Tensions and Experimentations of Kingship: King Narai and his response to missionary overtures in the 1680s.

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Abstract

Following a piece published in the previous issue of this journal analyzing the nature of sacred kingship in seventeenth century Ayutthaya, this article proceeds to show how these tensions in the performance of royal office shaped King Narai's response to Christian proselytism in the 1680s. This involves a consideration of his increasing residence in Lopburi; his fractious relationship with the Buddhist monastic order; his desire to innovate in the field of astrology and chronicle writing; the appeal of French culture and monarchical grandeur; and the possibility that his metaphysical worldview underwent a significant shift towards deism. With the exception of the latter, for which the evidence is dubious, all these themes helped stimulate hopes among the French that his conversion was indeed a real possibility. This was largely an illusion: while Narai chafed within the confines of his role, and was notably curious and cosmopolitan in his tastes, there was no great structural crisis which the French could take advantage of, and nor were they able to precipitate one.

In the 1680s, King Narai of Ayutthaya was drawn into a web of diplomacy, much of it spun by his official Constantine Phaulkon, which resulted in intensifying pressure to convert to Catholicism.[1] That pressure was made explicit by two embassies dispatched from the court of Louis XIV, which were received with great pomp in in 1685 and 1687. This article will explain aspects of Narai's response to the prospect of Christianity by exploring: the tensions involved in the performance of sacred kingship; his uneasy relationship with the sangha; the quest to perfect his court's mastery of astrology and chronology; the appeal of French culture and monarchical grandeur; and the possibility that his metaphysical worldview shifted.

It might seem as if the French ambassadors and missionaries were doomed to failure, for conversion would surely destroy the very idiom of kingship itself. In Ayutthaya, the understandings, images, and behavioural patterns of kingship were all deeply informed by various religious traditions, above all Buddhism and Hinduism. Yet, in the pre-modern world, rulership was nearly always sacralised in some sense – and still many such rulers, from the Roman emperor Constantine (310s) to Queen Ka'ahumanu of Hawaii (1820s), have indeed

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[1] There are already many excellent accounts of the embassies – not least in Dirk van der Cruysse 2002 – but my own interpretation will be set out in a forthcoming book, *Converting Kings*: *Kongo, Japan, Thailand and Hawaii in Comparison, 1450-1850* (Cambridge).

converted to monotheism. One of the reasons why this is so is that the business of sacralisation is neither straightforward nor straightforwardly advantageous. In certain contexts, a drastic restructuring of the religious field may actually enhance the authority of the monarch.

In a previous article in this journal, I introduced some of the principal conceptual terms deployed here, particularly the distinction between immanentist and transcendentalist forms of religiosity.[2] Immanentism refers to the religious practices deigned to access 'immanent' supernatural power through interactions with the ancestors, spirits, and gods who intervene in this plane of existence. Transcendentalism refers to the attempt to escape this plane of existence, to achieve salvation from the human condition through the realisation of ultimate truths, and the cultivation of a disciplined and ethical form of selfhood: it is a defining feature of traditions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. This gives rise to two different forms of sacred kingship: immanentism 'divinizes' the king, treating him as if he were a god or close to the gods in some way; transcendentalism makes him 'righteous', making him an embodiment of the quest for ethical attainment and soteriological virtue.

The main objective of that companion article was to analyse the development of kingship in late seventeenth century Ayutthaya in such terms. For example, the divinisation of the king often involves a degree of dehumanisation and ritualization that entail increasing isolation. This process dovetailed with anxieties over the king's bodily protection and the loss of heroic forms of charisma that came with leading troops into battle. But it risked detaching the ruler from the levers of rule – this is the ritualization trap. The king's capacity to interact with foreign envoys was also affected, of course, while his public persona was becoming ever more rarely visible outside the palace, a process continuing in Narai's lifetime. Another potential weakness of divinized kingship lies in the possibility that the ruler's cosmic powers may become vulnerable to empirical contradiction. However, a striking feature of the case of Ayutthaya is that the king was sacralised according to a 'righteous mode' no less strongly thanks to the tremendous moral and societal authority of Buddhism and the sangha which preserved it. Buddhism provided both a means of sacralising the king and a means of framing and containing his freedom of movement.

Such tensions in the fabric of sacred kingship could prompt rulers to experiment with or even explicitly convert to Christianity or Islam. Of course, they are more likely to do this when these tensions have developed into a palpable crisis, and where they have the intellectual capacity to entertain radical solutions. To what extent did Narai feel thwarted by the system that elevated him? To what extent was he a visionary, restlessly pacing the limits of his own cultural inheritance? The possibility of ruler conversion is also enhanced when the proselytising society is able to flourish powerful new forms of knowledge and cultural glamour. Therefore, it is also worth examining Narai's response to two major features of the French attempt to convert him: their challenge to the existing knowledge structures through the demonstration of astronomical

[2] See Strathern 2019b for the meaning of these terms, also briefly discussed in Strathern 2019a.

mastery, and the sheer grandeur of French material culture.[3] To what extent did indigenous cultural forms absorb and neutralize their threat?

Re-imagining kingship

What is undoubtedly clear is that Narai had the imaginative qualities that allowed him to appreciate entirely different systems of royal authority. The French sources are unanimous in their regard for Narai's ability to not merely enjoy foreign objects but to explore – from his palace – foreign cultures.[4] Phaulkon brought him news of the kings in Europe and in particular of victories won by Louis.[5] It was, in part, simply his curiosity that was satiated by the embassies to France, as is evident from what Narai expected of the reports from his ambassadors. We can see this in the tremendous detail contained in the surviving fragment of the Kosa Pan diary.[6] The nature of the Kosa Pan diary accords remarkably well with a passage in the Ayutthaya chronicle, written much later, which has Narai command his ambassadors to write down everything about France and their court in order to verify Phaulkon's tales, which they do, affirming that Versailles 'is as beautiful as the celestial mansions in the world of the gods.'[7]

The abiding theme running through Narai's interests appears to have been royal magnificence and exploits, but there was also a genuine intellectual impulse at work.[8] He spent several hours daily listening to a reader.[9] Bulking large in his diet was the history of his own kingdom and of all others near and far.[10] In 1680 one of his discussions with his bishops had ranged across 'mathematics, astrology, but principally geography and the government and grandeur of the princes of Europe.'[11] Simon de La Loubère reported that:

> 'He ordered Quintus Curtius to be translated into Siamese while we were there and had already had ordered the translation of several of our histories. He knows the states of Europe; and I don't doubt this, because one time, as he gave me occasion to inform him that the empire of Germany is elective, he asked me whether besides the Empire and Poland there was any other elective State in Europe; and I heard him pronounce the word 'Polonia' of which I had not spoken to him. I was assured that he often said that the art of reigning is not a matter of guesswork and that after much experience and reading he perceived that he was not yet complete in his understanding it. But he principally wished

[3] However, I can only address elsewhere two other major elements of the French overture to Narai: the tremendous significance of the operation of religious diplomacy, and the attempt to demonstrate the 'immanent' power of the monotheistic deity through appeal to empirical outcomes. These have proved very effective in persuading rulers to convert, and they are major themes of *Converting Kings.*
[4] Chaumont 1733 51; Le Blanc 1692: 17.
[5] De Bèze 1947: 12-13.
[6] *The Diary of Kosa Pan*: Busayakul 2002.
[7] RCA: 276. Given that this part of the text was written much later, it may even be a rationalization of the texts written about the French visit surviving in the archives at Ayutthaya.
[8] Tachard 1686: 191.
[9] Gervaise 1688: 282-3, Chaumont 1733 106.
[10] Tachard 1686: 294; Lionne to the Directors of the Seminary, 28 October 1684 in Launay 1920: 123.
[11] Report of Boureau-Deslandes, 1680, in Launay 1920: 106.

> to study the history of the king: he is avid for all the news from France; and so soon as his ambassadors had arrived, he kept the third by his side, until he had read to him their relation from one end to the other.'[12]

It seems that Narai was given to revolving various possibilities of governance and kingship around his mind: that on the level of intellectual enquiry at least he was even acquiring a certain spirit of scholarly relativism. The reference to Quintus Curtius Rufus' history of Alexander is most intriguing: had it been brought by the ambassadors precisely in order to tackle the problem of divinized kingship identified by Choisy?[13] For on coming to Book VI of this text, Narai would have encountered a very early episode in the development of European revulsion for the divinized oriental despot. After conquering Persia, Alexander had begun to take on its forms of kingship, giving up the restrained style of the Macedonian kings as

> 'he strove to rival the loftiness of the Persian court, equal to the power of the gods; he demanded that the victors over so many nations in paying their respects to him should prostrate themselves upon the ground, and gradually sought to accustom them to servile duties and treat them like captives.'[14]

This was a famous scene: Alexander's demand for proskynesis, openly detested by his veteran soldiers.[15] Perhaps at this point Narai gazed at his reader, who would have been reading while assuming just such an act of painful prostration, with a degree of irony.

Escaping Sacred Kingship

'At Louvo [Lopburi], where he is permitted to be less the king, he very often goes abroad…' [16]

One of the ways in which traditions of divinized kingship cope with the intense multitude of different functions they are made to bear is by fissuring into diarchical arrangements – sometimes split between the heroic or cosmic forms, or at least between more exposed/political and isolated/ritual forms.[17] But diarchies tend to remodel rather than remove forms of internal conflict. There is surely an echo of this in the Ayutthaya tradition of installing a Phra Maha Upparat, a vice-king who was invited to live in the Wang Na (the Front Palace), which can be seen as attempt to deal with the isolation of the king.[18] The Phra Maha Upparat, would be able to take on a more accessible role and discharge governmental functions more directly.[19] However, the problem was, that the Upparat could easily become an enemy within. Indeed,

[12] Loubère 1987: 343.
[13] When he stood on the riverbank watching the *kathin nam* and despairing at the veneration accorded to Narai: Choisy 1687: 244.
[14] Curtius Rufus 1976: 49-51 (Volume II, Book VI, Vi, 1-4).
[15] Lane Fox 1973: 439-41; Elements among the Greeks had developed their own forms of divinized kingship, however, see Whitmarsh 2016: 146-50.
[16] Loubère 1987: 222.
[17] See Strathern 2019, Chapter 3, for 'heroic' and 'cosmic' forms – two sub-categories of divinised kingship.
[18] Dhiravat 1984: 45-5. See Forest 1998, III: 437-8 on isolation and ritualisation.
[19] According to Reid 1993: 264.

Narai had been given this status in 1656 during the brief reign of his uncle, Sisuthammaracha, and it was from this position that he had promptly launched his own bid for the throne.[20] No wonder, then that Narai himself never appointed a Phra Maha Upparat, and initially refused to move from the Front Palace as if indicating that this active role would not be yielded to any potential rival.[21] The palace was a dangerous place; the violence of his succession struggle still roiled about him. In January 1657 a conspiracy was exposed that involved many khunnang in league with his half-brother who had been lodged in the Rear Palace. It was dealt with through the usual bloody purge. [22]

It is probably fair to say that Narai was not quite 'trapped' by the ritualised existence he had inherited from Prasat Thong. But if he still had access to the levers of power, it was only due to the exertion of considerable effort, spending long hours in council meetings and having recourse to brutal punishment. As the Abbé de Choisy notes in his journal 'When the kings were always confined into their palaces, the officials had all the power. But this king wants to know everything…'[23] Moreover, Narai seems to have felt distinctly claustrophobic. This conclusion does not rest so much on the speculations of French observers, who were struck by the personal humanity and intelligence of the king and inclined to imagine that he was dissatisfied with his own traditions.[24] Rather, it relies simply on noting where he passed his time. By the 1680s he was spending some eight or nine months of the year in Lopburi, a town lying to the north Ayutthaya.[25]

In effect, Narai was trying to solve the ritualization dilemma not through the division of office but the division of space. Somewhat paradoxically, this was facilitated by the way kingship was so bound up with the palace and city of Ayutthaya.[26] By physically leaving the city and establishing a new royal abode he was able to create a new mode of kingship, which was less formal, more experimental and cosmopolitan.[27] Guy Tachard puts it more plainly: the king spends so much of the year at Lopburi because 'he is more at liberty there and is not obliged to be shut up as he is at Siam, that he may keep his subjects in obedience and respect.'[28]

Many of the behavioural strictures in fact remained in place for formal encounters at Lopburi although they were executed on a smaller, less solemn scale.[29] However, the activity that defined Lopburi kingship was elephant hunting, and this presented opportunities for a more active and less scripted way of relating to his subjects and visitors, even if European eyes were

[20] Dhiravat 1984: 258-273.
[21] Baker and Pasuk 2017: 154
[22] The detailed account in the Ayutthaya Chronicle, *RCA* 235-44, is interesting for the emphasis on the role of divination involving a Buddhist relic and other magical devices used by the conspirators. When Narai was succeeded by a usurper in 1688, it was by a resident of the Rear Palace, Phetracha.
[23] Choisy 1995: 305.
[24] Gervaise 1688: 302; and Trakulhun 1997: 78-9 on Gervaise.
[25] He had begun turning Lopburi into a functional royal residence in 1666; Van de Cruysse 2002: 87.
[26] Kemp 1969: 37. However, at Ayutthaya there were also means of arranging less formal meetings – staged 'chance encounters' in the palace gardens, which the 1685 ambassadors profited from: Choisy 1995: 218..
[27] Baker and Pasuk 2017: 154 also notes that he could thereby separate the traditional nobles from their retinues.
[28] Tachard 1686: 265; compare Loubère 1987: 361; Choisy 1995: 239.
[29] Loubère 1987: 361.

still struck by the massive orchestration of manpower involved. To deploy the terms of Georges Dumezil, the hunting around Lopburi allowed Narai to demonstrate the *celeritas* that the battlefield no longer provided in contrast with the heavy emphasis on *gravitas* at Ayutthaya. [30] To choose more local terms: he could thus display the merit that the taming of such royal and auspicious beasts was believed to necessitate. A further division of space was brought into play here, for his hunting lodge of Thale Chupson was to Lopburi as Lopburi was to Ayutthaya. It was at Thale Chupson that his most intimate encounter with the missionaries took place at a makeshift observatory there.[31]

And it was while hunting that the King was able to meet the members of the French embassy of 1685, and speak to them with 'a charming familiarity.'[32] Gervaise noted that when Narai went hunting he often dressed in the French fashion.[33] The palace at Lopburi was clearly influenced by Persian and Indian aesthetics: here he could experiment more concretely with aspects of the foreign court cultures that he was so curious about.[34] To the burgeoning population of Lopburi, the cosmopolitanism of the royal vision would have been readily apparent by the 1680s. This is where Phaulkon had his European style mansion house. This is where Narai had one wat turned into chapel (through the insertion of gothic arches) in order to provide for his Christian guests, while another wat made way for a mosque.[35]

Narai's Relationship with Buddhism and State Ritual

For most of the year, then, the great palace complex at Ayutthaya stood empty; this microcosmic mountain of the gods denuded of its deity. And the major temples and monasteries that clustered around the palace received no royal attention – except for the *kathin* processions at the end of the rainy season.[36] How serious were tensions between the sangha and Narai during his reign?[37] Perhaps they can be symbolized by a rampant monkey. Gervaise tells us that a *sangkharat* informed Narai that his subjects were murmuring against him and his harsh

[30] Sahlins 1985: 90-2, following Dumézil, who contrasts the youthful, active, creative violence of *celeritas* with the 'venerable, staid, judicious, priestly' qualities of *gravitas*.
[31] Kemp 1969: 17.
[32] Choisy 1995: 277; Tachard 1686: 276-7.
[33] Gervaise 1688: 293. This may be an erroneous generalization, and that it happened only when the French were there.
[34] Julispong 2017. When Choisy 1995: 304 remarks that 'he is very fond of foreigners and retains their services as much as possible, and since the French missionaries are in his kingdom he is seen much more often than before' this might apply to his meetings with foreigners in Lopburi.
[35] Muhammad Rabi 1972: 77-8.
[36] Baker and Pasuk 2017: 166. There was clearly an important establishment of the Sangha at Lopburi, however.
[37] De Bèze 1947: 34-8 presents a different perspective on Narai's relations with the sangha, deriving from Phaulkon, which claims that the monks assisted the king in his succession and that, mindful of his indebtedness, he lavished affection on them. This is most likely a tale told by Phaulkon to further explain why it was so difficult to convert Narai. De Bèze 1947: 107 later reports Phaulkon's argument that the king might be more disposed to accept Christianity when he discovered that the Buddhist clergy had conspired to intervene in the succession and plot his downfall. See also Dhiravat 1984: 276

punishments.[38] Narai's response was to send a large monkey to the *sangkharat*'s house to do as he pleased, which was to cause terrible damage. When the monk begged for the animal to be removed, the king told him that insolence from his subjects was a thousand times more unbearable than the antics of a mischievous monkey.

Gervaise is vague about when this occurred but his narrative implies that Narai's reputation for cruel punishments followed his reaction to an assassination attempt in 1670. In that year, a group of monks had planned to murder the king as soon as he entered a wat without his official guard during one of the principal ceremonies of the year. The arms concealed by the monks were spotted by an official in time and they were all put to the sword.[39] This was the most serious threat to his life to issue from any conspiracy and an ugly expression of the sangha's willingness to translate their status into direct political opposition to the throne. It likely left him with an enduring mistrust of what monks got up to in their wats.[40]

The ceremony at which this drama occurred may have been the *kathin*. This would at least help to make further sense of a striking decision taken by Narai's during the *kathin nam* procession of 1673: he offered a most visible snub to the monks by choosing this as the moment to bestow his patronage upon the Christian mission.[41] We have at least one report of another assassination attempt on Narai during a hunting expedition around 1674, caused by his policy of protecting foreigners, though no information on the role of monks per se.[42] In this context a report from 1675 that Narai had defrocked 3000 monks takes on the guise of a purge as much as a purification of the Sangha.[43] A further widening of the breach occurred in 1676. This is when Narai suspended the ceremony – profoundly redolent of 'cosmic kingship' – of the 'speeding of the outflow' by which the floodwaters were commanded to withdraw at the end of the rainy season.[44] If some African kings have been expected to summon the deluge, here the king was called on to force its retreat. But this year, the waters failed to obey him: it rained, the barges were spoiled and Narai was displeased.[45] His astrologers, who had predicted fine weather for this day, were dismissed.[46] This is a good example of the way that claims to immanent powers

[38] Gervaise 1688: 254, who comments that 'up to the present the monks have not been at great pains to justify him in the eyes of the people'; he is vague as to when this happened.
[39] Gervaise 1688: 254.
[40] It is tempting to call on the explicit comments of Turpin 1771, II: 62, on Narai's anger against the sangha and the popular revulsion for sacrilege this aroused mong the people – but he probably has no more information than Gervaise.
[41] *Relation des Missions et des voyages des Evesques Vicaires Apososto liques et de leurs Ecclesiastiques és années 1672, 1673, 1674 & 1675*, 1680: 127, 131. See Strathern 2019 a on the ambiguity as to whether this ceremony was combined with the speeding of the outflow rites.
[42] Phaulkon to de la Chaise, 20 November 1686, Tokyo Bunko MS 48, f.5.
[43] The source for this is Laneau to the Directors, 19 December 1675, cited in Forest 1998: I, 204. The missionaries generally failed to see that such de-frockings were not in themselves a sign of antagonism towards Buddhism but rather a fulfilment of the function of a Buddhist king. However, they could also serve a political function, which in this context is highly likely.
[44] See Strathern 2019 a for more on this rite.
[45] Tachard 1686: 260, gives a version of this story indicating that it was not a single event but many years of experience which indicated that sometimes the waters increased rather than abated. It is odd that in the memory of Thai prisoners in Burma after 1767, (Tun Aung Chain 2005: 68), Narai should be specially credited with the power to make the flood water subside.
[46] Loubère 1987: 221.

on the part of kings could place them in a position of empirical jeopardy. Choisy claimed that the missionaries had also taken this as their opportunity to 'prove that it was a superstition.'[47]

African rainmaker kings who failed could be chased out of office; no wonder Narai sulked. Apart from wounded pride, was he concerned about the implications for his supply of merit? Was he, in a more rationalist and sceptical fashion, embarrassed by the logic of this ritual? In more structural terms, his move fits with a long-term tendency to abandon the more explicit occasions in which the king was used a ritual device to ensure that the elements yielded their bounty. Perhaps this was because the rhythms of the agrarian cycle were no longer quite so critical to Ayutthayan society during its 'early modern' period – in which trade had become an important generator of wealth and status.[48] Whatever the case, Narai decided that he would simply not perform the rite if it meant that his powers could be disconfirmed by the weather.

Intriguingly, however, his reaction went rather further than that. At this sacred time of the year, the high point of lay gift-giving to the sangha, Narai ordered that the doors of the temples were to be shut and no one was to enter. This is described in a missionary report, which comments:

> 'Everyone was extremely surprised at it. And since that time, we have not seen him go to a Temple, in the manner of his predecessors, it was commonly said that he was of the Religion of the Foreigners.'[49]

The last claim here is probably wishful thinking, although such a rumour may have been fuelled by Narai's explicit indication the following year that he would not block any of his subjects from converting to Christianity.[50] At the very least, one can see how the act of shutting down the temples could have signified to his subjects a real antagonism towards the religious establishment. The Sangha also apparently played an important role in staging the retreat of the floodwaters event – indeed, in indicating the point when they were just about to recede, thereby affording some degree of 'conceptual control' over the empirical risk – and would have been snubbed by its abandonment.[51] A Dutch source indicates that Narai lost much of his credit with the monks from this time.[52]

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[47] Choisy 1995: 202 is unclear as to whom they proved this to, and when. What seems to have been 'disproved' was the fact that supramundane powers were involved when the waters did abate; for the missionaries discerned that the 'talapoins' knew when this was likely to happen 'by a certain sign.'

[48] Note that the *Bophok* ceremony (See Strathern 2019 a) was abandoned at some point (at least we have almost no information beyond the *Palace Law*, in Baker and Pasuk 2016: 124-5) as was the ploughing ceremony, and also the *Thanyatho*, or rice-burning ceremony, used to help reassure about the following year's crop (ibid, p. 123). Kemp 1969: 34 suggests that the 'speeding of the outflow' rite may have been rendered superfluous due to the technological capacity of the Siamese to control the water system, which seems odd given that the occasion for its abandonment was a failure of control.

[49] *Relation des Missions et des Voyages des Evesques Vicaires Apostoliques et de leurs ecclèsiastiques és années 1676 et 1677*, 1680: 215.

[50] *Relation des Missions … 1676 et 1677*, 1680: 214, and see the letter of Laneau, 9 October 1677 in Launay 1920: 104.

[51] Choisy 1995: 202. According to Loubère 1987: 373, the monks 'preached' from morning till night when the inundation was at its height.

[52] Dhiravat 1984: 325, citing a letter from De Jonge of 12 December 1676.

Around 1684, Narai purified the Sangha again, ordering all monks to undergo an examination in Pali and scripture. [53] Thousands were defrocked and thus rendered liable for corvée duties. As with his purification of 1675, such acts cannot automatically be read as antagonistic towards Buddhism; he was discharging his function as a *cakkavatti* by maintaining monastic standards in this way. But equally, such moves could serve political functions too, and be carried out in a manner that aroused resentment. The last such endeavour seems to have happened in 1687, when Narai had several thousand monks 'reduced to the secular condition'.[54] It was around this time that a high ranking monk of eighty spoke out against the foreigners after an official was beheaded for offending a European officer: Narai had the impaled corpse of the man placed at the monk's door.[55] After this, it is not surprising to note that Narai does not have a record as an energetic patron of Buddhist art and architecture.[56]

There is enough evidence here to indicate that the transcendentalist tension between ruler and clergy had become palpable and indeed openly antagonistic in Narai's reign; that the king may even have been somewhat alienated from aspects of the rites of sacred kingship that he had inherited. He was not a warrior king in the mould of an Oda Nobunaga or an Akbar, who could use charisma to innovate a new and more public guise, and nor is there any evidence of personal spiritual proclivities that would have led him in that direction. Rather his instinct was to withdraw from his role, to Lopburi and away from even the few public ceremonies that were left.

And yet, all reigns have their challenges and Narai was very far from facing a crisis. Setting aside the wishful thinking of various French observers, there is very little to suggest that Narai saw in Christianity any solution. Succession, to be sure, was exceptionally problematic but Christian primogeniture would not have helped given that he had no son. Moreover, most importantly, it was easy for someone as perspicacious as Narai to see that Christianity brought its own version of the perennial tension between church and state. He questioned the missionaries directly about this in 1687-8, wondering pertinently about why Cardinals interfered with the business of the State or Popes exercised the princely function of ordering people be put to death.[57] Indeed, we know that he directly contrasted this with his brutal approach to the Sangha: here the Theravadin insistence on the transcendentalist purity of the

[53] Gervaise 1688: 198, who emphasizes that Narai was in need of manpower at the time; as does the *Ship of Suleiman*, in Muhammad Rabi 1972: 120.

[54] On 12 May 1687, the Jesuit Jean de Fontaney, (Letter in Tachard 1689: 258-9) reported that for a year the king had been 'chasing the ignorant out of the pagodas' but that on that day itself he had issued particular orders against the monks, extracting some for his service. This accords with La Loubère's statement (1987: 373) that when they arrived in the country (in October 1687) the king 'had just' done this: *il venait d'en reduire plusieurs milliers à la condition séculière*.

[55] Jean de Fontaney, letter in Tachard 1689: 258-9. See also the comments of the Franciscan Morelli, who commented that 'he greatly fears the Talapoins (Buddhist monks), and not without reason, because as they are in such numbers, and so esteemed by the populace', in his *Breve relattione della Religione di Siam* of 20 Sept 1686: Halikowski-Smith 2011: 360.

[56] See Baker and Pasuk 2017: 166 for evidence of a leaning towards brahmanical rather than Buddhist patronage. However, Narai did still visit the Buddha footprint once a year according to Loubère 1987: 128, gave puja to the Buddha (Gervaise 1688: 280), and gifts at the kathin (Choisy 1995: 213). See RCA: 303 on Narai restoring temples.

[57] Letter of Fontaney May 287 in Tachard 1689: 258-9.

clerisy directly assisted the monarch. When Phaulkon tried to proselytize to him, the King 'would only receive what appeared to him evident, and sought demonstrations of where God demanded of man the humble submission of his judgment.'[58] The demand for proof and the aversion to subordination to other authorities both seem characteristic of the man.

Matters Empirical: The Mastery of Time and Space

A rather similar pattern emerges in considering one of the crucial areas in which the French hoped to make progress with regard to the evangelism of the king**:** technological and scientific achievement. Otherwise in bitter conflict over the conduct of the embassy, Simon de La Loubère and Phaulkon agreed that this was a significant weapon in Christianity's arsenal.[59] It was Phaulkon's suggestion that led to dispatch of the six Jesuits in 1685, but from the start it was the MEP bishops' idea of the college of science that had first attracted the king's notice.[60] La Loubère was convinced,

> that the true secret of insinuating into the mind of these peoples, supposing that one has not the gift of miracles, is not directly to contradict anything directly, but to make them see, while unaware of it, their errors in the sciences, and especially in mathematics and anatomy…[61]

This is, in effect, a strategy of empirical disconfirmation – but since divine power is so unreliably immanent (i.e. absent 'the gift of miracles') one must instead rely on science. What was it that would thereby be disconfirmed? The strategy depended on conceiving the targeted knowledge system as tightly holistic, such that a demonstration of the superiority of Western techniques in the fields of astronomy or medicine, for example, would somehow undermine the entire religious and philosophical edifice of Siamese tradition. In one sense the French were right to imagine that the equivalent indigenous arenas of knowledge did not form an equivalent secular field of 'science' but were indeed bound up with ritual practices and religious understandings.[62] Narai may have missionaries to help in assessing mining endeavours, but he also asked them about enchanted places, such as ponds which he had seen magically disappear.[63] What the French would not have grasped is how intimately their focus on astronomy touched on conceptions of the sacred king.

For the French sources, for their part, already bear the hallmarks of the self-conscious confidence of the scientific revolution and can seem quite modern in the deprecation of alternative means of understanding natural processes.[64] Indeed, the Jesuit expeditions of 1685

[58] This is from De Bèze 1947: 39, who is relaying Phaulkon's own report.
[59] La Loubère's seem to have drawn heavily on the MEP missionary Louis Laneau for his information about and understanding of Siam. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for underlining this point.
[60] Launay 1920: 16.
[61] Loubère 1987: 421.
[62] Indeed, this episode brings out the way in which immanentism and science share a concern with observable results.
[63] Letter of Jean de Fontaney, 12 May 1687 in Tachard 1689: 244-5, 257.
[64] Eg Loubère 1987: 263. See Dew 2009 for general context.

and 1687 were also conceived as scientific fact-finding missions, and were appropriately equipped as such with questions to investigate from the Academy Royal of Sciences.[65] In their harangue presented to the King in Lopburi in 1685 the Jesuits referred baldly to the fact that it was their profession to use the 'human sciences, so as to bring men to the knowledge and love of the true God.'[66] Some days after this, Phaulkon conceived the plan of bringing twelve Jesuit mathematicians to Siam and having them stationed in an observatory like those in Paris or Peking, which Narai found pleasing.[67]

The king's interest in European clocks, globes, binoculars and telescopes was long-standing.[68] It was particularly on astronomy that the mission placed their hopes, and, in terms of obtaining access to the king, it was surely successful. Arriving in Lopburi in November 1685, the Jesuits soon set about setting up their instruments and taking measurements. On the night of the 11th of December, at the king's hunting-lodge, they invited him to observe the eclipse of the moon that they had predicted would take place. Tachard reports on the king's satisfaction at the telescope and also his pertinent questions as to the significance of what he was witnessing.[69] The king showed his pleasure in the usual manner by bestowing gifts, but also in an unusual way: through the relative informality and intimacy of the whole encounter, which was remarked on as 'a very rare thing'. In 1687, thirteen Jesuit mathematicians had arrived and on 16 April 1688, they observed a lunar eclipse from their residence, while the king did the same in his palace in Lopburi, sending questions to the fathers via a go-between.[70]

What might all this have meant to Narai? The Jesuits were stepping onto a clearly demarcated field of knowledge: the astrological expertise in the hands of the brahmans. Narai had a brahman present at the first viewing in 1685 in Thale Chupson and again in his palace for the 1688 eclipse. Indeed this Brahman – presumably the chief astrologer of the Front palace, or *phra horathibodhi* who dealt with military and political affairs – made it his business to investigate the telescopes independently.[71] There was an element of competition about this, for the brahman at Lopburi had predicted the eclipse to within a quarter of an hour, although he was mistaken as to its duration.[72] The brahman had engaged the Jesuits with a number of questions, at one point comparing their answers with the Chinese theory. Tachard here picks up on a difference in views between this open-minded brahman and the Buddhist monks who remained convinced that when the moon was eclipsed she was momentarily devoured by a 'dragon' (the god Rahu).[73]

[65] Tachard 1686: 14, 19, 274.
[66] Tachard 1686: 280.
[67] This plan would entail Tachard returning to France instead of going on to China, in order to press this case, 'which seemed to him [Phaulkon] to be of extreme consequence for religion' (Tachard 1686: 281-2). The use of mathematics and astronomy as a way into the Chinese court was of now of long-standing, and indeed the Jesuits in 1685 were bound ultimately for China: See Hsia 2009, and Alberts 2013: 105-9 for Southeast Asia. Two observatories were built, in Lopburi and Ayutthaya (Hodges 1999: 36).
[68] Riello 2017: 261; Bhawan 2007: 146-7; Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1993: 80-1.
[69] Tachard 1686: 328-9; Choisy 1995: 276-7; Chaumont 1733: 71-2.
[70] Le Blanc 1692: 81, and also Smithies 2003a. The latter notes that there was in fact another eclipse in April 1688, a solar eclipse, at which the Jesuits attended the king.
[71] Choisy 1995: 271. On the position of the *Phra Horathibodhi*, see Baker and Pasuk 2016: 109-10.
[72] Tachard 1686: 334.
[73] Tachard 1686: 335.

Here, Tachard alludes to one reason why the eclipse was already culturally construed as a salient and indeed worrying event in Siam.[74] No wonder Narai wished to see what was going on up there. While the French now made a distinction between astronomy and astrology, slicing apart the natural and social domains of existence, this was a unusual development in human history and not one that the Siamese had embarked upon. Instead, – as across much of the world in this period – to understand the stars was to gain the kind of mastery over the course of events that it was crucial for a king to maintain. Above all astrologers needed to calculate the auspicious moments in which to commence significant activities.[75] One can see this as a 'magical' business perhaps, but no less usefully simply as a technical affair equivalent to science. Indeed in many ways, the French were very impressed by the ingenuity of astronomical Siamese calculations.[76] But the wealth of new skills and machines – the globes, orreries, timepieces, telescopes and so on – brought by Europeans must have seemed to Narai and his brahmans as an opportunity to improve their control over the hidden mechanisms of the universe displayed in the stars. If so, they took what the Jesuits presented to them and used it to alter and perfect the existing domain of astrological knowledge without fundamentally challenging its premises.

A few years beforehand Narai had commissioned the *phra horathibodi* to write a new kind of historical text, which was finished in 1681 and which is now known as the Luang Prasoet chronicle.[77] In this light, Narai's enthusiasm for reading histories takes on a quite new significance – for history was a record of the course of events, and above all the fortunes of kings, that astrology sought to control. [78] The Luang Prasoet chronicle can itself be seen as a merger of two genres. The *Tamnan* texts, taking inspiration from Lankan chronicles, had subordinated the passage of time to a cosmic Buddhist patterning, in which the recording of dates was not relevant. Precise dates, however, were of prime importance for the astrological records (*chotmaihet hon*), and these were used as the template for the Luang Prasoet chronicle. The result was in effect the first of the *phongsawadan* (dynastic history) texts, albeit in an early, transitional form. It provided a chronologically ordered progression of human (royal) affairs, astrological events and unusual happenings.[79] It may have been an attempt to investigate more empirically the patterns that astrology set out to reveal.[80]

[74] Smithies 2003a: 198, and see 190. On the ritual marking of eclipse, see Baker and Pasuk 2016: 110.
[75] See Loubère 1987: 264.
[76] See the comments of Monsieur Cassini, the director of the Observatory at Paris, on the Siamese method, which he did not consider so distant from that of the French: Loubère 1987: 489.
[77] See Hodges 1999 and Nidhi 2005: 314.
[78] There may be analogies here with the use of astrology in early modern Islamic empires too, on which see Moin 2012.
[79] Hodges 1999: 40, notes that the Luang Prasoet chronicle did not yet reflect much on cause and effect and remained beholden to the format of astrological recording. The 'History of Siam' that Van Vliet drew upon may be something of a precursor but Baker and Pasuk 2017a: 149-50 remarks on its affinity with the *Tamnan* and their perspective from the temple. The interest in 'unusual happenings' here may be compared with the interpretation of *prodigia* in ancient Rome, see Davies 2004.
[80] In the *Palace Law* (Baker and Pasuk 2016: 112), the time between 9-10 pm of the king's day was to be spent considering 'the essence of ancient events', which may indicate that this had long been a responsibility of kingship in Ayutthaya.

It is unlikely to be a coincidence that in 1685, the same year that Narai gazed companionably through the telescope for the first time, he also altered the official basis for his calendar, shifting it from the Chulasakkarat (the Lesser Era) to Phutthasakkarat (the Buddhist Era), so that 1685 CE, which had been 1046, became the year 2228 after the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment.[81] Phaulkon seems to have given two different explanations about this: to the Dutch he explained that as the king had turned fifty-two and given that he also considered himself the fifty-second king of Siam, he felt that he should make a grand move for the sake of posterity.[82] But to Gervaise, Phaulkon claimed it was one of his own initiatives devised to avoid the 'public confusion and private annoyance' produced by the Chinese twelve-year cycle of animal signs.[83] Both explanations may be essentially bluster. Possibly, in this year of the French embassy, Narai favoured emphasising a calendrical system that simultaneously matched the principle on which the Christian system was based (anchored by the life of the founder) while also advertising Buddhism's greater antiquity.[84] But it may also represent the fact that the calculations around the Chulasakkarat had been shown to be imperfect by the Jesuit astronomers, and that a different framework was necessary for discerning the deep meaning of the flow of time.

How far, then, did the astronomical prowess of the Jesuits take them? It was certainly highly effective in catching the king's attention and patronage. If the brahman astrologers could have been profoundly undermined by the Jesuit displays it might possibly have had some implications for their ability to fashion the royal image.[85] But it seems that nothing like this happened, and that rather the brahmans engaged flexibly with them in a spirit of technical enquiry. The Buddhist monks, meanwhile, who had been invited to none of these viewings, were unsurprisingly not won over.[86] More importantly, this was not an area of knowledge that pertained to their core purpose or the core truth-claims of Buddhism; it was a realm of this-worldly concern that had been happily contracted out to brahmanical specialists in the first place.

Furthermore the French detachment of astronomy from astrology also diminished its social utility. It turned into a merely academic matter something that was otherwise seen as of vital political importance. The authority of local traditions of astrology was not only verified by

[81] However, clearly the Buddhist era was already in use before this time in some form, because the instructions given to the envoys sent to Portugal in 1684 state that the Ayutthaya calendar was calculated from the Buddha's attainment of nirvana. See Dhiravat and Smithies 2011. After his visit in 1687, Loubère 1987: 261-3, refers to both these two epochal systems as in operation but describes the Chulasakkarat era as more modern. He also says 'It seems they have twice caused their calendar to be reformed by able astronomers.' Letters using the Buddhist era are referred to on p. 202.
[82] I am following the account of Dutch sources in Dhiravat 1984: 396-7 and Bhawan 2007: 146 here.
[83] Gervaise 1688: 155.
[84] See the quotation from Tachard 1686: 309-10 below. It is also possible that some astrological concern about inauspiciousness on the part of Narai was rather the root issue, particularly if considered it in the light of Prasat Thong's calendrical anxieties described in Strathern 2019a.
[85] See Forest 1998, I: 140-1 on the court role of brahmans.
[86] Tachard 1686: 335. Gervaise 1688: 65, clearly sensitive on this point, remarks that the Siamese sense of superiority rested on 'the profound knowledge they flatter themselves they have of the movements of the Heavens and of what takes place on Earth. They imagine that their Observations on these matters should serve as models for ours: Not to agree with them is to appear among them as ignorant or stupid.'

their accurate account of heavenly movements but also every time their predictions of earthly affairs appeared to come true.[87] So empirical a business was this that the *Palace Law* set out punishments for astrologers making wrong predictions.[88] And the fact that astrology could be empirically verified through worldly events allowed it to slide underneath or to one side of all religious frameworks. A measure of this may be found in how the visitors to Siam themselves responded to it. Thus the Muslim Ibn Muhammad Rabi could note how a brahman astrologer in India had predicted the death of their ambassador shortly after making their next landfall, and the Catholic Abbé de Choisy could report on how a famous brahman in Ayutthaya had correctly predicted their own imminent arrival and again the arrival of bad news in the form of a military loss to Cambodian troops. [89] Perhaps it was this court astrologer who had predicted the shipwreck of the first Siamese embassy to France.[90] The Jesuit de Bèze even records a prediction by the brahman mathematician – 'who had credit with the people' – of the coming 'great troubles' in 1688; when he says that the French made fun of it, not knowing its source, it is with heavy irony.[91] Whatever the cognitive biases that actually lie behind these reports, such apparent successes assisted the brahmans in maintaining their grip on what the observation of the stars signified.

Cultural Cachet and Missionary Accommodation

The most significant factor behind Narai's engagement with French missions was his appreciation of the value of 'religious diplomacy' – the attempt to secure diplomatic and military advantage through engaging with missionary overtures.[92] But there is no need to reduce his behaviour to that logic. French high culture and its imagery of kingship held a genuine appeal for him. This was not quite a one-way relationship: in hosting the second Siamese embassy, which returned with Chaumont and Choisy to arrive in Brest in June 1686, the French court had amplified the pomp to receive them in accordance with news about the grandeur of such receptions in Siam.[93] Some Siamese music was even employed.[94] This is a signal of an important dynamic: royal peer-to-peer status consciousness; the desire to establish oneself as a great king in the way that other kings are. There was a tension to this dynamic: both parties benefitted from mutual recognition while also vying to assert their superiority in ways subtle and not so subtle.[95]

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[87] As to *how* such predictions regularly seem truthful, that is essentially a psychological or anthropological question, best investigated through analysis of societies today (for e.g. Sri Lanka and Thailand), where it is still relied upon by all levels of society.
[88] Baker and Pasuk 2016: 111.
[89] Muhammad Rabi 1972:42; Choisy 1995: 218. However, Choisy was already primed to take astrology seriously following an encounter with its European version, which, 'although he claimed to 'despise this sort of prognostication', had predicted that he would hunt for his fortune over water: Choisy, (*Mémoire pour server à l'histoire de Louis XIV*, in 1995: 411).
[90] Hutchinson 1940: 64, also cited by Van der Cruysse 2002; 211, although Hutchinson is not clear on his source.
[91] Bèze 1947: 89.
[92] See Strathern forthcoming.
[93] Love 2006.
[94] Irving 2012.
[95] Note, in a Thai eulogy to King Narai: Dhiravat 2015: 67.

This was what was at stake in all the tussles over protocol that beset the embassies in Ayutthaya in particular. Both Persians and French insisted on the modification of Siamese court etiquette in order to deliver their letters, and eventually won concessions.[96] Narai was perhaps unusually willing to suspend normal principles in order to receive the French, and this could only have signalled to his own elites, as well as to all other foreign groups, just how highly he regarded their king.[97] But as Giorgio Riello has pointed out, Narai's exchange of gifts and embassies was undertaken in a spirit of mutual regard rather than self-subordination: indeed, the Thai king sent long lists of expensive gifts to France that he expected to be provided with.[98] Indeed, if we can believe our French sources, Narai was fond of comparing himself with Louis Le Grand and seemed to them most sincere in his desire for a kind of trans-oceanic friendship.[99]

But how significant and disruptive was the cachet of French culture in Siam? Was it akin to the appeal of the Siamese and Siamoiserie in France, a certain transient revelling in exotica, or to the craze for Portuguese style dress and rosaries among Hideyoshi's retainers in the 1580s?[100] Our French sources, however rich, have to be treated with circumspection because they were just as inclined to assume the innate appeal of their culture as were the Persians.[101] It cannot at least be doubted that a distinct transference of civilizational glamour from Persia to France had taken place, for it is painfully acknowledged by the Persians themselves, who claimed that Phaulkon only had to declare to Narai how a Christian king would proceed and he would be immediately persuaded to follow suit, 'ever bent on imitating the Christians.'[102]

This is perhaps most evident in Narai's taste for interesting objects and luxuries from Europe.[103] Perhaps through his access to such eclectic exotica he demonstrated the kind of reach that the true *cakkavatti* possessed, and reinforced his unique status.[104] The 1684 embassy included four Siamese boys to be brought up in the French manner and become fountain-makers, architects, goldsmiths.[105] Ayutthaya and particularly Lopburi were beginning to

[96] See discussion in Bhawan 2007: 136.
[97] Gervaise 1688: 310-11; Choisy 1995: 221 ('Every day we overturn the customs of the Siamese'); Tachard 1686: 215-22; Céberet 1992: 78-9, 92-6. Kemp 1969: 14 -16. However, Bhawan 2007: 135-8 offers some reason to be cautious in accepting French claims of exceptional reception at face value.
[98] Riello 2017: 259.
[99] Céberet 1992: 96; Tachard 1689: 226 reports that Narai had remarked, to General Desfarges 'if you were to see my heart, you would see his [Louis'] portrait engraved there' – but by this point Tachard is a suspect source. Forbin 1991: 53: Narai 'liked nothing in the world so much as being compared with Louis le Grand'. See also Jacq-Hergoualc'h's note (7) to the text of Loubère 1987: 343.
[100] On Japan, see Boxer 1951: 163.
[101] As recognized by Claude de Bèze 1947: 59.
[102] Muhammad Rabi 1972:145, and compare Loubère 1987: 248 on Narai saying to Chaumont that 'if there was any custom in his court that was not in the court of France then he would alter it'. See Ruangslip 2007: 126 for some Dutch perceptions on how Phaulkon had altered royal style.
[103] The English and Dutch East India Companies had also been subject to long lists of requests: Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1993: 52-6; Bhawan 2007: 140-43.
[104] In part, the exchange of such luxuries was itself a means of establishing that mutual regard. Riello 2017, draws our attention to an observation of La Loubère (1987: 363) that in Siam demonstrating proper affection and respect for royal gifts was a means of demonstrating one's respect for the giver; a principle that was not reciprocated in France.
[105] Van de Cruysse 2002: 239.

acquire a French touch. The next Siamese embassy of 1686 returned with 4, 263 mirrors from the factory at St. Gobain, for example, destined to hang in the interiors of his palaces alongside thousands of pieces of crystal for his chandeliers, and many carpets, velvets, linens.[106] There were a few signs too, of European influence on architecture.[107] Narai's personality, his aesthetic openness and desire, therefore acted as a kind of magnifier of the extraversion of the Ayutthaya polity, and opened up the palace to a flow of French cultural influence.

However, in the field of cultural attraction no less than in the field of diplomacy, the obstacle to missionary hopes lay in the abiding pluralism of Narai's worldview. The French may have attained a particularly strong appeal in the 1680s but they remained just one of a number of traditions of royal magnificence and prestigious culture. Apart from the Islamicate culture which continued to shape royal tastes – Narai did not give up his Persian attire – there was the small matter of the Emperor of China.[108] Even after the imposition of Manchu rule in the form of the Qing dynasty, Narai continued to send ambassadors and gifts there.[109] Japanese and Chinese material culture was still highly valued; indeed it formed a large part of the gifts sent on to Paris.[110] Choisy noted that Narai had been assiduous in collecting books on the history of China, and indeed asked one of his ambassadors with experience of both to compare France and China, rather revealingly.[111] He remained eclectic to the end.

Moreover, French cultural cachet only enjoyed a brief moment in the sun, and its impact beyond Narai himself was ultimately rather small. In essence, Siamese cultural production continued unperturbed.[112] The first pair of officials who were sent to France in 1684 were frustratingly unmoved by its delights.[113] Kosa Pan gave some succour to French pride in expressing admiration for what he had seen, but not with any lasting impact on his affiliations.[114] Given the great esteem of the Siamese for decorum, civility, hierarchical etiquette and personal hygiene, there were probably aspects of French presentation that connoted barbarity.[115] Gervaise, echoing Marcelo de Ribadeneira, eighty years beforehand, commented 'there is no people with a better opinion or who speak more highly of their own country than the Siamese.'[116] Turpin writing much later (but perhaps echoing the judgement of

[106] Riello 2017: 255-61; Tachard 1689: 207.
[107] See Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1993: 157-80. Gervaise 1688: 51 refers to a large tank, the work of a Frenchman and Italian, and (217, check) to a recently built pagoda bearing European influence.
[108] Julispong 2017.
[109] Geravise 1688: 312. On the high status of embassies from China, the Mughals and Safavids: Gervaise 1688: 299-301, and Bhawan 2007: 71, 118.
[110] See Riello 2017: 241-5. Choisy 1995: 194: 'all the furniture is beds from China, carpets from Persia, screens from Japan.'
[111] Choisy 1995: 250; Choisy, *Histoire de l'Église* in Smithies 1997: 197; Loubère 1987: 8 'the Chinese, whom in many things they imitate.'
[112] Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1993: 253-6.
[113] Van de Cruysse 2002: 243, and see 248, 251.
[114] Kosa Pan was quite quick to side with Phetracha in 1688: Céberet 1992: 51; Le Blanc 1692: 173. Tachard 1689: 204 on his reaction to France.
[115] Choisy 1995: 202: Narai asked Phaulkon 'if the French were clean, if they looked after their teeth, if they washed their mouths and their bodies.' The French themselves commented on the Siamese concern with cleanliness, which clearly they did not share. See Loubère 1987: 188-90 on cleanliness, 244-5 on civility.
[116] Gervaise 1688: 41, compare Ribadeneira,1970, I: 43, 162: 'Commonly the people of that kingdom so much love their nation that it is common for them to say that men who are not Siamese live as beasts.'

a more contemporary source) put it that the French had been ridiculous enough to offer themselves as models, and that 'this national vice humiliated the pride of the Siamese, attached to the point of stubbornness to all their customs.'[117]

The missionaries, at least, tended to understand that they would have to efface some of their Europeanness in order to be effective. This was particularly the case for the MEP bishops, who came equipped with Papal instructions containing a very clear confirmation of the accommodationist principle.[118] It was mandated also by their circumstances in Siam and the now commonplace insight that popular esteem for the sangha was a massive obstacle to Christian success. Laneau had therefore followed in the footsteps of Roberto de Nobili, the Jesuit missionary at famous for his work among the high castes of South India. He set about frequenting Buddhist monasteries, learning both Siamese and Pali, and coming to an understanding of Buddhism that greatly assisted later French reports on Siam.[119] Laneau was elected Bishop of Metellopolis in 1673, and in 1677 it was decided that the vicars apostolic should adopt the deep yellow robes of the monks.[120] Indeed, they tried to set themselves up as an equivalent religious order, taking vows and abiding by equivalent ascetic principles to those of the sangha, including the profoundly non-European practices of vegetarianism and teetotalism.[121] They tried to be clean, to chew areca nut.[122] Laneau argued for the Christianization of certain ritual practices rather than their abolition and pressed Christianity as a sort of purification of Buddhist principles.[123] Even the church on the banks of the Chao Phraya river, finally finished by the time of the arrival of the French embassies, appeared rather like a wat.[124]

The Jesuits, surprisingly, had not adjusted their robes, but when another party of 14 Jesuit scholars arrived from France with the 1687 embassy, three of them were placed in the monastery of the *sangkharat* of Lopburi in order to learn the language of the palace.[125] More significantly, two of our most astute observers of Siam, La Loubère and Phaulkon, agreed that in future only a radical application of the Roberto de Nobili method could be expected to bring results in such a society. This would entail a kind of gradualism in the introduction of Christian novelties and a holistic adoption of the local lifestyle and the rules of the monks.[126] Thus, Siam was in effect placed alongside those Asian high cultures – Brahmanic India, Confucian China, Buddhist Japan – where indigenous standards of civility and esteem for their clergy compelled missionaries to themselves adapt rather than assume the appeal of the cultural baggage they brought with them.[127]

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[117] Turpin 1771, I: 10-11.
[118] Van de Cruysse 2002: 127.
[119] On MEP accommodationism in Siam, see Forest 1998, I: 195-6; II, 263-6.
[120] Alberts 2013: 97, noting that orders from the Propaganda Fide arrived in 1686 banning this practice.
[121] Alberts 2013: 97-9.
[122] Love 1999: 7.
[123] Forest 1998, III: 408; Alberts 2013: 156.
[124] According to Céberet 1992: 100; Forest 1998, I: 238.
[125] Le Blanc 1692: 144 who says this was on the orders of Narai; Tachard 1689: 216.
[126] Loubère 1987: 418-22; Tachard 1686: 282-3.
[127] See Pascal 2016: 15-16: earlier Franciscans had placed Siam alongside China and Japan in terms of its civilizational attainment.

Intellectual Movements: Narai the Deist?

'His Majesty had opened his heart to him on this subject; that he was persuaded that all religions were good; that he had even said 'You are Christian; if you adopted my religion I would think you a scoundrel.'[128]

We do not know what Narai really thought about the proposition of his own conversion; we can only juggle and assess various European representations. The quotation above at least has the merit of issuing from Choisy's frank late night exchanges with Phaulkon. No French source ever really suggests that Narai was close to baptism, even if they are not quite as blunt as the egotistical Chevalier de Forbin when reporting to Louis XIV: 'Sire… that prince never had a thought of it nor would any mortal be bold enough as to propose it to him.'[129]

When the embassy arrived from France in 1685, Phaulkon wavered in how he represented the king's attitude. To Chaumont he underlined that the king was 'extremely attached to the religion of his ancestors.'[130] To Choisy, he indicated that 'the King of Siam did not appear too attached to his idols but that he was still a long way from receiving baptism.'[131] This conveys a general impression that Narai had merely become detached from his intellectual inheritance without becoming attached to anything else: he occupied a kind of spiritual no-man's land.[132] The testimony of the Persian envoy conveys something similar, noting that though outwardly he maintained his traditional roles, he also showed an interest in Christianity. While no one knows what was happening in his heart, 'the most basic beliefs he held have been shaken to their foundation, his pagan faith is no longer so firm…'[133] On the strength of such sources Dirk van der Cruysse described the results of Narai's intellectual enquiries as a 'vague deistic indifference.'[134]

But this reference to deism also reflects a much more definite contention made by some of the sources: that Narai had come to acknowledge an all-powerful if placid deity. Guy Tachard reported that when Narai realised what was being proposed to him, he issued a reply – which is frequently quoted in scholarship as a rare clue to Narai's thought-processes:

> 'I am extremely vexed that the King of France, my good friend, is proposing something so difficult, and of which I had not the least knowledge. I refer myself to the wisdom of the Most Christian King to judge the importance and difficulty one faces in such a delicate matter as changing a Religion received and followed throughout my whole Kingdom without break for 2,229 years . Besides, I am

[128] Choisy, *Mémoire pour server à l'histoire de Louis XIV*, in 1995: 392.
[129] Forbin 1991: 132-2; De Bèze 1947: 34.
[130] Tachard 1686: 137.
[131] Choisy (The Memorial of 1686) 1995: 386.
[132] As also in Céberet 1992: 98; and Vollant des Verquains 1691: 5: 'however the King of Siam, without demonstrating repugnance for a religion which he considered to be useful for his subjects, gave to understand that he was not thinking of converting, and lived in indifference.'
[133] Muhammad Rabi 1972:99, and see 120.
[134] Van de Cruysse 2002: 283.

> surprised that the King of France my good friend, is so strongly interested in a matter which concerns God, in which it seems that God himself takes no interest, and which he leaves entirely to our own discretion… That order among men and that unity of Religion depend absolutely on divine providence, who could as easily introduce it into the world as the diversity of sects that have in all times been established in it. Ought one not to think that the true God takes as much pleasure in being honoured by different cults and ceremonies as being glorified by a prodigious number of creatures that praise him each in their own way?[135]

The appeal to the antiquity of Buddhism is plausible: we know this was on Narai's mind as he had ordered a shift to the Buddhist era in that same year (see above).[136] What follows, however, has on the face of it no basis in Buddhist thought at all.[137] It is closer to conveying certain currents of free-thinking in late seventeenth century France, in which early intimations of cultural relativism were helping to generate scepticism about revealed truth.[138] This is a characterisation of Narai that caught the European imagination.[139] But where did it come from?

There a few aspects of Narai's mental world that might lie deeply submerged beneath it. The first is simply the general benignancy with which Buddhists were liable to approach other traditions, the tendency to consider that 'all religions are good', i.e. may assist soteriological advancement. This, the Christian mind struggled to comprehend.[140] The second is a certain strand of elite rationalism, which may have allowed a relativistic or scholarly approach to features of the cultural inheritance, and may have been particularly pronounced in Narai's court.[141] In Gervaise's account, however, a plausible Buddhist scepticism about popular theistic tendencies is connected to a much less plausible vision of a creator God who has deliberately generated different cultures and religions out a delight for diversity.[142] Moreover, this rationalism, such as it was, did not extend to abandoning core features of Siamese religious culture, at least to judge by Narai's behaviour during his final illness.[143] He credited an oracle consultation that appeared to prophesy his death, and was very disturbed by reports that his half-brothers were planning to deny him the great cremation ceremonies that would assist his karmic progress.[144]

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[135] Tachard 1686: 309-10.
[136] See below. This specific part, on the 2,229 years, is also recorded in Choisy, *Histoire de l'Église* (in Smithies 1997: 195), but not what follows.
[137] Some common ground may be found in ideas about the powers of bodhisattvas or Indra, lord of heaven (My thanks to Tara Alberts for suggesting this). However, these would not equate to the kind of sole creator god imagined here. Ideas of creation itself are of course a feature of Indic cosmology, and often associated with Brahma.
[138] See for example the Jean-Paul Marana letters of 1684 and 1686, discussed in Betts 1984: 97-103. The mid-late seventeenth century was also a period in which Europeans tended to try to comprehend the global forms of religion diversity in terms of a universalising genealogy and diffusionism: see Rubiés 2019: 135-49/
[139] See how Narai's religiosity is described in the Anonymous Pamphlet of 1690 (Smithies 2003b: 159) and the letter of Madame Palatine in Van der Cruysse 2002: 375.
[140] Both Persian and Christian sources were prone to consider that religious tolerance, intellectual curiosity and cultural cosmopolitanism must indicate some dissatisfaction with existing models.
[141] Discussed in Strathern forthcoming. This would fit with the flexible mentality of his chief astrologer. See Vollant des Verquains 1691: 100-1 (the reference to 'acting according to custom').
[142] Gervaise 1688: 164-5, 228.
[143] Although, of course, it can be misleading to judge 'real' convictions by deathbed behaviour.
[144] Le Blanc 1692: 53 (Narai was 'very superstitious'); De Bèze1947: 99-100.

The deist interpretation of Narai may also have arisen from theological discussions at court, in which he and his advisors explored the logical problems resulting from the premise of an omnipotent deity working through history.[145] However, the most important factor is the attempt by Phaulkon and the Jesuits close to him to deliberately manufacture an image of a pagan philosopher king moving towards deism for European consumption.[146] We know that Phaulkon was surprisingly well versed in theological matters for someone of his background, and also needed to find a way of showing that his own evangelisation of the king was having some kind of impact.[147] Through one of his Jesuit allies, Claude de Bèze, Phaulkon claimed that his own superiority in debating with the monks had induced the king to become intellectually disgusted with them, and only tolerated them for political reasons.[148] Phaulkon's claims were further amplified through his other Jesuit mouthpiece, Guy Tachard, who presents Narai as having definitely rejected the notion of an 'annihilated God' (i.e. a Buddha who has achieved Nirvana), praying instead towards an interventionist deity, letting himself fall 'into the arms of divine mercy and providence'.[149] This goes beyond deism to theism; it is not credible.[150] These reports from de Bèze and Tachard smack of Phaulkon's desperation and are not echoed in other sources. The French sources do have Narai refer to 'God' from time to time, but given Phaulkon's ubiquity as a translator, such phrases surely represent little more than a further lubrication of the wheels of religious diplomacy. [151] Moreover, they were very close to standard Thai blessings calling on the goodwill of an array of deities – and Thai does

[145] For example: why would such an all-powerful being allow such profuse diversity to persist? Why would he reveal himself to just some peoples and not others? Such doubts obstructed the intellectual acceptance of Christianity in East Asian encounters too. Given the difficulties with translation, perhaps the French confused accepting premises for the sake of argument with accepting premises tout court (Tachard 1686: 309-10; Gervaise 1688: 228.) De Bèze 1947: 40 notes: 'I have been surprised sometimes in the conversations I have had with him upon religion, to see the objections he raised.'

[146] This would explain the report that Phaulkon gave of Narai's response to Chaumont in Tachard 1686: 189: Of Narai, 'who without any knowledge of the sciences of Europe has exhibited with so much force and clarity the most plausible reasoning of pagan philosophy against the true religion.' Note also Phaulkon's letter to Père de la Chaise, 20 November 1686, Tokyo Bunko MS 48, pp. 2-3 for Phaulkon's attempt to delicately balance signs of progress of Narai towards Christianity without promising it will happen.

[147] Tachard 1686: 314.

[148] De Bèze 1947: 39; Wyatt 2001: 100, seems to credit Phaulkon's accounts here of his discussions with Narai

[149] Tachard 1686: 310, 316.

[150] The deistic element of the long quotation above is at least in accord with Gervaise 1688: 164-5, who surely also received this information from Phaulkon. But Tachard's is followed by the more pronounced theistic claims.

[151] The Abbé de Choisy does report that the king vaguely alluded to a 'God' as a providential force – in saying, for example, that he did not know what God had in store for him: Choisy 1995: 247-8; 191 (this is a report from Vachet, repeated in his own memoir); 279 ('The poor monarch speaks of god all the time'); compare Tachard 1686: 331. But contrast this with Céberet's (in Smithies 1992: 159) report of the 1687-8 embassy, which remarks that Narai 'said nothing each time they spoke of praying to God for him or they referred, incidentally, to something concerning religion.' This may be all Phualkon's work. Indeed equivalent phrases were used in the letter that Phaulkon had drafted for Narai to Louis XIV in December 1687, and were also deployed by the Siamese ambassadors in their formal discourses at Versailles. Tachard 1689: 282-5; Smithies 1986: 36. Note that French missionaries were involved in translating and polishing what the ambassadors wished to say. Also note the reference to 'Dieu' in Kosa Pan's letter to M. de Briscacier, 12 December 1693, in Launay 1920: 287. There is one Phaulkon-free item of evidence to call on here, in Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim's report (Muhammad Rabi, 1972: 84) of Narai's farewell address as declaring, 'May God look over your lord's life and increase his prosperity.'

not distinguish between singular and plural as emphatically as Romance languages do.[152] There is little to suggest that Narai had undergone any profound mental transition.[153]

Conclusion

Structural tensions in the development of Ayutthayan kingship may help to explain why Narai was given to reflecting on the possibility of other ways of being a king and new ways of thinking about religion. Hence he was drawn to read Quintius Curtius, or to escape the elaborate staging of the capital for the comparative freedom of movement and cosmopolitan air of Lopburi, or to reflect with his chief brahman on how one might improve the understanding of the deep patterns of cosmic fortune with the aid of the new astronomical science brought by the French; or to induce palpitations among the small coterie of Catholic priests when he ostentatiously patronised them during the *kathin nam* of 1673. Naturally, his personal qualities of curiosity and intelligence were also at work in all these developments – even if it is unlikely that this culminated in deism.

These were also some of the reasons why hopes mounted so fervently among the French – in particular his struggles with the sangha seemed heaven-sent. But Narai, of course, did not convert. Whatever the persistent tensions in the system of sacred kingship, they had not yet created a crisis; that a crisis did develop in 1688 and found expression in a coup d'état and a violent ejection of French influence, was partly due to the rumoured prospect of his conversion itself, and the way it was bound up with Phaulkon's feverish playing of the game of religious diplomacy.[154] The rites of divinized kingship remained truly awesome, and their deep impression on the habitus of the Siamese unmistakeable. But the revolution of 1688 would reveal what the most fundamental structure lying behind the unthinkableness of the king's conversion actually was: the transcendentalist framework provided by Theravada Buddhism. However subordinate to the king the monks seemed, the moral authority they continued to wield – their duty to remain true to the case of the *dhamma* – formed a massive obstacle to an exclusivist royal conversion. In league with the *khunnang* who had their own reasons for revolt, they mobilized in 1688, and ensured that the Buddhist structure of the long-term held fast.

[152] I owe this point to Chris Baker (p.c. 13 December 2016). It would only have taken the slightest of creative translations elicited by normal diplomatic courtesy to make this seem like a reference to Providence. Compare also with a much later Westernizing King, Mongkut. In his letter of 1862 to the US President, he referred to the 'blessing of the highest and greatest superagency of the universe', while not yielding in his Buddhism one inch: Forest 1998, III: 445.

[153] Compare with the use of language by Bhuvanekabāhu VII of Kotte in Sri Lanka, another Theravada king dealing with a Catholic Mission, who also used a vague providentialism for diplomatic purposes: Strathern 2007: 163.

[154] See Strathern forthcoming and Strathern 'Thailand's first revolution? The role of xenophobia, religious opposition and 'the people' in the Ayutthaya rebellion of 1688' MS.

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