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Language Shift in the Third Reign

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Abstract

The situation regarding language use in external communication in the reign of King Rama III is examined by comparing the texts of the only foreign diplomatic mission to Rama II with the situation at the beginning of the reign of King Mongkut, taking into account intervening missions and other foreign records. In this period it is pointed out that there was a decisive shift away from the use of Portuguese or Malay to English and the factors behind this are considered, including Rama III's own attitude to change.

In a four part series of articles entitled "The Languages of International Communication in Siam[1]", I sought to examine texts dealing with the use of Malay, Portuguese and English, as well as consider the roles in Siam of Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and even Latin, in situations where communication with outsiders was necessary. I should like here, using *farang* texts, to look more closely at the changes which took place in the reign of King Rama III, and the reasons for the pivotal shift in the direction of English which took place then.

Rama III (Phra Nangklao) came to the throne on 21 July 1824 and died on 3 April 1851. He is generally considered conservative, sometimes even reactionary, anxious to preserve the old order against imported concepts. The circumstances of his selection for the throne do not concern us here, but one of the reasons that undoubtedly was in his favour was his considerable experience of statecraft. In the last years of his father's reign, it was Prince Chetsadabodin, as he was known, who handled all matters of importance,[2] and he was the conduit through which John Crawfurd had to pass during his unsuccessful mission to Siam in 1822. Indeed it was Prince Mongkut's comparative inexperience, as well as his youth, that probably led to his being passed over at what was considered a critical time; the East India Company on 5 May 1824 had declared war on Burma, traditionally a power in the region and one which had caused considerable trouble to Siam in the past, and on 10 May had occupied Rangoon unopposed.[3]

Crawfurd had to conduct his negotiations with "Prince Kromchiat [Chetsadabodin], the eldest son of the King, who superintended the foreign and commercial department."[4] He described him thus:

> "The Prince, a heavy and corpulent figure, about thirty-eight years of age, but having the appearance of fifty, sat on a mat towards the upper part of the room, leaning against a pillar... His countenance was sensible and good-natured..."[5]

He asked fairly banale questions, but showed interest in trade, and enquired if the British and Portuguese were at peace, doubtless ascribing importance to the latter from historical tradition. He was reassured.

There is a curious passage in Crawfurd, who wrote that the Portuguese consul, Mr. de Silveiro, "a native of the Brazils", and speaking excellent English and French, stated that Prince Chetsadabodin

> "had frequently expressed to him his admiration of the great achievements of the Emperor Napoleon; and that he had at last offered him a handsome sum of money, if he would translate from the French into the Portuguese language a history of his wars, for the purpose of being rendered into Siamese through the Christian interpreters."[6]

This passage shows that the future Rama III was much less closed to the outside world than one has been led to believe. Prince Chetsadabodin was obviously aware of the importance of Napoleon, who had died the year before Crawfurd's mission. The Prince almost certainly appreciated the changes in the region Napoleon's activities had caused: the seemingly powerful Dutch were occupied by the French. Under the terms of the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1788, and with the authority of the exiled Stadhouder William V. the British, at war with France, occupied Malacca from 1795 to 1818, and more importantly Java from 1811-1816. Only the fall of Napoleon after Waterloo led to the *status quo ante*.[7]

The serious eldest son of Rama II at Crawfurd's second audience on 18 April 1822 asked about the British occupation of Ceylon, another consequence of the Napoleonic wars, and if there were a cure for smallpox. Crawfurd, a medical doctor whose assistant on the mission, Finlayson, was also a physician, told him about cowpox. "His Highness wished to know whether the Governor-general of India would, if requested, send a skilful person to Siam, to instruct the Siamese in the use of this antidote."[8] Again, this request indicates that the future king was far from having a closed mind.

When Rama III come to the throne he was already 36. His reign was marked by personal piety and probity. He was no patron of the arts, unlike his father, and Thailand's most famous poet, Sunthorn Phu, suffered from his displeasure. The theatre was abandoned and temples prospered: Wats Thepthida, Rachanada, Chalerm Prakiat, Borworniwes, Prayurawong and Kalayanamit were founded and Wats Pho, Suthat, Ratchburana, Saket, Arun and Yannawa substantially added to in the reign. It would be tempting to present the king as anti-intellectual, but this would be unfair; he certainly did not persecute intellectuals nor prohibit the theatre, and he ordered the "university in stone" to be created in Wat Pho.

Crawfurd commented on "Christian interpreters," Siamese descendants of Portuguese adventurers, at the court of Rama II,

who not only had to interpret, but to supervise the laying out of the table in a Western fashion, and on formal occasions to act as waiters. They were mere flunkeys, being beaten on occasions like common slaves. But normally, even when these interpreters were present during Crawfurd's mission, they were not always allowed to interpret from Siamese into Portuguese and vice-versa. At the first meeting with the foreign minister, Crawfurd's "conversation was carried on in Malay through the medium of Ko-chai-sahak."[9] All formal interviews were conducted through Malay, as at the interview with the king, Rama II, on 8 April 1822, through the medium of "Ko-chai-sahak", who translated from Siamese into Malay and vice-versa, Crawfurd being fluent in Malay.

When the agreements accorded by the Siamese government were finally ready before Crawfurd's departure, he noted "The originals of both were in the Siamese language but they were accompanied by Portuguese translations." However, he gave in his published account of his mission the text of the letter to the Governor-General "as translated through the medium of the Malay"; this was presumably done verbatim from the Siamese, and Crawfurd provides an English rendering of his own.

The Portuguese first made an impact in the region in 1511 when they took Malacca, for Portuguese cannons and ships were far superior to those being used in the region. Malacca once taken became a centre of dissemination of Portuguese influence in the region. The earliest Portuguese (and the first westerners) to come to Siam used Malay to communicate, but Portuguese became the established language for communication with westerners and indeed between westerners. Phaulkon used Portuguese to communicate with the French in the 17th century. The Dutch are recorded as using Portuguese as a medium of communication with the Siamese in 1765. When the Director of the Dutch factory at Ayutthaya, Abraham Werndlij, was escaping with all his staff from the capital already besieged by the Burmese, he "wrote a letter to the *phraklang* informing him of their departure. He wrote it in Portuguese, because 'neither the interpreter nor anyone else in Siam speaks Dutch'."[10]

Prince Damrong[11] reminds us that the treaty negotiated by Captain Burney in 1826 was written in four languages, Siamese, English, Malay, and Portuguese "because neither the English nor the Siamese knew the language of the other." Burney in fact spoke some Siamese but much better Malay. He translated some documents himself into English from Malay.[12] Burney, incidentally, convinced that one of the chief problems experienced by Crawfurd was caused by linguistic difficulties, ensured all his document were written in Siamese and had gone armed with interpreters.

Malay was widely used for intraregional communication and served as a trading *lingua franca* for the Dutch East Indies Company. As has been seen, it was an official medium at the court of Rama II for communication with outsiders, and was used in correspondence. There is, for example, a record of the receipt of a letter in Malay from the King of Siam by Raffles in Singapore and of Raffles' reply in the same language.[13] The Phra Klang asked Crawfurd "as a favour, to afford my assistance in rendering an intelligible translation into

Siamese, through the medium of the Malay language, of a letter which he received from one of the secretaries of the Indian government." He did this with the aid of three Siamese secretaries, and complained of the difficulty in satisfying them. "They cavilled at and discussed every sentence as my Malayan [-Siamese] interpreter proceeded."[14]

Malay was interestingly not one of the languages used for drawing up the first treaty with the Americans in 1833. Knowing that Roberts had come through China and Vietnam, and unlike Crawfurd or Burney, had no background in Malay, his treaty was "written in four languages, viz: Siamese, Chinese, Portuguese and English, and is of the great length of nine feet and seven inches."[15]

English was hardly used at all during the Crawfurd and Burney missions.[16] Roberts came with Chinese interpreters, and the secretary of the mission came from Macao. Although American missionaries were established in Bangkok, he speaks of taking "Raymondo the Portuguese interpreter"[17] on a trip to witness the second king's funeral in the "praklang's boat" with Mr. Hunter of the party. Portuguese, backed if necessary by Chinese, appears to have been the language of the mission.

It was early during the reign of Rama III that the first permanent foreign missions were established. Protestant missionaries came to Siam in 1828 but did not stay. From June 1833 there was a continuous Protestant American mission (the first, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, withdrew in 1850) and the energetic Dan Beach Bradley arrived in 1835 with a printing press, the first in the country, and started the first newspaper, *The Bangkok Recorder*, in 1844. By the end of the reign there were three different American missions established in the country.

> "The Protestant missionaries were extremely active in many fields. They preached, translated religious tracts and portions of the Bible into Siamese, printed and distributed their translations, practiced medicine, and conducted schools."[18]

The Catholic mission was revitalised and expanded after 1830 and by 1849 had a bishop, eight European priests and some nuns. Their work was chiefly in direct contact and in schools. "The government of Rama III was, in general, tolerant of and even favorable to the Western missionaries; Western envoys and missionaries both agreed that this was so."[19] The skills they brought were appreciated, and the Phra Klang even specified to Bradley in 1838 the skills they should have, including botany, chemistry and minerology. It is true that in the last years of the reign, specifically in 1849 and 1850, there were difficulties with both the Catholic and the Protestant missions, but these Vella sees as "a reflection of [the king's] increasing distrust of foreigners and his worsening health."[20]

If the king had been a true reactionary, he would have banned the missions for the novelties they introduced and the threat they might have seemed to bring to the established tenets of the country. He did no such thing. The missions had a dismal lack of success in conversions, but they were not prevented from trying. The king even had a decree printed in Siamese on a mission press.

Crawfurd noted that the only things the Siamese claimed to want in trade items from the west were firearms.[21] Restrictive trade practices were in force for westerners (who were in competition with trading carried on by the king and the court), and this led to his mission. But the result of the war with Burma brought a change, and a certain awe of British power. Only after the Treaty of Yandabo was concluded, leaving the British masters of lower Burma, was Burney, on mission to Siam from 1825, able to turn the discussions to terms of trade. Rama III was originally opposed to a treaty but was persuaded by his advisors to accede. The trade agreement with the United States followed in 1833.

Trade did increase as a result of these treaties, but in the last ten years of the reign there was a decline, at least as far as foreign bottoms were concerned. The rise and fall in the fortunes of the first foreign trader settled in the country, the British Robert Hunter[22] reflected these changes. The decline in foreign trade was however to the personal benefit of the king and court. Rama III ordered superior square-rigged vessels in which to carry on trading; by 1847 he had at least eleven such ships and the nobles another six. These ships were given English names and had foreign crews, as Neale's testimony[23] makes very clear. Neale may exaggerate the importance of Hunter but it is significant from the point of view of language use that he appears to have been the only Western trader resident in Bangkok in the Third Reign.

Members of the royal family studied foreign languages, the most illustrious being Prince Mongkut, who aged twenty at the time of the death of his father and having just entered the monkhood, from discretion or choice, remained a monk throughout his half-brother's reign. Bradley commented

> "Like his brother Chutamani [Chudamani], Prince Mongkut was anxious to master Western languages. At an earlier time he had studied Latin with Bishop Pellagoix *(sic)*, and in 1839 he invited me to become his teacher in the English language... For a time I attempted to give English lessons to Mongkut five evenings a week, but this plan did not work out... It fell to the lot of my colleague and dearest friend, Rev. Jessse Caswell, to become the regular teacher of the Prince. Brother Caswell joined our mission in 1840... In the summer of 1845 Prince Mongkut invited Brother Caswell to visit him at Wat Baworniwet where they discussed a plan of instruction, which thereafter was followed for a span of eighteen months... The classes were conducted four days a week and were attended on a regular basis by ten young men in addition to the Prince. Mongkut himself was indefatigable in his efforts to acquire the English language."[24]

Dr. House was to follow as the royal teacher, the student preferring to work, for want of other reference material, as previously through the intermediary of a Pali-English dictionary. Prince Mongkut acquired a good working knowledge of the language, and if his turns of phrase are sometimes curious, they are, while indivi-

dualistic, always comprehensible. He became king in 1851 and used English secretaries and translators (one such was Robert Hunter, a son of the British merchant of the same name), and of course employed Anna Leonowens as tutor to his children.

King Mongkut's knowledge of English allowed for easy contact and close friendship with Sir John Bowring, who made several references to the favourable position of the language in 1855.[25] But King Mongkut's English was said to be not as good as that of his brother the Second King, Pra Pin Klao, who, as Prince Chudamani, through military and naval contacts in the Third Reign had acquired a fluent working knowledge of the language, and entertained in a completely western fashion.[26] Edmund Roberts, sent in 1833 to negotiate the treaty between the United States and Siam, noted :

> "He speaks and writes the English language with considerable fluency, and his pronunciation is very correct... he is a friend to the mechanic arts, and to the sciences; and is very friendly disposed, as well as his elder brother, towards foreigners. He seems solicitous to become acquainted with all Europeans and Americans"[27]

Bowring later was to note that during his visit to the Second King the furnishings "would lead you to believe you were in the house of an English gentleman" and that "there was a higher tone of civilization and better knowledge of European customs exhibited" than at his brother's palace.[28]

From the time of the ascension to the throne of King Mongkut, English and not Portuguese or Malay were used in international communication in Siam. The most obvious explanation is that the king spoke English and not the other languages, but his acquired mastery of the language was in response to a perception of changed political circumstances. The British had acquired Penang by 1785, Singapore in 1819, and were gradually extending their influence in the Malay peninsula. Singapore grew extremely rapidly, and King Mongkut ordered necessities through it, even Anna. English had the advantage, certainly perceived by King Mongkut if not emphasized by his American teachers, of not being merely the language of the dominant regional power, but of independent states as well.

Wyatt is certainly correct in his assessment of Rama III. He knew changes were taking place in the country and in the world around him, and probably saw them as inevitable.

> "He does not seem to have liked or approved of the direction of this change, but at the same time he did nothing to stand in its way. There was much he could have done--people he could have punished or expelled, practices he could have curbed, changes he could have resisted--but instead he allowed others to do as they wished while he himself clung to the old ways. He was a conservative, not a reactionary....".[29]

In the last year of the Third Reign, 1850, prompted by their decline in Siamese trade, two further missions came to Bangkok, those of Joseph Balestier, from March to April, from the United States and, from August to September, of Sir James Brooke (also Rajah of Sarawak) for Britain. Both were completely unsuccessful and failed to obtain anything. The king was already seen to be terminally sick and no one wished to compromise themselves given the uncertain nature of the succession in Siam at the time. Both left angry at what they saw as Siamese intransigence, "unyielding on every issue."[30] Their accounts, probably because they were not successful, were never published. Balestier was an American merchant consul in Singapore, and came only with one Chinese servant and an interpreter who was an American missionary based in Bangkok[31]; he was short-tempered and was told he would not be received by the king. Prince Damrong[32] says that the Brooke mission "was the first occasion that communications were carried on in the English language, because Sir James Brooke came direct from England" and adds, without giving a reference, that Prince Mongkut, the future king, helped in the negotiations in English. This seems curious, since Prince Mongkut was an abbot, and Phra Pin Klao, with his better English and lay status would, on the surface, seem a more likely choice of linguistic assistant. But whatever his origin or whoever his interpreter, the sick Rama III was in no mood to budge and seized upon every excuse not to continue the discussions.

Precisely because it was so late in the reign which had, in spite of external appearances, experienced so many profound changes, it would be interesting to know precisely who interpreted into what languages and on what occasions during the Brooke mission. Perhaps Ajarn Mayuri Sukwiwat; given her interest in historical linguistics and now her leisure in retirement, may care to examine the Thai texts at a critical point in linguistic usage in Siam.

Notes

(1) Smithies, M. (1988). The languages of international communication in Siam. *Living in Thailand, 17* (9-12).

(2) Finlayson, G. (1826). *The Mission to Siam and Hue 1821-22.* London: Murray, 128. "Almost all matters of government, in whatever department, are in the hands of this prince, who is considered to have shown genius and talent equal to the great charge with which he is intrusted. All matters relating to peace or war, to foreign intercourse, or to domestic regulations, to affairs of religion, of policy and of justice, are equally at his disposal, and rarely referred to the King, but for the purpose of obtaining his final consent."

(3) Hall, D.G.E. (1968). *A History of South-East Asia.* 3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 597.

(4) Crawfurd, J. (1828). *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China.* London: Colburn, 72.

(5) Crawfurd. *op. cit.* 85.

(6) Crawfurd. *op. cit.* 126. The future king was not the only person at the Siamese court in 1822 who was interested in Napoleon. The King, his father, Rama II, sent a messenger to the mission "at rather an unseasonable hour" of the night on 28 April with a puppet "purporting to represent an European. The object of this message was the singular request, that any of us who were skilled in such matters, would give the necessary directions for having the figure attired, so as to represent the late Emperor Napoleon; or if this as a matter of difficulty, that the puppet might be put into the costume of a young Englishman."

(7) Hall. *op. cit.* 498-9.

(8) Crawfurd. *op. cit.* 125.

(9) Crawfurd. *op. cit.* 82.

(10) Brummelhuis, Han ten. (1987). *Merchant, Courtier and Diplomat: A History of the Contacts between the Netherlands and Thailand.* Lochem: Uitgeversmaatsdschapij De Tijdstroom, 54.

(11) Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1926). "The introduction of western culture in Siam." *Journal of the Siam Society, XX* (2), 89-100.

(12) Burney, H. (1910-1914). *The Burney Papers.* Bangkok: Vajiranana National Library, *passim*; for example, *1.* 155, a reply to Captain Burney's note No. 13 of 2 February 1826 from Phaya Phiphut Kosa appears in *The Burney Papers* in English with the subscript "This letter written on Thursday... the 28th day of the 2nd Month in the year Four, Translated by means of a version in the Malay Language. (signed) H. Burney, Caytain, Envoy to the Court of Siam."

(13) Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, ed. A.H. Hill (1969). *The Hikayat Abdullah.* Singapore: Oxford University Press, 184-187. The king in question is certainly Rama II and not Rama III as Hill maintains. See Smithies, M. (1988). "Raffles and the King of Siam," *Living in Thailand, 17* (8), 46-50.

(14) Crawfurd. *op. cit.* 155-6.

(15) Roberts, E. (1837). *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochin China. Siam and Muscat... during the years 1823-3-4.* New York: Harper, 314.

(16) Crawfurd, *op. cit.* mentions the use of English only twice, once in relation to the Portuguese consul's ability in the language (105) and once concerning a Siamese Christian "who spoke some broken English" (84).

(17) Roberts. *op. cit.* 289.

(18) Vella, W. (1957). *Siam under Rama III 184-1851.* Locust Valley, New York: Augustin, 35-6.

(19) Vella, *op. cit.* 36.

(20) Vella, *op. cit.* 37.

(21) Crawfurd, *op. cit.* 89.

(22) Moore, R. Adey (1915). "An Early British Merchant in Bangkok", *Journal of the Siam Society XI* (2), 21–39.

(23) Neale, F. (1825). *Narrative of a residence in Siam.* London, National Illustrated Library, 43–44.

(24) Bradley, W. (1981). *Siam Then.* Pasadena Cal., Carely, 48.

(25) On 28 March "there was a letter from the King. It was brought... by three high officers, one of whom spoke English." He wrote of a Siamese captain "speaking English well. He had been in England in the service of Mr. Hunter"; Mr. Hunter, the son of the merchant of that name, acted as Bowring's interpreter on occasions. The Siamese employed "an Armenian, called Captain Joseph, speaking English well." Bowring noted that the king "has found means of employing many persons able to speak English," and one had studied in London from the age of fourteen. It was agreed neveetheless that Bowring would address the king through an interpreter when presenting his credentials. In the palace "almost everything seemed English" and even the soldiers were given their orders to present arms in English. At his audience Bowring gave a speech which "was put into Siamese and read aloud by the prime minister's brother"; Bowring's answers to the king's questions were "read aloud in a Siamese translation to the assembled nobles." Bowring insisted on the exactness of the English of the treaty "for we steadily refused to recognise the Siamese." All the same, Bowring decided to leave Mr. Bell, the student-interpreter, from his party for the purpose of learning Siamese, and the young man's services were offered to, and refused by the king, for the purpose of compiling in English a history of his times. Bowring, Sir John (1857). *The Kingdom and People of Siam.* London, Murray, 257, 270.

(26) Neale, *op. cit.* 92–3.

(27) Roberts, *op. cit.* 300.

(28) Bowring, *op. cit (vide* note 25) 324.

(29) Wyatt, D. (1984). *Thailand: A Short History.* London: Yale University Press. 175.

(30) Wyatt, *op. cit.* 179.

(31) Vella, *op. cit.* 134.

(32) Prince Damrong *op. cit.* 97.

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