

## Lady Phad Aharn Borirak Chouto's Biography

My mother was born in the Ramkomut Family in 1863 or 87 years ago. My grandfather was a son of Phraya Ramronrarongsongkram (Bua), the governor of Kamphangphet, who was also given the title of Luang Aphai Sena, for he was one of the court's officials, working under King Rama 5's Royal Police Force, which is equivalent to King's Guard regiment today. He was appointed as one of the King's Guards under the Royal Police Force. Back then, the people who were selected to be in the force were exclusive descendants of high ranks officials. They would be working as chamberlains and royal guards, serving the King closely. The positions paid well and came with different responsibilities from supervising the collection of certain types of taxes such as the Sena (land tax) and Akorn (duties) certain areas or sub-districts. They were allowed to deduct a portion of the taxes for personal usage but must be mindful not to take the amount beyond the allowed rate. If there were times where the deducted sum exceeded the permitted amount, the King must be notified. If the King wasn't mad, he would let things slide. But the King's disapproval could mean the person being stripped off the title or even imprisonment. If the person was dead and an auditing investigation was initiated and revealed that he was in-debt to the state, the owned amount of money would be passed on to the descendants, or his family's assets could be confiscated. Ultimately, the remaining descendants and family members could end up not having a place to live. My grandfather did not face such predicament and his children and grandchildren still have lands and houses inherited through generations, until today.

Back then, court officials and civil servants were working in Bangkok, the country's capital city. They led a decent quality of life with their own lands, houses and social statuses. They enjoyed social activities including indoors sports. Those activities were not card games such as bridge or poker, which are something most gentlemen pick up as hobbies these days. One of the most popular gambling games at the time was Tueng Po, and my grandfather, like many other people from his peers and social cycle, was an avid player. They would visit gambling venues hosted at homes of the society's elites. When playing, a lawyer or a servant would follow him, carrying the coin bag since bank notes were not yet used at the time. Each bag contained 10 'chang' coins or around THB 800, and weighed up to 15 kilograms. If all the coins were used, my grandfather would tell the lawyer to go back home and bring more money. Considering the number of coins, he was spending on Po, he was quite a wealthy man. After he had passed, he left a good sum of money and lands for his children and grandchildren, and like I mentioned earlier, those assets have been inherited to the family's current generation.

My grandmother was born in a family of orchardists who settled around the northern part of Bangkok Yai Canal, at the mouth of the canal near Talat Plu neighbourhood known as Amphawa Noi Canal. The family house was there since the post war period after King Taksin sustained the victory over Burma and built the capital city in Thonburi. My grandmother's last name was Sarntraphai and her brother was Phraya Apai Pipit (Soon

Santraphai). He was the second Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs succeeding Phraya Racha Nupraphan (Soodjai Boonnark) when Prince Krom Phraya Dewawong Waroprakarn was the appointed minister.

People who owned and run orchards were known to not having any expenses, just income. My great grandfather was like that. In the later time of his life, my grandfather did not only own a considerable portion of lands in Talat Plu but at least 10 plots of durian orchards. The land he owned further along Bang Nam Chon Canal, which separated from the southern part of Bangkok Yai, adjacent to Amphawa Noi Canal, was home to 15-16 plots growing areca nuts and betel plants. With the lands that gave abundant produce along with the know-how and tools he had, my great grandfather had mastered dessert making to the point where it became a business with tens of merchants coming to the house both via land and canal to buy and resell his products to resell. He had quite a successful dessert business going on.

There wasn't any school for women to attend back then. Young female members of the families with connection to or related with the members of the royal family or court officials were often sent into the palace to train and learn about all the knowledge and etiquettes that noble ladies were required to attain. Some were chosen to be mistresses of the King and other members of the royal family, which was something the women and their parents considered as fortunate. My mother was no different. She was sent to the palace when she was of age and was under the wing of Tao Worachan (the mother of Prince Krom Khun Pitayalappruetthithada), who was a close relative to my grandmother. Her kindness and compassion had always been something my mother was forever grateful for.

My mother spent years in the palace. When she was in her teen, my great grandmother fell sick, causing her to leave the court life behind to tend to her grandmother, fulfilling her role as a good granddaughter. As the most favourite granddaughter, my mother did her best in taking care of her ailing grandmother until her last breath. She later took over my great grandmother's orchard business, harvesting and selling the produce, and continuing the prospering dessert business. It was probably why my mother was inherited a majority of my great grandmother's heritage including several plots of the orchards. It marked the beginning of my mother's role and reputation as one of the most prominent areca nut merchants almost throughout her life.

My father wasn't as wealthy but came from a long lineage of aristocrats. He was a man of brilliant talents and was working as a civil servant, serving as a permanent secretary even before he was given any titles and at a relatively young age. Back in the days, permanent secretaries had to be rewarded a Phraya title. Without it, my father would sign in official documents as Phueng Paladtoonchalong. It wasn't before long that he was given the title of Phraya Prachacheep Boribarn. His responsibility was to issue land title deeds and he later established the Department of Lands, which has contributed a great deal to the country governing system until today. With my mother's excellent business and asset management skills, and my father's talents and visions in civil services, they were a perfect

match with the right compatibility and balance. My father later expressed his intention to be married to my mother.

After their wedding, my mother moved from her house to a new place near the city center, partly perhaps for the convenience of my father's work. She had a floating raft docked in front of Phraya Pasasorn's house (now the office of the Department of Land Measurement) to the south of the river. There, she began trading other products in addition to areca nuts and desserts, continuing her grandmother's business. When the government still hadn't initiated import and export tax collection, the Thai Customs Department was established. The import tax was calculated, not by the price of an imported product but 3% of the value of the imported items. For the evaluation to be done conveniently, the 100 takes 3 tax method was initiated. For instance, for every 100 gallons of oil, the government would keep 3 gallons, which would later be sold at a cheaper price. My mother said that she contacted the Thai Customs Department and was able to buy several items with her credit. When she sold the products and made some profits, she would pay back whatever outstanding amount and buy more items simultaneously. She once said that the reason she made all these efforts to have this business deal was because she intended to purchase another house not too far from the city center so that the family could have an actual house where they could settle down. The idea for a new house was also from her concern over the safety of her son and daughter, who fell into water several times when they were young for, they didn't know how to swim. Her son once fell into the river and was fortunately saved. My mother jumped into the water and saved my brother from drowning 11 times herself. The business with the Customs Department came to an end when my mother made enough money to buy a piece of land and built a home that she would later live in until her last breath. My mother social status and etiquettes were impeccable. She had experiences from living in the palace during her teenage years. She was incredibly educated, particularly among her peers. Back to 60-70 years ago when education among women was not as widespread, she could write well, and had the poetic skill that was good enough for her to write proses and poetry. She wrote many of them on papers but many of them were lost through time. There were some evidences that were salvaged when Princess Krom Muen Pittaya Longhorn was fleeing the war and shared a shelter with my mother for a period of time. They grew close and she respected my mother like a relative, calling her aunt because my mother was her aunt in law. When the two conversed about poetry, they would talk in poems. The princess complimented my mother's health and how she still looked good even in her eighties, and how good her memories were. My mother simultaneously answered in rhymed verses:

*Please excuse my forgetfulness for that  
I am old and with a memory like sieve at times  
I might end up saying the wrong things, please don't mind.  
Your forgiveness is what I ask for if that is fine.*

At the fair celebrating Bangkok's 100 anniversary, many games were played including the Sakkrawa, where the noblemen and noblewomen would do poetic improvisations. My

mother was in charge of playing 'Tone Ramana' (hand drums played as a pair in Thai classical music) of the Sakkrawa band for the person was required to have the skill to improvise poetic verses.

My mother had developed quite a connection with the members of royal family, noblemen and women. In 1892, the Queen of King Rama 5 established the Red Cross Council as a charity institution, which would later evolve into the current Red Cross Organization. She had invited a number of Thai ladies to be the members and my mother was one of the founding members of the council. She was assigned the responsibility of making Thai medicine where she would mix different kinds of herbs, roll them into balls and wrap them in papers before storing them in caskets to have them sent to the front-line soldiers guarding the borders during the Siam-France conflict in 1893. She was then joined the Red Cross Organization as one of the members. She contributed to the organization as much as her ability would allow, and the Red Cross Organization welcomed her as one of the honorable members.

The celebration held on the occasion of King Rama 5's return from the Europe trip in 1897 (Queen Sawapha Phongsri (King Rama 6's mother) was the regency during His Majesty's time away from the capital) spanned over a 15-day duration. As a lady of high social status, my mother was invited to meet the King and Queen several times. The balls were hosted by the associations and clubs under different ministries and departments to celebrate the joyous occasion. Socialites were invited to join the event, and open their shops at Sanam Luang where they sold a wide variety of food and household items that were free for the invited guests. My mother's shop sold afternoon tea paired with different types of Thai desserts instead of cakes and breads. She made everything from scratch with most of the ingredient being the produces from her lands and orchards, making the production cost relatively lower. She used to reminisce how she had to had her clothes tailored, using expensive fabric and materials. The entire attires, from dresses, socks to shoes would cost at least two-three thousands bath but she spent no more than three hundred baht on the socks and shoes. The sister of Krom Muen Pittayalongkorn was known for her excellent tailoring skills and she was kind enough to design and make the clothes my mother would wear at the fair. When she was tending her shop, King Rama 5 stopped by to pay a visit. When he was informed that all the deserts were the handiwork of my mother, he complimented her about her contribution. She was thrilled and grateful for a compliment from the King meant great honor and auspicious fortune.

My mother was inherited several plots orchards in Bang Nam Chon Canal from her great grandparents. Her orchards produced tens of thousands raw areca nuts per year. Despite the attempt to sell all the harvested produces, there were tens of thousands of excess yields, forcing her to come up with a way to turn the raw ingredients into dried products. The homemade dried areca nut industry was born, as she later grew to become the merchant with the largest areca nut warehouse in Thonburi.

Her products were truly homemade. Everyone living in the household had to help making

dried areca nut, including all of her daughters, sons and my father, all following my mother's wish for their contribution in the business. My father had provided several helpful opinions that would help dry the nuts even on the day where there was no sunlight. He designed a simple stove to roast the harvested nuts, taking the inspiration from Hunsley and Palmer's oven he came across when he was studying in England back in 1885. All the empty and unused spaces in the house were turned into storage areas. Even after she quit the areca nut business, the containers used to store the nuts and corrugated galvanized sheets used for the warehouse's roofing were later sold after the war was over, earning tens of thousands of baht in return.

My mother's household industry and her persuasion that ended up training her children to help out with the business were all parts of her intention to train her unemployed children about the responsibility of working. She hated seeing her children working outside of her home or socialize at friends' houses. She, however, encouraged us to attend social events hosted inside the palace, or by the high rank members of the court as well as the people in power. Her intention came into fruition when her children grew accustomed to working in the family business. The money they made in return became a motivation for them to work harder, resulting in the homemade dried areca nuts' prosperous success.

The business came to its end when the land where the areca nut orchards located on was expropriated. It was also the time when her health was beginning to deteriorate. The two doctors my mother had known and respected over the years, Khun Luang Boriban Wechakij, Khun Anuwat Wechakij and Colonel Dr. Shin Seributr provided the needed medical treatments and consultation. She also received great care from her children and relatives throughout the course of her illness. However, with her old age and ailing physical condition, the strength to her poor health was dwindling. In May of 1949, she was diagnosed with an intestine tumor and the only way to keep her going was to go through an operation. It was a high risk considering her age and health condition. Nonetheless, with the incredible talent of Dr. Udom Posakrissana, her operation at Siriraj Hospital went well. In the first 7-8 months of her recovery, she was doing well and her health almost went back to normal. During that period, she was able to spend time with her children and even welcomed her great grandchildren. Sadly, she relapsed and passed away on May 11th, 1950, departing the world and her loved ones forever.

My mother was our heart and our rock. If leaving this world means being able to be in a happier place, she would prefer it that way. Throughout her life, she deserved to be appreciated, not only for her amazing role as a mother who had provided a good, happy life to all her children (her youngest is now 50 years old and we are all reasonably happy), but for her many contributions and the good deeds she had done throughout her life. Those who had come to know her would undeniably agree. Despite having to look after the business and the family after the passing of my father, my mother would always find time for Dharma practice with Phra Putthakosajarn at Thepsirin Temple. As her health grew weaker, she continued the practice every day at Hong Rattananaram Temple near our house. In addition to her contribution to the Buddhist faith, she had always been consistent

in helping those in need.

For her funeral, we all agree to the making of this book as a memory for the people who had known my mother. Nuengnoi Chou-to wrote a prose from Phra Roung and gave it to Prince Muen Pittaya Longhorn to read when he was alive. He was pleased and provided some suggestions and explanations. With the book written by her youngest child, we thought it would be the perfect gift for her funeral. If there was any possible way for her departed soul to know this, we think she would be incredibly glad.

The Northern Charoenpas Residence

Thonburi

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Lady Phad Aharn Borirak Chouto's Biography

Written by Miss Neungnoi Chouto (a daughter of Lady Phad Aharn Borirak Chouto)

Taken from a book given as a remembrance gift of Lady Phad Aharn Borirak Chouto's cremation ceremony held at Trimitr Wittayaram Temple on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1951.