A SIAMESE LETTER DATED 7 DECEMBER 1776

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In the Danish National Archives a considerable number of documents are preserved from the files of the (Danish) Asiatic Company and from the Government of Tranquebar. The Asiatic Co. file no. 2188b has the title: Documents with reference to Pegu, Siam, Kedah, Johore, Cambodia, and Manila, 1682-1776. Only one letter in this package is written in Siamese. It is dated 7 December 1776, and is accompanied by a Portuguese translation -- or perhaps, more precisely, a Portuguese version of the letter -- under the same seal as the original, that of the Siamese King's 'Primeiro Ministro' (/phrá? khlag/ in Siamese). The recipient is the Danish governor of Tranquebar, (David) Brown. On an accompanying sheet is added information that the letters have been extracted from a bamboo tube.

The letter was registered by Henning Engelhart in 1780 together with other documents concerning Tranquebar and the following résumé of its contents was given (here translated from Danish): 'A letter in the Siamese language, from the King of Siam or his Prime Minister, to Governor Brown, containing requisitions of ammunition, inviting to trade with Siam, and promising assistance.'

In 1973 the National Archives asked Pensak Chagsuchinda, Lecturer in Thai in the University of Copenhagen, and me for a comment on the accuracy of the above résumé, and we supplied the Archives with a somewhat more detailed translation. Recently I had occasion to look at the letters again and decided to translate the original Siamese as well as the Portuguese versions and to supply some notes on both.¹

Transcription of the Siamese text

1. ṇejsy y njawāャthāncawphājaaphra?khlaŋphūŋjānjā?kruŋthēebphrá?–
māŋāŋkhōon miimāthūrā?

2. cīdsānīdsānēhāa maathēŋjōŋbōconsēenaacāwdiinmāg-
phūupencāwmyangtāŋkaabad dūaj

3. phrá?bāadsōmdēdpíra?māhākraśādtraathīrādadcāwthīisūŋjāj
miiphra?rāadchā?ooŋkaamaan

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2.4. phrá?banthuunsûrásîghänåkkâddamrádpînyaklnmallñakrâmsëmsáñwâ
nâ?möcrasëm

5. piñwòòg?âdthasûgkâpîtanlèg?ëgmaacâdëgûpyynnâ?myañtraq-
kaabâadphanbyôghkwâpajthuun

6. klâwthuunkrâmõmthâwâaj tôqphrá?råadchápràsûgûpyynkhâab-
sîlaâ?tiûnbyôb cyq

7. têqâjâkâpîtanlèg?ëgmaacâdëgûnâ?myañtraqkaabâad
khôjâjçâwmyañtraqkâa

8. bâdâhènâkîthâagphrá?råadchámajtri leemajtriichûaj-
thamnû?bâmruçcadceêghâjâkâpîtan

9. lègâjpyynnbyôbôgkâwmaacoûsàduûlag thâacâwmyañtraq-
kaabâadcâ?têqkaandilûg

10. kô?hâjtëqkampânkhâwmaaraâ?âwdiibûgkêkâpîtanlègùnâ?-
myañthâlêjagbôbôgâtòc

11. phaaraa thâacâ?têqkaançaschâaqnùmâjvsûkhäuseriññà?-
krûntëebphra?mâhâanâkhoonkâpî

12. tanlègrûuraakhaajûûlëw hâjtëqkampânbanthûgpyynkhâw-
maasôgêjthêqkârûntëebphra?

13. mâhâanâkhooncâ?khiдраakhâahjkrôbtaamcammuankhâapuyyn-
mî?hâjkhâaqkoonkhâdsônjûudâj prà

14. kaannûyntsaacâwmyañtraqkabâaadca?têqkampânbanthûgphan-
phâphàreoâphansûkhaaâkhâw

15. pajkhâakhâajnà?krûntëebphra?mâhâanâkhoon leeraakhaa-
phanphâaraakhaaâqanâqûnyâmâjvsû

16. nà?krûntëebphra?mâhâanâkhoonnàn kâpîtanlègrûulëw-
hâjtëqkampânbanthûgkhâw

17. pajthèodrawcâ?chûajthamnû?bâmruçmî?hâjphanphàasûkhaa-
khôgçâwmyañtraqkaabâadkhâadkhâajjûudâjpen?ankhâad

18. thïiïïiâñnàsûyßaamànâ?wan?aqkhaandyân?ñjreëmsîb-
khâmecnûsâggârâadphanrîjsàamsëbôj÷dïiûwòg?âdthàsòg

Notes to the text

2.1 /nãngsê/ 'letter'. The /a/ is written by means of the
diacritical sign which is now reserved for the tonal marker
/mâjthoo/. In this letter no distinction is made between
/mâjhan ñaakâad/ and /mâjthoo/. This will not be pointed out
in every single case in the following notes.

/náwâab/ 'Nabob'. The first syllable is spelt with the letter /nɔɔ neen/ as if it meant 'at, in'. The scribe may well have misunderstood the expression, thinking that /wâab/ was a noun designating something like 'residence, domicile'. But cf. /nãkhoon/ below.

/thân/ 'title'. This title is spelt with a long /aa/ as in the modern orthography, but without the tonal marker /máj?ëeg/.

/câw/ 'lord'. In this word the /májthoo/ has its usual force. All examples of this will not be pointed out below.

/phájaa/ 'title' is written with a conventional ligature.

/phráʔ/ 'honorific prefix' is written with a ligature in which the /r/ does not take on its usual shape.

/jâj/ 'big' is spelt with /májmálaaj/ rather than /májmúan/, and with /májthoo/ instead of /máj?ëeg/.

/kruq/ 'capital city' is in this letter consistently equipped with a /jâadnâmkhâaq/.

/nâkhoon/ 'city'. The first syllable is spelt with /nɔɔ neen/ rather than with /nɔɔ nûu/, and the second has the vowel /ɔɔ/ written out instead of the /r/ serving for vowel plus final consonant.

/miiʔ/ 'have' is spelt with a vowel symbol consisting of modern /sârâʔ?yʔ/ plus modern /máj?ëeg/ (a combination of /sârâʔ?iʔ/ with both /jâadnâmkhâaq/ and /fônthhoq/). This symbol is used in this style for any of the vowels /i/, /ii/ or /yy/. We shall call it the 'general i/y vowel'.

/mâthûrâʔ/ 'sweet'. Both of the short /a/ vowels are indicated with the /wâsâńchâniʔ/. There is not much consistency in the use or non-use of this symbol in this style.

2.2 /cid/ is spelt /cîdtrâ/ even though the meaning is probably 'mind, heart' rather than 'variegated, wonderful'. The two are not consistently kept apart in modern usage either. The word is spelt with the general i/y vowel.

/sânnîd/ 'amiable' is spelt with final /ccɔ caan/ instead of /thoo thâhâan/ or /thoo thoŋ/, the vowel is written with the general i/y.

/sânêehąʔ/ 'friendship' has the vowel /ee/ placed between /s/ and /n/ and is written without a tonal marker.