

# THE FACTS ABOUT *PALAD-KHIK* - TRUE AND PHALLUS

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Photographs by Chadri Chinalai

## INTRODUCTION

I used to be offended when people came into our booth at shows and laughed at the phallic-shaped amulets, called in Thai *palad-khik*, that we had on display. To me these are serious art objects as well as the creative outcome of some pretty serious beliefs. After all, I reasoned, they might not be understood as potent amulets by our western culture, but that didn't mean they didn't deserve the same respect a Thai fish-monger, hoping the five-inch carving suspended at her hip was going to assure good sales for her that day, would give them. Besides, I didn't enjoy being the laughing-stock of the show.

In any case we weren't going to stop showing them. For one thing my husband, Vichai, likes them. I don't know if he finds them empowering, or just interesting and sometimes very beautiful pieces of sculpture. Either way, though, I don't quite understand the depth of his infatuation, not to mention his total obliviousness to the standard they unwittingly set. After all many *palad-khik* are long, smooth and thick, not to mention that they appear to be in a constant and impressive state of erection. Doesn't he understand how high they raise the bar?

Or maybe it's some deep-seated and unconscious envy on my part. Don't get me wrong: I'm not looking for a confrontation with my generally non-confrontational husband. I just don't think he's thoroughly thought this through. The truth is he is caught himself between an appreciation for the aspect of *palad-khik* that relates to his Asian background - he's Thai - and the aspect of himself that has been married to an American woman and living in a western culture for just so long.

Many Thais believe *palad-khik* are not only magically protective, they are convinced that the right amulet justifies high expectations of wealth. In Asian markets in the early mornings you can see vendors pulling out their portable penises and touching their wares with them. Mangos, squashes, tee-shirts, feather dusters and soy-laden brown-glazed cooked ducks stiffly suspended by their feet - all receive the blessings of the *palad-khik* amulet.

I'm not sure if Vichai believes in all this or not. I'm not even sure if I believe in it. After thirty-eight years of marriage, we do tend to rub off on each other. I do know that he has his own personal necklace with amulets and small phallic charms and for a while he used to wear it to shows, though perhaps in the end it became more trouble than it was worth. "Just touch this," I would tell him, pointing first to one of the charms on his necklace

and then to the object I most wanted to sell. "Okay, how about this one?" I started to get used to it myself. One show he forgot to wear his necklace. "How can we expect to sell anything if you leave your *palad-khik* at home?" I complained. (Figure 1)

## *PALAD-KHIK* AND THE HEAVENLY FLOWER

In Thailand there are two main categories of talismanic phalluses. Technically the Thai word *palad-khik* refers to a group of smaller sized amulets, those that might be worn around the neck, hung at the hip or carried in one's pocket. The large phalluses of the other main group, those that are standing, inserted into or resting on specially-made bases or laid out on

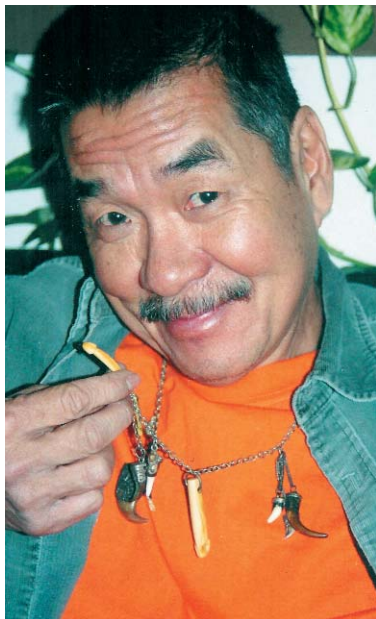


Figure 1  
Vichai Chinalai with his  
necklace of amulets.  
(Photograph by Perri Chinalai)



Figure 2  
Group of shrine pieces,  
dogmai jao, a.k.a.  
Heavenly Flowers or  
Noble Diamonds.

one's altar, are called *dogmai jao* - Heavenly Flowers. In some regions of Thailand Heavenly Flowers also were known as *khun pej*: Noble Diamonds. (Figure 2)

The etymology of the word *palad* probably comes from the Pali word, *parassawa* which means "side".<sup>1</sup> *Palad* in Thai means "someone who is next to you" or "on the side of you". Long ago, Vichai tells me, when people - especially women - saw a phallus hanging on someone's hip, they would laugh (even the Thais?!), "khik khik khik khik". Thus the word "khik" was added to "palad" to become *palad-khik*. Another story tells about a monk named Luang Por Krik who was famous for the powerful phalluses he fashioned, causing folks to add the word "Krik" to "palad", making it *palad-krik*. It was much easier to say "khik" than "krik", and - living language often taking the laziest path - the amulets became known as *palad-khik*.<sup>2</sup>





Figures 3-6  
Natural male and female  
rocks, China.

The origin of the phallic form, both man-made and as found art (*Figures 3-6*) goes back to prehistoric times. Archaeologists found stone talismans in dual male and female forms in tomb excavations in Inner Mongolia dating to as far back as the late Neolithic period (around 2900 BC).<sup>3</sup> From the Song Dynasty (960 AD) until the end of the Qing period (1911 AD), phalluses were also buried with deceased eunuchs in the belief that in their next life they would be born physically complete.<sup>4</sup> Phallic amulets of carved bone and horn and pots with phallic images, dating from 3000 to 1000 BC, were also excavated at Baan Chieng, an archaeological site in northeastern Thailand.<sup>5</sup> This may signify that the source of the original Thai *palad-khik* might, in fact, have been Thailand. However, we don't know if the archaeological finds at Baan Chieng indicate Chinese or Indian influence or concurrent development with similar Chinese amulets or the Indian male and female forms, the *lingam* and *yonis*. The phallus also emerged as a significant form in African art, and later in Japan large stone or wooden phalluses were installed in some of the shrines. Discoveries throughout the ages seem to indicate that penises (and vaginas) may have been worshipped since humanity first discovered their usefulness and throughout various regions of the world.

The meaning of the *lingam* in Indian religion and art has evolved since ancient times when it represented fertility. Later it became associated with the Hindu god, Siva, and his Sakti, or female energy. Today the *lingam* is still used as the focus of worship in temples dedicated to Siva and on Tantric altars. The earliest Thai objects probably also were ancient fertility symbols. Over time their meaning changed to become more inclusive, until today *palad-khik* and *dogmai jao* embrace a panoply of connotations. One of the earliest uses of the *palad-khik* was to protect infants and children. Hung from a cord around a newborn's waist, it was hoped that the amulet would drive away ghosts and malevolent spirits and keep the baby out of harm's way. Children, especially small boys, continued to wear *palad-khik* throughout their childhoods to protect against physical harm, like snake bites, and to ward off evil spirits,<sup>6</sup> and the practice sometimes continued on a larger scale (in all respects) into adulthood.

## MIRACLES

Stories of miracles associated with *palad-khik* and Heavenly Flowers - some quite wild - have expanded their early reputation as sources of protection. Nowadays they are credited with all manner of potency and good luck. Reports of some types of miracles are indeed so numerous as to be nearly unremarkable: for example, people wearing *palad-khik* walk out of car wrecks or a gun shooting directly at someone misfires or the bullet fails to penetrate the body.

Some of the most famous *palad-khik* came from a monk named Luang Por Ei, 1851-1932. Always interested in the black magic aspects of Buddhism and meditation, he became a monk at the age of twenty-three. After living in the temple for six years, he went into the jungle alone searching for wisdom, although periodically he ventured out to visit other monks with a reputation for the supernatural. He began to create *palad-khik* himself; then after years of experimentation, he succeeded in imbuing them with magic. Vichai says there are so many accounts of the miracles performed by Luang Por Ei's *palad-khik* that we could talk about them for two days and two nights and not finish talking about them, but the most well-known story is that his *palad-khik* can jump, swim or dive upon command.

Later Luang Por Ei founded his own temple, Wat Sataheeb in Chonburi Province. One time at the temple's annual festival a woman asked for a talisman to protect her. Luang Por Ei responded, "I don't have anything to give you but *palad-khik*," and he offered her one. The woman wasn't expecting a phallus, but courtesy demanded that she accept it. When she arrived at the dock to board the boat-taxi home, however, she tossed the unwanted amulet into the river. The journey was long and arduous and at one point she had to disembark from the larger motorized boat and hire a small single-passenger hand-paddled skiff. When she arrived at her destination, Luang Por Ei's *palad-khik* was there, waiting for her in the water at the bottom of the steps leading to her house.<sup>7</sup>

Luang Pu Tim was another illustrious monk, a contemporary of Luang Por Ei, who also experimented with the supernatural. Hearing about the sometimes miraculous nature of *palad-khik*, he tried to make his own, but no matter how long and hard he tried, he could not infuse his carvings with magic. After several years he decided to seek out Luang Por Ei to ask him what he had been doing wrong and how he would know when he had succeeded.

"You must put your entire heart into the making of the *palad-khik*," Luang Por Ei answered him cryptically. "You will know you are successful when they start to jump around." He left Luang Pu Tim to ponder his words.

Luang Pu Tim went back to his temple and tried again. However, no amount of study, meditation or effort seemed to help. After several years he heard about another monk, Luang Por Leua, also famous for the enchantment of his *palad-khik*, so he journeyed to ask his advice.

"You must put your entire heart into the making of the *palad-khik*," Luang Por Leua also answered him, unknowingly repeating the words of Luang Pu Ei. Luang Pu Tim tried again. This time when he studied, meditated and worked, he succeeded in putting all of his soul into each endeavor and his *palad-khik* began to jump and to perform miracles.

## OTHER AMAZING STORIES

One of the most outstanding uses of *palad-khik* and Heavenly Flowers is to confer prosperity, in part by making their owners so attractive that people are drawn to buy from them. From market stalls to high-class shops, the phalluses are a ubiquitous and vital presence. (*Figure 7*) Heavenly Flowers, sometimes singly, often in groups, or rarely, in the form of multi-



Figure 7  
Snacks vendor with  
*palad-khik*,  
Bangkok, 2004.





Figure 8  
Tree of phalluses,  
circa 1970s.

Figure 9  
Chili pepper vendor  
with palad-khik tree.

branched trees are placed high up on top of a cabinet or upon an altar. (Figures 8 and 9) At the start of the business day, the shop owner will worship them by lighting incense or offering flowers and food, all the while praying for good sales that day. Periodically the owner might apply gold leaf onto the heads and bodies of the amulets and shrine pieces or tie colorful strips of cloth ribbons around them.

In more transitory markets, the smaller *palad-khik* perform the same function and are worshipped with the same reverence, although perhaps in a less elaborate manner. Once he or she is done paying respect, a vendor touches the day's offerings with the *palad-khik* while invoking its assistance for the day's selling. The amulet is then restored to its place around the neck or hip, or perhaps on a keychain or in a pocket, to be worn or held throughout the rest of the day. If later on sales are not going well, the shopkeeper might refresh his or her wares by pulling out the *palad-khik* and tapping them a second or third time.

Although *palad-khik* are sometimes worn as pendants, the wearer is very careful not to mix them with figures of Buddha. It would be disrespectful to Buddha and his teaching to bring anything from below the waist in proximity to a Buddhist image or symbol in any form, whether statue, painting or pendant. For this reason it is more common to suspend the amulets at the hip than to hang them around the neck.

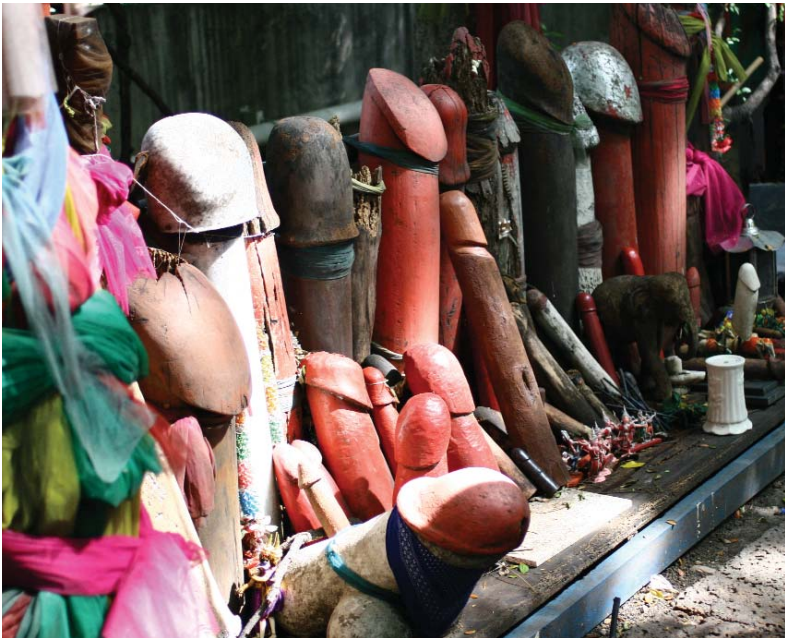
Quite a number of shrines to these talismanic potentates used to exist throughout Thailand before the late 19th century, but due to government intervention and economic expansion, few remain today. (Figures 10-13) In earlier days, Heavenly Flowers were also carried during processions to promote a good harvest. During the festivities, as a way of entertaining and paying respect to the gods, men danced holding *palad-khik* and pretended to fight each other with the amulets, like elephants engaged in combat.

*Palad-khik* and Heavenly Flowers often were donated to the shrines as offerings in response to the fulfillment of people's prayers. Certain shrines had their own special claims to fame, and some seemed more responsive to one kind of reward than another. The phalluses, in all sizes, were talked about as if they were wealthy but temperamental uncles, with their own wants and needs. "They like red flowers," one person whose prayers were answered might tell another. "Promise that you will dance for them," another might counsel.

Fervent appeals, often by women unable to conceive, might include bargaining that went something like this: "If you grant my wish to become pregnant, I promise that I will donate three Heavenly Flowers and nine *palad-khik* and I will come back and dance for you naked at midnight." Although the phallic statues and amulets at public shrines, as they are in home and business altars, are worshipped with candles, incense, ribbons of cloth and other offerings, one never knows upon visiting a shrine what else might be going on that day or night.

#### WHAT ARE PALAD-KHIK AND HEAVENLY FLOWERS MADE OF?

There are five basic groups of materials used in the making of *palad-khik* and *dogmai jao*. The most commonly used is wood. A variety of woods offer a choice of meaningful names and natures. Many of the names have dual or triple meanings, with the word referring to the type or essence of the wood and also signifying auspicious blessings. Whatever makes the



Figures 10-13  
A bi-lingual sign at a shrine in Bangkok, 2004, notes in English that basic types of offerings – "fragrant wreaths of snow-white jasmine flowers, incense sticks and pink and white lotus buds" – are accompanied by another, rather less conventional type of gift. It goes on to say, "Confronted by the extraordinary display, the shrine has automatically been concluded to be dedicated to fertility." Dwarfed by rows of dogmai jao and palad-khik, after so many litters the skinny cat in the photograph in the upper left perhaps should have considered relocating to a different neighborhood.





Figure 14  
At left:  
Hollow horn rattle found  
underwater has a two-  
tailed gecko, symbolic of  
good luck and sexual  
charisma, carved along  
its spine.  
At right:  
An anthropomorphically  
carved piece of branch  
coral required minimal  
work to take advantage  
of its natural form.

chosen wood exceptional also enhances the potency of the carvings. Besides producing his own *palad-khik*, for example, Luang Pu Tim gave his blessing to two thousand elegantly carved phalluses made by one of his disciples from the wood of a very special tree: it had been struck by lightning but still somehow remained standing.<sup>8</sup>

The second category of material employed is metal; for instance, bronze, silver or gold. The third includes precious and semi-precious stones, minerals and organic material: carnelian, amethyst, jade, emerald, ivory, horn or black, white or red coral. (Figure 14) The fourth material is stone, like sandstone, marble, alabaster or granite; and the fifth, herbal - usually a concoction of carefully selected herbs, powders and pollen from propitious flowers, all ground, mixed and molded together. The fourth and fifth kinds are not used so much any more, perhaps because the former is too hard and heavy and the latter too likely to disintegrate over the passage of time.

#### PALAD-KHIK À LA MODE

Even phallic amulets are subject to the whims of fashion. Prior to the 1950s the traditional plain and simple individual *palad-khik* might have had their unique character affirmed by a number of limited variations: the choice of material used, extra folds in the foreskin, sacred diagrams or writing called *gatha* engraved in or superficially applied to the surface; or they might have followed a particular natural form - a joint in a tree branch or piece of coral, for example. (Figures 15-18 and Figure 19) Around the 1950s, however, a new style of *palad-khik* emerged. Chunks of wood or horn were carved into spiraling snakes; humanoid figures that appeared to be standing in place or dancing; single phalluses straddled by a monkey or



Figure 15  
Palad-khik made of  
unusual woods; from  
the early to mid 1900s.



Figures 16-18  
Traditional amulets from  
the early to mid 1900s.  
Top to bottom: Brightly  
painted palad-khik: two  
have simple writing on  
them to enhance their  
potency; very special palad-  
khik carved from mortars  
that were previously owned  
and used by widows who  
had only one son; small,  
portable amulets, some  
inscribed with sacred  
writing and symbols.







Figure 19  
A pre-1950s transitional piece, this traditionally shaped palad-khik is just beginning to experience the change from simple to complex.

Figures 20-24  
Post 1950s style palad-khik.  
Left to right:  
Large wooden standing figure with phallic head, limbs and tail; amulet of wood resembling a prancing animal (collection of Ron Slowinski); chances are the dinosaur-like appearance of this standing black coral amulet is coincidental; wood phallus straddled by monkey; function follows form in this painted vine that is open to interpretation.

with the figure of a woman wrapped around them; or well-endowed crouching beasts with phallic bodies, tails and feet. (Figures 20-24)

In the 1980s things became even wilder. *Palad-khik* took a further turn away from simplicity and became a new form of one-of-a-kind talismanic folk art: semi-real, semi-abstract phallic variations often on an animal theme. The animals, some large, some small, and all symbolic themselves, added another dimension of power - thus the cleverness of the monkey or octopus, the brute strength of the bull or the intelligence of the elephant enhanced the good luck value of the simple phallus. Even the phallus itself began to appear in even greater multiples, the significance of many versus one being obvious. (Figures 25-29) The final difference in this unique trend that began in the 1950s, was that individual pieces were commissioned and then brought to the family temple or monk to be blessed, one at a time.

Throughout all the decades, however, the single phallus, carved and blessed in groups by masters or monks, continued to hold its place in the ever-changing world of style and fashion. The need for portability, especially for itinerant market vendors, and the reliance on the traditional have persisted while some stationary pieces evolved into fantastical sculptures.

#### THESE DAYS

These days *palad-khik* and *dogmai jao* continue to be seen as sources of protection from both the physical and ethereal, with an ability to deflect both harm and bad luck. Not surprisingly, they are also considered objects of supplication for love, compassion, fertility and virility. To all of these good effects, the makers sometimes draw or inscribe







Figures 25-29  
After 1980 the style of some palad-khik grew even wilder and the number of phalluses on each multiplied. The individual carvings were often in animal form.  
Top:  
A most atypical palad-khik in the shape of a knife and its sheath which when put together create the head of a crocodile.  
Left to right:  
The appearance of two bulls mating surely is not coincidental; looking like something out of a sci-fi film, there is no other way to describe this unusual wood palad-khik than as a jumble of overly-endowed elephants; a less wrinkled version of two mating animals.  
Opposite page:  
It is difficult to say if this is an octopus or jellyfish but there's no mistaking its components (collection of Russell Bush).



on them magical symbols and sacred writing to augment their power. The inscriptions vary, but generally follow a fairly standard formula with specific sacred syllables in rows along the sides of the phalluses and one, three or five sacred symbols called *na ood*<sup>9</sup> in Pali, gracing the tips. (Figures 30 and 31) Collectors study the *palad-khik* and the histories of their makers. An amulet that was produced by a highly revered monk or master and reputed to have performed or been involved in a miracle may become quite valuable.

### CONCLUSION

So as I said, people can laugh or ridicule us - I'm over it. Maybe before, I was simply being too sensitive anyway. Or perhaps if people read this article and understand the underlying history and true meaning of *palad-khik* and *dogmai jao* they will be less inclined to crack jokes about them.  
Then again, maybe I just don't get it - what is it about a place replete with penises that sends people into fits of hysteria anyway? Or am I not thinking globally enough? After all, who's to say that they wouldn't have the same reaction to a group of other body parts - feet for instance... or noses?



### Endnotes

- 1 Pakinaka, *Ganesapawnprakreung*, p. 77.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Translated from *Hongshan Culture*, Inner Mongolian University Publishing Company.
- 4 From discussions with Chinese historians.
- 5 Sor Plynoi, *Thewa Niyai*, p. 331; Hoskin, John and Jean-Lea Dugast, *The Supernatural in Thai Life*, p. 43.
- 6 Hoskin and Dugast, p. 43.
- 7 Information about Luang Por Ei is from Krasaeppra, pp. 16-18.
- 8 Pakinaka, p. 78.
- 9 Ood means something akin to "putting a cork in it", a reference perhaps to stopping a gun from firing or sealing up bad luck.

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Figures 30 and 31  
Left:  
A particular type of crouching beast palad-khik, circa 1950, each inscribed with powerful mystical yantra symbols and writing.  
Right:  
Sacred writing adorns this small Heavenly Flower, increasing the power that accrues from its form.