

MODERN MONARCHY





The institution of Thailand's monarchy is in several ways unique, often difficult for outsiders to fully comprehend. Not only does it have a history going back more than seven hundred years, but it also continues to function with extraordinary relevance and vitality in the contemporary world. Indeed, although the Revolution of 1932 brought an end to the monarchy in its absolute form, the institution has remained powerful in the sense of providing a unifying element for the country, a focal point that brings together people from all backgrounds and shades of political thought and gives them an intense awareness of being Thai. This was clearly shown by the unprecedented outpouring of public pride and personal affection that greeted such occasions as His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's Golden Jubilee in 1996, the celebration of His Majesty's Sixth Cycle Birthday in 1999, and the 60th anniversary of His Majesty's accession to the throne. It is continually apparent in countless other ways, large and small.

The intensity of respect felt by the Thai people for their King stems in large part from the distinctive form the modern monarchy has taken, one that involves a remarkable degree of personal contact. Also, it is rooted in attitudes that can be traced to the earliest day of Thailand as a nation and in past rulers who continue to serve as models of kingship.

¹ Henceforth, all historical dates follow the A.D. based chronology of the Western Calendar.

Background to the Modern Kingship

Thai concepts of the monarchy have their origins in Sukhothai, founded in the early part of the 13th century and generally regarded as the first truly independent Thai kingdom. There and then, particularly during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great (1275-1317), was born the ideal of a paternalistic ruler alert to the needs of his people and committed to guide them, a stance markedly different from the divine kingship practised by the contemporary Khmer rulers.

This paternalistic ideal was, at times, lost during the long Ayutthaya Period, when Khmer influence regarding kingship reappeared, and the monarch became a divine, inaccessible figure, rarely ever seen by the majority of the population. The four-century period witnessed the reigns of some remarkable rulers, whose achievements were far-reaching. With the founding of the Royal House of Chakri in 1782 and the establishment of Bangkok as the capital of Siam, kingship was based primarily on adherence to the Buddhist concept of virtue. The Rattanakosin or Bangkok Period produced a succession of highly gifted rulers capable of meeting a variety of challenges to both the country and the monarchy itself.

Though it had lasted longer than most others in the world, largely due to the wise rule by kings of the Royal House of Chakri, the country's absolute monarchy finally came to an end on 24 June 1932, when a group of military officers and civil servants staged a bloodless coup to demand a constitution. King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, 1925-1935), who had already been thinking along such lines himself and drafted a constitution which had been debated in the Supreme Council of State, agreed and thus became the first constitutional monarch. Three years later, unhappy with some of the results, he decided to abdicate. Prince Ananda Mahidol, his nephew, then a 10-year-old student in Switzerland, was chosen to succeed him as the eighth monarch of the Royal House of Chakri, as King Ananda (Rama VIII, 1935-1946).

The Forging of the Modern Monarchy

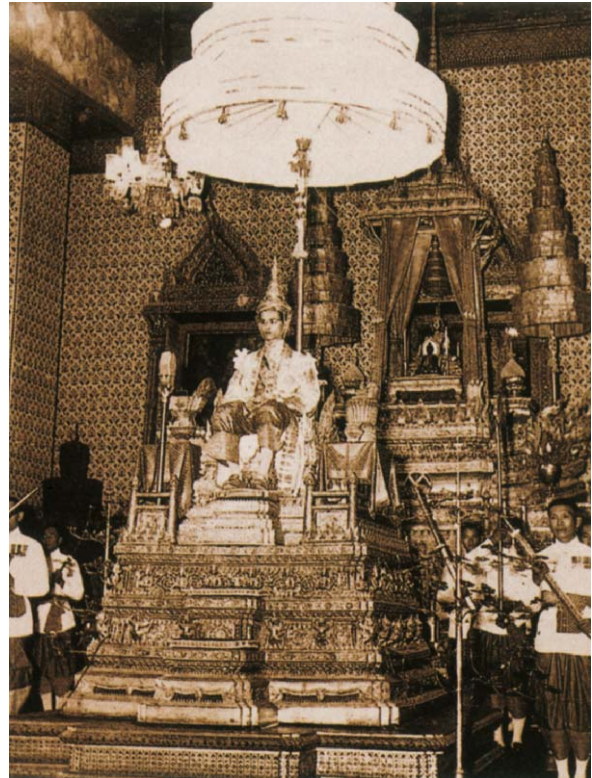
King Bhumibol Adulyadej was born in 1927, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States of America, where his father, Prince Mahidol of Songkla, was studying medicine. After his father's death, he lived mostly in Switzerland with his mother, sister, and elder brother. After one official visit to Siam accompanying King Ananda, in 1938, the family remained cut off from their homeland during the Second World War. Prince Bhumibol had a relatively ordinary youth, displaying notable talents in both music and engineering, and becoming fluent in three European languages – French, German, and English –

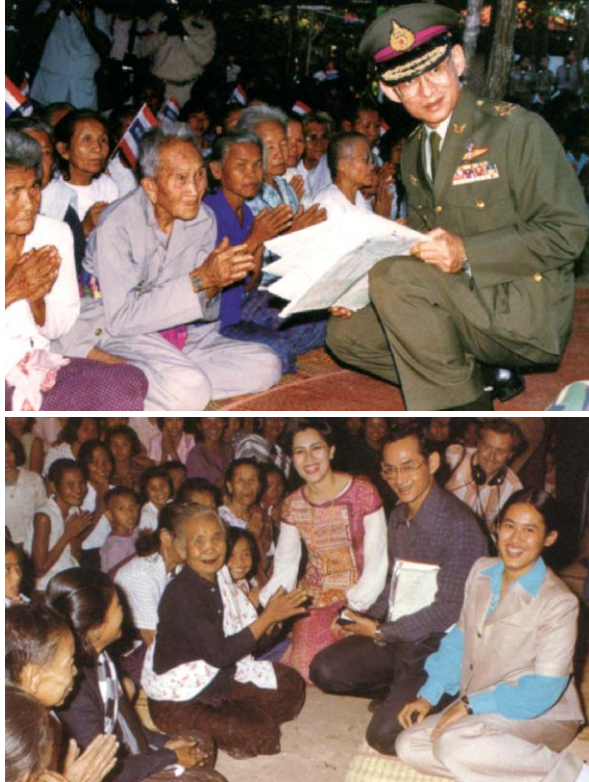
as well as being at ease in different cultures. During the royal family's first postwar visit, in 1946, his brother, King Ananda, died, and Prince Bhumibol suddenly found himself in accession to the throne as the ninth Chakri King, Rama IX.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej returned to Switzerland to complete his education, changing from engineering to political science and law in recognition of his new role, during the course of which he met the beautiful, young Mom Rajawongse Sirikit Kitiyakara, daughter of the Thai ambassador to France. They were married in Bangkok on 28 April 1950, and seven days later His Majesty was officially crowned in ancient ceremonies held at the Grand Palace.

In his Oath of Accession to the Throne, King Bhumibol Adulyadej pledged to "reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people". But what sort of reign would it be? After fifteen years of tumultuous change, during most of which the monarch had been merely a name to most Thai, was there still a place for the monarchy? If so, what form would it take?

Doubts, if any, about popular acceptance of the monarchy were quickly dispelled. Vast crowds in Bangkok had already shown their enthusiasm in the course of the ceremonies that accompanied the royal wedding and the coronation, which members of the younger generation were witnessing for the first time. In 1955, the King and Queen went on a pioneering journey to the impoverished northeast, then a remote region that had never seen a ruling monarch in person. Its population had, with some reason, felt neglected by the central government. For 22 arduous days, the royal couple toured the region, visiting remote villages as well as





towns, talking to ordinary people as well as monks and local officials. The response was overwhelming. Hundreds of thousands of people, some of whom walked for days from remote hamlets, turned out for even a fleeting glimpse of their King and Queen. The warmth of their greeting was unmistakable; so, too, was the extent of their needs as revealed in the conversations His Majesty had with those he met.

The decision to bring the monarchy into direct contact with the rural population was perhaps one of the most important of all those taken by His Majesty. Today, the King and members of the Royal Family would spend a large part of the year in one or another of the royal residences far away from

Bangkok – in Chiang Mai in the north, Sakon Nakhon in the northeast, Hua Hin on the west coast of the Gulf of Thailand, and Narathiwat in the deep south. When residing at these “regional” palaces, His Majesty set out to eventually visit every province in the kingdom, defying discomfort and inconvenience when travelling by helicopter, jeep, train, boat, or, on occasion, on foot to do field reconnaissance and appraise local conditions by himself. In the process, he has become the most travelled monarch in Thai history, as well as the best informed about a wide range of constraints and difficulties as well as potential and prospects for development especially in remote rural areas.

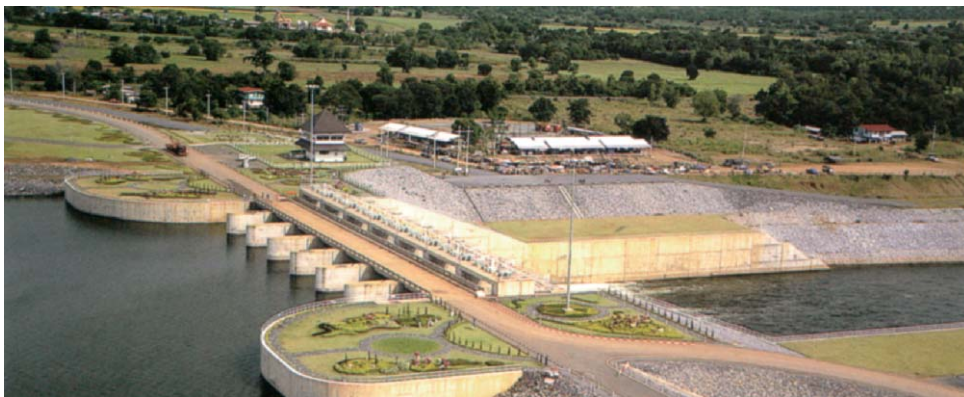
Often assisted by members of the Royal Family – Her Majesty the Queen, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, and Their Royal Highnesses Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and Princess Chulabhorn – the King takes copious notes on these reconnaissance trips, whereupon he initiates action to provide assistance, working through the appropriate government agencies or sometimes using his own funds, the latter salutary intervention particu-

larly at the early stage. His Majesty established the Chaipattana Foundation to provide initial financial support in cases of emergency, in preparation of subsequent development projects. A royal directive is never simply issued; the impetus comes from the local population, who must concur with the royal proposal and be able to co-operate on its implementation.

More than 3,000 royal-initiated projects were launched in this manner. These cover a broad range, encompassing agriculture, water resources, conservation of the environment and its natural resources, occupational promotion, public health, public welfare, and communication, all aimed at raising the standard of rural life and helping farmers to become self-reliant.

Some royal-initiated projects are fundamental in nature, like water conservation schemes and irrigation in the semi-arid south of the Northeast, or drainage and land reclamation in the South, which faces the problem of floods. In others, imaginative solutions were applied. His Majesty was the guiding force behind an artificial rain-making project which started in the late 1950s and took about ten years of experiments and refinement; the first field operations began in 1969 above Khao Yai National Park straddling the provinces of Nakhon Ratchasima, Prachin Buri, Nakhon Nayok and Saraburi. Since then, methods and techniques have been successfully applied countless times throughout the kingdom, whenever conditions were suitable. Neighbouring countries also called on Thai teams to assist in times of drought.

Another early endeavour was His Majesty's Hilltribe Development Project in the north, now known as the Royal Project and encompassing lowland areas as well. Migratory tribal people living in the mountainous region near Thailand's borders with the Lao PDR and Myanmar had caused serious problems, partly due to their destructive slash-and-burn technique of clearing land, and partly



owing to their traditional cultivation of opium poppy. Under His Majesty's project a wide variety of new crops were introduced to replace the growing of poppy, and educational as well as medical facilities were set up at newly created permanent hill-tribe settlements. International recognition of the Royal Project's effectiveness has come in many forms, including financial grants and expert assistance by several foreign governments. In 1988, the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for International Understanding was bestowed upon the Royal Project. In short, it may be said that through this project, His Majesty has given the tribal people a sense of belonging to Thai society and, in effect, prevented them from falling prey to communist influence, which would have cost the government vast sums of money for security expenses and might have entailed the loss of many lives. As it was, resources could instead be channelled for the development of the country's socio-economic infrastructure.

Two other important projects may also serve as examples. On His Majesty's many visits to rural areas, he observed how adversely water shortage did affect rice cultivation. In 1992, he outlined a "New Theory" of water conservation using small reservoirs and diversifying crop production. Tests proved the concept to be practical and effective, with the result that it is being adopted by farmers in all parts of the country. Another project concerns flood control, a problem not only in Bangkok but also in other areas. His Majesty suggested that various methods be employed according to local conditions; these include water diversion ditches, watercourse improvement, and reservoirs to retain water that would otherwise run off and be wasted. One programme is devised

specifically for the low-lying Central Region and Bangkok; it has helped significantly in preventing serious flooding that was once commonplace in the capital.

Implementation of royal-initiated projects takes into consideration the following major principles:

- *Tackling the immediate problems.*

His Majesty always emphasizes that projects aim at solving immediate problems, especially in emergencies. Examples are the development work in Buri Ram Province on the Thai-Cambodian border which was backward and under communist control. Once royal-initiated projects had been launched there, security



was restored and problems were resolved. More recent cases of this type of approach include the solving of traffic congestion and flood control in the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration area.

- ***Development according to steps, necessity, and economy.***

His Majesty emphasizes development work which aims to strengthen the community up to the self-supporting level, in order to equip it with a strong foundation prior to future progress. He uses the expression “explosion from within”, which means the community or village must be empowered and strengthened before being exposed to the outside world.

- ***Mobilizing self-supporting synergies.***

According to this principle, Thai people should be encouraged to become self-reliant and build productive communities as pillars of society. Examples include the Rice Bank Project, the Cattle Bank Project, and the Hup Krapong Land Management and Development Project in Cha-Am District, Petchaburi Province. All of these are geared to provide farmers with means of production such as land on which to live and cultivate, by encouraging them to form cooperatives in order to solve occupational and other problems.

- ***Promotion of modern and appropriate knowledge and technology.***

His Majesty stresses the necessity of having “a demonstration model of success” to allow farmers the opportunity to observe the model of success and apply it to their own occupation. Six Royal Development Study Centres have been established in five regions to conduct research and experimentation on applications of modern knowledge and technology, which farmers can apply in earning their livelihood. Moreover, the methodology employed in these Centres is inexpensive and suitable to the environment and occupation of the local people.





- ***Conservation and development of natural resources.***

His Majesty is immensely interested in the conservation of natural resources, because the recent, rapid modernization rendered evidence of how sheer economic growth resulted in overuse or misuse of such resources. To safeguard against such detrimental side-effects, His Majesty favours the conservation and development of natural resources as the foundation of the country's overall development. Examples of this

concern include the Watershed Conservation Project, the Forest Loves Water Project, the Wildlife Conservation Project, and the Land Development Project.

- ***Promotion and improvement of environmental conditions.***

Thai society has become increasingly urbanized, which entails economic progress chiefly in major cities of the various regions and in the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration area. At the same time, the country's environment has deteriorated. Many royal-initiated development projects are, therefore, aimed at solving environmental problems especially in regard of water pollution through waste water treatment, in Bangkok as well as in urban regional growth centres.

Modern Monarchy

Besides bringing obvious benefits to the country, such activities have yielded other results, less tangible but no less important. They have made the monarchy a potent moral force in Thai society and reinforced His Majesty's paternal image that inspires both respect and deep affection.

During a student-led uprising in 1973, both sides turned to the King for advice that eased tensions and prevented more bloodshed. His Majesty provided equally wise counsel during Thailand's struggle against the communist insurgency, suggesting solutions aimed at alleviating rural poverty and inspiring confidence in the government's constructive efforts. It can be said that, following the end of the conflict in Indochina, Thailand did not become "the next domino to fall to communism", as had been feared in some quarters of the world. This was due, to a great extent, to His Majesty's leader-

ship and wisdom. In May 1992, violence once again broke out between pro-democracy activists and military units. Television audiences around the world viewed the scene when the leaders of the conflicting factions were granted an audience by His Majesty, whose advice ended the confrontation. His Majesty the King similarly provided a unifying role in 2006 when he granted royal assent to the formation of an interim government, thereby avoiding any violent conflict.

In recent decades, His Majesty has tended to devote himself mainly to his developmental projects and the exigencies germane to his status and role as monarchical Head of State, both clearly focussed on the Kingdom of Thailand. In earlier years, however, His Majesty paid state visits to more than 30 countries. He frequently receives and entertains visiting monarchs and heads of state, and by meeting with nearly all the leaders of the contemporary world, has kept abreast of current international affairs.

In June 1988, King Bhumibol Adulyadej became the longest-reigning monarch in Thai history, surpassing the 42-year reign of his grandfather, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910). In 1996, His Majesty celebrated his Golden Jubilee, an even more notable landmark. In 1999, he observed his 72nd birthday, a milestone accompanied by an outpouring of affection from his people. With equal affection, in 2006 celebrations were held on the auspicious occasion of the 60th anniversary of His Majesty's ascension to the throne. That made him the longest-reigning monarch in today's world. It culminated in the grand reception attended by monarchs or representatives of 25 of the contemporary world's 28 monarchies, as a show of congratulatory tribute to His Majesty's dedication, foresight, and wisdom, reflected in Thailand's economic growth, the well-being of its people, and the security of the nation.



Traditional Royal Prerogatives

His Majesty presides over numerous official functions, many of them deeply rooted in Thai tradition. Three times a year, at the beginning of each season, he ritually changes the robes of the sacred Emerald Buddha image. Moreover, as a devout Buddhist, he participates in numerous merit-making ceremonies at temples all over the country. He is regarded as the Upholder of



all Religions, indeed, and as such has actively promoted better understanding between Thai Buddhists and other religious groups such as the Muslims in the southernmost provinces. All newly arrived ambassadors present their credentials to His Majesty, and he grants audiences to foreign heads of state, diplomats, and officials of international organizations. As Head of State, he convenes the National Assembly at the beginning of each session period, and every draft law is submitted to him for his signature before promulgation.

Early in his reign, His Majesty began to attend graduation ceremonies, personally handing out degrees to the graduates of Thai universities and military academies. The recent growth in the number of such institutions has made it necessary to delegate this responsibility to members

of the Royal Family, though in certain cases His Majesty still presides over the ceremonies at Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities.

To coordinate his active schedule, His Majesty relies on a special category of civil servants classified as belonging to the Court. The Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary and the Bureau of the Royal Household are domiciled at the Grand Palace. The Chitralada Villa in the grounds of the Dusit Palace serves as the royal residence. Officials maintain the royal appointment calendar, arrange ceremonial functions, manage royal finances, supervise royal housekeeping, and perform a wide range of related administrative duties. Many members of the staff regularly accompany the Royal Family on travels throughout the country.

The King personally appoints the members of his Privy Council, a body composed of distinguished advisers noted for their exceptional experience and knowledge of state affairs. The Privy Council reviews all draft laws and makes germane recommendations to His Majesty. It meets twice weekly to deliberate particular or complex issues, such as appeals for royal clemency or a request without precedent, before forwarding recommendations for His Majesty's consideration.

Her Majesty Queen Sirikit

The dedication to public service exemplified by King Bhumibol Adulyadej is also found in members of the Royal Family. Like His Majesty, all members of the Royal Family work untiringly for the benefit of the country, sometimes participating in projects initiated by the King and sometimes in others of their own. In doing so, all have contributed significantly to the creation of Thailand's modern monarchy.

Her Majesty Queen Sirikit spends as much time travelling as does her husband, equally indifferent to discomfort and long hours, and her interest in the welfare of rural people closely parallels his. An area in which she has taken a particularly deep interest is that of finding sources of supplementary income for farmers in the off-season, or when crops are destroyed by droughts or floods. It was to solve such problems that the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Techniques, widely known by its acronym of SUPPORT, was established in 1976 under Her Majesty's patronage, partly through funds supplied by Her Majesty and partly with donations by the public.

SUPPORT has as its primary objective to form women's groups and provide them with training, equipment, and materials to set up and operate cottage industries especially in rural areas. Among the traditional crafts deemed worthy of being promoted in both local and world markets are embroidery and weaving in the north, producing a kind of silk fabric with woven ikat or rhombic patterns called mudmee in the northeast, making dolls and rattanware in the central region, and weaving yan lipao, a basketry using the fibre of a strong vine that grows in the south. Most of the crafts are indigenous to the areas where the projects have been set up and generate income to meet basic necessities, particularly when emergencies arise.

Besides individual projects in various parts of the country, SUPPORT established two multi-craft training centres. One is situated in the premises of Chitralada Villa on the grounds of the Dusit Palace, where around 200 trainees



attend courses and workshops conducted by masters of particular crafts. The other is the Bang Sai Arts and Crafts Centre, located on the Chao Phraya River downstream of the historical capital city of Ayutthaya, which has an enrollment of around 300 persons. Trainees receive a daily allowance, travelling expenses, and remuneration for the crafts they produce. Upon completion of their training, they return to their home area where they act as “multipliers” by

passing on their newly acquired skills to local men and women.

In this vein, Her Majesty’s royal projects provide vocational training to people in rural areas, as well as opportunities to develop and market their products. Training enables the villagers to gain extra skills, earn additional income and, thus, improve their livelihood.

The Queen has personally undertaken the promotion of these crafts through travels abroad to meet potential buyers and also by using them prominently in her own wardrobe;

mudmee, for example, which was once hardly known outside the region where it was made, is now regarded as one of the most fashionable dress materials made in Thailand. The Queen’s interest in handicraft development led to the celebration of the Thai Arts and Crafts Year in 1989, which featured a wide variety of exhibitions, skill demonstration fairs, and promotional events under the auspices of the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

For her work among rural women, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit was awarded the prestigious Ceres Medal by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. In 1988, she was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by Great Britain’s 470-year-old Royal College of Physicians, the highest honour the College confers, for her “deep concern for the health and welfare of the people of Thailand”.

The Queen’s efforts on behalf of the less fortunate members of society were also extended to refugees from Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Vietnam who came to Thailand in large numbers, in the late 1970s. Members of the northern hill tribes as well benefit, with many of them attending SUPPORT centre training programmes, where they are given new ideas to use in practising such traditional skills as embroidery and jewellery making.





Sharing the King's concern about the degradation of the natural environment, the Queen is an active member of the Thailand Chapter of the World-wide Fund for Nature (WWF Thailand). For many years, she has lent her support to the conservation of forests as core areas of watershed development and habitat in which to preserve wild animals, especially those in danger of extinction. To this end, she has effectively facilitated a reforestation project in the north-east and worked closely with concerned people in protecting wildlife habitats.

The Royal Family

Their Majesties' only son, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, was born in Bangkok in 1952. Prince Vajiralongkorn was invested as Crown Prince by His Majesty the King in 1972. After completing his primary education in Thailand, His Royal Highness attended secondary school in England, and then enrolled at Australia's King's School and University of New South Wales, there in the Faculty of Military Studies. Upon his return to Thailand, the Crown Prince took up his duties which, besides serving in the Royal Thai Armed Forces, include frequent provincial tours and representing His Majesty the King at a wide variety of official functions and ceremonies. Of particular interest to His Royal Highness are the hospitals which were set up in



the provinces with funds donated by the public. On several occasions, His Royal Highness made state visits to foreign countries as His Majesty's representative.

Their Royal Highnesses Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and Princess Chulabhorn were born in Bangkok in 1955 and 1957, respectively. Both princesses received their education in Thailand, from primary school through university education.

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the first of the royal children to attend a local institution of higher learning, received her B.A. degree from the Faculty of Arts of Chulalongkorn University, where she majored in history.

She also holds M.A. degrees

in Oriental Epigraphy from Silpakorn University as well as in Pali-Sanskrit from Chulalongkorn University, and a doctorate in Development Education from Srinakharinwirot University. A gifted performer on traditional Thai musical instruments, she regularly accompanies her royal father on his visits to his rural development projects and assists him in collecting information relevant to their operations.

Her Royal Highness Princess Chulabhorn graduated with a B.Sc. degree from Kasetsart University. A gifted scientist who was awarded the coveted Einstein Gold Medal in 1986, she also holds a doctorate in Organic Chemistry from Mahidol University. In 1987, she set up the Chulabhorn Research Institute to promote scientific research in Thailand. She lectured on a number of occasions at academic institutions abroad.

Members of the Royal Family have always carried out their duties with great efficiency and dedication, lending valuable support to His Majesty in his



many tasks of national development. In 1978, Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn was bestowed with a new title and rank in recognition of her services to the throne and to the nation, henceforth known as Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

Royal Residences

There are two building complexes today associated with the monarchy: the Grand Palace, over 200 years old, and the Chitralada Villa in the grounds of the Dusit Palace, the much smaller and less ornate residence which King Bhumibol Adulyadej chose as his family's residence in Bangkok.

The resplendent Grand Palace, an enclosure covering 24.3 hectares on the east bank of the Chao Phraya River, is one of Thailand's best-known landmarks. Today it houses the offices of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, the Bureau of the Royal Household, and some offices of the Treasury Department. The earliest buildings in the palace compound, regarded as masterpieces of classic Thai architecture, were constructed in the reign of King Rama I (1782-1809), founder of the Royal House of Chakri. Extensive additions in both Thai and Western styles were made by subsequent rulers. Though the King no longer makes his home in the Grand Palace, its historic buildings are still used for most of the important ceremonies associated with the Thai monarchy.



Coronations, for example, took place in the Phra Thinang Phaisan Thaksin, one of a group of early structures of royal edifices including the throne hall known as the Phra Maha Monthian. This magnificently decorated hall contains, among other things, the Octagonal Throne, from which the King formally received the invitation from representatives of the people to rule over the kingdom, and the Phatthrabhit Throne, on which he was presented with the Royal Regalia, the Royal Utensils, and the Royal Weapons of Sovereignty. The adjoining Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall originally served as the Principal Audience Hall. It is still used for the Grand Audience on His Majesty's Birthday Anniversary and for Royal Religious Ceremonies throughout the year.

The Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall, also built by King Rama I, provides the setting for the annual Buddhist and Brahmin Coronation Day Anniversary Rites. It is also the customary place where to repose the remains of deceased kings, queens, and senior members of the Royal Family, prior to their cremation.

The Chakri Maha Prasat Throne hall, a largely western-style throne hall built by His Majesty's grandfather, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910), during 1876 through 1882, is used for royal receptions and dinners; it is also the venue where King Bhumibol Adulyadej receives the credentials of newly arrived foreign ambassadors to Thailand.



Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram, commonly known as Wat Phra Kaeo, or the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, which occupies one section of the palace compound, serves as the Royal Chapel and houses Thailand's most revered Buddha image. His Majesty performs certain important religious ceremonies there during the year, among them the ritual changing of the image's jewel-encrusted regalia at the beginning of the hot, cool, and rainy seasons.

Chitralada Villa on the grounds of the Dusit Palace serves not merely as the Royal Residence in Bangkok, but also serves several other functions. There also are a hospital which serves the royal staff and needy people, a school, and assorted experimental agricultural facilities, open to students from various schools.

In addition, four other royal palaces are maintained at Hua Hin, Prachuap Khiri Khan Province, on the west coast of the Gulf of Thailand; above the northern city of Chiang Mai; in Sakon Nakhon Province of the Northeast; and in Narathiwat, a southern province.

Throughout the year, Their Majesties the King and Queen, together with members of the Royal Family, use these palaces as regional bases from which they set out on their daily working visits to care for the needy people in rural areas.



Various Distinctive Characteristics of the Monarchy

One of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's most spectacular legacies passed down from his ancestors is his fleet of ornately carved royal barges. Largely gold and scarlet, these were mostly constructed during the reigns of early Chakri kings and resemble the barges that were used by Ayutthaya kings in battle and for transport. Powered by brilliantly-costumed, chanting oarsmen, they have been used to carry His Majesty to the riverside Wat Arun, the "Temple of Dawn", to present monks with robes after the annual Rainy Season Retreat.

Another royal prerogative ensures that all "white" elephants found in Thailand, esteemed as "auspiciously significant elephants", become the King's exclusive property. The discovery of any one of these animals is considered a good omen, and those elephants are presented to the monarch so that his reign may prosper. Regarded as an honorary human being, each "auspiciously significant elephant" is awarded a lordly title and thereafter leads a befittingly lordly life. King Bhumibol Adulyadej has had seventeen white elephants (eleven still alive), the highest number any Thai king ever owned, which is regarded as an exceptionally auspicious sign that augurs well for his reign.

The garuda, a mythical half-bird, half-human figure which in Hindu legend served as the mount for the god Vishnu, adorns King Bhumibol Adulyadej's sceptre and royal standard, as in former times the king was

considered an incarnation of Vishnu. Thus, it is used as the emblem on government stationary and as badges on caps for civil service officials, since technically government affairs are conducted in the service of His Majesty the King. Moreover, the garuda signifies the concept of “Purveyor to the Court by Royal Appointment”. It is awarded at His Majesty’s personal discretion as a sign of royal appreciation to business companies that rendered outstanding economic and charitable services to Thailand. Such an award is rarely bestowed and considered a great honour by its recipient.

As do other monarchs, King Bhumibol Adulyadej bestows awards and honours on government employees and ordinary citizens who have served the country with civic, administrative, or diplomatic distinction, and to individuals who have rendered great service to the Crown.

One distinctive feature of Thai royalty is that royal titles are not inherited in perpetuity but lapse gradually over five generations. Thai royal titles descend through the ranks of Chao Fa, Phra Ong Chao, Mom Chao, Mom Rajawongse, and Mom Luang. The children of one rank inherit the next lower rank on the father’s side, so that a male Mom Chao’s son or daughter is a Mom Rajawongse, while a male Mom Luang’s child is a commoner addressed as Mister or Miss. Once titles have lapsed, families of royal descent may add to their family name the suffix “na Ayutthaya”, meaning “of Ayutthaya”, thus indicating royal ancestry.

A Monarchy for the Times

Adhering to the traditionally close relationship between king and people yet daring to be innovative, Thailand’s modern monarchy meets needs that are at once old and new. This makes it the central element in the traditional Thai triad of nation, king, and religion, binding the diverse elements of the country in a literal as well as symbolic way. Much of its extraordinary success is due to the dedication and personal example set by the ninth monarch of the Royal House of Chakri who, in 1987, was popularly acclaimed as “Maharaj”, or King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great, by his loyal and loving subjects. 