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## Chaophraya Phrakhlang's letter of 1703 on behalf of King Seua to the *Hoge Regering*: trade, treaty and the royal command

Dhiravat na Pombejra

### The document in its immediate context

Between 8 November 1663 and mid-February 1664 two Dutch ships “cruised” the upper part of the Gulf of Siam and sea lanes further east, lying in wait for junks sailing from China and Japan. Cargoes were confiscated and a Siamese crown junk returning from Japan was seized. Following this blockade, the court of King Narai (r.1656-1688) concluded a “treaty and alliance” on 22 August 1664 with the Dutch United East India Company (VOC).<sup>1</sup> This treaty confirmed certain trading privileges the VOC had in Siam, and gave the Dutch what would later be termed “extra-territorial rights” in the Ayutthayan kingdom. After King Narai’s death in July 1688, the VOC was able to renew the terms of this treaty with the court of King Phetracha (r.1688-1703), adding to the earlier treaty an extra clause confirming a tin export monopoly at Ligor (Nakhon Si Thammarat), originally granted to the company in 1671.<sup>2</sup>

During the night of 5 February 1703 King Phetracha passed away in the Royal

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1 On the Dutch-Siamese crisis of 1663-1664, see George Vinal Smith. *The Dutch in Seventeenth-Century Thailand*. De Kalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University, 1977, pp.36-42; Dhiravat na Pombejra. “The Dutch-Siamese Conflict of 1663-1664: A Reassessment” in Leonard Blussé (ed.). *Around and About Formosa. Essays in Honor of Professor Ts'ao Yung-ho*. Taipei: Ts'ao Yung-ho Foundation for Culture and Education, 2003, pp.291-306.

2 J.E. Heeres. *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum*, Vol. III. Leiden: KIT-L-V, 1907-1955, DXII Siam, pp.473-479; Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Siam. *State papers of the Kingdom of Siam, 1664-1886*. London: Ridgeway, 1886, pp.233-237; on King Narai’s granting the Dutch the Ligor monopoly, see George Vinal Smith. *The Dutch*, p.41.

Palace in Ayutthaya.<sup>3</sup> His eldest son, “Prince Sorasak” or the *wang na* prince, succeeded to the throne. Although his formal name is Sanphet VIII, he is better known to posterity as Somdet Phra Chao Sua, or “King Tiger”<sup>4</sup>. His relatively short reign (1703-1709) was to prove a tumultuous period for Dutch trade in the Kingdom of Siam. Realising from the start that their commercial standing and prospects had recently been declining, the Dutch attempted to have the 1664 treaty renewed as quickly as possible, including its appended clause of 1688 confirming the VOC’s exclusive rights to Ligor tin. With a new order emerging at court during February 1703, the Dutch were especially eager to ensure that the company’s rights and privileges in Siam, such as they were, would be maintained.

The document analysed here dates from the very beginning of the reign of King Sua, being a letter written by the *phrakhlang* minister on behalf of the king to Governor-General Willem van Outhoorn and the Council of the Indies (collectively known as the *Hoge Regering*)<sup>5</sup>. This essay will examine not only the text of the 1703 letter, but also its contexts both immediate and longer-term. Batavia’s response to this letter will be briefly outlined. These letters formed part of a regular correspondence maintained by the Siamese royal court in Ayutthaya and the *Hoge Regering*.<sup>6</sup>

The letters written by the *phrakhlang* ministers of Siam to Batavia, though

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3 Nationaal Archief (henceforth NA), The Hague, VOC 1676, Tant to G-G, 8 Feb. 1703, fs.100-101.

4 Somdet Phrachao Sua (lit. “King Tiger”) was also known as Khunluang Sorasak. During King Narai’s reign he had held the rank and title of Okluang Sorasak, and helped his father Okphra Phetracha seize the crown in 1688. Although several recensions of the Siamese Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya claim that he was in fact Narai’s (unacknowledged) son, no contemporaneous primary sources support the veracity of this story.

5 NA, VOC 1691, Phrakhlang to G-G & Council, Tuesday in 4th month of the Year of the Horse, received in Batavia 18 Feb. 1704, fs.38-41. Also in Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI), HR 2525, fs.85-90; the *Hoge Regering*’s reply in HR 2524, fs.352-353.

6 The whole series of diplomatic letters between the royal court of Siam and the *Hoge Regering* may be accessed online via <https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id/hartakarun/> (a digitization project undertaken by The Corts Foundation and ANRI).

extant only in their Dutch-language versions, provide a much-needed Ayutthayan perspective on Dutch-Siamese relations and many other related matters, as counterpoint to the predominant Dutch voice in the archives of the VOC. The 1703 letter is remarkable for its detailed account of negotiations conducted by the *phrakhlang* with the Dutch *opperhoofd* in Ayutthaya, and for the Siamese minister's views on the current state of VOC trade in Siam.

Quite apart from purely commercial problems, there were also other factors which hampered the VOC's trading negotiations. During the fifteen years of King Phetracha's reign the spectres of rebellion, pestilence, famine, floods and drought all reared their heads. The years 1695-1696 saw a severe drought hit Siam, followed by a smallpox epidemic. Many people of all ages and status died during the pestilence, the Company's trade being affected too as fewer hides and sappanwood were collected.<sup>7</sup> King Phetracha's usurpation had led to rebellions and challenges from provincial centres against the new order, which were all suppressed. Yet the years 1698-1703, far from seeing him comfortably in control of his realm, saw more troubled times. Korat or Nakhon Ratchasima, the major town northeast of Ayutthaya and controlling Siam's border with Cambodia, rebelled in 1698 – it took almost a whole year to take the city. Numerous leading *khunnang*<sup>8</sup> lost their positions or even their lives in the purges both during and following this revolt.

In 1701, presumably in response to Dutch complaints about inadequate supplies of hides, the *phrakhlang* minister explained that the rebellion in Nakhon Ratchasima, though over, had also affected the nearby areas of Nakhon Nayok and Prachin, causing much displacement of people as well as many deaths.<sup>9</sup> These upheavals not only affected the supply chain of goods wanted by the VOC, but also the

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7 NA, VOC 1580, Van Son to G-G, 27 Nov. 1696, fs.171-172, 179; Archives des Missions Étrangères, Paris (henceforth MEP), Vol. 863, Pocquet to Directeurs, 27 Dec. 1696, pp.450-452.

8 High-ranking officials or courtiers.

9 NA, VOC 1648, Phrakhlang to G-G, received 3 Oct. 1703, fs.175 ff.

timely dispatch of Dutch ships, because (among other reasons) the requisite sealed documents or *tra* would sometimes take longer to be issued.<sup>10</sup>

What respect the Dutch had had for King Phetracha and his son the *wang na* prince (“Prince Sorasak”) had by 1703 largely disappeared. In December 1700 Tant related to Batavia that King Phetracha, had changed from being a pious monarch into a wholly self-indulgent “tyrant”, much feared by his courtiers and officials. Many purges of the *khunnang* were taking place.<sup>11</sup> The physical chastisement of senior officials, even ministers, continued into 1702, as the court became dominated by three groups, namely the king’s men; those supporting his elder son the *wang na* prince (“the Prince”); and the adherents of Kromluang Yothathep (“the Queen”, Narai’s daughter and one of Phetracha’s queens), wielding influence on behalf of her son the young prince (Chao) Phra Khwan.<sup>12</sup>

Amid the complexity of these end-of-reign intrigues, which included the complicity of key court figures in the Nakhon Ratchasima revolt, one issue stood out: the royal succession. The ultimate victor in the struggle for ascendancy was King Seu. He had his younger brother Phra Khwan killed, and purged the young prince’s supporters.

The official who wrote this letter to Batavia on the king’s behalf was a newly appointed *phrakhlang* minister. Son of Okya Chaiya, he had previously held the position of Okya Phetchaburi.<sup>13</sup> His predecessor, the former Okya Sombatthiban, a Chinese favourite of King Phetracha, had lost both his title and his life during a purge of *khunnang* loyal to Phra Khwan and Kromluang Yothathep.<sup>14</sup>

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10 W. Ph. Coolhaas (ed.). *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, Vol. VI*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976, p.96 (Letter of 20 Jan. 1700).

11 NA, VOC 1637, Tant to G-G, 28 Dec. 1700, f.59.

12 NA, VOC 1676, Tant to G-G, 29 Jan. 1703, fs.28-29, 58-59.

13 NA, VOC 1676, Tant to G-G, 8 Feb. 1703, f.103.

14 On these court conflicts, see Bhawan Ruangsilp. *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayuthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c.1604-1765*. Leiden: Brill, 2007, 169-177; NA, VOC 1691, “Relaes” by Cleur, c.1703/1704, fs.61-72 is the most detailed primary source.

Since the 1703 letter of the Chaophraya Phrakhlang was composed when King Seua had just succeeded to the throne, preparations for the upcoming cremation of his father took up much of the officials' time and attention, making it difficult at times to conduct business with the court. Thai Buddhist funerals and cremations are often elaborate and long-drawn out affairs, and the funeral obsequies of an Ayutthaya monarch were much more so than others. Nevertheless, to the Dutch, matters concerning treaty and trade were of great urgency, to be pursued with utmost diligence.

### **The letter's contents: trade, treaty and the royal command**

The structure of Chaophraya Phrakhlang's 1703 letter to the *Hoge Regering* follows Siamese diplomatic convention. After the usual diplomatic platitudes honouring His Majesty the King of Siam and the Prince of Orange as well as the Dutch Governor-General, Chaophraya Phrakhlang brings up important matters of trade and state. In contrast to the kings' letters to the Governors-General, which tended to be brief and formal, the *phrakhlang* ministers' letters frequently included detailed discussions on the supply and pricing of commodities, presents or luxuries for the court and, as in this instance, the conduct of the company's chief in Siam, known variously as the Netherlanders' "captain", "factor (*feitoor*)" or *opperhoofd*.

In this missive, the Siamese court stresses once again the high status of royalty: "[m]y gracious ruler and lord [the King of Siam]... has given me instructions to confirm the way of good agreement with the Prince of Orange". Even if the Governor-General was accepted as a potentate in his own right, as *de facto* ruler of Batavia on the "great isle of Java", he was still a commoner and head of a commercial concern. The kings of Siam still regarded the Princes of Orange as - if not "kings" - then the sovereigns of "Holland" (the Dutch Republic), though the practice of exchanging letters between the King of Siam and the Dutch "king" had long been discontinued on account both of the costs and inconvenience involved,

and the emergence of Batavia as a regional power.

Much of this letter, however, is taken up with criticism of the behaviour of Gideon Tant<sup>15</sup>, VOC *opperhoofd* in Ayutthaya, especially on the issue of the treaty renewal. Its main part begins by giving a blow-by-blow narration of events, beginning with the *opperhoofd* sending the translator Okluang “Tranpanet” (possibly “Songphanit”) to ask Chaophraya Phrakhlang to arrange a royal audience, so that he could ask His Majesty to renew and ratify the treaty. Tant wanted this audience to take place before the dispatch of the *phrakhlang*’s letter to Batavia.

In requesting an audience with the king the Dutch *opperhoofd* must have known that he was asking for something not lightly granted in Siam. He therefore cited a precedent, namely the audience which King Phetracha had granted in 1688 to “Lowang Apywaree” and “Lowang Witsi Sakoen”<sup>16</sup> (the Siamese court titles of Joannes Keijts and Pieter van den Hoorn, respectively). Keijts and Van den Hoorn had been received in audience by the newly enthroned king in the process of renewing the 1664 treaty and adding the Ligor tin clause to that document.

Chaophraya Phrakhlang replied that he had informed the king of Tant’s request, and His Majesty had instructed him to tell the Dutch “captain” to bring the text of the treaty to be renewed by the minister. In other words, an audience with the king was not going to be granted. Undaunted and insistent, Tant had sent the translator once more to the *phrakhlang* to request a royal audience, yet again citing the precedent of the audience granted Keijts and Van den Hoorn. Tant wished to “hear in person what favour was permitted to the Company”: in other words, he was implicitly dissatisfied with the present state of affairs.

This time Chaophraya Phrakhlang told Tant straight out that it was “against the

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15 Gideon Tant, *opperhoofd* in Ayutthaya 1699-1703; see *Generale Missiven*, Vol. VI, pp. 74-75, 281, 331, footnote 1 (Letters of 23 Nov. 1699, 26 Feb. 1704, 31 Jan. 1705); NA, VOC 1623, Tant and council to G-G and council, 6 Jan. 1699, f.6, Reijnier Boom died on 23 December 1698, and was succeeded as *opperhoofd* by Tant.

16 Luang Aphai Wari and Luang Wichit Sakhon.

custom” at court for a royal audience to be granted for this purpose. He explained that in 1688, the King of Siam had “commanded that Lowang Apia Waree, Willem Keis and Lowang Witsit Sakoen Pieter van Hoorn should appear before His Majesty, because at that time the French were doing a great deal of harm” in the realm.<sup>17</sup> After this audience the treaty had then been “renewed and signed”.

Nevertheless the minister still proposed humbly to His Majesty that the *opperhoofd* be granted an audience, but thus far had “not received permission” yet from the king. Chaophraya Phrakhläng even explains to Batavia the argument he put forward in asking for a royal audience on behalf of the *opperhoofd*: “I have said that on many occasions the captain had acted very well and upheld the path of friendship between the Prince of Orange and His Majesty, and that he wished to be allowed to be brought before His Majesty”, as Keijts and Van den Hoorn had been. The Dutchman, however, wanted to report all to Batavia, “to which I [Chaophraya Phrakhläng] said to him that he could indeed do that, and inform their Honours of what His Majesty had ordered me to say to the captain.”

These opening moves by Tant proved to be the prelude to an open clash between him and Chaophraya Phrakhläng at a meeting in the *phrakhläng*’s audience hall. On that occasion, the two translators brought Tant and his deputy to the residence<sup>18</sup> of the *phrakhläng*, “where all the *mantries*, officers and royal servants, Malays, Chinese and Moors as well as Siamese, had gathered together”. The stage

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17 The French troubles at the end of King Narai’s reign, interestingly enough also mentioned in Gideon Tant’s 1705 report (see below), primarily involved a garrison being put in place at Bangkok late in 1687, while another was sent to Mergui, according to the demands of Louis XIV’s government. The “revolution” of 1688 was not a typical Siamese succession conflict owing to this French element - Okphra Phetracha, who seized power from King Narai after May 1688 before acceding to the throne upon the king’s death in July, used as a rallying cry the dangers posed by the French and Roman Catholicism. Phetracha had to deal with this French military presence right till November of that year, when the Bangkok garrison succeeded in negotiating a departure from Siam.

18 In pre-modern Siam, for want of permanent buildings serving as ministry offices, state business was usually carried out at the residences of the various *senabodi* or ministers.

was set for a public showdown which the Dutchman should never have provoked. The *opperhoofd* began by requesting openly that Chaophraya Phrakhlang “take him to His Majesty”, whereupon the minister chided him, saying that “his request was contrary to custom of the Siamese realm” because at that time, the “old king” having died and “passed over from mortality to eternity”, the new king was “occupied for a period of 12 days by the many difficulties of preparing the tomb for the body and its decorations.”<sup>19</sup> The ultimate authority in Siam being the king, any reference to a royal command, or even to activities directly connected with His Majesty, would have been considered by the Siamese officials sufficient to silence any arguments, even those of a foreign chief.

The *phrakhlang* minister went on to ask why the *opperhoofd* was “in such a hurry to be taken to audience”, when he could just bring the treaty document to him, and “it would be renewed and signed, and would henceforth make the path of mutual friendship with the Prince of Orange firmer and stronger, whereby the Company would obtain greater advantage than before”. Chaophraya Phrakhlang seems here to wish to adhere to the original terms or, more to the point, to the original treaty *texts*, both Dutch and Siamese.

The *opperhoofd*, however, still insisted on being allowed to put forward his case in the royal presence. Instead of the treaty text, he then sent the translator Luang “Trongpanit” to the *phrakhlang*’s residence with a letter, “saying that Kididjngtan<sup>20</sup> requested to inform His Majesty that in the treaty document made

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19 “Tomb” here refers either to the *phra borommakot*, the royal cremation urn, or, as was more likely, the whole area set aside for the royal funerary rites, with its elaborate temporary structures. The funeral of King Phetracha as portrayed on a Siamese scroll, most probably commissioned by the VOC *opperhoofd*, made its way to Europe and has been preserved at the Collection of Prints, Drawings and Photographs, Dresden State Art Collections (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden) in Saxony, Germany. See Barend J. Terwiel. “Two Scrolls Depicting Phra Phetracha’s Funeral Procession in 1704 and the Riddle of their Creation” in *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 104 (2016), pp.79-94.

20 Gideon Tant.

at the time of Pytery Dya Pytry<sup>21</sup> it was specified that the tin of Ligor would also be included in the contract”. The exclusive rights of the VOC to the tin at Ligor was therefore probably the key issue that Tant (and indeed Batavia) wished to clarify with the king, feeling that the tin trade, as well as the company’s overall Siam trade, was not going well.<sup>22</sup> It was probably at this stage of the negotiations that the *phrakhlang* sent a written response to Tant’s letter, reiterating the court’s friendship with the Prince of Orange, and assuring him that the renewed treaty would still include the Ligor tin monopoly clause inscribed on the back of the document.<sup>23</sup>

In this same paragraph Chaophraya Phrakhlang confirms that “Praya Angkana has given me the task of writing out the contract and signing *it in the same way as the treaty and the contract with the Prince of Orange* [my italics]”: in other words, he has been ordered to renew the treaty on the same terms as that of 1664/1688. Who or what was “Praya Angkana”? From the (jumbled) context and from the (scrambled) transliteration it is nevertheless not too difficult to understand that the phrase “Praya Angkana” was the translator’s rendering of the Siamese phrase *phra ratcha ongan*, meaning “royal command”.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the *phrakhlang* was citing the king’s royal command as authority in his actions and words during these protracted and demanding negotiations with the Dutch *opperhoofd*. Indeed, the king’s word or command could be considered law. Thus the potency of royal power behind the phrase *phra ratcha ongan* resulted in it being left untranslated. The translators could easily have opted for a direct translation such as “royal command” or “sacred royal command”, rather than using the Siamese term.

Chaophraya Phrakhlang uses the words *phra ratcha ongan* again when

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21 Pieter de Bitter, VOC envoy (“*commissaris*”) to Siam in 1664.

22 See for example some passages in letters from Tant to Batavia of 28 Dec. 1700 (NA, VOC 1637, fs.29-33 verso); 31 Jan. 1702 (NA, VOC 1663, fs.10 ff.); 29 Jan. 1703 (NA, VOC 1676, fs.14-17).

23 NA, VOC 1691, Phrakhlang to Tant, 15 Feb. 1703, fs.73-74; see also Gideon Tant to Phrakhlang, 22 Feb. 1703, fs.74-75.

24 *Phra ratcha ongan* (พระราชโองการ).

referring to Tant's claim that the king (in that case King Phetracha) had *commanded* that the Ligor tin clause be appended to the text in the treaty renewal negotiated by Keijts and Van den Hoorn. He accuses Tant of behaving in a way which was "against the mode of operation" used by Keijts and Van den Hoorn, merely "following his own wishes". The *phrakhlang* then expands on his criticism of Tant:

"These are not new words [in the contract] that are being made up now, but [were] established in the time of Lawang Apy Waree and Lowang Witsit Sakoen. This method is still being followed, but the senior head is following his own ideas and is taking the proper text [in the contract] to his advantage. And whatever is not to his liking, he denies."

What exactly does the *phrakhlang* minister mean in this somewhat obscure passage? The subtext here seems to be the dispute over the contents of the treaty, though the main thrust of the narration is an attack on Tant's conduct. Certainly implicit is that the treaty renewal negotiations had been going badly. It seems that Tant wished to interpret the treaty text to suit his (or the VOC's) purposes, probably the clauses on "free trade" and the 1688 addendum on the Company's exclusive rights to Ligor tin. The *phrakhlang* minister here wishes to reiterate the court's standpoint on these issues.

Chaophraya Phrakhlang then informed the king once again that, although he wished to have the treaty written out again, he was still unable to obtain the company's copy of it. A further royal command was issued to Chaophraya Phrakhlang saying that if the Dutch did not want to draw up another copy of the treaty document of 1664/1688, seeing that it was requested by the *opperhoofd* himself, "then this will be regarded as an offence committed by the captain". In other words, the Siamese court is again insisting on the original text being used, since it was to its advantage.

A final chance was to be given to Tant to voice his "opinion", and if he was still unwilling to settle matters in the manner proposed, the *phrakhlang* had instructions

- obviously from the king – “to write to the Governor-General and members of the Council of the Indies to send another head [of the lodge] – someone who is inclined to uphold the way of mutual friendship made by the Prince of Orange”. The *phrakhlang* goes on to say that the king “hoped” that Tant would be replaced by “another captain”, a more suitable person.

What then follows is a detailed denunciation of Gideon Tant. The *phrakhlang* minister begins by stating that Tant, who had formerly been VOC chief in Ligor<sup>25</sup>, “has done much wrong in comparison with the other chiefs who have lived here in the past”, doing “much business on his own account, in opposition to the spirit of mutual friendship”. According to Chaophraya Phrakhlang, Tant made a personal profit from the sale of goods sent by the VOC to sell in Siam, “whereby the Company suffers a loss.” The minister accuses Tant of first calculating the personal profit he could gain from the sale of company goods to the crown treasurers, particularly textiles. Tant is alleged to have set the price of goods “much higher, as opposed to the method of trading of previous captains who traded with the treasurers to the great advantage [of the Company].” In the case of textiles brought by the VOC to sell in Siam, Chaophraya Phrakhlang actually accuses Tant of “lying” and “wrongly putting the blame on the Governor-General”. It is difficult to prove either way whether Tant or the officials of the *khlang* were at fault here, but the *Hoge Regering* does not seem to have suspected Tant of corruption while in Siam.

The *phrakhlang* next discusses how the *opperhoofd* has acted contrary to usage in the hides trade. Tant is accused of withholding payment for “deer and oxen” hides from the “Chinese, Siamese and people of Pegu” who supplied the VOC with these goods, contrary to usual practice. Normally the Chinese, Siamese and Mon

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25 This is not quite accurate. Tant was for a time the deputy in Ligor, but almost certainly not *resident* or chief of the factory. See NA, VOC 1498, Wagenvelt to G-G, 13 Jan. 1692, fs.278 verso-279, which mentions Tant, then the second in command at Ligor, being called up to serve in Ayutthaya.

suppliers<sup>26</sup> would bring their animal skins to the Dutch lodge, sorted in three grades<sup>27</sup>, to be paid in silver money according to the amount of hides delivered, from 10 taels to one silver catty of silver. These traders have been complaining to Chaophraya Phrakhlang, who concludes that Tant has, during three of the four years he has been in charge, acted in a way “opposed to the method of trading of the previous captains who traded with the treasurers to the great advantage [of the Company].”

The *phrakhlang*’s letter ends with a peroration exhorting Batavia to replace the *opperhoofd* Gideon Tant with a more suitable person. If left in charge of the VOC’s affairs in Siam, Tant would “completely ruin the process of sincere friendship, because he refuses to do what is the custom in Siam. And if the Company does not do the right thing then this will be to its detriment, whereby all the advantages that the Company so abundantly enjoys will cease.” Once again, the *phrakhlang* is citing precedent and emphasising “custom”. What is slightly ironic, however, is that Gideon Tant himself was trying to engineer a transfer away from Siam (see below).

### **Batavia’s response**

The *Hoge Regering* in Batavia responded to King Seu in a letter dated 27 August 1703,<sup>28</sup> informing the king that it has “read with exceeding joy how it had pleased God the Lord to take the previous king from this world [sic], and that the crown of the kingdom of Siam has in turn come to the head of His Majesty ... through lawful

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26 It is notable that the *phrakhlang* minister does not mention Japanese or Japanese mestizos in this list, even though during the seventeenth century they had been key components of the hides trade. It perhaps reflects the assimilation into local society of Ayutthaya’s community of Japanese and Japanese mestizos.

27 Deerskins in Siam were sorted into three sorts or main grades: Cabessa, Bariga and Pee (Portuguese for head, belly and foot); although after the 1630s there were extra classifications added, namely Jamma or Jammama (Cavalia de Matta), Chemen (Cabessa) and Attamat (Bariga de Cabessa), these were included in the “Three Sort” packaging; see George Vinal Smith. *Dutch in Seventeenth-Century Thailand*, pp.148-149.

28 Kasteel Batavia *dagregister*, ANRI, HR 2524, fs.352-353.

inheritance and succession”.

After the usual pledge of the good intentions, amity and alliance the Dutch company bore towards “the Siamese realm”, the Governor-General goes on to say “[w]e expect from his kindness that His Majesty will be pleased (if this has not already taken place) to renew the ancient contracts and privileges that were formerly made between ... Siam and the Honourable Company”. This was a hint that the matter should have been taken care of more promptly by the Siamese court.

Batavia then informs the king and *phrakhlang* that its Siam *opperhoofd* Gideon Tant had been transferred to Japan, his deputy Aarnout Cleur taking his place as head of the VOC factory in Ayutthaya.<sup>29</sup> The transfer of Gideon Tant must have pleased the Chaophraya Phrakhlang, whose letter to Batavia had been a catalogue of the *opperhoofd*'s faults and faux pas. Cleur was another experienced Siam hand, and was to serve as *opperhoofd* in Siam from 1703 till 1712, his term outliving the reign of King Seua.

The final section of the letter details the gifts Batavia was sending to King Seua. Most of the items were textiles, largely from India but also Persian and possibly European.<sup>30</sup> The company once again used its world-wide web of maritime trade to provide prized presents for Asian potentates. Aromatic gifts included cloves, nutmeg and cinnamon from Maluku and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), as well as Persian rosewater. Modern technology came in the form of European firearms, glass spectacles and telescope. Soft to the touch and luxurious were the textiles, chosen according to what the Ayutthaya court usually desired, for example the *sompak* cloths. Exchanges of

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29 Tant had in fact asked for a transfer from Siam since January 1702; at first this was rejected, but finally granted in 1703. See NA, VOC 1663, Tant to G-G, 31 Jan. 1702, f.39; *Generale Missiven*, Vol. VI, pp.199 (Letter of 30 Nov. 1702), 231 (Letter of 4 Sept. 1703).

30 The cloths listed were (presumably European) fabrics in crimson, purple and other colours, “lakenras” (a twilled woolen or silk fabric), “sompacken” (*sompak*), “sanen” (very fine Bengal silk), gold Persian cloth and gold “taatsen” (*tad*, a term denoting cloth partly woven with gold or silver thread). The *sompak* and *tad* textiles here, taken from the Company’s storehouses, were most probably of Indian manufacture and for use in the Siamese court.

gifts between the Dutch and the Siamese royal court had by this time become a form of trade, with each batch of presents carefully valued by both sides.<sup>31</sup>

### **The wider context of the letter: treaty terms vs. trading realities**

The key message in Chaophraya Phrakhlang's 1703 letter to the *Hoge Regering* had been the royal court's serious concern over the conduct of VOC trade in Siam. In attacking Tant's behaviour the minister was landing the first blow in the impending scuffle over Dutch trade in Ayutthaya and Ligor.

As a large part of the letter analysed here concerns Tant's attempt to renegotiate the Dutch-Siamese treaty, it might be apt to look at the VOC's trading troubles mainly through the eyes of Gideon Tant himself. Upon leaving Siam, he was asked to write a *berigt* or report<sup>32</sup> for the *Hoge Regering* on the Company's trade in Siam. From an examination of Tant's 1705 report and other Dutch documents from this period, there were three major reasons for dissatisfaction.

The first main cause of VOC dissatisfaction with its trade in Siam at the beginning of the eighteenth century may be traced to the following clauses in the Treaty and Alliance concluded by King Narai's court with Pieter de Bitter on 22 August 1664:

“Secondly, it is agreed that the Honourable Company shall henceforward enjoy perfect freedom to carry on trade in Siam, Ligoor, Oetgang, Salang,<sup>33</sup> and all other places and countries belonging to the King's dominions, none excepted, and to deal in such goods or merchandise as may be, without any reservation, in such a manner as the Honourable Company may deem expedient.

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31 Han ten Brummelhuis. *Merchant, Courtier and Diplomat. A History of the Contacts between the Netherlands and Thailand*. Lochem-Gent: De Tijdstroom, 1987, p.57, calls it the “Language of Gifts”.

32 NA, VOC 1711, *Berigt* (intelligence, information, news, i.e. report) submitted to *Hoge Regering* by Gideon Tant, Batavia, 20 March 1705, fs.1-20.

33 The place names here refer respectively to Ayutthaya (“Siam”), Nakhon Si Thammarat (“Ligoor”) and Phuket (“Oetjang Salang” i.e. Ujung Salang or “Junkceylon”).

“And also that the Honourable Company shall be free to negotiate, deal, and correspond with all persons, no matter what rank they occupy, whenever the Honourable Company may choose to do so, without, as has happened before, being interfered with either directly or indirectly by anybody, whosoever he may be.”<sup>34</sup>

After over three decades, however, the Dutch had still to enjoy “free trade” in Siam. According to Tant, whether it was the trade in sappanwood, tin, hides, namrack or gumlac, the Dutch found themselves hampered by competition from the crown itself as well as from other foreign merchants such as Chinese and “Moors”. The Dutch were constantly disappointed by their inability to choose their goods suppliers, as well as buyers for their imported merchandise. The Siamese crown monopolised trade in several commodities, and thus continued to be the main competitor for the goods most desired by the Company.

By decrees issued by King Prasatthong, and confirmed by a clause in the 1664 treaty, the VOC was given the right to export hides, principally deerskins but also oxen and buffalo hides, to the exclusion of all other foreign merchants in Siam. During the period when Dutch trade in Japan thrived on account of the VOC’s near-monopoly of several goods from other parts of Asia, especially Southeast Asia, such exclusive rights promised much for the Company. But notwithstanding the treaty terms, around the turn of the century the Dutch did not have a total monopoly of all the hides in Siam: a certain amount had to be given over to the king and the “Prince” (the *wang na*), who sent junks to China and Japan too, thus making them direct rivals of the VOC.<sup>35</sup> According to Tant’s 1705 report, whenever the king’s factors wanted hides for the crown junks trading to Japan, they would just go directly to

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34 From George Vinal Smith. *The Dutch*, p.138.

35 *Generale Missiven*, Vol. VI, p.5 (Letter of 2 Feb. 1698). “Prince” here refers to Prince Sorasak, later King Seu. On the sending of Sino-Siamese junks to Nagasaki in the name of Siamese royalty, see Yoneo Ishii (ed.). *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia. Translations from the Tōsen Fusetsu-gaki, 1674-1723*. Singapore: ISEAS, 1998; pp.1-21, 46-82.

the suppliers to get the goods, even though the VOC had paid a year in advance for them.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the problem of having to buy goods from the royal storehouses and negotiating with the crown factors, the sale of Indian cloth was a constant source of annoyance. The *phrakhlang* minister, addressing this issue in his 1703 letter, had thrown all the blame on Gideon Tant, accusing him of making a personal profit from sale of exorbitantly-priced textiles. Tant's own 1705 report, on the other hand, goes into detail on the travails of the Dutch in their textile trade in Ayutthaya: the principal problem was that the king's factors would always try to choose and price the textiles to their advantage.<sup>37</sup> A General Letter of the *Hoge Regering* dated 30 November 1702, based on data sent from Tant, relates that all the inhabitants of Ayutthaya were forbidden from dealing in textiles directly with the VOC.<sup>38</sup> In short, for quite some time now the crown factors had claimed the right of first refusal, and would take the VOC's imported Indian textiles into the royal warehouses before any other trader could have a chance to examine them. Tant complains also that the crown factors looked after these textiles very badly, sometimes leaving them exposed to possible theft as well as to damage from "white ants" (termites).<sup>39</sup>

In the Siamese context, the clause in the treaty promising "free trade" had not been intended to deceive. It was natural that the conduct of commerce in a court-dominated community such as Ayutthaya, however "free", would be limited by certain constraints. Indeed, the only Siamese text of the 1664/1688 treaty<sup>40</sup> extant (kept in the National Archives of Indonesia) does not use such exact and detailed terms when referring to liberty of trade:

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36 NA, VOC 1711, Tant's report, 20 March 1705, fs.12-13.

37 NA, VOC 1711, Tant's report, 20 March 1705, fs.4-7.

38 *Generale Missiven*, Vol. VI, p.198 (Letter of 30 Nov. 1702).

39 NA, VOC 1711, Tant's report, 20 March 1705, fs.9-10.

40 The text is reproduced in Jan J. Boeles. "Notes on the Treaty of Siam and the Netherlands of A.D. 1688 in Thai" in *Proceedings, International Conference on Thai Studies Bangkok 1984*, Vol. 3, "Relations between Thailand and other Countries".

“From now onwards the Dutch may trade at all *meuang* belonging to [within the boundaries of] Krungthep Phra Maha Nakhon Bowon Thawarawadi Si Ayutthaya without hindrance [จงสตรก] in the way that was done previously.”

A key point in Tant’s 1705 report indeed stresses the serious discrepancy between the Dutch and the Siamese texts of the treaty, especially the clause concerning the Company’s exclusive rights in purchasing tin in Ligor. Gideon Tant had probably been trying, all through his negotiations with Chaophraya Phrakhleng in early 1703, to point out these textual differences, or at the very least to assert VOC privileges as stipulated in the Dutch-language version of the treaty. Such textual discrepancies were of course not unique to this Dutch-Siamese treaty: not far away from Ayutthaya, and at around the same juncture, the Dutch had also encountered this problem in their 1685 treaty with Johor, where the Malay and Dutch texts differed considerably. The VOC also was unable in that case to change the indigenous (Malay) text to accord with the Dutch version.<sup>41</sup> In both the Siam and Johor cases, the problematic texts seemed not so much to be mistranslations of the Dutch version, but rather deliberately created documents which accorded with the indigenous ruler’s interests, couched in the cultural and linguistic idioms of those royal courts.

The second main reason for the VOC’s dissatisfaction stemmed from another key clause in the 1664 treaty as renewed in late 1688, and here, even more so than in the clause concerning free trade, the Dutch and Siamese texts differed on a crucial point. This extra clause confirmed the VOC’s exclusive rights to export tin from Ligor granted earlier by King Narai. Since the tin trade was becoming almost the only hope the Dutch had of success and profits in Siam, obtaining sufficient

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41 Leonard Y. Andaya. *The Kingdom of Johor 1641-1728*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp.140-145, 163, 325-327; Dianne Lewis. *Jan Compagnie in the Straits of Malacca 1641-1795*. Athens, OH: Ohio University, 1995, pp.26-27.

amounts of that mineral at good prices became a priority.<sup>42</sup> The addendum to the 1664 treaty which Keijts and Van den Hoorn obtained in 1688 offered up promising opportunities to the VOC:

“- the said Dutch chartered Company at the city of Ligor alone, to the exclusion of all other nations in the world, at the normal price, now and in the future shall be authorised to buy up all the tin, [only] excluding that which His said Majesty needs for his own use, according to former custom.”

However, the Siamese-language version of the treaty addendum, in the vital passage concerning the VOC’s rights to exclusive purchase of Ligor tin, may be translated as follows:

“The tin in Nakhon [Si Thammarat] all belongs to the crown; [His Majesty] grants to the Dutch Company the right to buy [tin] at [market] price, and no other traders are to buy other than the Dutch Company.”

As, from year to year, the Dutch failed to obtain satisfactory amounts of tin at Ligor, this discrepancy in the treaty texts had become evident to Gideon Tant and his colleagues, and may explain the *opperhoofd’s* insistence on taking the matter to the highest authority in the land, namely the King of Siam. In his 1705 report, Tant even opines that in 1688 Keijts and Van den Hoorn had been deceived into accepting the new treaty clause with its problematic texts, either through Siamese guile, or a bad translation of the text.<sup>43</sup>

Kings of Ayutthaya claimed tribute tin from Nakhon Si Thammarat (Ligor), as *suai*, tax in lieu of *corvée* labour. This tin was used in trade with foreigners and in royal construction projects.<sup>44</sup> Tin was a commodity in demand both east and west of

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42 Supaporn Ariyajsiskul has pioneered the study of the Dutch tin trade at Ligor. See especially her article “From Pepper Trade to Tin Rush: The Crossroad of Thai and Dutch History in Ligor” in Dhiravat na Pombejra, Han ten Brummelhuis, Nandana Chutiwongs & Pisit Charoenwongsa (eds.). *Proceedings of the International Symposium ‘Crossroads of Thai and Dutch History’ 9-11 September 2004*. Bangkok: SPAFA, 2007, pp.53-99.

43 NA, VOC 1711, Tant’s report, 20 March 1705, fs.9-10.

44 NA, VOC 1711, *Memorie* for W. van den Hoorn (resident at Ligor) by C. Woutersz., 21 April 1704 remarks that if the king were to require a lot of tin for royal building projects then the VOC’s monopoly at Ligor would suffer, fs.59-69, labelled f.“79”.

Siam.<sup>45</sup> It was also used as an alloy to make bronze which, though largely containing copper, comprised around 12% to 12.5% tin. Bronze was used to cast Buddha images and other objects.

Once again the crown was the VOC's main competitor. The ambiguity in the texts of the Treaty gave the Siamese justification in appropriating tin which the Dutch thought should have been sold to them. One of the enduring problems for the Dutch in Ligor was the pricing of the tin. They bought tin from Ligor at a price consistently below market price, which in the end put them at a disadvantage in what has been called a "price war". The Chinese were also able to access Ligor tin, and were willing to pay higher prices, which meant that local traders or suppliers were tempted to sell to them rather than to the VOC.<sup>46</sup>

The third main reason why the VOC was unhappy in its Siam trade was the king's growing debt to the Company, a matter of increasing concern to Batavia and the directors. The VOC's way of trading with the Siamese court during this juncture entailed the King of Siam having to pay a substantial sum for commodities bought from the Company, an amount which was not paid immediately upon receipt of the goods. This was thus classified as a "debt" owed by the Siamese crown. The amount of the debt was at times high: Els Jacobs estimates that during the eighteenth century it was around 100,000 guilders at any one time, after the annual settling of accounts.<sup>47</sup> The figures for the king's debt from around the period of the 1703 letter, or just after, were as follows: in November 1704 it amounted to 65,746 florins (guilders), while in November of 1705 it still amounted to 65,002.<sup>48</sup>

The king did not only buy goods from the VOC, but his factors travelling

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45 Supaporn. "Pepper Trade to Tin Rush", pp.75-76; tin "from Siam and Ligor" was in high demand in Surat, Persia, Japan and China.

46 Supaporn. "Pepper Trade to Tin Rush", pp.77-78.

47 Els M. Jacobs. *Merchant in Asia. The Trade of the Dutch East India Company during the Eighteenth Century*. Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2006, p.211.

48 *Generale Missiven* Vol. VI, pp.301, 355 (Letters of 30 Nov. 1704 & 30 Nov. 1705).

abroad often borrowed money from the Company, thus incurring more debts. A clause in the 1664 treaty may be obliquely relevant, stating that, if a ship belonging to the Company be in distress or be shipwrecked near the coast of Siam, or “if such disaster should befall any of His Majesty’s junks or ships near the coast of any of the Company’s dominions, their respective subjects shall lend their assistance to save the ship, crew and cargo, and shall deliver the crew or goods thus saved to whomsoever it may concern.”<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps in deference to the reciprocity implied in the above treaty terms, towards the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century loans were given to Siamese crown factors going to Surat, Bengal and the Coromandel Coast, as well as to the king’s horse buyers sent to Java during the 1690s and early eighteenth century.<sup>50</sup> The loans to Siamese crown factors, albeit reluctantly granted and done in hope of better trade in Siam, might be taken as expressions of amity in accordance with the spirit of that clause in the treaty.

A bone of contention between the two parties was how the king’s debt would be paid. By mutual agreement, the king’s treasurers would pay the crown’s debt to the Dutch in three parts: one third in cash, one third in tin and one third in sappanwood. The Siamese treasury appears to have run out of silver cash during the 1690s. Gideon Tant himself, in two letters to Batavia, mentioned this shortage of silver cash. From around 1698, if not earlier, the Siamese court hoped for imports of silver cash from the VOC, but was always disappointed.<sup>51</sup> The Siamese court therefore wished to pay the debt wholly in kind, whereas the *Hoge Regering* preferred the debt to be paid in cash.<sup>52</sup> The payment of the debt in tin and sappanwood elicited a mixed

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49 George Vinal Smith. *The Dutch*, p.140.

50 *Generale Missiven* Vol. VI, pp.26, 41 (Letter of 6 Dec. 1698), 124 (Letter of 1 Dec. 1700), etc.

51 NA, VOC 1602, Boom to G-G, 5 Dec. 1698, fs.930 & verso; VOC 1637, Tant to G-G, 28 Dec. 1700, fs.55 verso-56; VOC 1663, Tant to G-G, 31 Jan. 1702, f.20.

52 *Generale Missiven*, Vol. VI, p.75 (Letter of 23 Nov. 1699), p.199 (Letter of 30 Nov. 1702).

reaction on the part of the Dutch. Tin, whether from the Ligor region or from the crown storehouses in Ayutthaya itself, could always be resold for good profits, but the Dutch already had enough sappanwood in their own godowns. Tant in his 1705 report also analyses the debt problem. The amount of the king's debt was growing annually, instead of being paid year by year, and the Siamese crown's insistence on paying in kind was very disadvantageous to the Company owing to the high "pricing" of the goods handed over to the Dutch as payment of the debt.<sup>53</sup> A formal agreement was made between the VOC and the *phrakhlang* in 1708 to regulate the payment of the king's debt, but to no great effect.<sup>54</sup>

Having analysed all these considerable obstacles faced by the Dutch in Siam, Tant advised the *Hoge Regering* to threaten closing down the VOC's factories in Ayutthaya and Ligor. These closures became fact later on in 1705.

### **The immediate aftermath: withdrawal and treaty renewal**

The events related by the Chaophraya Phrakhlang in his 1703 missive do not reach a resolution in the letter itself, leaving us still awaiting an end to the story. The delay in the renewal of the Dutch-Siamese treaty dragged on through much of 1704 with Tant, then the new *opperhoofd* Arnout Cleur, responsible for carrying on negotiations with the court.

Finally, on 21 December 1704 King Sua commanded that the treaty be renewed.<sup>55</sup> The king refers to both the *Hoge Regering* and Okluang Surasen (the *opperhoofd* Cleur) asking in writing for this treaty to be renewed in the usual manner, and therefore ordered that this be done, namely by inscribing the back of the treaty document. Thus the story comes full circle as the phrase *phra ratcha ongan*

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53 NA, VOC 1711, Tant's report, 20 March 1705, fs.7-8.

54 Remco Raben and Dhiravat na Pombejra. "Tipping Balances: King Borommakot and the Dutch East India Company" in Remco Raben and Dhiravat na Pombejra (eds.). *In the King's Trail. An 18<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch Journey to the Buddha's Footprint*. Bangkok: Royal Netherlands Embassy, 1997, pp.70-71.

55 NA, VOC 1691, King of Siam's "*ordonnantie*" of 21 Dec. 1704, fs.6-7.

is used once again to denote the all-important royal command which ends the whole long process of treaty renewal.

Cleur, however, was not optimistic about the treaty renewal benefitting VOC commerce in Ayutthaya and Ligor. It was impossible to trade at Ligor during 1703-1704 on account of a rebellion having broken out there. Chaophraya Phrakhleng mentioned in his letter received at Batavia in May 1704 that an “armada” had been sent to subdue Ligor, but further details are unclear, other than that the rebellion was put down in 1705, all ringleaders executed.<sup>56</sup>

Quite apart from the actual trading problems, the Dutch were still disturbed by the difference in the wording of the treaty texts, particularly in the Ligor tin clause. This issue must have rankled, because among the VOC’s Siam papers in the *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren* series for the year 1707 there is a Portuguese translation of the Ligor tin clause from the 1688/1689 treaty. The Dutch obviously wanted an accurate translation of the text in a third language to put beside the Dutch and Siamese language versions.<sup>57</sup> By 1705 the *Hoge Regering* had acknowledged Gideon Tant’s point that there was a “huge difference” between the Dutch and Siamese language texts of the Treaty, but little could be done about it.<sup>58</sup>

Batavia therefore decided in 1705 to close the Ayutthaya and Ligor offices, leaving behind Christoffel Woutersz to try to collect the king’s debt. Batavia had decided first to send a representative, the director Jan van Velsen (or Velzen) to inspect the factories at Ayutthaya and Ligor, to see whether matters could be improved for the VOC. They could not, and the offices were closed. Furthermore, the Van Velsen mission turned out to be a diplomatic disaster, both on account of the

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56 On the Ligor rebellion of 1703-1705, see MEP, Vol.882, Relation de la Mission, 25 June 1703, p.83; NA, VOC 1691, Phrakhleng to G-G (received 6 May 1704), fs.92-93; Supaporn Ariyasajsiskul. “De VOC in Ligor: met nadruk op de tinhandel (1640-1756)”. MA thesis, University of Leiden, 1999, pp.56-57.

57 NA, VOC 1728, Portuguese translation of Siamese text in treaty of BE 2232 on exclusive rights to tin in Ligor, f.96.

58 *Generale Missiven*, Vol. VI, p.355 (Letter of 30 Nov. 1705).

envoy's attitude as well as the court's haughty treatment of the Dutch. Yet even after this debacle, Batavia still decided to reopen the VOC office in Ayutthaya. As the new chief, Arnout Cleur's first task was to negotiate favourable terms for the VOC's return. The *Hoge Regering* was willing to re-establish the Siam and Ligor offices only on condition that their privileges in hides and Ligor tin were retained, and that they would be granted "free trade" as stipulated by the 1664/1688 Treaty.<sup>59</sup>

The VOC's storehouses were maintained and Dutch vessels continued to stop in Siam during this hiatus. In June 1706 Woutersz reopened the factory at Ayutthaya. Although this was done with the king's permission, the Dutch were very much aware that the court still harboured resentment about the manner in which they had withdrawn from Siam.<sup>60</sup> The *opperhoofd* Cleur, before returning to reside in Ayutthaya, spent much of 1706 and 1707 going to and fro between Java and Siam, as negotiations continued between Batavia and the Siamese court.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

That the lesson learnt from the acrimonious treaty renewal process of 1703-1704 was taken to heart may be seen from the way the VOC obtained a renewal of the treaty almost immediately after the demise of King Seuá on 9 February 1709. The treaty was renewed on 1 March 1709<sup>62</sup> after the peaceful and orderly accession of the new monarch, Somdet Phrachao Thaisa.<sup>63</sup>

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59 On the Van Velsen mission, see Bhawan. *Dutch East India Company in Ayutthaya*, pp.177-178; Ten Brummelhuis. *Merchant, Courtier and Diplomat*, pp.44-46.

60 *Generale Missiven*, Vol. VI, p.485 (Letter of 30 Nov. 1707).

61 See for example *Generale Missiven* Vol. VI, pp.406, 414, 475, 488 (Letters of 31 March 1706, 30 Nov. 1706, 9 Nov. 1707, 30 Nov. 1707); NA, VOC 945, Cleur's *Memorie*, 11 June 1706, fs.729-730, on Woutersz being sent to re-establish Dutch factories in Ayutthaya and Ligor on old terms.

62 *Generale Missiven*, Vol.VI, p.644 (Letter of 15 Jan. 1710).

63 King Thaisa (literally "the king [residing] at the end of the pond", r.1709-1733), or Phumintharacha; born Chaofa Phet, a son of King Seuá and elder brother of King Borommakot (r.1733-1758). The "pond" or pool in the king's name was in the western part of Ayutthaya's Royal Palace, where the residence Banyong Ratanat hall was situated.

In Chaophraya Phrakhlang's letter of 1703, the subtexts and contexts may be read between the lines of the actual text as well as through contemporaneous documentary evidence. Most notably, the main subject-matter concerning Gideon Tant's persistent and – in Siamese eyes - discourteous attempts to obtain a royal audience to discuss renewal of the Dutch-Siamese treaty barely conceals a key subtext: that of seriously deteriorating trading relations between Ayutthaya and the VOC. The other, related topic was the treaty itself: its texts, translation and terms. Underlying the protocol and personal wrangles between the *phrakhlang* and the *opperhoofd* were the contrary standpoints of court and company on the treaty texts, often expressed in letters written by VOC employees but rarely explicit in this letter from the Chaophraya Phrakhlang.

The beginning of the eighteenth century may indeed be said to signal the beginning of the end of realistic hopes for profitable Dutch trade in Siam. The Company's sanguine optimism after the renewal of the 1664 treaty at the beginning of King Phetracha's reign, with its affirmation of the Ligor tin clause, had turned to bitter disappointment.<sup>64</sup> Even with its major European rivals departed or much weakened, the VOC still found it difficult to trade in Siam. The Siamese crown and the Chinese proved formidable competitors. The Japan trade upon which the VOC relied for profitable sales of Siam goods such as hides and sapanwood became more and more restricted, as by state policy the export of Japanese metals virtually stopped and, ten years after the renewal of the Dutch-Siamese treaty in December 1704, the Japanese government was to limit the number of VOC ships entering Japan to only two per year.<sup>65</sup> The VOC stayed on hoping to obtain cargoes of tin and sapanwood, or perhaps just as much in hope of collecting the whole of the king's debt. There may also have been corruption among the Dutch company employees in Siam, causing

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64 See George Vinal Smith. *The Dutch*, pp.44-45, 68-69; Ten Brummelhuis. *Merchant, Courtier and Diplomat*, pp.41-46.

65 Remco Raben and Dhiravat na Pombejra. "Tipping Balances", pp.64-65.

several of them to discourage Batavia from closing down the Ayutthaya and Ligor offices.<sup>66</sup>

Yet all through these negotiations and disagreements there is a sense that neither side really wished to be rid of the other. Dutch motives for staying on have been outlined above. In his 1705 report, Gideon Tant hints at some of the reasons why the Ayutthaya court was unlikely to break off relations with the Dutch. King Seuwa, for all his aversion to Europeans dating back to when he personally clashed with King Narai's Greek favourite Constantine Phaulkon,<sup>67</sup> must have realised that he could ill afford to jettison the Dutch. The sea routes could then become unsafe for Siamese trading vessels venturing abroad. Also, there was still some fear in Siam that the French could come back to avenge the events of 1688: the VOC therefore had to be retained as an ally and potential provider of armed assistance.<sup>68</sup>

A prominent feature of the 1703 letter of the Chaophraya Phrakhlang is its demonstration of how the Siamese court used custom, precedent and hierarchy to control its contacts with foreigners.<sup>69</sup> The Dutch had cited precedent in requesting a royal audience. The issue of the audience thus became a focus of conflict between Tant and the *phrakhlang*. The major issues in this letter, however, were directly to do with trade.

Although in the *phrakhlang*'s letter Gideon Tant seems to be acting independently in insisting on a royal audience, he could be viewed as having acted according to Batavia's best interests, using all means to secure improved terms for the VOC, by revising the treaty if need be. Once again the issue of access to

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66 See Els M. Jacobs. *Merchant in Asia*, pp.217-218.

67 When he was Okluang Sorasak, the future King Seuwa actually came to blows with Phaulkon, knocking out two of the Greek's teeth. See Richard D. Cushman (tr.), David K. Wyatt (ed.). *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2000, pp.304-305; for another version of the clash, see the Memoir of Father de Bèze in E.W. Hutchinson. *1688 Revolution in Siam*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 1968, pp.18-19.

68 NA, VOC 1711, Tant's report, 20 March 1705, fs.15-16.

69 See Bhawan. *Dutch East India Company in Ayutthaya*, pp.221-224.

persons as well as to information was crucial, and it was not within control of the Dutch in Ayutthaya. For the Dutch, the main sources of information on current affairs in Ayutthaya were limited to translators, “shahbandars” and other *krom tha* officials. As for the Siamese king, what he really knew of affairs in his realm depended on his own diligence or awareness, as well as on how much and faithfully his officials reported matters to him.

Gideon Tant had ended his *Berigt* of 1705 by wondering how fully and accurately Dutch-Siamese affairs were being reported to the king by the *phrakhlang* and other officials. It was impossible to find out what the monarch really knew, since the Dutch could not gain direct access to His Majesty through royal audiences.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, foreign residents, traders or even envoys were very rarely admitted to the royal presence. The 1703 letter of Chaophraya Phrakhlang clearly reflects these realities of protocol and kingship in Ayutthaya, describing how Tant failed both to obtain a royal audience and to secure the renewal of the treaty. In Siam, the monarch was the supreme authority, making his command or *phra ratcha onghan* imbued with his sacral power and having the status of law. Since the king was the ultimate authority in all matters, his *phra ratcha onghan* was considered the incontrovertible and final answer to all questions, and as such an untranslatable term.

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70 NA, VOC 1711, Tant’s report, 20 March 1705, f.17.