

Review Article

Ethnicity and the galactic polity: Ideas and actualities in the history of Bangkok

Justin Thomas McDaniel

Siamese melting pot: Ethnic minorities in the making of Bangkok

By EDWARD VAN ROY

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2017. Pp. 296. Illustrations, Figures, Tables, Bibliography, Index.

Edward Van Roy's *Siamese melting pot: Ethnic minorities in the making of Bangkok* is a tour de force and one of the most important books on the history of Bangkok and late-modern Thai history ever to be published. It is clearly written and presented, it provides excellent maps, and brings to light little-known sources and surprising facts about the history of the most iconic neighbourhoods in the city. It exposes the histories of various Muslim, Mon, Lao, Vietnamese, Chinese, European, Indian, and other communities in late Ayutthaya and Bangkok, as well as highlights various ways of seeing Bangkok as a feudal city, a vibrant port-city, or a galactic polity. Van Roy also reveals the complexities of defining ethnicity and class in Bangkok's changing neighbourhoods. In this review article I will look closely at two issues Van Roy exposes that need some theoretical and critical interrogation: the 'galactic polity/*mandala*', and 'ethnicity'. Then I will provide a short vignette about the Chettiar community in Bangkok and the idea of Hinduism in Bangkok history that both supports and supplements Van Roy's excellent research. I write this not to discount or criticise Van Roy's monumental achievement, but because I believe a book this important to the field deserves serious attention and engagement.

Whither the galactic polity?

Unlike most scholarly studies of urban history, Van Roy leaves the theoretical reflections and critical questions about how to think about the history of ethnic diversity, city planning, and foreign influence on the history of late modern Bangkok largely until the very end of his book. In this way, they seem less like guiding principles and more like reflections and afterthoughts. Clearly, Van Roy feels more comfortable in the wonderful world of details and curiosities than he does in the realm of theory. We, the readers, benefit from this.

His book comes off less as a didactic prescription of how to understand the history of Bangkok and more of a delightful stroll through the network of shifting

Justin Thomas McDaniel is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Correspondence in connection with this article may be addressed to: jmcdan@sas.upenn.edu.

neighbourhoods that make up one of the planet's great cities. I continually found myself thrilled to learn a fascinating tidbit about a street that I had walked down many times or a palace or monastery that I thought I knew well. While I have been researching the history of the Portuguese, Indian, Lao, Persian, Vietnamese, and Tamil histories of Bangkok for many years as a kind of hobby and thought I knew a lot, I was struck by the level of care Van Roy took in assembling his evidence. Even the most seasoned historian of Bangkok will learn many things from Van Roy's years of service to the field. The legendary Thai scholar Anake Nawigamune may be the only person I have read that knows the streets of old Bangkok better. The problem though with leaving theoretical reflections until the end of the book is that it is hard to determine where Van Roy stands. Should we see Bangkok as a mandala, as an ethnically diverse port-city, as the centre of a feudal monarchy, or as a melting pot? It seems that Van Roy doesn't quite know himself or, perhaps, is telling us not to settle on one definition (if this is the case, I concur) and enjoy the process of speculating and reflecting.

Regardless of how Van Roy wants us to consider Bangkok, I want to argue for what it isn't. It is not a *mandala* in anything but a purely symbolic idea that was abandoned early in the Chakri Dynasty. The competing terms 'mueang' (city-state), 'mandala' (galactic polity), 'theatre state', and others have been applied to cities in Asia for decades. In this short review, I cannot review all of these terms, but they are models scholars have employed to understand the ways in which royal symbolism, architectural decisions, and ethnic and class divisions have factored into the design of certain cities' historical cores — Angkor, Ayutthaya, Beijing, Bagan, Madurai, Kathmandu, and Kyoto being perhaps the best examples. No matter how we define the ways in which the monarchs and planners of these cities laid out palaces, reliquaries, monasteries, parade grounds, and canals, it is evident that spatial and temporal authenticity and connecting the microcosm of the city to the macrocosm of the universe was essential in their decision-making.¹

Perhaps the most enduring cosmological cum topographical model in defining cities in Asia is the *mandala* (Sanskrit: *maṇḍala*/Thai: *monthon*). Since Van Roy ends his book with a reflection on this term, I will offer some thoughts on it here. The best study on the appropriateness of the concept of the *mandala* in Thai historiography is Stanley J. Tambiah's *World conqueror and world renouncer*, where Tambiah defines the mandala as a 'galactic polity'.² When I was Tambiah's student we clashed about the usefulness of this term in Thailand, but it is still a very good term to think with. In short, a *mandala* is a kingdom defined by a strong urban centre, ritually and symbolically reinforced as well as mythologically enhanced, and ruled by a god-king (*dharmaraja*; *cakravartin*). Before the eighteenth century there were only vague understandings of borders to these galactic polities in Asia, and power simply radiated out like heat from the centre. Architecturally, topographically, and cosmologically these galactic polities — based on configurations of 5 (four spokes

1 See further, Justin McDaniel, 'Transformative history: The *Nihon Ryoiki* and the *Jinakalamalipakaranam*', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 25, 1 (2002): 151–207.

2 Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 102.

coming out of a central hub), 9, or 33 — were concentric models as seen in Negeri Sembilan, Mataram, Ayutthaya, Hanthawaddy/Pegu, and Thaton, among others. Tambiah summed up his approach in a 1977 response to reviewers and critics of his studies on Buddhism in Thailand:

For better or for worse, I consider my writings on Buddhism, society, and polity as situated at the confluence of anthropology, indology, and history the challenge ... has been to find my way towards a historical anthropology informed by indological learning ... let us all applaud the efforts of those linguists, philologists and grammarians who have dedicated their careers to composing meticulous translations of texts and painstaking glossaries and dictionaries ... for the benefit and enlightenment of scholars in other disciplines.³

From there he goes on to praise the *Sacred books of the East* series of translations and the Pali Text Society. His turn towards Indic texts and Indologists takes him away from local texts and local scholars. He extensively cites Pali canonical texts and the great Indologists: André Bareau, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Louis de la Vallée-Poussin, among others. He looks past Thai history to Indian history, past Thai language sources to Pali and Sanskrit sources, and sees that Buddhist civilisational force was actually founded in Brahmanic cosmology and Vedic ideas of kingship. Tambiah's turn towards Indology revealed (largely non-Buddhist) structural aspects of Thai royal symbolism, cosmology, and social organisation that influenced the work of Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, Yukio Hayashi, Richard O'Connor and many others.

Like Tambiah, Van Roy seems to force the model of the *mandala*/galactic polity to work too hard to accommodate a city like Bangkok that was never more than symbolically a *mandala* with the god Indra/the king and Mount Meru/city pillar (*lak mueang*) at its centre. He seems to know this though and his own evidence argues against him. He writes that:

Premodern Siam was replete with examples of cultural borrowing and adaptation from the Brahman tradition of South Asia. In Old Bangkok, the heir to that tradition examined in this book, application of the mandala as the template of symmetrical urban space was tacitly accepted ... the mandala provided the essential template for the city's original physical structure and social organization. (p. 250)

Yet, throughout the book, he shows how quickly and painlessly that structure was abandoned repeatedly for what he calls 'petty pragmatic reasons' (p. 250). Then he criticises scholars like Sunait Chutintaranond, Chris Baker, Neil Englehart, and Maurizio Peleggi for their 'blunt assertions' that the *mandala* model simply does not work for Bangkok (p. 251). His counter-evidence remains allusive, however. Van Roy seems to waver between seeing the symbolic centre as part of a larger symbolic *mandala*, which included a central circle encompassing parts of both sides of the Chao Phraya River (p. 5), and detailing clear evidence to the contrary, such as the city wall which was determined by the river's flow, for example, when he writes:

3 Stanley Tambiah, 'The galactic polity: The structure of traditional kingdoms in Southeast Asia', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 293, 1 (1977): 69–97.

‘supporting the specious claim that the entire Vietnamese community was situated within the city wall (contradicting the city’s *mandala* principles)’ (p. 207).

Indeed Van Roy demonstrates that the *mandala* was never much more than a symbolic ideal and that the city wall was a practical necessity of a city founded by war refugees and the remnants of the Ayutthaya ruling class. He shows that the city’s symbolic centre was moved from Thonburi to its present location only two weeks after the founding of the city for defensive purposes. Furthermore, after the move, he shows that the *mandala* model did not last long and had been fundamentally altered thrice during the first reign of the Chakri Dynasty. The city had to be expanded to accommodate waterways, swamp drainage, and worries of ‘imminent attack’. He also states strangely that this *mandala* was overlooked by the ‘great celebratory monument (*phra prang*) of Wat Arun [Temple of the Dawn], erected in the Second Reign as a visionary rendering of Mount Meru’ (p. 4). This is a very odd statement considering that the *mandala* model does not require overlooking monuments.⁴ Furthermore, competing monuments symbolising Mount Meru, like Phu Khao Thong (Golden Mountain), outside the centre of the supposed *mandala* were built much later and for other practical reasons. Indeed, if the actual centre (*axis mundi*/Mount Meru) was really that important symbolically for the Chakri kings, they could have easily enlarged the city pillar, which sits in an oft-forgotten, hard-to-visit traffic circle to the side of the Grand Palace. The palace could have been built around it. The city pillar could also figure more in the ritual, tourist, and historical literature of the city if the *mandala* concept was so important. Except for a minor annual ceremony, the supposed sacred centre of the city has been long forgotten and is a minor monument compared to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (‘stolen’ from the Lao), Wat Arun, Wat Chetuphon/Pho, Wat Suthat, Wat Kalayanamit, Wat Benjamaphit, Wat Rakhang, and others.

Within the first four reigns (and certainly after), the royal family itself has lavished monastic and palatial building funds far outside the symbolic centre that did not follow any strict observance of the *mandala* symbolism. Furthermore, Van Roy states that a ‘sizeable Chinese immigrant community was evicted from the delimited area [of the city pillar/symbolic centre]’ of the city, but then he shows that within the first 50 years of the kingdom, members of ethnic groups like the Malay, Mon, Vietnamese, Chinese, Lao, Indian communities were well-established (largely through the resettling of war captives/slaves) and the granting of land within the supposed sacred-centre (see maps, p. 5). Many of these groups were not only war captives from kings Rama I and Rama III’s military campaigns in the Malay, Khmer, Cham, Vietnamese, Lanna, and Lao regions, but also ethnic groups (especially Muslims) that abandoned Ayutthaya when the Burmese invaded in 1767 and who were some of the city’s earliest residents (for example, see pp. 137, 142, 152). Indeed, Van Roy’s own evidence shows that Bangkok was ethnically diverse even before Rama I took the throne and established the city pillar. One could even argue that the early Chakri kings, with their Mon, Persian, and Chinese blood,

4 Wat Arun was placed there for other more practical reasons and its *phra prang* was largely built under the third reign in place of two former temples; it is not Siamese, but Chinese, Persian, and Khmer in its architecture, symbolism, and design.

were foreign invaders into an ethnically diverse set of villages that was turned into Bangkok/Thonburi and that the ethnic minorities of the early city were the Siamese (something Van Roy acknowledges himself) (p. 20). Within the first 100 years of Bangkok, ethnic communities were not only an essential part of the original *mandala* circle, but Malay, Mon, and Lao communities were within the original city fortress — whose walls were largely built by foreign workers (see pp. 111 and 119). The *mandala* as an idea was simply mapped over an already diverse urban core by an already ethnically diverse royal family.

It was not just that ‘foreign’ ethnic communities were at the very heart of the *mandala*, but that their symbols and family members were part of the ruling Chakri Dynasty itself. The Emerald Buddha, the palladium of the kingdom, was, of course, a Lanna image that had been moved to Laos and then taken as war booty to Bangkok. There were also other Lao Buddha images in royal temples in Bangkok that Van Roy does not mention. Wat Sraphum (or more properly: Wat Pathum Wanaram Ratchawihan) is striking. It sits in the centre of the busiest high-end commercial district in Bangkok — Siam Square. This is the equivalent of Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles, the Champs-Élysées in Paris, or Orchard Road in Singapore. There are no less than nine luxury department stores within two blocks of the monastery. The Royal Thai Police headquarters complex is directly across the street. The high-rises surrounding it cast shadows over the entire grounds. The main juncture for the BTS Skytrain is some 460 metres from its front entrance. Princess Sirindhorn’s palace is behind the monastery. Despite its busy location, the monastery is actually a ‘forest’ monastery of the Thammayut (Mon) lineage. It also was a place far outside the centre of the original city in which King Mongkut (Rama IV) wanted to establish an important temple. In this way, the *mandala* was forced to shift and important royal connections were brought to the Lao community it seems, not vice versa. The monastery was originally built in a swampy area outside of the main city along the Saen Saep Canal in the 1840s. It was also an area that Lao refugees were forcibly settled after the wars with Laos between 1778 and 1827. It is ironic that this undesirable and overgrown malarial district in the suburbs of Bangkok would become over the next 150 years the country’s financial centre. It became symbolically and ritually important long before that. Indeed, the three main Buddha images (Luang Pho Soem, Luang Pho Saen, and Luang Pho Sai), along with dozens of smaller ones at the monastery, are proudly noted as Lao war booty stolen in 1827 and placed at the monastery in 1865.⁵

Across the river, another Lao image that was brought to Bangkok was placed at Wat Hong, a few hundred metres south of Wat Arun and next to the Ton Son Mosque (originally known as the Kudi Yai mosque/masjid). These foreign images were symbolically and ritually important and connected directly with patronage of the Chakri royal family. The Ton Son/Kudi Yai mosque was a former centre of royal power and wealth. The original mosque Kudi Yai was founded in 1688 by the Cham and for a short time, an important Muslim official under Taksin, Chao

5 See descriptions of the movement of these Lao images in King Mongkut’s chronicle, *Phra Ratchaphongsawadan Krunggratanakosin Ratchakan thi 4* [Royal history of Bangkok under the reign of King Rama IV] (Bangkok: Cremation volume for Mormchao Chongkonni Watthanawong, 1965), pp. 98, 152, 319, and 384–91.

Phraya Sri Ongkaraksa (great grandfather of Queen Srisulalai, see below), resided there.⁶ It is in the middle of Kudi Yai, an area with remnants of the Cham, Malay and Persian Muslim communities. Very close by, of course, are the main Portuguese Catholic Church of Santa Rosa, a Chinese shrine to Kwan Yin and other deities, the resting place of General Taksin's ashes and monument (the founder of Bangkok after Ayutthaya) and the Royal Thai Navy Headquarters. It was also next to the former location of the Thonburi Grand Palace.⁷ Ton Son mosque was rebuilt in 1827 in a style similar to the Dusit Grand Palace (the mosque prominently displays a drawing of this older building in its entranceway) during the reign of King Rama III, but in 1952 this building was replaced by the present building, which features a more classical Muslim minaret. This erased the physical memory of its royal sponsorship, but through interviews, I discovered that the local community is very aware of this connection today. The entire area was essential for royal power in the first three reigns. Indeed, Kudi Jin, across the canal from the Ton Son Mosque, was named after a Chinese shrine and home for Mahayana priests, most likely on the grounds of present-day Wat Kalayanamit — a temple directly connected to the Chinese community on land given to King Rama III by a wealthy Chinese family. As Van Roy notes, it was not until the move of the royal shipyards about a kilometre away that the area declined (p. 138). However, in early Bangkok history, this area could be seen as much as a centre of power in the early history of Bangkok as Ratanakosin Island and East Thonburi (the supposed centre of the *mandala*) and arguably was the important centre in the city for trade, military power, and wealth concentration. This is one of the many reasons it seems strange that he does not see the problems with the *mandala* as a useful concept for the study of Bangkok history.

Yet another example that questions the actual functioning power or guiding principles of the *mandala* is the fact that prominent Muslim families, mosques, and family members were part of the Chakri royal family. Even though Van Roy has an excellent section on Persian, Cham, Malay, and other Muslim communities (in one of the best researched chapters) and their history in Bangkok, he strikingly does not mention the fact that King Rama III, the greatest single sponsor of temples and palaces, as well as the greatest military leader in Bangkok's history, had a Muslim mother. He mentions Queen Srisulalai once, but fails to mention that she was a descendant of Sultan Sulaiman. Sultan Sulaiman was a Persian Muslim who himself was the son of Dato Mogol, a Persian who founded the Kingdom of Singkora (not Patthalung and Songkhla) in southern Thailand in the early 1600s. Sultan Sulaiman ruled that kingdom from 1620 to 1668 and it was host to Dutch, Persian, Portuguese, Malay, Japanese, and other traders and resisted against Ayutthayan rule in several battles. Sultan Sulaiman's sons, Mustafa, Hasan, and Hussein, could not resist Ayutthayan rule, however, and were forced to take up prominent positions in the Ayutthayan

6 Relatives of Queen Srisulalai are buried in the cemetery of Ton Son mosque, and their graves can be visited today.

7 Thank you to Sri Chalaidecha (an administrator at the mosque) for pointing this out to me and showing me photos and letters from members of the Thai royal family on their visits. See also an edition of the magazine published by the mosque, featuring a visit of King Rama VIII (Ananda Mahidol) and his brother, King Rama IX (Bhumipol) — *Warasan thi ni Ton Son* [Ton Son Magazine] 10 (Aug. 2549 [2006]) that discusses the royal connection to the mosque.

court in exchange for their kingdom's independence. Chao Chom Mandariam (from the Arabic name: Maryam) was the daughter of Phra Chonnipheng who was descended from Hasan and the wife of Phra Chongajan, the leader of Nonthaburi (just north of Bangkok). Chao Chom Mandariam was one of the wives of King Rama II and her son was elevated above the first queen's son, Mongkut (eventually King Rama IV), for a number of reasons that are too complicated and controversial to describe here.⁸

King Rama III did not deny or hide his mother's religion or ethnicity. Indeed, he promoted it openly. His very first act as king, before any military or building plans, was to elevate his mother as Queen Srisulalai, making her the highest-ranking Muslim in Thai royal history. Second, he built a mosque in her honour, not far from Ton Son mosque. The queen's mosque, Masjid Bang Luang, which Van Roy mentions (p. 139) but does not connect to her, is known as Kudi Khao (White Religious Building) locally. Local officials and neighbours proudly talk about their royal connections. Their mosque is unique, because it is in the design of a Thai Buddhist monastery of the Rama III period with a few notable changes in colour, placement of the altar — to face Mecca — and number of pillars. The Muslim *minbar* and *mirop* inside the mosque are of a mixed Chinese–Persian design and the flowers on the architrave are Chinese, similar to other Rama III period Buddhist monasteries like Wat Nang, Wat Ratchaorot, Wat Kalayanamit among many others. King Rama III had built it to replace a former Cham mosque dating back to 1767.⁹ His mother's Muslim heritage was celebrated during her life and her family was well-supported. She received a full royal funeral in 1837 at the Dusit Throne Hall of the Grand Palace and her ashes were put in a Golden Urn (Phra Got) like those of her husband the king.¹⁰ Even though she supposedly never 'converted' to Buddhism, it seems she was given a Buddhist funeral and cremation. A major monastery, Wat Chaloeprakiat-worawihan, was subsequently built in Nonthaburi in honour of the Queen's parents (who were also Muslim) and the queen herself.¹¹ Therefore, we have a Muslim queen who was treated as a Buddhist after her death, but honoured for her heritage by her son during her lifetime. The family remained prominent through the years; one of her descendants was the famous commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army and prime minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh.

Van Roy should not be faulted for not describing Queen Srisulalai in his chapter on Muslims in Bangkok, because, it may have associated her with 'indigenized Persians' (p. 142). This might also explain why there are so few references (pp. 121, 146) to the Persian Bunnag family, perhaps the second most powerful family in Bangkok's history, who had long converted to Buddhism and had their own sponsored temple, Wat Prayun (whose decorative iron fences were originally in the Grand Palace as a gift from the British), on the edge of the same Kudi Jin area where

8 See Phra Bhiksu Gaisri Kittisiri Chanthonpanya, *Ratchakan thi 3 haeng boromchakri mahakasatanu-son* [King Rama III Memorial Book](Chiang Mai: Suthin, 2551 [2008]), esp. pp. 75–91.

9 I also thank Thongchai Likhitpornawan and Anake Nawigamune for taking me there on a visit and introducing me to the imam and his family.

10 Chao Phraya Thipakorawong, *Phra ratchaphongsawadan krunggratanakosin ratchakan thi 3* [trans.], 7th ed. (Bangkok: Krom Silpakorn, 2547 [2004]), p. 75.

11 Wat Nang Nong, a Buddhist monastery in Thonburi, was also dedicated to his Muslim mother.

prominent Portuguese, Cham, Persian, and Chinese religious buildings are located. However, the fact that prominent Bunnags led the important Western Trade Department and controlled the highest positions in foreign ministry and military circles in the nineteenth century shows that their Persian Muslim connections were recognised. The Western Trade Department oversaw Siam's relations with India and Persia/Iran. Even today, the Bunnags are a well-respected family with prominent positions. Since Queen Srisulalai was posthumously 'converted' to Buddhism and the Bunnags had converted in the Ayutthayan period Van Roy does not see them as ethnically foreign (it is also strange that every other chapter of this book is organised by ethnic rubrics: Chinese, Lao, etc., but this chapter is organised by religion: Islam). This was probably a difficult choice for Van Roy and shows the complicated relationship between religion and ethnicity in Bangkok and in this book, as I will describe below.

For now, what is important is that the story of Queen Srisulalai shows the difficulty with using the *mandala* concept when discussing Bangkok's ethnic, religious, symbolic, and political history — the very centre of the kingdom was physically and ethnically diverse from the very beginning. In this way, Van Roy's own very well-argued book falls victim to Tambiah's mistake — assuming that Brahmanic/Indological cosmology and symbolism (albeit filtered through Khmer, Javanese, and Tamil intermediaries and interpreters) actually mattered in practical terms to General Taksin and the Chakri kings. Indeed Van Roy's work is so refreshing because it shows the fascinating results of the 'petty practical' decisions that leaders, monks, architects, business owners, and immigrants have to make because of the realities of water management, trading partners, conflicting landownership claims, intermarriage, and warfare.

As I argue in *Architects of Buddhist leisure*, we need to look at history, especially in cities, as a history of the ways certain historical agents 'get stuck at local optima'.¹² They settle on a series of small 'goods' and abandon the optimal 'perfects' that they initially wanted to reach in the end. Along the way, many agents have to develop alternative plans or, in computational-speak — 'low-level adaptive algorithms' — and give up ideal outcomes or overarching models.¹³ Sometimes lives and material creations are simply the product of a series of local optima. Architects have to settle on a series of local optima as do buildings. Buildings are never places fixed in time that begin at the golden-shovel ceremony or end at the ribbon-cutting. They are ever-evolving. Van Roy's book shows this perfectly and the theoretical overtures to the *mandala* concept seem arbitrary and distracting even though this is one of the terms he claims his book was designed to 'defend' (p. 235). In this way, he is similar to the great Tambiah. Tambiah respected and even celebrated the complexity and messiness of ethnographic and historical work. Even though he has been labelled a structuralist in numerous reviews and studies, he often built structures simply to dismantle them. He was a vocal critic of other structuralists, especially Melford Spiro, and tried to complicate any model he dreamed up with ugly political and economic realities, historical anomalies, and cognitive contradictions. His field notes and highly-skilled observational

12 Justin T. McDaniel, *Architects of Buddhist leisure: Socially disengaged Buddhism in Asia's museums, monuments, and amusement parks* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), p. 81.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

acumen betrayed his most elaborate schema. He acknowledges this himself (undoubtedly after some of criticism of his book):

In this analysis of the traditional kingdoms of Southeast Asia as pulsating galactic polities, I hope I have escaped being impaled on the horns of a dilemma by not resorting to any of the following frameworks, to the exclusion of others: 1) the 'archaic' cosmological mentality which entails the acceptance of the galactic structure as a given cultural system that serves as its own explanation without resort to historical or sociological factors, i.e., an extreme form of priority attributed to the cultural order than verges on idealism; (2) a simple-minded determinism which believes it can directly and pragmatically generate the political and ideological superstructure of the galactic polity from a type of ecological and economic base; (3) a model of patrimonial domination that focuses on the imperatives of power and political control as the true arena for the emergence of the galactic structure; (4) a certain kind of laissez faire utilitarianism as portrayed by the so-called 'central place' theory ...¹⁴

Ethnicity and the idea of ethnicity

Van Roy's use of the *mandala* concept overshadows perhaps his sophisticated use of ethnicity as a lens through which to understand the history of late-modern Bangkok (i.e. 'ethnohistory', see p. 234). He effectively and often brilliantly shows that one cannot begin to understand Bangkok without seeing it as essentially diverse and not a Siamese city that happens to have some other ethnicities because of historical circumstance and benign acceptance. He undertakes an 'ethnology' of Bangkok in Geertzian terms to see how ethnicity undergirds the history of every neighbourhood. Not since Leonard Andaya's masterful *Leaves of the same tree: Trade and ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (2008) has a historical study of Southeast Asia taken ethnicity so seriously and as well as a conceptual category. Like Andaya, whose book he surprisingly does not cite, Van Roy sees ethnicity not as an 'identity stamped on the soul ... [but as an] aspect of learned behavior ... a highly malleable social construct'. (p. 235)

There are many things to praise here. I will only mention what I believe are the two real strengths of his book in regards to ethnohistory. First, Van Roy shows that non-Siamese ethnic groups were not simply historical curiosities, but central in the intellectual, economic, social, and cultural history of Bangkok. For example, arguably the most respected and influential scholar monk of nineteenth-century Bangkok history was actually half-Vietnamese. Somdet Phra Paramanuchit Jinorot (also known as Prince Wasukri, 1790–1853) was the supreme patriarch of Thai Buddhism (Phra Sangkharat) and the son of King Rama I and one of his royal concubines, Jui, a Vietnamese noblewoman and daughter of Ong Wang-tai (Thai title: Phraya Phakdinuchit), one of several high-ranking Vietnamese royals who escaped Vietnam after the Tay Son peasant rebellion of 1778. Prince Nguyen Anh also gave his sister to King Rama I as a concubine and he went on to return to Vietnam and rose to become the famed Emperor Gia Long who united Vietnam, while his sister built one of the first Vietnamese Buddhist monasteries in Bangkok (pp. 207–9).

14 Tambiah, 'The galactic polity': 91.

Many members of the Lao royalty and commoners also held prominent positions in the early reigns of the Chakri Dynasty. Van Roy shows that after the defeat of Vientiane in 1779, many of the Lao elite were resettled in Bangkok and were ‘permitted to retain their positions as vassal rulers and ranking officials’ (p. 107). Lao artisans were valued in the Royal Artisans’ Department and served in the Siamese court as architects, goldsmiths, etc. Princess Khamwaen of Laos was elevated to the rank of First-Class Royal Consort and became a confidante of King Rama I (p. 113). She sponsored the building of two prominent Lao monasteries in Bangkok — Wat Daoadoeng and Wat Sangkhajai. These were two of several Lao monasteries in Bangkok’s history. Prince Tissa of Laos was awarded the lucrative ‘Bangkok spirits monopoly (*akon sura*)’ (p. 112).

Other prominent foreigners include the Portuguese envoy Carlos Manuel de Silveira, who was elevated to the noble title of Luang Aphai Wanit and was key in building the military of early Bangkok (p. 58), and Princess Roja (Siri Rochana) of the Lanna Kingdom (now northern Thailand), who was elevated to the rank of queen, as consort of the viceroy Bunma (p. 214). There were foreigners like the well-known Bishop Pallegoix of France who was a close adviser to King Rama IV, Dr. Dan Beach Bradley of the United States who was a royal physician and influential in the birth of printing in Thailand, and, of course Anna Leonowens, who wrote the famous book, *The English governess at the Siamese court*, which was published in 1870 through the help of New England abolitionists.¹⁵ Her story was made famous by Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical (and later film adaptation), *The King and I*.¹⁶ The list could go on and on to include prominent foreigners not mentioned by Van Roy like the royal photographer, Robert Lenz of Germany; Ekaterina Desnitskaya (Katya) of Russia who married Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath (40th child of King Rama V/Chulalongkorn) and bore the first half-European/half-Siamese child into a Siamese royal family in 1905; Annibale Rigotti, the Italian architect of Siam’s first bank, the reconstructed Portuguese Santa Cruz Church, and several other important royal buildings; and, of course, the great Florentine artist, Corrado Feroci, who moved to Thailand in 1923. This Italian national ended up becoming a Thai citizen in 1944, adopting a Thai name (Silpa Bhirasri), and having a state funeral in 1962. He is a national hero in Thailand. He founded and directed the first professional art school, which eventually became the first university dedicated to the arts in Thailand. He is considered the ‘father of Thai art’. He designed many of the prominent statues of the royal family and a number of important Buddhist and national monuments. Of course, I am not including any foreign influence after 1940, considering that Van Roy’s book largely is about ethnic diversity in Bangkok before the Second World War.

Second, although Van Roy does not explicitly state it, he shows well how religion and ethnicity do not necessarily go hand-in-hand in Bangkok’s history. He has two

15 Leonowens was Anglo-Indian (Indian/Welsh), not a governess, and never lived in England.

16 See, for example, Alfred Habegger, *Masked: The life of Anna Leonowens, schoolmistress at the Court of Siam* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014). Susanne Kerekes and I recently studied the influence of Dr Dan Beach Bradley’s wife on manuscript collecting in Bangkok. See Susanne Ryuyin Kerekes and Justin McDaniel, ‘Siamese manuscript collections in the United States’, in *Collections and collectors in the history of Siamese manuscripts*, ed. Justin McDaniel, special issue, *Manuscript Studies* 2, 1 (2017): 202–38.

well-researched sections on Vietnamese and Khmer Christians (he also has larger sections on Vietnamese Buddhists in Bangkok). He looks at the Vietnamese Catholic community descended from more than two hundred war captives in the 1830s resettled in the area formerly known as Ban Yuan (Vietnamese Area/Village), off Soi Mitrakam (near Samsen Road and the present National Library). While most Vietnamese Buddhists were settled in other areas in Kanchanaburi and other parts of Bangkok, this small Vietnamese Catholic community flourished here and still survives today, although most of its members no longer speak Vietnamese and the local Catholic School has largely ethnically Thai students.¹⁷ Vietnamese ethnic pride is still present though, especially for church-goers at St Francis Xavier Church (built in 1863). Unlike most Vietnamese Buddhists, Van Roy notes that the Vietnamese Catholics largely intermarried with Thais in the area.

Van Roy also has a short section describing the Khmer Catholic community. Four or five hundred Catholics were brought from Cambodia to Bangkok in the first reign (1781) and many of these were ethnically Portuguese, but some were Khmer converts to Catholicism. The church was locally referred to as Bot Ban Khamen (Church of the Khmer Village). They were settled in Ban Portuket in the Samsen area of Bangkok. There was actually an earlier Portuguese Church (the Dominican Church of the Immaculate Conception) built in 1673 under the reign of King Narai of Ayutthaya (p. 62). I wish there was more about the existing church building in the book. Known as 'Wat Noi' (Little Temple), it was built in 1834 and replaced by the new church in 1883, and was where Bishop Pallegoix once resided. Wat Noi has been transformed into a small private museum, only open by appointment and for special occasions.¹⁸ The museum has a wealth of information about the Catholic community, including nearly every death record, Portuguese ivory images, silver and brass ritual objects for mass (several that look to be made in Goa), cremation volumes documenting the lives of individual Thai Catholics in the neighbourhood, travel accounts of holy sites in Israel and Italy, and the like. These are primarily from the 1930s to the 1950s and are in Thai, with a few books in Latin like the *Missale Romanum*, as well as a few hymnals in English published by Westminster Press (Philadelphia). Some more detail on the impressive Catholic statuary would have also helped show the contributions of the community to religious art and material culture in the city.

What I found important about these sections, as well as his sections on the Lao and Cham, is that he shows well how religion, ethnicity, language, and customs remained separate in some neighbourhoods and became thoroughly blended in others. It is very difficult based on Van Roy's detailed evidence to state unequivocally that there was a particular way that ethnic groups have been assimilated and controlled under the Chakri in Bangkok's first 150 years. This is why I found the choice of title 'melting pot' unfortunate, as he clearly shows that Bangkok was not always a melting pot — it could be argued that it was a 'salad' a 'honeycomb', or a 'mosaic', or, as I like to say, a 'Jackson Pollock' in different neighbourhoods at different times.

17 I thank several teachers there for details about the school's history and student body.

18 I have visited Wat Noi twice (thanks to Arthid Sheravanichkul for arranging the trip the first time) and document its contents extensively in a forthcoming publication.

However, in his Mon section (which I found enlightening in general) he does not point out well enough that certain ethnicities have had a symbolic power far beyond their actual numbers or political/religious/social power in Bangkok's history. He has a long section (pp. 99–104) discussing the 'fading of the Mon ethnicity', in terms of population due to a natural erosion of group identity and language through intermarriage and public schooling (I would add the fact that the Mon are a stateless people who are often in a precarious position in Burma). This is true, for example, it is very difficult to find Mon language teachers in Bangkok (I have tried!) and there were few Mon in positions of actual institutional power after the end of the nineteenth century. However, in many ways, I would argue, the Mon hold a place of great prestige in the minds of many Bangkokians, especially devout Buddhists. On this point, Van Roy only makes three brief mentions, spread out in different chapters, about the founding of the Thammayut lineage/sect (Dhammayuttika Nikaya) by King Mongkut (Rama IV) in 1833 (before he rose to the throne, when he was a monk). King Mongkut himself said that he had to create a new lineage through the Mon, because most Siamese monks he witnessed did not follow what he saw as the proper monastic code (*pātimokkha*). He was inspired by Phra Sumetthamuni — the abbot of a Mon monastery, Wat Bowon Mongkhon — and created this new lineage at Wat Samorai, a Mon monastery, near the residence, coincidentally (or perhaps not) of the above mentioned Ban Portuket/Ban Bot Khamen and the residence of Bishop Pallegoix (pp. 61, 82, 89–90).¹⁹ It was a strange location, aside from the fact that it was a non-royal temple, for a future king to reside.

Mongkut was not merely inspired by the Mon — he worked to incorporate their Buddhist knowledge and language into the heart of Siamese Buddhism. For example, in approximately 1841 he invented the Ariyaka script. From my archival research and orthographic comparisons, Ariyaka is a radical adaptation of two scripts: Mon and Greek, which are two languages that the polyglot king studied as a monk and as a king, with foreign missionaries (Bishop Pallegoix being the most influential) and with Thai experts.²⁰ Intensely interested in other forms of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Burma (including the Mon), and Cambodia, King Mongkut was attempting to reform Siamese monastic discipline on the basis of what he believed were universal and 'original' standards. He may have developed the script because the one factor that ties the Buddhist communities of South and Southeast Asia is the Pali language. He

19 Surprisingly, Van Roy does not discuss the importance of Wat Paramai at Koh Kret, a largely Mon island in the Chao Phraya a few miles north of Bangkok with an impressive collection of Mon manuscripts.

20 See two books produced by Prince Wachirayan (printed after his death) describing King Mongkut's Ariyaka script: Somdet Phra Mahasamanachao Krom Phraya Wachirayanwororot, *Akson Ariyaka* [Ariyaka script] (Bangkok: Mahamakut Withayalai, 2501 [1958]); Somdet Phra Mahasamanachao Krom Phraya Wachirayanwororot, *Katha Chadok lae Baep Akson Ariyaka* [Buddhist verses and the Ariyaka script] (Bangkok: Wat Boworniwetwihan, 2514 [1971]). The Bhumipol Foundation also produced a study of the Ariyaka and other scripts: *Akson Khom lae Akson Boran Thong Thin* [The Ariyaka script and original ancient scripts] (Bangkok: Munitthi Bhumipol, 2519 [1976]). Phra Sugandha (Dr Anil Sakya) has edited and reprinted one of Mongkut's four texts produced in Ariyaka script in *Suat Mon* [Mantras] (Bangkok: Mahamakut University Press, 2004). I thank him for his helpful advice and for showing me some of the first editions of books produced on King Mongkut's Ariyaka script printing press. See also Justin T. McDaniel, *Lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: Practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

read Pali. He invited Sri Lankan, Khmer, Mon, and Burmese monks to study at Wat Bovorniwet (which notably still has a large number of international monks in residence).²¹ The one factor inhibiting universal Theravada communication in Pali was the fact that each Theravada group used its own script for writing Pali (Sinhala, Tham, Mon, Burmese, Khmer, Yuan, Shan, Tai Khoen, etc.). I suspect that he devised the Ariyaka script to solve this problem. The monastery's own annals state that he wanted to spread the teachings of Buddhism and so he had 'monastic codes of conduct' (*pātimokkha*), 'some chanting books' (*nangsue suat mon bang*), and 'other texts' printed in the Ariyaka script (*akson ariyaka*) in order to replace manuscripts. Actually, only four texts were ever printed in this script: *Suat Mon*, *Bhikkhu Pātimokkha*, *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha*, and the *Dhammapada*. Therefore, before he was King Mongkut, Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu/Prince Mongkut invented an actual new script (and a typewriter) to replace Khom/Khmer and Siamese/Thai in writing Pali. This script was inspired, partly, by Mon. The order went on to become and remains the most prestigious lineage by virtue of its direct connections to the royal family, despite Thammayut monks being very much a minority in Bangkok, like the Mons. This is just one small example, but it shows that the idea of a people can have power far greater than their numbers. To be fair, Van Roy shows this very fact well in his discussions on the Khmer and the power of the symbolism of Angkor in Bangkok (pp. 200–206).

Vignette: The Chettiers and the idea of Hinduism in Bangkok

Van Roy's book's significance for Thai Studies and Urban Studies of Southeast Asia cannot be undervalued. He brings a level of historical detail and exposes seriously understudied places and communities in Bangkok. Inspired by his work, I want to offer a short vignette — that supplements his book, as well as supports the two major questions, on ethnicity and the *mandala* schema I raise above.

Although, Van Roy describes numerous non-Siamese Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist communities in Bangkok's history, he curiously leaves out almost any mention of Hindus (not to mention the much smaller Sikh, Jewish or Armenian Orthodox communities, which had large trading communities in Penang, Yangon, Singapore, Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, Melaka, and other coastal cities in South and Southeast Asia, but not nearly as large in Bangkok) even though he employs the Brahmanic/Hindu concept of the *mandala*. Now, it is hard to criticise Van Roy for what he left out, when he wrote about so many subjects (I haven't even had time to discuss his excellent section on Chinese communities in Bangkok) and did so much research. No single book could ever fully cover a subject as big as the history of immigration and diversity in a city as large as Bangkok. However, I do find it odd that he left out one community considering he makes a slight reference to one of their members — Vaiti Padayatchi (p. 150) — and it supports some of the larger points I believe he is trying to make about the nature of ethnicity in Bangkok history. Van Roy notes that Vaiti was a partner with Mhd. Thamby Saibu Maraikayar, a Sunni

21 King Rama III is said to have sent his half-brother, who outranked him and was passed over for the throne by Rama III, to be the abbot at Wat Boworniwet. This monastery was outside the city walls (symbolically significant, as Van Roy argues). King Rama III may have sent him there because he disapproved of the founding of the Mon-influenced Thammayut.

Muslim livestock dealer — both had moved to Bangkok from Singapore on packet steamers (which brought many Singaporean/Malay/South Asian traders and goods to Bangkok in the nineteenth century). However, we learn nothing more about him or his religious/ethnic background. Indeed, Thamby and Vaiti were both Tamils from South India, one Hindu and one Muslim, and they worked together in cattle grazing and slaughtering (which is quite a strange livelihood for a Hindu for obvious reasons which are not explored in the book). The missed opportunity here was that this strange fact of history would actually support Van Roy's excellent point about religion and ethnicity not always going together. Vaiti and Thamby were partners and perhaps their shared Tamil language and heritage trumped their differences in religion. To say that Vaiti was a 'Hindu' only tells us part of a much larger story. Vaiti was a Chettiar.

Chettiars, which (full disclosure) is a group about whom I am writing a book, were among the most well-known ultra-wealthy families of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They ran transnational networks, accumulated wealth, controlled entire industries, effectively owned or controlled banks, started arts and culture foundations, and built a string of architecturally unique mansions that have largely been lost to the history of economics, banking, charity, and architecture. Also known as the Nagarathar or the Nattukottai Chettiar Families or Chetty, in less than a century between the 1850s and 1940s, this community largely controlled banking/lending and cattle/sheep-herding, as well as trade in timber, salt, diamonds, arrack, and pearls. They financed most of the opium trade in Malaysia and Singapore in the late nineteenth century and dominated the ship chandling industry in the region.²² Some Chettiars went on to become major politicians, founders of universities, and founders of large multinational banks like the Indian Overseas Bank and the India Bank; and R.K. Shanmukham Chetty was the first finance minister of independent India. With this wealth the Chettiars were also responsible for building over 70,000 mansions (that looked like ornate fortresses called Nattukottai or 'land-forts'), and a string of major Hindu temples in the region.

One of the largest of these temples is in Bangkok and is known in English/Tamil as the Sri Mariammam Temple and in Thai as Wat Umadewi or Wat Khaek. It is the most prominent Hindu temple in the city and was founded by Vaiti in 1879.²³ Chettiar families were not only some of the wealthiest in Tamil Nadu, but established homes, temples, and offices throughout Southeast Asia.²⁴ In Tamil Nadu, the families were nearly all associated with one of nine temples: Ilaythangudi, Mathur, Vairavanpatti, Iraniyur, Pillaiyarpatti, Nemam, Iluppakudi, Soorakudi, and Velangudi and the 96 villages that supported them.²⁵ These temple clans and sub-

22 David West Rudner, *Caste and capitalism in colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 85.

23 In Thailand, ethnic Indians and other South Asian peoples are commonly referred to as *khaek*, often glossed as 'guest' and 'foreigner' in dictionaries, but also a derogatory term for dark-skinned foreign labourers. *Si khaek* refers to a yellowish-brown mustard colour — and is a term which Pakistanis, Indians, Sri Lankans, and other South Asians in Thailand avoid for themselves.

24 See, for example, the history of the Vaithi Padayatchi family — landowners and wealthy sheep and cow herders in Tamil Nadu: <http://pallavar-vanniyar.blogspot.com/2012/02/padayatchi.html>.

25 S. Muthiah, Meenakshi Meyappan and Visalakshi Ramaswamy, *The Chettiar heritage* (Chennai: Lokavani-Hallmark, 2000), p. viii.

clans formed very close-kin trading/business/landed-gentry families that were able to work together, accumulate wealth, and support each other. Indeed, the name Chettiar comes from Sanskrit *śreṣṭhin* (Pali: *setṭhi*) for wealth and is where Thais get the term for a very wealthy person/millionaire: *mahasetthi*. A form of *setthi/śreṣṭhin/chetti* also is a common term for wealthy person in Lao, Shan, Indonesian, Malay, and Burmese. Starting largely in the 1820s, but growing significantly in the 1880s, British colonialism was a convenient vehicle for moving these locally wealthy families from their agricultural and banking base in Tamil Nadu to colonial trading cities like Penang, Melaka, Bangkok, Singapore, Yangon, Kandy, Ipoh, and as far as Zanzibar, Durban, and various towns in the Caribbean. Dutch and French colonial officials also worked with the Chettiars to establish local financing firms and provide for both local and colonial entrepreneurs to raise capital to begin new trading routes and diversify commodity production, expand land cultivation, and further gem extraction. Chettiars were well-respected for keeping meticulous records, learning local languages, and being responsible, yet not excessively strict with payment schedules.²⁶ Indeed, they were successful not necessarily because of shrewd business practices or strong-armed techniques, but because of consistency, efficiency, and trust.²⁷ The families worked so well together and were so generous with payment plans and local charity (*mahimai*) they became legendary throughout South and Southeast Asia.²⁸ They not only supported their own communities, but donated to Catholic churches, Buddhist monasteries, and other local institutions both in the Madras Presidency and abroad. They became so successful that in some areas they were controlling over 50 per cent of all lending services and their credit network enabled them to act as intermediaries for colonial powers in far flung places. For example, in certain towns in Burma, they were responsible for over 90 per cent of loans to farmers (helping the British expand the rice frontier deep into the country) and ran over 1,500 different companies in the country by the 1930s.²⁹

Most Chettiar finance agents went on short trips away from their homeland (usually no more than three years when they were around 22 years old) and had strict rules about marriage and landownership in various villages in Tamil Nadu.³⁰ The main deity of many of their temples is the Tamil saint, Pattinathar, a descendant of Kubera (the God of Wealth). However, in Southeast Asia and East Africa, Sri Mariammam becomes the primary deity of the temples, most likely connected to

26 Rudner, *Caste and capitalism*, pp. 67–73.

27 David West Rudner, 'Banker's trust and the culture of banking among the Nattukootai Chettiars of colonial South India', *Modern Asian Studies* 23, 3 (1989): 417–58. See also Heiko Schrader, 'Chettiar finance in colonial Asia', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 121, 1 (1996): 101–26. Schrader notes that the practice of sons of wealthy Chettiars apprenticing for other Chettiar families created bonds and decreased excessive nepotism (p. 105).

28 Muthiah et al., *The Chettiar heritage*, pp. viii and 58. See also Sean Turnell and Alison Vicary, 'Parching the land? The Chettiars in Burma', *Australian Economic History Review* 48, 1 (2008): 1–25.

29 Rajeswary Brown, 'Chettiar capital and Southeast Asian credit networks in the interwar period', *Local suppliers of credit in the Third World, 1750–1960*, ed. Gareth Austin and Kaoru Sugihara (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 262. See also S. Chandrasekhar, *The Nagarathars of South India* (Madras: Macmillan India, 1980), for an introduction to Chettiar history and a good bibliography of studies of the Chettiars in Southeast Asia.

30 Schrader, 'Chettiar finance', p. 105. See also Paul Kratoska, 'Chettiar moneylenders and rural credit in British Malaya', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 86, 1 (2013): 61–78.

protecting the visiting Tamil business people from diseases like cholera, smallpox, and malaria.³¹ Some families, like the Padayatchi in Bangkok and the Pillai in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore established more permanent local ties.³² While most families were making money abroad to bring back and build large mansions, shrines, and temples in towns like Karaikudi, Devakottai, Kulipirai, and Pillamangalam Alagapuri, some built large temples in coastal trading towns of Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These temples were not only places of worship, but also gathering places for Chettiar families and were surrounded by small shops selling food and gifts. *Hundial* shops popped up around the temples too which sold promissory notes for remittances transferred back to extended families in Tamil Nadu. *Nakarattar-vitutis* or *matams* (lodging houses for visiting Chettiars and business associates that also served as small shrines, libraries, study-rooms, and kitchens for families and priests) were often adjacent to these temples in Bangkok, Singapore, Calcutta, Medan, Colombo, and Penang. They served as a mixture of hotel, travel agency, bank, and monastery. The temples and *vitutis* were managed by *panchayats* (councils of elders) that settled disputes, arranged rituals, set the interest rates (on the sixteenth day of every month, to be precise), and the like.³³ Some even supported small *patasalais* (Vedic training schools for Brahmin boys), although rarely did these thrive outside of India.³⁴ These local families in Bangkok, Yangon, Saigon, and other places expanded from moneylending to owning or partnering in rice mills, rubber refineries, sawmills, and urban real estate.³⁵

The Great Depression in the 1930s, the increase in competition from Multani, Gujarati, and Marwari moneylenders, the growth of markets outside of their expertise in Japan and China, local laws like the Moneylenders Bill of 1936 in Singapore, and the disruptions of the Second World War eventually led to the collapse of Chettiar dominance in South and Southeast Asian finance networks.³⁶ The Chettiars are disappearing from memory as producing some of the wealthiest families in the world for a century (although some descendants like the billionaire Ravi Pillai, now living in Dubai, and many others, continue to hold vast sums of wealth, but no longer invest in local Tamil village construction). However, in Southeast Asia, the Chettiar Hindu temples continue to operate and thrive, and the Chettiars still organise themselves

31 I thank a priest at the Sri Mariammam Temple in Bangkok, who wanted to remain anonymous, for explaining the role of Sri Mariammam today.

32 Vineeta Sinha, 'Unravelling "Singaporean Hinduism": Seeing the pluralism within', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 14, 2–3 (2010): 253–79. The temple in Singapore is no longer connected to the original Pillai family, but has been since 2005 under the administration of the Sri Samayapuram Mariammam Pallaigal, which is a modern form of *panchayat*. Their main work is maintaining the temple, hosting annual festivals, and raising money for children's education. They also welcome Hindus (and even Taoists and Buddhists) from all backgrounds and are no longer a Tamil temple as has happened with many other Chettiar temples abroad. See Vineeta Sinha, 'Mixing and matching: The shape of everyday Hindu religiosity in Singapore', *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37 (2009): 83–106.

33 Rudner, *Caste and capitalism*, pp. 123–7; Schrader, 'Chettiar finance': 107.

34 One exception was the *patasalai* in Yangon, which expanded into the Chettiar's Residential High School in 1928. Muthiah et al., *The Chettiar heritage*, p. 67.

35 Brown, 'Chettiar capital', pp. 259–61.

36 Schrader, 'Chettiar finance': 118. Kratoska, 'Chettiar moneylenders': 72. See also Medha Kudaisya, 'Marwari and Chettiar merchants, c.1850s–1950s: Comparative trajectories', *Chinese and Indian business: Historical antecedents*, ed. Malik Kudaisya (Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 85–119.

through local *panchayats*. Many have integrated into local communities, marrying locally, and losing the ability to speak Tamil. In some cases, as in Saigon's Sri Mariammam Temple on 45 Truong Dinh Street, nearly all ties with the Chettiers have been lost. The temple is owned by the government and the *panchayat* has five members (two of Khmer ethnicity and three of Vietnamese), none of whom speak Tamil or have ever visited India. The chanting is in a Khmer–Sanskrit mixture that they claim is in the spirit of the Tamil original. However, they still celebrate some of the traditional Chettiar festivals, especially the annual sixth of October festival.

In Bangkok, there are still Tamil families connected to the Sri Mariammam Temple, but most visitors are Thai Buddhists and the main shop next to the temple is called 'Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha'; although it sells Hindu posters, temple offerings, and Indian sweets, the owners are a Buddhist family who also sell Buddhist products. Although the networks of moneylenders, landowners, traders, and *hundial* shops have largely disappeared, the buildings and the largely non-Tamil and non-Hindu visitors are lasting and colourful landmarks in port cities on three continents. Van Roy's book is excellent for its exposure of the Tamil Muslim communities (compared to the more influential Persian, Malay, and Javanese Muslim communities of Bangkok) in Bang Rak, Khlong San, Kudi Jin, and other neighbourhoods in Bangkok. I merely wanted to show that the Tamil Hindu community was also prominent and their temple is still hugely popular today among Buddhists, tourists, and the small, but influential Hindu community of Bangkok.

Besides supporting Van Roy's work on the flexibility and multiple ways of being 'ethnic' in Bangkok, a study of Hinduism in Bangkok also further complicates the very idea of the Brahmanic cosmological basis of the *mandala* model.³⁷ There are only a few small Hindu temples actually staffed by Brahmin (usually Tamil) priests like Wat Umadewi (Sri Mariammam), a few small shrines near Si Yaek Ban Khaek, the Punjabi community's Wat Thepmontian, the small Viṣṇu temple serving Northern Indians on Soi Wat Prok, and the Thewasathan (discussed below). Furthermore, there are very few Hindu temples outside of Bangkok and only one in Thailand's second largest city of Chiang Mai.³⁸ However, like the very important influence of the Mon on Siamese/Thai culture and religion, the influence of Hinduism far outweighs the 'Hindu' or Indian ethnic population. It is the idea of Hinduism and Brahmin ritual power that carries weight in the culture of Bangkok, but like the *mandala*, it largely exists in the mind and has cultural capital, not practical power. In Siam Square and Ratchaprasong (perhaps the two busiest intersections in Bangkok) tourists, shoppers, and explorers will undoubtedly pass many shrines on street corners, at bus stations,

37 On Hinduism in Bangkok, see Justin McDaniel, 'This Hindu holy man is a Thai Buddhist', *Southeast Asia Research* 21, 2 (2013): 191–210. See also the recent and excellent study by Nathan McGovern, 'Balancing the foreign and the familiar in the articulation of kingship: The royal court Brahmins of Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48, 2 (2017): 283–303.

38 Hindi is still taught at the Rongrian Bharat Withayalai (Indian High School); however, besides this subject (which is not taken by all students) and some Indian cultural events and instruction, this is a 'matrathan' (standard) Thai high school with a government-approved curriculum. Indeed, most students are either Thai Buddhist or Muslim, and some Thai-born/ethnic Indian high school students. Instruction is in Thai. Funerals for the small ethnic Indian community take place near Wat Yannawa in Bangkok. Child blessings usually take place at the Thewasathan or are performed by Brahmins in private homes.

and on Buddhist monastic grounds to supposedly ‘non-Buddhist’ deities.³⁹ There are shrines to ‘Hindu’ deities like Gaṇeśa, Brahma, Śiva, Indra, and the Brahma-like ‘Jatukham Ramathep’.⁴⁰ These are quite popular and visited by hundreds of Thai Buddhists everyday. This is not just a modern phenomena, Hindu goddesses and gods populate Thai Buddhist texts like the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, many Pali and vernacular *jātakas*, *desanā*, *sutta* texts, as well as astrological (Thai: *horasat*), and ritual (*chalong/pithi*) texts. Van Roy notes this himself in the very beginning of the book in his references to the symbolic power of the god Indra in Bangkok. The long history of Hindu statuary in Thailand has been well-studied. There are statues, bas-reliefs, and mural paintings of Harihara, Śiva, Lakṣmī (or Bhū-Devī), Gaṇeśa, Brahma, Indra and others found in the area we now call Thailand dating back 1,200 years as clear evidence. Indeed, art historians and historians working under the early rubric of ‘Hinduisation’ or early Hindu influence on Thailand like Georges Coedès, Subhadradis Diskul, Stanley J. O’Connor, Alexander B. Griswold, and many others have unearthed or identified hundreds of statues of Hindu deities at Si Thep, Phimai, Lopburi, Suphanburi, Phanom Rung, among many other places. Museum collections at the National Museum of Thailand and numerous regional museums like the ones at Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Kampaeng Phet, and in collections like the Asian Art Museum (San Francisco), Guimet (Paris), British Museum (London), and Tokyo National Museum all contain numerous examples of imagery from Thailand that curators and historians refer to as ‘Hindu’.

It is not just that the idea of ‘Hinduism’ or Indian culture has importance in Bangkok history far beyond the numbers of ethnic Indians in the city, but their legacy also shows the problem with the *mandala* concept. While the idea of India is important, the actual role of Brahmins is not at the centre of the *mandala* and they do not have much influence on the actual activities of the royal family. The royally sponsored Brahmin temple is near the edge of the old city walls and not in centre of the supposed Bangkok *mandala*. Nor did court Brahmins have an office within the vast walls of the Grand Palace. They work out of the Thewasathan (Place of the Gods/Devas; also known as Bot Prahm). This is the royally sponsored temple founded in 1784. There are less than fifteen actual Brahmins (ordained Phra Prahm) in all of

39 On the shrines, see Justin McDaniel, ‘The gods of traffic: A brief look at the Hindu intersection in Buddhist Bangkok’, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Universities* 2 (2009): 49–57. For background on the figure of Brahma, see Nathan McGovern, ‘Brahmā worship in Thailand: The Ērāwan Shrine in its social and historical context’ (Masters’ thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2006).

40 See for example, Georges Coedès, *Les états Hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie: Histoire du Monde Tome VIII* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1948); Subhadradis Diskul, *Hindu gods at Sukhodaya* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995); Hiram Woodward, *The art and architecture of Thailand: From prehistoric times through the thirteenth century* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Stanley O’Connor, ‘Hindu gods of peninsular Siam’, *Artibus Asiae supplementum* 28 (1982): 1–73; Theodore Bowie, A.B. Griswold, M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, *The sculpture of Thailand* (Sydney: Visual Arts Board, 1977); Louis Frederic, *The temples and sculptures of Southeast Asia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965); Robert Brown, *The Dvaravati wheels of the law and the Indianization of South East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Gauri Devi, *Hindu deities in Thai art* (Varanasi: Aditya Prakashan, 1998). See also the catalogues (many online) for the museums at Ayutthaya (http://www.thailandmuseum.com/thaimuseum_eng/bangkok/main.htm); Chiang Mai University Center for Art and Culture (<http://art-culture.chiangmai.ac.th/index.php>); and Kampaengphet (http://www.thailandmuseum.com/thaimuseum_eng/kamphaengphet/main.html), among others.

Thailand and few intact Brahmin families left.⁴¹ There is no evidence that there were many more in early Bangkok history as well and they are almost never mentioned by name in royal chronicles of Bangkok. Certainly, they had and still have influence on royal and other ceremonies. This can be seen in murals, like the ones at Wat Ratchapradit Sathitmanasimaram near the Grand Palace and the Ministry of Defence and in King Rama V's writing on the 12 royal ceremonies. The most useful information I gained was from Phra Maharatchakhru Phithisriwisutthikhun, the chief royal Brahmin in Thailand and teacher to many of the present Brahmins.⁴² In this very informative session I learned that there are no exceptions to the rule that in order to become a Brahmin in Thailand, one must come from one of the brahmanic bloodlines (*ben luk-lan khong Phra Prahm*) that he claimed stretched back over 1,200 years in Thailand and were invited to come from the Nakhon Sri Thammarat area in southern Thailand to serve the Siamese royal family. These lines were originally from the Tamil region of India, but only oral records exist. Many of these families have long intermarried with local Thai Buddhists and are at this point ethnically Thai. None of the Brahmins was born in India and none speak a modern Indian language well. Most had either never visited India or had gone there on a short tourist trip. He admitted that a recent two-week visit to India came after a gap of seven years. He also admitted that they use primarily Thai language books and some Thai–Sanskrit glosses in their study. He had in his possession some Sanskrit ritual manuscripts which were composed in what he called '*akson tamin boran*' (Old Tamil Script).⁴³ He emphasised that none of the Brahmins knew Sanskrit grammar, but were trained to chant Sanskrit mantras during rituals. There is no school at the Thewasathan and no formal curriculum. Instruction and ordination is done on a one-on-one basis and over his whole life (he is near retirement age) he has trained fewer than twenty-five people (he has been the primary trainer for the last couple of decades) and has the most students. Clearly, he is treated with great deference by all the other Brahmins and staff. Training does not take place in any serious way in Bangkok or anywhere else in the country. Several of the Brahmins in present-day Thailand are in fact from his own bloodline and I had a chance to meet one of his cousins, who also serves in the royal rituals. They do not produce books, hold regular classes, seek converts, promote the building of Hindu temples, have regular publicised visits from famous Brahmins from India, nor have a public lecture series.

The point is that there are certainly Indic influences in almost every part of Thai cultural life, from architecture to astrology to dance to nomenclature to governance to

41 They are (in order of rank): Phra Maharatchakhru Phithisriwisutthikhun (family name: Khawin Rangsi-phrahmanakhun), Phra Ratchakhru Siwachan (Thawon Bhavangkhanan), Phra Khru Sathanathamuni (Arun Sayomaphop), Phra Khru Yananasayambhu (Khachon Nakhanawethin), Phra Khru Sitthikhayabadi (Khon Komonwethin), Phrahm Sombat Ratanaphrahm, Phrahm Sisonphan Rangsi-phrahmanakhun, Phrahm Phisana Rangsi-phrahmanakhun, Phrahm Bhatihari Sayomaphop, Phrahm Bharikhawut Nakhanawethin, Phrahm Khawankhat Ratanaphrahm, Phrahm Phathan Wuthiphrahm, Phrahm Kharan Buransiri, and Phrahm Thawutthi Komonwethin. From this list, you can see that these positions are often a father-brother-uncle-son affair.

42 I thank Arthid Sheravanichkul for helping me arrange this interview and to the Buddhist monk Phra Sompong Santikaro for his help at the Thewasathan.

43 Although I did not closely read or translate them, from their appearance they were central Thai-style *samut khoi* manuscripts from the mid-nineteenth century.

ritual. The Indic cultural sphere includes much more than religious expressions, whether they be Mahāyānist, Theravadin, or Hindu (or another broad and relatively arbitrary category).⁴⁴ However, Hinduism is an umbrella term for a number of loosely related religious teaching lineages, philosophical systems, ritual programmes, narrative tropes, and aesthetic tendencies largely centred on Vedic ritual, Deva puja, and ascetic, tantric, and yogic practices. Buddhism, Jainism, particular schools of Christianity, Sikhism, and certain forms of Zoroastrianism also were born in the Indic cultural sphere. We should not conflate ‘Hindu religious’ influence and ‘Indian cultural’ influence which is a problem with which Van Roy’s book struggles, and it is in that struggle that we, the readers, benefit. However, Hinduism as a religion, like the *mandala* as a concept, is not actually a guiding force in Thai culture.

Edward Van Roy has produced through decades of observation, research, and walking through the city a book unlike any other and I believe it will launch many a research study, inspire historians, anthropologists, and even tourists in Bangkok. Despite my reservations about some of his approaches, I stand in awe at the way he carefully and meticulously collected information and presents it with clarity and purpose. I highly recommend *Ethnicity and the galactic polity: Ideas and actualities in the history of Bangkok* for students at any stage in Thai, Southeast Asian, and even Urban studies more broadly.

44 Of course, there are problems with the terms Hinduisation and Indianisation which have been discussed in Southeast Asian Studies for three decades. The two main problems being that they: 1. suggest that the influence was only one-way and that Southeast Asian writers, thinkers, and artists had no influence on Indic culture; 2. there was no creative engagement with Indic art, literature, science, etc., and so Southeast Asian cultural producers accepted Indic culture wholesale and did not adapt it. Prapod Assavavirulhakarn’s *The ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2010) is a good example of how to examine Indic influences on Thailand in a sophisticated and balanced way. See also the seminal articles by Ian Mabbett: ‘The Indianization of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the pre-historic sources’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, 1 (1977): 1–14; and ‘Indianization of Southeast Asia: Reflections on historical sources’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, 2 (1977): 143–61. Many major textbooks on the region and the *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* also discuss problems with the Indianisation approach to understanding Southeast Asian culture. The concomitant problems with ‘Hinduisation’ or ‘Hinduism in Thailand’ have not been extensively explored. Of course, in Japanese, French and even Victorian English, Hindou, Hindoo, Hindouisme sometimes have a wider lexical import and can often be equivalent with ‘Indian culture’ and do not always simply specify the ‘Hindu’ religion as they do in contemporary English. John Holt’s study *The Buddhist Vishnu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) tackles the problem of separating Buddhist and Hindu deities in everyday practice in Sri Lanka and is highly recommended.