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Nikki Savvides
University of Sydney

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Abstract

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Living with Dogs: Alternative Animal Practices in Bangkok, Thailand

Nikki Savvides

Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, University of Sydney

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***Keywords:** Street dogs, Bangkok, Thailand, pets, community dog-keeping, animal practices, animal rescue, Theravada Buddhism, merit-making, urban wildlife, hybrid ecology*

Introduction

The streets of Bangkok are home to some three hundred thousand stray dogs, a mix of wiry, semi-feral mutts descended from native Thai dogs,¹ and pedigree animals that were once owned but have since been abandoned. They live on the stoops of buildings, under highway overpasses, on wastelands around the city's disused train lines, in empty lots and wrecking yards, and amongst the markets and stalls that line the city's streets. They sleep in back alleyways under the cover of car bodies and overflowing bins. They breed and fight in the open, dodging speeding tuk-tuks and taxis, and they bark and howl long through the night. Commonly known as 'soi dogs', these animals own the streets, or *sois*, and are members of Bangkok's large non-human society. They are startling in their appearance. Most have mange and ringworm which leaves their skin rough and cracked and grey like cement. They are almost always malnourished, and covered in fleas and ticks. Most have worms. Many have their ribs sticking through their skin. Their eyes are full of thick yellow discharge, and the toenails of many are long and curled like eagles' claws. Some hobble from injury, some are missing their tails. Others are missing their ears. Many female dogs suffer from various stages of venereal cancer, their wombs partially prolapsed, red raw and buzzing with flies.

When I first visited Bangkok in 2008 I spent my first day wandering around the suburb of Khlong Tan. I quickly became lost in the narrow back alleyways. Mid-autumn, the heat was oppressive and sweat trickled down my face, forming droplets and rivulets that ran like waterfalls onto my singlet. I searched for shade, walking quickly along the cracked and melting asphalt towards a copse of trees. Up ahead, a man was cutting a carcass on a makeshift table. Wiping sweat, blood and flies from his face he rhythmically stamped his feet to dissuade the pack of soi dogs that surrounded him, hungering for scraps of flesh. Most of the animals had mange, some so severe that all their fur was missing. Their exposed skin was rough and filthy. One dog was missing an eye, its empty socket infested with flies. Another dog had lost a foot. From the stump protruded a nub of bone, the flesh around it still raw. The condition of these animals shocked me.

I became aware of the canine communities that had their own claim on parts of these suburbs. Each day I would walk around Khlong Tan, encountering many different dogs and musing about

their lives. There was the broad-chested, thickset animal with the ridged back and chewed-up ears who patrolled the streets, master of his territory. There was the small terrier chasing rats, her once white and fluffy coat now grey and matted. Some alleyways were home to snarling packs of dogs with long teeth and terrifying eyes, encounters which quickly sent me fleeing. And there was the friendly black Labrador who followed me around for a whole day, who I fed with bits of fried chicken bought from a street vendor. Each animal was part of an urban hybrid ecology which was home to both dogs and humans.

Bangkok's soi dogs have a very different relationship with humans from many dogs in the West. Fending for themselves on the streets, rather than living in the homes and backyards of human carers, soi dogs are not 'pets'. The way they live confounds the understandings of dogs that we have in the West and shows that there are culturally-specific ways of relating to animals. These variations are a product of 'different human-animal boundary constructions' that influence what Elder, Wolch and Emel term 'animal practices' (198). Norms of animal practices 'are not consistent or universal' (Elder, Wolch and Emel 184). Laws and Miele note that they are '*a somewhat patterned set of relations*' (original emphasis, Law and Miele 55) that are influenced by numerous factors, including the ecological, the physiological, the cultural, and the geographical (Law and Miele 62). Animal practices emerge from 'highly variable cultural landscapes', and as such place is implicated in the different ways in which human-animal relationships develop (Elder, Wolch and Emel 184). With 'attention to specificity and difference', as Laws and Miele argue, we are better able to understand the character of these practices (57). Analysing animal practices across cultures can therefore be used to rethink dominant viewpoints and perspectives. Using the example of human-soi dog relationships in Bangkok this paper demonstrates that there are alternatives to the dominant narratives for human-animal relationships that appear in Western theories of pet-keeping practices. Drawing on observational research I examine the disjunction between Western ideals for human-dog relationships and the actualities of living with dogs in Bangkok. I explore the concept of community dog-keeping in Bangkok as an alternative to Western dog-keeping practices as an illustration of socio-cultural and spatial factors that influence the ways in which humans care for dogs.

Living with dogs

My interest in soi dogs led to the decision to volunteer for Soi Cats and Dogs (SCAD). This was a Western-run organisation devoted to improving the lives of stray dogs and cats in Bangkok which closed its doors in June 2012 due to funding issues.² Up until that date SCAD was focused on improving soi dog welfare through health care, animal birth control, and adoption programs. I spent two weeks working with SCAD in 2008, walking, training, washing, and providing medical treatment for soi dogs. I conducted observational research during that time. I was interested in what I saw as the tensions between Western ideals for canine welfare and the ways in which soi dogs were viewed and cared for by Thai people. Since that first visit I returned to Bangkok yearly from 2011 to 2013. I have continued to observe soi dogs, to take notes on their living conditions, and to wonder more about their day-to-day lives. I have been particularly interested in observing the ways in which humans interact with soi dogs.

I observed SCAD's team capturing soi dogs from the streets a number of times. The animals would then undergo health assessments, a neutering operation and treatment for any medical conditions. Once treated, the dogs started looking less startling. I was amazed seeing the many before and after pictures SCAD's staff proudly proffered which showed the transformation of soi dogs from monstrous-looking creatures devoid of hair and muscle tone to sleek, well-cared-for animals. These dogs were candidates for SCAD's adoption program, aimed at improving the welfare and living conditions of soi dogs by finding them homes with humans as pets. Despite the dogs' transformations, it was difficult for SCAD to achieve this aim. Between 2003 and 2009, SCAD found homes for 362 dogs out of the tens of thousands they treated, with almost half of them sent to the USA and Europe to be adopted ('Adoption Achievements'). Just as in many Western countries, dogs up for adoption in Bangkok outnumber potential homes. In Australia, organisations including the RSPCA and Monika's Doggie Rescue help to place some dogs with human owners, but many of these animals are put on 'death row' and destroyed. Buddhist beliefs guide human-animal relationships in Thailand, and soi dogs are not destroyed unless they are close to death. Instead they are returned to live on the streets. This explains both the number of serious veterinary cases I have seen in Bangkok, and the enormous soi dog population. Whilst finding adoptive homes for stray dogs in Australia is a difficult endeavour,

finding homes for even a significant number of these hundreds of thousands of soi dogs is virtually impossible.

SCAD aimed to improve adoption rates through the publication of dog ‘biographies’ on their websites. An example is that of Hayley, who is described as:

a sweet and gentle puppy who loves to run around and play with her siblings and humans alike. She is friendly, affectionate puppy who would love a new home! She gets on well with other dogs and is a very happy, well adjusted pup! (‘Adoptable Dogs’)

Another, named Lyca, was described as:

a very sweet-natured puppy who is gentle and can be shy with new people. She came to SCAD very timid but she has quickly grown in confidence and has grown into a friendly, playful young dog. She loves treats ... and playing with chew toys and once she gets to know you, she is a very affectionate girl! (‘Adoptable Dogs’)

These descriptions of dogs were used to highlight the character of each animal in such a way as to make them appeal to potential adopters. With names and back stories the dogs were no longer the anonymous creatures hiding under cars, stealing from rubbish bins, and scurrying out of the way of tuk tuks and taxis.

Similar is the ‘auto-biography’ of a female dog named Som, told via her blog at <http://scadbangkok.blogspot.com>. The blog began in 2009 when Som was captured from the streets, and was written by British expatriate and SCAD volunteer Claire Deacon who adopted her. Before being captured Som’s life was typical of that of a soi dog:

I don’t really remember much of the first few years of my life. I know I was living on the sois ... and in the temples of Bangkok, and I remember always being hungry and thirsty. I also remember that sometimes people weren’t very nice to me ... I was emaciated, had no fur, my skin was cracked and bleeding, and my toe nails were severely overgrown. It hurt. Also, because I was so malnourished, my teeth turned black and grew horizontally instead of vertically. (Deacon)

Deacon/Som describe what happened since the dog found a ‘home’:

I am now so happy that I can't wipe the smile from my face. My mum and dad say that I am 'the happiest, skippiest, most loved and most loving dog anyone could hope for'. All I wish for now is that all the other dogs and cats who are living rough on the Sois can have as happy an ending as I do. (Deacon)

Speaking for Som using anthropocentric terms, Deacon's interpretation of the dog's thoughts and feelings aligns with similar understanding of animal emotions expressed by 'animal caretakers' (Arluke and Sanders 66). The 'readily recountable narrative history' written by Deacon implies that the dog lives in what Sanders describes as 'a subjective world in which emotion played a central role' (Sanders 216–17). The subjectivity attributed to Som is consistent with the ways in which many Westerners who live with dogs regard their animals. Studies conducted by Cudworth (181) and Sanders (207, 215) in the UK and USA respectively show that such subjectivity is a marker of the belief that dogs are 'unique individuals'. These animals are viewed 'as minded social actors and as having, at least, a "person-like" status' (Sanders 211).

According to Deacon, Som's life changed dramatically after being captured from the streets. She became part of her 'mum and dad's' family and her 'happiness' depended on this particular scenario. She was no longer a soi dog, but a 'pet', embedded in relationships with these humans that are, in Cudworth's words, 'close, family and friend-like' (Cudworth 69). Because they live in the home, Cudworth argues, pets inhabit 'a liminal position between human and animal' (146). This liminality has afforded them higher status than most other animals because they are viewed as 'virtual persons', in Arluke and Sanders' words (66), or, in Haraway's, subjects rather than objects (*When Species Meet*). For some authors the significance of these sorts of relationships is that they parallel, in some ways, interpersonal relationships (see, for instance, work by Tannen, and Power). In viewing Som as part of her 'family' Deacon expressed an understanding of the relationship as familial. According to Franklin this is common amongst Western pet-keepers who, he argues, name pets as they would their own children (95). For Sanders dogs in particular are seen to fit this definition because they are part of humans' 'social relationship[s]' (211).

Many Western theorists interested in dogs have commonly reflected on their own interactions with these animals that take place in the home, the domestic space which shapes

these relationships. In Shapiro's work, his interactions with his dog, Sabaka, occur in a 'playing field' which extends from what he calls the 'playroom ... into a hallway that made a circuit around the stairwell and then back into the playroom' (35). Sabaka's territory stretches from 'a certain spot at the head of the drive' to places within the house from which he can observe Shapiro and his family, including 'the couch in the playroom, on the second floor landing, at the threshold between the dining room and the kitchen' (37). Sanders discusses the behaviour of his dogs in his 'household' (214), whilst Cudworth recounts a childhood tale in which she proudly took home a cocker spaniel (3), noting that the sort of connections that occur between humans and animals in 'human households', or what she terms 'multispecies homes', are 'the closest, most "humanised" of encounters across species' (17). Even Haraway, for whom dogs are steadfastly co-habitants rather than family members, describes her relationships with Cayenne Pepper and Roland in terms of a 'canine and human household' in which dog and human can 'go running together and come home to cook dinner' (*When Species Meet* 300).

Western theory on human-dog relationships has shaped a narrative for dog-keeping practices in which the animal lives in an individualised, pseudo-familial relationship with the human in the home. But Haraway notes that 'dogs and humans have always had a vast range of ways of relating' (*Companion Species Manifesto* 33). This is evident in challenges to the concept of the dog as 'unique individual' who is part of the family and a co-habitant in the home. In Tuan's work dogs and other pets are often dominated, fetishised objects for human consumption. These relationships are not familial but are marked by 'dominance and affection, love and abuse, cruelty and kindness' (Tuan 102). Cudworth also notes that the status of these animals 'remains precarious and a backdrop to stories of happy multispecies living is the abandonment and abuse of animals as pets' (17). For Haraway, human-dog relationships are far more complex than most scholarship would suggest. The human-dog relationship, she argues, 'is not especially nice; it is full of waste, cruelty, indifference, ignorance, and loss, as well as of joy, invention, labor, intelligence, and play' (*Companion Species Manifesto* 12). These relationships are not, for Charles and Davies, 'simply substitutes for interpersonal relationships' (74). As Sanders explains, animal caretakers do not view dogs 'as literally human' (Sanders 212). Rather they are, in Cudworth's words, 'both family and non-human kin' (147–48).

The variations in narratives offered by Western scholars show that there are many possibilities for human-dog relationships, challenging the dominant narrative for the dog as a near-human individual in a familial relationship with the human. But what is missing from the work of these scholars is acknowledgement of the cultural and spatial differences in animal practices that exist across Western cultures, even within the same country. In cruelty and in kindness, the majority of Western human-dog relationships, according to these authors, still belong in the home. Analyses of animal practices within Western cultures show that this is not always the case. In Australia, for example, there are many different types of human-dog relationships that are specific to various locations, such as between cities and rural/regional areas. In my observations of human-dog relationships in the country town of Mudgee it is evident that not all dogs are treated in the ways in which their urban counterparts are treated. Many dogs in such areas are working animals. Most live outside in kennels, runs, or other confined outdoor spaces. In these places the concept of the dog as an animal that lives in the home is an urbanised ideal.

Tuan and Serpell note the existence of practices in other cultures, including those in non-Western nations, that involve the animals that most Westerners know as 'pets'. Tuan discusses pet fanciers in China and Japan, linking the tradition of Western pet-keeping practices to centuries of domestication and manipulation of animals in these cultures (141–42). Serpell explores in detail a number of complex relationships between humans and 'pets' and notes the parallels and differences that exist between them (*In The Company of Animals*; 'Pet-keeping in Non-western Societies'). He explains, for instance, that pet-keeping amongst the Barasana Indians of eastern Colombia involves caring for a diverse array of animals including dogs, parrots, tapirs, and ocelots, and spending time not just hand feeding animals but 'masticating plant food ... for their tame parrots and macaws' (*In the Company of Animals* 64). These are evidently practices that differ from those performed in the West. Serpell provides many other examples, mainly amongst tribal societies. His work shows that analysing specific animal practices can reveal interesting cultural differences, at the same time devaluing the Western perspective of human-pet relationships as the dominant narrative. No doubt there are a myriad of practices currently in existence in different cultures that defy any current understandings of human-dog relationships. Those between humans and soi dogs in Bangkok are one such example.

Why not adopt?

The limited application of the dominant narrative is evident in the disjuncture between the adoption ideal and the reality of life for soi dogs. The biographies of Hayley, Lyca and Som were used by SCAD to entice people to adopt soi dogs, but adoption only made a small difference to the much larger issue of soi dog welfare. The stories of the three dogs, whilst undoubtedly reflective of the lives of many of these animals, were being used to alert people to the specific issues facing each dog as an individual, rather than looking towards ameliorating broader welfare issues.

There are many reasons why people in Bangkok might not think of soi dogs as ‘pets’, or want to adopt them. There are a number of different socio-cultural and spatial factors that are influential in this case. People do keep dogs as pets in Bangkok, where they can be found in 20% of households (Kasempimolporn, Jitapunkul and Sitprijia 433). As Kasempimolporn et al. explain, this percentage is significantly larger than in the rest of the country, representative of the rather high correlations between pet-keeping and urban dwelling (433). The growth of what Funatsu and Kayoga term the ‘middle classes’³ in Thailand correlates with increasing rates of dog-ownership. Members of these middle classes are part of a heterogeneous group linked by an ‘economically distinct status’ and found primarily in cities (Funatsu and Kayoga 260). Dog-keeping practices amongst this group appear to operate as a function and consequence of development⁴ and the changing cultural milieu in Thailand which has occurred as a result. With ‘households getting smaller and [an] increasingly aging population’, many Thais now seek ‘the company of a pet and more owners now let their dog ... live inside their homes’ (‘Welcome to a Booming Dog Care Market of Thailand’). But despite the growing popularity of dog ownership a very small proportion of this group might adopt a soi dog,⁵ with most choosing to buy pedigree animals from breeders.

My observations led me to speculate that people in Bangkok might not want to live with soi dogs as pets. Soi dogs are not the well-trained, healthy and obedient animals that are often found living in homes in many Western nations. They live in packs, fight amongst themselves

and often pay little attention to the humans around them. They generally look at best, mangy, and at worst, hideous. For many Bangkokians, soi dogs are also a source of fear. Whilst most of the soi dogs that I have met during my visits to Bangkok have been friendly, some soi dogs are very territorial. Soi dogs have been known to attack humans, and some carry rabies, which is a great source of anxiety for many Bangkokians (Bhanganada et al.; Kasempimolporn et al.). Some two hundred people die from rabies annually in Thailand (Bhanganada et al. 249), with 70% to 95% of these deaths caused by dog bite (Kasempimolporn et al. 43). Stories about soi dogs and rabies are commonplace in Bangkok, particularly around Bangkok's popular Chatuchak Market where, in 2001, a rabid dog bit 52 people in one day until it was beaten to death by a security guard. Whilst incidences such as these are relatively rare, they have a long-lasting impact. After coming across these stories during the course of my research I have been extra cautious when passing any soi dog who appears to be behaving bizarrely. I've observed many Bangkokians carefully avoiding the particularly terrifying looking dogs. Most Bangkokians know someone who has died from the virus which compounds this fear (Bhanganada et al.; Kasempimolporn et al.).

Soi dogs may also be undesirable pets due to their indeterminate breeding. In the case of the middle classes, this appears to be a particularly salient reason for not wanting to live with a soi dog. As 'natives' or 'mongrels', soi dogs are seen to be compatriots of the 'employees' of the middle classes, rather than the middle classes themselves (Kasempimolporn et al. 434). For these wealthier individuals, dog-ownership and pedigree go hand-in-hand. During the course of my time working with SCAD the organisation took part in the second annual 'Pet-a-Porter' event, held at the Emporium Mall, an exclusive shopping centre. The event was a celebration of pet ownership and SCAD used the opportunity to educate the public about soi dog welfare issues. Pet-a-Porter mainly appeared to be a marketing exercise for the pet food and pet accessory industries, targeting individuals with large disposable incomes that they were willing to devote to their pets. As well as stalls selling pet food, leads, food bowls and other rather generic items, at the extreme end of the scale were stalls targeted at Bangkok's elite. These sold designer clothes, haircuts and blow dries for dogs, Swarovski crystal dog earrings and necklaces, and studio portraits of dogs and their owners. Impeccably dressed women wandered from stall to stall, pushing prams holding pedigree dogs dressed in frilly dresses and wearing very small sneakers. Besuited men walked perfectly coiffed poodles on leather leads attached to crystal- and

gold-inlaid collars. Few looked at SCAD's stall as they walked past. Although we had a pen full of playful soi puppies to lure them in, most people were perturbed by the images displayed on signs around their pen. The signs told of suffering: the pictures of dogs with amputated limbs, with their genitals swollen grotesquely from venereal cancer, with weeping eye sockets and broken legs bent out at odd angles. Aimed at eliciting sympathy and hopefully donations, these images of soi dogs could not be more different from the pedigree dogs to which the event was devoted. The latter were trophy objects and status symbols: the wordplay on 'prêt à porter' symbolic of the role of the dogs in patterns of middle class consumption and fashion. For the upper echelons of Bangkok's societies these pedigree dogs were 'ready to wear': accessories for their owners, like clothing, bags or jewellery.

It appears that in some cases pedigree dogs, like other trophy objects and status symbols, are ultimately disposable. A study by Kasempimolporn et al. showed that a significant number of these dogs are abandoned, ending up on the streets (434–35). As SCAD's former manager Wendy Edney explained to me:

[w]e get purebreds and their mixes in here every week. Shih Tzu, Poodle, Golden Retriever, German Shepherd are very common. At the moment we have a Cocker Spaniel. Lots of dogs have Jack Russell, Beagle or Labrador in them. (Edney)

Looking through SCAD's adopted dog records, it was evident that whilst some of the pedigree dogs had found homes post-abandonment, they seemed to fare no better than their native or mongrel counterparts in being considered suitable as pets. This suggests that the word 'pedigree' is associated more with the place from which the dog was acquired than the breed itself. It would appear that all soi dogs, including those with pedigrees, have been tainted by their life on Bangkok's streets.

SCAD secured some sponsorship funding over the course of the day at The Emporium, and a number of people were interested in the work of the organisation. Adoptive homes were found for two of the puppies with Western expatriates. None of the other eight dogs that accompanied us that day were adopted, and few people were interested in learning more about them, particularly the older animals. Undoubtedly, the welfare of dogs who were adopted that day would have improved. Being fed regularly, being groomed and having their medical needs

met would have made the lives of ex-soi dogs far easier than they were on the streets. However, this would not be the case for most of Bangkok's three hundred thousand soi dogs. How could we choose which of the dogs should be adopted and which should be left on the streets? After seeing the lack of interest at Pet-a-Porter I briefly entertained the idea of adopting a dog myself. After looking into just how much money it would cost to bring a dog back home to Australia (around \$2500) I also reflected on how much more effective it would be, in welfare terms, to donate the money to SCAD to use for neutering operations, food, and healthcare. This would have made a much greater difference in terms of soi dog welfare by helping the majority, rather than the few.

Community dog-keeping in Bangkok

Despite their hope to find homes for soi dogs, staff at SCAD appeared to recognise the limitations of the adoption ideal. They took advantage of the particular cultural practice of what I will term 'community dog-keeping' to ensure that Bangkok's residents took care of the dogs, even if they did not take them into their homes. Because almost all dogs treated by SCAD were returned to the streets, there was little choice but to leave them to fend for themselves. However, being on the streets did not mean that soi dogs were not cared for. SCAD could rely on the fact that in most areas, people would look after these animals, mainly by feeding them. The selfless act of feeding those in need is a central tenet of Theravada Buddhism, which is particular to Thailand. As Kusalaya explains, in the Theravada tradition humans who 'do good' by caring for animals receive 'merit' for the next life (40). The dogs receive care, and the humans are reincarnated as higher beings: a mutually beneficial relationship. This plays out in various settings, such as in the grounds of Bangkok's Siriraj Hospital, where Bhanganada et al. note that the continued presence of soi dogs, despite the occurrence of numerous dog bites, is directly related to the merit-making precept, whereby families hope for the health of their loved ones in return for caring for the strays (253). Similar practices occur in other sites around Bangkok. According to Edney, once members of the community are invested in soi dogs and their welfare they were 'more likely to report injuries, disease and other issues' to SCAD staff, who could then organise for the animal to be captured and treated (2010). In many cases, if

finding food was a problem, SCAD could use donations from its supporters to buy food so that members of these communities could afford to feed the dogs.

The three times I returned to Bangkok I conducted observational research, aimed at exploring the ways in which community dog-keeping practices could be used to tackle welfare issues. On each trip I ate dinner most nights at one of Bangkok's many food markets, which were always home to a number of soi dogs. I observed market stall owners feeding dogs scraps, mainly rice but sometimes fish heads and off-cuts of meat. Women and men selling noodles, soups, and fried chicken at the markets put out bowls full of food on the streets every evening. Some hand fed the animals. I saw people tending to soi puppies, ensuring that they could eat without being bothered by larger dogs. On occasion, and as my Thai language skills improved, I would approach these people and would ask them about these dogs. As I understood it, some people had particular ties to individual dogs, whilst for others these ties were with groups of dogs rather than individual animals. Many people knew the dogs by specific names, usually describing their appearance.

On one trip I observed the same market stall owner consistently feeding the same group of dogs every day for a week. The dogs would hover around the area near the market in the hours before it closed. When this particular stall owner had packed everything away they would come out from their various hiding spaces and she would feed them with scraps. After they had finished and were sure that no more food was available they would slink away, back to their various spots under cars and in doorways. Other market stall owners would have particular dogs for which they would care. For many market stall owners, however, the dogs are a nuisance rather than animals to be cared for. I saw dogs chased away by irate stall owners who would wave their arms and brandish sticks or brooms at the animals.⁶ It was evident that soi dogs had different statuses depending on the ways in which the individual humans who shared their space regarded them.

Members of the city's numerous 'working class'⁷ communities are willing to provide this sort of care, despite their limited funds. I observed a connection between these individuals and soi dogs that developed as a consequence of sharing an environment. Many of Bangkok's residents spend their lives on the streets alongside these animals. Some are street food vendors who sell noodles, soups and other items from trolleys that can be wheeled from their homes out

into the community. Some work in shops that front onto the streets, where awnings provide cover under which soi dogs can shelter. There are also slum-dwellers, eking out a living doing odd jobs like street sweeping, rubbish removal, or in construction or road works that are instrumental to Bangkok's growth. Living with soi dogs seems to have encouraged these communities to care for them because, whilst they do not inhabit their homes, these animals nonetheless live alongside them in the urban street-scape. Further, the dogs were viewed as protectors of the community, described as 'guard dogs' both by Kasempimolporn et al. (434) and by locals I talked to who told me stories about soi dogs scaring off burglars and unfamiliar dogs. Having experienced the ferocity of dogs defending their territory, I could understand how effective the security provided by these animals could be.

The people I observed feeding and caring for soi dogs could have been seeking merit, or repaying the dogs for guarding their community. However, my observations led me to believe that people who care for soi dogs do so for reasons that go well beyond these explanations. The carers who carefully prepared food, talked gently to the dogs, patted them, and helped them defend their territory were not caring for these animals purely because they would get something in return. For these humans soi dogs could be considered, in Wolch's words, as 'valued neighbours and partners in survival' (125). In a city and culture in which many social gatherings take place in the streets, it appears to me that community dog-keeping practices make far more sense than domestic human-dog relationships that occur in the home.

There are many complex practicalities associated with community dog-keeping, some of which relate to merit-making itself. It is evident that the precept may play an important role in community dog-keeping, but it has also contributed to soi dog overpopulation. Because feeding soi dogs is one of the most 'public and entrenched' forms of merit-making in Bangkok, most of these animals regularly receive food (Winn). This may be true, but considering the appearance of most soi dogs it is apparent the food that they receive is not enough. Mainly fed on rice, it seems that the dogs do not receive adequate nutrition because they are usually skinny and malnourished. Nonetheless dogs are able to eke out an existence and feeding them contributes to overpopulation because the animals are more likely to reproduce and their offspring are more likely to survive ('Stray Animal Management Strategies'). A large soi dog population means greater potential for outbreaks of zoonotic diseases such as rabies (Bhanganada et al.),

leptospirosis and toxoplasmosis (Jittapalapong et al.), and other highly contagious diseases like distemper and parvo. Soi dogs often carry intestinal worms and other parasites in their faeces which can contaminate waterways, green areas and sidewalks (Hinz).

The interests of humans and soi dogs are often at odds with each other. Dogs present problems for human communities in the form of disease and contamination, and their territorial nature has made certain areas of the city out-of-bounds, particularly at night. On more than one occasion a local friend has warned me not to walk down a certain street, or to be careful passing a certain empty block because of aggressive soi dogs. At the same time, humans present problems for the dogs. They are often hit by cars, tuk-tuks and other vehicles, and some are targets for beatings and abuse. Many of the dogs treated by SCAD had been involved in traffic accidents or had been beaten, and were left with hip fractures, dislocations, amputations, and other mobility problems. The tensions between human and canine communities provide obvious challenges to harmonious species coexistence. Nonetheless, this sometimes uneasy coexistence shows the city, as an urban hybrid ecology, is home to multi-species communities in which the interests of both humans and non-human species intersect. In understanding human-dog relationships in these terms it becomes clear that hybridity is not a simple matter of humans and animals *sharing* territories and spaces. Tensions are at the heart of multispecies communities, just as are species interconnections. These communities are not stable, consistent, or predictable, but are constantly changing. Soi dogs and humans might be partners in survival, but these partnerships are not neat and predictable.

The form of community dog-keeping that is popular in Bangkok is not only considerably different to many Western pet-keeping practices, but is most likely different to pet-keeping practices in other non-Western cultures. I am aware that community dog-keeping practices occur in other countries. Anecdotal evidence suggests that other Southeast Asian countries, including Cambodia, have similar practices.⁸ My own observations in India also confirmed the existence of community dog-keeping practices.⁹ It is quite possible that similar practices exist in non-Western countries beyond Asia that have as yet been unexplored. I have also observed that community dog-keeping practices exist across Thailand, but that they differ in certain ways depending on the location. For example, in the rural Mae Chaem region I observed community dog-keeping practices that were quite different to those in Bangkok, possibly reflecting the

differences between living with dogs in urban and rural spaces. In Mae Satop, a remote village in Mae Chaem, feeding stray dogs is not as prevalent as it is in Bangkok, mainly because the residents are quite poor. Dogs in Mae Satop live a semi-wild existence, finding shelter both under houses in the village and in the surrounding forest. The dogs catch rats and other small rodents but do not seem to eat the various small animals that wander freely through the village, including chickens and piglets. I assumed that any dog that did so would no longer be welcome in the village, and still wonder about the territorial relationships between humans and dogs in Mae Satop.

There are interesting differences and parallels between dog-keeping practices in Bangkok and those involving stray dogs in the US city of Baltimore. These are further evidence that animal practices are neither stable nor consistent within both Western and non-Western cultures. As Beck's 1973 study showed, care for free-ranging dogs in Baltimore at that time was also a matter of treating disease (including zoonoses) (59–68) and potentially putting sterilisation programs into practice (72). The matter of contamination caused by faeces and urine (Beck 53–59) and the incidence of dog bites (Beck 45–50) were also significant public health issues. Interestingly, Beck noted that humans living in lower-income, 'working class' areas were more likely to feed stray dogs than those living in higher-income areas (26), suggesting an interesting parallel in dog care between the cities. Beck's study is particularly interesting because although current data on Baltimore's dog population is not available, his analysis shows quite clearly that differences exist within Western cultures in relationships between humans and dogs, once again challenging the dominant narrative. Stray dogs are an unusual sight in my home town of Sydney because they are quickly removed from the streets by councils. For this reason the concept of stray dogs roaming in Baltimore is as unfamiliar to me as my first observations of soi dogs in Bangkok.

Community dog-keeping in Bangkok is specific to the city's spatial geographies. It takes place in the particular layout of its suburbs; its markets; its alleyways; its slums. Soi dogs in Bangkok face their own issues that are particular to their location. Bangkok's intense traffic causes injury to soi dogs, whilst the city's sanitation problems contribute to the spread of diseases like distemper. When Bangkok's rivers and canals overflowed in the 2011 floods, hundreds of soi dogs drowned and thousands more were left stranded, injured and sick. Care

itself comes in a form that is specific to the spaces found in the city. The market stall owners and street sweepers who feed the dogs live in close contact with the animals in spaces that are unique to Bangkok. Monks living at Bangkok's many temples provide food for these animals, a particular part of the monastic duties of Theravada Buddhists. And visitors to places like Siriraj Hospital, who feed the dogs in exchange for merit, are involved in relationships that stretch beyond that particular environment, into complex associations not just between humans and dogs, but between the cultures, classes, and belief systems that intersect in the urban hybrid ecology of Bangkok.

Conclusion

Ideals for human-dog relationships commonly associated with pet-keeping in Western cultures cannot be assumed to apply to all cultural practices involving dogs. Relationships between humans and soi dogs in Bangkok are specific to that location; influenced by different socio-cultural and spatial factors, including class, socio-economic status, religion, places and types of work, and the configuration of urban spaces. These factors reflect the many different ways in which members of different communities live, and the room that they have (or might not have) for dogs in their lives and in their homes. The form of community dog-keeping that exists in Bangkok is just one example of an alternative narrative for living with dogs. Comparing different animal practices shows the possibilities for other types of human-animal relationships that exist not only between cultures but within them. Such comparison also points to the limitations of understanding animal practices as stable or consistent whether they occur in the socio-cultural and spatial milieus of Western or non-Western countries. Specific analyses of different animal practices, such as that I have undertaken in Bangkok, will shed further light upon the complex nature of our relationships with non-human species.

Notes

¹ Most soi dogs in Thailand are descendants of the native Thai Ridgeback, but many have been bred with other breeds that have been introduced from Europe. Some of these mixes can be traced back hundreds of years whilst others are more recent, the product of interbreeding with abandoned pedigree animals.

² The dogs who were up for adoption when SCAD closed its doors now live in Chiang Mai, on the grounds of Elephant Nature Park, an elephant rescue and rehabilitation site which has now built kennels to house soi dogs from Bangkok.

³ 'Class' is difficult to define and am somewhat uncomfortable categorising groups of humans as either 'middle class' or 'working class'. In this article I have utilised generic conceptions of these different classes in Thailand, mainly via the work of Shiraishi, and Funatsu and Kagoya, who connect class to socio-economic status.

⁴ The concept of 'development' is a complex one that is far beyond the scope of this paper to disseminate. I consider development significant as a marker of both socio-economic status and factors such as education, access to health care, conflict and life expectancy, which in turn impact upon the socio-cultural practices of human societies, including those involving animals.

⁵ A number of the 362 dogs that found homes through SCAD were adopted by individuals who could be described as members of the 'middle classes'.

⁶ Although I did not observe anyone hitting the dogs some of the animals captured by SCAD suffered injuries consistent with being beaten. I am not sure of the circumstances surrounding these cases.

⁷ See note 5.

⁸ Friends and colleagues similarly interested in human-animal relationships have described seeing Cambodians feed stray dogs in a way that appears to parallel some of the practices associated with community dog-keeping in Bangkok.

⁹ In 2009 and again in 2011 I spent several weeks working for animal welfare organisations around India. During this time I observed many examples of community dog-keeping practices, which, just as they are in Bangkok, appear to be common amongst the working classes. As in Bangkok, community dog-keeping in cities like Jaipur and Udaipur is connected to spiritual beliefs. The Hindu precept of *ahimsa*, which promotes kindness and non-violence towards all living things, influences human-dog relationships.

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