

The Saint with Indra's Sword: Khrubaa Srivichai and Buddhist Millenarianism in Northern Thailand

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Millenarian movements tend to be correlated with periods of intense socio-economic upheavals.¹ Despite this pattern, scholars have been remarkably reluctant to consider the role of messianic beliefs in Buddhist societies, presuming its emphasis on nirvana inhibited millenarianism (Malalgoda 1970). Thus Yonina Talmon has asserted that an apocalyptic tradition “has not occupied an important place in Buddhism,” adding, “Religions with a radical other-worldly orientation which puts all of the emphasis on the hereafter or a purely spiritual and totally non-terrestrial salvation do not give rise to the vision of the kingdom of God on earth” (1962: 139). Similarly, Peter Worsley states, “Orthodox Buddhism had little attraction for those who looked for an activist solution to man’s problems, though it offered a solution in terms of resignation and escape.” He concludes, “Unlike the Judeo-Christian and Islamic faiths, which promised salvation to those who led the good life on this earth, Buddhism offered no such hope to the many” (1968: 223; see also Cohn 1970: 42–43). As recently as 1999, in their article in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding write that eschatological notions were “developed most fully in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scripture” (1999: 286).

Against this prevailing bias, a growing literature is revealing the presence of millenarian movements in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist

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¹ For example, Adas 1979; Burrige 1969; Cohn 1961; Cohn 1970; Harkin 2004; Hobsbawn 1965; Jackson 1988; Kehoe 2006; Lanternari 1963; Lepowsky 2004; Linton 1943; Mooney 1965; Stewart and Strathern 2004; Wallace 1956; Worsley 1968.

societies, these movements typically led by monks or former monks who are considered incarnations of the coming Maitreya Buddha. As Steven Collins writes in his study of Buddhist texts, the idea of future Buddhas “is intrinsic to the logic of Buddhism,” concluding that Maitreya is a “feature of the imaginaire which envisions a universe in which Buddhas repeatedly arise to bring ultimate salvation” (1998: 351, 394). Charles Keyes summarizes his early review of millenarianism in the Theravada Buddhist societies of mainland Southeast Asia: “Not only can Buddhist beliefs be given millennial interpretations, they have in fact been thus interpreted in a number of Theravada Buddhist societies” (1977: 302). He points out that in times of crisis one would expect the villagers of mainland Southeast Asia to turn to Buddhism as “an ideological response formulated in the cultural terms with which that population is most familiar”(ibid.). Parallel arguments have been made regarding Mahayana Buddhist societies in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam (e.g., Naquin 1976; Ooms 1993; Ownby 1999; Salemink 1994; Sponberg and Hardacre 1988; Tai 1983).²

Khruubaa Srivichai (1878–1938) is the most famous monk in all of northern Thailand. Today, Srivichai is most commonly referred to as *tonbun haeng laannaa* or the “saint” of the Lanna region (currently known as northern Thailand).³ During the 1920s and 1930s, he helped to build or restore over a hundred temples throughout the region.⁴ His statues, photographs, and amulets can be found at Buddhist temples and homes throughout the north. Tourists around the globe flock to his shrine at the foot of the famous temple of Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai province; Thailand’s current prime minister, the northern-born Yingluck Shinawatra, began her successful 2011 national electoral campaign at the popular shrine. The rise of her brother Taksin Shinawatra (2001–2006) to the prime ministership was attributed to his act of having made merit with Srivichai in a previous life. In contemporary Thai society the term *tonbun* has become an apolitical accolade for one who exemplifies worldly detachment. Such saintly monks, both in life and afterward, serve their Thai devotees as inspirations to lead a virtuous life and as “fields of merit” who provide opportunities for laity to make merit to improve their own karmic standing, gain protection, win lottery numbers,

² Collins makes a befuddling argument that the millenarian movements of mainland Southeast Asia are modern and therefore not Buddhist (1998: 405). Some Buddhologists also distinguish between messianic leaders claiming to be Maitreya and those claiming to be his precursors (e.g., Collins 1998: 395–408; Keyes 1977: 289–90; see also Wilson 1997: 352). However I consider both as variations that are integrated within the same belief nexus.

³ See Faa Wongmahaa 1976–1977; Sommai Premchit 2002; Sophaa Chanamuul 1991. Srivichai is variously called a *tonbun*, *nak bun*, *ton wiset*, *phuu wiset*, an *arahant*, and a *phothisat* (Boddhisatva). For simplicity, I use *tonbun*. Srivichai’s name is also transliterated as Siwichai, Sriwichai and Srivijaya, but Srivichai seems to have become the most common and so I use that. *Khruubaa* (also transliterated as *kruba* or *khruuba*) is a northern honorific for a revered monk.

⁴ See Salisbury 2005: 64–67 for a list; and Easum 2013 for a discussion of sacred space.



IMAGE 1. Modern worshippers at Khruubaa Srivichai's shrine in the upper floor of the museum at Wat Baan Pang, Lamphun. The tigers represent the year of his birth. Author's photo.

pass school examination, obtain job promotions, succeed in business, and enjoy a range of other blessings. As Stanley Tambiah explains, "The more saintly the monk is, the more virtues he is believed to possess, and the more sacred powers he is held to radiate" (1987: 112).

However, a *tonbun* can also be understood as a precursor or incarnation of the future Buddha, Maitreya (also called Phra Sri Ariya). Believed to be residing in the Tusita Heaven, Maitreya will descend to earth when the dharma (moral principles) has been forgotten, as a savior who will reestablish Buddhist teachings and a just moral order. Despite his depoliticized saintly image of today, Srivichai spent his life at the center of political controversy. He lived during the period when the formerly independent kingdoms of the Lanna region were being incorporated under Siamese (central Thai) administrative control.⁵ No other person symbolized northern resistance more completely. Srivichai was detained under temple arrest on multiple occasions, stripped of his ecclesiastical titles, and sent to Bangkok in 1920 and 1935 for investigation by

⁵ The country today known as Thailand, in particular its central region, was called Siam until 1939, and again from 1945–1949.

the Supreme Patriarch. By the time of his second detention in Bangkok in 1935, conflicts in the north had become so intense that “the independent monks of the north had openly severed connections with their ecclesiastical superiors and declared Phra Sri Vijaya to be their leader” (Thompson 1967 [1941]: 642).⁶ Only after he finally agreed to sign a document promising to abide by the rules of the central Thai *sangha* (monastic order) was Srivichai allowed to return to the north. His signature marks the uneasy incorporation of the northern region into the central Thai state.

Explicit evidence of messianism associated with Srivichai exists in the historical record. During his first trip to Bangkok, he was denounced as a rebel and a “traitor to his religion and his King” (*Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* [henceforth *BT*] 7 June 1920). Although Srivichai faced eight charges in 1920, scholarly attention has focused on the seven charges of ecclesiastical disobedience, particularly the charge of conducting unauthorized ordination ceremonies.⁷ Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the eighth charge—catalyzing a rumor that “a sword with a gold scabbard fell from the sky on to the altar at Phra Sri Vijai’s Wat [temple], and that he retained possession of this sword” (*BT* 28 July 1920; see also Sangaa Suphaaphaa 1956: 85; Sommai Premchit 2002: 19).

To a modern audience, this charge perhaps seems too silly to be given credence, but newspaper accounts of the day tell us that the rumors surrounding this sword were taken very seriously. Known in Thai as the Srikanchai sword, it is associated with the god Indra.⁸ The god Indra is the head of the Theravada Buddhist cosmological pantheon. Associated with thunder and rain, Indra is often depicted holding a *vajra* representing thunderbolts and the Srikanchai sword symbolizing the victory of righteousness over oppression. To charge Srivichai with possession of Indra’s sword was, in effect, to accuse him of spearheading a millenarian revolt. The Supreme Patriarch makes the underlying messianic link explicit in his report: “It seems that the suspicion of the officials was that Phra Sri Vijai was a ‘*phi bun*’ [“holy ghost”; i.e., a messianic leader],⁹ but as they could not make any definite charge on that score,

⁶ Over three hundred monks and even more novices residing in some sixty northern temples left the order, some disrobing voluntarily in protest and some forced to do so by police (see Sangaa Suphaaphaa 1956: 99, 260–82; Sommai Premchit 2002: 40).

⁷ Scholars have suggested these various charges resulted from the institution of the 1902 Sangha Act. Elsewhere I have argued that Srivichai’s primary conflict was not caused by changes within the monastic hierarchy but rather with the secular state’s right to conscript monks and novices into the military (Bowie n.d.a).

⁸ Pointed at a patient or placed in water that the patient either drinks or bathes in, the Srikanchai sword is also believed to cure illnesses.

⁹ Siamese court officials mockingly called *phuumiibun* leaders *phi bun*, creating an oxymoron, “since spirits occupy their place on the moral hierarchy because they lack, rather than ‘have’ merit (*bun*)” (Keyes 1989: 129).



IMAGE 2. Indra with his sword, floating in the heavens. Painting located on interior wall of Khru-baa Srivichai's mausoleum at Wat Baan Pang, Lamphun. Author's photo.

they found other alleged offences to put together to afford some reason for punishing him, and to get him put in confinement"¹⁰ (*BT* 28 July 1920).

¹⁰ The possible treasonous aura was strengthened by the fact that King Rama VI's emblem was the *vajra* of Indra.

Despite the associations of *tonbun* with Maitreya and the Srikanchai sword with the fight against injustice, existing scholarship has failed to explicitly consider the possibility of a linkage between Srivichai and millenarianism.¹¹ He has been glossed as a “cosmocrater” (Swearer 1981: 54); a “savior saint” who works for “spiritual and social betterment” (Keyes 1982: 173); a “field of merit” or “one who is so endowed with merit himself that he can, through compassion towards others, serve as a means for them also to acquire merit” (ibid.: 149); “an activist charismatic monk” (Tambiah 1984: 302); and most recently, a proponent of “Buddhist revivalism” or one who “initiates the construction of religious monuments to provide others with the opportunity to make merit” (Cohen 2001: 228).¹² Stanley J. Tambiah suggests, “We must in part at least necessarily associate [Srivichai] with the phenomenon of millennial Buddhism” (1984: 306), but provides no reasoning in support of this association.

In this essay I argue that Srivichai should be contextualized not merely as an apolitical saintly *tonbun* but as an incarnation of Maitreya embedded in a millenarian social movement. Restoring the full political resonances of *tonbun* helps to explain why Srivichai was feared by the state and revered by the populace. Because he faced the de facto charge of treason in 1920, I will focus on the preceding decade. Drawing upon studies that have shown the intersection of messianic worldviews and political economy cross-culturally, I combine evidence from oral histories, newspaper accounts, archival documents, and secondary sources. The essay is divided into three sections, each of which provides circumstantial evidence in support of interpreting the rumors regarding Srivichai’s possession of the Srikanchai sword as indicative of a broader millenarian movement in northern Thailand. I begin by describing supernatural tropes of Srivichai’s mytho-biography indicative of *tonbun* generally, noting his extraordinary popular support. I then review the evidence of widespread Buddhist millenarian beliefs in mainland Southeast Asia and in northern Thailand, highlighting the theme of apocalyptic omens made manifest in the natural world. I conclude by presenting evidence of a political economy in the period between 1910–1920 that was marked by dearth, disease, natural disasters, and moral decline, and suggest that these were understood as harbingers of the coming apocalypse. Thus, given the circulation of millenarian beliefs and the dire social conditions of this stormy decade, I argue that the northern populace had reason to search for a savior and the central Thai court had reason to fear them uniting behind the thunderous might of Indra’s sword.

¹¹ A major biography of Srivichai was published in 1956 by Sangaa Suphaaphaa, a northerner, in the context of Buddhism’s 2500th anniversary (1956: 152). Another account was written by the northerner Sanguan Chotisukharat in 1963. Faa Wongmahaa (1976–1977) and Singkha Waanasai (2010) are less hagiographical accounts. Other accounts are largely derived from these.

¹² Cohen provides Maitreyan links with other northern holy men (2001: 227).

THE SACRED BIOGRAPHY: MILLENARIAN TROPES

Of Indra and Thunder

Like any sacred biography (Reynolds and Capps 1976; Schober 2002), Srivichai's life story is a blend of myth and history, each relevant and impossible to fully unravel. Srivichai did not claim to be a *tonbun*. In his response to the investigatory committee in Bangkok, he "said he did not have a sword and did not boast that he had such a possession. It was a rumour created by other people." Nonetheless, he was accused of being "the reason of the rumour commencing, and it led the ratsadon [people] to like and respect him when they would not have done so if there had not been such a rumour" (BT 28 July 1920; for more on the role of rumors in millenarian movements, see Stewart and Strathern 2004). Srivichai would have been guilty of an infringement of monastic regulations if he had bragged about owning this sword. However, the committee concluded, "There was no evidence to show that Phra Sri Vijai had boasted that he possessed this sword.... Other people had started the rumour and it is not right to blame Phra Sri Vijai for the rumour being started" (BT 28 July 1920).

Although found innocent of the charge of claiming to possess Indra's sword, Srivichai's mytho-biography redounds with cosmological portents which echo those of messianic leaders elsewhere in the region. Saints are generally known for their supernatural powers (*iddhi*), generally thought to be the result of meditative practice. According to Buddhist textual sources, supernatural powers include having a divine ear (*huu thip*), having a divine eye (*taa thip*), and having the abilities to read minds, assume various forms, and recollect past lives (see Tambiah 1987: 115–16). Srivichai was believed to have had at least the first three of these powers and more.

The "official" biographies of Srivichai generally include four supernatural events. The first surrounds his birth. He was born on 11 June 1878, in Baan Pang village in what is today called Tambon Srivichai, in Amphur Lii in the northern province of Lamphun. Accounts say that he was born in the midst of a thunderstorm at the beginning of the rainy season; consequently Srivichai was named "Inthafyan," "one whom Indra created." The circumstances of his birth resonated with the local belief that the god Indra heralds the births of *tonbun* with natural signs such as earthquakes or thunderstorms (Sommai Premchit 2002: 7; Faa Wongmahaa 1976–1977: 170). In his childhood he is portrayed as demonstrating compassion through his refusal to kill animals.¹³ After

¹³ Srivichai is often portrayed as part Karen and born into poverty. According to Poh Noi Sri, a villager of Baan Pang (age ninety-five in 2011) who knew Srivichai and his family, his father was not Karen, but instead a buffalo trader from Saraphi district in Chiang Mai who became village head of Baan Pang and later caretaker of the royal elephants. Srivichai's mother was the daughter of a local leader with a royal title (Thao Chaiyaa). Thus Srivichai was the son of an elite village

ordaining as a novice, he subsequently ordained as a monk in 1899, with the ordained name Srivichai (“Victory”). After an initial interest in black magic, he traveled to study meditation (Faa Wongmahaa 1976–1977: 172; Sommai Premchit 2002: 11; Salisbury 2005: 4). When his village abbot died (ca. 1902), Srivichai returned to his village.

Two further miraculous events are commonly mentioned as having occurred while Srivichai served as village abbot and subsequently as ecclesiastical subdistrict head (*hua muat*). When Srivichai wanted to build a forest temple on the hilltop above the village, the local guardian spirits revealed their approval through a dream Srivichai had of a full moon with rays emerging through clouds (Faa Wongmahaa 1976–1977: 172; Sommai Premchit 2002: 11; Salisbury 2005: 5).¹⁴ In another event, a mound of cloth appeared from nowhere in the middle of the temple, preceded by a loud explosion that brought the villagers running (Salisbury 2005: 6–7; see also Singkha Waanasai 2010: 17).

These formal biographies go on to describe Srivichai in ways that parallel many other saints, as virtuous and detached. He was a strict vegetarian who only ate once a day and fasted on holy days. He did not chew betel or tobacco. He was known for his generosity and lack of interest in material gain, distributing his offerings of gold, money, and other gifts among the poor and his fellow monks (Sommai Premchit 2002: 16–17). He did not speak ill of others, look down on anyone, or defer to those with high status (*ibid.*). Srivichai was admired for treating laity and novices fairly and for not abusing power like many abbots of the day did (*ibid.*: 13). A *Bangkok Times* author wrote, “He is a most conscientious priest, and never shows anger or greed. He is very popular, and people liked to tamboon [make merit] with him, so that things were always being brought to him to make merit. Of all that he retained nothing, passing everything on to be distributed among other people” (*BT* 7 June 1920).

The final supernatural event that is mentioned in his more formal biographies is his death. Accounts highlight that he foresaw his death and died after pouring symbolic water onto the ground saying, “I hand over the entire monastery to the care of the sangha.” As the monks surrounding him chanted while he took his last breaths on 20 February 1938 (also the year of the tiger), “The sky grew dark and was covered by dark clouds.... Then torrents of rain came down as if to bathe Khruba Srivichai. This can be regarded as another miraculous event” (Salisbury 2005: 57).

family. The closest Karen village is some 8 kilometers away. See Singkha 2010, for another variation.

¹⁴ Faa Wongmahaa mentions other incidents, for example, his followers seeing a flock of crows attacking a magical bird (*nok insii*) without success, until the bird flies into the heavens. Srivichai was believed to be the magical bird (1976–1977: 175).

However, villagers describe his mystical powers as well as these supernatural events. Villagers repeatedly told me that Srivichai, like other saints, was able to see and hear long distances (*huu thip, taa thip*) and read minds (Sommai Premchit 2002: 19–20; Cohen 2001: 229). Sommai tells the story of an old man who had brought Srivichai a dish made of plant vines (*phak tamlyng*) as an offering. Srivichai refused the old man's offering because he said it was not pure. The old man was stunned and hurried home to inspect his vines, and sure enough, the plants' roots were in his neighbor's land (2002: 19–20). On another occasion, a cruel man who had beaten his parents brought Srivichai an offering of coconuts and various fruits. But Srivichai refused to accept it, saying that the insides of the coconuts were filled with blood. The man went home and split the coconuts open and found their insides were indeed rotten and oozing with a red liquid the color of blood (*ibid.*: 20).

By far the most common description of Srivichai among villagers I interviewed was that he did not get wet in the rain or hot in the sun (see also Salisbury 2005: 24; Kwanchewan 2002: 4; see also 1988).¹⁵ Other common rumors relate that Srivichai was able to walk on water and that he walked in the air about a meter above the ground (2 *sohk*) (Salisbury 2005: 24; Kwanchewan 2002: 4). My favorite story involves an account of his detention at Wat Sridonchai in Chiang Mai before he was sent to Bangkok. The temple's abbot assigned people "to watch him and to see what arts he employed to make people go mad about him. But they could find no arts to report" (*BT* 7 June 1920). One villager I interviewed described this study of Srivichai's arts more colorfully, explaining that the abbot was jealous of Srivichai and claimed that he was not a real *tonbun*. To prove his argument, the abbot had his subordinates inspect Srivichai's toilet. "But," this villager explained, "There was never any sign of use. He never needed to shit (*khii*). He was a real *tonbun*" (Oral History MR388; see also MR 370).

Extraordinary Popularity

Prevailing explanations of Srivichai's popularity have thus far rested on descriptions such as "his reputation for being endowed with supernatural powers" (Keyes 1971: 557), or "his personal charisma" (Ishii 1986: 77). The tropes of Srivichai's mytho-biography—ranging from his birth in the midst of Indra's thunderstorm and his strict practice of Buddhism to his magical powers and mystical lack of feces—resonate with general signs of saints. Yet many monks have developed such reputations, but do not incur charges of treason or draw such impassioned followings. By 1920, Srivichai was

¹⁵ Noted northern Buddhist scholar Singkha Waanasai was a novice with Srivichai and once asked Srivichai if the rumors were true that he did not get wet in the rain. Srivichai apparently replied, "Of course. I (*khaa*) have an umbrella!" (2010).

attracting huge crowds wherever he went, and rumors of his magical protective powers (*waetmon khathaa*) mushroomed. People spread turmeric on his feet and saved the white cloth on which he had walked for worship and protection (Sommai Premchit 2002: 19). There were so many people coming to pay him respect that every day was “like a temple festival” (ibid.: 16).

By 1920, a newspaper correspondent concluded that Srivichai had the support of “80 per cent of the people” (*BT* 7 June 1920). During his detention in Chiang Mai prior to being sent to Bangkok, “there were nearly a thousand and on hardly any day was there less than a hundred to see him” (ibid.). His worshippers came from throughout the northern region and included a wide range of ethnicities. As the correspondent recorded, “All the time Indians, Burmese, Kariens, Tongsu, Ngiew, and the town people of Lampoun [Lamphun], Lampang, Tak, Maehongson, Muang Pai, Muang Fang, Muang Prayow, and Chieng Kaow went to him to make merit” (ibid.). His return from Bangkok in July 1920 involved various stops. The same newspaper detailed how he was met at each location by throngs of admirers laden with offerings:

Phra Sri Vijai reached Lampang on the 22nd July. Some 800 people were waiting to receive him, and asked him to stay a night there. To make merit many people gave him money and presents. He left again by train on the 24th.... When he arrived at Pang Yang, some hundreds of carriers were waiting to carry him. At Mae Ta some thousands of people had assembled to receive him, and he stayed one night there. The people followed him to Lampoun. Seventeen wagon-loads [*sic*] of boiled rice in 7,000 packages, called “*khao hor*,” were sent by sympathisers to distribute to the people following the priest from Mae Ta to Doi Tee. Thousands of people were waiting for him at Doi Tee, where he arrived at about 11 a.m. The pathway to the *sala* [pavilion] was covered with white cloth; some took their head-coverings to spread on the ground for him to step on; and some lay down on the path that this revered priest might step on their backs. To make merit, many people gave him presents, and he blessed them (*BT* 18 Aug. 1920).

At the main temple in the city of Lamphun the crowd is said to have numbered over fifteen thousand people.¹⁶

MILLENARIANISM AND APOCALYPTIC OMENS

Eschatological belief in the future coming of the Maitreya Buddha was widespread throughout mainland Southeast Asia. Stories about the Maitreya Buddha, conceptualized as living in the Tusita Heaven awaiting his earthly rebirth, were popularized by monks and troubadours who drew upon Buddhist texts such as the Traiphum and Phra Malai (Brereton 1995: 10; Chatthip 1984: 126; Collins 1998; Keyes 1977: 295; Reynolds and Reynolds 1982). The Phra

¹⁶ Upon his return from Bangkok in May 1935, he was welcomed by “more than eight thousand people” (Thompson 1967 [1941]: 643).



IMAGE 3. Photo of Khruubaa Srivichai taken at age forty-six while restoring temples in Muang District, Phayao province. Displayed with Thai national flags at Wat Baan Pang, Lamphun. Author's photo.

Malai sermons have long formed an integral part of recitations of the Vessantara Jataka, the popular story of Gautama Buddha's penultimate life in which he perfected the virtue of generosity (see Bowie *n.d.b*; Jory 2002; Lefferts and Cate 2012). These sermons and ballads describe the deterioration of Buddhism,

the decrease in life expectancy and the decline of social order prior to Maitreya's utopian reign (Brereton 1995: 10–11). These messianic beliefs fueled millenarian movements throughout mainland Southeast Asia. The northern Thai concept of “*tonbun*” had equivalents in “*phuu mii bun*” (*phou mi boun*) or “*phuu viset*” in northeastern Thailand and Laos, “*setkya-min*” in Burma, and “*qanak man puny*” or “*nak sel*” in Cambodia. In this section, I will summarize the evidence for millenarianism in the region and in northern Thailand itself, noting the use of supernatural omens in the natural world as tropes for the looming apocalypse.

In the Surrounding Region

Messianic movements in central Thailand can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. After the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, dissident monks, wearing reddish-brown robes symbolically associated with Maitreya, seized political power in Sawangburi and Uttaradit (Tambiah 1976: 184).¹⁷ Shortly after ascending to the throne in 1782, Rama I issued a decree against instigators of revolt claiming supernatural powers (*ibid.*: 185). Nonetheless, holy men still arose in the central region; as late as 1909, the *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* reported that a *phuu viset* monk was arrested in Petchaburi for providing invulnerability tattoos (*BT* 16 Mar. 1909).¹⁸ The promise of the 1933 National Economic Policy plan to be “in fulfillment of the Buddhist prophecy to be found to the religion of Araya Mettaya” indicates the population's widespread familiarity with this utopian trope (Landon 1939: 292–93). In 1973, Keyes came across several pamphlets describing an ongoing Maitreya cult in the Bangkok region (1977: 290).

Northeastern Thailand has a long history of revolts led by “holy men.” These uprisings so concerned the central Thai court that they were included as a justification for the Military Conscription Act of 1905. In 1850 a “shaman” fomented an uprising in Sisakhet (Gunn 1990: 110). Participants in an 1895 revolt in Khon Kaen province used magical rituals to render themselves invulnerable (Chatthip 1984: 116). The most famous of the northeastern revolts are the “Holy Men Revolts” of 1901–1902, led by Ong Man; his followers observed Buddhist precepts and dressed in white clothing (Chatthip 1984; see also Gunn 1990: 112–14; Tej 1967; Keyes 1977; Murdoch 1974). In 1902, in Sakon Nakhon province, a former monk re-ordained and declared himself to be an incarnation of Vishnu. He only ate one meal a day, of only vegetables, and “he dressed in white” (Chatthip 1984: 118; Keyes 1977: 297–98). In 1924, three monks and a novice in Loei province predicted the birth of Maitreya in their village; the villagers were asked to observe the precepts, pray

¹⁷ Taksin (1734–1782), the founder of the Bangkok dynasty, appears to have laid claim to a form of sainthood (see Tambiah 1976: 184).

¹⁸ In southern Thailand a *phuu viset* caused “trouble in Patani” (*BT* 21 Nov 1911).

constantly, give alms, respect their parents, and eat only fruit, sesame, beans, and rice (Chatthip 1984: 119). In 1936, and as late as 1959, revolts occurred based on the imminent arrival of Maitreya in Mahasarakham, Kalasin, and Ubon Ratchathani (Chatthip 1984: 120–21; for accounts in the 1970s see Keyes 1977: 290).

Messianic revolts also took place in Laos and Cambodia. In 1820 a Lao monk named Ay Sa claiming supernatural powers led an uprising of more than six thousand people to attack the town of Champasak; a local chronicle records, “our sufferings will be no more” (Chatthip 1984: 114–15; Baird 2007). Another resistance movement led by “*phou mi boun*” in Laos took place from 1895–1899. A *phuu viset* named Ong Keo (Bac My) led a holy man uprising in Laos in 1901–1902. He was proficient in Pali, and had “prior experience of the study of Buddhist texts” (Gunn 1990: 110; see also Gunn 1985; *BT* 14 Jan. 1902; 23 May 1902). One of Ong Keo’s supporters, Kommadan, claimed to be the “bodhisattva in the form of a future Buddha” as late as 1933–1935 (Gunn 1990: 123–25 for fuller listings of messianic revolts, and see p. 102; see also Baird 2013; Gay 2002; Gunn 1988). The French colonial regime in Cambodia was so concerned with millenarianism that it regulated travel by monks and monitored them for seditious activities (Harris 2005: 131–35; Chandler 1996: 64–75; Hansen 2007).

In Burmese folklore, the Setkya-min are precursors of Maitreya, who are sent by the god Indra when, “The natural order of things, the ethical and social order, shall have been reversed; bribery and corruption shall be reigning” (Sarkisyanz 1965: 153). In 1897, a former Buddhist monk who was “prophesied to be the Setkya Min” and his followers attacked the British-occupied palace of Mandalay (*ibid.*: 106). A newspaper reported the sentencing of a Setkya-min in 1902 (*BT* 3 May 1902). In 1927, Mendelson wrote, “Traditionalist rebellions of the setkyamin type arose in Tavoy, Shwebo, and Pegu” (1975: 205). The 1930 revolt led by Saya San is another famous example (Cady 1958: 309–21; Mendelson 1975: 208; Sarkisyanz 1965: 160–65; Spiro 1970: 172). During Burma’s independence movement, both nationalists and Marxists appealed to utopian prophecies of prosperity (Sarkisyanz 1965: 179). Melford Spiro remarked that during the course of his fieldwork in 1961–1962 many Burmese peasants “firmly believed in the coming of a Future King,” adding, “indeed most of my informants believed he would appear in their own lifetime” (1970: 172–73; see also Mendelson 1975: 332–33).

Despite regional variation, the overall themes of Maitreya’s precursors were strikingly similar. These movements were typified by a “[b]elief in imminent catastrophes to be followed by a new society of material abundance” and an appeal to followers “to observe the moral precepts strictly, to meditate, and to chant Buddhist texts” in order to be saved (Chatthip 1984: 123; see also Murdoch 1974; Hansen 2007: 59). The leaders were often monks or former

monks who were generally thought to possess supernatural powers and were often vegetarians who only ate one meal per day. As surviving nineteenth-century Khmer texts reveal, “natural” disasters were considered harbingers of the impending millennium, signs of supernatural discontent with earthly immorality.¹⁹ Thus, as a result of “an unrighteous ruler whose errors of judgment engender the proliferation of poverty, violence, and immoral behavior” (Hansen 2007: 55–56), “[t]he celestial deity of rain does not permit rain to fall anywhere, causing drought, causing the grass to wither and the rice to die on the stalks. Because the people of the earthly realm were inclined away from the Dhamma, the deity of the wind did not permit the fruits of food to ripen” (ibid.: 61).

In Northern Thailand

There is evidence of widespread belief in the Maitreya Buddha and the presence of millenarian leaders in northern Thailand in archeological records, palm leaf manuscripts, missionary accounts, and oral histories. As early as 1426, an inscription written by a king from Nan (now a province in northern Thailand) states that “he devoutly wishes to behold the Lord Sri Ariya” (Griswold and Prasert 1969: 105, quoted in Brereton 1995: 64). Bonnie Brereton observes, “Similar expressions of this belief frequently occur in dedicatory inscriptions on the bases of Buddha images and in the colophons of manuscripts presented to monasteries as acts of merit” (ibid.). In 1728 in Lampang, Thep Singh proclaimed himself a *tonbun* and led a peasant revolt against repressive Burmese rule (Anan 1984: 40–41).

William Dodd, a Presbyterian missionary who lived in northern Thailand from 1886–1919, noted the presence of “many prophecies” that “cluster around The Coming One, Ariya Metteya” (1923: 334). Another missionary in northern Thailand, Hugh Taylor, wrote, “The devout Buddhist, when he bows before Buddha’s image, prays the prayer, ‘Oh, that I may live to see the face of Pra Allenyamathai [Ariya Maitreya] the Savior’” (n.d.: 121). Taylor cites northern prophecies such as, “In that day the slave will ride horseback down the street ahead of his master” (ibid.). One old man was perplexed by a bread loaf on Taylor’s breakfast table. When Taylor explained, “It is our rice,” the man “humbly crawled to the table, keeping his head below the bread, and with his right hand supported at the wrist by the left hand, took the loaf from the plate and, holding it high above his head, reverently exclaimed, ‘Great Buddha! Thy slave’s eyes have seen it!’” Taylor continues, “He then told me one of the signs of Pra Allenyamathai’s coming was that a grain of rice

¹⁹ Keyes documented the circulation of four similar texts in northeastern Thailand in the late nineteenth century (1977: 295). These texts depict “a savior-ruler figure who will arrive to save the good and pure from the social chaos wrought in large part by the corruption and moral excesses of those in power” (Hansen 2007: 60).

should be as large as a coconut" (ibid.: 134–35). Ironically, several early Christian converts "worshipped Jesus under the name of their promised Buddha Metraya" (McGilvary 1912: 171; Taylor n.d.: 122–24, 132, 134; Dodd 1923: 334).²⁰

Indeed, in northern Thailand the Maitreya Buddha appears to have been accorded more legitimacy than the historical Gautama Buddha. Several villagers I interviewed in the 1980s in Chiang Mai province told me the story of the stolen lotus. One villager (HD#38) asked me if I knew whether Gautama or Ariya Maitreya was the older brother and the differences in the poses of their respective Buddha images. He then told me the following story:

The god Phrayar Indra told both Gautama and Ariya to plant lotuses. Whosever lotus flowered first would be the first to be born on earth. Ariya's lotus opened first, but Gautama stole it and showed it to Indra. Consequently Gautama was born first. The people here on earth thought that Ariya was born, and so they made Buddha figures in his image, with both palms together. But when they realized this Buddha was not Ariya, they hid their images in the forest and caves. And that is why the Gautama image is in the incomplete meditation position; he is afraid of being caught out for his theft of the lotus.²¹

Intriguingly, a version of this same story was recorded by Hugh Taylor in Lampang province in the nineteenth century, suggesting its former popularity (n.d.: 120–21; see also Landon 1939: 186). The story was also known among the Karen followers of Khruubaa Khao Pi, a disciple of Srivichai, who explained that because of Gautama's jealousy and deceit, society fell into moral decline and chaos (Cohen 2001: 232; Kwanchewan 1988: 118). This subversive story was represented iconographically in lotus imagery, as well as in Buddha images.²²

During the 1980s, villagers in Chiang Mai spoke to me in still secretive, hushed tones about a hidden messianic text. As one elderly villager explained, the government had forbidden people to discuss this subject (HD#39). Although none of them had seen the text, they recalled predictions such as, "There will be roads, but no one will walk on them; there will be rice, but no one will pound it"; and "that a red dust (*fun daeng*) will enter everyone's homes, that fire will burn their roofs, and that the religion will decline." In addition, one villager recalled, "If war comes from the easterly direction, there will be no way to stop it; the fighting will come up through Ayuthaya, Lampang, Lamphun, Chiang Mai, and Fang and come down via Doi Kham

²⁰ McCarthy notes an anti-royalist cult in Fang that may have had Maitreyan links (1900: 127).

²¹ This pose is often considered as "the Buddha calling the earth to witness." LeMay describes it as "Buddha Frightened by the Burmans" (Phra Sadung Man) (1986 [1926]: 119). Bock provides yet another interpretation (1986 [1884]: 282–83).

²² Hallett notes that the wooden implements in several important temples were "for use of expectant Buddhas" (1890: 322).

to the area near the Chiang Mai airport. Then Phrayar Tham [Maitreya] will come” (HD#38).²³

Subsequent dissertation research by Betty Nguyen has uncovered many of these texts. As she explains, “According to these texts, the future breakdown of the cosmo-social order will entail kings oppressing the populace, rampant unrestrained warfare, crop failure, natural disasters, famine, and the unleashing of evil spirits” (2011: 1). These texts emphasize the importance of “the practice of giving of dana, keeping the moral precepts, listening to dhamma sermons, having loving-kindness (*metta*), and meditation (*phavana*)” to protect oneself from impending misfortunes (*ibid.*: 2). The authors exhort “the people to heed the prophecy and remain faithful for only the pure will be saved” (*ibid.*: 6). According to one text:

Beginning in the year *sanga*, there is a great natural disaster. It is called ‘*chatue*’ in the Ho language and in our Thai language ‘earthquake.’ Mountains will crumble, rain will fall in torrents, the sky will thunder. In the year *met*, countless numbers of people will die. So it will come to pass. In the year *san*, there will be powerful storms causing flooding everywhere.... In the year *sed*, there will be ominous events (*ubat*): tigers, not roaring, will come to live in the middle of the city, creating a troublesome situation. So it will be. In the year of *kay*, the city will be flooded. In the year of *cay*, chaos erupts (*kolahon*) causing enemies to arise. In the villages and cities, people stab one another to death. People will flee from the villages and cities. In the year *kot*, a *cao tonbun* will be born (Tamnan Ho 1895, translation in Nguyen 2011: 6; see also Nguyen 2014).

DEARTH, DISLOCATION, DISEASE, AND OTHER DISASTER TROPES

“Natural” Catastrophes

The widespread familiarity of the northern region with millenarian tropes suggests that changes in the political economy would have been interpreted as cosmological omens of the looming apocalypse. As Charles Keyes has observed elsewhere in Thailand, among the immediate causes of millennial movements are “natural catastrophes that play havoc with the productive system (crop failures, epidemics that decimate the animal work force, etc.) or cut a wide swath in human populations (plagues, etc.)” (1977: 284). Although the nineteenth century was generally difficult for the Thai peasantry (e.g., Bowie 1988; 1992), as this section will show, the decade of the 1910s prior to Srivichai’s detention in Bangkok was characterized by particularly significant famine, social upheaval, disease, and other disasters of both natural and social causes. These hardships would have been consistent with apocalyptic omens portending the advent of Maitreya.

Famine. The early twentieth century was characterized by widespread reports of famine throughout the northern provinces of Phrae, Lampang,

²³ In 1968, a district abbot in Mae Sariang showed Keyes a tract that told of the imminent coming of Maitreya (1977: 290).

Lamphun, and Chiang Mai. Although famine conditions appear to have occurred with more regularity in Lampang and Phrae,²⁴ a newspaper report in 1907 indicates that there were widespread shortages throughout the northern region due to a general shortage of rainfall: "Owing to the unusually scanty rainfall in 1906 last year's paddy crop in the Lakhon [Lampang] district proved an almost total failure.... The scarcity of paddy would, at present, however, appear to be general in the North of Siam, and it has not been possible, as in the case of other years, to meet the exceptional deficiency in the Lakhon district by imports from outside sources" (*BT* 18 Sept. 1907).

In 1910 there are again reports of "a great deal of suffering throughout the country on account of the scarcity of rice" (*BT* 16 Oct. 1910). In Chiang Rai, a correspondent records "misfortune in several recent harvests" and that, "famine has become a reality," explaining, "[The people] do not have food to enable them to carry on till the harvest. Many were living on roots and green herbs, and others were going heavily into debt" (*BT* 7 Nov. 1910; and see 16 Nov. 1910). Even though the following year saw a good harvest in Chiang Rai, the reporter comments, "It will take years for these people to get even," since "most of them mortgaged their crop in order to get food during the famine months last year" and "were forced to pay back from four to six baskets of paddy for each basket advanced to them" (*BT* 4 Feb. 1911).

The following year a poor harvest "estimated at one seventh of a good harvest" was reported again in Lampang (*BT* 14 Feb. 1912; 8 Apr. 1912). There, the correspondent writes, "The shortage of the past three seasons is being felt very keenly and one is constantly besieged by those in unfortunate circumstances to purchase jewellery and heirlooms at sacrifice prices, in order to tide over until the harvest. The usurer is plying his trade with an unsympathetic hand" (*BT* 18 Aug. 1912).²⁵

Lampang villagers went to Lamphun in search of rice, but, "Many of the people contract fever while away from home, and not a few succumb.... This is due perhaps to the exhausted condition of the people" (*BT* 26 Aug. 1912). Another report stated "On one occasion recently between four and five hundred persons went over from Lakawn [Lampang] to buy in Chiengmai [Chiang Mai], walking to and fro" (*BT* 5 Sept. 1912). One long-time resident commented that Lampang had been in a "semi-famine condition year after year," noting that while wages had doubled over the period, the cost of rice had increased about four-fold (*BT* 17 Sept.

²⁴ Famine also occurred in Lampang in 1891–1892 (Taylor n.d.: 114; Bowie 1998: 470; Stringer's 1891 report in *BT* 24 July 1912; and 1 Aug. 1912).

²⁵ Interest rates were high. The report continues, "The present rate is one rupee for every rupee lent, and a bucket of rice as interest on each rupee. The end of the rice harvest is the final date. In case the crop fails of course the lender takes the field. This amounts to practically one hundred percent interest for seven to eight months" (*BT* 18 Aug. 1912).

1912).²⁶ The December 1912 harvest was “not more than half what the amount of ground actually planted should normally produce,” and the Lampang writer stated, “There is bound to be a shortage of rice in the province due in part to the present year’s shortage but also to the fact that there has not been a full crop for the past four years” (*BT* 7 Jan. 1913). Also in Phrae, a reporter told of the “almost famine-like condition of the past two years due to lack of water” (*BT* 13 Feb. 1913).²⁷

Lampang’s 1913 rice crop was also poor, with “an extremely small proportion of the total area planted; and of that which is planted, an extremely large proportion suffering from disease” (*BT* 1 Oct. 1913; 2 Oct. 1913).²⁸ By April 1914, famine was widespread. As the *Laos News* described the situation: “The famine in Lakawn this year is most distressing... The people in many places are living only on roots, which they obtain in the forest. In their weakened condition they are victims of fever and many die” (quoted in *BT* 2 July 1914). Although Chiang Mai Valley generally produced sufficient rice, the 1911 crop there was described as “a 66 per cent crop,” and British Vice Consul Gorton noted “great scarcity” in Maehongsorn, Lampang, Phrae, and Nan as well (*BT* 2 Oct. 1912). In June 1913, “anxiety for the next rice crop” was reported, with the writer adding, “though after three successive semi-dry years apprehension is easily aroused” (*BT* ca. 16 June 1913). The drought was followed by floods which in turn caused intensive damage such that the Chiang Mai correspondent writes: “The poorer classes are beginning to suffer already. We hear of many families who eke out their scanty supplies of rice by mixing with bananas, greens, leaves, roots and any edible thing that they can gather. This will probably mean an increase of fever and other sickness through the community” (*BT* ca. 16 Oct. 1913). British Consul W.A.R. Wood reported, “The crop for 1913 was very poor in the Chiengmai province” (*BT* 23 Sept. 1915).

A rare report from Lamphun itself, in 1913, states, “For several years past, the local rainfall has been exceedingly scanty, and the plain east of the city which is dependent upon that gives little prospect of a crop. Much of it has absolutely no water” (*BT* 4 Sept. 1913). The drought was followed by flooding such that, although there was a good crop on the rice plains around the city of Lamphun, “In other areas prospects are not so good, and east of the city there

²⁶ He writes, “When I arrived in Lakawn, sixteen years ago, paddy could be had for from 30 to 40 rupees per one-hundred ‘mun’ baskets. The last I bought this year cost 130 rupees per one hundred baskets, and at present it cannot be had for that price” (*BT* 17 Sept. 1912).

²⁷ In Muang Phrae poor rice harvests were reported in Feb 1912 (*BT* 2 Feb. 1912).

²⁸ Such shortages also affected Buddhist monks. As one report in September 1913 notes, “It is officially reported from Nakon Lampang that in the neighbourhood of Wat Rai Sroi, in the Amphur district of Muang Long, it is so difficult to obtain food that it had become impossible for the monks and novices to stay there. The Nai Amphur has therefore made a collection and presented five coyan of paddy and four tang of rice (valued at Tes 500) to the monks and novices so that they may continue to remain in the district” (*BT* ca. 16 Sept. 1913).

will be very little rice" (*BT* ca. 16 Oct. 1913). Some sense of the comparative hardship in Lamphun is revealed by the fact that the paddy land tax for year 1912 was remitted on over 799 *rai* in Chiang Mai, and 934 *rai* in Phrae due to poor harvests, but on 4,130 *rai* in Lamphun (*BT* 17 Nov. 1913).²⁹ Conditions then seem to have improved, but a report in October 1915 again records that east of Lamphun city, "All the rice that is dependent on local rains is in bad shape. Much of it has not even been planted, and the same is true of some parts of the Me Ta valley" (*BT* 30 Nov. 1915). Another account in September 1918 suggests continuing hardships in Lamphun, the correspondent having met a family en route to Chiang Rai "as there was not enough water down there to permit the ploughing of the fields" (*BT* 3 Sept. 1918).³⁰

Dislocation. Many families responded to rice shortages by migrating. In 1912, the Lampang correspondent reported, "Many have already moved to other provinces, principally to Chieng Rai" (*BT* 18 Aug. 1912). This same year, many in Chiang Mai also moved: "I have heard a lot about the wholesale removal of households from some parts of Monthon Phayab, as Quang [district] Mee Wang, Quang Metachang, Quang Chieng Dao, etc. Some of the people have gone over to the Burma side, others have only changed into another Quang. The reason is partly scarcity of rice or good land for cultivation, partly the taxes and the forced labour, making of roads, etc." (*BT* 26 Aug. 1912).

A correspondent in Chiang Rai confirms the migration of many local families (*BT* ca. 8 Oct. 1912; 18 Dec. 1912). A January 1914 report from Chiang Mai records a crop shortage, and that "migration to the North has already commenced and is expected to assume unusually large proportions this season" (*BT* 24 Jan. 1914). Another report in Chiang Rai in November 1915 observes that the annual influx had begun, explaining, "From Chieng Mai, Lampang, Pre [Phrae] and Nan, as well as from the countries to the north, Chieng Rai receives every year a large addition to its population" (*BT* 15 Nov. 1915). Migrants also came from Lamphun (*BT* 3 Sept. 1918).

Epidemics. Several diseases reached epidemic proportions during the decade of Srivichai's rise to local fame. Some of these diseases were longstanding, but resulted in greater numbers of fatalities due to growing malnutrition; others were introduced or spread by increased inter-regional contact. Malaria was

²⁹ A *rai* of land equals 1600 square meters.

³⁰ Adding to the problem, the central plains, too, were reporting rice shortages following several years of poor harvests there. Landowners in Bangkok were buying rice to send to their tenants. In addition, monks were "receiving less than they did" (*BT* 23–24 July 1912). According to an August account, "Very few people in Bangkok can afford to give alms every morning to the monks.... The cessation of almsgiving is not due to any great slackness of religious principles on the part of the people ... but is wholly owing to the present high price of rice. Formerly the palace ladies used to send out alms every morning sufficient for nearly four hundred priests. This has also ceased..." (*BT* 3 Aug. 1912).

endemic, but became epidemic throughout the north in 1911–1912.³¹ Longtime missionaries Dr. and Mrs. McGilvary remarked that in more than fifty years in Thailand they had seen only one equivalent epidemic of malaria. The *Laos News* quoted Dr. McKean, a respected missionary physician: “There comes a wave every twenty-five to thirty years which leaves in its wake ‘ruined households, deserted villages and great distress among those who survive its ravages’”; the article continues, “The present is believed to be as virulent as the epidemic of some thirty years ago” (McKean in *Lao News*, quoted in *BT* 21 Nov. 1912). In Lampang in May 1911, there were “176 deaths in a district with 200 houses” (*BT* 8 Apr. 1912). By May of 1912, a correspondent could write, “Thousands have died during the past eighteen months” (*BT* ca. May 1912). Rev Howard Campbell recorded that Chiang Mai was also experiencing “an epidemic of malarial fever much worse than any I have ever seen before.” He wrote, “In many cases all the members of a household suffer at the same time, so that there is no one to do the work or to care for the sick. In the district in which I have been labouring during the past six weeks scarcely a day has passed without one or more funerals near my headquarters. One day there were four deaths within easy shouting distance” (*BT* 24 May 1911). Those with malaria who did not die were often left as invalids, which in turn diminished village resources and government revenues: “For more than two years past a Malarial epidemic has slowly moved over these Northern Districts and the result has been not only a great many deaths, but also a great deal of invalidism. This of course has greatly hindered the people in farming and in all the ordinary avocations of life. All this reacts upon the Government in diminishing the amount of poll tax as well as revenues from other sources. It hinders also in the building of roads and in other improvements” (*BT* 24 Feb. 1913).

This same period also saw an epidemic of smallpox. A report of an outbreak in February 1912 stated, “For more than twenty years, there has been no similar outbreak of the disease” (*BT* ca. 23 May 1912). Smallpox was understood as having traveled “northward from Bangkok via the river route from Raheng and the railway from Bangkok” (*BT* 8 Apr. 1912; 18 Apr. 1912),³² which may describe a fact, or instead reveal anti-Bangkok sentiments. Lampang was particularly hard hit. In the first week of April its correspondent records: “There are not less than thirty-five deaths each twenty-four hours on a conservative estimate in the city of Lampang alone, not to mention the out-villages where the death rate is very high” (*BT* 8 Apr. 1912). The following week, the same writer estimated, “twelve hundred deaths have resulted from the present epidemic,” and said, “Nine funerals were counted passing along

³¹ In 1917, Dr. Barnes from the Rockefeller Foundation, using enlarged spleens among children as an indication of malarial infection, found “the spleen rate ranged from 20.4 to 83.3” (*BT* 17 Aug. 1917).

³² He suggests “the disease first occurred in the barracks” (*BT* [day unknown] Apr. 1912).

one road during one single day from one section of the city only" (*BT* 13 Apr. 1912; see also 18 Aug. 1912). Nan province was also hard hit, and the correspondent there reported, "At the Governor's Palace alone there have been twenty deaths" (*BT* ca. 6 June 1912).

Vaccination campaigns introduced by Dr. McGilvary over forty years earlier helped limit the epidemic in Chiang Mai (*BT* ca. 23 May 1912; 27 May 1912). Nonetheless, "In the mountain districts where vaccination is less common there has been a large loss of life," and, the correspondent reported, "In the far distant villages trees have been felled across all roads leading into the villages to prevent the approach of visitors, who might possibly spread the disease" (*BT* ca. 23 May 1912). The Chiang Mai correspondent also noted, "In some places the epidemic is taking the hemorrhagic form, popularly known as black pox. It is needless to say that nearly all of these cases are fatal" (*BT* ca. 27 May 1912).

The northern Thai region was also hit by the global influenza epidemic of 1918, as described by the *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail's* Lampang correspondent:

The so-called Spanish fever or influenza has reached this place and is playing havoc with all classes. During this past week there were in one day at the army barracks 150 men entirely incapacitated on account of the malady, not to mention the scores of clerks, school teachers, servants of every class.... Some whole families, father, mother and children have succumbed, dying within a few hours of each other. No doubt the great prevalence of malarial germs in the system of almost every person here in the North has weakened their vitality to such a point that they are unable to resist the attack of the new enemy (*BT* 31 Oct. 1918).

Writing in the next month, a Lampang reporter comments, "The epidemic is still raging in this vicinity and each day seems to have its quota of deaths" (*BT* 23 Nov. 1918). By December, influenza had also afflicted a "considerable proportion of the population" in Chiang Mai: "Now there are at least twenty houses within the sound of the writer's voice that have one or more members ailing" (*BT* 10 Dec. 1918). Similarly in Phrae, a reporter recounts that in December "Influenza has been bad in the city and has spread throughout the villages.... The death toll has no respect of persons, some of the official class having been taken also" (*BT* 21 Dec. 1918). Even when the epidemic had run its course, it continued to affect the local market since villagers were afraid "that they will be the next to be attacked by the disease" (*BT* 8 Nov. 1918; see also 20 Dec. 1918).

A variety of other epidemics were reported in Monthon Phayab during this decade. Deaths from beri-beri were widespread in Chiang Mai in 1908–1909, and in 1918 (*BT* 22 Oct. 1910; 23 Nov. 1910; 29 Nov. 1918). Typhoid broke out in Chiang Mai in 1910 (*BT* 23 Nov. 1910). An outbreak of cholera in Nan, described as "the first in the history of the province," reached epidemic proportions and over 50 percent of patients died (*BT* 3 Mar. 1911). The next

year brought cholera to Lampang (*BT* 27 May 1912). An epidemic of dengue fever is recorded in Nan in 1915 (*BT* 19 Nov. 1915), and in Chiang Rai large numbers of people were “suffering and dying from dysentery” (*BT* 25 Nov. 1915). The mortality rate was exacerbated by the high percentage of the population suffering from hookworm and other parasites. Of the soldiers examined at the barracks in Nan, “100% had hookworms; 55% had roundworms; 28% had tape worms, and 25% had pinworms” (*BT* 30 June 1916). A similar investigation in Chiang Mai found 91 percent of the soldiers infected with hookworm (*BT* 17 Aug. 1917; 2 Nov. 1917).

Animal Diseases. In addition to diseases affecting humans, there were outbreaks of diseases among livestock. Heavy losses due to cattle disease were reported in Chiang Mai in January 1910 (*BT* 8 Apr. 1910), and again in April 1911 (*BT* 27 June 1911). By July 1911, the death toll was such that the “scarcity of buffaloes in Chiang Rai district is going to prevent the planting of a large area of paddyfields” (*BT* 31 July 1911). That September, the Chiang Rai correspondent said that there was a second epidemic among the water buffaloes and, “Many people are training cattle to plough in place of buffaloes that are so scarce. Now the fear is that even the bullocks will die” (*BT* 14 Sept. 1911).

A significant number of animals perished in 1913 as well. A report notes, “In Monthon Bayab [Phayab] in these eleven months ... 6,649 buffaloes and 6,174 other cattle died of disease.... These numbers represent a heavy loss for poor people” (*BT* 21 July 1914). About Lamphun in August 1914, a correspondent wrote, “I have seldom known anthrax to be so hard among the buffaloes as this season. Some villages actually have no animals to work their rice fields, and losses elsewhere are very serious” (*BT* 3 Sept. 1914). Many cattle also died in Phrae, and the reporter gave readers a sense of the impact: “One man having a herd of twelve water buffaloes lost all but one. Another with seven lost five, and so on. The disease is said to have been brought by pack trains from the North towards Chiang Rai” (*BT* 14 Aug. 1914).

In 1915 there was a widespread outbreak of anthrax and rinderpest, with over a thousand deaths from rinderpest reported in the district of Doi Saket alone (*BT* 31 July 1915). Outbreaks also occurred in Muang Song and Phrae, following the caravan route from the Den Chai railway station (*BT* 10 Aug. 1915). Complicating animal disease was its impact on human health, since it was “common custom for the people here to save portions of the carcasses of animals dying of anthrax and even to eat the meat” (*BT* 31 July 1915). In Doi Saket district, “Four men died of anthrax from cutting up a dead animal, infected with this disease, for sale” (*ibid.*). In Muang Song, over forty people died from dysentery in June, and “in almost every case they admitted having eaten of dead buffalo flesh” (*BT* 10 Aug. 1915).

Natural Disasters. In 1909, there was a record-breaking rise in the Ping River (*BT* 6 Aug. 1909; 27 Nov. 1909). Chao Dara, the daughter of the

ruling king of Chiang Mai, had been sent to Bangkok in 1886 to become one of King Chulalongkorn's wives, and this flood corresponded to the period of her first return visit to Chiang Mai. During her stay, she made a controversial decision to relocate the funerary remains of Chiang Mai's ruling families to Wat Suan Dok (Woodhouse 2009: 196). The flood may have been interpreted as an inauspicious omen linked to this decision, or to her visit itself.

In 1912 two earthquakes occurred throughout northern Thailand, one on 21 May and the second, more severe shock two days later (*BT* 23 May 1912). A Chiangmai correspondent reported, "Old residents say that this is the most severe shock within their memory" (*BT* ca. 4 June 1912). The earthquake damaged "a number of wooden houses," and a *jedi* containing Buddhist relics "outside one of the city gates was demolished" (*BT* ca. 7 June 1912). In Lampang, "almost every clock in the city" was stopped, and in Nan, "Houses swayed, rocking chairs were started in motion and a general disturbance was noted." The second shock "was sufficiently severe to cause many persons to experience 'light headedness.'" More earthquakes occurred in 1914, on 3 February and 10 August (Chiang Mai, *BT* 14 Feb. 1914; Chiang Rai, *BT* 12 Aug. 1914).

This decade also saw a series of serious hailstorms. On 17 April, 1913 hail "the size of betelnuts" smashed roof tiles in the Chiang Mai region (*BT* 14 May 1913). On 1 May 1914, a major hailstorm caused massive devastation in Lamphun, uprooting trees and destroying three temples in a 5-mile radius of Lamphun, including its most important temple, Wat Luang.³³ One observer recorded, "In fifteen years' residence here, I have not seen so large or so serious damage done by a storm" (*BT* 16 May 1914; see also 21 May 1914). The importance of Wat Luang cannot be understated. As the Lamphun newspaper correspondent explained, "Both the temple here and the one on Doi Suthep are held in almost equal veneration," and its pagoda "is held in great reverence by the people and by pilgrims who journey to it from long distances" (*BT* 21 May 1914).³⁴ The annual state "drinking the water of allegiance" ceremony took place at this temple. The chair of state ("*absana*") and other royal regalia used in those ceremonies were also destroyed (*BT* 16 May 1914). Another devastating hailstorm hit Chiang Mai on 5 April 1916. This storm was compared to one that occurred in April 1871 in which the hailstones were said to have been "as large as the eggs of hens and ducks," and caused damage to roofs and injuries to people (*BT* 7 Apr. 1916). As a subsequent report describes, "The hailstones fell very thickly and pieces of over two

³³ The other two temples were at Nong Seng, "about a mile north of the city gates," and a Wat Bah Sow "five miles north" (*BT* 16 May 1914; see also 21 May 1914).

³⁴ The reporter adds, "Girls who have made the pilgrimage to the temples at both Doi Suthep and Wat Luang, Lampoun, are sought in matrimony in preference to their stay-at-home sisters" (*BT* 21 May 1914).

inches in length and at least one inch thick were very common; even pieces like a good sized duck's egg were picked up. Houses covered with tiles had them smashed and some roofs looked like sieves. When the storm was over, it was found that several people were suffering from cut heads" (*BT* 15 Apr. 1916).

Unjust Rulers and Moral Decay

In the millenarian eschatology, such economic and "natural" disasters are both omens of cosmological disharmony and the result of morally corrupt government. During the early twentieth century, central Thai administrative changes were seen as increasingly oppressive. The implementation of a head tax contributed to the 1902 Shan uprising (*BT* 14 Oct. 1902).³⁵ Villagers too poor to pay the head tax were arrested and forced to labor on roads or government buildings. As a Chiang Mai correspondent remarked, "compulsory labour is detested" (*BT* 8 Sept. 1913). The second government act that had a major impact on the everyday lives of villagers was the Military Conscription Act of 1905, which went into effect in the north in 1914 (*BT* 22 Sept. 1913). The act sparked major resentment: "The application of the [Conscription] Act to the provincial population has given rise to much discontent, the farmers complaining that the youth of the country is impressed into the unproductive military service while productive agriculture depends for its labour mainly upon the women and old men" (*BT* 30 Mar. 1910; Bowie n.d.a). Some sense of the growing anti-Siamese sentiment is revealed in a remark by a Chiang Rai correspondent upon the arrival of Chao Phya Surasi, "They blame the Government for all the peskiness on the newly arrived man with a medal on his jacket and ruminate how they can retaliate on the Government" (*BT* 31 July 1911).

The development of the Siamese-controlled administration contributed to a decline in oversight of the complex irrigation system of dams and canals (*muang faaj*) for which northern Thailand had been famous. Many of these systems covered significant distances. As the Siamese divided the land into districts, they placed a different official in charge of each district; however, the irrigation systems often passed through multiple jurisdictions. In December 1913, prominent merchants and other interested citizens of Chiang Mai made a plea to the government regarding the irrigation system that laid out the resulting problem:

In former years the local Chaos [northern aristocracy] had entire charge of the irrigation with full powers to command labour.... In those days there was no scarcity of water because the official referred to had authority over the canal throughout its entire extent. But now, since the new regime has been brought into force, a single canal, which passes through many different Amphurs [districts], may have many officials in

³⁵ The implementation of the poll tax in Bangkok caused widespread strikes among the heavily Chinese population in June 1910 (see *BT* for descriptions). The poll tax was implemented in Monthon Isarn in 1911 (*BT* 21 Feb. 1911; for earlier taxes, see Keyes 1977).

charge of its different sections. Inasmuch as the farmers along this canal have varying interests, there is always a scramble for water and there is not central authority to insure an equitable distribution of the same (*BT* 13 Dec. 1913).

Still, as late as December of 1918 the Lampang correspondent lamented the state of the irrigation system, complaining, "It does not seem to be anybody's business to repair the ditches" (*BT* 30 Dec. 1918).³⁶ Government concessions to foreign teak-logging companies caused further disruptions. One report describes their impact on irrigation systems in Phayab: "Sometimes dams are more or less damaged by the floating down of logs with consequent loss of water" (*BT* 21 Oct. 1913). Another from Lampang says that farmers there had tried to build dams and canals, "but this has not been a success as the 'fai' [dam] gets broken down by the floating teak logs" (*BT* 2 Oct. 1913; see also Taylor n.d.: 111).

The national expansion of the railway system also had significant impacts on livelihoods and trade patterns in the region. Oxen caravans, boats, rafts, and porters had long transported goods on routes between Yunnan, China, and Moulmein, Burma (see Bowie 1988; 1992).³⁷ The railway reached Phrae in May 1911. When the railway reached Lampang in April 1916, the British Acting Vice Consul soon noticed, "The opening of the railway from Bangkok to that town has already affected local trade," and "Boat traffic with Bangkok has practically ceased to exist" (*BT* 17 Oct. 1916; see also 20 Feb. 1915). A northern correspondent wrote, "Paddy is now being sent from Phrae and district to Bangkok by the railway," adding tellingly "This is the more interesting as Monthon Bayap ... has in the past years known what it means to be short of paddy, and to have to import to feed the people, from Chiangmai and Bangkok" (*BT* 7 Apr. 1916; see also 24 July 1912; 24 Aug. 1918). By October 1918, this correspondent tells readers, "Chinese are vieing [*sic*] with one another in buying up paddy and railing it south, and prices are soaring like the eagle" (*BT* 11 Oct. 1918). Wrote one observer in Lampang, "One is amazed to see the amount of hulled rice that is being hauled to the railroad daily, a procession of carts loaded with the grain in bags sometimes blocking up the roadway for other travellers" (*BT* 31 Oct. 1918).

World War I. Although Siam remained neutral at the outset of World War I in 1914, the war affected trade routes between Chiang Mai and Moulmein, Burma. By August 1916 trans-frontier trade had decreased 31 percent (*BT* 15 Aug. 1916). Exports from northern Thailand to Burma declined to "5,470

³⁶ A 1913 Chiang Mai report indicates that for the "first time in many years," the wells inside the city were more or less dry because water from the Huay Kaew stream had been diverted to water bananas planted by the barracks (*BT* ca. 21 July 1913).

³⁷ The railway replaced the "large caravan trade between Phre and Uttaradit" that brought down "yearly over Tcs 300,000 worth of goods, weighing roughly 800 tons" (*BT* 6 Apr. 1911). For more on the development of the railway, see Patel 2011.

head of cattle (as compared to 16,706 the year before), 110 elephants (as compared to 104), and 319,980 cubic feet of teak (as compared with 572,655)" (*BT* 15 Aug. 1916). According to a 1917 report, when the triennium 1914–1917 is compared with the period 1911–1914, "It is found that Northern Siam's [northern Thailand's] import of European piece-goods has fallen by over two-fifths, of manufactured silks by one-half, and of bazaar articles by nearly one-third" (*BT* 22 Aug. 1917; see also 15 Dec. 1916).

Crime and Lawlessness. With so much poverty and disruption, it is not surprising that crime also increased. Writing of Lampang, one newspaper report stated: "Poverty will inevitably beget crime, and with each year adding to the number of fields lying idle there seems no escape from an impoverished condition. And it may be that the all too common sight of gendarmes with a man in chain is most of it due to stealing" (*BT* 30 Dec. 1918).³⁸ A Lampang correspondent reported, "Buffalo stealing is getting more popular in this province," explaining, "With many people the bulk of their wealth is represented by a buffalo or two," so "it is a big loss if an animal is taken" (*BT* 15 Apr. 1916). That hunger was an important factor is suggested by the fact that, "The thieves usually kill the animal and eat the meat" (*ibid.*). A report seven months later stated that buffalo stealing even in the city "goes merrily on around Lampang," and, "Many buffaloes are taken from under the houses at night time" (*BT* 25 Nov. 1916). The next year buffalo and cattle theft were reported to be on the rise (*BT* 26 Oct. 1917; see also 12 June 1917; 26 Sept. 1917). An account from Chiang Mai in 1913 records that the problem was so pervasive that, "Every householder was given permission to shoot at sight any one found trespassing on his premises at night" (*BT* 23 July 1913; see also 14 Mar. 1914). Similarly, the Phrae correspondent reported, "The stealing of a buffalo is all too common," but said that many a villager feared to provide the police with information lest he "have his house burned or himself shot at from ambush" (*BT* 19 Aug. 1913). The rise in crime in Phrae during this period may have been correlated with the fact that, "The drinking of intoxicants is on the increase here as more of the foreign article is brought in by the railroad" (*BT* 19 Aug. 1913).

SEARCH FOR A SAVIOR IN THE APOCALYPTIC STORM

Under such dire portents of dearth, dislocation, disease, death, and decline, it is not surprising that some northern villagers were in search of a savior. The times

³⁸ There are also reports of gendarmes being killed (*BT* 8 June 1915; 1 June 1917). Two crimes in Amphur Lii made the Bangkok newspapers. In December of 1910, the head of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation for the Chiang Mai region, E. P. Miller, was murdered near the town of Muang Lii. That his murder was perhaps more than the result of a simple robbery is hinted at by the fact that two of the five alleged perpetrators were former monks (see *BT* 13 Dec. 1910; 30 Dec. 1911; 17 Feb. 1912). The second case involved a former policeman executed for robbing and killing two women in Amphur Lii (18 Sept. 1915).

were desperate, ripe with rumors and prophecies.³⁹ At the beginning of the decade, “Certain brass plates, falling from heaven, were said to have contained a prophecy to the effect that within the three years 1909, 1910, 1911, nine out of ten of the population will have died” and predicted that “the price of rice will rise until a quantity of rice weighing as much as five silver ticals⁴⁰ will be sold for one tical” (*BT* 16 Oct. 1910). In Phrae, villagers began cutting down their papaya trees in April of 1917 in response to rumors “that a spirit came down and announced that there is going to be great danger from lightning” (*BT* 24 Apr. 1917; see also 21 Aug. 1917).⁴¹ In Chiang Mai, in response to the drought, 238 monks and some eighty novices went up to Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep for three days in 1913 to pray for rain from “the rain God” (*BT* ca. 23 Sept. 1913).⁴²

Khruubaa Srivichai was neither the first nor the last of the millenarian *tonbun*. Dodd found that there was a “distinct sect in the Chieng Dao region, led by a lay imposter named Noi Inta Kaw” who claimed to be Maitreya; he “had so large a following and had become so powerful that the Siamese government remitted taxes in the case of himself and all his cave disciples” (1923: 319). Many villagers in the districts of Hang Dong and Chomthong told me about another millenarian figure named Chao Raat.⁴³ In fact, rumors of millenarian *tonbun* continue into the present day.⁴⁴ Far from inhibiting millenarianism, Buddhism has provided its suffering adherents with seminal tropes of disaster and salvation.

In this essay, I have argued that the historical hint preserved in the treason charge slices through the haze of history to reveal the popular and official view of Srivichai as a Maitreyan *tonbun*. The tropes characteristic of millenarian movements in general resonate in the cosmologically inflected political economy of northern Thailand in the decade prior to Srivichai’s investigation in Bangkok. Powerless to defend themselves against the devastating changes

³⁹ Already in 1901, local tutelary spirits were believed to be opposed to government road construction (*BT* 21 Dec. 1901).

⁴⁰ A tical was the western term for the baht, a unit of Thai currency.

⁴¹ In both cases, “government officials took active measures to locate the authors of this story” (*BT* 16 Oct 1910).

⁴² As in village rain rituals, a cat was included. For a village description, see *BT* 2 Aug. 1917.

⁴³ He was generally described as the author of a messianic text. One villager insisted Chao Raat (also called Chao Raatsamphan, Chao Ratsamphanthawong, and Khruubaa Lat) was Gautama’s father (HD#38). Several villagers assured me that he was a real person whom they had met about 1930 (CT#74; HD#39). According to a Chomthong villager, Chao Raat had been involved in a succession dispute that he had lost to the central Thais. Afterward, he had fled to Burma and ordained as a monk, but he would secretly come back to the area to visit (CT#74). He had various supernatural powers (*aphinihaan*; see CT#105). He refused to *wai* [bow before] images of the Gotama Buddha, and would only *wai* images of Ariya Maitreya (HD#39).

⁴⁴ For more on Karen millenarianism, see Cohen 2001; Hinton 1979; Kwanchewan 1988; and Stern 1968. For millenarianism among the Silver Palaung, see Ashley 2011; among the Lue, Wasan 2011. See also Jackson 1988.

and desperate for a guardian of righteous moral rule, northerners were seeking a protector and savior who could wield Indra's sword of righteousness. Born during Indra's thunderstorm, Srivichai's mytho-biography was forged in his generosity to the poor and his defiant acts of ordination, acts that saved men from corvée labor and military conscription (Bowie n.d.a). As rumors about Srivichai spread, the government had ever-intensifying reason for concern—several uprisings had already been suppressed in northern Thailand, notably a rebellion in 1889 led by Phrayar Phaab, a revolt in 1899, and the Shan revolt in 1902 (Bowie 1988: 9–16; Bristowe 1976: 108–9, 149; McGilvary 1912: 305–6; Ramsay 1979; Tanabe 1984: 75–110; Taylor n.d.: 55–60, 166–86; Tej 1967: 152–53; 1968). Grasping firmly the meaning of Indra's sword in the context of Buddhist millenarianism lays bare the contrary concerns of both a suppressing, fearful state and a resisting, hopeful populace.

The thunderous storms that swirled around Srivichai have been silenced by scholars downplaying the existence of millenarianism in Buddhist societies, modernists embarrassed by seemingly silly superstitions, Thai nation-builders seeking to erase internal historical conflicts, and northerners eager to have their regional saint revered by the nation. At the temple in Lamphun province where he lived and where some of his ashes are kept, Srivichai's arrests go unmentioned in his biographical plaque.⁴⁵ His life and writings deserve much more scholarly attention. As a historical anthropologist interested in peasant politics, I would suggest that spotlighting Indra's sword against the backdrop of both the comparative and Buddhist literature on millenarianism begins to clarify the cosmological storm of the early twentieth century and the monk at its eye.

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⁴⁵ His arrest scene is carved into the temple's doors, but without explanation.

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Abstract: Despite a growing literature revealing the presence of millenarian movements in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist societies, scholars have been remarkably reluctant to consider the role of messianic beliefs in Buddhist societies. Khruubaa Srivichai (1878–1938) is the most famous monk of northern Thailand and is widely revered as a *tonbun*, or saint. Although *tonbun* has been depoliticized in the modern context, the term also refers to a savior who is an incarnation of the coming Maitreya Buddha. In 1920 Srivichai was sent under arrest to the capital city of Bangkok to face eight charges. This essay focuses on the charge that he claimed to possess the god Indra’s sword. Although this charge has been widely ignored, it was in fact a charge of treason. In this essay, I argue that the treason charge should be understood within the context of Buddhist millenarianism. I note the saint/savior tropes in Srivichai’s mythobiography, describe the prevalence of millenarianism in the region, and detail the political economy of the decade of the 1910s prior to Srivichai’s detention. I present evidence to show that the decade was characterized by famine, dislocation, disease, and other disasters of both natural and social causes. Such hardships would have been consistent with apocalyptic omens in the Buddhist repertoire portending the advent of Maitreya. Understanding Srivichai in this millenarian context helps to explain both the hopes of the populace and the fears of the state during that tumultuous decade.