

THE VIEW FROM THE OUTSIDE – NICOLAS GERVAISE, SIMON DE LA LOUBÈRE AND THE PERCEPTION OF SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SIAMESE GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY

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Abstract

This analysis examines the accounts of two European seventeenth century authors, Nicolas Gervaise and Simon de La Loubère, against the background of European modes of interpretation. Hitherto, European sources for Siam were mainly used to reconstruct historical facts. However, this has specific difficulties. Being a part of a literary genre, the composition of travel accounts did not depend on individual observations alone but also on the methods being used to present distant civilisations and exotic cultures to a European public. This study focuses on the detection of conventions and categories of judgement which were developed in West European discourse. The writings of Nicolas Gervaise and Simon de La Loubère are perfect examples to illuminate the nature of Eurocentric attitudes toward the observed society.

Introduction

Due to the fact that most of the contemporary Thai writings were burnt in the flames which swept and consumed the city of Ayudhya in 1767, European records, as uneven and spotty as they are, have a great value to the reconstruction of Thai history. Owing to this paucity of indigenous sources that have survived from before the late-eighteenth century, western historians might be encouraged to reduce Thai history to a peripheral part of European history and, by doing so, tend to renew a somehow Eurocentric view. Yet this inquiry is exclusively based on European source material; but its motive is not to stress out a special European impact on Thai society during the period concerned, but rather to bring out the differences, minute and great, between Thai and European practices and values and the nature of an encounter of different cultural systems that presented a challenge to Euro-

pean intellectual thought. Simon de la Loubère's *Du Royaume de Siam*² and Nicolas Gervaise's *Histoire naturelle et politique du Royaume de Siam* may be considered the most authoritative – and maybe best known – accounts of ancient Thailand published during the last twenty years of the seventeenth century. Therefore, their work can be used as representative examples for an early anthropological absorption of the (to Europeans) exotic world of Siam.³ Naturally, a greater part of these accounts deals with its objects in a pejorative way; some parts disclose more of the authors' intentions than of the nature of their objects. That is why it is necessary to devote part of this examination to the detection of perceptual schemes behind the text.

Much has been written about the two historical accounts concerned, and this analysis does not assert the claim of covering all aspects incorporated in the historical writings. These accounts have certainly been very helpful in adding detail and depth to the history of Ayudhya. My aim, however,

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is to emphasize a number of remarkable points which might illuminate the methodological problems as epistemological barriers to a proper understanding of Siamese society at the end of the seventeenth century.

I will first glance very briefly on the importance of travel accounts for perceptions of Asia in Europe and will then present a more detailed examination of the works of two writers, Nicolas Gervaise and Simon de la Loubère.

Encountering ancient Siamese society, Gervaise and La Loubère were faced with a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which were at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which they had to retrieve first and grasp then to describe.⁴

Generally speaking, the experience of *distance* by getting in touch with the lives of strangers had to be compensated by specific strategies guiding perceptions. However, this fact was scarcely an object to reflect upon, and even the ablest observers and chroniclers lacked self-consciousness about their modes of representation. The reasons for this attitude are not difficult to find. Especially when religious and moral subjects were concerned, it was assumed by virtually all true believers during the period under consideration (and they all were true believers) that the Holy Bible was a divinely inspired work of universal validity for all times, for all places and for all peoples (see Boxer 1978: 1). However, next to dogmatic attitudes toward indigenous religions, scientific categories in a more or less modern sense started developing. The attempt to gain more clarity and to observe more systematically is embodied in the form and convention of travel literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

That observations are shaped by pre-existing interpretive schemas and that perception itself depends on those schemas has long been argued by anthropologists as well as by historians. In the later state of the Enlightenment in Europe the oriental world

was often perceived in a highly selective manner. Those who referred to Asia (and especially to China) did so with a specific rhetorical or ideological purpose (see Lottes 1991: 66). As a result, the aim of my analysis is to feature the motives behind written text rather than to examine the reality of Thai history. I will endeavour to sort out the structures of signification and determine its social, political and religious ground.

Travel accounts and the perception of the world

To the public of seventeenth century Europe, travel literature was the only window on the world outside Europe. Travels into the Far East were long, expensive, unhealthy and dangerous. Most Europeans who undertook such a journey were sailors, soldiers and merchants, and only few of them were willing or able to compose an account of considerable worth (Furber 1976: 300). Hence travel accounts received the highest attention of the public. They had a profound effect on the construction of the image of the Orient in seventeenth century Europe. At a later time, the German philosopher Hegel depended for his view of Asia upon these European sources (Hegel 1986: 319) and so did his famous predecessor Immanuel Kant to whom reading travel literature and travelling itself came down to virtually the same thing (Kant 1968: 120). The great collections of travel literature were compiled for different reasons; some of them have a more clearly expressed scientific and intellectual purpose than others, some were intended to promote national overseas enterprise, and finally, other compilers were mainly concerned with the publication of travel accounts which would appeal to the popular taste for the remote and exotic (see Lach 1965: 204). Considering that perception makes its objects, each account only represents an individual view of its author and it is useful to be explicit as to what divides them. Yet even if statements and propositions may differ, we do find systematic modes of description and established structures in most of these works.

For example, plausibility and truth were major challenges required by the public. Therefore, the confirmation of truth was a part of the form and convention of the genre. Simon de la Loubère as well as Nicolas Gervaise followed that rule. La Loubère initially remarks:

In a word, those with whom I am acquainted do know that I love the Truth; but it is not sufficient to give a sincere relation to make it appear true: 'Tis requisite to add clearness to sincerity, and to be thoroughly informed of that wherein we undertake to instruct others. I have therefore considered, interrogated, and penetrated, as far as I was possible; and to render myself more capable of doing it, I carefully read over, before my arrival at Siam, several Ancient and Modern Relations of divers Countreys of the East. So that in my opinion that preparation has supplied the defect of a longer residence, and has made me to remark and understand in the three Months I was at Siam, what I could not perhaps have understood or remark'd in three Years, without the assistance and perusal of those Discourses. (1693: 2)

And Gervaise stated:

If novelty and truthfulness are two qualities in a history that are especially estimable, then I may hope that this book will be very well received by the public, for both these qualities are happily united in it. (1989: 3)

The demand for truthfulness refers to the fact that in the early stage of Enlightenment in Europe travel literature was not only regarded for fiction and light reading, but also to be of great importance for the scientific knowledge of the world (see Adams 1962).

The conventions in writing and composing travel accounts comprehended structural similarities concerning geographic

matters as well as the description of the people, the habits of the society observed, the way men and women dressed and how people exercised the arts and sciences; they covered justice and government, kingship and religion, medicine, marriage and funeral ceremonies.

This topical framework, the way objects were disposed and how and in what terms reality was adjusted to it, certainly affected the way in which reality was perceived by the reading public.

Nicolas Gervaise: the description of Siamese kingship and court

Nicolas Gervaise (1662-1729) spent almost three years in Siam in the 1680s and his work widely was based upon empirical data collected during these years.

When Gervaise reached Ayudhya in 1683, the French *Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris* (SME) had maintained a more or less continuous presence in Siam since 1662 (see Hutchinson 1959). One of Gervaise's main interests in Siamese society was to 'work for the salvation of souls', since he had been sent out as a missionary by the SME in Paris and was accompanied by Monsieur François Pallu, Bishop of Heliopolis. During this period, an effective unity and central authority helped to provide stable conditions and a favourable climate for the spread of the catholic religion. Therefore, a major part of his description of Ayudhya deals with the way in which the Siamese practised their religion and with Siamese political rule. I need not enter into the details of his view concerning the Buddhist religion. Not surprisingly, he imputes the pursuit of profit into almost everything the indigenous monks do. No clear understanding of Buddhist cosmography and doctrines emerge from his account. Traditionally, European spiritual and temporal powers were closely connected. As a result, the French political expansion was attended to the propagation of religious ideas. The missionaries sent by *le roi soleil* Louis XIV not only regarded themselves as better trained and educated

than those of the King of Portugal (Boxer 1969: 243). Their self-assessment also raised them up against the Dutch who 'prefer a good warehouse to a beautiful church' (Gervaise 1989: 176).

In contrast to Portuguese and Dutch strategies of economical overseas expansion, French Asian policy initially was connected rather with national interests. As a result, Gervaise intended to give a 'complete knowledge of the habits and propensities' for those, who 'go there for the intention of settling there' (1989: 4).

The reasons for this shift of emphasis concerning the aims and attitudes of French ambassadors and missionaries in Siam may be found in the structures of the European political status quo. French overseas policy during the reign of Louis XIV initially focused on the accumulation of power and political influence for the French crown rather than the establishment of trade in Europe or throughout the non-European world (Reinhard 1983). The relations between Siam and France could be used as a political argument to justify the model of French absolutism. Gervaise not only intended to promote missionary work in Siam, he also made efforts to spread the political influence of France in the entire region of Southeast Asia. He did his best to insinuate that Siam was a nearly perfect case in point (1989: 1-2). Highly impelled by ideologically motivated ideals, Gervaise's description of the Siamese king differs from that given by the Dutch or the Portuguese. The latter were interested in Ayudhya purely for commercial reasons (see Smith 1977: 10). Unlike the Dutch merchant Jeremias van Vliet, who had lived in Ayudhya in the first half of seventeenth century and who condescendingly commented on the political reality observed in Ayudhya⁵, Gervaise was much impressed by King Narai (r. 1656-88) and the way he ruled his kingdom:

Although the present king, following the custom of his predecessors, makes his duty to amass great wealth in this way ... he does not neglect to make rich

presents to the ambassadors of neighbouring rulers and even of more distant princes when honour and courtesy demand it [...] All this demonstrates well enough that it is not out of avarice that he desires always to keep his treasury well filled, but in pursuance of a wise and prudent policy. (1989: 219)

Although his observations were based on personal experiences he made during his three years of residence in Siam, his sympathy for the Siamese king was made possible only by attributing an almost European mind to that ruler. It shows that experience alone cannot confirm the truth of facts. The philosopher Alfred Schutz has argued that the interpretation of lived experience consists in the 'referral of the unknown to the known, of that which is apprehended in the glance of attention to the schemes of experience' (Schutz 1932: 84). Experiences do not have meaning; rather, we give meaning to our experience through reflection (see Kertzer 1988: 83-84).

In Gervaise's version King Narai resented the ceremonies practised at his court:

It must be most frustrating for him to be unable to speak to a commoner or to a peasant without having to ennoble him, and it must be equally tiresome for all his subjects to be unable to obtain his ear until they have performed all the ceremonies that are observed at royal audiences. (1989: 223)

Actually, it is most unlikely that the Siamese king disapproved of those practises. It seems that Gervaise's impressions were based on political or ideological intentions and preconceived conviction rather than on personal observations. Apart from the question of whether his observations are in accordance with the truth (a question which has to be suspended in this case), his description signifies a strategy to diminish cultural distance and to justify his hopes to convert the king. Therefore, he creates his

own image of King Narai, endowing the king's person with attributes more suitable to a European mind than a member of the Siamese society.

Gervaise's attitude to the King of Siam not only differed from that of the Dutch. His compatriot Simon de la Loubère stated:

But these Kings which are so absolutely the Masters of the Fortune and the Life of their Subjects, are so much the more wavering in the Throne. They find not in any person, or at most in a small number of Domestic, that Fidelity or Love which we have for our Kings. (1693: 106)

In old Siam the monarchy was absolute and the Thai king's position was quite extraordinary. Until the time of King Rama IV (r. 1851-68) who installed today's court ceremonial, the monarch's unlimited power was embodied and enacted in an elaborate ritual more suited to a divinity than an ordinary human being (Terwiel 1991: 38). The ritual construction of political power in old Siam was primarily incarnated in symbolic forms. According to Gervaise 'there has never been any court anywhere in the world more ritualistic than the court of the king of Siam' (1989: 221).

Gervaise noted the symbolic systems of Thai court rituals with amazement rather than with disgust. But he points out that King Narai surely would be 'more communicative, if he was not unfortunately restrained by the customs of the country and the false idea which his people have of the greatness of kings' (1989: 223). His characterization of the people of Siam turned out to be less respectful:

The spirit of servility with which they are born and in which care is taken that they should be brought up, damps their courage and makes them so timid that they tremble at the sight of the smallest danger they encounter. Perhaps it is this natural timidity which makes them so loyal to their king and

so respectful that they dare not even look at him when he speaks to them. (1989: 53)

The usage of terms like 'timidity' and 'servitude' (occasionally replaced by terms like 'temperate' and 'sober') attributed to the people of Siam play a key role in Gervaise's description as well as in La Loubère's *'Du Royaume de Siam'*. Leaving aside pejorative connotations, their terminology reflects a highly selective categorisation of perception. In Gervaise's description the Siamese king, the mandarins at the court, the people of Siam, and the indigenous monkhood are all representing separate parts of a social world which in fact was a homogeneous cultural and political system.

Simon de la Loubère: the burden of higher education

Simon de la Loubère made his observations after three months of residence in Ayudhya also in the 1680s. He reached Siam in September 1687 as an envoy from the court of Versailles and left in January 1688. Since he was interested in political and cultural subjects rather than in religious ones, he placed a different emphasis than Gervaise on non-religious aspects of the kingdom of Siam. As we know from his preface, he regarded himself as well prepared after having read 'several Ancient and Modern Relations of divers Countreys of the East' (1693: 2). We do not know exactly which literature he was able to gather; but his intellectual background surely covered the Greek tradition including the *Historia* of Herodotos, the Ptolemaic text, Lucian and the myths of Alexander the Great. It is also likely that he was familiar with the accounts of Medieval Europe, especially the famous and popular writings of Marco Polo as well as with the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* dating back to the Renaissance. Contemporary relations and materials of the sixteenth century consisted mainly of the writings of Iberian commentators and Dutch merchants, but at least in the sixteenth century, a large part of the Portuguese literature was not

readily available to the general public.

The most famous itineraries of the Iberian world were those of Tomé Pires: *Suma Oriental* and the *Book of Duarte Barbosa*. We cannot assume with certainty that La Loubère had access to these books. Particularly Pires work, written between 1512 and 1515, was presumably dispatched shortly thereafter to the *Casa da Índia*, where it was kept as a secret document. However, Habsburg ascendancy in Portugal brought a definite end to Lisbon's control of information of the routes, ports and products of Asia and at least in the second half of the seventeenth century, the *Book of Barbosa* was available in France (Lach 1993: 921; see also Pottinger 1958: 122-31.).

Simon de la Loubère himself mentions that he has read the relations of Nicolas Gervaise, Fernão Mendes Pinto, and Jeremias van Vliet. The literature compiled by Jesuit missionaries was more international in its composition, more easily accessible to the general public, and became a major purveyor in the sixteenth and seventeenth century of information about non-commercial and non-political aspects of life in Asia. (Lach 1965: 185). Therefore, la Loubère might have used these texts to prepare himself for his journey to Ayudhya.

Obviously, his interpretation was influenced by his readings. We may safely assume that he tried to sort out structures of significance that seemed to him quite strange and irregular by using familiar terms. This patterns of interpretation is illustrated with an example:

Lying towards Superiors is punished by the Superior himself; and the King of Siam punishes it more severely than any other: and notwithstanding all this, they lye as much or more at Siam than in Europe [...] Their manner of promising themselves an eternal amity, is by drinking of the same Aqua Vita in the same cup, and when they would swear themselves more solemnly, they taste the blood of one another; which Lucian gives us for a custom of the ancient

Scythians, and which is practised also by the Chinese, and by other Nations: but the Siameses cease not sometimes to betray after all these Ceremonies. (1693: 74/76)

As this example suggests, the use of Antique examples like the reference to the *Scythians* (first described in the *Historia* of Herodotos) reflects the burden of higher education.⁶ Steeped in classical learning, La Loubère's knowledge and intellectual capacity determined his mode of categorisation of his observations.⁷

In early modern Europe, the ancient Greek and Roman traditions symbolized much more than a historical period only. The canonization of various ancient authors established a certain judgement as to values and particular standards of social morality and social organization, which had a most pervasive effect on European conceptions of the world and a decisive function in shaping the experiences and perceptions of an educated seventeenth century European mind.

Hence, de la Loubère's understanding of Siamese social practices are widely based on the values handed down by antiquity:

Anciently in *Greece* the *Stagyritæ* made a Law in these words: What you have not laid down take not up; and it is perhaps from them that Plato learned it, when he inserted it amongst his Laws. But the Siameses are very remote from so exquisite a probity' (1693: 75).

The comparison of the Siamese with the people of antiquity or those from China (which were better known in Europe by several accounts published since the sixteenth century) could ease the understanding of strangers. In a way, this comparison constructs accessibility. The more frequently a construct, or schema, is employed, the more available it becomes for dealing with the future. Conversely, it aggravates a deeper analysis of the peculiarities of the Siamese people and the cognition of what these pe-

cularities derived from. The consequences of aesthetical and social ideals that are shaped by antique traditions should not be underestimated.

La Loubère was conscious of the fact that he was an observer looking at a homogeneous cultural system from an outside position. Although he might have been able to learn more about the Siamese society on his way to Ayudhya (in which he was accompanied by the Siamese ambassador Kosa Pan and his attendants) he stressed that the information he could achieve during his residence at Siam was limited and rather incomplete. He suspects that details on the inner parts of the country (1693: 3) as well as the Siamese law (1693: 81) were kept secret. Therefore, he states:

The publick Law of Siam is written in three Volumes. Nothing would have been more necessary than a faithful extract of these three Volumes, tightly to make known the Constitution of the Kingdom of Siam: but so far was I from being able to get a Translation, that I could not procure a Copy thereof in Siamese. It would have been necessary upon this account to continue longer at Siam, and with less business. This is therefore what I could learn certainly about this matter, without the assistance of those Books, and in a Country where everyone is afraid to speak. The greatest token of Servitude of the Siamese is, that they dare not to open their mouth about anything that relates to their Country. (ibid.)

It cannot be proved whether or not the Siamese people wanted to keep secret their laws and geography of their country; more important is that the nature of the Siamese character is *perceived* as mystifying.

The interpretation of what is being viewed could not always be comprehended by perceptual categories employed. Sometimes, if communication failed, the experience of *distance* was held for insincerity (for the reproach of 'lying' was a topical pattern

in early modern European travel literature). In other cases this distance was perceived and confirmed in a more general way, or in the words of Simon de la Loubère:

Uncertain in the whole thing wherein all Europeans are not. In all the rest we vary every day, and they never do. Always the same manners amongst them, always the same Laws, the same Religion, the same Worship; as may be judged by comparing what the Ancient have writ concerning the Indians, with what we do see now. (1693: 102)

European *mutation* and Siamese *invertibility* as a contrasting classification of European and Siamese peoples and habits in general is a basic pattern in La Loubère's account. The presentation of what is new and unknown is represented as an inversion of what is known. A characterization of unknown and exotic civilisations is only possible by comparing it to Western standards and this characterization is to a wide extent based on the description of equality, similarities, and dissimilarities between the Occidental and the Oriental world:

In general they have more moderation than us [...]. They act only by necessity, and do not like us place merit in Action. It seems not rational to them that Labour and Pains should be the Fruit and Reward of Vertue. They have the good Fortune to be born Philosophers, and it may be that if they were not born such, they would not become so more than we. I therefore willingly believe what the Ancients have reported, that Philosophy came from the Indies into Europe, and that we have been more concerned at the Insensibility of the Indians than the Indians have been at the wonders, which our Inquietude has produced in the discovery of so many different Arts, whereof we flatter ourselves, perhaps to no purpose, that necessity was the Mother. (1693: 76)

Conclusion

This analysis examines two European travel accounts of the seventeenth century against the background of European modes of interpretation.

European characterizations of the national and regional qualities of various Asian peoples in pre-industrial times were likewise a mixture of the factual and fanciful and resembled many of the beliefs still popular in the West. Beside the fact that from the point of view of their documentation of the kingdom of Siam the accounts from Nicolas Gervaise and Simon de la Loubère remain of contestable value, they reproduce a stark picture with an absence of gray and shading. Provincialism, temperance, timidity and peace are, along with extraordinary ritualistic court ceremonies, the fundamentals of the Siamese and Siamese society. Compared to Simon de la Loubère, the knowledge presented in Nicolas Gervaise's account is based primarily on individual observation. But an acquaintance or familiarity gained by sight or experience does not necessarily mean an increase of reliability. Both Gervaise as well as la Loubère referred to Siam with a specific rhetorical or ideological purpose. Siam was perceived in a highly selective manner. Both writers created their own image of Siamese society.

These built-in attitudes towards distant civilizations had been shaped by categories of analysis and judgement which were developed in an essentially European or even West European discourse. As a result, the individual experiences of those who composed and published travel accounts on Siam were submitted to topical conventions inherently expressed in the literary genre of itineraries. Therefore, the use of European accounts and travel accounts on Siam as historical source materials for the reconstruction of Thai history is linked with specific difficulties. First, one must be aware of the fact that a major part of all Occidental presentations of empirical data produced in early modern Europe are based on the adaptation of 'proto-scientific' conventions and

topical traditions handed down by the authors of antiquity. Being a part of a literary genre, the composition of travel accounts did not depend on individual observations alone but also on the methods being used to perceive and present exotic cultures. La Loubère's *Du Royaume de Siam* is a perfect example of the way in which civilisations beyond the Old World were introduced to a European public. Faced with a multiplicity of complex social structures, he had to classify his perceptions according to the categories that a European education and the knowledge of antique and contemporary literature were able to deliver. It rendered them accessible; setting them in the frame of familiar terms dissolved their opacity.

Due to the fact that a composite picture of the history of Ayudhya will always be closely connected with European conceptions modes of interpretation of foreign culture, a systematic and comprehensive analysis of hidden conceptual schemas inherently expressed in the readings of Occidental historical texts on Siam remains a vital task for both Thai and European historiography.

Notes

2. La Loubère, 1691. This study is based on the English edition of 1693, for other editions see References.
3. There is, of course, a great number of other French and Dutch travel accounts that deal with the description of the Siamese culture and society and which are worth to dedicate a separate analysis. Of the numerous French accounts written in the seventeenth century there should be mentioned Bouvet, Père [1685] 1963; Chaumont, Chevalier de 1686; Choisy, François-Timoléon de 1995; Tachard, Guy 1688. The most important seventeenth century Dutch accounts are Neijenrode, Cornelius van 1854; *ibid.* 1871; Schouten, Jost 1636; Vliet, Jeremias van 1910; *ibid.* 1975.
4. For a general outlook upon terms and strategies of ethnological work see Geertz 1973.
5. 'By the usurped authority of the kings and by the continuous praise of the people the pride of the former kings had reached such a height that it looked as if the king was not there for the good of his community, but that the whole

country and the people were for his pleasure alone', (Vliet 1910: 18).

6. References to antiquity were still used by Malinowski (1922). This shows that still in the twentieth century, the evocation of mystical conceptions, in the sense of a 'rhétorique de l'altérité', was able (and necessary) to illustrate the character of strangers.
7. Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h (1987: 28) stressed La Loubère's affinity to the writings of antiquity.

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