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SIAMESE MELTING POT

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SIAMESE MELTING POT

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THE MAKING
OF BANGKOK

EDWARD VAN ROY



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Preface

More than half a century ago, upon my initial encounter with Bangkok, I discovered a labyrinthine city of joyous confusion, the exotic Orient in all its enigmatic splendor. From my well-situated home base on Worachak Road I first explored, always on foot, my neighbourhood from Wat Saket to Wang Burapha and then gradually stretched my reconnoiterings across an ever-expanding urban terrain, reaching from the Grand Palace and Sanam Luang to Sampheng's raucous waterfront. Wandering the city's dusty byways I sought to find the order behind the clutter but was stymied at every turn. In the process of negotiating the baffling metropolis I found that many locals faced as much difficulty as I in directing me to my destination. Few street signs — and those few only in indecipherable Thai — were available to guide my way, and house numbers were aligned in no apparent sequence; even a reasonable city map was unavailable. Only many years later was I able to acquire my first reliable Bangkok street-guide (Tanya 1984), which still occupies its cherished place on my bookshelf as a memorial to those bygone days. That unforgettable experience inspired me, in my abiding conviction in the innate rationality of mankind, to continue to the present day my search for the logical underpinnings of Bangkok's apparent spatial chaos.

Similar dissonance met my efforts to identify the guiding principles of Thai culture and society. A clear sense of easy acquaintance, happy camaraderie, and calm self-effacement overrode less affable undertones of nationalist sensitivity, class prejudice, and an elemental dialectic of seniority and servility. Bangkok's social cacophony was a pervasive presence. From dancing the *ramwong* (a formerly popular Thai dance form) at a sumptuous charity ball where the capital's elite flaunted their wealth, to sharing bamboo-joints of *khao lam* (steamed sweetened sticky rice) and tin cups of *nam tan sot* (watered palm sugar) at a roadside stall with a gang of *sam-lo* (three-wheeler) taxi drivers was tantamount to crossing civilizations. Yet all were Bangkok natives, and proud of it. Searching the city's few English-language bookshops for clarification of that jumbled scenario, all I could find was an assortment of esoteric monographs on the "loosely structured" Thai social order (Evers 1969), elaborating on a curiously chaotic theory of the amiable incongruities of Thai life so evident all around me. Scholarly

research on traditional Thai social organization and its continuing evolution has progressed significantly since those days, as the subsequent chapters show, but it surely still has far to go.

Some years later, having made some progress in my grasp of Bangkok's spatial and social contours, I was fortuitously posted to temporary office quarters in the midst of the inner city's Bang Lamphu district (long before the backpacker invasion of that neighbourhood's Khao San Road). Two dramatically contrasting royal temples bracketed that market locale. The sparkling grandeur of one, Wat Bowon Niwet, put to shame the sadly squalid state of the other, Wat Chana Songkhram, where mangy dogs, scrabbling chickens, and the occasional scrawny bullock strayed the unkempt grounds. Yet both temples, I learned, were closely associated with Bangkok's former division between king (*maharat*) and viceroy (*uparat*). The baffling contrast between those two royal landmarks whetted my appetite for uncovering their untold backstory. Some of my findings on the far-reaching implications of that political anomaly of Old Bangkok are contained in the following chapters.

Roaming Bang Lamphu's maze of lanes and alleys (many of them long since eradicated in the district's ongoing modernization), I discovered the remnants of its past human geography, including residual elements of a number of old palaces, lingering signs of an old Mon community, whispers of a past Khmer presence, and vestiges of a nearby Lao settlement, not to mention the neighbourhood's still-vigorous Malay village and bustling Sino-Thai marketplace. That remarkable diversity of what I had initially thought to be nothing more than a simple Thai urban precinct raised further enticing mysteries. It soon became evident that the ethnic *mélange* so evident in Bang Lamphu's history permeated the entire city. Only many years later, having mastered Thai (to some degree) and having gained the freedom to pursue these interests full-time and across the entire cityscape, have I been able to construct a logical solution to what originally posed such a riddle.

* * *

And so this book, the result of a half-century's participant-observer immersion in the urban melting pot that has become my hometown, a city hiding a fascinating human past. The book presents an ethnohistory — a socio-cultural biography — of Old Bangkok (1782–1910), otherwise known as Ratanakosin, the capital of Siam. It traces the synergy between the city's evolving spatial design, social organization, and political plot from its eighteenth-century origins to its early-twentieth-century modernization.

It deals with a set of closely related thematic threads woven around a single topic — Old Bangkok's ethnically plural society — reaching from the former Siamese feudal state to its transformation into today's Thai nation-state.

Among those themes are the following: First, the function of the city, from its beginnings in the wake of the fall of Ayutthaya, as a haven for refugees, detention centre for war captives, and magnet for entrepreneurs and wage workers of diverse ethnicity; the contributions made by the respective ethnic communities to the city's growth and development; and the social and spatial autonomy long maintained by those ethnic groups despite their close proximity with one another and intimate relations with their elite Thai patrons. Second, the feudal structure of Old Bangkok, with the respective ethnic communities linking hierarchically to the Thai elite through a variety of functional reciprocities; the forces that in the closing decades of the nineteenth century led to the city's meteoric transformation from feudalism to nationalism, from a policy regime of "benign neglect" to one of "active intervention," and from ethnic pluralism to ideological factionalism. Third, the factors, such as economic opportunity, social proximity, intermarriage, and mass education, that facilitated cultural assimilation, in opposition to those such as religious partisanship, communal endogamy, and social isolation which supported or reinforced the retention of ethnic identity in the face of integrative pressures. And fourth, the manner in which Old Bangkok's physical design, conforming to the metaphysical, aesthetic, and utilitarian principles of the mandala, complemented the city's ethnically plural social organization; and the process whereby that symbolic schema disintegrated, just as its social corollary withered away under conditions of growing royal absolutism, intensifying bureaucratic centralization, and rising nationalism.

The ethnic constituencies of Old Bangkok covered in this book range from the Thai (elite and commons), Portuguese-Thai, Mon, Lao, Muslims (Cham, Persians, Arabs, Indians, Malays, Indonesians), and Chinese (Taechiu, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, Cantonese) to a congeries of lesser groups (Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai Yuan, Sikh, *farang*). The following chapters treat those various groups seriatim. They can be read together to gain an appreciation of the city's unfolding human history, or individually as the reader's interests in specific ethnicities may dictate. In either case, they provide a bottom-up perspective on Bangkok's evolving human tapestry to complement the top-down vision conveyed by the conventional historical literature.

Several of the following chapters contain revised versions, in whole or in part, of previously published papers on those themes. The respective publishers are thanked for their permission to reuse those materials here:

- “The Portuguese in Siam: A Quinquacentennial Retrospect”, *Asian Review* 20 (2007), pp. 125–64.
- “Sampheng: From Ethnic Isolation to National Integration”, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 23, no. 1 (2008), pp. 1–29.
- “Under Duress: Lao War Captives at Bangkok in the Nineteenth Century”, *Journal of the Siam Society* 97 (2009), pp. 43–68.
- “Safe Haven: Mon Refugees at Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok from the 1500s to the 1800s”, *Journal of the Siam Society* 98 (2010), pp. 151–84.
- “Rise and Fall of the Bangkok Mandala”, *Journal of Asian History* 45, nos. 1–2 (2011), pp. 85–118.
- “Contending Identities: Islam and Ethnicity in Old Bangkok”, *Journal of the Siam Society* 104 (2016), pp. 169–202.

* * *

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