Tourismification of the Royal Funerary Tradition: 
A study of King Bhumibol Crematorium Exhibition

Thanya Lunchaprasith*
Silpakorn University

Abstract: This article explores the visiting experience at the cremation site of King Bhumibol (1927-2016), which was open to the public in the form of an outdoor exhibition, showing traditional arts and customs associated with the royal funeral, in parallel with the life and work of the late King. After a one-year preparatory process, the temporary crematorium (called ‘Phra Meru Mas’) at Sanam Luang constituted a revival of death rituals according to the Buddhist and Hindu tradition of kingship. The goal of this paper is to gain an understanding of the narratives constructing visit experience at the royal crematorium exhibition in the context of the negotiation between royal exclusivity and public accessibility. The research involved a series of visits to the exhibition, where visitors and volunteer workers were approached for interviews. Venue observations were also conducted. The findings reveal that the crematorium exhibition brought commoners closer to the monarchy, and at the same time enhanced the significance of royal tradition by educating visitors about elements of Thai fine arts and folklore incorporated in the design and the performance of the death rituals, without discounting the supreme status of the tradition. Besides being an occasion to pay final tribute to their monarch, the exhibition intensified visitors’ sense of gratitude towards the deceased King. However, the findings reveal that the royal tourism event was not without issues that could possibly detract from royal tradition and hinder visiting experience at the site. It can be concluded that the royal crematorium reflects positive synergies between royal culture and tourism where tourism can help sustain the royal culture and promote nationalism among visitors. At the same time, the interpretation of royal experiences on the site and viewpoints expressed by the stakeholders are evidence of the cult of monarchy in the Thai society. Given these factors, the research paper suggests the possibility of integrating the royal legacy as part of tourism experience; but this needs to be done with respect for the monarchy.

Keywords: tourismification, royal tourism, funerary tradition, cultural heritage tourism
Introduction

The paper explores visit experiences at the crematorium site of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, King Rama IX, who reigned over Thailand from 1946-2016. After the performance of funerary ceremonies in October, the royal crematorium was transformed to operate as a public exhibition from 2nd November- 30th December 2017, allowing people to appreciate the royal architecture before it was demolished. This open-air event received tremendous attention from the public. As reported by the Ministry of Culture, the total number of visitors to the royal crematorium was 4 million (Bangkokbiznews 2018).

Born in 1927, King Bhumibol Adulyadej Borommanathbopittra (aka King Bhumibol), the ninth King of the Chakri Dynasty, was the son of Prince Mahidol Adulyadej and Srinagarinda, the Princess Mother (née Sangwan Talapat). The King’s father was a son of King Chulalongkorn, the fifth King of the Chakri dynasty. The King spent much of his childhood and teenage years abroad and ascended the throne in 1946, following the sudden death of his brother, King Ananda Mahidol. Throughout his 80-year reign, the King was a popular monarch and well-respected by Thai citizens, not only because of his quasi-divine status but also because of his community projects that operated across the country - there are over 4000 community development projects founded under his initiatives (Khaosod 2016), most of them focusing on agricultural development- the backbone of the country’s economy.

His death on 13th October 2016 at Siriraj Hospital was regarded as a significant loss for citizens across Thailand and Thai nationals living overseas. To mourn the king’s death, people wore black and white outfits. Thai TV channels and websites temporarily shifted to black and white display mode. Public and private celebrations and entertainment activities were suspended for at least one month after his death, in parallel with television content being switched from entertainment to documentaries, and programs related to the late King. News reports featured the royal death ceremony and the late King’s life and work. A number of news media focused on reporting royal funerary tradition and intimate life stories of the royals. A number of royal-related exhibitions were organised by public and private organizations. They served to narrate the King’s life, glorify his contribution to the wellbeing of the citizens, showcase monarch-inspired artistic creations, or explain the stories behind the royal funerary process.
After his death, the body of the King was transferred from Siriraj Hospital to the Grand Palace, where it rested in the Pimanrattaya building- the temporary resting place for deceased high-ranking royals. A series of private royal rituals were performed to place the body of the King in a gold-coated 100-year teak coffin, lying behind the royal urn under the nine-tiered umbrella (Thai: chat), signifying his status as monarch. The public were allowed to pay homage to the dead King for 50 days after his death. Sanam Luang, the open field besides the Grand Palace, was closed to prepare for the construction of the royal crematorium. A part of the field was also turned into a resting area for mourners who visited the King’s body in total 12.7 million (Khaosod 2017).

The cremation ceremony took place over 23-27 October the following year. The King’s body was moved from the Grand Palace to the royal crematorium, which had taken one year to design and construct under the guidance of Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and the Department of Fine Arts. Built according to the Southeast Asian interpretation of Buddhist and Hindu divine rights of kings - the ‘Devaraja’ concept (Tingsanchalee 2017), the royal crematorium represented a simulated Mount Meru, the base of heaven. The cremation ceremony symbolises the departure of the King to his place of origin. The cremation was a state ceremony attended by members of the Thai royal family, high-ranking royals from other countries and high-ranking government officers.

Following the cremation ceremony, the crematorium was opened for public access on 2nd November as an open-air museum and exhibition. Initially, the duration of the exhibition was to be one month but given high popularity it was extended to two months- open until 31st December 2017 instead of 30th November 2017. During this time the royal crematorium was opened every day from 7.00-22.00. The exhibition had five access points around Sanam Luang, where visitors would need to present their ID and have their belongings inspected before entering the site. Visitors would then be given a brochure about the exhibition (English for non-Thai nationals and Thai for Thai nationals) and a ticket indicating their visit group (groups were divided by ticket colour). Visitors had to wait for their turn to be called. Visiting time was one hour per group. After the visit, they would go to the exit, where they would be asked to leave their ticket in exchange for a souvenir postcard.
The relationship between tourism and royal culture is the focal point of this paper. In this context, tourism has temporarily transformed royal culture, which for most of the time was exclusive to the traditional ruling class, into objects to be gazed at by the public. Taking Geertz’s (1973) definition of culture as ‘webs of significance’ that are discernible through meaning and interpretation, visitor experiences in the crematorium reflect how meanings are constructed by the interactions and negotiations between stakeholders (Puczko 2013). As Binkhorst, den Dekker and Melkert (2010) postulate, visitors’ perceptions of experiences are shaped by both the tourist’s individuality and the worldview of those staging the experience. All these correspond with the objective of the research - to discern the meanings elicited in this temporary cultural space through exploring different elements in the exhibition, emphasizing the stakeholders’ interpretations of the experience.

**Literature Review**

*Tourism and the representation of culture- an insight into royal tradition*

The relationship between tourism and culture is clear. Tourism, besides reflecting the individual’s desire to temporarily move away from home for leisure purposes (Smith 1989), is part of the social phenomenon and therefore should be studied in the social context. For the most part, tourism is embedded within the context of commodification. Appadurai’s (1986) definition of commodity as a state of being where both tangible and intangible elements are integrated into the exchange value, implies the situational nature of tour experience, given the possibility for local culture to be turned into a saleable commodity. In many cases tourism offers commercial opportunities for local culture (Grunewald 2006) and an economic benefit for local society (Zhao and Ritchie 2007). Nevertheless, the contribution of tourism is not necessarily confined within the tourism context; tourism is recognized for its potential to improve non-material aspects of community life, for instance, the role of tourism in consolidating national unity (Bendix 1989; Van den Berghe 1994).

Royal tourism is a tourism category that focuses on the delivery of royal-related experience. According to Long and Palmer (2008), royal tourism is about appreciating royals’ life stories as well as learning about the history and culture associated with the royal family. In view of this, the practice of royal tourism is not limited to countries that have a royal family, but also exists in
republics with a solid royal legacy (Duncan 2016; Nguyen 2016; Singyabuth 2016; Tam 2016; Thirumaran 2016). Royal tourism can be expressed either in the form of staged experience, or in royal rituals where commoners can gaze or take part (MacRae and Putra 2013).

The monarchy is found to play a part in the tourism industry. Royal family members in some countries are known for their active participation in promoting their country’s tourism (Peleggi 1996; Nyaupane and Timothy 2010; MacRae and Putra 2013; King 2016). A royal presence has the potential to become an opportunity for tourism development. As seen, a number of tourism destinations are promoted after royal visits (Walter 1988; Zuelow 2006; Cadavez 2013) or royal charitable projects (Leepreecha 2016). Monarchy can be viewed as a trade mark which generates economic contributions to the nation by attracting international visitors to the country. For instance, the engagement and wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle resulted in an increased number of tourists to Windsor Castle and in international tourist arrivals in the UK (Calder 2017; Donnelly 2018), in addition to the money generated by the sales of memorabilia (Keneaglly 2018). Also, it is said that this interracial royal nuptial bears symbolic implications, viewed as part of cultural diversity, and social integration.

The existing body of tourism literature allows us to see that the reciprocity between tourism and culture can be explained in terms of ‘contextualization’, referring to the role of tourism in locating culture in a new context, and ‘perpetuation’, referring to tourism as a mirror reflecting society.

**Tourism as the contextualization of culture**

Tourism can be viewed as the process of subjecting culture and tradition into objects of people’s gaze. In this sense tourism does not only ascribe new meaning and significance to culture but also locates culture in the new context.

Several writings, mostly from the early days of tourism study, view this transformation negatively on the grounds that it cheapens culture. MacCannel (1973) postulates that tourism renders the representations of local tradition inauthentic through the process of ‘stageisation’- tourism intentionally simplified for tourist accessibility. In his view, tourists, unlike academics, are often trapped in the staged experience and manipulated by the experience of
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the developers (Urry 1990). The opposition between tourism and authenticity is also stressed in Churyen, Duangsaeng and Kontogeorgopoulos (2015), where the authentic experience of homestay is equated to the absence of tourist disturbance. This goes in line with Greenwood (1989), where ease of access promoted by tourism may devalue the original meaning and function of tradition given by the locals.

Tourism also can be seen as a fake reproduction of culture when embedded in the commercial context, as can be seen in Selwyn (1996) who sees authenticity as a process of myth-making. Likewise, MacLeod (2006) and Duncan (2016) see tourism as a selective narration of culture and tradition, where positive aspects of a society are enhanced at the expense of negative reality. Moreover, the manipulation of tradition for tourists’ use can have adverse effects on the locals; according to Greenwood (1989) and Avieli (2013) the tourist-oriented modification of tradition may result in the locals becoming ignorant of their culture.

However, the protective aspect of authenticity is challenged in later tourism studies. As much literature shows, tourism does not necessarily deprive culture of its authentic quality. Taylor (2001) points out that tourism enables sincere interaction between hosts and guests, beyond the commercial context. The term ‘emergent authenticity’, coined by Cohen (1988) affirms that authenticity is ephemeral and subject to alteration with the flow of time. Salamone’s (1997) comparative study of two San Angel inns suggests that a replica attraction can express authentic quality on its own. Moreover, Chhabra, Healy and Sills (2003), in their study of highland games in the USA, confirm that the reproduction of folklore tradition in the American social context can provide a more faithful account of the past than what is preserved in the place of origin.

The positive impact on the tradition can be witnessed in a number of research papers. The term ‘cultural involution’, coined by McKean (1973), demonstrates how tourism can extend the longevity of traditions that are on the verge of extinction. Fox (2007) also postulates that tourism can revive elements of culture that are gradually fading away from the society. The incorporation of innovative narration strategy in visit experience can make the past attractive for people living in the present (Kim 2015).
The above discussion is undoubtedly related to the nature of heritage as not being static but alterable through the flow of time. The constant production of meanings in heritage sites is described by Chang (2017), through his definition of the heritage scape, as ‘constantly reproduced, consumed, questioned and reinterpreted by different local stakeholders and people from all around the world.’ Commercialization, to an extent, ascribes new significance to cultures and traditions when viewed through modern eyes (Lowenthal 1998) but may result in the disappearance of traditions with less commercial potential. This is exemplified by Tuchman-Rosta (2014), who describes the transition of Khmer royal dance from an exclusive royal court performing art, to a disappearing culture due to lack of government financial support.

Culture transmission from one generation to another is controlled and mediated by gatekeepers in contemporary times. Things that are labelled as tradition and heritage can actually be contemporary creations, with the past being manipulated for a specific purpose. This idea is coined by Hobsbawn et al. (1983) in their concept of the invention of tradition. Royal tourism is acknowledged as a mechanism to promote national unity. It is found that the appreciation of royal culture through tourism experience can evoke a sense of nationality (Park 2010) as well as loyalty to the current royal family (Peleggi 1996). Tourist access to royal residences is seen as playing a crucial role in financing the expenses of a royal family (Kennedy 2011).

Some literature goes further by postulating that authenticity has nothing to do with truth validation, but should be seen as a meaningful positions generated during experience, development and consumption. Rickly-Boyd (2012), influenced by Benjamin’s (1968) concept of aura, points out that authenticity is defined by the feeling, experiences, and perception of something against other things. In Wang’s (1999) concept of ‘existential authenticity’ the authentic/inauthentic dichotomy becomes less important than tourists’ perception of meaningful feeling during travel. Mkono (2012) regards authenticity as tourists’ active engagement to distinguish authenticity from inauthenticity. In a number of research papers, such as Wang (2007), and Knudsen and Waade (2010), authenticity is seen as a web of significance elaborated by reciprocal interaction of the stakeholders. The research conducted by Park demonstrates that stakeholders’ voices can elucidate the understanding of the meaning of royal legacy in Korea in the tourism context (Park 2010); the dissolution of the monarchy in the early 20th century made royal objects remnants of an ideal past which becomes a source of identity shared by citizens.
Tourism and the perpetuation of socio-cultural environment

Tourism in a given community reflects the social and cultural environment. Visiting experience is shaped by locally available resources, be they natural, cultural or intellectual. In some research papers, such as Bruner (1994), visiting experience is shaped by people’s values and beliefs.

Socio-cultural environment also influences the integration of royal legacy in tourism experience. Royal experiences vary from one country to another depending on the relationship between the monarchy and the society in the past and up to the present as well as the current status of monarchy. Royal tourism can take many forms, including but not limited to 1) historical attractions that are associated with the royal tradition and the life story of the monarch and royal family members; 2) performances of royal court routines that are now accessible to the public, e.g. the changing of the royal palace guards in London; 3) visits to royal residences that are open to the public (either all-year round or at specific times of the year); 4) visits to temporary events and exhibitions organised by royal family members; 5) visits to sites where community projects initiated by the monarch or his family members operate.

Socio-cultural factors are indicative of both the potential and the limitations of tourism. Existing social prestige can be an advantage for some tourism destinations in promoting their culture. As Karim and Chi (2010) have shown, countries with highly respected cuisine are in a better position to promote gastronomic tourism. Similarly, as revealed by Hall and Mitchell (2002), countries with prestigious histories and culture are in a more favorable position than new countries when it comes to marketing their cultural experience. The interaction between stakeholders is also indicative of the performance of tourism destinations. Regions with collaborative supportive stakeholders are in a better position in tourism promotion than countries where this is missing. At the same time, tourism can be hindered by non-supportive locals (Mansson 2010) and ongoing social conflict (Hillel, Belhassen and Shani 2013). With regard to royal tourism, the integration of royal legacy as a tourism resource is known to compensate for a locality’s limitations in terms of conventional tourism resources- sun, sand and sea (King 2016). Nevertheless, one should not overestimate the potential of royal tourism. Since royal tourism has an intrinsic relationship with the politics of the state, prudence is needed when interpreting the royal tradition so as to prevent conflicts (Thirumaran 2016).
and negative perceptions towards the country (Duncan 2016). Moreover, tourism in working royal residences is highly restricted, not only because of limited opening periods but also of security requirements (Royal Collection Trust 2018).

This is a case-specific research paper. Nevertheless, the findings from this research enable us to understand the nature of royal tourism as strongly embedded in the relationship between citizens and monarchy. The practice of royal tourism differs in each country given differences in the status of the monarchy and social perception of the monarch. This paper contributes to the study of royal tourism, still a very much understudied topic in academia.

Research Methods

The objective of this research paper is to investigate expressions of royal culture in the royal crematorium through the exhibited objects and the meanings projected by stakeholders, which also leads to an understanding of the role and the status of royal tradition in the modern times.

A number of field trips were conducted at the royal crematorium during the exhibition period. Multiple methods were used to collect data in the field. Site observation, noted in the form of field notes and photographs, was conducted alongside semi-structured interviews with visitors and volunteers working at the site. A combination of methods proved to be useful in elucidating the narratives behind the tourism scenario because it brought together different perspectives and insights into the social phenomenon in question (Avieli 2013). Moreover, as Park (2010) suggests, multiple-method research design can help reduce biases that may occur if only one research method were used.

Convenience sampling was used in selecting the interviewees. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2003), this sampling strategy is practical in research projects with limited time and accessibility. The nature of the research context, as an exploration of a temporary socio-cultural phenomenon, resulted in a short data collection period. Interview data had to be collected during the exhibition period or shortly after it, when stakeholders’ memories were still fresh. Moreover, the interviews had to be held outside the exhibition premises, as on-site interviews were not allowed without special permission from the organizers. Given such difficulties, informants involved in the research project
were those who agreed to take part in the interviews. Snowball sampling was used wherever possible to reduce the bias from the researcher (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003). Many interviewees were approached after recommendations from other participants. The interviewees were both male and female, Thai nationals, and aged between 24 and 65, employed in both the public and private sector.

The data from the field work were safely stored in the computer immediately after the field trips. The data gained from the interviews were then transcribed and translated from Thai to English by the researcher. Thematic analysis was used to process the data. Themes were developed from reading and rereading the data. When reporting on themes, data from the field was used in conjunction with secondary data - magazine articles and online news reports concerning the death and funeral of King Bhumibol. When reporting interview data, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the informants.

**Tourism and Royal culture in the Royal Crematorium**

The royal crematorium exhibition fell into three parts: the showcase of royal arts (including the architecture of the royal crematoriums and decors that embellish the structure), the exhibition on the royal funerary tradition; and the life story of the King and the performances on the stage. The royal crematorium was equipped with facilities to assist disabled people including a section specifically dedicated to people with visual impairments, where they could appreciate displayed objects by touching.

From the field study at the royal crematorium, the relationship between tourism and royal culture can be seen as multi-dimensional, which can be framed under three themes: 1) tourism and the royal fine arts 2) tourism and intensification of loyalty to the monarch 3) royal tourism and disrespect.

**Tourism and the Revival of Royal Fine Arts**

The field study reveals the connection between the royal crematorium and the revival of fine art that originates from the royal court.
The royal art formed a substantial part of the royal crematorium exhibition, which highlighted the architectural showcase of the royal crematorium (Thai: Phra Meru Mas). The crematorium comprised a series of seven open-air square pavilions with pointed roofs, representing the seven peaks of Mount Meru according to Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. During the cremation ceremony, the body of the King was placed under the central pavilion, over the cremation furnace, and then burned into ashes. The base of pavilion was surrounded by the simulated Himmapan forest- a natural border separating earth and heaven, where sculptures of thirty kinds of legendary animals were placed along the simulated Anodat pond. By examining the architecture, visitors could, at the same time, appreciate the beauty of Thai fine arts used to decorate the crematorium.

Royal culture was also featured in one of the two exhibitions, ‘The Graceful Crematorium Exhibition: Craftsmanship Tribute to the Beloved King’, which was located in the pavilions surrounding the royal crematorium, used to accommodate guests during the funerary ceremony. The exhibition narrated the history of royal funerary tradition, the story behind the design and construction of the crematorium and the display of fine arts elements used in its decoration.
A variety of strategies was used in presenting the cultural artefacts. The displayed artefacts, models, artworks and architectural miniatures were accompanied by written description (in Thai and English). QR codes were provided for visitors who wished to see more detailed information through their smartphones. There were a number of volunteers working as guides at several points of the exhibition. In some locations, vinyl backgrounds with a photograph of the crematorium were provided for visitors wishing to take a picture with the crematorium, free from the crowd.

The royal crematorium was a cultural space which showcased a wide array of traditional fine arts, as explained by a volunteer worker in the cultural heritage sector.

…The crematorium was an opportunity to gather new knowledge and reorganised things. Actually, knowledge does not last forever and may die with the person who knows it. The government definitely benefits from this event. They can re-collect knowledge. They can take pictures of the architecture for use on other occasions (Sith, interviewed January 2018).
The role of tourism in reviving the royal tradition is explicit from the perspective of the organiser, the Ministry of Culture. The educative function of the event serves as the primary purpose of the exhibition.

The royal cremation ceremony was organised to celebrate the honour of the King through his life story, his duty and the projects developed from his suggestions. It is an opportunity for children, young adults and commoners to learn about the royal culture that has been preserved from the past till the present…(Royal Thai Government 2017).

The royal crematorium proved an effective means of educating visitors about Thai culture and tradition. As confirmed by some visitors, the event enabled them to visualise things that they had learned from texts.

I got to know more about Thai culture. There were banana trunks crafted in Thai motif. This is what we have heard before, but we have never seen the real thing…They were very detailed works. Completely handmade. It is a culture of Thai people that we hardly see. Another thing that impressed me is the recreation of Himmapan. It was really beautiful. When I saw it, it felt like someone is telling me a story from the classical literature. It was truly splendid. You need to see with your own eyes. You will never be disappointed (Nong, interviewed December 2017).

The royal crematorium exhibition could motivate visitors’ interest to learn Thai culture beyond the exhibition, as noted by the following comment made by an interviewed visitor.

This exhibition makes me learn a lot. It makes me become interested in the tradition of constructing the crematorium…I’m now motivated to study more about it (Wisaya, interviewed November 2017).

It was also found that, according to the stakeholders, tourism does not necessarily result in degrading the essence of royal tradition. Rather, it can be seen as a positive action to preserve tradition.
Culture should not be left to one side. Rather it should become part of our life and bring meaning to us. The crematorium is an opportunity for Thai people to express their feelings and love through their exposure to the culture… (Jean, December 2017).

Tourism also plays a part in linking royal tradition with national pride. As seen in the comment below, the royal crematorium became representative of Thai national culture when it was subject to the gaze of international tourists.

Thai culture is very beautiful. This can be an opportunity for foreigners to see our tradition and culture. As I can see, there are some foreigners visiting the crematorium which makes me very proud (Nong, December 2017).

Tourism and the intensification of the Loyalty to the Monarch

From the field study at the royal crematorium, it was found that tourism brings Thai citizens closer to the monarchy, enabling visitors to establish personal connection with the monarch. This visitor saw that the exposure to the royal culture enabled her to form a connection with the deceased King.

The crematorium allowed the new generation of people to understand more about Thai culture. Previously, we thought that tradition should be left untouched. However, the loss of King Rama IX and this royal funerary tradition make us learn. It brought us closer to him as if he had been still alive (Pachara, December 2017).

The presence of monarchy is visible throughout the exhibition. The exhibition, ‘The King in the Everlasting Memory’, located in the Royal Dhamma Pavilion, the biggest pavilion used as a shelter for royals during the cremation ceremony, was dedicated to narrating the late King’s life story as well as the humanitarian works operated under his initiatives. Photographs and objects associated with the King’s life and works were also displayed in the exhibition. In some places, audio and video clips associated with the King’s memory were used to accompany the narration of his life story.
The life of the late King also appeared in the design of the royal crematorium. The story of his humanitarian projects was incorporated in the wall painting and the paintings that decorated the fire barriers surrounding the cremation furnace. The paintings of the King’s benevolence were placed under those of the Hindu mythology which depicted the ‘Devaraja’ concept of kingship. At the entrance of the royal crematorium, a rice field located by a pond with a Chaipattana water wheel, the late King’s invention to deal with water waste, served to commemorate the King as the father of community development.

We found that visiting the royal crematorium enhanced loyalty to the monarch among Thai citizens. As confirmed by a volunteer working at the royal crematorium, many visitors were strongly driven by their love and loyalty to the king. The royal crematorium could intensify visitors’ connection to the deceased monarch through the memories of the late King evoked during the visit:
It was also found that loyalty was developed from collective consciousness. As one visitor explained, the feeling of loyalty stems from the awareness of the collaboration of many artists in the design and construction of the royal crematorium, and the crowds of visitors at the site.

The exhibition makes me think about him. I was crying a little bit when I went to the air-conditioned exhibition room, where I saw the video with mourners. There were also songs and pictures of the King when he was on duty. He seemed really tired. He has worked hard for the Thai people. I’m so appreciative and sad to see him gone (Bee, interviewed December 2017).

Visiting the crematorium made me realise how much I know the King. Is he actually like what we have seen and known about him? The event reminded us about this kind of thing. I love him so much and the crematorium has intensified my feeling towards him (Pachara, interviewed November 2017).

Figure 4. Wall painting depicting the community development projects initiated by the deceased Monarch. Source: the author.
In the crematorium I saw how Thai people love the King. It was very impressive to see that everyone loves him. During the funerary ceremony, a lot of royal artists from each province were gathered to create the best thing for him. This explained the great love Thai people had towards him. You can also see that visitors at the crematorium came from different corners. This was really impressive. I genuinely feel that everyone loves him. This is so fulfilling…The honour of the king was felt through the generosity of Thai people and their love towards the late monarch (Wisaya, interviewed November 2017).

Moreover, loyalty to the king, for some visitors, can compensate for the negative aspects of the visit. As seen in the comment below, difficulties encountered during the visit were comparable to a pilgrimage where people sacrificed comfort in order to pay respects to the king.

I think everything was fine. The visit was something that we shared with other people. Everyone wanted to approach the monarch. It was totally understandable there was no parking space provided. We were there to sacrifice. We could use public transportation instead… (Bee, interviewed December 2017).

**Royal Tourism and Respect**

From the field study we found that, in general, visitors had positive experiences at the exhibition. Tourism is perceived as a positive phenomenon that helps validate the role and significance of the royal culture in today’s society. However, disrespectful behaviours were seen to undermine the sacredness of royal tradition, as explained in the following comments made by visitors.

For me, people’s misconducts were the factor that rendered the royal tradition less sacred. For visitors who were very motivated and genuinely loyal to the King, they would know right away how to behave properly (Pachara, interviewed November 2017).

Things were impressive in general. However, I saw some people who took selfies. Well, it was clearly announced at the exhibition that photography had to be discreet. However, some people simply just
did not have a sense of propriety. I think selfies were inappropriate. I am a bit conservative about this (Wisaya, interviewed November 2017).

Apparently, visitor behaviour was not easy to control. Prior to the exhibition, the Ministry of Culture announced a series of regulations that people needed to follow when visiting the royal crematorium. This involved outfit restrictions (no revealing or overly casual outfits) and visiting manners (no selfie sticks permitted).

When the royal crematorium was opened for public visits for the first time on November 2, 2017, visitors were allowed to walk inside the royal crematorium. However, after receiving reports that some visitors damaged the architecture and stole pieces of the decor to take home, the government decided to close the royal crematorium to public access. For the rest of the opening period, the crematorium could be seen only at a distance.

Difficulties in controlling visitors’ behaviour were also reported by an interviewed volunteer. Visitors intentionally transgressed the visiting rules under the pretext that they wanted to pay homage to the king for the last time before the crematorium was demolished.

The last day, when we were about to close the exhibition, at 10 pm, there were some people who did not want to leave. They wanted to stay longer to say goodbye to the king, whatever. When we told them to go, these people gave us a feeling like we didn’t love our Dad. It was like we didn’t want them to say good bye to their Dad (Sith, interviewed January 2018).

**Discussion**

The study of the royal crematorium exhibition enables us to understand the tourism phenomenon from the following framework:

**Relationship between tourism and culture**

The royal crematorium exhibition can be read as a social phenomenon where royal tradition, previously exclusive to the elite, was transformed into
cultural objects accessible to the public. The paper shows that tourism does not always have a conflicting relationship with authenticity (in contrast to MacCannel (1973). The stakeholders did not see the display of culture as a simplification process that deprived the culture of its essence. Rather it helped to situate tourism in the contemporary context by enabling visitors to reconnect themselves with the national heritage. Besides appreciating the artistic beauty, royal funerary tourism evoked nostalgic memories of when King Bhumibol was alive. The findings also confirm that tourism can be used as a communicative medium to revive public interest and active engagement with high culture and heritage (Fox 2007). The royal crematorium exhibition is proved to have broadened visitor cultural knowledge and to have stimulated their interest in discovering tradition. It was a rare learning opportunity that concretized knowledge on traditional literature and folklore that was illusory in the mind of visitors.

Understanding the royal culture from the existential perspective also provides a useful insight into the continuity of royal tradition into the present time. In line with Wang (1999), it can be concluded from the findings that the meanings of royal culture can be shaped at both individual level - explained by familial and educational background and personal preferences; and collective level - explained by the influence of national values and beliefs. Nevertheless, the paper also notes that the significance of existential nature does not always override objective authenticity (Rickly-Boyd 2012), as the notion of royal origin and royal usage still plays a pertinent role in visitors validation of experience.

The findings also show that the instrumentality of royal tradition presents another aspect of reconceptualization brought by tourism. This coincides with King (2016), who discusses the potential of royal tourism to become a government mechanism to promote monarchist-centred nationalist discourse. The leisure but also educative experience provided by this cultural exhibition, besides being an effective educational medium of national history and culture, proves to be useful in stimulating loyalty to the monarchy. The stakeholder interviews demonstrate that the honor of the King can be felt through the understanding of his life story and his philanthropic works. Appreciation of the artistic creations made specifically to commemorate his departure from the earth and seeing the royal funerary-related objects and their accompanying stories, can enhance royalist feelings among visitors.
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Royal tourism as a reflection of the Thai society

Another aspect of the tourism phenomenon revealed by the findings is that socio-cultural environment plays a part in shaping visitors experience at the site. It confirms Bruner’s (1994) theoretical stance, which focuses on the role of socio-environmental factors in the authentication of tourism experience. Many elements of the visitor experience at the royal crematorium were driven by the country-strong cult of monarchy. Royal family members actively played a part in the construction of the crematorium and the conversion of royal funerary space into an educative open-air museum. The components of the exhibition, including the crematorium architecture, the showcased art objects, and the depiction of the life story of the King exist specifically to honor the late King both as a reincarnated god and as a highly respected statesperson.

This funerary exhibition reflects the meanings of royal status in the present time, which is developed through the mediation between ‘devaraja’ - absolute monarchy according to Buddhist/Hindu belief, and his earthly achievements witnessed through his community development projects. The cultural expression in the royal attraction demonstrates that divine power is still salient in the existence of the monarchy today, despite the fact that the monarchy has been constitutionalized for almost a century. The adoption of constitutional monarchy in Thailand has placed the monarchy into a symbolic function, where the traditional divine rights of the monarch become representative of the ideal identity of the nation and its long history. Public respect for the monarch is driven by his being the society’s role model and by his philanthropic works, coupled with traditional divine status.

Monarchism was found to influence visitors’ authentication of visiting experience. The showcase of royal items was not a way of depriving royal culture and its tradition of its privileged status, but rather as an opportunity for people to reconnect with the late monarch and the monarchical institution. This can be seen in the way visitors related their visit to the final tribute to the late King. At the same time, the status of the King had an influence on their behavior at the site. Improper behavior was perceived as demeaning the culture and hence spoiling the visit.
Conclusion

This research paper describes the process of constructing ‘heritage scape’ in the context of royal funerary tradition in Thailand. The royal tradition, which had been kept away from the public eye, was temporarily made accessible to the public in the form of the visiting experience. Unlike most other tourism activities, commercialization was not the primary concern of the royal crematorium, but rather the educative experience promoted by the government. Based on the narrative of the visiting experience, largely drawn from the exploration of the stakeholders’ worldview and site observation, the royal crematorium exhibition reflects the contemporary interpretation of the royal tradition. Studying the web of significance in the construction of the tourism experience enables us to see that tourism does not always have a commercial aim but should also be valued for its instrumentality to promote national unity through monarchism and intangible national heritage.

The paper confirms the dynamic character of heritage when it travels from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy - tradition does not always disappear in the face of modernization. Despite the changing status of the monarch as a consequence of the Siamese Revolution in the 1930s, the divine concept of the monarch still plays a preponderant role in the public perception of the monarchy, as expressed in the meanings reciprocally shared among the exhibitors and the viewers when they reflect on the exhibition experience.

The findings also imply the possibility of incorporating the royal legacy as part of cultural tourism. The royal crematorium exhibition, besides reflecting Thailand’s rich royal history and culture, is seen as an example of successful heritage interpretation. The ability of the funerary tradition to respond to contemporary social needs and public engagement is more important than the preservation of tradition in its pristine state. Moreover, this paper shows that the heritage interpretation strategy is an equally important ingredient of the success of the royal attraction as individual’s cultural enthusiasm (Cohen 2002). The incorporation of modern technologies in the narration of the past contributes to the ability of cultural tourism to captivate visitors’ interest, as well as intensifying visitors’ perceptions. However, unlike popular cultural objects, tourismification of royal culture in countries with a strong cult of monarchy is a sensitive issue, since it is necessary to balance between public curiosity about the royal life and respect for the royals. Ideally, the royal experience should not dishonor the royals nor demean the royal exclusivity.
This research paper is among the earliest attempts to understand the presence of the royal legacy in tourism experience offered in Thailand, and also the complexity between public accessibility and royal exclusivity, which constitutes the central core of the interpretation of royal culture. The findings and discussions and the conclusions in this paper are still at a preliminary stage, given the temporary nature of the research context, and absolutely worth future examination and discussion.

Notes

*Thanya Lunchaprasith is currently a lecturer at Silpakorn University International College, Bangkok. Thanya obtained Ph.D. from Glasgow University. She has a very broad interest in the field of tourism, including but not limited to anthropology of tourism, cultural heritage tourism, gastronomic tourism and royal tourism. Her previous research in gastronomic tourism in touristic markets has been published in a number of international journals. Email: thanya.lunchaprasith@gmail.com

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