

REVIEW ARTICLES

A PERSIAN MISSION TO SIAM IN THE REIGN OF KING NARAI
ibn Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, Translated from the Persian by John O'Kane (Persian Heritage Series, No. 11; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, and New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). x, 250 pp.

Some years ago, intrigued by comments I had made about the origins of the Bunnag family, one of my students suggested she might study the Persian language and investigate Thai relations with Persia in the seventeenth century. My response must have carried with it a hint of ridicule, for she never mentioned the subject again. I am now embarrassed to have to tell her that the study of Persian would have repaid her efforts, for John O'Kane has brought to light a previously unsuspected, major source for the history of Siam with his translation of *The Ship of Sulaimān*, published in the impressive series of English, French, and Italian translations in the "Persian Heritage Series" edited by Ehsan Yar-Shater of Columbia University.

The *Safīna'i Sulaimānī* was written by ibn Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, secretary of a mission sent by Shah Sulaimān the Safavid (1666-94) to King Narai in 1685. The work must have been written shortly after the mission's return to Persia in May, 1688. O'Kane says virtually nothing about the original manuscript bearing on its provenance, save that "it has been sitting in the British Museum for many years now." In a fourteen-page Translator's Preface he presents the work primarily as an example of Persian literature. Although written as an official report, it is a work of considerable imagination, contrived and stylized, and littered with cliché. This Preface succeeds remarkably well at conveying to the reader some understanding of a style that might easily be taken as eccentric, but which in fact is fairly typical of the official style of a cultivated man of the author's day.

The work is divided into four main parts or "jewels," preceded by an introduction in which the author praises God and his ruler and outlines the background to the mission. Here he explains that King Narai sent a certain Ḥāji Salīm Māzandarāni as an envoy to Iran in 1682, to which the 1685 mission was the Persian response.

Part I, the "First Jewel," describes the early portion of the mission's journey, from Bandar 'Abbās on the Persian Gulf on 27 June 1685 through

their short stay in India. Of some interest here are the author's comments on his contacts with Europeans in India.

Part II, the "Second Jewel," begins with the mission's departure from India on 16 September 1685. The mission then traversed the Bay of Bengal to Siamese Tenasserim, where they landed at Mergui and travelled by way of Tenasserim town, Jalang (in the headwaters of the Tenasserim River?), Paj Purī (Phetburi), Sūhān (Suphanburi?), and Shahr Nāv (Ayudhya) to Lubū (Lopburi), where the mission was received by King Narai. The mission was entertained in Lopburi for some time, hunting elephant and tiger, and then followed the king back to Ayudhya. Remaining quite a considerable space of time there, the envoys finally took their leave of the king in formal audience and sailed for their return home on 18 January 1687.

Part III, the "Third Jewel," is an extremely interesting attempt at "recording some facts about the local conditions." In particular, the author recounts what had been related to him as recent Siamese history. He gives a brief account of "The war between Siam and Paigū [Pegu]," and writes at some length about the role of the Iranian community in Siam in the seventeenth century. He ascribes to them a major role in bringing King Narai to the throne on a date he gives equivalent to 17 October 1657.¹ Two Persians are mentioned as having held the office of "prime minister" subsequently filled by Constantine Phaulkon: 'Abdu-r-Razzāq of Gīlān and Āqā Muḥammad Astarābādī. The latter, long in favor with King Narai, introduced into the court an Iranian Guard of 200 men apparently similar to the Japanese Guard of Ekathotsarot's reign and the French of 1688. After discussing briefly the rise of Phaulkon, he moves through a long series of desultory comments about life in Siam, and particularly on Buddhist religious belief and practice, the legal system, the character and religious faith of King Narai, marriage, debt bondage, and various festivals. He includes nearly four pages on the Macassarese and their revolt of 1686, and has an even longer section on court administrative procedure, the income and expenses of the Crown, and trade in various commodities.

Part IV, the "Fourth Jewel," has very little to do with Siam or the Iranian mission. It is a miscellaneous collection of information on winds

1) The dates given by the *Royal Autograph Chronicle* of Ayudhya for Narai's "victory over his enemies" and invitation to become king are, respectively, equivalent to 29 October and 4 November 1657.

and tides, various forms of animal life, notes on Ceylon, Atjeh, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Spanish Manila, Japan and Dutch activities there, Pegu, and China. The last portion of this section, however, details the mission's return journey from Siam, beginning with their embarkation aboard a Sūrāt vessel on 21 December 1686. The mission sailed via Patani and Malacca to Cochin, and eventually returned to Bandar 'Abbas on 14 May 1688.

A short final section entitled "The Case of Abū'l-Ḥasan and the Fall of Ḥaidarābād" briefly recounts "The latest news from India."

The audience for which *The Ship of Sulaimān* was intended may have read it in several different ways. Although formally written as an official report of the mission, it is little more useful in that regard than John Crawford's *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China*, for the author's account of official business takes second place to his description of unfamiliar peoples and places. His account is written more as an expression and affirmation of his own society's Islamic religious beliefs and values. Most of all, however, it must have been read for its style, for its inventive metaphor, for its learned borrowings from Islamic, Persian, and Indian literature, and for its incessant cleverness. It is not, perhaps, a style with which most English readers will at first be comfortable, but as one proceeds through the book it assumes a weight and form that bring its author alive.

The importance of *The Ship of Sulaimān* to those interested in Thai history is considerable. Its evidence bears on three main themes: the foreign policy of King Narai, the Persian community in Siam, and the rise and fortunes of the Bunnag family in the seventeenth century.

The connection with Persia is treated only in passing in the conventional accounts of King Narai's reign, and much of its significance often is lost in general references to "the Moors." *The Ship of Sulaimān* expands upon, and renders more concrete, vague references in such accounts as that of Père de Bèze, which mentions Phaulkon's supervision of a mission to Persia at some unspecified date,² which on the evidence of the Persian account must have taken place in 1682. Even cursory examination of the history of the Persian mission of 1685-87 suggests that it might be useful to consider Narai's foreign policy within an inter-

2) E.W. Hutchinson, *1688 Revolution in Siam: The Memoir of Father de Bèze, s.j.* (Hong Kong, 1968), pp. 11-12.

national framework much broader than the Thai-French-Dutch-English pattern within which it usually is viewed.

Muḥammad Ibrāhīm's frequent references to the Persian community in old Siam are a real eye-opener in many ways. He mentions the presence of Persians wherever he went in Siam, beginning with high public officials in the Tenasserim province, Phetburi, and Suphanburi, and including numerous merchants and officials including the highest officials in the kingdom. He explains that "From the time merchants first arrived until just before the present king came to power, about thirty Iranians had settled in Siam due to the great profits to be made in trade" (p. 94), and later notes that 200 Iranians were recruited in India for service in the royal bodyguard. The community subsequently was racked with dissension and lost permanently its grip on public affairs when Phaulkon succeeded to the office of prime minister previously held by three successive Iranians. The significance of Muḥammad Ibrāhīm's numerous references to the Iranian community in Siam is that they enable one to begin to see better, in ways not previously possible, some of the details of Ayudhya's social and economic structure, particularly as that structure incorporated immigrant communities. His account is the first we have had from within any Muslim community of Ayudhya, and is of assistance not least in enabling us to see how Dutch and English traders of the time were treated like other Asian traders.

Finally, material contained in *The Ship of Sulaimān* provides important information that goes a long way towards solving the mystery of the origins and early history of the Bunnag family, a noble family powerful in the affairs of the kingdom of Siam for more than three centuries.³ At the same time, it provides startling confirmation of the validity of some of the historical work of the much-maligned K. S. R. Kulāp.⁴

Of the Persians specifically mentioned by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, there are the following individuals:

- (1) Ḥājī Salīm Māzandrānī, Siamese king's envoy to Persia (1682), pp. 20, 44, 46, 53, 104-5

3) See D.K. Wyatt, "Family Politics in Nineteenth Century Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* IX : 2 (September 1968), esp. pp. 211-12, 214.

4) See Craig J. Reynolds, "The Case of K.S.R. Kulap : A Challenge to Royal Historical Writing in Late Nineteenth Century Thailand" *Journal of the Siam Society* 61 : 2 (July 1973), pp. 63-90.

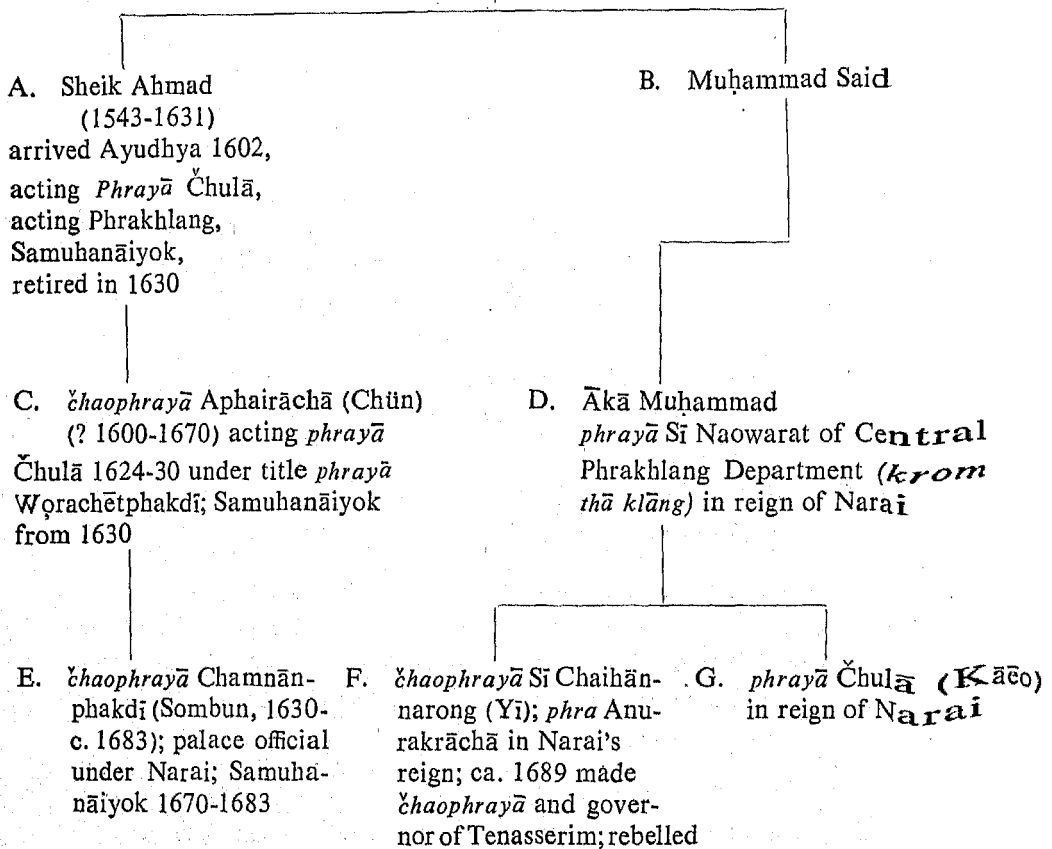
- (2) (unnamed), former governor of Tenasserim or Mergui (?), p. 46
- (3) Muḥammad Ṣādiq, son of (2), pp. 46-47
- (4) Sayyid Māzandarānī, governor of Phetburi, p. 50
- (5) Rajah Chelebī, "from among the people of Rūm" (i.e., Anatolia), rajah of Suphanburi, pp. 50-51
- (6) Khwāja Ḥasan 'Alī, from Khurāsān, "presently holds the ministerial post which Āqā Muḥammad held and as such is the head of the Iranian community in Siam," pp. 55, 69, 74-75, 144 (?)
- (7) Āqā Muḥammad Astarābādī, [see quotation above under (6)]: originally from Astarābād, settled in Siam to trade, became minister (ca. 1660 ?), fell out of favor; "has been dead for a while now" (p. 101); Phaulkon was hired when he was still in office (p. 103); cf. pp. 55, 58, 59, 77, 98, 100-103, 126, 151, 218
- (8) 'Abdu'r-Razzāq, "whose family is from Gīlān," made prime minister by King Narai in 1657, continued in office several years, then was imprisoned and died; pp. 97-98
- (9) Chū Chī, and (10) Chū Kīā, sons of (8), sent into exile; pp. 101-102
- (11) (unnamed) prime minister, originally from Shūshtar, lineage traced to the Mullā Ḥasan 'Alī of Shūshtar, assassinated, shortly after appointment as premier; pp. 102-103
- (12) Sayyid Dardmandī, poet from Khurāsān, commissioned by Narai to present a written summary of the Shāhnāma; p. 127.

The conventional accounts of Bunnag genealogy mention none of these individuals.⁵ The only detailed information on Bunnag genealogy in this period is provided in a rare book compiled by K.S.R. Kulāp in the early years of the current century.⁶ On the basis of this, the following genealogical chart may be constructed :

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5. พระยาบุรุษรัตนราชพัณณตริ, *จดหมายเหตุ/ระถมวงศกกุลขุนนาง* (พระนคร, 2482); เจ้าพระยาทิพากรวงศ์, *สกุลเอกอหัมดี* (ลำดับสกุลเก่าบางสกุล ภาค 3; พระนคร, 2473).
 6. ก.ศ.ร. กุหลาบ, *มหานุชมาตยานุกุลวงศ์ เล่ม 1 ว่าด้วยลำดับวงศ์ตระกูลขุนนางไทยทั้งสิ้นในแผ่นดินสยาม* (พระนคร, ร.พ. สยามประเภท, ร.ศ. 124, พ.ศ. 2448).

EARLY ANCESTORS OF THE BUNNAG FAMILY

Merchant family of
Ma-ngon Muslims,
of Müang Kuni



The only firm correspondence between the list of individuals mentioned in *The Ship of Sulaimān* and the genealogy provided by K.S.R. Kulāp is between the former's (7) and the latter's (D)—Āqā Muḥammad (which Kulāp spells as อากาหมะหมัด). Several other tentative identifications might also be put forward :

- (2) the former governor of Mergui or Tenasserim may be Kulāp's (F), although we might expect that individual's descent from Āqā Muḥammad would have been mentioned;
- (6) apparently refers to the position of *phrayā* Čhulārāčhamontrī, head of the Right-hand Department of the Phrakhlang (*krom thā khwā*), a post consistently held by Bunnags in the nineteenth century. This might be Kulāp's (G); and
- (8) might be identified with Kulāp's (C), although the latter's dates are suspicious.

Even if only the identification of Āqā Muḥammad holds, this is sufficient cause for us to take most seriously the enormous quantity of genealogical and historical information published around the turn of the century by K.S.R. Kulāp which, among other things, includes extensive discussion of Chinese commercial families in Ayudhya early in the eighteenth century.

There are many small points on which O'Kane's translation of *The Ship of Sulaimān* might be criticized. Notes on Siamese aspects of the book are wholly inadequate, especially in the failure to identify relatively simple toponyms and Thai words (e.g., mahālak มหาเล็ก, ṣālah lakūn ศาลาลูกขุน, Kurūm Kān กรมการ, Kawām ความ, Vām Prā วันพระ). The index is incomplete : it lists, for example, only four of the nine or ten references to Āqā Muḥammad. And a fuller account of the origins and provenance of the British Museum manuscript would have been appreciated. These are, however, only minor faults.

The Ship of Sulaimān deserves to be included among the most important primary sources for the history of Siam in the reign of King Narai. It is particularly welcome because it should serve to open up new avenues of inquiry that have previously been neglected.

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