

# La Loubère's Translation of the Lord's Prayer into Thai

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**Abstract**—One of the earliest documented translations of any biblical passage into the Thai language is the Lord's Prayer in La Loubère's report of his diplomatic mission to the kingdom of Siam from 1691. When Komonbut translated La Loubère's book into Thai in 1967, he also restored the original Thai text of the prayer from La Loubère's rudimentary transcription. His failure to provide any commentary on his restoration, however, largely conceals his achievement. This paper will evaluate Komonbut's success in establishing the Thai wording and thereby provide some commentary on both La Loubère's transcription and the difficulties of restoring a Thai text from it. At the same time some suggestions for minor improvements of the transmitted text will be made.

**Keywords**—Thai language, Bible translation, Early modern era, Christian missions to Southeast Asia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Simon de La Loubère (1643-1729) was a French diplomat sent by the Sun King Louis XIV on a mission to the then so-called Kingdom of Siam which is Thailand. Although his stay in the kingdom lasted only three months from October 1687 to January 1688, he afterwards published a voluminous and detailed description of the land and its customs that would remain the most comprehensive account of Thailand available in Europe for more than a century to come [1]. Detailed accounts of La Loubère's life can be found in [2–8].

In his book La Loubère also gives a brief sketch of the Thai language at the end of which he prints Thai versions of the Lord's Prayer and the Ave Maria as sample texts, albeit in a very rudimentary transcription [1]. We do not know who provided La Loubère with these linguistic data and analyses. A likely, but difficult to prove candidate is the Greek adventurer Constantine Phaulkon (1647–1688) who by this time had risen to a high rank at the Thai royal court. See [9], [10], and [11] for different perspectives on his rise and fall. Since the translator of the Lord's Prayer is unknown, the attribution of the Thai version to La Loubère is conventional and does not imply any involvement of him in the translation process.

The biblical passage that the Thai version of the Lord's Prayer is based upon is the Gospel of Matthew 6: 9–13. This version is commonly recited in church services as opposed to the slightly shorter parallel version in the Gospel of Luke 11:2-4 which is of no further concern here.

La Loubère's book was translated into Thai by San T. Komonbut [12]. In his translation Komonbut also provides an attempt to convert La Loubère's transcription of the Lord's Prayer back into Thai. Unfortunately he refrains from any comment on his restoration of the original Thai text so that the obstacles he encountered and his achievement in overcoming them have gone unnoticed. This paper will follow the path from La Loubère's transcription (Section I) to Komonbut's Thai text and provide some necessary comments

(Section III) on either of them.

## II. LA LOUBÈRE'S TRANSCRIPTION

La Loubère prints the Lord's Prayer in transcription with interlinear glosses in French placed above the Thai text. The same text including the French glosses is reproduced with but minor misprints in the English edition of his book [13]. To adapt his style of glossing to modern conventions the Thai transcription is here shifted above the French glosses and the text is segmented into individually numbered syntactic units. But La Loubère's practice of printing function-words added to the glosses to increase clarity in italics is maintained. So is his choice to provide no interlinear gloss to the word *hái* (2), (4), (5), (9), once misspelled *hái* (3). The gloss to this word is provided once and for all by him in a marginal note that declares it an imperative marker.

- (1) *Pô ráou you savang.*  
*Pere de nous qui estre au Ciel.*
- (2) *Scheu Prá hái prákot touk heng kon tang-lái touái Prá pôn.*  
*Nom de Dieu glorifier en tout lieu par gents tous offrir à Dieu louange.*
- (3) *Meüang Prá cô hái dái kê ráou.*  
*Royaume de Dieu, je demande trouver à nous.*
- (4) *hái léou ning tchái prá Meüang Pen-din semò savang.*  
*finir conformément au chœur de Dieu au Royaume de la Terre également du Ciel.*
- (5) *Ahan ráou touk van cô hái dái kê ráou van ni.*  
*Nourriture de nous de tous les jours je demande trouver à nous en jour ce.*
- (6) *cô prot bap raou,*  
*Je demande pardonner offences de nous,*
- (7) *semò ráou prot pou tam bap kê raou.*  
*également nous pardonner aux personnes qui faire offence à nous.*
- (8) *Yá hái ráou tok nái koüan bap:*  
*Ne nous tomber dans cause de péché:*
- (9) *hái poun kiac anerái tang-poang. Amen.*  
*délivrer dehors malheur tous.*

This translation captures the gist of the prayer without adhering too closely to the wording of the Lord's Prayer in English or French Bibles. Note especially the omission of any conjunctions like 'and' or 'but.'

III. KOMONBUT'S THAI TEXT

Komonbut [12] prints his Thai rendition next to a photographic reproduction of La Loubère's glossed version. Against the usual practice of writing Thai without spaces between words he adds spaces and spreads the words in a grid-like pattern. The syntactic segmentation is indicated by full stops. His version is printed below in Thai letters, in an up-to-date transcription, in an approximate glossing, and in an English prose translation that tries to capture the actual meaning of the Thai phrases as they stand. As above, segmentation and numbering are added. Sentence (2) is split into two syntactic units, (11) and (12).

- (10) พ่อ เรา อยู่ สวรรค์.  
*pôr rao yòo sà-wǎn*  
 father us stay heaven  
 'Our father is in heaven,'
- (11) ชื่อ พระ ให้ ปราบทุก แห่ง  
*chêu prá hâi bpraa-gòt túk-hàeng*  
 name God give known everywhere  
 'make the name of God known everywhere,'
- (12) คน ทั้งหลาย ถวาย พระ พร.  
*kon táng-lǎai tà-wǎai prá pon*  
 people all offer God blessing  
 'everybody (shall) bless God,'
- (13) เมือง พระ ขอ ให้ได้ แก่ เรา.  
*meuang prá kôr hâi-dǎai gàe rao*  
 land God please give-encounter to us  
 'the Kingdom of God let us receive,'
- (14) ให้แล้ว (ประ)หนึ่ง ใจ พระ เมือง แผ่นดิน เสมอ สวรรค์.  
*hâi-láew (bprà-)nèung jai prá meuang pǎen-din*  
*sà-měr sà-wǎn*  
 give-finish as-if heart God land earth as heaven  
 'give to us according to the will of God (in) the earthly kingdom as (in) heaven.'
- (15) อาหาร เรา ทุก วัน ขอ ให้ได้ แก่ เรา วันนี้  
*aa-hǎan rao túk wan kôr hâi-dǎai gàe rao wan-née*  
 food us every day please give-encounter to us to-day  
 'Our daily food let us receive today.'
- (16) ขอ โปรด บาบ เรา  
*kôr bpròht bàap rao*  
 please pardon sin us  
 'Forgive our sins,'
- (17) เสมอ เรา โปรด ผู้ ทำ บาป แก่ เรา.  
*sà-měr rao bpròht pòo tam bàap gàe rao*  
 as we pardon people do sin to us  
 'as we forgive people sinning against us.'
- (18) อย่าให้ เรา ตก ใน ความ บาป  
*yàa-hâi rao dtòk nai kwaam bàap*  
 not-give us fall in thing sin  
 'Do not let us fall into sin,'

- (19) ให้พ้น จาก อันตราย ทั้งปวง. อาเมน.  
*hâi-pón jàak an-dǎ-raai táng-bpuuang aa-maen*  
 give-deliver from danger all amen  
 'deliver (us) from any danger. Amen.'

Komonbut's rendition sticks as closely as humanly possible to La Loubère's text. The choices Komonbut makes are generally ingenious, but might have profited from a commentary accompanying them. Therefore, the necessary commentary is provided here in what follows.

IV. COMMENTARY

The most pervasive shortcoming of La Loubère's transcription is its incomplete representation of phonemic distinctions in the Thai language. For instance, it fails to render aspiration or lack thereof in plosive consonants (table I), it does not adequately capture distinctions of quantity or quality among vowels, and it treats tones haphazardly (table II). Of the five tones in Thai the transcription indicates only four. For the rendition of vowels see the discussion in Miller and Chonpairot [14]. Due to the brevity of the sample text the numbers in both tables are given in absolutes.

Table 1. The rendition of consonants

Consonant	<	<	<	<	<	<c
Aspirated (/p/, /t/, /k/)	9	-	6	-	2	3
Unaspirated (/bp/, /dt/, /g/)	4	-	1	-	4	-
Voiced (/b/, /d/)	-	3	-	3	-	-

Table 2. The rendition of tones

Tone	< >	< ˆ >	< ˆ ˆ >	< ˆ ˆ ˆ >
High	7	5	-	1
Rising	4	2	3	2
Mid	12	7	2	-
Falling	1	8	2	-
Low	17	-	4	-

Nevertheless, despite the shortcomings of La Loubère's transcription most words are easily identifiable thanks to the glosses he provides. Therefore, the commentary can focus on dubious cases that require more extensive discussion.

The Thai text arrived at by Komonbut [12] can be compared to later Thai translations of the Lord's Prayer as, e.g., the ones done by Pallegoix [15] and Bruguière [16] both of which are likewise printed in transcription. But in their re-edition of Bruguière's article Breazeale and Smithies [17] render his transliterated version of the prayer in Thai script. For a more comprehensive account of early Bible translations into Thai see Darlow and Moule [18].

Finally, it has to be pointed out that the Thai script itself contributes to the difficulty of the matter at hand. In principle the pronunciation of a Thai word can be derived from its spelling quite straightforwardly, but the opposite is not true in the same way. Not only is Thai spelling historic in that it preserves letters that are not pronounced, it also has multiple letters that represent one and the same phoneme. So even with a flawless transcription it would still be difficult to establish the underlying Thai spelling anyway.

The commentary provided here is necessary because Komonbut [12] does not comment on his rendition of the

Thai text. Neither does Jacq-Hergoualc'h [19] who devoted so lavish a commentary on the remainder of La Loubère's book venture to comment much on the linguistic content of it. So there is in fact no other previous commentary that the present one could build upon. This being said, the restored text can be attended to.

Sentence (10) is grammatical as it stands, but fails to exhibit the intended structure of an invocation followed by a relative clause ('Our father, who is in heaven'). Instead, it will most naturally be understood as a single assertive clause. The use of the pronoun เรา *rao* 'we' is problematic even by the standards of La Loubère's own sketch grammar, because there he states that it marks a certain superiority or dignity of the speaker [1] which seems inappropriate when the speaker is addressing God in a prayer. The pragmatics of Thai pronominal usage is discussed at length in [20–22], and [23]. The additional complications of pronominal usage in Bible translations are unfolded in [24–29]. Later translations insert the pronoun ข้าพระเจ้า *kâa-prá-jâo* instead which literally means 'His Majesty's servant' in order to aptly express the humility of the person praying in front of God.

The word *prâkot* (2) is easily identified as ปราบกฏ *bpraa-gòt* (11), although La Loubère's French gloss "glorifier" is slightly misleading. Pallegoix [30] translates it with: To be known, to be made manifest; evident.

In the case of *touái* (2), the gloss is on point, but the transliteration is slightly off. The closest word for 'offer' in Pallegoix [30] is ถวาย *tà-wǎai* (12).

With the word *pôn* (2) La Loubère's gloss "loüange" guides the way to the entry พอร *pon* 'benediction, blessing' in Pallegoix's dictionary [30]. In today's orthography, however, the word is spelled พร (12).

In (13) as well as in (15) and (17) the preposition แก่ *gâe* 'to' is employed as an indirect-object marker. Twice it is used in the phrase ให้ได้ แก่ เรา *hâi-dâai gâe rao* 'give (it) to us,' once it is governed by the verb ทำ บาป *tam bàap* 'commit sins (against us).' Although one might suspect that this juxtaposition was chosen because of its close alignment with the syntax of European languages, it is nevertheless intelligible and corresponds well enough to the intended meaning of the prayer.

Completely beyond comprehension, however, is sentence (14). The intended meaning ('Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven') is barely salvageable and no single intervention could render it intelligible. A combination of alterations is required to produce a meaningful sentence.

The word *ning* (4) glossed "conformément" in La Loubère's transcription is partly corroborated by *nung* in Bruguière's text [16]. Breazeale and Smithies [17] interpret this as the cardinal number หนึ่ง *nèung* 'one' and add a question mark, thus indicating that a numeral does not fit the context. Komonbut [12] elegantly and swiftly solves this puzzle by inserting (ประ)หนึ่ง (*bprà-)-nèung* 'as if.' Pallegoix [30] translates it with "As, just as."

Despite the gloss "Royaume" in (4) the transcription *Meüang* must be erroneous. If the prayer were to mention a kingdom it should not be an earthly kingdom, but the Heavenly Kingdom instead. So although in (3) the word เมือง *meuuang* 'kingdom' is properly placed, in (4) the similar

sounding word เหมือน *měuuan* 'like' is required to render the phrase 'so on earth as in heaven.' With these corrections (14) reads:

- (20) ให้แล้ว ประหนึ่ง ใจ พระ เหมือน แผ่นดิน เสมอ สวรรค์.  
*hâi-láew bprà-nèung jai prá měuuan pàen-din sà-měr*  
*sà-wǎn*  
 give-finish as-if heart God state earth as heaven  
 'give to us according to the will of God (on) earth so as (in) heaven.'

La Loubère glosses *semò* with "également" (4). The same word spelled *samo* reoccurs in Bruguière [16] with the gloss "comme." Breazeale and Smithies [17] correctly identify it as เสมอ *sà-měr* although its common meaning 'always' [31], [32], and [33] does not befit the context. The word reoccurs causing the same problem again in (7).

The word *koüan* (8) poses a different kind of problem. La Loubère glosses *koüan bap* with "cause de péché" (8). So *koüan* cannot be the transcription of ก๊วน *gúuan* 'gang' which otherwise would make some sort of sense in the context of the prayer, but does not fit the gloss at all. Komonbut [12] solves this problem by reading the prefix ความ *kwaam* that in combination with บาป *bàap* renders the abstract noun 'sin' (18). The conflation of *n* for *m* is phonetically tolerable, even though the distinction is phonemic in European languages. Final confirmation can be derived from Pallegoix [30] who lists "reason, affair" among the translations of ความ.

Another riddle is posed by *poun kiac* (9). Komonbut [12] correctly identifies it as พันจาก *pón jàak* 'deliver from' (19) and his identification is confirmed by Breazeale and Smithies [17] who interpret Bruguière's *phôn chac* similarly glossed "délivrer de" [16] in the same way. La Loubère's transcription <ki> for /tɛ/ is far off, but might be meant to reflect Italian *ci*. The transcription *poun* for พัน *pón*, on the other hand, is easily explicable by the close perceptual proximity of short closed *o* to *u*. One of the meanings of พัน *pón* according to Pallegoix [30] is "to be delivered" which corresponds perfectly to both La Loubère's and Bruguière's gloss.

Intriguingly, the transcription of อันตราย *an-dtà-raai* 'danger' (19) appears to generally be slightly off given La Loubère's *anerái* [1], Bruguière's *oïnnarai* [16], and Pallegoix's *annarai* [15].

One final point that should be made is that since this prayer was translated by a European who had not yet achieved full comprehension of the target language its language in itself reveals some of the prejudices that Europeans tended to harbor against the peoples of the East. As Low [34] puts it bluntly: "The Siamese have no definite grammatical rules." And the most charitable interpretation of this statement, namely that the Thai language lacks inflectional morphology, is expressly precluded by him mentioning the absence of rules specifically. Thus, Low adheres to a common trait in early descriptions of the Thai language that refuses to concede the existence of syntactic structure outside of European languages. His contemporary Crawford [35], for instance, muses: "The Siamese language is characterised by great simplicity of grammatical structure. It is destitute of inflexions, and hence its construction depends wholly upon

the principle of juxtaposition.” Qi [36] rightly calls out the European prejudice that primitive languages are indicative of primitive minds. The Europeans deem their own insufficient understanding of Thai syntax to be a defect of the Thai language. Hence translations by foreign translators result in Thai sentences grammatically so unacceptable that the Thai negotiators whom Crawford [35] interacts with, “displayed an uncommon repugnance towards making use of the interpreters of the Mission.” The same prejudice lurks behind La Loubère’s translation of the Lord’s Prayer.

The European gaze towards the East was and at times still is tainted by deeply ingrained prejudices that also distort the European view on the Eastern languages in general and on the Thai language in particular. What Crawford [35] says about the Indian languages is representative of the European gaze on all Eastern languages: “Eastern ideas may be rendered, without difficulty, into the copious and flexible languages of Europe; but to render the peculiar idioms and formalities of the languages of Europe into the meagre and obdurate dialects of India is altogether impracticable, except when we write with an express view to future translation, which is the safest course to pursue in our intercourse with the Eastern nations.”

#### V. CONCLUSION

Any attempt to restore a Thai text from a deficient transliteration has to face a number of challenges on different levels. Challenges of the transliteration include insufficient distinction of vowel and consonant phonemes and insufficient indication of tones. These combine with challenges inherent in the Thai writing system itself that include the impossibility of straightforwardly establishing the spelled out form of any given word on the basis of pronunciation alone.

In case of the Lord’s Prayer the challenges are partly remedied by the fact that the content of the prayer is known in advance and that an interlinear glossing is provided by La Loubère. His glosses help solve most of the puzzles that his transliteration poses. The most difficult puzzles, however, require consultation of other translations of the Lord’s Prayer in order to suggest probable solutions.

Komonbut’s rendition successfully reestablishes La Loubère’s Thai text of the Lord’s Prayer. As Komonbut himself has seen, some corrections are necessary to achieve a meaningful text. Hence he convincingly introduces (ประ)หนึ่ง (*bprà-)*nèung ‘as if’ in place of the otherwise nonsensical *ning*. To this I have added the introduction of เหมือน *měuuan* ‘like’ in place of เมือง *meuung* ‘kingdom’ in the same sentence (14). To be sure, despite these minor adaptations the resulting Thai text is yet miles away from an idiomatic translation. But these deficiencies must not be elided from a text that stands as a testimony of its time. They are historically conditioned by the circumstances of the text’s production and thus illustrate the low level of understanding that the unknown European translator has had of Thai syntax and semantics.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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