

Female Renunciants (*nang chi*) in Siam

According to Early Travellers' Accounts

Peter Skilling

In a recent article I attempted to trace the history of the order of Buddhist nuns (Pāli *bhikkhuni*, Sanskrit *bhikṣuṇī*) in India and abroad on the basis of inscriptions and historical accounts.¹ I could not find any incontrovertible inscriptional evidence for the existence of the order of nuns in Siam or anywhere else in mainland or insular South-East Asia during any period. Literary evidence, however, suggests that there may have been fully ordained nuns in the central Malay Peninsula—in the kingdom of P'an-p'an and in Śrivijaya—in the 7th century. It is at any rate clear that when the Sinhalese Vinaya lineage was introduced to Siam and neighbouring regions in the 13th and 14th centuries, the *bhikkhuni* ordination lineage was not introduced, since it had already died out in Ceylon by the 10th century. That is to say, there has been no institution of fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhuni-saṅgha*) in Siam since that time.

The urge or need to live apart from the world—whether from devotion or from dissatisfaction with or frustration in worldly pursuits—transcends gender boundaries: it is common to men and women. While for men there existed the formal institution of the monkhood (*bhikkhuni-saṅgha*), into which they could ordain as full-fledged *bhikkhus*, for women there was no institution of a corresponding status. Although women could not become nuns in the technical sense (that is to say, as fully ordained *bhikkhuni*), they could still devote themselves to religion as female renunciants (*nang chi* or *mae chi*).² The present article attempts to trace the history of female renunciants in Siam, using information from early European accounts.³

The earliest European records of Siam (and, generally speaking, of Asia) are those of the Portuguese, but unfortunately no Portuguese accounts were available for this study. The earliest accounts of female renunciants in Siam that I have been able to find are by Dutchmen of the East India Company. The first

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Dutch foothold in Siam was in the vassal state of Pattani, where Dutch merchants arrived in 1601. The Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) or East India Company was established in 1602; in 1608 the Company set up a trading post (*comptoir*) at the capital of Ayutthaya. Cornelis van Neijenrode, director from 1617–22, published an *Account of the Kingdom of Siam*, “the first description of a Dutchman’s impressions of Siam”.⁴ This work was not available for the present study.

Joost Schouten was director at Ayutthaya from 1624 to 1629, during the reigns of King Song Tham (reigned 1610/11–13 Dec. 1628) and Chettaracha (reigned 13 Dec. 1628–August 1629), and again from 1633 to 1636, during the reign of King Prasat Thong (reigned Sept. 1629–7 Aug. 1656).⁵ During his last visit he compiled his *A Description of the Government, Might, Religion, Customes, Traffick, and other remarkable Affairs in the Kingdom of Siam*, first published in Dutch in The Hague in 1638. Schouten notes:

Besides these Priests, there are a sort of old Nuns shorn, lodged in Chappels near the greatest Temples, who assist very devoutly in all their preachings, singings, ceremonies, and other Church services, but all voluntary, being tied to no rules or prescriptions.⁶

Schouten’s successor was Jeremias van Vliet, who was agent at Ayutthaya from 1629 to 1634 during the reign of Prasat Thong. His *Description of the Kingdom of Siam* was published in English translation by L.F. van Ravenswaay in the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1910.⁷ He notes:

Besides these male priests, there are connected with the principal temples many old women, who also have to shave their heads. They are dressed in white linen, and they are present at all sermons, songs, ceremonies and other occasions connected with the religion. They are not, however, subject to any extraordinary rules, and they do everything out of religious fervour and free will. Also they have to live on the alms which they receive from the people. There are no young maidens or pregnant women among them.⁸

After the Dutch came the French, who left a number of important records about Siam and the region. Nicolas Gervaise, who visited Siam in 1683, during the reign of King Narai (reigned 26 Oct. 1656–11 July 1688), devotes a short chapter to “Siamese Nuns.” He starts by observing that:

Siamese ladies are too fond of their freedom to confine themselves in a cloister like our nuns, there to spend their whole lives. They only give to the monastic life those years which are no longer fitted for the world and it is rare that they leave it before it leaves them. Moreover, since they frequently have dealings with the monks, they are not permitted to become nuns before the age of fifty, so as to avoid all occasion for scandal.⁹

He goes on to give a detailed account, much of which is as true today as it was then:

They shave their heads and their eyebrows like the monks, and dress in white, which is considered by the Siamese to be the most modest colour and is worn for mourning and important ceremonies. They do not live in communities in monasteries, but simply abandon their families and lodge in the precincts of some pagoda, together with three or four other nuns. They take no vows and their rule consists simply of obeying in its entirety the rule of the monks. They observe all the commandments and all the counsels of the law, they listen to sermons every day and they spend much time praying in the temples. Their principal activity is to serve the monks, to prepare their food and to supply their needs by continual almsgiving. They visit the poor and the sick and devote themselves assiduously to rendering to their fellow-creatures all the good offices that charity can inspire. They enjoy all the same privileges as the monks and are no less respected. Everybody bows to them and they bow only to monks and pagodas. They are called *nang chy*, which means "holy woman". They have a place set aside for them in the pagodas and at the great ceremonies. They are much in demand for the funerals of mandarins, to which they go in order as if in a procession, and their attendance at these ceremonies is always liberally rewarded.

Gervaise refers again to the participation of "all the monks and nuns from the towns and villages round about", at the "obsequies of people of quality", and describes the presence of nuns at sermons: "The nuns sit nearby [the pulpit] on mats with their hands joined together."¹⁰

Shortly after Gervaise came Simon de la Loubère, who visited Siam in 1687–1688, also during the reign of King Narai. He makes several important references to nuns.

Though at *Siam* there are some *Talapoinesses*,¹¹ or Women, who in

most things do observe the Rule of the *Talapoins*, yet they have no other Convents than those of the *Talapoins* themselves: The *Siameses* do think that the advanced Age of all these Women, for there are none young, is a sufficient caution of their Chastity. There are not *Talapoinesses* in all the Convents: but in those where any are, their Cells run along one of the sides of the Bambou Inclosure, which I have mentioned, without being otherwise separated from those of the *Talapoins*.¹²

The *Talapoinesses* do call themselves *Nang Tchii*:¹³ They are clad in white, like the *Tapacaou*,¹⁴ and are not esteemed altogether Religious. A simple Superior sufficeth to give them the Habit, as well as to the *Nens*:¹⁵ And altho' they cannot have any carnal Commerce with Men, yet are they not burnt upon this account, as the *Talapoins* are, which are surprized in a Fault with the Women.¹⁶ They deliver them up to their Parents to bastinado them, because that neither the *Talapoins* nor the *Talapoinesses* can strike any person.¹⁷

La Loubère also notes that parents sometimes ordained to mourn a deceased child: "Sometimes the Father turns *Talapoin* and the Mother *Talapoiness*, or at least they shave the head one of the other."¹⁸

Dr. Englebert Kaempfer, who travelled to Siam in the service of the Dutch East India Company in 1690, during the reign of Phra Phetracha (reigned 11 July 1688–1703), devoted the following remarks to female renunciants:¹⁹

There are also Nuns among them, whom they call Nanktsij [*nang chi*], or Bagins,²⁰ who wear such pieces of cloth like the Monks, but of a white colour instead of yellow. These Nuns in former times liv'd among the Priests near the Temples, but it having happen'd at a place a league above Judia [Ayutthaya], where the religious of both sexes liv'd promiscuously together in the same village, that several of the Nuns prov'd with Child, they have since been remov'd from the Temples to particular Houses, the better to keep their Vow of Chastity. The Temple of that Place still bears the Name of Wat Nantsij [Wat Nang Chi], or the Temple of Nuns.²¹

Conclusions

The accounts of Schouten and van Vliet establish the existence of white-robed,

shaven-headed nuns at Ayutthaya during the reigns of Kings Song Tham and Prasat Thong in the second and third decades of the 17th century; the accounts of Gervaise, La Loubère, and Kaempfer establish that the expression *nang chi* was used by the time of King Narai in the late 17th century. Taken together, the accounts establish that the nuns shaved their heads and eyebrows, wore white, and lived apart from the monks in the vicinity of temples. Since Schouten (as well as the others) imply that the *nang chi* were normal figures in the daily religious life, it is clear that the tradition of female renunciants was already well-established by the 1620's. To give a round figure, we may suggest that the institution of *nang chi* or *mae chi* has existed since at least 1600, or for nearly four hundred years. Further research, especially into Portuguese sources and into Siamese literature of the Ayutthaya period, is needed, and may throw further light on the subject.

Notes

1. Peter Skilling, "A Note on the History of the *Bhikkhuni-saṅgha* (II): The Order of Nuns after the Parinirvāṇa", *W.F.B. Review*, Vol. XXX, No. 4/Vol. XXXI, No. 1 (October–December 2536/1993, January–March 2537/1994) (Double Issue), pp. 29–49. The article was originally published (with numbers of misprints) in Pathompong Bodhiprasiddhinand (ed.), *Pāli and Sanskrit Studies: Mahāmakut Centenary Commemorative Volume and Felicitation Volume presented to H.H. The Supreme Patriarch on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday*, Mahāmakaṇḍa Rājavidyālaya Foundation, Bangkok, BE 2536 [1993], pp. 208–251. For Part I see "A Note on the History of the *Bhikkhuni-saṅgha* (I): Nuns at the time of the Buddha", *W.F.B. Review* Vol. XXXI, Nos. 2–3, April–September 2537/1994, pp. 47–55.
2. For the term *chi* (*jī*) see the forthcoming article by Olivier de Bernon. The earliest sources—the accounts of Gervaise (1683), La Loubère (1687–1688), and Kaempfer (1690), as well as the mid-19th-century account of Pallegoix (Mgr. Pallegoix, *Description du royaume thai ou Siam*, présent et adapté par M. Dassé, D.K. Book House, Bangkok, 1976, p. 202)—prefer the term *nang chi* (*nāñ jī*). So also does George Bradley McFarland's *Thai-English Dictionary* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1944, p. 297a, s.v. *chi*; p. 450a, s.v. *nang*), which adds the term *yai chi* (*yāñ jī*, p. 297a, s.v. *chi*; p. 673b, s.v. *yai*) and the first (BE 2493) edition of the Rājapaṇḍityasthān Dictionary (p. 500a, s.v. *nang*). The second (BE 2525) edition of the latter drops the reference to *nang chi* (p. 430a, s.v. *nang*) and gives only *mae chi* (p. 268b, s.v. *chi*), the term in current usage. (Neither McFarland nor the first edition of the Rājapaṇḍityasthān Dictionary records *mae chi*, under either *chi* or *mae*. Neither edition of the Rājapaṇḍityasthān Dictionary records *yai chi* under either *chi* or *yai*).

3. Dr. Prasert Na Nagara informs me that he has not come across any inscriptions from any period that use the term *nang* or *mae chi* (oral communication, December 1994). Out of the references to be given below, those of La Loubère and Kaempfer are referred to briefly in Chatsumarn Kabil Singh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1991, p. 36. (Chatsumarn's book contains a wealth of information on the activities and social position of *mae chis* in Siam.)
4. The information in this paragraph is based on Han ten Brummelhuis, *Merchant, Courtier and Diplomat: A History of the Contacts between the Netherlands and Thailand*, Uitgeversmaatschappij De Tijdstroom Lochem, Gent, 1987, pp. 9–16.
5. The regnal dates are from David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, Thai Wattana Panich/Yale University Press, Bangkok, 1984, Appendix C, p. 313.
6. François Caron and Joost Schouten, *A True Description of the Mighty Kingdoms of Japan and Siam*, a facsimile of the 1671 London edition in a contemporary translation from the Dutch by Roger Manley, Introduction and Notes by John Villiers, The Siam Society, Bangkok, 1986, p. 141.
7. A facsimile reprint of the Dutch was published by the Toyo Bunko, Tokyo, 1956.
8. JSS VII (1910), p. 77.
9. Nicolas Gervaise, *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam*, tr. John Villiers, White Lotus, Bangkok, 1989, pp. 163–164.
10. Gervaise, pp. 171, 154.
11. *Talapoinesse* is the feminine form of *talapoin*, for which see Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, Hobson-Jobson, *A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, [London, 1903] Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 890–891; Ivor Lewis, *Sahibs, Nabobs and Boxwallahs: A Dictionary of the Words of Anglo-India*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1992, p. 230; *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Oxford, [1933; 1973] 1985, II 2237b; C.T. Onions, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, Oxford, [1966] 1967, p. 900b. None of the lexicons record the form *talapoinesse*. The last three authorities agree on deriving *talapoin* from Talaing (Mon) *tala pōi* through Portuguese *talapão* (but the three voices may be reduced to one, since Onions is responsible for both Oxford entries, and Lewis' source is OED). The term is originally associated with Pegu, as Kaempfer (p. 69) remarked long ago: "The Peguans call them Talapoi, which name becoming first known to foreigners, they now bestow it indifferently on all the Priests and Ecclesiastics of the Symbolic Religion in Pegu, Siam, Cambodia, Aracau, Parma, Laos, Tunkin, and Cochintzina."

12. *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam by Monsieur de La Loubère, Envoy Extraordinary from the French King, to the King of Siam, in the years 1687 and 1688*, London, 1693; facsimile repr., Simon de la Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam*, Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1986, p. 113.
13. That is, *nang chi* in the transcription used in this article.
14. Cf. pp. 117–118: “they [the *Talapoins*] have each one or two Servants which they call *Tapacaou*, and which are really Seculars, tho’ they be habited like the *Talapoins*, excepting that their Habit is white, and not yellow. They receive the money which is given to the *Talapoins*, because the *Talapoins* cannot touch it without sinning: they have the care of the Gardens and Lands, which the Convent may have, and in a word they act in the Convents for the *Talapoins*, whatever the *Talapoins* conceive cannot be done by themselves.” The *Tapacaou* also has a role in cremation rites (pp. 123–124). The phrase represents *ta* (= “grandfather”: cp. *yai chi*) *pa khao* (“white cloth”).
15. That is, *sāmanera*, abbreviated in Thai usage to *ner*, pronounced *nen*.
16. Cf. La Loubère p. 115: “All … [*Talapoins*] … are obliged under pain of Fire strictly to keep Celibacy, so long as they continue in their Profession; and the King of *Siam*, from whose Jurisdiction they cannot withdraw themselves, pardons them not in this point.” The punishment is mentioned by Schouten (p. 141): “These [the monks] are prohibited the natural use of Women, upon pain of being burned.” Gervaise (pp. 148–149) gives more detail: “If one [a monk] is discovered having an affair with a woman, the law condemns him to be roasted alive over a slow fire. While I was in *Siam* this harsh sentence was carried out on two wretches who had been convicted of this crime.”
17. La Loubère, p. 119.
18. La Loubère, p. 125.
19. *A Description of the Kingdom of Siam* 1690, first published in London in 1727, facsimile repr., White Orchid Press, Bangkok, 1987, p. 70.
20. I do not know the origin of this term.
21. The location and history of this Wat Nang Chi merits further research.