

KINNARI: ON THE SPACE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND CORPORATE MYTH

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Kinnari with Lion body
Wat Phra Kaew
Bangkok



Ronald McDonald
McDonald's Restaurant
Bangkok



Kinnari and Kinnara

Detail of Mural at Wat Tri Thotsathep Woraviharn
by famous contemporary Thai artist
Mr. Chakrabhand Posayakrit

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Abstract

We navigate within a landscape full of mythical images and icons which ask for our commitment or trust. These include both manufactured corporate myths whose aim is the circulation of commodities and capital, and traditional myths which lead us to a place beyond mere exchange value. This essay seeks to investigate how we can begin to disentangle the various myths which compete for our attention. It draws from the works of Hans Blumenberg and Georg Simmel and their ideas of “pregnance” and “value”. It uses the stories surrounding the Thai mythical creature – the Kinnari – to demonstrate how the richness of traditional myth, can provide reorientation for those of us lost in contemporary culture. The story of the Kinnari points to the very source of wealth, value and trust.

Let me tell you some stories.

I originally had the responsibility of designing the poster for our conference. The poster was to have on one side a picture of a Kinnari - a Thai mythical creature. These Kinnari can be seen at the Grand Palace (Wat Phra Kaew) greeting visitors by performing a “Wai.” On the other it was to have a picture of a Ronald McDonald greeting customers by

performing a “Wai.” Two statues, two icons, One representing traditional Asian culture, the other representing global corporate culture.

I believed this to be the ideal poster for our conference. Indeed our entire concern, our problem, our discourse, *takes place* between these two entities. We even asked permission to use the image of a Ronald McDonald performing a “Wai” for our conference poster. Not surprisingly, it was denied.

Corporations, after all, fiercely protect their logos and mythic auras. And perhaps the juxtaposition of the corporate and the traditional is itself threatening. But allow me to jump into the space between the two. It is the space which is important. It is the space we occupy as thinkers.

I am also fulfilling a promise by the investigation of this space. A few years back, I gave a lecture here at Assumption University on Walter Benjamin and certain aspects of his philosophical “technique” which might provide strategies of *orientation* within the maze of accelerating globalization. At that time I suggested that his technique of “montage” had important possibilities. By juxtaposing objects and images a tension is created which strips away the veneer of everydayness from the objects and allows us to see them for what they are: entities with a stored-up history. Organic entities, like flowers which have gradually blossomed, animated by the historical forces of ideology, politics, and economics. Entities which represent what Benjamin called the *dream states* of history. Benjamin describes in cryptic terms the whole strategy of his *Arcades Project*:

Comparison of other’s attempts to setting off on a sea voyage in which the ships are drawn off course by the magnetic north pole. Discover that North pole. What for others are deviations, for me are the data by which to set my course. I base my reckoning on the differentia of time that disturb the “main lines” of the investigation for others. [*Arcades Project*, N 1, 2]

Benjamin wishes to chart these aberrations of history with the idea that understanding them will cancel them out. He, like his famous image of the *angel of history*, would like to “awaken the dead”. The role

of the critic is to allow us to see our place within history; a history which is adrift from the source.

While Benjamin at times wishes to explode the objects through the violence of his surrealistic montage technique, we however need to be more careful. While Benjamin was engaged in the messianic quest of breaking free from the wreckage of European history and the more dangerous aspects of the momentum of progress, we still want to preserve certain aspects of local culture. We have to create the tensions in our montages in a more precise way.

Our figures possess commonalities which draws them into juxtaposition. Both are performing the traditional Thai greeting: the “Wai.” Both stand outside their respective temple, and so both signify and act as guardians of the mythology of that particular space. Eliade writes in *The Sacred and the Profane*:

For a believer, the church shares in a different space from the street in which it stands. The door that opens on the interior of the church actually signifies a solution of continuity. The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds - and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible. (p. 25)

We navigate a landscape of mythical thresholds: between the traditional, the religious, the political, the institutional, and the corporate. We can assume at this present moment in history, the corporate and political are converging. So let us focus on the tension between corporate and the traditional myths in the hope that it will open us to new ideas concerning our orientation and negotiation of the many thresholds within our contemporary world.

Kinnari

A Kinnari [or Kimanari] is a mythical being from Thai mythology.

The half-bird half-human *kinnara* is supposed to be the offspring of a *hamsa* and a human. The Sanskrit word *kinnara* means ‘what kind (*kim*) of being (*nara*) is this?’ ...

The *kinnari* in Buddhist literature is often the epitome of the ideal wife. Best beloved of the *kinnari*, Princess Manora [or Manohara] is said to have been reborn as Yasodhara, wife to Prince Siddhartha. Buddhist monks in Northern Thailand committed the Manora legend to writing between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries as a part of a collection of fifty noncanonical *Jataka*...

Manora [or Manohara] and her six *kinnari* sisters lived on the slopes of Mount Meru. One day a hunter found himself in a beautiful garden with shade trees and a pond with lotuses of five colours. He hid and watched the seven sisters remove their wings and tails and frolic in the pool. Using a magic noose belonging to a *naga*, the hunter snared Manora. He presented the captive *kinnari* to Prince Suthorn [or Sudhana] who took her in matrimony. The two lived together happily until jealous courtiers caused Manora to don her wings and fly back to her celestial home. Suthorn followed his wife, finally regaining her after performing several great feats. (Taylor, Pamela York. *Beasts, Birds and Blossoms in Thai Art*. pp. 79-80)

In traditional Thai folklore, it is also said that a Kinnari can guide someone lost in the forest. I would like to suggest that the Kinnari represents the function of the mythical itself. It is something which *guides our way*, it orients us towards the source.

McDonaldland

The success of the McDonald's corporation was partly based upon the stress they placed on developing consumer loyalty beginning with children. They nurtured a close relationship with the Disney corporation. They developed an instantly recognizable architecture, scattered throughout every town. And they developed a mascot – Ronald McDonald - who like a Disney character was given a mythology. Ronald McDonald is one of the mythical beings who occupies McDonaldland, a kind of sacred space whose happenings are broadcast through television. The children riding in an automobile with their parents recognize the same sacred space, symbols and icons that they see on television, and coerce their parents into stopping to eat. This *loyalty* remains through the rest of their lives.

In the documentary *The Corporation*, there is a segment with a marketing executive attempting to explain how branding was pioneered by the church.

One of the earliest brands was the church. And if you think of the tools... that the church used, they understood branding principles well before most others in society did. They created a symbol or symbols, they created, what in our vernacular would be, a “branded environment” When you enter the town and you saw in some places a steeple ... you had an idea of what kind of brand that environment was. They used early forms of marketing and advertising. They had a call to arms if you will: the sermons ... they used sound, in many cases there is a bell that rings ... They're the very earliest forms of branding. (Clay Timon, CEO, Landor and Associates, Branding and Design Consultants, as quoted from *The Corporation*)

Here the executive's explanation has reversed the matter. Of course it is not that the church pioneered branding, but that modern corporations began to draw from the power of religion and myth to create desire for their products.

Eric Schlosser in his book *Fast Food Nation* points out that “trust” was the emphasis of McDonald’s promotional campaigns.

The fundamental goal of the “My McDonald’s” campaign ... was to make a customer feel that McDonald’s “cares about me” and “knows about me.” A corporate memo introducing the campaign explained: “The essence McDonald’s is embracing is ‘Trusted Friend’ ... ‘Trusted Friend’ captures all the goodwill and the unique emotional connection customers have with the McDonald’s experience ... [Our goal is to make] customers believe McDonald’s is their ‘Trusted Friend’ . Note: this should be done without using the words ‘Trusted Friend’ ... Every commercial [should be] honest ... Every message will be in good taste and feel like it comes from a trusted friend.” The words “trusted friend” were never to be mentioned in the ads because doing so might prematurely “wear out the brand essence” that could prove valuable in the future for use among different national, ethnic, and age groups. Despite McDonald’s faith in its trusted friends, the opening page of the memo said in bold red letters: “ANY UNAUTHORIZED USE OR COPYING OF THIS MATERIAL MAY LEAD TO CIVIL OR CRIMINAL PROSECUTION.” (Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, pp. 50-51)

Here a feeling of trust is promoted but never outwardly spoken. To do so would expose the trust as being empty. Corporate brand trust and brand mythology is designed to facilitate the accumulation and circulation of wealth. Such a system wants to perpetuate itself; to create its own ground, its own reality, and its own ideology.

Notice that the story of the Kinnari was also about trust, treachery, and the performance of various feats to regain trust. This shows us that the space we inhabit between mythologies is one of *competing trust*. So the question now becomes: how can we begin to find our way through this landscape? Notice the high stakes involved. How can we live in a world which requires the mechanical circulation of wealth and false manufactured trust? How can we orient ourselves in a world where value is based only on economic flow? If in fact that *is* our global reality, and myth is a

mechanism of adaptation to reality, then the mythology of McDonaldland would represent the next evolutionary stage of global myth, and our traditional myths, will rightly fade away.

But perhaps this is a land in which one cannot live.

Western Philosophies of Mythology

We can tell many stories about the development of our philosophical understandings of myth. Certainly this is too great a task for us here. But it may be helpful to sketch a brief story of how the idea of myth in Western philosophy was influenced by the fear of fascism.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, philosophers began to attempt to recover the truth of mythology, and critically examined the replacement of *mythos* by *logos*. Myth for them represented a harmony between thought and nature. The reliance upon the rational concept – an artificial construction – upset that balance. Therefore, the treatments of myth in the counter-enlightenment thinkers Vico, Hamann, and Herder; or the Romantics such as Schlegel, Novalis and Schelling, lament the passing of mythical thought and proscribe a type of return. As this type of thinking is conditioned by a linear understanding of history, the proscribed return is projected into the future as a “new Mythology”, or a “coming God”.

Philosophy in the twentieth century was haunted by the dark monument of the Holocaust. It had rightly become a test of the ethical merit of any philosophy. The neo-Kantian philosopher Cassirer who earlier in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, defended the philosophical significance of myth, was later troubled by the Nazi appropriation of myth. Nazi myth according to Cassirer was a manufactured myth, “myth made according to plan”, which facilitated the brutality of that political movement. For Cassirer, the role left for philosophy was to combat manufactured myth.

It is beyond the power of philosophy to destroy the political myths. A myth is in a sense invulnerable. It is impervious to rational argument; it cannot be refuted by syllogisms. But philosophy can do us another important service. It can make us understand the adversary. (Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*. p. 296)

The tradition of neo-Marxist Critical Theory apports some of this blame to reason as well. Myth is still functioning secretly behind the facade of enlightenment reason itself. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, enlightenment reason is based upon the myths of *progress*, *objectivity* and *identity*. Yet reason is a kind of myth which doesn't recognize myth as such. Reason, blind to its own mythical underpinnings – its desire for domination - was therefore led into the most brutal horrors of the twentieth century. Therefore, we need salvation from both rationality (the domination of nature) and from myth (the enthrallment to nature). Adorno's redemptive mechanism is his *negative dialectics*; a mechanism which operates through the destruction of identities – the *hubris* of enlightenment reason.

It is also instructive that Critical Theory had aligned itself with the psychological models of Freud which stresses *demythification*, while the more myth-friendly models of Jung were identified with the dangers of fascism. This has been an understandable, yet unfortunate move in the history of Western philosophy since it denied an understanding of the psychological significance of mythical thought. Therefore the peculiar soteriology of Critical Theory involves the surpassing of both myth and reason; a projection toward a future un-representable utopia. Walter Benjamin also occupies this tradition; he is wary of a return to the *ahistoricity* of myth. Yet he also has closer connections with the Romantics, and the work of the great art historian Aby Warburg which keeps alive in his writings an appreciation of myth's significance. Benjamin remains especially important for us due to these ambivalences.

Finally, the philosophical approaches of twentieth century French discourse, begins to make undecidable even the distinction between mythos and logos. Georges Bataille writes:

If we define ourselves as incapable of arriving at myth and as through awaiting its delivery, we define the ground of present-day humanity as an absence of myth. And he finds himself before this absence of myth as one who lives it, and lives it, let us understand, with the passion that in former times animated those who wanted to live in their reality but in mythic reality ... this absence of myth before him can be infinitely more exalting than had been, in former times, those myths linked to everyday life. (Bataille, "l'absence du

mythe,” quoted in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 59)

The absence of myth is itself a myth. It leads to our interest in myth but our inability to create new myth. Jean-Luc Nancy calls this “myth interrupted”. This would also involve the dissolution of community. Global community would involve this myth concerning the absence of myth, which leads to the dissolution of traditional myths; it would be a community which leads to the dissolution of local communities. French philosophy, like Critical Theory, has taken the route of the critique of all identities, unities and determinations. It follows such a pure affirmation of difference and alterity, and the refusal of unities and identities, that it has lost the ability to appreciate the significance of concrete myths and rituals.

We find in all the above approaches a desire for a messianic emancipation from the terrain of global reason, a desire for a *beyond*: beyond both the concreteness of myth, and beyond systems of reason and representation. The way *out* is always a forward movement beyond the profanities of our present languages and representations.

And the moral of this story? ... All of these approaches are interesting and helpful to us in some ways. Yet *here*, we stand in a space which does not feel the full force of Western thought. Western thought struggles with the end, interruption, or decline of myth. While outside the West, one experiences various conflicting flows of traditional myth, the absence of myth, and corporate myth. One experiences the *tensions* between different conceptions of time. The question is not one of a recovery, or a surpassing; but it is a question of the tensions between myths.

Significance

We can find something more helpful in the work of the twentieth century German philosopher Hans Blumenburg. In his *Work on Myth*, Blumenburg recognizes the persistence of myths,

Only if we take into consideration the history of myth, to the extent that it is not *primaeva*, will we be able to approach the question

that we naturally ask: What after all does the disposition toward mythical ways of looking at things consist in and why is it not only able to compete with theoretical, dogmatic, and mystical ways, but actually increased in its attractiveness by the needs that they awaken? No one will want to maintain that myth has better arguments than science; no one will want to maintain that myth has martyrs, as dogma and ideology do, or that it has the intensity of experience of which mysticism speaks. Nevertheless it has something to offer that - even with reduced claims to reliability, certainty, faith, realism, and intersubjectivity - still constitutes satisfaction of intelligent expectations. The quality on which this depends can be designated by the term significance [Bedeutsamkeit], taken from Dilthey. (Blumenburg, *Work on Myth*, p. 67)

But how can one understand or test the significance of a myth or traditional belief? Blumenburg uses the idea of “pregnance”.

Pregnance is resistance to factors that efface, that promote diffusion; resistance especially to time, which nevertheless is suspected of being able to produce pregnancy through the process of aging. This suggests a contradiction, or at least a difficulty. (Blumenburg, p. 69)

On one hand our myths are that which resists the diffusion of time and history, while at the same time they are worn away by the movement of history. The solution Blumenburg offers:

Time does not wear away instances of pregnancy; it brings things out in them - though one may not add that these things were ‘in them’ all along. (Blumenburg, p. 69)

Myth is not necessarily destroyed by history and the growth of rationality, it transforms itself. Blumenburg here begins speaking of a “Darwinism of Words.” Certainly, this is where we will have to take leave of Blumenburg. The Darwinian image is too problematic for us since it

comes dangerously close to taking us along the road of Hegel or Fukuyama. But what is important is the idea that myth still operates next to science, mysticism (Buddhism), and global capitalism. Also, significant here is that time or history is a process which exposes the tensions and ultimately the pregnancy of myth. The significance of our traditional myths are able to transform, deepen, renew itself.

We cannot follow a philosophy of mythology based either upon history or the emancipation from history. The reason is that history itself is a function of myth. And in places like Asia, historical time and mythical time overlap. We are faced only with competing times, competing myths, which ask for our trust, which claim significance. But how do we test significance?

Trials of Significance

Georg Simmel in his *Philosophy of Money* points out that the value of money is based upon comparison and exchange, yet this value is an “analogy” of a more fundamental idea of value which provides its ground. This idea of value involves a kind of detachment. So value in its deepest form is something beyond both subject and object, yet is what makes the desire for the object possible. Let me quote his account at length.

Just as we represent certain statements as true while being at the same time conscious that their truth does not depend on their being so represented, in the same way we feel, with respect to certain things, people, events, that they not only happen to be felt valuable by us, but would be valuable even if nobody estimated them.... Furthermore, intellectual energy and the fact that it brings the most secret forces and arrangements of nature into the light of consciousness; the power and rhythm of emotions,... the fact that, regardless of man, nature moves according to reliable fixed norms, that the manifold natural forms are not incompatible with a more profound unity of the whole, that nature’s mechanism can be interpreted through ideas and also produces beauty and grace - all this leads us to conceive that the world is valuable no matter

whether those values are experienced consciously or not. This extends all the way down to the economic values that we assign to any object of exchange... Here too a basic capacity of the mind becomes apparent: that of separating itself from the ideas that it conceives and representing these ideas as if they were independent of its own representation. It is true that every value that we experience is a sentiment; but what we mean by this sentiment is a significant content which is realized psychologically through the sentiment yet is neither identical with it nor exhausted by it. Obviously this category lies beyond the controversy over the subjectivity or objectivity of value, because it dispenses with that relationship to a subject without which an “object” is no longer possible; it constitutes instead a third entity, of an ideal nature, which is inherent in that duality but not exhausted by it. On account of the practical nature of its domain, the category establishes a peculiar form of relationship to the subject, which ... can be described as a claim or request. The value attaching to a given thing, person, or event, *demand*s to be acknowledged ... [it arises] from an ideal domain which does not lie within us, nor does it purely adhere as a quality of their own to the objects of valuation; rather it consists in the significance which they acquire for us subjects by virtue of their location within the rankings of that ideal domain. (Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, pp. 67-68)

This would suggest that there always needs to be a *ideal source* of value; something that the pure momentum of capitalist exchange tends to forget - gold or oil cannot fulfill this function. Roy Rappaport also points to Simmel's idea that money annihilates quality. He concludes his last work by speaking on the *cybernetics of the holy*.

Those subordinate to the regulatory hierarchy, the members of the community, are themselves the congregations participating in the rituals accepting, and thus establishing, the Ultimate Sacred Postulates which, in turn, sanctify the regulatory hierarchy and, often, explicitly accepting the connection of elements of such hierarchies to the Ultimate Sacred Postulates. Thus, the validity of

Ultimate Sacred Postulates and the connection of elements of regulatory hierarchies (such as monarchs) to those postulates, is ultimately contingent upon their acceptance by those presumably subject to them. ... The structure of sanctification and thus of authority and legitimacy, is “circular”, a cybernetic “closed loop”. (Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, p. 429-430)

He then warns:

If authorities wish to maintain their sanctity, which is to say their legitimacy, and to maintain the sanctity of the regulatory structures over which they preside, they must be sure that those regulatory structures remain in reasonable working order and reasonable responsive to those subject to them. (Rappaport, p. 430)

While Rappaport stops at the level of the human community insisting on a closed loop, we can extend this *flow of value* a bit deeper. Political power cannot simply manufacture its own sanctification. It cannot sustain itself merely by meeting human utilitarian *needs*. And it cannot ground itself by enlisting the most reactionary and un-grounded fundamentalist movements, since these have also been manufactured to promote the circulation of capital. Sanctification must come from below; from the rituals and practices which connect us with a *place outside* of the mere circulation of power or capital, and even outside the human community.

Here, we return to the story of the Kinnari. The story seems to wish to show something about our connection with the source of all things. The kingdom of the Kinnari is the forest on Mount Kailasa, which is one of the peaks of the sacred Mount Meru. The place of the Kinnari is therefore the sacred itself, and the *ultimate source* of wealth. The Kinnari princess Manohara, would be not only the model of the ideal wife, but the model of wealth and happiness that emerges out of love. As in the Sufi teachings, this connection of love is a connection with the sacred itself. Treachery disrupts this connection, and to reestablish it requires a trial to demonstrate one’s honesty, integrity and purity.

First the king had a variety of obstacles set up through which Sudhana had to shoot an arrow.

When all was ready Prince Sudhana, calm and unafraid, fired his arrow. Like a blazing meteor, the arrow struck and demolished all that had been placed before it. It did not stop even then, but continued on until it reached the ocean where it sped across the surface and hit a mountain. It then bounced back and placed itself in the archer's right hand.

The arrow not only goes through the obstacles but continues to the mountain - the axis mundi - and returns. This demonstrates that Sudhana *really* is connected with the source, or worthy of trust.

But the king, not yet satisfied, set before Sudhana still another task. He ordered his seven daughters to dress themselves in identical attire and to sit in a row with Manohara in their midst. He then told Sudhana that if he remembered his wife he should go to her and take her hand. The prince's heart nearly stopped beating – he could not recognize his Manohara from her six identical sisters. Once again, he invoked the help of the gods in recognition of his great merit and instantly, a golden fly circled the head of one Kinnari three times. All who saw him would claim that the prince, without hesitation, walked straight to Manohara and took her by the hand.

The last test is a bit problematic. Sudhana cannot recognize Manohara directly. Since all Kinnari look identical, recognition needs assistance. But here it comes from the gods who assist out of respect for Sudhana's merit.

Corporate mythology only wants to promote customer loyalty, promote consumption. But at least in the case of the Kinnari, traditional myth leads us back to the source of wealth, the source of trust. It is as if the deceptiveness of Corporate myth has played the important function of allowing one to see the significance or pregnancy of traditional myth, just as in the Kinnari story, deceit leads one to brave the trials to demonstrate one's authenticity.

This story can allow us to see that it is not enough to simply attack the exchange principle in the manner of Adorno, or the various post-structuralist writers. In their refusal of concrete myth and identity, they simply have nothing to offer in the void of their negative dialectical or deconstructive enterprises except for a kind of nebulous messianism: a gift, a promise, a trace. This messianism too is of course a myth which is based on a mythical idea of linear temporality and history. Messianism is a story about some *un-fore-seeable* future salvation. But outside of the anxieties of contemporary Western philosophies, we find many myths and practices which guide us back to a source or ground which are *see-able*, which have a powerful *presence*. Yet I am not advocating a new type of romanticism. These traditional myths and practices cannot replace many of the very powerful tendencies of globalisation. But they can balance, transform or supplant the weaker and more facile myths of corporate capitalism and politics.

And so what does this say about the strategies of interpretive orientation in our so-called global age? How does one sift through the competing mythologies which ask for trust? The role of interpretation would not be one of dialectical synthesis, deconstruction, consensus, or even a hermeneutic circling towards some originary significance. It would instead involve framing the tensions and contradictions within a cultural tradition faced with globalization and allowing those *tensions* themselves to speak. To allow the traditional myths to speak in new ways to allow new (or old) solutions to the problems of our current situations...

...To allow the tensions between competing stories, to create new stories.

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