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Art, Symbolism, and Sovereignty: Elephants as Living Regalia in the Malay Court of Perak

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the elephant as animate regalia in Southeast Asian royal culture, specifically the Sultanate of Perak. While regalia are generally synonymous with inanimate objects such as crowns, swords, and thrones, elephants, particularly white or ceremonially enhanced elephants, were mobile, sacred manifestations of ruling authority. Drawing on chronicles, oral tradition, and court practice, the essay illustrates how elephants such as Kulup Chandan, Larut, and Chapang Pileh were deployed in ritual, diplomacy, and symbolic articulations of kingship. Through interdisciplinary approaches, the study brings elephants back in as agents of royal authority, extending from Malay-Muslim myth, art, and political theology to wider Southeast Asia

Keywords: *Southeast Asia; royal regalia; elephants; Malay kingship; Perak Sultanate; political symbolism; ritual performance; living regalia*

1.INTRODUCTION

In the courts of Southeast Asia, royal regalia served as both emblems of monarchical authority and instruments through which that authority was enacted, sanctified, and perpetuated. While scholarly focus has historically centered on inanimate symbols of power like the keris, crowns, and thrones, there has been a notable lack of emphasis on living symbols, particularly elephants. In numerous Southeast Asian nations, elephants, especially white elephants, transcended their roles as mere ceremonial creatures; they represented the very essence of divine kingship, cosmic legitimacy, and the ideological framework of the state.(Andaya, 2016; Smith, 2004). The use of calligraphy, textiles, and artifacts like the Prophet's Mantle to establish governmental legitimacy in societies that are opposed to anthropomorphic representation has been studied by Islamic academics (Necipoğlu, 2005). Our grasp of sovereignty as a performative and visual practice has grown as a result of these investigations.
The material culture of European, African, and Islamic monarchies is commonly included in global studies of regalia. Scholars have examined the ways in which robes, crowns, and scepters bridge the political and the religious and function as emblems of royal

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authority (Strong, 2005; Cannadine, 2001). African and Native American regalia have been examined as sites of ancestry, religious continuity, and cultural resistance, and ritual objects such as masks, staffs, and woven robes have deep metaphysical significance (Ezra, 1992; Tanner, 2004).

Southeast Asia's unique use of animate regalia, particularly elephants, is undertheorized, even though study on this subject is still expanding and filling in. The literature that does address elephants focuses on either their economic and military value or their symbolic significance in Theravāda cosmology. Elephant utilization in the Islamic-Malay political imagination is not given due consideration even though trailblazing work by Andaya (2016) and Smith (2004) has attempted keen interpretations of the sacrality of elephants in Siamese and Burmese kingdoms. This imbalance is particularly prominent within Perak Malay sultanates where elephants doubled as ceremonial performers and bearers of daulat (divine sanction), ceremonial power, and inter-polity diplomacy.

By reconceptualizing elephants as animated, moving, and semiotic forms of kingship in the Malay-Muslim world this work attempts to fill that historiographical gap. It moves the elephants as living tools of statecraft along the lifelines of named elephants Kulup Chandan, Kulup Gangga, Larut, and Chapang Pileh, all based upon the oral traditions, royal pedigree, and ceremonial reports. In this manner, the study completes a fuller understanding of Southeast Asian political theology, whereby sovereignty is asserted by means of performative interaction with living beings rather than simply by means of text or artifact. In this essay, the term "animate" or "living regalia" is attributed to ceremonial beings that exercise an active role in the exercise of sovereignty.

Drawing on theories of performativity (Butler, 1997; Tambiah, 1976) and material agency (Gell, 1998), I use the concept to describe how elephants were not passive symbols but sentient, mobile co-actors in the visual and ritual construction of Malay kingship. Their movement, temperament, and ceremonial comportment formed part of the grammar of royal authority

In the Malay world, Siam (Thailand), Burma (Myanmar), and Cambodia, the symbolic and ritual use of elephants is particularly important. Their use in royal processions, diplomacy, and coronation rites signified more than just pomp; it guaranteed the ruler's concordance with sacred cosmology and territorial dominion (Reid, 1988; Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017). As "living regalia" that etched political will, cultural memory, and daulat (divine authority), Perak's elephants were revered in the Malay Sultanates within the visual and performative aspects of royalty. These elephants were active participants in the drama of sovereignty, occasionally upending, deviating from, or even rewriting courtly texts rather than being passive symbols (Andaya, 2016).

Using the Perak Sultanate as an example, the essay examines the ceremonial, symbolic, and political role of elephants as royal regalia. By placing elephants in Southeast Asian traditions of holy animals and royal performance, the essay demonstrates how elephants serve as living extensions of royalty through an analysis of the cases of Kulup Chandan, Kulup Gangga, Larut, and Chapang Pileh. With a focus on how these animate royal creatures serve as extensions of monarchy through ceremonial presence, movement, and symbolic action, this study intends to investigate the elephant as living regalia in the Perak Sultanate.

This research advances a more sophisticated understanding of Southeast Asian royal material culture and political performance by shifting analytical focus from inanimate

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regalia to live creatures. Scholarly discourse has mostly disregarded elephants as deliberate instruments of statecraft, especially in the Malay world, despite their prominence in oral histories, local histories, and colonial records. Elephants in Buddhist cosmography and Siamese Burmese politics have been noted in the scant scholarly literature that exists, such as Barbara Watson Andaya's (2016) treatment of court symbolism and Ronald B. Smith's (2004) discussion of the white elephant in Southeast Asia. However, there is little information on how Islamic-Malay polities, like Perak, used these animals to perform daulat and sovereignty.

As mentioned earlier the main area of study is this historiographical gap, where discourses of royal power, which usually focus on literature, rituals, or things, are peripheral to live regalia like the elephant. To address that, the study uses a qualitative-historical methodology that draws from ethnographic reports, archive materials, oral histories, and Malay royal annals (hikayat) to investigate the ways in which particular elephants Kulup Chandan, Kulup Gangga, Larut, and Chapang Pileh were crucial in creating the performative and visual form of kingship. In addition to providing a rich cultural appreciation of the elephant as a sovereign being at the heart of Malay monarchy's visual economy, this enables an interdisciplinary reading that combines historical anthropology, political symbolism, and Southeast Asian court traditions (Reid, 1988; Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017). *This essay is based on qualitative-historical synthesis drawing from three principal sources: (1) Malay royal chronicles such as* Misa Melayu *and* Adat Istiadat Diraja Negeri Perak; (2) oral traditions collected from Kuala Kangsar and Sayong informants (3) colonial-era records and museum archives on Perak ceremonial practice. While some of these materials are well known, the analysis reinterprets them through the lens of political theology and semiotic anthropology to reveal the elephants' performative agency as regalia.

2.TRANSITION FROM INDIC COSMOLOGY TO ISLAMIC-MALAY SYNTHESIS AND SPATIAL SYMBOLISM

An example of syncretic religious and cosmological sophistication is the use of elephants by Malay monarchs. Elephants were used in temple reliefs, ceremonial processions, and ritual imagery during the earlier Hindu-Buddhist era. They were also seen as mounts of divine might, particularly in relation to Indra's white elephant, Airavata (Wheatley, 1961; Hall, 1985). They represented kingship, rain, fertility, and victory—qualities central to the Indic concept of sacred kingship (devaraja). These cosmological characteristics were not completely abandoned or rearranged when Islam arrived in the Malay world in the thirteenth century; rather, they were translated into an Islamic idiom through local interpretations of divine authority, symbolic continuity, and adat (customary law).

With its emphasis on justice (adl), divine power (daulat), and moral leadership, Islamic political theology offered a new vocabulary that allowed for the reinterpretation of previous Indic symbols. Previously associated with pantheons of polytheism, the elephant was now envisioned as a symbol of divine trust and monarchic jalal (majesty). Elephants were aligned with the Islamic values of Malay sultanates through ceremonial purification, symbolic naming, and formal placement in royal processions. Remarkably, pre-Islamic religious substance was preserved under the aegis of keramat (sacredness), enabling Malay courts to reframe elephants as symbols of legitimacy and harmony between divine

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will and worldly rule rather than as idols (Milner, 1982; Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Elephants continued to exert their sacred presence in this syncretic political cosmology, which reflected Islamic principles of social responsibility and hierarchical order. The preference of Islam in the archipelago to localize its values rather than repress existing customs is an example of this pattern of tolerance.

Spatial planning and palace design were the tangible manifestations of this spiritual synthesis. Elephant stables, or kandang gajah, were placed close to the royal audience hall or balai rong seri in Perak and other Malay courts as a symbol of their closeness to the ruler's person and power. In order to house and dedicate the royal beasts, these enclosures were constructed with architectural consideration and included carved timbers, batik-draped screens, and even raised floors (Khoo, 1991).

Elephants were permitted to enter palace grounds through arched doorways and ceremonial gates, confirming their inclusion in state ceremonies and royal audiences as approved and spatially intended. The elephant's passage through these portals mirrored the monarch's own shift from prominence in society to spiritual prominence, confirming an idea of cosmic order brought to life through spatial alignment. Elephants served as both material and metaphysical symbols of Malay kingship, transforming architecture from infrastructure to a performative grammar of kingship (Gullick, 1987; Milner, 1982).

3.ELEPHANTS IN MALAY KINGSHIP: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the Hindu-Buddhist empires of Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Angkor to the more recent Islamic sultanates of Malacca, Johor, and Perak, the symbolic employment of elephants in Southeast Asian royal courts is a deeply ingrained historical and theological phenomena. They were seen as symbols of cosmic power and royal charisma in addition to being animals of burden. Elephants were associated with monarchy and divinity in the Indic worldview that governed early Southeast Asian polities. Indra's elephant, Airavata, was most commonly associated with rain, fertility, and protection (Hall, 1985; Wheatley, 1961). Elephants kept their royal significance but were incorporated into Islamic court ceremonial practice, transforming this into the Malay-Muslim heritage.

Elephants served as both ceremonial and utilitarian kingship tools in the Perak Sultanate. Their use at public receptions, royal trips, and coronation ceremonies attested to the ruler's riches and authority as well as the persistence of pre-Islamic magnificence in an Islamic register. Elephants were used in the visual pomp of the royal procession during the 1897 Kuala Kangsar Durbar, promoting the historical gravity and grandeur of Perak's monarchy (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Sultan Muzaffar Shah was installed in a procession of seventy-seven elephants, a great feat that highlighted the elephant's spiritual and political capital, according to premodern histories like Misa Melayu (Raja Chulan, 1962).

The maintenance of royal elephants was also institutionalized, with authorized officials and trained mahouts taking care of the animals and overseeing their use in ceremonies and diplomacy. As a sign of recognition and allegiance, elephants were occasionally moved between courts; this practice was imitated in Thai, Burmese, and Cambodian cultures (Reid, 1988). Elephants were thus a combination of the local, Indic, and Islamic traditions of monarchy, power, and spectacle in Malay court life, where they served as a living emblem of dynastic sovereignty and divine legitimacy in addition to being a means of transportation.

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4.ELEPHANTS AS LIVING REGALIA OF THE MALAY COURT OF PERAK

Perak has one of the most extensive ceremonial repertoires of any Malay sultanate, and elephants were used as both moving symbols of royal power and modes of transportation. Elephants represented the daulat of the Sultan, the sacred brilliance of a legitimate monarchy, and connected the monarchy to the sacred environment, ritual display, and polity inside the Perak palace's sacred economy. Similar ceremonies were also performed in nearby courts like Kedah and Selangor, but Perak stands out for adopting Islamic ideas of sovereignty in an antiquated Indic and animist worldview. As a result, the elephant became a hub where local theo-politics, royal perceptibility, and holy continuity came together. This Indic–Islamic synthesis was not purely doctrinal but expressed spatially and ritually. In the Perak court, for example, the placement of the kandang gajah near the balai rong seri symbolized the elephant's proximity to royal personhood and divine authority. The integration of Qur'anic recitations into older consecration rites demonstrates how Islam localized, rather than replaced, pre-Islamic cosmology—producing a uniquely Malay theology of sacred animality.

It is evident from combining these threads—ritual, place, myth, diplomacy, and theology—those elephants served as living theology in motion throughout the Perak Sultanate. They used dynamic performance rather than static representation to bring the Sultan's heavenly mission to life. The philosophical framework of the Malay government was dramatized in each ceremonial procession: God as the supreme ruler, the Sultan as His vicegerent, and the elephant as the physical vehicle by which divine power moved across the earth. Through its movement, the animal transformed the invisible into the visible and transcendence into immanence.

The elephant's body was a text in this way; it was sanctified by ceremony, engraved with decoration, and interpreted by subjects as a symbol of cosmic harmony. Adab, the orderly conduct that characterizes both courtly and spiritual excellence, was typified by its silent, majestic posture, and regulated walk. Perak's court expressed a political theory in which sovereignty is not only institutional but also ontological, existing in the balance between the human, animal, and divine domains, by honoring the elephant as living regalia.

5.COURT RITUAL AND CEREMONIAL FUNCTION

Intricate procedures for the use of elephants during important events, including as coronations (istiadat pertabalan), royal marriages, processions (arak-arakan), and visits to district chiefs, were maintained by the Perak royal court in Kuala Kangsar. The enthronement of Sultan Muzaffar Shah I, in which 77 elephants formed a magnificent parade, is vividly described in Raja Chulan's 1962 Misa Melayu. Each elephant signified a royal virtue, such as courage, patience, generosity, or wisdom, and taken as a whole, they indicated the Sultan's rule over the four quarters of the kingdom. This spectacular show symbolized not just wealth but also cosmological order. The circulation of daulat was physically enacted by the procession's passage through the royal town, guaranteeing its spread from the palace center to the neighboring areas.

The ornamentation of the elephants was equally important. Echoing the Islamization of royal tastes, court embroiderers produced embroidered caparisons and headdresses embellished with gems bearing Qur'anic inscriptions. The elephants' foreheads were anointed with scented oils and sandalwood paste, reenacting previous Indic consecration rites that were reframed as doa selamat rites of divine grace. The more common Kulup Chandan, the Sultan's own elephant, was adorned with silver bells and gold-thread cloth, which symbolized the sanctity of the royal body it carried as well as royal opulence. These elephants performed a religious theater in which the crowds saw, heard, and felt power dramatized as sensory experience through processions across the royal square and Balai Rong Seri.

6.THE PALACE AND SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF SOVEREIGNTY

The elephant's holiness was enhanced geographically by its proximity to royal space. Royal stables (kandang gajah) were built next to Bukit Chandan Palace, close to the royal bath site by the Perak River, according to both written and oral history (Khoo, 1991). Their placement in the transitional area between the Sultan's private and public spheres, which reflected their symbolic role as go-betweens for the political and the religious, was no coincidence. The animals' home was transformed into a miniature royal pavilion by the stables' architecture, which is claimed to have included carved wooden columns and ceremonial hangings.

The elephants' daily river bathing ritual, in the accompaniment of court servants chanting selawat, correlated the purity of water with daulat renewal. The landscape of Kuala Kangsar thus became a sacred geography in which natural features, fauna, and architecture worked in concert to maintain kingship.

Elephant participation in royal processions (lawatan diraja) further linked ceremonial cosmology and political migration. It was measured, purposeful, and accompanied by prayer and music as the Sultan marched into far-off districts like Pasir Salak or Beruas. The procession's leader, Kulup Chandan, represented both the expansion of the royal presence into far-off areas and transportation. With every step, it was a reenactment of religious order, paralleling the Qur'anic ideal of the universe balanced by melody and measure (mizan). Thus, in terms of performative geography, the royal elephant parade represented abstract religion.

7.KULUP CHANDAN: ROYAL MOBILITY AND THE SACRED BEAST

Kulup Chandan, the most renowned elephant in Perak court history, is the most legendary of the many elephants owned by the Perak royal court. The name itself has significance: "Chandan" is the Malay term for sandalwood, a sacred and fragrant substance commonly used in royal and religious ceremonies, and "Kulup" was a title of aristocracy historically used in Malay courts to indicate aristocratic adolescents or noble children (Milner, 2002). The elephant is thus elevated to quasi-human grandeur by the union of the two—Kulup Chandan—which gives it courtly grace and symbolic holiness.

Kulup Chandan was more than just a means of conveyance; it was a mobile representation of sovereignty, driven by the Sultan himself during formal and ceremonial

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trips. According to Perak oral traditions, Kulup Chandan made appearances in audiences, processions, and durbars, highlighting the connection between the elephant's stately movement and royal mobility (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Kulup Chandan was the "mobile throne," carrying daulat (divinely given authority) throughout the kingdom. The Sultan's mobility was not a physical move, but rather a ceremonial tour that reaffirmed his religious and political primacy (Gullick, 1987).

The elephant in this instance was a hybrid creature that was part political apparatus and half religious animal. Any royal procession was ritualized by its size, commanding stature, and slow, deliberate walk. The aura of the elephant was accentuated by its retinue, regalia, and the stunned hush that preceded its presence. In Southeast Asian cultures, elephants were considered auspicious and sensitive creatures with near-supernatural sensibilities. This combination of adat (customary practice), daulat, and older animist cosmologies gave elephants like Kulup Chandan mythic status (Reid, 1988; Endicott, 2016). The respect given to Kulup Chandan is evidence of a profound cosmopolitanism between Islam and pre-Islamic societies, where the king's reign was validated by both regional representations of sacred authority and Islamic ideas of sovereignty.

The legend of Kulup Chandan, transmitted in Perak oral memory, crystallizes the convergence of nobility, sanctity, and human–animal kinship. The name itself, blending kulup (aristocratic youth) and chandan (sandalwood), attributes to the elephant both noble birth and fragrant sanctity. Local storytellers recount that Kulup Chandan would bow three times before the Sultan and refuse food during periods of royal mourning, behavior interpreted as a sign of spiritual intelligence. In one tale, when the Sultan’s procession encountered a collapsed bridge near Sayong, Kulup Chandan halted and refused to cross until repairs were made, an act later cited by court chroniclers as the elephant’s amanah (moral trust) to protect royal safety. Such narratives humanize the elephant as a moral subject, reinforcing Malay conceptions of animal adab, the proper comportment expected even of non-human beings within divine order.

The Sultan's court hearings were also a performative and educational theater. The court created a daily drama of legitimacy, hierarchy, and divine rights by openly linking the Sultan with such a revered animal. Thus, the elephant served two purposes: it was a practical facilitator of royal movement and a metaphysical extension of the monarch's body and power. Therefore, Kulup Chandan was a potent cultural and political symbol in Perak's monarchical imagination, representing both earthly might and metaphysical sovereignty.

In the worldview of the court, Kulup Chandan was the Sultan's "mobile throne." According to Milner's (1982) interpretation of kerajaan, or Malay polity, monarchy is physically and ethically centered, using performance to spread daulat. The Sultan executed such illumination in motion while riding on Kulup Chandan; the elephant served as a witness and a transmitter of the divine decree. The Sufi idea of barzakh, a mediator between the visible and invisible worlds, is complemented by this interpretation. Kulup Chandan then functioned as a barzakh that moved between matter and spirit, between ruler and creation.

8.LARUT: THE ELEPHANT OF DISCOVERY AND DESTINY

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Larut, Long Jaafar's elephant, has a special and transformative function in the larger context of Malay royal and economic history. In contrast to Kulup Chandan and the other court elephants, whose functions were ingrained in the ceremonial and symbolic manifestations of kingship, Larut's historical significance stems from an unplanned incident that led to the discovery of tin in the Larut district, one of the most important economic events in Perak's history. According to local legend, Larut wandered into the woods while working for Long Jaafar's plantation or forestry company and was subsequently found with tin ore patches on its body. Large tin reserves were found by following the animal's tracks, which resulted in the tin boom in Perak (Gullick, 1999; Khoo, 1991).

This is not a simple anecdote; it begins a cosmological history in which animals, elephants especially, were not simply tools of status or labor, but became quasi-mystical forces with intelligence, capable of shaping human fate. In many Southeast Asian cosmologies, elephants have connotations of wisdom, memory, and supernatural sensitivity (Endicott, 2016). The Larut myth therefore places the animal in a teleological story in which nature acts purposefully to uncover prosperity. It is no coincidence that the terrain itself would come to be named Larut, symbolically grounding the elephant's name and reaffirming its mythic function as a discoverer and bringer of fate.

The implications of this discovery were far-reachingThe new wealth of tin mining attracted thousands of Chinese laborers, Hakka and Cantonese immigrants specifically, and ultimately gave rise to Taiping as one of the earliest and most prosperous urban settlements of colonial Malaya (Khoo, 1991; Trocki, 1990). This economic transformation, brought about by serendipity in the trail of an elephant, reorganized the demographic, political, and spatial makeup of Perak. It led to British involvement, fueled the infamous Larut Wars between Chinese secret societies, and led to the imposition of a system of British Residents under the Pangkor Treaty of 1874 (Andaya C Andaya, 2001).

Thus, Larut the elephant is a figure of myth and history, nature and economy, animal agency and colonial destiny. Its story is one of how animals became part of the cosmology and historical imagination of the Malay world. Contemporary historiography may read the story as folklore, but its persistence in popular memory testifies to a deeper cultural rationality, one whereby animal were not merely helpers but prophetic beings, inseparable from the spiritual and material past of the land. Larut is a figure of environmental agency in a human-dominated historical process, mediating between indigenous cosmologies and the capitalist and colonial forces that remade the Malay Peninsula in the 19th century. Distinct from Kulup Chandan’s ritual role, the elephant Larut embodies Perak’s intertwining of myth, ecology, and economic destiny. As tradition holds, Larut owned by Long Jaafar wandered into the forest and returned with tin ore clinging to its skin, leading to the discovery of the rich Larut mines. Beyond anecdote, this narrative reveals a deeper cultural logic: animals, particularly elephants, were agents of fate (takdir) in the Malay cosmology of nature. The land’s prosperity was not an impersonal accident but the revelation of divine bounty through the medium of a sentient creature. In this reading, Larut becomes a keramat tanah, a sacred herald of abundance linking the natural and political orders.

Historically, the discovery of the mine occasioned great change—migration, conquest, and colonial ingression. Nevertheless, Malay historiography never assigns the elephant,

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rather than human activity, the agent of change. The reversal of agency testifies to a pre-colonial epistemology where animals are active actors in the making of history. By preserving the memory of Larut through place names and legend, Perak society maintained an ethical geography where sovereignty, economy, and nature were mutually constitutive. The elephant thereby represented divine providence and the Sultan's celestial guardianship over people and land.

9.CHAPANG PILEH: THE DIPLOMATIC ELEPHANT

The elephant Chapang Pileh occupies a unique position in 19th-century Malay diplomatic history, as well as in the complex tributary relations among the Malay states and the Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand). Given by the Sultan of Perak to the King of Siam, Chapang Pileh was not merely an example of hospitality or ritual gift-giving,it was a deliberate act of diplomatic maneuvering, one that aimed to renegotiate the tributary status of Perak and its obligations to its northern suzerain. The gift of a royal elephant, and significantly a very pedigreed and trained one, was an act of immense political and cultural meaning across the courts of Southeast Asia (Reid, 1988; Wyatt, 2003).

Within the region's hierarchical diplomatic language, elephants were representations of royal power and wealth but also of acknowledgment of sovereignty and mutual legitimacy. When Perak sent Chapang Pileh to the Siamese court, the act was as much tribute as tactical negotiation. By offering an esteemed elephant, the Sultan tried to demonstrate obedience while implicitly demanding the worth of Perak as a vassal but independent state. The gesture was not novel. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Malay sultanates conventionally negotiated vassal status in the Siamese mandala through ritual diplomacy, using elephants, gold trees (bunga mas) and other ritual presents to secure favor and autonomy without inviting direct intervention (Ibrahim, 2003; Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

Such creatures as Chapang Pileh were adequately suited to such a mission by virtue of their dual status as prestige animals and living extensions of court honor. In Southeast Asian perceptions, elephants—white or ceremonial elephants in particular—were believed to possess spiritual merit and royal charisma (baraka or daulat), so they were well qualified to carry messages of peace and alliance (Wheatley, 1961). The royal elephant Chapang Pileh holds a distinguished place in 19th-century Malay diplomatic history, as well as within the intricacies of the tributary relationships between the Malay states and the Kingdom of Siam, modern Thailand. Gifted by the Perak Sultan to the King of Siam, Chapang Pileh was something more than a show of hospitality or ritual gift practices; rather, Chapang Pileh was a calculated diplomatic act designed to redefine Perak's tributary status with its northern suzerain duties. Gift-ing a royal elephant, and an elephant with distinguished training and breeding at that, had immense political and cultural interpretations throughout the court societies across Southeast Asia (Reid, 1988; Wyatt, 2003).

Among the area's diplomatic hieratic rhetoric, the elephants were badges of royal power and wealth as well as acknowledgement of sovereignty and mutual legitimacy. Perak's sending Chapang Pileh to the court of Siam was as great a tribute as a strategic negotiationillustrates how Perak's court utilized elephants under the mandala politics of the Malay–Siamese realm. Nineteenth-century accounts have the Chapang Pileh given as an envoy gift from the Sultan of Perak to the King of Siam (Reid, 1988; Wyatt, 2003).

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The gesture was an exercise in both subordination and sovereignty at the same time: by gifting a royal elephant, the Sultan signaled submission to Siam's suzerainty but proclaimed Perak's kingdom hood as suitable for reciprocal gift-exchange instead of conquest. The pedigree and ceremonial training of the elephant transmitted the honor of the sender, whereas the retinue of mahouts and courtiers provided Perak's administrative acuity.

In Southeast Asian diplomacy, elephants were more than gifts—they were animate symbols of barakah and honour. The transfer of Chapang Pileh replicated spiritual exchange: Perak's daulat met Siam's merit (bun), forging a pact within shared sacred idioms. Moreover, such diplomatic acts were staged with theatrical precision. Chronicles describe the Siamese court receiving the elephant in a procession of monks and officials, followed by the recitation of blessings. The spectacle transformed international politics into ritual communication, where the body of the elephant bore the invisible weight of legitimacy and recognition.

10.ISLAMIC REINTERPRETATION OF THE SACRED ANIMALITY

The coming of Islam to the Malay world redefined but did not abolish existing animistic and Indic views of sacral animals. In Perak, this synthesis gave birth to an originally Islamic concept of living regalia. The elephants were bathed by doa selamat, their foreheads anointed with rose water, and their names proclaimed during royal sermons. The court ulama justified their ceremonial function by likening the elephant to the buraq—the celestial steed that carried the Prophet during the Mi'raj. As the buraq, the royal elephant was an animal of grace and power that bridged heaven and earth. The performance of the Sultan riding Kulup Chandan thus assumed theological significance: this was never pageantry but an enactment before the masses of the order of heaven.

The adat istiadat manuals chronicle precise rules for the treatment of royal elephants. They were approached by only noble ranks; their mahouts fasted ritually before great ceremonies; and special verses from the Qur'in were read for the animals' safety. These customs illustrate the way Islamic morality permeated the care of royal animals, converting pre-Islamic reverence into disciplined management. The elephant's majesty was thereby subjected to order based on morality—an aesthetics of power moderated by piety.

11.ART, MEMORY, AND THE AFTERLIFE OF ROYAL ELEPHANTS

Perak's visual and material culture further institutionalized the elephants' regalian function. Palace wall paintings, silverware etchings, and early colonial photography present elephants with regalia attached, affirming their inclusion within the visual lexicon of royalty. The elephant form appeared among the patterns on songket cloth as well as woodcarving designs, representing longevity and wisdom. Even during the colonial reorganization of the Federated Malay States, when elephants found uses increasingly in logging expeditions or ceremonial processions for British Residents, their monarchical correlation continued. Archival photos in Elephant & Seladang Hunting in the Federated

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Malay States (ca. early 20th century) present trained elephants under the direction of Malay mahouts under the watchful eyes of the British—a bittersweet continuation of the same animals previously representing royal independence. Their evolution from regalia to display reflects the larger dislodging of indigenous sovereignty during colonial domination.

12.ART, SYMBOLISM, AND REGALIA: THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF POWER AND IDENTITY

Art has long been a vehicle for conveying authority, religion, and identity. Its most communicative manifestation is regalia—objects, dress, and signs related to sovereignty and ceremonial rank. Regalia is not mere ornamentation; it is the visual lexicon of power, making such abstract concepts as legitimacy, divinity, and collective memory concrete. In symbolic art, regalia is a vehicle mediating the sacred and the profane, the private and the political, the mythological and the historical.

In most cultures worldwide, regalia is a primary source of political theology. European monarchs' crowns, throne, scepter, sword, and robes, for instance, are not just decorative but instantiations of divine right, martial virility, and dynastic perpetuity (Strong, 2005). Such objects typically have mythic significations, e.g., the "divine right of kings"—and are used in coronation rituals to enact power transition. The British Crown Jewels, for instance, denote Christian symbolism, heraldry, and imperial iconography, anchoring the monarchy in a sacral genealogy spanning centuries (Cannadine, 2001). Regalia is here both a performative tool and a mnemonic, inscribing political ideologies onto visual forms.

Similarly, Southeast Asian court regalia took on deeply spiritual and cosmological meanings. Elephants, umbrellas, krises, and cloth were not only ornamentation but symbols of spiritual legitimacy and court glory. White elephants in Theravāda Buddhist Siam and Burmese kingdoms were considered omens of righteous monarchy and cosmic order (Andaya, 2016). They were typically ritually kept and given high-sounding names. They were depicted in art and procession. Displaying them in mural, sculpture, and ritual practice cast them firmly in both sacred animal and royal regalia roles—living symbols connecting the ruler to celestial authority (Smith, 2004). The use of such symbolism in visual culture shows how regalia in Asian courts were never static; instead, they were dynamic, ceremonial, and performative, adjusting to shifts in cosmology, government, and diplomacy.

In African monarchies like Benin and Ashanti, regalia is at the center of sovereignty, lineage, and divine right expression. The Benin Bronzes, for example, bear intricately cast figures of Obas (kings), leopards, and court rituals, functioning as historical accounts as well as religious objects (Ezra, 1992). Every item—coral-beaded crown or ceremonial staff—had metaphysical power attached to it. Art here was not just representational but ontological: it was involved in the creation and sustenance of royal power. The manufacture of regalia in these societies was often limited to guilds, whose practitioners handed down ritual knowledge from one generation to another, implying the sacred custodianship involved in royal symbolism.

Across Islamic civilizations, regalia took specific forms that negotiated aniconism by means of calligraphy, geometry, and luxury textiles. The Ottoman Empire, for example, used objects such as the Sword of Osman and the Mantle of the Prophet not merely to

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authorize the sultan but to position him on the line of the Prophet Muhammad (Necipoğlu, 2005). The artwork adorning objects often entailed Quranic inscriptions, stylized motifs, and materials drawn from the farthest reaches of the empire, and in doing so, transformed regalia into a syncretic symbol of political unity and religious authority. The symbolism in this case was less in the object itself, but in the inscribed histories, narratives, and materials contained within.

Regalia is also a visual repository of cultural resistance and identity. Indigenous regalia in colonized cultures became sites of contest and preservation. To cite one example, Māori cloaks (kākahu) in Aotearoa New Zealand were not only markers of status but also sites of whakapapa (genealogy) and mana (spiritual power). Weaving such cloaks was a spiritual activity, and their enactment in ritual asserted indigenous sovereignty, even under colonial occupation (Te Awekotuku, 1991). Similarly, the regalia of the Native American nations—feathered headdresses, wampum belts, and dance regalia, for example—contain encoded histories of alliance, resistance, and spiritual continuity, particularly in the contexts of treaty-making and memory (Tanner, 2004).

In all such cases, symbolism and art in regalia are more than decoration—they are tools of narrative, ritual, and rule. Cast in bronze, sculpted in stone, sewn in silk, or performed in procession, regalia transforms objects into sovereign signs. It leverages myth, belief, history, and craft to make authority tangible, believable, and long-lasting. To this extent, the study of regalia is not merely a study of aesthetics but of the political imagination of societies throughout space and time.

13.ELEPHANTS AS LIVING REGALIA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the Malay context, art, myth, and theology intersect as mutually reinforcing languages of sovereignty. Artistic depictions of elephants in royal textiles or carvings were not merely decorative rather they encoded oral narratives of divine mandate and reflected theological notions of daulat as embodied grace. Thus, the visual, performative, and spiritual registers of regalia converged to produce an aesthetic theology of kingship.

Elephants in Southeast Asian courts were not simply beasts of burden but living regalia—sacred animals representing royal power, cosmic order, and ceremonial splendor. Their high status was accounted for through overlapping matrices of art, ceremony, myth, and political history, appearing prominently in temple bas-reliefs, palace murals, and court paintings from Angkor to Ayutthaya to Mandalay (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017; Hall, 1985). White elephants (chang samkhan) were particularly hallowed in Theravāda Buddhist polities like Siam and Burma as auspicious signs of virtuous dynastic rule, appearing in coronation ceremonies that legitimized a monarch's divine mandate (Smith, 2004; Andaya, 2016). Those ceremonies merged into royal processions and durbars—like Kuala Kangsar's 1897 Durbar—where elephants added to the spectacle and daulat (divine aura) of kingship (Reid, 1988). Mythologically, elephants were scripted into stories of sacred origin: Queen Maya's dream of a white elephant foretelling the Buddha's conception was transposed across Southeast Asia to justify dynastic genealogies, while the Hindu-Buddhist Airavata, Indra's celestial elephant, represented the monarch's connection to heavenly realms (Reid, 1988; Smith, 2004). Politically, elephants were diplomatic tools instantiating inter-polity relations. The Perak Sultanate's gift to the King of Siam of the elephant Chapang Pileh shows how royal diplomacy was negotiated in a

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shared sacred idiom of sovereignty that married adat to Indo-Buddhist symbolism (Andaya, 2016). Even Islamized Malay courts maintained elephants' sacral and royal meaning, ritually preserving, symbolically identifying, and integrating them into courtly aesthetics. Elephants were not passive utilitarian beasts but active agents in royal ideology, mediating the realms of nature and kingship, the mythic and the material, and the sacred and the political.

14.THE ELEPHANT AS LIVING REGALIA: ART, SYMBOLISM, AND SOVEREIGNTY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Regalia in Southeast Asian monarchical cultures are the visual, ceremonial, and symbolic expressions of sovereignty. Regalia, crowns, swords, umbrellas, or robes, are not simply ornament; they are the physical embodiments of a ruler's authority, divine right, and connection to cosmic order. The elephant in a few polities advanced beyond the passive quality of regalia to serve as a living embodiment of royal power. Artistic ornament, mythological connotation, ceremonial employment, and diplomatic utilization turned elephants into living regalia—animals whose presence and display embodied political theology in action.

The visual transfiguration of elephants into royal regalia is central to their symbolic role. Differing from inanimate objects such as thrones or crowns, elephants were attired in rich material, embroidered caparisons, jeweled headpieces, and gold-plated howdahs. They were not mere decorations but crafted from the finest available material and imbued with cultural symbols of legitimacy, majesty, and sacredness. Their periodic painting, perfuming, naming, and ritual grooming within Siam, Burmese, and Malay courts testify to their exalted status within the royal aesthetic (Hall, 1985; Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017). Art was the method through which the elephant was rendered visible not just an animal, but an icon of kingship.

The elephant's symbolism is solidly rooted in Southeast Asian royal cosmology and mythology. The chang samkhan (white elephant) in Theravāda Buddhist kingdoms like Siam and Burma was the sign of just rule, believed to occur only in the time of virtuous kings. The best-known myth—the dream of Queen Maya, when a white elephant appears in her womb to foretell the birth of the Buddha—was enlisted in royal genealogies to obtain sacred legitimacy (Smith, 2004; Reid, 1988). The Hindu-Buddhist god Airavata, Indra's white elephant, also connected elephants with the divine realm. Through myth, the elephant's meaning became divine, and kings could assume their place as cosmic rulers. The mythic sense was translated into visual representation and ritual practice, writing elephants into the larger semiotic system of regalia.

Ceremonially, elephants played leading roles in coronations, processions, and state rituals. They were not stage props but choreographed aspects of ritual theatre, drilled to kneel, trumpet, or march in line. Used in such spectacles, elephants were not just viewed but experienced—eliciting awe, affirming hierarchy, and enacting royal power under the public eye. The 1897 Durbar in Kuala Kangsar, for example, put elephants front and centre, proclaiming the grandeur of Malay kingship according to both Islamic and pre-Islamic tradition (Reid, 1988). The deployment of the elephant in such rituals is the equivalent of a sceptre or throne in European coronations—but amplified by movement,

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sound, and ritual interaction. The elephant here is the performative equivalent of regalia, bringing art and symbol to life.

Politically, the elephants were diplomatic instruments and markers of geopolitical status. The presentation of elephants, such as Chapang Pileh from the Perak Sultanate to the Siam King, was not only tribute but a sacred gift, operating with reciprocal codes of sovereignty (Andaya, 2016). Elephant was gift and message—its presence communicated political loyalty, sacred recognition, and reciprocal involvement in a transregional cosmology of kingship. These diplomatic gestures employed the elephant as a living, animate extension of royal regalia, speaking transregionally with many levels of symbolic meaning.

Even in the Malay-Muslim world, where Islamic aniconism had structured visual culture, elephants continued to fulfill their regalian role through localized adat manifestations. Elephants were ritually maintained, ceremonially named, and integrated into royal aesthetics in a manner that merged Islamic sovereignty with pre-existing Indic-Buddhist and animist practice. The court regalia consequently encompassed not only objects like the tengkolok (royal headdress) or the keris, but the very living glory of the elephant, whose artistic embellishment and spiritual compartment engaged it with the divine aura (daulat) of the ruler.

Briefly, the elephant in Southeast Asia is not just a royal animal—it is living regalia. By its decoration by artistic craftsmanship, conveyance of sacred symbolism, role in ceremonial performance, and role in diplomatic theatre, the elephant dissolves the distinctions of art, myth, and politics. It vitalizes the inert language of regalia as a moving, kinetic, and sacred visual act of kingship. In doing so, the elephant incarnates the collision of the aesthetic and authoritative, spiritual and political—a grand exemplar of how art mobilizes power. The elephant's role in Southeast Asian courts was more than utilitarian or symbolic purpose—it was an integral part of royal power, spirituality, and statecraft. As living regalia, elephants were living forms of kingship, rooted in polity aesthetics, cosmologies, and diplomatic ritual, including the Perak Sultanate. By ceremonial procession, ritualized ornament, or diplomatic gift-giving, elephants stood for the sacred and sovereign aspects of rulership. Their presence invoked divine legitimacy (daulat), narrated dynastic pomp, and addressed the cosmic order through visible, mobile performance (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Reid, 1988; Smith, 2004).

Above all, this research helps bring about the decolonial turn of political symbolism by re-routing attention away from Eurocentric models that privilege static, inanimate regalia—crowns, sceptres, and thrones, for example—and towards Southeast Asian notions of power as embodied, mobile, and animate. In Malay society, the elephant was never merely a backdrop to sovereignty but a co-performer with royal power. This reorientation unsettles hegemonic models of royal iconography centered on Western conventions (Strong, 2005; Cannadine, 2001) and opens up space for other models of political aesthetics based on movement, ritual, and sentient presence (Milner, 1982; Gullick, 1987).

By classifying elephants as living regalia, the thesis argues that Southeast Asian political symbolism is not explained by categories borrowed from elsewhere. It calls for a locality-oriented methodology that is attuned to local cosmologies, syncretic traditions, and performative authority. Ultimately, elephants were not simply carriers of kings—they were

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sovereign symbols in motion, authoritative and living co-designers of kingship's visual and ceremonial landscape

15.CONCLUSION

The elephant's role in Southeast Asian courts was more than utilitarian or symbolic use—it was a constituent feature of royal power, spirituality, and statecraft. As living regalia, elephants were living embodiments of kingship, integrated into the aesthetics, cosmologies, and diplomatic rituals of states such as the Perak Sultanate. Through ritualized procession, ceremonial embellishment, or diplomatic gift, elephants embodied the sacral and sovereign aspects of rulership. Their existence legitimated divine right (daulat) remembered dynastic greatness, and enacted the cosmic order through visible, mobile display. In identifying elephants as living regalia, we transcend Eurocentric models of royal power and instead make use of a Southeast Asian one where art, myth, and living creatures come together to maintain political theology. In the end, elephants were not merely carriers of kings—they were sovereign icons in motion, majestic, living co-architects of the visual and ceremonial landscape of kingship. By foregrounding elephants as animate regalia, this study also contributes to a decolonial reframing of political symbolism. It recentres Southeast Asian epistemologies that conceive power as relational, mobile, and embodied—contrasting with Eurocentric models privileging static, object-based regalia. This local-centered framework restores agency to both human and non-human actors in the sacred ecology of Malay kingship.

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