2000-01-01

VOC participation in Siamese society during the Late Ayutthaya Period (1688-1767)

Dhiravat na Pombejra

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv

Part of the Asian Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.ARV.13.1.4
Available at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv/vol13/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Chulalongkorn Journal Online (CUJO) at Chula Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian Review by an authorized editor of Chula Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ChulaDC@car.chula.ac.th.
VOC participation in Siamese society during the Late Ayutthaya Period (1688-1767)

Dhiravat na Pombejra

Abstract

This paper examines the roles played by employees of the Dutch United East India Company (VOC) in late seventeenth and in eighteenth century Ayutthaya Society. The Dutch were in Siam primarily to trade, but they were also given formal standing in court society by the Siamese. The head of the Dutch community in Ayutthaya, a European merchant with Siamese rank and title, therefore had social functions to attend within the pluralistic society of the Siamese capital, both at court and outside the court. The paper analyses the different ways in which the Dutch interacted with Siamese society during the Late Ayutthaya Period, and attempts to sum up how each side (the Dutch and the Siamese) perceived the role of the VOC in Siamese society.
Voc Participation in Siamese Society During The Late Ayutthaya Period (1688-1767)*

Introduction

The kingdom of Ayutthaya was a state that had become powerful not only through military conquest and religious or administrative integration, but also through the vigorous conduct of foreign trade. By the sixteenth century the city of Ayutthaya had become a busy international port, with a cosmopolitan population. This much is clear from the extant sources. But how much actual social contact was there between the foreign communities in Ayutthaya and the Siamese? This paper is a preliminary examination of the VOC’s role in Siamese society during the last eight years of Ayutthayan history.

Some general remarks are necessary before the VOC’s participation in Siamese society can be discussed. Firstly, it must be emphasized that the “local” population itself was a mixture of Tai, Mon, and other races.¹ A further general point is that the various foreign communities in Ayutthaya did not all have the same function or status. For example, the Makassarese who emigrated to Siam during the 1660s were political refugees, while the Dutch – almost all of whom were employees of the VOC – came to trade. These differences influenced the nature of each community’s contacts with both the court and the local populace.

Although a start has been made to study aspects of Siamese-VOC social interaction, notably by George Vinal Smith (1977) and Han ten Brummelhuis (1987), much of the focus has been on the seventeenth century, a period when Ayutthaya’s relations with the VOC were at

* An earlier version of this essay has appeared in Dhiravat na Pombejra, Court, Company, and Campong (Ayutthaya, 1992).
their closest. The late Ayutthaya period (1688 - 1767), by contrast, is somewhat neglected. During this period, when relatively few western traders frequented Siam, the VOC maintained regular trading contacts with the Ayutthaya kingdom, abandoning its “factorij” in Ayutthaya only in late 1765, when the city was besieged by the Burmese army which soon afterwards succeeded in sacking it. From a study of Dutch primary sources, especially the VOC records actually written in Ayutthaya, a fairly detailed picture of Siamese – VOC social relations emerges.

The VOC Settlement in the Siamese Hierarchical Context

In his classic account of Siam in the late seventeenth century, King Louis XIV’s envoy Simon de La Loubère writes:

Twas...the Liberty of Commerce, which had formerly invited to Siam a great multitude of Strangers of different Nations: who settled there with the Liberty of living according to their Customs, and of publicly exercising their several ways of Worship. Every Nation possesses a different Quarter. The Quarters which are without the City, and which do compose the Suburbs thereof, the Portugueses do call Camp, and the Siamese Ban. Moreover every Nation chooses its Chief, or its Nai,...and this Chief manages the Affairs of his Nation with the Mandarin, whom the King of Siam nominates for this purpose...But Affairs of the least importance are not determined by this Mandarin, they are carried to the Bar-Calon.3

Did the Dutch settlement fit into the above pattern? It certainly did in the matter of the VOC coming to Siam to take advantage of the relative “Liberty of Commerce” there, and then being assigned a separate quarter or ban. The VOC settlement (the Dutch themselves called it a “campong” or village in several eighteenth century documents4) was never a large one, and its inhabitants were mostly
temporary residents who came to Ayutthaya for a limited spell in the context of long careers in the Company's service.

Having been classified as a ban or village, the VOC settlement had to have its position defined within the Siamese social and administrative hierarchy. The appointment of a nai was an easy task because the VOC already had an opperhoofd (director or resident) stationed at its Ayutthaya office. In the VOC chain of command, the Governor-General at Batavia was the person to whom the opperhoofd was directly responsible. He had to correspond regularly with the Governor-General and the Council of the Indies, receiving in return detailed instructions from Batavia. In the Siamese context the opperhoofd was, as nai of the Dutch ban, ultimately responsible to the phrakhlang or kosathibodi minister, the minister in charge of foreign affairs and the royal treasury. As stated by La Loubère there were also officials of middling rank who had more direct contact with the foreigners. In the old Siamese Law of Civil Hierarchy the harbour-master responsible for the VOC was a certain Luang Thepphakdi, an official under the command of Luang Choduk ratchasethi (the Chinese harbour-master). Other port officials also had regular contact with the VOC.

Even more vital to the VOC in its trading negotiations or activities in Siam were the translators. The Dutch could not hope to accomplish anything without the cooperation of these officials assigned to them by the court. Because so few VOC personnel knew Siamese, the cooperativeness and goodwill of the translators could be of crucial importance to the Company’s business. The translators were the link between the royal court and the VOC, and could become purveyors of inside information on the political affairs of the kingdom. The Dutch naturally wanted to choose, or at least to have a part in choosing, these translators, but this privilege was seldom accorded them, so that they sometimes had to put up with what were to them unsatisfactory translators. The Company also employed, however, some “natives” (or mestizos) as translators.
The VOC personnel in Ayutthaya were thus fairly isolated socially from most sectors of the local population. Most of the contacts they had with the Siamese were with officials and some local traders. They rarely met Buddhist priests, and there was probably even less contact with the peasantry. One of the objectives of dividing the foreign communities in Ayutthaya into ban, with their respective nai, was surely to segregate them from Siamese society, and thus make them easily controllable.

Another way of placing the Dutch in the complex social and administrative hierarchy of Siam was for the king to confer on the VOC opperhoofd a title and rank, making him (formally at least) part of the court hierarchy. The opperhoofd would therefore, by implication, be obliged to serve the king if and when required to do so. In theory he had two masters: the Company and the king. That the kings were sparing in their demands upon the Dutch nai suggests that the Siamese court knew very well what the limits of its power were concerning the VOC settlement at Ayutthaya. Nevertheless, by conferring ranks and titles on the VOC men, the Ayutthaya kings also gave the Dutchmen marks of social standing which they could publicly display, especially as ranks and titles were always accompanied with insignia such as betelnut boxes and ceremonial swords which had to be carried or worn on formal occasions.7

Ceremony and Festivity

Since the VOC needed to keep on good terms with the Siamese court, and with the officials directly connected with the conduct of Company business, they had at least to show a readiness to participate in certain social events. Ceremony and festivity in the royal court, and in Siamese society as a whole, were of great significance not only in themselves but also as indicators of the host’s merit, power, and wealth. To attend these festivities was to confer honour and prestige on the host as well as to demonstrate one’s goodwill or loyalty to him. On a more basic level, it was part of the VOC factor’s job to attend certain social and ceremonial functions.
What kinds of ceremony did the Dutch opperhoofd and his colleagues have to attend during this period (1688-1765)? The ceremonies or festivities may be divided into three main categories:

1. Ceremonies at the court, or other festivities connected with the king.

2. Ceremonies arranged by leading Siamese officials (or khunnang).

3. Ceremonies unconnected with the royal court or with the khunnang.

The first category of ceremonies or festivities attended by the Dutch in Ayutthaya included tonsure ceremonies of the king’s children. The most notable example was the tonsure ceremony of Chaofa Naren, eldest son of King Thaisa (r. 1709-1733), held on 7 January 1716. The Dutch opperhoofd Dirck Blom attended this very splendid ceremony upon being requested to do so by the king. Blom was given a good seat, and was impressed enough by the ceremony to describe it in detail. He mentions how all the Siamese courtiers, both male and female, were dressed in white, how the “King of Cambodia” (probably the exiled Chey Chettha) was present, and how the Dutch partook of a fine meal containing both “European” and “native” dishes. ⁸

Some ceremonies attended by the VOC personnel did not take place in the Royal Palace itself but appear nevertheless to have been royally sponsored. In April 1730 the VOC opperhoofd Rugier van Alderwereld, accompanied by his wife and the Company’s two translators, attended the cremation of a leading Buddhist priest. The opperhoofd was allowed to go up to 20-25 paces away from the king to do homage. It was a privilege to be in such relative proximity to the monarch. The king and his brother the Prince of the Front Palace (later King Borommakot) had also arranged it so that the Dutch could eat “European style” from a silver service. This was seen to be a signal honour to the Dutch. ⁹
Court life was punctuated by ceremony and festivity marking the coming of age of princes (tonsure), death, and so on. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, royal pilgrimages also formed an integral part of the court calendar, especially pilgrimages to the shrine of the Buddha’s footprint at Phrabat (Wat Phra Phutthabat). On one, apparently unique, occasion in 1737 the Dutch opperhoofd Theodorus Jacobus van den Heuvel was asked to accompany King Borommakot (r. 1733-1758) on the Phrabat pilgrimage. Van den Heuvel did not seem aware (or perhaps was simply uninterested) about the significance of merit-making in Buddhism, let alone about the importance of royal alms-giving in traditional Siamese Buddhist kingship and did not analyse these things. What he did do, however, was record in copious detail his experiences on this trip. Van den Heuvel relates how he followed the splendid royal barge procession on the way to Phrabat. While at Phrabat, he attended ceremonies at Wat Phra Phutthabat, including those in which the king gave alms to his subjects, “the people who had assembled in great and countless numbers”. There was much festivity at the monastery, “various conjurers and comedians were made to perform for us...and finally several fireworks...of Chinese make were set off”. At times the Dutch found Siamese court culture to be less than enthralling. On 13 March 1737,

- the Oluang Raxa Sombath...welcomed us and conducted us to the chamber of a little pagoda ... and then to the dancing of the King’s female dancers, whose exercises we, sitting without shelter in the hot sun, had to watch as a great penance for more than three hours, which however we did not dare to show-Van den Heuvel’s dagregister of his Phrabat journey remains a valuable historical document, containing data on topics as diverse as the Phrabat temple, the personal appearance of the king, and a Siamese priest’s opinions on the universe.10

The second category of ceremonies attended by the Dutch in Ayutthaya consists of ceremonies hosted by leading officials with whom
the VOC had to deal in its commerce in Siam. The VOC director in Siam had to attend regularly the tonsure and the “doopfeesten” (lit. “baptism”, probably *tham khwan duen*) ceremonies of the leading officials’ children. In 1731 alone the Dutch *opperhoofd* Rugier van Alderwereld attended the “doopfeesten” of the Children of the *phrakhlang*, the Okluang Choduk and Okphra “Rapusit”. He also was invited to attend the tonsure ceremonies of the children of Okluang “Radjay” and Okluang Thepphakdi. Abraham Werndlij, last of the VOC residents in Ayutthaya, assiduously attended important social functions in Ayutthaya. In 1761 he attended the tonsure ceremony of the Chinese official Okluang Choduk’s son, because this *khunnang* was at that time in great favour with the king. In June 1764, one year before the beginning of the long siege of Ayutthaya by the Burmese, he went to a “consecration” ceremony of two of the *phrakhlang* minister’s temples, a function which was attended by all the most powerful and important people in the kingdom.\(^{11}\)

The *phrakhlang* minister was of course the minister directly in charge of all foreigners and foreign affairs. Any social invitation from such a dignitary had to be accepted. In the event van Alderwereld went to this Siamese “baptism” ceremony and complainingly wrote in his journal that so many people attended, making it impossible to speak business with the *phrakhlang*.\(^{12}\)

The other Siamese ceremonies attended by the Dutch *opperhoofd* in 1731 were also connected with Company business. The Okluang Choduk, for example, was the official in charge of the Chinese half of the king’s port department, while his subordinate the Okluang Thepphakdi was the harbour master directly responsible for VOC affairs.\(^{13}\) The Dutch thus knew very well how to cultivate the goodwill of key Siamese officials, even though they complained about Siamese greed or covetousness because every time they attended a ceremony or festivity they had to take appropriate gifts to their host.

The third category of ceremony comprises social occasions not hosted by the court or court officials. The foreigners in Ayutthaya also
had their own society. The Frenchman René Charbonneau, a medical attendant in the French missionaries’ hospital and later a provincial governor during King Narai’s reign, lived on in Siam for several years after 1688, the year of Narai’s death and Phaulkon’s fall. Charbonneau lived near the VOC settlement, dying in 1730 at the age of eighty-three, having lived in Siam for forty-five years. The VOC opperhoofd and his deputy both attended Charbonneau’s burial at the French “campong”, where a mass was said. The funeral of Charbonneau was thus a Roman Catholic ceremony attended by people of other religions or denominations (such as the presumably Protestant Dutch merchants).

Similarly, when a VOC opperhoofd died, as Arnout Cleur did in February 1712, his funeral was attended by people of various positions and religions. Cleur’s burial took place at the VOC settlement on 24 February 1712. Among the guests were the Okya “Sinnorat” (Sinaowarat ?), the syahbandar of the “Moors”, the syahbandar of the Chinese, and “many other Mandarins”. Again it was a case of commercial and official connections dictating social responsibilities. The Okya “Sinnorat”, usually a Muslim, was at that time overseeing the phrakhlang ministry because the minister himself, along with several other high-ranking courtiers, was away accompanying King Thaisa on a hunting trip upcountry.

**Gift-giving**

Regular exchanges of gifts between the Governors-General and the Siamese king and phrakhlang also took place. Relations between the VOC and the Siamese could be gauged, maintained, or even regulated through the process of gift-giving. Referring to a “language of gifts”, Han ten Brummelhuis concludes:

For the court-which regarded trade as a somewhat demeaning pursuit-exchanging gifts was the appropriate way of acquiring goods and it provided the correct form for contact with foreign merchants.
The VOC Governor-General exchanged presents with the Siamese court on a yearly basis. This practice had been going on ever since the first period of the Company’s contacts with Siam. During the late Ayutthaya period the exchange of gifts became so much a part of the regular dealings between the court and the VOC that the gifts were systematically valued by the Dutch so as to ensure that there was no discrepancy between the value of gifts given by themselves and those given by the Siamese to the Governor-General. Indeed, gift exchanges became a form of trade.

Disagreements over the valuation of these presents occurred from time to time. In letters dating from 1693, 1721, and 1723, the Dutch complained that the Company’s gifts to the court were valued by the Siamese at sums far lower than their true worth, so that the return gifts to the Governor-General were in consequence of less value than those given to the Siamese king and phrakhlang. In 1692 the VOC estimated that it made a loss of over 106 catties (about 15,250 guilders) – an enormous sum. In 1693 the VOC made a smaller loss of 23 catties (about 3,300 guilders). In 1721 and 1723 they also claimed that the Siamese undervalued the Governor-General’s gifts so much that the VOC made losses of over 1,000 guilders both times.\(^\text{17}\)

The VOC opperhoofd in 1723 (van Alderwereld) therefore complained about these losses to the Chaophraya Chakri, the chief minister who was at that time also doubling up as acting phrakhlang minister. The formal Siamese reply was that they had always used this method of valuation. But a few days later the king (Thaisa) gave the VOC an extra gift of tin valued at 7,200 guilders not as an admission of guilt or error but as a gesture of appreciation for the VOC bringing over silverware and other goods to Siam recently.\(^\text{18}\) Dutch feelings were thus mollified, while the court could still hope to count on the Company bringing over textiles and luxury goods as requested. This timely “gift” (in effect a form of payment) thus meant that “face” was saved on both sides.
Gift-giving by the VOC personnel stationed in Ayutthaya took up a considerable part of the Company’s expenses from year to year. As they stayed on longer in Siam, the Dutch came to realize full well the importance of gift-giving in Siamese society, and the necessity of finding ways to oil the cumbersomely slow wheels of Siamese bureaucracy. The Dutch also had to justify – or at least explain – these extra expenditures to the authorities in Batavia. The VOC documents originating from the Company’s Siam office are full of details concerning expenses incurred in giving presents to Siamese rulers and dignitaries in order to further Dutch interests.

When the Dutch attended the tonsure ceremony of Chaofa Naren in 1716, they presented King Thaisa with over 662 guilders worth of Persian silver and gold cloth, Indian cloth, rosewater, and attar of roses. VOC records of 1731 and 1732 mention that the Company had to give presents to the leading figures at court on the occasion of their setting out on pilgrimage to the shrine of the Buddha’s footprint at Phrabat. Whether or not these gifts were interpreted by the Siamese as being Dutch contributions to their merit-making is not clear, but it seems possible, because for the members of the court such pilgrimages entailed high expenses. The VOC’s own expenses were considerable: in 1731, for example, the Dutch gave presents (textiles, spectacles) to the king to the value of over 247 guilders, and gifts to the Prince of the Front Palace and Chaofa Naren totalling around 207 guilders. They also had to give presents to the chief minister Chaophraya Chakri worth c.111 guilders, the foreign minister Chaophraya Phrakhlang (gifts worth c.142 guilders), and the phrakhlang’s deputy the Okya Phiphat (gifts worth c.105 guilders). The total value of presents given by the VOC on this single occasion was over 814 guilders.

The Dutch also understood the importance in Siamese society of family relationships. Thus in 1707 the opperhoofd Arnout Cleur, adept at dealing with the Siamese, sought to curry favour with the then-powerful Okya Sombatthiban by giving a ring to the okya’s son as a present. The Dutch could also, on occasion, overcome their habitual
The Siamese did not just accept everything and give nothing in return. The giving of gifts in Siamese society was done to earn patronage, protection, or special favours. The kings, especially, had the power and the means to give occasional rewards to senior VOC personnel in Ayutthaya, quite apart from the regular gifts they sent to the Dutch Governors-General in Batavia.

As already mentioned, the kings usually conferred ranks and titles on the VOC opperhoofd in his position as nai of the Dutch village or settlement. Along with these titles went other, more concrete, marks of royal favour such as Indian textiles, gold or silver betelnut boxes, and gold swords. The recipients had to take these betelnut boxes and swords with them whenever they attended a royal ceremony since such tokens indicated their status within the court hierarchy. In 1705 Arnout Cleur asked the Governor-General for permission to keep his betelnut box (instead of giving it to the Company as the regulations dictated), citing the precedent of two VOC directors in Siam during the late 1680s having been allowed to keep their tokens of royal favour. Four years later Cleur (whose title was Okluang Surasen) was given extra tokens of royal favour by King Sua, namely a ceremonial sword “covered with gold” (gilt?), and gold cloth. He again sought Batavia’s permission to retain these gifts. Cleur had been given the sword and cloth personally by the king when he presented the king with a boat on the Company’s behalf. This was an example of the king using ceremony and gifts to reciprocate honour done to him by the Dutch.

Such close encounters with a Siamese king, however, were rare events. It seems that the Dutch had less access to the royal court during
the 1688-1765 period, compared with the 1630s or 1640s during King Prasatthong’s reign, the high point of VOC – Siamese relations. Then, along with the usual tensions and even friction, there had also been military cooperation between the two parties. Most of the time royal favours were conferred on the Dutch secondhand, for example through the phrakhlæang or one of his subordinates. The opperhoofd van den Heuvel, for instance, was in 1737/8 made Okluang “Appaja Wietschiet” (Aphai Wichit ?) and given a gold betelnut box plus sword, but did not receive these tokens of honour directly from the king. He had to show his gratitude by doing three Siamese gestures of obeisance in the direction of the Royal Palace.

The Royal Presence

Among the documents kept in the VOC settlement and inventoried in 1731 was a Siamese decree forbidding all foreigners from appearing at the Palace or other places where the king or the princes of the blood were also present, unless they had official permission to do so. The royal presence was imbued with great sanctity during the Ayutthaya period, and there was a certain drill which the Dutch had to follow whenever the king passed by their kampong. In 1720 the outgoing director Wijbrand Blom wrote in a memorandum intended for his successor that whenever the VOC has been formally notified of the king and his retinue passing the Dutch settlement by water, flags had to be flown, carpets brought out as decoration, and the opperhoofd and his deputy must sit in the Company’s ceremonial barge/boat, paying homage to the king “in the native style” when he passes by. No-one in the area must walk around or stand and stare at the king’s procession.

The opperhoofd van den Heuvel was privileged to see King Borommakot at fairly close quarters, because in travelling up to Phrabat in March 1737 the king “passed...very close by and had the kindness to turn his face entirely” towards the Dutch. Van den Heuvel observed that the king was “already fairly old, hollow-cheeked and thin-faced and carried himself well”, and was dressed in “a garment of red velvet with gold embroidery”, buttoned up to his chin to hide his disfiguring goitre.
Later on, the Dutch had to take extra care not to offend King Borommakot during his informal excursions downriver. King Borommakot recovered from an illness in 1739 and took to sailing for pleasure on the Chaophraya River just below the VOC settlement. His boat would be accompanied by only two or three other vessels, making it difficult for people to recognize that this was in fact a royal party. Nevertheless some people who had been unfortunate enough to come across the king’s boat were physically chastised, some even executed. An order was therefore brought to the Dutch settlement compelling all VOC personnel, on pain of death, to go down upon the ground, Siamese style, whenever the king passed by in his boat. When the Dutch protested that it was impossible to recognize the king’s informal yachting party the Siamese replied that the *opperhoofd* should order his men (if they were outside) to go inside immediately whenever they saw a large proa or boat approaching, as a precaution against giving offence.  

**Miscegenation and Manpower**

The topic of miscegenation or interbreeding needs a separate essay in itself to do it justice. However, some generalizations and examples may help give an idea of the issues involved.

The dearth of Dutch women in the East led to several marriages and liaisons between VOC employees and “inlandse vrouwen” (native women) all over Asia. This in turn led to a large number of *mestizo* children being born. In Siam jurisdiction over these *mestizo* children became a regular cause of conflicts between the Dutch and the Siamese court.

Marriage – or cohabitation – between VOC men and “native women” (mostly Mon) was common long before the 1688-1765 period. According to the French envoy La Loubère, “the *Siameses* are naturally too proud easily to give themselves to Foreigners, or at least to invite them”, whereas the Mons, being themselves foreigners, “do more highly esteem of Foreigners”. La Loubère goes on to say that the Mons in
Siam did not stigmatize any of their women for bearing a European man's child, "and they do even glory in having had a white Man for a Husband". The Frenchman ends his discussion of this issue by repeating "an established opinion in the Indies" that Mon women (Osoet) had the most "vigor and spirit", and thus speculated that perhaps Mon women "are of a more amorous Complexion than the Siamese". The famous seventeenth century VOC opperhoofd Jeremias van Vliet and one of his successors Jan van Muijden even had the same Mon woman as concubine – at different times of course. Several other VOC employees during the seventeenth century also took local women as wives, in spite of the Company's efforts to discourage such liaisons.27

During the late Ayutthaya period there were also many instances of VOC employees cohabiting with native women. Some of these men lived a long time in Ayutthaya, even settling there permanently. The VOC's French surgeon Daniel Brochebourde, for example, married a Ligor woman, entered the service of King Narai in Ayutthaya as court surgeon, and went on to serve King Phetracha (r. 1688-1703) before dying in 1697. Daniel's son Moses married a Mon woman of Ayutthaya and succeeded his father as court surgeon. Indeed, the Brochebourdes continued to serve the kings of Siam well into the eighteenth century.28 Another example was the case of Andries Wens of Magdeburg, a VOC employee who in 1731 married a "native woman" named Margeretha (probably a Christian), thus legitimatizing at one stroke their nine children. In November of the following year Wens died, having done his duty by his children.29

The case of the bookkeeper Gerrit Dircksz. de Haas and his family is perhaps the most illuminating, however, because it involved a dispute with the Siamese court. De Haas married a Dutch-Mon mestizo and had children who were therefore three-quarters Dutch and a quarter Mon. In 1706, when the VOC was temporarily withdrawing from Siam, the court refused to allow de Haas' wife and children to leave because, according to the Siamese, all natives and children of natives (even if they were part European) were subjects of the King of Siam. In 1707, after the Dutch had normalized relations with Ayutthaya, de Haas asked
for royal permission to take his family with him when he moved to Melaka (Malacca). King Sua refused to allow de Haas’ wife to leave Siam, giving as is reason that since she was born of a Mon mother (a Siamese subject) she must stay on in Siam. The kings of Ayutthaya were always covetous of manpower since it was the most vital resource in the kingdom. In the end de Haas had to wait almost three years before being allowed to take his wife and children with him to Melaka. Royal permission was granted in 1710, largely because the Dutch Governor-General himself appealed to the king in writing.\textsuperscript{30} The court’s change of mind may also have come about because King Sua died in 1709 and had been succeeded by King Thaisa.

Apart from disagreements over the status of Dutch mestizo children, the Dutch and Siamese also had occasional disagreements concerning the use of manpower. Within the VOC settlement also lived some native employees of the Company and their families. In 1731 the court ordered that one person from every household in the Dutch “campong” had to go and help perform public works at the king’s monastery at Ratchakhram, a few miles downriver from Ayutthaya. Only houses belonging to Dutchmen were to be exempted. The Dutch asked that the people in their settlement be excused this service, but this request was refused. The court’s reply was that this order was a royal order, therefore no village or settlement could be exempted.\textsuperscript{31}

The VOC, however, could refuse to comply with some of the court’s requests. In 1739 van den Heuvel, upon receiving a request from the phrakhlang minister that all carpenters working on the VOC’s own sloops were to go and help build the king’s 30 new galleys instead, politely refused to let them go.\textsuperscript{32} The Siamese did not continue to dispute this point, presumably because the VOC carpenters were not “native” residents of the Dutch settlement but were Company employees, and thus not the King of Siam’s “subjects”.

**Crime and Maladjustment**

In 1690 the opperhoofd Pieter van den Hoorn sent the Company’s pyrotechnist Christoffel Smit back to Batavia on account of
the latter’s “brusqueness and dissolute lifestyle”. Three years after that another VOC employee, Anthonij Isaacqssoon, killed himself in the Company’s warehouse “Amsterdam” at the mouth of the Chaophraya River. He had been confined there after behaving in a debauched manner. The opperhoofd Thomas van Son had earlier obtained Isaacqssoon’s release from the Siamese authorities after some misdemeanour. Van Son concluded ruefully that this whole episode had been “harmful” to the good name of the Dutch in Siam.  

In The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800 C.R. Boxer emphasized the average Dutchman’s addiction to drink:

The pipe and the bottle were the inseparable companions of the Dutch overseas, as they were in the United Provinces. ‘Our nation must drink or die’, wrote Jan Pieterszoon Coen in 1620, and he was not referring to water.  

Boxer goes on to venture the opinion that “most of the Dutch and English males who died in the tropics died of drink, even making due allowance for the heavy toll taken by malaria and dysentery.” The VOC men stationed in Siam also appear to have been heavy drinkers, and some of them gave their immediate superiors considerable problems.

Drinking could also lead to violent death. In 1711 the seaman Jodocus de Vries was killed after a drunken brawl in the city. According to the official Siamese version of the incident, de Vries and a colleague bought strong native drinks from a Chinese, got drunk, and then became involved in a quarrel with two Chinese men, one of whom struck down de Vries with a stick or truncheon. De Vries then tried to run away, was struck again by the Chinese, tried to get across the river, and finally drowned as he was trying to cling on to a boat belonging to the Chinese official Okluang Siwirot.

The Siamese took a long time to bring the culprits in the Jodocus de Vries case to justice. At first the VOC director Cleur was convinced that the Chinese khunnang at the court were protecting their
guilty compatriots. The Sino-Siamese junk trade was flourishing at this time, and the Chinese were powerful at King Thaisa’s court. The phrakhlang minister was himself Chinese. In the end, the three guilty Chinese (the two initial troublemakers and a servant of Okluang Siwirot) were sentenced to 150 strokes each of the rattan cane plus life imprisonment. They could not be sentenced to death because, explained the phrakhlang, they were foreigners. The Chinese official Okluang Siwirot also got 150 strokes of the cane for his negligence, and was made to pay costs. The Dutch believed that Okluang Siwirot ordered his man to push de Vries into the river after the Dutchman had already been beaten half to death by the other two Chinese.36

The Jodocus de Vries case demonstrates again how cosmopolitan Ayutthaya was, and also how firmly controlled it was by the Siamese royal court and judiciary. In this instance a Dutch sailor died after encounters with three Chinese, one of whom was a servant of a Chinese official at the Siamese king’s court. The case was then judged by a Siamese court of justice. By a clause in the VOC-Siamese treaty of 1664,37 which was subsequently renewed, the VOC had the right to try its own employees. But in this case the accused were not employees of the Company, therefore the case had to be tried by a Siamese court of law. Even though the Chinese elements at the royal court appear to have sought to protect the culprits, the due process of law was observed, albeit with what seems a compromise in that the guilty men’s lives were spared on account of their not being the Siamese king’s subjects.

During the eighteenth century some VOC personnel fell foul of the Siamese court for allegedly trading in opium, a forbidden merchandise in Siam. In 1713 this led to a two-month suspension of Dutch trade in Ayutthaya and the death of a VOC translator. During 1736-1737 the VOC butler Geert Cornelisz. Lans had to be deported (at King Borommakot’s insistence) on account of his involvement in opium trading. The VOC maintained that Lans was innocent, but the Siamese court refused to believe this, since opium was found hidden
underground at the VOC’s “Amsterdam” warehouse. A “spy” was even sent to investigate the warehouse. Lans fell under suspicion when a Mon woman who was caught selling opium claimed that she had obtained her merchandise from him.\textsuperscript{38}

Dutch Perceptions of their Role in Siamese Society

Although Dutch trade in Siam during the 1688-1765 period did not prosper, the eighteenth century being a period of general decline for the VOC, the Company’s personnel in Ayutthaya tried to maintain their status in Siamese society as leading foreign merchants (along with the Chinese and “Moors”). According to the English captain Alexander Hamilton, writing in 1727, “the Dutch Chief makes a pretty good Figure there (in Ayutthaya)”.\textsuperscript{39} The Dutch generally knew how to uphold the Company’s honour amid a society that set great store by ceremony and appearances.

The burden and pressures which they had to bear sometimes made the VOC directors vent their frustration in letters and memoranda. In 1697, the outgoing opperhoofd Thomas van Son (who himself had not got along well with the Siamese court) wrote a memorandum instructing his successor Reijnier Boom to proceed “with all prudence” in dealing with the Siamese, and urging him “to comply with the laws and manners of the land”. Van Son also advised Boom to try to please as much as possible “the king, the Prince (of the Front Palace), together with the Okya Phrakhlang and his deputy the Okya Phiphat... because that is by far best”.\textsuperscript{40} Van Son’s advice clearly reflects the necessity felt by the Dutch to keep on good terms with the court by cultivating personal contacts and keeping some key figures there favourably disposed to the Company. To do so, the Dutch had to respect and comply with Siamese law, customs, and social values.

General criticisms of the Siamese court and people can be found fairly regularly in the VOC records. Dirck Blom, for example, wrote in 1715 that the Siamese were an ill-natured people with whom one had to deal with “all obligingness, dexterity, and prudence”.\textsuperscript{41} Of course, it
was not uncommon for a Company employee to attempt to cover up for his own failures or inefficiency by exaggerating the natives’ intransigence, unreliability, or even malice. The director van den Heuvel, who was at first much disliked by the Siamese court, naturally had harsh words for King Borommakot. According to him, “this shameless prince” ruled according to his whims and passions, lacking in any sense of justice or responsibility. This particular criticism stemmed from personal animosity, but similar condemnations of Siamese despotism were not uncommon in the VOC records.

The Dutch, then, had limited but well-defined and regulated social contacts with the Siamese king and elite. The Dutch opperhoofd was formally part of the Siamese social and administrative hierarchy even though he was first and foremost a Company employee. The VOC personnel stationed in Siam during the late Ayutthaya period were very much aware that they had to play a certain role in Siamese society and to abide by the customs of the land if they wished to further the Company’s business there. However frustrated and irritated they were on occasion by the court or by officialdom, the Dutch opperhoofden seemed not to disdain their royally conferred Siamese ranks, titles, ceremonial swords, and golden betelnut boxes. Such ambivalent attitudes on the part of the Dutch make the history of VOC participation in Siamese society endlessly fascinating. What we sadly lack, however, are contemporaneous Siamese accounts of their own attitudes towards the Dutch, evidence which would provide a better-balanced picture of Dutch-Siamese social relations.
Notes


4 ARA, VOC 1945, Memorandum by Wijbrand Blom, 22.XII.1720, fs.87-90.


5 Krom Sinlapakon (Fine Arts Department), *Ruang kotmai tra samduang* (Bangkok, 1978), 117.


7 ARA, VOC 1711, Cleur to G-G, 14.II.1705, f.41.

VOC 1776, Cleur to G-G, 29.I.1709, fs.9-10.


H.G. Quaritch Wales, in *Siamese State Ceremonies* (London, 1931), 126-127, describes the tonsure ceremony in Siam as “a rite of initiation of youths, corresponding to the Hindu Culakantah Mangala,” taking place “either in the eleventh or thirteenth year” of a Siamese youth’s life.

10 ARA, VOC 2410, Siam dagregister for 6-23.III.1737 (by van den Heuvel); now published in Remco Raben and Dhiravat na Pombejra eds., In the King's Trail (Bangkok, 1997).

11 ARA, VOC 2193, Siam dagregister, fs. 130-131 (6.II.1731 entry), f.150 (18.V.1731 entry), and f.161 (24 VIII.1731 entry); VOC 3024, Werndlij to G-G, 4.XII. 1761, fs. 11-12; VOC 3152, Werndlij to G-G, 28. XII. 1764, f.7.


13 Ruang kotmai tra samduang, 116-117, 141-142. Okphra “Rapusit” probably corresponds with Phra Ratchaprasit, and Okluang “Radjaij” with Phra Rachai mahaisuriyathibodi, both royal treasury officials.


15 ARA, VOC 1827, de Bevere to G-G, 25.II.1712, fs.17-18.

16 Ten Brummelhuis, op.cit., 57.

17 ARA, VOC 1536, van Son to G-G, 27.XI.1693, f.96.
   VOC 1961, Verburg to G-G, 15.II.1721, f.5.

18 ARA, VOC 1996, same as note 17.


20 ARA, VOC 2193, Siam dagregister, fs.157-158 (8.VII. 1731 entry)

21 ARA, VOC 1743, Report by Cleur, 2.VI.1707, f.97.
   VOC 1541, findings from investigation of Siam and Ligor negotieboeken (1692-1963), fs. 572-582 verso.

22 See: George Vinal Smith, op.cit., 106-107, on titles conferred on VOC personell in Ayutthaya.

   ARA, VOC 1711, Cleur to G-G, 14.II. 1705, f.41.
   VOC 1776, Cleur to G-G, 29.I.1709, fs.9-10.
23 George Vinal Smith, op.cit., 21-35.


25 ARA, VOC 2193, Carry-over of cash, goods, and documents from van Alderwereld to Syen, 27.XII.1731, f.205..

VOC 1945, Memorandum by W.Blom, 22.XII.1720, fs.91-92.

26 ARA, VOC 2410, Siam dagregister, 6-23. III. 1737;
VOC 2467, Siam dagregister, fs. 85-86 (20-30.IV.1739 and 3.V. 1739 entries).

27 George Vinal Smith, op.cit., 101-102, 175 (note 7).
La Loubère, op.cit., Part II, 53.

Ten Brummelhuis, op.cit., 57-60. Ten Brummelhuis quotes the VOC physician Gijsbert Heeck (Heecq), who visited Siam in 1655, concerning the way the Company’s staff of forty people lived: “They lived very luxuriously here because of the great plenty…most of them had concubines or mistresses, in order (so they said) to avoid the common whores, and they maintained them with all necessities, buying or building houses for them, each according to his means-”. Nevertheless, Heeck remarks, they still rarely referred to their concubines “other than as whores, sluts, trollops and the like”, this failing being common to opperhoofd and boatman alike.

28 For details concerning the Brochebourdes, see Dhiravat na Pombejra, Court, Company, and Campong, 25-42..

29 ARA, VOC 2193, Siam dagregister, fs.138-139 (25.III.1731 entry).
VOC 2239, Syen to G-G, 31.XII.1732, f.7.

VOC 1751, Cleur to G-G, 30.XI.1708, f.1006 verso.
VOC 1776, Cleur to G-G, 7.I.1710, f.9.


32 ARA, VOC 2467, Siam dagregister, f.76 (16.II.1739 entry).
ARA, VOC 1485, van den Hoorn to G-G, 1.XI.1690, f.149 verso.
VOC 1536, van Son to G-G, 27.XI.1693, f.109.


ARA, VOC 1841, “Maij” (mai, notice) of the phraklang, 5.II.1713, fs.38-41.

ARA, VOC 1841, ibid.
VOC 1827, D. Blom to G-G, 30.XI.1712, f.18.

36 See George Vinal Smith, op.cit., 138-141, for translation of 1664 Treaty.


ARA, VOC 1596, Instructions from van Son to Boom, 8.XII.1697, f.70.
