

Moving within Urban Hierarchical Spaces: Children's Trajectories in the Urban Scenario of Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

This article analyzes slums and slum children (*dek salam*) in Bangkok from two perspectives. From a diachronic perspective, slums and slum children will be considered as the discursive product of specific historical, economic and socio-cultural changes that hit Thailand after WWII and reproduced a structural conflict between the state, society and transnational agencies. From a synchronic point of view, the article will consider the impact of such discursive formations on the lives of slum children, their subjective experience of being in the world and their positioning within the hierarchical spaces and relations of Thai society. It will focus in particular on the children's trajectories within the slum and on some of the international charitable institutions for children established outside the slum.

Keywords: anthropology, Bangkok, slums, children, hierarchy, NGOs

Introduction

Appearing in several countries of the Global South as a side effect of fast-flowing modernization, slums (*chumchon ae at*¹) represent the dynamic opposition between the rational organization of space operated by the hegemonic institutional power and the ways, both individual and collective, in which those excluded from participating in the decisions concerning such rational organization try and get possession of space.

This contrast juxtaposes, on the one hand, the utopian urban concept of a scientific and capitalist technocracy operating from the top down - the pur-

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1 *Chumchon ae at*, literally "crowded communities", is a term introduced in the 1980's by the government as a substitutive of the more stigmatized word *salam* (shanty town). This semantic redefinition is part of a project to reshape and subsume all governmental policies directed to the poorest parts of Bangkok population under the label of "development policy" (Askew 2002, p. 79). The purpose was to present Thailand on the global scene as a civilized country (*siwilai*), respectful of human rights.

pose of which is to level and “discipline” (Foucault 1993) an ever expanding population in order to create a city that is the symbol of the global, the economic and the civilized - and, on the other hand, a local urban reality of everyday actions and spatial practices. Slum children (*dek salam*) are masters of this creating of space. They engage in the (counter)production of a parallel spatiality which does not meet the regulations of the rational-functional project of urban planners and formal authorities.

In this article, drawing from ongoing fieldwork (June-September 2011, March-August 2012, July 2013-March 2014), I will follow the spatial and existential trajectories of some of the children living in a Bangkok slum, “Tuek Daeng”.² I will focus on space, intended here as physical, mental and social space (Lefebvre 1991), from both a diachronic and synchronic perspective.

From a diachronic perspective, I conceptualize the slum and slum children as the product of the historical, political and economic processes that hit Thailand soon after WWII. I unveil how such processes are imbued with “structural violence”, to paraphrase Paul Farmer (2006). From a synchronic point of view, I will look at the movement of the children of the “Tuek Daeng” across the porous boundaries of the slum. By analysing their “spatial stories”³ (De Certeau 1984), I will focus on the use they make of the different urban locations that articulate from the shanty town, and on the experience they have of themselves and of others in relation to the image of childhood created by the different institutionalized spaces that are present around the slum. In particular, I will look at the notions of self, hierarchy, seniority and authority that these places embody and reproduce.

My first purpose is to demonstrate how slums are political arenas where local, national and global social forces and interests converge and clash, and how childhood and the children of the slums are at the core of such conflict. Since the 1970s, the organization of slums has been redefined by NGOs, religious aid agencies, CBOs (Community Based Organizations) that have brought in specific ideas and discourses about children. My second purpose is to examine the impact of such ideas and discourses on the structural role and the everyday life experiences of children, and to show if and how new

2 To protect the identity of my informants, all names of places and people throughout the article are pseudonyms.

3 The term space and the adjective “spatial” refer here to a subjective semantic spatiality. According to Merleau-Ponty, “space is existential” and “existence is space” (Merleau-Ponty, cit. in De Certeau 1984, p. 117). Stories are metaphors able to “[...] traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories” (De Certeau 1984, p. 115). The “spatial stories” produced by slum children to describe their own physical and existential trajectories are here conceived as a subjective vehicle in the organization of “practiced places” in an existential self narration.

subjective, social and power opportunities have emerged for the children. I will look at their spatial trajectories, the ways they are created and interpreted, and the new forms of *agency* they express in terms of local hierarchies, imagination and orientation.

The diachronic dimension of spaces and people: slums and slum children as historical and social constructions

Bangkok Slums: a brief history

The key processes that determined the current social and spatial organization of the Thai metropolis took place soon after WWII.

In 1958, General Sarit Thanarat took power through a *coup d'état*. The consequent military regime was strongly supported by the US government which, during the Cold War, found in Thailand an essential anti-communist ally in the South East because of its geo-political relevance.

The military and economic support received from the US and from other international institutions such as the World Bank and the UN, in addition to the adoption of an economic system based on the free market, led Thailand, supported by a nationalist ideology of development (*patthana*), to be identified in the 1990s as the “East Asian miracle” (World Bank 1993, pp. 138-42). Between 1984 and 1994, Bangkok was the city which registered the most rapid economic growth in the world (Unger 1998, p. 1). It was a decade of infrastructural and technological development that changed the face of the Thai capital city and transformed it into “a key industrial city, a city of the poor, a city of the middle classes and a tourist city” (Askew 2002, p. 49): slums, skyscrapers, condominiums, commercial mega-stores, residential districts, temples, congested roads and canals define a spatial hybridity that reflects the post-modern negotiations between the state, the local and global capital, and the people.

Both in the city and between the city itself and the rest of the country economic inequalities grew.⁴ From the 1960s-1970s, peasants from the rural areas (*khon ban nok*⁵) started to move to the capital looking for job opportunities in the context of an ever-expanding economy. One of the *mottos* General Sarit chose to summarize the ideology of the governmental politic of

4 Statistics regarding the internal distribution of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) effectively show such inequalities: in 1986 Bangkok only held 46,8% of the Thai GDP while in 1990 the percentage grew to 52,6% (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, statistical data bank).

5 *Khon ban nok* (person whose house is outside) is a depreciative term used by Bangkok native residents (*khon muang*, people from the city). It is used to indicate the inhabitants of the capital who come from the rural provinces of Thailand, and sometimes the inhabitants of the slums. The dichotomy *khon muang/khon ban nok* embodies the inequalities between classes in the developing Thai society.

the time was: “Work is money. Money is work. It makes you happy” (“*ngan khu ngoen, ngoen khu ngan, bandan suk*”) (Baker and Phasuk 2005, p. 150).

The city, veined by a complex system of canals branching off the Chao Phraya river and extending down to the Gulf of Thailand, turned from a “canal-based settlement” into a “concrete-and-asphalt automobile city whose crowded population represented people from all regions of the country, and whose unskilled workers were drawn disproportionately from its poorest provinces” (Askew 1994, p. 88), and “the world’s most congested, sprawling and polluted city” (Rimmel and Dick 2009, p. xvii).

The formation of slums is related to the role of landowners. In some cases, both private and public landowners chose to keep their share of land instead of selling it to allow infrastructural development (Sopon 1998, pp. 424-25). Those in possession of land instead built small wooden houses, turning the rooms into cabins to rent to communities of poor people who were looking for affordable housing solutions (Askew 1994, p. 102).

In the 1950s, as a result of the influence of transnational agencies such as the UN, the definition of the “slum” as a social problem started to emerge. In fact, the radical changes in the urban tissue bore new ideas of what appropriate development should be. This led to an increasingly bureaucratic rationalisation of space that was mirrored by the continuous appearance of administrative structures and government authorities in charge of the slums (Johnson 2006, p. 89).

The uninterrupted growth of these housing solutions is linked to the inability of the government and the market to provide the low income population with adequate housing. Policies on the subject of slum relocation and eviction have proven ineffective. Furthermore, slums seem to serve several purposes in the context of the urban economy in terms of micro-businesses, informal labor and small services. The ecological morphology of the congested and densely populated slums does today allow for a great variety of informal activities that generate income (from food sales to small scale manufacturing, from waste recycling to transport services, from mutual economic assistance and money credit to illegal activities such as drug trafficking and prostitution).

A 1990 survey by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) shows the presence of 981 slums with a population of approximately 947,000 individuals, that is 16.12% of the population (CDO 2002, p. 44). This is only an estimate, since official statistics do not include illegal settlements.

Although migration from rural areas has been one of the main contributing factors for the development of slums, research illustrates the prevalence of a rural-to-rural over a rural-to-city pattern. It also shows that most contemporary slum inhabitants were born in Bangkok (Sopon 1992, pp. 74-79), while the number of illegal immigrants, who have come from the near-

ing states of Burma, Cambodia and Laos and reside in the slums, is growing, thus creating an increasingly articulated internal stratification.⁶

Tuek Daeng: the shanty town and its inhabitants

“Tuek Daeng” is one of the oldest slums in the capital. Located in the Bang Sue district, in the north of Bangkok, it has a 66.67 rai⁷ surface and hosts 3,996 residents (Nutsathapana 2002, p. 52). Consisting of three blocks (*khut*), it is bordered by the north branch of the national railway to the north, east and west and lies on one of the many canals (*khlong*) veining the capital, the *khlong Prem Prachakorn*.

A Buddhist temple and two government schools are situated beyond the canal. It is possible to reach the slum by taking one of the motorcycle taxis that gather around the Bang Sue station.

The marsh-like land, on top of which wooden and tin-plated houses lay, looks like sludge, winding through the sheds and the cement paths built in the 1980s by the authorities in order to promote internal mobility. Most of the houses are regularly registered and supplied with water and electricity; nonetheless, the sewers are filled with rubbish and exhausted materials and become a vehicle for illnesses and bacterial infections, which are often severe.

The name (Tuek Daeng, “red bricks”) is drawn from a series of brick coloured buildings that rise by one of the sides of the rails and that were originally destined for railway employees who worked in the maintenance of the steam locomotive.

In the years after WWII, the railways provided the inhabitants of the area with an occupation and the large number of people who settled in and around this area gave birth to the “Tuek Daeng”. Nok, 53, originally from Isarn (North-eastern Thailand) remembers those years:

In the beginning, there were just a few of us, and they wanted to send us away everyday. The canal was really big; we didn't have electricity, streets in cement. Then came those of the railway (*rotfai*) and brought work. Rich ones started to get the land and building houses to rent. So, as time went by, we became

6 Some authors (Korff 1986, p. 23; Askew 2002, p. 51) underline the risks associated with the use of the concept of class in an extremely stratified context. Although slums are mostly inhabited by the low income brackets of the metropolitan population (which legitimizes resorting to class analysis), some residents, especially long time residents, belong to the middle class. They exploited the informal labour provided by the slums in order to consolidate their power. For this reason, aside from the concept of class, in this article I refer to the patronage model (Scott 1972, pp. 91-113; Kemp 1982, pp. 142-61; Akin 2010, pp. 86-88) as being more apt to detect the differences of status inside the slums and in Thai society (see below).

7 Rai is a Thai unit of area, equaling 1,600 m².

a community, the train community (*chumchon rotfai*) and they couldn't send us away anymore. (Nok)

The coming of fuel entailed the relocation of the plant to the Makasan district. This provoked the isolation of the community and a progressive material, economic and social deterioration, resulting in the current living situation. The decision of the government to evict the area in order to expand the subway transiting in Bang Sue (Purple Line Project: Bangsue - Bang Yai - 23 km) adds to this, although it has not been put into effect yet (Than Setthakij 2004). This chain of events has made substantial uncertainty a characteristic trait of everyday life in several slums, and is an "economic and psychological toll that has a devastating effect on the life of the inhabitants" (Herzfeld 2003, pp. 101-119).

Approximately 60% of "Tuek Daeng" residents are unspecialized ex-farmers with no formal education who come from every part of the country. People born in the slum largely live in the *khet 1*, the oldest part. Among the inhabitants it is possible to distinguish three categories: home and landowners (35%), land tenants (60%) and squatters (4.3%) (Nutsathapana, 2002, p. 56). One third of the land is owned by the Treasury Department, another third is in the possession of the National Housing Authority (NHA)⁸ and the remaining third belongs to private citizens.

Since most of the inhabitants of "Tuek Daeng" come from the Northern and Eastern rural regions, where matrilineage is the historical form of family system, and because relationships with men in the slum usually do not provide financial security (Thorbeck 1987), matrilineal links continue to be important, particularly those between mothers and daughters.⁹ Internal migration, female occupation, material and social degradation, everyday uncertainty and poverty on the one hand, and the connection between old mothers and daughters on the other have transformed, I argue, the local family structures into fluid and less structured relationships. Matrifocal households where the grandmother replaces the mother are common. In fact, as women are away for work, family units frequently include grandparents and an extensive number of grandchildren born of unstable relationships with unknown (or uncertain) men.

Some more stable family connections show the bidirectional trajectory between rural village and city marked by the circular movement of aspiring workers who move from the countryside to the capital, and who continue, for a long time, to provide for their relatives. For this reason, it is possible to

8 The NHA is a governmental agency instituted in 1973 in order to coordinate the allocation of public housing.

9 Among the city's upper-middle class, on the contrary, the traditional matrilineal marriage pattern has been tending to decline because of the couple's search for the best economic and professional resources (Richter and Podhisita 1992).

locate the persistence of cultural elements typical of the rural context in the metropolitan area in the slum.

The activities of the community revolve predominantly around micro-businesses and the informal economy. The absence of official working relations, formal training, education and licences is the main trait of this kind of employment. An increasingly relevant part of the informal sector is also supported by gambling, rackets (often coordinated by the local police), prostitution, and drug dealing, especially the selling of amphetamine pills known as *ya ba* (medicine which makes you crazy). Children and women are the most exposed to the critical socio-economic situation. Domestic violence, the lack of formative opportunities and exploitation are the main issues underage children are subjected to.

Pa is a 68 year old grandmother and a life-long resident of the slum. She lives alone with four grandchildren (*lan*) to take care of. The woman talks about the everyday life of children in the slum:

Children (*dek dek*) have nothing to do. Many have family problems: the father finds a new woman (*mia noi*) and leaves the family; the mother leaves the children (*thing luk*¹⁰) to the grandmother to go to work. Some children don't have anybody. Many of them don't go to school. Even if the government says that schools are for free, then you have to buy uniforms, books, and bus tickets. Many people can't make it. Those who don't go to school take drugs (*kin ya ba*), some also sell them. Or they go and play all day long at a videogame shop that a trader (*pho kha*) opened a while ago here in the Tuek Deang. They don't respect older people (*phu-yai*) anymore. Many anyway get moving and help us working. (Pa)

In the eyes of children, however, even the slum can become a recreational and adventurous place: the rails turn into an adventurous track for acrobatic exercises, the canal is transformed into a pool, where new motor skills can be tested, and children can experience a sense of freedom. As 10 year old Phud puts it: "Here there aren't the rules (*rabieb katika*) we are given at school. We are free to dress as we like, free to run and play". Nevertheless, some strict informal rules continue to regulate the relationships between children and adults (*phu-yai*), despite all the chances of freedom. Noi, a 9 year old girl, explained to me that: "I have to obey (*chuafang*) and respect (*khawrob*) the *phu-yai*. I have to listen to them, and if they ask me to do something, I have to do it".

Representations of the slum: governmental policy and NGOs

10 *Thing*: literally to throw out. It is generally used to indicate the act of throwing out garbage.

The governmental policy and the public discourse on the “slum problem” have always oscillated between the opposite attitudes of solidarism and social stigma (Herzfeld 2003).

The inhabitants themselves seem to reproduce this ambivalence in the way they choose to represent their life from time to time. In defining “Tuek Daeng”, for instance, Pan says: “We are a community (*chumchon*), not a slum (*salam*). Here we all help each other (*ruammu*), not as it happens outside. People from the city (*khonmuang*) are selfish, they act out of self-interest (*hen kea tua eng*)”. To the contrary, Nok tends to stigmatize his own life in the slum and reproduces the dominant public discourse: “People here in the slum are envious (*icha*), they try and take advantage (*awprieb*). Many sell drugs...you can’t trust anyone”. The opposition between inside and outside of the slum is then also present within the slum itself.

The ambivalence of governmental policies varies according to their target and their audience, and also according to their agenda and the elitist needs they intend to serve. On the one hand, the welfare system aims to establish better housing and social conditions in the slum¹¹; on the other hand, clearings and evictions stigmatize the slum and its inhabitants. The need to represent Bangkok as a modern, civilised, democratic and functional capital on the international scene is challenged by the presence of the niches of poverty that are the slums.

The prevailing tendency has been to both visually eliminate the signs of these inequalities through an evictions policy when the political and economic, Western-based, international interlocutors are not paying close attention, and to provide assistance when these foreign interlocutors threaten to lay claims based on moral arguments in order to intrude in the local development policies.¹² Paradoxically, the initiatives of the government which targeted the drainage of degraded areas, infrastructural development and urban relocation happened in conjunction with increasing evictions (Somsook 1983, pp. 254-283).

In the polarity of these ambiguous territorial policies, a crucial role has been played by NGOs. Since the 1980s, the expansion of the activities of NGOs in the slum, supported by international organizations such as UNICEF, has given these urban realities contractual power over the possession of the land, and room for negotiation with the authorities. NGOs aid-

11 Financially supported by the UN, the “National Housing Authority” (NHA) started a requalification of the slums in the 1980s. It provided for the allotment of public housing, maintenance and the building of cement paths inside the settlements.

12 On September 5th, 1999, Thailand signed the United Nations (UN) convention, according to which governments intending to carry out evictions have to demonstrate that they are strictly necessary and that all other viable options have been tried (Herzfeld 2003, pp. 101-119).

ed the formation of numerous “Community-based-Organizations” (CBOs) funded by both local and international contributors. They also promoted the circulation of new ideas about slums and offered slum inhabitants solutions to numerous problems.

While the authorities represent the slums as a locus of criminality, illegality and a threat to national security, NGOs, academics and international organizations portray the slums as places characterized by communitarian self-help, egalitarianism and democratic organization (Herzfeld 2003, pp. 101-119), “spatial entities socially constructed, products of collective *agency*” (Berner 1997, pp. 57-8).

These discourses have been used by slum inhabitants to legitimize their right to live in the slum and to stop all evictions. Public demonstrations, the constitution of lobbies, and new forms of leadership in the slum¹³ (Ockey 1996, pp. 124-150) have established a link between the slum and the political structure of Bangkok, and slums have become directly involved in the larger debates and disputes between society and the state (Askew 2002, p. 151). The case of “Khlong Toei”, the largest slum in Bangkok, is emblematic. In the 1990s, its inhabitants succeeded in their fight against evictions and thanks to their leader Praatep they established a relationship with their political international and national interlocutors and developed local forms of political representation.

The politicization of slums also affected “Tuek Deang”. In 1980 the BMA instituted the Community Development Office in the slum; a committee elected by the residents to administrate public funds in order to activate a number of services for the community (Askew 2002, p. 146). In “Tuek Deang”, several structures were created in 1981: a day-care center for pre-school infants, a small clinic and a center for elderly people.

In the eyes of the residents, however, the structure of the committee was hardly perceived as democratic. As Pa says:

There are those who come [local authorities' officers], help and give money, but usually they only give it to those who are at the head of the line (*thi hua krabuan*). When they come here, there is a boss (*huana*) who administrates the funds. He only cares about the head of the line. The tail doesn't get any-

13 These same years saw the birth of organizations such as the “Forum of the Poor”. It consists of rural producers who face crisis and of inhabitants of the slums, coordinated by allied NGOs. The “Forum of the Poor” beset the Parliament in 1996 during a non-violent demonstration that lasted 99 days. This new and heterogeneous political coalition protects the interests of the urban and rural “subaltern” classes, by using public tactics finalized to embarrass the officers. These strategies include complaisant reviews of the papers and the mobilisation of representative delegations (Baker 1999, pp. 15-21).

thing. The government thinks it has helped the whole community, but actually it gave money only to a few. (Pa)

Several inhabitants of the slums do not seem to be aware of the presence of these structures. They continue to refer to well-known informal leaders and do not understand the internal electoral mechanism. When they do participate in the election process, they tend to reproduce the traditional structure of power.¹⁴

Authority, power and childhood in Thailand and in the slums

Akin Rabibadhana, one of the most important Thai scholars of slums, looked at the social organization, at the distribution of power and at the genesis of informal leadership within shanty towns through the lenses of the patronage model (*rabob upatham*) (Akin, 2010).

James C. Scott (1972) defines the patron-client relationship as:

an ex-change relationship between roles, (...) a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron (Scott 1972, pp. 91-92).

Patronage has characterized Thai society in a pervasive manner since its origins, through a highly hierarchical, pyramidal social system that sees the King, the absolute religious and political authority, the Buddhist *sangha* and the army vouching for national security at the top, and a complex net of relationships, where formal leaderships which emerged with the constitu-

14 In "Tuek Deang" a lot of slum dwellers don't even know the elected head of the local committee (*prathan*) nor the other components (*khamakan*). They continue, instead, to refer to a "natural leader" (*phunam doi thammachat*) who is widely respected for his high moral profile and higher social position, and who is described as the slum traditional informal leadership by some authors (see for example Akin 1976). Some older inhabitants told me they received money during the past election to sign a piece of paper without any awareness of the fact that their signature corresponded to a vote. Moreover, the recent coming of new NGOs supporting the community seems to have fragmented the same networks of power, centered on the economic assistance these agencies provide, which are likely to assign the local elected committee a secondary, and sometimes even competing, role. Beside traditional patron-clients patterns, this modern relationship between money and power, or "money politics", has been considered by many authors as a central trait of the whole Thai political system as well (see for example Pasuk and Baker 2009).

tion of the national state (governmental officials, local administration unities and so on), alternate with diversified and locally grounded informal leaderships, at the bottom. These hierarchies permeate all inter-individual relationships as well, and behaviour, verbal communication and modalities of expression change according to the hierarchical status of the interlocutor, thus generating complementary status dichotomies.

Also outside the circle of family relationships, social interactions are mediated terminologically by the use of linguistic markers of status (old/young *phu-yai/phu-noi*, elder brothers/younger brothers *phi/nong*, etc..) that refer back to a vocabulary of power. Power is also normatively distributed within the family through the use of metaphors.¹⁵ As Bechstedt (1991) underlines:

As the formal genealogical structure of Thai kin terms demonstrates, there are no equal at all. Pupils in a group on the way to school are expected to walk according to their age; likewise, during their morning procession for alms the single file of monks is headed by the most senior one. At a wedding, a funeral, or an official party, all guests set great store on addressing each other according to rank and status. All Thai people, whatever the situation, are fully aware of their own as well as everyone else's position in the social hierarchy, and will reinforce this by appropriate manners and speech (Bechstedt 1991, p. 242).

The concept of gratitude (*khwamkhatanyu*) that the client owes to the patron in exchange for protection and assistance is central to the regulation of hierarchical relationships, as are the notions of cooperation (*kanruamma*), reciprocal help (*kanchuaikan*) and cohesion.

Children occupy the lowest position of the hierarchy. The word child itself (*dek*) seems refer to a hierarchical state rather than a stage in development. The term (*dek*), and the personal pronoun (*nu*)¹⁶ used by children to refer to themselves, are not only indicators of a biological age, but also of hierarchical grades. Whatever the age of a subject, if the interlocutor is an older person, a monk, a teacher or simply an older friend, the subject in question will be either *nu* or *nong* (younger brother), while the interlocutor will be *phi* (older brother). Subaltern in any relationship, the child is expected to show obedience, respect, devotion, docility and no assertiveness. All these characteristics seem to replicate a patron-client relationship in an adult/child relationship.¹⁷

15 Sarit conceived the nation as a family, and citizens as his "children". Childhood has been charged with political meanings: the role of the child towards their parents was modelled on the duties and the responsibilities a person has towards the state. Family has been used as a metaphor to mirror the structure of the state, where the King (often referred to with the term *pho*, father) is constructed as a loving father for the whole popular family. The use of such terminology has reinforced the idea of the nation as family (Montgomery 2001, p. 62).

16 *Nu*, literally: mouse.

17 The representation of childhood also follows gender logics that, because of space limits, will not be discussed in the present article.

Pa, for example, affirms: “A child has to listen and help their dad, mom and adults (*phu-yai*), must obey (*chuafang*) and show respect (*khawrob*). Children who behave this way are good (*pen khon dee*)”. In the same way, when a depreciative comment directed at a mother who left her 4 year old child to play next to the garbage slipped out of my mouth, Ui, 13 years old, warned: “When you talk about these things...do it in English! Here if you say bad things about moms (*mae*) and dads (*pho*), they blow you away”.

The child as a “victim”: local appropriations of politically sensitive Western discourses on childhood and the increase of slum children mobility

While the impact that the arrival of the NGOs in the 1980s had on traditional leadership in the slum (through the redefinition of relations of power and the use of new and more relevant political mediators between inside and outside the slum) has been underlined (Ockey 2004, pp. 81-124), an aspect to which the literature did not pay enough attention is the discursive vehicle used by NGOs to substitute the patrons in exercising the dialogic monopoly with the authorities: the discourse on the “rights of children”.

The normative Western conception of childhood (which was affirmed at a trans-national level through the institution of agencies such as ONU, UNICEF, and so on) refers to childhood as a time of innocence and enthusiasm, and dictates that “children are demarcated from adults by a series of biological and psychological, as opposed to social, characteristics that are universally valid. It also dictates the childhood is accompanied by a set of rights that can be enshrined in international law” (Boyden 1997, p. 190). This representation, which starts to be reproduced once again as a marker of status by the upper-middle class residents of the Thai capital, appears to be in contrast with the local conceptions of childhood, which are still widespread in large areas of the country, slums included, despite the emerging legal and juridical definitions produced by the government to conform to the global mainstream.¹⁸

Beside the rhetoric of endogenous development and the right to maintain the land, NGOs, joined shortly after by Christian aid agencies and riding the wave of the proclamation of the universality of children’s rights, began to support Western ideologies on childhood based on the construction of slum children as a “victims” to be saved from a place where their rights are too often violated.¹⁹

18 On the 27th of March 1992, Thailand signed the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

19 The local and international support which enabled the “Khlong Toei” to resist the

The coming of the NGOs did not only lead to a more effective political representation of the urban poor, but also modified the social, economic, political and symbolic positioning of childhood in the slums. By determining the opening of the slum and the mobility of its young residents, often hosted in scholastic and aid structures linked to the NGOs, it also increased the possibilities of a child's *agency*, which principally expresses itself in terms of access to new physical, social and symbolic spaces. Very often, it is through the child that alliances between slums and NGOs, or other international interlocutors, can be established. The complaisant disposition of the child in this direction (they will have to accept to move from the slum to the hosting structure, define and construct themselves in order to match the representation of infant distress that is prescribed there) is a focal point when starting the political economic relationship²⁰ (the hosting structure will provide for the child, and sometimes also for their family), which is functional (also) to the community anti-eviction tactics.

The inhabitants of the slums therefore started to use children and these new "moral geographies" of childhood (Aitken 2001) to access political mediation and the resources that they provide, giving the children a much stronger contractual power in the relationship with the authorities than before.

In the "Tuek Deang", this evolution also passes through the action of the PIME (Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere), an Italian missionary branch of the Catholic Church. Besides promoting local "social development" activities (*patthana chumchon*) through the referents internal to the slum (the parents of assisted children), PIME hosts disadvantaged slum children in its own hostel: the Saint Jacob Center, located in Nonthabury. There, children are given economic support and scholastic assistance.

Father Nicola, the Italian guide of Saint Jacob Center in Thailand since 1978, says: "These children are defenceless and need, above all, to be loved, hugged, cuddled, after all they've been through". These words seem rest on an interpretation of the slum child as a victim, complementing his spiritual and assisting role.

Referents at the Saint Jacob Center in the "Tuek Deang" are in a network of economic and assistance relationships that is able to alter the traditional

evictions must be related to the local conditions of childhood. The local school created by the young Thai teacher Prateep in her own house in 1968 became a meeting place and a "symbolic focus" for the first local anti-eviction assemblies (Asia 1981). The funds gathered by Prateep were used to institute the "Duang Prateep Foundation" (DPF) which began to fund activities addressed to the children of the "Khlong Toei" (Askew 2002, p. 156) and attracted the attention of the media and other important political figures.

20 Through a vast ethnographic comparison, David Lancy (2008) underlined how children have been treated throughout history, and even nowadays in most parts of the world, as a "commodity" with economic value.

internal power structure and the official representations of both the inside/outside relationship and that of childhood.

Noi, 45 years old, originally from Isarn, is the single mother of three children assisted by the Saint Jacob Center. She is a representative of PIME at “Tuek Deang”. The woman says: “White people (*farang*) are generous (*jaidee*), they help us with money, and give us advice without wanting to be paid. People in the slums, instead, are envious; they compete and don’t want you to live better than them. They don’t even want us to go outside the slum and have contact with the outside (*mai chop hai cri pai khang nok*)”.

About the children, she says: “Children need to be listened to, you have to be concerned with them, ask them questions, let them express themselves. This is the only way they will trust us”. These discourses channel a reproduction of Western values that imply the recognition of the child as an individual with which it is appropriate to establish horizontal relationships. Nevertheless, they appear to be in contrast with practices directed at children in the slums, which are based on a rigidly vertical logic.

In keeping with the images of childhood transmitted by PIME, these ideas appear therefore to be instrumental to the consolidation of a relationship that has the support of an economic and political tie with a trans-national subject as a primary purpose, as opposed to the protection of minors based on a Western construction of slum children as victims.²¹ Despite this, since 2002, the intervention of PIME has widened the possibilities of social and spatial mobility for the children of the “Tuek Deang”, and destabilized a system based on a rigid hierarchy, the chippings of which seem to produce new and plastic configurations.

Spatial stories: the synchronic dimension of individuals and spaces

Wat: status trajectories

Wat is a 15 year old boy born in the “Tuek Deang”. From the age of six he lived at Saint Jacob Center because of the inability of his family to provide for him. I met him while volunteering as a psychologist at the organization. Before my return to the field, Wat had run away from the catholic Center to go back to the “Tuek Deang”, where he lives with his maternal uncle who is unemployed and an alcoholic. His father and older brother are in prison for drug dealing (*khai ya ba*) and his mother works outside the city. While

21 This thesis is supported by the representation that the inhabitants of the “Tuek Deang” built around my figure before I revealed my role as a researcher. In fact, I started my fieldwork through PIME. Being a *farang* representative of the organization, the individuals I interviewed tended to reproduce the discursive positions of the Saint Jacob Center, as a strategy to consolidate their alliance.

I was visiting his house, he explained the reasons behind his choice to leave Saint Jacob: "If I had stayed there, I would have stayed a child, I wouldn't have known how to face problems in life. Outside (*khang nok*) real life is different".

Just like other Western aid agencies, with NGOs at the forefront, the charitable institution from which Wat ran away embodies and reproduces a normative construction of childhood based on right/duty, reciprocity, equality and democracy. This ideology translates into a pedagogy that aims to create socially and morally desirable subjectivities through a system of equal rules (principle of egalitarianism), that tends to level the differences in status and requires the community to respect a law that does not admit *phi* (older brother, see above). All individuals have the same rights and duties.

The adherence of slum children to these norms is, to a great extent, formal. The hierarchical structure that permeates Thai society and the context characterized by practices of favoritism act as filtering classifiers that are essential to regulating relationships. From the age of twelve-thirteen, the children hosted in the structure become impatient towards this form of imposed equality. They feel humiliated when called to perform the same duties normally given to younger children and demand the recognition of the acquired role of *phi*.

Not all of the guests are as brave as Wat is, but nevertheless express similar considerations. Biu is 15 years old and has been a guest at Saint Jacob Center for seven years. He says: "Now I get bored here, I don't feel free. There are too many rules, and I am not a child anymore".

Flight from the aid agency is conceived by Wat and the other children as a spatial "rite of passage" (Van Gennep 2002), a movement marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is a post-modern rite of passage that can replace traditional forms of transition into adulthood.²²

A further point needs to be made. Some of the slum children take advantage of the chance to come across NGOs to negotiate their own status and power, and work on social hierarchies. Concerning this last point, Wat says:

Before coming to Saint Jacob's I was just another child of the slum (*dek salam khon nung*). Now I am a boy (*dek phu-chai khon nung*) studying for my future. Saint Jacob's helped me to become an authoritative guide (*phu-nam*) for the younger children (*luk nong*). *Phu-nam* is somebody able to guide the younger, both in the family (*krobkrua*) and in the society (*sangkhom*) in order for them to grow up (*phu-yai*). (Wat)

22 Among the traditional rites of passage the Buddhist monastic novitiate (*kan buad*) for male children (*nen*) represented one of the major channels of social mobility for poor people (Tambiah 1976, pp. 288-312), a very effective way to accumulate karmic merits, the end of childhood and the start of adulthood (Akin 2010, pp. 95-96).

Then, he smiles and adds: “I am a *nakleng*²³ now, a good ‘mafia person’ (*khon mafia dee*). I have a lot of people counting on me, but don’t tell anything to Father Nicola!” (Wat)

By staying at an organization that, in the eyes of the community, is a rich Western institution, Wat was able to impose himself not only as a leader in school, but also to subvert the traditional generational relationships of authority. One day, as Wat and I were coming back to his house, we met his uncle, who was having some whisky with his friends. The man shook my hand, while Wat, who kept on walking, affirmed: “You see? He’s always drunk! He does nothing but drinking whisky from morning till night! ”. It was a public scoff I would never have expected from a local child towards a *phu-yai*.

The permanence in a space so different from the slum is perceived by Wat as an occasion to acquire resources to invest in order to resist the hierarchical oppression to which local children are generally submitted, and to build his own leadership among the community. The circular movement from slum to NGOs and back to slum has in fact signified for Wat the opportunity to acquire symbolic capital and negotiate his own position within the local structure of power.

As the NGOs’ attempt to promote “horizontal” and democratic relationships and values, Wat has used Saint Jacob Center to “vertically ascend” the traditional authoritarian hierarchy, which remains informally recognized and based on seniority.

Once on Skype his status read: “I was born to have others in my power (*koed maa phua hai khon iu tai amnad*)”.

Yut: the search of space

Yut, 13 years old, lived at the Saint Jacob Center for eight years. When he was four, Father Nicola used to see him wandering around the slum. His mom had recently started a relationship with a new partner who, according to the missionary, did not tolerate the offspring of her previous relationship. The child perceived the domestic environment as hostile, and therefore preferred to spend his time strolling around by himself. When Father Nicola suggested that the mother bring Yut along to the Catholic organization, she did not hesitate, additionally benefiting from the economic help that the

23 The term *nakleng* refers to a brave, manly person, ready to fight, who is faithful to his friends and extremely loyal. This figure developed as a result of the distance between the village and the central authority. The *nakleng* protected the villages from theft by engaging in raids at the expenses of other villages. Respected and admired, he was a central figure not only in a criminal context but also in protecting the village. He exercised a great deal of power through threats and rewards, sometimes to the point of becoming the head of the village itself (*phu-yai ban*) (Ockey 2004, pp. 81-82).

farang would guarantee.

In July 2011, while I was living at the Center, Yut worried the people in charge at the structure: his progress at school was poor, his teachers reported his frequent unexcused absences and they suspected he had started to take *ya ba*.

I decided to avoid adhering to the local normative models of authority (*phi*) in order to allow the emergence of “horizontal” relational patterns. I wished to be perceived by Yut as a peer (*phuan*), a “special *farang*”, who would not intend to influence his choices. I was very surprised when, irritated by such manipulation, he told me: “You are not one of my friends (*phuan*). You are my elder brother (*phi*)”.

The hierarchic structure that permeates Thai social order becomes a mental structure and also defines the subjectivity of these individuals from an emotional and affective point of view. Paradoxically, Yut perceived my “horizontal” approach as the attempt to create a distance, thus identifying in the culturally normative dyad *phi/nong* the only recognizable vehicle of affection in the context of a caring relationship.

One evening, far from the prying eyes of the educators at Saint Jacob, Yut told me: “Younger children (*dek dek nong*) here don't obey me. I don't want to do the same things they do anymore. I am big now (*phu-yai*). I can't stay here anymore. I found an apartment and a job. You are my *phi* now, I can talk to you about these things! I'm going to run away soon!”.

Yut soon took action. At the end of July, he ran away from the Center, seeking adventures in a spiral of improvised peregrinations in order to experiment and define a perceived condition of autonomous “adulthood”. Thanks to the information received from some schoolmates, the operators at Saint Jacobs found him in the house of a drug dealer. The man had promised the child an apartment, a moped and a “salary” had he accepted to deal *ya ba* in his place. Taken back to Saint Jacob, Yut ran off again: he had publicly announced to his peers he would go away. If he had stayed, his reputation would have been compromised. He had to prove he was a *phu-yai*.

He went back to “Tuek Daeng” where his mother insisted he return to Saint Jacob Center. She was vexed by the fact that her son deprived her of the precious economic and political alliance with the Saint Jacob's *farang* and consequently she would not take him back.

On the basis of the last piece of news I received from Father Nicola, it appears that Yut is now working for a travelling circus. Unlike Wat, Yut unfortunately does not seem to have what it takes to be a *nak leng*.

In his analysis of the “rhetoric of walking in the city”, Michel De Certeau (1984, pp. 100-103) talks about the possibility of discovering a dreamed place in a practised “spatial story”; he also claims that “to walk is to lack a place”. Continuous displacements imply the inability to find a place where one can feel represented. Yut's movement seems to mirror an undefined process of transience, an anomie of the self, which finds in the endless wandering of

the child an apt spatial metaphor to represent the “predatory” nature of contemporary cities (Kleinmann 2011) and which condemn some individuals to remain excluded.

Concluding remarks

The diachronic and synchronic analysis of the spatial and existential mobility of some of the children in a Bangkok slum, the “Tuek Daeng”, sheds light on the relationship between the practices of individuals who live in a dynamic but limited urban spatial context, and the processes of global trans-national movement, in a country at a historical turning point (Hanerz 1992; Low 2005, pp. 1-36).

Slums, a side effect of an economic and territorial policy which favours urban elites, appear to be the result of a historical, economic and political process which redesigned the nature of the Thai capital after WWII, and the products of violence that runs along numerous lines and creates inequities in the control of space.

The historical form of social organization inside the slums has been described as the vertical patron-client relationship. In this hierarchical system children sit at the bottom of the scale. More generally, and at a broader level of analysis, the slums themselves occupy a subaltern position in the wider urban context. They are depicted by governmental and media discourses as a locus of danger, drug trafficking and moral degradation, and have been the subject of eviction policies.

By insisting on a trans-national discourse which focuses on the rights of children and on horizontal values NGOs and Western international agencies like Saint Jacob Center have been precious allies for the inhabitants of the slums since the 1970s. They were responsible for new forms of political organization within the slum and for destabilizing a hierarchic system. At the same time, this repositioning of childhood within the slum is a symbolic resource cleverly manipulated by the adults, and the basis for political negotiations centred on the use of urban space and access to financial support.

The advent of Western aid agencies is thus redefining both the structural position, the everyday life and the subjective experience of slum children but also, through the children themselves, the hierarchical power relations between slum dwellers and the city. As a result, children have seen their mobility increase and have begun to creatively renegotiate their subaltern position. As imperfect and unpredictable as the process of growing up is, they have begun to rethink themselves within society while others still wander around a world that is quite hard to understand.

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