Thai Captives, Slave Gathering Warfare and Cultural Exchange in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia

Introduction to the proposed project

In 1767, nearly two years of siege warfare ended when in a final desperate attack Burmese military forces breached the defensive wall surrounding Ayudhya, the Thai capital city. The city was home to the kingdom’s highly skilled artisans, royal elite, intellectuals, and religious leaders. In a determined manner, Burmese forces enslaved between 30,000 and 100,000 city dwellers, carefully divided them according to their valued skills, and forcibly relocated them to the Burmese capital in the Mandalay area (Nai Thien 1959, James 2000, Cushman 2000). Consequently, these people disappeared from Thailand and the latter attention of those who study the Thai past, but they did not really disappear. The Burmese elite held many of these captives in high esteem, and their interaction with Burmese culture effected broad change in artistic, religious and musical practices in their new homeland. To date, the study of Thai history has been artificially limited to the activity of people within the borders of the modern nation-state (Thongchai 1994). The unfortunate result being that the history of Thai captives living outside of Thailand remains entirely unstudied. My research project is an historical study of these invisible people.

Many of these Thai captives were settled in Mandalay, southwest of the royal palace. Their community stretches for more than a mile along the Shwe Ta Chaung canal, an important waterway they were charged with maintaining. A walk through this area, like the ones I took during my pre-dissertation research, illuminates the possibilities of my study. Artisans were settled here and commanded to manufacture goods for the palace, some of which are still produced by their descendants. On 34th street, for example, lacquer craftsmen decorate gold resin with cut glass; close
by seamstresses toil at gold embroidery. Both skills came from Thailand (Kywe Kywe Sein 1998). Sand pagodas, a potent symbol of Buddhist impermanence, are rare in upper Burma, but are numerous here. At the largest of these temples, located near 42nd street, a stone inscription credits the captured king of Ayudhya, Uthumphon, with popularizing this tradition (Ni Ni Myint 2004). Up until WWII you could visit the “Ayudhya Market,” which specialized in Thai-style sweets many of which are still popular in Mandalay. On 30th street, a small alley opens onto the “Ayudhya Spirit Shrine” where Thai dancers and musicians once prayed before their daily performance in the palace. Thai performance traditions transfix Burma’s commoners and royal elite. In the early 19th century, committees formed to translate Thai dance-dramas and orchestral works resulting in a transformation of Burmese dance and music (Maung Htin Aung 1937, U Sa 1971, Singer 1989, U Ye Htut 1997).

My dissertation research is more than a recuperation of this captive community; it has broad implications for the cultural history of mainland Southeast Asia. Area specialists have long recognized the significance of slave gathering warfare to the state building process. In Southeast Asia where arable land was abundant and in many fertile regions largely unexploited, warfare often centered on the large-scale capture of rival populations, their enslavement, and eventual transfer back to their conqueror’s political center (Kraisri 1965, Warren 1981, Reid 1988, Grabowski 1999). One byproduct of this kind of warfare was a somewhat steady circulation of populations across intra-regional cultural spheres. Prior to 1820, captives made up the majority the region’s urban populations (Reid 1983). Work on 18th century Burma suggests that of the workers controlled by the king to produce goods and services, 35% were from captured foreign populations; and that this percentage was higher in the capital itself (Koenig 1990). Elsewhere it is estimated that by the early-19th century, one-fifth of the entire population of upper Burma was comprised of captured
communities and their descendents (Lieberman 1991). However, to date there has been no study of
the cultural ramifications of slave gathering warfare and captive communities. Burmese chronicles
state that captured royalty maintained their ranks, and that artisans and other skilled slaves were
employed in these same tasks by their captor society (Sein Maun Oo 1998, *Mahayazawin Taw Kyi*).
At the same time art historians have repeatedly recognized substantial and transformative changes
to Burmese sculpture, lacquer design, dance and music following the conquest of Thai states (Kyaw
1995, Galloway 2000). Seen in this light, the large-scale movement of captured people should be
understood as a potent vector for the movement of cultural and artistic practices and as a force for
cultural integration between Thailand and Burma, and the region as a whole.

The goal of my project is to expand our scholarly notion of Thai and Southeast Asian studies to
include distant captive communities, and to illuminate the crucial role of enslaved people in the
intraregional process of cultural exchange. This study would also foreground the role of captives as
potent historical actors capable of fundamentally altering the culture of captor societies. Finally, in
mainland Southeast Asia, historical allusions to the slave gathering warfare of the 18th and early-
19th century has become a recurrent characteristic of intraregional antagonism. In Thailand, the sack
of Ayudhya resulted in long-lasting nationalist animosity toward Burma and the Burmese (Sunait
1992). Similarly, Thailand returned to power after 1767 by virtually depopulating Laos, and by
taking large populations from Cambodia and the Malay Peninsula. All have had significant negative
ramifications for interstate relations in the present (Mayoury 1998). Yet below this surface history
of conflict and strife lays a fascinating and completely unstudied story of transformative contact and
cultural exchange. This is the history that I would like to excavate.
Slavery and cultural development in Southeast Asian studies

Scholarly notions of cultural development in Southeast Asia are largely guided by the region's geographic position in the center space of East-West trading networks. Area specialists have come to understand the region through its cosmopolitan cities that served as a "neutral meeting ground" where foreign merchants, pundits and holy men interacted with local communities (Hall 1985, Clammer 2002). The long dominant trope or framework for the study of Southeast Asia centers on the concept of localization, or the ways that local elites interacted with various facets of global culture and then transformed or hybridized these ideas to make them Southeast Asian (Mun 1934, Coedes 1968, Wolters 1999). Yet this framework has contributed to another feature of Southeast Asian studies: the general sense by some inside and many outside the field that the region is incoherent; that it essentially contains many wildly heterogeneous culture groups that share some common cultural features due to a shared contact with foreign groups and foreign ideologies, but relatively little due to intra-regional relations. A study of captive communities can improve the coherence of the region by shifting focus from trans-regional cosmopolitanism of urban life to the equally important intra-regional interaction and exchange that develops when captives from neighbor states comprise 25-50% of a given urban population.

From the beginning, scholarly interest in Southeast Asian slavery focused on its striking dissimilarity to the plantation system in the Americas. One of the first significant anti-slavery tracts, Montesquieu's contribution to the Encyclopédie in the early 1700s, framed the cruelties of the Western slavery against the kinder and more benign system found in Southeast Asia. Western scholarship has continued in this vein, essentially elucidating the structure of Southeast Asian slavery versus its American doppelganger. An insightful essay by Gwyn Campbell (2004) represents the current state of the field. Campbell writes that in Southeast Asia violence played a less significant role in the management of slaves, and these slaves generally had recourse to
traditional and proscribed rights not seen in the Americas. Additionally, slaves were rarely employed in plantation labor; rather they participated in a great variety of tasks—as soldiers, artisans, fishermen, concubines, gurus, weavers, merchants, traders. etc. Finally, slaves were not alienated from the society. They shared in the status of their owners, thus the slaves of high-status persons, especially those artisans that worked directly for the king or another high-status person were higher up on the status pyramid than a putatively free person. For these reasons scholars have long debated whether the word “slave” should be employed to describe the social position of war captives in Southeast Asia (Watson 1980, Aung-Thwin 1983, Reid 1983). At least one academic, though, has challenged the “scholarly complacency” that emerges from this comparative framework that too easily overlooks the dislocation, trauma and extreme suffering that slavery visited upon Southeast Asian people (Bowie 1996).

While up to now contrast has dominated the study of comparative slavery, emerging research in the field of American slavery and “Atlantic World” history suggests new comparative models for the study of captive communities in Southeast Asia. Atlantic World scholars argue that slavery stimulates multilateral cultural exchange that enables culture to pass from slaves to the larger society (Sobel 1988, Mann 2001). Paul Gilroy, in his famous study Black Atlantic (1993), stressed the “intercultural positionality” of slaves and their descendents that facilitated the creation of “contact zones” between the culture of their homeland and that of their captors’ community. Historian James Brooks (2002), meanwhile, demonstrated that slavery stimulates the development of hybrid identities amongst the slaves that gradually, through inter-marriage and manumission, pass into the slave holding society. Studies of music, dance, religious practice, agricultural technology, food preparation, and other subjects, have repeatedly shown the movement of African

Culture passed between slaves and the larger society in the Americas, in spite of grossly asymmetrical power relations, racism, and numerous laws that expressly forbade these kinds of cultural interactions. Therefore, we should expect these exchanges to be far more common and frequent in the Southeast Asian context where slave-gathering warfare actively targeted populations that possessed coveted skills or knowledge. Whereas in the Americas this process of exchange was an accidental byproduct of slavery, in Southeast Asia it was a strategic intention. To return to my proposed case study, the Mandalay suburb I described in my introduction is one of many “contact zones,” to borrow Paul Gilroy’s term, where Thai culture could pass into Burmese society.

Preliminary Research and Preparation

In 2003, I was fortunate enough to receive pre-dissertation research funding. I spent 12 weeks in Rangoon and Mandalay conducting preliminary interviews with musicians, performers, craftsmen and knowledgeable scholars about the various contributions made to Burma by Thai captives. Upon my return I used this knowledge to conduct additional library research.

Previous to this research trip I spent many years living and working in the region. In 1990-1991, I was an exchange student at Chiang Mai University (CMU) in Thailand. It was in that period that I developed my passion for Thai culture and Southeast Asian history. This was followed by an intensive study of Southeast Asia at the University of Hawaii and more than two years (1997-1999)
spent working and researching in Bangkok. The resulting thesis, a history of the 13th century kingdom of Sukhothai, was nominated for the WAGS/UMI thesis competition in 1999. On the strength of this research, I was admitted to the History Department at Cornell University in 2001. Choosing to enter Cornell instead of continuing at UH was a difficult decision. My grades were excellent and Cornell's courses broadened my knowledge of Southeast Asian history, but I found the environment stifling. I took time off from the university, worked as an adjunct professor of Southeast Asian history at Northern Illinois University, and concluded that I should transfer back to the University of Hawaii. Due to this combination of preliminary in-country research, a wide ranging academic background, and practical experience working in the Southeast Asian context, I am confident that I can succeed at this innovative project.

**Continued Research in Burma and Thailand**

Conducting research that follows the leads and contacts that I developed in 2003 is crucial to the success of my project. My research methodology will include a mixture of text-based historical analysis, interviews and observation. The royal chronicle traditions in Thailand and Burma are primarily elite focused. They can be carefully employed, along with other state documents, to illuminate the important role of slave-gathering warfare and the ultimate fate of captured peoples, how they were put to work and by who; but they are poor sources for the social history of captives. The private writings of some Burmese elites discuss this community, as do the publications by European visitors. Ultimately, it is by interviewing Thai descendents that we can best supplement textual sources, and approximately 200 families in the Mandalay area acknowledge this ancestry. They descend from palace dancers and musicians and maintain distinctive rituals that celebrate this connection. Following research techniques pioneered scholars of American slavery, I will observe the work of artisans who produce crafts following techniques that originated in Ayudhya. Slaves
left little writing, but the objects they made reflect skills brought with them from their homeland, as well as the slow processes of adaptation and invention (Thompson 1984, Holloway 1990, Vlach 1991). Traditional art forms are still widely practiced in Mandalay, and through consultation with Thai scholars and artists it will be possible to discern yet unnoticed Thai influences.

Contacts and Academic Affiliation

Through the combination of research conducted for my Masters degree and my recent pre-dissertation research, I have many contacts in both Thailand and Burma. The historian Charnvit Kasetsiri, former President of Thammasat University, has agreed to advise me during my Fulbright tenure, as he did during my MA research. He is a world-renowned authority on pre-colonial Southeast Asian history and has conducted a great deal of research on the historical and political relationship between Thailand and her neighbors. I have already confirmed my affiliation with the Southeast Asian studies program at Thammasat University. Thanet Ampornsuwan, a historian of comparative slavery, currently administers this program. In fact, Professor Thanet’s PhD thesis was on American plantation slavery. Both scholars are uniquely positioned to assist my project and Professor Thanet will introduce me to the students and faculty and Thammasat with an academic interest in Burma. I will also be able to enroll in Burmese language courses at the university, helping me to polish my language ability. Sunait Chutintaranond, a specialist in Thai-Burmese relations at Chulalongkorn University and the first Thai scholar to master the Burmese language, also has an interest in my project and has agreed to assist me. In Burma, where “official” academic affiliation is unfortunately impossible, I made many unofficial contacts during my preliminary field research. Among these contacts is the historian U Thaw Kaung; Dr. Tin Maung Kyi, an oral historian of Thai descendents; and the language specialists Aung Soe Min and Naing Tun Lin. In
addition, I have dozens of contacts with knowledgeable artisans, musicians, and performers in the Mandalay area.

**Plans for Scholarly Exchange**

As I did during my MA research, I will make frequent presentations during the various stages of my project. Thammasat has numerous venues for sharing academic work and receiving feedback from audiences of both students and academics, and conferences of visiting academics. I will also request similar opportunities at Chulalongkorn University. Due to tensions between the West and the Burmese government, academic exchange in Burma is much more problematic. There is one formal setting in which this interaction is actively condoned, the UHRC Conference held yearly at Rangoon University. I will present my findings at this conference. Informally, Burmese academics are eager to read and comment on the research of foreign scholars, so I will circulate printed versions of my work to all interested academics for feedback and advice. In addition, as I did during my last visit, I will create a CD-Rom of current research on Burmese topics for distribution to the academic community. In isolated Burma, these digital gifts are one of the few ways that Burmese scholars can access international journal articles and unpublished PhD research. Similarly, Burma’s isolation has made it difficult for foreign scholars to access rare historical documents. For this reasons I plan to digitally copy rare manuscripts that I uncover during my research and have made arraignments with my university’s librarian for the Southeast Asian studies collection to make these digital files available to the public.

**Conclusions and Support**

To study this kind of cultural exchange the scholar must maintain a sustained focus on the enslaved community, from their point of origin to their life as captives. I possess the unique academic background for this project. I received an interdisciplinary MA in Southeast Asian
Studies with a focus on Thai intellectual history. My course work in the University of Hawaii’s innovative area studies program included the study of Thai and Buddhist art, textile production, architecture, painting, dance, language and theater. My Ph.D. study continues in this same vein and also incorporates a new focus on Burmese history and language. My committee is similarly wide-ranging and has offered me encouragement at every stage. I have the receiving advice from three historians of Southeast Asia, one of whom specializes in Burmese studies; a specialist in comparative slavery; and a world historian. Taken together, I have the unique, multifaceted skills and the essential support system required to study the cultural interactions between Thai captive communities and pre-colonial Burmese society.

The research project that I’ve outlined in this proposal is highly unique. With assistance from Fulbright-Hays, I would have resources necessary to conduct interviews and gather the far-flung sources necessary for this history of slavery as a vector of cultural exchange between Thailand and Burma. I believe that this research will produce new insights in the field of comparative slavery; create an alternative history for state development and cultural exchange in mainland Southeast Asia; and, possibly, create a less contentious narrative of intraregional warfare. Beyond the production of my PhD dissertation, I hope to publish articles related to my research and to continue researching pre-colonial relations between these two states. As an academic I hope to encourage student interest in this important and understudied part of the world and to continue to produce histories that tell the story of slaves and other cultural outsiders.