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# The galactic polity in Southeast Asia

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I have coined the label *galactic polity* to represent the design of traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms, a design that coded in a composite way cosmological, topographical, and politico-economic features. The label itself is derived from the concept of *mandala*, which according to a common Indo-Tibetan tradition is composed of two elements—a core (*manda*) and a container or enclosing element (*la*). Mandala designs, both simple and complex of satellites arranged around a center, occur with such insistence at various levels of Hindu-Buddhist thought and practice that one is invited to probe their representational efficacy.

## Mandala as cosmological topography

Cosmological schemes of various sorts in Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism have been referred to as *mandala*—for example, the cosmos as constituted of Mount Meru in the center surrounded by oceans and mountain ranges. At a philosophical and doctrinal level, the Buddhist *Sarvastivadin* school represented the relation between consciousness (*citta*) and its associated mental phenomena (*caitta*) in terms of the law of satellites, wherein consciousness placed in the center is surrounded by ten *caitta*, each of which again is surrounded by four *laksana*, or satellites (Stcherbatsky 1923;

Conze 1970). The design and arrangement of the magnificent architectural monuments like Borobodur and Angkor Vat have been called mandala (Mus 1935, 1936).

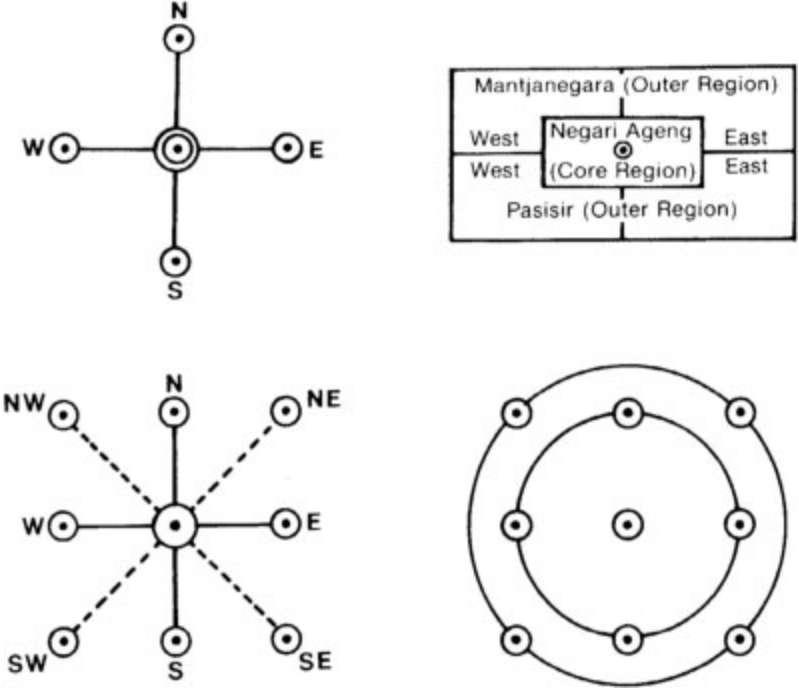
At quite a different level, Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* used mandala as a geopolitical concept to discuss the spatial configuration of friendly and enemy states from the perspective of a particular kingdom (Shamasastri 1960). The human body is likened to a mandala (Tucci 1971), a description that finds its resonances in ritual and medical practices. Finally, mandala designs are printed on textiles or are reproduced in the transitory designs drawn with powdered colors on numerous occasions.

My primary interest in this paper is the traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms that are described as conforming to the mandala scheme in their arrangement at various levels. Mandala as geometrical, topographical, cosmological, and societal blueprints are not a distinctive feature of complex kingdoms and polities only. The evidence is quite clear that simpler mandala designs appear in tribal lineage-based segmentary societies practicing slash-and-burn agriculture, and that the most elaborate designs are manifest in the more complex centralized polities of valley-based sedentary rice cultivators (for example, see Mus 1935; Heine-Geldern 1942; de Jong 1952; Schrieke 1955; Shorto 1963; Moertono 1968; Wheatley 1971). But this is a simplification. There are indeed expressions both simple and complex found in phenomena standing between these poles—at the level of tribal polities and local communities. An excellent case in point are the Atoni of Timor. They have named patrilineal descent groups, live in villages, grow maize and rice by shifting agriculture on mountainous terrain, and at the same time belong to principedoms. Their village houses are made to a complex center-oriented design wherein concepts of inner and outer, right and left, four major mother posts, twelve peripheral chicken posts, and so on build up a scheme that simultaneously has cosmological, ritual, sexual, and practical ramifications (Cunningham 1973). And, as may be expected, the wider encompassing polity as such is constituted according to an elaborate design of center and satellites and of successive bipartitions of various kinds (Nordholt 1971).

Examples of the elementary geometric designs are the five-unit (quinary) and nine-unit samples. The first consists of four units deployed around a central one, and the second is composed of a center, four places in

the major cardinal positions, and four more placed in between at the lesser cardinal points (Figures 1 and 2). In Indonesia, for example, the quinary formula called *mantjapat* (“five-four”) had various usages: it denoted the arrangement of four village tracts around a fifth central one; it represented the rotational location of village markets in a five-day cycle; it made its appearance in the settlement of Minangkabau land-ownership disputes in that the unanimous testimony of the heads of families owning the four surrounding plots was required (de Jong 1952); it described the headman’s council at the village level (in the same sense as that of the *panchayat* in village India); and it appears (Schrieke 1955) to have been the underlying pattern of the Mataram kingdom during the second quarter of the eighteenth century, arrived at by successive bipartitions (Figure 1, upper right).

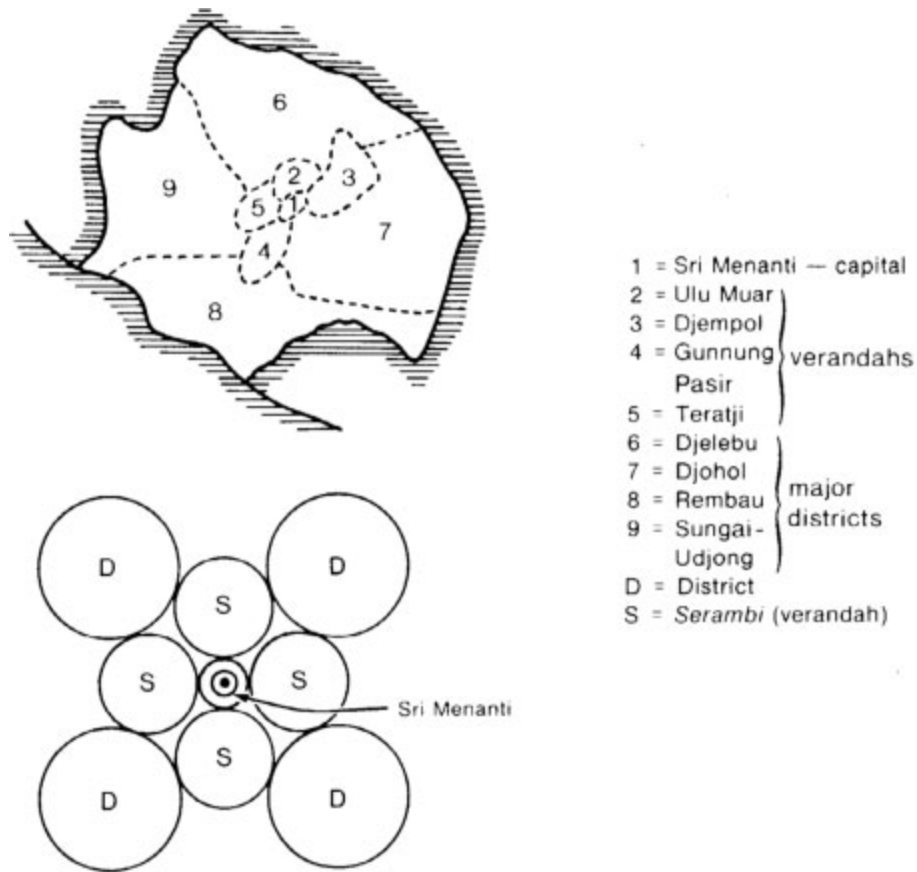
Similarly, the nine-unit design appears in stereotyped accounts of the king and his ministers arranged in two concentric circles. It also appears in the territorial design of the traditional Negrisembilan polity (Figure 2), with the domain of Sri Menanti in the center, immediately surrounded by four “verandah” (*serambi* tracts and these again being flanked by four major districts (de Jong 1952).



**Figure 1** : Upper left: The *mantjapat*. Upper right: The Mataram state—a five-unit system through successive bipartitions (after Schrieke 1955) Lower left: Nine-unit system, showing a radical pattern. Lower right: The king’s council, showing two concentric circles.

Here is the first problem posed by these facts: because these geometrical and radial constructs, traditionally conceived as cosmological designs, occur in slash-and-burn and wet-rice economies, occur at the level of local community and the widest conception of polity, and occur in simpler and more complex societies, there are no *prima facie* grounds for explaining their manifestation as immediate and *direct* projections of ecological considerations or the logistical constraints of sociopolitical organization. The logic of their use cannot be reduced to a simple causal explanation. It is clear that if we approached these center-oriented constructs or models as a form of classification, we could start with an initial pentadic or quinary system and progressively build up an expanding series of mandala circles comprising seventeen, thirty-three, and still larger clusters of units.

Perhaps the most famous of these complex schemes was realized in the Hindu-Buddhist polities of Southeast Asia that employed the thirty-three-unit scheme to express and organize cosmogonies and pantheons as well as religio-political groupings. In this scheme the king as wielder of *dharma* (the moral law), as the *chakra-vartin* (universal emperor) and *bodhisattva* (buddha-to-be), was seen as the pivot of the polity and as the mediating link between the upper regions of the cosmos, composed of the gods and their heavens, and the lower plane of humans and lesser beings.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 2 :** Negrisembilan (after de Jong 1952). Bottom: Schematic design of the Negrisembilan polity as a nine-unit system.

The best expression of this scheme is the thirty-two *myos* of the medieval Mon kingdom and the thirty-seven *nats* of the subsequent Burmese pantheon so well elucidated for us by Heine-Geldern (1942) and Shorto (1963); both these schemes derive from the paradigmatic heavenly scheme of the god Indra, flanked by the four guardians of the world (*lokapala*) and twenty-eight lesser *devatas* as retinue. For example, Thaton, the Mon kingdom overrun by Anawrahta in 1057, had thirty-two *myos* or provinces, each the seat of a subordinate prince, ringing the capital. All these political and territorial units were further linked together by the Buddhist *cetiya* cult of relic pagodas, also thirty-three in number. Similarly, the kingdom of Pegu in 1650 and the Mon kingdom of Rammanadesa of Lower Burma had their own permutations and variations of these schemes (Shorto 1963).

All these Buddhist courts also provided prolix examples of such mandala schemes as the king surrounded by thirty-three queens and thirty-three lineages into which they married, and the like.

Following is the second problem of interpretation. The classical descriptions of these Southeast Asian polities arranged in center-oriented galactic schemes were and are accompanied by a certain interpretation of their *raison d'être*, which I shall label as the *cosmological mode*. It is best exemplified by the writings of Eliade and Heine-Geldern (among others), and repeated by Shorto and Wheatley; surprisingly, it is also espoused by Riggs (1967) in his characterization of the traditional Siamese polity. Even Geertz's (1973) trinitarian formulation of the traditional Javanese and Balinese polities in terms of the doctrines of exemplary center, graded spirituality, and theater state resonates with a "cosmological" ontology, which provides the impulsion for the politics in these traditional kingdoms to be the enactment of ritual.

The doyen of contemporary cosmological interpreters is Eliade, who for instance in his *Cosmos and history: The myth of the eternal return* (1959) argues that Archaic Man, as opposed to Modern Man, constantly enacted archetypes or exemplary models in his rituals (as well as other activities), of which the symbolism of the center as the *axis mundi* is the most celebrated. For Eliade, these center-oriented cosmologies are enacted and implemented by the archaic mentality, not because of any rational or practical considerations but because they constitute a prior ontology and therefore an absolute reality for the actors. In other words, the "sacred" orientation provides the impulsions and guidelines for the "profane" activities of traditional man. Thus, in Eliade's vision, archaic man's "reality is a function of the imitation of a celestial archetype [and this] reality is conferred through participation in the 'symbolism of the center': cities, temples, houses become real by the fact of being assimilated to the 'centre of the world.'" "

Again, more recently, Wheatley, the author of a large work, *The pivot of the four quarters* (1971), repeats in his inaugural lecture the same interpretive perspective: "in these religions which held that human order was brought into being at the creation of the world there was a pervasive tendency to dramatize the cosmogony by constructing on earth a reduced version of the cosmos, usually in the form of a state capital. In other words,

Reality was achieved through the imitation of a celestial archetype by giving material expression to that parallelism between macrocosmos and microcosmos without which there could be no prosperity in the world of men” (1969: 10).

Let me be clear about what i am questioning in the received wisdom so persuasively purveyed by these eminent scholars. My own stand is far from a vulgar utilitarianism or pragmatism in terms of which the schemes in question ought to be explained. one must grant the validity of the galactic model as a collective representation. But what i question is seeing the rationale for this model in a cosmo-logical mode of thought as an ontological priority, which is so interpreted as to constitute a sociological anteriority as well, such that for the imputed “traditional” or “archaic” mentality a notion of the “sacred” is alleged to engulf the “secular” and to serve as the ground of reality.

Apart from the limitation that such a cosmological mode of explanation is static and cannot account for either variations between the schemes employed by societies or polities or dynamic changes in the schemes over time, there is the major objection that in these examples of traditional thought and practice, the sacred as such cannot be persuasively distinguished from a profane domain, and that the cosmological, religious, political, economic dimensions cannot be disaggregated. What the Western analytical tradition separates and identifies as religion, economy, politics may have either been combined differently, or more likely constituted a single interpenetrating totality. If, as I believe, these entities under scrutiny were total social phenomena in the Maussian sense, then one has to employ a different analytical strategy from those already cited so as to recover something of their con-tours and relations.

My approach, which I shall call “totalization,” aims to give an integrated account that is, as far as possible, a true representation of the traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms as extant actualities. But the task is not easy, least of all the problem of translation of indigenous concepts and their elucidation in terms of the analyst’s concepts and vocabulary.

My thesis is that the kingdoms in question were arranged according to a galactic scheme, and that this scheme was conceptualized and actualized in ways that are best elucidated in terms of certain key indigenous concepts.



The most central of these concepts is mandala (Thai: *monthon*), standing for an arrangement of a center and its surrounding satellites and employed in multiple contexts to describe, for example: the structure of a pantheon of gods; the deployment spatially of a capital region and its provinces; the arrangement socially of a ruler, princes, nobles, and their respective retinues; and the devolution of graduated power on a scale of decreasing autonomies. Other key concepts in the Thai language (which have their counterparts in other Southeast Asian languages as well) are: *muang*, which in a politico-territorial sense signifies kingdom/principality in terms of center-oriented space, and of central and satellite domains; and *krom*, which represents the radial mapping of an administrative system of departments and their subdivisions, as well as the constitution of successively expanding circles of leaders and followers or factions.

The range of meanings of these and other concepts will emerge in due course. Here I shall note certain features integral to the notion of totalization. First, there is a semantic overlap and a certain amount of redundancy in the meanings attributable to the Thai concepts cited, although they are not identical and do not occupy equal semantic space. Second, these (and other similar) concepts are polyvalent, and if their meanings are mapped onto a Western conceptual grid of “levels,” they are revealed to be, in varying degrees of overlap, *at once* cosmological, territorial, politico-economic, administrative, and so on.

Thus, from the standpoint of the integrity of these traditional polities, it would be a mistake to disaggregate them into the above-mentioned Western conceptual levels and to treat them as analytically adequate and exegetically sufficient. Although not committing this error, I, as translator and analyst, can only give some idea of the totality by showing that the key concepts do resonate with the polyvalent implications that we attribute to these levels. Therefore, I shall adopt the descriptive strategy of showing that the galactic scheme was characterized by certain structured relations, which were reflected at various levels that I disaggregate or deal with in succession only so that later I can reconstitute the totality.

My descriptive strategy has two implications, which are paradoxically the two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, because the levels—cosmological, territorial, politico-economic, and so on—have no true analytical validity, it follows as a corollary that we cannot assign a

deterministic and privileged role to any of them. on the other hand, because the key polyvalent concepts are totalistic and simultaneously carry those significances which we descriptively disaggregate (as cosmo-logical, political, economic), we have to see the galactic scheme as encoding all the impulsions that we customarily attribute to each level. Thus, in requiring us not to assign priority to any one level or to ignore its impulsion—cosmological or logis-tical—the approach makes it possible to integrate the claims of a cosmological imperative with other imperatives without contradiction. Finally, the approach also makes it possible to relate the model of the galactic polity to certain parameters that define the outer limits of its existence and explain processual oscillations within those limits.

## **From cosmology to political process**

The so-called cosmological schemes can be seen dynamically as serving as frames for political processes and outcomes of a pulsating kind. Furthermore, and this is i hope a novel argument, the cosmological idiom together with its grandeur and imagery, if read correctly, can be shown to be a realistic reflection of the political pulls and pushes of these center-oriented but centrifugally fragmenting polities. in this instance myth and reality are closer than we think.

Before I enumerate its salient political and economic features, let me provide some factual illustrations of the galactic polity.

### ***The kingdom of Sukhothai***

The kingdom of Sukhothai, which historically marked the first political emergence and realization of a Thai polity in the thirteenth century (in what is now Thailand), bore the unmistakable marks of a galactic polity (principal sources here are Wales 1934; Griswold 1967).

The concept of *muang* (the Mon parallel is *dun*) had a range of meanings signifying kingdom, country, province, town, capital, and region. The most relevant gloss for that concept is that it referred to “centered” or “center-oriented” space as opposed to “bounded” space, and typically stood for a capital, town, or settlement with the surrounding territory over which it exercised jurisdiction. At the widest limit it was commonly the case that the name of a kingdom was synonymous with the name of the capital city

(Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Pagan, Pegu, Majapahit). The Javanese analogy was that of a torch with its light radiating outward with decreasing intensity; the power of the center determined the range of its illumination (Moertono 1968: 112).

This conception of territory as a variable space, control over which diminished as royal power radiated from a center, is integral to the schematic characterization of the traditional polity as a mandala composed of concentric circles, usually three in number. This concentric circle system, representing the center-periphery relations, was ordered thus: in the center was the king's capital and the region of its direct control, which was surrounded by a circle of "provinces" ruled by princes or "governors" appointed by the king, and these again were surrounded by tributary polities more or less independent. Note that the capital itself was an architectural representation of a mandala. Thus, the Sukhothai capital had in the inner core of the city the king's palace and the major temple and monastery (Wat Mahadhatu) standing side by side; this center was surrounded by three circles of earthen ramparts, with four gateways at the cardinal points (Griswold 1967).

Prince Damrong is cited by Wales (1934) as giving this description of the territorial and administrative distribution of Sukhothai, after it had freed itself from Khmer control and had succeeded in bringing three neighboring *muang*—Sawankalok, Phitsanulok, and Kamphaengpet, all, situated within a distance of two days' march—under its sway: 1) At the center was the capital province or region, ruled by the king, *muang luang* (great or chief *muang*). Within this royal domain, the king was situated in his capital "city" and within it again in his palace. 2) At the four cardinal points were the *muang*, each ruled by a son of the king (and their sons in turn often succeeded them). These regions, ruled by the princes as almost independent kingdoms, were regarded as having the status of "children" with respect to the capital province, as signified by the expression *muang luk luang*. The provinces were received from the king and governed on the same lines as the capital, the sons being sworn to cooperate with the father for mutual defense and on campaigns of conquest. 3) This principle of a decentralized constellation of units that replicate one another, in that they show minimal differentiation of function, finds expression also among those units recognized as the building blocks of the internal structure of a *muang*,

whether capital or provincial. Examples of these lower-level components are the *pau ban*, “father” of the village settlement, and, following at the lowest level, the *pau krua*, the “father” of the hearth (head of commensal household / family). 4) The outer ring, the third concentric circle beyond the four provinces, was the region of independent kingdoms, which, wherever brought under sway, were in a tributary relation—that is, in a relation of overlordship rather than direct political control. When King Ram Khamheng claimed as part of his kingdom various Lao polities of the north and northeast, the old kingdom of Nagara Sri Dharmaraja in the south, and the kingdom of Pegu to the west, he was at best claiming this indirect overlordship.

King Ram Khamheng’s inscriptions give evidence of the following social classification of the ruling stratum (and are reminiscent of the Mon concepts cited earlier):

1. *khun*, the ruling princes / nobles, especially of the relatively autonomous “provinces”;
2. *pau khun*, the “father” of the *khun*, the appellation for the king, who was also called *chao muang*;
3. *luk khun*, literally “children” of the *khun*, who were lesser princes / nobles confined to the capital *muang* and who as “chiefs of the great body of retainers which formed the population of his capital and the land immediately surrounding, assisted the king in matters of administration” (Wales 1934: 69).

Before taking up other examples of the galactic polity, I shall underline a fundamental duality concerning the constitution of the central or capital region of the king and its provinces, and the relations between them. On the one hand, there is a faithful reproduction on a reduced scale of the center in its outlying components; on the other, the satellites pose the constant threat of fission and incorporation in another sphere of influence. If we constantly keep in mind the expanding and shrinking character of the political constellations under scrutiny, we can grasp the central reality that although the constituent political units differed in size, each lesser unit was a reproduction and imitation of the larger. What emerges is a galactic picture of a central planet surrounded by differentiated satellites, which are more or less “autonomous” entities held in orbit and within the sphere of influence

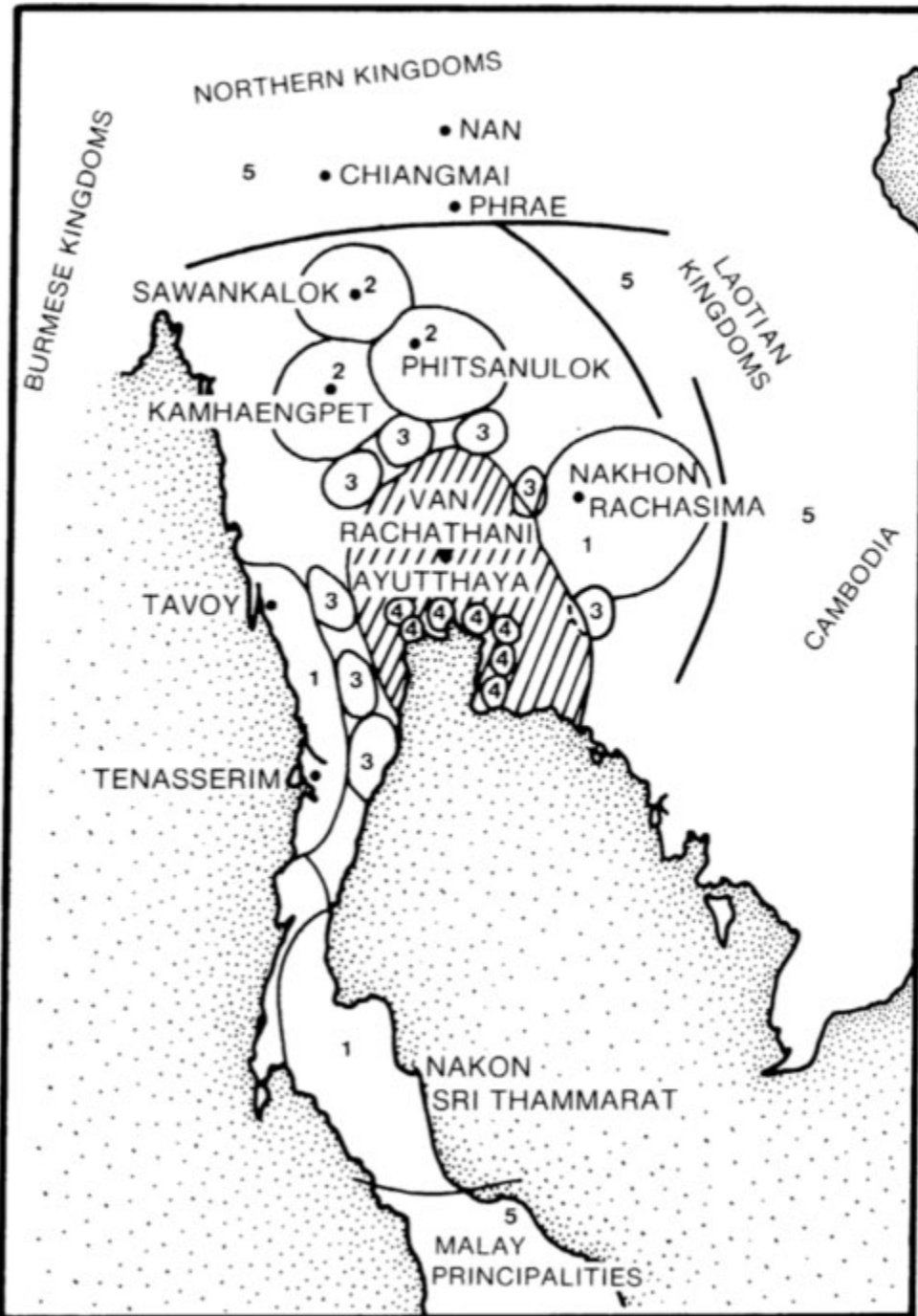
of the center. If we introduce at the margin other similar competing central principalities and their satellites, we shall be able to appreciate the logic of a system that as a hierarchy of central points is continually subject to the dynamics of pulsation and changing spheres of influence.

It is clear that the fortunes of the Sukhothai rulers waxed and waned with regard to territorial control. Although Ram Kamheng boasted of his vast area of control, Lu Thai (1347–1374), who succeeded a few generations later, ascended a throne that was on the verge of extinction. He had first to fight for his throne and then to regain as many of the lost vassal states as possible.<sup>2</sup> The problem of territorial control was related to the distribution of rival foci of power. To the north of Sukhothai was the kingdom of Lan Na, further to the northwest was Pagan, in the south was Ayutthaya, to the west Lan Chang, and far to the southeast Angkor. The interstitial provinces under governors and principalities under petty rulers were always disputed—for example, Prabang and Kamhaengpet frequently changed hands between Sukhothai and Ayutthaya in the middle of the fourteenth century. Furthermore, the exigencies of warfare and rebellions, and the overall fissiparous nature of the polities frequently dictated that the capital of the ruler shift its physical location. When Lu Thai began a campaign of pacification around 1362, he first went to Nan, from there eastward to Pra Sak, and finally for tactical reasons took up residence in Kong Swe and remained there for seven years before returning to Sukhothai. Thus, a measure of sober realism ought to teach us that we must match the doctrine of the capital as the exemplary center with the fact of a moving center of improvised bamboo palaces, and field camps of the warrior king on the march or on the run, whose area of control was hotly disputed and liable to shrink or expand with the fortunes of battle. The son of Lu Tai (Mahadhammaraja II) was reduced to a vassal of Ayutthaya in 1378, and by 1438 the Sukhothai provinces were decisively and irrevocably incorporated into the kingdom of Ayutthaya.

## **The Ayutthayan polity circa 1460–1590**

I have in a previous work (1976) given a detailed description of the design of the kingdom of Ayutthaya and the pattern of its political process and administrative involution at certain points in its history. Here I shall briefly give a formal sketch of the Ayutthayan polity around the third quarter of the

fifteenth century onward, so as to confirm the point that although more complexly ordered, the underlying principles of Ayutthaya's territorial and administrative organization conformed to the scheme of the galactic polity.



**Figure 3** : Schematic representation of the Ayutthayan polity (ca. 1460–1590). The shaded portion represents Van Rachathani (Van Rajadani), the royal domain of Ayutthaya. 1 = Brahyamahanagara

(Phra Mahanakhon)—major provinces/principalities. 2 = Moan Luk Hluari (Muang Luk Luang)—provinces ruled by “sons” of the king. 3 = Moan Hlan Hlvan (Muang Lan Luang)—provinces ruled by grandsons/nephews of the king. 4. = Moan Noi (Muang Noi)—small provinces making up the Van Rachathani. 5 = Moan Pradhesa Raja— foreign (independent) kingdoms.

King Trailok is credited at this time with the reorganization of his kingdom. The emergent pattern was as follows (see Figure 3):

1. *Va rachathani*: This comprises the capital of Ayutthaya and its core region or royal domain, which was internally divided into small provinces (*muang noi*, later called “fourth class” provinces). These lesser provinces were in theory administered by officials directly responsible to the ministers (*senapati*) resident in the capital.

2a. *Muang luk luang*: In theory these were the provinces ruled by the king’s sons of *chao fa* status of the highest class (born of mothers of royal status). (In a later classification they were called provinces of first-class status.) The principalities that fitted this description were in fact the three *muang* that previously composed the major portion of the now defunct kingdoms of Sukhothai-Phitsanulok, Sawankalok, and Kahamphaengpet.

2b. *Phra mahanakorn*: Roughly of the same category as *muang luk luang*, but with a firmer history of local rulership and of more or less autonomy, were the principalities of Nakhon Rachasima in the east, Tenasserim in the west, and most famous of all, Nakhon Srithammarat in the south. These autonomous provinces provide the best historical evidence of reproducing the conceptions and arrangements prevailing in the capital do-main.<sup>3</sup> All princely governors and rulers of categories 2a and 2b maintained their own armies.

3. Between categories 1 and 2 were situated the *muang lan luang* (literally, “provinces ruled by the grandsons/nephews of the king”), administered by *chao fa* princes of the second class; these were smaller, buffer provin-ces separating the central domain from the large provinces.

4. At the perimeter were ranged the independent polities, such as the northern kingdoms of Chiang Mai, Chiang Saen, Phrae, and Nan, and the peninsular Malay states of Johore and Malacca: all these stood in a tributary relationship to Ayutthaya. Then there were the Cambodian and Burmese polities; *vis-a-vis* the former, Ayutthaya exercised tributary privileges intermittently, while the latter were unambiguously of enemy status and powerful foci of galactic formation in their own right.

A still more complex mandala model representing the formal design of the Ayutthaya kingdom was developed in the seventeenth century in King Naresuan's time (Wales 1934). Provinces were now classed into four types: there were two of the first class, six of the second class, seven of the third, and thirty-four of the fourth class directly under the control of the capital. The first-, second-, and third-class provinces also had minor provinces directly subordinate to them rather than to the capital. It was this classification that was written into the Palatine Law and the Law of Military Ranks and Ranks of Provinces, which was reproduced in the law code revised by Rama I in 1805. It is most apposite to note of this classification that, in theory, the first-class provinces were entitled to a full set of ministries and *damruot* officials duplicating those of the capital, second- and third-class provinces had the same number of ministries but fewer official positions, and all of these officials were appointed locally by the governor, except the *Yokrabat* sent from the capital. The fourth-class provinces lacked such local official ranks and in theory were controlled by the ministries in the capital, with governors appointed for three-year terms (Vickery 1970: 865–866). Of course, reality deviated from the theory— but that leads us into the political dynamics of the galactic polity.

This center-oriented concentric circle view of the polity was pervasive in Southeast Asia. The Javanese text called *Nagarakertagama*, which documents various features of the Majapahit kingdom in the fourteenth century, gives most valuable evidence supporting my thesis of the galactic polity (Pigeaud 1962). An analysis of the text read in relation to my concerns is presented as an appendix; here I shall note that the text's grand tapestry of the exemplary center and its "ring kingdoms," of the kings' royal progresses and the staging of court festivals, is systematically balanced by the countervailing scenario of dual powers within the capital



and of dual (but complementary) religions within the kingdom, of the capital itself revolving into relatively self-contained compounds, just as the kingdom fragmented into the central domain and outer satellite province enjoying various degrees of autonomy.

It appears that Majapahit's successor, Mataram, also recognized three categories: *nagaragung* (the core region), *mantjanegara* and the *pasisir* (the outlying provinces), and the *tanah sabrang* (the lands across the sea). Moertono, having presented the above information, expounds a basic feature of these center-oriented pulsating polities (1968: 112): "What we have observed about the relative position of officials in the *nagaragung* and in the *mantjanegara* leads us to conclude that a territory was allocated to one of the three categories on the basis of the degree of influence that the center, that is, the king, exercised there. Consequently, territorial jurisdiction could not be strictly defined by permanent boundaries, but was characterized by a fluidity or flexibility of boundary dependent on the diminishing or increasing power of the center."

## **The salient political features of the traditional kingdoms**

At a surface level the cosmological account gives a magnificent picture of the exemplary center pulling together and holding in balance the surrounding polity. But we can properly appreciate in what manner the center attempted to hold the remainder—the centripetal role of the center—only after we have properly understood the decentralized locational propensity of the traditional polity and its replication of like entities on a decreasing scale; in other words, only after we have grasped the structure of the galactic constellation, which is a far cry from a bureaucratic hierarchy in the Weberian sense.

One of the principal implications of the cosmological model is that the center ideologically represents the totality and embodies the unity of the whole. The mechanisms that both express unity and that seek to achieve it are so well known that it will suffice to merely enumerate them:

The cosmology is realized in the architecture and layout of the palace and the capital; for example, the capital is the Mount Meru of the kingdom,

and within the capital, the palace represents the same central pillar of the world ringed by concentric circles.

The capital is the starting point for the performance of annual cosmic rites—rites of regeneration and purification—and in a ripple effect the graduated provincial centers replicate in temporal succession the same rites on a diminishing scale (see Archambault 1971).

The royal harem and its forbidden women (*nang hang*—forbidden in the double sense of the women's not being allowed, save on rare occasions, to leave the inner palace grounds, and of being inaccessible to men save the king himself—given to the king by princes, nobles, and officials, is a prime expression of the king as husband of the kingdom. In a sense, the king actively represented the subjects through obligatory and/or politically feasible marriage or concubinage alliances with women kinfolk of princes and officials and rulers of regional provinces and principalities. Once again, true to the galactic model, the princes, nobles, and officials in turn replicated the kingly model with courts and harems of their own.

In Thailand the biannual ceremony of drinking the water of allegiance to the king (there were of course similar ceremonies in other kingdoms) brought the officials and rulers of the outer periphery to the capital. Similarly, it was to the center that these same persons came to receive their titles and regalia of office.

Again in Thailand the institution of the royal corps of pages (*mahatlek*), whose members were sons of princes and nobles attached to the court, was a valued training in the arts of courtly life and royal administration, as well as a guarantee of the loyalty of the king's agents and provincial rulers (*chao muang*) located outside the capital.

There were other administrative devices by which the center attempted to control or oversee directly the activities of the provincial rulers: for the Bangkok period we have evidence of the king posting his own agents, the *yokkrabat*, who, though formally invested with judicial tasks, were charged with the duty of spying on behalf of the king. Again, the king was strongly suspicious of the possible collusion between provincial governors and rulers against his own person and powers, and therefore treated unauthorized visiting among the latter as treason. In theory, the king was safe only when

these rulers and officials had dyadic relations solely with him as the radial center of the network.

## The paradoxes of kingship

The institution of kingship was shot through with many paradoxes.

The *dharma* of kingship—the very concept of *dharmaraja* itself—can hardly be interpreted as the king's capacity and warrant to innovate creatively and to initiate change in the field of legislation. As Mus (1964) put it, the king's role is better described as “inefficient causality,” or an ordinating principle that represents and maintains an eternal order rather than initiating progressive change toward an ideal order in the future. Ideas of fixed regularity and noninterference inform this notion of *dharma* as order, and this sense instructively emerges in the Mon-Burmese-Thai juridical distinction between *dhammasatham/thamasat* as eternal order and *rajasatham* as the rules and orders issued by particular kings, which may or may not find their way into the *dharma* code (Lingat 1950).

But the king's relatively passive and enduring aspect as maintainer of order is punctuated by his active heroic aspect in the conduct of warfare, which was an irregular activity, usually undertaken for the acquisition of booty and manpower (in the form of slaves). The campaigns themselves were brief, more in the form of raids than sustained battles, a feature that is also related to the fact that the soldiers were primarily the peasantry mobilized ad hoc from the immediate area or province in which or near which the war in question was being waged. The technology and weaponry of traditional warfare were of course primitive, and the peasantry brought their own weapons. Some kings may have had their own limited number of mercenaries, who would be more effective if the king's engagement in foreign trade gave him access to European guns.

Thus, warfare, in principle a quintessential royal activity, was in fact episodic and spasmodic, constrained by the prevalent mechanisms of manpower recruitment, technology of warfare, and its control. Warfare, then, is related to the larger questions of the institutional arrangements for manpower mobilization (normally called *corvée* in the literature), the pattern of extraction and distribution of agricultural surplus, and the volume

of internal and overseas external trade directly entered upon or indirectly regulated and taxed by the political authorities.

As already mentioned, the objectives of warfare were really capture of booty, and, more importantly, prisoners for resettlement in the kingdom. “Loss of population by captivity was infinitely more serious than the comparatively small numbers of those killed in actual fighting” (Wales 1934: 9). We should not for a moment lose sight of the manpower shortage and of the low demographic densities in all the traditional Southeast Asian mainland polities, and of the fact that control over men rather than over land was the dominant principle of their political organization.<sup>4</sup>

The foregoing is intimately connected with the major paradox of divine kingship and perennial rebellions that was the hallmark of the galactic polities. Any of the traditional chronicles such as the Sinhalese *Mahavamsa* or the Burmese, Thai, or Javanese counterparts will reveal the pattern of brief reigns, frequent rebellions, usurpations, and assassinations that characterize court politics. It is well known that there were no settled succession rules, and that the princes, procreated in profusion in the harems, formed a multitude of contestants, whose propensity for hatching intrigues was matched by the reigning king’s own tendency to kill off his rivals. (In Burma, for instance, it appears that it was in part this goriness surrounding kingship that morally outraged the British of the nineteenth century and allegedly spurred them on to subdue the Burmese and deliver them from their savagery.)

It is precisely because there were perennial rebellions and usurpations and because legitimation through orderly succession was absent that the rituals of kingship, particularly the periodic *abhiseka*, which purified and replenished kings with sacred power, were so elaborate and considered so essential. Of course, usurpers frequently married royal women and fabricated royal genealogies retroactively in order to buttress their position. But equally important in such political systems was the charisma gained by special initiation or by ascetic practice or even by auspicious birth, all of which were recognized as signs of merit and power and capable of upstaging hereditary claims to kingship. A royal person was automatically conceived as possessing merit accumulated in previous lives. But it was the *dharma* of a king to act in the world, and therefore to expend his potency and to distribute his merit. He had, therefore, periodically to recoup his

potency by withdrawal and engaging in ascetic practice, and by depending on transfer of power from the professional ascetic priest, whose vocation was to store up mystical powers by retreat from the world. But the king emerged from solitude or from ceremony charged with potency only to demonstrate his virility and to expend his potency in the harem or in war.

Just why and how divine kingship was dialectically conjoined with perennial rebellion can be better understood by studying the pattern of political relations that generated volatile factional struggles. I shall later describe the seedbed of factionalism for both Ayutthaya and early Bangkok periods under the label of *administrative involution*. Here I shall merely note that in a situation where power and wealth stemmed from the control of men, and where, as in the Thai kingdoms, the pool of subjects or commoners was divided between those who served the king (*phrai luang*) and those who served the princes (*phrai som*), and the king's men were at the same time allotted to administrative "departments" (*krom*) placed under the control of officials and nobles, the ground was laid for those kinds of factional struggles and aggrandizing exploits that produced an intermittent chain of usurpations and rebellions.

## **Parameters of the galactic polity: The weaker and stronger states**

The lifecycles and trajectories of the traditional polities of Southeast Asia can be viewed as taking place within certain parameters that are the product of certain basic factors.

The polities can be said to have had a *weaker* form, which was perhaps the more usual state, and a *stronger* form, which was perhaps achieved during exceptional periods.

The weaker picture of the "origins" of the polity is as follows: Among certain decentralized "autonomous" petty principalities or chiefdoms (for example, *muang* ruled by *chao*, in Thai terminology) already existing on the ground, a dominant principality emerges that attempts to pull them together and hold them as a differentiated whole, but this centripetality is achieved not so much by real exercise of power and control but by the devices and mechanisms of a "ritual" kind which have, to use the English philosopher Austin's phrase, "performative validity."

Perhaps among contemporary studies, Gullick's *Political systems of Western Malaya* (1958) is an apt illustration of this weaker state of the traditional polities—in this case, in the period immediately preceding their coming under British control in 1874. The sultan at the apex of each Malay state “did not in most states of the nineteenth century embody any exceptional concentration of administrative authority. Powerful district chiefs could and sometimes did flout his wishes with impunity; some of them were wealthier than he was.”<sup>5</sup> “A sultan was generally in control of a royal district which he governed after the fashion of a district chief. But his role in the political system of the state, as distinct from his additional and local role of district chief of the royal district, did not consist in the exercise of preeminent power” (1958: 44).<sup>6</sup>

The glue that held together the Western Malay polity was largely symbolic. The sultan's position of great dignity was related to his role as the apex of the political system of the state, as the symbol of its unity and *the titular source of rank and authority for the chiefs, among whom the real power was divided* (1958: 54). No doubt considerations such as threat of external attack, the need for a larger trade unit than the inland district, and even “sheer facts of geography” may have helped preserve the sultan and his satellite chiefs as a polity. But the collective representation of the polity, given the “replication” of the sultan by his chiefs, rested on exemplary enactments that took place at court.

The sultan was the source of aristocratic and chiefly titles, in that the impress of his seal was the concrete validation of titled position, and the regalia of office handed by the sultan to the chiefs and officials were again concrete “embodiments” of validation, and were “repositories” of efficacious “power.” The regalia of office (*kebasaran*—“symbols of greatness”) which the sultan distributed consisted of musical instruments (drums, pipes, flutes, and trumpets), insignia of office such as scepter, betel box, jewels, umbrella, seal of state, and secret verbal formulas, and weapons such as swords, lances, and long daggers of execution. There were also sumptuary privileges, such as kinds of clothing, domestic architecture and furnishings, rare meats and food, “anomalous” rare animals, and humans (albino elephants and buffaloes, dwarfs, and freak humans), which were associated with and considered the special possessions of titled offices and their objective signifiers. Finally, whatever the realities of power,

formal obeisance ceremonies on the part of chiefs toward the sultan, and the enactment of a graded cosmos at the sultan's installation and mortuary rites, were indeed not merely an expression but the creation of the galactic polity in its usual form.

In Weber's discussion of "patrimonialism" (1968: vol. 3, ch. 12), the section entitled "Decentralized Patrimonial Domination: Satrapies and Divisional Principalities," which highlights the decentralized nature of the center's domination and the high degree of autonomy enjoyed by the dependent rulers, approximates in some respects my account of the galactic polity.<sup>7</sup> But much the greater part of Weber's discussion is devoted to the expansion of patrimonial domination over the "extrapatrimonial" areas.

To turn, then, to the stronger form of the polity. The processes by which this form of the polity was reached in Southeast Asia approximate some of those discussed by Weber in his classic treatment of patrimonial domination: how a patrimonial prince attempts to expand his direct control over the outlying extra-patrimonial areas by extending the relations and links of personal dependency, loyalty, and fidelity; by enlarging his control over the judicial institutions; by securing military control, by directly levying taxes and dues, and, more importantly, through forming an independent army which freed him from his dependence on his vassals; and by enforcing a monopolistic control over trade in luxury goods and weapons, and trade involving money. The dispatch of *ministeriales* and the incorporation of *honorarios* were parallel processes.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to Southeast Asia, it can be confidently asserted that the stronger form of the polity was only rarely and temporarily achieved by strong rulers seizing the opportunities of favorable circumstances. I shall propose a hypothesis of transformation whereby the stronger form of the patrimonial polity is realized: Given a central domain and a surrounding field of satellite principalities, the process of cumulative strengthening of the center's hold over the satellites *goes hand in hand* with the cumulative strengthening of the hold of the satellite rulers and local authorities over their own subjects. There is, so to say, a 'payoff' to all parties in this process by which a loose scattering of political aggregates is brought into a tighter relationship in a polity in which the central ruler exercises for a time decisive control. Schrieke (1955) imagines the process thus: "A change comes about in the character of the leaders of the primitive communities:

henceforth they have not only to act as intermediaries for the will of the central authority ...but the support of the central authority opens a possibility for them to advance from *primi inter pares* to being ruling notables insofar as they are capable of this” (p. 172).

Schrieke, the Dutch historian of Indonesia (no doubt benefiting from Max Weber’s discussion of patrimonial domination), enumerated certain means by which the increased authority of the central government was enforced in traditional Java, means which are exactly paralleled elsewhere. A well-worn method was the attempt to tighten dynastic links by marriage alliances, should the kingdom be composed of a number of smaller principalities in a state of loose coherence. But in more energetic and expansionary times, the king strove to neutralize the power of the princes by appointing *ministeriales* of humble origin as provincial rulers; but in the long run they too became hereditary and the *ministeriales* system did not escape the cleaving process of decentralization. Another strategy was for the ruler to form his own hired guard of praetors whose task would be to make the king independent of his vassals. Schrieke gives a historical illustration of this attempted change from “a loose coherence” to “state” system in the seventeenth-century Mat-aram Empire.<sup>9</sup> Comparing the policies of sultan Agung (1613–1646) and Mangkurat I (1646–1677), he points out the difference between the former’s older policy of requiring autochthonous princes to remain at court and binding them to himself through marriage alliances, and Mangkurat’s policy of destroying the princes, replacing them with closely supervised *ministeriales*, and introducing a more effective system of enriching his coffers by farming out revenue collection to them in exchange for fixed annual sums and by making trade with foreign lands a state monopoly.

## **Internal limits of the galactic polity’s politico-economic basis**

But this process of incremental centralization was abortive, because of certain parameters of the traditional polity that defined the internal limits of the agricultural base, the arrangements for revenue collection, the logistical and communication facilities, and so on.



I shall demarcate the parameters of the traditional polity by reference to twin motors in an engine room, one being the rice-plains economy with a particular relation of people to land and the patterns of mobilization of their services, and the other being the ruler's attempt to monopolize foreign trade, to tax riverine trade (and, in certain instances, to be a beneficiary of mining operations).

The first motor, which was concerned with the extraction of agricultural goods, peasant labor (*corvée*), and military service, was more unwieldy and ramshackle than the official theory would have us believe. In theory the king, raja, or sultan was the "lord of the land," "the lord of life," and so on. He distributed to his superior officials, both at the center and in the provinces, the rights over certain kinds of revenue collection and services in specified territories; the lesser officials in turn enjoyed from their superiors rights over smaller domains; and so on. In respect of these "rights" over land, in many a traditional polity a distinction was made between rights over territory and people attached to an office (that is, nonhereditary rights, unlike a "fief" in later European feudalism) and similar rights alienated by a king or ruler to a subject as a private estate in perpetuity (or until confiscation).<sup>10</sup>

The formal view of the traditional land tenure system is usually from the top: it sees the hierarchy of rights as radiating outward from the center and from the apex downward to the lower rungs of the king's functionaries. But the entire picture changes when we look at the process of extraction from the bottom upward as a process of collection and creaming off at each successive level of officers, until what trickles in to the king's treasury and warehouses is really a minuscule part of the gross produce and profits extracted at the ground level. To understand this process of how successive layers of political intermediaries slice off a portion of the revenue—a phenomenon that is remarkably like the small margins of profit successively appropriated by a chain of middlemen in contemporary peasant marketing structures (Mintz 1960; Dewey 1962; Geertz 1963), also revealing a close fit between administrative involution and agricultural involution—we have to appreciate the mode of remuneration of officials and functionaries in the traditional polity. They appropriated a portion of the taxes they collected and the fees and fines they imposed, and commanded for their own use some of the *corvée* owed to the king. Thus, this process of collection and

transmission of “revenue” upward made possible the support of a large number of functionaries, but scarcely put in the hands of the king a large capital that derived from *outside* his royal domain—that is, from his provinces and satellite principalities.<sup>11</sup> From these territories kings were able at the best of times to mobilize large-scale labor (*corvée*) for building palaces and religious monuments and as temporary armies to fight wars. But these were extraordinary projects, and the success of such mobilization was highly variable in these pulsating kingdoms.<sup>12</sup>

The rice-growing, land-based sector of the economy could support an administrative system of replicated courts and redundant retinues, and could at special times provide massive labor pools and armies for brief periods of time, but could not put directly in the hands of the center large economic resources which it could disburse and manipulate and thereby control the recipients. It is because of this insufficiency that the monopolistic control of certain items of foreign imports and exports, and the direct taxation of other kinds of trade goods, were crucial in the emergence and maintenance of the Southeast Asian kingdoms. It is primarily through this sector of the economy that in Thailand, the Ayutthaya-type polity (whose features persisted well into the early Bangkok period) achieved a transformation that in turn implicated the agricultural base.

A brief gloss on the role of trade in the traditional polity is relevant, especially because there was a complementary linkage between riverine rice-growing settlements on the one side and politically controlled and monopolized foreign trade on the other.

That the emergence of the ancient kingdoms, and their physical location on strategic coastal points or on river mouths in Southeast Asia was importantly related to the impact of an explosive expansion of trade at the beginning of the Christian era is well attested. The sea lanes of the great maritime trade route extending from the Red Sea to South China, and operated by Arabs, Indians, indigenous entrepreneurs of the Malayan waters, and Chinese, connected the emergent polities with riparian economies (producing exchangeable commodities, luxuries, and rare products) with one another. The earliest polities in existence by the third century AD were located in the valleys and plains of the lower Mekong (the central Vietnam of today) and on the Isthmian tracts of the Thai Malay peninsula (Briggs 1951; Wheatley 1961; Coedes 1968). Later, by the sixth

century, other polities had emerged in Sumatra and west Java, virtually all crystallizing along the maritime thoroughfare between India and China.<sup>13</sup> And in subsequent centuries “states predicated on similar principles came to occupy the Pyu country of central and upper Burma, the coastal plains of Arakan, the Mon lands around the lower courses of the Irawadi and Chao Phraya rivers, and other parts of Java and Sumatra. All, with significant exception of some of the Javanese kingdoms, were based in, and in most parts restricted to, the lowlands” (P. Wheatley, n.d.).

In their attempts to answer the riddle of the primary determinants of the emergence of these Southeast Asian polities, most writers have highlighted the impact of the activities of trading entrepreneurs and warrior adventurers, and of the consecratory and ideological roles of the Brahman priesthood that accompanied them. The resources, in the form of luxury goods for redistribution, of arms and weapons for strategic use of force, or of new ideas and concepts for representing new political horizons, which trade must have put in the hands of the newly emergent rulers and their satellites, are without question. But I also would like to insist that the riparian communities practicing rice agriculture, whose scale and density of settlement probably kept pace with the expansion of the trading sector, were an equally indispensable factor, in that they supported a stratum of rulers and officials and a network of ceremonial centers and religious foundations, provided labor for the projects of warfare and monument building, and, not to be minimized, collected and channeled to the center those forest products, spices, minerals (especially gold), and handicraft products that foreign traders avidly sought.

The vast distance from the early centuries of the Christian era to the late nineteenth century did not efface in Southeast Asia the importance of trade and rice cultivation in the petty chiefdoms and sultanates (which would soon be engulfed by colonial conquest). For example, Gullick (1958: 21) paints this general picture of the Malay polities of the last century: “The territory comprised in a State was related to the geographical structure of the peninsula and to the use of rivers as the main lines of communication and trade. A State was typically the basin of a large river or (less often) of a group of adjacent rivers, forming a block of land extending from the coast inland to the central watershed. The capital of the State was the point at which the main river ran into the sea. At this point the ruler of the State

could control the movement of all persons who entered or left his State, he could defend it from external attack and he could levy taxes on its imports and exports.”<sup>14</sup>

The importance of the river system for location of agricultural settlements, for transport and trade, in the Malay Sultanates, the Javanese kingdoms of Madjapahit and Mataram, the Thai kingdoms of Sukhodaya, and, even more significantly, Ayutthaya, needs no underlining. The increasing stabilization and cumulative centralization of the Thai kingdom in the Bangkok era were in large part both cause and result of the expansion of trade, and of the manner in which the agricultural sector articulated with it.

## **The implications of administrative involution**

Let me make a fuller comment now on the feature of administrative involution, which, as I said before, revealed a close fit with the agricultural involution so characteristic of Asian peasant societies.

It has already been suggested that the agricultural base of a developed traditional polity was capable of supporting not only the agriculturists themselves but also a heavy administrative overhead that skimmed off portions of the taxes and revenue as it was transmitted upward to the king's treasury and storehouses.

The arrangement of this administrative system itself is remarkable for its reflection of the *mandala* pattern. The principle of replication of the center on a progressively reduced scale by the satellites that were the major characteristic of the polity's territorial arrangement now finds its counterpart in the administrative system in the form of multiple palaces replicating the king's own palaces, and redundant retinues surrounding the individual princes, nobles, and officials. Structurally even more remarkable was the *duplication* of administrative, military, and judicial departments (*krom*) and subdepartments, and the fragmentation of administrative tasks not necessarily, or only remotely, dictated by considerations of functional specialization. I shall call this feature of administrative involution the principle of bipartition and duplication of similar units, so that not only are “departments” balanced against one another, duplicating functions, but also within departments there occurs bipartition into parallel, virtually redundant

units. (See Wales 1934; Riggs 1967; and Rabibhadana 1969 for ample evidence for these features of bipartition and replication during the late Ayutthaya and early Bangkok periods.)

Weber himself observed the occurrence of a similar feature in the patrimonial administrative structure which he called *typification* (in the sense, i think, of stereo-typy), and which he said contrasted markedly with the principle of functional specialization in the rational bureaucratic system. Weber remarked that in the patrimonial system, office and person tend to become conflated; the king's power is regarded as a "personal possession," and this power is fragmented and allocated to princes and ministers of the royal house. "Since all powers economic as well as political are considered the ruler's personal property, hereditary division is a normal phenomenon" (Weber 1968: 1052). Such subdivision on a hereditary basis on the one hand does not produce definitive division and on the other strives for equalization of revenues and seigniorial rights among the divisional rulers and claimants. Weber further argued that every prebendial decentralization and distribution of fee incomes among competitors and every appropriation of benefices signified typification rather than rationalization. As the appropriation of offices progresses, the ruler's political power "disintegrates into a bundle of powers separately appropriated by various individuals by virtue of special privileges" (p. 1040).

Weber's sociological explanation of administrative involution, bipartitioning, and replication—only partially satisfactory and capable of being taken further—nevertheless stands in stark contrast to that kind of explanation which (stemming from Heine-Geldern) attributes these features simply to the working of a cosmological (and therefore nonpragmatic) orientation (see, for example, Riggs 1967).

I want to go beyond the Heine-Geldern-type explanation of attributing these features simply and solely to a cosmological orientation, and establish that the pattern of administrative involution faithfully mirrors the structure of political and social relations of a factional sort and that these relations translated into space so to say, represent the galactic polity in its territorial aspect.

Apart from meaning an administrative "department," the concept *krom* in Thailand additionally meant, as Rabibhadana (1969) tells us, a leader and

his attached followers and retainers. A prince or *chao muang* (chief of a principality/province) had his own personal following, and a king assigned princes graduated *krom* privileges, primarily in the form of titles and retainers (*phrai som*). The most conspicuous examples were the princes who resided in the front and rear palaces (*van na* and *van lang*) and reproduced the king's own court and functionaries on a reduced scale. The *khunnang*, the nobility, who in the main ran the king's departments, similarly had control over the subjects owing service directly to the king (*phrai luang*) and who were allocated to the royal administrative divisions and units. In fact, groups of these free men were registered under the name of individual leaders, *nai*, and the network of these *nai* from whom the nobility was recruited provided the grid for mobilization of subjects for royal tasks.

In short, the galactic structure is again reproduced in the domain of politico-social interpersonal relations, and can, in this context, be likened to an "emulsion" made of globules joined in (temporary) allegiance to leaders of the next-higher rank and so on until the entire political society is constituted of interlocking *nai-phrai* (leader-follower) circles or factions of varying size. The point of the emulsion metaphor is that these factions are impermanent, and that their constituent units can and do change their affiliations .

Such factionalism, for instance, resolved into a contest and strategy of divide and rule among three parties: the king and his following, the princes and their clients, and the nobility/officials and their circles. The death throes of the Ayutthaya kingdom were characterized by a suicidal conflict between the king and the princes; the early Bangkok period, including the reign of King Mongkut in the mid-nineteenth century, witnessed the corrective measure whereby the king curbed the power of the princes by seeking support among the nobility. This move, however, led in turn to the rise of powerful nobles such as the Bunnag family who successfully circumscribed the king's power. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the succeeding King Chulalongkorn managed to come into his own politically in the 1880s only by finding a way of superseding the nobles by means of an active reliance on and support from his princely half-brothers—such as Princes Damrong, Nares, Rabi, and Dewawong—who also spearheaded the program of modernization.

Reverting to a classical anthropological problem, I want also to suggest that the much misunderstood “debt bondage” or “debt slavery” which is reported to have been a common phenomenon in Southeast Asian polities—as also in “tribal” societies which were familiar with rank and political structures—is best understood in relation to the structure of patron-client relations and factionalism, and the premium placed on control of manpower.

As an illustration suggestive of a general paradigm, let me cite the debt bondage in the Malayan Sultanates, as described by Gullick (1958: 103): “*Contra* the prejudicial account of many British administrators, it is clear that debt-bondage was usually an asymmetrical relation of mutual advantage to the creditor-master and the debtor. Of particular relevance here are the bondsmen who were in actuality members of the household and the personal following of the creditor, usually the political chiefs. For the chiefs the bondsmen constituted followers who owed loyalty and service and were preferable to both mercenaries and free volunteers in the arena of political maneuvering. The bondsman in turn, especially if poor, wifeless and homeless, found his main wants satisfied by his master’s ‘bounty.’ It was a recognized custom that a follower might ask his chief to give him a wife from among the women of his household.”

Gullick (1958: 100) accounts for the institution of debt bondage in nineteenth-century Malaya thus: “A part of the population was mere flotsam and jetsam in a hostile world. In these circumstances, a homeless man might be tempted to attach himself in bondage to a chief. He thus got a living, the protection of a powerful patron, access to women and the ultimate prospect of obtaining a wife ...The follower needed a patron, a living and a wife. But the chief on his side needed a private army. On balance it would appear that the bondsman’s position, as Hugh Clifford put it, involved “no special hardship.” And although the debtor’s services did not count towards a reduction of the debt, he had a certain margin for manoeuvring as indicated by the rule that a debtor ‘could demand to be transferred to any other creditor who would pay off his debt to the original creditor.’”

These features of debt slavery closely resemble accounts of the phenomenon reported in other Southeast Asian contexts—including the “tribal” societies of Upper Burma, which were familiar with rank and

chiefly institutions. Examples are Leach's account of the Kachin *mayam* (Leach 1954) and Stevenson's of the Chin *tefa* systems (1968). Leach, for example, has this to say about Kachin *mayam*, usually translated as "slavery" but in many respects similar to the serf system in England and the *boi* system among the Chins (p. 299):

There were two types of *mayam*—the outside (*nong mayam*, and the household (*tinung*) *mayam*, some grades of which may rightly be called slaves.

The outside *mayam*, serf-like in many respects, owned their house and property and, when living in a *mayam* village, shared in the ownership of communal land. The dues they paid their master were heavy in goods, labour and half the marriage price, and although they had no rights in relation to their owner, few owners seemed to have been oppressive. Some of them even become slaves voluntarily and pay their dues in return for land and protection.

The household *mayam* had no rights in relation to their master (paralleling unmarried children in relation to their fathers) and no rights of ownership. In practice, however, they are well cared for and hardly distinguishable from a child of the house. They are generally contented to receive their food, clothing, drink and opium. They are given wives and sacrifices are made on their behalf when they are sick. And although a socially inferior being, in practice there was very little difference between the life of a *mayam* and an ordinary member of the chief's household.

Mayam were occasionally bought and sold. Nearly every unmarried household *mayam* woman was burdened with one or two children by fathers from the ruling class, and these children were known as *surawng*. It was customary for parents of chiefly status to give their daughter upon her marriage a slave as handmaiden.

The large majority of *mayam* were inherited or born in that status, though some were bought, purchased as wives and obtained as handmaids to brides (and therefore sexually available to their husbands). Some *mayam* became so voluntarily, either in payment of debts or in order to get wives and food, forfeiting their liberty by



taking on a *mayam* woman and thereby becoming themselves the property of her owner.

According to a 1931 census, the Triangle and adjacent areas in the Kachin hills had an estimated free population of 80,000; the total number of slaves was 3,989 (less than 4 percent), of whom 2,367 were born in bondage.

## Conclusion

In this analysis of the traditional kingdoms of Southeast Asia as pulsating galactic polities, I hope I have escaped being impaled on the horns of a dilemma by not resorting to any of the following frameworks, to the exclusion of the others: 1) the “archaic” cosmological mentality, which entails the acceptance of the galactic structure as a given cultural system that serves as its own explanation without resort to historical or sociological factors—that is, an extreme form of priority attributed to the cultural order that verges on idealism; 2) a simpleminded determinism which believes it can directly and pragmatically generate the political and ideological superstructure of the galactic polity from a type of ecological and economic base; 3) a model of patrimonial domination that focuses on the imperatives of power and political control as the true arena for the emergence of the galactic structure; 4) a certain kind of laissez-faire utilitarianism as portrayed by the “central-place” theory which seeks to explain the location and hierarchy of central places (towns) in terms of their economic (and administrative) service functions.<sup>15</sup>

I have preferred to rely on a method of exposition that I have called totalization. I have tried to show that the geometry of the galactic polity is manifest as a recurring design at various levels that the analyst labeled cosmological, territorial, administrative, politico-economic, but of which the accurate exegesis is that his recurring design is the reflection of the multifaceted polyvalence built into the dominant indigenous concepts, and of the traditional idea of a simultaneous convergence of phenomena in a mandala pattern. A corollary of this demonstration is that the cultural model and the pragmatic parameters are in concordance and buttress one another, and cannot be disaggregated.

The galactic polity as a totalization is not, as I have indicated, a smooth and harmonious entity but one ridden with paradoxes and even

contradictions. If it represents man's imposition of a conception upon the world, it is also a reflection of the contours of the politico-economic reality. The rhetoric and ritual display of the exemplary center and divine kingship is frequently deflated by perennial rebellions and sordid succession disputes at the capital, and defections and secessions at the periphery. A politico-economic system premised on the control of manpower as its chief resource, and whose building blocks are circles of leaders and followers that form and reform in highly unstable factions, frequently deteriorates into power struggles within and suffers continuous intrusions from without. These movements in political relations and groupings in turn disorient and redraw the boundaries of the polity's territorial space. Moreover, agricultural involution is matched by administrative involution. Just as at base the society has its mundane existence in a multitude of decentered rice-growing peasant communities, existing save for intermittent and spectacular intrusions from the theater state, in relative isolation from the capital's network of political exaction, so does the hierarchy of graduated power and merit fragment and shatter into the multitude of replicated, redundant, and competing administrative cells. The patterns for the mobilization of men, resources, and produce and the mechanisms of regulation and deployment of authority have their logistical limits. These are some of the paradoxes, restraints, and contradictions that motor the pulsations and oscillations of the traditional Southeast Asian polities within the parameters of their existence. They are also the features that match the cosmology and the actuality of the galactic polity in a closer fit than anyone has previously imagined.

A further implication, which I have not spelled out in this essay, is that these polities are not timeless entities but historically grounded, and that they can be subject to irreversible transformation—as, for example, happened with the impact of Western colonial powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Thailand there was a change from a galactic to a more centralized “radial” polity that is by no means modern in the Western sense; in the ex-colonial new nations, galactic propensities still find their transformed expression in regionalism and com-munalism, despite the exaggerated hopes of an “integrative revolution.”

## **APPENDIX**

## Some galactic features of the Majapahit Kingdom of fourteenth-century Java

What I propose to do in this brief account is begin with the conventional representation of a traditional Javanese polity—in this case Hayam Wuruk’s Maja-pahit kingdom—as a mandala system allegedly expressing the cosmic symmetry of a graded ordering from an exemplary center outward to its periphery of “ring kingdoms,” and then take the subversive step of revealing how this same account also contains other galactic features, such as asymmetrical bipartitioning (or dualism) and graded multicenteredness, which serve to explain why the substance of politics practiced by and allotted to the center was more ritualistic and exemplary than administrative and regulatory. (The principal source for this account is Pigeaud 1962, vols. 1–5.)

My source for this illustration is the famous Javanese text called the *Nagara-Kertagama* (ca. AD 1365), attributed to a Buddhist court cleric; the title can be loosely translated as “a manual for the cosmic ordering of the capital and kingdom.” The poet calls his poem *deshawarnana*, which is rendered as “topography” by Pigeaud (1962: vol. 4, 509). The text describes, among other things, the formal layout of the palace, capital, and kingdom, and treats at length the tribute-collecting and redistributive “royal progresses” (circuits) to parts of the kingdom, the staging of a court festival, and so on.

Majapahit was an inland rice-based agrarian kingdom and is to be contrasted with the harbor-focused mercantile coast (*pasisir*) principalities of the north coast of Java, which were the first to go Islamic in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But we should be careful that in calling Majapahit an inland agrarian kingdom we do not obscure the fact that trade—overseas, interinsular, and internal—was a crucial arm of the royal economy. While the capital of Majapahit itself lay in the foothills of the East Java massif at some distance from the river Brantas, there was the important port of Bubad situated on the river, having as its inhabitants colonies of Chinese, Indian, and other merchants. (Another river port was Canggal.) Javanese rice was traded for Indian cloth and Chinese ceramics. The chief difference between the trade of Majapahit and the coastal mercantile principalities of North Java lay in this: in the latter, such as Tuban and Surabaya, the ruling

aristocrats were directly involved as entrepreneurs in trading activities, while in the former the political rulers granted royal patents to traders for overseas trade, exacted tolls and duties on internal trade, and probably appointed port governors who regulated trade.<sup>16</sup> Majapahit's rulers administered trade rather than being merchant princes themselves. (See Pigeaud 1962: vol. 4, pp. 37–38, 498, 502–504, 509.)

The mandala ordering of Majapahit is depicted in an exaggerated panegyric in keeping with the composer's court affiliation. The glorification of the king emphasizes three things: "Successively the King's works [especially public (*kirtis*) and religious (*dharmas*) foundations], the King's zenana, and the expanse of the King's dominions are praised." An example of the last is Canto 17, stanza 3, which states (Pigeaud 1962):

1. The whole expanse of Yawa-land (Java) is to be compared with one town in the Prince's reign.
2. By thousands are (counted) the people's dwelling-places, to be compared with manors of Royal servants, surrounding the body of the Royal compound.
3. All kinds of foreign islands; to be compared with them are the cultivated lands' are as, made happy and quiet.
4. Of the aspect of the parks, then, are the forests and mountains, all of them set foot on by Him, without feeling anxiety.

The canto makes four comparisons and equivalences that derive from the mandala geometry which mirrors the outer in terms of the inner core:

The prince's town (capital) : the whole of Java;

The royal manors surrounding the royal compound : the multitude of common people's homesteads;

The cultivated lands : the other islands;

The parks : the forests and mountains.

Again, in Canto 12, stanza 6, the parts of the kingdom are correlated with the cosmic pattern of the heavenly bodies: the two central compounds of the capital with the sun and the moon, the groves surrounding the compounds and manors with the halos of light surrounding the sun and the moon, the

towns and other islands (*nusantara*) of the kingdom with stars and planets. (The last circle—the ring kingdoms, or *mandalikarastra*—are described as dependent states.)

This is no doubt the imagery of an unrivaled exemplary center, a unified gradient of spirituality and cosmic symmetry—but let us look at the picture again and reconstitute it with additional details contained in the text. To begin with the poem is, not surprisingly, partial in suppressing any reference to the West Javanese kingdom of Sunda, Majapahit's immediate neighbor and rival, because the latter could not be included as either a friend or a tributary within the circle of dominion. Similarly, the prominent coastal mercantile harbor-principality of Tuban is ignored, for it too had cheekily defied Majapahit. Again, the expansive world ruler's claims have to be scaled down to the actuality: the Majapahit king's *effective domain of control was East Java*, the perimeters of which delineated area were made the "royal progresses." The king's effective power also possibly extended over the east-erly islands of Bali and Madura, whose chiefs are described in the royal progress of 1359 as meeting with tribute the king's caravan when it arrived at the eastern coast of Java.<sup>17</sup>

Next, let us focus on those features that imply that the mandala is constituted by asymmetrical dualism and by a cluster of replicated entities, the net effect of which is to produce a centrifugality and a pointillist mosaic of the whole.

The previous reference to the sun and moon is a statement of the relation between the two central compounds within the capital complex, and of the two urban centers within the kingdom, standing in a dualistic though asymmetrical relation. The moon stands for the eastern *pura* of Wengker-Daha, the sun to the western royal compound of Majapahat-Singasari-Jiwana. Again, the town of Daha and the capital are lined up similarly. "Evidently the idea is that Daha is the chief of the lesser towns like the moon ruling over the stars and planets. Majapahit of course is the sun, spending [sic] light to all and sundry" (Pigeaud 1962: vol. 4, p. 26).

The following excerpts from Pigeaud highlight a crosswise balancing of powers between the king of Majapahit and the Prince of Wengker, and their respective vizirs.

Canto 12, stanza 3, 4. It is remarkable that the vizir of Daha had his manor north of the Royal compound and the vizir of Majapahit east of it, probably north of the Daha-Wengker compound. The four most important compounds and manors of the centre of the town appear to have been situated on the corners of a quadrangle. The holy crossroads of canto 8-2-4 probably was the point of intersection of the diagonals of that quadrangle and so it was considered as the centre of the town. The distances between the compounds and the manors are unknown and so the exact centre of the town can not be determined. Probably the Maja-pahit Javanese were perfectly satisfied with the notion that the holy centre of their town was situated somewhere north-east of the Royal compound.

The crosswise relation between the compounds and the vizirs' manors is an instance of the importance attached to cross connections in Javanese thought. The idea of unity and cosmic interrelationship pervades Java-nese social and religious organization to a very high degree. (Vol. 4, p. 24 .)

According to the Nagara-Kertagama, Majapahit contained two main compounds and four main manors. Of the two compounds the western, the Royal compound, was inhabited by the family of Majapahit-Singasari-Jiwana, to which King Hayam Wuruk belonged; the eastern compound was the residence of the family of Wengker-Daha. Two of the manors were situated north of the compounds. The north-western manor was inhabited by the vizir of Daha, the north-eastern one by the vizir of Maja-pahit. The other two manors lay south of the compounds. The southeastern one was the residence of the bishop of the Shiwaites, the southwestern one was inhabited by the bishop of the Buddhists. Besides those six main compounds and manors there were many more manors of mandarins and noblemen along the edge of the great complex. (V ol. 4, p. 27).

Thus, the capital of Majapahit was more a complex of compounds than a single walled-in fortress town of the medieval European type. And the royal compound itself at the very center of the complex resolved into three areas of accessibility graded from public to private.

Topographically, then, the capital of Majapahit, the center of the mandala, was composed of a number of relatively self-contained and walled-in compounds; each of these was composed of the central residence of the patron, surrounded by the lesser residences of his personal following and retinue, and then again by the bondsmen's dwellings at the periphery. Open spaces intervened between compounds, whose gradation was indexed by their size and location. Finally, there was no city wall at the outer boundary of the town: "As neither any kind of fortification nor any city gate is mentioned at the boundary, Majapahit could not be defended as a town. Only the compounds and the manors had walls and gates. That state of things survived in all Javanese towns [and, one might add, Thai and Burmese and other Southeast Asian towns as well] up to modern times" (vol. 4, p. 157).

There are many other examples which can be adduced to support the thesis that the mandala unity is in good measure achieved through parallel structures and bipartitions. The glory and power of King Hayam Wuruk was rivaled not only by other princes but also by his grand-vizier, Gajah Mada.<sup>18</sup> as, for example, suggested by the poem's pointed mention in its account of the Royal Progress of 1359 (to eastern Java) that the Gajah Mada's caravan leading the procession (with the king's at the opposite end) contained some 400 carts. At the level of religious cults and functionaries, parallelism and duality were manifested in the coexistence and mutual relations of Shiwaism and Buddhism, the former apparently exoteric and associated with the "material element" and with "worldly rule," the latter esoteric and expressive of the "immaterial" and the "inconceivable" (vol. 4, p. 4). The two clergies collaborated and competed in the annual purification ceremonies (p. 14). The two sets of shrines were located side by side in the eastern part of the main public courtyard of the palace compound, and the houses of the Shiwaite clergy were located on the eastern boundaries and those of the Buddhist on the southern boundaries of the royal compound. The asymmetry between the two systems was manifest in the fact that the Shiwaite cult and clergy were accorded a slight superiority over the Buddhist, but their common meeting in a single unity was achieved in the architecture of the central building, the Jajawa temple, whose ornamentation of the base and body was Shiwaite and of the top Buddhist in design and motif.

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1. The cosmological scheme contains three lokas: the *kama loka* (world of sense and form), the *rupa loka* (world of form), and the *arupa loka* (world of no sense and no form). In this context I am primarily referring to the *kama loka*, which is divided into eleven levels—six inhabited by gods (including the second heaven of Indra, and the fourth Tusita heaven which is the abode of the next Buddha, Maitreya), and the remaining five divided among the four lower worlds of men, animals, *asuras* (demons), and ghosts (*preta*), and the last world which consists of various abominable hells.

2. See Griswold (1967: 33–34) for inscriptional evidence of the muang that had broken away before Lu Thai's ascension and returned to his suzerainty between 1347 and 1357.

3. For instance, see Wenk's description (1968: 29) of the administrative arrangements prevailing in the southern province of Phattalung at a much later time, at the beginning of the Bangkok era. The traditional divisions (*krom*) of the capital's administration into the treasury (*khlang*), city (*muang*), palace (*wang*), and fields (*na*) were reproduced in the province.

4. The same point is cogently argued for Ayutthaya and early Bangkok by Rabibhadana (1969: 16). It is clear that similar considerations applied in traditional Java, where control of populations was more important than control of territory, and rulers also attempted wholesale deportations of prisoners (Anderson, in Holt, 1970: 30).

5. This discrepancy was partly, at least, an accident of the economic activities, especially tin mining, of Western and Chinese entrepreneurs. These activities made chiefs in whose territory the mines were located wealthier than others.

6. Clive Kessler (personal communication) informs me that in comparison with the Western Malay Sultanates, those on the east coast were even more weakly centralized and larger in scale. He has kindly made available to me chapter 2 of his dissertation (1974), in which he states: "The basic riverine state did not fail to emerge in Kelantan, but it developed in the midst of an expanding area of independent districts and chiefdoms" (p. 47); "Prior to the nineteenth century Kelantan constituted a mosaic of coastal baronies and principalities arranged about a politically turbulent core" (p. 51).

7. With regard to the light Weber may throw on the understanding of the "galactic polity," Weber's presentation has two inadequacies. First, he was curiously "unmusical" toward the cosmological and ritual aspects of the galactic polity; second, he envisaged "patrimonial domination" as grounded in the ruler's control of land on which he settled dependents or which he distributed to them. To cite his own words: "Patrimonial domination is thus a special case of patriarchal domination—domestic authority decentralized through assignment of land and sometimes of equipment to the sons of the house or other dependents" (1968: 1011). The nuclear idea that patrimonial domination is the "patriarchal household" writ large, or that it was basically realized in a manoral-type system, does not correspond to the politico-economic facts of the traditional polity in Thailand (and elsewhere), in which it is the leader's control over men (that is, a leader surrounded by his followers) and not his control over land per se that is the nuclear cell.

8. Patrimonial domination historically adopted two strategies. In the first instance, the king's own agents, and officials directly dependent on him—the *ministeriales*—managed to exercise administrative power both at the center and in the provinces. This was achieved in Egypt and China and in the Ottoman Empire (via the famous Janissaries). In the second instance, the local landed interests and the gentry—the *honoratiore*s—were coopted through compromise and concessions, and made to serve the interests of the ruling power. Cases in point were the nobility of Tsarist Russia, and the gentry of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England (who were made justices of the peace).

9. Schrieke defined the “state” as a type of political organization “in which the state prevents the disruption of component parts of the kingdom and makes the local notables more effective in its service” (1955: 173). Wertheim (in Soetajatmoko 1965: 346–347) compares this description to Weber’s “Patrimonial bureaucratic state.”

10. Regarding Java of the later Mataram period, scholars have distinguished between “appanage” (*lungguh*) and “salary field” (*bengkok or tjatu*). An appanage has been defined as an assigned region where one has the right to gain from the land and from the inhabitants a profit, from which the king himself can draw a portion, but which gives no rights over the land itself. Taxes, fees, services, and incomes from domains are examples of the profit accruing. A “salary field,” by contrast, is a piece of arable land that is part of the lands of the king and is assigned to an official, kinsman, or favored person. It is tilled by levy-service to the benefit of the person granted (Moertono, 1968: 117).

11. Wenk (1968: 34–35) gives an account of taxes collected and the distribution of income in the early Bangkok period that provides additional supporting evidence for our thesis.

12. In my view, Polanyi’s concept of “redistribution” as operating in such traditional “centric” polities tends to be applied indiscriminately. In the polities that I am discussing, redistribution of the consumable-agricultural surplus extracted appears less sumptuous and elaborate than is commonly assumed.

13. For example, Wolters says this of the maritime empire of Srivijaya, based in southeastern Sumatra: “Srivijaya, sometimes in control of territory on the Malay peninsula, has been ascribed a career from the seventh to the fourteenth century, spanning much of the history of Asian maritime trade and responsible in no small measure for its expansion by providing efficient harbor facilities for merchants making the long voyage between Middle East and China” (1967: 1).

14. Perhaps the most historic of the Malay Sultanates, the Malacca Sultanate, was a compact centralized polity which lived on the foreign trade of its port; it perhaps approaches Polanyi’s conception of “the port of trade” which mediated between service and agriculture-based kingdoms. Gullick leaves us in no doubt as to the importance of tin mining for the maintenance of the Malay polities in the nineteenth century: “Malay chiefs taxed tin mines in various ways and thus diverted into their own hands from a fifth to a third of the value of the output. Revenue from tin was the mainstay of the Malay political system” (1958: 6).

15. The possible contribution of central-place theory to my subject can be fully treated only in a separate paper. The theory is primarily concerned with the principles that order the distribution and hierarchy of cities and towns in their role as service centers; it is a theory of location of tertiary activity. It is not this major aspect of the theory, but another that was relatively marginal to it—namely, the system of central places according to the sociopolitical principle (rather than according to the marketing and traffic principles)—that is germane to my discussion of the traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms. For example, Christaller’s application of the “separation principle” based on political and administrative considerations produces a distinct system of central places reminiscent of my galactic pattern: “The ideal of such a spatial community has the nucleus as the capital (a central place of higher rank), around it, a wreath of satellite places of lesser importance, and toward the edge

of the region a thinning population density” (1966: 77). While we may remark on the convergence of design at a general level, we can truth fully say that Christaller’s fragmentary discussion of the pattern deduced from sociopolitical and administrative considerations neither profitably adds to or subtracts from my fuller account of the galactic polity as it is inflected by several factors—cosmological, territorial, administrative, and political. It, however, helps support my view that in a comprehensive understanding of the galactic polity, what we customarily see as political and administrative orientations and considerations cannot be ignored.

16. A comparison with Ayutthaya, an inland capital but built on the main river artery of Chaophraya, is interesting. In Ayutthaya (as well as in early Bangkok), trade with foreigners was conducted via royal monopolies (controlled directly in the king’s interest or farmed out to ruling princes and nobles), and there was an important administrative division called the *Khlang* which administered the coastal ports in the gulf, supervised overseas trade, and collected the revenue accruing from it.

17. In other words, as in Ayutthaya, the central royal domain is the area of direct control, the outer provinces being satellites enjoying varying degrees of autonomy.

18. “The grand-vizier Gajah Mada, the mediator (of wealth) was considered as chthonic in opposition to the Royal Family” (Pigeaud 1962: vol. 4, p. 54).