

The History of the Introduction of Shi'ism to Thailand and the Role of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi in Its Expansion

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Abstract

This study investigates the historical introduction and propagation of Shia Islam in Thailand, with a particular emphasis on the pivotal role of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi. Arriving in the 17th century during the Ayutthaya era, Sheikh Ahmad emerged as a significant figure within the Siamese court, facilitating cultural and religious interactions between Iran and Thailand. His elevation to the esteemed position of Joularat Chammontri charged with overseeing Muslim affairs and foreign relations, allowed him to formalize Shia practices within Thailand. A notable contribution was his introduction of the Ashura commemoration, honoring Imam Hussein (a.s.), which integrated Shia Islam into a predominantly Buddhist society. The investigation also considers the earlier presence of Iranian Muslims in Thailand, tracing back to the Sukhothai period and potentially earlier. Historical documentation reveals that trade and cultural exchanges facilitated the arrival of Iranian merchants and academics. By the Ayutthaya period, Iranian cultural influence extended beyond religious aspects to include Persian art, cuisine, and fashion, evidenced by the adoption of Persian-inspired attire within the Thai royal court. Sheikh Ahmad also significantly contributed to the political and economic relations between Siam and various Islamic states, establishing a lasting Iranian presence in Thailand. His legacy is evidenced by the continued prominence of his descendants in political spheres, underscoring Sheikh Ahmad's enduring impact on Thailand's multicultural identity, as well as the critical role of trade, migration, and religion in the assimilation of Shia Islam and Persian culture.

Keywords: Thailand, Shia Islam, Sheikh Ahmad Qomi, Cultural exchange, Iranian influence

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Introduction

Islam's arrival in Thailand likely occurred during the Sukhothai period, potentially as early as the seventh century CE. While evidence suggests the presence of Muslims in Thailand during this period, it's unclear whether they practiced Shi'ism.

Sheikh Ahmad Qomi played a pivotal role in the spread of Shi'ism in Thailand. Arriving in Thailand around 1605 CE, Sheikh Ahmad was a religious scholar from Qom, Iran, who traveled to Thailand with his brother, Mohammad Saeed, for trade and religious propagation. After settling in the Thakayi district near the royal palace, they prospered in the trade of forest products and imported goods. Sheikh Ahmad eventually gained the trust of King Songtham and ascended to the position of Krom Thakwa (Minister of Treasury), signifying his growing influence in the Thai court. In this role, he was responsible for managing trade with China and western nations, particularly Muslim communities. He was also appointed Sheikh al-Islam, the highest religious authority for Muslims in Thailand. Sheikh Ahmad's influence extended beyond his lifetime, as his descendants continued to hold important positions in the Thai government, including the role of Krom Thakwa. His legacy is also evident in the Jaosan group, a Shi'a community he established, which introduced Iranian mourning rituals for Imam Hussain to the Thai people. The significant contributions of Sheikh Ahmad and other Iranians in Thailand, not only in the spread of Shi'ism but also in the realms of trade and culture. They highlight the influence of Iranian fashion and cuisine, suggesting a vibrant cultural exchange between Iran and Thailand during the Ayutthaya period. The sources ultimately portray Sheikh Ahmad Qomi as a key figure in the establishment and growth of the Shi'a Muslim community in Thailand.

Conceptology

Thailand

Thailand is bordered to the northwest by Myanmar, to the northeast and east by Laos, to the southeast by Cambodia, to the south by the Gulf of Thailand and Malaysia, and to the southwest by the Andaman Sea; it also shares maritime borders with Vietnam to the southeast and Indonesia and India to the southwest. Bangkok is the state capital and largest city. (Public Relations Department.2022)



Figure 1. Thailand, located in the centre of mainland Southeast Asia. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024); Population: 71,646,621 (Worldometer, 2024)

Thailand, a nationalist country located in Southeast Asia, was formerly known as Siam. During the government of Marshal Field Pibulsongkram, who himself held nationalist beliefs, the name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand. According to an announcement from the Prime Minister's Office regarding states, country names, peoples, and nationalities, dated June 24, 1939, it was preferred that the name of the country align with its nationality and people. However, from a legal standpoint, the exact date to be considered is August 26, 1939, when the government presented a draft constitutional bill to the parliament proposing the official name change of the country. The main point of the legislation was that the country's name should be "Thailand," as stated in the constitution and other laws. Wherever the word "Siam" appeared, it was to be replaced with "Thailand." (Jetiya Komonpelin, 2020)

Sheikh Ahmad qomi

Sheikh Ahmad Qomi (Qummi) was born in 1543 in district of Qom³, Persia. Bearing the title sheikh, Ahmad was highly educated and qualified in the teachings of the Islamic religious scriptures. He belonged to the Twelver Sect or Imami Shi'ism. The exact year that Ahmad came to Thailand (Siam) with his younger brother Muhammad Said, is disputed. Some sources stated 1602, other 1603 and 1605. Both brothers and their retinue set up their residential and trading quarters in Ayutthaya.

³ Qom is the capital city of Qom Province in Iran, 156 Km southwest of Teheran. Qom is the second most sacred city in Iran and a significant destination of pilgrimage

The sheikh married a Siamese woman named "Chuey" and got two sons and a daughter. The eldest son, was named Chun, the second one died at young age, while the daughter was named Chi. Sheikh Ahmad's trading prospered and he became wealthy; increasing his influence at the court during the reign of King Ekathotsarot (r. 1605-1610/11). (Marcinkowski, 2005)



Figure 2. Sheikh Ahmad Qomi picture

Shi'ism

In linguistic terms, the word "Shia" (شيعة) has two primary meanings: first, agreement and harmony among two or more individuals on a specific matter, and second, the act of following or adhering by an individual or group to another individual or group. Ibn Manzur in Lisan al-Arab states:

"الشيعۃ القوم الذين يجتمعون على أمر، وكل قوم اجتمعوا على أمر فهم شيعة، وكل قوم أمرهم واحد يتبع بعضهم رأي بعض هم شيع"

Translation:

"Shia refers to a group of people who gather around a certain matter; any group of people who unite on an issue are considered Shia. Furthermore, any group whose concern is singular, and whose members follow one another's opinion, are also Shia." (Ibn Manzur, 1414/1993, vol. 8, p. 188: Al-Tabatabai, n.d., vol. 17, p. 147)

In Islamic terminology, "Shia" refers to those Muslims who believe in the immediate succession and Imamate of Amir al-Mu'minin Ali (peace be upon him). They hold the view that the Imam and successor to the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him and his family) is determined through explicit divine designation (nass shar'i). Furthermore, they believe that the Imamate of Amir al-Mu'minin Ali (peace be upon him) and the other Shia Imams has been established through such explicit divine texts. (Sheikh Mufid, 1993, vol. 1, p. 35: Shahrastani, (n.d., vol. 1, p. 146)

Culture

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition goes a step further, defining culture as shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, culture can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group. “Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones and a million other things.” (Pappas, S., & McKelvie, 2022)

Before delving into the history of the arrival of Shiism in Thailand and the role of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi in its expansion, it seems necessary, for a better understanding of the topic, to first review and highlight the history of Muslims in Thailand. Once this background is established, we will proceed to examine the main subject in detail.

Section 1: The Arrival of Islam in Thailand (Siam)

The presence of Islam or its followers in the region likely dates back to the early history of the Thai nation. This is because Islam had already spread to Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula before the migration of the Sino-Tibetan peoples from southern Yunnan (modern-day southern China) to Siam. During the early Thai historical period, particularly the Sukhothai era (1279–1299 CE), under the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng, the kingdom expanded its territory to the Malay Peninsula. This included areas like Nakhon Si Thammarat and Malacca, the latter being an Islamic state at that time.

According to historical Chinese records, Siam had begun establishing relations with other nations, and Muslims were known to travel to and from Siam. However, these relations often had a colonial nature, with these regions sending tributes or taxes annually to the Siamese kingdom. Most scholars agree that Islam entered Thailand through the southern part of the country.

In addition to the Muslims already residing in Thailand, international relations with Islamic nations became more formalized during the Sukhothai period. Historical evidence, such as ancient ceramics, a major export of the Sukhothai era, has been discovered in Islamic countries, including Indonesia, Iran, Africa, and India. This indicates that Sukhothai had trade connections with Islamic nations long

before the Sukhothai period, though these interactions are difficult to trace due to the lack of recorded history in Siam at that time. (Muslims in Thailand,1994, p. 1-5)

While the historical narrative of Siam was not officially documented during that era, these pieces of evidence suggest an early connection between Siam and the Islamic world, facilitated by trade and diplomacy. Thus, if we speak with greater clarity about history, it can be said that the relationship between Siam and other Islamic countries, as well as the presence of Muslims, has always existed. It should be noted that maritime travel among the Thai people at that time was quite limited, as they were not proficient sailors. As a result, the commercial ships of that era were mostly owned by foreign traders and belonged to other nations, primarily used for transporting goods.

Additionally, the presence of Europeans in the region was not significant during that period. Therefore, those who interacted and traded with Siam were predominantly Arabs, Indians, and Iranians, most or all of whom were Muslims. (Muslims in Thailand,1994, p. 1-5)

This type of relationship and the presence of Muslims in Siam has become clearer and more evident to us. Additionally, a recent excavation by an archaeological institution uncovered valuable treasures from a stupa built at the beginning of the Ayutthaya period. Among these findings were two gold coins inscribed with Arabic script, later identified as originating from the present-day Kashmir region during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin. These coins serve as evidence that Siam consistently maintained relations with other Islamic countries. During the Ayutthaya period, relations with Islamic nations and the presence of Muslims in Siam became more prominent. One notable group included Sheikh Ahmad and his brother Muhammad Said. National records indicate that during the Ayutthaya era, Muslims had designated areas within the city for their residence. Foreigners who entered and resided in the country were referred to as *khaek* (a term meaning "guest"). Those who lived in Siam for an extended period could own land, engage in farming, and participate in trade, much like other Thai citizens. The Muslim population at that time included people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, such as Iranians, Arabs, Malays, and Chinese. (Muslims in Thailand,1994, p. 1-5)

Section 2: The Arrival of Shiism in Thailand

Shiism and Iranians can be likened to two inseparable sides of a coin—wherever Iranians are present, Shiism often follows. This thought has emerged in contemporary understanding, although it might not be entirely accurate. Before the

Safavid era, Iranians did not possess a distinctly Shiite religious identity. However, following the rise of the Safavids, this association between Iranians and Shiism became firmly established.

Regarding the presence of Shiites in Thailand prior to the 16th century CE, there is no concrete information. However, there is historical evidence indicating the presence of Iranians in the region before this period. According to reports, the presence of Muslims in this country coincides with the formation of the Thai nation. As discussed in the previous section, the presence of Muslims in Thailand dates back to the Sukhothai period, an early era in Thai history. In contrast, reports and sources suggest evidence of Iranians in Thailand even before the Sukhothai era. One report states...

"Islam spread to Thailand, Sumatra, Java, and Brunei after reaching Malaysia, and it reached Malaya and Singapore as early as the 9th century CE. In any case, before the Sukhothai period, Muslims, particularly Iranians, had entered Siam and gained influence in cultural and political affairs. The term Pasan, meaning Persia, found inscribed on a stone tablet in Siam, serves as evidence of the longstanding trade relationship between Iranians and Siam, with traces of this connection dating back to the 7th century CE."
(Bahrani-pour, 2004, p. 7)

Thus, the presence of Iranians in the land of Thailand dates back to before the Sukhothai period. In fact, some reports even suggest that the presence of Iranians in Thailand coincides with the eras of the Sassanian and Achaemenid Empires.

Despite the long history of Iranians in Thailand, it seems that Shiism did not have a presence in the region before the era of Sheikh Ahmad (1605 CE). This is likely because the Iranians who arrived earlier for trade were not necessarily Shiites. It was only during Sheikh Ahmad's time that Shiism began to spread in the region. After spending some time in Siam, Sheikh Ahmad and his companions saw significant success in trade, which eventually made them some of the wealthiest foreigners in the country. Sheikh Ahmad became acquainted with a man who was the head of the royal treasury, and through his assistance, he established connections with the royal court and began collaborating with the government on trade matters. From that point onward, Sheikh Ahmad gradually initiated efforts to promote Shiism in Thailand. Once he gained the trust of the ruling monarch, he requested a piece of land, which the king granted. Sheikh Ahmad used this land to establish a religious

center and a cemetery for Muslims. He also formed a group called Jaosen (Imam Hussein), whose activities will be discussed later in this section.

Section 3: The Role of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi and Muslims in the Spread of Islam and Shiism

First Discussion: Biography of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi

Sheikh Ahmad Qomi, born in 950 AH (1543 CE) during Shah Tahmasp I's reign in the Safavid dynasty, emerged from the Chahar Mardan neighborhood of Qom. By adolescence, he displayed a strong passion for religious studies, quickly mastering the Qom seminary's curriculum. His academic success earned him the title of Sheikh, alongside admiration from peers and scholars. Described as devout and intelligent, Sheikh Ahmad was revered for his commitment to Shiism.

At age sixty, he reportedly traveled to Thailand, although there is uncertainty regarding his formal clerical education due to a lack of definitive documents. Genealogical records from the Bunage family in Thailand, which has Persian roots, identify Sheikh Ahmad and his brother Muhammad Saeed as originally from Qom. As the Safavid dynasty strengthened and Iran expanded its international relations, various religious and commercial delegations began to travel abroad. This period saw Sheikh Ahmad inspired by tales of those journeys and the opportunity to share Shiite beliefs and Persian culture. In 1014 AH (1605 CE), he and Muhammad Saeed set sail from southeastern Iran, facing dangers at sea before reaching Malacca and entering the Gulf of Siam.

In Thailand, Sheikh Ahmad married a local woman named Choei, with whom he had three children: two sons and a daughter. His sons served at the royal court, with the elder, Chuen, eventually succeeding his father as an advisor to King Songtham. Unfortunately, the younger son, Chom, died young due to smallpox. His daughter, Chee, later caught the king's attention, raising the intriguing question of why Sheikh Ahmad, a Muslim, would marry her to King Narai, a Buddhist. This situation suggests possible scenarios: either King Narai converted to Islam and practiced taqiya, or Chee may not have fully embraced Islam herself. However, her later marriage to Aga Mohammad Istrabadi, Sheikh Ahmad's grandson, complicates this theory.

Today, Sheikh Ahmad's tomb is situated at the Teacher Training College in Ayutthaya, approximately 80 kilometers from Bangkok. It is regarded as a significant cultural and political landmark, adorned in Islamic architectural style with influences from Iran. The tomb features a striking golden dome and a stone inscription summarizing Sheikh Ahmad's life. This inscription states, "Sheikh Ahmad, Prime Minister of the Siamese government in Ayutthaya, was born in 1543

CE in the lower neighborhood of Qom, the religious center of Iran. He was a Shia Ithna Ashari and migrated to this land during the reign of King Narsuan the Great." In summary, Sheikh Ahmad Qomi's life reflects a rich intertwining of Persian and Thai histories, showcasing the cultural exchange that occurred during the Safavid era, his significance in the propagation of Shiism in Southeast Asia, and his legacy that resonates in both nations today.



Figure 3. Tomb of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi in Ayutthaya city

Second Discussion: Political, Social, and Cultural Activities of Sheikh Ahmad

During the Ayutthaya period, after Siam gained independence, foreign subjects from various countries came to Siam with specific objectives. Some came in pursuit of commercial interests, while others sought royal privileges and the favor of the king. Among these foreigners were Muslims from diverse backgrounds, including Persians, Arabs, Hindus, Malays, Javanese, and others. In addition to their commercial endeavors, some were invited to the royal court and became involved in the political affairs of the kingdom.

According to ancient national sources, a group of Iranian Muslims, led by Sheikh Ahmad and his brother Muhammad Said, arrived in Siam for trade and commerce. They would purchase Siamese goods, transport them by ship to different countries, and sometimes bring goods from Iran to meet Siam's needs. Sheikh Ahmad's exceptional skills were instrumental in gaining access to the royal court and becoming involved in the political affairs of the kingdom.

In addition to his contributions to Siam's trade and economy, Sheikh Ahmad also played a significant role in assisting with the management of the royal treasury.

He dedicated part of his time to helping organize and reform the country's financial administration.(Pujatkan online)

Familiarity and close association with the minister responsible for the treasury marked a significant step for Sheikh Ahmad in gaining influence in governmental affairs. Due to his charitable acts and contributions to the state's commercial activities, the king conferred upon him the title of *Phraya Sheikh Ahmad*, or Prime Minister of the country. In the Thai language, this position was referred to as **Krom Tha Khwa**, with responsibilities that included overseeing ports, managing tribute relations with the Chinese Empire, and handling trade with China.

Over time, as more Muslim merchants—Indian, Iranian, Arab, and others—arrived, the administration was divided into two distinct sections:

1. **Eastern Division:** Continued overseeing trade and tribute relations with China.
2. **Western Division:** Managed trade with the western nations bordering Thailand, which were predominantly Muslim at the time (prior to Western dominance over the region's seas).

This restructuring reflected the increasing importance of international trade and the role of Muslim merchants in Siam's economic and diplomatic framework.(Kit Tari, 2016)

In addition, when a significant number of Muslims entered government service, a new position was established to ensure smoother and more efficient administration. The title of *Sheikh al-Islam*, responsible for overseeing all matters related to Muslims in Thailand, was granted to Sheikh Ahmad. Upon his appointment as both the Grand Vizier (Prime Minister) and *Sheikh al-Islam*, Sheikh Ahmad skillfully carried out his duties. His exemplary performance earned him another high-ranking role as the Minister of Interior.

Sheikh Ahmad's distinguished service to the government and royal court laid a strong foundation for future generations. Following his tenure, two of his descendants also ascended to the position of Minister of Interior:

1. **Chuen**, Sheikh Ahmad's eldest son, during the reign of King Songtham.
2. **Sombun**, Chuen's son (Sheikh Ahmad's grandson), who held the same position during the reign of King Prasat Thong. (Muslims in Thailand,1994, p. 140)

Sheikh Ahmad's legacy became a cornerstone for his family's continued contributions to the political and administrative framework of Thailand.

King Narai, for political reasons, began his relationship with the East and also established diplomatic contacts with Asia. The *Safina* of Solomon mentions a Muslim governor in Ayutthaya as well...

When the Iranian embassy group reached the city of Phetchaburi, a person from the city's governor, named Sayyid Mazandarani, came to greet us.

The next day, we arrived in the city of Suphanburi, a prosperous and fertile city, where a governor named Jeal Bi, originally from Greece, who had converted his religion to Islam and Shiism, came to welcome us. (Safina Sulaimani, 1984, p. 11-12)

These reports indicate that during the reign of King Narai, various regions, particularly large and important commercial and military cities, had Muslim governors. This position was highly significant as these governors had another critical responsibility, which was to prevent invasions from enemies and to prepare their forces for defense and warfare. From this, it is clear how much Sheikh Ahmad contributed so that even after his death, the kings of Siam placed complete trust in Muslims, especially the Shia. Therefore, this became a special privilege for him.

In addition to the points mentioned earlier, it is also stated in another place about how Sheikh Ahmad entered the royal court and the social context at that time. According to When Ayutthaya was captured by Burma in 1596, many Siamese people were taken as prisoners to Bago, Burma, and few remained in the city. As a result, the royal court needed to encourage foreigners to trade and settle in Ayutthaya to increase the treasury's revenue. Consequently, merchants and travelers from various lands, including Iranians, came to the Kingdom of Siam. Among these, most of the Iranian travelers were Shia Muslims. Iranians who settled in Siam came not only for trade but also spread Islam and Shia teachings in Ayutthaya. Because the royal court followed a liberal policy in promoting religion, Siam became a refuge for Iranian travelers. Therefore, it is no surprise that before the reign of King Narai, many Iranians had already played a role in Siam's history. The first Iranian to serve in the Siamese court seems to have been Sheikh Ahmad, an Iranian merchant who traveled to Siam during the late reign of King Naresuan, continuing through the reign of King Ekathotsarot. Later, during the reign of King Songtham, he entered the royal service. According to historical reports, Sheikh Ahmad was a close friend of King Prasat Thang, who at the time held the position of head of the Ministry of Defense and had not yet become king. After Prasat Thang ascended to the throne, he

appointed Sheikh Ahmad to the position of Krom Takwa (Minister of State) and also made him the head of the Iranian community in Ayutthaya. Later, Sheikh Ahmad was appointed as Prime Minister at the end of King Prasat Thang's reign. For a foreigner like Sheikh Ahmad, who received such a high political position, it may seem strange to people today. However, considering the policies of the Prasat Thang dynasty, it might be understood. When King Prasat Thang took power from the Sukhothai dynasty king, he faced opposition from many local chiefs and nobles. These chiefs and nobles had forces under their control, some of whom were dependent on or directly loyal to them. King Prasat Thang fought for years against these rebellious chiefs and ultimately succeeded in suppressing them. Thus, he understood the dangers of local aristocrats holding power with their own forces. He gradually stripped them of their power and ordered the execution of many of the nobles. He also frequently changed the high-ranking aristocrats of the country so that no nobleman could feel secure in their position. While the king was stripping the local aristocracy of power, he encouraged foreign nobles to play a greater political role. These nobles were selected by the king and were directly granted titles. The individuals the king chose were all heads of their respective communities, which had forces under their control. Therefore, King Prasat Thang established a foreign army as a base of royal power, which he gained through his relations with foreign elites. These forces were more powerful than the local common people, as they were armed with modern weapons and could be mobilized more quickly. As King Prasat Thang had conflicts with the head of the Japanese volunteers and later had serious disputes with the Japanese, he eventually sent his forces to suppress the Japanese community in Ayutthaya. From these struggles, he realized the need for help from other foreign communities, and none other than his close friend, the wealthy merchant and overseer of the Iranian community in Ayutthaya, Sheikh Ahmad Qomi, came to his aid. After Sheikh Ahmad entered government service and rose to the position of Prime Minister during the reign of King Prasat Thang, he encouraged more Iranians to settle in Siam, thus forming a large community in Ayutthaya. Alongside the Iranians, Shia Muslims from India and Central Asia also traveled to Siam to live within this growing community. (Chulitphong Chularat, 2003)

Section Three: Economic Activities of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi

As previously mentioned, historical evidence and sources indicate that there was a strong trade and cultural exchange relationship between Siam and Persia before and after the Ayutthaya period. The influence of Iranian culture can be observed in the royal attire and the clothing of the aristocracy, especially during the reign of King

Narai. The royal garments and the clothing worn by the aristocracy during the Ayutthaya period were influenced by Persian styles.

The culture of Iran during the Safavid period heavily influenced the attire of Siam's aristocracy. This clothing, known as *chouqa* or *chokha*, was sewn with Persian patterns. The style of clothing resembled that of the Safavid Qizilbash, particularly the high hats and pointed shoes. Additionally, Persian-style rugs were considered official products of the Iranians, often used by kings and aristocrats. One historian from Sheikh Ahmad's lineage noted that *"He arrived by ship, sold Iranian goods, and bought Thai products, which he would then transport to other countries."*(<https://mgronline.com/online/section/detail/9590000021710>)

In a journal called *Pujatkan online* (History Section), this topic has also been researched, and it is noted that...

Iranians played a significant role in trade, politics, and culture in Ayutthaya, particularly during the reign of King Narai, as seen in aspects such as clothing culture. The royal attire of the king and the aristocracy at the Ayutthaya court were influenced by the "chouqa" robe worn in the Persian court, as well as the "lumpok" or high hats and pointed shoes, which were clear indicators of Iranian imports.

(<https://mgronline.com/travel/detail/9660000011266>)

When Sheikh Ahmad arrived in Siam, he became one of the wealthiest individuals in the community through trade. Historical evidence shows that the goods he brought were primarily for the aristocracy, and ordinary people and the poor could not afford them. These items included Persian carpets, cooking utensils, silk fabrics, and other important exports from the Safavid era. (Taghavi Baghan, 2020) Consequently, those who wished to purchase from him were either wealthy individuals or royal court members. According to sources, foreign goods, particularly clothing and carpets, were popular among the upper class at the time. In addition, Sheikh Ahmad also sold food products to the people of Siam. This Iranian style of dress, which became widespread in Siam, reached its peak during the reign of King Narai, becoming the royal attire. From then on, the long robe became a formal garment, used by various officials, including as graduation attire for students and judges. (<https://mgronline.com/travel/detail/9660000011266>)

Therefore, cultural evidence suggests that Iranians during the Ayutthaya period were involved in trading clothing, various types of home decor, and

ornaments to honor the kings. Iranian tailors were also employed to do manual work for the king and the nobility. As a result, in addition to selling cultural products, Iranian workers were well received by the King of Thailand and the aristocracy. Perhaps the widespread popularity of Iranian clothing during the Ayutthaya period played a significant role in the success of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi's trade with Ayutthaya, eventually leading him to gain access to the royal court.



Figure 4. Ayutthaya Ambassador to France during the reign of King Narai (Rajanubhab, 2001)



Figure 5. The Safavid Qizilbash costume (Taghavi Baghan, 2020)

Chapter 4: The Names and History of "Jowalrat Chamontri" (Shi'a Sheikh al-Islam)

Sheikh Ahmad Qomi (1602–1627)

Sheikh Ahmad Qomi is considered the first "Jowalrat Chamontri" (Shi'a Sheikh al-Islam) in Thailand. He and his brother Mohammad Saeed came to Ayutthaya for trade during the reign of King Narai and settled in the "Takai" district near the royal palace. Over time, their business flourished, and they became known as some of the wealthiest members of the community. In the later years of King Songtham's reign, Sheikh Ahmad contributed to improving the maritime affairs of Ayutthaya, which yielded successful results. As a result, the king appointed him to the position of "Krom Takwa" and "Jowalrat Chamontri."

Sheikh Ahmad is considered the first Jowalrat Chamontri and the person who brought Shi'a Islam to Thailand. He later worked alongside his companions to suppress an external rebellion, which was ultimately quelled. Following these wise actions, the king appointed him to the position of Prime Minister. In the later years of King Prasat Thang's reign, Sheikh Ahmad, in his old age, was appointed Minister of the Country. He passed away in 1631 at the age of 88 and was buried in Ayutthaya.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Kaew (1656–1682)

The second "Jowalrat Chamontri" of the country during the reign of King Narai was "Kaew." He was the son of Mohammad Saeed, Sheikh Ahmad's brother, and the grandson of Sheikh Ahmad, as his mother, "Jowalrat Chamontri Kaew," was the eldest daughter of Sheikh Ahmad, named "Chee." Kaew is considered the second head of the Muslim community in Thailand after Sheikh Ahmad. He received important government positions from the king, including the position of Krom Takwa and Jowalrat Chamontri, along with other titles.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Son (1732–1758)

He was appointed as Jowalrat Chamontri during the reign of King Borommakot. He was the son of "Yee," the elder brother of Kaew, and was promoted to this position after his uncle. There is no record available regarding his date of death.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Shin (Exact Date Unknown)

The fourth Jowalrat Chamontri of Ayutthaya was "Shin." He was the son of "Jai," a descendant of Sheikh Ahmad. His father, "Jai," converted to Buddhism during the reign of King Borommakot. This conversion caused a division within the Sheikh Ahmad's family, splitting into Muslim and Buddhist branches. However, Shin, unlike his father, did not convert to Buddhism and remained a Shi'a Muslim. Like

his ancestors, he was appointed to important positions in Ayutthaya. During his time, due to the Burmese invasion, the city of Ayutthaya began to decline and ultimately fell. Shin thus became the last Jowalrat Chamontri of the Ayutthaya era, marking the end of the period with only four Jowalrat Chamontris.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Kan Kaew (Kaew Khon) (1786)

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Kan Kaew, also known as "Mohammad Masoom" in his Muslim name, was the son of Shin, the previous Jowalrat Chamontri. He entered the royal service at a young age. After the fall of Ayutthaya to foreign invaders, he fled to the Thonburi region, where the king appointed him to a court position. Later, during the Rattanakosin period, he was elevated to the rank of Jowalrat Chamontri, becoming the first Jowalrat Chamontri of the Rattanakosin era and the fifth in total for Thailand. Afterward, the king granted him land to build a religious site, leading to the construction of the Gudi Luang or Gudi Jao Sen mosque, which is considered the first Shi'a mosque in the modern era following the Ayutthaya period. He passed away at the age of 82 and was buried at the "Tonsun" mosque cemetery.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Aqa'i (1807)

He was the son of Jowalrat Chamontri Shin and the younger brother of Mohammad Masoom. After the death of his brother, he was appointed by the king to the position of Jowalrat Chamontri, becoming the second Jowalrat Chamontri in the Rattanakosin era and the sixth in the history of Thailand. Like his brother, he received land from the king and built the Gudi Aleng Mosque, the second Shi'a mosque in the Rattanakosin era. Aqa'i passed away during the reign of King Rama II.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Thuean (1824)

Known by his Muslim name "Amir Shah Mohammad Karim" or "Mohammad Kazim," he was the son of Mohammad Masoom. He was highly talented both militarily and diplomatically, as well as being a religious preacher. He passed away during the reign of King Rama III and was buried next to his father at the Tonsun Mosque cemetery. He became the third Jowalrat Chamontri in the Rattanakosin era and the seventh in the history of Thailand.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Nam (1867–1889)

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Nam, known by his Muslim name "Mohammad Taqi," was the son of Thuean (Mohammad Kazim). He was born during the reign of King Rama II, although the exact year of his birth is unknown. During the reign of King Rama III, he entered the royal service in the Krong Takwa and later, under King

Rama IV, took up responsibilities in the country's treasury and tax affairs. He also participated in suppressing rebellions in the southern region and implemented regulations to govern the southern provinces, serving as the governor of the south. He was appointed Jowalrat Chamontri after his father's death and held the position until his passing at the age of 74. He was buried in the Tonsun Mosque cemetery.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Noy (1867)

His Islamic name was "Mohammad Baqir," and he was the son of Jowalrat Chamontri Aqa'i. He served in the Krong Takwa, and after the death of Jowalrat Chamontri Nam during the reign of King Rama IV, he was appointed by the king to the position of Jowalrat Chamontri. He became the fifth Jowalrat Chamontri in the Rattanakosin era and the ninth Jowalrat Chamontri in the history of Thailand. His grave is located at the Tonsun Mosque.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Sin (1889–1910)

Jowalrat Chamontri Sin, whose Islamic name was "Ghulam Hussein," was the son of Jowalrat Chamontri Nam. He entered royal service at the age of 18 and later rose to a higher position. He studied law and, at 30, had the opportunity to serve in the Ministry of Justice. When national administrative regulations were reformed in line with civilized countries' standards and the Supreme Court was established, he reached the position of Jowalrat Chamontri and judge at the Ministry of Justice. Ghulam Hussein became the sixth Jowalrat Chamontri in the Rattanakosin era and the tenth Jowalrat Chamontri in Thailand's history. He passed away at the age of 65, and his grave, like his ancestors', is located at the Tonsun Mosque cemetery, a place of pilgrimage.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri San (1911–1923)

San was the son of Jowalrat Chamontri Sin, and his Islamic name is not mentioned. In his youth, he studied governmental regulations and then joined royal service in the Krong Takwa for foreign affairs. When the Ministry of Justice established the Supreme Court, he was transferred to the Ministry of Justice, where he worked in the financial department and was later promoted to the rank of sergeant in the foreign courts. During the reign of King Rama VI, he was appointed Jowalrat Chamontri and requested the family name "Ahmad Jowal" from the king. From this point, the family of Sheikh Ahmad split into two branches: "Boon Nak" and "Ahmad Jowal." He became the seventh Jowalrat Chamontri in the Rattanakosin era and the eleventh in the history of Thailand. His grave is located at the Tonsun Mosque cemetery.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri Kasem Ahmad Jowal (1923–1926)

He was the eighth Jowalrat Chamontri in the Rattanakosin era and the twelfth in the history of Thailand. His Islamic name was "Mohammad Racha." He was the fifth son of Jowalrat Chamontri Sin and the younger brother of Jowalrat Chamontri San, although they had different mothers. Kasem Ahmad Jowal entered royal service as a child and worked as an assistant in the financial section of the Ministry of Justice. After the death of his brother, he was promoted to head the same section and appointed Jowalrat Chamontri. He only held this position for three years and passed away at the age of 37. He was buried in the Tonsun Mosque cemetery.

Phaya Jowalrat Chamontri San Ahmad Jowal (1930–1939)

San Ahmad Jowal was the son of Jowalrat Chamontri San. He served in the Krong Takwa and reached the position of Jowalrat Chamontri during the reign of King Rama VII. San Ahmad Jowal was the last member of the Shiite branch of Sheikh Ahmad's family to hold the position of Jowalrat Chamontri. He became the ninth Jowalrat Chamontri in the Rattanakosin era and the seventeenth in Thailand's history. After some time, due to political pressure, he resigned from his position. He passed away at the age of 56 and was buried in the Tonsun Mosque cemetery. (<https://www.skthai.org/th/pages/6794>) A total of 13 individuals from this family held the position of Jowalrat Chamontri continuously for approximately 337 years, from Sheikh Ahmad to San Ahmad Jowal. Throughout this period, the family served alongside the king and contributed to the country of Thailand.

Conclusion

The introduction of Islam to Thailand is historically intertwined with the early formation of the nation, facilitated by trade and cultural exchanges between Siam (historical Thailand) and Islamic states in its southern regions. These interactions, although colonial in nature, underscore a longstanding relationship with Islam that extends back several centuries. Notably, the arrival of Iranian traders and the subsequent spread of Shi'ism approximately 420 years ago highlighted this connection. Evidence suggests that Iranian merchants, prominent during the Sassanid Empire, were among the first to engage with the region, bringing not only goods but also influential cultural elements that permeated various aspects of Thai life, including the arts, language, and social practices.

A significant contributor to the formalization of Shi'ism in Thailand was Sheikh Ahmad Qomi, whose mission was to promote and integrate this sect of Islam into Thai society. His arrival marked a critical turning point, as he and his followers

endeavored to gain the trust of the Thai royalty, which enabled them to permeate the royal court. Sheikh Ahmad's influence was recognized through his appointment as Sheikh al-Islam (Joularat Chammontri) by the reigning monarch, a role that positioned him to oversee religious and social affairs within the Muslim community in Siam, thus impacting governance at both religious and civil levels. Among his notable achievements was the establishment of the Jauson group, a religious organization dedicated to disseminating Shi'ism throughout the region. Through this institution, Sheikh Ahmad introduced key Shi'ite figures, such as Imam Hussein (AS), and emphasized mourning rituals related to Ashura. These observances not only fostered solidarity within the Muslim community but also created a unique cultural identity that merged Iranian religious traditions with local Thai customs.

In addition to religious influence, the Iranian community significantly shaped Thailand's cultural landscape. Iranian merchants introduced distinctive aspects of their culture, including attire, cuisine, and artistic forms. Traditional Iranian garments and headwear became fashionable within Thai royal courts and among the elite, while Iranian culinary practices enriched local gastronomy with dishes such as kebabs and pilafs. Moreover, the Iranian influence brought artistic traditions like calligraphy and carpet weaving, which were embraced by Thai society.

The enduring adoption of Iranian cultural practices, alongside the establishment of Shi'ism, reflects the profound legacy of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi and his followers in Thailand. Their efforts established a lasting fusion of Thai and Iranian cultures, evident in the customs and traditions of the Thai Muslim community today. Sheikh Ahmad's role in both religious propagation and cultural enrichment underscores his significance as a historical figure in the development of Thailand's Islamic narrative.

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