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Dangerous Friendships in Eighteenth-Century Buddhist Laṅkā and Siam

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Abstract

The kingdoms of Kandy (now Sri Lanka) and Ayutthaya (now Thailand) were briefly connected across Indian Ocean waters in the mid-eighteenth century by Dutch East India Company (hereafter VOC) traders, leading to the importation of valuable Siamese Buddhist monks and their ordination lineage to the island. Two series of events related to the VOC's search for and delivery of these monks demonstrate that the patronage of connected religious dynamics—not just the contingencies of trade, land, labour, and statecraft—was an essential aspect of Company business. At the same time, mediating Buddhist connection was a dangerous, sometimes perilous undertaking. Analysing VOC records alongside Laṅkān and Siamese historical chronicles and travelogues reveals that what were initially friendly connections at first necessitated, and later intensified certain forms of danger. We begin with perilous shipwrecks and diplomatic impasses across monsoon waters that eventually led to the restoration of an important but defunct Kandyan Buddhist ordination lineage, and conclude with the aftermath of a failed assassination attempt in 1760 against the royal patron of that lineage transmission. I advance the notion of “dangerous friendships” to characterise how Buddhist courts and European traders worked together to first generate, and then exploit, friendly religious connections.

Keywords: Kandy; Ceylon; Sri Lanka; Ayutthaya; Siam; Thailand; Dutch East India Company; VOC; Friendship; Danger; Buddhism

Introduction

In their attempts to forge religious connections across what are now Sri Lanka and Thailand between 1741 and 1760, Buddhist monks, together with Dutch traders, traversed dangerous maritime frontiers to restore friendly religious relations amongst independent kingdoms separated by the Bay of Bengal. As Sunil Amrith has observed, in this “world shaped by the movement of names and stories,” emotion and rapport, as much as reason and law, determined how one made a life on the move and how one managed the dangers one encountered along the way.¹ While benefitting from decades of work following Sanjay Subrahmanyam's call to write “connected histories” of early modern Eurasia,² this article

¹ Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013), 283.

² Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31:3 (1997), 761–2.

aspires, as Jeremy Adelman has recently suggested, to “reckon with disintegration as well as integration, the costs and not just the bounty of interdependence.”³ In early modern Lañkā, Zoltán Biedermann has shown that the very instruments of connection—communication, dialogue, translatability, even shared political ambition—have served as tools for the eventual conquest of one party by another.⁴ On the ground (and also in the middle of the ocean), the coproduction of the “global” and the “local” rested on forms of connection between parties who believed such interactions to be connectable.⁵ Often times, acts of connection gained efficacy through attestations of friendship, a rhetorical and diplomatic discourse in a world made more dangerous, I will argue, by the demands and experience of interconnection.

By focusing on “dangerous friendships” between the ambitious individual actors who made up powerful institutions like company-state, trading house, indigenous court, and religious *saṅgha*, I suggest that what looks like connective tissue between European traders and Buddhist Indian Ocean polities might be better understood as a range of dynamics where the potential for connection and disintegration are equally present. This article also endeavours to show that amongst the surprising dynamics that temporarily brought the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company, hereafter VOC) and the Kandyan and Ayutthayan courts together were the Company’s extensive efforts to bolster, and then exploit, a Buddhist ordination lineage.

I analyse the importance of Buddhist monks to the interconnected but fractious political fortunes of Lañkā and Siam, independent kingdoms briefly joined in maritime religious diplomacy in the mid-eighteenth century by the VOC’s self-serving fealty to Kandy, and its desire for increased trading opportunities in the gulf of Siam. I first ask how the religious interests of Lañkā and Siam were brought together by the maritime and mercantilist prowess of Dutch traders, and also what characterised the experiences of Buddhist monks and envoys on Dutch ships. Second, I ask why this short-lived and tenuous relationship was forged, and especially why it fell apart in maritime “Southern Asia,” an interconnected zone which had not, by the middle of the eighteenth century, achieved the academic and geopolitical areal designations which nowadays distinguish Southeast and South Asia.⁶

While the commercial success of the VOC across Southern Asia declined over the eighteenth century, its trading operations continued to direct the flow of everyday life for seafaring communities in the eastern half of the Indian Ocean. In this mercantilist and monsoon environment, the religious and diplomatic interests of the predominantly Buddhist kingdoms of Ayutthaya (now Thailand) and Kandy (in Sri Lanka) were brought together not only by the maritime and economic prowess of Dutch traders, but more acutely by the shared demands of what Anne M. Blackburn has called “religious statecraft,” which co-entailed the management of Buddhism with the affairs of the state.⁷ More specifically, across what Tilman Frasch has characterised as a shared Theravāda Buddhist “*ecumene*” in the early modern Bay of Bengal, for generations the importation of fresh *upasampadā* (Pāli: monastic ordination) conferring monks has been an important

³ Jeremy Adelman, “What Is Global History Now?,” *Aeon*, 2 March 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>.

⁴ Zoltán Biedermann, *(Dis)Connected Empires: Imperial Portugal, Sri Lankan Diplomacy, and the Making of a Hapsburg Conquest in Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 219.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ Anne M. Blackburn and R. Michael Feener, “Sufis and *Saṅgha* in Motion: Toward a Comparative Study of Religious Orders and Networks in Southern Asia,” in *Buddhist and Islamic Orders in Southern Asia: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Feener and Anne M. Blackburn (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2018), 8–9.

⁷ Anne M. Blackburn, “Buddhist Technologies of Statecraft and Millennial Moments,” *History & Theory* 56:1 (2017), 77–9.

duty for Buddhist kings whenever their local lineages go into periodic decline.⁸ This tentative and brief period of connection between Buddhist centres mediated by European traders in the eighteenth century was not, I will argue, indicative of a sustained network. Instead, between the 1740s and 1760s, the search for and delivery of Siamese Buddhist monks to Kandy by the VOC, and especially what came after, was a perilously undertaken and politically dangerous one-off triangular diplomatic endeavour carried out by individuals who called each other friends, but whose interactions left each more vulnerable than before.

Social and economic histories of VOC trading operations in Southern Asia tend to undervalue the role of connected indigenous religious dynamics. Similarly, accounts of Buddhist connectivity between Lañkā and Siam often deemphasise the role of the VOC. Both historiographic vantages tend to favour broad institutional dynamics over the ambitious individual actors and relationships these eminently more powerful institutions comprised. Philip Stern has argued that as commercial, political, and diplomatic intermediaries between Asian and European courts, British and Dutch “company-states” were marked by flexible forms of political power that drew from adopting alternating stances of “deference and defiance” as interactions with local polities dictated.⁹ In Madurai and in Lañkā, Markus Vink has argued that parties on each side of the encounter were drawn together by a shared interest in trade, leading towards unstable and complex relationships fraught with conflict and coexistence alike. Vink’s characterisation draws from multiple historiographic articulations of this uneasy dynamic: an “Age of Contained Conflict” (Sanjay Subramanyam), a “Balance of Blackmail” (Ashin Das Gupta), “Perceived Mutual Advantage” (Om Prakash), “Conflict-Ridden Symbiosis” (Chris Bayly), “Co-operation or Acquiescence and Accommodations” (Peter Marshall), and “Two-Way Dependency” (David Ludden).¹⁰

While this article does not dispute these characterisations, it endeavours to demonstrate that in eighteenth-century Lañkā and Siam, Buddhism was crucial to this balance of conflict and coexistence. As Biedermann has argued, at least as important as trade and statecraft were the social and geographic spaces in which early modern communication was carried out, and especially where and why it broke down.¹¹ Chris Nierstrasz has suggested that although in the second half of the eighteenth century the VOC was still in a powerful enough position to strong-arm Kandy to bow to its economic interests, it assiduously avoided doing so whenever possible for fear of driving up costs, or worse, causing the valuable labour force of cinnamon peelers (over whom Kandy still exerted political influence) to escape into the reclusive kingdom.¹² Foremost in the Kandyan monarch’s arsenal of political control over this force was his power to inspire Buddhist fervour amongst local populations of VOC-employed labourers. Thus, a careful status quo was tenuously and inconsistently maintained. For the VOC, the mediation of local religious demands became an increasingly important, as well as complex and expensive business.

Into this mix of commerce and politics this article foregrounds a consideration of religious diplomacy and its dangers in the hands of Buddhist monks and VOC traders,

⁸ Tilman Frasch, “The Theravāda Buddhist Ecumene in the Fifteenth Century: Intellectual Foundations and Material Representations,” in *Buddhism across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange*, ed. Tansen Sen (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2014), 347–68.

⁹ Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

¹⁰ Marcus P. M. Vink, *Encounters on the Opposite Coast: The Dutch East India Company and the Nayaka State of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 4.

¹¹ Biedermann, *(Dis)Connected Empires*, 16–7.

¹² Chris Nierstrasz, *In the Shadow of the Company: The Dutch East India Company and Its Servants in the Period of Its Decline (1740–1796)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 51.

focusing centrally on both the VOC's as well as Laṅkān and Ayutthayan archives' articulations of "friendship." In my argument, friendship is a rhetorical tool used to manage fractious diplomatic relationships between Kandyan, Siamese, and Dutch parties in environmentally and politically dangerous climates. My conceptualisation of friendship draws on Evgeny Roshchin's observation that over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, diplomatic communication grew beyond the contingencies of treaty making, and increasingly comprised dynamic moral relationships expressed in the language of friendship. These friendships in turn constituted the very grounds upon which tenuous and unequal political alliances were constructed and maintained.¹³ Roshchin argues that the efficacy of social bonds like religion and kinship for enforcing rulemaking or adjudicating disputes began to erode, and as a result, alternative instruments became necessary to manage new political arrangements in bi- and multi-lateral global engagements without a singular central authority.¹⁴ To focus on the role of early modern friendships, argues Roshchin, is also to uncover linkages and fractures underneath the façade of the eminently more powerful institutional forms of which they are constructed and maintained.¹⁵

By focusing on friendship in service of religious connections forged over dangerous waters and foreign lands, this article draws methodologically on what Remco Raben has recently characterised as an "eccentric reading" of VOC colonial documentation alongside Buddhist historical chronicles, letters, and travelogues. Raben calls on historians to resist the "gravitational force" of the colonial archive's epistemologies by reading "beyond the archival grain."¹⁶ I endeavour to heed this call by contrasting VOC correspondence and the reports of its traders and governors with Laṅkān and mainland Southeast Asian travelogues and Buddhist chronicles. To develop the argument about "dangerous friendships," I first reconstruct the motivations of the Kandyan, Ayutthayan, and Dutch parties to the Buddhist ordination lineage transmission between the 1740s and 1760s before engaging two series of events demonstrating that what were initially friendly connections forged over perilous waters became increasingly destabilising conduits of political intrigue and danger.

First, accounts of fatal shipwrecks, ships running aground in unfamiliar territories, and illnesses contracted abroad reveal how Kandyan, Siamese, and European monks, traders, and sailors managed environmental and physical hazards in service of religious connection. As successive groups of apprehensive monks and envoys stepped aboard VOC ships in the wake of earlier failed voyages, in their travelogues and historical chronicles we see how they sought to mitigate these perils at sea with Buddhist protective rituals. We then move from the danger of the monsoon ocean to that of personal animosity and political rebellion at the Ayutthayan and Kandyan courts. Bringing the reports of VOC spies concerning a 1760 assassination attempt (plotted by Siamese and Kandyan monks) against Kandy's King Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha (r. 1747–82) to bear on the rapidly changing feelings and fortunes of each party, I advance the notion of "dangerous friendship" to characterise the religious (dis)connection at the centre of a now-disintegrating triangular relationship. During the 1760s and especially after, the foreign-born "Nāyakkar" king and his family, descendants of a high-caste matrilineal dynasty of Southern Indian nobles, increasingly

¹³ Evgeny Roshchin, *Friendship Among Nations: History of a Concept* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 7–8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 219–20.

¹⁶ Remco Raben, "Ethnic Disorder in VOC Asia: A Plea for Eccentric Reading," *BMGN—Low Countries Historical Review* 134:2 (2019), 116–7.

became the target of personal and political troubles which were justified in terms of his religious, and later, ethnic classifications.

While the diplomatic language of Buddhist and Dutch parties to this tendentious, sometimes perilous, and ultimately short-lived moment of triangular religious diplomacy was one of friendship, by drawing itself more intimately into the religious affairs of Ayutthaya and Kandy, the VOC's friendship was a dangerous one. Furthermore, despite the religious and political value of the exchange of monks for both kingdoms, by enthusiastically drawing themselves more intimately into one another's religious dynamics, this "Buddhist friendship" would have dangerous political consequences, especially for Kandy, consequences the VOC was—because of its ongoing mediation of Buddhist connection—uniquely poised to exploit. The Company, eager to exacerbate political turmoil in Kandy and newly appreciative of the shared importance of Buddhism to both kingdoms, attempted to install a Siamese puppet king on the throne in the aftermath of that failed rebellion.¹⁷ Siamese and Burmese Buddhist chronicles and VOC intelligence about these events reveal how royals, monks, and Dutch agents navigated the disconnected world of hazardous political intrigue left in the wake of those earlier missions of friendly religious diplomacy.

The VOC as Buddhist Cultural Broker

The *Cūlavamsa* (an eighteenth-century continuation of the *Mahāvamsa* chronicle) summarises this remarkable triangulation between the Kandyan court under the reign of King Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha and before, the Ayutthayan court under King Borommakot (r. 1733–58) and after, and the VOC. Upon receiving a request from Kandy to supply monks to the island, the chronicle relays that in 1751 "the wise king [Borommakot] [. . .] chose a chapter of priests, at the head of whom was Upāli, an elder distinguished for moderation and contentment, and endued with gentle manners, and of an upright behaviour. [. . .] A stately ship that was thus sent with an image of [a] gold [Buddha] and other presents which made the voyage across the deep sea that abounded in terrors and perils, arriving in perfect safety [. . .] in the beautiful island of Laṅkā."¹⁸ Wise kings, upright monks, and perfectly safe voyages made in stately ships across seas full of terror and peril (Figure 1)? This late eighteenth century Pāli chronicle of the monarchs and monks involved in restoring Kandy's *bhikkhu* (Pāli: full male monk) ordination lineage portrays the Dutch as "charged with the protection of (the seacoast of) [Laṅkā]."¹⁹ Before considering the perils of the sea and of foreign courts, let us first consider why the VOC acted at its own material and financial risk as the broker of Buddhist monks between Ayutthaya and Kandy.

Dhiravat na Pombejra and Remco Raben characterise the relationship between the two crowns and the Company as especially fractious. Their contact was lubricated by friendly diplomatic programmes of negotiation and gift giving, but was ultimately bolstered by espionage,²⁰ and personal animosity was rife amongst parties calling one another friend.

¹⁷ Reinier Broekhuizen, "VOC als Kingmaker: Hoe de VOC een Thaise Prins op de Troon van Kandy Wilde Zetten," (MA Thesis, Utrecht University, 2013), 59–71; K. W. Goonewardena, "A Dutch Mission to Tenasserim and Glimpses of the Mid-Eighteenth Century Ayutthayan Kingdom," in *International Conference on Thai Studies, August 22–24, 1984, Bangkok*, vol. 3, *Relations Between Thailand and Other Countries* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1984), 10.

¹⁸ L. C. Wijesinha, trans., *The Mahāvamsa, Part II: Containing Chapters XXXIX to C* (Colombo: George J. A. Skeen, Government Printer, 1889), 360–2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 360.

²⁰ Remco Raben and Dhiravat na Pombejra, "Tipping Balances: King Borommakot and the Dutch East India Company," in *In the King's Trail: An 18th Century Dutch Journey to the Buddha's Footprint: Theodorus Jacobus van*



Figure 1. Two sacred Buddha footprints—one in Siam, the other in Laṅkā—separated by a sea “abounding in terrors and perils.” Wall painting, Wat Phutthaisawan, Ayutthaya, Thailand, circa late seventeenth century. Photographed by author.

For example, in his 1757 *Memoir*, Joan Gideon Loten, the VOC governor at Colombo from 1752 to 1757, betrayed a rather negative opinion of the “blood-relations” of Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha. “[T]he Nayakars,” he wrote, “are certainly the instruments most subversive of the Company’s interests on this Island, and who for no other reason than their own advantage do nothing but attempt to wrest from the Company the profits which it has enjoyed since early times and divert them to themselves.”²¹ In the final section of the article, we will return to some ways in which this fraught “Nāyakkar” designation was used. Similarly, in Siam, in the journal of Theodorus van den Heuvel, the VOC *opperkoopman* (Dutch: chief merchant) at Ayutthaya from 1735 to 1740, King Borommakot is described as “greedy,” “arbitrary,” and as having a “capricious temperament.”²²

In spite of these perceptions, friendly relations with Kandy were essential to the Company’s business on the island, and to the continued control of its ports.²³ Batavian authorities directed Company officials in Colombo to placate the Kandyan aristocracy

Den Heuvel’s Account of His Voyage to Phra Phutthabat in 1737, ed. Remco Raben and Dhiravat na Pombejra (Bangkok: Royal Netherlands Embassy, 1997), 64.

²¹ Joan Gideon Loten, *Memoir of Joan Gideon Loten, Governor of Ceylon, Delivered to His Successor Jan Schreuder on February 28, 1757*, trans. E. Reimers (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1935), 10–1.

²² Bhawan Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c. 1604–1765* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 184, 192; Raben and na Pombejra, “Tipping Balances,” 74.

²³ L. S. Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka, 1707–1782* (Colombo: Stamford Lake, 2008), 99.

in order to enjoy, to the fullest extent possible, access to the kingdom's cinnamon lands.²⁴ Nira Wickramasinghe has demonstrated that Kandy's stance was to regard the VOC's presence and trading operations on the island littoral as the "feudatories" and protectors of its interests.²⁵ This perception was also reflected in the experiences of ordinary labourers living in the intermediate zones between the kingdom and low-lying VOC-controlled territories, who Kandy had little difficulty recruiting when war erupted against the VOC in the mid-1760s. However, the Company's relationship with Kandy does not alone explain why the VOC would supply the ships, labour, and costly gifts needed to restore a Buddhist ordination lineage. Lorna Dewaraja has suggested that if the Dutch had not been willing to supply vessels in service of Kandy's desire to revive the defunct *bhikkhu* lineage, it was likely they would have turned to British forces in Madras, or to the French in Pondicherry.²⁶

Of no less importance is the Company's relationship with Ayutthaya, and the motivations of King Borommakot to dispatch monks, texts, and ritual objects on Dutch ships. In the *Ayutthaya Chronicles* we learn that the Siamese king "manifested His holy compassion by being pleased to have crown servants commissioned as an embassy to convey a holy royal missive and escort articles of royal tribute [. . .] to the Holy Lord of Langka. Then the King was pleased to have the Reverend Ubali [Upāli] and the Reverend Ariya Muni [. . .] go out to establish the Holy Buddhist Religion and ordain noble youths within the Continent of Langka."²⁷ Why Ayutthaya? The suggestion that the VOC might search for *bhikkhus* in Siam rather than from Pegu or Arakan—from which Kandy had initially hoped to locate them—most likely came from Gustaaf Willem van Imhoff, governor-general of Batavia from 1743 to 1750, who had served as the governor of Colombo before that.²⁸ After consulting with Abraham Arnouts, his Colombo *opperkoopman* (who was previously based in Siam), the Company persuaded an influential courtier named Leuke Ralehamy, a Kandyan *disāva* (Sinhala: provincial chief administrator) that the manner of Buddhism practised in Pegu was also found in Siam. Not incidentally, there, and not in Burma, the Company had a lodge, and a relatively amicable but unstable trading relationship. Correspondence between the VOC and Kandy in 1746 reveals that the Company deemed a mission to Pegu absolutely "out of the question," writing that Arakan would also be impossible because "here, too, the realm has been troubled by heavy internal warfare. [. . .] Thus, no Dutchman dare visit without fear of death."²⁹

Incredibly, during the 1740s the VOC was employed by Kandy to determine the suitability of Buddhist monastic practices in mainland Southeast Asia.³⁰ After its trading operations in Siam dwindled to one ship a year following a withdraw in 1741, the Company's desire to reestablish contact with Ayutthaya, as intermediaries of Kandy's own desire to acquire monks from a friendly foreign court, was an opportunity it could not refuse.³¹ na Pombejra and Raben have argued that the VOC's patronage of Buddhist connections

²⁴ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, "Baron van Imhoff and Dutch Policy in Ceylon 1736-1740," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 118, no. 4 (1962): 456–7.

²⁵ Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

²⁶ Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka*, 99–100.

²⁷ Richard D. Cushman, trans., *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya: A Synoptic Translation*, ed. David K. Wyatt (Bangkok: The Siam Society Under Royal Patronage, 2006), 452.

²⁸ Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka*, 100.

²⁹ Dutch National Archives, The Hague [hereafter DNA], VOC 9897: Translation Sinhala *ola Śrī Vijaya Rājasimpha* to Governor Julius Stevin van Gollennesse, 25 September 1746; Report of Meeting of Kandyan Envoys with the Dutch Governor, 10 July 1746.

³⁰ K. W. Goonewardena, "Ayutthia in the Twilight Years and Its Triangular Relations with the V.O.C. and Sri Lanka," *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 6:1 & 2 (1980), 7, 28.

³¹ Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants*, 195.

was not at all altruistic, and despite the significant expenses it incurred hoping to placate Kandy so that the kingdom would “remain tractable, dependent, and inclined to grant trade privileges,” in Ayutthaya, the Company endeavoured unsuccessfully to gain access to surplus rice and other commodities it hoped to secure as backup for its Laṅkān and Southern Indian settlements.³²

Of course, maritime religious connections across Southern Asia long predate the arrival of European explorers and traders. After the centralisation—purification, in a Buddhist hermeneutic—of the Laṅkān *bhikkhu* orders under the Mahā Vihāra temple in Anuradhapura in the twelfth century, numerous mainland Buddhist centres ranging from Arakan, Pegu, Nakhon si Thammarat, Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya intensified their exchanges of monks, texts, and knowledge with the newly prestigious form of Laṅkān monasticism.³³ New evidentiary syntheses of archaeological and textual evidence by Himanshu Prabha Ray and Kate Crosby also point to underacknowledged Buddhist ritual and meditation practices which circulated across the region, many of them carried to Kandy by the Siamese monks.³⁴ By the sixteenth century, Ayutthaya emerged as a prosperous and cosmopolitan upriver Siamese capital, with designated trading zones for Siamese, Chinese, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese, and Dutch alike, and an impressive artistic, intellectual, legal, and of course, religious output. Due in part to the growing size and complexity of that society, Buddhism increasingly became an important legal, moral, and political technology around which it could become organised, and concomitantly, Ayutthaya began to envision itself as a new and important centre of the Buddhist world. King Borommakot helped to advance the centrality of Buddhism in both respects.³⁵

King Borommakot selected a master in the *Vinaya* (Pāli: ordination rules and principles of monastic community conduct) named Upāli Mahāthero to lead the first mission to Laṅkā in 1751–53. Between 1753 and 1756, Upāli gave hundreds of *bhikkhu upasampadā* ordinations before succumbing to a fatal illness.³⁶ The entire project to restore the Laṅkān *bhikkhu* ordination lineage with a foreign importation of monks should be understood as the long-simmering and precariously fulfilled ambition of a Kandyan novice monk named Vāliṅga Saraṇaṃkara (1698–1778), who was the second to receive Upāli’s *upasampadā* ordination in 1753, and who went on to wield a great deal of religious and political power for many decades. Saraṇaṃkara, a highly adept novice monk, rose to religious and political prominence in the Kandyan court by 1740, and served as a religious adviser to the monarchs. The *Syāmūpadasampadā*, an account from circa 1775 by Saraṇaṃkara’s pupil Tibbotuvāvē Buddhārakkhita, recounts that “King Kirtisri [. . .] was instructed in the doctrines of Buddhism and the laws of the land by the priest Saranankara. Being informed that there was not a single *Upasampadā* priest in the whole of Lankā this king resolved that he would in his time glorify the religion of Buddha. When he enquired as to what country the religion of Buddha was most prosperous, he was told that it was in Siam.”³⁷ Nowhere in this text, which elides years of tendentious diplomatic red tape, do we learn that the king first sought to locate monks in Burma. Rather, it claims that Siamese Buddhists were initially deemed suitable. Additionally, we

³² Raben and na Pombejra, “Tipping Balances,” 75.

³³ Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 36–7.

³⁴ Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021), 54–5; Kate Crosby, *Esoteric Theravada: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2020), 173–4.

³⁵ Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya*, 211–2.

³⁶ Siddhartha Buddhārakkhita, trans., *Syāmūpadasampadā: The Adoption of the Siamese Order of Priesthood in Ceylon, Saka Era 1673 (1751 A.C.)* (Bangkok: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1914), 56, 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 53–4.

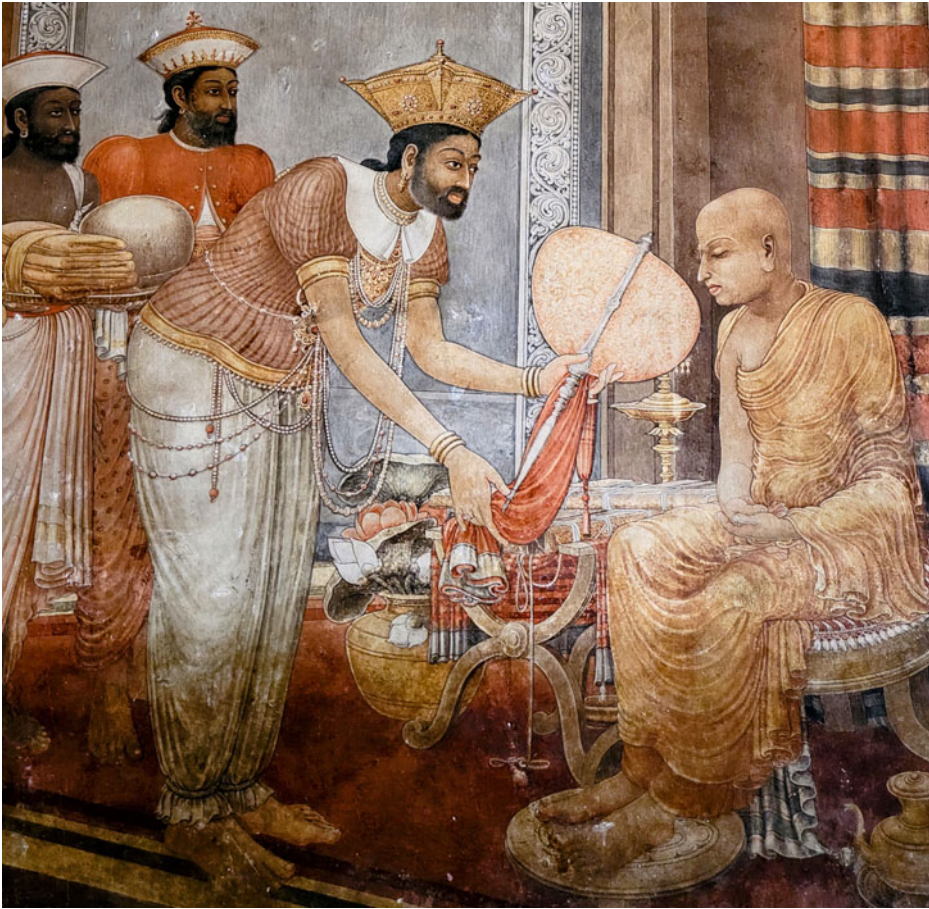


Figure 2. Solias Mendis, *Kirti Śrī Rājasimha and Vāliṅga Saraṇaṅkara*, wall painting at Kelaniya Rājamahā Vihāra, circa 1925–45. Photographed by author.

are told that Vāliṅga Saraṇaṅkara taught the king not only “the doctrines of Buddhism,” but also “the laws of the land.” In the final section, we return to the dangerous friendship that played out between monk and king (Figure 2). But let us first understand why forging maritime connections was a dangerous business before considering the dangers made possible by that connection.

Danger on the Monsoon Seas, 1741–1754

Beginning with Kandy’s first attempt to secure *bhikkhus* in 1741, nearly every voyage across the Bay of Bengal encountered trouble. Despite immense and sometimes fatal dangers, in Buddhist sources the eventual success of the mission is attributed to lifesaving protective rituals done by seafaring monks. The *Saṅgharāja Sādhuariyā*, a biography of Saraṇaṅkara, recalls the events of the first fateful voyage in 1741 during the reign of King Śrī Vijaya Rājasimha (r. 1739–47), Kirti Śrī’s predecessor. “Their ship hit sand in a shallow part of the sea when approaching [Pegu]. As the ship sank, the *Sāmaṇera* [novice monk] of Vaṭavana and the youth went ashore with the help of rafts and headed upland.

The rest of the people drowned at sea. [. . .] Thieves robbed and beat Vaṭavana and the young men [. . .] but some sympathetic, virtuous people treated them with kindness.”³⁸ Despite the danger of the monsoon seas and the violence the novice monks encountered in unfamiliar lands, we see glimmers of friendly assistance, such as kindness shown by those “sympathetic, virtuous people.” Wagenaar provides substantive details about this voyage.³⁹ The *Constantia*, a VOC ship, departed in late February 1741 for Batavia. Following a stop from April until early June, it set sail for Malacca where it anchored until July. When it approached mainland Southeast Asia in September, having lost both of its anchors, the ship encountered weather so bad that it was no longer seaworthy and within days, a passing English vessel collected the stranded Kandyan and Dutch travellers.

Under the additional weight, the English ship capsized and most of the Kandyans drowned. When the remaining survivors were brought to the mouth of the Irrawaddy River by British forces, Doranāgama Rāla, the sole surviving Kandyan envoy, was on his own. While stranded he attempted to contact the court at Pegu about acquiring monks, but without the “royal letter” from the king—this too drowned—his overtures amounted to nothing.⁴⁰ When he arrived back in Kandy in March 1742, he complained about the impolite behaviour of the Dutch company men he encountered, and their bad navigation.⁴¹

Another mission was sent five years later that would also be aborted, this time not because of trouble at sea, but because of a change in political regime. Doranāgama Rāla, accompanied by two others, Mīdēniye Rāla and Vilbāgedara Rāla, together with several other envoys, royal letters, and gifts, departed in early February 1747 from Galle aboard the *Sara Jacoba*. In September, the VOC notified Kandy that the party had reached Batavia, where they would soon make their way to Siam. Doranāgama then became ill and died. The remaining party set sail for Siam, arriving safely. In August, likely the same month they reached King Borommakot’s court, King Śrī Vijaya Rājasimha died.⁴² Although the *Ayutthaya Chronicles* highlight Borommakot’s “holy compassion” and willingness to restore the *bhikkhu* ordination in Kandy, we know that in 1747 he was not yet ready to do so unless he was certain that the new Kandyan ruler would sanction it. It would take until 1750–1 for Saraṇaṅkara and the new king, Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha, to contact Ayutthaya through the VOC again. King Borommakot was agreeable, and the elder monk Upāli, along with his retinue of *bhikkhus*, novices, texts, and ritual objects made their way towards Batavia aboard the combination of a Siamese ship and the VOC’s *Tulpenberg*.

Vilbāgedara Rāla’s travel account chronicles the difficulty they encountered at sea during the 1751 voyage. “Water leaked into the ship at numerous points [. . .] in spurts as thick as an ankle or a wrist, and the ship began to sink. Valuable articles stored in the ship were then jettisoned and the monks began to preach the *dhamma* day and night without intermission. Because of this all persons on board and the gifts were saved.”⁴³ To the

³⁸ Āittāliyadde Muhamdiramrāla, *Āittāliyadde Muhamdiramrāla’s Saṅgharāja Sādhucariyāva: The Biography of Veliviṭa Saraṇaṅkara Saṅgharāja*, trans. Wijitha Yāpā Baṇḍāra (Colombo: Samayawardhana Book Shop, 2020), 119.

³⁹ Lodewijk Wagenaar, “Looking for Monks from Arakan: A Chapter of the Kandyan-Dutch Relations in the 18th Century,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 48 (2003), 98.

⁴⁰ Goonewardena, “Ayutthia in the Twilight Years,” 8.

⁴¹ Sri Lanka National Archives, Colombo [hereafter SLNA], 1/3050: Colombo Diary, 16 March 1742; Wagenaar, “Looking for Monks from Arakan,” 98–9.

⁴² Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka*, 101.

⁴³ Vilbāgedara Muhandiram and P. E. E. Fernando, trans., “An Account of the Kandyan Mission Sent to Siam in 1750 A.D.,” *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies* 2:1 (1959), 67; Vilbāgedara Muhandiram and P. E. Pieris, trans., “An Account of King Kīrti Śrī’s Embassy to Siam in 1672 Saka (1750 A.D.),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 48 (2003), 145.

Buddhist sensibilities of the monks, diplomats, and Southern Asian courts which constituted the intended audience of this travelogue, the risk-mitigating virtue and lifesaving success of the monks' *dhamma* preaching would come as little surprise. When the monks' Siamese ship was towed back to Ayutthaya in 1752, they had to wait another year for favourable monsoon winds. Vilbāgedara privately hired the VOC *opperkoopman* at Siam, Nicolaas Bang, for the use of his vessel to get the Siamese monks to Batavia, and from there they successfully sailed for the Laṅkān port of Trincomalee aboard the VOC ship *Oostkappel* in March 1753.⁴⁴ They landed in late May and were brought to the Kandyan court with great care and enthusiasm.⁴⁵

In 1754, after arriving safely in Kandy, Upāli wrote a letter to the VOC expressing his gratitude and relief. The letter was translated into Dutch at the Colombo fort by interpreters:

Because the favours that have been proven by the most dignified *heeren hollanders*⁴⁶ are very great, I will keep them in mind continuously.

It is well known that the King of Siam, in name Darmasooke [Dharmāsoka], and his royal Majesty of Candia, Dewenipoetisse [Devanampiya Tissa, r. 247–07 BCE] in former times lived in friendship with one another by sending gifts back and forth. This has not been maintained for about 2000 years and has once again been set in motion by the work of the *heeren hollanders* with the result that nowadays letters and gifts are sent and correspondence is maintained; this being even more impossible for those of us who have little luck and power because these places are [located] very far from each other. However, it has been accomplished by the wisdom and experience of the *heeren hollanders*, so that it shall be broadcast to all lands.

From the day that we left our country and arrived here, we have not suffered any deprivation by virtue of the goodness of the *heeren hollanders*, and also the ship's authorities on which we departed have proven to be very skilled men. Having shown many tokens of affection to the chief priests and more, everything they had assured us [beforehand] has truly happened.⁴⁷

Upāli's letter to an unnamed VOC recipient invokes the centuries-old relationship between Siamese and Laṅkān Buddhists, characterised here as an interrupted friendship. His gratitude and relief at having arrived safely are also apparent. Consider that in the fertile upland delta of the Chao Phraya river, Upāli grew up amidst the bustling imports and exports of this politically and economically cosmopolitan zone in the centre of the Siamese kingdom (Figure 3), a major international trade centre and the heart of religious and political power since the fourteenth century.⁴⁸ Although Upāli likely participated in overland Buddhist pilgrimages, it is doubtful that he engaged in any maritime travel prior to his attempts to reach the island. After several fatal and near-fatal shipwrecks and false

⁴⁴ Goonewardena, "Ayutthia in the Twilight Years," 29–33; Lodewijk Wagenaar, "The Arrival of Buddhist Monks from Siam in 1753: Mid-Eighteenth Century Religious Contacts between Kandy and Siam, as Recorded by the Dutch East India Company," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium: Crossroads of Thai and Dutch History*, ed. Dhiravat na Pombejra (Bangkok: SEAMEO-SPAFA, 2007), 512.

⁴⁵ R. G. Anthonisz, comp., *Digest of Resolutions of the Dutch Political Council, Colombo, 1644–1796* (Colombo: Department of National Archives of Sri Lanka, 2012), 138.

⁴⁶ Following Wagenaar, "Looking for Monks from Arakan," 103, I am opting to leave this term untranslated. Here and subsequently, the capitalisation or lack thereof for any proper nouns conforms to the original.

⁴⁷ SLNA, 1/3264: 97r–8r, Translation *ola* High Priest Oepalie Mahateroen Wahanse, 12 April 1754; DNA, VOC 2832: 909r–10r, Translation *ola* High Priest Oepalie Mahateroen Wahanse, 12 April 1754.

⁴⁸ Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya*, 43.



Figure 3. Jan Luyken, *Landschap in Siam met Boten: Gezicht van Siam*, etching, 1687 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

starts between 1741 and 1752, the prospect of sailing with Dutch traders to a distant land over the monsoon seas to a place “very far” away would have indeed been quite daunting.

The reply to Upāli was drafted by none other than the VOC governor at Colombo, Joan Gideon Loten, suggesting the extent to which the VOC appreciated how important these monks were to Kandy, and by extension, its own operations in Ayutthaya. Full of diplomatic overtures of “honour and affection,” and the reciprocation of Upāli’s invocation of the millennia-old Buddhist friendship between Siam and Laṅkā, the reply indicates a careful reading of the monk’s translated words, and the Company’s self-conscious awareness of the delicate stakes in this complex, multisited diplomatic triangulation. “I express my singular obligation for the friendly communication so amicably exchanged,” Loten wrote, “and I give the assurance of my willingness to please your Honourables to the best of my ability, as I have always tried to execute [good] services for the great court.”⁴⁹

Chronicles of these events from Burma provide a glimpse into what Upāli and the other monks faced at sea. Here too, Buddhist protective rituals served as lifesaving risk mitigation. The *Yodaya Yazewin*, a Burmese edition of the *Ayutthaya Chronicles*, relays that when a storm also threatened this voyage:

Patriarch Ubali [Upāli] [. . .] and the 50 monks carried the Image of the Dipankara Buddha and, placing it in the prow of the ship, took up positions to the left and right of it. They then recited the attributes of the Lord Buddha and the *sutras* of protection. [. . .]

The storm came near the ship, but because of the Image of the Dipankara Buddha and [the recitation of] the attributes of the Lord Buddha and the protective *sutras*, it did not strike the ship but blew to its right and left. [. . .]

⁴⁹ DNA, VOC 2832: 911r&v, Reply Governor Loten to High Priest Oepalie Mahateroen Wahanse, 4 July 1754. A Sinhala-language copy of this letter also appears in SLNA 5/64/9 (15) with a transcription date of 26 November 1884.

Paying reverence to the Three Gems,⁵⁰ the monks [. . .] recorded the matter. Then, sailing on, they arrived in the harbour [of the country] named Lankadipa.⁵¹

When a severe storm threatened the success of the mission and the lives of monk, sailor, and trader, Upāli and the monks conducted a ritual by chanting protective Pāli language *suttas* and *parittas* (ritual formulae) in the presence of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha. To the surprise of the Dutch sailors, and, we are meant to understand, through the virtue and merit of not only this act, but of the auspicious mission to bolster a Buddhist lineage abroad, the storm moves safely to the side. Compared to Upāli's admission in his letter to the VOC that they had arrived safely due to the "skill" and "wisdom" of the ship's captain, in this version, their safe arrival is attributed to the Dīpaṃkara Buddha and the monks' protective rituals.

The Dīpaṃkara Buddha of aeons past has been strongly associated with the protection of sailors.⁵² His name, not incidentally, translates as both the "calmer of waters" and the "bearer" of variously "island," "continent," or "lamp." That King Borommakot selected *this* Buddha (amongst many others) indicates a strong connection between a ritual Buddhist *imaginaire* and real-world practices of protection from danger. The ritual was successful thanks to the Dīpaṃkara Buddha's presence and the monks' ritual, and the ship made its way safely to the "island-continent" of Laṅkā.⁵³

After performing several hundred *bhikkhu* ordinations in Kandy during the three years following his arrival, and along with Saraṇaṃkara and his pupils, Upāli created the conditions for a major reformulation of monastic practice.⁵⁴ He succumbed in 1756 to what the *Cūlavamsa* describes as a "disease of the nose," or to what Saraṇaṃkara's biography gives as an "earache-like sickness."⁵⁵ Despite their disagreement about the locus of Upāli's fatal malady, these sources suggest that his religious piety and work were inexhaustible and his conduct beyond reproach. To this day, he remains a beloved figure in Ayutthayan and Kandyan Buddhist communities (Figure 4).

The monks who left Laṅkā faced severe difficulties returning to Siam. By the early 1760s, friendly relations between the Company and the two crowns had deteriorated to such an extent that return journeys had to be privately arranged. The monks who afterwards wandered through India pretended to be Malay or Javanese to survive in that strange environment, others died of chickenpox, still others perished at sea.⁵⁶ The few who made their way back to Ayutthaya found the kingdom, the centre of Siamese power since the fourteenth century, on the verge of collapse at the hands of the Burmese. Let us now turn to one of these monks.

⁵⁰ The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha.

⁵¹ Tun Aung Chain, trans., *Chronicle of Ayutthaya: A Translation of the Yodaya Yazawin* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2005), 82–7.

⁵² G. Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1968), 21–3.

⁵³ The *Mahāvamsa* famously describes the island as *dhammadīpa* (island/continent of *dhamma*). Thai sources on the lineage transmission following, I believe, Prince Damrong Rāchānuphāp, *Ruang Praditsatan Phrasong Sayamwong Nai Lan̄ka Tawip* [On the Establishment of the Siamese Saṅgha on the Lan̄ka Continent] (Bangkok: Rongphimkansasana Kromkansasana, 1914; repr. 1960) refer to the island as *Laṅka tawip*, which connotes "continent" (i.e. *jambudvīpa* in Sanskrit) more resolutely than it does "island."

⁵⁴ Anne M. Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 139.

⁵⁵ Buddharakhita, *Syāmūpadasampadā*, 64; Vilbāgedara and Fernando, "An Account of the Kandyan Mission," 49–5; Wijesin̄ha, *The Mahāvamsa, Part II*, 366.

⁵⁶ Alexey Kirichenko, "The Itineraries of 'Sihaḷa Monk' Sāralaṅkā: Buddhist Interactions in Eighteenth-Century Southern Asia," in *Buddhist and Islamic Orders in Southern Asia: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael R. Feener and Anne M. Blackburn (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 56.



Figure 4. Venerable Phra Upāli Mahāthero, statue, circa 2013, Wat Thammaram, Ayutthaya. Photographed by author.

Danger at the Kandyan Court, 1758–1765

The next sources bring our attention to an altogether different form of “dangerous friendship”—political, rather than geographic or aquatic—and the tenuous bonds of connection between king, court, and Company that it would soon strain. By the time of Upāli’s death in 1756, thousands of privileged, high-caste Kandyan men, led by Saraṇaṃkara and Tibboṭuvāvē, had taken the hoped-for *upasampadā* ordination that Upāli and his peers worked to restore. In 1756 a second voyage of monks and texts arrived from Siam after running aground in February off the eastern coast of the island (six Siamese monks drowned),⁵⁷ and at the end of 1759, the winds brought a final VOC-brokered shipment of Siamese monks.⁵⁸ Amongst them was an exiled Ayutthayan monk-prince named Krommuang Thep Phiphit.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Anthonisz, *Digest of Resolutions of the Dutch Political Council*, 141; S. Paranavitana, “A Document in Cambodian Characters Found in the Malvatte Vihare, Kandy,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 48 (2003): 164.

⁵⁸ DNA, VOC 2986: 1617r&v, Letter Resident Bang to Governor Schreuder, 25 February 1759.

⁵⁹ According to D.A. Kotelawe, “New Light on the Life of Sangharaja Welivita Saranankara,” *Śrī Laikā Vidyālaṅkāra Viśvavidyālayīya Śāstrīya Saṅgrahaya* [Journal of the Vidyālaṅkāra University of Ceylon] 1, no. 1 (1972): 119, Tammebaan was the monastic name of Prince Krommuang Thep Phiphit. Many, but not all, VOC sources also refer to him as Tammebaan.

In the year following King Borommakot's death in 1758, Phiphit ended up on the losing side of the succession dispute amongst his elder siblings, Kings Uthumphon (r. 1758) and Ekkathat (r. 1758–67). Without a concretised system of primogeniture, factional ties and personal animosities frequently turned succession disputes into bloody multiyear struggles.⁶⁰ Under threat of death, Thep Phiphit was exiled from the court and took *bhikkhu upasampadā*,⁶¹ and was banished to the island by Ekkathat in 1759.⁶² He arrived late that year with a final contingent of Siamese monks, and unlike Upāli, was not at all beyond reproach. This prince-turned-monk was a key actor in an aborted rebellion against Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha and in its aftermath; he had been selected to take Kandy's throne in the event that a 1760 plot to assassinate the king succeeded.⁶³ It is to this royal rebellion that we now turn.

The correspondence during the summer of 1760 between Dumbara Ralehamy (the Kandyan *disāva* who succeeded Leuke) and the Colombo *opperkoopman* Robertus Cramer includes a striking report about the failed assassination plot hatched against the king by five coconspirators. These include Vālivīṭa Saraṇaṃkara and his pupil Tibboṭuvāvē Buddharakkhita, Prince Thep Phiphit, together with Ralehamy's superior, Samanakkodi, an influential *adigār* (Sinhala: one of two chief administrators under the king). The report relays that they,

[. . .] have all gone to the offering place [in] annurajepoera [Anuradhapura], and from there have returned with designs on going to keeheelelle [Kehelella].

On their way to that place, they made plans with one another to treacherously kill the king on an appointed Thursday at seven in the evening, and to establish the Siamese prince on the throne in his place. With letter bearers they sent an *ola* in the Siamese language to the prince in Kehelelle, letting him know of their intentions, and that it would be very good if he, without fail, made his way to the Court that coming Wednesday. [. . .]

While this was taking place, the *adigār* of oedoeampaha [Udagampaha] arrived at the Court and, kneeling before his Royal Majesty the King, requested that he appear the following Thursday at the pogemalloe [Poyamalu] offering place, where there would be a Siamese priest conducting a sermon in his mother tongue. When the intercepted *ola* had been transferred to the court, and the King had read it, his Royal Majesty asked [several] headmen and chief inhabitants to appear publicly. [. . .] The king sent them to the Chief Priest Welliwitte [Vālivīṭa Saraṇaṃkara] with instructions to ask him if the story was true or not. The headmen proceeded to the pogemalloe offering place, being the residence of that chief priest, and there found a grave five [*cobidoes*]—and a coffin fit inside with protruding steel spikes four—*cobidoes*⁶⁴ long. Over the grave lay planks covered by earth and manure.⁶⁵

What motivated such an extraordinary rebellion? One justification, given in a nineteenth-century account, the *Śāsanāvātīrna Varṇanāva*, portrays the king as merely a nominal Buddhist, accusing him of secretly performing Hindu rituals, even being a “Tamil heretic”

⁶⁰ Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya*, 243.

⁶¹ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, 468.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 471.

⁶³ Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants*, 208–9.

⁶⁴ A *cobido* is approximately eighteen inches, according to Sushil Chaudhury, *Companies, Commerce and Merchants: Bengal in the Pre-Colonial Era* (London: Routledge, 2016), 192–5.

⁶⁵ DNA, VOC 2986: 1695r–97r, Translation Sinhalese *ola* Related to the Incident in Candia Concerning the Undertaking of the Siamese Priests Against the King, 23 August 1760.

on the throne.⁶⁶ Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha was the brother of his predecessor's South Indian chief consort, and the son of an influential Kandyan courtier named Narenappā Nāyakkar. Towards the end of the Portuguese colonial occupation of coastal Laṅkā, the number of "solar" caste brides on the island diminished significantly, and as a result, Kandy forged an alliance with the South Indian Nāyakkar dynasty, resulting in the importation of royal-caste Telegu and Tamil-speaking consorts and their sons to the island.⁶⁷

The rebellion and the king's Nāyakkar identification feature in an important and public historiographic debate that raged during the Sri Lankan civil war between the 1980s and 1990s about the "origins," precolonial continuity, and durability of what, if anything, constitutes Sinhala identity. H. L. Seneviratne has contended that while the foreign-born so-called Nāyakkar kings were "heirs to varying degrees of 'alienness,'" and while they "sometimes used religion to suit their political ends," nevertheless they grew up in Kandy, he asserts, and "the Tamil language and other 'alien' cultural forms were prestigious, and socially and culturally mobile sections of the people were anxious to copy them."⁶⁸ More recently, Gananath Obeyesekere has observed that except for Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha, all of the "Nāyakkar" kings were born in Kandy. And including Kīrti Śrī, all of them were fluent in Sinhala, Telegu, and Tamil; the latter being an important *lingua franca* in the region.⁶⁹ Michael Roberts tempers the cosmopolitanism of these analyses, arguing that while the late twentieth-century historiographic reticence to attribute the language of "ethnicity" to eighteenth-century Laṅkā society is fuelled by post-orientalist scholarship and responses to wartime ethno-nationalism, contemporaneous oral histories suggest we should take claims about the religious and ethnic affiliations of this "alien king" seriously.⁷⁰ For instance, that the plot took place in Anuradhapura (a long-standing centre of Sinhalese Buddhist and political power between circa 430 and 1070 CE) suggests that anxieties about legitimate Buddhist kingship were strongly operational. Additionally, that the king might be enticed to his death by an Ayutthayan Buddhist monk preaching "in his mother tongue" also indicates a public desire to be strongly associated with their religious dispensation.

Roberts argues that the plotters' charge of the king's private performance of Śaivā *pūjas* is not merely a politically expedient justification alleging the supposed religious heresy of an "alien" king, but a window into tendentious struggles that were about ritual performance and religion as much as politics and power. However, John Clifford Holt calls our attention to the fact that the assassination plot failed probably for the very reason that was proffered only after the fact to justify it: the charge of supposed heresy ultimately proved unconvincing.⁷¹ A fellow *disāva* of Ralehamy revealed the plot to the king just in time, before he tumbled into the concealed pit of spikes.⁷² While Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha had the non-monastic conspirators executed, he refrained from doing so with the monks Vālivīṭa Saraṇaṃkara, Tibboṭuvāvē Buddharakkhita, Thep Phiphit, and the other Siamese *bhikkhus* and novices (whom he put into the hands of the VOC to ship off the island).⁷³ In late 1760, he issued a royal proclamation giving the lands of several of the

⁶⁶ Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka*, 122; John Clifford Holt, *The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī: Buddhism, Art, and Politics in Late Medieval Sri Lanka* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 29.

⁶⁷ For more on caste-based claims to rulership see Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka* 53–71.

⁶⁸ H. L. Seneviratne, "The Alien King: Nayakkars on the Throne of Kandy," *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies* 6:1 (1976), 56.

⁶⁹ Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Doomed King: A Requiem for Sri Vikrama Rajasinha* (Colombo: Sailfish, 2017), 30–1.

⁷⁰ Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period*, 48–9.

⁷¹ Holt, *The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī*, 29.

⁷² P. E. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Hollanders, 1658–1796* (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries Press, 1947), 67–8.

⁷³ Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka*, 124; Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750–1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 66.

conspirators to the *disāva* who revealed the plot, and vowed to protect the newly resuscitated *bhikkhu* lineage from decline. Incredibly, he named Vāliviṭṭa Saraṇaṃkara as the new *saṅgharāja*, its institutional and administrative head.⁷⁴

Anne M. Blackburn cautions against adopting a simplistic apprehension of royal agency here. While doubtless the king and his would-be assassins' conduct were informed by attempts to gain and retain power, certain royal acts were deemed efficacious within communities disposed to interpret them in particular ways, whether they reflected self-consciously or not on the power of representation.⁷⁵ Whatever the nature of his personal religious commitments or practices, and why and to what extent they might have been deemed "heretical" or "alien" in his time and after, what is clear is Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha's impressive record of Buddhist patronage, one that rendered his numerous commitments to the religion beyond question. Kitsiri Malalgoda has argued that the king exercised shrewd judgement in not only refraining from executing the monastic plotters and the would-be Siamese royal, but also in appointing Saraṇaṃkara to the kingdom's highest religious office. "Any possible alienation of the mass of Buddhists against him," argued Malalgoda, "was thus averted [. . .]. His reputation as the greatest patron of Buddhism during the Kandyan period was thus preserved completely intact."⁷⁶

But why replace him with a banished Siamese prince? While the initial plot was most likely Samanakkodi's idea, and not that of the Kandyan or Siamese monks, it was most likely the latter from whom the suggestion came to select a royal from their own lands.⁷⁷ The Siamese were led to believe (as were the Dutch) that the Buddhism of ordinary Kandyans was being suppressed by the "heretic" on the throne.⁷⁸ What seems more likely is that Samanakkodi at last attempted to act on his and his kin's resentment of the centralisation of power in the hands of a successful foreign-born dynasty.⁷⁹

When Kīrti Śrī wanted Thep Phiphit and the rest of the Siamese monks off the island, he put the Company into a difficult situation. The VOC was unwilling to risk the newly restored trading relationship its Siamese *opperkoopman* Nicolaas Bang had worked out with the Ayutthayan court, one he was not prepared to upset by any perceived "mistreatment" of their monks in Laṅkā. "And besides, the monsoon winds are no longer suitable," the Colombo *opperkoopman* wrote to Ralehamy that August, "for sailing back to Batavia and Siam."⁸⁰

While the Laṅkā-centred wartime historiography about the assassination plot and its aftermath foregrounds the motivations and implications of Kandyan courtiers and the Siamese monk-cum-royal, most do not mention the Ayutthayan prince's broader entanglements. Similarly, while the micro- and macro-politics of identification, belonging, and the concentration of power in the hands of the foreign-born "Nāyakkar" kings embroiled the monastic lineage transmission in its wake despite their virtuosic acts of Buddhist patronage, in the final decade of its ascendancy as a major centre of trade and accumulated spiritual and economic wealth in mainland Southeast Asia, the spectre of persistent warfare and court intrigue also dogged, and would soon bring to an end, the pace of daily life in Ayutthaya. Thep Phiphit stood dangerously at the nexus of both destabilisations.

⁷⁴ H. C. P. Bell, trans., "Getaberiya Sannasa," in *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon: Report of the Kégalla District of the Province of Sabaragamuwa* (Colombo: George J.A. Skeen, Government Printer, 1904), 101.

⁷⁵ Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice*, 104.

⁷⁶ Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, 66.

⁷⁷ Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka*, 121.

⁷⁸ SLNA, 1/748: 159–62, Translation unsigned *ola* to Mahabadda Mudaliyar Carl Mirando, 22 May 1762.

⁷⁹ Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka*, 114.

⁸⁰ DNA, VOC 2986: 1692r–3r, Letter *Disāva* Ralehamy to *Opperkoopman* Cramer, 30 July 1760; 1721r–2r, Reply *Opperkoopman* Cramer to *Disāva* Ralehamy, 14 August 1760.

After the rebellion, Kīrti Śrī put Phiphit into the hands of the VOC with strict instructions to keep him under guard.⁸¹ He was reluctantly deported from the island amidst a Kandyan insurrection against the Company in 1761. He then wandered throughout the Malay peninsula, Burma, and Siam, continuing to cause trouble wherever he went.⁸² The *Ayutthaya Chronicles* relay that Phiphit toured around the Malay Archipelago and the “Brahmin municipalities” before eventually returning to Siam via Burma.⁸³

With war against Kandy looming in 1761–2, the VOC looked towards this ambitious prince as a potential puppet king, hoping to depose Kīrti Śrī themselves. Secret but unsuccessful Company missions to Siam were dispatched in 1762 and 1764–5, each hoping to obtain permission from the Siamese court to locate the prince.⁸⁴ The earlier religious missions to forge monastic linkages between Siam and Laṅkā strengthened Dutch knowledge about the shared religious practice between them, and this made the VOC acutely aware that it would need a royal with a Buddhist imprimatur on Kandy’s throne.⁸⁵

In June 1762, the VOC’s Galle-based *mudaliyar* (Sinhala: local Company-employed headman) and interpreter Nicolaas Dias Abeysinghe (Figure 5) was involved in gathering intelligence about the extent to which Thep Phiphit might be deemed acceptable on the throne:

In the matter of the Siamese prince in Candia, the first *rijksadigaar* [Samanakkodī] was executed by the king, and this person’s cousin,⁸⁶ along with a high priest at court who has supervision over three offering houses—another priest named Wellewatte Toeroenance [Vālivīṭa (Saraṇaṃkara) *Therunansē*, an honorific]—had been exiled, but now these two people have risen again somewhat in His Majesty’s favour. However, the cousin is still very dejected and in his heart is very bitter towards His Majesty. [. . .]

If the gentlemen and lords of the Hon. Company were to look for the banished Siamese prince, who was honestly committed to the Buddhist teachings that all sincere Singaleese hold in the highest affection, his cousin should come, along with those two other distinguished persons, into the Hon. Company’s lands in the quality of envoys. [. . .]

The cousin is also a wise and noble man, and an opponent of the King, so it would be very good if [he] were to come into the Hon. Company’s lands to retrieve that prince.⁸⁷

This cousin is described as “*geen goede vriend van Zijne Majesteit*” [no good friend of His Majesty’s], Dias’s informant claimed,⁸⁸ and through him, Governors van Eck and then Schreuder hoped to entice Thep Phiphit and his son to return from Siam.⁸⁹ With outright

⁸¹ Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka*, 125–6; Broekhuizen, “VOC als Kingmaker,” 49.

⁸² J. H. O. Paulusz, “Prince Crumpty-Pippit and Governor Van Eck,” *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon* 11:2 (1931): 93.

⁸³ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, 492.

⁸⁴ DNA, VOC 3051: 1393r–5r, Secret letter General and Council to Governor van Eck, 6 August 1762; VOC 3095: 235r–8r, Appendix to Secret Council Resolution, 27 July 1764; VOC 3138: 594r–624v, Report of Secret Mission by Willem van Damast Limberger, 5 February 1765. Substantive details about these missions are given in Broekhuizen, “VOC als Kingmaker,” 59–70.

⁸⁵ Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants*, 208–9.

⁸⁶ *Neef* could also refer to a nephew.

⁸⁷ DNA, VOC 3051: 1478r–9v, Account by Galle *Mudaliyar* Nicolaas Dias, 19 June 1762.

⁸⁸ SLNA, 1/748: 159–62, Translation unsigned *ola* to Mahabadde *Mudaliyar* Carl Mirando, 22 May 1762; DNA, VOC 3051: 1475r–7r, Letter to Mahabadde *Mudaliyar* Carl Mirando, 22 May 1762.

⁸⁹ Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants*, 209–10.



Figure 5. Jan Brandes, drawing of Nicolaas Dias, detail from *Ontvangst van Gezanten van de Koning Kandy, 1785* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

war on the horizon, van Eck sent his ambassador Willem Van Damast Limberger to Siam on two secret missions in 1762 and 1764–5 to attempt to bring the dangerous monk-prince back to Kandy to install him as a puppet king. Each time they were unsuccessful.⁹⁰ So enthusiastic was Governor van Eck about this that as he lay dying in March 1765, he dictated a letter to the General Council urging them to make another attempt to locate Phiphit.⁹¹ For his part, Nicolaas Dias Abeysinghe, the *mudaliyar* who gathered secret intelligence about Kandyan political disintegration for the VOC, was awarded a medal in April 1768 by Governor Jan Schreuder for his service to the Company.⁹²

Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to draw together Dutch colonial and Southern Asian Buddhist sources of knowledge to interject, into a “connected” historiography of interregional economic and political friendships, the registers of disconnection, fracture, and

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁹¹ Paulusz, “Prince Crumpty-Pippit and Governor Van Eck,” 95.

⁹² Pieris, *Ceylon and the Hollanders*, 143; Lodewijk Wagenaar, *Galle, VOC-Vestiging in Ceylon: Beschrijving van een Koloniale Samenleving aan de Vooravond van de Singalese Opstand Tegen het Nederlandse Gezag, 1760* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1994), 196.

danger. While friendship indexed Buddhist diplomacy in this short-lived moment of fragile connection, these were dangerous friendships. I have attempted to show that the desire for religious restoration, as much as economic and political objectives, was a major force drawing two Buddhist courts and one European trading corporation and their human actors more intimately into one another's affairs. But more than that, this triangular friendship was dangerous, especially for Kandy, whose weakened geographic and political position made any internal destabilisation by virtue of its VOC mediated religious connection with Siam an easy target for exploitation.

Company agents and governors, eager to exacerbate political turmoil in Kandy and newly appreciative of the importance of Buddhism, sought to install a Siamese puppet king on the throne in the aftermath of the failed assassination attempt only because the earlier missions led them to appreciate the importance of connected Buddhist statecraft to the exercise of political power.

In drawing out the rhetorical and political perspectives of Buddhist and VOC sources alike, I have attempted not only to heed Remco Raben's call to resist the gravitational force of the colonial archive's regimes of ethnic classification and labelling,⁹³ but also, in telling a story that inherently destabilises anachronistic Southern Asian areal distinctions, I have endeavoured to show that all kinds of people—religious adepts and specialists as much as explorers, traders, and sailors—crossed and transgressed hazardous maritime frontiers in service of religious connection marked by “dangerous friendships” across perilous waters and in foreign lands. Even in disconnection, the co-entailed local and global dynamics that motivated the perilous circulations of monks and ministers on Indian Ocean waters were at least as much the work of individual “dangerous friendships” as they were of institutional dynamics.

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⁹³ Raben, “Ethnic Disorder in VOC Asia,” 116, 126.