

THE MYTH OF YAMADA NAGAMASA  
AND ITS EFFECT ON THAI-JAPANESE RELATIONS<sup>1</sup>

by

*Dr. H. Carroll Parish*

Funk and Wagnalls' *Comprehensive Standard Dictionary* describes a myth as "a fictitious narrative for a time received as historical; an unproved tradition." In the field of political science a myth is often considered as a belief, which may or may not be based on truth, that affects political developments. In our enquiry here the term "myth" will be treated in its political context.

Yamada Nagamasa is reputed to have been a Japanese adventurer who went to Siam during the seventeenth century, made a fortune and became a great noble. His supposed adventures and exploits became household knowledge in Japan because of a popular story written in 1707 by Tenjiku Tokubei, and because of the many fabulous stories that followed in its wake. Until the present century these stories were all but unknown in Siam.

Any Thai accounts about Yamada which may have existed were probably destroyed along with the greater part of Siam's historical records at the time of the capture of the capital city of Ayudhya by Burmese armies in 1767. Fortunately, several Westerners who lived in or visited Siam during the seventeenth century kept extensive diaries, made written reports to their superiors, and published books containing their views and accounts.

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1. Based upon a paper delivered at the Fourth International Conference of Orientalists in Tokyo on May 22, 1959.

It is agreed that Japanese adventurers and traders came to Siam during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that, in the early part of the latter century, the Japanese in the country may have numbered more than one thousand. Trade with foreign countries was encouraged during the early years of the Tokugaza Shogunate, and records for the years 1604 through 1616 show that during that time more than forty-four charters were issued to Japanese ships engaged in trade with Siam. In this early period, Siamese merchant ships were promised the freedom of Japanese ports and at least six official Siamese missions were sent to Japan during the period between 1616 and 1656.

It was the custom of Siamese kings to employ foreign troops in their armies and as royal bodyguards. In the wars between the Siamese and Burmese in the sixteenth century it is recorded that both sides employed Portuguese mercenaries. Dutch and Japanese records agree that a Japanese Guard was maintained by several Siamese monarchs. Sir Ernest Mason Satow in his "Notes on the Intercourse between Japan and Siam in the Seventeenth Century," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, XIII, pt. 2 (1885), mentions on page 187 that up to 1884 the Siamese Royal Guard included a section known as *Asa Jipun*, headed by an official bearing the title of *Phraya Senaphimuk*.

Siamese officials were referred to by the titles they held at that time. Royal titles were composed of two main parts which successively indicated the person's rank and then described his task or accomplishments. Ranks in the seventeenth century included that of Mūn, and progressed through Khun, Luang, and Phra to Phraya. The descriptive part of the title was quite often used only in an abbreviated form because of its length. Thus *Senaphimuk* was the short form for *Senaphimuk-raxa-montri*, which was composed of the Thai words *sena* meaning "troops," *phimuk* meaning "chief," *raxa* meaning "guard," and *montri* meaning "honor." A Luang Senaphimuk is mentioned in the reign of King Naresuen (1589-1594) and an official bearing the

same descriptive title is mentioned frequently in histories of the reigns of his immediate successors.

Because all history is subject to exaggeration, bias, and distortion, it is necessary to compare the accounts written by authors of different backgrounds, interests, and nationalities in order to arrive at probable truths in their points of agreement. The first recorded comparison of Japanese and Western accounts of the career of Yamada in Siam may be found in Satow's paper which was originally delivered on November 19, 1884. In this paper he suggested that the *Khun Chaija Sun*, who was later promoted to *Oya* (Phraya) *Senaphimuk*, mentioned in Jeremias van Vliet's *Beschrijving van het Koninkrijk Siam* (1692) as translated into French, and the "Yamada Nagamasa" mentioned in the various Japanese chronicles were one and the same person.

In 1913, after examining Thai records and comparing them with translations of van Vliet's work and the Japanese stories, Professor Sakae Miki, a Japanese employed by the Royal Household Ministry, substantiated Satow's hypothesis. He also analyzed the correspondence exchanged between officials of the two countries, including letters written by Yamada himself, and he argued that these documents conclusively proved that the two individuals were the same person. In 1926, W.A.R. Wood, a British resident official in Siam for more than thirty years, supported Miki's conclusions in his *History of Siam* which was published in Bangkok.

In 1930, Professor Miki's analysis of Japanese stories about Yamada, in the light of van Vliet's history, was made public in Japan under the title "Yamada Nagamasa no Jiseki," and appeared in the July and August issues of the *Shigaku Zasshi*. The following year these articles were translated into English by Mr. Tetsuo Okumura and published in a booklet entitled *The Exploits of Olya Senaphimocq (Yamada Nagamasa), the Japanese General in Siam in the Seventeenth Century*.

In 1934, the doctoral dissertation of Professor Kiichi Gunji, a former Japanese Consul-General in Bangkok, was published by the Japanese Foreign Office. Entitled *Jushichi Seiki ni okeru Nissen Kankei*, it contained more than 150 pages devoted to the story of Yamada, based on Dr. Gunji's examination of the works of van Vliet and Wood. But, whereas Wood gave Yamada credit for the conquest of Petchaburi in 1610, Dr. Gunji showed that the leader of that exploit was in reality Shiroy Kynyémon (Dr. Iwao calls him "Kii Kyuemon"), who was given the Thai title of *Luang Sou-Pattrou* (or *Oluang Son Sattorou*). Subsequent works by Professor Murakami, such as *Rokkon O YAMADA Nagamasa* (1942), and by other authors were based, at least in part, on Dr. Gunji's *magnum opus*.

Beginning in 1930, Dr. Seiichi Iwao conducted extensive research in the Dutch Royal Archives at The Hague, and he discovered the original Flemish version of van Vliet's accounts. He also copied and translated records of the East India Company and compared with one another the several works and translations of van Vliet. The result of these studies, which took place over a number of years, was several articles and the most definitive work to date concerning the life of Yamada in Siam, the two volume *Historiael Verhael der Sieckte ende... door Jeremias van Vliet, 1640* (1958).

The distinguished scholar-statesman, H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, began the reconstruction of his country's history by instituting a thorough search for existing records in Siam, and, during his trips abroad, by collecting histories that had been compiled by foreigners. In 1904, he arranged for the publication of W.H. Mundie's English translation of the French version of van Vliet's history and, twelve years later, he sponsored the initiation of the publication by the Vajiranana National Library in Bangkok of a work known as the *Records of the Relations between Siam and Foreign Countries in the 17th Century*. The last volume of the *Records*, all of which, according to Dr. Iwao, were based mainly on accounts in Great Britain's India Office, came off the press in 1921,

Textbook histories of Siam used in the schools in that period included a brief account of the seventeenth century Japanese colony and referred to Okya Senaphimuk's exploits. In 1913, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) requested his retiring chief legal advisor, Dr. Tokichi Masao, (Phraya Mahidon), to collect and send him such materials concerning Siamese-Japanese relations as could be found in Japan. On his return home, Masao secured the aid of Professor Sanji Mikami at Tokyo University and Professor Ginzo Uchida at Kyoto University. Also assisting in this task was a graduate student of Professor Mikami, now Dr. Koya Nakamura, who, at first, collected materials in the Tokyo area and, later, assisted with proofreading and compilation.

Prefaced by an English summary written by Dr. Masao, the *Siam-Japan Interchange Historical Material* contained a section entitled "The Rise and Fall of Yamada." Although five copies were prepared, only one was made complete. This copy was presented to the King in 1914. According to Dr. Iwao (*op. cit.*, p.v.) several copies of these documents were also sent to the Vajiranana National Library. Their interest excited by this project, Professor Uchida published a book, *Nihon to Taikoku tono Kankei* (1931), and Dr. Nakamura produced an article, "Yamada Nagamasa, Japanese Warrior in Old Siam," which was later published in *Cultural Nippon*, VII (December, 1939).

In 1935, Phya Srishtikar Banchong, who devoted many years to the promotion of better understanding between the Siamese and Japanese peoples, published a booklet in Thai and English based on Satow's paper which was called *A Brief History of Okya Senaphimukh (Chao Phya Nakorn) (Yamada Nagamasa) in the time of Ayudhya in the reign of King Prasart Tong*. A former Ambassador to Japan, Luang Vichitr Vadakarn, and Phya Mahai Suwan have also made an effort to popularize a favorable version of the Yamada story among the Siamese people.

In spite of the continuing efforts of the most competent researchers, however, the Yamada story remains largely a myth. Such important facts as the date and place of Yamada's birth, his

status in Japan, the date and manner of his coming to Siam, his life in Siam, and the manner and date of his death remain to be verified.

One example of the factual disagreement among scholars about Yamada concerns the manner of his death. On the one hand, as Dr. Nakamura points out, on page 84 of his article mentioned above, that according to Siamese history Yamada died a natural death. Both H.S.H. Princess Poon Pismai Diskul and Khun Dhanit Yupho, Director-General of the Fine Arts Department, substantiate this conclusion in recently published articles. On the other hand, three Japanese scholars argue that Yamada was poisoned, although they differ as to the exact method employed. Professor Miki on page 21 of his book in English states that Yamada's death was due to a "poisoned plaster" which was placed on a wound in his leg. Dr. Gunji, on page 364 of an article entitled "Yamada Nagamasa, Japanese Condottiere in Thailand," *Contemporary Japan*, X (March, 1941), states that Yamada died of poison placed in his food. However, on page xxvii of the later study by Dr. Iwao it is mentioned that an attendant "applied poison as though it were medicine."

There is also a question concerning the veracity of the source of information which has been considered the most reliable, that of the merchant, Jeremias van Vliet. If 1630 is accepted as the year of Yamada's death, it must be noted that van Vliet did not set foot on Siamese soil prior to 1633. Then, as Dr. Gunji and other writers point out, the literature of the time clearly testifies to the rivalry between the Japanese and Dutch in Siam and contains many slanderous remarks by Dutch merchants about the Japanese. Is it possible that van Vliet's accounts concerning Yamada were biased? Most Westerners in rendering accounts of their visits and residence in Asian countries were prone to exaggerate and distort the facts. Was it possible for van Vliet to have been an exception?

To the Japanese, Yamada became an important symbol of the interest they began to be evince during the 1930's in the countries to their south. The achievements of Yamada were constantly praised. The statement of Dr. Nakanura on page 94 of his article mentioned above is typical of those made at that time. He says: "Yamada-Nizayemon-Nagamasa was a heroic adventurer in Siam, but at the same time he was a pioneer in promoting friendly relations with that country. He certainly deserves mention in bold letters in the diplomatic history of Japan." In 1921, when summing up the virtues of the late Dr. Masao, Minister Yoshida called him a "second Yamada Nagamasa." He called attention to the fact (?) that both men were born in Owari Province and that the Japanese kanji for "masa" in Masao was identical with the kanji for "masa" in Nagamasa.

In the decade preceeding World War II, the Japanese Government strongly encouraged and financially supported research on Southeast Asian countries, and the Foreign Office published or assisted in the publication of materials concerning Japanese-Thai relations, including stories of Yamada Nagamasa. Japanese motion picture companies on two occasions sent representatives to Siam to develop plans to film the story of Yamada in its original setting. On September 26, 1937, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the signature of the first *Declaration of Amity and Commerce* between Japan and Siam, the Japan Society (Bangkok) held a ceremony in Ayudhya to celebrate the completion of a shrine dedicated to Yamada Nagamasa.

Although, after the publication of Wood's *History of Siam*, the Siamese gradually became aware of the historical personage of Yamada Nagamasa, their image of his activities was not always a particularly favorable one. One reason for this was their determination to prevent foreign interference in their internal affairs. Many Siamese people believe that Yamada was a rebel against his sovereign. Others agree that if Yamada died of poisoning as reported in Japanese accounts, he deserved such a fate because of his meddling in Siamese politics.

In spite of these opinions, the favorable Yamada story issued under the guidance of Luang Vichitr Vadakarn and Mr. Yanagisawa Ken remains an effective one. Many young Thai have developed a sympathetic attitude toward this version of the myth. And in Japan the interest in Yamada remains strong. A motion picture about him, although of doubtful historical authenticity, has recently been produced. It was made by Daiei Productions in cooperation with Siam's veteran producer, H.R.H. Prince Bhanubhand Yugala, and it was released in May 1959. It is hoped that this continuing Japanese interest in Yamada will be channelled into more extensive scholarly investigations and that Yamada may yet emerge more clearly as a political symbol whose lustre will not depend upon the vicissitudes of political relations.