

# Erik Seidenfaden and his Quest for Knowledge: Gendarmerie Officer, Amateur Scholar and the Siam Society

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**Abstract**—This article explores Erik Seidenfaden's life and scholarly career in Thailand. Seidenfaden arrived in the country in 1906 to take up a position as officer in the provincial gendarmerie and resided there until he returned to Denmark in 1946. During his forty years' residence, Seidenfaden became an influential amateur scholar in the fields of ethnography and archaeology. He was an active member of the Siam Society, a prolific contributor to the *JSS* and, for a short period, the Society's president. The aim of this article is to present a broader assessment of Seidenfaden and his scholarly work. In doing so, we will present new knowledge on his life history and how he refashioned himself as an amateur scholar, and contributed to turning Siam into a knowable object.

## Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, several people from Denmark settled in Siam (renamed Thailand in 1939) to pursue career opportunities. H.N. Andersen, for example, went to Siam in 1879, and through trade, hotel operations, land development and contracting, established the economic foundation of the Danish East Asian Company. Another successful Dane was naval officer Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu, who arrived in Siam a few years before Andersen. Richelieu worked in the Siamese navy and served as Minister of the Navy for several years before returning to Denmark in 1902. Under Richelieu's leadership, about 100 Danes served in the Siamese Navy. Another example is Gustav Schau, who travelled to Siam in 1884 and made a career first in the navy and later in the army. In 1897, when Siam's Interior Minister Damrong Rachanuphab took the initiative to establish a provincial gendarmerie, he appointed Schau as inspector general. Schau employed a total of twenty-one Danes as officers to serve in the gendarmerie from its founding in 1897 until 1926. Erik Seidenfaden was one of these officers, arriving in Siam at the age of twenty five in 1906. He remained in Siam until 1946 when he travelled back to Denmark with his family. He passed away there in 1958.

During his forty years in Siam, Seidenfaden served in the gendarmerie until 1920, when he started working as an accountant at the Siam Electricity Company in Bangkok. During his long residence, Seidenfaden became deeply involved with the Siam Society. He was a productive contributor to the Society's journal, dealing especially with ethnographic and archaeological topics and, for a short period, he was president of the

Society (1938-1940). Under the auspices of the Royal State Railways of Siam, he was the author of several guidebooks (e.g. 1927, 1929, 1931) to various tourist destinations in Siam. Posthumously, the Siam Society published his book, *The Thai Peoples* (1958), which constitutes his main oeuvre. He wrote two more books: one in Danish on the provincial gendarmerie in Siam (Seidenfaden 1999), the other in English dealing with the history of the Thai peoples. He intended this latter volume as a sequel to the 1958 publication, but it remains unpublished.

In the academic literature, there are only scattered references to Seidenfaden and his work in relation to the formation of ethnological and archaeological knowledge in Siam (Jonsson 2000; Keyes 1978; Streckfuss 2012; Thongchai 2000). The aim of this article is to present a broader assessment of Seidenfaden and his scholarly work. We will do so by contextualizing his scholarly work with reference to his career in Siam—both as an officer and active member of the Siam Society. This contextualization will be based primarily on a reading of the diaries Seidenfaden wrote throughout most of his life.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, we will be presenting new knowledge on Seidenfaden's life history with a special emphasis on how he actively attempted to refashion himself as a scholar and in this endeavour contributed to turning Siam into a knowable object although he was never able to achieve his dream of turning his quest for knowledge into a vocation. Also, through this, we will see how colonial projects, desire, Orientalist worldviews and projections, in the guise of the quest for scientific knowledge, are embodied and unfolded in such a man with grandiose plans as Seidenfaden.

### Congo dreaming

Seidenfaden was born in Copenhagen in 1881 to Frederik Julius Seidenfaden, a civil engineer, and Emmy Jacobine Philipsen. Apart from a few years when his father was employed at a sugar factory in Assens, on the island of Fyn, Seidenfaden grew up in Copenhagen. Following his father's wish, Seidenfaden left school soon after he had completed compulsory education and started working as a clerk at a marine assurance office in Copenhagen. At the same time, he continued his schooling and studied for the so-called preliminary exam, which included the study of languages (English, French and German), physics and chemistry. In 1898, he passed this exam, which qualified him for employment in the state administration (Levnedsbeskrivelse 1932: I-II).

However, working as a clerk in the state administration was not Seidenfaden's dream. As an adolescent, Seidenfaden had already dreamt about leaving Denmark and taking up a post abroad. While he ended up spending over half his life in Siam, initially this was not this country that nourished his dream. At the turn of the 20th century, a considerable number of Scandinavians worked in the so-called Free Congo State—Belgian King Leopold's colonial project in Africa. As sailors, officers, doctors, engineers, judges or missionaries, they were important players in the daily affairs of the colonial project (Wæhle 2014: 339). It was Seidenfaden's dream to serve as an officer in

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<sup>1</sup> The authors received the diaries from relatives of Erik Seidenfaden. The diaries are written in Danish and all translations in this article are by the authors.

the colonial army in Congo. When his father passed away in 1899, Seidenfaden decided to “break out and follow my own path” (Levnedsbeskrivelse 1932: II). In order to realize this ambition, Seidenfaden enrolled in the Danish army in 1902-1906 to acquire the necessary military qualifications.

As an officer in the Congo, Seidenfaden not only wanted to contribute to the establishment and preservation of peace and order in an ‘unruly’ society, he also believed that his participation in the colonial project would offer him an opportunity to be part of a humanitarian and civilizational project among the people of Africa. Here his vision was in line with the official colonial discourse representing King Leopold’s undertaking in Congo as a philanthropic project: to free the local population from slave traders and bring Christianity, civilization and free trade to the region (Wæhle 2014: 339). As Seidenfaden later noticed in his diaries, at the time he planned to go to Congo he perceived King Leopold as ‘benefactor of the negroes’ (25.8 1911) and he envisioned himself as a reformer of Congo combining the roles of administrator, explorer, missionary and soldier. He saw himself as following in the footsteps of David Livingstone, whom he labelled ‘the explorers’ missionary king’ or ‘Africa’s light and sun’ (6.12 1901). From Seidenfaden’s Christian and colonialist world view mankind formed a unity. All races on earth derived from the same origin, were capable of progressing and achieving a ‘civilized’ status. For the Africans, however, this implied Christianization and living under white colonial rule. As he put it, “the blacks are not lazy—under the guidance of clever white people they can achieve anything” (12.5 1904). Through this vision of an evangelical colonialism, Seidenfaden consigned the Africans to what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed “the imaginary waiting room of history” or “the ‘not yet’ of historicism” (Chakrabarty 2000: 9):

I believed in the black race. Determined but humane treatment, work, military education in connection with sport and the right considerations about their culture, moors, their princes and chiefs should turn Congo into the black race’s paradise. I imagined how the hundreds of tribes in Congo would be organized into states .... Congo would become another India with its Rajas. Roads, bridges, rest houses, telegraph lines would be constructed. Cannibalism would be eradicated by giving the natives cattle and small goats. Missionary work should be supported by all means ... so Congo would be evangelized within the span of one human lifetime. The natives should be provided with adequate national dress – under no circumstances ugly and stupid European dress.... I assumed the State of Congo to be under strong leadership by people from Belgium and Scandinavia in fraternal union.... Congo’s Christian tribes would form Africa’s heart, the bulwark against Islam.... The regeneration of Africans – yes! – so was my vision (25.8 1911).

Yet, at the very time when Seidenfaden had ambitions of going to the Congo, his grandiose understanding of the colonial project in Congo as a benevolent and justified endeavour was hit by reports of atrocities committed against the local population. While Seidenfaden was preparing himself to go to the Congo, he read widely about



Figure 1. Erik Seidenfaden in Siam, ca 1911. He was awarded the knighthood of the Siamese Crown Order in 1912, the order of the Crown of Thailand in 1926, the Danish knighthood of Dannebrog, as well as knighted with the Siamese Order of the White Elephant, in 1932.





Figure 2. Mali Maria Seidenfaden, born Praivichitr, 1892-1973. Together they had six children.

Africa, e.g. travelogues, colonial and missionary reports. From this literature and from his encounters with Danish officers, who had served there, he became well aware of such atrocities. From his perspective, however, this state of affairs was merely a minor deviation from an otherwise sound colonial project. It was not the colonial system, as such, which caused such instances of violence. Rather, he linked it with the moral deficiency of individual Belgians in the Congo—officers and traders—whom he characterized as “riffraff”. “If only all were Christians”, he proclaimed, the colonial project would adhere to the philanthropic framework in which he believed (10.1 1902). In this manner, Seidenfaden believed in Europe’s cultural and racial superiority and

did not question the right of white people to colonize and subjugate other people, as long as the colonial projects were linked with Christian values, evangelization and the ‘regeneration’ of primitive people.

However, Seidenfaden’s colonial adventure in the Congo never materialized. In November 1904, after he had attained officer rank in the army in Denmark, he travelled to Brussels to enroll in the *course colonial*, which was a necessary step in the process of gaining employment as an officer in the colonial army in the Congo. Much to his consternation, he did not pass the medical examination. Without medical approval, serving in the colonial army was no longer an option. He thus returned to Denmark, with his dreams of the Congo utterly shattered. Yet, he refused to accept that he had been rejected on medical grounds. He found it more likely that his rejection might be linked with a growing critique of conditions in the Congo expressed by Danish officers who had served there. Therefore, Seidenfaden reasoned, the Free Congo State did not want to employ yet another potential critic, who would pass on information about atrocities in the Congo to a wider public (Seidenfaden 1904). It is in this context that Seidenfaden directed his attention towards Siam and looked for employment in the gendarmerie.

### Siam bound

The creation of the gendarmerie was part of the administrative reforms in Siam which took place around the turn of the 20th century. This period is usually described as the time when the royal elite worked to create a Siamese nation-state under the guidance of the absolute monarchy (Baker & Pasuk 2005; Thongchai 1994). This transformation encompassed both territorial integration and administrative centralization. The gendarmerie was a body of military police patrolling the countryside on horseback, assisting local civil authorities in their efforts to deal with crime and banditry. Within the first ten years of the gendarmerie’s existence, the Ministry of Interior established gendarme stations in all of Siam’s provinces—both at provincial and local levels—and the gendarmerie had grown to around 10,000 men by 1915.<sup>2</sup>

In the period Seidenfaden served in the provincial gendarmerie, he was based primarily on the Korat Plateau: Prachin Buri (1907-1908), Korat (1908-1909, 1917-1920), Udon (1909-1910) and Ubon (1910-1917). Here he undertook the general duties of the Danish officers, who had status as instructors (*khru*). This implied training of new gendarmes at provincial gendarme stations and inspection tours in his district, checking on conditions at local gendarme stations. Serving in the gendarmerie offered Seidenfaden an opportunity for the career in foreign service he had dreamt about as a young man in Denmark. He praised the reforms launched by the Siamese government and believed that the gendarmerie could play a central role in this project, not only as a law and order institution, but also as a disciplinary body. He perceived the population in Siam at large as “indifferent, apathetic and lazy” (23.4 1908) and he hoped the gendarmerie could contribute to awakening the population from this lethargic state by turning gendarmes

<sup>2</sup> For more details about the workings of the gendarmerie, see Ivarsson 2016; Seidenfaden 1999; Sing and Ivarsson 2020.



Figure 3. Gendarme station in Ubon (no year). All gendarme stations were made according to the same model and manifested the state in a permanent symbol outside Bangkok. Seidenfaden surrounded by Siamese gendarmes (Source: Seidenfaden 1999: 241).

into loyal and disciplined subjects, and nourishing a sense of patriotism among them.

At the same time, however, he also had great doubts about the possible success of this project. His dream project in Congo had been linked closely with the Christianization of the local population—Christianity should constitute the foundation for moral and material progress. Of course, Seidenfaden's position in the gendarmerie was not linked with the same kind of missionary project and he did not intend it to be. Still, he found that the development and modernization of Siam would be difficult to achieve, as he did not believe that Buddhism could supply the population with a proper morality to sustain such a transformation (23.4 1908). After his return to Denmark, Seidenfaden explained his view on Buddhism to a Danish newspaper in the following way:

Buddhism makes them somewhat carefree, but that religion does not exactly call for energy and initiative. I mean its goal is basically to fight the urge to exist! It does not quite work in a modern society.... Perhaps one could say that the average Siamese to some extent misses the determination that characterizes people in northern Europe. They are the children of the sun (Sørensen 1947).

In addition, Seidenfaden found that the workings of the gendarmerie were constantly curtailed by conflicts with local civil servants—district officers or village headmen—whom he believed colluded with local criminal gangs or were misusing their position for economic gain (e.g. 1.7 1910; 6.2 1911; 12.3 1911). Seidenfaden also had conflicts with the Siamese army, which he reckoned constituted a state within the state (e.g. 20.1

1911; 15.1 1913). In 1910, in Udon, Seidenfaden was wounded when he tried to take action against illegalities conducted by the army in the town (Seidenfaden 1999: 95-96). In conformity with the way he envisioned his role in the colonial adventure in the Congo, he never questioned the necessity of his participation or other foreign advisers in the royal elite's reform project. In his opinion, it was the Danish officers who were key to the functioning of the gendarmerie, but he did not feel that the Siamese officials acknowledged this. Rather, he often complained about the widespread opposition among Siamese officers in the gendarmerie to the presence of the Danish officers (e.g. 7.7 1910; 4.10 1910; 5.12 1910; 12.1 1913).

Therefore, Seidenfaden's Congo dream, envisioning himself as a harbinger of civilization modelled on icons such as Livingstone, did not materialize when he served as an officer in the gendarmerie in Siam. Being a uniformed, white male did not situate him in an uncontested place at the top of the social hierarchy and at the vanguard of a civilizational project. In 1911, after reading a book on Africa, he lamented:

This book awakens in me the longing for Africa – marching, fighting, negotiating, organizing, administering! Alas! Will it ever be my lot to see just a little bit of my youthful dreams come true? Here in Siam, none of them have been fulfilled. Siam is only a surrogate for Africa (18.6 1911).

In many ways Schau shared Seidenfaden's critical view on the position of the Danish officers in the gendarmerie. In his dairies, Seidenfaden referred to a conversation with Schau, in which the latter noted that in Siam the Danish officers carried 'the white man's burden', but – just like the work of other Europeans in Siam, their work was a "pointless exercise" (19.1 1913). Schau knew that Seidenfaden was interested in the ethnography and archaeology of Siam. He advised him to pursue these interests in earnest and thereby open up the possibility for an alternative career in Siam: "Become a member of the Siam Society. Write and make yourself a name" (12.1 1913). We shall now see how Seidenfaden heeded this advice and refashioned himself as a scholar in the context of the Siam Society.

## The Siam Society and the production of knowledge

The Siam Society was founded in 1904 by a group of expatriates living in Bangkok: many of its original members were advisors to the Siamese government. In the first issue of the Society's *Journal*, Oskar Frankfurter, future librarian of the Wachirayan Library and future president of the Society, nicely set out the project to be undertaken by the members of the Society and contributors to its *Journal*: "I consider we are the workmen to collect the materials on which the master builder may at some future day erect the edifice, in the shape of an encyclopedic work on Siam" (Frankfurter 1904: 1).

In order to supply the building blocks for such an encyclopaedic work, authors were invited to pay attention to a long list of subjects including, among others, aboriginal races and tribes, ancient cities and monuments, anthropology and anthropometric measurements, ethnography and ethnogeny, inscriptions, and tribes (Gerini 1904: 228-



232). In relation to India, Bernard Cohn (1996) has shown how British colonialism worked through a series of investigative modalities that turned India into an object available for science. In the same manner, the Siam Society's encyclopaedic gaze indicated how 'Siam' emerged as an object of scientific inquiry for European scholarship defined effectively by the inventory of topics in the first issue of the Society's Journal. While Cohn's investigative modalities produced usable knowledge for British colonial rule in India, the Siam Society's encyclopaedic gaze did not have the same utilitarian aim related to the government of people and things, at least not directly. As the Society's Journal was published in English, it offered an international window to this body of knowledge on Siam and soon constituted the most important source of authoritative knowledge about Siam. As the Siam Society was under Royal Patronage, its workings signalled how Siam was made available for Western science and turned into a knowable object with support from the royal elite.

The Siam Society and its Journal were not meant as an exclusive venue for scholars. In fact, non-specialists, or non-scholars, were called upon to contribute to the scientific project:

An enormous mass of valuable information can rapidly be collected through the co-operation of everyone. No special training is in most instances required, nor special facilities or leisure for inquiry. Many facts fall under the eye of the ordinary observer which go lost to science, simply through their not being jotted down. ... Every casual observer even if not interested in the subject, can help by simply noting down such facts as fall under his knowledge on a slip ... (Gerini 1904: 228).

These words were written by Gerolamo Gerini, an Italian military instructor in Siam who himself exemplified the kind of successful amateur scholar the Society sought. Gerini also urged the "casual observer" to write papers, monographs, translations of native works or of rare accounts of Siam, taking plans, sketches, photographic views, and rubbings of inscriptions. In fact, a most important qualification for the "casual observer" was not formal training, but a sustained presence in Siam and the ability to be an inquisitive observer. This requirement opened up the field of knowledge production to people beyond formal academia. They were believed to be able to produce knowledge, which, due to their position in Siam, could counter what Gerini called the nonsense about Siam produced by "globe-trotters and other occasional writers gifted more with imaginative powers than with the capacity and perseverance of research" (Gerini 1905: 85). However, as pointed out by Su Lin Lewis in her study of the formation of learned societies in Southeast Asia, to participate in the academic and social life of such a society required both knowledge of English and bourgeois sociability (Lewis 2013: 356). Therefore, despite Gerini's declaration on inclusivity, few Siamese became involved with the Siam Society in the early years of its existence. However, with such programmatic statements, Seidenfaden and the Siam Society were a perfect match.

## The quest for standardized ethnography

At the turn of the 20th century, Siam was evolving as a bounded territorial object. As described by Thongchai Winichakul (2000a; 2000b), the formation of Siam's geo-body was accompanied by the creation of a proto-ethnographic knowledge classifying and describing non-Thai groups living in Siam. Following Thongchai, this proto-ethnographic knowledge was mapped onto an 'ethno-spatial discourse'—a civilizational hierarchical ordering of the population with reference to distance from the ruling centre—which gave the Siamese elite a sense of cultural superiority within Siam. The producers of this knowledge were Siamese officials on official trips to 'outer' parts of Siam, who identified and differentiated between the different population groups with reference to a loose classificatory grid, including factors like language, physical characteristics and cultural factors.

When Seidenfaden took up his position in the gendarmerie on the Korat plateau, he was also interested in gathering information on the population inhabiting the areas he dealt with on his inspection tours. Thus, entries in his diaries relating to such tours generally contain information on the size and the racial composition of the population in the localities he visited. This information was based on data derived from local censuses, local officials and his own observations. At that time, the Siamese government was erasing the Lao from the Korat plateau in order to prevent French designs on this part of Siam as a part of Laos in French Indochina with reference to a common identity (Streckfuss 1993; Ivarsson 2008). This erasure of the Lao took various forms—the term 'Lao' was, for example, removed from the names of administrative units, historical source material, censuses and travelogues (Iijima 2018). Seidenfaden was aware of the Siamese government's intentions in this regard from the demographic set up of the country. With reference to the district of Phak Pang, for example, he noted: "In this district there are 600 Thai, 15 Shan, 37 Chinese – the rest of the population is Lao. In this year's local census, the district officer has listed the Lao as Thai. Apparently, he is a reformer!" (3.1 1909). Seidenfaden also came across examples showing how not only the Lao, but also other groups, were erased from local censuses. In Amphoe Sawang, for example, he found that "the Laos, Hjä Yo and Phuthaj living here were all listed as Thaj Udon" (26.11 1909). Seidenfaden linked this engineering of the local census lists with a "mendacious nationalism" orchestrated by Damrong, which threatened to abolish all other nationalities in Siam (26.11 1909; 23.1 1914; 27.4 1917). He found Damrong's project highly problematic, as it ran counter to his ambitions about identifying the various groups of people inhabiting the Korat Plateau, their origins and their relationships. In conformity with this perception, his representation of the population on the Korat Plateau constituted a mosaic of groups: e.g. Laos, Thai, Thai Korat, Khmer, Mon, Chinese, So, Thai Yo, Lawa or Chaobon, Kha, and Kui (Suay).

In his critical analysis of Western representations of the Orient, Edward Said has shown how a hallmark of such representations is an expression of a mixture of overly positive and romanticized views coupled with descriptions of degeneration and contempt (Said 1985: e.g. 31-36 on Balfour's representations of Egypt and Egyptians). In the same manner, Seidenfaden's representations of the Lao oscillated between praise and



Figure 4. Map of a tour Seidenfaden conducted in 1912 in which he covered a total of 733 km in 44 days. In general, the inspection tours were lengthy affairs. (21.6 1912)

contempt. Indeed, his descriptions of his early encounters of the Lao were indeed very positive. In terms of economic enterprise and cleanliness, he found that “the so-called lower cultural position of the Laos people (it is the Siamese who say so), then I find the majority of Laos towns far cleaner and more orderly than the Thai towns” (28.12 1908). Thinking back on his arrival in a Lao village after a long and tiresome ride he noted:



The eye rejoices – green swaying sugar cane, stately coconut - and sugar palms and whole groves of banana trees, mulberry bushes, etc. The Laos people always have many kinds of fruit – they bother more than the Siamese. And in addition, we met a lot of smiling, cheerful, well-built and very beautiful Laos girls with the coquettish white flower in the earlobe. I got in a really good mood after the boredom of the monotonous terrain (8.1 1909).

Seidenfaden's positive representation of the Lao soon gave way to a much more negative one, which corresponded more to contemporary accounts by foreigners (e.g. Smyth 1994; Graham 1912). As Seidenfaden noted: "The longer you are with them the Lao, the less you love them" (29-30. 12 1910). Soon he substituted references to the thrift and orderliness of the Lao with references to the "the dim-witted Laos whose urge to destruction knows no limits" (1.12 1910). Seidenfaden's racial essentialism always referred to a specific group of people in a specific location at specific point in time. In his accounts, however, his characterizations were generalized to a validity for the population group in general—the specific came to stand for the general. When on inspection tours, Seidenfaden stayed overnight in pavilions intended for visiting officials and he often found these in a sad state as "the wretched and lazy Laos destroy the pavilions (*sala*) as they do not bother to find firewood in the forest, but use the walls and even the floorboards of the pavilions that are already littered with betel saliva and other ugliness" (21.1 1910). When some of his belongings were stolen while on an inspection tour, he exclaimed "the Laos are thieving rats, lethargic, and very unreliable" (29-30. 12 1910). When dealing with a group of new gendarmes, he noted: "Negroes are certainly more apt than these ugly and degenerate Laos" (14.12 1912).

Seidenfaden's interest, however, was not directed primarily towards the Lao. Rather, it was the Kui (or Suay) that attracted his attention. He found that this group was distinct from the Lao—both in terms of physiology, food and language—and he also observed that the Kui was becoming Lao- or Khmer-ified and losing their language and other markers of their distinct cultural identity (23.1 1914; 12.5 1914). At the same time, he regarded the Kui villages as "the paradise of dirt and vermin" (9.4 1911), the people were "rascals and incarnate robbers" (3.3 1911), and their houses were "dirty miserable flea-filled huts" (1.3 1911). In Seidenfaden's racial essentialism, the dirt and immorality of the Kui indicated that they could potentially be identified as the indigenous population on the Korat Plateau (4.5 1913; 12.5 1914). In his eyes, it was this combination of cultural eradication and possible status as indigenous population that made it pertinent to study the Kui:

Why this interest in these dirty people? Because linguistically they represent an endangered population group. A mission can save them from linguistic and national ruin. This is worth the effort. Science would be grateful (1.2 1917).

To study the Kui would not only preserve their language and culture for posterity, but would also provide the Kui with a knowledge about themselves which he found they did not possess:



These Kui people have no idea that they form a great nation or that they are divided into many tribes or that the majority of ‘Lao’ in Khorat or Sisakhet are all Kui of origin. Their language is dying out. The Lao language is more refined. In fifty years, everyone will be Thai and no one knows a word of Kui (27.4 1917).

This concern for a systematic classification of the groups of people inhabiting Siam, and for the preservation of languages and cultures facing extinction due to cultural assimilation, became Seidenfaden’s leitmotif for his ethnographical work in the Siam Society. As he later put it, Siam was a “melting pot of many races, peoples and tongues which are in the process of becoming unified – it is therefore important to study them now before ethnological characteristics disappear” (Seidenfaden 1935: 18). In 1919, he approached the Siam Society, suggesting that the Society should spearhead the collection of information on the diverse population groups found in Siam. This information should be collected via a questionnaire distributed to governors, provincial doctors and missionaries throughout Siam (17.2 1919). After Seidenfaden left the gendarmerie, he became the chairman of the subcommittee on anthropological, ethnographical and linguistic research in the Siam Society and responsible for carrying out this project. Under his supervision, a questionnaire was formulated and 250 copies were sent out. For Seidenfaden, this project heralded a new phase in the formation of ethnological knowledge in Siam, as it promised to “facilitate all comparative studies in anthropology, ethnography, and philology, as well as a make rational classification of all these tribes possible” (in Boriphandh 1923: 191).

With only minor differences, the questionnaire was identical to a questionnaire Marcel Mauss, the French sociologist and anthropologist, had earlier designed for *École française d’Extrême-Orient* that was intended for field workers involved in ethnographic research. As Jean Michaud points out in his analysis of military ethnography in Northern Vietnam, the questionnaire was designed so that it could be used by non-scholars and did not require any specialist skills (Michaud 2013: 13). Accordingly, the questionnaire promised to accommodate one of the initial aims of the Siamese Society: to activate the casual observer as a producer of knowledge on Siam. At the same time, the questionnaire also promised to serve as an ideal framework for the envisioned share of labour between Siamese and expatriate producers of knowledge on Siam:

For the results of the Society’s labours to be of a valuable and authentic nature, friendly cooperation between Siamese and foreign members are essential, the one to bring knowledge of the intimate life and customs of his own people, and the other to bring his western methods of scholarship and research to bear upon the knowledge gained, for its presentation in a scientific form (Annual 1924: 70-71).

However, Seidenfaden and the Siam Society only received seven questionnaires. These were all translated into English and published in the journal (Petchabunburi 1921; Walton 1922; Boriphandh 1923; Chandr 1923; Chan and Nonwakorn 1925; Unknown 1925; Unknown 1943). Therefore, this project failed to fulfil its expected potential for the scientific advancement of ethnographic knowledge in Siam. Still, the project and the

published questionnaires reflected Seidenfaden's ambitions of turning Siam into a knowable object through systematic and scientific enquiry on the composition of Siam's population. As the translator of several of the published questionnaires, composed by Siamese officials, Seidenfaden also acted as a 'scientific gatekeeper', as he included comments on the quality of the data recorded in the questionnaires. For example, he praised the compiler of the questionnaire on the White Meo for his "keen powers of observation" and he ranked it as the best reply received so far although he found it preferable if the compiler would have referred to Meo in "less disparaging terms" (in Boriphandh 1923: 191).

After he left the gendarmerie and settled in Bangkok, Seidenfaden probably dreamt of pursuing his studies into the ethnography of Siam and collecting data in the field. In 1932, he undertook an excursion to Chiang Mai with E.W. Hutchinson to collect information on a group of Lawa in Northern Siam (Hutchinson and Seidenfaden 1935). Later, in 1934, Seidenfaden participated in the International Congress of Anthropology and Ethnology. At the congress, he read a paper on the status of anthropological and ethnological research on Siam, in which he presented himself as a leading contributor to these fields of knowledge (Seidenfaden 1935). For Seidenfaden, however, the 1932 excursion did not mark the point of departure for a new and more systematic engagement with the production of ethnographic and anthropological knowledge on Siam. With the rare exception of his project of collecting and exhibiting tribal dresses in 1937 (Seidenfaden 1939), his many publications in the *Journal of Siam Society* reflect how he drifted away from the kind of fieldwork that his 1932 excursion had heralded. Instead, his job at the Siam Electric Company occupied his time and energy; although he continued contributing articles to the Journal, these took the form of extensive book reviews. His articles dealing with ethnography were linked with the knowledge he had collected earlier, during his period in the gendarmerie (e.g. Kerr & Seidenfaden 1950; Seidenfaden 1952; Seidenfaden 1958). In the following section, we shall examine how Seidenfaden also refashioned himself as a scholar in the field of archaeology.

### A monumental past and the degenerate Khmer

The Korat Plateau is dotted with ruins and other artefacts dating back to the time when this area was a part of the Angkor Empire—temples, fortified cities, statues and inscriptions. On his inspection tours, Seidenfaden encountered many of these archaeological sites and artefacts, and soon set out to survey them more systematically. At that time, archaeological work in Siam was still in a nascent phase and the survey of the Khmer monuments on the Korat Plateau was very much a French enterprise. In 1881, Étienne Aymonier had surveyed Khmer ruins in Cambodia and in areas under Siamese authority (Aymonier 1901). Later, Étienne Lunet de Lajonquière followed in Aymonier's footsteps to produce detailed descriptions of the Khmer monumental landscape on the Korat Plateau (Lajonquière 1907).<sup>3</sup>

Seidenfaden's interest in the Khmer ruins seems to have been especially encouraged by his encounter with two people. The first was actually Lajonquière, who Seidenfaden

<sup>3</sup> For more information on early archaeology in Siam, see Peleggi 2002.



Figure 5. Sketch of Prasat Don Ngao, Sangkha, Surin (31.1. 1911)



Figure 6. Detail from Prasat Don Ngao, Sangkha, Surin (31.1. 1911)



met when he was based in Prachin Buri in 1908 (29.5 1908). From him, Seidenfaden acquired information on the monumental topography of the plateau, but he did not seem to be aware of the extensive scope of the work Lajonquière had already carried out on this topic. The second was Sanphasit Prasong, who Seidenfaden met not long after his encounter with Lajonquière (12.10 1908). At that time, Sanphasit was High Commissioner of Monthon Isan (1893-1910) although he is more widely associated with the rediscovery of Khao Phra Viharn in 1899, when he led an expedition to the temple and engraved his name on the base of the first temple (International Court 1962: 142). After meeting both of these individuals, Seidenfaden started a systematic survey of the ruins on the Korat Plateau. His motivation may not only have been the concrete information about the ruins he gained from them, but also Lajonquière's exemplary career was the very path about which Seidenfaden had dreamed. After Lajonquière had been commissioned as an army officer to survey the Khmer temples in Cambodia, the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* had him transferred from the army to take up a post in this newly established academic institution (Edwards 2008: 36).

From this time on, Seidenfaden began visiting ruins and archaeological remains while on inspection tours. Based on information he had gained from Lajonquière and Sanphasit, supplemented with information from local officials and members of the local population, he found his way to the ruins and started measuring, sketching, identifying statues and making prints of inscriptions, e.g. Phimai, Ban Prasat, Mueang Tam, Phra Viharn and Phanom Rung. In early 1911, Seidenfaden produced status reports for his surveying efforts. For Monthon Korat alone, he knew of the existence of forty to fifty old fortified towns or forts, of which he had visited and surveyed twenty-one. As for temple ruins, he surveyed around thirty places (26.2 1911). Entries in his diaries reflect how, after a feeble start, he began making more systematic surveys of the ruins, often coupling his textual descriptions with sketches and measurements.

In late 1910, it was Seidenfaden's ambition to start drafting a book on Siam containing information on the Khmer ruins he has surveyed on the Korat Plateau (19.10 1910). This book, however, never materialized as he apparently encountered two obstacles. First, to locate, measure and sketch was one thing; identifying and interpreting the artefacts was quite another. In his diaries, he often complained about the difficulty of obtaining information about the ruins and other artefacts, with regard to both their history and their past function. On these matters, he found the local population ignorant (e.g. 26.2 1911). Second, he was unfamiliar with how to deal with, or present, the data he had collected. In this connection, once again, Lajonquière became a source of inspiration.

In September 1913, Seidenfaden read Lajonquière's book on Khmer ruins in Cambodia (Lajonquière 1902). The French scholar's systematic description offered Seidenfaden the key he needed to unlock the ruins he had surveyed. Not only did Lajonquière's book help Seidenfaden better understand the meaning of the different ruins and sculptures, it also offered a model for how to compile and present a comparable list of ruins in the provinces he had surveyed (28.9 1913; 22.10 1913). Seidenfaden was still not aware of Lajonquière's 1907 publication, which covered the same ground he himself intended in his planned publication. He was working on his own, with little knowledge of existing relevant archaeological literature.





Figure 7. Sketch of figure at Phra Vihan (11.4 1911)

At the same time, however, he also used his knowledge about the archaeology and history of the Korat Plateau to establish himself as a broker of knowledge and artefacts related to this part of Siam. On visits to Bangkok or through exchange of letters, Seidenfaden established connections with Damrong Rachanuphab, Oscar Frankfurter and, later, George Cœdès. He provided them with copies of local chronicles and prints of inscriptions he had located (e.g., 7.2 1915; 11.8-14.8 1915; 30.9 1915; 14.4. 1917; 6.5 1919). Likewise, when Seidenfaden was on leave in Denmark in late 1919, he was instrumental in establishing an exchange of books between The Royal Library in Copenhagen and the Wachirayan Library in Bangkok. Damrong also asked Seidenfaden to provide specific chronicles from Ubon and Roi Et (9.4 1916). While in Denmark, he also donated several objects to the Ethnographic Museum and several sculptures to the National Museum (23.7 1919; see photos of statues from the National Museum in Denmark in Seidenfaden 1922: plates iv, vi).

In late 1917, Cœdès brought Lajonquière's published survey of the Khmer ruins of the Korat Plateau to Seidenfaden's attention and pointed out the major overlap between the two surveys. However, Cœdès found that parts of Seidenfaden's survey merited publication as a supplement to Lajonquière's already published survey (22.9 1917; 1.10 1917). In 1922, with support from Cœdès, Seidenfaden's article appeared in the prestigious journal of *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* (Seidenfaden 1922). In dry, 'scientific' language, the text offered short descriptions of the monuments, measurements, photos and sketches, and the location of the monuments was designated on a map. This inventory mirrored, and was a supplement to, the one published by Lajonquière in 1907. Seidenfaden's text drew attention to some mistakes in Lajonquière's text and supplemented this text by providing data on Khmer monuments in places not included



The Sanctuary with towers and galleries viewed from South.



Part of galleries surrounding the three towers.

Figure 8. Photos of Phimai from *JSS* 1923 (Seidenfaden 1923: between 8 and 9).



by Lajonquière. In doing so, Seidenfaden's supplementary inventory attested Khmer influence on the Korat Plateau beyond the area indicated by Lajonquière.

With this article, Seidenfaden made his contribution to the early documentation of the monumental landscape of this part of Siam, manifested himself as an expert on Khmer monuments and as a producer of knowledge in a dialogue with the existing French scholarship of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient*. His diaries, however, also reflect how his perception of the Khmer ruins mirrored French imaginations on Angkor Wat and the Khmer people. As described by Penny Edwards, the French scholarship on Angkor Wat carved out a national narrative of Cambodia, in which the greatness of the ancient temple constituted an ancestral mirror representing the contemporary population in colonial Cambodia as a pitiful and degenerate remnant of the once powerful and majestic Khmer people. In the words of Edwards (2008: 144-145): "There was only an Angkorean ancestral then and a colonial now, with a yawning abyss in between .... The split designated for the Khmer in this colonial vista was as the vanished, absent or lacking in the present, and as the ancestral Khmer suspended at the peak of Khmer time." In this depiction, French colonialism represented the necessary dynamic force to resurrect the degenerate Khmer.

Expressing the same colonial ideology, Seidenfaden associated the Khmer ruins on the Korat Plateau with remnants of a Golden Age, which stood in blunt contrast to the contemporary conditions he experienced. With reference to a visit to Phra Viharn, for example, he wrote: "Alas! Where is your splendor, where is your civilization and power now? What sad degenerate remnants, these dark-skinned Negro-haired inhabitants! Are they Khmer descendants? It is difficult to believe" (11.4 1911). Or, with reference to Phnom Ban Prasast: "These pitiful ignorant Khmer with brutal and rude facial features, these slaves living in dingy low huts, are they descendants of temple builders? Almost unbelievable" (15.6 1912). Seidenfaden also dreamt about a regeneration of the Khmer under the influence of Christianity—a parallel to the way he perceived his quest in the Congo. Seidenfaden described a visit to Phnom Rung in the following picturesque manner—almost in a trance he envisioned the past life of the temple:

I sing out my dream as an improvised poem about the golden age of the Khmer. Towering temples, mighty kings, and magnificent processions of princes and army commanders, and soldiers on saddled elephants come to feasts in the temples and the king's palace. Lust, extravagance and the barbarous Thai lead to the fall of the Khmer golden age. After ages of barrenness the Khmer will be reborn by the Gospel .... The ruined temples are rebuilt and the images of Christ to appear on the altars in Nakhon Wat, Nakhon Thom, Mueang Tam, Phanom Rung and Phra Viharn. The new realm will only include Khmers and even though it will be less extensive than the historical Khmer empire it will be glorious due to its delicate Hindu culture and Sanskrit language – the language of the cultured (13.2 1913).

In this manner, Seidenfaden's dedication to the study of ruins on the Korat Plateau buttressed his belief in the central role Europeans, like him, played in Siam in the early 20th century. Western science provided the necessary tools to classify, categorize,

analyze and understand the material remnants from past societies, and hereby create a knowledge that was unknown to the local population. Likewise, he still believed in evangelization as a central and, indeed, necessary element in civilizational projects.

Seidenfaden not only turned his knowledge about Khmer ruins on the Korat Plateau into knowledge meant for scholarly consumption. As a member of the Siam Society, he also wanted to turn the most spectacular representatives of the Khmer ruins into tourist attractions. In 1920, he presented a talk on how to visit Phimai and its temple ruins and what to expect from such a visit (Seidenfaden 1923). Seidenfaden intended the talk to be an advertisement for visits to the Phimai ruins and he supplied information on what to bring, how to travel, the cost of travel, where to stay, and the layout and symbolic meaning of the temple ruins. His description also offered a detailed account of what the traveller would see and experience along the way. According to Seidenfaden, for example, the first part of the trip out of Bangkok through flat and swampy country will not be very interesting. After ascending through the Dong Phraya Fai forest, however, the scenery shifts rapidly and over the dark and luxurious forest the traveller will see “a confusion of distant chains and summits wrapped in blue haze”. While a stopover in Korat is necessary, the town is “not very interesting nor picturesque being too dirty”. On entering the temple complex, the traveller will meet “a sight which fills one’s heart with delight. Indeed, a finer sight than that you will hardly find in this country.” Seidenfaden’s advertisement combined historical imaginations with the exoticism of travelling, and with his description in hand, you could travel into the unknown in a knowing manner. (See also Seidenfaden 1932).

The article in the *Journal of the Siam Society* demonstrated Seidenfaden’s talent for travel writing, and soon the Royal State Railways of Siam hired him to write guidebooks to several destinations in Siam (18.12 1922). Although commissioned to write guidebooks to nineteen destinations, only a few appeared in print, namely Bangkok (1927), Nakhon Pathom (1929) and Phetchaburi (1931). Through these publications, Seidenfaden contributed to an early process of determining what was significant to travellers in Siam, foreigners and Siamese alike. For the travellers, the guidebooks turned localities into familiar places when they followed predetermined itineraries and saw the sights in predictable ways (Cohn 1996: 6). This was yet another way of turning Siam into knowable object.

For Seidenfaden, the greatness of Angkor Wat spilled over into Siam and offered splendour to his own project of surveying the monumental past of the Korat Plateau: a project that mirrored French archaeological work in Cambodia and promoted Seidenfaden as a self-made archaeologist. His 1922 article in *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* and his advertisement for Phimai as a destination for tourists attested to the new role he had managed to invent for himself. Still, the 1922 article also revealed the limits of his expertise. While he located, measured, described and sketched ruins with patience and passion, he did not have the linguistic qualifications to decipher the inscriptions. Here, again, he relied on French expertise, as Coëdès provided the translation of the inscriptions. Nonetheless, Seidenfaden hoped that that he could achieve employment in an archaeological department in Siam. In fact, not long after Seidenfaden left the gendarmerie, Damrong had offered him a position at the City Library. This position



would have made it possible for Seidenfaden to pursue his interest in archaeology, but he declined as he found the salary much too low (22.11 1921). One year later, Seidenfaden reached out to Damrong asking for a post in the archaeological department should one be established in the future (12.2 1922). While an archaeological department came into being in 1924, a position for Seidenfaden never materialized. Damrong became head of the department and Cœdès the daily leader.

Later, in 1934, while in Denmark, Seidenfaden tried on his own to secure funding for a Danish archaeological expedition to Siam. In a Danish newspaper, he advertised how such an expedition would fill an archaeological vacuum and bring the archaeological knowledge of Siam on a par with that of neighbouring countries. The expedition would provide a much needed “summary overview that can put the Siamese territory into context and conclude the great overview of the Indian cultural circle. Here lies a huge task that Danish science has an unusual opportunity to solve.” Such an expedition would inevitably be a success because, as Seidenfaden noted, “one simply needs to scratch the ground with one’s nails to find wonders” (*Dagens Nyheder* 8.7 1934). Yet, he never secured the funding for the expedition. Instead of marking the beginning of a career, his 1922 article marked the end of Seidenfaden’s career as an archaeologist in Siam.

### Seidenfaden, the amateur scholar

In his introduction to a collection of selected articles marking the Siam Society’s centenary, Chris Baker notes how:

most of the contributors to the Journal over its first fifty years were officials (both Thai and farang), diplomats, advisors and other residents who made a hobby of scholarship or just being inquisitive. They unearthed old documents, travelled to remote places, recorded folklore, dug up remains, translated, analysed, and speculated (Baker 2004: ix-x).

Baker refers to Anuman Rajadhon and Kraisri Nimmanhaeminda as representatives of this tradition in its “final fling” (Baker 2004: ix-x). Seidenfaden offers another example of this kind of hobbyist or amateur scholar associated with the Siam Society. His publications span almost half a century (1918-1958) and they represent both the Golden Age of amateur or hobbyist scholarship and the eclipse of this tradition. Not surprisingly, when the Siam Society published *The Thai Peoples* in 1958, Seidenfaden’s book met harsh criticism from a new generation of anthropologists, who rightly pointed out that the book did not reflect recent developments in anthropology or similar scholarly traditions (e.g. Coughlin 1960; Philips 1960). Still, in this article, we have seen how he effectively used his long employment with the gendarmerie on the Korat Plateau and his engagement with the Siam Society as a point of departure to refashion himself as a successful amateur scholar within the fields of ethnography and archaeology. In doing so, he contributed to contemporary efforts to turn Siam into a knowable object. In this endeavour, he drew on, and was influenced by, the contemporary colonial and Orientalist imaginaries.

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