

## **A New Vision: Chamari, Chamadewi, and Female Sovereignty in Northern Thailand**

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On the walls of a temple named Wat Duang Diaw in Amphur Li, the southernmost district of Lamphun province in northern Thailand, is to be found a series of 91 paintings.<sup>1</sup> Only three or four years old,<sup>2</sup> the paintings depict in meticulous detail the story of Queen Chamaridewi and the founding of the city of Li. The name “Chamaridewi” is suspiciously similar to that of Chamadewi, the legendary Mon queen who is the matriarchal figure typically credited with bringing Theravada Buddhism and the civilization of the southern kingdom of Lavo, modern-day Lopburi, to the north.<sup>3</sup> At first glance, a scholar familiar with Northern Thai Buddhism might assume that Chamari’s story is a localized version of the story of Chamadewi. As Daniel Veidlinger suggests, the Chamadewi text itself was likely an amalgamation of Buddhist scripture, local legends, and verses that the monk Bodhiramsi composed himself.<sup>4</sup> However, after

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<sup>1</sup> These paintings were brought to my attention by Professor Katherine Bowie, who photographed nearly all of the 91 paintings in the series over the summer of 2011. Anthony Irwin photographed the remaining nine so that I could complete the translation in July of 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Bowie 2012, personal communication.

<sup>3</sup> Donald K. Swearer and Sommai Premchit, *The Legend of Queen Cama: Bodhiramsi’s Camadevivamsa, A Translation and Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Veidlinger, *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing, Orality and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 54-55.

translating the text painted at the bottom of each of the Li paintings I believe that these are two very different heroines.

The recent emergence of Chamari's<sup>5</sup> tale on the walls of Wat Duang Diaw has interesting implications for our understanding of how Thai people, particularly northern Thais, remember the roles of elite women of the past. Her story reinforces the work done by academics such as Barbara Andaya, Penny Van Esterik, Anthony Reid, and others who argue that women played a critical role in the political and religious lives of pre- and early modern Southeast Asia and enjoyed higher status than the women of India, China, and the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> The tale of Chamari suggests a need for further investigation into the question of women's status within the structures of the state and Buddhism as a world religion, especially when the story is juxtaposed with accounts of other Buddhist queens in mainland Southeast Asia. As Andaya states, "because debates on women in early Buddhism have concentrated almost exclusively on India and Sri Lanka, the religious past of Thailand, Cambodia,

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<sup>5</sup> The text refers to the queen as both "Chamari" and "Chamaridewi." "Chamari" is used more frequently throughout the text than "Chamaridewi," so I will use the shorter version of her name throughout this paper. The longer version is used at particularly critical points in the story, such as when she is first introduced in the text in painting number five, and when she is burned at her funeral pyre in painting number 53.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara W. Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 1; Barbara Andaya, "Old Age: Widows, Midwives and the Question of 'Witchcraft' in Early Modern Southeast Asia," *Asia-Pacific Forum* (Unpublished essay, 2005): 104-147; Anthony Reid, "Female Roles in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* (1988): 629; Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, "Introduction," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1-18.

Myanmar, and Laos is ripe for a reevaluation”.<sup>7</sup> The seemingly sudden appearance of Chamari in the small district of Li leads us to wonder how many more local histories celebrate women as their initial founders and benefactors.

While theories and histories of the *dhammaraja* (righteous monarch) and the *cakkavattin* (wheel-turner) in Southeast Asia have been consistently explored by religious scholars and historians,<sup>8</sup> notions of Buddhist queenship have been largely ignored in the literature. In one of the remarkably few attempts to frame female Buddhist sovereignty, John S. Strong asserts that an understanding of Buddhist queenship that sees the queen’s “rule and authority as part of a greater symbiosis of power and performance,” shared between her and her king, is needed in the field of Buddhist studies.<sup>9</sup> Strong concludes by offering the following three characteristics of a potential theory for Buddhist queenship:

First, just like a king, a Buddhist queen is independent; she earns her queenship by virtue of her own merit achieved in her own past life, and by virtue of her own realization of the truth of the

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, “Gender History, Southeast Asia and the ‘World Regions’ Framework” in *A Companion to Gender History*, ed. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks and Teresa A. Meade (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 333.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Swearer offers a summary of the work on Buddhist kingship in his book *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, stating that “in general, religious and royal institutions were mutually supportive of each other in South and Southeast Asia” (Swearer 2010, 72). Andaya cites an earlier work by Swearer, writing that “frequent reference was made to the concept of the Universal Monarch, the *cakkavatti*, who has obtained his position because of the great merit he has built up in previous lives and the charismatic glory (*pon*) he has attained in this one” (B. W. Andaya, *Political Developments between the Sixteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* 2007, 68).

<sup>9</sup> John S. Strong, “Toward a Theory of Buddhist Queenship: The Legend of Asandhimitta” in *Constituting Communities: Theravada Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. John Clifford Holt, Jacob N. Kinnard, Jonathan S. Walters (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 52.

dharmā. Secondly, just like a king, a Buddhist queen is interdependent; she must enjoy a symbiotic relationship with her husband, whose kingship she supports, just as he supports her queenship. Without him, she is no queen; without her, he is no king. Finally, just like a king, a Buddhist queen is dependent; she must be a good wife, and this implies subservience to her husband.<sup>10</sup>

In his essay, Strong refers to Buddhist queens who reigned successfully without a husband such as Chamadewi of Thailand as “anomalous”.<sup>11</sup> His theory certainly applies to many examples of queens across the ambit of Buddhist monarchy in Southeast Asia. However, I suggest that portrayals of autonomous queens who do not need the complementary half of a king are not anomalies in northern Thailand. While some Southeast Asian Buddhist codes of conduct for women developed from ideas of “virtuous behavior” demonstrated in Indian epic literature,<sup>12</sup> the stories of Buddhist queens that emerge from northern Thailand stray from the patterns identified by Strong. Specifically, I analyze an alternative vision of Buddhist queenship illustrated in the stories of Chamari and Chamadewi. By comparing two written versions of these stories, it is clear that these two sovereigns are separate people, and that they are both examples of queens who ruled independently without husbands. The patterns of queenship observed in northern Thai and Lanna accounts are distinct from others in Thailand.

### **Women in Pre- and Early Modern Southeast Asia**

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<sup>10</sup> Strong, “Buddhist Queenship,” 60.

<sup>11</sup> Strong, “Buddhist Queenship,” 42.

<sup>12</sup> Pakdeekul Ratana, “Social Strategies in Creating Roles for Women in LanNa and Lan Sang” (PhD diss., Institute of Ethnology, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, 2009), 110.

In analyzing the stories of Chamadewi and Chamari, some review of women's historical roles in Buddhism and Southeast Asian society is useful in lending context to the textual sources. A steadily increasing body of literature demonstrates that women were active in positions of power and leadership in pre- and early modern Southeast Asia. The historical and anthropological scholarship tends to assert two general points regarding women's status. The first is, as previously stated, that women in Southeast Asia had higher status and more autonomy than did the women of India, the Middle East, and China. Andaya has cited several factors that lessened the disadvantages of being female in Southeast Asia, including "a low level of state penetration into rural areas, the late entry of world religions, a largely agricultural economy, limited urban development, widespread bilateral kinship systems, (and) frequent matrilineal residence".<sup>13</sup> The second prevalent theme in the literature is that the arrival and dissemination of the world religions in Southeast Asia did much to damage this high status.<sup>14</sup>

One reason why scholars have largely agreed that Southeast Asian women enjoyed autonomy and comparatively high status is that evidence suggests women played pervasive roles in the pre-and early modern economy, including in trade, marketing, and finance. Early European and Chinese traders, who began arriving in greater numbers from the sixteenth century onward, were surprised to find themselves negotiating with women.<sup>15</sup> Court women were often considered to be knowledgeable patrons, and many inherited land or made money by investing in trading enterprises.<sup>16</sup> It is also significant

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<sup>13</sup> Andaya, "Old Age," 109.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Andaya, "Gender History," 328; Pakdeekul, "Social Strategies," 1.

<sup>15</sup> Andaya, "Gender History," 329; Reid, "Female Roles," 634; Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>16</sup> Andaya, "Gender History," 329.

that textile and cloth production was largely controlled and carried out by women.<sup>17</sup> Textiles were an integral component of local economies, as they were used as both exchange items and currency. Indeed, the profits earned by women as producers and retailers were one of the important mainstays of the domestic economy.<sup>18</sup>

In some instances, local or government authorities recognized women as being skilled in financial matters, such as in Thailand and Burma where governments apparently appointed women as tax collectors.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, according to Reid “even today Southeast Asian countries top the comparative statistics assembled by Ester Boserup for female participation in trade and marketing”.<sup>20</sup> At present, the *Bangkok Post* reports that approximately 40 percent of senior executives in Thailand are women, a rate that ranks second highest in the world.<sup>21</sup>

Women were also frequently associated with agriculture in rice-growing areas of Southeast Asia in regards to socioeconomics

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<sup>17</sup> However, Katherine Bowie has found that in many northern Thai villages, less than half of the women could actually spin and weave. Due to the complex division of labor, many women were involved in other steps of the production and distribution of textiles (Katherine Bowie, “Unraveling the Myth of the Subsistence Economy: Textile Production in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 51 (1992), 797-823.

<sup>18</sup> Andaya, “Gender History,” 330.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Reid, “Female Roles,” 634.

<sup>21</sup> “Red shirts demand amnesty”, *Bangkok Post*, April 27, 2012, accessed June 2, 2012, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/290631/red-shirts-demand-amnesty>.

and spiritual beliefs.<sup>22</sup> Perceptions of earth and harvest were often manifested in the form of earth goddesses, as the cycle of planting and harvesting was compared to human conception, pregnancy, and birth. Andaya cites comparative studies in India and China showing that rice-growing communities hold women's agricultural labor in higher regard than societies that grow wheat, and argues that this general cultural pattern holds true for Southeast Asia as well. In fact, the strong emphasis on the earth goddess Mae Thorani is not present in the Buddhist cultures of India and Sri Lanka.<sup>23</sup> Transplanting and harvesting tended to be "intimately connected with female-dominated fertility rituals, and there was an implicit understanding that the community would go hungry without women's involvement".<sup>24</sup> In this sense, women were expected not only to nurse their infants at their breasts, but also to feed entire communities from their work in the rice paddies.

Andaya also suggests that the close links often made between women, agriculture, and land could partially explain why property and

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<sup>22</sup> Andaya, "Gender History," 329; Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Culture, Materializing Thailand*, (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 28.

<sup>23</sup> See Barbara Watson Andaya and Yoneo Ishii, "Religious Developments in Southeast Asia, c. 1500-1800," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume One, Part Two, From c. 1500 to c. 1800*, ed Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 167. The earth goddess Mae Thorani is commonly portrayed in temple paintings that depict the Buddha's life. A widely recognized scene depicts Mara, the symbolic king of evil and material desires, sending his forces to prevent the Buddha from attaining enlightenment. The Buddha calls Thorani to "bear witness to his right to enlightenment" through the karma he has accumulated in previous lives. Thorani drowns Mara's army by wringing the water from her hair that she had collected every time the Buddha had performed an act of selfless generosity. The extraordinary amount of water that she has gathered represents the infinite number of times that the Buddha performed good works for others in his past lives (Falk, *Making Fields*, 153-154).

<sup>24</sup> Andaya, "Gender History," 329.

houses were usually passed and inherited through the female line.<sup>25</sup> Recent historical work supports the speculation that women's inheritance, ownership, and control of land may have been more ubiquitous than previously thought. The status that women could accrue through property ownership was sometimes demonstrated by making donations to Buddhist establishments. For example, a seventeenth-century text from modern day Phattalung in southern Thailand mentions that a maternally-related kin group of mothers and daughters dedicated their lands to a local Buddhist temple called Wat Kuti Luang.<sup>26</sup>

The influence that women had in property dealings was also apparent in marriage and divorce customs and laws. According to European accounts from the seventeenth century, it was quite easy for either a man or a woman to initiate a divorce and equally unproblematic to remarry other people.<sup>27</sup> In Siam, the Three-Seals Law Code was established in 1805 under the authority of the new Chakri dynasty. Under this series of laws, pre-nuptial property was given by the parents of each side to their daughter and son, and this property was to be handled independently by the wife and husband. Hence, if the wife made a successful business venture with the capital she received from her family, she could be awarded up to two-thirds of the conjugal property in the event of a divorce.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, if a

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Andaya, "Old Age," 118; Andaya, "Gender History," 330; Lorraine M. Gesick, *In the Land of Lady White Blood: Southern Thailand and the Meaning of History* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, 1995), 39.

<sup>27</sup> Reid, "Female Roles," 629; Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Vol. I: The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 152.

<sup>28</sup> Junko Koizumi, "Women and the Family in Siamese History," in *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Barbara Watson Andaya (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), 260-261.

couple chose to legally separate, the pre-nuptial property was returned to their respective families “even at the expense of conjugal assets”.<sup>29</sup> Married women also maintained connections with their families through inheritance practices, as Siamese inheritance law gave sons and daughters the same rights. These arrangements offered women strength and leverage in their families.<sup>30</sup>

Female roles in Southeast Asia were not limited to economic and financial affairs. Women throughout the region were also active as participants and leaders in spiritual life. In Lanna, present-day northern Thailand, the local spirit medium was almost always a woman, which greatly influenced how women’s roles in society were viewed and valued in the public sphere. Women were the support base for addressing many kinds of concerns, such as curing illness, forecasting the future in family life and agriculture, and locating missing loved ones.<sup>31</sup> Even today, researchers observe that the majority of spirit mediums in Thailand are female. Rosalind Morris states that modern spirit mediumship in Chiang Mai is dominated by women, and Walter Irvine writes that 84 percent of the spirit mediums he studied in northern Thailand were female.<sup>32</sup> This role is often associated with “effeminacy and penetrability”<sup>33</sup> despite the fact that the occupying spirits tend to be male.<sup>34</sup> While they are possessed,

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<sup>29</sup> Koizumi, “Women and the Family,” 261.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Pakdeekul, “Social Strategies,” 63.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Irvine, “The Thai-Yuan 'Madman' and the 'Modernising, Developing Thai Nation' as Bounded Entities Under Threat: A Study in the Replication of a Single Image” (PhD diss., University of London: 1982), 320.

<sup>33</sup> Morris, “Materializing Thailand,” 2.

<sup>34</sup> Megan Sinnott, *Toms and Dees: transgender identity and female same-sex relationships in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 56.

these women take on masculine characteristics. They might wear men's clothing, smoke, or drink alcohol. The few mediums that are male tend to be *kathoey*, people who are biologically male but perform in a feminine manner and may or may not identify as women in their everyday lives.<sup>35</sup>

### **Women and Theravada Buddhism**

Charles Keyes has noted that conceptions of gender in any culture are particularly influential if they are connected to religious assumptions. Therefore it is necessary to interpret gender in Thailand with reference to Buddhism, for, as he states, “the peoples in these communities situate themselves within worlds with a distinctive Buddhist horizon”.<sup>36</sup>

By the fourteenth century, Buddhism was dominant on mainland Southeast Asia, with the exception of Vietnam.<sup>37</sup> Scholars largely seem to agree that the spread of the world religions contributed to women's loss of autonomy in many ways. Andaya writes that “there is no doubt that the penetration of the world religions and rising state authority did combine to promote a more pronounced gender hierarchy in Southeast Asian societies”.<sup>38</sup> This view of the shift in power and gender relations is echoed by Pakdeekul Ratana who states that beginning in the fourteenth century, as Buddhism took hold in Lanna and Lan Xang, changes

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<sup>35</sup> Irvine, “The Thai-Yuan ‘Madman,’” 338, 354-355; Sinnott, *Toms and Dees*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Charles F. Keyes, “Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand,” *American Ethnologist* 11 (1984): 233.

<sup>37</sup> Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Andaya, “Gender History,” 328. Christine Gailey defines “gender hierarchy” as “the association of social power with maleness, that is, with characteristics associated culturally with masculinity” (*Kinship to Kingship: Gender Hierarchy and State Formation in the Tongan Islands*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987: 4).

developed in political and social attitudes that ultimately caused the power balance to shift in favor of men.<sup>39</sup>

Along with Buddhism, for example, came the belief that simply being born a woman is evidence of having gained insufficient merit in past lives; men were naturally closer to enlightenment than women.<sup>40</sup> Some scholars have noticed that in the near-universal hierarchal opposition of culture versus nature, female tends to be associated with nature, while male is associated with culture “and thus superiority”.<sup>41</sup> Women were associated with the secular; there was a societal expectation for them to subscribe to particular methods of accruing merit in this life in efforts to be reborn as males in their next lives and have the opportunity to enter the monkhood, study the dharma, and eventually attain nirvana.<sup>42</sup> In her present life, a woman was naturally prone towards coveting material goods and clinging to worldly desires. Interestingly, however, Jane Hanks observes that “many a Thai woman has stated that she does not wish to be reborn to the higher status of men and so lose her female attributes, capacities and power”.<sup>43</sup>

Women were seen as spiritually inferior for sins they committed in past lives, and their physical bodies were and still are considered to be toxic. For example, in Thailand the female body is often considered “leaky and ambiguous,” not to mention “inferior,

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<sup>39</sup> Pakdeekul, “Social Strategies,” 2.

<sup>40</sup> Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, 76; Jane Richardson Hanks, “Females and Fertility” in *Anthropology and Community in Cambodia: Reflections on the work of May Ebibara*, ed John Marston (Caulfield: Monash University Press, 2011), 190; Susan Starr Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>41</sup> Gailey, *Kinship to Kingship*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Pakdeekul, “Social Strategies,” 99.

<sup>43</sup> Hanks, “Females and Fertility,” 190.

polluted, taboo, ugly, and hidden.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in several of northern Thailand’s most popular temples, women are prohibited from entering certain areas, including the area surrounding the *chedi* (stupa) as well as the ordination hall (see Bowie 2011 for an analysis of this controversy). The fact that this ban is specific to the north is made all the more interesting by the fact that historically and in literature northern Thai women have played a strong role in political leadership and perpetuating Theravada Buddhism. Bowie states that in northern Thailand the “primary association of female menstrual pollution is with the magic of male protective tattoos”.<sup>45</sup> Menstrual blood and women’s lower garments are believed to adversely affect the supernatural power of men’s tattoos, which otherwise are said to protect men from bullet wounds, blades, and wild animals.<sup>46</sup> The notion that women’s bodily fluids are pollutants is still often cited as a factor that contributes to the subordination of women in Buddhism, and many researchers have argued that Thai women themselves have internalized the idea that women are contaminating to the monastic order.<sup>47</sup> Andaya has argued that one of the reasons

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<sup>44</sup> Falk, *Making Fields*, 106. For a cross-cultural perspective on menstruation, see *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (1988) edited by Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb.

<sup>45</sup> Katherine A. Bowie, “Polluted Identities: Ethnic Diversity and the Constitution of Northern Thai Beliefs on Gender” in *Southeast Asian Historiography, Unravelling the Myths: Essays in Honour of Barend Jan Terweil* ed. Volker Grabowsky (Bangkok: River Books Press, 2011), 131.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Falk, *Making Fields*, 106-107. Many scholars reference the taboos surrounding menstruation to further arguments for how women were subjugated under the world religions. Bowie, however, points out that as “northern Thai men found themselves embedded in matrilocal marriages and strong matrilineal spirit cults, it is perhaps not surprising that they may have felt vulnerable” (Bowie, “Polluted Identities,” 135). This viewpoint situates men at a more defensive angle in the gender hierarchy.

why older women enjoyed a higher degree of authority than they did as younger women is because they had “entered a sexual zone where perceptions of a dangerous fertility no longer applied...the mysterious processes that ended a woman’s reproductive years...made her more ‘male-like’”.<sup>48</sup> Post-menopausal women in Hindu-Buddhist Java were able to live alone as ascetics, and some scholars believe that in Thai societies it was acceptable for older females to roam the land “like wandering monks”.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to decreasing the role of women as spiritual leaders and vessels of supernatural authority, the coming of Buddhism reshaped educational opportunities for women. Formal religious systems were associated with learning, both of which in turn were associated with the importance of literacy for men but not for women. In the seventeenth century, six-year-old boys in Ayutthaya went to the monasteries to acquire basic literacy. Because females were not allowed to be ordained, girls usually did not have the opportunity to learn how to read and write.<sup>50</sup> Positions of authority in spiritual life were increasingly designated for men.<sup>51</sup>

Scholars tend to add a disclaimer to the assertion that women’s power declined with the coming of Buddhism. Andaya notes that the world religions were adapted to pre-existing Southeast Asian cultures and spiritual beliefs because of the strong influence of women in the economy, ritual and spiritual practice, and the domestic

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<sup>48</sup> Andaya, “Old Age,” 122.

<sup>49</sup> Andaya, “Old Age,” 114, 122. While it is true that post-menopausal women were often able to take on roles that younger women were barred from, it is problematic to assume that women could only be powerful if they were considered ‘male-like’ or if they took over a position that was traditionally kept by men.

<sup>50</sup> Reid, “Female Roles,” 639.

<sup>51</sup> Andaya, *Flaming Womb*, 212.

sphere.<sup>52</sup> In fact many women may have been drawn to the world religions as a new way to access protection for their families against illness and death,<sup>53</sup> as well as because of positive images of women such as the example of Buddha's aunt and caretaker, Mahaprajapati.<sup>54</sup> Modern feminists and Buddhist scholars have also emphasized evidence demonstrating that there did exist a lineage of nuns during the Buddha's own lifetime, and that the Buddha himself believed that women have potential to reach enlightenment.<sup>55</sup>

While the rise of the world religions often worked to inhibit women's autonomy, particularly on the mainland, women were not completely cast aside as leaders. For example, in pre-modern Burma women could inherit the position of "myo-thuygyi", or village head, and in some cases this seems to have been passed through the female line. In 1767, a headwoman in the Pagan area told officials conducting the annual revenue inquest that her great-grandmother had been the leader of the village.<sup>56</sup> In the upper echelons of society, royal women became idealized archetypes of piety and generosity, "and inscriptions and chronicles frequently refer to royal mothers, aunts and wives who sponsored texts, donated religious buildings,

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<sup>52</sup> Andaya, "Gender History," 328.

<sup>53</sup> Andaya, *Flaming Womb*, 78.

<sup>54</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 9. Mahaprajapati raised the Buddha, as his mother died shortly after his birth. After the Buddha's enlightenment, Mahaprajapati told him that she and her female companions wished to become monks. The Buddha initially denied her request, but eventually he agreed to allow women to join the order as *bhikkuni* (Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 9).

<sup>55</sup> Bowie, "Polluted Identities," 124.

<sup>56</sup> Andaya, "Old Age," 117.

and nurtured the monkhood”.<sup>57</sup> The most important role for women in Buddhism became that of religious supporter, particularly elite women, who often donated food, land, and other necessities for the construction of a monastery or pagoda.<sup>58</sup> This role is highly apparent in depictions of queens in Buddhist texts and folklore.

### **Women as Queens in Southeast Asia**

While the work on Buddhist queenship is limited, particularly queenship in Southeast Asia, the interest in the role of queens is increasing as the body of work on women continues to expand. However, the literature has thus far tended to portray queens as mothers and wives but not as rulers in their own right. While most of the following examples depict queens in these typical roles, it is also crucial to note that many of these women do not rely on their husband or sons for karma, protection, or prestige. They have their own historical trajectory of merit that has raised them to positions of leadership, authority, and responsibility.

In terms of kingship and queenship, Reid states that “female monarchy is anathema alike to Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Chinese traditions of statecraft.” Austronesian societies such as Indonesia and the Philippines and port cities have been more inclined to place elite women on the throne.<sup>59</sup> Where Indian influences had been strong, female rule was rare, especially in the more “exalted” courts of mainland Southeast Asia. The only time when Siam has put a woman on the throne was in 1897, when King Chulalongkorn appointed Queen Saowapha to serve as regent while he was visiting

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<sup>57</sup> Andaya, “Gender History,” 334.

<sup>58</sup> Pakdeekul, “Social Strategies,” 63.

<sup>59</sup> Reid, “Female Roles,” 639.

Europe for eight months.<sup>60</sup> While northern Thailand was not located near maritime trade networks, the region was far from isolated. Bowie notes that the north “has long been linked with regional and international trade networks in which manufactured cloth and thread were among the primary goods traded”.<sup>61</sup> It is interesting that two clear examples of autonomous queens, Chamadevi and Chamari, emerge from northern Thailand. According to Reid’s study, the people of a landlocked region such as northern Thailand would have been unlikely to place a woman on the throne, as it is far from seaborne trade networks.<sup>62</sup>

There is evidence that some Southeast Asian queens are remembered as warriors and military strategists. While warfare “is normally an exclusively male business, every culture is probably inclined to romanticize and celebrate those exceptional women who emerge to save a desperate situation”.<sup>63</sup> In 1443, Tilokarat, the king of Lanna, asked his mother to surround the city of Phrae.<sup>64</sup> When Thao Mean Khun, the ruler of Phrae, refused to pay homage to the Lanna queen, the officers told the queen they should fire a cannon into the city walls of Phrae. No one knew how to use the weapon except for a Vietnamese chief named Pan Songkhram. The queen negotiated an offering to Pan Songkhram, who then fired the cannon. Thao Maen Khun finally surrendered, presented tribute, and the Queen showed

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<sup>60</sup> Katherine Bowie, “Women’s Suffrage in Thailand: A Southeast Asian Historiographical Challenge,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (2010): 723.

<sup>61</sup> Katherine Bowie, “Unraveling the Myth of the Subsistence Economy: Textile Production in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 51 (1992), 815.

<sup>62</sup> Reid, “Female Roles,” 639-641.

<sup>63</sup> Reid, “Female Roles,” 637.

<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, no name is provided for King Tilokarat’s mother in the *Chiang Mai Chronicle*.

mercy and let him rule as before.<sup>65</sup> Andaya suggests that the occasional presence of queens on the battlefield may also be explained by the belief that some queens held “spiritual powers” that ensured victory. Another example is found on an inscription dated to around 1400 that describes how the Queen of Sukhothai joined her son in a sweeping campaign to regain territory. Additionally, This remember Queen Suriyothai from the *Chronicles of Ayutthaya* who died defending Ayutthaya against the Burmese in the sixteenth century. Suriyothai famously dressed as the king’s male heir and joined the king in battle. She saved the king’s life and lost her own by moving her elephant between him and enemy blows.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, many people in eastern Thailand commemorate Lady Mo, who saved Khorat from a Lao invasion in 1826 after reportedly leading several hundred captive women to escape.<sup>67</sup>

There is not a rich literature on female Buddhist leaders and queens in mainland Southeast Asia. However, as previously discussed, we can draw from scholarship on the region as well as Buddhist texts and mythology that women did have a significant impact on state and community functions, including governance. For example, in many small northern Thai kingdoms, the queen often

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<sup>65</sup> David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeo, *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, Second Edition (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 84.

<sup>66</sup> Andaya, *Flaming Womb*, 170.

<sup>67</sup> Reid, “Female Roles,” 637. Scholars in Thai Studies are now aware that much of Lady Mo’s legend is fabricated. In her Master’s thesis, Saiphin Kaewngamprasoet discusses how nationalist ideologues of the 1930s made Lady Mo, also known as Thao Suranari, into a national cult figure. Thousands of residents of Khorat were infuriated by the thesis and Saiphin faced criticism and threats. For an analysis of the situation, see Keyes, 2002. My point is that Lady Mo is still commemorated as a great female leader, which supports the argument that modern Thai society is not reluctant to celebrate women in a variety of roles.

took control when a ruler died or was rendered incapable [of rule].<sup>68</sup> The assumption of authority by a “Queen Mother” was a common pattern, especially in the northern Thai areas. Andaya cites a text from the Liu kingdom of Chiang Kheng, which reports that on many occasions a queen mother would take control upon a sudden and unexpected vacancy left by a king or regent. Sometimes, the queen mother kept the position of sovereignty permanently. According to the Liu text, in 1612 a queen appropriated all of the symbolic accoutrements of kingship, including “the crown, the sword, the umbrella, the betel set, the drum, and the set of clothing,” and went on to rule for 25 more years.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to the tales of the two northern Thai queens, there are other examples of queens who are portrayed as generators and preservers of Buddhism. In a short essay, Strong focuses on the legend of Asandhimitta, one of King Asoka’s wives. King Asoka Maurya was the grandson of Candragupta, who founded the Mauryan dynasty in 189 B.C.E. During his reign, which lasted from 270 to 232 B.C.E., Asoka achieved the most expansive political unity that India would know until the colonial period. After conquering the formerly independent kingdom of Kalinga, Asoka converted to Buddhism as a response to the remorse he felt for inflicting so much violence. Within the Buddhist tradition, he became the exemplar of what the *cakravartin* should embody. Swearer states that:

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<sup>68</sup> In his article entitled “Power Behind the Throne,” Cheah Boon Kheng argues that Malay women played a significant role in the court politics of Melaka, saying that “It seems a forgotten fact today that in the history of early civilizations, many queens had been chosen as rulers” (Kheng 1993, 4). Apparently, female Malay rulers were accepted by society rather than challenged by Islam as long as a legitimate heir was not present (Kheng 1993, 20).

<sup>69</sup> Andaya, “Old Age,” 115-116. Additionally, Cambodian women could also assume positions of authority in the earliest Khmer societies. Elite women, like elite men, appealed to different political factions for support and legitimacy (Jacobsen 2008, 31).

Asoka's conversion to Buddhism and its consequences becomes the seminal event in the institutional history of Theravada Buddhism, not simply for the development of Buddhism in India, but also for the normative influence of his example on how monarchs in the Theravada cultures of Southeast Asia were depicted.<sup>70</sup>

According to Strong, Asandhimitta's story is found in two Pali sources, which are the *Extended Mahavamsa*, also called the "Cambodian Mahavamsa," and the *Dasavattbhuppakarana*, as well as in the Thai *Trai Phum*, or *Three Worlds*.<sup>71</sup> Each story emphasizes Asandhimitta as a woman who has accumulated great merit in a past life, merit which has made her a virtuous woman in her present life. In every version of Asandhimitta's story, King Asoka offers her complete rule over his kingdom, and in every version she refuses.<sup>72</sup> To accept the king's offer of sovereignty would mean that she would not have to obey him any longer. Therefore, she declines his offer due to her desire to be a dutiful and virtuous wife.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, she

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<sup>70</sup> Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, Second Edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 72-73.

<sup>71</sup> Strong, "Buddhist Queenship," 43. The *Trai Phum* is a work composed in 1345 A.D. by Phya Lithai, who was at that time the heir to the throne of Sukhothai-Srisachanalai. Phya Lithai became "one of the greatest and most colorful kings in the history of the Sukhothai kingdom and of Thailand," and his historical persona and literary accomplishments "helped to establish the model of the Thai king as a Buddhist teacher and writer" (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982, 10-11).

<sup>72</sup> In the *Trai Phum*, King Asoka offers Asandhimitta his kingdom after she presents 60,000 monks with beautiful robes which appear from a magical jeweled box that never empties. After all the monks have received their "celestial cloth," King Asoka says to her: "you are a divine and virtuous woman, and from today on into the future I transfer to you the dwellings, territories, villages, cities, castles, royal houses, elephants, horses, slaves, freemen, all of the soldiers, the silver, the gold, the precious possessions, and all the 16,000 concubines; you may be their ruler" (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982, 182).

<sup>73</sup> Strong, "Buddhist Queenship," 57.

consulted with her husband before she did anything at all: “when he gave the command, she did it.” If the King had not eaten, she would not eat.<sup>74</sup> The ideal Buddhist queen must also be an ideal Buddhist wife; she must be subservient to her king, even if she has incurred positive karma by the merit of her own good deeds in previous lives.

Another seldom-discussed example of Buddhist queenship is Keo Keng Ya, the wife of Chao Fa Ngum, the fourteenth century king who founded the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang. Chao Fa Ngum was given Keo Keng Ya, a daughter of King Jayavarman of Angkor, to be his queen. Jayavarman had recently converted to Theravada Buddhism, and he maintained contact with religious leaders in Ceylon.<sup>75</sup> When Chao Fa Ngum left Lan Xang to conquer more territories around 1353, he appointed Keo Keng Ya as his regent and left the capital under her authority. Chao Fa Ngum became increasingly tyrannical as he succeeded in his conquests, and eventually the people and court officials pleaded to Keo Keng Ya for help. She believed that only through Buddhism could her king change his despotic ways, and begged him to let her ask Jayavarman to send monks and the *Tripitaka* (Buddhist scriptures) so that Lan Xang could become a truly Buddhist and moral society. Jayavarman sent the scriptures and a sacred Buddha statue along with a large procession of monks, craftsmen, and lay helpers. When Keo Keng Ya died in 1368, Chao Fa Ngum was inconsolable and Lan Xang entered a period of decline and corruption.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1982), 183.

<sup>75</sup> Peter Simms and Sanda Simms, *The Kingdom of Laos* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 30; Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and Decline* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998), 52.

<sup>76</sup> Simms & Simms, *The Kingdom of Laos*, 37-41.

The pious queen Indradevi is an example of another influential female Buddhist leader. The greatest Angkorian king, Jayavarman VII, ruled from 1181 to 1220, and apparently had a strong inclination towards Buddhism. Indradevi, one of his wives, became an eminent Buddhist patroness in her own right, described as having “surpassed in her knowledge the knowledge of philosophers”.<sup>77</sup> According to her inscription, she also taught nuns and converted the king’s first wife, Jayarajadevi, to Buddhism.<sup>78</sup>

The legend of Lady White Blood provides an example of an influential Buddhist queen from southern Thailand. There are many versions of this story, though Lorraine Gesick provides a translated version of a text that was originally from Phatthalung. According to her translation, there was once an elderly couple, Grandfather Sammo and Grandmother Phet, who were skilled in training elephants. One day, they released two elephants, one female and one male. When they did not return, Sammo tracked them and found the female kneeling before a *phathong* bamboo clump and the male kneeling before a clump of *samriang* bamboo. The elephants brought bamboo shoots back to Sammo and Phet’s home, where they continued to pay homage before the shoots. When Sammo and Phet cut the *phathong* bamboo, they saw a noble girl’s arm spilling white blood. The same happened when they cut the *samriang*, except it was a boy and his arm spilled red, black, yellow and white blood. The elderly couple eventually married the two noble children together. Lord Kuman, Lady White Blood, and their elephants go on to travel extensively in the south, constructing Buddha images and building temples. According to the text, the physical beauty and pious nature of Lady White Blood caught the attention of the king of Ayudhya. He sent the ruler of Phitsanulok and 500 ladies to receive her and escort her to the capital, presumably to make her his wife, against

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<sup>77</sup> Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>78</sup> Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, 18-19, 23.

both her will and the will of Lord Kuman. When she reached Ayudhya, the king “found he could not consummate his union with her because the supernatural power of the royal child in her womb blazed forth.” After Lady White Blood erected a temple in honor of her newborn son, the king asked to adopt her child as his royal heir to Ayudhya, and then allowed her to return to her husband.<sup>79</sup>

The only example of a non-benevolent Buddhist queen in mainland Southeast Asian chronicles appears to be a woman known simply as Maha Thewi, or “Great Queen.” The late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries saw Buddhism begin to flourish in Laos. In 1428, the king of Lan Xang, Lan Kham Daeng, died, and his kingdom plummeted into a succession crisis. The deceased king’s oldest son, Phommathat, was crowned, but was a mere puppet under the authority of Maha Thewi. She waged a bloody campaign to maintain her power, killing Phommathat and later assassinating a succession of kings.<sup>80</sup> Her tyrannical reign ended when the Council of Nobles ousted her and tied the queen and her lover to rocks on a river bank, leaving them to die. Stuart-Fox argues that this negative portrayal of Lan Xang’s first and only female sovereign, who like Chamadewi and Chamari ruled without the counterpart of a legitimate king, was a message that women should not intrude into the male-dominated realm of politics.<sup>81</sup>

There was also a powerful female sovereign in pre-modern Burma who apparently ruled without a king. After King Razadarit of Pegu died in 1453, his daughter Shinsawbu rose to the throne “by general consent”.<sup>82</sup> Her reign is apparently the only instance when a

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<sup>79</sup> Gesick, *Lady White Blood*, 86.

<sup>80</sup> Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom*, 61.

<sup>81</sup> Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom*, 62-63.

<sup>82</sup> G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 Marcy, 1824, the beginning of the English Conquest* (London: Cass, 1967), 117.

woman ruled a major state in Burma, and she is remembered as a gracious and kind ruler who brought peace during her reign.<sup>83</sup> There appears to be some scholarly disagreement as to how many years she remained queen—Harvey states that she ruled for seven years<sup>84</sup> while U Lu Pe Win states that she held power for 19 years.<sup>85</sup> By her own free will, she abdicated the throne so that she could devote more time to religious and spiritual endeavors. She spent her remaining years in Rangoon, and made significant additions to the famous Shwedagon pagoda. She reportedly beat out her own weight in gold and used it to gild the dome. Win argues that she and her son-in-law “worked together to bring about a renaissance in Mon Buddhism as well as the unification of the various sects of Mon monks”.<sup>86</sup> They sought to purify Theravada Buddhism, and asked members of the sangha to participate in new ordination ceremonies. Shinsawbu and her son-in-law are also known for their religious inscriptions, which they usually wrote in both Mon and Pali.<sup>87</sup> At the age of 78, she requested that her bed be placed where she could rest her eyes on the Shwedagon pagoda as she died.<sup>88</sup> Scholars have noted that Shinsawbu is an anomaly as the only female to rule over Burma. However, perhaps more information on female sovereignty in Burma will come to light as the field of gender studies in Southeast Asia continues to expand and as Burma becomes more accessible to researchers.

Other than Chamari and Chamadewi, there are two other

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Harvey, *History of Burma*, 118.

<sup>85</sup> U Lu Pe Win, “The Jatakas in Burma,” *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum* 23(1966): 104.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Win, “The Jatakas in Burma,” 105.

<sup>88</sup> Harvey, *History of Burma*, 118.

recorded examples of northern Thai queens who ruled without the presence of a king. Shortly after the death of King Tilokaraj, Lanna entered a period of decline. A series of three kings rose and were either expelled or executed before Chiang Mai descended into riot and chaos. In 1545 the ministers invited Phra Nang Chiraprapa, the daughter of the previous king who had been executed for insanity, to ascend the throne temporarily until the former king's nephew arrived from Luang Phrabang in Lan Xang. Interestingly, Phra Nang Chiraprapa was crowned the fifteenth *king* of Lanna. However, she only reigned for one year before Phra Chai Chesatha arrived to claim his birthright to the throne.<sup>89</sup> While Chiraprapa was the sovereign, it is clear that she was merely used as an interim leader during a male sovereign's absence.

Visuttidevi ruled as regent in Lanna during Burmese rule. In 1558, King Bayinnaung of Burma invaded Lanna from the north, and the Lanna king was eventually captured and brought to Pegu in 1564.<sup>90</sup> Bayinnaung then named Visuttidevi, a Lanna royal, the queen regent of Lanna.<sup>91</sup> There is very little information about Queen Visuttidevi available in English, so the argument for the “unique” qualities of northern Thai queens will focus on the tales of Chamari and Chamadewi. However, it is fascinating that the Burmese king selected a woman to lead Lanna during this tumultuous time, particularly as he regarded Chiang Mai to be the most important area

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<sup>89</sup> Phaisal Lekuthai, “Discussion Paper No. 168: Lanna Culture and Social Development: A Case Study of Chiangmai Province in Northern Thailand” (Nagoya University, 2008), 29 and 32.

<sup>90</sup> Harvey, *History of Burma*, 168.

<sup>91</sup> “Lanna,” last modified July 27, 2012, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanna#cite\\_note-hy-3-48-2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanna#cite_note-hy-3-48-2). So far, only one source appears to discuss Queen Visuttidevi and it is a Burmese document: Hmannan Yazawin. 1-3 (2003 ed.). Yangon: Ministry of Information, Myanmar. 1829.

of his realm.<sup>92</sup> Visuttidevi's story, as it unfolds in scholarship to come, will likely contribute to the existing pattern of the strength and independence of northern Thai queens.

### **A New Vision: The Two Camas and Female Sovereignty in Northern Thailand**

*Even when the focus is on men's affairs, there is a persistent female presence. Women emerge as progenitors of a prestigious dynasty, nubs of a diplomatic alliance, or catalysts for some great conflict, while objects associated with them have survived as symbols of personal status and residues of life histories.*<sup>93</sup>

While there are many versions of the Chamadewi Chronicle, both oral and written, I will primarily use Swearer and Sommai's translation of Bodhiramsi's text as a basis for analysis and comparison with the story of Chamaridewi. Bodhiramsi was a monk who lived at the beginning of the "Golden Age" of Buddhism in Lan Na and compiled chronicles from vernacular stories that were circulating during his time.<sup>94</sup> He edited the various versions of the stories and translated them into Pali, endeavoring to elevate the language of the stories.<sup>95</sup> Swearer describes the Chamadewi Chronicle as "a loose narrative in a rather florid style".<sup>96</sup>

The chronicle of Chamadewi begins with the Buddha in his enlightened state predicting to the Mon people that one of his relics

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<sup>92</sup> Harvey, *History of Burma*, 171.

<sup>93</sup> Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, 165.

<sup>94</sup> This Golden Age lasted from the fifteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth century, and was an era of political expansion as well as a time of thriving Buddhist cultural production (Treesahakiat 2011: 32).

<sup>95</sup> Veidlinger notes that, unfortunately for his cause, Bodhiramsi made frequent grammatical errors when he wrote in Pali (Veidlinger 2006: 51).

<sup>96</sup> Donald Swearer, *Wat Haripunjaya* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), 3.

will appear in a future northern kingdom called Haripunchaya.<sup>97</sup> Years later, the sages Vasudeva and Sukkadanta feel compelled to fulfill the Buddha's prophecy and build a great city in the shape of a conch shell. They press a shell into the ground and the impression magically expands and outlines where the city walls should appear.<sup>98</sup> The sages build the city using their supernatural powers and then debate over where to find an appropriate leader for their new kingdom. The population of the north had been born from animal footprints, and the two sages agree that the local people are not cultivated enough to govern themselves. Sukkadanta suggests that they summon the daughter of the king of Lavo, Chamadewi, to be the queen of Haripunchaya, as she is "a serious observer of the precepts" and "beautiful in all respects." The king of Lavo complies and sends Chamadewi, who is three months pregnant, to the north along with 500 men and 500 monks. Seven days after arriving in Haripunchaya, Chamadewi gives birth to twin boys, Mahayasa and Anantayasa. After seven years, Mahayasa is crowned king. Chamadewi acquires "incomparable" merit by her good deeds, so

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<sup>97</sup> Donald K. Swearer and Sommai Premchit, *The Legend of Queen Cama: Bodhiramsi's Camadevivamsa, A Translation and Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 37-40. The Mon people of the Dvaravati civilization are believed to have formed the basis of Buddhist culture in what is now central and northeastern Thailand between the sixth and ninth centuries. Archeological discoveries have uncovered inscriptions in the Mon language as well as a wide distribution of stone Buddha images. These discoveries indicate that the Mon had an extensive overland trade route and were "an extensive, populous, and prosperous Buddhist civilization" (Wyatt 2003, 19-20).

<sup>98</sup> Given the emphasis on the "mandala" structure in the literature on pre-modern Southeast Asia, it is noteworthy that the sages built their city in the shape of a conch. The word "mandala" comes from Sanskrit and came to be used by 20<sup>th</sup> century historians as a way of avoiding the word "state." In a mandala formation the polity "was defined by its center rather than its boundaries" (Dellios 2003, 1).

much so that the gods send her a large elephant for protection.<sup>99</sup>

When the boys are five years old, the king of Milakkha, Vilanga,<sup>100</sup> decides to attack Haripunjaya with 80,000 soldiers. Mahayasa and Anantayasa and their army ultimately win the battle with the help of their mother's auspicious elephant. In order to secure a peaceful future, Chamadewi agrees to marry her twin sons to Vilanga's twin daughters.<sup>101</sup> She eventually crowns Mahayasa as king of Haripunjaya and makes Anantayasa the king of Khelanga, or modern-day Lampang. At Anantayasa's request, Chamadewi joins him in Khelanga where together they build many temples and monasteries. After some years, Chamadewi falls ill, and returns to Haripunjaya to die. Her sons preserve her relics after her cremation.<sup>102</sup>

However, Chamadewi's tale is more commonly recounted in its humorous and often bawdy oral forms, some of which draw upon versions from other texts such as the *Tamnan Mu'ang Lamphun*, *Tamnan Nang Jam Thewi*, and *Tamnan Mulasasana*. In some of these versions, Vilanga demands the beautiful Chamadewi's hand in marriage. She does not want to marry him, and in response to his ardent pursuit she sets a seemingly impossible task before him. She says that she will wed Vilanga only if he can throw a spear from the top of Doi Suthep into the walls of Haripunjaya within three attempts. This is no simple feat, as Haripunjaya, or modern-day Lamphun, is about 40 kilometers from Doi Suthep. After his first attempt, Vilanga's spear lands shockingly close to Haripunjaya. Chamadewi fears that success is within Vilanga's reach, and decides

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<sup>99</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 49-65.

<sup>100</sup> The king of the Lawa in the Chamadewi story is known by several versions of this name, including Tilanga, Wilanka, Milakkharaja, and Malanka.

<sup>101</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 72-73.

<sup>102</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 85-98.

to make a hat out of her undergarments and offer it to him as a gift of admiration. Thrilled that Chamadewi seems to be showing encouragement, he puts on the hat. His second spear lands far short of Haripunjaya's walls. On the third try, Vilanga's throw is so weak that the wind catches the spear and turns it back against him, driving it into his heart.<sup>103</sup>

Queen Chamadewi is a clear example of how “heroines from the past re-emerge in the present” and have the potential to wield influence in the lives of contemporary men and women.<sup>104</sup> In recent years, Chamadewi's story has become increasingly popular and a cult has developed around her statue in Lamphun.<sup>105</sup> In the 1990s, a television personality named Duangchiwan Komonsen became a spirit medium for Chamadewi, and she still enjoys widespread fame in northern and central Thailand.<sup>106</sup> A monument to Chamadewi has recently been erected in the Nong Dok public park of Lamphun and now draws swarms of pilgrims daily. Chamadewi is also becoming a figure in the entertainment industry. The Thai production company Oriental Eyes has recently released a preview for a film entitled *Phra Nang Chamadewi: Legend of the Queen*, which is due for release in 2012 and stars the king's eldest daughter, Princess Ubolratana, as the famed ruler of Lamphun.<sup>107</sup> Some critics of Thai politics have stated

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<sup>103</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 22-24.

<sup>104</sup> Falk, *Making Fields*, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 26-27.

<sup>106</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 27; Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 183. King Vilanga is also sometimes invoked by northern spirit mediums. For example, the people of Chom Tong who claim to be descended from the Lua people have been reported to often invoke his spirit during their rituals (Svetamra 2011, 159).

<sup>107</sup> “Oriental Eyes Co., Ltd. – THE LEGEND OF THE QUEEN,  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOyHBjodSzI>

that the film will most certainly amount to royalist propaganda thinly veiled in the glitz and special effects of a high-budget action flick.<sup>108</sup>

While the legend of Chamadewi is commonly passed down orally, it is also preserved in texts such as the *Camadevivamsa* allowing populations in various regions of Thailand and the world access to the story. Another important way in which stories are communicated is through temple artwork. Many scholars have noted the importance of temples as meetings places for communities of all sizes in Buddhist Southeast Asia, which means that the likelihood of relaying the stories to a large audience is high. However, some murals and paintings in the temples of Thailand are not necessarily meant to be seen or read. Luke Schmidt notes that murals within the *vihara* of Buddhist temples are often there not for didactic purposes, but rather to “saturate the monastic building with the presence of the Buddha and Buddhas of the past, which contributes to the monastery’s power and creates a sacred landscape”.<sup>109</sup> One can assume, however, that Chamari’s paintings are most certainly intended for didactic purposes. The text is written using Standard Thai, with the exception of a few

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<sup>108</sup> Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Princess Ubolratana in Queen Jamadevi,” *New Mandala* (January 26, 2012), <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2012/01/26/princess-ubolratana-in-queen-jamadevi/>. Film can have a surprisingly broad political impact. Since the 1990s, several Thai productions have led to diplomatic incidents, particularly films emphasizing historical events. A well-known example is the 2002 period drama *Suriyothai*, which was supposedly inspired by a dream of Queen Sirikit. In the film, the Burmese were portrayed as ruthless “marauders.” A Burmese academic, Ma Thin Win, wrote a series of articles in *The New Light of Myanmar* which criticized the sixteenth century Ayutthayan king, Naresuan, who is depicted in the film. Afterwards, the Thai army radio stations broadcasted “a barrage of anti-Burmese commentary, even accusing the regime of slandering the Thai monarchy” (Jory 2003).

<sup>109</sup> Luke Schmidt, “Initial Findings on Wat Suthat: Presence, Power, and Merit-Making in the Vihara Murals and Inscriptions,” *Religion Compass* 4 (2010): 589.

Northern Thai phrases and some royal language. The paintings are displayed along a four-sided wall, and from the photos I gauge that there are no other objects obscuring the view of the text.

According to the text below each painting, Queen Chamari hailed from somewhere north of Luang Phrabang. Her people are referred to as the Yonok and they are attacked by a group of Chinese soldiers and forced to flee south.<sup>110</sup> In an attempt to stabilize their community once more, her father, Chao Kampira, founds the city of Luang Phrabang where he builds many Buddhist temples.<sup>111</sup> The Chinese eventually find them and sack Luang Phrabang, and Chamari's father urges her to flee south with their people.<sup>112</sup> Supported by her two male attendants, Chamari leads the Yonok out of the grasp of the Chinese army and together they trek south through the mountains in search of an auspicious location to found a kingdom. Chamari's elephant eventually discovers a large termite mound, and after seeing a mysterious orb glowing above it one night, Chamari decides to build their city there and call it "Li".<sup>113</sup> During Chamari's reign, the people of Li are happy, and both Buddhism and business flourish.<sup>114</sup> After Chamari passes away, Li falls to the army of Sukhothai in a violent war.<sup>115</sup> Li and the charred remains of the temples are deserted and its people are taken captive by Sukhothai.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Painting #2.

<sup>111</sup> Paintings #3,4.

<sup>112</sup> Paintings #6, 7.

<sup>113</sup> Paintings #34-42.

<sup>114</sup> Paintings #45-47.

<sup>115</sup> Paintings #61-73.

<sup>116</sup> Paintings #74-75.

### **The Two Camas: Motherhood and Resistance**

A comparison of important differences in the storylines demonstrates conclusively that Bodhiramsi's Chamadewi and Amphur Li's Chamari are not the same woman. There are, however, some significant thematic similarities suggesting that the role of queens in northern Thailand deviates from the set of characteristics that are demonstrated by Buddhist queens in other parts of Southeast Asia and in India. In contrast with Strong's theory of queenship, which he does not limit to a specific world region, Chamari and Chamadewi do not have husbands. It would be interesting to explore how many kings rule without the support of queens—Strong says, after all, that even the most powerful kings such as Asoka needed the partnership of a queen to maintain legitimacy.

One of the most obvious differences between the two stories is that Chamadewi is a mother, while Chamari has no children. The difference is striking because “the dominant image of woman in the popular texts of Buddhist culture of the rural peoples in northern and northeastern Thailand is that of woman as mother”.<sup>117</sup> Andaya has argued that one of the reasons why elderly women were respected among peoples throughout Southeast Asia is that they “had confronted the very real possibility of a premature death every time (they) became pregnant.” If a woman died during childbirth, it was often believed that she would be reincarnated as a dissatisfied and angry spirit, and the very triumph over such threats meant that a woman's status rose with every successful birth”.<sup>118</sup>

There are also more complex and nuanced reasons for why motherhood was such a valued trait. Maternal figures are almost universally associated with kindness and generosity, especially in Southeast Asian societies where a “deep sense of child-indebtedness”

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<sup>117</sup> Keyes, “Mother or Mistress,” 227.

<sup>118</sup> Andaya, “Old Age,” 110.

courses through family relations. One frequently observes the view that an individual's greatest obligation is to one's mother because of her sacrifice in giving birth and her unselfish nurturing afterwards.<sup>119</sup> For a child to lash out against his or her mother is akin to lashing out against nature itself. This trope is demonstrated in one of the first chapters of the Chamadewi chronicle in which a mother appears before the king of the people dwelling in what is now Lamphun. She tells the king that her son brutally beats her, but the king refuses to help, saying that "A mother, when struck by her son, resonates like a bronze bell." Astonished, the woman kneels and beats the earth, calling out to Mother Earth (Mae Thorani) and all the deities to help her. Just as Thorani drowns Mara's army, so she drowns the king, his advisers, and the other unrighteous people who had agreed that a son is justified in beating his mother.<sup>120</sup>

However, the image of woman-as-mother is "not simply that of the 'natural' mother...what is marked in the texts is the relationship of woman-as-mother to that supremely cultural product, the Buddhist religion".<sup>121</sup> The importance of motherhood in this dual sense is reflected in a text that, according to Keyes, is commonly read in north and northeastern Thailand as well as Laos on a male's ordination day known as "Blessings of Ordination" (*Anisong Buat*). In this story, a couple has a son who desires nothing more than to be ordained as a novice, but his parents deny him permission, as they have never heeded the *dharmā*. The son is so despondent over their refusal that he begins to fast. The mother, pitying her starving child intensely, changes her mind. The boy proves to be an excellent and disciplined novice. One day the mother falls asleep and a servant of Lord Yama, God of the Underworld,

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<sup>119</sup> Andaya, "Old Age," 111.

<sup>120</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 44.

<sup>121</sup> Keyes, "Mother or Mistress," 227.

comes to see her. He demands that she tell him if she has made merit through virtuous deeds, to which she responds that she has not. Yama's servant throws her towards Hell. At that moment, however, an immense golden lotus appears between the mother and the flames, protecting her from harm. The servant is shocked, and asks her how a person who has no merit could evade hell. The woman responds that she herself has not offered alms nor performed meritorious acts of any sort, but that her only son has been ordained as a novice and is determined to become a monk. Upon hearing this, Yama immediately sends her back to the human world.<sup>122</sup> The *Anisong Buat* illustrates the kindness inherent in all mothers, as well as mothers' reliance on their sons to earn merit and ensure their happiness in the next life. Because women have never been permitted to become monks in Thai society, women have been "deprived of the practice that was believed to be the greatest way to alter one's balance of merit".<sup>123</sup> Women allow Buddhism to continue by giving their sons to the monkhood, hence furthering the sangha and enabling more people to preach the Buddha's teachings.

While there is no mention of Chamadewi's sons entering the monkhood, she does raise them to be Buddhist and pays respect to the monks alongside them.<sup>124</sup> By the time she passes away, she has established a lineage that will allow Buddhism to flourish for hundreds of years in northern Thailand, right up to the present day.

Unlike Chamadewi, Chamari is apparently unsuccessful in establishing a biological lineage. When she dies, a new king is crowned and neither the text nor the illustrations indicate whether he bears any familial relation to her.<sup>125</sup> However, while Chamari is alive

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<sup>122</sup> Keyes, "Mother or Mistress," 228-229.

<sup>123</sup> Falk, *Making Fields*, 55.

<sup>124</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 80.

<sup>125</sup> Paintings #52-54.

she is attentive to the sangha and founds several temples. In fact, the inspiration for constructing Wat Ha Duang came from an auspicious dream that Chamari has after her city is built:

One night, Phra Nang dreamed that there was a translucent sphere floating from the Great Termite Mound to the area east of Wiang Wang. It floated back and forth five times. Therefore they built a temple in the city area and the name of the temple was.../ Wat Phra That Ha Duang.<sup>126</sup>

Chamadewi, however, is a strong maternal figure in both a biological and metaphorical sense, giving birth to twin boys and founding a lasting lineage. After her five-year-old sons return victorious from the war against the Lawa, she breastfeeds them immediately.<sup>127</sup> This image forges a connection between benevolent motherhood and the success of Buddhist kingdoms, as her sons were fighting against a non-Buddhist ethnic group. After she crowns them kings of their own kingdoms, they continue to seek her support and advice until she dies.<sup>128</sup> Swearer and Sommai link Chamadewi's fertility with the proliferation of the Buddhist religion. In the Chronicle of Chamadewi, the designation for Haripunchaya's geographical location relies on the appearance of a relic of the Buddha. Just as Chamadewi procreates her royal lineage biologically, the Buddha generates his religion through promises of bodily relics or footprints.<sup>129</sup>

Another fascinating difference between the two stories is embedded in the identities of the enemies in each account. In Chamadewi's story, the enemies are the members of a mountain-

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<sup>126</sup> Painting #44.

<sup>127</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of the Queen*, 67-69.

<sup>128</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of the Queen*, 89-93.

<sup>129</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of the Queen*, 10.

dwelling ethnic minority in the north—the Lawa and their king, Vilanga. According to Swearer:

Above all else, this history narrates the creation of civilization...in the midst of a non- civilization (i.e., forest-dwelling hill tribes). The fundamental polarity of these mythic-legends is, therefore, one between town or city and village or tribe....Chamadewi personifies the advanced or Muang culture of Lopburi adumbrated in the stylized lists of professionals in her retinue. She stands in stark contrast to the rustic attributes of those whom she has come to govern symbolized in the Chamadewi Chronicle by the children in the footprints of the forest animals.<sup>130</sup>

When Chamadewi wages war against the Lawa to protect her new kingdom of Haripunjaya, she is not only representing the people of Haripunjaya but also the Buddhist civilization of the southern lands from whence she came, a civilization that ultimately triumphs. One of the striking aspects of Chamari's chronicle is the portrayal of Sukhothai in relation to Li. The king of Sukhothai and Sri Satchanalai is portrayed as greedy and opportunistic, wanting to plunder Li for its human and material wealth.<sup>131</sup> The soldiers of Sukhothai are merciless murderers and rapists who burn down Buddhist temples and brutally decapitate local monks:

After winning the war, the ruler of Sri Sachanalai provided liquor for his soldiers. They drank it and then happened to see groups of captive women. The soldiers seized and raped them. Whoever resisted was killed and discarded. They then burned the homes until they were completely razed. They carried off everything. The ruler of Sri Sachanalai ordered his soldiers to burn the temples and chedis after ordering them to ruthlessly kill and cut off the heads of the monks and go around disgracing them as

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<sup>130</sup> Swearer, *Wat Haripunjaya*, 17.

<sup>131</sup> Painting #55.

the ruler stood there ordering the soldiers to help each other find a lot of firewood and bring it to burn the chedi and take the gold.<sup>132</sup>

In addition to this fairly explicit text, the visual aspects of these scenes are quite violent. In one battle scene, a female Yonok warrior is viciously stabbed in the back by a mounted soldier. Nearby, a decapitated body leaks blood into the dirt. In the background, the enemies wave the heads of the dead on long poles like banners, and a naked child mourns his dead mother.<sup>133</sup>

This portrayal of Sukhothai is dramatically distinct from the nationalistic narrative of Sukhothai and King Ramkhamhaeng. The modern Chakri kings of Thailand have claimed a seamless lineage from Ramkhamhaeng, particularly since the early twentieth century when King Vajiravudh and Prince Damrong designated Sukhothai as “the first capital of the Thai”.<sup>134</sup> In her book *Intellectual Might and National Myth* (2003), Mukhom Wongthes discusses the Chakris’ “curious attempt to link their genealogical line with the Sukhothai dynasty”.<sup>135</sup> She focuses on Inscription One, the stele that many have used as proof to demonstrate that Ramkhamhaeng was the creator of the first “Thai” alphabet. The Chakris have cited the continuity of the monarchy since Sukhothai as an explanation for their right and ability to rule.<sup>136</sup> The military regime of Plaek Phibunsongkhram in post-

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<sup>132</sup> Paintings #73, 74.

<sup>133</sup> Painting #72.

<sup>134</sup> Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 73.

<sup>135</sup> Mukhom Wongthes, *Intellectual Might and National Myth: A Forensic Investigation of the Ram Khamhaeng Controversy in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Matichon Public Co., Ltd., 2003), 16.

<sup>136</sup> Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 278.

absolutist Thailand also elaborated on the rhetoric of Sukhothai and a glorious, albeit inaccurate, national history.<sup>137</sup> However, it was not until the advent of King Mongkut (Rama IV) that the historiographic focus shifted from Ayutthaya to Sukhothai. Mongkut is said to have found Inscription One while on a pilgrimage to Sukhothai in 1833. Many of the scholars that Mukhom discusses argue that Inscription One was actually fabricated, probably by Mongkut himself. Mongkut also “discovered” Ramkhamhaeng’s “seat of justice” among the ruins, which he brought with him to Bangkok. This throne remains the coronation stone for all Thai kings.<sup>138</sup>

The paintings in Li raise questions regarding identity as represented through manifestations of local history versus the national identity that is perpetuated by Bangkok. Chamari’s story is not contesting the importance of monarchy, but it does demonstrate a sentiment of contested belonging to normative Thai identity via its portrayal of Sukhothai. As previously stated, while Chamadewi refuses to marry Vilanka, she marries her twin boys to his twin daughters, and in doing so, forges a lineage of kings. The lineage also fuses an enduring bond between the two societies, between the center and the north. This bond, this symbol of unity, is not present in Chamari’s tale. Though Lamphun claims Chamadewi as a regional heroine, her story could support a more nationalistic viewpoint in that Chamadewi unites the center with the north. Chamari’s story does not contribute to a nationalistic narrative, as she brings Buddhism from the northern hinterlands rather than the “civilized” south.

There are other Southeast Asian examples of female historical figures and deities who are strategically located on the fringes of the polity. People in Vietnam have enshrined a plethora of goddesses and

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<sup>137</sup> Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 126.

<sup>138</sup> Abbot Low Moffat, *Mongkhut, the King of Siam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), 14.

female spirits, most of which are housed in places that are geographically distanced and culturally distinct from the modern-day capital. For example, a goddess named “The Lady of the Realm” is one of Vietnam’s many “border guards” in that she represents Vietnameseness or “the collective’s identity” in Vinh Te village near Cambodia—she, like many other goddesses, are on “the front line of the imaginatively threatened polity”.<sup>139</sup> Chamadewi is in this way a “border guard” of Thai-ness, an envoy from the center who instills civilized notions of religion and governance on the fringes of Siam.

Taylor also stresses that many historical writings present goddesses as symbols of freedom. Goddesses are “celebrated as signs of cultural resistance against various oppressive Confucian patriarchal overlays associated with Chinese colonial rule, feudalism....and state authority”.<sup>140</sup> This trope applies to the story of Chamari as well, as Li is far from the lowlands of Bangkok. The first paintings in the series emphasize that the Yonok love freedom and refuse to give up their freedom to the Chinese. It is not until after Chamari passes away that her people are conquered and captured as slaves by the army of Sukhothai.

### **Chamari and Chamadewi: Thematic Similarities**

There are also some noteworthy similarities between Chamari and Chamadewi. These similarities contest Strong’s pioneering though limited theory on Buddhist queenship. As mentioned earlier, queens sometimes acted as military leaders and strategists. Chamari and Chamadewi are both strong examples of this trait. Chamari leads her people out of war with the Chinese army, and with the help of her auspicious elephant, finds a haven where they can build a thriving Buddhist community. Chamari also instructs her people to plant a

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<sup>139</sup> Phillip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 51-52.

<sup>140</sup> Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise*, 251.

bamboo wall around the city of Li so that it will be invisible to outsiders.<sup>141</sup> By the time Sukhothai attacks, the wall is thick with growth and impossible to penetrate with military force. Queen Chamari is sometimes depicted in military dress. When she first appears, in the painting if not in the text, Chamari clearly has a dagger belted to her waist. Unlike the other women, she is wearing pants as well as the thick piece of cloth that is typical garb for the men in her kingdom.<sup>142</sup> Chamari also carries a long sword in a sheath strapped to her back, just like her male attendants do.<sup>143</sup> While Chamari does not engage in combat herself, the artwork suggests that she is a capable military leader.

Chamadewi is a military leader as well in that she sends her two sons into battle against the Lawa. She also serves as a peacemaker in encouraging her sons to marry the twin daughters of Vilanka, the defeated Lawa king.<sup>144</sup> Bodhiramsi writes that “the two states of Milakkha and Haripunjaya lived together in harmony and cooperation...the two kingdoms became allies and joined family lines through the intermarriage of their sons and daughters”.<sup>145</sup>

Another striking similarity between the two queens is that neither has a husband or a male co-ruler. The men who might have been influential in their lives are abandoned early on in their stories. Chamadewi leaves Lopburi without her husband, as he has become a monk<sup>146</sup> and Chamari is urged to flee Luang Phrabang by her father,

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<sup>141</sup> Painting #41.

<sup>142</sup> Painting #2.

<sup>143</sup> Painting #34.

<sup>144</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 67-74.

<sup>145</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 73.

<sup>146</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 56.

who presumably perishes in the battle with the Chinese.<sup>147</sup> Entangled in Buddhist concepts of motherhood is also the notion of the ideal wife, as briefly mentioned with reference to Asoka's queen, Asandhimitta. While male identity in Thailand is ultimately realized by celibacy within the monkhood, women have been traditionally expected to marry and have children.<sup>148</sup> In pre-modern Southeast Asia, marriage and parenthood were likely considered the most significant steps in attaining adulthood.<sup>149</sup> Though Chamadewi's potential for marriage is signified by Vilanga's proposals, she is certainly recognized as a sovereign queen who has earned great merit in this life and in previous lives.<sup>150</sup> Soon after she is consecrated queen of Haripunjaya, a host of gods deliver an elephant to protect her due to her meritorious nature.<sup>151</sup> While Chamadewi is alive, the entire kingdom "was busily engaged in constructing *kutis* and *viharas* in five thousand large and small villages," and study of the Pali

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<sup>147</sup> Painting #7. There are some unofficial accounts of Chamadewi's personal life before she travelled north. One blogger declares that Chamadewi had become pregnant due to an out-of-wedlock affair, and her father exiled her to the north instead of executing her (<http://www.bloggang.com/mainblog.php?id=1105497&month=12-11-2007&group=2&gblog=63>).

<sup>148</sup> Falk, *Making Fields*, 31.

<sup>149</sup> Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, 205. At present, scholars are noticing a decline in marriage rates in Thailand, suggesting a change in attitudes towards women and marriage. The rates of non-marriage in some large cities in Southeast Asia are among the highest in the world. More middle-class Thai women choose to stay single, as it is becoming more and more possible for women to acquire social status by selecting from an expanding range of lifestyles and careers (Falk 2007, 53).

<sup>150</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 65 and 79.

<sup>151</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 59-60, 65.

scriptures thrived.<sup>152</sup>

Similarly, Chamari does not have a husband, although the text does hint that she is particularly close to one of her male attendants, Chao Phan Mahat.<sup>153</sup> She is, like Chamadewi, a competent and meritorious religious leader and an avid supporter of the sangha.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, Chamari's merit is so great that after her death, she is reborn as a *teptida*, or goddess.<sup>155</sup>

A crucial aspect of the stories and another point of comparison is the role that relics play in the foundation of Buddhist kingdoms. The locations of Haripunjaya and Li are determined by the appearance of the Buddha's relics. According to Strong, relics may include "objects that the Buddha owned or used or with which he was closely associated" as well as "dharma relics," such as a verse, sutra, or anything that preserves and passes on the Buddha's teaching.<sup>156</sup> Though relics are often material objects, they can prompt reflection on the lives of the Buddha, narratives that are "upheld and recognized by the community".<sup>157</sup> Relics do not only incite followers to recollect events of the Buddha's life; relics also embark on their own journeys and adventures:

They travel to distant countries, to heavens and *naga* worlds.  
They help legitimate empires here on earth and they further  
spread the dharma to places that the living Buddha never visited.

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<sup>152</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 80.

<sup>153</sup> Paintings #5, 20.

<sup>154</sup> Paintings #42, 44, 45, 47.

<sup>155</sup> Painting #89.

<sup>156</sup> John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>157</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 7.

Sometimes these adventures have been foretold, predestined, by the Buddha himself; at other times they have not.<sup>158</sup>

In this way, the Buddha's biography continues on through his relics and teachings after his *parinirvana*, his death.

Relics are closely related with the stupa, or in Thai, the *chedi*. According to Swearer, the stupa became "the locus of popular piety and relic veneration of monastic establishments in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia" and "was closely associated with royal patronage of Buddhist monastic institutions".<sup>159</sup> The origin of the stupa is still debated among scholars and religious authorities. However, most agree that the construction of stupas as reliquaries was already important in the first few centuries of Buddhist history.<sup>160</sup> The stupa is often linked to Vedic stories of the creation of the universe. In one origin myth, Indra separates heaven and earth and props the sky up with a pillar, which simultaneously pegs the "primordial mound" to the floor of the "cosmic ocean." Indra's act of separating while maintaining connection between the earth and sky stabilizes the universe, creating order before the birth of humankind. The stupa, then, could originally have had much "axial-cosmogonic symbolism" if we think of it as the "peg" of Indra.<sup>161</sup>

In the *Camadevivamsa*, the Buddha flies from India to Lamphun and predicts that someday his relics will appear there.<sup>162</sup> After he collects alms from the local people, the Buddha looks for a place to set down his bowl. A slab of stone rises from the earth, and

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<sup>158</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 7-8.

<sup>159</sup> Swearer, *The Buddhist World*, 76.

<sup>160</sup> Rachele M. Scott, *Nirvana for Sale? Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakaya Temple in Contemporary Thailand* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>161</sup> Swearer, *The Buddhist World*, 77.

<sup>162</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 39.

the Buddha realizes that this is the place where his relics will appear and where the holy city of Haripunchaya will be built. Later, two sages heed the Buddha's prediction and decide to build a city around the sacred stone.<sup>163</sup> Significantly, Chamadewi's own relics were ceremoniously enshrined in a stupa which still stands today.<sup>164</sup>

Like Haripunjaya, Li is founded at a site where relics are present, although the story gives no information as to whether the Buddha predicted that they would appear there. Chamari's sacred elephant, Chang Phuang Kam, leads her people to a large termite mound that is guarded by a serpent god or *naga*. The elephant pays respects to the naga, and the entire caravan stops to stay in the area.<sup>165</sup> More auspicious events occur after the sun goes down:

...that night she (Chamari) heard the startled cries of her followers; therefore, she arose and went out. She saw a transparent sphere floating in midair, illuminating the chief termite mound that was in the middle of the others.<sup>166</sup> At dawn, Phra Nang Chamari had her followers start a fire in the area around the great termite mound to clear the land before making it the center of the city. They also had a ceremony to make an offering to the spirits and angels.<sup>167</sup>

While the Chamari text never explicitly states that the termite mound is also a reliquary for remains of the Buddha, there are many visual cues and textual clues that implicitly alert viewers that relics are present.

Although an encompassing study on the symbolism of

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<sup>163</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 52-55.

<sup>164</sup> Swearer and Sommai, *The Legend of Queen Cama*, 95-98.

<sup>165</sup> Paintings #35 and 36.

<sup>166</sup> Painting #37.

<sup>167</sup> Painting #38.

termite mounds in Southeast Asia remains to be conducted, numerous sources indicate that mounds like the one depicted in the paintings are often considered auspicious or magical in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. So far, scholars have asserted that termite mound worship stems from Vedic and Hindu practices in India. J. Donald Hughes elaborates on the concept of the “sacred grove,” defined as “segments of landscape, containing trees and other forms of life, that are protected by human societies because it is believed that to keep them undisturbed is an expression of relationship to the divine or to nature”.<sup>168</sup> Such spaces in India host local deities who have been worshipped since pre-Brahmin times, and their presence may be represented by vacant areas, stones, or termite mounds. Hughes states that Hinduism is able to “rationalize local deities as forms of the great gods and goddesses.” In other words, some Hindus localize the dogma and mythology of a world religion to fit pre-existing beliefs and practices. Therefore, the spiritual status that was once given to the symbols found in nature is now accorded to man-made structures such as temples and shrines.<sup>169</sup>

This evolution from termites to temples is quite similar to what occurs in the Chamari murals. The queen’s elephant discovers the termite mound and fans the guardian *naga* serpent with a tree branch. After the aforementioned spheres appear, Chamari burns the area around the mound in order to render it suitable for construction.<sup>170</sup> She goes on to build several temples and becomes the foremost supporter of the sangha in the community.<sup>171</sup> This architectural progression is revived when Kruba Sriwichai begins to

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<sup>168</sup> Donald J. Hughes, “Sacred Groves and Community Power,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 8 (1997), 99.

<sup>169</sup> Hughes, “Sacred Groves,” 102.

<sup>170</sup> Paintings #35-38.

<sup>171</sup> Paintings #42, 44-47.

renovate the temples in the early twentieth century after hundreds of years of abandonment.<sup>172</sup> The final painting in the series illustrates the evolution in full: a *naga* coils around a votive lamp under the termite mound. The mound is coated in three more “layers” of renovations, ending with the golden stupa that is present today.<sup>173</sup>

Researchers in Thai studies observe that the tendency to revere termite mounds and other natural elements still exists in Thailand as well as India. Michael Wright argues that Thai Buddhism has hardly replaced or destroyed the old ways. Similarly to Hughes’ observations in India, Michael Wright states that Buddhism “has destroyed little” in Thailand and rather “has adapted and preserved the pre-Buddhist earth religion to a large extent in art and in architecture, in ritual and in story”.<sup>174</sup> He describes witnessing villagers “worshipping” large termite mounds for “lottery numbers,

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<sup>172</sup> Paintings #84-88.

<sup>173</sup> Painting #91.

<sup>174</sup> Michael Wright, “Sacrifice and the Underworld: Death and Fertility in Siamese Myth and Ritual,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 78 (1990), 43.



Figure 1.1. Illustrating the evolution of the chedi at Wat Duang Diaw in Amphur Li: From termite mounds to Buddhist temples (photo by Katherine Bowie).

cures and good fortune”.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, Terweil mentions a termite mound near a popular monastery in the central Thai province of Ratburi, saying that it had garnered a widespread reputation because “its power, when properly invoked, was often used to increase luck in business”.<sup>176</sup> In his research in a Palaung village in northern Thailand, Sean Ashley mentions that the site for the shrine of the local guardian

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> B.J. Terweil, “A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35 (1976), 397.

spirit was chosen due in part to the presence of a termite mound, which reflects “the presence of powerful natural forces and spirits”.<sup>177</sup> Research suggests, then, that the reverence for visually striking natural elements that existed before Buddhism, such as termite mounds, still courses through Thai belief systems.

Like stupas, termite mounds also have a role in Vedic origin mythology in India. In the Vedas, everything in this world was thought to be contained within a “primordial rock” or “mound” before the creation. This mound is often pictured as a cave or womb that encloses all the potential of our universe.<sup>178</sup> Perhaps the analogy between the termite mound and the female womb is one reason why termite mounds in India have often been associated with village goddesses.<sup>179</sup> In India, there are folktales that describe a treasure that is guarded by a serpent hiding within the termite mound. According to legend, a jewel located in the serpent’s head releases rays creating a rainbow. If you find the end of the rainbow and dig into the nearest termite mound, you will find the serpent and his treasure. Some rural groups in central India believe that the treasure is sheep, so if “you embrace an anthill and put your ear to it, you will hear the bleating of the first lambs of the creation”.<sup>180</sup>

Scholars have established that termite mounds are often considered sacred sources of power. But how do we know that the mound in the Chamari paintings houses a relic? The clue is derived from the depiction of three creatures: a naga coiled atop the

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<sup>177</sup> Sean Ashley, “Exorcising with Buddha: Palaung Buddhism in Northern Thailand” (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2004), 27.

<sup>178</sup> John C. Irwin, “The Sacred Anthill and the Cult of the Primordial Mound,” *History of Religions* 21 (1982), 353-356.

<sup>179</sup> Irwin mentions, however, that pastoral peoples of India tend to associate the mounds with male gods (*Ibid.*).

<sup>180</sup> Irwin, “The Sacred Anthill,” 343-343.

hollowed-out mound, Chamari's elephant, and an ethereal being that we might assume to be the local spirit.

Irwin discusses how many Indian folktales depict serpents as guards who protect a "treasure" hidden within the mound. Nagas are famous for their involvement with relics<sup>181</sup> and are often depicted as "enthusiastic collectors, guardians, and worshippers of relics".<sup>182</sup> The intensity of their devotion to the Buddha is reflected in Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Lalitavistara*. After the Buddha realizes that severe fasting is not the path to enlightenment, he accepts an offering of milk rice from a laywoman named Sujata. The Buddha takes a bath in a river, and then realizes he has no place to sit while he eats. Naga maidens suddenly appear out of the earth and offer him a throne. After he finishes eating, he throws away the rice bowl and a naga king immediately snatches it, considering it an object of worship. However, Indra also wants the bowl. He takes the form of a *garuda* bird and tries to steal it from the naga. When he fails, Indra transforms back into his own form and politely asks the serpent king for the bowl, and the naga complies.<sup>183</sup> Given the sensitive and protective nature of nagas, it is understandable that Chamari's elephant pays respects before the Yonok settle in the area and construct a stupa over the mound.<sup>184</sup>

In fact, Strong suggests that a relic must first be in the care of a naga in order to be suitable for veneration. In the Theravada tradition, candidates for ordination into the sangha are called "nagas"; in order to become a monk, one must first be a naga. Potential monks are called nagas in recollection of an actual naga who transformed himself into a human because he wanted to be

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<sup>181</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 84.

<sup>182</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 67.

<sup>183</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 68.

<sup>184</sup> Painting #36.

ordained. He was soon excommunicated by the Buddha, as animals and spirits are not permitted to be ordained, nor can they attain enlightenment. Similarly, a relic must go through a rite of passage before it is enshrined, which usually includes being guarded by nagas before it is discovered.<sup>185</sup> In the Chamari paintings, the artist has hollowed out the termite mound in two of the pictures. In number 36, the inside of the mound is illuminated by a single votive lamp. In painting number 91, the naga has descended under the earth and is coiled around the lamp.<sup>186</sup> Again, much of the scholarship done on termite mounds is conducted in South Asia rather than Thailand. However, when attempting to decode local Thai lore such as the story of Chamari, it can be useful to situate the appearance of natural symbols within the larger frame of Hindu and Buddhist studies.

The second feature of the paintings that supports the argument that the termite mound shelters a relic is the presence of a royal elephant. According to Strong, “in legend and cult, Buddha relics in general, and tooth relics in particular, are often connected to elephants”.<sup>187</sup> Like serpent deities, elephants are known to harbor a “legendary devotion” towards relics and are often depicted as beings who “naturally” know how to venerate them. Additionally, elephants are an emblem of kingship and royalty.<sup>188</sup> In Buddhist folklore, elephants that are tamed by a monk or novice must soon after be abandoned by them. In the case of ordination, an elephant is a symbol of high social status that must be given up. This trope is

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<sup>185</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 168-169.

<sup>186</sup> While there does not appear to be much research regarding the symbolism of votive lamps and Buddhism, Wright mentions that they were used in forms of “primitive worship” (Wright 2004, 43). Whether this statement refers to pre-Buddhist practices or Buddhist rituals is unclear.

<sup>187</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 183.

<sup>188</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 183-184.

illustrated clearly in the Vessantara Jataka in which the Prince Vessantara gives away his rain-making elephant. This sacrifice symbolizes his “own forced abandonment of his kingdom and occasions his own wandering forth into a homeless state”.<sup>189</sup>

The third clue that suggests that relics are the determining factor in where Chamari decides to build her city is the depiction of the spirit that is present in several of the paintings but rarely mentioned explicitly in the text. The spirit first appears in painting 26, in which Chamari and her people are making an offering of a boar’s head to the local spirits.<sup>190</sup> The spirit’s translucent body appears behind a large tree, its hands in the prayer or “wai” pose. The spirit appears again in number 28, this time to Chamari’s elephant, who eventually leads Chamari to the termite mound. Chamari makes another offering to the spirit in painting 32, and the spirit is once more depicted listening to the people’s prayers from behind a tree.<sup>191</sup> The spirit appears for the final time in number 35. His figure is imprinted on the mound directly underneath the naga. According to Irwin, there are numerous tales in India of gods and goddesses disappearing into termite mounds, or being born from them.<sup>192</sup> In this northern Thai story, the spirit leads the elephant and subsequently the Yonok people to an auspicious location for their new kingdom. The presence of this spirit can be interpreted as

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<sup>189</sup> Irwin, “The Sacred Anthill,” 185.

<sup>190</sup> Animal sacrifices still take place in northern Thailand. For example, Chiang Mai has an annual buffalo sacrifice, and there is a yearly pig sacrifice in Lampang (Wright 2004, 49).

<sup>191</sup> Interestingly, everyone behind Chamari in this painting is a man. The figures in the background are blurred. It is easy to tell men from women in these paintings, even at a distance, because the men wear a wide cloth wrapped around their foreheads (Painting #34).

<sup>192</sup> Irwin, “The Sacred Anthill,” 64.

another illustration of how Buddhism often does not replace older supernatural beings and forms of worship but rather is adopted and adapted by local people to suit their needs and pre-existing beliefs.

While the text of the *Camadevivamsa* states that Chamadewi's ashes were enshrined in a stupa, it is not clear in the case of Chamari as to what is done with her relics after her death. The text only states that her community built a funeral pyre for her.<sup>193</sup> However, the important point is that both queens were the first sovereigns to rule over their respective kingdoms, both of which were established in close proximity to relics of the Buddha.

## Conclusions

*...all stories that recount history are complex, messy, and intensely political. They ebb and flow over time within oral traditions and in people's minds. Such stories move and change according to those who are doing the remembering and why they are telling the story.*<sup>194</sup>

As no field work is included in this essay, the story of Phra Nang Chamari remains incomplete and many questions linger. Temple paintings, such as those of Wat Duang Diaw, are influenced by any number of factors, including “the intentions and commitments of those who gave the money that maintained the artists, and the particular intentions they may have had to educate or inform those they assumed would for the next several generations be gazing upon those walls”.<sup>195</sup> Similarly, Schmidt argues that in order to understand the role of mural painting in Thailand, analyzing the motives for mural production is just as necessary as studying the depictions in the murals themselves.<sup>196</sup> The artist(s) of the Li paintings might have

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<sup>193</sup> Painting #53.

<sup>194</sup> West, *Conservation is our Government*, 125.

<sup>195</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Reading Thai Murals* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), 78.

<sup>196</sup> Schmidt, “Initial Findings,” 593.

been expressing the common values and collective memories of the entire community, or they might have been offering a more personal viewpoint of how they think Li should be represented.<sup>197</sup>

The production of paintings celebrating founding legends might also be linked to a recently rejuvenated sense of regional identity in northern Thailand. Interestingly, Rosalind Morris has observed that while today most northerners have a very strong sense of national identity, more people have “begun to espouse the nostalgic politics of Lanna regionalism,” such as local history and courtly rendition of Lanna culture. Indeed, she states that “pastness, and specifically northern pastness, has become an object of desire”.<sup>198</sup> A longing for a particular kind of past might be one of the factors that prompted the community of Li to invest time and resources into so many paintings. The desire to display this past to visitors might also contribute to this project. In one of the final paintings, the artist depicts Wat Duang Diaw as it stands presently. The chedi is covered in gold, and several lay people are gathered near the temple, taking photos and listening to a monk speak.

The representation of Li’s history through the Chamari paintings could also be a response to recent political and class conflicts. Over the past few years, sociopolitical turbulence in Thailand has erupted in the form of the Red Shirt Movement.<sup>199</sup> The

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<sup>197</sup> Wyatt, *Reading Thai Murals*, 78.

<sup>198</sup> Morris, *In the Place of Origins*, 6.

<sup>199</sup> It would be interesting to pursue the question of how common it is in Southeast Asia for people to seek protection under female figures such as goddesses and revered historical figures during times of drastic change or political decay. In Vietnam, for example, the 1990s saw a renewed fascination with goddesses. This decade was a time in which many in Vietnam felt threatened by the rapid changes that their society was facing, such as the “renovation” of the regime and “open-door” policies. In Vietnam, goddesses were seen as constant “touchstones of cultural identity (Taylor 2004, 50-51).

movement began as a protest in response to the 2006 coup which removed Thaksin Shinawatra from his office as prime minister. These protests “developed into a broader social movement” seeking more income equality and a reduction of the military’s influence in politics.<sup>200</sup> In April and May of 2010, thousands of people occupied a section of the most important commercial district of Bangkok and demanded new elections. About 90 people were killed in violent military crackdowns over the course of the protests, and hostilities still continue between the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts and the right-wing royalist Yellow Shirts.<sup>201</sup> The Red Shirts are commonly associated with the rural and urban poor, particularly in the north and northeast, while the Yellow Shirts tend to be connected with the middle and upper-middle educated classes of Bangkok.<sup>202</sup> The Chamari text could be interpreted as a northern Thai community’s assertion of distinctiveness from the wealth and corruption of central power. Sukhothai is usually discussed as an ideal kingdom, the foundation of Thai unity and benevolent monarchy. To muddy the historical image of Sukhothai as a force of terror and destruction could represent a modern-day community’s frustration with the current political situation and a government that they view as distant and un-relatable.

While the specific motivation for the production of the Chamari paintings remains to be explored, the recent appearance of her story raises an important question: as scholars slowly pull together indigenous accounts, how many other communities, particularly in northern Thailand, have origin stories that celebrate

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<sup>200</sup> Thomas Fuller, Seth Mydans, and Kirk Semple, “Violence Spreads in Thailand After Crackdown,” *The New York Times* (May 19, 2010), A1.

<sup>201</sup> “Red shirts demand amnesty,” *Bangkok Post*, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/290631/red-shirts-demand-amnesty> (April 27, 2012).

<sup>202</sup> Ungpakorn Ji Giles, “Class Struggle between the Coloured T-Shirts in Thailand,” *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 1(2009), 76-100.

meritorious women as founders and autonomous leaders in their own right? The exploration of such a question could contribute immensely to both Buddhist studies as well as the study of gender in Southeast Asia.

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