SLAVERY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY SIAM

by

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This paper will set forth a description of the slavery system in the 19th century in what was then called Siam. Through summarizing the established views of this system, certain deficiencies will be suggested and alternative explanations of the system and its history advanced. I will then briefly describe the socio-political structure of Thai society and its relationship to slavery. Using a patron-client perspective I will argue that slavery in 19th century Siam should be seen as participating in the basic dynamics and structure of Thai society. Moreover, I will suggest that this perspective allows us to propose answers to certain puzzles about the nature of slavery as well as moves us away from a static presentation of slavery toward one which offers hypotheses for changes and conflicts within the society as a whole.

In this discussion I will be dealing with a pre-national state and will focus on the central area of that state, where control by Bangkok was strongest, where there were no semi-independent city-states, and where the complications of Lao and Cambodian vassals and vassal states are eliminated. Even though the extent of this "central area" was constantly being expanded in the 19th century as central power grew, spread, and was consolidated, it was still only by the end of the 19th century that some newly established laws in the "center" were applied to the "fringe" area.[1]

Slavery as practiced in Siam has long been seen as more debt-bondage than slavery as we know it in the Americas.[2] This distinction, which I

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1) For instance, the 1905 abolition of slavery laws was only later in force in the Lao states. James C. Ingram. *Economic Change in Thailand : 1850-1970* (Palo Alto : Stanford University Press, 1971), p. 63.

2) For instance, see John Bowring. *The Kingdom and People of Siam, with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855* (London : John W. Parker and Son, 1857), v. 1, p. 189 and 193; and Ingram, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

accept, will become clearer in the light of the discussion below. For convenience I shall continue to use the terms "slave" and "slavery" since there are not clear and less cumbersome alternatives.

I

The laws on slavery list seven "types" of slaves : [3]

1. Those who had been redeemed with property.
2. Children of slaves born in the house of the master.
3. Slaves given to children by their parents (or inherited).
4. Slaves who had been acquired as a gift.
5. Slaves who had been rescued from imminent perils and legal penalties.
6. Slaves who had been supported in times of famine.
7. Slaves who had been conquered in war.

Both Akin Rabibhadana and Lingat point out that the list is in fact a survey of ways one could become a slave, not a list of types of slave at all.[4] It might be said that there are actually two main slave types in Siam in this period, though they too are described in part by method of acquisition, namely the war captives and debt-bondage slaves.[5]

Not much has been written about the category of war captives in Siam. It seems clear, however, that their fate, once they had arrived

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3) Akin Rabibhadana. *The Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period : 1782-1873* (Ithaca : Cornell University, 1969 (Data Paper Number 74), p. 105. Different phrasing but the same sense can be found in Bowring, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 195.

4) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, p 105. Robert Lingat. *L'Esclavage Privé dans le Vieux Droit Siamois* (Avec une traduction des anciennes lois siamoises sur l'esclavage) (Paris : Les Editions Domat-Montchrestien, 1931), p. 41-50.

5) I am omitting, for lack of information, hill people and temple slavery. The former could easily have followed an assimilation pattern similar to that of the war captives. I am also omitting any discussion of the maritime slave traders who sold slaves to Siam, though here too a similar assimilation pattern is imaginable. For this last group, see John Crawfurd. *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China, Exhibiting a View of the Actual State of Those Kingdoms* (London : Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), v. 1, p. 226-227.

through forced marches from the scene of the battle or raid, was generally good. Barriers to assimilation would not necessarily be high, especially since this was before nationalism existed.[6] However, preservation of language group identity, as remarked on by Bowring, was common.[7] There were three main functions of war captives: to serve in the army, to augment the victorious state's population, and to provide labor for the king. Bowring points out that for use in the military the various groups had different assignments; thus Malays were used as sailors and Cochin Chinese, Laos, and some Malays and Peguans were soldiers. He also mentions that they were paid and fed on duty, which was usually only three months a year, the rest of the time to be spent as they saw best.[8] The increase in Siam's population was aided by the settlement of captive family and village groups in areas of need.[9] King's labor was used directly around the palace or given, presumably as *phrai luang* (see below), to nobles.

None of these alternatives would seem to have necessarily hindered incorporation of the war captives into the Siamese social system. Moreover, no source mentions any significant attempts to escape after they had been brought back. Indeed, there seems little reason why they should flee, since there is no mention of harsh treatment. In fact, at least in the 19th century, the laws concerning them seem to have been similar to those for Thai slaves. For instance, they had by at least 1801 the right to purchase their freedom according to a fixed range of prices (based on sex and age), which were the same for those born into slavery and those who were bought with their mothers.[10] Clearly then, except in method of acquisition and the separateness of ethnic-language

6) H.G. Quaritch Wales. *Ancient Siamese Government and Administration* (London: Bernard Quaritch, Ltd., 1934), p. 64.

7) Bowring, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 189-190.

8) *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 190.

9) *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 191.

10) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, p. 106. See Walter F. Vella. *Siam Under Rama III : 1824-1851* (New York : J.J. Augustin, Inc., 1957), p. 26; Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 60; and Virginia Thompson. *Thailand, the New Siam* (New York : The Macmillan Co., 1941), p. 600, who say they were allowed in 1805 to buy their freedom.

affiliation, the war captives can be included under the general category of debt-bondage slaves, and will be considered as such henceforth in this paper.

Slavery through debt-bondage was possible in three ways. The first type is what Wales calls "redeemable slaves", or people who had been sold for less than the fixed price and who had a guarantor who was held responsible if the slave fled. The slave could be returned if the owner were dissatisfied.[11]

The second group of debt-bondage slaves is what Wales and many others have called "non-redeemable" slaves. These were individuals who were sold at a price higher than the fixed price. These had no guarantor; if the slave fled, the owner had to bear the loss.[12] Wales, as his term suggests, held that this type of slave could not purchase his freedom.[13] Lingat disagrees, for the 19th century at least, as does Akin Rabibhadana.[14] We will see that they were a special sort of slave and perhaps redemption would have been unusual, though I doubt if it was impossible.

The third type of slave, not discussed by Wales, was what I will call "pro forma security" slaves. These were people who were advanced as security against a loan. The common example is a poor man offering his wife as security for a loan from a rich man. However, the wife would not stay with the rich man but remain with her husband; the husband merely paid interest at some agreed upon rate. Possession, even in cases of default, seems not to have been allowed.[15]

11) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, p. 107; Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 59-60.

12) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-108.

13) Wales, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60. Also Ingram, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14; W.A. Graham. *Siam* (London : Alexander Maring, Ltd., 1924), v. 1, p. 235; Bowring, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 405-406; and M. Pallegoix. *Description du Royaume Thai ou Siam* (Paris : Imp. de Vialat et Companie, 1854), v. 1, pp. 298-299.

14) Lingat, *op. cit.*, p. 66; Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, p. 108, whose example, however, deals with an abused slave of this sort whose price was lessened by two-thirds, thus suggesting to me that they were saleable and "redeemable".

15) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

It is clear that all three cases are bondage due to debt or bondage through seemingly voluntary sale.   It has been said that either one-third or one-fourth of the six million people in Siam (of which about two million were Thai, c. 1854) were debt-slaves,[16] and at least one scholar says the numbers were increasing.[17]   The sale and purchase of slaves was, however, a private matter between the one selling (or being sold), the buyer, and, probably, the patron of the one being sold (see below) : "there was no slave market, nor any evidence of selling slaves for profit . . . ."[18]

Bowring suggests that the "redeemable" slaves were probably more common than the "non-redeemable" ones, since there was no guarantor and "more than four-fifths" of them fled when they could.   He adds that the most common type of "non-redeemable" slave was "young girls sold by their parents".[19]   This suggests that the "non-redeemable" slaves were bought for non-labor duties, probably for prostitution, hence their being sold at a price higher than usual.   It seems reasonable that if four-fifths fled the remaining fifth might have been too small to trace accurately.   Moreover, to be absolutely non-redeemable is highly inconsistent with the whole system as we will see.

It seems to me that a basic idea of the system is the measurement of rights over slaves, with the more paid the more power one had over them.   Thus the "non-redeemable" slaves were sold for the most and had the least recourse to freedom, because they had no guarantor or protector. (Without a guarantor these individuals would have to contract with a new patron, purchase their own freedom, or flee to regain freedom; such possibilities would not have been impossible within this system, only perhaps more difficult).   The "pro forma security" slaves were, presumably, "bought" for the least money and had the greatest amount of freedom since they continued to live at home.   "Redeemable" slaves would be a middle case with gradations possible within that group.   There could

16) Pallegoix, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 235, says one-third; v. 1, p. 298, says one-fourth; v. 1, p. 8, gives the approximate number of Thai.
17) Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
18) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
19) Bowring, *op. cit.*, v. 1. p. 191.

well have been complicating factors, such as the personality of the slave owner and his power *vis-a-vis* the guarantor, which would make the correspondence of price and power less than perfect. The three types might very well overlap. Nonetheless, it seems that some such grada-tion is implied.

In any event, most observers suggest that slaves in Siam were very well-treated.[20] The rights of the owner and the limits of punishment seem to have varied, depending on whether the slave was "redeemable" or not; probably the "pro forma security" slaves were best off. Punish-ment for any slave was limited to that "necessary" to ensure obedience; but what was "necessary" had to stop short of permanent injury, breakage, gashes, or death, or the master would be subject to fines or to having the price of the slave reduced : "It is certain that the master had no power of life and death over any kind of slave".[21] Slaves could own and inherit property.[22] While the head of a household had the legal right to sell himself, after 1867 his wife and children had to give their permission before they could be sold.[23] Slaves could enter into contracts,[24] were granted access to the courts of justice (but see below), and had the right of self-redemption. The price of the original sale was the price of redemption, no matter at what other prices he might have been sold subsequently; the new master in such a case had to get the difference, if more, from the old master. Prices for those born into slavery or transferred as children were set, as I pointed out in discussing war captives. Moreover, the sale of slaves had to be accompanied by a contract in writing, setting forth the date of sale, the price paid, the name of the purchaser, the name of the guarantor, and the name of the slave; the master had to give it up upon demand of the slave wishing to purchase his freedom.[25] Akin Rabibhadana has a compact description

20) *Ibid.*, v. 1, pp. 123-124; Pallegoix, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 233; Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
21) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, p. 108; also see *Ibid.*, p. 107.
22) *Ibid.*, p. 120 and p. 105.
23) *Ibid.*, p. 105.
24) Bowring, *op. cit.*, v. 1, pp. 191-192.
25) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

of the other obligations and restrictions on the master, which is worth quoting in full : [26]

> In regard to legal protection for slaves, the right was given to a slave to redeem himself in case the master refused to accept the payment. When the slave had been in the service of the master for a long time, and then ran away to seek shelter in another place, the master could not get him back, if the owner of the premises where the slave had sought shelter refused to give him up. In other cases, the owner of such premises could demand a reward from the master. The master was obligated to feed his slaves during famine. The master could be punished for adultery if he violated his female slave who already had a husband. The master was made responsible for the welfare of the children of his slave while the mother was on duty. Besides redeeming himself by payment and manumission, a slave would become automatically freed if he was sent on business and captured by hostile forces, and when the owner allowed his slave to become a monk or nun. A female slave would become free automatically by having a child by her master or his relative.

How effective in practice were these restrictions and provisions for protection ? Some skepticism is justifiable, especially in the light of comments by Ingram, citing Dilock, that the work as a slave was considered interest and not measured against the loan itself,[27] which would seem to make redemption difficult. Put in a different way, what facts or mechanisms would have helped to ensure the compliance by the master with these regulations ?

There are three points which suggest that the situation may indeed have been fairly lenient for the slaves. The first is Buddhism as a set of norms which, if incorporated into one's beliefs, would work strongly against maltreatment of another living organism; social pressure would reinforce this. Secondly, the lack of manpower and the ease of escape, either to another master as suggested in the quotation above or into the forests, would discourage maltreatment.[28]

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26) *Ibid.*, p. 112.
27) Ingram, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
28) As an example of the jungle as refuge, though in reference to the hazards of war not slavery, see the 1810 appeal by Rama II to escapees to return, quoted in Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 131-134.

The third point is the more significant, I think, because it would have provided the slave with a protector. As the slave is sold by the master, so too a free man could approach his patron and request a loan; if the patron could not advance it, he could stand as surety for the sale to another person. The requirement that contracts of these sales include the name of the guarantor suggests that since all sales of slaves, except those of non-redeemable slaves, had to have guarantors, so too almost all slaves must have had a protector, probably his patron. This guarantor must therefore not only have guaranteed satisfaction to the buyer but must also have been a guarantee to the slave that the conditions and limitations of his slavery would be honored. Therefore, according to this reconstruction, the slave system could well have been benign since most slaves would have had a protector.

I have suggested that slavery in Siam involved patrons. In fact, I think it should be seen *primarily* in terms of patron-client relationships, with the three categories of debt-bondage, and thus the scale of prices, distinguishable on the basis of the presence and guarantees of the patrons, or their absence. To indicate how crucial a patron could be, especially in claiming the rights outlined above, I should mention as an example that access to a court of law was guaranteed to a slave. However, a non-slave commoner, and thus probably a slave too, had to go through his noble (read patron) to have access to the courts.[29] I will have more

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29) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, p. 86. The concept of patronage is well-established in the literature. For an introduction to that literature and a brief overview, see James C. Scott. "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia" (*American Political Science Review*, v. 66, 1972), p. 91-113 (esp. pp. 92-95), who defines the patron-client relationship as an

> exchange relationship between roles ... involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.

He emphasizes that the parties are unequal in wealth, power and status, the relationships tend to be personal ("face-to-face"), and involve a whole complex of ties and obligations ("diffuse ... rather than explicit, impersonal contract bonds").

to say about patronage in Siam and its relationship to slavery below. Let us turn from the structure of the slavery system to its changes over time.

The history of the 19th century changes in the slavery code and its eventual abolition is fairly straightforward and part of two major themes in the history of the country as a whole.   The two most common explanations of the changes in the code in that century depend upon 1) the changing nature of the economic basis of the country; and 2) the necessity of changes in the Siamese legal code so as to end extra-territoriality and to help ensure that the European powers would continue to respect Siam's independence.   That there was such pressure is well-established, but the pressure could not have succeeded without internal circumstances as well, many of which hinged upon the large-scale movement of Chinese to Siam and the change to a money economy. Consequently I will only set forth the skeleton of the first explanation and ignore the second.   Briefly, the important points in the alteration of the economic system are

1)   more and more Thais were buying out of their corvée obligation in the second half of the nineteenth century, while King Mongkut declared in favor of hired labor (i.e. Chinese), when available.[30]

2)   the availability of large numbers of Chinese as labor meant a shift from a labor-poor to a labor-rich economy.   The corvée was finally exchanged for a head-tax in 1899 (its continuation even that long has been abscribed to the wealth to be gotten from bribes and fees received from Thais seeking to avoid it).[31]

3)   the growth of the rice industry and the pressure of population on the land made ownership of land valuable, whereas before it had been control of labor that had been crucial (see below).   It has been said that the abolition of slavery was possible because of the shift of value

30)   Ingram, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
31)   *Ibid.*, p. 59.

measured in labor to value measured in land (and its rent).[32]   Ingram
is not sure of the proof, but admits its possibility.[33]   Such an explana-
tion combined with the increase in wealth has a great deal of plausibility,
but studies with field work remain to be done in order to test it. I
will suggest at the end of this paper that such a linkage between land
value and labor abundance may not be necessary to explain the aboli-
tion of slavery.

The actual abolition of slavery followed in three stages : the 1874
royal decree moved to free permanently all slaves born into slavery after
October 1st, 1868, and limited or eliminated further sales; in 1897, King
Chulalongkorn restated that no further sales were permitted; and in 1905,
he completely abolished slavery by "reasserting that no new persons
could be enslaved and that debt slaves were to have 4 baht per month
credited to their account until their debts were paid and they were
freed".[34]

While practice probably lagged, and the thirty-one year period and
the 1897 restatement suggest some resistance, the formal abolition seems
to have been accomplished smoothly, with a recognition of the interests
and potential disruptions involved.[35]   Details of the transition on the

32) Ingram, citing van der Heide. "The Economical Development of Siam During
    the Last Half Century" (*Journal of the Siam Society*, v. 3, part 1, 1906), pp.74-
    101.   See especially p. 85 where van der Heide says "In consequence land
    became a valuable property, from which rent could be obtained.

    "Slavery and bondage under such circumstances lost their economical
    basis and ceased to be an indispensable institution; thus in course of time they
    could be abolished without any disturbance being caused in the system of
    production of the country."

33) Ingram, *op. cit.*, p. 63; the same sort of point is made by Thompson, *op. cit.*,
    p. 599.

34) Ingram, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

35) David K. Wyatt. *The Politics of* Reform *in Thailand, Education in the Reign
    of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1969). p. 55 :
    "Slavery did not, however, become a major political issue, primarily

local level seem to be lacking, but from the perspective of patronage and the changing economy the transition would not necessarily have been difficult. In the context of the socio-political structure of Thai society as a whole, while formal slavery might have been ended, other forms of dependence probably continued. To this larger context I now turn.

II

One way to study a political-social system is in terms of power. Simply put, the basic questions are who has it, how it is used, and what its basis is. The first and third questions are of particular importance for an understanding of Siam's system of slavery. As usual, an elite had the power. The elite can conveniently be divided into the king, the princes, and the nobles. As with most systems, though perhaps subject to greater intensity due to the unsystematized rules of royal succession, the three parties competed among themselves for dominance. The basis of power in this system was the control of people. Territorial control was not important as such. Control of the labor and produce of people were the essential keys to power, wealth, and prestige in Siamese society, and can be seen as the essential returns given to the patrons by the clients. From the perspective of this analysis, wars were conducted to capture and to carry off people to home areas.[36] As a corollary to the object of war, the political and social system permitted rapid mobilization of people.[37]

The basic outline of the socio-political structure is easily sketched. The king is at the top with theoretical control over everyone in the system. Everyone except the slaves and the princes is either of the *nai*

because it was attacked in a combination of traditional and modern moral terms which could not seriously be opposed, and because it was handled in a conciliatory and purposeful manner."

36) Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
37) Akin Rabibhadana, *op, cit.*, p. 19, p. 53, and p. 77.

(or *munnai*) class (the nobles) or of the *phrai* (the commoner) class.[38]
The nobles are subordinate leaders, as were the princes; the commoners
are followers, each of whom must be registered under a noble or prince
and thus be available for rapid war-time mobilization. Without the
protection and aid of a noble or prince, a commoner was helpless in face
of the law and exactions of government.[39]   A noble or prince had certain
powers over his commoners : he had the right to command and the right
to give corporal punishment.   The noble or prince was responsible to
the government and king for mobilization and judicial appearance of
his commoners upon call.   The nobles and princes had "almost complete
control of the services of their *phrai*" and their movements, although
there seems to have been at least a legal understanding that they could
not be worked as consistently (that is, without time for their own affairs)
as slaves.   The obligations of what is clearly a patron included helping
the *phrai* in his livelihood, material support, and contacts with the
government; in return the commoners gave part of their produce as
"gifts" to their nobles—"The unsalaried officials lived on 'gifts' from
and services of their phrai".[40]   In many ways the view was that the
commoners belonged to the nobles much as slaves, wives, or children
belonged to their respective masters.[41]   The parallels are striking.

Everyone in the system had a rank, from five on up to infinity for
the king : [42]

King	Infinite
Princes	11,000 to 50,000*
Nobles	400 to 10,000*
Commoners	10 to 400
Slaves, destitute persons, or beggars	5

*The prince versus noble distinction is not absolute; repre
sentatives of each existed within the ranges given above.

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38) The Thai organized the people into four groups, the *chao* (royalty), *khunnang*
(nobility), *phrai*, and the *that* (slaves), *ibid.*, p. 98. But it is also true that
the basic division between upper and lower was between *chao-khunnang* and
phrai-that, *ibid.*, p. 179 and p. 121. I have omitted the Buddhist hierarchy
from this and other aspects of the paper.

39) *Ibid.*, p. 86.

40) *Ibid.*, pp. 80-85.

41) *Ibid.*, p. 171; also see p. 21 for a similar point.

42) Adapted from *ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

The range of rank depended upon factors such as birth and social level, type of government department (*krom*) belonged to, and marital status; there was no range for the bottom group because even if the slave had a family, that labor belonged to his master. These numbers were signs of status and of power. One's rank determined what his social ranking was and the amount of land he could have. The amount of land he could have depended on how much he was able to use—thus we are full circle to the point that control over people and their labor was the key to the system, because "land was plentiful, manpower was lacking".[43]

The king's actual power depended upon his ability to regulate the number of people under the princes and the nobles and upon successful techniques of divide-and-rule. His control of manpower was difficult. Attempts to regulate it, and the impact of economic change, are, by Akin Rabibhadana's account, the major source of socio-political change in the system. By following the logic of his argument some very interesting conclusions about the nature of slavery in Siam emerge.

There were two basic kinds of commoners, the *phrai som* and the *phrai luang*.[44] The former, the more desirable category, were registered under either the princes or the nobles; they were free from corvée duty and were inheritable by the prince's or noble's descendants. The *phrai luang* ostensibly belonged to the king, were subject to corvée labor, and only belonged to the noble as head of a department (*krom*), staying behind when he was reassigned to another department. The princes tended to control most of the *phrai som* while the nobles received *phrai luang* from the king. Growth in *phrai som* meant the increase of princely power; a prince with many *phrai som* was a threat to the throne. Growth in *phrai luang*, while dangerous too, was less so because it reduced the

43) *Ibid.*, p. 85.
44) There was also the *phrai suai* who supplied scarce and desired materials to the government in place of corvée. *Ibid.*, p. 35. They are not important to this essay.

power of the princes and because distribution and control of the *phrai luang*, but not the *phrai som*, was within the king's power.[45]

Unfortunately for royal stability, the power of the princes tended to increase and that of the nobles to decline since there was a strong tendency for *phrai luang* to try to become *phrai som* for the fewer duties and exaction.[46]   The balance would tip back only after a military defeat, with the disruption of the *phrai som* system due to death, capture, or disappearance of princes, whose *phrai som* would then become *phrai luang*.[47]   This movement of *phrai luang* to become *phrai som* not only was a threat to the king but also undermined the status system: two nobles of the same rank might have significantly different numbers of people under their control due to loss of *phrai luang*.   Moreover, the loss of *phrai luang* by the nobles meant a loss in their wealth; hence there was renewed incentive for them to place themselves under the patronage of a prince, with more danger for the king as the princely factions increased their power.   These factions not only threatened the king's power, they also lessened the ability of the kingdom to resist invasions.[48]

As a result of these weaknesses, which were clearly manifested after the second fall of the former Siamese capital of Ayutia in 1767, the new dynasty began to tattoo the *phrai* with the name of his noble and the group to which he belonged, thus trying to control the movement from *phrai luang* to *phrai som*.   Moreover, in this same late eighteenth century period, the corvée burden was shortened and both *phrai som* and *phrai luang* were subjected to it.[49]   *Phrai som* were now to become

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45) *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32.

46) *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

47) *Ibid.*, p. 30.

48) *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27 and pp. 174-176.

49) Slaves did not have to do corvée work until about 1873. Money fees were accepted at all times from people who wished to get out of it; this type of exemption was particularly prevalent towards the end of the 19th century. How much time spent on corvée, however, remained as a distinction among the groups with *phrai luang* serving for three months or paying 18 baht; *phrai som*, 1 month or 6 baht; *that* (slaves), 8 days or 1.50 baht. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

phrai luang at the death of their prince or noble.[50]   The Chakkri Dynasty also removed the princes from governorships of provincial towns and relied much more upon trusted nobles and their families for government administration.   The farming out of tax collection to Chinese also affected the power of princes, as well as nobles.[51]

This excursion into the (greatly simplified) mechanics of the Thai socio-political system is necessary because of the light it sheds on the question of slavery in Siam.   On the basis of two essential points, it appears slavery was clearly part of the Thai social system and its basic dynamics.   First, the system is a hierarchy based on patron-client relationships with rewards in status and wealth from the control of people. Within this hierarchy, everyone is property in a theoretical sense, from the household up.[52]   There are extensive and reciprocal rights and obligations between the patron and commoner, just as, as we have seen, there are between the master and the slave.

Second, the question of sale must be considered: does sale distinguish the *phrai som* and *phrai luang* from the slaves?   It appears that it does not.   Apparently *phrais* of both kinds could be sold.   For instance, if a *phrai som* wanted to change masters and move to a wealthier one (where there would be more *phrai* and slaves, and thus less work for him) he would "make his prospective *nai* buy him off from his old *nai*... and it could easily be done".[53]   Obviously what is being sold is the right to his labor.   The only difference between this sale and the sale of, say, a *phrai luang* into slavery, is not method (apparently) nor underlying rationale (sale of right to labor and personal value), but cause (desire to change masters versus sale because of too many debts).   Even here, however, an intermediate distinction is possible since *phrai luang*, presumably to escape the corvée, evidently quite often in the late 18th

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50) *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58, 87-88, and 177-178.
51) *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.
52) *Ibid.*, p. 105.
53) *Ibid.*, p. 34.

century sold themselves into slavery.[54]   The *attraction* of becoming a
slave so as to escape the corvée is understandable.   Vella says that to
escape the corvée, a *phrai (luang?)* had to pay 6 baht per (corvée?)
month, while a slave, until 1873, only had a tax of 5 baht per year—and
that was paid by the master.[55]

Here is a system of debt bondage whose members, called "slaves"
in the literature and as a translation of the Thai, are very much part of
the total system's continuum of labor control and patron-client relation-
ships.   Sale is found among both slaves and non-slave commoners; thus
both are seen as transferable preperty in the system.   Slavery status is
not cut off from the rest of society but seems to be essentially another
type of commoner status.[56]   Just as the *phrai* owed services to the nobles,
and just as the nobles could punish them and often lived on their labor,
so too the slave.   The status of slave seems at times to have had an attrac-
tion for *phrai*, especially for *phrai luang*.   Moreover, although the Thai
did distinguish the *phrai* from the slaves, in their ranking system they
intermixed *phrai* with slaves, since the paupers were *phrai*.[57]   Finally,
the nature of the tasks given to the slaves did not differ from those
performed by the *phrai*, since both would help around the house, work
in the fields, perhaps do some marketing, and serve as retainers and
parts of the noble's retinue.   At the most there is a quantitative not a
qualitative difference in the labor and other services which could be
demanded, which appears clearly in the distinction of the amount of
work which could be demanded from *phrai* as contrasted with slaves
(see above, p. 326).

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54) *Ibid.*, p. 118; and see p. 88.   Also see Ingram, *op. cit.*, p. 61, on slavery as an
     attraction.
55) Vella, *op. cit.*, p. 21.   Also see note 51, above.
56) A point noted by, among others, *ibid.*, p. 25.   But note that one important
     difference is that slaves could not be monks, Wales, *op. cit.*, p. 57.   Was
     this because there could be no claims on, and no outside obligations of, a
     monk ?
57) Akin Rabibhadana, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear that, as I noted at the beginning, echoing many other observers, "To carry over the idea of Western slavery and apply it to *that* [the Siamese category of "slave"] is to misunderstand *that* completely".[58] Another type of misunderstanding I indicated earlier is to rely on the seven "types" of slavery in Siam without seeing that they are really methods of acquisition, not categories. Nor does the distinction between war captives and other slaves work well when one examines the many ways in which the two are identical.

Another type of distinction, that between "redeemable", "non-redeemable", and "pro-forma security" slaves, is not incorrect but essentially legalistic and unproductive except for working comparative morphologies. Moreover, any dispute about a point concerning one of the categories (e.g. are "non-redeemable" slaves really non-redeemable?) quickly bogs down into counter-assertions based on different texts or translations.

Yet if one looks at the logic of the system a decision on these points is quickly made. As Akin Rabibhadana put this perspective, "The only way to understand *that* is in the context of Thai social organization".[59] Moreover, if one moves from questions about the structures to how they work, several new conclusions appear. Akin Rabibhadana did this for the whole Thai social organization from 1782-1873, using mainly a theory of patron-client relationships.

For our purposes, the major contribution this perspective makes to an analysis of 19th century Siamese slavery is to suggest an explanation of how Siamese society interacted with its slaves. Earlier I reproduced a chart ranking levels of Thai society from the king to the slaves. The next to lowest category to slaves was commoners, but we have already seen that there was much voluntary movement by some commoners (*phrai luang*) into the slave group.

To interpret this as a type of Asian "enclosure" system, where instead of loss of communal lands forcing farmers to the cities and

58) *Ibid.*, p. 109.
59) *Ibid.*, p. 109.

factories there is the desire to avoid the corvée but inability to pay the exemption fees, thus forcing the *phrai luang* to sell themselves into slavery, would be, I think, a grave misreading of the situation. But such a misreading is possible if one misunderstands the relationship between the socio-political system and the slaves.

My thesis is that Siamese slavery is part and parcel of the social system, participating fully in its two essential aspects, control of people for wealth, power and status and the necessity of having a protector of higher rank. That is, what is crucial to the system is that there are clients and that there are patrons. Slavery in Siam is just too lenient to be seen, except legalistically, as the bottom of the hierarchy. A much better schema, it seems, would represent it as such :

<div style="text-align:center">

King

Princes

Nobles

Phrai som   Phrai luang   Slaves

Destitute persons or beggars

</div>

Destitute persons and beggars are at the bottom because they have no patrons—if they had patrons they probably would not have been destitute. *Phrai som, phrai luang,* and slaves are on the same level because they all have patrons but no clients. Nobles and princes have clients and patrons while the king only has clients. Thus the move from *phrai luang* would seem to have been more horizontal than vertical, involving, as we have seen, merely minor changes in "life-style", just as the move from *phrai luang* to *phrai som* would offer some advantages but no significant changes in behavior. The logic of this perspective allows therefore a much less drastic interpretation of the avoidance of corvée than the terms and situation might suggest initially.

The other major contribution this allows is a view of social and political structures as dynamic and potentially full of change. Clients are power in this system; hence there is continual movement toward instability contained within it as patrons compete for what was for most of the 19th century a scarce resource, people. This is especially true for competition between the king and the princes as suggested before.

Perhaps the use of Chinese for corvée work with the introduction of easier methods of buying out of corvée, even the abolition of slavery itself, should be viewed in terms of royal consolidation of power against the princes.   In this view, then, slavery in Siam was essentially a further means of controlling retinues and their labor, using the mechanism of debt bondage.   Functionally slavery, once again, is seen as on a par with commoner status, though perhaps it was a more efficient method of control.   With labor abundance perhaps slavery, for that reason alone,[60] became unnecessary and its abolition became a new element in the old game between the king and the princes, this time, though, played to a foreign audience of imperialist powers.

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60) This implies that van der Heide's view (see note 35, above) of the growing importance of land ownership may be superfluous as an explanation for the ability and willingness of the system to eliminate slavery.

NOTES

SOURCES IN THAI HISTORY :
THE PAPERS OF PRINCE DAMRONG

by

Benjamin A. Batson*

The main holdings of the National Archives (Bangkok) consist of
the files of the Royal Secretariat for the Fifth through Seventh Reigns,
collected by reign and subdivided by ministry.[1] In addition the National
Archives also has custody of several special collections of documents,
among the most important of which is that comprising the personal
papers of Prince Damrong Rachanuphab.[2] This collection totals more
than 80,000 pages, divided by subject matter into four groups of
documents of greatly varying size, which are subdivided into a total of 58
sections. The 58 sections are further subdivided into files, the number
of files per section varying from one to nearly 700, each file in turn
containing from one to several hundred pages of documents ostensibly
relating to a single topic. The first 49 sections are included under the
general Archives designation for the Papers of Prince Damrong, บ. 1.3;
Nos. 50-55 comprise บ. 1.3 ก, "correspondence;" Nos. 56-57, on the
writings of Prince Damrong and chronicles, comprise บ. 1.3 ข; while the
final general heading บ. 1.3 ค. consists of the single section No. 58 con-
taining biographical data on Prince Damrong.

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1) For a general description of the organization and holdings of the National
Archives and the National Library, and a detailed inventory of materials rela-
ting to the Fifth Reign, see David K. Wyatt and Constance M. Wilson, "Thai
Historical Materials in Bangkok", *Journal of Asian Studies*, November 1965,
pp. 105-118.

2) The papers of Prince Damrong are, it should be emphasized, housed in the
National Archives and not, as might be expected, in the Damrong Library, a
separate structure which adjoins the Archives and houses Prince Damrong's
collection of books and journals.