

CHAPTER 7

SUKHOTHAI: RULE, RELIGION AND ELITE RIVALRY¹

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Inscription One can't die a death of a thousand cuts. To hack away at it— an ambiguity here, an oddity there — draws no blood. Inconsistency is not enough *in itself* because it cannot exist *by itself*. It presumes consistency — some system or order. Until we know that order, collect all the quirks you like, but you'll not catch a fake. No, you'll only make a mirror to see yourself. Each inconsistency you note will show the consistencies that define you or your era.

What defines our era? Systems. We use them to explain everything from disease to culture, from a single cell to the earth's ecology. So the recurring rules our minds. Social science codifies this consciousness. When it comes to the unique, our era makes us near fools, but on the recurring — whatever 'fits' a system — we are at once geniuses and tyrants. The tyrant insists that life really is prepackaged in neatly sealed, perfectly tuned systems: culture, society, language, even writing or describing. When life fails to fit, he doubts the authenticity of that life, not the adequacy of his system. Hence Inscription One becomes a fake, convicted by its quirks. That is a misuse of systems.

We cannot escape systems and so we must learn to use them well. Sadly, we have no metasystem to settle which *system works where*. So we must try, err and debate. Points go for simplicity, consistency, and fit. The first two can be easily though wrongly had. What's simpler than 'God — or Mongkut — did

it?; does it fit life as the natives live it?

Here Professors Vickery and Piriya fail. They do not try to understand Sukhothai within its own world. Instead, they stay in ours, compiling oddities and ambiguities that testify to little save modern expectations of the past. Still, to be fair, we must address the coherence each scholar claims for his critique. For Vickery (1987) it is the writing. Here the oddities seem to add up, but Diller (1988) gives the definitive reply, even turning Vickery's own evidence against him. For Piriya (1988) it is the errors and clever ambiguities. To him these show that the inscription's author was not a native. Well, anthropology wrestles with what a native knows and doesn't know, says and doesn't say, but if error and ambiguity disqualified our informants as natives, that would do us out of a discipline. Besides, in looking at other cultures and eras, it is not always clear who is mistaken and confused – us or them. To understand why they see what they see, we must enter their world, not stay in ours to judge them by our standards of correctness and clarity.

Let me take one specific case. Piriya (1988:30) observes that Inscription One is vague on describing monasteries, but precise on the ecclesiastical hierarchy. His explanation: this shows the author knew the monkhood well, the monasteries poorly. My explanation: monks mattered, monasteries didn't. The king made the top ecclesiastical appointment and possibly others. To rule well he had to know the Sangha elite, not their monasteries.² Anyway, what one knows and what one says always differ. Some knowledge can be too obvious to say, other bits just not worth mention. Either might explain the little said on monasteries. Or what is unsaid may be deliberate. The inscription glorifies Ram Khamhaeng, but apparently he built little and so it says little. After all, why honor others? Indeed, if many buildings and builders were Khmer, why glorify rivals? That fits the inscription's conspicuous exclusion of Khmer ways and words that Coedès (1954 : 295) noted long ago.

But let me go further: were Inscription One to describe monasteries well it would be an anachronism suggesting forgery. It was only later that the Tai³ religious complex known as

a *wat* came into being (O'Connor 1985). The word itself does not appear in early Sukhothai inscriptions and then later it occurs irregularly. True, Inscription One shows all the necessary elements – monks, monastic lodgings, and shrines – but they are described one by one as distinct pieces, not as *wat*-like sets. It took power and time to join these into a single administrative and conceptual entity, the *wat*. Once done it bound the Sangha to society's hierarchy, effectively domesticating Buddhism. But that did not come quickly or easily. No, 13th century Southeast Asian monks were true mendicants. They were charismatic, relic-wielding forest ascetics. Their freewheeling ways perhaps undid the temple-centered Khmer and surely the Tai polity had yet to bind all monks to temples under clear control. What Piriya expects betrays a modern consciousness and would be a sure sign of forgery.⁴

Finally, if ambiguity is the question, we should consider the prose. Note Inscription One's unassuming style: simple sentences and common Tai words. That did not last. Later inscriptions would delight in borrowings and complexity, but then later court life would dote on imports and society would be formally complex.⁵ So we may claim consistency for Inscription One's tone: its informality fits a still simple society as well as its author, a warrior-hero, a man of action from whom we might expect direct speech. Now reflect on what sociolinguistics says about such informality: much is known and taken for granted. To spell everything out violates the assumption that all parties are insiders. Of course such informality creates ambiguity for outsiders – hence Piriya's dilemma. What he wants – essentially a tour guide for strangers – violates the inscription's tone. Its author, in styling himself 'father lord' (I/18, 35, II/9, 28, III/10, 16, 21, IV/1, 9, 11), his subjects 'children' (IV/26-27), presumes his readers are insiders or soon will be. This is not a quirk; as we shall see, it is a policy. Nor is it unique to Ram Khamhaeng. Calling such language condensed speech, Benjamin (1984/5) shows it pervades the region. He contrasts it to elaborated speech which spells everything out and permits control from afar. This is the language of bureaucrats, lawyers and scholars. It is the language Piriya wants and Mongkut would have given.

It fits what the Siamese king and polity became, not what Ram Khamhaeng and early Sukhothai were. In sum, we end up where Diller did: the evidence to show forgery actually argues for authenticity.

Of course this counters only one major charge, leaving petty ones unchallenged. That's intended. A full reply would remake Sukhothai to suit the present. The best answer to critics is a better understanding of Sukhothai. My paper aims at that. I shall focus on elite rivalry in an unsettled society. This requires a new reading of Inscription One. Many treat it as a straightforward description or even the effective constitution of Sukhothai. It is neither. It is just one strong voice in a heated debate. Surely debate suits Ram Khamhaeng's rhetoric. He seeks to convince and cajole, not just report or record. True, a debate has two sides, and yet we know only the author's – his opponents are silent, the issue unspoken. Are we only imagining the other side? No. As we shall see, Ram Khamhaeng's words reveal his opponents. Like any good debater he aims at what he opposes; what he affirms reveals what he must deny. His antagonists are petty lords whose local power impedes the consolidation of royal rule. Let's place them in their setting before we look for them in the inscription.

A Setting for Struggle

What was early Sukhothai like? In an era of radical change we should expect shifting possibilities, not settled kingdoms and cultures. Tai saw their leaders grow from petty chiefs to conquering lords. Their polities evolved. Thai ruling centers arose, denying local autonomy, while great monarchs turned rival lords into courtiers or commoners. Sukhothai came midway. Its ruler, Ram Khamhaeng, stood supreme but he stood alone. His powers were personal, not institutional; his realm was regional yet local power still held sway. Given this setting we may suspect he was trapped between strong factions with local roots and weak institutions of centralizing rule. One explains or at least implies the other, but let us take each in turn.