Buddhism, Kingship, and Symbols in Laos

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In the Theravada World, Buddhism has become an intrinsic part of the culture, in that it is difficult to understand the history and cultural system of such nations without understanding Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism as the traditional religion of the majority ethnic Lao people of the Lao nation has historically played a significant role in constructing the Lao society and in turn protects and ensures the continuity of Lao culture.

This paper explores the roles of Buddhist symbols and its relationship to Buddhism and Kingship (state politics). In doing so, this paper gives a concise examination of Buddhism and the Ideal Kingship in which Buddhism becomes an intricate force of secular politic in the Theravada World. In understanding the complexity of the interrelationship between Kingship and Buddhahood, it may enable us to fully recognize its influential role in the politics of Theravada nations.

In the course of Lao history, Luang Prabang and Vientiane became a symbol of power as both polities were equally legitimate in their own right because of various Buddhist symbols associated with it, namely the Pra Bang image and Pra That Luang. The Pra Bang image that once served as the palladium of the feudal Kingdom of Lan Xang Hom Khao (Million Elephant and White Parasol) and the Royal Lao Government (RLG) has continued to be the palladium and protector of the current socialist government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). In addition to the Pra Bang image, the Pra That Luang which served as the symbol of Muang Vientiane and as the national symbol of the RLG has become the national symbol that replace the hammer and sickle of the Lao PDR as Marxist ideology lost its authority. The
examination of these symbols is divided into two segments: (1) a concise review of the mythical and historical journey of the symbols; (2) an investigation of the role each symbol played in power legitimacy and the continuity of Lao Buddhism. The paper claims that Buddhist symbols has played a major role in providing political legitimacy and contributed to the continuity of Buddhism of the Old State to the New State of the Lao Nation.