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3 ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE FORTRESS OF RATIONALITY

If environmental conservation conjures its own global spatial universe out of a deliberate focus on the needs of biodiversity rather than the needs of people living in or near protected areas (Hughes 2005: 157; Tsing 2000), archaeological heritage conservation might be said to conjure a global spatial universe of its own. This latter is an order of space defined by the discourses of archaeology and heritage. It exists in the imaginary of national and international archaeology and heritage practice and is largely unknown to local people despite the fact that they dwell in it. It is unknown to them insofar as the old objects and places that populate this space—the equivalent of nature conservation’s biodiversity—are known to them in other terms.

Practitioners of archaeology and heritage conservation who are committed to a cosmopolitan view seek to accommodate these local realities via a “values approach” that endeavors to canvass, document, and assess the multiple meanings that old objects and places can have (e.g., Avrami et al. 2000; Byrne 2008) using such value categories as the scientific, the social, the aesthetic, and the historical. A parallel values approach is employed by many nature conservationists who reject the “fortress conservation” approach (Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004; Brockington 2002, 2004; Colchester 2004: 94; Harmon and Putney 2003). As the name implies, fortress conservation seeks to protect national parks from local people, who frequently become the subject of expulsion and forced resettlement (see chapter 4 by Meskell, this volume; Phillips 2003: 12). They join the ranks of the world’s “conservation refugees.”

My geographic focus here is Southeast Asia, a region where forced resettlement of people from archaeological conservation zones is by no means unknown today. There is, however, another dimension to fortress conservation in the Southeast Asian heritage field that, though less traumatic for those on its receiving end, is far more pervasive. I
refer to a discursive barrier, erected by archaeologists and heritage practitioners, that excludes serious consideration of popular religion as a means by which old objects and places are contextualized within the world of everyday life. Citing the case of Thailand, I describe the ways in which people attribute magical supernatural qualities to the material past. I argue that we are prevented from acknowledging, let alone accepting, this situation because of the way our discourses are constituted in a secular-rationalist Western worldview that grew out of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. This worldview not merely rejects the magical supernatural; to a significant extent it was founded upon this rejection.

For the most part we do not find practitioners of archaeology or heritage conservation actively blocking people from interacting with the material past via the magical supernatural. What we find instead is an effacement of that whole contextual frame. This effacement is clearly incompatible with a cosmopolitan respect for plurality; but how do you respect a plurality that you cannot see? I propose that a thick cosmopolitanism requires history: we need to be willing to excavate our own practice in order to know how it is constituted.

The Local, the Popular, and the Magical

Before embarking on a history of the effacement of the magical supernatural in the specific case of Thailand it seems advisable to make some general observations about popular culture and popular religion. As a belief system and field of practice, the magical supernatural in Thailand is spread across all segments of the population, albeit not evenly. The belief in the supernatural empowerment of certain objects and places appears to be shared by farmers, construction workers, upcountry Buddhist monks, politicians in Bangkok, waiters in the tourist hotels of Phuket, pop singers, noodle stall owners, and taxi drivers, among others. It transcends the rural-urban divide and the class divide, as well as the divisions of gender and age. And yet it is absent from the school curriculum, will not be found in modern orthodox institutional Buddhism, and tends not to be mentioned in heritage impact assessments, heritage inventories, government museums (except as a relict phenomenon), or at those other sites that have their origin in the formation of the modern Thai nation-state (beginning in the mid-nineteenth century).
Thai popular religion includes the often overlapping practices of animism, non-canonical Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, and elements of Chinese popular religion. Animism in Thailand is centered on the phi, those territorial spirits associated with particular trees, fields, forests, swamps, and other natural landscape elements. Described as “nature spirits” by Tambiah (1970: 316), they inhabit road intersections, bridges, and mountain passes. Turton (1978: 124) shows how “non-specific forest spirits” become specific when forest areas are cleared for houses or cultivation. Phi commonly occupy archaeological sites and ruins (e.g., Wijeyewardene 1986: 147–48). When the ruins of temples are discovered in the jungle it is assumed they are occupied by phi and mediums may be brought in to attempt to channel the spirit and thus identify it. The many millions of spirit shrines that continue to be erected in Thailand map the tangible presence of the supernatural but so do the tens of thousands of Buddhist stupas, the physical fabric of which is frequently considered to be empowered and miraculously efficacious. At a popular, non-canonical level, the realms of animism and Buddhism overlap and entangle.

In addition to the localized cults of territorial spirits there are those cults that have a virtually unlimited spatial spread. The emergence in the 1980s of the cult of the former Thai king, Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reigned 1868–1910), exemplifies this phenomenon. At the spatial epicenter of the Rama V cult is the equestrian statue erected to honor him in the Dusit area of Bangkok. While amulets and images of Rama V appear not to have originally been associated with rituals seeking supernatural assistance (for example, in providing invulnerability), the cult’s more recent popularity among rural and urban laborers has led to the incorporation of these ritual objects within established patterns of Thai supernaturalism (Jackson 1999a: 168). Cult objects of Rama V have jumped the national borders of Thailand and are now to be found, for instance, on the hing bucha (worship shelf) of Thai restaurants all over the world.

Almost any object that is old is likely to be considered saksit (supernaturally empowered). The historian Lorraine Gesick (1995: 62) cites a case from southern Thailand where the remains of an old dugout canoe were excavated by villagers who placed them in the local temple. But, “gradually,” she tells us, “as villagers took away slivers as talismans, [the canoe] almost entirely disappeared.” It was said that some of the
people who took the wood died because they could not withstand its supernatural power.

A key principle in Thai popular religion is that of contagion, the belief that supernatural power transmits via physical contact. This is seen in the way caves once occupied by famously empowered forest monks become empowered places and in the way powerful monks transmit efficacious power to amulets and statues of the Buddha by praying over them while linked to them via sacred cotton threads. Similarly, the efficacious potential of an ancient stone adze is transmitted to the water in the earthenware jar in which it is kept and protects those who drink the water against illness and lightning strikes (Sorensen 1988: 4). To think of such objects as having agency is not to imply they have intentionality (Gell 1998; Meskell 2004: 77); it is we human agents who initiate the “causal sequences” that give objects the power to act on us (Gell 1998: 16). Within these limits, however, the magical agency possessed by a great array of objects and places in Thailand means that they are not available to be “managed” by us in the conventional mode of heritage management. The agency they have means that they have the capacity to act upon us as much as we have the capacity to act upon them. We might usefully think of local people being in dialogue with old objects and places; we might consider the appropriate relationship of conservators to these objects and places as also one of dialogue (Byrne 2005: 59–60).

The magical supernatural is better thought of as a geographically unbounded discourse than a localized practice. Particular cults may be quite localized, but the magical supernatural, as a way of giving meaning to the material past, constitutes a kind a lingua franca that exists across the whole of Southeast Asia and beyond and arguably brings into being a transnational community. I would guess that the cosmopolitan urge, to the degree that it currently exists in archaeology, takes the form of an openness to the particular meanings that different cultures give to old objects and places. It is cosmopolitan at the level of culture. The magical supernatural, however, is a discourse in the sense that archaeology is a discourse. It is global in its reach and it characterizes the relationship that the greater proportion of humanity has with the material past. The sheer prevalence of the magical supernatural in Asia, Africa, and Latin America alone, as against the very restricted penetration of archaeology and heritage discourse into the realm of
everyday life in these areas, urges us toward a cosmopolitanism that is comfortable with magic.

Western Disenchantment in Southeast Asia

By the time it achieved a significant presence and influence in Southeast Asia, the West had rejected the existence of the magical supernatural. Yet even in the case of those Southeast Asian lands that, unlike Thailand, were acquired as colonies, the West never enjoyed sufficient influence to significantly influence the practices and beliefs of popular religion. What it did achieve was a significant influence on elite society in these lands and on the path these elites took to modernity. It profoundly influenced the discourses of archaeology and heritage as and when they developed in Southeast Asia. In this section I offer a brief overview of the West’s experience of “disenchantment” and its influence on Thailand’s modernity.

In European medieval Christianity God was a living presence in the landscape, manifest in the miraculous efficacy flowing from saintly people, sacred relics, and sacred places (Bender 1993: 253–55). In part this was a reflection of the way early European Christianity had assimilated elements of preexisting religions. Many of the sacred sites of paganism were physically overlain with churches, altars, and shrines. Wells and springs were named for Christian saints and martyrs and their water became “holy water” used in Christian rituals (Strang 2004: 88; K. Thomas 1971: 48). Christianity’s scheme of the supernatural consisted of the ordered realms of the diabolical, the natural, and the divine supernatural, the first governed by Satan, the second two governed by God (Le Goff 1988: 12). The character of the divine supernatural came to be heavily informed by the cults that formed around saints and their relics (Geary 1986; Meskell 2004: 45–46). The sites of saints’ graves and the relics themselves were believed to be animated by miraculous efficacy and were a target of appeal by the faithful for favors in this life as well as in the next. There are a great many parallels between medieval Christianity and contemporary Thai popular Buddhism. These include the latter’s syncretic overlap with animist belief and ritual, the superimposition of stupas and monasteries onto animist sites such as hilltops and rock outcrops, the cults that form around saint-like “magic” monks (Jackson 1999a), and the ascription
of miraculous power to Buddha images, consecrated amulets, and the physical fabric of religious structures, including stupas (Byrne 1995). The key characteristics of the world of Thai popular religion should thus be familiar to us, in the West, as they are so much a part of our own past. The Protestant Reformation, beginning in the sixteenth century, had the effect, however, of distancing us from our medieval selves. I suggest that it is the Reformation in us that makes it so hard for us to accept the validity of the magical supernatural as a way of making sense of the material past in today’s world.

In the Protestant view, particularly the Calvinist view, religion was to be a matter between one’s soul and a God who dwelt in heaven (Eire 1986: 312). This is Latour’s (1993: 32–35) “crossed-out God,” the God of modernity, relegated to the sidelines. In repudiating belief in the presence of magical and sacramental forces in the landscape, the Reformation effectively removed God from nature as an active, causal force, opening the natural world up to understanding through learned inquiry via discourses such as natural history and archaeology. Counter-Reformation Catholicism, for its part, validated the worship of holy images but warned against regarding them as possessing power in their own right. It did not exactly resile from the miraculous—this was hardly possible, given the central place in Catholicism of the sacramental act of transubstantiation, in which the bread and wine are magically transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Instead, it sought to carefully manage popular engagement with the miraculous. We see this at Lourdes, where pilgrims are discouraged from treating the spring water as magically efficacious (Eade 1991: 55–68). The revolution in European scientific thought that took place in the seventeenth century complemented key tenets of the Reformation: “The notion that the universe was subject to immutable natural laws killed the concept of miracles” (K. Thomas 1971: 643).

One thus speaks of the “disenchantment” (Weber 1946: 155) of the post-Reformation world. One problem with this proposition is that for many of Europe’s Christians, God continues to be immanent in nature—for them, the relics of the saints continue to be miraculous. Nor have other manifestations of the supernatural entirely faded from modern life experience, as Jay Winter (1995: 54–77) shows in relation to the First World War. Another problem is the common assumption that post-Reformation disenchantment encompasses the
non-European world, Asia for instance. While, as described in the next section, most Asian countries have experienced state-driven campaigns against “superstition,” nothing similar to the Protestant Reformation ever actually occurred there. Contrary to the Weberian “rationalisation thesis,” in Asia capitalism and modernity have not been accompanied by disenchantment. On the contrary, Asia’s rapid economic development in the last decades of the twentieth century has been accompanied by a surge in popular religion (Keyes et al. 1994; Jackson 1999b).

The first Europeans to arrive in Siam, toward the end of the seventeenth century, set foot there nearly two hundred years after Martin Luther (1483–1546) formulated his ninety-five theses in 1517. The first to reach Siam were Portuguese explorers and traders in 1511; Portuguese Dominican missionaries followed in 1567. The Dutch opened factories at Patani in the south of Siam in 1602 and six years later at the capital, Ayuthaya, where Japanese traders, many of them Christians who had fled persecution in their homeland, were already established (D. Hall 1981: 380). The British East India Company followed in 1612. In 1664, during the reign of King Narai (reigned 1657–88), French missionary priests were allowed to build a church and a seminary at Ayuthaya and they were soon carrying out missionary work elsewhere in Siam. The other Christian missionary project of the most influence in Siam was that of the American Protestants beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Protestant missionaries were particularly concerned to attack what they saw as the idolatry of popular Thai Buddhism and they used every opportunity to try to demonstrate to Thais that images of the Buddha and other deities were not imbued with divine power. On occasion this involved destroying the images in order to demonstrate their powerlessness (e.g., Perkins 1884: 452), a strategy in the iconoclastic tradition of Calvinism. At around the same time that Western missionaries were attacking “idols,” Western art historians were appropriating them to the discourse of aesthetics. While the outcome was the reverse—the physical fabric of the idols was privileged and preserved for aesthetic edification—the discursive shift was in other ways the same. That is to say, it moved away from the idea of religious objects as divinely empowered and toward the idea of them as cultural property or cultural heritage. Being perhaps the most obvious “collectible” in Thai material culture, statues of the Buddha began to be acquired by Western traders,
travelers, and missionaries as early as the seventeenth century though it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the European discourse of art history began to inform this collecting. In 1917 George Coedès, formerly director of the Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient in Hanoi, was appointed to the National Library in Bangkok and it was only then that art history and archaeology began to be practiced on a professional basis in Siam. Unlike most missionaries, the art historians and archaeologists would treat the images of Buddha respectfully or at least “neutrally” though still via a discourse that focused purely on their formal materiality. It was a discourse that was immune, so to speak, to the divine power and efficacy of the objects.

This discursive shift would be manifest spatially as thousands and then, by the twenty-first century, hundreds of thousands of images of Buddha began their migration out of Asia toward the museums, the mantelpieces, and the glass coffee tables of the West. Some of these images are ancient, some are modern sacralized images, and many are unsacralized images produced specifically for the Western market. Not all of these images, however, have moved into the purely secular realm of art history; many have been acquired and displayed by westerners who, though not Buddhists, do appear to invest them with some degree of spirituality. Interesting here is Meskell’s (2004: 177–94) view that the modern collecting of ancient Egyptian religious objects (and reproductions of them) does not entail a leaving behind of their original spiritual, magical properties. She observes the “quasi-ritual piety” with which many modern consumers “revere” them (2004: 178) and she notes that while “consumption may to some degree cheapen the grandeur of religion . . . commodities can also democratise the spiritual” (2004: 182). In the case of Thai images of Buddha, an added permutation of their migration westward has been that this transfer has been accompanied by a movement in the same direction of Buddhism itself. Beginning in the nineteenth century, many in the West have been attracted to a certain construction of Buddhism emphasizing holistic thought (Bruce 2002) and meditative, transcendental practice. But the Buddhism championed in the West tends to be “a religion without gods, a type of spiritual self-effort totally dependent upon the will of a determined practitioner” (J. Holt 2003: 112). This could hardly be further removed from the kind of popular religious practice in Thailand that mediates local relations with the material past. As Jackson (1999a: 251–52) observes:
In popular religiosity—whether practised within an animist, Brahmanical, or even a Buddhist symbolic frame—neither the clerical bureaucracy of the Buddhist sangha nor notions of non-self (anatta) or transcendent salvation (nibbana) play a significant role. In Thai popular religion it is the ‘self’ of the spiritually powerful personality that is of paramount importance, and spiritual practice centres on establishing a strong personal relationship between the devotee and that personality. This is the case whether the spiritual personality is a Buddhist monk, a Hindu god, a former king of Siam, a Chinese deity, or a locality spirit believed to inhabit an old tree, a cave, a mountain top, or other natural feature.

Returning to the nineteenth-century missionaries, we observe that they brought more than religious faith with them to Asia; they also travelled with the science of medicine, the technology of the printing press, and an enthusiasm for modern education. Apart from their undoubted altruistic, humanitarian aspect, the medical services provided by missionaries were intended to help undermine superstitious beliefs (e.g., Cort 1886: 318). On the whole, Thais accepted the efficacy of modern medicine, but it seems unlikely that they saw it as canceling out the efficacy of the magical supernatural as recourse against illness and injury. In present day Thailand, where modern medicine is almost universally employed, invulnerability tattooing and recourse to the spirits and deities, channeled by mediums, are both extremely common in the remedy and prevention of bodily harm as well as spiritual assault (Kitiarsa 1999). Even more prevalent in contemporary Thai society is the wearing of invulnerability charms, many of which are small stamped clay amulets (Chirapravati 1997; Turton 1991). They are ritually sacralized by powerful monks and are frequently “archaeological” in the sense of having been dug up from archaeological sites or “released” from stupas that have been broken open (Byrne 1999: 276; Tambiah 1984: 204).

What the above discussion indicates is that in Thailand, as in many other parts of the non-Western world, the discourses of science and the supernatural can be practiced simultaneously, and by millions of people they are so practiced. The practice of one does not necessarily lead to the collapse of the other; the idea that they are antithetical is one of the conceits of Western modernity. I would argue that in a similar way and in the course of everyday life Thais participate in and practice the public discourse of heritage while simultaneously practicing
supernatural Buddhism. For example, people visiting the iconic heritage site of Sukhothai in Central Thailand participate willingly in the state-sponsored narrative of this ancient religious center as the first capital of the Thai nation (Peleggi 1996) while at the same time venerating and propitiating individual structures and objects within the complex as supernaturally empowered entities. This display of cosmopolitanism on the part of ordinary Thai folk stands in contrast to the manner in which archaeologists and heritage practitioners tend to police a
strict taxonomy aimed at preventing the archaeological meaning of the material past from being contaminated by supernatural meaning. Like the nineteenth-century missionaries, we archaeologists put our faith in the incompatibility of science and the supernatural. One effect of this is that it prevents local practice from having a say in heritage management, but another is that it denies heritage practice the richness of discourse plurality and contributes to the experiential and intellectual aridity and blandness that characterize heritage practice.

The interest taken in the natural history of Siam by Western travelers and sojourners from around the middle of the nineteenth century was similar to the advent of modern medicine in that natural history constituted a self-contained, explanatory system with no interest in integrating existing indigenous forms of knowledge to itself. Its self-consciousness as a modern science insulated it from traditional knowledge. Natural history embodied a classificatory approach based on observable physical attributes (Foucault 1973). It detached observed objects such as plants, animals, trees, soils, and rock formations from their local social and religious settings, moving them into the new global setting represented by geological tables and biological taxonomic systems. “Natural” objects might be acknowledged to have quaint meanings assigned to them in local custom and folklore, but this had nothing to do with their essential meaning as “natural” phenomena. Taxonomic systems such as Linnaeus’s could accommodate the biological species and other natural phenomena of Asia as easily as those of Europe. As Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 30) observes, circumnavigation of the globe by Europeans brought into being not just a “planetary consciousness” but a “European global or planetary subject”: “One by one the planet’s life forms were to be drawn out of the tangled threads of their life surroundings and rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and order. The (lettered, male, European) eye that held the system could familiarize (‘naturalize’) new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system” (Pratt 1992: 31).

The Western sojourners who made up most of the membership of the Siam Society, founded in Bangkok in 1904, traveled widely in Siam, sometimes resided in the provinces, and were in a position to make just the kind of firsthand observations valued by natural history. The indefatigable Colonel Gerini (1904), in his exhortation to his fellow members of the Siam Society, suggested 217 topics that warranted their
interest. Under the letter “a” were to be found Aboriginal, agriculture, alchemy, alimention, amulets, ancient cities, animals, Annamese, anthropology, archaeology, architecture, arms, arts, and astrology. “Every casual observer,” he urged, “even if not interested in the subject, can help by merely noting down such facts as fall under his knowledge” (1904: 1). The Siam Society, under royal patronage, functioned somewhat like its sibling learned societies in the surrounding European colonies, including the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and the Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient. It served to gather and centralize knowledge that was made available to various branches of the sciences and humanities in the metropolitan centers. These forms of knowledge—for example, archaeology, botany, ethnology, geology, zoology—had no precedent in the indigenous cultures of the region, which they marginalized by creating authorized bodies of knowledge whose center of gravity was situated in Western centers of learning. In relation to these centers, places such as Siam, Malaya, and Burma constituted the “field.”

Much more was involved, though, than the simple collection of knowledge and the channeling of it into Western repositories. As Foucault (1967, 1973) was at pains to point out, the great classifiers of eighteenth-century Europe strove to transform the disorder of preclassical knowledge into a new type of order. The “disorders of illness,” for instance, were transformed “into something akin to the order of plants” (Elden 2001: 127). It is tempting, by analogy, to see the classificatory schemes of art history and archaeology, which arranged Buddhist stupas and other structures into types and subtypes, as an effort to remedy and displace a similar disorder. This disorder was the perceived madness of a system of popular knowledge that ordered these monuments according to their record of miraculous efficacy or according to the spirits and deities known to reside at or in them, information that was recorded in shrine chronicles as well as being the subject of a vastly detailed and continually updated body of oral local knowledge.

Art historical and archaeological taxonomy is based on visual observation of material fabric and form. Popular religious knowledge is not indifferent to materiality but is interested primarily in materiality’s effects. It finds evidence of these effects in dreams and apparitions and messages channeled by mediums. It carefully observes the flow of good fortune emanating from places and objects actively venerated or propitiated; equally, it registers the flow of ill fortune consequent
upon the neglect or mistreatment of the same objects and places. These two knowledges coexist, but while the former is legitimated as proper knowledge by national and international institutions, the latter, though it flourishes at a popular culture, is denied this legitimacy.

Western knowledge systems operating in Siam rendered local popular religion as quaint rather than real. As noted at the beginning of this section, this discrediting has had little or no impact on the belief in and practice of local religion and the way it contextualizes the material past. What it has done is move it to the periphery of our view. But at least as important in the way the popular has become largely invisible has been the emergence, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, in Siam-Thailand of the nation-state. This highly centralized form of government necessitated the crafting of a new national history (Reynolds 1991), one that spelled the “nationalization” of archaeological heritage sites and the emergence of a discourse of heritage that—somewhat incidentally, somewhat tactically—was disarticulated from popular culture.

Marginalization of the Popular by the Centralized State

There are strong parallels between the development of the nation-state in Southeast Asia and the development in that region of archaeology and archaeological heritage management. This is not happenstance. As numerous archaeologists themselves have noticed, the nation-state, particularly in its project of national identity building, has profoundly shaped the form that modern archaeology has assumed in most parts of the world (e.g., B. Anderson 1991; Diaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; L. Jones 1997). There was no precedent in Southeast Asia for the type of space the nation-state would require for its existence, and archaeology, along with historiography, cartography, demography, education, museums, and transport infrastructure, would be among the programs or technologies that would help make this space available (B. Anderson 1991).

The centralization of knowledge that has occurred in the course of the formation of nation-states in Asia is well illustrated by the production of Thailand’s new national history, beginning in the late nineteenth century. The production of this history does not imply the absence of prior historiography. Premodern “traditional” historiography, known as tamnan (Wyatt 1976), was a localized form of history, each locality
having its own body of *tamnan*, oral or written, closely associated in
an explanatory way with local sites (built and natural) and local land-
scapes. Royal capitals had their own *tamnan*, which, like those of
outlying places, blended mythology and history, and the premodern
state also maintained archives of royal edits that were themselves sa-
cred objects. Then there were Buddhist cosmological texts such as the
Traiphum, which was compiled as early as 1345 BCE from the Pali canon
and commentaries and was preserved and kept current by the kings
of Siam, who periodically commissioned recensions of it (Reynolds
1976). The nature of premodern Siamese historiography was thus con-
tinuous from the local to the state, from the village to the center.

The move to the creation of national history is documented at a lo-
cal level in a case study by Gesick (1995). She describes the situation in
the Songkla area of peninsula Thailand where, traditionally, *tamnan*
manuscripts written on palm leaf were regarded as sacred objects in
their own right (Gesick 1995: 20). Curated in local temples, they were
charged with power in a way that made them dangerous to read. In
1902 Prince Naris toured the Siamese provinces of the Malay Peninsula
in his capacity as the minister of post and telegraph in the government
of King Chulalongkorn. While visiting a famous old monastery in the
Songkla area, he was shown a set of old manuscripts that had been in
the care of a local woman (Gesick 1995: 5–6). Gesick interviewed two
elderly sisters who were descendants of the curator of the manuscripts
during Naris’s time and who related the story of how the manuscripts
had been removed to Bangkok.

Reading the manuscripts, they say, was extremely dangerous and was
rarely if ever done, and then only with ceremonial precautions. The manu-
scripts, they agreed, could only be read—the clear implication is “read
aloud”—from the back of a white elephant. Otherwise, whoever attempted
to read the manuscripts would cough blood from the larynx and die.
Upon questioning, they explained that the “white elephant” was a sym-
olic white elephant constructed out of cloth over a bamboo frame. They
also said the “royal servants” (*kha ratchakan*) who took away the manu-
scripts took them on a white elephant. Without the white elephant, the
manuscripts “refused to go.” (Gesick 1995: 20)

The removal of the manuscripts to Bangkok “signals” the ascendancy
of scientific “national history” over sacred local history (Gesick 1995:
15).
The collection of local source material to build national history had its counterpart in archaeology. What Prince Damrong Rajanuphab (1862–1943) accomplished for the government as the minister of the interior under Chulalongkorn, establishing and administering the new provincial bureaucratic infrastructure, he also did for the past of the new nation: he centralized it (Craig Reynolds, personal communication). Damrong personally recorded numerous ancient sites, mainly religious monuments, during his frequent travels across the country. Provincial governors and other officials were requested to put out feelers and to report finds to Bangkok and they were instructed to collect and conserve antiquities. The resulting inventory served to give these sites a new coherence as the physical imprint in the landscape of the emergent national narrative. Unlike the case of the tamnan, this project of mapping, which helped to bring into being a national space, had no interest in the supernatural attributes of the sites. It might indeed be argued that these places could only play their nation-building role once they were freed from the web of magical supernatural power relations that contextualized them within popular culture. Similarly, in the master plot of the new national history, the old narratives of kings that explained their rise and fall in terms of their religious merit were replaced by ones in which the kings were nation builders (Thongchai 2000: 544).

The interrelatedness of the various components of the nation-building program is seen in the relationship between archaeology, history, and transportation. By 1907 some 550 miles of railway track were in operation in Siam (B. Anderson 1978: 225). Railways, new roads (replacing buffalo and elephant tracks), and telegraph lines allowed the center to be present at the periphery, permitting the centralized national government to be a tangible reality in all parts of the country and to control minutely life across the country in a way that had never been possible previously. If the railway and then the highway system made even the far-flung reaches of the nation governable it also made the physically dispersed heritage sites visitable. Successive Thai governments have developed iconic monumental sites such as Ayuthaya, Sukhothai, Pimai, and Phanom Rung as historical parks for visitation by both Thai and foreign tourists. As Ivy (1995) has shown in the case of Japan, the railway helped introduce the public to the idea of national space as well as promoting the idea that national culture was
a visitable, consumable entity. In Siam, as in India, China, and elsewhere, the building of the railways required huge volumes of “ballast” for use in constructing the bed of the line and this was often acquired in the vicinity of the line by demolishing the ruins of old stupas and other monuments. Among other places, this occurred in the area of the old capital, Ayuthaya (Vella 1978: 203–4). One author even claims that railway contractors were actively encouraged to use temple ruins as a source of “ballast” (Graham 1924: 178). There is a sense then in which those sites that nationalism raised to iconic status became visitable by the new national community in a process that consumed non-iconic sites of purely local-popular significance.

In Benedict Anderson’s words (1991: 173), across Southeast Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century, the surveyors were “on the march to put space under the same surveillance which the census-makers were trying to impose on persons.” Whereas previously the power of the king only extended as far out from his capital as he was able to project military force, now the writ of government extended across the whole country to its very borders. But the borders themselves had to be created for the purpose. Previously there had been no need to know precisely where the kingdom began or ended geographically—at their peripheries, the kingdoms of Siam, Burma, and Cambodia gradually merged into each other. The modern topographic survey map of Siam, first produced at the end of the nineteenth century by Western surveyors employed by King Chulalongkorn, displaced a preexisting notion of a sacred landscape that consisted of sacred centers, such as princely capitals, surrounded by unmeasured space (Thongchai 1994). This space was depicted in the murals painted on temple walls in which “the universal land of the Buddha” (Thongchai 1994: 22), consisting of stories from the Buddha’s life, was shown as being set in the local landscape surrounding the temple. It was a spatial order in which the cosmological and the terrestrial tied together. Henceforth, however, it was only the confines of the Buddhist temples across the country that were recognized by the center as constituting sacred space, not the landscape surrounding them, which was subsumed into the new “geobody” (Thongchai 1994) of the nation.

Prince Damrong’s nationalization of ancient monuments, alluded to earlier, was part of a larger move to invent a whole new notion of Thai “culture,” which became particularly marked in the 1930s and 1940s.
The thinker, writer, and politician Luang Wichit Wathakan (1898–1962) played a key role in this invention, convinced as he was that the new nation must be “a tangible entity which individuals could identify with and love” (Barmé 1993: 87). This tangibility included new ritual behavior in relation to national symbols (for example, the flag and the national anthem), a whole new raft of performing arts (sponsored by the Fine Arts Department, founded in 1933), a new style of dress and deportment, and the promotion of Thai language at the expense of Chinese languages (Barmé 1993: 144–63). Popular religion had no place in this new cultural domain.

The construction of the Thai nation-state thus affected popular religious practice in a variety of ways. An attempt was made to confine religious belief to a segment of life that was defined by institutional Buddhism. The supernatural was taken out of history (by the new national historical narrative), taken out of nature (as an explanation of natural phenomena), taken out of the landscape (displaced by modern cartography), taken out of the very notion of “culture,” and taken out of the material past, where it would be displaced (at an official level) by the discourses of archaeology and heritage. At least this was the program: it would be more accurate to say that popular religion was taken out of visibility.

It is impossible to separate the creation of archaeological or heritage space in Thailand from either the influence of Western secular-rational modernity or the internal nation-building project. One might say that the magical supernatural context of the Thai material past has been stratified below these developments and obscured from view. I mean specifically the view from “above,” the perspective one has of Thai society when one’s view is mediated by official institutions and discourse. Archaeology has benefited from the disenfranchisement of popular religion as a form of legitimate knowledge and practice insofar as it has allowed us to promote the illusion that ordinary Thais see the material past the way we do. A space has been opened up for us to occupy, but our occupation of it is always at the expense of a disengagement from the world of our fellow citizens in places like Thailand. To dwell in this space is to live an illusion.

Finally, in this section, I turn to briefly consider the role that religious reform in Thailand has played in the disenfranchisement of the popular. King Mongkut (Rama IV, reigned 1851–68) came to the throne
after living twenty-seven years as a Buddhist monk, during which time he learned English and read extensively about Western religions and Western science, himself becoming a knowledgeable astronomer. But he also studied the Pali canon of Buddhism and turned his energies to promoting an orthodox practice of Buddhism that eschewed belief in magic and the supernatural. In 1829 he founded the Thammayut order of Buddhist monks, who aimed “to purify the religion by restoring to it the outstanding qualities of rationality and objectivity that had characterized early Buddhism but had been lost with its popular acceptance” (Ishii 1986: 156). Before and after his ascension Mongkut was a vocal defender of Thai Buddhism against those Westerners, particularly Protestant missionaries, who denigrated it as a primitive, superstition-ridden religion. In doing this he stressed the rationality of orthodox Buddhism: “His discussions with the missionaries made him realize that it was the folk beliefs appended to Buddhism that underlay their contempt for his religion. He became firmly convinced that in order to defend Buddhism from the pressures of Western civilization, he must strip it of those heterodox accretions” (Ishii 1986: 159).

Monastic reform and the “modernization” of religion continued throughout Mongkut’s eighteen-year reign and during that of his son, Chulalongkorn. Several Brahmanistic and animistic court rituals, such as the Giant Swing ceremony, were discontinued and a radical reform of the Buddhist sangha (the monkhood) was instituted. The highly dispersed nature of the monastic structure was reinvented as a centralized system, controlled by the Sangha Council in Bangkok, that was not unlike the new civil service and that paralleled the newly centralized Thai state. Tamnan were removed from local monastic education but the Sangha reforms also involved a very direct intervention in monastic ritual and the way that monks lived their religion. The modern state has always had a problem with mobile populations of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers and it is significant that one of the key measures of the reform package was a concerted campaign to stop the wandering existence led by many of Siam’s monks, an existence that saw them roam from one forest monastery, pilgrimage site, ancient ruin, or meditation cave to another. Under the terms of the 1902 Sangha Act monks were required to register at a particular monastery (J. Taylor 1993: 71).

The spiritual power possessed by monks meant that it was natural for local people to rely upon them in their various dealings with the phi
and other non-canonical spirits and forces (Tiyavanich 1993). To counter this, a program of surveillance on the part of the Sangha Council aimed to curtail the extent to which village monks were enmeshed in non-canonical religious practices centered on the local cults.

It is questionable how much effect any of this has had in the long term on the practice of popular religion in Thailand. The emergence in the 1980s of “prosperity cults” headed by “magic monks” (Jackson 1999a, 1999b) suggests that non-canonical Buddhism is enjoying a resurgence. Jackson notes that “from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, the Thai state withdrew from its historical role of controlling expressions of Buddhist religiosity and that its place was increasingly taken by the market” (Jackson 1999a: 258). The orthodox-conservative leadership of the sangha has also suffered a loss of prestige. A run of financial and sexual scandals in recent decades has eroded the position of the monkhood in general, and the supreme patriarch’s alignment with the conservative military side during the democracy massacre in 1992 was also damaging (J. Taylor 1993: 74). At the same time the state has to some extent relaxed its highly centralized power structure and has implemented the policies of decentralization that are now common to governments in most parts of the world. This has been concurrent with a resurgence of interest in local history, which, in places, even includes a relegitimization of tammam (Thongchai 1995: 111).

Cosmopolitanism and Conservation

I would stress the point that popular religious culture does not require our consent in order to flourish in its relationship with the material past. It is principally we who stand to gain by taking a cosmopolitan approach. Our choice is over whether we want to live and work in the world of actual social practice or in the imaginary world our discourse has furnished us with.

It seems wishful thinking, however, that the Western conservation movement will bring down the walls and engage with local practice anytime soon. To date, the real gains made by socially inclusive conservation management, both in the natural and cultural domains, are almost entirely confined to the developed world. In places such as Australia, New Zealand, and North America, indigenous people have gained a real degree of control over their heritage, resulting sometimes
in embargoes on archaeological research and sometimes in collaborative research. In the developing world the gains have mainly been at the level of the case study. In Thailand, for instance, ICCROM has a project to promote the engagement of heritage professionals with local communities and their value systems. The regional intergovernment heritage body, SPAFA, also promotes community engagement, but this usually turns out to be focused on educating local communities to adopt state-endorsed heritage values, ignoring the local systems of value that already exist. In the cultural heritage field, as in nature conservation (Brockington 2004: 414; Igoe 2006: 73, 76), a combination of the desire of proponents of the community conservation approach to want to believe it works and the “loudness” of the positive spin put on the approach by international conservationists obscures the shallowness of its penetration.

We need to go beyond the sort of community engagement programs that aim to give locals a better appreciation of their heritage. They already appreciate it. The problem for us is that their appreciation often does not amount to “conservation” in the restricted sense in which we use that term, a sense in which “things trump people at every turn” (see Meskell’s introduction to this volume). Our restricted understanding of what a thing can be blinds us to alternative forms of conservation. For example, historically and in the present day, Thais often “restore” the crumbling ruins of old or ancient stupas by completely encasing them within the form of a new stupa constructed on top of and around them. What they achieve in this way, at considerable financial cost to themselves, is the conservation of the meaning of the stupa as a divine object (Byrne 1995). The divine nature of the stupa is by no means compromised by such an intervention; it can only be enhanced.

And yet there is hope to be had from the pressure that continues to build within the fields of archaeology and heritage conservation for the implementation of the “values approach” mentioned at the opening of this chapter. There is particular pressure to give adequate weighting to the contemporary social value of the material past. The social turn in heritage management consists at least as much of rhetoric as action, but this simply underlines the problem for cultural heritage: one can only foreground social value at the level of principle for so long before people begin to notice the way it is effaced at the level of professional practice. My guess is that this will eventually lead archaeologists and
heritage practitioners to an engagement with popular religion: the religious simply cannot be extricated from the social and the social, it would seem, is here to stay.

Cosmopolitanism draws heavily on the mind-expanding benefit of cross-cultural conversations. A cosmopolitan archaeology is one whose “researchers will have to engage in wider social and political conversations,” the outcomes of which we cannot control (see Meskell’s introduction to this volume). According to the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006a: 57), while value judgments may differ, “Cosmopolitans suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation.” However, when it comes to the possibility of dialogue between local practitioners of popular religion and professional practitioners of archaeology and heritage, we have to question whether such overlap presently exists. Can it exist in the face of our rejection, as rational modernists, of the existence of the magical supernatural?

In pondering this we might note that the type of conversation Appiah refers to would be based on the principle of tolerance and that this principle does not necessarily require us to accept the truth of the magical supernatural. Indeed, as Habermas (2003a: 3) observes, “Toleration first becomes necessary when one rejects the convictions of others: we do not need to be tolerant if we are indifferent toward other beliefs and attitudes.” It is not belief we need, then; it is tolerance, tolerance as a deliberate position that we take up and tolerance that proceeds from our disbelief.

Notes

1 Environmental conservation projects funded by the World Bank alone, in the decade between 1986 and 1996, entailed the forcible relocation of an estimated three million people (Colchester 2004: 30).


3 Following the coup of 1932, which ended the absolute monarchy, the military government changed the country’s name from Siam to Thailand in 1938.

4 See http://www.iccrom.org.