

# **Book Review : Contesting National ‘Truths’: New Academic Writing on Thailand**

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*Review of Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (editors), Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand, Copenhagen, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2010; and David Streckfuss, Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, treason, and lese majeste; New York, Routledge, 2011.*

In contemporary Thailand, the state asserts the right to act as the final arbiter of Thai-related truths, promoting some propositions and proscribing others. To many, this seems warranted. It is also in keeping with how “cultural resources” are managed and marketed in the international arena.

Within the field of Thai Studies, however, truth claims are pursued differently. Therein, knowledge of things Thai – from cultural practices and political institutions through to social conflicts and public debates – is constituted through an ongoing series of critical exchanges, publically framed arguments and rebuttals that are oftentimes all about questioning prevailing understandings and challenging established authorities.

The idea of singular national truths, proprietary meanings and understandings that must be vigilantly defended from ‘external’ assault, is at odds with the Thai Studies enterprise in several other respects as well. For one thing, area expertise is hardly a national monopoly; a brief glance at contemporary scholarship reveals an endeavor conducted in a multiplicity of languages by ‘authorities’ situated around the globe. For another, ‘foreign’ participation is in no sense new; the field is generally acknowledged to have been framed by pioneering ‘outsiders’, Westerners whose foreign-language histories and ethnographies of Siam provided models and points of departure for subsequent Thai-language studies. Foundational institutions like the Siam Society were from the outset multi-national and multilingual and in the subsequent period, the construction of a ‘modern’ Thai identity seems to have entailed a high

degree of direct and indirect transnational collaboration.

The point can be better understood with reference to a recent history of legal reform in late 19th and early 20th century Siam. (Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law and Colonial Modernity in Thailand*, Chian Mai, Silkworm, 2006). Among other things, the author notes that the modernization process was a thoroughly transnational venture, driven in no small part by ‘external’ agency. The extraterritoriality clauses of Western—imposed commercial treaties provided an impetus for change. Western legal standards and practices served as models for revision. Hundreds of locals were sent overseas for periods of study and scores of foreign jurists - British, Americans, Belgians, Frenchmen, Ceylonese, and Japanese – were contracted and deployed locally to draft statutes, organize courts, and advise local counterparts.

This collaborative modernization, in turn, constituted an important reference frame for distinguishing between things ‘foreign’ and things ‘Thai.’ Take family; in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Siamese kinship arrangements were sufficiently complex as to render the drafting of uniform legal codes almost impossible. Elites were generally polygynous, grouping wives and children into categories that afforded variable legal standing. Below this level, marital practices were much less formal, with sexual intercourse alone often sufficing to indicate marital status. Members of the foreign missionary community were scandalized by such practices, which were decried as both shameful and uncivilized. At the same time, polygyny had its defenders, among them foreign legal advisors who argued that such ‘traditional’ practices should be retained in law. Years of debate eventually engendered a compromise – a marriage law that, in limiting males to a single legal wife, appeared to support Western-style monogamous marriage without actually penalizing the popular but henceforth statistically invisible practice of polygyny. From this point onwards, however, it became possible to imagine an archetypical Thai family, one that extended vertically across generations as opposed to horizontally across maternal groupings.

The development of the ‘modern’ Thai monarchy affords another example of cross-border collaboration, one of particular relevance to this review essay. The topic is potentially seditious, challenging ‘official’ representations of the Royal Institution as the unchanging center of

Thai national life. The contemporary historiography of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Siam makes it abundantly clear that local kingship was radically transformed by the colonial encounter, which provided the impetus, models, and methods for a European make-over. Less well documented and more difficult to assess are the transnational processes that have reworked the institution in the subsequent period: its awkward adjustment to Western-styled constitutionalism in the post-1932 period, its near-eclipse in the run-up to World War II, its re-emergence as potent symbol of conservative nationalism during the Cold War, and its current prominence in Thai political life. As these latter histories touch upon the god-like stature of the reigning monarch, academics have generally tended to write elsewhere.

Self-restraint has also been buttressed by repeated state interventions, however - a point which David Streckfuss has thoroughly documented in his recent study, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, treason, and lese majeste* (New York, Routledge, 2011). Streckfuss' work is much more than a history of how law has been used to protect the monarchy from discursive crimes, however. He examines the way in which legislative frameworks that arose in a European theater have been redeployed locally to create a hybrid 'regime of exception' - a state that in unexceptional circumstances retains legal measures consigning extraordinary powers to a ruling elite, or to put it differently, a state that reserves the right to act as the final arbiter of Thai-related truth. Streckfuss' work here is brilliant, informed by some 30 years of research and writing on Thailand. It remains to be seen whether his standing as perhaps the leading authority on *lese majeste* in a Thai context will keep state censors at bay.

In the event *Truth on Trial* is unavailable locally, interested readers can find an excerpt of Streckfuss's work, and whole lot more, in the second book under review here - Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager's *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*. The bi-product of a conference hosted by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Amsterdam in 2007, *Saying the Unsayable* is a collection of essays that flush in the recent history of the Royal Institution. A central theme of the text is the extensive political role of the monarchy in the post-1932, a taboo subject in that the monarchy is 'officially' situated somewhere

high above the political realm. As contributors include of some of the better known scholars in the field, this book is difficult to ban.

But not impossible; within the conservative realm of Thai royalist thinking, little space has been left for critical reflection. Official accounts of the monarchy are uniformly hagiographic. Critical scholarship, in turn, is extremely limited. In this context, the above mentioned studies are truly illuminating.