



Tin-winners in Ron Phibun district, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand 2001

Courtesy of the author

For the Love of Tin The VOC in Ligor

Research >
Southeast Asia

The Southern Thai province of Nakhon Si Thammarat is heir to one of the oldest port city-states of Southeast Asia. In the early days, Dutch and other European traders knew the province by the name 'Ligor'. For more than a century, from around 1640 until 1756, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) ran a small office in the flourishing entrepôt, the collecting station for the region's tin.

By Supaporn Ariyasajiskul

It is commonly believed that Nakhon Si Thammarat was already annexed to the kingdom of Ayutthaya (or Siam) to the north when the Dutch East India Company arrived to trade in the region in the early seventeenth century. Yet, control from the capital was weak. Classified as one of eight tributary kingdoms ruled by its own princes (Mueng Phaya-Mahanakhon), Nakhon Si Thammarat was granted authority to police the Malay Peninsula on behalf of Ayutthaya. The Dutch records show that at the time of the VOC's entrance, Ligor still enjoyed considerable autonomy in governance, trade, and foreign relations.

During the first three decades of the seventeenth century, the VOC had direct contact with the ruler of Ligor, annually purchasing 600-700 *bahar* of black pepper (approximately 250,000 pounds; 1 *bahar* = 375 pounds). In the best of years, the purchase could be up to 1,000-1,200 *bahar* (375,000-450,000 pounds). In 1612 the Company concluded a contract with the so-called in the Dutch records 'king of Ligor', who granted it exclusive rights to construct housing and to trade anywhere in the region, exempt from tolls and taxes. The Company was additionally allowed to build a stone warehouse in Sangora (Songkhla) to store Chinese goods intercepted at sea.

The honeymoon period between Ligor and the VOC ended in the 1630s. Behind this was a temporary but sharp decline in the European demand for pepper and the outbreak of war between King Prasathong of Siam and his vassal states on the Peninsula, which refused to recognize his legitimacy on the Siamese throne. According to the Dutch records, the Company sided with Siam, cautiously providing military aid to King Prasathong. Ligor and the other Thai-Malay vassal states were eventually subdued and severely punished. The Dutch records also describe how Ligor was completely destroyed. The pepper plantation was demolished and the 'king' and his wife, trapped in their ammunition-laden

palace, died when the palace was blown up.*

The political situation changed with the dismemberment of Nakhon Si Thammarat. The provinces of 'Bordelong' (Phattalung), Sangora (Songkhla) and Tsaija (Chaiya) were henceforth ruled by governors and other high-ranking officers sent directly from the capital. The victory of Ayutthaya over Ligor in 1632 was thus a historical turning point, leading to a more complicated triangular relationship between Siam, Ligor, and the VOC. It also opened new trading opportunities for the Company.

Tin in Ligor was known to be very pure and of high quality. Tin production is estimated to have been 700-1,000 *bahar* (248,000-354,000 pounds) per annum in the mid-seventeenth century. The Company expected to secure at least 400 *bahar* of tin per year.

This target, however, could not be realized without the *tra* or seal of approval to trade tin in Ligor, and without Ayutthaya's support. The Dutch Company managed to obtain exclusive rights in 1660 by concluding a contract with King Narai of Ayutthaya. These exclusive rights allowed it to secure quotas for export and purchase tin in Ligor at less than 'market' prices. These preferential trading rights were, however, not absolute. VOC officers in Ayutthaya and Ligor had to battle continuously, both locally and in the capital, to secure their tin supply and export quotas. As a whole, the period running from 1670 to 1700 was the VOC's most successful one. In peak years, tin export from Ligor reached 1,400 *bahar* and the Company then realized profits of up to 100 per cent.

The tin affair became more complicated and less favourable to the Company in the eighteenth century. Of all the competitors, the Chinese through their networks were the best organized, and wrested control of the tin trade everywhere, and particularly on the black market. The Dutch Company in the meantime received permission to arrest tin smugglers in Ligor and to confiscate contraband. Its new role as the Ligor 'tin police' restored its tin exports between 1726 and 1735.

The trade policy launched by Ayutthaya in the reign of King Boromkot

was a blow to the Company; its exclusive rights to trade tin in Ligor, which it had enjoyed for almost a century, were lifted in 1734. As a result, it could obtain only very limited amounts of tin each year. After long negotiations, and due to the improvement in the relationship with the Royal Court in Ayutthaya, the exclusive rights were restored in the contract of 1754. It was, however, too late for the VOC to regain its position in Ligor. Ayutthaya lost control over the tin trade there. With no further prospects in sight, the Governor General and the Council in Batavia decided to close the office in Ligor for good, reporting the decision to the Board of Directors in the Republic on 31 December 1756. <

Supaporn Ariyasajiskul, MA is a TANAP research fellow, and an affiliated fellow at IIAS/CNWS-IGEER, presently researching Late Ayuttaya foreign trade policy. supaporn@noknok.nl

Note >

* The status of the rulers of Ligor seems to have been quite ambivalent. Ayutthaya saw Ligor as a vassal state, but the Dutch records seem to suggest greater autonomy. Until 1632, the VOC records always refer to the ruler of Ligor as 'king'.

Information >

The above article is a summary of the paper on 'The Siamese throne, the Company and the so-called tin-monopoly at Ligor; the limits of negotiating power and preferential trading rights' presented at the second TANAP (Towards A New Age of Partnership) workshop 'Asia in the Age of Partnership', Bangkok, Thailand, 24-26 October 2002. The full article will soon be published in *Itinerario*, the journal of the Institute for the History of European Expansion (IGEER).



Southeast Asian 'Living Theatre'

Report >
Southeast Asia

10-14 November
2003
Bangkok, Thailand

International arts promoters and not a few scholars are heavily invested in the dichotomy between the traditional and the contemporary. Books, exhibits, and performances on 'sacred/classical/indigenous' art and 'innovative/cutting-edge/postmodern' art are marketed to consumers around the world each year. Such labels, however, poorly fit much recent Southeast Asian theatre, which muddles received categories.

By Matthew Isaac Cohen

The new and the old, the foreign and the local, the urban and the rural: all of these apparent dichotomies have long existed in dynamic relation in Southeast Asian theatre. Today's living theatre is traditional and contemporary, a restoration of the past and alive to the present, locally rooted and globally aware. In the course of two days of academic presentations on theatre and dance flowing into three days of practical workshops on contemporary dance, Burmese marionette puppetry, theatre games, Balinese traditional dance, object animation, tableaux, and Thai traditional dance-theatre and rod puppetry, the SPAFA seminar-workshop on

Balinese *topeng* performed by I Wayan Dibia

Southeast Asian Performing Arts vividly brought these complexities to life.

Tradition-based contemporary performance

Nicanor G. Tiongson, in his presentation, described a recent revival of *sarswela*. A musical theatre popular in the Philippines at the turn of the century, traditional *sarswela* was a cheery cultural defence of class privilege, produced by the middle class for a predominately lower-class audience. The award-winning entry in the 1998 Centennial Literary Prize *sarswela* competition, Mario O'Hara's *Palasyo ni Valentin* (The Palace of Valentin), is a subversion of the ideology and form of traditional *sarswela*. *Palasyo* is a memo-

ry play set in a decrepit theatre in the city of Intramuros. Brutality, murder, suicide, deception, and revolution are explored through the ghostly recollection of pre-independence *sarswela* theatre. *Palasyo* rejects a linear plot, stereotypically 'good' and 'bad' characters, and pat moral messages in order to explore class conflict and the vicissitudes of history and character. No easy pleasure or reassurance is to be had. *Palasyo* uses songs, *sarswela* acting, and even excerpts of *sarswela* plays. But is *Palasyo* *sarswela*?

In her presentation on Thai comic performance, Wankwan Polachan described the Talok Café, and then led participants to this well-known feature of Bangkok nightlife. The Talok Café is a comedy and

Students and professional actor-dancers in a Khon workshop



All photos courtesy of SEAMEO-SPAFA

music club, as well as an eating establishment, frequented primarily by migrants from rural Thailand. Comedy troupes presenting comic skits and sketches with an emphasis on physical humour and bawdy word play alternate with attractive male and female singers performing Thai pop music. The atmosphere is chic and urban, but the slapstick humour and conventions of audience-performer interaction are traditional and rural. Guests socialize with the singers, and present garlands of money as tokens of appreciation. Some of the comedy troupe leaders are long time Bangkok residents and have become nationally recognized stars through their Talok Café performances, television appearances, and VCDs but their humour remains rooted in rural ways. The comedians, however, are now faced with a dilemma. They are running out of jokes and losing touch with recent rural developments. Some performers are educating themselves on rural migrants' urban concerns to better relate to their audiences. The Café now stands at a crossroads. Will it transform into an urban venue? Or will it disappear?

The internationally famous Singaporean theatre maker Ong Keng Sen presented an overview of his intercultural productions and Flying Circus workshops. Ong's work shows that Southeast Asian practitioners best known for their groundbreaking work are often vitally concerned with the traditional arts of their countries of origin, and of other countries in the region. One of his recent projects on Cambodian court dance and drama resulted in the reconstruction of core repertory items, as well as a powerful piece of reminiscence theatre performed by and devised together with former court dancers: *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* (2001). The Flying Circus Project was conceived in the same spirit. The 'antithesis of the museum', Flying Circus brings together traditional and non-traditional artists into a space for exchange and exploration, leading to moments both silly and sublime. Ong Keng Sen has been criticized by scholars for his 'Made in Singapore' cultural imperialism and entrepreneurship – criticism he has cannily incorporated into his work. Should Ong

Ken Sen be seen within a history of Singaporean Chinese cultural brokers and impresarios, or does his work demand appreciation according to non-local standards?

Zulkifli Bin Mohamad presented a possible solution to some classificatory problems in his discussion of the political economy of Malaysian performance. A new mode of practice is emerging in Southeast Asia, which Zulkifli calls 'tradition-based contemporary dance and theatre'. Artists from both traditional and modern backgrounds are reinterpreting time-honoured disciplines as the basis for new performances, accessible to non-traditional audiences in national and international venues. Tradition is not merely appropriated by these practitioners, but is transformed in the process. Traditional and new audiences equally appreciate many of these artists. Some are as adept in performing folksy comic turns as in discoursing on critical theory. Tradition-based contemporary performance is a particularly critical cultural intervention in Malaysia, where government and religious authorities have colluded to end old patterns of sponsorship for *wayang kulit*, social dance, and ritual drama.

Border crossings

A number of papers and presentations explored the historical and contemporary dimensions of Southeast Asia as a lively crossroads where global artistic practices inter-articulate in exciting and often surprising ways. Southeast Asia's shadow puppet theatres have long ignored what Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof called 'the often artificial boundaries between nations', with performers and puppets travelling overseas for economic, religious, and political ends. As I discussed in my own paper, popular theatre in the Indonesian archipelago has seen the active participation of artists from India, China, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and many other countries for hundreds of years. Singapore's Chinese Opera Institute, under Chua Soo Pong's direction, not only teaches and performs staples of the Teochew operatic repertoire; it has also reinterpreted 'The Golden Deer' episode

of the Ramayana as bilingual Chinese opera. As Pawit Mahasarinand demonstrated, twentieth-century European and American spoken drama in Thai translation has provided a mode for exploring subjects customarily considered taboo in Thai society.

Many issues brought up at the seminar-workshop demand further exploration, including the reinvention of tradition, the politics and aesthetics of Southeast Asian intercultural theatre, copyright and other legal issues involved in the consumption of artistic property across national borders. Virtual and real routes connect the theatres of insular and mainland Southeast Asia. Some are new, others old. The theatre of Southeast Asia will continue

to live as long as it flows across borders, representing the past and imagining the future. <

Dr Matthew Isaac Cohen is a lecturer in theatre studies at the University of Glasgow, where he teaches anthropology of theatre, performance studies, puppet theory, and Indonesian theatre. He was an IIAS fellow in the research programme 'Performing Arts of Asia: Tradition and Innovation' in 1998-2000. He is currently completing a book on the Komedi Stambol and has written extensively on wayang kulit and other forms of Indonesian theatre. He is also a practicing dhalang and convenes the Glasgow performance ensemble Gamelan Naga Mas (www.nagamas.co.uk). M.Cohen@tfs.arts.gla.ac.uk

Tradition-based contemporary dance demonstrated by Zulkifli Bin Mohamad

What is SPAFA?

The Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA) was founded in 1978 under the aegis of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and is hosted by the Government of Thailand. Its mandate is to 'promote professional competence, awareness, and preservation of cultural heritage' in ASEAN member states. Its activities over the past 25 years have included training courses in methods and techniques of archaeology, cultural administration, library science, and arts documentation; seminars on tourism, archaeology, and the theatre; and practical workshops in the arts. The organization is active in exchange programmes and consultancy, and has carried out field research on Southeast Asian ethnic music, epigraphy, and arts education. The publication wing puts out a journal and books on archaeology and the arts.

www.seameo-spafa.org



Information >

The seminar and workshop on Southeast Asian Performing Arts, organized by the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA) and Bangkok University, brought together Southeast Asian academics and practitioners of drama, dance, and puppetry, and Thai theatre professionals, young and old, to discuss, act out, and evaluate issues engaging theatre in Southeast Asia today. Publication of the proceedings of the seminar in both English and Thai is anticipated.