THE TRADE MISSION TO SIAM IN 1718 IN THE CONTEXT OF FILIPINAS-SIAM RELATIONS AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY*

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The embassy that the Spanish colonial government in Filipinas sent to Siam in 1718 seems a forgotten, even unknown, episode in Southeast Asian diplomatic history. It was dispatched by then governor-general of Filipinas, Fernando Manuel Bustillo y Rueda, to renew trade and friendly ties with Siam as one of several measures he enforced to deal with a severe social and economic crisis in Filipinas. It has not been quite studied yet but there are now at least two major Spanish accounts of it. One has been in print since 1952 as a facsimile reproduction in a biographical work on the governor-general¹ and was written by the mission’s general del mar, Benito Carrasco Paniagua. This account became the subject of an article by James N. Mosel that appeared in a collection of studies on Siam by The Siam Society in 1965.²

The other account, which appears to be somewhat unknown to historians, was written by the nephew of the governor-general and the appointed ambassador himself, Gregorio Alejandro de Bustamante. It includes not only a narration of the mission but also descriptions of Siam and the Philippines in that period, correspondences relating to the embassy’s objectives and brief accounts of succeeding events relating to Alejandro Bustamante’s fate. Its title, in part, is Breve y puntual relación de la embaxada que executó en Siam el General Don Gregorio Alejandro de Bustillo, y Medinilla… It was printed in Manila in 1719 and comprises 423 pages.³

This imprint is significant because it provides historians of Asia with another source material, not only for a study of the embassy itself but also of Siam during

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the Ayutthia period and certain aspects of the Philippines in the early 18th century. For the part of Siam, Mosel's view that *virtually all accounts of Ayutthia by Western observers were written in the 17th century* remains a sound statement of the state of our sources for the 18th century. Also for Filipinas, much still has to be done to discover and catalogue source materials for this period.

Why this embassy has not been given much attention is not clear. We know, however, of at least two works that have taken note of it. It was viewed, though rather limitedly, as an aspect of Spanish administrative concerns in the colony. The one by Jose Díaz de Villegas bears a title that refers to the embassy itself but did not actually deal with it and merely reproduced Benito Carrasco's account. The other, by Concepcion Pajaron Parody, substantially tackled the embassy, but as part of a discourse on the governor-general's political administration.

This author's dissertation focuses on Alexandro's account, but will also compare it with that of Benito Carrasco. This paper, however, limits itself to the stated objectives of the embassy and situates these in the context of Filipinas-Siam relations and Southeast Asian history.

**Resurrecting a Forgotten Episode: Alexandro's Mission**

From Alexandro's account, it would appear that the most pressing reason for dispatching the mission to Siam was to seek the importation of rice from the kingdom to meet a severe supply crisis in Filipinas. A widespread locust infestation (*una plaga de langostas*) devastated the country's ricelands from Pangasinan to Panay that began in 1717, in the year of Governor's arrival in Filipinas, and well continued into the next year. The crisis, however, appears to have been aggravated by massive hoarding by *alcaldes mayores* and religious orders, causing the governor even more conflicts than when he arrived as he introduced changes in the colony.

The account also specially mentioned as an immediate concern the colonial government's desire to avail of teak wood, supposedly abundant in Siam, for the construction of galleons. It was accordingly preferred because *las maderas de teca que no se corrupmen en quarenta años bajo de la agua*. Aside from teak, the Spanish regime also sought iron from the kingdom to be used likewise in galleon works and, possibly, war equipment. More than the acquisition of these materials, however, was the construction of galleons right in Siam that was calculated to cost cheaper than in Filipinas. Much savings could be had, it was said. In Filipinas, a galleon would cost about 100,000-150,000 pesos to construct. In Siam, the co-
lonial government in Filipinas would spend only about 30,000 pesos.\textsuperscript{10}

Throughout most of the account however, Alejandro laid stress on the need to forge commercial relations with Siam. It would appear that the objective was not only to deal with the critical situation in Filipinas but also to establish Spain’s commercial position in Siam. This seemed to have been borne out by the articles of commerce that the embassy was able to contract with the kingdom.\textsuperscript{11}

One article provided for the establishment of a factory (\textit{endonado a los Españoles}) in an area called Campo Japon, apparently previously reserved to the Japanese. Another article provided for the construction of galleons that the account indicated would be utilized in the trade with Mexico\textsuperscript{12} and for other voyages in the service of the Spanish monarch or commerce with nearby kingdoms. It was stipulated in this article that the colonial government in Filipinas would pay for teak and iron and daily wages in accordance with prevailing levels in Siam.

Articles on monetary matters were also stipulated. One provided for money changing between merchants of Filipinas and the kingdom to facilitate commercial exchange and for which an exchange rate was fixed. Another provided for a requirement that the Chao Prahya Phra Klang\textsuperscript{13} would present an advisory to the head of the Spanish factory and to the governor-general in Manila for payment to services rendered by the kingdom to the Spaniards that amount to about 30,000-75,000 pesos. In terms of commerce itself, an article allowed the Spaniards to buy merchandise from Siam, except saltpite, ivory, cattle and deer hides, and other products reserved for the Siamese sovereign and the Dutch. A related article also exempted the Spanish ships engaged in the Manila-Siam traffic from paying port duties.

Finally, the account also emphasized that the embassy would facilitate the spread of the \textit{light of Christianity} in the \textit{rey nos vecinos} of Laos, Pegu, Cambodia, Cochin China and Tonkin. In particular, the colonial government would want to see the reduction of Siam and her abandonment of \textit{idolatries}.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Enduring Factor in Filipinas-Siam Relations Until ca. 1720s}

The treaty of commerce that Alejandro Bustamante concluded with Siam was the last of several attempts by the Spanish regime in Filipinas to engage in commerce with the kingdom. Although successful, it was, however, not sustained.
There was a report, cited by Pensri Duke in 1971, that a Spanish galleon was constructed in Siam in 1721 but it appears that nothing beyond this ever occurred again between Filipinas and Siam.

No systematic study has yet been done on Filipinas-Siam relations during the Spanish regime and much less on the role played by Filipinas under Spain in mainland Southeast Asia from the 16th to the 18th centuries. Duke’s article would tend to indicate that these relations were carried out rather irregularly, time and again being renewed or revived as exigencies of the colonial government would demand. Alejandro Bustamante himself, in his account, would note that his embassy would renew such relations after being closed for about 60 years, the last contact having been forged in 1656 during Narai’s reign in Siam.

The objectives of the embassy of 1718, elaborated by Alejandro Bustamante in his account, may considerably speak of the substance of the relations that the colonial government had had with Siam since the 16th century. He might have eloquently expressed it:

\textit{Se serviesse despachar embasada en esta occasion en el Real Norbre, y de Nuestro Catolico Monarcha, y de Rey de Siam, en solicitud de arraignaruna amistosa, permanente correspondencia entre su Reyno, y los de España, vajo los pactos mas honrosos, utiles al comercio, y conservacion de las islas..., y con este pretexto su pudiesse conducia de aquel Reyno (que abunda en graños) la cantidad de Arros, que fuese bastante a reparar tan grave urgencia... Hicieron presente a su memoria el entre estas Islas, y dicho Reyno... del que resultaba ademas de la conveniencia de abastecerse de Arroz en casos urgentes, la de poder disfrutar las prediosas maderas de Theca...}

The key here could be the word \textit{pretext}. One would tend to agree with Sanjay Subrahmanyam, in a recent work comparing Portuguese with Spanish aims in Southeast Asia, that at least in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, in the reign of the Habsburgs, schemes were drawn up that \textit{speak of substantial territorial conquest requiring Spanish-Portuguese cooperation}. Accordingly, one of these schemes concerned the possibility of conquering the Thai kingdom of Ayutthia, as well as its ports, such as Patani. Of course, Governor Bustamante was a Bourbon, the first in Filipinas. One would not, however, speculate yet on policy distinctions between the Habsburgs and the Bourbons since Alejandro Bustamante, in his account, upheld the efforts begun by previous governors-general of Filipinas to realize Spain’s interests in Siam.

Parody, however, seems to point to Governor Bustamante’s enterprising
spirit in commerce, indicating a shift from what Subrahmanyam would describe as the model of land-based expansion. But we are not sure with Parody’s bottomline on this. What was certain though in Filipinas was the vicious entrenchment of a land-based economic system that possibly snuffed out whatever commercial spirit the governor-general had and sought to give life to in the China Sea or the Gulf of Siam.

Alexandro Bustamante’s account, at least within the purview of the stated objectives of the mission, may thus mirror two basic features of the relations that the Spanish colonial government sought to contract with Siam. One was to seek the aid of Siam in times of urgent need (socorro was the term used in the account), as in the 1718 trade mission (que se huvieron seguido al comercio de Filipinas, principalmente en tiempo de escazes de Arros). The other was the lingering ambition to carry out the conquista in Siam and Cambodia. Alejandro Bustamante’s account, like similar manuscripts from the 16th to the 18th centuries, including religious reports, glowed with descriptions of the abundant natural wealth of the reynos vecinos like Siam, emphasizing rice, timber and mines. Thus from the 1590s to 1718, contact with Siam alternated between forging commercial relations and intervening politically or militarily on a limited scale to partake of the kingdom’s abundance or gain a foothold therein.

The general commercial and interventionist efforts of Spain in the Gulf of Siam were heightened by religious missionary zeal and rhetoric (para plantar en ella de firme nuestra Santa Fe Catolica). The Augustinians were, in fact, conscious not only of their Christianizing mission but also of the economic interests that went with the commercial and interventionist vision of the Catholic monarch (certificando al Rey de estas, le pondero quantia seria la importancia para su Corona, en el creido Comercio, y en los intereses, para enriquecerla, si conservasse en sus Dominios a unos Religiosos de tan Santa vida). The Dominicans were not to be outdone. Their own accounts hinted of plans to be carried out in conjunction with the expansionist designs of Spain and Portugal in the region (por lo que toca, pues, a los reinos de la Indochina, comenzó por tantear abrir Mision en el reino de Camboja). Alejandro Bustamante’s account itself was interspersed with calls for the conversion of the Gentiles to the Christian faith. Dominican friars sailed with Alejandro Bustamante to Siam.

Such religious zeal and rhetoric may only have been part of an ideological campaign to rationalize territorial expansion in Southeast Asia, bringing into play what Subrahmanyam described as legal-ethical considerations. The need to juc-
tify conquest was in the air during this period, as can be read in correspondences of the governors-general from the 16\textsuperscript{th} to the 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Alejandro Bustamante himself spoke of reducing the kingdom of Siam and ridding her of idolatras, describing the introduction of the holy gospel there to be so strong and qualified a justification not to merit Real Acuerdo in Manila.\textsuperscript{31}

The rest of the articles of commerce gained by the embassy either renewed or improved what previous governors of Filipinas had forged with Siam, such as the establishment of residence (through a facturia) in the Ayutthia kingdom. Why relations were not sustained on a more regular and productive basis since the beginning of contact and after 1718 is the big question. It can be surmised that, perhaps, the answer lies in the nature of Spain’s attitude and consequent moves in the region, as has already been noted. The forging of treaties of amity and trade responded not to commercial perspectives but to moments of need, or as pretext for ulterior schemes that were geared to the exploitation of land in the long run, which, however, did not also prosper.

With the coming of the Bourbons, as personified by Governor Bustamante, the desire to renew commercial relations on a more productive and long-term basis could have taken shape in government economic perspectives, as Parody seemed to indicate.\textsuperscript{32} There were, after all, enduring reasons for commercial ties with the reynos vecinos, such as the chronic economic crisis that beset the colony since the beginning of conquest (exacerbated from time to time by plagas de langostas) and the covetousness with which the Europeans viewed the abundance in these lands, whether for trade or for labor and rent, as in Filipinas. The attempts at revival, however, during or after Bustamante’s time may have faltered as the colonial regime was drawn into the conflicts and unrest that the conquista wrought in haciendas Filipinas.

The land issue may be the key in the failure of long-term commerce with Siam. There is a need to look into this. Only in the last quarter of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century would the colonial regime somewhat change tack and strive to keep pace with the commercial spirit of the times, led by the Dutch and the British. Likewise, the rapaciousness of the Spaniards in the haciendas and the vigorous resistance that indigenous Filipinos waged against it may have stolen the winds from the sails of Spanish initiative in commerce with Siam and a foothold in the mainland.
Into Southeast Asian History: Reflections on Filipinas and Siam ca. 1700s

Alexandro Bustamante’s account is not only a testimony on the aspects of Filipinas-Siam relations from the 16th to the 18th centuries. In the tradition of Hamilton, Gervaise, La Louberere and others, the descriptions of Siam and Filipinas that it contains also speak of the world within which the 1718 embassy was situated. At least with the objectives of the mission, about which we have confined this paper, there are certain important aspects of Filipinas and Siam that the account has brought into our view.

One, there is the aspect of the state of rice production and supply in Filipinas and Siam that is well worth looking into as an enduring factor in Filipinas-Siam relations, still valid to this day. It appears that Siam was quite well known at that time for its abundant supply of rice. As for Filipinas, there are also accounts that rice was plentiful in many parts of the archipelago and that locust plagues recurrently devastated ricelands, as in the time of Governor Bustamante. We can draw up a comparative study of the rice situation in Filipinas and Siam as a constant factor in the evolution of Filipinas-Siam relations.

There is also the aspect of shipbuilding and the timber used in the galleon works as an issue for Filipinas-Siam relations. Filipinas and Siam both share a boatbuilding tradition and had an abundance of timber. The reason that Alexandro Bustamante’s account gave for seeking teak in Siam may require reviewing. One has yet to come across accounts of teak in the 18th century in Filipinas similar to that of Siam, as described in the account. There are reports, though, on various types of timber, such as molave, used for constructing galleons in Filipinas, and reports about teca in the early 19th century! One question is, how did timber in Filipinas (including teca) play into the picture of the plan to construct galleons in Siam? This and other questions also require further study as a component part of Filipinas-Siam relations.

Then we have the matter of iron required not only in the galleons but in other government works as well. Some archaeological studies could provide clues as to the necessity of exploring iron supply in Siam or a country near it. Bennett Bronson theorized that it made more economic sense for groups like the Spaniards to import metal than produce it locally because it was more efficient and less
costly. He noted the abundance of iron in Southeast Asia, like Filipinas, but that it was better importing it from the Chinese or the Indians who were efficient producers. A study on the problems and issues that the Spaniards dealt with in acquiring iron from various purposes has to be drawn up, too.

Finally, there is a need to look into the dynamics of diplomatic and commercial interaction in Siam in the early 18th century and the part played by Filipinas or Spain in it. Studies on the roles played by the Dutch, the British and the Portuguese in the region are already available. There is, however, little study yet on the Spanish and Filipino side of the diplomatic and commercial intercourse in Siam and the whole region in the 16th-18th century period. Much has to be done about questions in this area. For example, what happened to the privilege granted by Siam to the Spanish colonial government to reside and trade in the kingdom? What bearing did the Spanish religious missions have in the growth of these relations? And so forth, and so on.

These issues and questions drawn from Alejandro Bustamante’s account of the 1718 trade mission to Siam provide a starting point to discover the context and the elements that shaped Filipinas-Siam relations during the Ayutthia period. It is certain that many of these factors could be found in the situation of both Filipinas and Siam in the latter half of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century. There is a world to see in Alejandro Bustamante’s account regarding indigenous Filipinas and Siam as a decisive factor in the twists and turns of the diplomatic and commercial intercourse in the region. A study of the 1718 trade mission could very well be a social and diplomatic history of Filipinas-Siam relations for that period. This paper is a preliminary discourse in that direction.

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Notes


Breve y puntual Relacion de la Embaxada, que executo en Siam el General Don Gregorio Alexandro de Bustamante, Bustillo, y Medinilla, Manjon de Estrada, Senor, y Mayor de las Casas de su Apellido: en una epilogada descripcion de aquel Reyno, y sus costumbres; y otra muy succinta de las Islas Filipinas, sus servicios en ellas, y alguna parte de los trabajos, e infortunios, que despues la han seguido. (Manila, 1719). This account was probably first issued in Ferdinand E. Marcos, Tadhana: A History of the Filipino People, Vol. II, Part 2 (n.p. 1982).

Mosel, p. 123.

Villegas, op. cit.


Breve, p. 1.

Governor Bustamante’s conflicts with officials, clergy and merchants came to a head in October 11, 1719 when he was killed in an uprising instigated by the religious.

Parody, pp. 27-29.

Breve, p. 5.

Ibid., pp. 140-150.

Referring to the Manila-Acapulco or the Galleon Trade.

The Phra Klang was the minister for commerce and foreign affairs.

Breve, p. 5.

Duke, p. 129. See also Jose Luis Porras. *El Galleon de Manila in Estudios Sobre Filipinas y Las Islas del Pacifico*, coordinado por Florentino Rodao Garcia (Madrid: Asociacion Española de Estudios del Pacifico, n.d.). Porras mentioned a galleon called *Guadalupe* which was constructed in Siam but did not indicate the year.

Duke, *op. cit.*

Breve, p. 3.

Duke, p. 127.

Breve, pp. 3-5.


I have come across the manuscripts by Luis Perez Dasmariñas on the plan to conquer Siam. See Breve’s *apuntamientos importantes...son acerca de la conquista del Reyno de Siam y poblacion y entrada y importante de espanoles en la tierra firme de estas parte, 15 Enero, 1600* (A.G.I. Patronato 25, R, 61). On this project, Subrahmanyanam used Charles Boxer, “Portuguese and Spanish Projects for the Conquest of Southeast Asia, 1580-1600” in the *Journal of Asian History*, 3.

Breve, p. 4.

Parody, p. 59.

Referring to the *hacienda* system.

There is a long list of manuscripts on Indochina in the 16th-17th century period at the AGI. See, for example, *Filipinas*, Legajos 6-34. See also Gabriel San Antonio y Rodrigo de Vivero, *Relaciones de la Camboya y el Japon*. ed. Roberto Ferrando (Madrid: Historia 16, 1988).

28 In 1597, for example, Spain contracted a treaty with Ayutthia that gave
the colonial government the right to establish residence and trade in various parts
of Siam, like Tenasserim. Then in 1624, Spain and Portugal declared war on Siam
in the wake of seizures and counterseizures of shipping vessels involving the Dutch,
with whom Ayutthia had friendly relations then.

29 Historias de las Misiones Dominicanas dirigidas en Tungkin por los
PI. Españoles de la Provincia del Santisimo Rosario de Filipinas, n.p.

30 Breve, p. 138.

31 Ibid., p. 5.

32 An Assessment of the country’s economy would appear in 1823, discussing
the imperatives of developing commerce and agriculture. It particularly noted the
positive direction of the 1718 Bustamante trade mission to Siam in consideration of
the needs of the archipelago and what Siam offered. See Disertacion sobre la
Agricultura de Filipinas y medios que pueden emplearse su fomento. MN, MS
1576, Doc. 7, Fol. 63-76.

33 See Simon de la Loubere, A new Historical Relation of the Kingdom of
Siam in 1687 and 1688 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969, 2 vols.).

34 Disertacion sobre la Agricultura, fol. 65.

35 Ibid., fol. 68. See also Informe del comisionado D. Juan Urroz sobre
el estado de la Agricultura e Industria de las Islas Filipinas, Junio 30, 1802
(MN, MS 1662, Doc. 77s, Fol. 262-300v.). Also, see D. Jose Felipe Amedo a D.
Pascua Enrile sobre la lucha contra la langosta (MN, MS 305, Doc. 2, ff.2-3).

36 See for example, Tablas de resistencia y peso de las maderas de Filipinas
(183?). MN, MS 305, Doc. Varios.

37 See cartas de D. Pascual Enrile sobre maderas y teca. MN, MS 305,
Doc. Varios.

38 Bennett Bronson, Patterns in the Early Southeast Asian Metals Trade
in Early Metallurgy, Trade and Urban Centres in Thailand and Southeast Asia,
Eds., Ian Glover, Pronchai Suchitta and John Villiers (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1992),
pp. 63-113.