

MUSLIMS IN THE KINGDOM OF AYUTTHAYA

Oleh

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WHILST it could be reasonably argued that a great deal has been written on the role of Islam in the history of the Malay archipelago, by contrast, academic literature on the role of the Muslims in the traditional polities of mainland Southeast Asia is still relatively scanty.¹ This article represents a modest attempt to stimulate discussion on an area which has remained relatively neglected. It hopes to briefly describe, examine and interpret the role of Muslims in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya in Thailand, admittedly one of the most illustrious traditional polities ever known in the region.

The rise to prominence of Ayutthaya as a political power coincided with the period of the dominance of Muslim trade in Southeast Asia and the phenomenon of Islamisation in the region particularly in the archipelago. This coincidence, partly helped account for both the presence and the influence of the Muslims in the Buddhist Kingdom of Ayutthaya. Like most other traditional Southeast Asian polities Ayutthaya was inextricably linked to the political and commercial events that were unfolding in the region as a whole, although, unlike the archipelagic principalities it was only peripherally affected by the Islamisation process. The basically eclectic Siamese political structure showed a greater degree of flexibility during the Ayutthayan era when non-Buddhists and non-T'ais were also recruited into the royal service, often in highly influential positions. It was a common feature of the Ayutthayan polity to have foreigners such as the Japanese, Malays, Chinese, Portuguese, Persians and Indians in the service of the King and the State in various capacities.² It would appear that the ease and facility with which foreigners could gain prominence and favour within the ruling royalty, precipitated in Ayutthaya an extension of what was then a global inter-religious rivalry between Islam and

1 Most historical accounts of Southeast Asia would invariably incorporate some discussion of the process and phenomenon of Islamisation in the Malay archipelago, whereas the situation in the mainland, on the other hand, would rarely attract comment. See, for example, D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, Macmillan Student Editions, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., London and Basingstoke, (3rd ed.) 1970 rep.; B.H.M. Vlekke, B.H.M. Nusantara, *A History of Indonesia*, The Hague, Van Hoeve, 1959 J.C. Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society*, The Hague, Van Hoeve, 1955; Sir R.O. Winstedt, "The Early Muhammadan Missionaries," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, No. 81, 1920; and S.Q. Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia*, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, Singapore, 1963.

2 See, for example, E.W. Hutchinson, *Adventurers in Siam in the Seventeenth Century*, The Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1940, p. 8; Joost Schouten, *A Description of the Government, Might, Religion, Customs, Traffic, and Other Remarkable Affairs in the Kingdom of Siam*, written in 1636 (translated into English by Capt. Roger Manlet), Chalermit Historical Archives Series, Bangkok, 1969, pp. 133–134; and L.F. van Ravenswaay, "Translation of Jerimias Van Vliet's. Description of Siam" *Journal of Siam Society*, Vol. VII, Bangkok, 1910, Krauz Reprint, Nendeln Liechtenstein, 1969, p. 28.

Christianity set against the background of a Buddhist kingdom.

Invariably, just as it was trade that ushered in the Islamisation process and the political and economic development of the maritime states of the Malay world in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries A.D., it was also the dominant factor of trade that inevitably brought Islam into contact with Ayutthaya, and perhaps more importantly securing for it a respectable place within the Buddhist polity. The fall of Malacca in 1511 to the Portuguese and its resultant relegation to a subordinate status as a trading and military outpost in a global chain of what was emerging as a Portuguese sea-borne empire, from that of an international emporium of trade, had a far-reaching political and commercial impact on the region as a whole.

In the situation Ayutthaya benefitted from the disrupted Malaccan trade in at least three ways. Firstly, Ayutthaya itself became embellished with the redirected Malaccan trade, endowing it with an unprecedented commercial prosperity. Ayutthaya, in effect, emerged as a new emporium of trade in Southeast Asia. Secondly, the redirected Malaccan trade had also significantly helped promote the commercial revitalization of Ayutthaya's vassals in the Isthmus of Kra, such as Tenasserim, Mergui and Pattani. And finally, the ancient trans-peninsular trade, which had been for some time overshadowed by the success of Malacca was resuscitated. The Isthmian region had been, since the opening centuries of the Christian era an invaluable focus of intra-regional and international trade, notably that between China and India, although its fortunes were very much dependent on the events enveloping the region as a whole, particularly in the Straits of Malacca. The emergence of a powerful thalassocracy like Sri Vijaya which could guarantee the safety of shipping in the Straits of Malacca significantly encouraged its use as an international waterway thereby resulting in the comparative decline of the trans-Isthmian trade. Likewise, the rise of Malacca to prominence in the 15th century both as a growing centripetal political authority in the Straits as well as an international emporium of East-West trade undermined the commercial and political significance of the Isthmus. But whenever the Straits of Malacca was in a renewed state of turmoil, trans-peninsular trade in the Isthmian region would at once be revitalized.³

For reasons of geographical and political expedience neither did the Chinese navigate direct to India, nor did Indian and Persian vessels go all the way to China, but all chose Siam as the new emporium for their trade.⁴ In the case of high value goods or those of small bulk, such as silk and procelain from China and cotton from India, and the trans-peninsular trade itself, there is little doubt of the preponderant

3. Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before A.D. 1500*, The University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1961, pp. 263–264.

4. Maurice Collis, *Siamese White*, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1936, p. 27.

role of the Muslims.⁵ Joost Schouten, describing the early 17th century Ayutthaya remarks, "This City, by reason of its great traffick, is frequented by several Nations, as the Indians, the more western Asiatics, European Moors; and Christian Merchants".⁶ According to La Loubere, "Amongst the (trade of) several Nations, that of the Moors has been the best established".⁷

Evidence of the dominant position of the Muslims in Ayutthaya can be seen from the fact that many of them at various times, had even served the King as his ministers and factors.⁸ A Muslim of West Asian origin, Sheikh Ahmad (Okphra Synnorat?) was said to have been appointed by the Thai King as the *Cawkrom Thaa: Khwaa*, a Minister of considerable influence whose duties included the administration of foreign trade and the affairs of foreigners in Ayutthaya; the collection of import-export duties and the supervision of international shipping.⁹ Later he was made *Samuha Naajog Faaj Nya* and during the reign of King Prasat Thong, (1630–1656) at 87, he was appointed as a royal adviser in the capacity of *Cawwang Krommahaadthaj*.¹⁰ It seems that his meteoric rise to power and his ability to solicit favours from successive Thai kings were the result of his instrumental role in thwarting the Japanese conspiracy in A.D. 1532, thereby emerging as the saviour of the dynasty.¹¹ The trust that he managed to cultivate within the royalty gave him tremendous influence. It is no wonder that he was allowed to engage in the lucrative West Asian trade in Agillah wood, a rich perfume growing in the woods near the confines of Cambodia, which used to be a Royal Monopoly.¹²

The commercial influence of the Muslims was pervasive. However, it would appear that Muslim merchants were most active in the export sector. According to George Vinal Smith, the Thais were not generally engaged in the export end of

5 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

6 Schouten, p. 148.

7 Simon De La Loubere, *The Kingdom of Siam*, Oxford University Press, Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints, London—Kuala Lumpur, 1969, p. 112.

8 *Ibid.*, Collis, p. 29, p. 42.

9 Kukrit Pramoj, *Khwaampenmaa khong isalaam naj pratheedthaj*, (The Origin of Islam in Thailand — in Thai) Mitr Siam Press, Bangkok, B.E. 2514, p. 9. Although Kukrit does not use the name Ophra Synnorat, it seems certain that he is the person Kukrit refers to as Sheikh Ahmad.

10 Kukrit, p. 10.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 9. In my interview with Khun Sengdao Siamwalla in March 1977, a Thai-Islam of Persian extraction, the role of Muslims as the saviour of the Ayutthayan Dynasty was strongly emphasized. It was suggested that the story could be verified from leading Buddhist Abbots in Bangkok.

12 "Letter from (?) George White to Robert Parker, Agent at Bantam, dated (?) 1679" in *Records of the Relations between Siam and Foreign Countries in the 17th Century*, Vol. 11, 1634–1680, Bangkok, 1916, p. 203.

the international trade and "even the King and Princes who were involved in international trade did not actually manage it; this was left to their factors who in many cases were Muslim".¹³

The role of the Muslims as the King's Ministers and merchants for successive rulers made them a very powerful group in the Ayutthayan Court.¹⁴ Against this background it was easy for them to gain royal favours. This, to some extent, explains why many accounts of the time attribute the power and influence of the Muslims elsewhere in the Thai kingdom, particularly on the trans-peninsular trading route, as being the direct result of the instrumental role of the Muslim Ministers in promoting their cause from Ayutthaya. It has been generally claimed that it was Ophra Synnorat, the renowned Muslim Minister, who had assisted his co-religionists on the Mergui overland route, giving them more concessions and administrative posts than they had ever enjoyed before, justifying this policy to the King and to the Siamese mandarinat as a necessary measure to counteract the Dutch menace, a strategy which had proved partly successful in the neighbouring Muslim Sultanates.¹⁵ The Muslims therefore had not only totally engrossed the trans-peninsular trade but were also able to secure key administrative appointments all over the kingdom of Ayutthaya.¹⁶ In the words of George White, "the Governor of Mergui, the Viceroy of the Province of Tenasserim, and the Governors of all the principal towns on the overland route between Tenasserim and Ayutthaya were either Indians or Persians", who, owing to the help of the King's First Minister, a fellow Muslim, had all become "an element of great importance in the State".¹⁷ Nicolas Gervaise, on the other hand rationalizes that as the King "generally found them to be more intelligent than the Siamese, he often preferred them for the management of the most important affairs of state".¹⁸

The Indians and Persians were, of course, not the only Muslims in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya at that time, nor were trade and administration the only vocations that attracted Muslims. The Arabs, Chams, Malays, Macassarese and Acheenese also made up the ranks of the broader Muslim society of the time, although numerically it was the Malays who were the most distinct. A seventeenth century account of Ayutthaya which describes a scene outside the royal palace where Malay lads were said to be playing a ball game (*sepak takraw?*) suggests the extent to which the

13 George Vinal Smith, *The Dutch in Seventeenth Century Thailand*, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, Special Report No. 16, 1977, p. 75.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Collis, p. 42.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 29.

18 Nicolas Gervaise, *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam, A.D. 1688*, (trans. into English by Herbert Stanley O'Neill) Bangkok, 1928, p. 131.

Malays had become very much a part of the Ayutthayan ethnic landscape.¹⁹ According to Nicolas Gervaise, "The Malays also are established here and are in greater numbers than could be desired, for they are Mohammedans and are known to be the worst people that can be found in the Indies, and to them are imputed all the crimes committed there".²⁰ La Loubere estimates that there are about three or four thousand Malays at Siam, the equivalent of the total population of the Moors there.²¹ The cosmopolitanism of Mergui also includes Malays among its population.²² Nicolas Gervaise distinguishes the Malays from the Moors as Muslims stating that "although they are circumcised like the Moors, admit the same principles and believe in the same mysteries, they have not, however, anything to do with them. This is because they have not been taught by another disciple of Mohammed".²³ On the basis of La Loubere's description of a Moor religious festival commemorating "the Death of Haly (sic), or of his children", it seems certain that the Malays unlike the Moors who were Shiites, were Sunnites.²⁴ Notwithstanding this distinction, as a religious community, the Muslims were the largest foreign nationality in Ayutthaya. The Moors in particular were a favoured group.²⁵

The extreme religious tolerance advocated by Ayutthayan rulers encouraged the growth of the foreign population in Ayutthaya. Not only were foreign nationalities favourably received but each community was even encouraged "to live according to its national customs, to build temples and publicly to follow the religion of its own country, provided that it does not interfere with the peace of the State".²⁶ Similarly, Ayutthayan subjects were also allowed to "embrace the creed that pleases them best, and they are in no fear of being punished, or arrested in any way for so doing".²⁷ The cause of Islam was, interestingly, even supported by the State in many ways. Islam was patronized by the King.²⁸ State funds were used for the construction of mosques in Ayutthaya and even the cost of Muslim religious festivals was borne by the King.²⁹ No less interesting is that, according to La

19 E.W. Hutchinson, (trans.) *1688 Revolution in Siam : The Memoirs of Father de Beze s.j.*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 1968, p. 22.

20 Gervaise, pp. 26–27.

21 La Loubere, p. 112.

22 Collis, pp. 24–25.

23 Gervaise, p. 95.

24 La Loubere, p. 112.

25 Ravenswaay, p. 66.

26 Gervaise, p. 95.

27 *Ibid.*

28 La Loubere, p. 112.

29 *Ibid.*

Loubere, "The Siamese, which embraced the Religion of the Moors, had the Privilege of being exempted from the personal service".³⁰ Although this policy was not sustained with equal interest during the different reigns of the Ayutthayan kings, the fact that it ever existed at all, shows how intimate Islam had once been with the Thai polity. Significantly too, this also suggests the phenomenon of conversions to Islam by Siamese themselves from as early as the Ayutthayan times. Perhaps encouraged by the apparent special status Islam enjoyed in Ayutthaya and inspired by the knowledge that in any case the Muslims were a numerical force to be reckoned with, occupying positions of influence and authority, foreign Muslim States felt tempted to proselytize, and perhaps more importantly to attempt to convert the Ayutthayan rulers themselves. It was against this background that Muslim Missions were sent to Ayutthaya. In 1668 Ambassadors from Acheen and Golconda tried in vain to persuade King Narai to accept Islam.³¹ Seventeen years later in 1685, a Persian Ambassador arrived in Ayutthaya and tried unsuccessfully to convert the Thai king.³²

Trade in Ayutthaya had always been an important function of foreign policy. It was largely through the medium of international trade that Ayutthaya, like most other Southeast Asian polities at that time, had hoped to enhance and glorify its political status. Undoubtedly it was the factor of trade that facilitated Ayutthaya's exchange of embassies with foreign nations. And at a time when trade was under the domination of Muslims it became expedient for Ayutthaya to maintain cordial relations with Muslim States, although contacts with others were not ignored. Trading links with Muslim States were invariably initiated or conducted by Muslims in the employ of the Ayutthayan kings. For example, it was a Muslim, Ali Salim, who led the Siamese Embassy to Isfahan.³³

The Muslims in Ayutthaya also took up military duties. Joost Schouten remarks that although the natives and the King's vassals constituted the bulk of the Ayutthayan army, there were also Moors and Malays in the military service.³⁴ Van Vliet too makes a similar observation, saying that the Moors and the Malays were among foreigners who had joined the Ayutthayan army.³⁵ According to La Loubere the King of Siam had a foreign standing Horse-guard in the exterior service of which the Moors made up two Companies.³⁶ P'ya Rajabangsan, the

30 *Ibid.*

31 W.A.R. Wood, *A History of Siam*, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., London, 1926, pp. 196–197; and John Anderson, *English Intercourse with Siam in the Seventeenth Century*, Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner and Co. Ltd., London, 1890, p. 233.

32 Anderson p. 248.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 249.

34 Schouten, p. 134.

35 Ravenswaay, p. 28.

36 La Loubere, p. 97.

Admiral in charge of a war fleet sent by Ayutthaya in 1692 in an expedition to quell the rebellion in Nakhon Si Thammarat was himself a Malay, as was the rebel Governor of that Province.³⁷ The Muslims also served in the King's merchant navy; together with Chinese and Thai-born Chinese they helped man the King's junks.³⁸

Despite the predominance of the Muslims, particularly throughout the greater part of the 17th century, a plural society situation had emerged in Ayutthaya. Although there were many nationalities residing in Ayutthaya, each nationality was allocated its own residential quarter and representation based on the Thai method of organization. Each community had its own chief from among its own ranks whose task was to liaise with the Ayutthayan officialdom on all matters concerning his community. For example, according to Van Vliet, at one time "the Pegues had Oya Poeletip as their quarter-master; the Lauws, Oya Awangh; the Japanese, Oya Pitsjacenram; the Chinese, Oopras Sysebat and Thonsuy; the Malays, Oopra Alaks Amane; and the Portuguese, Opra Ray Montry".³⁹ The Moors, however, were placed under the direct patronage of the King.⁴⁰

Notwithstanding the plural society situation in Ayutthaya, as Constance M. Wilson suggests "Racial and ethnic distinctions meant little in Ayutthaya, differences were accepted and a general spirit a pragmatic attitude toward life underlay the development of policy and of tolerance and the activities of the various groups".⁴¹ It was this kind of pragmatism that had enabled the Siamese to immediately recognize and utilize the expertise of the Muslims in trade and administration in an era and a world in which Muslim supremacy was unchallenged. It must have been the same kind of pragmatic thinking that later on encouraged the Siamese to forsake Muslim officials at a time when Islam in the region was in the doldrums, particularly in the late 17th century after coming under severe pressure from the European rivals. The unsuccessful attempt to convert King Narai to the Muslim faith had also taken place at a time when the Muslims were ceasing to be the unrivalled masters of Asian trade, as their commercial hegemony in the East was being suddenly undermined by the increasing European presence and competition in the area and the fact that the Ayutthayan Court itself had rid itself of many of its Muslim officials. Ayutthaya had also emerged as a valuable prize, not just for the Muslims but the Christians too. It was this deep-seated rivalry that undermined whatever hope and design the Muslims had over Ayutthaya. The outbreak of the Macassar Uprising in Ayutthaya in the 1680's dramatized eloquently the last-ditch attempt by the Muslims to halt the erosion of their influence and power in the kingdom in the wake of the Christian threat.

37 Wood, p. 221.

38 Smith, p. 40.

39 Ravenswaay, p. 66.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Smith, p.x.

This historic episode in Ayutthaya marked an important watershed in the history of Muslims in the Buddhist polity. Although the Macassarese bore the brunt of the fighting, other Muslims, such as the Chams, Moors and Malays were also implicated in the rebellion.⁴² Nicolas Gervaise attributes the rebellion to the ambition of the Moors to impose Islam throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom.⁴³ According to Neale, the rebellion had a religious objective as it was led by a Muslim priest, who, it was said, desired, if successful "to offer the inhabitants the usual alternative – death or the Koran".⁴⁴ Anderson offers another plausible explanation of the incident saying that the Macassarese had entered into a conspiracy "with some disaffected persons of great authority to set fire to the city and to seize the palace and the royal residence at Louvo, and to murder the King and Phaulkon and all the Europeans".⁴⁵ Whereas religion was understably a key factor in influencing the Macassarese decision to take up arms the scenario was nonetheless strikingly political.

The suspicious circumstances under which Phaulkon rose to power and his policy of recruiting Europeans to replace serving Muslim officials in the kingdom had embittered the Muslims. The fact that he came to power at the expense of the Muslims and worked to promote the increasing dominance of the Europeans in Ayutthaya not only served to exacerbate the mutual suspicions between Europeans on the one hand and the Muslims on the other but also contributed to arouse the fear of the Siamese mandarin and the Buddhist clergy of the prospect of complete European domination in Ayutthaya. Although Christian Missions were introduced in Ayutthaya largely through the work of Phaulkon for the ostensible reason of counteracting previous Muslim missionary efforts, the Buddhist Talapoins were, in the process, also provoked by such developments. It was, in actual fact, Phaulkon who had conspired, quite successfully too, to discredit the Muslims in the eyes of King Narai, alleging that the Muslims had their eyes on the throne and were planning to impose Islam in his kingdom, the evidence of which, he argued, lay in the unusual enthusiasm of the Muslim Proselytizing Missions from Acheen, Golconda and Persia to endeavour to convert King Narai.⁴⁶ The fact that the Macassarese captives of the abortive uprising were, under torture, approached by the French missionaries, who, holding out the crucifix, called upon them "to renounce their false gods, Allah and his prophet", underlines the inter-religious rivalry that had characterized Christian-Muslim relations of the time.⁴⁷ But, even

42 Andi Zainal Abidin, "Sekelumit Kisah Daeing Ruru dan Daeing Tulolo di Perancis Pada Abad ke XVII" in *Majalah Universitas Hasanuddin*, Tahun VIII/XVIII, No. 11–12, November-Disember, 1977, p. 527.

43 Gervaise, p. 29.

44 Neale, F.A., *Residence in Siam*, Office of the National Illustrated Library, Strand, London, 1852, p. 219.

45 Anderson, pp. 285–286.

46 Collis, pp. 54–55.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

then, religion would appear as no more than a means to political power and privilege rather than an end in itself. An even stronger vindication of this view can be seen in the collaboration of the Muslims with the Buddhist Talapoins and the Siamese Mandarinate under Phet'raja in later events to bring about the successful overthrow of Phaulkon, the French and Narai in 1688.⁴⁸

It appears that despite their earlier religious zeal, the Muslims were never really alienated from the Siamese and certainly had never antagonized them, especially the Mandarinate, but it was Phaulkon, a foreign element, who had attempted to drive a wedge between the Muslims and the Siamese, whatever his motives were. The Macassar Uprising epitomized the Muslim resistance to what was seen as the erosion of their political and commercial power in Ayutthaya. Its failure, however, sustained the trend of the decline of their political and commercial domination in Ayutthaya. And although, in various ways they continued to give of their service to later Ayutthayan rulers, their once pre-eminent role in the kingdom as traders, administrators, ambassadors, governors and political advisers in the service of successive Ayutthayan rulers, particularly in the first seven decades of the 17th century was simply eclipsed and was never to be restored again whether in later Ayutthayan or Bangkok times.

48 Hutchinson, *1688 Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. ix.