

The Persian Connection: Four Loanwords in Siamese

Jimmy G. Harris

1. Introduction

There is excellent documented evidence from the 17th century that a small Persian trading colony was already well established in Siam.¹ These Persian traders were so influential in both trade and politics that some of them, by winning the favor of the king, became high officials in the government of the kingdom.² Additional evidence from the same source leads us to believe that Persian traders probably arrived in Siam as early as the 16th century. A Persian connection could have, in fact, taken place much earlier. We know, for example, that Persian trading communities were in India as early as the 8th century and that beginning in the 13th century Muslim rulers governed India for more than six hundred years. By the 16th century, during the Mughal (Persian for Mongol) Empire of India (1526–1761), the official language of India was Persian and over half of the educated men in Indian government service were from Persia.³

Persians and other Muslims have always considered trading an honorable profession; consequently, Persian commerce was a bigger business than industry or agriculture. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that when Vasco da Gama reached the city of Calicut, India in May 1498 he discovered that the Muslims there had a monopoly on trade with other countries.

We may never know the exact date when the first Persian traders arrived in Thailand or the native language of the speakers who introduced these specific Persian words into Siamese. It is possible that some of these Persian words were introduced into Siamese by Indian traders whose second language was Persian. One thing we do know however is that there are Persian loanwords in Siamese and they were borrowed in, at the latest, the 16th or 17th century. The following are four of those loanwords.

Mr. Harris, presently teaching in Saudi Arabia, has lived and worked in Thailand off and on since the late 1950's. From 1969–1975, he taught general phonetics and phonology at the Central Institute of English Language (CIEL) and, along with his many students and colleagues, pioneered and stimulated research on Thai dialects and the indigenous languages of Thailand.

2. The Franks

Originally the Franks were one of a group of Germanic tribes. These Germanic Peoples were the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Alamanni, Bavarians, Franks and Langobardi. In the 3rd and 4th centuries the Angles, Saxons and Jutes moved across the channel into the British Isles; the Alamanni, Bavarians and Langobardi moved into Southeastern Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Northern Italy and the Franks moved into France and Southern Germany. Shortly after, they occupied most of France and the Netherlands and established themselves along the Rhine River. In the 9th century this Frankish kingdom split into the Western Frankish kingdom which is approximately the area of present day France and the Eastern Frankish kingdom in what is now Germany. The word *Frank* could have been borrowed by the Muslims as early as A.D. 732 when the Franks defeated a Muslim army at Tours, France. More likely however, the word *Frank* was probably borrowed at the time of the Crusades (1096–1291). The first Crusade was largely made up of Franks so the Muslims may have thought that all European Christians were Franks. *Frank* thus became the Persian words for a European Christian. Throughout the Muslim world to this day the word *Frank* or a derivation of it still has the bad connotation of a Christian infidel.

France is derived from the Germanic word for the Franks. The Old High German word for these people was “Franko” and the Old French name for them was “Franc”. The old form of this word is still around today in words like Francophile, Franco-Swiss, etc. It seems the original German meaning was something like “free from bondage or restraint”. This meaning is also still around today in, for example, the English phrase “to speak frankly” (to speak without restraint).

The Siamese words กวน /khæək/ means “guest or visitor” and when said alone it usually stands for an “Indian” (from India). Another usage is as a cover term for Muslim peoples as in /khæək malaa juu/, /khæək India/, /khæək thaj/, /khæək sà?ù?/, etc. Until very recently the words also covered Africans and other black people but during the Vietnam War there was a large influx of American negro servicemen into the country and ever since then a common word for black people has been นิโกร /nikroo/ “negro”. I have no reason to doubt that the word /khæək/ was the common word used to denote Persians, Indians and other Muslim traders when the first European came to Siam and since the Siamese has no word for these non-Muslim Europeans they borrowed the Persian word فرنگ farang “Frank”. *Frank* was not only the common Persian word for any European Christian at the time but all Muslim traders in Siam would have called any Christian Portuguese, Englishman or Dutchman by this term. It is obviously the source of the Siamese word ฝรั่ง /faràng/ “Occidental, European”.

ฝรั่ง /faràŋ/ is also the Siamese word for “guava”. Since this shrub or small tree originated in South America and was probably first brought to Siam by the Portuguese it is understandable why the Siamese called it “the Frank’s tree” ต้นฝรั่ง /tōn faràŋ/.

3. Rose

The Siamese word for “rose” is ดอกกุหลาบ /dòk kulàap/. /kulàap/ is definitely of Persian origin. The original Persian word is گولاب golāb and means “rosewater”. Persian golāb is a compound word made up of gol “rose” and ‘āb “water”. This Persian word was borrowed into Urdu as gulāb to mean both “rose” and “rosewater”. Thus a speaker of an Indian language could have been the direct source of this word into Siamese but there is no doubt that the word is of Persian origin.

4. Grape

The Siamese word for “grape” องุ่น /aŋùn/ is also of Persian origin. The Persian word is انگور aŋgūr. This Persian word was borrowed into Urdu with the same pronunciation and meaning as the original.⁴

5. Cabbage

Both the Siamese words for “cabbage” กะหล่ำปลี /kalām plii/ and “cauliflower” กะหล่ำดอก /kalām dòk/ contain the Persian borrowed word kalam which means “cabbage.” The Persian word for cauliflower is گل کلم gole kalam literally “the flower of the cabbage” which is the exact meaning of the Siamese equivalent กะหล่ำดอก /kalām dòk/.⁵

NOTES

¹ The Important record of an official Persian delegation to Siam during the reign of Sha Sulaiman I (1666–1694) has recently been translated into English as *The Ship of Sulaiman*, by John O’Kane, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1972.

² The descendants of some of the original Persian traders
– members of the Bunnag, Siphon and Singhaseni families
– have continued to be in positions close to the throne into the twentieth century.

³ See especially the translations of the original Persian chronicles of the Mughal Empire in Henry M. Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India*, as told by its own Historians, 8 Volumes (1867–77, reprinted 1966). Other good sources for this period are *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. 3, (1928), *The Oxford History of India*, 3rd ed. (1958) and *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 5, (1968).

⁴ It is interesting to note that modern Pakistanis and Indians still remember that the best grapes came from Persia an Afghanistan.

⁵ I wish to thank Jerry Gainey for bringing this word to my attention.