Spatial Anthropology of Traditional Thai-Islamic Dwellings in Eastern Bangkok

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Abstract
Accelerated urbanization and the tremendous effort in achieving a state of modernization have significantly transformed the Bangkok cityscape over the past few decades. This situation inevitably accounts for the demise of traditional Thai dwellings, or ruan thai, the inherited tradition and the dwellers' way of life rooted in an agrarian society. Among the existing ruan thai in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, it is remarkable that there are not only Thai residents but also those from diverse cultural groups such as Muslims, the Mon and Laotians. This paper is a study of the spatial anthropology of the ruan thai resided in by Thai Muslims in the east of Bangkok. Based on field surveys and oral history, its central goal is to examine the spatial characteristics of Thai-Islamic dwellings, which reflect a dialogical relationship between the socio-cultural and spatio-temporal dimensions. Grounded in the context of a matriarchal society, the case studies constitute several spatial aspects shared by typical Thai dwellings. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the Islamic way of life plays a crucial role in the way the dwellers use space, particularly in terms of the invisible, yet fixed-feature, sphere.

Keywords: spatial anthropology; ruan thai; Thai-Islamic dwelling; cultural aspects; matriarchal society

1. Introduction
Owing to the prime setting of the "Golden Peninsula" of Suwannaphoom, or Mainland Southeast Asia, the coexistence of culturally diverse groups has brought about an intricate intermingling from settlement level to architecture and art forms. At this cultural intersection, Muslims are an important minority group in Thailand—the second largest minority group next to the Chinese. They possessed their own kingdom and have displayed tangible cultural aspects such as language, art and attire. It is remarkable that the architectural convention, decoration and particularly dwelling-related customs that influence the dwellers' spatial perception and organization, i.e. zoning and gender domain, of the mainstream Muslim in the south are distinctive and different from other Muslims in the country. In spite of this fact, the Thai Muslim way of living in the central region bears resemblance to Thai dwelling culture. On these grounds, it is interesting to explore the process of acculturation of Muslims in the Thai living environs and their response to the evolving urban context.

Considering that the house is an important manifestation of complex socio-cultural phenomena, this paper aims to clarify how Thai Muslims of the central region of the country, eastern Bangkok in particular, utilize space in their traditional dwellings. The study examines the cultural context and the spatial content of Thai-Islamic dwellings, thus shedding light on the cross-cultural understanding between the Thai and the Islamic dwelling discourse. In addition, the study analyses the modern implications of these Thai-Islamic dwellings as an intertwined process of the country's undertaking of urbanization.

1.1 Muslims in Thailand
Muslims have settled in Thailand since the formation of the Thai kingdoms in the ninth century. In a region where Hinduism and Buddhism has dominated for centuries, it is inevitable that Buddhism has become the national religion representing approximately 90 percent of the population and Islam remains a minority religion with roughly 8 percent of the population. The official terms for the Islamic people—"Thai Islam" and "Thai Muslim"—were created during the Pibulsongkram Government in the early 1940s as a part of the government campaign to mitigate racial and cultural differences, to foster nationalism and to promote Thailand as a civilized and unified nation. Since it is the cradle of Islamic history, culture and education, the demographic concentration of Thai Muslims is in the southern provinces, with more than 85 percent of the country's total Thai Muslim population. Other Muslim communities are scattered throughout the country.

1.2 Thai Muslims in Bangkok
Among the 22 provinces, Bangkok is the most...
populous city consisting of approximately 570,000 Thai Muslims, or about 57 percent of the total Muslim population in the central region. Several Thai Muslim quarters in Bangkok have a relatively homogenous population. For example, the Ban Khrua District is occupied by the Cham, districts in Thonburi contain descendants of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent and in southern Charoen Krung there are people from the Malay Peninsula. However, in the outer areas, especially to the east of the city in the Bangkapi and Pravate Districts and to the northeast in the Minburi District, Muslims of diverse origin are to be found alongside other religious groups. Unlike the closed society of the Muslim South, their settlements exhibit a harmonious integration into the city's fabric.

2. Case Studies

In contrast to the intensive development and bustling economic activity of the Central Business District, the east of Bangkok, has retained vast fields, orchards and canals, or khlongs, that coexist with fast-developing districts. Along the network of canals—Klong Lamsali, Klong Ban Ma, Klong Tab Chang and Klong Wang Yai—in Bangkok's eastern suburb, there are Thai Muslim settlements of the Sunni Sect (Fig.1.). Each Muslim community consists of collective, public and private dwellings, i.e. mosques, schools and houses. Clusters of houses—usually those in the traditional Thai-style, and others consisting of a simple wooden structure—enclosed by a natural landscape, represent the Thai Muslim living environs in the city's suburban area. This paper has selected 4 house compounds whose inhabitants are from the same genealogical roots as the case studies. These houses include the Sani House, a 180 year-old house owned by Sani (Arunphoonsap) Manshu, the Kularb House and the Mariam House, 50 year-old houses owned by Kularb Chumchuen and Mariam Phoomphuang, including 40 year-old house of Yusob Arunphoonsap (Fig.2.).

"The first family of the area is the Arunphoonsap—the oldest and most affluent. We have been settled here for over five-six generations from Klong Tab Chang to Klong Wang Yai. Originally, there was no access to tap water, electricity and road ways. We excavated water ponds for household use, e.g. drinking and bathing, had generators for producing electricity and boats for travelling here and there." The Sani House is situated near Klong Ban Ma and is surrounded by orchards, ponds, fish farms, stables and shelters for keeping domestic animals. For generations, it has been occupied by the Arunphoonsap family and is thus the oldest and largest house in the area. The house has undergone tremendous transformation from a single-unit dwelling of a nuclear family to the extra-large compound occupied by 10 members. Located along Klong Lamsali was the group of the medium-sized ruan thai of the Kularb, the Mariam and the Yusob families. There were open-air bathing areas, wooden decks, overhanging hammocks and shelters for rest and relaxation interspersed with lush greenery. In addition, the families built small one-storey wooden houses for rent. Before the expropriation and demolition of the houses in 2006, there were 9 and 7 members in the Kularb and the Mariam Houses respectively and one member in the Yusob House.
Fig. 4. The Sani House: Upper Floor Plan (above), Ground Floor Plan (below)

Fig. 5. The Kularb House: Upper Floor Plan (above), Ground Floor Plan (below)

Fig. 6. The Mariam House: Upper Floor Plan (above), Ground Floor Plan (below)

Fig. 7. The Yusob House: Upper Floor Plan (above), Ground Floor Plan (below)
3. Physical Setting

The architectural convention of the case study originates from 2 basic dwelling units; the traditional Thai-style house, or *ruan thai*, and a simple wooden house. Bought from Ayutthaya Province, the building components of the old *ruan thai* were transported along waterways and reassembled on site by the families and their helpful neighbors. To facilitate the dwellers' spatial demands, a gabled structure with surrounding walls replaced the *ruan thai*’s outdoor space, i.e. the *chaan*, and semi-outdoor space, i.e. the *palai*. The covered *chaan* is called *look-hong*. This emerging interior space came to be utilized as served space. At the rear part of the compound, an additional wooden structure functioned as a service quarter. In addition, new building materials such as outward-swinging windows and a corrugated iron roof displaced the long and narrow inward-swinging windows and terracotta roof tiles.

The house was simple in style with minimal decoration. There were no gable finials, ornate roof ridge, or carved fretwork as in the traditional Muslim houses in the southern region. Instead, the presence of Arabic calligraphy in praise of Allah made from wood or metal-carving and pasted to the *ruan thai*’s gable ends was the most distinctive feature of the house. (Fig.8.)

Following the Islamic prescription relevant to the orientation of houses, all the houses originally faced east. The entrance consisted of a stairway and verandah or terrace, which were sheltered under extended eaves. Equipped with a built-in bench, the covered verandah served not only as the transition between the out-of-door and indoor space but also as an extension of the interior living space.

Because of the dwellers' floor-based lifestyle, the interior space had linoleum flooring and small number of fixed feature items of furniture that were typically arranged around the walls. The absence of spatial barriers between the *ruan thai* and the *look-hong* resulted in the large multipurpose nature of the house.

When the families grew in size, the houses consequently grew in number and since Muslim custom prohibits the construction of new dwelling units on the eastern side of an extant house, the Sani House and the Kularb House had their new houses built on the western side of the property. The Mariam House had new units linked to the south.

4. Cultural Setting

Based on field surveys and oral history, the cultural aspects—the context of life—of the Thai-Islamic dwellings in eastern Bangkok are outlined below;

4.1 Living with Nature

"Initially, this area was covered with paddy fields. People engaged in rice farming. When we settled here, we dug ponds around our property, made ditches for orchards and planted trees. My mother loved growing a garden and we helped her. Year by year, it became a large and dense garden, providing us with fruit and shade."

Surrounded by a bountiful environment, the inhabitants lived in touch with nature. Orchards and water served not only as places for rest and relaxation but as an edible landscape. Here, the families utilized a variety of plants, e.g. bamboo, banana, mango and coconut trees and fish, e.g. gouramy, catfish and snakehead fish, as important food resources.

4.2 Living with Others

"The Sani House over there is the center of our families. When we have religious ceremonies, we usually gather at her house."

As shown in Fig.3., the Sani, the Mariam, the Kularb and the Yusob families were a large extended household, in which multigenerational members lived together. Like the Thai agrarian family of the past, they took care of each other and took part in building a homely living atmosphere. The ground space of the house and the homogenous hall on the upper floor unmistakably portrays a vivid scene of the inhabitants' solidarity where everyday experiences, such as food sharing and fish catching, and special events, e.g. weddings and religious ceremonies, took place.

4.3 Self-Sufficient Life

"In the Tab Yao sub-district, we have paddy fields of around 20 rai (32,000 sq.m). The area is blessed with the pristine nature of vast rice fields and fresh air. Of these, there are 3 rai of orchards; banana, mango, coconut and jackfruit trees, which we call the 'mixed garden.' Like here, there are ditches and trees enclosing an area of 800 sq.m, where we plan to build a house in the future."
The families' method of subsistence ranged from agriculture, handicraft work, to the house rental business, trade and working as employees. As a rule, male members engaged in fish farming and cattle breeding. Female members were responsible for the domestic chores and needlework. Here, the families made their living sufficiently, yet industriously. As shown in Figs. 4.-7., their living environs unveil an integrated entity of dwelling and work place.

4.4 Faithful Life
"Before prayer time—the time we meet God, we need to clean our bodies neatly, wash our hands, mouths, faces, arms and feet. The praying place should be in an enclosed area, whether in a room or in a partitioned space."

As members of the faithful, the dwellers never neglected to pay daily reverence to God. Given that the direction of Mecca serves as an important frame of orientation for the Thai Muslim's daily activities, the organization of interior space was west-oriented. To preserve an unobstructed conceptual space between God and the prayer, most praying areas were located in room corners, which made these spaces centrifugal in nature. The spread of the carpet defined the horizontal territory of the sacred space; the use of such flexible partitions as cloth curtains helped screen off for privacy. The notion of the west as the sacred direction was also manifested in the orientation of the bed or, more precisely, the inhabitant's head position while sleeping. As evident in Figs. 4.-7., the inhabitants' heads were not directed towards the east. This is because pointing one's feet directly to the west is considered inappropriate according to Muslim tradition. At this point, it can be inferred that there are certain invisible, yet fixed, spatial patterns derived from the Islamic way of life that result in the way they use space. Furthermore, the family members participated in various Muslim activities, such as Ramadan and religious schools, like other Muslims.

4.5 Festive Life
"In the morning of the Eid al-fitr, we pray at the mosque. When the religious ritual finishes, we have a meal, e.g. rice, curries, soup, broiled sticky rice wrapped in banana leaf and various other kinds of sweet. Then, the ceremony resumes. After that, we visit our ancestors in the graveyard and proceed to our elder members' houses. From here, one can see a lively scene of the Muslim colorful outfit; white, red, orange, pink. On this day, Muslims ask each other for forgiveness."

Apart from day-to-day activities, the Muslim way of life is manifested on festive occasions as well. For example, the making of Muslim sweets made of mixed beans, rice, sesame and coconut in the first Islamic month, called Muharram or the event of Ashura, is a special gathering that unveils the solidarity between the host family and helpful neighbors. Such cooperativeness is also apparent at the Muslim wedding ceremony, which is often held at home in a cozy ambience. On a larger scale, the celebration marking the end of Ramadan, or the after-fasting festival, is an important religious ceremony that reinforces the communal spirit among the families and the entire community. Therefore, it is noted that the Muslim way of life—living with nature, living with others, self-sufficient life, faithful life and festive life—essentially molds the inhabitants' spatial perception and utilization.

5. Anthropology of Space
Rooted in matriarchal society, the Thai Muslim way of life influences not only the way the dwellers use space but also how they perceive temporal dimensions. The anthropological space of the case studies is listed as follows;

5.1 Space in Space – Shared Space
"Space in Space" implies a co-presence between the "corner(s) of life" and the "center of life." With the least degree of privacy and with no fixed territoriality, it is a shared space where 2 modes of dwelling—part and whole—are in an ongoing process. Its "half-open/half-closed" spatial character is evident in the case of the praying corner in the central hall of the Mariam House, the sleeping corners of the Sani House, including the praying, sleeping and rest corners of the Yusob House (Figs.9.-11.).
5.2 Space on Space – Multidimensional Space

Along with the horizontal expanse, "Space on Space" represents a creative use of verticality. Derived from agrarian ingenuity, the use of vertical space as extensional storage is manifested in the production space, i.e. the taitoon and kitchen, of the case studies. As shown in the stacks of coconut fruit in the taitoon of the Sani House—the product-preserving technique widely found in Muslim houses in the south—not only helps prevent humidity from the ground, but also minimizes storage space. The exposed structure of the floor, wall and roof provides an extra area for keeping the tools of life and things awaiting use. Moreover, the overlaying of three-generational members' favorite places at the sheltering structure of the nearby waterfront at the Kularb House offers a good example of the "Space on Space" spatial feature (Figs.12.-14.). In this respect, the integration of horizontal and vertical space creates the multidimensional functional space of the dwelling.

5.3 Time in Space – Temporal Space

Rooted in matriarchal society, "living with others" way of life accounts for "Time in Space" spatial quality. Without the notion of permanent ownership among the inhabitants, each space could serve various purposes whether in daily activities or festivities. As well as the Kularb family's multi-layered favorite space, the multiple use of the central hall of the Sani House, the Kularb House and the Mariam House reveals the temporality in territoriality. During daytime, the central hall functioned as the family's common area, the praying corner, including the religious classroom for the young Muslims in the neighborhood (as in the case of the Sani House) and turned into sleeping unit(s) at night. On special occasions, the homogenous hall served as a reception area reflecting the image of the inhabitants' "festive life." In addition, the verandah and the ground space of the Mariam House belong to this category. To put it in another way, it is the worthwhile use of a small space with a time-sharing strategy (Figs.15.-16.).

5.4 Time in Space – Multisensory Space

The dwellers' "living with nature" lifestyle and the open nature of the dwelling contribute to another aspect of "Time in Space" spatial feature. With the slightest trace of a spatial barrier, the verandah, the taitoon and the adjacent waterfront act as a transition between house and nature, inside and outside space, and thus help enhance the dialogical relationship between inhabited and natural landscape. Drawing all the senses of sight, smell, hearing and touch into close proximity, the multisensory space evokes in the inhabitants the sense of time and, accordingly, the sense of place (Figs.17.-23.).
5.5 Space in Time – Growable Space

Given that space contains compressed time, the “Space in Time,” constitutes the crucial quality of the dwelling. Derived from the inhabitants’ "self-sufficient life," the houses are adaptable, changeable and expandable in accordance with spatial needs. Growing inside-out, the correlation between the house and its inhabitants is dynamic and ever-shifting. As shown in Figs.24.-26., it is evident that the house is ultimately a formal articulation of the interrelationship between space and time.

Epilogue

Grounded in the context of the matriarchal society, the traditional Thai-Islamic houses at Khlong Ban Ma and Khlong Lamsali in eastern Bangkok reveal several spatio-temporal qualities in the dwelling—the "Space in Space," the "Space on Space," the "Time in Space" and the "Space in Time." In other words, these essential characteristics include the shared space, the multidimensional space, the temporal space, the multisensory space and the growable space.

Beginning with the most fundamental aspects, the "Space in Space" and the "Space on Space" denote the manifold possibilities of the use of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the lived space. This multidimensional functional space can be optimized by implementing the "Time in Space"—the concept of polychronic space and time rooted in the traditional way of life. Besides, the coexistence of "Space and Time" creates a multisensory perceived world and thereby helps recreate the sense of place of the dwelling. Last but not least, the "Space in Time" is a collective dwelling experience, which constitutes the psychological attributes of the house. In this way, it is manifest that the dialogical relationship between space and time ultimately brings about the oneness between life and place.
The high demographics of Muslims in Bangkok might be explained by the way in which during wars in the King Rama II and the King Rama II reigns of the Bangkok period, the Siamese army and naval forces attacked Pattani, which was the cradle of Islamic culture and education before the founding of Bangkok. The Kings settled them sparsely in the neighboring districts around Bangkok and nearby provinces with free lands and later irrigated canals for rice farming. There were neither an easy means of communication nor a railway system, and the people were cut off from Pattani. Muslims in certain areas are descendants of these people. See, Direk Kulasisriswad (1994), p.14. In addition, intermarriage and recent conversion to the faith have contributed to an increase in the number of Thai Muslims in Bangkok.

Gilquin (2005), p.34.

Since their settlement in the suburban area in the east of Bangkok, the Arunphoonsap family has had five generations. Based on oral histories of the present family members, the first generation members consisted of three key persons; Yeeka (YK), his wife named Moh (M), and another wife named Noh (N). The second generation members included Moh's daughter, Wo (W) and Noh's children; Sani (SN), Wangman, Wangmahd, Teemoh, and Yusob (YS). The third generation members consisted of Wo's daughters; Kularb (KL) and Mariam (MR), who is an adopted child, San's children; Somjit, Rohman, and other siblings, who moved out to other areas, together with Yusob's son, who passed away at an early age. The fourth generation members included Kularb's children; Surapong (SP), Sarayut (SY), Sarawut (SW), and two other siblings, and Mariam's daughters; Nareerat (NRR) and Suparanee (SPN). The Fifth generation members are composed of Surapong's daughters; Piranat (PRN) and Janista (JNT), and Nareerat's daughters; Nataporn (NP) and Natarika (NRK). As shown in the family relational diagram, the Kularb household consists of nine members, the Mariam household has seven members, and the Sani household has nine members living together, while the Yusob household has only one member. However, according to the interview carried out in 2009, the owner of the Sani house passed away about a year ago. Mariam Phoomphuang, interview April 2009.

Rohman Manshu, interview August 2003.

As of 2003, there were 9 members living together in the house. However, Sani Manshu passed away 1-2 years ago.

In 2007, new houses of the Kularb and the Mariam families were reconstructed in the neighboring areas by recycling building materials of their old houses. However, the Yusob house was sold to his relative.

It is believed that the presence of these sacred words would bring good fortune to the residents.


Ibid.

MARIAM PHOOMPHUANG, interview June 2003.

MARIAM PHOOMPHUANG, interview November 2003.

MARIAM PHOOMPHUANG, interview October 2003.

MARIAM PHOOMPHUANG, interview November 2003.

The carpets are usually brought from Mecca, either by the owners or by other pilgrims.

During Ramadan, or the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, participating Muslims offer more prayer than usual and purify themselves through self-restraint and not eating or drinking from dawn to sunset. As for the young, they attend not only regular but also religious schools. Along with formal education, elder members train their children basic words and manners.

MARIAM PHOOMPHUANG, interview November 2003.

Notes
1 These include the Mon, Khmer, Burmese, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Tai (or Thai).
2 In fact, Mainland Southeast Asia has been a settlement center for forty thousand years. Yet, it was thirty thousand years later that the diverse cultural groups began to be differentiated. See Wyatt (1984).
5 In spite of the more educated and official terms, the common name that the Thai use to refer to Islamic people is khaek, which somehow has negative connotations as it, on the one hand, means a visitor, a stranger, or an outsider, yet, on the other hand, it relates to the description of the Malay-Muslims in the south. Reflecting the political conflict, the term khaek is considered inappropriate and insulting to the Muslim people for it brings about a sense of contempt and social distance among difference races and religious beliefs. See, Thanet Aphornsuvan (2003), p.5.
7 The high demographics of Muslims in Bangkok might be explained by the way in which during wars in the King Rama II and the King Rama II reigns of the Bangkok period, the Siamese army and naval forces attacked Pattani, which was the cradle of Islamic culture and education before the founding of Bangkok as the capital of Siam, due to her refusal to remain a vassal state. Siam took thousands of military and civilian captives together with weapons to Bangkok. The Kings settled them sparsely in the neighboring districts around Bangkok and nearby provinces with free lands and later irrigated canals for rice farming. There were neither an easy means of communication nor a railway system, and the people were cut off from Pattani. Muslims in certain areas are descendants of these people. See, Direk Kulasisriswad (1994), p.14. In addition, intermarriage and recent conversion to the faith have contributed to an increase in the number of Thai Muslims in Bangkok.

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