

# Muslim Influences in Seventeenth Century Ayutthaya: A Review Essay

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“For some years the impious dogmas of Mohammed have struck deep roots in Siam and there is considerable anxiety lest it become the dominant religion of the country. At first the king favored it very strongly and often contributed to the expenses necessary for the proper celebration of Muslim festivals. Their mosques are very fine, and they can preach and worship as freely as in the countries where they are masters. Every year they go in procession in the country and in the towns accompanied by a great multitude of people, who are attracted from all directions by the pomp and strangeness of the spectacle. Indeed, this ceremony is well worth seeing and could easily win over the Siamese, who love display and ostentation.”

Nicolas Gervaise, *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam* (1690)

## Introduction

There is still debate on the topic of when Islam first came to Southeast Asia. In general, Western scholars traditionally claimed that Islam filtered through India and arrived relatively late, whereas Muslim scholars argue that Arabs have played roles as “mediators” and government officials since early times. One thing scholars can easily agree upon is the means of Islam’s travel and propagation—namely the Muslim spice traders who frequented Southeast Asian ports as far back as the thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup> By looking at the modern religious map of Southeast Asia we can easily see in which places Islam ‘took hold’ and in which places it either failed, or was subsumed by a competing religion. Thailand is one of the latter case: a ninety percent Buddhist rather than Muslim country in the center of Southeast Asia’s diverse religious landscape. Dipping as it does into the Malay Peninsula, it is the Southern Thai border areas that can be said to traverse the political divide

between the mainland Buddhist world and the Muslim world in Southeast Asia’s island region and West.

Recent tensions between Buddhist Thais and southern Thai Muslims show just how contentious this dividing line is becoming in modern times. In this paper, I wish to show that the division between Buddhists and Muslims in Southeast Asia has not always been so polarized. For many years, Muslims and Buddhists not only traded with each other and interacted peaceably, but in fact, worked side by side under the same administration. As I shall demonstrate, at no time and place in Thai history was this effective ‘harmony’ more apparent than in the seventeenth-century Thai city-state of Ayutthaya.

## On the Primary Sources

Primary sources related to Muslim involvement in the politics and trade relations of early seventeenth Thailand are somewhat scarce. Many Thai records were

destroyed during the final Burmese sacking of the kingdom in 1767. The extant *Royal Chronicles* are later era reconstructions of events, and thus cannot be thoroughly trusted. Also, within these limited Thai records, Indians and other Islamic foreigners are generally referred to not by their genuine ethnonym or place of origin, but instead either by their Thai governmental titles or simply by the generic term *kaek* (a term that has come to mean “guest” or “customer” in Thai) making individuals difficult to identify.

Still, the sources that exist do provide valuable insight into the relations of Muslim traders, officials, and diplomats with the various empires of mainland Southeast Asia. Among the European sources, one of the best and most oft quoted accounts is from the Portuguese explorer, Tome Pires. Pires wrote a travelogue of his voyages throughout Southeast Asia in the early sixteenth century, and he tells of Muslims of various national origins in the Siamese capital of Ayutthaya.<sup>2</sup> The writings of the Dutch factory president, Jeremias Van Vliet are also useful. Van Vliet arrived in Ayutthaya to take over duties as factory president in 1638, and his accounts, combined with those of his successor Joost Schouten, make occasional references to the powerful Muslims who held considerable power in Ayutthaya. Also important among the European sources are the writings of French missionary Nicholas Gervaise and Louis XIV’s special trade envoy, Simon La Loubere, both of whom make mention of the activities of Muslims in the Thai capital.

Perhaps the most intriguing firsthand record of Muslim influence in old Siam is *Safinina’i Sulaimani* (The Ship of Sulaiman, referred to by English title), an eloquent record of a Persian diplomatic mission to Ayutthaya during the reign of King Narai (1657–88) that was penned by the embassy scribe, Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim. The Persian embassy described was made up of men from various divisions of the army, as well as *Khasa* administrators from the Safavid Empire.<sup>3</sup> The embassy voyaged to Ayutthaya in response to a letter of good will that King Narai had sent to Shah Sulaiman’s court in Isfahan. Narai’s invitation was written just after the high point of Persian influence in the Kingdom of Siam. The account provides interesting insights into seventeenth century life in Siam from a Muslim perspective. It also offers a glimpse of Persian life during the reign of the mission’s sponsor, Shah Sulaiman the Safavid (1666–94).

*The Ship of Sulaiman* was first translated into English in 1972 by John O’ Kane and brought to broad scholarly attention two years later with the publication of David Wyatt’s 1974 article in the *Journal of the Siam Society* entitled *A Persian Mission to Siam in the Reign of King Narai*.<sup>4</sup> Wyatt argued that “*The Ship of Sulaiman* deserves to be included among the most important primary sources for the history of Siam in the reign of King Narai.”<sup>5</sup> And yet, despite Wyatt’s rallying cry, to date there have been few in-depth analyses of this text. The best and most frequently cited is Jean Aubin’s *Les Persans au Siam Sous Le Règne de Narai* (Persians in Siam during the reign of Narai) published in 1980. For his part, O’Kane, in his “Translator’s Preface,” suggests that “it is doubtful” that anyone outside of himself and Jean Aubin has studied the manuscript since its acquisition by the *British Museum*. Based on my research this situation still holds true today. I will discuss the conditions surrounding the Persian mission that birthed *The Ship of Sulaiman* below in my section entitled “Aqa Muhammad and the Persian Flowering.”

## Muslim Minority Groups within the Kingdom: Indian, Cham, Chinese, and Malay

Amidst the majority Buddhist populace, several minority Muslims groups also inhabited the seventeenth century entrepôt of Ayutthaya. Expanding Southeast Asian trade networks had brought Indian Muslim traders to the region, particularly to the port towns such as Mergui and Tennasserim.<sup>6</sup> Since Mergui was one of Ayutthaya’s tribute states, it is likely that members of the Indian trade population there moved to settle in Ayutthaya. As I will discuss below, there were also influential Arab Muslims who came from India to take up high positions in the Thai administration of the seventeenth century. As Leonard Andaya notes, these powerful Muslims brought south Indian merchants with them who, in the early 1600s, established retail shops in Ayutthaya. Under royal patronage, these Indians Muslims established a *baan kaek* (India-town), which contained a mosque and graveyard.<sup>7</sup>

There were also Cham Muslims in Ayutthaya who were military volunteers in a corps referred to in Thai as the “*Krom Asa-Cham*.” This group of Muslims was composed of refugees who arrived via Cambodia,

Malacca, and Java to which they fled after the 1491 fall of the Champa Empire. It was in these places that, through their interaction with Malay Sunni Muslims, the Cham had become more fully Islamicized. In Ayutthaya they stood out as a relatively pious group of Muslims in a sea of Buddhists that otherwise made up the Thai Empire.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Thai historical documents, Scupin (1980) has charted the official ranks by which the Cham were divided under the *sakdi na* (or Thai feudal ranking) system.<sup>9</sup>

Other than the Persians, whose influence I will discuss in detail below, another significant Muslim minority that requires mention are the Chinese Haw of Northern Thailand. The Haw were transient traders of Chinese silk and other products in Southern Yunnan, northern Thailand, and other regions along the Yunnan-Southeast Asian border.<sup>10</sup> However, the Haw operated on the periphery of the Ayutthayan empire, and though they formed an important minority group in northern areas, this paper's focus is on Muslim influence in Ayutthaya, central, and Southern Thailand.

## Muslims on the Southern Thai Periphery

Before examining the Ayutthayan example, I would like to look at the historical relationships between Muslims and the Thai monarchy. For this, it is important to remember that because the ancient Thai capitals were geographically positioned on the outskirts of the burgeoning Southeast Asian trade routes, their influence on trade, and the influence that traders had on these capitals was less direct.

Following Tambiah's "Galactic Polity" model, we find that the Thai kingdoms of this period would have had varying relations with the nascent Muslim polities on the peripheries of their spheres of influence. Those cities, on the Indian spice route, which were exporting Islam, to China were mainly on the periphery of the Thai Kingdoms' spheres of influence. Of these peripheral regions, Malacca and Patani had the most significant relations with the Thai kingdoms to the north.

### Malacca

Malacca rose as an active trade entrepôt between India and China as early as the fourteenth century, but did not formally become a Muslim kingdom until the

mid-fifteenth century. The city-state had an active tributary relationship with Ayutthaya as evidenced by the "Palatine Law" of 1468.<sup>11</sup> Through these regular relations it is logical to conclude that some Malaccan Muslims eventually came to settle in the Ayutthaya. However, Malacca's stint as a Muslim trade center did not last. The Portuguese seized Malacca in 1511 and imposed serious restrictions on Muslim trade. Sunait Chutintaranond, following European accounts, argues that this was "an important factor behind the rapid growth of seaborne trade at other ports in mainland Southeast Asia (Syriam, Pegu, Patani, and Ayutthaya) and in the Indonesian archipelago (Acch, Johor, and Banten)."<sup>12</sup>

### Patani

Citing contemporary Thai documents on Islam in Thailand, Scupin (1980) claims that the area of Patani in southern Thailand was a part of the Sukhothai kingdom as early as the thirteenth century. But Scupin takes issue with the claim that this area was "an integral part of Thailand," as the documents claim.<sup>13</sup> Rather, he makes the case following Tambiah's *Galactic Polity* model, that the area likely experienced various degrees of autonomy that would have fluctuated with the changes in Thai royal power.

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Patani was an intact, but occasionally unstable trading partner with Ayutthaya. Patani's tributary relationship with Thai power became increasingly volatile in the seventeenth century. Perhaps because of the influx of foreign wealth, particularly from the Japanese, Patani began to assert its independence, and in 1630 launched attacks against other Thai tributaries such as Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat.<sup>14</sup> Yet, despite its rebelliousness and close links to the Malay Sultanate, Patani remained an important connection linking Muslim traders to Ayutthaya. Ayutthaya, due to its cosmopolitanism and the sheer volume of commercial activity, naturally drew traders from across the region.

## Ayutthaya's Ties to Muslim India

From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there are reliable references in travelogue literature—European, Asian, and Middle Eastern—to the presence of Persian traders in Ayutthaya and the surrounding trade ports such as Malacca. This was largely due to the important trade

relationship between Ayutthaya and Muslim India. Marcinkowski (1994) and other scholars agree that the 1511 conquest of Malacca by the Portuguese was cause for the Siamese to look for “additional gateways for trade with the western Indian Ocean region.”<sup>15</sup> From the late sixteenth century, Tenneserim and Mergui provided just such a gateway—connecting Ayutthaya to the Gulf of Bengal and Mughal India.

In the sixteenth century the Sunni Mughals began to take control of many parts of northern India, and by 1600 they had full control over Bengal and Orissa giving them access to the Bay of Bengal.<sup>16</sup> But it was from south of this area that a distinctly Persian-influenced, Shi’ite empire took up trade with Siam and its vassal states. From the early 1500s the Deccan Kingdom of the Qotb-Shahi (also written Qutb Shahi) dynasty (1512-1687) in Golconda was, as Marcinkowski puts it, a “highly Iranized kingdom [that] was not only a major trading power but also was to become a haven for Shi’ites, in most cases Persians from Persia but also from northern India, who were at times subjected to persecution under the Sunni Mughals.”<sup>17</sup> The relationship between Mughal India and the Thai monarchies flourished for years. There was a fairly steady stream of influential Indian migrants to the Thai kingdom and some of these men were brought into the royal court as consultants and ministers. At the same time, state-to-state relations between these two parallel empires were somewhat informal.

Trade to the east, emanating from the Coromandel Coast and port cities such as Matchlibandar, intensified throughout the sixteenth century, and it is likely that at this time an uncertain amount of immigration took place as well. Of particular influence were the ‘Chulia’ or Tamil Muslim traders who resided in South Coromandel. The Chulia hubs such as Porto Novo exported diverse products such as spices, tin, woven baskets, rugs, and elephants to fill the growing demand Southeast Asian city-states such as Ayutthaya.<sup>18</sup> The traders of South India ventured to ports such as Tenneserim, Mergui, and Patani (as well as Indonesian ports), and from these cities traveled to Ayutthaya. These ports, and others in island Southeast Asia, bustling with commerce in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and as Muslim power centers developed throughout Southeast Asia, Muslim influence in Ayutthaya’s royal court grew accordingly.

When in 1660, King Narai sent a formal embassy to Qutb-Shahi, the Shah of Golkanda, it seems that relations were nearing a low-point. Judging from the historical circumstance surrounding this embassy, it is reasonable to conclude that the diplomatic mission represented more of an attempt to repair relations and save face than anything else. It was around this time that Constance Phaulkon, King Narai’s bold new Prime Minister, was actively bolstering the influence of Europeans in the Ayutthayan court. Various sources record that one of his first actions at his new post was to spoil a coup attempt by a faction of Ayutthaya’s resident Muslims.

### *Aqa Muhammad and the ‘Persianate flowering’*

What Marshall Hodgson has termed the “Persianate Flowering” is also evident in Siam. Hodgson coined the term to describe an expansive growth and influence of Persian culture emanating from the Safavid Empire, which he argued “bears several analogies with the Italian Renaissance.”<sup>19</sup> And although Hodgson does not include the Ayutthayan Empire as a ‘focus’ a strong case can be made that Ayutthaya, too, experienced the Persianate flowering, especially during the reign of King Narai.

The period of Persian influence seems to have begun in the reign of Prasat-Thong (1629-56), reaching its pinnacle in the reign of King Narai. The Iranian Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim tells of the seeds of Narai’s strong predisposition to Persian culture:

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.<sup>20</sup>

Ibrahim’s tale of Narai’s boyhood connection to Muslim culture is confirmed in other historical sources, including the history produced by Jeremias Van Vliet, in his *At the Court of King Prasat-Thong: An Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century Account*, Van Vliet describes the resolution of a controversy that had arisen between Dutch and Muslim workers. Based on Ibrahim’s comments, it is safe to assume that the Thai prince whom he mentions here is none other than future King Narai. Van Vliet writes:

In the morning of 11 December [1636], before sunrise, I went to Radie Ebrehem [Raden Ibrahim], a Muslim merchant and one of the slaves of the Prince, because he was a friend who, I knew, was quite influential at the court. I told him what had happened and induced him immediately to go to the palace to ask his Highness amicably to settle the difficulties that had arisen between his slaves and the Netherlanders, to send the Netherlanders home to me, and to keep the whole incident from the King. I added that he could assure his Highness that I would most sharply investigate the whole matter.<sup>21</sup>

Narai's boyhood interactions with the Persian Muslim community gave him a strong inclination to favor this group once he became king. The king was famous for his internationalism, and brought numerous foreigners into his court as officials, but for much of his reign he turned over to his Muslim ministers exclusive control on matters of trade with states to the south and west. The most influential of these was Aqa Muhammad, who is referred to in Thai records as Okphra Sinaowarat<sup>22</sup>.

What little scholars know about Aqa Muhammad comes mostly from *The Ship of Sulaiman*. This Persian embassy record includes a section entitled *The Rise of Aqa Muhammad*, which describes him as a successful Muslim merchant who rose through the ranks to become a high-ranking minister:

...It is more than evident from his works and deeds that he was a man of noble character. He possessed the laudable manners and fine integrity of a truly well-bred man. His is originally from Astarabad, the abode of the faithful. Wise and loyal, and a man of practical skill, trained in the school of experience, he originally settled in Siam to carry on trade. After learning the language and customs of that domain he rose to a position of authority and became a minister and a favored councilor of the king.<sup>23</sup>

Immediately proceeding is a section titled *The Siamese king receives instruction from Aqa Muhammad*. Here, the Persian scribe tells in poetic terms, of Aqa Muhammad's ongoing effort to convert King Narai to "beholding the beauty of true Beloved and mastering the Perfect Subject, which consists in knowing one God..."<sup>24</sup> But on these matters he makes little progress, and the scribe complains that the king's "inner eye of understanding remained limited to the bare exterior of the world," and "[d]espite the breadth of his

studies, the king held firmly to the path of ingratitude before his Maker and to this day continues on the road of ignorance."<sup>25</sup>

*The Ship of Sulaiman* goes on to detail the depth of Muslim influence on the kingdom of Thailand during Aqa Muhammad's life, and also its rapid decline in the years after his death. One detail relevant to this discussion is the mention of an honor guard of "200 Iranians, mostly men originally from Astarabad and Mazandaran" who were brought to the Kingdom under Aqa Muhammad's direction. The author claims that this somewhat rowdy group of soldiers was culled from the lower classes and "lacked the integrity necessary to succeed."<sup>26</sup> He continues:

Due to their lack of integrity, which is a commodity always wanting in the low-bred, they were quick to stumble into the meshes of mischief and sedition. They became embroiled in mutual hatred, malice, jealousies and all manner of perverseness. Despite the king's manifest affection, they opened the register and accounts of treachery.<sup>27</sup>

For Aqa Muhammad and the Persians, the establishment of these Iranian troops in Ayutthaya marked the beginning of the end. Whether it was the threat of their new presence that raised the enmity of the other foreigners vying for power, or it was that the King himself felt that the Persians had had their run is hard to determine. More likely, it was a combination of these factors

### ***Royal Warehouses and Muslims in Positions of Power***

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Ayutthayan monarchy had developed a system of royal warehouses in order to profit from foreign trade on certain goods. The royal warehouses operated as wholesale outlets in that they bought (or received as tribute) and stockpiled exportable goods of both domestic and foreign origin.<sup>28</sup> The agrarian Thai populace was divided into a complex social system of royals, nobles, and commoners<sup>29</sup> from which the king could exact commodities for the warehouses. The monarchy maintained a monopoly on most exportable domestic goods, most of which were obtained at no expense by way of tax and tribute.<sup>30</sup>

A foreign trade community that had close relations with the monarchy stood to benefit substantially, this is especially due to the way that domestic goods were

collected and consolidated through royal control. In the early period of the seventeenth century, the loyal service of Japanese warriors to several Thai Kings in fending off Burmese invasion appears to have given the Japanese this advantageous position. However, by the middle of the seventeenth century, Japan had entered its *Sakoku* (closed-country) phase and their influence had consequently diminished in Ayutthaya. The power vacuum was apparently filled by Muslims. Their star was rising, at least for the time being, in mainland Southeast Asia.

### Muslim Ministers

Kennon Breazeale's enlightening essay *Thai Maritime Trade and the Ministry Responsible* outlines the bureaucratic structure Thai kings employed to maintain their country's status as a profitable center for trade in the seventeenth century. Drawing on Thai records, Breazeale identifies four ministries: 1) Department of General Administration, Appeals and Records 2) Department of Western Maritime Affairs 3) Department of Eastern Maritime Affairs and Crown Junks and 4) Department of Royal Warehouses.<sup>31</sup> Of these, it was the *Department of Western Maritime Affairs and Crown Junks* (known in Thai as *Krom Tha Khwa*, Ministry of the Right) that was traditionally led by a Muslim minister. Breazeale explains:

The ministry was reorganized during the 1610s with the assistance of two prominent Muslim merchants who moved to Ayutthaya from the region of the Persian Gulf... it seems no coincidence that the new structural division placed all areas that were of primary concern to Muslim traders within a single department, encompassing all the ports on the northern and eastern rim of the Indian Ocean, as well as the Muslim trading centers of the archipelago.<sup>32</sup>

Essentially the *Krom Tha Khwa* was the Kingdom's method to engage profitably with the Muslim trade networks throughout Asia. The Muslim ministers, though likely of Persian descent, must have been conversant in Malay—then the lingua franca of Muslim trade in Southeast Asia—and it was through them that the King dealt with his Muslim neighbors, as well as those Muslims residing within his kingdom. The counterbalance to the *Krom Tha Khwa* was of course the *Krom Tha Sai* (Ministry of Left), which was traditionally run by a Chinese official, and oversaw trade with

China and Japan, as well as some portion of the emerging European trade.

Under King Narai's leadership Muslims and other foreigners were brought into the fold of government in Ayutthaya. Thus, the royal court was infused with many ministers whose ethnic backgrounds were non-Thai and whose ancestors would tend to dominate certain posts over many generations. David Wyatt's essays entitled *Family Politics in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Siam*<sup>33</sup> and *A Persian Mission to Siam in the Reign of King Narai*<sup>34</sup> illustrate the continuity of a "Persian line" that continued to be influential well into the nineteenth century. Though over time members of these imperially favored families may have converted to Buddhism, the Muslim roots of power in certain spheres of the Siamese court are quite clear.

### Faith, Scripture and Religious Diversity

According to Anthony Reid, in Southeast Asia both Islam and Christianity reached their convert-producing peaks in the early seventeenth century.<sup>35</sup> To Reid, conversion produced a sea change in the "mental universe" of Southeast Asians who sought to deal with what he calls "some perceived lack of fit between existing beliefs and the changing world."<sup>36</sup> He describes this era as a time of changing values, and suggests that converts were attracted to new world religions because amidst the region's instability, these universal religions offered: "Portability", "Association with Wealth", "Military Success", "Writing", "Memorization", "Healing" and "A Predictable Moral Universe."<sup>37</sup> Ayutthaya was an exception to the wave of conversions in Southeast Asia as these forces had little bearing on Thai Buddhism and the seventeenth century Thai monarchy. In each area, the rapidly solidifying Buddhist and State structures in Ayutthaya provided a strong counterpoint to the "attractions of conversion" mentioned by Reid. Ayutthaya's monarchs were always involved in building projects that lavishly displayed their wealth. Most of these projects were Buddhist in nature, though the Thai Kings also sponsored the construction of Mosques for the Muslim members of the community.

In an opening invocation of the *Ship of Sulaiman*, we are led to understand that the Persians, for their part appreciated King Narai's patronage of their religion:

Good rulers, therefore, take a further step on the path toward world harmony. With ambassadors and delegations as their key they unlock the doors of world-wide friendship. Such was the intent of the Siamese king, possessor of the white elephant and the throne of solid gold. For he loves all Muslims and was overawed seeing that our king, the brilliant luminary of the world had risen into the Heavens of eternal sovereignty our king who is the noble planet of good fortune, adornment, of the throne of omnipotence and bearer of Chosroes' crown and the cap of Kayan. Thereupon the Siamese monarch hastened to open the accounts of friendship and affection. 'May Allah bless him and guide him into the fold of Islam'.<sup>38</sup>

To be sure, the Muslim community had significant political power in seventeenth century Ayutthaya. Then again, so did the Europeans, so did the Chinese, and so did the Japanese in their time. It was this very balance of foreign influences on the Thai state, and the play of them each against the other that allowed it to thrive in the seventeenth century without undue colonial penetration. During the peak of Muslim influence in the Ayutthayan court, King Narai had also brought a skilled European—the Greek, Constance Phaulkon—to a high position of power. Phaulkon rose to the rank of Prime Minister, and according to Gervaise, it was he who spotted and crushed an imminent Muslim rebellion. In his *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam*, Nicholas Gervaise remarks that “[i]f Monsieur Constance, the first minister of state had not discovered their [the Muslim community's] conspiracy and if he had not been crafty enough to prevent it being carried out, it would have been the end of the king and the kingdom of Siam.”<sup>39</sup>

Yet, Gervaise's assessment (above, and as quoted at the beginning of this section) does not necessarily fit with our contemporary scholarly understanding of the Thai monarchy in the time of King Narai. A religious transition to Islam would surely not have been as easy as Gervaise suggests. As one anthropological review of mass conversion summarizes: “Popular explanations attribute religious transitions to the enchantment of new visions of the cosmos, more efficient elite exploitation, and more effective administrative models, or some combination of these.”<sup>40</sup> Further, there exists a role for the relationship “between charisma and kingship” whereby “...a king's charisma does not just induce fear and awe in his subjects; it also promises to enhance the efficacy of his followers' actions.”<sup>41</sup> This

may be the key to the steady success of Buddhism vis-à-vis Islam and Christianity in Thailand and the rest of Buddhist Southeast Asia. By the time Islamic groups acquired political and economic power in Ayutthaya, the Buddhist Sangha had for centuries been growing as an effective religious and educational institution that would be immensely difficult to displace. The institution had royal patronage and legitimacy as a social institution in so many communities that it is difficult to imagine any local popular support developing for the high-level threat that Islamic groups posed to the Thai monarchy.

In the end, this should reveal the strict limitations on the “power” of foreign entities in Ayutthaya. How “real” was this power? This power may have been potent in the economic realm, and perhaps influential in terms of elite policy making. Yet, it appears to have been negligible in terms of popular support, the proverbial ‘hearts and minds’ of the Thai populace. Tambiah (1976) rightly rejects the Geertzian model of scripturalism as an “ideologisation of religion” for Thailand because, as he puts it:

...as far as most Thai are concerned, it would be difficult to detect a shift from religiousness, from Buddhism as a way of life in all its ramifications, to a more skeptical narrower on-the-defensive religious-mindedness. Virtually at all levels of society the integral relevance of their religion for conduct is not in doubt. Buddhism is as much the religion of the bourgeoisie as of the peasant, of the soldier as much as the recluse.<sup>42</sup>

Even though Tambiah is, at this point, referring to modern Thai society (Bangkok period forward), his argument is just as relevant to the Ayutthayan period. By that time Tambiah's ‘Asokan ideal’ whereby “purifications of religion occurred in the reigns of famous kings in Ceylon, Burma, and Thailand”<sup>43</sup> was already well established. Unlike the Islamic states that eventually formed in island Southeast Asia, it has been described that Southeast Asian Buddhist societies, composed as they were of householders, monks, and Bhodisatva Kings, were “like hallow vessels that have in the past and could in the future hold various contents.”<sup>44</sup> This image helps us to understand the way that Islam was integrated into Thai society in the seventeenth-century. It could grow and even flourish with royal patronage from Buddhist monarchs, but the very fact that it was, and always would be the client and not the patron, gave Islam a subordinate standing and, more

importantly nullified the possibility of any popular influence or widespread acceptance of Islamic thought or Islamic leaders.

## Conclusions

This article focused mainly on a brief period in the seventeenth-century when Muslims groups in Thailand enjoyed an unprecedented degree of autonomy and political power that has never been realized since. Within the context of a benevolent ruler and his administration, Muslims lived peaceably in the old Thai capital of Ayutthaya and played key roles during the city-state's famed age of international commerce. Minority Muslim groups from Southeast Asia and beyond came to Ayutthaya, as they would to any thriving entrepôt, in search of economic opportunities. They thrived in an environment with a comparable degree of freedom, and most importantly, freedom from persecution.

They found in Ayutthaya a bustling entrepôt of international trade and domestic commerce. Some, like the Persians, were quickly integrated into the Thai royal court, and given powerful positions as ministers of trade. These Muslims were an indispensable component of Ayutthaya's prosperity because they assisted in connecting the kingdom to vast Persian networks of traders stretching from the Middle East to South Asia, as well as the Chinese empire. These Persians appear to have worked closely with other local Muslim groups, such as the Chams, who resided within the Thai Kingdom. The Muslim community, particularly during the period of Aqa Muhammad, lived in peaceful co-existence in seventeenth-century Thailand. The turning-point came around 1660 when new leadership emerged in Ayutthaya. The Thai monarchy's focus began a gradual and inexorable shift towards European influence, a shift marked by the rise to power of Constance Phaulkon. Thus began the gradual diminishment of Persian influence in the Thai courts.

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Actually, even claiming that Islam arrived in the thirteenth century is controversial since some scholars give Islam credit for having an impact on places such as twelfth-century Aceh.
- <sup>2</sup> Andaya (1999): 121
- <sup>3</sup> O'Kane (1972): 2
- <sup>4</sup> Wyatt (1994)
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid: 157
- <sup>6</sup> Scupin (1980): 67
- <sup>7</sup> Andaya (1999): 125
- <sup>8</sup> Scupin (1980): 68
- <sup>9</sup> A system used by Thai kings to allocate land and divide manpower based on an individual's given status.
- <sup>10</sup> Scupin (1980): 70
- <sup>11</sup> There has been some controversy over the dating of this historical Thai legal document because the date of 720 that is given does not specify to what era it is referring.
- <sup>12</sup> Chutintaranond in Brezeale (1999): 114
- <sup>13</sup> Scupin (1980): 57
- <sup>14</sup> Wyatt (1984): 110
- <sup>15</sup> Marcincowski (1994): 1. Also see Chutintaranond in Brezeale (1999): op. cit.1
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid: 2
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid
- <sup>18</sup> Andaya (1999): 133-134
- <sup>19</sup> Hodgson (1974): Vol. 3, p. 49
- <sup>20</sup> O'Kane (1972): 94
- <sup>21</sup> Van Vliet (2000): 15
- <sup>22</sup> Dhiravat na Pombejra: 134
- <sup>23</sup> O'Kane (1972): 98
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid: 99
- <sup>26</sup> O'Kane (1972): 100
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid
- <sup>28</sup> Brezeale (1999): 5
- <sup>29</sup> This system was called "*nai-phrai*" and it is discussed extensively by Smith (1977) in his chapter "The Seventeenth-Century Thai Economy and the VOC": 72 - 97
- <sup>30</sup> Smith (1977): 74
- <sup>31</sup> Brezeale: (1999): 5
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid: 9
- <sup>33</sup> Wyatt (1994)
- <sup>34</sup> ibid
- <sup>35</sup> Reid (1993): 181
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid: 150
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid: 151-160
- <sup>38</sup> O'Kane: 19
- <sup>39</sup> Gervaise (1999): 63
- <sup>40</sup> Bentley (1986): 296
- <sup>41</sup> ibid
- <sup>42</sup> Tambiah (1976): 429
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid: 431