

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF KAMPUNG SIAM, KUALA LUMPUR

by

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Kampung Siam which is sited behind the Jalan Pekeliling low-cost flats was originally settled by the Siamese. It was founded in February 1925, by a Chinese-Thai lady named Madam Yap Yoke Liew. Madam Yap was from Tongkah, a place in Puket. In 1923, she migrated from Siam to Taiping, where she met her husband. Her husband was a Singhalese Buddhist and at that time he was working in the British Government printing press department. In Taiping, Madam Yap established the first Siamese Buddhist temple. Later, when the printing press where her husband was working in, was transferred to Kuala Lumpur, they migrated south and reached the present site of Kampung Siam in 1925. Land was for sale then, and since the plot of land which is now Kampung Siam was cheap, they bought this piece of land from the British Government. Ever since then, it has belonged to them and now the ownership has been passed over to their son, Edward De Alwis.

When Kampung Siam was founded, it was a jungle and was very swampy. Pigs were reared there. Madam Yap and her husband, at their own expense started to develop the place. During that time, there was some misunderstanding among the monks in Thailand. As a result, many of them

started to migrate to Malaysia, but they had no place to stay. So Madam Yap, who was a well-to-do and influential lady built a Siamese Buddhist temple for these monks to live in. This is the first Siamese temple that was built in Selangor, and it was recognised by the British Government. The first monk who came to Kampung Siam was the Venerable Phra Kru Sungakar (Vieng) Sungkatsaro. He was the Chief Thai monk of Selangor and Perak and he was bestowed the title of Chief High Monk.

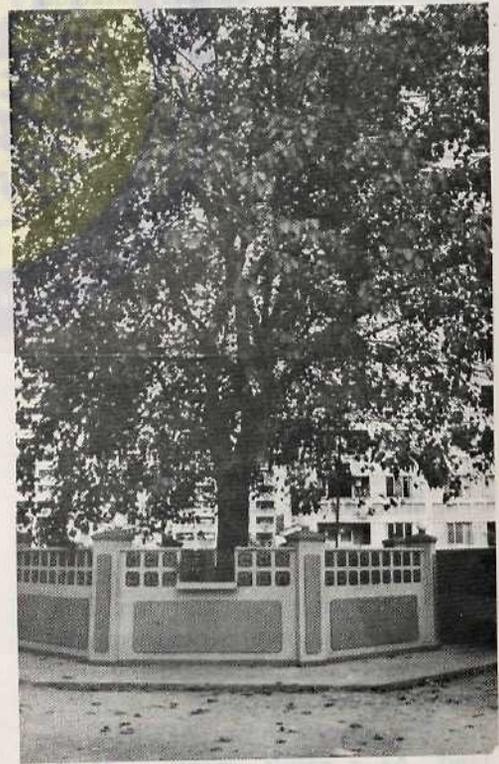
With the development of Kampung Siam and the establishment of the Siamese temple, many Siamese people from other places in Malaysia came to settle down in this Kampung. This was mainly due to the reason that all of them were mostly staunch Buddhist. They all felt a duty towards supporting the monks and also as the temple was here, they could easily do their worship to their Lord Buddha. During those days, there was unrestricted immigration. Thus many Siamese, who heard from their friends here that Malaysia had a better and higher living standard and a very much better climate here than in Thailand, migrated to Malaysia, and settled in Kampung Siam. Thus this region was the first and earliest Siamese settlement in Selangor. As it was settled mostly



The Meh Liew Buddhist Temple in Kampung Siam



The Sangha Raja (King of Monks)



The Boh Tree

by Siamese then, the people around there called it by the name of Kampung Siam. But the name of this settlement was only registered by the British after 'the Japanese Occupation. At the very beginning, this settlement was made up of only about fifty Siamese families but by 1930, there were about three to four hundred Siamese families.

Madam Yap passed away in 1942 and the place was inherited by her son. When the Japanese attacked Malaysia, the British expected the Thais in Thailand to guard the border and stop the Japanese from entering Malaysia. They were greatly disappointed when the Siamese were defeated by the Japanese. The Siamese could not withstand the forces of the Japanese nor could the British. Just before the Japanese reached Kuala Lumpur, the British who were very angry with the Siamese captured all the young Siamese men and the monks in Kampung Siam and packed them off to Madras by ship where they were imprisoned. They could not come back to Malaya as war was in progress. It was only after the Japanese Occupation that very they were brought back to Malaya. But many of men died; those who survived were very poor and had no money.

During the Japanese Occupation, the Siamese in Kampung Siam did not suffer as badly as the Chinese. This was partly because the Japanese could get food supplies from Thailand especially rice, for their army. During their occupation the Siamese like most of the people here, suffered from malnutrition. Some even died; especially the weak ones. The

Japanese also forced the Siamese to plant vegetable in their own gardens.

When the Japanese surrendered, those imprisoned in Madras come back. Mr. E. De Alwis was then appointed headman of the village by the British. This was evidence by the letter written to him by a British district officer, "Sir, I have the honour to state that you have been elected as a member of the Liaison Committee for Area No. 5, Kuala Lumpur."

As headman, he had to see to the welfare of the people, to make sure that new settlers register themselves, to find out where these new settlers were from and also those who were shifting away and where they are shifting to. He was also to make sure that there were no communists hiding there. One of his duty was to make sure that there was peace and order in the Kampung. As the people there were all very disciplined, Mr. De. Alwis did not set many laws or rules for the people to follow. He also looked after the monks in the temple, giving them food and the necessary utensils. With the help of the Thais there, he tried to develop the region.

Mr. Edward De Alwis also encouraged the immigration of other races to settle in Kampung Siam. In 1953, he allowed a Chinese Hokkien to start a factory there. This workshop deals with the milling of coffee and flour. When this factory was started, Chinese Hokkiens flocked to this place and settled around the temple and the factory.

When Malaya got her independence in 1957, some of the Thais went back because they wanted to see their families, but

there were others who went back for good because they were frustrated, especially those who were imprisoned in Madras. Many of the Thai ladies who had lost their husbands during the Japanese Occupation also went back to their homeland. Later, with the introduction of the passport, they could not come over so easily. After May, 1969, the Siamese monks were required to leave as they were not citizens of Malaysia. They were not allowed to stay here for more than ten years. Thus fewer and fewer Siamese remained. Those who are still here in Kampung Siam and other parts of Malaysia are mostly Chinese Thais who were citizens of this country.

Since the Government embarked upon the policy of demolition of squatter-areas, many families in Kampung Siam have shifted to other parts of Selangor, especially to the flats nearby. Now only about twenty houses remained. Although the Government has planned to buy that piece of land from Mr. De Alwis, he does not want to sell it. To him, this is a sacred place and he has plans to build flats and modern houses here for Buddhist people to live and also to take care of the temple.

This place also attracts tourists, especially Buddhists. There is a beautiful temple here. There is also a very big image of Buddha which was consecrated by the Sangha Raja (King of the Monks) of Thailand, Sompej Phra Ariyong Sakatayan on 15th March, 1968. In front of the temple is a big tree. This is the seedling of the original Boh Tree under which the Lord

Buddha once rested. It was brought over from India about twenty years ago and was planted by the deputy Sangha Raja. Walls are built around this tree and there is an altar where the people come and pray.

As the people here are all Buddhists, they joined the monks in their celebrations. The most important festival is the Wesak Day. This was the day when the Lord Buddha was born, when he received his enlightenment and also, his death too falls on this day. At the beginning of July up till September, when India is having its rainy season, the monks are not allowed to leave the temple. This period is called the Buddhist Len Period. The Monks will stay in the temple to do their service, religious study and chanting. The candles in the temple will also be kept burning until the three months are up. Once it is up, they will celebrate the Katina Festival, known as the Monks' Festival because this is the time, when other Buddhists from all over the place will come and give their offerings. All sorts of things are required by the monks such as robes, pencils, mats, ink, kitchen utensils and even money.

Today, the residents of Kampung Siam regard Malaysia as their home and many of them have inter-married with Malaysians and become citizens of our country.

SOURCE: Mr. Edward De Alwis of Kampung Siam.

He is the former headman of Kampung Siam during the colonial days.

He has been living there for 32 years, since the Japanese Occupation.