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ONWARD TOWARD HEAVEN

Burning the Nok Hatsadiling

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Prasat-nok hatsadiling funerary structure. Wat San Khok Chang, San Pa Tong District, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, February 2012. Photograph by R. Hall

Abstract

The final rite in Southeast Asian Buddhist funerals, cremation sends the deceased to the next birth cycle. It is also a reminder of the ephemeral nature of life. Goals of heavenly rebirth are reflected in cremation structures and their visual references to heaven and Mount Meru. In the case of high-ranking monks in Northern Thailand, cremation edifices borrow from royal funerary imagery and depict the mythical *nok hatsadiling* (elephant-headed bird) with a *prasat* (palace) on its back. The structure itself and the overall event hold great meaning for everyone involved. As the *prasat* is burned with the body in the funeral pyre, the animal is believed to safely guide the spirit to heaven. This article examines the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* structure as part of a larger visual language of transition, heaven, and religious power.

THE SIGHT OF A FUNERAL PROCESSION AND CREMATION in Northern Thailand is not easily forgotten. In the case of high-ranking monks, in particular, funerary structures are grand, brightly colored constructions that depict a *prasat* (palace) atop a lifelike, composite animal with the body of a bird and the head of an elephant (fig. 1). It is called a *nok hatsadiling*, which means “bird with characteristics of an elephant.”¹

Proper steps must be taken to ensure the recently deceased make safe and successful transitions into the next life cycle, beginning immediately following death and culminating with cremation. In the countries of Buddhist Southeast Asia—including Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma—these steps often include the construction of a towering edifice to house the body during its final rites. Styles, names, and functions of cremation structures vary by region. This article focuses on *prasat-nok hatsadiling* architecture in Northern Thailand, where the rich practice of creating elaborate cremation structures dates back hundreds of years and continues into the present. Deeply rooted in local Buddhist conceptions of the afterlife, these structures communicate Northern Thai identity as something exceptional that is embraced throughout the region and reflected in its arts. They are part of a local practice, and their continued use connects them to the Lanna Kingdom (1292–1775/1873).

Although exclusively built for monks and royalty, the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* is, for the most part, typical cremation architecture used for the funerals of the highest-ranking members of society as well as the ordinary people who constitute the Buddhist laity. Each *prasat* makes clear reference to the goals of heavenly rebirth. Through the creation and destruction of the structure, the cremation event takes on great meaning for everyone involved: laity and monks, the living and the dead. It reminds viewers not only that all things expire, but also that the desired result of the end of this life on Earth is rebirth in a heavenly realm. The exclusive status of high-

ranking monks and members of the monarchy demonstrates their accumulation of merit and is reflected in the grand scale of the cremation edifices built exclusively for them. The tiers of the structure and the restricted elite use of the *nok hatsadiling* echo the hierarchies of Buddhist cosmologies. By situating the structure within a larger regional context of cremation architecture and Buddhist cosmology, we gain a more complete understanding of the correlation between cultural hierarchy and the goals of heavenly rebirth.

The composite nature of the supporting animal commands attention. Its awe-inspiring size towers over everyone who steps up to it to honor the deceased. These *prasat-nok hatsadiling* structures are built to impress all who see them, but they also incorporate a more serious function. In one sense, a visual reminder of heaven and the likelihood of the deceased's experiencing rebirth there, the Northern Thai cremation event and the animal structure at its center are intended to ease worries about the volatile, transitional period that follows death. By ensuring the successful transition from one existence to the next, a cremation also can assure the living that no spirit has been left behind to disturb them. In addition, the complete destruction of the edifice within the cremation pyre is a profound reminder of the impermanent nature of our existence in this birth cycle, a central theme of South-east Asian Buddhism.

The grand scale of the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* warrants special attention as the art and practice continue to flourish in contemporary Northern Thailand. The mythical bird and its associated cremation event are increasingly embraced as expressions of Northern Thai culture, usually called Lanna after the historic kingdom whose capital was located at Chiang Mai. The edifice is used in the north and in parts of the northeast but not in Central Thailand. In addition, historical records describe the use of *nok hatsadiling* in royal cremations as far back as five hundred years ago.² As the people of Northern Thailand refocus on the specific cultural traditions of Lanna, the *nok hatsadiling* has gained increased attention as well.

Bringing the Nok Hatsadiling to Life in a Cremation Structure

The incorporation of *prasat-nok hatsadiling* cremation structures into elite funerals can be dated to at least as early as the sixteenth century during the Lanna Kingdom. Photographs of the structures throughout the twentieth century document their ongoing role in monks' cremations. In the twenty-first century, their visibility in Northern Thailand each year during the months of December, January, and February calls attention to their continued importance. These months follow the rice harvest, which once provided the money and time required for the construction and execution of an expensive event, such as the funeral and cremation of an important monk.

Nok hatsadiling cremation structures differ widely in size and style but share many specific physical characteristics, not the least being their colorful exteriors. The basic components are a large, round bird body with full wings, tail, feathers, and taloned feet; an elongated neck covered with naga (serpent) scales; and the head of an elephant, complete with long trunk and flapping ears. Resting on the *nok hatsadiling*, stretching far above the back of the animal, the *prasat* is a multi-tiered, tall, open-sided architectural form of elaborate construction with one or more spires. The coffin holding the body of the deceased is placed inside the *prasat*.

Each construction gives a distinctive interpretation to the basic components. Contemporary *prasat-nok hatsadiling* structures vary in style, depending on several factors, including locality and artistic preference. The descriptions included here highlight the basic, formal details incorporated into each structure: the composite animal with the *prasat* on its back; its larger-than-human size; and the bright colors that complete its appearance.³ The *prasat* is golden, projecting a richness that is easily associated with a palace. Photographs spanning the early decades of the twentieth century into the twenty-first reveal that the body is always large, with emphasis on the wings and tail. Individual feathers are painted or cut individually from paper. The widest differences in the *nok hatsadiling* structures appear in the representations of the elephant head, which might be round or elongated, small or large.

Construction of the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* requires the use of flammable materials to create a large sculpture that can be incinerated by the cremation fire. As seen by the author at a workshop in Mae Rim in February 2012, the initial shape is made from bamboo strips. The cremation structure then is completed with papier mâché, paint, and multicolored metallic paper. The *nok hatsadiling* is either built on-site or walked in procession to the cremation site as part of the funeral. If installed as a stationary structure for a funeral, the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* is assembled from pieces that were created at a different location and transported. It is built atop a platform that raises the structure above the ground to gain a more commanding presence and function as a sacred space during the funeral ceremony.

Prasat-nok hatsadiling structures are brought to life through movement. The bird is animated through the mechanical turning of its head and flapping of its wings. In the past, this movement was created by people who sat inside the belly of the animal and manipulated the head and wings by pulling mechanisms. Increasingly, the animation is created with the use of a motor, resulting in a very consistent, hours-long show that keeps the structure moving throughout the course of the merit-making ceremonies leading up to the *bangsukun* (the offering of robes to monks; Pali: *pamsakula*). This animation gives the *nok hatsadiling* a realistic appearance, as if the creature itself were standing in front of the attendees.

Cremation Structures in Buddhist Southeast Asia

Incorporation of composite animals in cremation ceremonies is not exclusive to Northern Thailand. The *prasat* structure also holds important connections to the broader region. The production of large structures is a central component for guiding the deceased in the cremation process and helping the living to visualize the rewards of heaven. The *prasat-nok hatsadiling* structure is part of a larger language of death, transition, and cosmology that is used throughout Buddhist Southeast Asia. To understand its continued use and the particularities of this local version at work in Northern Thailand, we must look at its history within the broader context of cremation structures in Buddhist Southeast Asia.

In the past in Northern Thailand, the largest, most elaborate funeral biers, including those with composite animals, had specific associations with members of the royal family, as evidenced by chronicles and eyewitness accounts.⁴ Even recently, in interviews conducted in and around Chiang Mai, the function of *nok hatsadiling* in royal funerals is the first association mentioned, though the interviewees may never have seen them used in this way.⁵ Structures for monks' funerals in Northern Thailand continue the tradition, highlighting the respected and central role that monks play in Southeast Asian Buddhist culture.

A cremation structure forms a vital part of a funeral, as it is the final resting place for the deceased before his or her body is burned.⁶ Wealth and status influence the size of the structure, which is dictated by tradition, cost, and the politics of display. Cremation is the culmination of several days, months, or even years of important funerary events that include chanting and the making of merit.⁷ Components integral to funeral ceremonies include groups of monks chanting the *Abhidhamma*, the final *pitaka* or basket of the Pali canon, to emphasize impermanence and the ultimate goal of release from suffering achieved through *nipphan* (enlightenment; Pali: *nibbana*).⁸ Immediately before cremation the important *bangsukun* ceremony occurs. The offering of robes to monks by the family of the deceased or important dignitaries for the purposes of gaining merit for the deceased recalls the Buddha's years as a monk, when he would retrieve cloth for his robes from the shrouds of abandoned corpses.⁹ Cremation is often an event with music, monks chanting, and even fireworks to accompany the deceased into his or her next life cycle.

Whether they are split bamboo covers swathed with cloth and flowers or multi-level, glittering mountains occupying nearly an acre in space, cremation structures share several identifying features. The most significant of these is a pointed spire that reaches above the body and mimics the vertical orientation of the Buddhist universe and more specifically the towering Meru, the mountain at the center of that universe. Permanent cremation architecture built of concrete also features such spires. The pinnacle and the architectural space around the corpse represent

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Meru cremation structure for the late King Norodom Sihanouk. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, February 2013. Photograph by A. Carter

both Mount Meru and a palace—physical entities that refer to heaven. Local terms for “Meru” and “palace” are synonymous with the cremation structure, further solidifying the connection.

Large and small cremation structures throughout much of Thailand mimic the Meru shape of the royal versions, discussed below. In Northern Thailand, smaller *prasat* for Buddhist laity are shaped to have a central axis similar to the pinnacle of Meru structures, also discussed below. The body is housed in a coffin that rests in an open-sided pavilion with a peaked roof standing on columns at each corner.¹⁰ Although Northern Thai cremation structures traditionally are built to be burned with the body in the funeral pyre, permanent concrete cremation buildings are increasingly common. When the buildings are used, the pyre is not the culmination of the funeral event. Instead the body is inserted into the building, and the process is complete. These concrete cremation buildings are now seen across the country and were introduced from Central Thailand.

Historically, the grandest of funeral ceremonies and cremation architecture in any Southeast Asian Buddhist country was reserved for royalty. Such practices continue in contemporary Thailand and Cambodia, the most recent example being the funeral of Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk in February 2013 (fig. 2). Royal funeral practices include a large mountain modeled and named after Mount Meru. This structure is built in a central location on or near the palace grounds, using only the best materials, including teak and gold. It is built in the same architectural style as the glittering monastery buildings seen around the capital city (Bangkok or Phnom Penh, respectively).¹¹ Inside the royal Meru is

a functioning crematorium where the body can be burned without destroying the structure. From the ground to the tip of the pinnacle, the structure is several stories tall—with heights reaching between thirty and one hundred meters—and has a commanding presence.¹² Stairs lead to a columned platform that houses the body until its cremation. An elaborate multilevel roof finishes the structure, complete with a spire that is often a third of the total height. While most royal Meru cremation edifices are tiered at the bottom, multiple levels leading up to the platform holding the body are neither a necessity nor an identifying feature. The tiered lower levels add to the overall grand presence of a Meru structure and further enhance its mountain-like qualities.

The resting place for the deceased, for purposes of display and veneration within a royal Meru structure, is a large, open space enclosed by four corner columns and the enormous roof. Royal cremation architecture is not burned, and no expense is spared in its production, which incorporates only the finest, new materials. The composition of this open space in combination with the roof echoes the shape of a *prasat*. In fact, the full Meru construction is a unification of Mount Meru and the palaces on top of it, which represent the heavens, a depiction often seen in Thai manuscripts, murals, and cloth paintings. In addition to their connection to Buddhist cosmology, specifically Buddhist heavens, *prasat* and Meru structures share physical characteristics: the tall nature of their shapes and their sky-reaching spires. These soaring spires serve as axis mundi—uniting heaven and earth at a time that is believed to be a moment of vulnerability for the living and the dead.

Smaller *prasat* also feature prominently in royal funeral processions. The deceased is celebrated and moved from the resting place to the cremation site on a wheeled vehicle composed of a *prasat* atop a mythical animal. In Thailand and Cambodia, the vehicle for transporting deceased royalty is a golden, tiered boat with many naga heads adorning each level, a detail that was included in Norodom Sihanouk's cremation.

In addition to the reference to Mount Meru and the *prasat* of heaven, another consistent element of cremation structures across Southeast Asia is the variety of mythical animals depicted underneath or constructed to serve as support or as vehicles. These animals typically mark transitional space. For example, naga are featured at the bottom of funeral procession vehicles for nonroyal laity in Cambodia and also as support for cremation structures in southern Laos.¹³ Naga atop walls form the boundaries of *wats* (Buddhist monasteries) and designate the space between Mount Meru and the cosmic ocean in paintings and sculpture. The naga is powerful and perhaps able to keep amorphous power at bay, something needed at the time of a funeral.¹⁴ Vehicles in the form of a *hong* (mythical goose) are also used in Cambodian royal funeral processions.

Before the twentieth century, a royal funeral in Central Thailand might feature sixty or more images of mythical animals in a procession making its way to the cremation ground. Each animal stood on a wheeled platform and had a small *prasat* on its back. This component of Bangkok funerals likely was influenced by the Khmer, whose traditions inspired many aspects of Bangkok court culture. Although the practice had ceased by the funeral of Rama V in 1911, illustrated manuscripts and published accounts provide insight into the animals and their specific roles and places in the procession.¹⁵ The animals included a variety of mythical birds and mammals and composite animals, for example, monkey-birds, *garuda*-crocodiles,¹⁶ and aquatic elephants.¹⁷ One of the many mythical animals included in the royal funeral processions of the past was the *nok hatsadiling*, although it received no special attention. The many animals that formed this part of the funeral procession were believed to live in Himaphan (Pali: Himavanta), the lush forest teeming with a variety of fantastic animals at the base of the cosmic Mount Meru.

While similar in symbolism and meaning, funerary architecture in Northern Thailand differs in style from that of Central Thailand, reflecting a wide cultural difference. Further understanding of the *prasat*–*nok hatsadiling* can be gained instead from comparisons with cremation structures of neighboring groups, including the Shan and Burmese.¹⁸ The Shan, whose ethnicity, language, and culture are similar to the Northern Thai people, construct cremation architecture for high-ranking monks that features a large *karaweik* (Pali: *karavika*) with a tiered structure on its back. The *karaweik* is a mythical bird, known for its beautiful voice that has been compared to the voice of the Buddha.¹⁹ *Karaweik* cremation structures are similar in size and design to the Northern Thai ones, and further research is needed to gain an understanding of the relationship between the two types and the history of the *karaweik* of the Shan.

The traditions that connect the Northern Thai to their neighbors in Burma are strong. The Burmese ruled over the Lanna Kingdom for more than two hundred years (1551–1772), influencing and supporting Lanna religious and artistic traditions and establishing relationships with Northern Thailand. Recent articles have examined the influence from Northern Thailand on Burma and vice versa, making the argument for more exploration by scholars into a better understanding of the cultural relationship between the areas.²⁰ Photographic documentation of Burmese cremations from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows an abbot monk's coffin atop a large papier mâché elephant with a *prasat* on its back.²¹ The elaborate cremation ceremonies held for Burmese monks are congruous with those in Northern Thailand and elevate powerful monks to near-royal status.

The combined presence of the animals from Himaphan, Mount Meru, and *prasat* make it clear that royal and monastic cremation structures and the art-

works built to accompany them purposefully represent the Buddhist universe with a specific focus on heavens. Indeed, more than mere representations, they create the physical presence of Mount Meru and its various levels of existence on Earth. Because royal cremations are the most lavish, they provide the most elaborate versions of this element of Buddhist cosmology. However, because the smallest of cremation structures include physical references to *prasat* and Mount Meru, these too bring the center of Buddhist cosmology into the human world (Thai: Chompuhawip; Pali: Jambudipa). In so doing, the living attendees of the cremation ceremony are comforted by the understanding that the deceased has moved on to a better realm and are given an inspiring image to apply to their own lives.

Heaven on Earth: Cosmology of Death

The transition from one birth cycle to the next after death is full of uncertainty for the living and the dead. Care of the dead is a central component of Buddhism and one that has contributed to the religion's development and continued success in Southeast Asia.²² Funerals simultaneously provide the living with assurance that the deceased has moved successfully into the next cycle and confirm the well-being of the surviving community.²³ They are elaborate, multiday events that ease the tension for the living and guide the deceased. Cremation structures are but one component of the larger event. However, their function and symbolism place them squarely at the center of the action, both physically and mentally. Connections between heaven and earth, and ideas about movement between them, inform these funerary practices and their related structures, including the *nok hatsadiling*.

Within a cremation ceremony, a Meru or *prasat* represents heaven on earth and emphasizes to viewers the luxuries of heaven. In addition to its function as an axis mundi, the cremation structure reminds attendees of rewards that may await them in the next life cycle. The *prasat* and pyre are cosmological models, and the multiple roofs represent the levels of existence or heavens located on Mount Meru. As the fire burns, this earthly model transforms into the actual heaven, where the deceased is transported.²⁴

Buddhist cosmology divides the universe into three worlds: the formless world, the world of form, and the world of desire. The world of desire includes Mount Meru, six heavens of the gods, the realm of Chompuhawip, and three hells.²⁵ Most practicing Buddhists from Southeast Asia understand that their next birth cycle will be in a realm within the world of desire. Whether in heaven, hell, or a return to the human realm, rebirth in the world of desire not only is the most likely result, it is the easiest to visualize.

Mount Meru is located at the center of the world of desire; the lower level of heaven rests on the slopes of the mountain. Sakka's heaven,²⁶ known as the heaven

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The fiery destruction of a *prasat-nok hatsadiling* structure in a cremation pyre. Wat San Khok Chang, San Pa Tong District, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, February 2012. Photograph by R. Hall

of the thirty-three (Thai: Dawadeung; Pali: Tavatimsa), sits on Meru's peak, and is the location of the sacred Culamani stupa. Higher heavenly realms, including Dusit (Pali: Tusita), extend vertically above the mountain. At the base of Meru is the Himaphan Forest, land of mythical animals and magical trees. Himaphan usually appears in Buddhist stories, such as the Vessantara Jataka, to create a setting that is supernatural and separate from the forests of Chompuhawip. The forest's mythical animal residents often have the ability to travel to various heavens. They are featured in art at Buddhist monasteries and remind viewers of the existence of Mount Meru and the proximity of the heavens.

In Southeast Asia, ideal actions, such as generosity, compassion, and loving kindness, are central to Buddhist practices for the purpose of creating *bun* (merit; Pali: *puñña*). The merit received from feeding monks, honoring the Buddha, and treating others with respect, etc., is believed to help one's fortunes in future birth cycles, perhaps in the forms of wealth, beauty, brilliance, or some combination of the three.²⁷ Most people, however, believe that proper actions, and the merit that occurs as a result, help Buddhist laity to be reborn in heaven. The concept of merit keeps people engaged with Buddhist practice and cosmology, with possibilities of rebirth in heaven or one of the hells.²⁸ The length of a lifetime in heaven can last a short period of time or as long as nine million human years, correlative to the merit earned in previous lives.²⁹ If someone spends an allotted length of time in heaven, he or she most likely will be reborn in the human realm.

Each of the heavens in the realm of desire is a luxurious place, full of beautiful palaces, gardens, and *thewada* (heavenly beings), with the types and abundance of

luxuries increasing with each ascending level. Beings reborn in the heavens lead peaceful existences and do not want for anything. The descriptions of heaven put forth in Buddhist texts—such as the *Traiphum* (the Three Worlds), the story of Phra Malai, and the Nimi Jataka—paint pictures of a place that is far more desirable than Chompuhawip. Thus, they encourage believers to be moral and just.

Death is an assured result of life, but the transition from Chompuhawip to heaven is tentative. Proper actions throughout the funeral and cremation help ensure a successful transition. The destruction of the physical body through cremation is an important factor. Cremation not only ensures that the deceased's spirit does not remain on Earth, it also serves as a reminder of the temporary nature of life. Fireworks accompany the burning of the *prasat-nok hatsadiling*, and a magical transition occurs (fig. 3). The structure and body disappear as the smoke rises up into the sky. Viewers are reassured that the deceased has made his journey to heaven.

Nok Hatsadiling of the Himaphan: Narratives and Meaning

The use of cremation structures and their connections to cosmologies focused on heaven and hell situate the *nok hatsadiling* within the Buddhist landscape of South-east Asia. Its meaning exists within the connection between larger cosmologies and local narratives. Himaphan, the *nok hatsadiling*'s residence, serves as a buffer between the heavenly and human realms, and this purpose is echoed in the creature's physical appearance and its overall role within the funeral context.

Descriptions of the *nok hatsadiling* state that the mythical bird is the size of five elephants.³⁰ Others declare that its body is the size of a house, and its favorite things to eat are elephants, tigers, water buffaloes, and people.³¹ Its size is important to its role in cremation structures, but additional narratives and artistic forms further explain its symbolism as a marker of transition and its significance to the people of North Thailand.

The *nok hatsadiling* also is represented in sculptural form on roof finials. Although they are not often seen in Northern Thailand, they are becoming increasingly popular on *wat* roofs in Chiang Mai and the surrounding area.³² They are taking a place often reserved for the *hong*, the elegant goose that is an intermediary between heaven and earth.³³ *Nok hatsadiling* sculpture sometimes are perched atop posts holding *tung kradang* (wooden banners), as seen in Wat Chiang Yuen in Chiang Mai (fig. 4) or Wat Phra That Lampang Luang, another space often occupied by the *hong*. *Tung kradang* are donated to monasteries for purposes of gaining merit from the bird on the post from which the banner hangs.

In Thai art and texts, the creature appears either with the Buddha or with an incarnation from one of his previous lives. In the Sudhana Jataka, one of the apocryphal birth stories (*Paññasa Jataka*), Prince Sudhana flew on the back of a *nok*

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Nok hatsadiling atop a post with *tung kradang*. Wat Chiang Yuen, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2009. Photograph by R. Hall

hatsadiling whose body was the size of a house. Searching for his wife, Princess Manohara, Sudhana lay down between the bird's wings as it flew through the air.³⁴ The image of *nok hatsadiling* as a vehicle also is seen in an unusual sixteenth-century Northern Thai sculpture of the Buddha in the National Museum in Bangkok. Little is known about it, but the depiction of the Buddha riding on the back of the mythical bird bears certain connections to the Sudhana Jataka story and cremation structures.³⁵

The *nok hatsadiling* plays an important role in descriptions about the founding of Hariphunchai, the Mon city-state that predated Lanna in Northern Thailand (circa 750–1292).³⁶ Hariphunchai influenced the development of Lanna, both politically and religiously, and Northern Thai chronicles describe the origin of the earlier kingdom in several ways. One popular version tells about the hermit Suthep who founded a city named Hariphunchai at a location with rich soil. After Suthep determined that the city should be shaped like a sea shell, a *nok hatsadiling* flew to the ocean, picked up a shell, returned to Hariphunchai, and dropped it where the Buddha had predicted his religion would prosper.³⁷ In this story, the *nok hatsadiling*'s presence symbolizes the establishment of a new kingdom and thus a new order of things.³⁸ The significance of the kingdom of Hariphunchai as the religious foundation for Lanna is important and might explain the popularity of the *nok hatsadiling* in Northern Thai funerals—namely, the bird associated with the founding of the first northern kingdom continues to bless the region with its presence and assist the elite during times of transformation.

Some narratives in Northeastern Thailand and Laos emphasize the *nok hatsadiling*'s enormous size and fearsome qualities. Its destructive nature is a central characteristic in the story of a *nok hatsadiling* who wreaked havoc on a kingdom by killing people and animals and carrying off the dead. The king was greatly saddened and searched for someone to kill the bird. A princess named Nang Sida volunteered and succeeded in slaying it, with the help of Indra, who provided her with a bow and arrow. The kingdom was overjoyed.³⁹ According to one version of this story:

The chief religious official arranged for a cremation ceremony for the *nok hatsadiling* and the lord of the principality [who had been killed by the bird] by placing the coffin of the lord on the top of the back of the bird and building a golden *meru* over it.⁴⁰

If the *nok hatsadiling* is so brutal, why does it form a central role at funerals of the highest members of society? One explanation looks to the similar role it plays in funerals in areas of Northeastern Thailand, such as Ubon Ratchathani. However, there are differences in the ceremony and narrative. Before the burning of the

structure in the funeral pyre, the animal is “killed” by a woman who takes the name Nang Sida and reenacts the rescue of her family from the fierce creature.⁴¹ Charles Keyes states that the “ambiguous nature” of the large, composite animal “symbolizes the threat to normal structure posed by death.”⁴² According to Keyes, the ritual killing of the *nok hatsadiling* achieves a balance and resolution for the difficult period following death and clears the way for the deceased to go to heaven.

Further research is needed on the specifics of the symbolism of the *nok hatsadiling* and whether its interpretations are part of a larger Buddhist narrative or are specifically local. The narrative of the *nok hatsadiling* as a fierce animal and its eventual “slaughter” is a local method for smoothing the transition from life to death and a local explanation for its role in Northeastern Thai funerals for monks and royalty. Its size and unique hybrid qualities lend themselves to such a narrative. However, in the funerals of monks in Northern Thailand, as opposed to those in the Northeast, the *nok hatsadiling* clearly marks a transition, helping the deceased to move safely from life to death and from the human realm to the heavens.

Prasat–Nok Hatsadiling in Northern Thai Monks’ Funerals

Another perspective for understanding the *nok hatsadiling* is to identify the connection of royalty to Buddhism and the *sangha* (monkhood) in Southeast Asia. Monks’ funerals are well attended in Northern Thailand, and the final cremation is a major event for the locality where it occurs. Funeral attendees have a *kammic* investment in the ceremony,⁴³ in which they can gain merit by attending and donating any variety of things, including flowers, candles, and incense. Many attendees also have a monetary investment in the cremation; a great deal of money is donated for the construction of the *nok hatsadiling*. The manufacture of cremation structures is an expensive endeavor; add the full funeral and cremation ceremonies, and the costs can be quite high. Money raised to pay for the funeral is not confined to the local laity who have a connection to the monastery where the monk lived. Contributions might come from as faraway as Bangkok.

The size of the cremation edifice reflects both the amount of money raised and the status of the deceased monk. For example, in January 2010 a *prasat–nok hatsadiling* cremation structure for Chan Kusalo, the highest-ranking monk (or archbishop) of Northern Thailand, was more than fifty feet tall from the ground to the tip of the *prasat* (fig. 5). Another structure for the abbot at Wat San Khok Chang in San Pa Tong district in February 2012, built by the same group that made the one for Chan Kusalo, stood at the relatively smaller, yet still imposing height of approximately twenty-five feet.

Historical accounts tell of the use of *prasat–nok hatsadiling* in royal funerals during the Lanna Kingdom. Specifically, the Yonok chronicles describe the struc-

ture as central to the funeral of Phra Nang Visuddhidevi, the queen of Lanna, in 1578. Housing the coffin of the dead queen, the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* was pulled by an elephant to the cremation ground.⁴⁴ Whether the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* was incorporated into the funerals of important monks as early as the sixteenth century (as it was for the elite) and when the mythical bird became associated with important monks are unknown. But the clear connection between the iconography in royal and religious funerals raises the question of whether calculated changes were made to mark the difference between the two types of structures. Certainly some change could be expected; however, no evidence of differences exists. The association between royalty and the *sangha* is fluid and well established in Northern Thai Buddhist practice.

The relationship between monks and monarchs is complex and can be traced to the origins of Buddhism, when Siddhartha Gautama gave up his princely wealth and status to become an ascetic and gain enlightenment. This connection is further conflated within the specific context of death in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta. In it, the Buddha tells his disciple Ananda that his remains should be “dealt with like the remains of a wheel-turning monarch” and that the four persons worthy of such treatment are a Tathagata (title given to the Buddha meaning “thus gone”), an Arahant (one who gains enlightenment by following the *dhamma*), a fully enlightened Buddha, and a disciple of the Buddha.⁴⁵ Although the discussion between the Buddha and Ananda concerns post-funeral remains and the building of stupas, one can see its application to the treatment of the deceased in the actual funeral.

The relationship between the Buddha, monarchs, and monks was further enhanced in Buddhist texts describing the conversion of kings, and the conversion and support of Buddhism by Emperor Ashoka (reigned circa 272–31 BCE). In Thailand, the association between the monarchy and powerful monks is further conflated by the ordaining of a king or prince into the *sangha* for a limited period of time. One of the more popular photographs of the current king that is displayed throughout Thailand features him as a monk.

Photographs of prominent or powerful monks often are displayed in homes, businesses, and monasteries, much like images of the royal family. Monks’ powers, achieved through meditation and by following precepts, are something to admire and aspire to. Relics and amulets from particularly powerful or charismatic monks are highly revered and valued because their power might be transferred and remain after their physical essences are gone.⁴⁶

Often the power associated with monks is derived from the Buddha himself, as monks specifically follow his *dhamma* (truth or teachings).⁴⁷ The Southeast Asian monastic line is believed to trace directly from the Buddha, as the first monks were his disciples. In other words, monks are a living connection to the Buddha. In addi-

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Constructing the *nok hatsadiling* for the cremation of Chan Kusalo, the highest-ranking monk of Northern Thailand. Chiang Mai, Thailand, January 2010. Photograph by V. Suwanvanichkij

tion, monks provide power and comfort to communities where they reside.⁴⁸ They are fields of merit for laity; through donations to monks, Buddhists enlarge their stores of merit. Monks also preside over life-extension ceremonies (in Northern Thailand: *seupchata*) to help the laity through life's difficult moments. Because of these roles, monks, especially abbots, are venerated and maintain a high social status in life and death.

Monks' funerals are major events for a community, and large numbers of laity and monks attend the elaborate cremations featuring the *prasat-nok hatsadiling*. The production of an important monk's funeral generates continued support for a monastery and the Buddhist religion as a whole.⁴⁹ To commemorate the event, highlight the deceased monk's life, and further propagate the Buddha's teachings, cremation volumes are printed and distributed at the ceremony. Over time, the volumes have become valuable historical documents that create further connection to charismatic monks.⁵⁰

Like royalty, monks are believed to have a larger stock of merit than common laity, and thus are considered closer to enlightenment and more likely to enjoy rebirth in heaven. As such, they deserve the grand, elaborate structures, both as a reminder of the rewards of dedicating one's life to Buddhism and as a visual reinforcement of the travel a monk will undergo after cremation to reach the upper levels of heaven within the world of desire. The Burmese name for these cremations—*pongyiban*—is a reference to the monk's "soaring" or "flying" to heaven.⁵¹ Such a connection is an easy one to see in the *nok hatsadiling*—*prasat* structures of Northern Thailand as well.

The Continuing Presence of Prasat–Nok Hatsadiling Structures in Northern Thailand⁵²

In contemporary Northern Thailand, the *prasat–nok hatsadiling* edifice is reserved for the most senior monks. It is not merely a remnant from the past but an art form that draws from the past and continues in the present. Its popularity reflects growing and changing sentiments of modernity and regional identity within Thai culture. Construction of a *prasat–nok hatsadiling* is an expensive undertaking for a community. In Northern Thailand in recent years, increasing numbers of these elaborate structures have been built and burned for monks' cremations. The months from December through February comprise an auspicious season and feature the largest number of monks' funerals. Culminating in February, this "funeral season" takes place far from the Buddhist rains retreat (a three-month period extending from July until early October), after the rice has been harvested, and without a threat of rain, the traditional time of the Lanna calendar for high-ranking funerals. During these months, the *prasat–nok hatsadiling* structures are built and burned each year. Special funeral artists create the structures and take responsibility for their construction and destruction at the cremation site. Great pride is taken in the building and incorporation of the mythical birds, as they not only signify an important monk's death, they are highlighted as a honored local tradition.

In January 2010, the cremation of the highest-ranking monk of Northern Thailand took place in the center of Chiang Mai at Wat Chedi Luang. The enormous size of the *prasat–nok hatsadiling*, as it towered over nearby buildings and people, indicated the monk's significance. The funeral and cremation were supported by the king and queen, and the cremation was attended by members of the royal family. Their support demonstrated the importance of the tradition and that the *nok hatsadiling* remains a proper vehicle for the journey of a monk ascending to heavenly rebirth. In addition, the huge size and central location of this particular structure cemented the iconography into the minds of current residents in Northern Thailand.

Economic factors have an impact on the incorporation of the *prasat–nok hatsadiling* in funeral ceremonies. In recent years, as the economy has improved in Thailand and increasing numbers of people have gained disposable income, monasteries have gained wealth as well. The influx of money also has helped increase the number of *prasat–nok hatsadiling* structures in monks' funerals. The tradition will flourish and even gain attention as the economic and cultural factors continue.

Conclusion

Every aspect of the *prasat–nok hatsadiling* edifice and its subsequent decimation by fire marks it as an unusual event. In addition, the structure serves a dual purpose of art and rebirth. Its connection to royal funerary architecture across the region

is important for a better understanding of its relationship to Buddhism, royalty, and the past. Cremation architecture's grounding in Buddhist cosmology and royal precedents highlight the relationship among wealth, power, and Buddhism. Such structures serve the living and the dead with visions of heavenly success.

This article provides a preliminary examination of the cremation structures of high-ranking monks in Northern Thailand, where the construction and use of the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* is flourishing. Its connection to the Lanna past is important as is its evident relationship to contemporary construction of Northern Thai arts and identity. Further research is needed for a more in-depth understanding of the history of these structures and local variations of the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* as well as other cremation structures of the elite in Buddhist Southeast Asia.

The composition of the *prasat* plus *nok hatsadiling* is significant because it conveys status and functions as a reminder of the rewards that can be achieved by living well and following the tenets of Buddhism. The *nok hatsadiling* is a signifier of transition and a transporter of people to heaven; the *prasat* is a heavenly palace; together, they deliver a fulfilling message that the deceased will transition from the human realm up to heaven. The burning of the impressive and stunning *prasat-nok hatsadiling* structure is extraordinary in that an elaborate work of art is made explicitly for the purpose of its complete destruction, which becomes a reminder of the transient nature of life. Thus we can conclude that the nature of the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* is not only one of beauty but is also specifically didactic. Echoing the function of any Buddhist funeral in Thailand, the incorporation of the *nok hatsadiling* into the cremation structure signifies to attendees the status of the one they mourn and provides a level of symbolic assistance to the deceased as he navigates the transition from this life to the next.

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NOTES

- 1 John Hartmann, “The Middle Mekong River Basin as a Cultural Corridor,” in *The Middle Mekong River Basin: Studies in Tai History and Culture*, ed. Constance M. Wilson (DeKalb, IL: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2009), 81.
- 2 For a discussion of a history that dates to the beginnings of the Lanna kingdom, see Cremation volume for Chan Kusalo: *Jotmay Hetphana Nok Hatsadiling* (จดหมายเหตุพญานกหัสดีลิง Chronicle of the King of the Nok Hatsadiling) (Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010), 8.
- 3 In an interview with the author, the abbot of Wat Koh Klang in Chiang Mai Province stated that in the past *prasat-nok hatsadiling* structures were not as colorful as contemporary structures (July 20, 2013). With only black-and-white photos to refer to, further research is needed.
- 4 H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies: Their History and Function* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1931); Jean Boisselier and Khaisri Sri-Aroon, *Les Etres de L'Himalaya* (Torino, Italy: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1995).
- 5 The author conducted interviews with artists who make *prasat* structures and with monks about the significance of the *prasat-nok hatsadiling* structure in Chiang Mai Province in July 2013, and each group mentioned the *nok hatsadiling*'s royal connections.
- 6 A typical Buddhist cremation includes much more than the central cremation structure. However, to maintain focus on the architectural forms and their meanings, I will not discuss the actions, sounds, and additional objects here.
- 7 The body of a high-ranking monk is usually kept for several months, a year, or, in rare circumstances, several years, as was done with the well-known monk Kruba Si Wichai. Sommai Premchit and Amphay Doré, *The Lan Na Twelve-Month Traditions* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 1992), 94–95.
- 8 Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 64–65.
- 9 Erik W. Davis. “Weaving life out of death: the rag robe,” in *Buddhist Funeral Culture of Southeast Asia and China* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 61–63.
- 10 Except in the case of royalty, in which the traditional container for the body is a golden urn. See Karl Döhring, “Cremation in Siam,” in *Phramerumat Phra Merulae Meru: Samai Krung Ratankosin* (พระเมรุมาศ พระเมรุ และเมรุ สมัยกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์ Phra Merumat, Phra Meru, and Meru in the Ratanakosin Period) (Bangkok: Samnakphim Amarin), 417–18.
- 11 Döhring, “Cremation in Siam,” 418–19.
- 12 Nithi Sthapitanonda and Brian Mertens, *Architecture of Thailand* (Singapore: EDM Books, 2012), 130.
- 13 Charles Archaimbault, “Contribution à l'étude du rituel funéraire lao,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 51 (1963), 14.
- 14 Email exchange with Erik W. Davis, September 16, 2013.
- 15 Boisselier and Sri-Aroon, *Les Etres de L'Himalaya*; Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*.
- 16 The *garuda* is a very large, fantastical eagle-like bird.
- 17 Boisselier and Sri-Aroon, *Les Etres de L'Himalaya*.
- 18 Ralph Isaacs, “Rockets and Ashes: Pongyiban as Depicted in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century European Sources,” *Journal of Burmese Studies* 13 (2009), 120; Nicola Tannenbaum in discussion with the author, March 2012.

- 19 G. P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* (New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 2003), 205.
- 20 Justin McDaniel, "Two Bullets in a Balustrade: How the Burmese Have Been Removed from Northern Thai Buddhist History," *Journal of Burmese Studies* 11 (2007), 85–126; Alexandra Green, "From Gold Leaf to Buddhist Hagiographies: Contact with Regions to the East Seen in Late Burmese Murals," *Journal of Burmese Studies* 15 (2011), 305–58.
- 21 *Funeral rites for a Buddhist Archbishop—coffin in elephant-shaped car—Mandalay, Burma*. Underwood and Underwood, 1900. Photographic print, 8.8 x 17.7 cm. The British Library, 18014. <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/f/019pho000000180u00014000.html>.
- 22 See, for example, Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 23 Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 64.
- 24 Charles F. Keyes, "Tug-of-War for Merit: Cremation of a Senior Monk," *Journal of the Siam Society* (1975), 52.
- 25 Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1982).
- 26 Sakka is also known by the name Indra. Not only is he the ruler of Tavatimsa heaven, which stands atop Mount Meru, he is also a protector of Buddhism. In many stories popular in Thailand, he descends to Earth to fulfill this role.
- 27 Assisting with cremation and attending funerals are also ways of earning merit. See S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 184.
- 28 Swearer, *Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 21.
- 29 Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 298.
- 30 Jaree Sunthonsing, "Nok Hatsadiling," in *Jotmay Hetphana Nok Hatsadiling* (จดหมายเหตุพญานกหัสดีลิงค์ Chronicle of the King of the Nok Hatsadiling) (Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010), 7.
- 31 Green, "From Gold Leaf to Buddhist Hagiographies," 328; Hartmann, "The Middle Mekong River Basin as a Cultural Corridor," 81.
- 32 The author made these observations in July 2013.
- 33 Carol Stratton, *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2004), 358.
- 34 I. B. Horner and Padmanabh S. Jaini, trans., *Apocryphal Birth Stories*, vol. 1 (London: The Pali Text Society, 1985), 158.
- 35 Stratton, *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand*, 259, 358; Jean Boisselier, *The Heritage of Thai Sculpture* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1975), 154, 158.
- 36 The Mon are a Theravada Buddhist ethnic group that pre-date the Thai and Burmese presence in Southeast Asia. Their city-states often are credited as having been very influential on the kingdoms and religious practices that followed. Scholars cite differing sources to assign a date for the founding of Hariphunchai (or Haripunjaya). Chronicles and archaeological evidence point to the mid-eighth century, although the Mon presence may have begun as late as the eleventh century. See Donald K. Swearer, "Myth, Legend and History in the Northern Thai Chronicles," *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, no. 1 (1974), 67–88; and Hans Pentz, *A Brief History of Lan Na: Civilizations of North Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2000), 23–37.
- 37 Swearer, "Myth, Legend and History in the Northern Thai Chronicles," 72, 78.
- 38 Swearer, "Myth, Legend and History in the Northern Thai Chronicles," 78, n. 21.
- 39 Didier Brengues, "Les cérémonies funéraires à Ubon," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 4 (1904), 734–36.
- 40 Hartmann, "The Middle Mekong River Basin as a Cultural Corridor," 82.
- 41 Hartmann, "The Middle Mekong River Basin as a Cultural Corridor," 80–82.
- 42 Keyes, "Tug-of-War for Merit: Cremation of a Senior Monk," 51 n. 14.
- 43 *Kamma* is an action that has an intended result, either good or bad. The result of good actions is merit. Therefore the "kammic investment" in a funeral ceremony is the production of good action with the intention of receiving merit.
- 44 Premchit and Doré, *Lan Na Twelve-Month Traditions*, 93–94.
- 45 Maurice Walshe, trans. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 264.
- 46 Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Justin T. McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- 47 Swearer, *Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*.
- 48 Nicola Tannenbaum, *Who Can Compete Against the World? Power-Protection and Buddhism in Shan Worldview* (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 1995), 181.
- 49 Jason A. Carbine, "Care for Buddhism: Text, Ceremony, and Religious Emotion in a Monk's Final Journey," in *The*

Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 443.

- 50 Grant A. Olson, "Thai Cremation Volumes: A Brief History of a Unique Genre of Literature," *Asian Folklore Studies* 51, no. 2 (1992); McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*.
- 51 Isaacs, "Rockets and Ashes," 109.
- 52 For a discussion of funerals in Northern Thailand, specifically those including *nok hatsadiling-prasat* structures, see Vithi Phanichpant, *Withi Lanna* (วิถีลานนา Lanna Culture) (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2005), 135–50.