trees in and around the crematorium area
- (4) Transportation for the safety of population (green batch): Transport people to where they needed to be
- (5) Social services: Help pass out food, water, umbrellas, and a few other things for people waiting on the street
- (6) Health and medication: Volunteers—anyone, especially doctors, nurses, or college medical students in training—to help people with health/medical conditions
- (7) Security: Responsible for reporting any incidents that occur, including removing any obstacles blocking the streets where the procession would take place, and reporting people with mental health issues in the area or any explosions and problems with electricity, riots, arson, sound of gunshots, suspicious objects, or pipe bombs
- (8) Traffic control: Help police by directing people if any terrorism occurs

Anyone needing information or help could easily spot these volunteers. A few volunteers had to speak harshly to people who did not follow rules during the ceremony. We know several people who felt compelled to go to Thailand to volunteer at this event. We saw and interviewed volunteers who were there by choice and others who were ordered to volunteer by their employers. They all seemed happy to be able to help out, including several foreign-exchange students who were studying at a university in Bangkok. However, when we asked, “Would you like to come back to work again tomorrow?,” they replied, with sweat on their foreheads and smiles on their faces, “No!”

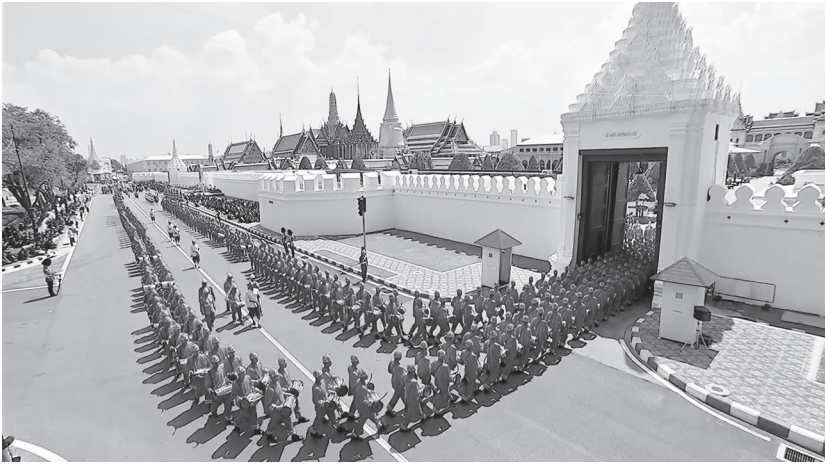


Figure 15. The *wong prakhoom* enters the Grand Palace in procession. Video still from the livecast.

The second royal procession bearing the Royal Urn to the Phra Meru began at 7:00 a.m. on October 26, 2017, and was a mass-mediated spectacle that went on for several hours (fig. 15). It was broadcast live on television and covered by media outlets from all over the world. It featured masses of soldiers in their most formal uniforms from all branches of the military as well as the most highly placed government officials and members of the royal family in full dress, by Order of the Royal House of Chakri. According to BBC News (2017), each procession had 5,613 participants and was a spectacular sight, full of brightly colored uniforms, some similar to Western European styles and others in traditional Thai styles. Royal palanquins and chariots,¹⁷ all built in previous reigns and carefully restored for royal funerals, bore ritual objects. The Great Victory Royal Chariot (Phra Maha Phichai Ratcharot) was pulled by 216 cadets, for example. Every detail was either prescribed, carefully overseen, or both.

As is true of many high-status rituals in Thailand, different kinds of music were played simultaneously. A military band played slow marches, including “Sarasoen Phra Barami,” “Sarasoen Sūa Paa,” “Sanrasoen Phra Narai,” and a military version of “Phayaa Sook.” The *wong prakhoom* were prominently featured and included several hundred performers. These ritual ensembles were divided into three sections in the procession: (1) the ensemble featuring the conch shells and brass horns: *wong trae-sang*, including *trae farang* (แตรฝรั่ง), *trae ngaun* (แตรวง), and *sang* (สังข์); (2) the bronze drums (*mahorathuk*); and



Figure 16. One of the military bands (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).

(3) the oboe with one hundred drums (*pīi chanai klaung chana*). Counting the military band (fig. 16), each of the four ensembles played simultaneously but not with each other, and the leader of each group provided orders for when to play and stop.

We interviewed Anant Sriraudom (อนันต์ ศรีระอุดม), a “master of royal rites” in the Bureau of the Royal Household and one of the main coordinators for the *wong prakhoom* (fig. 17). He inherited his job in the palace from his father and believes he is trusted by his colleagues because he was well trained by his father. He joked a bit, saying that “everyone knows everyone here,” meaning that there is no room for mistakes in his position. He is proud to have the duty of making arrangements for the king and is committed to it with all his heart; he will work there until he is no longer able to serve. He helped rehearse and organize the ensembles and performed repeatedly (often playing *poeng*). He explained that several of the ensembles that perform *wong prakhoom* do not play musical compositions as such: for example, the one hundred *klaung chana* players simply play a series of rhythmic patterns (not a set composition), and the *mahorathuk* only plays a continuous pattern of eighth notes. The *trae farang*, *trae ngaun*, and *sang* play “Phleng Samrapbot” (เพลงสำหรับบท), which features a distinctive wailing phrase played in loose unison—and this is the entirety of its repertoire. The *pīi chanai klaung chana* play right after the instruments just described either stop playing or may play simultaneously with them, but not together in any coordinated way. Whereas *pīi chanai* players

require special skill and training (and receive a higher salary), drummers do not receive much specific training because their parts are not so complicated. The person who plays the lead drum, also known as *poeng* or *saung naa* drum, must, however, have some basic musical skills to be able to keep the beat correctly. Most of the musicians who performed in *wong prakhoom* are government employees who work at the royal palaces, and many are much younger than musicians from the Fine Arts Department who perform in royal rituals.

The *pii chanai* players who specialize in performing for royal rituals often have a long and deep relationship with the royal palace; some come from generations of royal musicians and become one of them only over time and after much training. The only song that the *pii chani* plays for the *yam yaam* or for the royal procession is “Phyaa Sook Loi Lom” (พญาศุภลอยลม). This piece is extraordinarily simple yet taxing to perform, and extremely expressive. It expresses profound sorrow, which is built into its name: *phyaa*, an honorific meaning “great”; *sook*, “sorrow”; and *loi lom*, “to float or to be diffused by the wind.” The piece originally had only four phrases, and the term “garland” (*raui dauk*, “to string flowers together”) is the metaphorical description for how the musician moves from one phrase to the next. When playing in a procession, two *pii chanai* players walk side by side, one playing “Phyaa Sook Loi Lom” for quite a while, and when he is ready to take a break, the other player seamlessly begins playing—by threading the garland—and the piece



Figure 17. Anant Sriraudom (อนันต์ ศรีระอุดม), a “master of royal rites,” in his workplace at the Bureau of the Royal Household (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).

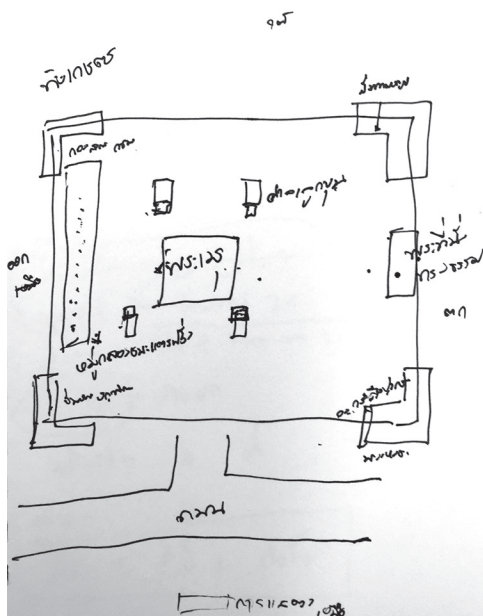


Figure 18. Hand-drawn map by Anant Sriraudom showing the Phra Meru and musicians' pavilions.

continues without any noticeable break or transition. “Phyaa Sook Loi Lom” is the only piece played by a *pii chanai* player in *yam yaam* or in the royal cremation procession. A musician first learns it as a fixed melody and only later develops his own way of performing it with much ornamentation and improvisation. Its four phrases are long, melismatic, and relentlessly sad. A *pii chanai* player must sometimes play it for hours and thus must have exceptional stamina and focus.

The corps of one hundred drums consisted of soldiers (i.e., not trained musicians) playing two kinds of drums: the two-headed multilaced *klaung chana* and the bronze *mahorathuk*. *Mahorathuk* is the quintessential Southeast Asian drum, essentially like the bronze Dongson drums that have been found in the archeological record dating back to as early as 300 BCE.¹⁸ Their use in royal processions is seen in nineteenth-century murals at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, where they are clearly depicted as high-status percussion instruments. A pair of *mahorathuk* accompany a *pii chanai* and *poeng*, with the musicians usually walking side by side at the front of a corps of soldiers.

In a mandala arrangement, the design of the Phra Meru and the structures surrounding it featured eight pavilions (*saalaa*) specifically for musicians, as shown in figure 18. Four small *saalaa* around the Phra Meru were for the *bua*

loi ensembles, and surrounding them, four large pavilions at the outer four corners were provided for larger music ensembles. The layout of the cremation grounds was thus designed for music, or rather, designed so that musicians sat in particular structures so that their sounds emanated from the cardinal directions, sometimes overlapping in deliberately uncoordinated ways. The design of royal cremation complexes is in every way designed for sound. To put it another way, they are built with musicians in mind.

Bua loi (*bua*, “lotus”; *loi*, “floating”) is one of three genres of traditional funeral music. It features four male musicians playing *pii chawaa*, two *klaung khaek* (two-headed laced drums) played with a drumstick in the right hand, and a small knobbed gong that keeps time. It is only played in funerals for people of high status: the musicians perform the piece “Phleng Bua Loi” just before the flames are lit, and their playing accompanies much movement as guests file up to the coffin to pay last respects.

When the procession arrived at the Phra Meru, four *bua loi* ensembles from the Fine Arts Department played as the Royal Urn went past (fig. 19). Each ensemble began to play “Phleng Rua” as the urn approached (a standard piece from the dance drama repertoire indicating magical transformation), and when it turned the corner out of sight, each ensemble would stop playing, and the next would begin. They couldn’t hear one another and deliberately made no attempt to play together even when they overlapped sonically. Each *bua loi* ensemble played in *Ajarn* (Professor) Bunchuay Soowat’s style. To be clear, all



Figure 19. One of the four Floating Lotus (*bua loi*) ensembles from the Fine Arts Department. Left to right: Thiraphon Noinit, Sattru Talu, Krairit Kanruang, Bunchuay Soowat, and Sahawat Pluempreecha (photo by Sattru Talu, used with permission).



Figure 20. *Piiphaat Mon* ensemble with navy musicians
(photo by Manoot Sawaengsin, used with permission).

were accomplished and highly trained musicians, most of them with many years of experience: Bunchuay ensured that the four *pii chawaa* players used a similar style, which he had learned from a leading *pii* player from the previous generation.¹⁹ As Sattru Tatu (one of the four *pii chawaa* players) explained in an interview with us (October 28, 2017), Bunchuay coordinated them so that they would sound right when playing together, even though they did not play at the same time or in unison. Bunchuay (b. 1947) did not perform at the funeral, but he sat with one of the *bua loi* ensembles, offering his dignified presence as a key teacher.

After this, and for the next few days, two other kinds of traditional funeral music were featured in the four large pavilions at the corners of the crematorium. These huge pavilions were only for the music ensembles, and they were filled with activity for 18 hours per day; each had a grand name referring to the heavens. Four *piiphaat nang hong* ensembles performed alternately by musicians from the Fine Arts Department, the Kau Tau Mau ensemble, the Royal Army Thai Music Division, and the Royal Air Force Thai Music Division. Another four *piiphaat Mon* ensembles also played in alternation by musicians from the Ministry of Culture's Banditphatanasilpa Institute (BPI), the Royal Navy Thai Music Division (fig. 20), the Royal Police Thai Music Division, and the famous Phattayaakoosol family.²⁰ They played in the large pavilions every day, multiple times per day. From 10:00 p.m. until midnight, military bands played in the large halls surrounding the Phra Meru, and then at 6:00 a.m., the cycle of performance started again. Many of the musicians were on-site for

14 or even 18 hours each day. Some of them posted to photos to Facebook and other social media platforms, always respectfully and proudly.

The Night of the Royal Cremation

Music and dance at royal funerals should be huge and grand: a mind-boggling number of performers is the driving aesthetic, along with as many different traditions as possible, and on the night of the cremation, they were staged simultaneously, spread across the Sanaam Luang. This more-is-more aesthetic is old and well established. Its purpose is described in different and complementary (rather than contradictory) ways. Some say that the performances are “for” the deceased; others, that they are for the assembled deities and divine beings; or that the proper forms of music and dance create a connecting bridge between the human and sacred realms; or that the grandness of the performances reflects the grandness of the deceased. Still others simply say that music and dance are for the people attending the funeral and help lift their grief. We suggest that all these meanings were in play concurrently. Our sense is that the funeral of King Rama IX featured a spectacular variety of performances and that it was probably a bit more controlled and formal than royal funerals one or two hundred years ago, when murals and historical records indicate a wider range of rural and working-class traditions. That is, the emphasis in 2017 was on an impressive range of carefully polished music and dance traditions that involved performers almost entirely from prestigious institutions.

Importantly, the panoply of performances at any royal funeral is performed both for the royal audience and for ordinary people. Kriangkrai Koetsiri (2560/2017) addresses the historical use of music in several royal cremation ceremonies from the end of the Ayutthaya era, drawing from historical sources. He notes that the following musical instruments were featured in royal funerals from the period: gong (ฆ้อง), drum (กลอง), *trae* (แตร), *sang* (สังข์), a kind of trumpet (ลำโพง), *trae ngaun* (แตรวง), *chana* drum (กลองชนะ), and *taphoon* drum (ตะโพน). He notes the use of *mahorii* (มโหรี) and *piiphaat* (ปี่พาทย์) ensembles as well as chanting by monks. He found many performance genres mentioned, most several times in accounts of royal cremation: *khon* (โขน), shadow puppet (หนัง), dance drama (ละคร), puppets (หุ่น), Mon dance (มอญรำ), group dance (ระบำ), *thepthong* dance (เทพทอง), dance with one big drum (มรดุม), *phalaa* game (ผาลา), dance with sticks (กลองตีไม้), and a lot of unspecified singing and dancing (การร้องรำ) (134–39). Information and cultural evidence about performance at royal cremations can also be found in literature, stories, and temple murals, which provide vivid detail about what genres were performed and which stories were used as dramatic material. Siam Phatranuprawat (2560/2017) writes

in detail about performance genres included in royal funeral rites, documenting how many stages were present at different royal funerals and even how much each group got paid, including performances for several royal cremations from the Ayutthaya era up to the Thonburi and early Rattanakosin eras. There were masked dance drama (*khoon*; โขน); dance drama from the inner palace (ละครใน); dance drama from the outer palace (ละครนอก); dance (ระบำ); puppet theater from multiple ethnic backgrounds (หุ่น); kickboxing (มวย); acrobatics (กายกรรม); climbing and gymnastics on top of a pole, with a pyramid of acrobats (เล่นแพน); walking a tightrope (ไต่เชือก); jumping across hoops (ลอดบ่วง); shooting spears (พุ่งหอก); archery (ยิงธนู); dancing with two sticks and one big drum (ไม้ม้วน); dancing with sticks (กลาตี่ไม้); Chinese opera (จ๊วง); the great shadow puppet (หนังใหญ่); shadow puppets from the south (หนังตะลุง); *thepthong* dance with fan (เทพทอง); singing (เพลงขอทาน); improvised responsorial singing (ปรบโก); Mon dancing (มอญรำ); Lao dancing (ลาวเซ็ง); and military brass bands (วงดุริยางค์).

The kinds of performance featured in royal funerals has, of course, changed over the centuries. Surat Jongda, an assistant chancellor for the Banditphatanasilpa Institute and one of the main organizers for the royal cremation in 2017, told us that there were far more performances for royal cremation in the past than at present. In the past, performing for royal cremations was supported by the leaders of non-Thai ethnic communities who lived in Siam under the king's protection. Performing at a royal funeral was a sign of loyalty and at the same time entertained the multiethnic audiences drawn to the event. Any royal cremation thus featured many forms of performance from different ethnic communities (Surat Jongda, pers. comm., October 24, 2017). The funeral for King Rama V in 1911 was significantly reduced in grandeur: the king himself was concerned about the cost of staging royal funerals, and his emphasis on the creation of a modern Thai nation meant that he sometimes preferred to downplay Thai traditions. He decreed that his own funeral should be less sumptuous than usual.

Knowing that it was impossible for us to get near the stages on the Sanaam Luang, we watched the performances from our hotel rooms, since they were broadcast live on television and streamed online. The Performing Arts Office of the Fine Arts Department under the Ministry of Culture was appointed to organize commemorative performances. The official record shows that 3,064 performers participated—a stunningly large number that is entirely in keeping with the long history of royal funerals.²¹ The Ministry of Culture appointed all of the performers, and most came from two institutions in Thailand: the Fine Arts Department and the Banditphatanasilpa Institute, which includes the 12 branches of the College of Dramatic Arts (Wittayalai Nattasin) in other regions of the country, though most were from the main headquarters in Bangkok. Other groups of musicians were from the royal militaries (army,

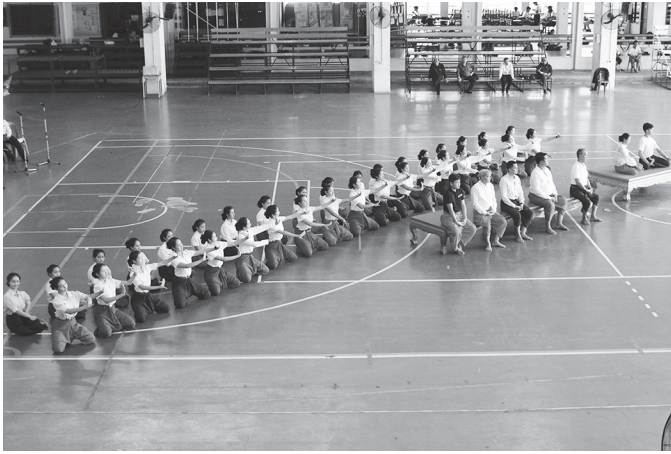


Figure 21. Rehearsal a few days before the royal cremation, at the Sathaban Banditphatanasilpa for the masked dance drama performance in front of the Royal Merit-Making Pavilion (Phra Thii Nang Songtham) (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).

navy, air force, police) and from universities; these ensembles performed both traditional Thai music and Western music on Western musical instruments, including the king's compositions and other songs.

In the late afternoon, the plaza immediately in front of the Phra Meru was used to stage a huge performance of masked dance drama (*khoon*) featuring three hundred performers from Her Majesty Queen Sirikit's Khon performers and the Fine Arts Department.²² A performance of this kind in front of the Royal Merit-Making Pavilion (Phra Thii Nang Songtham) is a high point of any royal funeral and directed toward making merit for the deceased (fig. 21). While it took place, King Rama X was inside the crematorium with other royal families and high-status government employees (fig. 22).

The two-hour performance featured three episodes from the *Ramakien*:

- (1) *Rama Avatara*, when the five hermits ask Phra Isuan to send the avatar of Phra Narai to come down to earth to defeat the demons (*yak*)
- (2) *The Abduction of Sida*, depicting the demon Thosakan kidnapping Sida in the forest, the bird Sadayu witnessing it, fighting with Thosakan, and then telling Phra Ram what had happened; Phra Ram assembling an army of monkeys to help him rescue his wife
- (3) *The Banishment of Phiphek*, in which Phiphek interpreted Thosakan's dream and told him to return Sida to Phra Ram to avoid massive war and destruction; angry, Thosakan banishes Phiphek from Langka; Phiphek joins Phra Ram's army and helps rescue Sida



Figure 22. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, on the far left, with other government officials. Video still from the livecast.

After that, and a little farther away, three large open-air stages each featured nonstop performances from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. on the night of the cremation:²³

Stage 1 featured *khon* and *nang yai* (the great shadow theater), with a total of approximately fourteen hundred performers from the Fine Arts Department over the entire night performing episodes from the *Ramakien* (fig. 23).

Stage 2 featured puppet shows (*hun luang* and *hun krabok*) and dance drama (*lakhon nai*, *lakhon nauk*, and *lakhon chatrui*), with a total of 422 performers from the Fine Arts Department and Banditphatanasilpa Institute performing episodes from the *Ramakien*, *Phra Abhai Mani*, *Inao*, and *Manora* (fig. 24).

Stage 3 featured contemporary forms of music, including big-band jazz, Western orchestras, and ballet. A historic first Thai ballet performance was featured, inspired by the story of *Manora*, featuring two music compositions by the late king: “A Love Story of Kinari Suite” (ภิรมย์รัก) and “Blue Day” (อาทิตยอัปมงคล), performed by 99 dancers (fig. 25). Many of the other ensembles performed songs composed by the king. The ensembles came from many different institutions, including the A.S. (Ambara Sathan) Friday Band, the Sahai Pattana Band, the Fine Arts Department, the Government Public Relations Department, the Royal Thai Army, the Royal Thai Navy, the Royal Thai Air Force, the Royal Thai Police, Chulalongkorn University, the Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music, Banditphatanasilpa Institute, and Rajini School. In all, 942 musicians, singers, and performers were featured on this stage.

Several big screens broadcast the stage performances live on-site for spectators who were not near any of the stages. In sum, these 12 hours represented months of rehearsal, planning, and preparation for the thousands of performers and were a gold mine for anyone interested in Thai music and dance. We watched the performances for hours from our hotel as we continuously checked social media and texted back and forth with other musicians.



Figure 23. Stage 1, masked dance drama performed by the Fine Arts Department (*khoon*). Video still from the livecast.



Figure 24. Stage 2, *manoora* (*lakhon chatrii*), performed by the Fine Arts Department and students from the Banditphatanasilpa (College of Fine Arts). Video still from the livecast.

The actual cremation was scheduled for 10:00 p.m., and although no details about it had been released, we anticipated that it would be grand and public. Instead, the cremation took place privately and with barely any announcement. While artists on all three stages continued to perform, around 10:20 p.m. people in the audience noticed that smoke had suddenly emanated from the Phra Meru, and they began posting photos of it to social media. The live coverage on TV and online was suddenly interrupted with a screen message stating, “The public relations organizers announce the Royal Cremation of King Bhumibol Adulyadej” (fig. 26). The wording of the announcement was deliberately vague enough so that it wasn’t clear *what* was being announced. No media outlets had been notified. In the hours and days following, it became clear that the royal family had opted to keep the cremation private.

All four *bua loi* ensembles played at the same time when the cremation began. They had been waiting in place for more than 14 hours, since 8:00 a.m. that morning. Peep Khonglaithong, a noted *pii* player who was in one of the *bua loi* ensembles, later told us that the musicians in the four *bua loi* ensembles also saw the smoke and waited for someone to tell them to start playing, but when no one did, they began to play on their own and watched and listened to one another across the four pavilions. Without direction, they played for about 20 minutes and then finished one by one, in unspoken agreement.

After this—close to midnight, after watching the TV coverage for hours—Supeena decided to go out and try to get into the Sanaam Luang area; Deborah opted to keep watching the performances on TV and on live webcast. Supeena,



Figure 25. Stage 3, big-band jazz with vocalist Professor/Lady Noppakhun Thaungyai na Ayutthaya singing the king’s composition “Love at Sundown.” Video still from the livecast.



Figure 26. The announcement of the royal cremation, which interrupted the livestream of the stage performances. Video still from the livecast.

dressed in black, walked across the Pinklow Bridge from our hotel in Thonburi; it took her about an hour to reach the other side of the river, or the Phranakhon side with the cremation area. After getting near the Sanaam Luang, she waited for about three and a half hours in line; luckily the line moved quickly, and she was able to pass through the security checkpoint and finally reach the cremation ground. We texted each other continuously, sharing messages and pictures about what we were seeing on TV and on the ground. Supeena saw that many people were already asleep. Others were closely watching the performances on the three stages. Supeena walked from stage to stage to observe. Amplified sound came from multiple directions. Afterward, around 6:00 a.m., as the performances on each stage drew to a close, she talked with musicians. They were tired but content (fig. 27). It had been an extraordinary 24 hours, or week, or month, or year.

Conclusion: Life after the Royal Funeral

The funeral was not over yet. The next day, the new king gathered up his father's ashes and bones; monks chanted; the "relics" were encased in small urns and the Fifth and Sixth Processions circumambulated the Phra Meru. The king spent the rest of the day taking the relics to five different temples in different areas of Bangkok. "Sarasoen Phra Barami" was played many times by the military band.

During November and December, the public continued to visit the cremation complex by the thousands, and for two months live music was played from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m. every Saturday and Sunday, mostly featuring the funeral ensembles (*nang hong* and *piiphaat Mon*) from the Fine Arts Department. The



Figure 27. Musicians from the Thai Royal Navy Music Division at dawn, after performing all night (photo by Supeena Insee Adler).

Phra Meru was empty and King Rama IX was gone, but the musicians kept playing. Chirapong Kotutha, a musician who performed in a *nang hong* ensemble at the funeral,²⁴ told Supeena that the musicians subsequently had recording sessions at the National Theater to be archived at the King Rama IX library.

All over Thailand and in Thai communities in diaspora, Buddhist rituals were held one hundred days and then one year later. On Thai Father's Day (*Wan Phau*), December 5, 2018—King Rama IX's birthday—additional community events were held. The commemoration continues.

Two months after the funeral, the Phra Meru was taken apart. It took two more months to remove the buildings, but they were gone by March 11, 2018. Another two months were needed to remove the sculptures and landscaping. Most of the buildings were moved to a new satellite of the National Archives, located north of Bangkok in Prathumthanii province. Other parts were donated to temples, community centers, and institutions for educational purposes. The Sanaam Luang was gradually returned to its original state—an empty grassy field, ready for the next royal funeral.

This was far from the first and surely not the last royal funeral staged on the Sanaam Luang, but it was historic. It marked the end of an extraordinarily long reign and an extended, suspended moment of political uncertainty. Like Thailand, our account contains silences—things that cannot or should not be said. Nonetheless, we had the opportunity to witness a historic event and to hear some of its performers talk about what it meant to them; and every one of them said that it was an honor and a high point in their lives. We had a small,

privileged window on an elite circle of performers who know they are at the sacred center of royal power, and we also saw how thousands of ordinary people went to great lengths to pay their respects and to witness the end of an era.

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Notes

We are grateful to the many musicians and administrators who helped us in Bangkok, including Anant Sriraudom; Anant Nakkhong; Chirapong Kotutha; the members of the Korpai Thai music ensemble; musicians from the Fine Arts Department, Bangkok; Pattara Komkam; Peep Konglaithong; Dr. Pornprapit Phoasavadi; the Royal Navy Thai Music Division; Sattrat Talu; Surat Jongda; Sahawat Pluempreecha; and Thapanut Thumtheing. We could not have done this research without their help, though all mistakes and interpretations are our own. We thank the anonymous reviewers for extremely helpful suggestions.

¹ We use Wong's romanization system for Thai, which is an adaptation of the system used by the Thai Royal Institute (2001, xxxi–xxxiv). Thailand uses the Buddhist calendar, so when a source provides a Buddhist date, we cite it in both the Buddhist and Gregorian forms: e.g., the Buddhist year 2560 is equivalent the Gregorian year 2017, cited as “2560/2017.”

² To our knowledge, this article is the first to address Thai royal ritual performance in English. Many sources address Thai court-music traditions, but the music ensembles and repertoires used only for the king have received little attention in English because they are esoteric. Describing royal ritual musics in the Ayutthaya era, Terry E. Miller simply states, “The instruments used on these ceremonial occasions became largely obsolete with the cessation or simplification of royal functions, especially after [the end of the absolute monarchy in] 1932. A few such rituals persist” (1998, 248). We suggest this is and is not true. While royal ritual may not be as extensive as it once was, it is alive and well, maintained by several different branches of the government and palace. Its practitioners are called on as needed, and they are ready when summoned.

³ This song has a long and complicated history. One news source describes it like this (edited by us for ease of reading), in a narrative that has been much reproduced:

The Royal Anthem is believed to have been composed during the Ayutthaya era. At that time a song similar to this one was used when the king entered and left the throne hall. It was called “The Royal Anthem for Narai,” and it was also known as the national anthem. It was still being used in the Ratanakosin era. King Rama IV then introduced a new anthem derived from “God Save the King,” which was the British national anthem. King Rama V then made a royal visit to Singapore and Java in 1871, where British soldiers welcomed the king with the original “God Save the King” song. King Rama V then asked Thai music teachers to compose a new Thai Royal Anthem to replace “God Save the King.” The Thai music

teachers then suggested a song called “Bulan-Loy-Leun” or “Dream Song,” which was composed by King Rama II with the intent for it to be the Royal Anthem. The king asked Mr. Heutsen, a Dutch composer, to arrange this song into Western style. This version was used as the Royal Anthem beginning in 1871. Court musician Phra Pradit Phairoh’s arrangement of the Royal Anthem version was used beginning in 1873, and Russian composer Pyotr Schurovsky arranged the song to make it more suitable for Western musical instruments. In 1888, Prince Narit composed new lyrics for the Royal Anthem, to use in the Royal Bathing ceremony for Crown Prince Maha Vajirunhis. King Rama VI slightly revised the lyrics for the Royal Anthem: he kept most of the original lyrics except from the last part and added “Long Live The King” instead. This version was introduced in 1913 and is still used today. (“ความเป็นมาของเพลงสรรเสริญพระบารมี / Khampenmaa khaung Phleng Sarasoen Phra Barami” 2016).

Most Thai people know the anthem by heart. It is taught in all schools, and some schools perform it on both Thai traditional and Western musical instruments.

⁴ For the Princess Mother Srinagarindra in 1996, the Princess Galyani Vadhana in 2008, and Princess Bejaratana in 2012.

⁵ The king created and supported numerous projects, and many were run by appointed personnel chosen by the king. Over his lifetime, the king initiated 4,741 projects. Most addressed water management (3,248); others supported the development of different occupations (339) and social support and education (398). The Phra Meru was surrounded by a pond or moat representing the king’s water management projects, and a rice field was built nearby as well, alluding to the king’s many agrarian projects.

⁶ In 2013, King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia was similarly placed in a coffin that was processed through the streets of Phnom Penh behind a royal *koot*. That is, both the traditional receptacle and a contemporary coffin were present, and although neither king wanted to be prepared for cremation in the elaborate sitting position, a *koot* was still featured as an important symbol of a royal death.

⁷ We focus on the three primary music ensembles used in royal death rituals because they are without question the ones considered the most significant and appear to have been featured since the end of the Ayutthaya era. At the same time, royal funeral musics are not completely fixed and immune to change. Peep Konglaithong, a leading Fine Arts Department musician and ritual music specialist, told us that in addition to those ensembles, Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn ordered the leader of a *piiphaat nang hong* ensemble to perform a traditional musical piece called “Ching Phra Chan” (ฉิ่งพระฉัน) and added speakers for the ensemble to project their sound so that people around the area could hear music while the monks ate their late-morning meal near the Dusit Throne Hall. They played it for the first one hundred days of mourning every morning around 11:00 a.m. and then during the five days of the royal funeral rites leading up to the cremation. Peep emphasized that in the past, this piece had never been performed for any royal cremation; thus, it was a change in practice (Peep Konglaithong, pers. comm., October 23, 2017).

⁸ For more discussion of this ensemble, see Adler (2014, 90–95). For an example of this and other performing ensembles in the funeral, see the following edited video

excerpts: *wong pii chanai klaung chana* procession, <https://youtu.be/VJcwYToe1Is>; multiple ensembles performing simultaneously, <https://youtu.be/jWQA9QUK7T8>; and *khoon* masked dance drama, <https://youtu.be/UgsLr89Hmdg>.

⁹ An ensemble of *klaung chana* may be played for nonroyal people of high status at the king's direction, but always featuring fewer than one hundred drums to indicate that the person's status is lower than the king's.

¹⁰ The traditional Central Thai funeral ensemble called *nang hong* was found in both rural and urban contexts in the past and is named for the mythical swan (*hong*).

¹¹ Few of the titles for these pieces can be translated into English in any meaningful way. "Phleng Phraahm Kep Hua Waen," for instance, literally means "the Brahmin keeps a jeweled ring," which refers to a tale usually performed in unmasked dance drama (*lakhon nauk*). Our point is that this repertoire, when played by this kind of ensemble in a funeral context, has the deep ritual function of carrying the soul away from the human realm.

¹² *Phleng* simply means "musical work" and precedes all proper names of pieces.

¹³ Supeena Insee Adler transcribed the drum pattern.

¹⁴ The drum (*poeng*) patterns for *wong prakhoom* or *wong khruang suung* are very distinctive and are divided into two similar rhythmic phrases that signal significantly different social status. Yuumangmii describes the patterns in terms of the mnemonic syllables used by musicians, as follows. The first pattern, "ติ่งเปิงครุฑ ติ่งเปิงเปิงครุฑ ติ่งเปิงเปิงเปิงครุฑ / TingPoengKhrup TingPoengPoengKhrup TingPoengPoengPoengKhrup," is used only in royal funerals. The other pattern, "ติ่งเปิงครุฑครุฑ ติ่งเปิงเปิงครุฑครุฑ ติ่งเปิงเปิงเปิงครุฑครุฑครุฑ / TingPoengKhrupKhrup TingPoengPoengKhrup TingPoengPoengPoengKhrupKhrupKhrup," is used only in funerals for high-status but nonroyal deceased persons (Yuumangmii 2560, 155).

¹⁵ We note that in King Norodom Sihanouk's royal funeral procession in 2013, both the Royal Urn and the coffin containing his body were borne through the streets, but in King Rama IX's procession, only the Royal Urn was featured, since his body and coffin were already in place in the Phra Meru.

¹⁶ See the official web page about volunteerism (accessed March 25, 2019, <http://www.kingrama9.th/NewsHighlights/Detail/30>).

¹⁷ These are described in wonderful detail at "The Royal Cremation Ceremony for His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej," accessed March 25, 2019, <http://kingrama9.th/EN/Palanquins>.

¹⁸ Large bronze drums, often referred to generically as Dongson drums, are found in a wide cultural region from Vietnam and China into eastern Indonesia. The earliest artifacts are from around 300 BCE, and they appear to have been made until the third century CE. Most feature a star or sun in the center of the drum head that is surrounded by birds. See Looft-Wissowa (1991) for a discussion of the drums' iconography and possible ritual use; and Solheim (1988) for an overview of the drums' implications for the contested emergence of bronze culture in mainland Southeast Asia.

¹⁹ *Khruu* (teacher) Thiap Khonglaythong (1902–81) was the leading *pii* performer of the first generation of Fine Arts Department musicians and *Ajarn* Bunchuay's teacher. For a discussion of his lineage in some detail, see Adler (2014).

²⁰ The *piiphaat mon* ensemble is now a standard music ensemble played during funerals in several regions of Thailand, but its mainstreaming into Thai death ritual is a twentieth-century practice (Wong 1998). The ensemble was probably first highlighted in a royal cremation in the mid-nineteenth century for a wife of King Rama IV; the usual explanation is that the Mon ensemble was prominently featured to honor her Mon ethnic background. Veera Phansue provided facsimile images in his book of receipts for *piiphaat mon* ensembles that performed in the royal cremation for King Rama V (2558/2015, 52, 313–35). During the reign of King Rama IX (1927–2016), all three royal cremations for members of the king's family featured *piiphaat mon* as part of the ritual performances, and it was featured in his funeral as well. As far as we can ascertain, *piiphaat mon* was not included in the ritual musics for the royal funerals for Kings Rama VI, VII, or VIII.

²¹ This figure includes the 12 music ensembles inside the crematorium area, which were completely separate visually, sonically, and spatially from the public performances on the three huge stages.

²² We attended the final rehearsal for this performance at the College of Dramatic Arts several days before the cremation.

²³ This information is from the official website for the funeral (accessed March 25, 2019, <http://kingrama9.th/EN/Ceremony/Detail/2>) and was reflected in what we witnessed in the live broadcast coverage and in person.

²⁴ Chirapong Kotutha works for the Krungthep Mahanakorn ensemble (KoToMo ensemble) as a *pii* (shawm) player. He and several colleagues are in the process of transcribing the *nang hong* repertoire for deposit at the King Rama IX library.

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