

Eunuchs in Siam: Before, During and After the Reign of King Narai in Ayutthaya¹

Katherine Bowie

University of Wisconsin-Madison

ABSTRACT—Eunuchs played important roles in courts across Asia. Although some scholars have argued there were no eunuchs in the Siamese courts, eunuchs—albeit few in number—were present in the court of King Narai (1657-1688). Drawing on hints regarding race, gender, numbers, and roles provided in the Palace Law of Ayutthaya and European accounts, this essay considers the evidence regarding the presence of eunuchs before, during and after the reign of King Narai. Indian eunuchs were most likely brought to Ayutthaya during King Narai's reign. If eunuchs predated his reign, they were likely of Chinese origin. However, Chinese eunuchs may have first arrived following the collapse of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and the expansion of trade during the Qing dynasty. Eunuchs apparently served during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868). Rather than policing harems, eunuchs promoted the interests of kings and palace women alike.

Eunuchs played important roles in courts across Asia, most notably in the Chinese, Mughal, Ottoman and Persian courts of the 17th century. The Safavid court of Persia in 1666-1667 was estimated to have had some 3,000 eunuchs; the Chinese court had some 100,000 near the end of the Ming dynasty (Babayan 2012; Tsai 1991: 144).² Eunuchs fulfilled a wide range of functions, ranging from public roles as court officials, ritual specialists, provincial administrators, and military commanders to private roles as sexual partners to both palace men and women. Most attention has focused on their roles in harems in which eunuchs served to oversee and “to police the king’s wives and concubines” (Peletz 2009: 74).

Despite their prominence in many other Asian courts, remarkably little attention has been paid to the relative presence or absence of eunuchs in the Siamese courts. No less than the distinguished scholar of Siamese palace life, H.G. Quaritch Wales, has asserted, “[t]here were no eunuchs” (1992: 49; see also Suwadee 1989: 58; Reynolds 2006: 213). Eunuchs were certainly present in Ayutthaya during the 17th-century reign of King

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² For further discussion, see Hathaway 2018: 52-54. The Mughal and Ottoman courts had fewer numbers; nonetheless the Ottoman court had not less “than 600 to 800” (Penzer 1936: 132).

Narai; whether there were eunuchs before or after his reign remains unclear. Siam also had large harems, estimated at about 3,000 women in the 19th century; however its inner palaces were long guarded by women (Andaya 2008: 31; Laffin 1967: 46-47; Leonowens 1988; Loos 2005; Smith 1982: 57; Suwadee 1989: 58). If eunuchs did not serve as harem police, then what functions did they serve in Siamese courts? When and why did they appear and disappear?

This article considers the evidence regarding the presence of eunuchs in the Siamese courts, before, during and after the reign of King Narai (1657–1688). The *Palace Law of Ayutthaya* mentions eunuchs, however it is difficult to determine the historical period to which it applies.³ Although this document is believed to have been first compiled in 1468, it underwent various revisions; furthermore, the text was lost after the Burmese conquest of Ayutthaya in 1767 and was only reconstructed during the reign of King Rama I (1782-1809). The historical record has left only enough hints to invite curiosity but not enough to resolve it.

An argument can be made that eunuchs first appeared in Siam during the reign of King Narai because accounts of foreign travelers to Ayutthaya during earlier reigns make no mention of eunuchs.⁴ The first European who mentioned the presence of eunuchs in the Siamese court was Abbé de Choisy; he traveled to Ayutthaya in 1685, near the end of King Narai's reign.⁵ Choisy described King Narai's typical day as beginning at 7 a.m. when, after giving alms at the palace gate, he held audience “for the women, the eunuchs, and other persons privy to the palace” (1993: 184). Choisy's observation of the presence of eunuchs is confirmed by Simon de la Loubère who led a French embassy to Ayutthaya in 1687. La Loubère described the *Ocya Vang*, or Minister of the Palace, as overseeing “the Expence which is made for the Maintenance of the King, of his Wives, and of his Eunuchs, and of all those whom this Prince maintains in the Vang” (La Loubère 1969: 96).

However, it is possible that the presence of eunuchs was a longstanding feature of court life that was taken for granted and hence not worthy of special comment. Complicating matters was the difficulty Europeans had in learning about court life. As Choisy's fellow traveler who remained in Siam, Count Claude de Forbin, commented:

[T]is no easy matter to inform you...They who wait in the chambers which are nearest the gate know no more of the palace than what happens in that place. In the chambers adjoining to those are officers who know no more than the others; and so successively to the king's own apartment, who generally keeps close to it, and thinks that such retirement is the principal part of his grandeur. (Forbin 1997: 157-158)

³ For an English translation, see Baker and Phongpaichit 2016.

⁴ Eunuchs are not mentioned in the early accounts of Portuguese or Dutch longtime residents such as Jeremias Van Vliet and Joost Schouten who were present during the 1630s (e.g. Smithies, ed. 2011; Schouten 1986; Van Vliet 2005).

⁵ Indeed one wonders if Choisy's own life as a cross-dresser heightened his awareness of matters of gender and sexuality.

Although much of the working of the palace remains unknown, three hints in the existing sources may shed light on the historical appearance and role of eunuchs in the Siamese court. One hint is the apparent racialization of Siamese court eunuchs. The Palace Law consistently differentiates Indian from Chinese eunuchs; La Loubère also notes that eunuchs were “as well white as black” (1969: 101).⁶

Secondly, this racialization appears to parallel a gender differentiation. Out of the six descriptions of eunuchs in the *Palace Law*, four specifically associate Indian eunuchs fulfilling roles serving the king and two suggest an association of Chinese eunuchs with royal women. In describing the king’s guards when he leaves the palace, the law states, “If the King proceeds to the jetty in front of the palace, the inner guard does down there... If the King proceeds to the area of the water olive and beyond, palace-rear officers, Kanyubat, Ratchasawek, pages and Indian eunuchs go down there” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 88).⁷ However, “If the King travels by barge and [ladies from] the inner palace embark also, only Indian eunuchs, Chinese eunuchs and boat officers embark” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 88). As part of the *Butsayaphisek* ritual, “the king proceeds to the throne hall, with Indian eunuchs beating claves” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 122). In two other rituals, the placement of both Indian eunuchs and Chinese eunuchs is specified (Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 107, 125-126). In addition to differentiating guards, the law differentiates messengers handling royal decrees by gender and ethnicity, noting “If a royal order, an Indian eunuch carries it; [if] secondary queens or the Royal Scion, a [?Chinese eunuch] carries it” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 103).

Thirdly, the total number of eunuchs serving the Siamese palace was very small, especially in comparison with other Asian courts. La Loubère writes, “Tis reported that he [King Narai] has eight or ten Eunuchs only” (1969: 101). There were additional eunuchs owned by palace women and likely some court officials. Claude Céberet du Boullay records in his journal in 1687 that Princess Yothathep, King Narai’s only child, had “extremely insolent” eunuchs (Ceberet 2002: 155). Engelbert Kaempfer, who observed the Siamese embassy’s audience at the Persian court in 1684, comments that the Siamese envoy was a native Persian, noting, “he received a robe of honor [i.e. *khalcat*], as did the negro who was in his retinue” (Marcinkowski 2002: 35; Kaempfer 1977: 270).⁸ The “negro” in question is almost certainly a eunuch, possibly African. Their overall small numbers can be used to argue for either their importance or unimportance. If eunuchs were unimportant, why have any at all? If they were important, why did they disappear?

This article is divided into four parts. The first three parts explore the evidence regarding the appearance and disappearance of eunuchs in three historical phases, namely the periods prior to, during, and after King Narai’s reign. The fourth part considers their possible roles in court. Hints provided by race, gender, numbers, and roles suggest that

⁶ Arguing that all eunuchs in Narai’s court were from the Muslim world and not Chinese, Julispong suggests that the differentiation between black and white eunuchs refers to those from Africa and South Asia respectively (2018, 2021).

⁷ For further details on titles, see Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 88.

⁸ The German word was “Neger” (see Kaempfer 1977: 270). The “native Persian” was apparently the Haji Salim Mazandarani (Marcinkowski 2002: 35; see also Muhammad 1972: 20, 104-105).

the presence of eunuchs was greatest during the reign of King Narai. These hints also suggest that if eunuchs predated King Narai's reign, they were more likely to be Chinese, both because of Ayutthaya's longstanding orientation towards China and because many of the likely functions of these eunuchs were more closely related to palace women's roles overseeing rituals and trade. Because King Narai's reign was heavily influenced by Safavid Persia and because Indian eunuchs appear to have been associated with the king, Indian eunuchs were most likely brought to Ayutthaya during his reign. Although Chinese eunuchs may have predated King Narai's reign, they may also have first arrived after 1644 in the wake of the collapse of the Ming dynasty and the dramatic expansion of trade during the Qing dynasty. That eunuchs served during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) may indicate their continuing presence or their revival.

Evidence before 1657

Eunuchs should not be confused with the transvestites who were to be found in many of the courts of insular Southeast Asia. Eunuchs in the Asian courts underwent radical castration, a traumatic procedure involving the surgical removal of both penis and testicles. Because of the significant mortality rate, the surgery was typically performed at castration centers; recovery typically took about 100 days.⁹ There is no evidence that castration was practiced in Siam, whether for war captives or criminals, or any other reason; therefore we can infer that any eunuchs found in Siam were imported. Lending support to this inference is the fact that at least Indian eunuchs were referred to as *nakthet*, meaning "foreigner," as opposed to the more general term, *khanthi* (see also Julispong 2018).¹⁰ To decide if Siam had eunuchs prior to 1657, we should consider both supply and demand.

Assessing eunuch supply

In addition to castration sites in Europe, central Asia, and northeastern Africa linked to the western side of the Indian Ocean, there were centers in China, Vietnam, Java and Bengal. Although neither China nor Vietnam appear to have exported eunuchs to external slave markets, Java and Bengal did. Ludovico di Varthema notes of his travel to Java in 1505 that "in this island there are a kind of merchants, who follow no other trade excepting that of purchasing little children, from whom they cut off in their childhood everything, and they remain like women" (1863: 258; see also Pires (1944: 178). Bengal served as the principal source of eunuchs for the entire Mughul Empire (Hambly 1974: 125). Thus in the 13th century Marco Polo wrote:

There are many eunuchs, and from this province all the nobles and gentlemen from the neighbouring provinces are provided with them Indian merchants come

⁹ Hogendorn concludes that mortality rates went as high as 90% (1999: 146). The 17th-century French jeweler, Jean Chardin, wrote of Persia that "only one in four survives" and the 19th-century French army doctor working in Egypt, Antoine Clot Bey, states that two-thirds die (Stent 1877: 145).

¹⁰ My thanks to Nathan McGovern for this insight.

to this province, and buy the eunuchs I have mentioned, and also many slaves, and then they take them to divers other countries to sell them again. Eunuchs and slaves are very numerous, because all who are taken prisoners by those people, are straight-way castrated, and then sold. (Polo 1931: 203; see also Pires (1944: I: 88); Hambly 1974)

Writing in 1518, Duarte Barbosa suggests that eunuchs were not only castrated in Bengal, but also underwent special training there, such that they were held “in high esteem as men of upright character” (Barbosa 1921 Vol 2: 147).

Fetching several times the price of an ordinary slave, the primary buyers in this specialized market of Indian and African eunuchs were Muslim traders.¹¹ Muslims had dominated the routes for centuries across the Indian Ocean, particularly the Gujaratis whose trade routes linked to the Red Sea and Europe. The presence of Iranian Muslim communities in Gujarat can be dated to at least 1264 (Moosvi 2009: 240). Following the treaty of Amasya between the Ottomans and Safavids in 1555, the Middle Eastern presence in the Indian Ocean expanded significantly. Although the primary Iranian port of Hormuz fell under Portuguese control in 1515, Persians reclaimed control in 1622, enabling both “Iranian and Armenian merchants to take part in the Indian commerce on a scale not seen before” (Moosvi 2009: 242-243). Pires, who visited Ayutthaya during his voyages of 1512-1515, noted the presence of “Arabs, Persians, Bengalees, many Kling [south Indians], Chinese and other nationalities,” adding “the Gujaratees come to its port every year” (Pires 1944 I: 104, 109). “The chief merchandise” Siam imported from Malacca were “male and female slaves, which they take in quantities, spices, cloths, carpets” (Pires 1944 I: 108). Thus Ayutthaya rulers, from the kingdom’s founding in 1351, had access to trade across the Indian Ocean and therefore to the possibility to acquire eunuchs from these regions.

However, trade and tributary relations between Ayutthaya and China were much more robust and longstanding. Of the many foreign merchants he saw, Pires added “most of these foreigners are Chinese, because Siam does a great deal of trade with China” (1944 I: 103). Siam had ports of trade on both sides of its peninsula, however it had many on the eastern side and during Pires’ time, only three ports on the western side (see 1944 I: 103; Marcinkowski 2002: 30).

Ayutthaya rulers were no doubt well aware of the institution of eunuchs in the Chinese court. Eunuchs were heavily involved with the Maritime Trade Supervisorate and the Ministry of Rites, which oversaw the presentation of tribute to the Chinese emperor (e.g. missions in 1410, 1413, 1509; in Wade 2005). Evidence of tributary missions to China dates back to 1292. Further missions took place in 1295, 1299, 1300, 1314, 1319 and 1323 (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 51). Over the course of the 15th century China was Ayutthaya’s “favorite trading partner in the southern seas”; Ayutthaya sent sixty-eight tribute missions to China between 1369 and 1439, more than any other port (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 52). Conversely, the Chinese also sent

¹¹ Eunuchs cost “at least three or four times the ordinary price of slaves” and even as much as twenty times more (Hogendorn 1999: 145-146).

representation to Ayutthaya. The Chinese envoys sent in 1396, 1403, 1408 and 1416 are explicitly described as eunuchs (Wade 2005). The most famous Chinese eunuch, Zheng He, undertook seven naval voyages between 1405 and 1433. Exactly when he first visited Ayutthaya is unclear, but in 1408 Chinese records explicitly mention that Zheng He was to “confer brocades, fine silks and silk gauzes” upon the king of Siam (Wade 2005). In 1422 the Chinese record that Siamese envoys accompanied Zheng He on his return to China and in 1431 Zheng He was sent to chastise Siam after Malaccan complaints about trade interference (Wade 2005).

Nonetheless, although China produced eunuchs by the thousands, they were an imperial monopoly and not available through a public export market. However, eunuchs could be obtained as imperial gifts and through other more subterranean means (see Tsai 1991: 135). Traders on tribute missions were reported buying “the sons and daughters of impoverished people” from China in 1457 and in 1481 (Wade 2005). Furthermore, Ming restrictions on Chinese traveling overseas encouraged the development of Chinese expatriate communities. In Ayutthaya, some Chinese became the king’s agents in the tribute trade (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 54; for more, see Charnvit 1976; Sarasin 1977; Wade 2005). Some of these agents may have been eunuchs from the Chinese delegations who remained to oversee diplomatic and trade relations.

Assessing eunuch demand.

Evidence suggests that although eunuchs could be supplied from both the eastern and western sides of the Ayutthaya kingdom, they more likely came from China due to strong tributary relations. But was there actually a demand for eunuchs in Siam? In addition to their absence from contemporary foreign accounts, four structural reasons can be given why eunuchs were unlikely to have been part of the Ayutthaya courts prior to the reign of King Narai.

Firstly, the period prior to the founding of the Prasat Thong dynasty in 1630 has been dubbed the “Age of Warfare” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 85-118). Following repeated attacks, Pegu succeeded in conquering Ayutthaya in 1569, taking the Ayutthaya elite—together with their craftsmen and any existing eunuchs—off to Pegu. King Thammaracha (reigned 1569–1590) was installed as a vassal of the Burmese King Bayinnaung, but his two sons, Naresuan and Ekathotsarot, were held in Pegu as hostages. Following the death of Bayinnaung in 1581, Ayutthaya regained its independence in 1584. Naresuan succeeded his father as king in 1590, but only lived two years of his fifteen-year reign at his capital; instead he spent his time fighting and capturing prisoners (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 116). Ekathotsarot succeeded his brother in 1605. He and his successors developed strong relations with the Japanese shogunate, employing Japanese mercenaries in court; the Japanese court had no history of utilizing eunuchs (Mitamura 1970: 169-172).

Secondly, although eunuchs often served to symbolically insulate the palace from the populace, the early Ayutthaya kings did not seem to seek to distance themselves from their citizenry. Unlike grand descriptions of palace life elsewhere, Ma Huan, the Chinese observer who accompanied Zheng He, describes the king’s abode in 1420 as

“elegant, neat and clean” and the king as wearing clothing “little different from the average” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 58). Pires comments the kingdom under King Ramathibodi II (reigned 1491–1529) is justly ruled, adding that the king “is always in residence,” “a hunter”, and “easy with the natives” (1944 I: 103-104).

Thirdly, there is no indication of women being sequestered from men (e.g. Andaya 2008: 32). Already by 1515, the Ayutthaya kings had harems, Pires remarking that the king “has many wives, upwards of five hundred” (1944 I: 104). Instead many visitors to Ayutthaya remark on the active role of women in trade, Ma Huan commenting:

It is their custom that all affairs are managed by their wives; both the king of the country and the common people, if they have matters which require thought and deliberation—punishments light and heavy, all trading transactions great and small—they all follow the decisions of their wives, [for] the mental capacity of the wives certainly exceeds that of the men. (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 57)

Interestingly, the Chinese court even welcomed “missions from females at Ayutthaya including a sister and consort of the king” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 53).

Fourthly, although the Ayutthaya court was clearly interested in the acquisition of slaves, they would appear to have had more to gain from full-bodied slaves than eunuchs. In addition to slaves acquired from Malacca and other southern ports, the primary aim of Ayutthaya’s earliest expeditions north was “to acquire more people” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 59). The court sought slaves, both male and female. Why a court interested in gaining population would prioritize the more expensive category of eunuchs who would have had no ability to reproduce is unclear.

Thus although there was likely a supply of eunuchs, it is unlikely there was a serious demand for them—certainly not in large numbers—in the Siamese court. Nonetheless the possibility of the presence of eunuchs before the reign of King Narai cannot be ruled out. If there were eunuchs, they would most likely have been Chinese. Rather than guard duties, the first eunuchs may have provided specialized advice about proper court rituals as performed in the Chinese court and facilitated trade negotiations, particularly with Chinese merchants. Because court women have typically been involved in making preparations for court rituals and in managing trade, women were likely to have worked more closely with eunuchs.

Reign of King Narai

By the time of King Narai, the kingdom had stabilized, Ayutthaya controlling the west-coast ports of Tenasserim southwards and Burma controlling those of Tavoy northwards. In the first few years after his accession in 1605, King Ekathotsarot made contact with the Portuguese, the English and the Dutch. By the early 1610s, Japanese, Chinese and Indian Muslims were regularly trading at Ayutthaya (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 120). Following the Manchu takeover of China in 1644, the Chinese emperor banned all overseas trade, but trade resumed again in 1652. Ayutthaya grew in importance, both producing goods for export and serving as a major entrepot in the

trade between China, Japan and the Philippines to the east and Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Persia and Mughal India to the west.

Of this mix of foreign traders, Persians came to dominate. Persian influence in Ayutthaya can be dated to 1602 when two brothers, Shaykh Ahmad and his younger brother Muhammad Said, arrived at Ayutthaya “from the Persian Gulf” and married local women. Ahmad was soon appointed “Krom Tha Khwa” in charge of trade with the Indonesian world and the western Indian Ocean area.¹² In 1620 Ahmad helped mastermind the coup which put King Songtham in power (Scupin 1980: 63). Under King Songtham, Ahmad was promoted to the position of Phra Khlang and later became Samuhanaiyok or “prime minister.” During King Prasat Thong’s reign (1629-1656), Shi’ite Muslims came to dominate the commercial offices of Siam. Ahmad’s eldest son, Chun, was appointed Samuhanaiyok in 1630, serving until 1670, well into the reign of King Narai (Wyatt 1994 ab; Scupin 1980; Marcinkowski 2002).

Although there were only some thirty Persians present at the beginning of King Narai’s reign in 1657, they were influential. Using the Shi’ite *taziyat* commemoration as a ruse, Muhammad Said’s son, Aqa Muhammed Astarabadi, helped place Narai on the throne in 1656.¹³ Astarabadi married Narai’s cousin and became Phra Khlang in the 1660s (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 126). King Narai used both Persian and Chinese as counterweights to the Dutch. Astarabadi’s influence on Narai’s court was wide-ranging. As Subrahmanyam explains, “Under Aqa Muhammad’s tutelage, the external commerce of the Thai kingdom was transformed; stronger relations were built up with Surat, Masulipatnam, and the Persian Gulf using the royal ships of Narai, under the command of Iranian *nakhudas*, while goods from the Far East were subject to a royal monopoly once in Thailand” (1992: 349). By the 1670s, Persians were appointed as governors for all the towns along the portage route—Mergui, Tenasserim, Pran, Kui and Phetchaburi; and a Turk was governor at Bangkok (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 126). Persians also managed Narai’s factories in Macao and Bengal. Narai’s reign saw a growth in diplomatic relations between Ayutthaya and the rest of the world, including Persia and various kingdoms in South Asia; Narai sent embassies to Persia in 1668 and 1682 (e.g. Muhammad 1972: 99-100; Marcinkowski 2002). Thus, as Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim summarizes the situation in 1685, “From the beginning of this king’s reign up until just recently, all important business and matters of state were in the hands of the Iranians. They were the source of the king’s power” (1972: 58).

Narai’s court was heavily influenced by Persian culture. Narai’s close relationship with Persians dated back to his childhood, Muhammad commenting, “When the present king [Narai] was still a boy, he used to visit the Iranians regularly and he took great pleasure in their social manners and their foods and drink. In that way, he became quite familiar with the Iranian style of life” (Muhammad 1972: 94). Narai wore a robe and slippers in Safavid style and these garments became fashionable for the nobility.

¹² The Krom Tha Kwa was headed by a “khaek” (Indian), the Krom Tha Sai was headed by a person of Chinese descent and dealt with the Chinese (Scupin 1980: 64).

¹³ For details, see Muhammad 1992: 94-97.

Mohammad commented, “When his servants ask what kind of weapon he wishes to wear, he replied, ‘What one wears must conform to one’s rank and I find the Iranian style dagger alone worthy of my waist’” (1972: 99). Persian culture also influenced court cuisine. Sheep were raised to supply both the Persian community and the royal table (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 129). Muhammad notes houses in Ayutthaya of “exquisite beauty,” each “furnished with cushions and sofas and contains a recently built hammam [bath]” (1972: 74). Narai’s palace in Lopburi was built by Persian architects or engineers and his audience hall at the Ayutthaya palace, the Banyong Rattanat, suggests likely influence from Persian palaces at Isfahan. Persian motifs also appear in temple murals, manuscripts, and scripture cabinets (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 129). By 1685, some 2,000 Shi’ites participated in the annual Hasan-Husein processions, still paid for by the king in gratitude for their role in his accession (Tachard 1686: 215; La Loubère 1691: 112; Reid 2: 191).¹⁴

In addition, Persians shaped the palace staff more directly. As Muhammad explains, the king “has acquired a permanent taste for our food ... For this reason he has had a cook brought over from India” (1972: 68). Muhammad notes during both of his visits to the palace and his residence quarters that “the servants who waited on us were Iranians” (1972: 69, 74). A Persian was among Narai’s doctors. As Subrahmanyam explains, “[Aqa Muhammad] reformed the royal bodyguard, importing over two hundred men from India (for the most part, natives of Astarabad and Mazandaran in Iran)” (1992: 349; for details, see Muhammad 1972: 100-101). Some of these servants and bodyguards may have been eunuchs or overseen by eunuchs.

The dominance of Persian culture in the court of King Narai suggests that the incorporation of black or Muslim eunuchs began during his reign. Although their presence is possible earlier, Narai’s immediate predecessors appear to have had other orientations. As Baker and Phongpaichit suggest, King Songtham “lavished money on religious construction” and King Prasat Thong “shrouded the monarchy in mystification,” but was oriented towards claiming Angkorian heritage. By contrast, “Narai sought association with the glittering courts in the outside world, first with Safavid Persia and then with Bourbon France” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 139).

That the incorporation of black or Muslim eunuchs into the Ayutthaya court occurred during Narai’s reign is further supported by its parallels with the Safavid court. Unlike the Chinese courts, eunuchs in both the Ottoman and Safavid courts were racialized, albeit in opposite patterns. In the Ottoman court, as Jane Hathaway explains, “Spatially, the African and white eunuchs were associated with two separate sections of the palace—the harem and the Third Court respectively”; thus black eunuchs guarded the women and their young children, with the white eunuchs guarding the sultan and his pages (2018: 50). In the Safavid court, the opposite pattern held. As late as the reign of Shah Suleiman (1666–1694), the use of black eunuchs was restricted to the king. According to Jean Chardin’s account, although some were African, “black” referred to eunuchs who came from India, mostly from Malabar and the Gulf of Bengal (Babayan

¹⁴ In return for their services to the state, Muslims were exempted from corvee, stimulating conversions to Islam (Reid 2: 190-191). For more on Ayutthaya’s Muslim communities, see Julispong 2007.

2012). Although the Muslim eunuchs in Narai's court may have been African, they were probably Indian and quite likely from Bengal.

Just how eunuchs came to King Narai's court is uncertain. Clearly Narai could have afforded to buy both Chinese and Indian eunuchs. By his time, "the crown became spectacularly wealthy" (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 139). Gervaise writes that the king had "eight or ten warehouses ... that are of unimaginable wealth" (1989: 183-184). Persian merchants may have already had eunuchs in their households and may have presented "black" eunuchs to Narai or his daughter as exotic gifts. Chinese eunuchs may have already resided in the Ayutthaya court prior to the arrival of Indian eunuchs, playing roles facilitating tribute and trade. Alternatively they may have become part of the Ayutthaya court after 1644 when trade relations with China expanded significantly.¹⁵ The Qing dynasty's hostility towards eunuchs may have also encouraged some eunuchs to flee to Ayutthaya after the collapse of the Ming dynasty in 1644.¹⁶

Eunuchs after King Narai: dating the disappearance.

Given the presence of eunuchs during the reign of King Narai, the question arises of when and why did they disappear? As this section will suggest, arguments can be made for their disappearance following the death of King Narai in 1688, during or after Yothathep's lifetime, or after the Burmese conquest of Ayutthaya in 1767; however, they may also have been an unnoticed, but continuing presence throughout the reign of King Rama IV.

King Narai died in 1688 and Phetracha, after a number of murders which included two of Narai's brothers, usurped the throne. Because Phetracha is unlikely to have trusted any eunuchs who had served Narai, they may have been killed, fled, or sought protection from Narai's powerful daughter, Yothathep. To buttress his claims to the throne, King Phetracha married both Yothathep and Yothathip, Narai's queen and half-sister. However, Yothathep was an unwilling bride and was accused of masterminding a rebellion against him in 1699-1700 (Bhawan 2016: 107). Although Phetracha may have had her eunuchs removed or killed as punishment and to reduce her influence, it seems Yothathep remained powerful. A Dutch record from January 1703 describes Siam as ruled by a three-headed government: Phetracha, Sorasak (Phetracha's adopted son) and Yothathep. Following Phetracha's death later that year, Sorasak became king (reigned 1703-1709). Soon after, rumors spread of Yothathep's involvement in the plot to assassinate Sorasak, already known for his cruelty.¹⁷ Yothathep sought refuge with her aunt Yothathip who had apparently already retired to convent life. With Yothathip's intervention, Yothathep's life was spared, but "all her privileges were revoked and she was banished from the royal palace" (Bhawan 2016: 107). Following her reputed involvement in the attempted assassination, Yothathep's eunuchs may have fled, been

¹⁵ In 1652 Siam became the first tributary allowed to trade at Canton (Guangzhou) under the Qing dynasty (Sarasin 1977: 30).

¹⁶ For further discussion of Qing anti-eunuchism, see Dale 2018; Hsieh 2014; Tsai 1991.

¹⁷ Sorasak may have had Yothathep's son, Khwan, murdered. See Bhawan 2016 for discussion.

reassigned or killed. Yothathep's death in 1736 is yet another possible time of their disappearance from court life.



Figure 1. Eunuchs (at top left) bothering palace women in the murals at the Lacquer Pavilion in Suan Pakkad Palace (Photo by Parin Kankeaw).

Eunuchs may have remained part of the 18th-century court through the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. A sign of continuing interest in Persia is reflected in a translation of Persian literature¹⁸ dealing with courts, customs, and ruling techniques of ancient Persian and Mughal kings. It was compiled in 1752 and apparently King Boromoraja regularly had it read to him. (Scupin 1980: 66). In 1753 there is a record of the Siamese court requesting ginseng, oxen, horses and “some eunuchs conversant with the ceremonial of the Court and household. A present of ginseng was made, but the rest of the request appears to have been negatived” (Bowring 1856: 78-79). Although scholars have typically highlighted the impact of Brahmanism and Buddhism on court rituals, Chinese influences merit further consideration. Any eunuchs who remained in the Ayutthaya court at the time of the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 would likely have been carried off to Burma together with “princes and princesses and their retinues, more than 2,000 in number” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 257).

However, if the fall of Ayutthaya seems like a probable end of the presence of eunuchs in the Siamese court, the historical record presents additional lingering wrinkles. One is the continuing inclusion of eunuchs in early 19th-century literature, such as the Palace Law of Ayutthaya reconstructed during the reign of King Rama I. Eunuchs are mentioned in the Thonburi version of *Kritsana Sorn Nong*, a text intended to teach manners to court women which advises them to treat eunuchs and others in court well.¹⁹

¹⁸ Known in Thai as the Persian Rajadhamma. For details see Scupin 1980: 66.

¹⁹ Eunuchs disappear from later versions. My thanks to Julispong Chularatana for this information. On this

Eunuchs appear in the *Ramakien* from the reign of King Rama I, both Chinese and Persian mentioned around a dozen times (Fine Arts Department 1997).²⁰ They also appear in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (Baker and Phongpaichit 2010: 1109). Eunuchs in Persian dress are portrayed in paintings at Suan Pakkad Palace (Julispong 2021; see Figure 1).

More significant is the account of Anna Leonowens, who served as a governess to the Bangkok court from 1862-1867:

In the pavilion, which served as a private chapel for the ladies of the harem, priests were reading prayers and reciting homilies from that sacred book of Buddha called *Sasanah Thai*, “The Religion of the Free”; while the ladies sat on velvet cushions with their hands folded, a vase of flowers in front of each, and a pair of odoriferous candles, lighted. Prayers are held daily in this place, and three times a day during the Buddhist Lent. The priests are escorted to the pavilion by Amazons, and two warriors, armed with swords and clubs, remain on guard till the service is ended. The latter, who are eunuchs, also attend the priests when they enter the palace, in the afternoon, to sprinkle the inmates with consecrated water. (Leonowens 1988: 106)

Although Leonowens has been criticized as unreliable, I find her account of eunuchs worthy of consideration because it emerges not in a polemical context, but rather a description of everyday palace life.

If Leonowens’ account is accurate, questions then arise of when did eunuchs return to the Siamese court or were they always a continuing presence? Where did they come from? It is unclear if Taksin was the sort of ruler who sought out eunuchs; he is described as a ruler on horseback who “addressed the ordinary people through proclamations using the vocabulary of *pho-luk*, father and son shedding the ritualism of Ayutthaya court style” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 265). As trade revived, Bangkok was more closely linked to China than Ayutthaya ever had been (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 269). Europeans who visited Bangkok in the 1820s found the Chaophraya River crammed with junks, and estimated that the Chinese formed the majority of the city population (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 269). In addition to Chinese influence, there was also Muslim influence. The second of King Rama II’s royal wives, Chao Chom Manda Riam (1770–1837) came from a southern Muslim noble family; however there is no evidence that eunuchs played roles in the Malay kingdoms of southern Thailand. How and when Leonowens’ two (or more) warrior-eunuchs came to court is lost to history. There is no further indication of the presence of eunuchs after the reign of Rama IV.

Evaluating the evidence

Any effort to understand the presence of eunuchs in the Siamese court necessarily involves a consideration of their function. Attention has typically focused on their

text, see Jory 2021: 145.

²⁰ Thanks to Chris Baker for this information.

roles guarding and overseeing harems based on the argument that eunuchs could not impregnate women. Scholars have typically also presumed eunuchs were effeminate due to their high-pitched voices. However, the hormonal changes following castration also resulted in longer limbs such that eunuchs were taller than average males; they therefore could have been understood as hyper-masculine and hence ideal honor guards.

Although eunuchs are often associated with harems, in fact they often served rulers. With no family and therefore no interfering kin or need to develop an inheritance, eunuchs were seen as more likely to be loyal and trustworthy.²¹ Typically foreign slaves, they were socially more isolated and therefore more dependent on the ruler's approval. They also were seen as a useful check on the power of the traditional elite, forming an alternative power base (Tougher 2008: 47; Tsai: 1991; Hathaway 2018: Pierce 1993). Accordingly, many eunuchs who gained royal trust came to hold important administrative positions, serving as governors and military commanders.

With the possibility of embodying binary oppositions such as male and female, pure and profane, Shaun Tougher suggests eunuchs were ideal mediators between the sacred emperor and his subjects (2008: 49).²² For Orlando Patterson, "The absolute ruler requires the ultimate slave; and the ultimate slave is best represented in the anomalous person of the eunuch" (1982: 315). As expensive ambiguous figures, eunuchs held a liminal quasi-sacred status, their linguistic skills, specialized training and castrated bodies both representing and facilitating the economic, political and sacral power of the court in local and international relations.

The available evidence suggests that Ayutthaya court eunuchs were not about policing women but rather serving the king. La Loubère's account orients both women and eunuchs towards the king, writing of the inner palace, "Tis said that no person enters further, not the King's Domesticks themselves, excepting his Wives and Eunuch" (1693: 32). He also mentions that "neither his Subjects nor Strangers do ever see him on Foot. This Honour is only reserved for his Wives and Eunuchs, when he is lock'd up within his Palace" (1693: 40). The king's innermost attendants were apparently female, La Loubère writing:

As to the King of Siam's Chamber, the true Officers thereof are Women, 'tis only they that have a Privilege of entering therein. They make his Bed, and dress his Meat; they cloath him, and wait on him at Table: but none but himself touches his Head when he is attir'd, nor puts any thing over his Head. (La Loubère 1693: 100; see also Andaya 2008: 36)

Instead, eunuchs appear to have mediated the space in the inner palace between the bedchamber and the outer palace. According to La Loubère, "The Pourveyors carry the

²¹ In reality, those who were castrated in adulthood often had family connections; other eunuchs married and adopted children.

²² Tougher also suggests "the fact that an uncastrated male ruler was surrounded by castrated men probably intensified his masculine identity and thus his status as a powerful individual" (2008: 52). Ironically, although eunuchs often fulfilled religious roles because they were considered chaste, they could also be viewed as "passive sexual partners for men" (Tougher 2008: 75).

Provisions to the Eunuchs, and she which plays the Cook” (1693: 100). No mention is made of eunuchs supervising the behavior of palace women.

That the Palace Law mentions the Indian eunuchs together with other of the king’s guards suggests their role was as much for guarding the king as for any palace women. Indeed Narai’s harem was relatively small. La Loubère mentions that he had “few

Mistresses, that is to say eight or ten in all” (1969: 101]. Two of these wives were his sisters, namely Queen Krasattri and her younger sister Srisuphan (later known as Yothathip). By his various wives, he only had one offspring, his daughter Yothathep (originally known as Sudavadi), born in 1656 to Queen Krasattri. By the time of La Loubère’s visit in 1687, Queen Krasattri had already died and Yothathep, then only thirty-one years old, had assumed “the Rank and House of a Queen” (La Loubère 1969: 101).²³ Narai appeared to have little interest in acquiring a large harem, instead entrusting considerable power to his daughter and preferring hunting elephants to court life. Eunuchs evidently accompanied Narai on his extended periods of hunting at his palace in Lopburi. In the early 1670s he spent four to five months a year there, but by the early 1680s he was spending eight to nine months there, returning to Ayutthaya only for the religious festivals held during the Buddhist rains-retreat (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 154). La

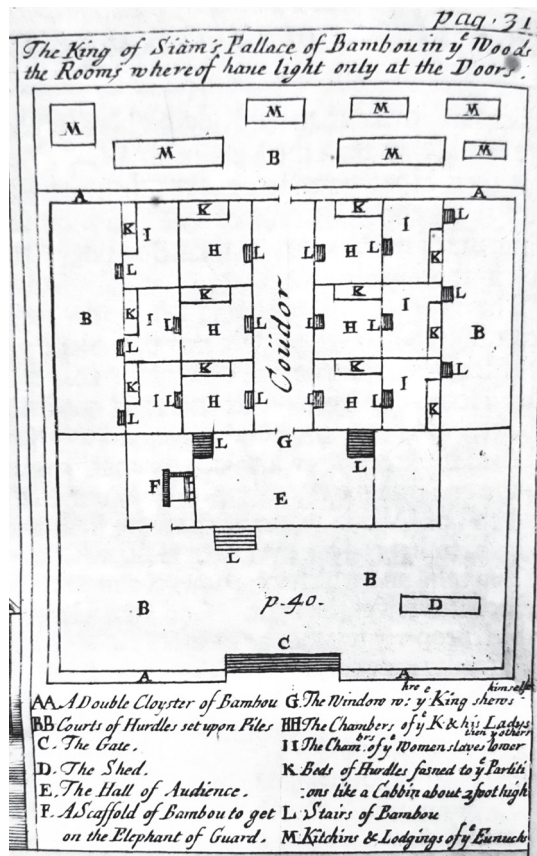


Figure 2. Plan of an upcountry palace from La Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam*, 1693.

Loubère provides a map of the upcountry palace (La Loubère 1969: opp. p. 31; see Figure 2). The court is divided into three main sections, with a single entrance in the front. The king’s audience hall is located in the middle. Behind the audience hall are six “chambers of the king’s ladies” and “chambers of the woman slaves.” In the very rear of the court are seven lodgings marked as “Kitchins and Lodgings of the Eunuchs.”²⁴

Narai had reasons to distrust many of his own nobles. With the rising wealth, there was also growing tension between the court and the nobles. Narai’s own path to the

²³ Narai was close to Phra Pi, described as his adopted son, “a favourite with the king who loved him more than any other young man at court” (Forbin 1997: 142); see also Tachard (1688: 274). Varying accounts suggest that Narai had wanted Yothathep to take the throne or to marry Phra Pi, but she refused (Bhawan 2016: 97, 102). However Ceberet reported that “he does not want her to marry” (2002: 155).

²⁴ Unfortunately maps of the main palace in Ayutthaya do not provide a similar level of detail. See Baker 2013.

throne had involved executing his predecessor and two half-brothers. Only two months after acceding the throne, Narai faced a revolt led by senior nobles and at least 5,000 men. He carried out a massive purge. Other purges of senior figures followed over the years (see Baker and Phongpaichit 2017: 155-156 for details). Although the eunuchs in Narai's court did not appear to hold high ranks,²⁵ Baker and Phongpaichit explain the logic behind Narai's use of other foreigners in court that could easily be used to justify the incorporation of eunuchs:

The kings preferred a foreigner as Phrakhleng for several reasons: foreigners had the commercial expertise and overseas contacts; they had no *phrai* of their own; they depended totally on their royal patron; and they were easy to dislodge when they became too powerful. For similar reasons, the kings also increasingly relied on foreigners for their personal protection. (2017: 15)

Eunuchs accompanied the king and royal women in various processions and ceremonies; their presence can be understood not simply as physical protection, but as adding to royal symbolic power. Indeed Alan Strathern has argued that Narai's reign "stands out for the sheer intensity of its sacralisation" (2019: 49). In addition to royal barge processions, the Palace Law specifically mentions eunuchs attending two ceremonies which have since become defunct, the Auspicious Flower Circle ceremony (*Butsayaphisek*) intended to reinforce the king's divine powers and the remarkable ceremony in which the king spends the night sleeping with a goddess named Queen Phra Phi.²⁶ The law also specifies where everyone sits during a royal audience: royal consorts, royal children, and other court attendants sit inside; on the inner terrace sit the wives of high ranking officials and provincial cities, supervisors of royal children, grandchildren, and dancers; and on the outer terrace sit Indian eunuchs and Chinese eunuchs, together with the head of the palace maids, pages, dwarfs and hunchbacks (Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 113); those sitting on the outer terrace arguably formed the outermost ring of a sacral royal universe.²⁷ The 1753 request for Chinese eunuchs "conversant with the ceremonial of the Court and household" provides support for their role in sacred court rituals.²⁸

Scholars have noted that as rulers sought to become more sacred, awe-inspiring figures, they needed a channel to communicate with the outside world, both to transmit messages and gather information. The semi-sacral status of eunuchs likely facilitated

²⁵ Two of the eunuchs, both Chinese, held *sakdinaa* ranks of 1000 and 500, under the Okya Phrasadet. For further details, see Gervaise 1989: 71; Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 113.

²⁶ See Baker and Phongpaichit 2016: 121 for details of these ceremonies.

²⁷ Such exotica contributed to court spectacle but also served as demonstration of royal power. Thus King Narai purchased white "Georgian women" from Persia, evidently at considerable expense (La Loubère 1969: 28; Andaya 2008: 31).

²⁸ That the eunuchs came under the Okya Phrasadet raises further questions about their roles. Tachard notes that the Okya Phrasadet "Was the Chief and Protector of all the Talapoins of the Kingdom, having the power to Judge, and Sentence them to be punished when they deserve, which is one of the Chief and most Important Offices of the State" (1688: 161). Although scholars have typically highlighted the impact of Brahmanism and Buddhism on court rituals, Chinese influences merit further consideration.

their role as royal messengers. Perhaps implying his eunuchs, Forbin writes, “the King of Siam never sends his orders by any but the soldiers of his guard” (1997: 142). La Loubère continues, “The Women do never stir out but with the King, nor the Eunuchs without express Order” (1969: 101). The possibility that Yothathep deployed her eunuchs as messengers is implied in Ceberet’s comment:

She administers justice to the eunuchs of her household, but far from being severe, she never refuses any pardon, so that her eunuchs are extremely insolent and this indulgence and prodigality have often caused her to be in dispute with her father, but that does not make her alter her conduct. (Smithies 2002: 155)²⁹

In addition to “insolent” eunuchs who served as her messengers, eunuchs also served as her travel escorts. Apart from her main duties including the organization of ceremonies within the palace, Yothathep was responsible for organizing and facilitating the royal relocation. When King Narai was to travel to Lopburi, she traveled in advance to arrange the welcome reception (Bhawan 2016: 98). As La Loubère notes, “The Queen hath her Elephants and her Balons, and some Officers to take care of her, and accompany her when she goes abroad; but none but her Women and Eunuchs do see her” (1969: 101). Eunuchs protected rather than policed Yothathep.

Extremely powerful, Yothathep was hardly a woman to be intimidated by anyone. She is described as having the wives of senior court officials and eunuchs “subject to her Justice” (1969: 101; see also Choisy 1993: 176; Ceberet 2002: 155). She governed major cities and profited from the right to levy tax and recruit civilian and military manpower (Bhawan 2016: 97). The French diplomat Choisy remarked, “she [Yothathep] has her own lands, revenues, subjects, soldiers, and officers, all independent of the King” (Choisy 1993: 176). Similarly La Loubère writes, “she has her Magazine [likely warehouse], her Ships and her Treasures” (1969: 101). Eunuchs may have not only served as her messengers, but may also have been directly involved in overseeing her lands or commercial ventures. In interactions with Chinese, Muslim and even European merchants not used to negotiating with women, the eunuchs’ royal status likely contributed a certain sacrality and authority to any message sent from her to other palace officials or ordinary citizenry.

Conclusion

When evidence is minimal or non-existent, only guesswork remains. Drawing on hints provided by race, gender, roles and overall numbers provided in the Palace Law of Ayutthaya and accounts left by Europeans, the following speculations can be offered. Prior to the reign of King Narai, although there were possible sources of eunuchs on both the eastern and western sides of the kingdom, there is no concrete evidence that

²⁹ Yothathep’s conflict likely was over trade (La Loubère 1969: 101; Bhawan 2016: 102). Yothathep’s own orientation may have been more towards China; while her father was open to exploring trade deals with the French, she refused to meet with them.

eunuchs were in demand. If there were eunuchs, due to the court's overall orientation towards China, they were more likely Chinese. Siamese queens, like other Siamese women, have long played active—if underappreciated—roles in trade and tribute. Any such early eunuchs likely worked with palace women, given the typical roles of women both in organizing court rituals and overseeing trade.

Eunuchs were present in the court of King Narai. Influenced by Safavid Persia, his court differentiated between Indian and Chinese eunuchs. The hints provided in the Palace Law suggest that Narai's eunuchs were more likely Indian and Yothathep's were more likely Chinese. Based upon evidence suggesting the rise of Persian influence during King Narai's reign, it is likely Indian eunuchs first came to court during his reign as gifts or purchases made through merchants linked to Persian court officials. The appearance of Chinese eunuchs in Narai's court may have been the result of tributary exchanges, subterranean purchases, the migration of eunuchs unwanted by the Qing court, or demand generated by Ayutthaya's growing trade with China following the rise of the Qing dynasty.

Although the function of eunuchs appears to have changed over time, there is no evidence of eunuchs serving to supervise palace women. Instead eunuchs appear to have served both kings and palace women in roles as linguistic, cultural, political and economic brokers. Chinese eunuchs likely were involved in court rituals and commercial ventures, roles supervised by palace women. Indian eunuchs more likely served the king, particularly as honor guards and as signs of sacral status. Both Indian and Chinese eunuchs served as royal messengers and honor guards for the king and palace women respectively. By the 19th century, the role of any remaining eunuchs had evidently been reduced to escorting Buddhist monks entering the inner palace.

The overall history of eunuchs in the Siamese courts suggests, whatever their earlier roles, their presence peaked during the reign of King Narai and gradually disappeared afterwards. Although the inner palaces may have had large numbers of women, the presence of eunuchs was minimal. This difference between the Siamese court structure and that of the Chinese, Mughal, Ottoman and Safavid empires invites a further consideration of comparative differences in the position of women in the intimate structures of court politics.

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