

BUDDHIST SYMBOLISM IN SIAMESE FLAGS

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This article does not introduce any new flag and in fact most of the flags shown may be already known to the advanced vexillologist. The aim of this study is to explain the ancient symbols of deep religiosity that the flags derive from. Most of the flags dealt with in this article were adopted at the end of the last century, during a period, when the three most beloved kings of the Chakkri dynasty were ruling: They were Mongkut (Rama IV.), Chulalongkorn (Rama V.) and Vajiravudh (Rama VI.). They ruled from 1851 until 1925 and under their absolute authority modern legislative changes were introduced, human sacrifices were abolished, and general education and technical progress was encouraged. The religion of Thailand is «Hinayana» buddhism, usually known as «Theravada». This faith developed from one of the two schools after Buddha's death, dating from the most ancient period of Buddhism.

The official etymology from the «Thai's Royal House Dictionary» term «Thong», translating as flag, describes it as «a piece of cloth which by colours and drawing shows who represents the nation, who the government, the fleet and so on, being generally a signal». Undoubtedly the flags used in Thailand today originated from Buddhist liturgies from India. Three types of flags used during the sacred ceremonies come from India too: «Tacià», which is a square or triangular flag put on top of a high staff. «Patakà», which is formed by a series of small flags hung along the same staff, and «Toranà», which is formed by a horizontal row of many small flags hanging from a rope [Fig. 1,A]. According to an ancient belief those three types of flags, when suitably assembled, symbolised the body of a person: «Tacià» is the head, «Patakà» the trunk and legs and «Toranà» the arms. Thai people fly these three types of flags during religious ceremonies, spiritually considering them an attending person. This act is meant to bring «good luck» to all those present.

[Fig. 2] shows two royal standards used by king Chulalongkorn: the one on top was used between 1855 and 1892 and the one below from 1885 until 1910. The centre of the upper standard shows a royal crown upon a trident. This trident, named «Nahok», is an amulet of good fortune [Fig. 1,B]. To each side of the crown and trident there is a seven-storied umbrella, an attribute of the sovereign power of the king. On the occasion of king Chulalongkorn's coronation in 1868 such umbrellas were taken in procession across Bangkok.

The standard at the bottom of Figure 2 shows the royal crown above the trident «Nahok» and a toothed wheel, called «Chakra», which stands for the military power and moreover symbolises the «Wheel of Law» of Buddhism. The «Chakra» [Fig. 1,C] has been for centuries a lethal weapon, which may behead a man, if thrown with force and ability. Below the «Chakra» and the «Nahok» is the tripartite royal coat-of-arms. This shows in chief an elephant with three heads, named «Erawan» [Fig. 1,D], and whose three heads stand for the three components of Buddhist faith. To the left is a

sacred white elephant and to the right are two crossed «Kriiss» [the kriiss is a symbol of authority].

The royal standard still in use today was adopted in 1910 [Fig. 3,A]. It consists of a square yellow flag with in its centre a «Garuda», an eagle-man [Fig. 3,B]. The wings of the «Garuda» are red, its body and face are very light red and its claws, crown and ornaments yellow. Legend tells that «Garuda», an eagle with a human face, stole the drink of the Gods ('ambrosia') to liberate his mother who had been taken prisoner by a devil. Later, «Garuda» cheated and thus subdued the snakes, becoming their implacable enemy.

The wife of king Chulalongkorn used from 1899 until 1910 a similar standard to the one of his royal husband (see Fig. 2, below), but the flying end was swallow-tailed. Flags of female members of the royal family usually were swallow-tailed, their design corresponding to their husband's flag. The royal standard of the actual queen is a swallow-tailed yellow square flag with a red «Garuda» [Fig. 3,D]. The royal standard of the wife of king Prajadhipok (Rama VII.) is an exception to the rule, since it is neither swallow-tailed nor does it show the same design as the king's flag: The square flag is of a very light pink colour, having in its centre the queen's silver monogram stitched below the golden royal crown [Fig. 3,C]. Rama VII. ruled from 1925 to 1935. While the emblems of unique standards made of pure silk, like a royal standard, were stitched with gold and silver thread, the flags for common use on palaces or ships were made of normal bunting, the emblems thereon being sewn on them with white or yellow bunting.

From 1892 to 1899 the standard of crown prince Vajiravudh was red with the royal arms and above them the «Nahok» and the «Chakra». From 1899 until 1910, when he was crowned king Rama VI., prince Vajiravudh used a blue standard containing a yellow platform, where the royal arms, flanked by two golden umbrellas and crowned with the golden royal crown, were resting. Between the royal crown and the royal arms were placed the tiny «Chakra» and «Nahok». Since 1910 the crown princes use a square blue flag with the royal flag as a central device. The flags of crown princesses show since 1910 the same design (blue with the royal «Garuda» flag in the centre), but their flags are swallow-tailed, as all flags of female members of the royal family.

«Rama» was a hero prince from the Indian poem «Ramayana» (third century BC). He was often represented on red Siamese military flags of the late 19th c., which used to be waved in front of the enemy to chase away his evil spirits. Even more popular was the trident «Nahok», which used to be put on military flags as a symbol of good luck. Military flags from the end of the last century usually were red with the crowned royal arms in the centre and various golden attributes, like the «Nahok» and the umbrellas. Parade colours were of white colour instead, showing the national flag (then red with a white elephant with yellow ornaments) in a small canton and the units' emblem in the centre of the flag. The elephant was the most important transportation medium of the time and it was an important religious symbol too, representing strength, goodness, intelligence, fidelity and the reincarnation of Buddha. From 1908-1911 on, the richly ornamented white ele-

phant took the place of the king's arms on military flags, the canton now showing the golden royal crown above a sacred sign in blue. These signs were either «Yan» [Fig. 4,A], the enlightened flame shining from Buddha's head, which will protect from evil spirits, or «Jo-Po-Ro» [Fig. 4,B], the symbol of the Chakkri dynasty still in use since 1782.

The three-coloured new national flag adopted in 1917 was introduced for the military too in 1936, their colours showing the golden emblem of the army set on the central blue and adjacent white stripes of the flag. The army emblem shows a white «Chakra» within a circle of yellow flames, the «Chakra» containing a yellow bordered red disc with the yellow symbol «Yan». In 1939 a canton with the yellow royal crown above the red «Jo-Po-Ro» sign and the black unit name in a half-circle below the central army emblem was added to the colours of military units.

Towards the end of the last century two red flags were introduced for use on palaces while the monarch was absent [Fig. 5]: Both flags show the three-headed elephant «Erewan» carrying a canopy. Within the canopy of the upper flag is the sacred sign «Yan», whereas the canopy of the other flag shows the golden royal crown above the golden «Jo-Po-Ro». The flags thus have a religious message, in as the royal power (symbolised by the umbrellas) of the Chakkri dynasty (the «Jo-Po-Ro») is protected by Buddha (the elephant), who will also chase away all evil spirits (with his enlightened flame, the «Yan»).

Chronology of the Chakkri Dynasty

Chao Phya Chakkri	Rama I	1782–1809
Phra Buddha Loet La Naphalai	Rama II	1809–1824 (son)
Phra Nang Klao	Rama III	1824–1851 (son)
Chao Phya Mongkut	Rama IV	1851–1868 (half-brother)
Chulalongkorn	Rama V	1868–1910 (son)
Maha-Vajiravudh	Rama VI	1910–1925 (son)
Prajadhipok	Rama VII	1925–1935 (brother-abdicates)
Ananda Mahidol	Rama VIII	1935–1946 (nephew-assassin.)
Bumiphol Aduladey	Rama IX	1946–regnante (younger brother)

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Illustrations

- Figures 2 and 5 from: C. Majaram, «Thong Muang Thai», Bangkok, 1977.
- Figures 1, 3 and 4: author's artwork.

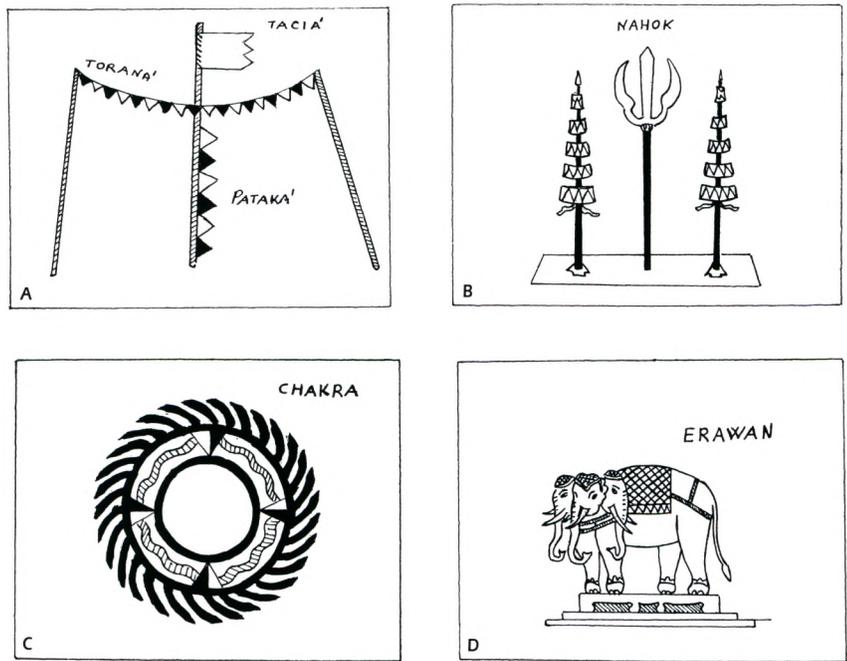


Fig. 1

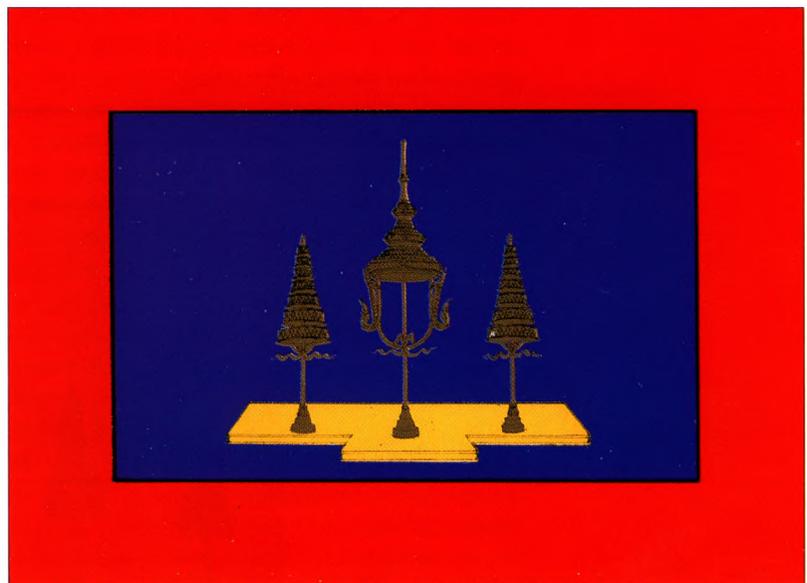


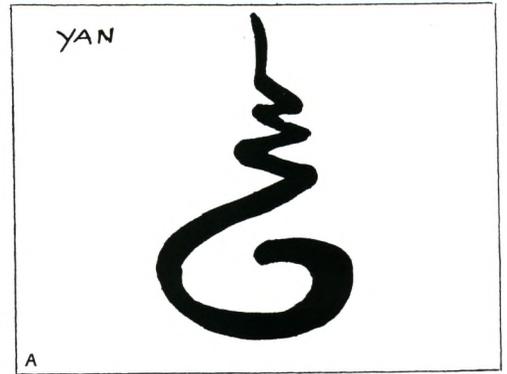
Fig. 2
Royal standards of King Rama V. Above is the flag used between 1855 and 1892, below is the one used from 1885 until 1910.



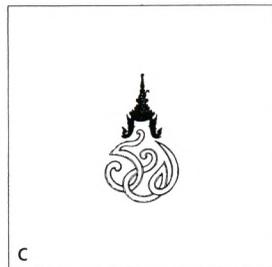
A



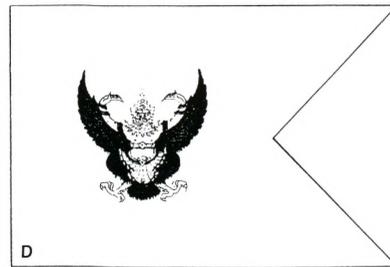
B



A

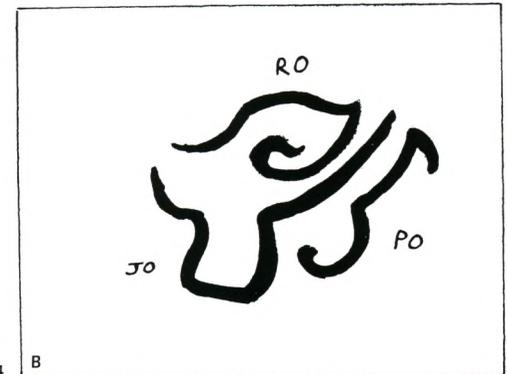


C



D

Fig. 3



B

Fig. 4

Fig. 5
Two flags flown over the royal palaces in the absence of the king, 19th century.

