

The Golden Hour of Laan Sukaprok

- text and pictures by Gert Joe Fode

Place with no name

If you have stayed in Patong for more than the average two to three weeks, you might have noticed this place. Certainly every expat knows it. I'm talking about the Thai eatery located on the corner of Rath U Thit and Bangla, facing the Hard Rock. The most prominent features of the place are its opening hours. I have never seen it closed except once, on the King's 60th birthday - which made a deep impression on me. I know that the King is like God to Thai people, but closing down the Thai eatery on the corner of Rath U Thit and Bangla is something else. What's funny is - if the darn place has a name, I never met anybody who knew it. People have to euphemise, saying they are going to "that place which is open all the time" or something to that respect. Maybe it doesn't need a name because every Thai body knows it anyhow. To Thai palates it produces the best down home soulfood south of the Northpole, you see. On the other hand, if you consider the many names Thai people put on persons and places they know and like, you couldn't understand why an omnipresent topos like this should go unnamed. It's just one of these Thai mysteries I guess.

Show of life

The most popular of dishes at the unnamed eatery is *Mee Jinn*, Chinese noodles. They come with spicy Phuket style sauce and a plate of *tua* and *tua ngo* - beans and soy sprouts. I myself do not eat at this place, I must admit. It is dirty. Lizards, cockroaches and rabiate dogs chase each other under the tables. The single toilet is a horror even to Thai standards. To Western eyes the *Mee Jinn* looks more like something that has been in somebody's body once already than anything else. And the stench... My wife used to call the place "Laan Sukaprok" (the Dirty Shop) and finally that became the nickname to stay with it. To me it doesn't matter much, you see, because like I said, I don't eat there. I just have a *Radler* - a *Bia Chang* mixed with tonic - and use my eyes. I do not use my eyes on the cockroaches. I do not see the rusty oilcans nor the rotting piles of garbage on the street in front of the shop. I don't even perceive the eggshells on the floor. What I do is, I enjoy looking at the show.



There is no real show, of course. Just real life. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week the *Laan Sukaprok* entertains its visitors with life. It's like a concert with the tenor changing by the hour.

No assault

During the evening the tables slowly fill with Thai people who enjoy salted fish with tender bones, chicken intestines, fat pigskin and all the many delicacies with white rice served on a mix of household utensils like plastic plates and sheet metal dishes. After nine o'clock the waitresses start moving. No more time to take long naps with the head on the table.

One of the good things about Laan Sukaprok is the absence of background music. Unlike most Thai eateries and bars of that caliber, there is no assault to your ears by either wailing Isaan songstresses or slashing pop music cymbals. Instead there are the sounds of people. Laughing girls, the sputter of Phuket dialect, a few noisy farangs and the languages of Babylon. Pidgin Thai-English is the common nominator. Behind it all is the accompaniment of traffic. The taxis, the Honda Dreams and every twentieth minute a young Thai man screaming by on one of those high-pitched motorbikes. Then there is an eruption in the kitchen, a gush and a cloud of chili. The concert of life crescendos after midnight. Bargirls come in for a plate of mee jinn, some of the supermarket and hotel girls in their uniforms, too. The joint begins to jump.

Fire in the house

Alas, now the firehouse has gone. It was a special treat at the time we had that Go Go, located right next to the Laan Sukaprok. The Firehouse ladies would come in for a morsel of Thai noodles and stand at the counter clad in minimalistic French lingerie... Sketchily covered by a sarong, a T-shirt or any other piece of garment, so that they would not stand stark naked. But still the exorbitantly high heels, the powerful make-up and the nylons gave them away. The Firehouse girls were a wonderful, sopranissimo counterpoint to the griminess of the surroundings. Sitting with a Radler, catching glimpses of nylons, bustieres and even the adorable small G-string undies was heaven on earth. Go Go goddesses had come down to earth to sit and suck spaghetti with decollated breasts and all the other outlets of femininity. It was impossible not to think of irregular French verbs.

The Golden Hour

And then, finally, the golden hour would strike. I don't know how much time I have spent through the years in this eatery, watching the chicks roll in late at night. You see,



as all the "downtown" bars close around two, the girls gyrate towards Soi Sunset, where the action will continue until the break of dawn. In order to get there, they all stride up through Soi Bangla and must pass the intersection of Rath U Thit. That's where the Laan Sukaprok sits and when you sit in the Laan Sukaprok at this hour, the exodus will pass right under your nose. For exodus it is. I wonder how many places our universe has, where one can

sit and watch hundreds of chicks roll in? All gorgeous, all dressed up to kill and all available for a song and a dime? Sitting in funky old Laan Sukraprok between 2 and 3 always makes me feel like a caesarian Nero, clad in plain clothes, wandering around in the dirty alleys of Rome, exploring the underworld. There is great manpower in beholding so much female beauty, knowing, you can have it all.

Action fun feeling

Mythological events come to mind, as I watch five hundred sirens swaying and dancing in their black skirts and silvery shoes. Cinderella, Barbarella, Cleopatra. Do you know what I'm trying to say? Nubian princesses with glowing tiaras on their foreheads. Prancing onyx antelopes with high hinds, black unicorns with shining ivory horns. On

and on they come, some of them on motorbikes with the nude thighs bent to meet the pedals.

Some girls cannot stand up against the soulfood lures of the Laan Sukaprok. They come in and bring with them the late night action fun feeling. Now they are wide awake, now they are having a good time. This is where you want to catch them: young and lovely like the Girl from Ipanema at the prime time of the night. Spirits are high. Flower children, katoys and Filipino musicians mingle and merge in the concert of life.

Much too bright

Later still the garbage men come to collect the piles of rubbish. That is nothing as prosaic as it sounds. The first thing you notice are the lights. I don't know who has equipped the vehicle, but it always reminds me of that blinking thing in the sky of "Blade Runner". Flashlights on the back and the rear, colored lights all around the truck. The next thing you notice is the sound of the engine and finally - the stench. The guys cling to the truck like monkeys to a tree. When the thing stops, they jump down and attack the rubbish piles with their bare hands. I have always admired these guys. Actually I have bestowed my earthly belongings to them. There is wonderful symbolism in giving the last of me to a team of cleaners. And I am sure they can put my CD collection of Frank Sinatra - my only worldly possession besides a 13 years compilation of The "Bartenders Union" - to good use. As the hours drift away like sand between a child's fingers, mee jinn gets eaten, Heineken gets drunken and everybody is either merry or pretends to be. Suddenly it is six in the morning and the waitresses do not have to move so much any more. Finally only a couple of katoys and a small group of older bargirls still cling to a table with the dwindling hope of making a lucky draw. After a dozen of Radlers the dawning world looks grim, spoilt and much too bright. But the waitresses seem more awake than ever and all of a sudden a new breed of visitors pour in.

Lunch is slow

The decelerating diminuendo of bassoons is quickly being substituted by crisp horns



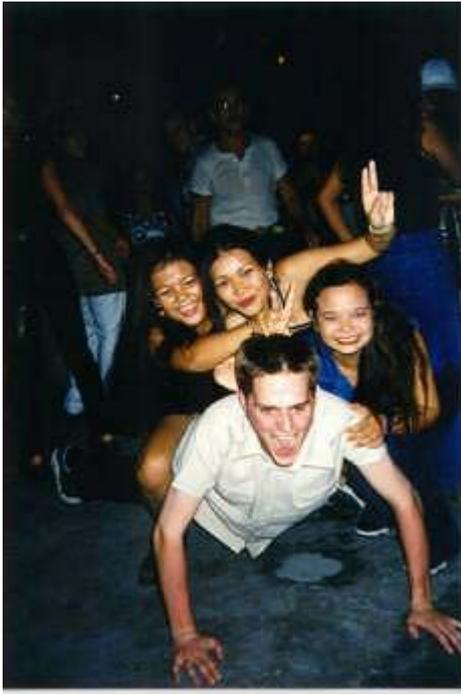
and piccolo flutes as bank clerk and office workers occupy the empty seats. With a quick disapproving glance they take in the katoy-bargirl scenario and place their energetic bodies in the green and blue plastic chairs. It is wonderful to behold their fresh, polite and clean appearance. But they don't stay for long. Not more than an hour and they are gone.

From now until noon only a few people are still breakfasting. Usually it is hot already at this time of the day. Thai people are not great breakfasters and most farangs are either still asleep or at work already. Lunch is even slower. Every sensible person rests in the shade, taking a nap. Time for the girls to rinse the vegetables and prepare the meat. Only from four o'clock in the afternoon things begin to happen gradually. The first boozers show up. Hippies with long hair and beard, which have mistaken the direction of Goa, India. Balding beerbellies; serious drinkers, who don't care about looks any more. There is always the odd guest or couple with a rucksack or a sportsbag.

Sometimes - but very seldom – even a spectacled backpacker with his worn copy of "Lonely Planet".
Late evening/early night is soon to come again. And with it a new performance of the endless concert of life.

Funky old coffin

I have a lot of fond memories of the Laan Sukaprok. The other day I awoke early to the sight of a horse munching pineapple in the garden. My mia noi said mai pen rai. It was just some neighbor's animal paying a visit.



I decided to get up anyway and have myself a drink. The only place to go at that time of day was - you guessed it - the dirty shop, Laan Sukaprok. My old Honda Dream knew the route by heart. All I had to do was to lean back, close my eyes and let it roll. Laan Sukaprok was twinkling its neonlights into the face of dawn, billowing clouds of chili-smoke steamed from its kitchen-corner. In other words, things were what they used to be. I tried to order a Bia Chang, but as all the waitresses were busy picking noses and studying the decade-old poster on the wall depicting a fat baby child with oily substance dripping down the surface I had to serve myself. I opened the lid of the coffin - they still had that funky old Thai "refrigerator" filled with ice at that time - and pulled a bottle up from under the ice chunks. I rejected the so-called "bottle opener" - an old, rusty, worn-out thing welded to the metal housing and used my lighter to pry the beer open. Then it started to rain. At first it was the typical Phuket wash that hits you without any warning. Shlamm - there it is, like somebody pulled the plug on Niagara.

Concert of life

But only few minutes later the heavy rain stopped and turned into a steady fizzle. The world was gray, wet and warm. A tall, blond ladyman with breasts quelling out of his short sleeved shirt and quivering buttocks stood at the counter in anticipation of a plateful mee jinn... when the monks appeared. First there was one, then there was two and three and four. Like pregnant storks they walked barefooted in the rain, beggarbowls concealed under the robes. The ladyman stiffened. Then he grabbed his freshly arrived food and donated it to the senior monk, who opened his stomach like a creature out of "Total Recall". The noodles disappeared into the womb and the tall, blond lady who once had been a black-haired boy bowed down, fell to her knees and received the monk's blessing. Rah rah rah, ohn ohng ohng... Rain, sex, old rite. There was something in the air that morning. Like a wind blowing out of eternity it grabbed my stony heart and made my eyes water. Here I sat on my old plastic chair in the old Laan Sukaprok in the middle of rainy season. And somehow the whole picture - the Nubian princesses, the office clerks, the katoys and the pregnant monks all added up to... I do not know what. Tears in the rain. Stirrings in the river of life. Eternally evolving the wheel of karma. Like fleeing melodies in the concert of life.