

PERSIAN PRESENCE IN AYUTTHAYA:

Iran–Thailand Relations, Cultural Hybridity, and the Role of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia

Mahmud Hibatul Wafi^{1*}, Taufiq Hidayat², Alimuddin Hasan Palawa³

¹Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kerinci, Jambi, Indonesia

²International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

³Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia

*Correspondence author: Email: mahmudwf@gmail.com; Tlp. +62 822-3380-2474

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the historical presence and cultural contributions of the Persian community in Ayutthaya, Thailand, with a particular focus on Sheikh Ahmad Qomi as a central figure of Islamic diplomacy, political integration, and transnational cultural exchange in the early 17th century. Drawing on the framework of cultural hybridity (Bhabha) and intra-Asian cosmopolitanism (Duara; Green), the research explores how Persian elements were localized into Thai cultural, political, and aesthetic forms—from Arabesque architectural motifs to the culinary adaptation of Massaman curry. Far from being a passive cultural visitor, Persia played a proactive role in shaping Thailand's bureaucratic institutions, religious pluralism, and soft power diplomacy. The findings challenge dominant postcolonial narratives that view Southeast Asia merely through the lens of European colonization, advocating instead for a reorientation toward the agency of Asian actors in shaping regional histories. This paper contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to decolonize Southeast Asian historiography and reinstate the complexity of Asia-Asia cultural dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Interstate relations are not solely shaped by contemporary geopolitical dynamics, but also by historical interactions and centuries-long cultural exchanges. One compelling relationship within this context is between Iran (formerly Persia) and Thailand (formerly Siam), reflecting a long-standing cross-cultural engagement extending from the classical period to the modern era. Although formal diplomatic ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Thailand were officially established in 1955, the historical roots of their relationship run much deeper, dating back to the 17th century when the Ayutthaya Kingdom emerged as one of the cosmopolitan hubs of Southeast Asia (Feener & Sevea, 2009).

The presence of the Persian community in Ayutthaya, led by key figures such as Sheikh Ahmad Qomi (also known as Ahmad of Qom), marked the beginning of significant Iranian contributions to Thailand's socio-political and cultural frameworks. Arriving in Siam in the early 17th century

(circa 1602–1605), King Ahmad warmly received Sheik Songtham. He was appointed **Chula Rajmontri** (a royal mufti-like figure) and royal advisor on international and religious affairs. He became an influential figure in the royal administration. He founded the Bunnag family—an aristocratic dynasty that would later play a strategic role in Siam's governance until the late 19th century (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017; Smithies, 2002).

The Persian community's influence was not confined to the royal bureaucracy. Persian cultural elements permeated various dimensions of Ayutthaya's social life and continued into modern Thailand. In architecture and decorative arts, Persian influence is evident in the use of arabesque motifs, Islamic calligraphy, and geometric patterns found in the ornamentation of temples, mosques, and royal palaces in Ayutthaya (Sukswan et al., 2020). These artistic elements are still traceable in decorative features at Wat Arun and the Grand Palace in Bangkok, reflecting a syncretic aesthetic blending local, Chinese, and Persian influences (Khaikham & James, 2019).

In the literary sphere, evidence suggests that Persian epic literature, particularly *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, influenced the development of Thai literature during the early Rattanakosin era. Heroic tales and epic narratives were adapted into royal court poetry and theatrical performances (Forbes, 1982). The reception and localization of Persian literary traditions underscore the organic cultural ties fostered through Muslim interactions across Asia.

One of the most enduring and popular Persian legacies in Thailand is culinary. *Massaman Curry* (*Kaeng Matsaman*), now considered a national Thai dish, is believed to have originated from Persian cuisine introduced by Muslim communities, including Persians, in Ayutthaya. This dish blends Middle Eastern spices—such as cumin, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg—with local ingredients like coconut milk and meat. Culinary historians, including David Thompson, have described *Massaman* as a remarkable "cultural fusion" between Persian Islamic taste profiles and Southeast Asian culinary traditions (Santarita, 2022).

Furthermore, Iranian descendants played a critical role in shaping the Muslim identity in Thailand, coexisting for centuries with the Buddhist majority. The Ayutthaya court's tolerance toward the Persian community—including their right to build mosques and organize Islamic education—offered an early model for minority integration within a national framework. Even into the modern period, Persian descendants have retained significant socio-political positions within Thailand's elite circles, demonstrating an enduring legacy across generations (Yegar, 2003).

In this light, the Persian community in Thailand should not merely be seen as part of migratory history but as a crucial agent in shaping Thailand's diplomatic, cultural, and national identity. They acted as cultural bridges between the Islamic world—particularly Iran—and Buddhist Thailand, creating a vibrant zone of cultural encounter that remains productive and relevant today (Duara, 2001).

Despite this, the Iran–Thailand relationship has received disproportionately little scholarly attention in global academic discourse, especially within Southeast Asian studies and the broader field of Islamic–Asian cross-cultural relations. Dominant narratives in Asian history have primarily centered on China, India, and European colonial powers, sidelining Persia (Iran) as a cultural, commercial, and religious intermediary. This has contributed to forming an epistemic framework that often neglects non-Arab Islamic networks in Southeast Asia, including the dynamic role of the Persian diaspora in shaping local sociocultural configurations (Lieberman, 2009; Reid, 2004).

From the 16th to the 19th century, Iran held a central position in the Indian Ocean's trade and intellectual networks, with strategic ports across Gujarat, Malacca, Aceh, and Ayutthaya (S. Hall, 2021). Through merchants, scholars, and diplomats, Persia disseminated commodities and navigational technologies, propagated Islamic values, introduced new artistic and architectural forms, and established diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian kingdoms. In Thailand, this role is exemplified by the Persian migration to Ayutthaya, where they were integrated into the royal socio-

political structure (Smithies, 2002; Yegar, 2003).

The absence of Iran-centered narratives in Southeast Asian historiography also reflects the orientalist and Eurocentric tendencies in historical writing, where European powers are positioned as the primary agents of change and modernization, while non-Arab Islamic contributions are marginalized. Consequently, Persia's role in shaping Asia's cultural and political dynamics—Thailand included—remains underexplored. A more holistic approach, as proposed by transregional historiography and global Islamic studies, reveals that Persian communities were cultural agents bridging Islamic, Indian, and East Asian civilizations (Eaton & Louw, 2000; Subrahmanyam, 2020).

In the Thai context, Persian cultural diplomacy functioned not only in a political-economic sense but also symbolically and ideologically. The royal appointment of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi, the integration of Persian decorative arts, and the adaptation of Islamic culinary practices reflect a form of Iranian soft power creatively adopted by local societies (Dalrymple & Joll, 2022). This phenomenon calls for a critical reevaluation of Southeast Asian historiography, recognizing Iran—through its Persian diaspora—as a key node in the region's cultural architecture.

Therefore, the imperative to decolonize Southeast Asian historiography and reintegrate Iran into the region's historical narrative becomes increasingly relevant, particularly in the face of fragmented scholarship focused on the West–Far East binary (Strathern, 2012). Positioning Iran within Thailand's cultural and religious relations not only corrects historiographical bias but also enriches our understanding of Islamic agency in Asia. This agency transcends ethnic and geographic boundaries.

This paper thus seeks to recover Iran's legacy in Thailand's historical and cultural landscape through an interdisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, visual culture studies, and international relations. By examining Iranian diaspora figures, architecture, cultural artifacts, and contemporary diplomatic policies, this study argues that Iran–Thailand relations represent a notable example of peaceful, enduring, and mutually enriching intercultural exchange.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of Iran–Thailand relations necessitates a theoretical approach that goes beyond mere descriptive-historical narration. It must also be interpretive and analytical (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). Given that these relations encompass multidimensional domains—political, religious, commercial, and cultural—this research adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing primarily from transnational historiography, cultural diplomacy theory, and Asian intercultural Islamic studies.

First, this study applies the perspective of transregional historiography, particularly the concept of connected histories developed by Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1994). This approach rejects the compartmentalized historical narratives framed within the modern nation-state boundaries and instead emphasizes the importance of viewing history as a dynamic network of interregional connections. Within this framework, Iran–Thailand relations are not understood as a static bilateral encounter but as part of the broader currents of cultural and intellectual exchanges across the Indian Ocean, wherein Persia served as a vital bridge between the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Subrahmanyam, 2020).

Second, the study draws upon cultural diplomacy theory to explain how various elements of Iranian culture—including art, language, cuisine, and religious values—functioned as symbolic instruments of soft power and social integration within Thai society. According to scholars such as Joseph Nye (2008), the soft power of a nation often operates through cultural channels rather than solely through military or economic means. The historical role of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi as both a political advisor and religious leader exemplifies cultural diplomacy in practice—one that was not

limited to elite diplomatic circles but also materialized in local adaptations at the societal level (Zamorano, 2016b).

Third, to understand the dynamics of Islam brought by the Persian community in Thailand, the study engages with the framework of Asian intercultural Islam. This approach views Islam as a dialogical and context-sensitive tradition shaped by interacting with diverse local cultures. In the Southeast Asian context, scholars such as Anthony Reid (1999) and Azyumardi Azra (2022) have emphasized Islam's role as a civilizational force that expanded through networks of scholars (ulama), merchants, and social institutions. The Persian Muslim community in Ayutthaya constituted one node in this larger network, contributing to early modern Thai society's spiritual, social, and aesthetic dimensions.

Fourth, this research incorporates Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of cultural hybridity to interpret the fusion of Persian and Thai cultural elements. From this perspective, Iranian influences in architecture, literature, and culinary traditions are not viewed as manifestations of cultural domination but as negotiated spaces of meaning-making that give rise to new, plural, and fluid cultural identities. For instance, the popular dish massaman curry is not merely a product of culinary adoption but a hybrid formation that blends Persian flavor profiles with local Thai spices and cooking techniques.

By integrating these four approaches—connected histories, cultural diplomacy, Asian intercultural Islam, and cultural hybridity—this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive, dynamic, and non-reductionist lens for analyzing Iran's historical and cultural imprints in Thailand. It also enables a critical re-reading of Southeast Asian cultural identity, which has long been interpreted primarily through the influence of China, India, and Europe, while marginalizing the crucial contributions of the Persianate world.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a historical and interdisciplinary orientation (Arifin, 2012), aiming to trace and analyze the cultural footprint and socio-political role of the Persian community in Thai history, particularly since the Ayutthaya Kingdom. Given the transregional nature of the topic—which encompasses cultural, religious, and political dimensions—this approach was chosen to accommodate the complexity of Iran–Thailand interactions, which cannot be reduced merely to formal diplomatic relations.

Methodologically, the study is grounded in the principles of transnational historiography, which rejects geographical and nationalistic boundaries in interpreting history. This perspective enables a re-reading of Persia's role not as a foreign entity imposed from the outside but as a cultural actor that actively shaped Southeast Asia's social and cultural landscape, especially Thailand. Through this framework, the Persian legacy is not viewed as an "external influence" but as an integral part of the cosmopolitan processes that characterized the pre-colonial Southeast Asian region.

Data for this research were collected by examining both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include historical archives, royal chronicles, religious and administrative manuscripts, artistic artifacts, and material evidence such as architecture, ornamentation, and cuisine. Travel accounts from Persian envoys and merchants who resided or passed through Ayutthaya were also utilized. Secondary data were drawn from scholarly literature, including academic books, peer-reviewed journals, ethnographic reports, and analytical articles from reputable institutions such as Thai PBS World, which has explicitly highlighted Iran's contribution to Thailand's cultural landscape.

In processing and analyzing the data, this study employs a combination of narrative, discourse, and hermeneutic analysis techniques (Lisa et al., 1967). Narrative analysis is applied to reconstruct

the historical trajectory of relations between Iran and Thailand through key figures such as Sheikh Ahmad Qomi and the Bunnag dynasty, who descended from him. Discourse analysis examines how narratives about Persia and Islam are framed within local historiography and Thailand's collective memory. Meanwhile, a hermeneutic approach is employed to interpret literary texts and cultural symbols—such as arabesque motifs, the culinary dish Massaman curry, and local stories—that reflect possible Persian elements or cultural hybridization.

Triangulation is conducted across various sources and disciplinary interpretations as part of the validity assurance. Historical claims are cross-verified through multiple channels, including archival documentation, material cultural heritage, and credible academic studies. Furthermore, theoretical reflections on cultural hybridity, cultural diplomacy, and cosmopolitan Islam are also employed to enrich the interpretation of the empirical findings presented in this research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sheikh Ahmad Qomi and the Transnational Trajectory of Persian Islam in Ayutthaya

One of the most salient findings of this study is the role of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi (also known as Tok Ayah) as a strategic nexus between Persian Islam, local political authority, and cross-Asian cultural diplomacy during the pre-modern era (Daneshgar, 2014). Born in Qom, Iran, Sheikh Ahmad was part of a dynamically expanding Persian diaspora along the Indian Ocean trade routes during the 16th and 17th centuries. According to Yoneo Ishii (2018) and Dhiravat Na Pombejra (2013), Sheikh Ahmad arrived in Siam around 1602–1604, during the reign of King Songtham of the Ayutthaya dynasty. Due to his exceptional diplomatic and economic acumen, he quickly ascended to prominence within the royal court.

Although he hailed from the Twelver Shia tradition, Sheikh Ahmad successfully assimilated into Thailand's predominantly Theravāda Buddhist religious environment without inciting sectarian tensions. This reflects his ability as a transnational actor to convey Persian Islamic values in a form that was cosmopolitan, flexible, and adaptive to the sacred monarchical structures of Ayutthaya. As Anthony Reid asserts in *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* (2017), Persian traders and scholars often served as cultural intermediaries, not imperial aggressors, but partners in both economic and spiritual exchange. Sheikh Ahmad epitomized this pattern: establishing a Persian Muslim community in Siam. He embedded himself into the royal bureaucracy as *Chula Rajmontri* (Royal Mufti) and official advisor on foreign affairs (Reid, 1990).

As royal advisor, Sheikh Ahmad managed the kingdom's relations with the Islamic world, including the Mughal Empire, the Sultanates of Aceh and Johor, and maritime powers like the Ottoman Empire, then a global center of Muslim power. He was head of the *Krom Tha Khwa*, a royal department responsible for trade and diplomatic relations with Muslim nations and non-Christian Western entities. This institutional role evidences that the Persian contribution to Siam was not merely symbolic, but strategic and fully integrated into state structures (K. R. Hall & Reid, 1994).

Furthermore, Sheikh Ahmad's founding of the Bunnag family—later one of the most influential aristocratic clans in Thai history up to the 19th century—demonstrates that minority Persian-Muslim ethnicities were accepted and empowered within a strongly Buddhist nation-state framework. The Bunnag dynasty produced prime ministers and royal advisors loyal to the Thai monarchy, reinforcing the notion that cultural hybridity is feasible and may serve as a pillar of long-term national stability (Dhiravat, 1980).

Accordingly, Sheikh Ahmad Qomi exemplifies what Sanjay Subrahmanyam has termed "intermediary elites" in his connected history framework—individuals who bridge disparate power structures without disavowing their identity of origin. Sheikh Ahmad became crucial in negotiating relations between the Islamic world and non-Muslim Southeast Asia, illustrating how Persian

values—encompassing aesthetics, Sufism, and bureaucratic ethos—could take root within seemingly distinct socio-political systems.

Beyond his role, Sheikh Ahmad Qomi came to embody the broader class of *cultural intermediaries* with significant historical and theoretical importance in shaping new social spaces across Southeast Asia. His contributions align closely with Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity and the "third space"—a discursive arena where two seemingly opposing cultures interact and co-create new forms of identity. In this context, Sheikh Ahmad did not merely act as a bridge between Persian Islam and Thai Buddhism; he actively produced a new sociopolitical configuration that fused Iranian-Islamic values with the royal structures of Ayutthaya. This was reflected in his development of an inclusive bureaucracy, establishment of multicultural maritime trade networks, and initiation of an aristocratic lineage with local and international legitimacy (Han, 2005).

Bhabha's theory of the third space elucidates how the space constructed by Sheikh Ahmad was not a passive zone of compromise but a productive arena enabling the articulation of novel identities (Easthope, 1998). The boundaries between Persia and Siam, Islam and Buddhism, "foreign" and "local" were blurred and reconfigured within this space. The emergence of the Bunnag dynasty serves as more than a biological legacy; it represents a political manifestation of hybridity—a new elite family that rose to occupy the highest positions in Thai governance, including Prime Minister, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and royal advisor well into the 19th century.

Over time, the family not only retained its influence but succeeded in institutionalizing the presence of the Persian Muslim minority within the Buddhist power structure. This challenges the assumption that hybridity must always exist in a subordinate position, showing instead that it can evolve into a new hegemonic formation—fluid, adaptive, and deeply rooted in the local context. In this sense, Sheikh Ahmad was not merely a historical actor but a symbol of radical interculturalism, peacefully and strategically enacted in Southeast Asian history—a narrative often marginalized in postcolonial studies and global Islamic historiography (Al Qurtuby, 2015).

Sheikh Ahmad's presence also marked a transformation of Islam in Southeast Asia—from a face of Arabism to a more cosmopolitan and multiethnic one. In this light, Persia served as a vital East-to-East connector, rather than merely an East-to-West conduit. This is a crucial narrative, frequently overlooked in Islamic and Southeast Asian studies, which discourses of Arabization and Indian influence have long dominated.

Architectural, Aesthetic, and Culinary Heritage: Persian Presence in Thai Forms

The Persian imprint on Thai culture is not limited to politics and religion; it is also deeply embedded in aesthetic structures and material culture. This study finds that visual elements such as arabesque motifs, geometric patterns in temple and palace architecture in Ayutthaya, and decorative techniques in woodcarving and textiles demonstrate the adoption of Islamic-Persian symbolism into local Thai traditions (Noor, 2021).

Arabesque, a hallmark of Islamic art characterized by its non-figurative, repetitive, and theologically symbolic nature, found a unique expressive space in Thailand's visual landscape, especially during the Ayutthaya period. As part of Islamic-Persian aesthetics, arabesque originally served as a form of spiritual devotion that eschewed depictions of living beings to emphasize the oneness of God (*tawhid*) (Kwame Sundaram, 2018). A complex adaptation process unfolded when this visual idiom was introduced into temple architecture and royal gardens in Thailand. Islamic forms and aesthetic values were appropriated, modified, and localized within the context of the Buddhist monarchy.

This process is not a passive assimilation but a concrete example of what Stuart Hall terms "cultural hybridity"—a condition in which cultural identities are continually shaped through encounters, negotiations, and productive contaminations. Within this framework, arabesque ceased

to function as a marker of a foreign Middle Eastern identity. It became integral to Thailand's visual narrative, reflecting its historical openness to external influences (Nagata et al., 1998). At historic sites such as Bang Pa-In Palace and Wat Chaiwatthanaram, Persian geometric and floral motifs blend with local roof structures, colors, and ornaments, yielding an aesthetic fusion that defies singular cultural ownership.

This phenomenon also reflects James Clifford's (1994) notion of "traveling cultures"—cultures as entities that move, shift, and transform according to their surrounding social and political contexts. In this case, arabesque as a form of Persian Islamic artistic expression not only "migrated," but also underwent cultural translation, allowing it to be embraced within the Thai context without losing its symbolic roots. Such transformation strongly evidences that culture is neither static nor essentialist, but is always an open project shaped by histories of migration, diplomacy, and cross-civilizational exchange (Martins, 1998).

Hence, the presence of arabesque in Thai public spaces does not merely signify an aesthetically accepted Islamic art legacy; it also affirms Iran's role as a cultural actor in Southeast Asian history—one that remains underacknowledged in dominant historiographies.

In the culinary domain, Persian influence on Thai culture is most vividly evident in the iconic dish Massaman Curry (or Matsaman), which has gained global recognition, including being named one of the world's best dishes by CNN Travel (CNN, 2021). More than a gastronomic offering, Massaman represents a tangible manifestation of the transculturation of Muslim cuisine from Iran, Central Asia, and the broader Islamic world into the culinary landscape of Southeast Asia.

Historically, Massaman is believed to have emerged from interactions between Muslim communities—particularly Persian and Indian merchants and bureaucrats—and the Ayutthaya royal court in the 17th century. Using spices such as cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, and slow-cooked red meat in coconut milk contrasts sharply with traditional Thai dishes' lighter, herb-based profiles. These features point to strong influences from Persian-Mughal culinary routes, emphasizing flavor complexity through layered aromatic spices and prolonged cooking processes.

The etymology of the word "Massaman" further supports its Islamic-Persian lineage. Many culinary experts and food historians believe it derives from the term "Mussulman," an old European word for "Muslim," which entered Thai vocabulary through trade and diplomatic exchanges. This interpretation is reinforced by historical accounts of King Phra Narai of Ayutthaya, who favored the dish and often served it to foreign guests as part of culinary diplomacy.

From a cultural theory standpoint, this phenomenon may be analyzed through Appadurai's (1996) concept of gastro-politics, where food is viewed not merely as a biological necessity but as a symbolic political field reflecting status, power, and intercultural relations. Massaman thus becomes a symbol of encounter and identity negotiation between Muslim communities—especially Persians—and Thai Buddhist elites. It underwent a process of indigenization, transforming into a staple of national taste and identity in Thailand.

Consequently, Massaman Curry is not simply a popular dish but a concrete representation of Thailand's historical cosmopolitanism—its openness to foreign influence without sacrificing its own cultural identity. It encapsulates the dynamics of cultural hybridity in art and politics and deeply personal realms such as food. This reaffirms that Persian traces in Thai history are not marginal but rooted in the social practices that shape the modern Thai sensory and cultural experience.

Art, cuisine, and decoration are not merely visual markers but enduring historical media. Collectively, they demonstrate that Persia did not merely leave an "influence" but constructed a complex network of intertextuality among symbols, tastes, and spaces to form Thai cultural identity.

From Trade Diplomacy to Cultural Cosmopolitanism: Reclaiming Persia's Role in Southeast Asian Historiography

A noteworthy finding of this study is that the relations between Iran and Thailand, particularly since the Ayutthaya period, should be seen as an integral part of pre-modern cultural diplomacy and cosmopolitan networks—areas that have historically been overlooked in Southeast Asian historiography. In prevailing historical narratives, Persia is often depicted as a passive "visitor" rather than an active contributor to the cultural landscape of Asia (Rabbani, 2013). However, historical evidence demonstrates that Persia played a crucial role in shaping maritime trade networks, spreading non-Arabic forms of Islam, and mediating internal court conflicts through soft diplomatic engagement.

The study further contends that Iran–Thailand interactions since the Ayutthaya era form a critical yet underexamined component of cultural diplomacy and pre-modern cosmopolitanism in the region. Prevailing Southeast Asian historiographies remain predominantly Eurocentric and Indocentric, framing cultural and political interactions primarily about India, China, or colonial European powers such as Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain. Persia has often been reduced within this framework to a transitional or peripheral entity, devoid of agency in shaping local sociopolitical and cultural dynamics (Baskoro, 2020).

Contrary to such depictions, historical data indicate that Persian communities played a proactive and structural role in the global maritime networks of the 16th to 18th centuries, particularly in facilitating the spread of transregional Islam, the spice trade, and sociocultural transformations at key port cities such as Ayutthaya, Melaka, Aceh, and Patani. These communities not only brought commodities but also transmitted values, institutions, and epistemologies that directly contributed to the sociopolitical architecture of local polities (Jin, 2023). In the Thai context, figures such as Sheikh Ahmad Qomi exemplify Persia's cultural and diplomatic agency in shaping state structures, far beyond the role of mere foreigners or traders.

Theoretically, these findings align with the framework of cultural diplomacy, which emphasizes not only formal negotiations between rulers but also informal channels of value exchange, symbolic interaction, and institutional transfer—manifested in interethnic marriages, the employment of foreign bureaucrats, and the diffusion of culinary and architectural aesthetics. Scholars such as Joseph Nye (2008) have argued that soft power is not an exclusive attribute of modern Western states, but was also deeply embedded in pre-modern political cultures, where culture functioned as a strategic tool to build loyalty and consolidate authority (Zamorano, 2016a).

Persian Muslim diasporas cultivated a cosmopolitan mode of Islam that was non-confrontational and highly adaptive to Thailand's Buddhist sociocultural structures. The Islam they introduced was not based on Arab-centric exclusivism, but instead took shape as a transcultural Islam—flexible, locally responsive, and often harmoniously coexisting with indigenous belief systems. This challenges long-standing assumptions that Islam in Southeast Asia was exclusively imported from Arab or Indian sources. On the contrary, Iran's contributions were profound, primarily through Sufi teachings, calligraphic arts, palace architecture, and political governance models.

Reframing Iran–Thailand relations through this lens allows for a reconstruction of Southeast Asian history that is more multipolar and inclusive. These relations enrich our understanding of Islamic trajectories in the region and invite a reconsideration of pre-modern Southeast Asian cosmopolitanism, largely buried under colonial and nationalist narratives that oversimplify the complexity of intercontinental cultural networks.

Beyond presenting historical facts of bilateral relations, this study critiques the dominant narrative of "colonized Asia" as the overarching framework in Southeast Asian studies. This narrative—often shaped by Western postcolonial perspectives—positions Asia as a passive recipient of change triggered solely by European colonial interventions. However, prior to the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16th century, Southeast Asia had already been part of dynamic and layered transregional interactions—including with Persia, the Arab world, India, and China—that formed a

complex mosaic of intra-Asian cosmopolitanism.

By positioning Persia as an active historical agent in Southeast Asia—particularly Thailand—this study seeks to restore historical memory of reciprocal, egalitarian, and productive inter-Asian networks. The Persian imprint in Thai history should not be seen merely in the contributions of individuals like Sheikh Ahmad Qomi, but as reflective of a broader Persian Muslim diaspora that established deep economic, religious, and diplomatic ties well before the onset of colonial influence. This perspective echoes Prasenjit Duara's (2015) assertion in *The Crisis of Global Modernity* that "Asia must be reclaimed as a historically networked region before colonial modernity disrupted its autonomous trajectories."

Therefore, the Iran–Thailand relationship must not be reduced to contemporary bilateral diplomacy; instead, it should be read within the broader framework of intra-Asian cosmopolitanism that unfolded over centuries. Within this network, Persian Islam did not operate as a hegemonic force but as a cultural vector, offering scientific, spiritual, and aesthetic values that were locally received and creatively integrated into Thai society. This was not mere cultural "penetration" but a reciprocal civilizational encounter that gave rise to hybrid and autonomous cultural forms.

More broadly, this approach challenges Western-centric assumptions in global historiography that frame cosmopolitanism as a product of European modernity. Historians such as Nile Green, in *The Persianate World* (2019), have demonstrated how Persianate cultural networks shaped regions as diverse as East Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia through maritime trade, Islamic scholarly movements, and interregional exchange. In this light, Southeast Asia was not an empty cultural space awaiting Western infusion, but a dynamic arena of multidirectional cultural flows in which Persia acted as a bridge among major world traditions—Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, and Sinic.

In sum, this study not only reconstructs the historical trajectory of Iran–Thailand relations but also contributes to the epistemological decolonization of Asian studies, repositioning Asian actors as active, creative, and autonomous agents of history. It emphasizes that Southeast Asian cosmopolitanism resulted from intra-Asian cultural exchanges rather than a derivative of later Western colonial influences.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the historical relationship between Persia (Iran) and Thailand should not be viewed as marginal; rather, it is an integral part of Asia's longstanding cosmopolitan networks that existed long before the advent of Western colonialism. Through the key figure of Sheikh Ahmad Qomi, it becomes clear that Persian Islamic values influenced not only the spiritual aspects of Thai society but were also deeply integrated into the Thai people's political power structure, visual aesthetics, and culinary identity.

Sheikh Ahmad Qomi represents more than just an individual within the Persian diaspora; he serves as a cultural agent of hybridity, creating what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as a "third space"—a location where Persian and Thai identities intersect, merge, and give rise to new socio-political configurations, such as the Bunnag family. This process of hybridity illustrates that cultural fusion does not diminish identity. Instead, it represents a productive contamination that fosters cultural richness and innovation.

Moreover, this study emphasizes the importance of reinterpreting the grand narratives of Asian history by repositioning Asian actors—like Persia—as active and participatory subjects. In this context, the relations between Iran and Thailand can serve as a model for understanding egalitarian and non-hierarchical intra-Asian connectivity. Additionally, it provides a foundational framework for advancing the decolonization of knowledge in Southeast Asian studies.

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