The Impact of Political Instability on the Education of the *Saṅgha* in the 17th Century Siam

Venerable Khammai Dhammasami[1]

Introduction

From 1569 to 1809 there were periods of great instability at Ayutthaya, in which the monarchs, if they were strong enough, felt the need to apply greater control over the Order. One of those periods that has drawn our attention is some critical years during the reign of King Narai (1656-1688). Towards the end of his reign, now famously known as "the 1688 Revolution"[2] , King Narai is reported by La Loubère, the French ambassador to Ayutthaya, to have defrocked "thousands" of monks at Ayutthaya on account of their "not being learned enough".[3] The King employed an instrument, formal examinations, later came to be known as *Parian*, to assess monks' the knowledge of Buddhist scriptures. Traditionally, this

[1] Venerable Khammai Dhamamsami, DPhil. (Oxford), serves as a trustee of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, University of Oxford and is professor at ITBMU, Yangon. He is also a founder and the Executive Secretary of the IABU.

[2] Hutchinson, trans. 1688 *Revolution in Siam: The Memoir of Father de Bèze, s.j.* pp.63-103; Desfarges, de La Touche & des Verqiains, *Three Military Accounts of the 1688 Revolution in Siam; Smithes, A Resounding Failure: Martin and the French in Siam* 1672-1693, pp.88-98; de Forbin, , *The Siamese Memoir* 1685-1688, pp.177-181; Van Der Cruysse, *Siam and the West* 1500-1700, pp.427-467; Wyatt, *Thailand*, p.117.

[3] La Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam*, p.114.

incident has been interpreted as one brought about mainly by the failure of the *Saṅgha* who neglected their duty of study (and to a certain extant of the earlier Ayutthayan kings who ignored their royal patronage)[4]. However, we will suggest that the Buddhist monastic Order, for the most part, was not responsible for King Narai's uncompromising stand; instead, it was rather due to the circumstances, namely geopolitical, by which the two most powerful institutions in Siam, the *Saṅgha* and the monarchy, were brought into a conflict. The great instability from the seventeenth century Ayutthaya affected the Buddhist monastic Order in general and its education in particular. Here the analysis is undertaken, in the absence of well documented ecclesiastical records of the relevant periods, mainly through the available sources on Siamese history in both Thai and English.

Wat as an educational institution

The *wat*, monastery, was not just the spiritual focus of the society, but also an educational institution. Indeed providing education for the people was the major means of recruitment into the Order, because ordination was a pre-requisite for higher study. During the time of the Buddha ordination was motivated by a desire for salvation; but centuries later, when Buddhism was established outside India, study became the primary motivation. This was true in the Siamese kingdom from the time of the arrival of Buddhism at Sukhothai right up to the 1930s, when secular primary education, which had been introduced about half a century earlier, was made compulsory throughout the country. Indeed, monasteries were the only places to which ordinary people could send their children for education, as the royal school, *samnak ratchpandit*, situated in the palace, was reserved for children of royal descent.[5]

Parents sent their sons to a monastery to receive education[6] ; these boys were known as *dek wat,* "temple-boy", receiving instruction in reading and writing in Siamese, and serving their master. Many boys spent a few years in the Order studying, and then left. This temporary ordination became a part of Thai Buddhist

[4] *Prawat karn suksa khongsong* , pp.14-16.
[5] *Prawat Krasong Suksathikarn* (History of Ministry of Education), pp.1-2.
[6] Young, *Village Life in Modern Thailand*, p.118.

culture and was one that often caused "needless readjustment within the community" as the monastery had to devote human and material resources to training them.[7] Ordination "was considered as part of a man's education"[8]. It was felt in those days in Siam that the objective of ordination was to study,[9] *bot-rian*, "to ordain and study". As with all other Theravada countries, a boy was normally initiated as a novice, *sāmaṇera*, if he received ordination before he was twenty. A young man of twenty and above would be given a full or higher ordination, *upasampadā*. Study after ordination, on the other hand, was focussed on raising the monk's knowledge of Buddhism. Learning the Pāli scriptures, the *Tipiṭaka*, preserved in Siam only in Khmer script until the mid-nineteenth century, was one of the most important factors in monastic life. One studied for one's own practice. This was to enable one to live by the discipline, *vinaya*, and to practise meditation. In addition, secular arts and sciences were occasionally integrated into the monastic curriculum to fulfil the needs of the wider society.[10]

Royal Patronage

As a spiritual and educational institution, the Order attracted royal support. In Siam, as in other Theravada states, kings viewed it as their duty to support the Order to earn merit for themselves and to perpetuate the religion. On this tradition Gombrich remarks: "History has shown the importance for the Order of the favour of kings and governments"[11]. The monarchs were interested in two aspects of the Order: maintenance of discipline and study of the scriptures.

As far as discipline is concerned, royal attention was given to maintaining the unity of the *Saṅgha* and strict observation of the *Pātimokkha* rules by individuals. Many rulers forced monks to leave the Order from time to time on the grounds of poor discipline. To maintain the unity of the Order and strict adherence to the *Vinaya*,

[7] Bunnag, *Buddhist Monk and Buddhist Layman*, p.41; Zack, *Buddhist Education Under Prince Wachirayanwarorot*, pp.45-46.

[8] Ishii, *Saṅgha*, *State and Society*, p.26.

[9] *Prawat karn suksa khong khana song thai*, p.16; Thewethi, *Phra phutthasasana gup karnsuksa nai adid* (Buddhism and Education in the Past), p.117.

[10] Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform*, p.4. See also Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, p.161.

[11] Gombrich, "Introduction: The Buddhist Way", p.9.

a system of ecclesiastical hierarchy, with a *Saṅgharāja* at the top, was instituted by the kings in the early days of the Siamese kingdom.[12] According to European visitors to 17th century Ayutthaya, such as the Dutchman van Vliet and the French Catholic missionary de Bourges, by the late Ayutthaya period there were at least four "highest regents", i.e. *Saṅgharājas*, at any one time; all *Saṅgharājas* were appointed by the king; and one of them was made "supreme dignitary" of the whole *Saṅgha* in Siam.[13] Here three of the four "highest regents" were clearly the deputy-*Saṅgharājas*, one each from the "village-dwellers of the south", the "forest-dwellers" and the Mon *Saṅgha*.

Over the centuries, the kings took measures to promote monastic education. The monk appointed to the post of *Saṅgharāja* would usually be the most learned (and senior), often described as one who knew "all the three *piṭakas* in their entirety".[14] Here the question may be raised whether every past *Saṅgharāja* actually knew all the scriptures very well. The tradition of appointing a learned and senior monk to this highest ecclesiastical post began during the Sukhothai period. King Ramkhamheng (1279-1298) appointed a learned "forest-dweller" from Nakhon Sri Thammarat as *Saṅgharāja*, for he "has studied scriptures from beginning to end and is wiser than any other monk in the kingdom".[15] That enthusiasm on the part of the monarch in promoting monastic education meant that sometime kings themselves took up the task of teaching the *Tipiṭaka* to members of the Order. At Sukhothai, King Lithai (1346-1368), the author of the famous work on Buddhist cosmology, *Traiphum Phra Ruang* or *Tribhūmikathā*, taught monks. At Ayutthaya, King Song Tham (1611-1628), who was a very senior monk with the title Phimontham (*Vimaladhamma*), before leaving the Order to ascend the throne, taught monks and novices the *Tipiṭaka* "in the three pavilions (*chom thong*, golden spires) in the palace".[16] As a part of their support for monastic education, the kings throughout the centuries also provided learned

[12] na Nagara & Griswold cit., pp.274, 277.
[13] na Pombejra, *A Political History of Siam Under the Prasathong Dynasty*, p.91.
[14] na Nagara & Griswold cit., p.492. Swaeng Udomsri, *Karn Bokkhrong Khanasong Thai*, p.66.
[15] Ibid, pp.261-262, 274, 298.
[16] Besides these pavilions, there was a chapter house in the palace compound, called *Wat Sri Sanphen*.

monks with requisites and built them monasteries. These monasteries have come to be known as *wat laung,* "royal monastery".

Monastic Education in Early Ayutthaya

However, despite such strong royal patronage, abbots were in total control of the administration and also of the education in their monasteries: they selected their own candidates for ordination and designed their own syllabuses.[17] With regard to administration, no permission was required to admit a new member into their monasteries. *La Loubère* reported that even "*Sancrats* have not any jurisdiction nor any authority, ……. over the *Talapoints*, which are not of their convents".[18]

In education, consequently, there were no centrally designed syllabuses for all monasteries to follow.[19] "The nature of traditional education" provided in the monastery "was clearly determined by perceived traditional needs". The subjects were not necessarily religious alone, but reflected "instead whatever academic abilities the teacher had such as mathematics or poetry, for example".[20] Having taught reading and writing in Siamese to new students, various teachers must have adopted different texts or parts of them of their own selection to plan a curriculum. But we do not know what texts were actually used to teach monks and novices in monasteries.

However, from the fact that some texts were more popular and widely used than others we may possibly deduce that in ancient Siam there was some standardization of the curriculum, or, in the words of Justin McDaniel, a researcher on the *nissaya* literature in northern Thailand and Laos, even a "curricular canon" or "practical canon".[21] Charles Keyes, in his work *Thailand*: *Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*, lists three "key" texts which he considers to define basic parameters of Buddhist education in Siam because they were "in almost every monastic

17 Bodhiprasiddhinanda, "*Kansuksa khongsong nai adid*, (The Saṅgha's Education in the Past)" *Roi pi mahamakut withayalai (The Centenary of the Mahamakut Royal University)* p.418.

18 La Loubère, p.114.

19 Keyes, *Thailand*, 184.

20 Zack, p.44.xxx

21 McDaniel, "The Curricular Canon in Northern Thailand and Laos" *Manussaya: Journal of Humanities*, 4:2002, pp.20-59.

library".[22] These texts are the *Traiphum Phra Ruang (Tribhūmikathā)*, the *Phra Malai* and the *Vessandon [Vessantara-jātaka]*.

The Traiphum Phra Ruang, written in 1345 AD by Phya Lithai, at that time the heir apparent of Sukhothai and later its paramount ruler, is an "expression of the orthodox Theravada tradition, and a sermon that seeks to make the *Dhamma* more accessible to the laity".[23] Working "closely with the leading Theravada monks of his day", Phaya Lithai drew the materials from "the scriptures, commentaries, and treatises that had been transmitted and endorsed by the Theravada elders".[24] It is a sermon, as Phya Lithai endeavoured to put the message of those scriptures "in a new and more accessible form" because he feared, as George Coedès puts it, that the Three Baskets, the Buddhist canonical scriptures, would disappear.[25] *The Traiphum Phra Ruang* deals with the way to enlightenment, mainly but not exclusively in a cosmological form. As Frank and Mani Reynolds have observed, the cosmological vision is also seen by Phaya Lithai as complementary with the psychologically orientated analysis of consciousness and material matters (*nāma-rūpa*). *The Traiphum Phra Ruang* explains the differences in the universe as conditioned by the inhabitants' own *karma*, the law of intention-based action. This work "has exerted a powerful influence on the religious consciousness of the Thai" and is described by Reynolds as "the most important and fascinating text that has been composed in the Thai language". [26]

The *Phra Malai* is the collective name of texts that tell the legend of an arahat *Māleyya (Mālayya)*, believed to have lived in Aruradhapura, Sri Lanka, during the reign of the legendary Sinhalese King *Duṭṭhagāmaṇi* (101-77 BC). The majority of the texts were composed in Thai dialects such as Lanna, Laotian and central Thai.[27] All the texts were based on the Pāli version of the *Phra Malai* called *Māleyyadevatthera-vatthu*. The exact details of this work remain

[22] Keyes, p.179.

[23] Reynolds & Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, p.5. For more information see na Nagara & Griswold, *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, pp.424-425; Lausoonthorn, *Study of Sources of Triphum Praruang*, p.11.

[24] Lausoonthorn lists 28 texts as identified sources of the Traiphum Phra Ruang.

[25] Coedès, *Recueil des Inscriptions du Siam*, Part I, pp.77-90 cited by Reynolds, p.6.

[26] Reynolds & Reynolds, p.7.

[27] Brereton, *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai*, p.1.

unknown despite several attempts by different scholars.[28] However, despite the uncertainty surrounding its origin, the various versions of Phra Malai in Thai dialects have dominated the Thai monastic syllabuses throughout the centuries.[29]

The *Phra Malai*, in summary, portrays the good life in heavens and the suffering in hells which the monk, *Phra Malai*, visited "repeatedly" using "his supernatural power and knowledge". [30] The *Phra Malai*, "one of the most pervasive themes in Thai Buddhism", helps simplify the intention-based Buddhist moral teaching of cause and effect, *karma*, for ordinary folk. It was through heavenly rewards and hellish tortures that the majority of the Buddhists were taught about the importance of moral action and its consequences. The monk Malai, through his conversation with sakka, "the king of gods", and with the future Buddha, Metteyya, was able to give hope of enlightenment, the final goal, to the laity, who usually thought that liberation was impossible for them. Moreover, the *Phra Malai* leaves a powerful impression on listeners that the actual verification of *karma* and its effect is beyond the capacity of ordinary people. In a comparison of the *Traiphum Phra Ruang* and the *Phra Malai*, we find that the former attempts in some way to justify the differences between social classes in the human world but the latter focuses on the impact of present action on future existence. The monk *Phra Malai* brought back to the human world a message from the future Buddha, Metteyya, that in order to meet and listen to him (Metteyya), and attain enlightenment, people should "listen to a complete recitation in

[28] Denis in his thesis at Sorbonne in 1963, for example, thinks that the work was not known in Sri Lanka and was probably written in a Southeast Asian country, though he did not mention which country. Denis, "L'Origine cingalaise du P'rah Malay" *Felicitation Volume of Southeast Asian Studies Presented to H.H. Prince Dhaninivat*, pp.329-38., cited by Brereton, *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai*, p.38. Supaporn Machang, however, in her doctoral work on the origin of *Phra Malai*, writes that the Pāli version of *Phra Malai* was composed in Burma by a Burmese monk sometime between the tenth and the twelfth century, based on a Sinhalese work *Cullagalla*, which itself is a part of another work Madhurasavāhinī. Supaporn Makchang, "*Khwan pen ma khong malai sut* (The Origin of the *Maleyya Sutta)" Wattanatham: somphot krung rattanakosin 200 pi (Culture: The 200th anniversary of the Ratanakosin Dynasty)*, p.1-14. But Bangchang suggests that the work was written by a Thai monk in the late fifteenth or late sixteenth century. Supaphan na Banchang, *Wiwithanakan gnankhian thi pen phasa bali nai prathet thai* (Research on Work Written in the Pāli Language in Thailand), p.320.

[29] Collins, trans. "The Story of The Elder Maleyyadeva" *The Journal of the PTS*, XVIII (1993), p.65.

30 Brereton, p.1.

one day of the Great *Vessantara* Birth-Story",[31] which is known in Thai as the *maha chat* (great life). The *Phra Malai in* northern and eastern Thailand (and Laos) has therefore been used as a preface to the preaching of the *Vessantara-jātaka.* [32]

The *Vessantara-jātaka*, the last of the three important texts that Keyes mentions, is, according to Cone and Gombrich, "the most famous story in the Buddhist world" .[33] As is well known to most, Prince Vessantara "gave away everything, even his children and his wife" and this story "has formed the theme of countless sermons, dramas, dances, and ceremonies".[34] It was from this popular *Jātaka* that many Buddhist values, for instance, generosity, which is foremost among them, but also others, e.g. loyalty to one's family, determination, and Buddhahood as the highest possible goal in life were conveyed.

The *Vessantara-jātaka* attracted the interest of two Siamese monastic commentators: the first, whose name is unknown, wrote a commentary on it in the vernacular language at the request of King Boromatrailokanat (1448-1488) of Ayutthaya, and this work is believed to be the one known today as *mahā chat kham laung*, "the Royal Version of the Great Life" and forms the heart of every *thed mahā chat* (chanting of the Great Life) ceremony;[35] the second author, a monk by the name of *Siri Sumaṅgala*, composed in 1517 a commentary in *Pāli*, which he named *Vessantaradīpanī*.

Apart from these three "key texts", there may have been some other texts that served both as popular literature, at least among the erudite scholars, and as part of a monastic curriculum. Such texts were those that prompted the writing of numerous *nissayas* and other forms of commentary on them. Justin McDaniel lists some of the most popular *nissayas*. They include *Dhammapada*, *Paritta (Sutmon)* (which are discourses selected for chanting), *Paṇṇāsa-jātaka* (a post-canonical work composed in Lanna),

[31] *Mahāvessantarajātakaṃ ekadivase yeva pariniṭṭhitaṃ suṇantu.*. "Brah Māleyyadevattheravatthuṃ" (ed. Denis) *The Journal of the PTS*, XVIII (1993), pp.44-45. See also Collins' translation on p.85.

[32] Brereton, p.61.

[33] Cone and Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, p.xv.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Wyatt "The Buddhist Monkhood as an Avenue of Social Mobility" *Studies in Thai History*, p.208; *Thailand*, pp.73-75; Wood, A History of Siam, pp.84-85; *A history of Wat Rachathiwat* (Samorai), also mentions these facts. See *Prawat Wat Rachathiwat* (History of Wat Rachathiwat), p.31.

Mātikā (the contents of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*), *Aṭṭhasālinī* (commentary to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*), *Aṭṭhasālinī–yojanā* (commentary on the *Aṭṭhasālinī*), *Saccasaṅkhepa* and *Kammavācā* (texts for ordination and other ecclesiastical rituals).[36]

Besides these *nissayas*, at its higher level the Siamese monastic education system emphasised the study of a certain tradition of Pāli grammar, perhaps *Kaccāyana's*; we assume that bi-lingual versions of *Kaccāyana's* grammar or sections of them were used. One of those bi-lingual versions of the *Kaccāyana's* grammar extant today is a work called *Mūlakaccāyana-atthayojanā* written by *Ñāṇakitti* Thera in the late fifteenth century. The influence of *Kaccāyana's* grammar is evident in the way commented words (*saṃvaṇṇetabba-pada*) are explained, for example, in the *Maṅgalatthadīpanī*.

The *Abhidhamma*, some of the *Vinaya-aṭṭhakathās* and the *Visuddhimagga* were also studied, at least in some of the bigger monasteries. *Ñāṇakitti* Thera's works are a good indication of this fact. His various works on the seven texts of Theravada *Abhidhamma* and on the *Vinaya* were all called *atthayojanā*, indicating that they were composed to aid students. *Ñāṇakitti* Thera wrote commentaries on the Bhikkhu-pātimokkha, the *Sammohavinodanī*, and also a work on *sīmā*, "chapter hall". Another monk, by the name of *Uttarārāma*, wrote a commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*, and named it *Visuddhimaggadīpanī*.[37]

We do not know which *suttas* were selected for syllabuses. But we know that the famous *Maṅgala-sutta* of the *Sutta-nipāta* was one of them. *Siri Sumaṅgala*, the author of the *Vessantaradīpanī*, already mentioned earlier, composed a *Pāli* commentary on the *Maṅgala-sutta* in 1524 at Chiang Mai. It is clear from this famous work that the author was well versed in the Pāli canonical and commentarial texts, which he cited often as his authorities. The *Maṅgalatthadīpanī* is about ten times longer than *Ācariya Buddhaghosa's* commentary, written a thousand years earlier. The *Maṅgalatthadīpanī* was the only Pāli commentarial work

36 McDaniel, "The Curricular Canon in Northern Thailand and Laos", pp.28-30.
37 Khruathai (ed.) "*Bod nam* (Introduction)" *Wannanukam phutthasasana nai Lanna (Buddhist Literature in Lanna)*, pp.14-15.

which is still a part of the monastic curriculum today and is the few works from Siam to be known to monastic scholars in Burma ,[38] Cambodia[39] and Sri Lanka.

The history of the *Sāsana* may have also been part of the monastic curriculum at Ayutthaya. Well-known among the chronicle works composed in Siam are *Jinakālamālī* (1516), written by *Ratanapaññā* Thera; *Mūlasāsana* by *Buddhakāma* (year unknown); and *Cāmadevīvaṃsa* (1407-1457) and *Sihiṅganidāna* (1411-1457), both by *Bodhiraṃsī* Thera (1460-1530). *Ratanapaññā* Thera and *Bodhiraṃsī* Thera (1460-1530) were *Siri Maṅgala's* contemporaries. Although most of these works were written in Lanna, the northern part of present Thailand, they undoubtedly reflected the nature of monastic education in Ayutthaya as well. This was because the Sinhalese fraternity, *Lanka wong*, to which these authors in Lanna belonged, was first established at Ayutthaya before expanding into Lanna. The Sinhalese connection explains the high standard of *Pāli* knowledge in Ayutthaya and Lanna, which in turn helped develop Thai literature.

It may be noted here that nearly all the *Pāli* and bi-lingual works, twenty-eight out of thirty-one,[40] composed during the early history of Siam were produced between 1407 and 1530 before Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya were conquered by the Burmese, when the people and the monastic Order enjoyed peace and stability.

In the Siamese monastic education system before the late seventeenth century, there were no formal examinations, and in their absence a student's qualifications were judged in several ways, for instance as a teacher or a preacher. With respect to the reputation of a monk as a learned teacher, one such instance is recorded in the inscriptions and in the *Jinakālamālī.*[41] *Mahāsāmi Saṅgharājā*, whom we have mentioned earlier, attracted to "Maung Bann" (Martaban) the future leaders of the two Sukhothai fraternities, forest-dwellers and village-dwellers, *Sumana and Anumati.*[42] They decided to go to study with *Mahāsāmi Saṅgharāja* when they heard

[38] *Sāsanavaṃsa*, p.51. Bode, p.47.
[39] Dutt, *Buddhism in East Asia*, p.100.
[40] Khruathai, *Wannakam putthasasana nai Lanna* (Buddhist Literature in Lanna), pp.14-15.
[41] *Jinakālamālī* p.6.
[42] *Ibid*, pp.82-85.

of his reputation in learning and observing monastic rules, and submitted themselves to the *Saṅgharāja's* rules and course of training. As to preaching, La Loubère observed of Ayutthaya: "When they (the Talapoints) preach, they read the *Balie [Pāli]* text of their Books, and they translate and expound it plainly in Siamese, without Action, like our Professors, and not our Preachers."[43]

Changes in Ecclesiastical Administration and Education in the 17th Century

However, there were developments at Ayutthaya in the late 17th century such that the abbots lost absolute control over administration and education. In administration, the abbots were not permitted to conduct ordinations. They were to be conducted only by one of the four senior monks in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, namely *Saṅgharājas*, who were all appointed by the king. La Loubère thus reported: "None but the *Sancrats [Saṅgharāja]* can make *Talapoints*, as none but Bishops can make priests".[44]

In education too, an equally far-reaching transformation had taken place: the introduction of formal examinations. Towards the end of his reign, King Narai (1656-1688) is believed to have introduced formal examinations for the monks. Consequently, the abbots, who had until then enjoyed total freedom in devising syllabuses for their students, had to take into consideration the syllabus of the royal pundits, that is to say the texts on which they occasionally tested the knowledge of monks.

King Narai, wrote La Loubère, who was the first to record formal examinations in Siam, "causes them [the monks] to be from time to time examined as to their Knowledge, which respects the *Balie* Language and its Books".[45] *Oc Louang Souracac,*[46] a twenty-eight year old and the son of a commander in charge of elephants, was charged with the task of examining the monks and novices. The "forest-dwellers", *araññavāsins*, resisted being examined by a layperson and demanded that they be examined only by their own superior. It was unlikely that the demand was granted. At the end of

[43] *Ibid*, p.61.
[44] La Loubère, p.114.
[45] *Ibid*, p.115.
[46] He became King *Süa* (Tiger King) (1703-1709).

those exercises "several thousand" monks and novices were forced to return to "the secular condition" for "not being learned enough".[47] In the next section, we shall examine the circumstances in which these developments took place. But before that, we shall discuss the current official position as to why King Narai found it necessary to introduce formal examinations.

Why Formal Examinations were Introduced

According to the currently accepted interpretation, King Narai instituted formal examinations for the *Saṅgha* to prevent the standard of monastic study from further decline.[48] The deterioration, the official version claims, was due to two factors: first, the early Ayutthayan kings, unlike their predecessors at Sukhothai, neglected their duty to provide royal patronage. As a result, the *gāmavāsins*, the "village-dwellers", who were once influential over the monarchy and the people, lost their prominence, and neglected their main profession, teaching. Second, the "Aranyik" [*Araññakavasins*], "the forest-dwellers", on the other hand, exploiting this royal negligence, began to study astrology, magic and mantra (*saiyasart wetha katha*), which were "the animal sciences" that the Buddha forbade monks to study.[49]

We consider this interpretation to represent the official voice because the book, *Prawat karn suksa khong song*, (The History of Education of the *Saṅgha*, 1983), containing the above arguments was published by the Department of Religious Affairs (*krom karn sasana*), (the Religious Studies Section) with an introduction by the Director of the Department. It bears no authorship, the mark of an official paper in Thailand, and carries several announcements by the *somdech Saṅgharāja*, Minister for Education, and Director of Religious Affairs.

---

47 La Loubère, p.114.

48 *Prawat karn suksa khong song*, pp.14-16.

49 *Ibid*. This opinion is also held by other Thai writers, for instance Bodhiprasiddhinanda. See "*Karn suksa khong song nai adid* (The Saṅgha's Education in the Past)" *Roi pi mahamakut withayalai* (The Centenary of the Mahamakut Royal University), p.418.

Traditional Interpretation

However, this official interpretation of the causes for the decline is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Firstly, the early Ayutthayan kings, particularly those before King Narai, were themselves strong supporters of the Order. King Boromatrailokanat, for example, who ruled at Ayutthaya and Phitsanulok between 1448 and 1488, was an ardent supporter of the *Saṅgha*. According to the "Law of the Military and Provincial Hierarchy" (1454 AD) "the educated monks and novices received higher *sakdi na* grades [by which they were given land indicating their social status] than those who were not educated".[50] He also vacated the throne temporarily to become a monk; and, as noted earlier, he caused the Siamese version of the *Vessantara-jātaka (mahā chat)* to be written. King Song Tham (1610-28), another predecessor of King Narai, was very religious, and as already discussed, taught the *Tipiṭaka* to monks. While we have no evidence to assess the impact of his scholarship on the learning of the *Saṅgha*, it is possible to discern his keen support for monastic education. This fact has been cited by Bhikkhu Prayut Payutto.[51] But, although this historical fact was quoted also in *Prawat karn suksa khong song*, "The History of the Education of the Saṅgha", it had no impact on the way the official interpretation was reached. Furthermore, up to 1634, about two decades before King Narai came to power, there were no signs that the *Saṅgha* was neglected by the king and the people. Van Vliet, who was in charge of the Dutch East India Company at Ayutthaya between 1629 and 1634, estimated that there were "about 20, 000 ecclesiastics" and wrote that "they live partly on what the king and the mandarins bestow on them.... But most they receive from the common people, who furnish them with food and other necessities."[52] While the number of the members of the *Saṅgha*, if true, might be unusually high for the population of Ayutthaya at that time, there was no evidence that the *Saṅgha* and their "beautifully gilded and painted" monasteries were uncared for in any way.

[50] Wyatt, "The Buddhist Monkhood as an Avenue of Social Mobility", p.208; *Thailand*, pp.73-75; Wood, *A History of Siam*, pp.84-85;

[51] Payutto, *Karn suksa khong song thai*, p.6. *Prawat karn suksa khong song*, p.15.

[52] Cited by Tambiah, pp.179-180.

Secondly, the attribution of astrology and magical practices to the "forest-dwellers" alone was hardly reasonable. The "village-dwellers" were equally sympathetic to the needs of lay society, and thus would have been persuaded by lay people to give astrological advice. In fact, Gervaise, a missionary who travelled widely throughout Siam, reported that "they [both village-dwellers and forest-dwellers] were asked regularly to calculate auspicious times and dates, to tell fortunes and to find hidden objects… They also gave charms to sick people, travellers, and young children to ward off evil. A Buddhist monk could thus be teacher, preacher, astrologer, and magician to a community."[53]

A New Interpretation

Having shown the inadequacy in the current official position, we shall now argue that the introduction of formal examinations was due to a combination of internal and external political circumstances.

Internal political problems at Ayutthaya were already evident by the beginning of the seventeenth century. The waning days of the famous Thammaracha dynasty (1569-1629), that included the reign of Naresuan, the great warrior king, were characterised by succession problems that would persist until the end of Ayutthaya. The following dynasty, that of Prasat Thong (1629-1688), therefore saw a systematic undermining of the political power of princes by the reigning monarchs, lest they challenge the throne. The kings were also concerned about the threats posed by powerful nobles, who controlled both manpower and government departments. To reduce the influence of the nobles, the responsibilities for controlling manpower were divided between *Kalahom*, the Defence Department, and *Mahathai*, the Interior: the former took charge of the southern provinces and the latter the northern. There was also another department (*krom tha*) to maintain "centralised registers of all freemen [*phrai laung*] liable for labour service".[54] These internal politics at the capital, Ayutthaya, affected the king's ability to control

[53] Gervaise, *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam*, p.83. Also cited by na Pombejra, pp.95-96.

[54] Wyatt, *Thailand*, pp.75-76.

manpower from the provinces. Wyatt therefore argues: "Kings seem to have had continuing difficulties in controlling the provinces and manpower and in maintaining a ready military force".[55]

Other domestic problems resulted from wars. Due to the campaigns in the early years of Narai's reign (1656-1688), when people had no time to plant their crops, there had been a severe shortage of rice; as a result, rice export was banned, except by the Dutch, who had by that time successfully negotiated economic concessions from the Siamese. The wars also damaged the economy of the provinces, such as deer-hunting in Phitsanulok; deer-meat too was exported by the Dutch. The crumbling economy in the provinces threatened the power of the *khunnang*, the governors of those provinces.

Developments at Ayutthaya from the 17th century on, or even earlier, in the 16th century, were related to geopolitics at the time: Southeast Asian states were at war with one another, building and consolidating their empires. Ayutthaya was overrun for the first time by the Burmese in 1569. The invaders "thoroughly looted the city and led thousands of prisoners, both commoners and nobles, away to captivity in Burma" and installed Mahā Thammaracha (1569-90) on the throne.[56] A son of Mahā Thammaracha, Prince Naresuan, was taken as a captive to Pegu as a surety for his father's good behaviour until his sister was presented to Bayinnaung, alias Burennaung, the Burmese king (1551-1581) at Hamsavati, the then capital of Burma. In 1593, a year after escaping from Burma and soon after succeeding his father, Naresuan (1590-1605) defeated the invading Burmese troops under Nandabayin (1581-1599), the son and successor of Bayinnaung, in what has become famous as the battle of *Nong Sarai*. Naresuan's brother and successor, Ekathosarot (1605-1611) subsequently continued to repel Burmese attacks and to rebuild Ayutthaya.

When Narai came to the throne in 1656, the kingdom of Ayutthaya had been at war with her neighbours, especially with Burma, for most of the past century. Although Ava, as Burma was then known, under Pintale (1648-1661) and Pyi (Pyei) Min

[55] *Ibid*, p.108.
[56] *Ibid*, p.100.

(1661-1672) was no longer its former self, and could hardly pose a threat to Ayutthaya due to the incursions from China and Manipur ,[57] her earlier aggression meant Ayutthaya had to be on guard at all time. Apart from Ava, Ayutthaya had other wars to fight. Another neighbour, Cambodia, attacked Ayutthaya no fewer than six times, according to Wyatt, in the two decades after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1569. On the other hand, Ayutthaya also expanded its power whenever given the opportunity. "The Lao country", (i.e. the present northern part of Thailand), Cambodia and remote parts of Burma were the usual targets. In 1660, just four years after coming to power, King Narai marched thousands of troops to conquer "the Lao country" i.e. Chiang Mai. In December 1668 Narai blockaded Cambodia with several vessels. But from now onwards the king would choose to stay behind and ask *Phrakhlang*, a minister, to lead his troops into battle. This was because of the increasingly dangerous political situations at home: a conspiracy involving his half-brothers and some *khunnang*, "nobles". As a result, some provinces over which Ayutthaya often fought with Burma (Tavoy, Mergui and Tenasserim) were at times administered by foreigners, who were employed at the Siamese court by the Ayutthayan king. The picture we get here of Ayutthaya, described by Tambiah as being a "galactic polity", is a state constantly at war, having to marshal all its human and natural resources. Tambiah, in fact, comments on the "galactic polity" as being "no effective cybernetic system" for it "lacked… mechanisms that produced homeostasis and balance." [58]

Whenever the Ayutthaya kingdom was under attack or the king wished to occupy another country, for example, Cambodia or "the Lao country", all able-bodied men in the capital and other provinces were conscripted. This was because there was no standing army before Rāma V (1868-1910).[59] Narai conscripted thousands of men in his various war expeditions. The Dutch recorded that he levied sixty thousand men in 1658 and 1659. When he actually marched, not to Ava, but to "the Lao country", i.e. Chiangmai, in December 1660 the number swelled to two hundred and seventy thousand men, and that army was joined by another two hundred

[57] Phayre, pp.136-148.
[58] Tambiah, p.123.
[59] For more information see Wyatt, *Thailand*, pp.100-09.

thousand men from Phitsanulok province.[60] Even foreign communities at Ayutthaya had to contribute manpower to such expeditions.[61] Na Pombejra observes: "The years 1659-1665 thus saw Siam's manpower resources being constantly drained."[62]

As mentioned earlier, there was a plot by some senior princes and nobles against the king, preventing him from personally leading troops to war. In those circumstances, it was understandable that the king would look to outsiders for help. Foreigners to whom the king turned were from among those settled at Ayutthaya as well as merchants, missionaries and diplomats. They were appointed in many capacities, from that of bodyguard to adviser and even minister and prime minister.

The king recruited Japanese, Chams and Malays, all settled at Ayutthaya, as royal bodyguards, although such recruitment was not always in the best interest of the kingdom: the risks were evident during the power struggles, for example in 1611 and 1629, between King Suthat (Si Saowaphak) (1610-1611) and Song Tham (1611-1628), and between King Athittayawong (Aug - Sept 1629) and Prasat Thong (1629-1656), in which the Japanese in the royal bodyguard supported the opposition, Song Tham and Prasat Thong respectively. Sometimes members of the foreign communities at Ayutthaya were conscripted for war expeditions: there were one hundred and fifty Portuguese men conscripted in the war against "the Lao country" in 1660. Some of the men were "stationed at strategic points above Ayutthaya to stop deserters fleeing downriver".[63]

Some foreign merchants and even adventurers were also employed by the king. A few Englishmen, for instance Richard Burnaby and Thomas Ivatt, from the East India Company, and a former English army captain, Williams, were hired by the Crown. Williams trained the king's bodyguards while the others were employed at the royal court.

French and Portuguese Catholic priests, who had already

[60] A letter from Van Rijck, representative of the Dutch company V.O.C at Ayutthaya written to Governor-General Maetsujcker cited by na Pombejra, pp.286-287.
61 *Ibid*, p.288.
62 *Ibid*, p.307.
63 *Ibid*, p.288.

established themselves in Siam as early as 1662, were not directly employed by the king, but he and also the Ayutthayan people appreciated their learning and involvement in education.[64] Jesuit priests, most of whom were mathematicians, advised King Narai when he built another palace at *Luvo*, now Lopburi. To strengthen their presence at Ayutthaya, two French Catholic bishops[65] came to Ayutthaya with a letter from Pope Clement IX and King Louis XIV in 1673. [66]

Foreigners who by far exceeded all expectations and became extremely powerful ministers were some Persians, for instance Sheikh Ahmed, his younger brother, Muhammad Said, and their descendants. In 1630 during the reign of Prasat Thong, the predecessor of Narai, Sheikh Ahmed was made the minister responsible for trade, *phrakhlang*, and then for home affairs, *mahatthai*, and eventually prime minister, *samuhanaiyok*. He was succeeded by his son, Chaophraya Aphiracha (Chun), and his (Sheikh Ahmed's) grandson, Chaophraya Chamnanphakdi (Sombun), at the *mahatthai* office, which was controlled by the family for more than half a century. Muhammad Said's son, Aga Muhammad Astarabadi (Okphra Sinaworarat), also became prime minister under Narai.[67] The dominance of this Muslim Persian family was only interrupted by the appointment of another foreigner, Constance Phaulkon (1647-1688). This Greek adventurer was first employed as a court official, and finally became prime minister in the later years of Narai's rule in 1685.

In the meantime, foreigners trading with Ayutthaya, such as the Dutch, French, English, Chinese and Japanese competed with one another for privileges. The commercial concessions, such as exclusive rights to export and deer-hunting, enjoyed by the Dutch, were biased against other foreign nationals, some of whom, notably the Portuguese, the French and the English, already had a strong presence in South and Southeast Asia. Now King Narai had to turn his attention to balancing his relationships with these foreign powers. However, he did not always succeed. For example, the Dutch

[64] Tachard, Voyage to Siam, pp.195-196, 202-204.
[65] Vicar-apostolic Pallu, Bishop of Helipolis, and Lambert de la Motte, Bishop of Beritus.
[66] na Pombejra, p.321; Wyatt, *Thailand*, p.113.
[67] na Pombejra, p.301 & Wyatt, cit., pp.108-109.

blockaded the ships of China and Japan in 1663, which resulted in the 1664 Siamese-Dutch Treaty: the treaty prohibited King Narai from using Chinese and Japanese crews on his ships, and from punishing Dutch citizens breaking Ayutthayan laws. The Dutch, whose first ships had arrived at Ayutthaya more than half a century earlier, also seized some possessions of the prime minister, Aga Muhammed (Okphra Sinaworarat), saying that he owed them 2,700 guilders.[68] In future the Dutch were to conduct commerce in Siam wherever they chose.

The French were determined, however, not to be bound by any such agreement between the Dutch and the Siamese. The Siamese were equally keen on good relationships with France in order to balance the influence of the English in India and the Dutch in Java. France, in order to obtain political and commercial privileges for herself, used her missionaries at Ayutthaya, who had been in the kingdom more than a decade. By 1680 their efforts "over the preceding 15 years" resulted in the exchange of diplomatic missions between the two countries. King Narai sent a diplomatic mission to France in that year. The mission was accompanied by Jesuits, who acted as translators. By now Phaulkon, a Greek Orthodox Christian, had converted to Catholicism, and the increased influence of the French at the court of Ayutthaya owed much to his involvement. Even before he was appointed prime minister in 1685, he began to oversee an improved relationship between Siam and France.

Over the course of time, the French missionaries were able to convince their king, Louis XIV, that the aims of his mission to Ayutthaya should include securing not only commercial privileges but also the conversion of King Narai to Catholicism.[69] The leader of the first French diplomatic mission to Siam in 1685, Chevalier de Chaumont, was specifically despatched to achieve this divine assignment,[70] and the second mission, led by Simon La Loubère in 1687, was also partially tasked with this undertaking.[71] With the

[68] *Ibid*, p.301.

[69] Smithies (ed.) in his "Introduction" to the Chevalier de Chaumont and the Abbé de Choisy, *Aspects of the Embassy to Siam in 1685*, p.4. See also Wyatt, *Thailand*, p.113.

[70] Kuloy, in his "Introduction" to Tachard's *Voyage to Siam*, p.4.

[71] *Ibid*, pp.420-421.

second mission came six hundred French troops. They requested King Narai to permit them to set up garrisons at Ayutthaya and Bangkok, the two strategic points, perhaps to pressure Ayutthaya into offering better commercial deals. The demands by the French to set up garrisons ultimately culminated in the Great Revolution of 1688, in which the French had to leave Ayutthaya, King Narai was dethroned and Phaulkon was executed.

In their religious mission, too, the French seem to have been equally frustrated with the outcome. When King Narai had still not been converted even after the two diplomatic despatches from France, a senior Jesuit, Father Guy Tachard, is reported to have told the French envoy: "that in the future Narai ought to be instructed by a Jesuit who was proficient in Siamese."[72] For Bishop Metellaopolis, despite being in Siam for almost twenty-five years, had not been able to convert King Narai to Christianity. On realising this lack of progress, Phaulkon had earlier told the missions that "Christianity hath made no greater progress in Siam after so many years of endeavours…." and counselled them that "there must be another House of Jesuits, where they should as much as lay in their power lead the austere and retired Life of the *Talapoints*, that have so great credit with the people".[73] For this, Lord Constance, as Phaulkon was then known to the French, promised the French missionaries that "he would protect and favour [them] in all things that lay in his power".[74]

It is interesting to note here that it was Phaulkon, known officially to the then Siamese as Phaya Wichayen, was the prime minister who ordered the monks to leave the monastic Order and put them in the royal service.[75] The *Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* records: "Many were the monks and novices whom he unfrocked and brought to perform royal services". Phaulkon's instruction to defrock the monks and novices brought him into a "conflict" with Oc Louang Soracac (also Sorasak), the royal pundit who examined the monks and novices. Realising that King Narai would not stop Phaulkon, Oc Louang Soracac is said to have physically "struck"

[72] na Pombejra citing Cébéret's journal. *Ibid*, p.421. See also Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, pp.204-205.
[73] Tachard, pp.203-204.
[74] Ibid, p.203.
[75] The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, pp.303-304. See also Prawat karn suksa khong song, p.15.

and "knocked down" Phaulkon. [76]

These internal and external political developments worried the Siamese, particularly the most privileged groups: the princes, the nobles and the monastic Order; and we have already pointed out how the senior princes and the nobles, having witnessed how their powers were being undermined, conspired to depose King Narai.

The *Saṅgha*, too, had seen their relationship with King Narai deteriorate over the years. The most controversial area was conscription. Even the official version of why the formal examinations were introduced recognised that a large number of men took refuge in the Order as ordained persons. The reason for this was officially considered to be the generosity of the king himself towards the *Saṅgha*, which attracted many into the Order: many became monks for a comfortable life.[77] The *Saṅgha* was accorded a few privileges: no corvée obligation; no taxes, and in many cases offenders were not punishable by the law of the land while in the yellow robe. These privileges had been afforded to members of the *Saṅgha* from the early days of the Order. This was evident in the conversation between the Buddha and King *Ajātasattu*, in which the King said to the Buddha that he would not force anyone, a former servant, a farmer or a householder, who had joined the *Saṅgha* to leave their religious life but would pay them homage and material support.[78]

It is indeed possible as indicated in the official interpretation of the event during King Narai's time that some joined the Order for an easy life, some for "a short cut to wealth and fame". The privileged position of the Order was always open to abuse, as indeed suggested in King Narai's claim and other royal edicts. Yet we cannot rule out other reasons, such as continuous conscription. If conscription was the main reason for the deterioration in relations between the monarch and the *Saṅgha*, this raises a question: is it right for the Order to admit those fleeing conscription as its members? On this, we have already explained in Chapter One that the Buddha forbids the Order from ordaining anyone who is *already* "in the king's service" (*abhiññātam rājabhaṭam*), military or civil.

[76] Ibid, p.304.

[77] *Prawat karn suksa khong song*, p.15.

[78] For more, see the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, D i 60-62.

But what if someone is not on the official reserve list, and there is no conscription law or any other law specifically barring people of a certain age from ordination? Whilst, as we have explained, there was continuous conscription under King Narai and there is evidence that there was a drastic increase in the number of monks and novices at Ayutthaya, we do not know if the Order during the reign of King Narai admitted men who were already on active or reserve service. Nor do we have any evidence to suggest that King Narai himself passed a law prohibiting men of a certain age from receiving ordination, as indeed was the case under King Mongkut alias Rāma IV about two hundred years later. There are different reports on whether a man needed permission from the authorities before becoming a monk: La Loubère, who was in Siam after formal examinations were introduced, said that every citizen was free to become a monk. However, Nicolas Gervaise, a missionary who had visited various provinces of Siam before the introduction of examinations, reported that all candidates for ordination needed permission from an official of the crown.[79]

Yet the fact that some form of formal examination had to be introduced suggests that there were no effective measures to stop men from entering the Order. The absence of such a law may have led to confusion and then tension between the King and the Order on the question of conscription. Because, on the part of the Order, turning away fleeing men who came as candidates for ordination was not an option, even on the grounds of their avoiding potential conscription. In other words, whilst the spirit of early Buddhism emphasises the importance of the right motive for entering the Order, the *Vinaya*, particularly the rules dealing with ordination procedures, on the other hand, stress the absence of wrong motive. Here the wrong motive, fear of conscription, was extremely difficult to prove. In such a situation, the Order might have to accept anyone who had met the normal requirements for ordination even though it was evident that the candidates were likely runaways from enlistment in the army. This may have created a situation in which many able-bodied men joined the Order, and members of the Order were reluctant to leave their robes, apparently for fear of conscription.

[79] Gervaise, cit., p.83.

This state of confusion and tension was brought to an end only two centuries later by King Chulalongkorn, Rāma V. He promulgated a law, the military act, in 1905, requiring men of a certain age to serve in the armed forces. But if someone had already been in the Order before that age, and if he was judged to be a *phu ru tham*, "one who knew the Buddha's teaching", he would not be required to leave the Order, but would be exempt from military service.

If men were ordained with a worldly motive such as fleeing conscription, the case we have mentioned under King Narai, this would be a burden on the abbot, for it was more difficult to administer or teach a larger group of men with motives other than faithfully following the path to salvation. The increase in number (*vepullamahattaṃ*), the Buddha himself was reported to have said, was one of the four main reasons why the Order was becoming corrupt. The other reasons are when the Order has attained "long standing" (*rattaññumahattaṃ*), "greatness of (material) gains" (*lābhamahattaṃ*) and "great learning" (*bāhusaccamahattaṃ*). These conditions had necessitated the prescription of monastic rules and regulations, *sikkhāpadāni*.[80]

With those who had fled conscription, the number of monks and novices at Ayutthaya swelled to "thousands", as noted by Gervaise at Ayutthaya, causing shortages of manpower. The king was therefore prompted to keep a separate register of all the monks "in the state's population polls". This was to retain the control of manpower on which his authority depended.

The king's difficult relationship with the nobles, as explained earlier, was most likely further to complicate the relation between the crown and the Order, already strained over the question of fleeing conscripts.[81] The dissatisfaction felt by the nobles towards the king was likely to have spread among some important members of the Order, because "the kings and *chaos*, [nobles,] had their favourite monks".[82] The "forest-dwellers", for example, used to have great respect from Narai's father, King Prasat Thong. He built for the "forest-dwellers" a monastery, Wat Chai Watthanaram,

[80] Vin III 10; *Samantapāsādikā* i 194.
[81] na Pombejra, p.325.
[82] *Ibid*, p.93.

considered to be "the grandest building project of his reign", and appointed its chief a *Saṅgharāja*.[83] The Order itself, on the other hand, was not totally outside politics. Succession problems often dragged influential members of the *Saṅgha* into political affairs. Support from the *Saṅgha* or a section of it would go a long way in any power struggle. As Father Claude de Bèze said, King "Narai won the throne with the support of certain *talapoints*".[84] His successor, Petracha, also received, in his attempts to gain the throne, the blessing of the *Saṅgharāja* of Lopburi. The *Saṅgharāja* was rewarded for his part when King Petracha donated the palace in Lopburi (built by King Narai) to the *Saṅgha* of Lopburi. King Narai, however, may have lost the favour of the Order soon after coming to the throne as a result of the power struggles between him and the higher-ranking princes or the nobles early in his reign. Indeed, in 1676 the Dutch had already reported that king Narai had "lost much of his credit" in the eyes of the Buddhist clergy. Interestingly, that was when the French missionaries increased their profile with the arrival at Ayutthaya of two Bishops to head the mission.

For their part, the *Saṅgha* may have been concerned about the influence over the Crown of the Europeans, particularly the French. It must have been known to some of the nobles, and therefore also to the *Saṅgha*, that first the French missionaries and then the envoy, Chaumont, had tried to convert the king to Catholicism. It is said that a few months after the departure of Chaumont in 1686, there was a petition "attached to a tree in front of the palace" in Lopburi, which warned of "the dangers that threatened the Buddhist faith, and invited all men to open their eyes to a matter which concerned the public weal."[85]

It was in these circumstances, in which the king, as Na Pombejra notes,[86] needed manpower, that King Narai ordered the monks to be examined, between 1684 and 1686, on their knowledge of the scriptures. Consequently, as already mentioned, "several thousand" monks and novices with insufficient knowledge of the scriptures were required to disrobe.

[83] *Ibid*; *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, pp.215-216.
[84] Hutchinson, 1688 *Revolution in Siam*, p.54; also cited by na Pombejra, p.94.
[85] *Ibid*, pp.409-410.
[86] na Pombejra, p.94.

However, these uncompromising actions by King Narai did not seem to have affected, in the long run, the traditional custom of temporary ordination among the Siamese during which boys received the best education the monastery could offer. In fact, the harsh measures were confined only to the last four years of King Narai's thirty-two-year reign. And, as far as education was concerned, even during those decisive years, the abbots by and large retained their freedom in designing syllabuses for their monasteries because the examination syllabuses were not standardised for the next one and half a centuries; nor were enough candidates to hold state examinations regularly, even once in every three years, for another two centuries or so.

Over the following centuries, in contrast to King Narai's rigid approach, the kings adopted a more diplomatic tactic: through their generous support for the successful candidates, the kings made efforts to popularise formal examinations within the *Saṅgha*. Though never compulsory after the time of King Narai, as indicated earlier, examinations were used, whenever possible, as an instrument to strengthen the ecclesiastical hierarchy: administrative posts within the *Saṅgha* came increasingly to be filled by candidates successful in the examinations. As a result, in the subsequent reigns the influence of these examinations was to become increasingly perceptible.

The *Parian*

Despite the evidence showing that King Narai introduced formal examinations, the early development of formal examinations in Siam remains sketchy. Nothing about *Parian* or any other form of formal examination is mentioned in *The Royal Chronicle of Ayutthaya* or any other documents related to the period. The first evidence of the existence of the Parian is found only in one royal order, *phongsawadan*, issued by Rāma I (1782-1809), just after he came to the throne. Part of that order reads: Appoint Mahā Mee, *Parian Ek*, of Wat Blieb as *vinayarakkhita* ("the guardian of ecclesiastical disciplines") replacing Phra *Upāli*…..Appoint *Mahā* Thongdi, *Parian Ek*, of Wat Hong (*haṃsa*) as the abbot of Wat Nag (*Nāga*)…[87] In this order, the king mentioned of *Mahā Mi* and *Mahā*

[87] *Phra phongsawadan Krung Ratanakosin Ratchkarn thi nung*, (Chronicle of the First Reign of the Ratanakosin), p.13. (*Mahā Mee* became *Saṅgharāja* during the reign of Rama II).

Thongdi as *Parian* monks with a *Parian ek* degree, confirming that the *Parian* had existed before he came to the throne. And, based on this evidence that Phya Damrong concluded that the *Parian* examinations had begun sometime during the Ayutthaya period, for there is no record of King Taksin of Thonburi (1767-1782) sponsoring any *Parian* examinations.[88]

Here it is presumed that Narai introduced only some form of formal examinations, for the sole reason, as argued earlier, of purging the Order; but these examinations in the form that had been introduced may not have continued under Narai, and it was for sometime before the formal examinations, which we now know as *Parian*, developed at Ayutthaya. This was because Narai introduced formal examinations, as described earlier in detail, for the wrong reason, and at the wrong time. The examination was introduced just four years before he died. During that time the political situation in the kingdom was, as we have seen, fragile and dangerous, and the *Saṅgha* was no longer in good terms with the king. It would not have been possible even to devise a systematic syllabus for the *Parian* in those circumstances, let alone to complete it. As we shall see later, it took at least two years to study *Pāli* grammar at that time, and many more years for a candidate to be able to enter the *Parian* examination with a syllabus based on the centuries-old classification of the *Tipiṭaka*: the *Vinaya*, the *Sutta* and the *Abhidhamma*.

However, regardless of when they became fully developed, the *Parian* examinations were the only formal examinations in Siam from late Ayutthaya to early Bangkok.[89] They were also informally known as *blae Balie* [the Thai pronounce *Pāli* as *Balie*], "translating Pāli", because candidates studied and translated the *Pāli nikāyas* at the examinations. Among students, the examinations were identified as *Parian Balie* or P.B for short, because the emphasis was on learning *Pāli* and translating passages from Pāli texts. Hereafter we shall use the word *Parian* to refer to these examinations.

---

[88] Rachanubhab, *"Athipai reung karn sop phra pariyatti tham"* (Account of the Pariyatti Examinations) *Tamnan tharng phra phutthasasana* (Chronicle of Buddhism), p.341.

[89] *The Life of Prince-Patriarch Vajirañāṇa*, p.60.

The origin of the word *Parian* is not clear. It could be the Thai pronunciation of *pariyatti*, meaning learning. Or, it may have been derived from *Pāli Pariññā*, "knowledge", but was first used by the Khmer to mean one who had full knowledge of the *dhamma* and then adopted by the Siamese at Ayutthaya. According to the *Pariññā-sutta* and the *Pariññeya-sutta* of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya, pariññā* is equal to the extinction of greed, hatred and delusion (*rāgakkhaya, dosakkhaya, mohakkhaya*).[90] If this was the case, we could see that the principal object of examinations in monastic education was supposed to be to liberate students from defilements. Incidentally, *pariññā* is now the Thai word for "knowledge at university level", and the term *pariññā-batr* is used for an academic degree.[91] The term *Parian*, apart from the examinations, was also applied, according to the Royal Thai-Thai Dictionary (1986), to mean "students of Buddhist scriptures".[92] But, as far as written history is concerned, at least by the end of the Ayutthaya period, the term *Parian* may have come to apply specifically to being a graduate. The word was added to the names of monks who had passed the examinations. Once all the three levels were completed, a monk was called *mahā parian*, or *mahā* in short, which was added in front of the names of successful candidates.

There were three levels in the *Parian* examinations, following the division of the *Pāli* Buddhist scriptures into *Vinaya-, Sutta-* and *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. At the highest level, i.e *Parian ek*, all the canonical texts from the three *Piṭakas* were prescribed. At the intermediate level, i.e *Parian tho*, the *Sutta-* and *Vinaya-piṭaka* were examined and at the preliminary level, i.e *Parian tri*, the whole *Sutta-piṭaka* was the syllabus. Theoretically, the examiners could examine candidates on any passage from the Canon. However, we have no evidence in our hands to suggest that the Canonical texts were so thoroughly examined.

[90] S iii 26, iv 32-33, v 29, 159, 182, 191 & 236.
[91] *Thai-Thai Dictionary*, p.126.
[92] *Ibid*, pp.126, 144.

A candidate took about three years to prepare for each grade. So to complete all levels took nine years or more on average. Students preparing for the *Parian* examinations first studied *Kaccāyana's* Pāli grammar, which, the Prince-Patriarch and Prince Damrong said, took about two years.[93] That was before students were introduced to canonical texts.[94]

The main task of the candidates in the examinations was to translate at sight, orally, selected passages from the texts. It was held that understanding the teachings of the Buddha depended on one's ability to read the original Pāli texts, and the best way to ensure this was to examine the translation skills of students. Until the reign of *Rāma II*, the translation was from Pāli to Thai; hence, the informal but popular term *blae balie*, "translating the Pāli canonical texts" for the Parian examinations. As in Sri Lanka and Burma, the *Tipiṭaka* was preserved in Pāli in Thailand. Following the centuries old *Theravāda* tradition that emphasises preserving the teachings in the original, people were not keen on translating the *Tipiṭaka* into the local tongue for fear it would alter the words or meaning of the teachings.[95]

The *Parian* examinations were held only when there were candidates. During the Ayutthayan (and early Ratanakosin) era, once a student felt confident enough to be examined on his knowledge of the texts, he informed the abbot, who applied on his behalf to the king. We have found no record of the number of candidates during the Ayutthaya period. Over the following century, we may assume that the *Parian* examinations did take place when there were candidates and the kingdom was stable enough. However, during the period of great instability leading up to the destruction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767, it was unlikely that *Parian* examinations were held.

In conclusion, the internal instability and changes in geopolitical circumstances during the seventeenth century at Ayutthaya led to changes in the relationship between the ruler and the *Saṅgha*. Those changes which took place under King Narai increased the influence of the temporal authority over the *Saṅgha*,

[93] Rachanubhab, *"Athipai reung karn sop phra pariyatti tham"* p.340.
[94] *Prawat Mahamakut Ratchwithayalai*, p.3.
[95] Rachanubhab, cit., p.341.

the trend culminated in 1902 in the creation or rather formalisation of "a tradition of ecclesiastical hierarchy". Such a hierarchy, as Mendelson and Tambiah observe, "materialised under powerful kings".[96]

Selected Bibliography

Brereton, P. Bonnie, 1995. *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai*, University of Arizona Press, Tempe, Arizona.

Bunnag, Jane, 1973. *Buddhist Monk and Buddhist Layman*, Cambridge University Press.

Chaumont, De, The Chevalier & Choisy, De, The Abbé, 1997. *Aspects of The Embassy to Siam 1685*, ed. & trans. Michael Smithes, Silkworm Book, Chiang Mai.

Cone, Margaret & Richard Gombrich, 1977.*The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, Oxford.

Cushman, D. Richard, trans., & Wyatt, K David ed., 2000. *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, The Siam Society, Bangkok.

Denis, Eugène, ed. & Collins, Steven, trans. "The Story of The Elder Māleyyadeva", 1993. *The Journal of the Pāli Text Society*, Vol. XVIII, Oxford

Desfarges, General, de La Touche, Lieutenant & des Verqiains, Vollant, Jean, Engineer, 2002. *Three Military Accounts of the 1688 Revolution in Siam*, trans. Michael Smithes, Orchid Press, Bangkok

Forbin, de, Claude, Count, 1996. *The Siamese Memoir* 1685-1688, ed. Michael Smithies, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai.

Gervaise, Nicolas, 1928. *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam*, trans. H. S L'Neill, Bangkok

Hutchinson, E. W. trans. , 2002.*1688 Revolution in Siam: The Memoir of Father de Bèze, s. j*. White Lotus Press, Bangkok

[96] Mendelson, pp.66-67; Tambiah, p.179

Ishii, Yoneo , 2515/1972."Ecclesiastical Examination in Thailand" *Visakhapuja*, Annual publication of the Buddhist Association of Thailand, Bangkok.

Ishii, Yoneo, 1969. *Saṅgha, State and Society*, trans. Peter Hawkes, Honolulu University Press, Hawaii

Keyes, Charles, 1989. *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*, D.K Book House, Bangkok.

Keyes, 1995. Charles *The Golden Peninsula*, University of Hawai' i Press, Honolulu.

La Loubère, de, Simon, 1969. *The Kingdom of Siam*, Oxford University Press, London

Lausoonthorn, Niyada (Prof./ Dr.), 2000. *Study of the Sources of Triphum Praruang*, Bangkok.

McDaniel, Justin, 2002. "The Curricular Canon in Northern Thailand and Laos" *Manussaya: Journal of Humanities*, 4:2002, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

na Nagara, Prasert & A. B. Griswold, 1992. *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, The Historical Society Under the Royal Patronage of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Siridhorn, Bangkok.

na Pombejra, Dhiravat, 1984.*A Political History of Siam under the Prasatthong Dynasty, 1629-1688*, (Unpublished PhD Thesis), SOAS, University of London

Reynolds, E. Frank & B. Mani, trans, 1982. *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, University of California Press,

Berkeley Reynolds, J. Craig, 1972.*The Buddhist Monkhood in Nineteenth Century Thailand*, (Unpublished PhD Dissertation), Cornell University, Ithaca

Smithes, Michael, 1998. *A Resounding Failure: Martin and the French in Siam* 1672-1693, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai

Tachard, Guy, 1999. *Voyage to Siam* 1685, Orchid Press, Bangkok

Tambiah, Stanley, 1976. *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Tun, Than, 1984. "Ayut'ia Men in the Service of Burmese Kings, 16th &17th Centuries" *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu (Southeast Asian Studies)* Journal, vol. 21, No. 4, Kyoto University, Kyoto.

Turpin, François-Henri, 1997. *A History of the Kingdom of Siam up to 1770*, trans. Cartwright, B. O., Bangkok (1st Edition in 1908)

Wyatt, K., 1994. David *Studies in Thai History*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai

Wyatt, K. David, 1984. *Thailand: A Short History*, Yale University Press, New Haven

Wyatt, K. David, 1969. *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education under King Chulalongkorn*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Dhammapiṭaka, Phra (P. A. Payutto), 1998. *Bot rian 25 pi khon thai rian ru rue yang* (The Lessons of 25 Years: Have the Thai People Learnt?), Bangkok.

Kasetsiri, Charnvit, 2544. *Ayutthaya: prawatsart lae karnmaung* (Ayutthaya: History and Politics), Toyota Thailand Foundation, (3rd print) Bangkok.

Khruathai, Phanphen, ed., 2540 *Wannakam phutthasasana nai lanna* (Buddhist Literatures in Lanna), Chiang Mai University Press, Chiang Mai (1997).

Payutto, P., 2532 (1988). *A Prawat karn suksa khong khana song thai* (The History of the Thai Sanhga's Education), Mahachulalongkorn University Press, Bangkok (?) .

Prawat karn suksa khong khanasong (History of the Saṅgha's Education), Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education, Bangkok, 2527 (1983).

Prawat krasong suksathikarn (History of Ministry of Education) 2435-2507 (1891-1961), Khrusapha Press, Bangkok, 2507 (1961).

Rachanubhab, Damrong, Prince, 1963. *Khwamsongcham [Memoirs]*, Social Science Association of Thailand, Bangkok

Rachanubhab, Damrong, Prince, 1970. "*Tamnan karn buak phra pariyattitham* (History of Teaching Pariyatti tham)" *Tamnan phra phutthasasana* (History of Buddhism), Wat Phraphiren, Bangkok.

Thepwethi, Phra (Prayud Payutto), 2531 (1988) *Thit than karn suksa khong khanasong*, (The Direction of Monastic Education), Mahachulalongkorn Royal College, Bangkok.

Thepwethi, Phra (Prayut Payutto), 2530. *Phra phutthasasana gup karnsuksa nai adid* (Buddhism and Education in the Past), Mahachulalongkorn University Press, Bangkok (1986).

Udomsri, Swaeng *Karn bokkhrong khanasong thai*, (The Administration of the Saṅgha) Mahachulalongkorn Royal University Press, Bangkok, (undated).