

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND PROMOTION IN THAILAND

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### BACKGROUND

If culture is interpreted as a way of life, then we are faced with a dilemma as to whether it is possible at all to direct and shape the course of cultural development or whether culture should be left to develop in its own natural way. At various intervals, official actions have been taken in Thailand to direct cultural development on the national level, and it has

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to be admitted that the annals of Thai history contain a fair number of noble failures in this direction. During the Second World War, the Government went so far as to initiate a series of edicts whose stipulations included such prescriptions as the way one should dress or address each other in day-to-day conversations. The post-war period saw the establishment of a short-lived Ministry of Culture which, after an existence of barely six years, dwindled into a Division within the Department of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Education. As recently as 1979, a new Act of Parliament was promulgated which led to the creation of an Office of the National Cultural Committee within the Ministry of Education. The Office has been entrusted with a number of onerous responsibilities which include such quixotic tasks as "to undertake projects and initiate plans to prevent (sic) and solve problems related to national culture."<sup>(1)</sup> This may be a statement that might baffle many a serious-minded anthropologist, but whatever be the merits or demerits of the "normative" efforts outlined above, one can detect a consistency in the Thai official thinking, a consistency that is marked by a belief in the possibility of cultural

totally absent from the mind of the master-builders of our higher education, their prime concern was of a more pragmatic nature: Thailand needed a cadre of professionals and civil servants, needed them badly and quickly, for the purpose of modernization, and we were dead serious about it, since we linked modernization with the safeguarding of our independence from belligerent western powers. The earliest institutions created were professional schools: the Medical School in 1889, the Law School in 1897, the Royal Pages School in 1902 (re-organized in 1910 as the College for Civil Servants), and the Engineering School in 1913. Our first University, Chulalongkorn, was created in 1916, being primarily an amalgamation of the existing professional schools (with the exception of the Law School) with the newly created School of Arts and Sciences and that of Public Administration. Although the Royal Proclamation of 26 March 1916 clearly stipulates that the new institution was established "to give opportunity of education not only to those who intend to enter the Civil Service, but also to those who wish to pursue higher studies for their own sake"<sup>(3)</sup> -thus paving the way for a truly "liberal" education -, few educators of the ensuing generation fully appreciated the message of the Oxonian King Rama VI, and subsequent development in the 30's and the 40's of the present century confirmed the adherence to the utilitarian concept of higher education. Some Ministries created their own staff colleges which were labelled as "universities". Thus the Ministry of Agriculture had under its tutelage the "University of Agriculture" (now Kasetsart University); the Ministry of Public Health oversaw the "University of Medical Sciences" (now Mahidol University); and the Department of Fine Arts ran its own "University of Fine Arts" (now Silpakorn University).

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Thai universities have not managed to make headway is that of the Liberal Arts" and that "our Faculties of Arts have always been accused of complacency and smug traditionalism and scorned by most men-students as intellectual deserts fit to accommodate only the weaker sex."<sup>(4)</sup> The situation has not improved very much in a matter of a decade. Not that there has been no effort to reform Thai higher education or to "liberalize" it from the "professional" yoke, but whether we like it or not, the pursuit of excellence could better be carried out in the laboratories or workshops of our professional schools than in our libraries or archives, for being pragmatic as we are, we need tangible results to convince ourselves of our own prowess. Stupendous advances have been made by our universities in such fields as the agricultural and the medical sciences. It appears that the kind of aristocratic and leisurely pursuit of cultural enrichment envisioned by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj might not be the ideal the contemporary university man would be looking for. Deeply engaged in a "project" of staggering complexity and sophistication, would he have time to think about the role of his University in the preservation and promotion of culture?

#### UNIVERSITY LIFE

Rapid changes have taken place in the way of campus life over the past decade that it has become extremely difficult for the chronicler of Thai higher education even to record these changes, let alone to interpret or evaluate them. The main change-agent has, of course, been the student. A decade ago a Professor of Physics at Chulalongkorn University was able to remark that "the students are here to study as little as possible and to play as much as they can."<sup>(5)</sup> The Professor has, of course, in the meantime changed his attitude about the "playfulness" of his students. Recent events, political and

or that of Vice-Rector for Student Affairs has been created in all Thai institutions of higher learning, and in the current fiscal year, the Government has allocated a "Special Fund" of \$ 20,000,000 to support student activities in the field of rural development and social welfare. Some cynics have remarked that the Office of Dean of Students had been strengthened as part of national security measures, and that in many instances, the Government was using "culture" as an antidote against student activism. But the fact remains that the revivification of campus life is entirely in consonance with our philosophy of higher education. It is up to the universities themselves to see to it that they are not being used as political instruments. The major obstacle besetting the universities is not essentially that of funding. What they lack is a teaching staff which is willing to be more than just classroom instructors. We need teachers who are willing to devote themselves to their students, people who are humanely literate and who know how to perform the function of the traditional Thai teacher, that of the transmitter of a culture.

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#### CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND PROMOTION - A NEW FUNCTION?

It cannot be said that Thai institutions of higher learning have not been contributing towards cultural preservation and cultural promotion, but what they have done is usually integrated into the pattern of campus life, more often than not, unorganized and with no specific, definable or identifiable "programme objectives". Teachers Colleges, (which only recently have been admitted into the "higher education" system) have been taking the lead in this direction. It appears as though our educators had automatically linked the function of cultural preservation and promotion to teacher training. There is another characteristic of these teacher training institutions that is worth noting. Situated

Thai universities have not managed to make headway is that of the "Liberal Arts" and that "our Faculties of Arts have always been accused of complacency and smug traditionalism and scorned by most men-students as intellectual deserts fit to accommodate only the weaker sex."<sup>(4)</sup> The situation has not improved very much in a matter of a decade. Not that there has been no effort to reform Thai higher education or to "liberalize" it from the "professional" yoke, but whether we like it or not, the pursuit of excellence could better be carried out in the laboratories or workshops of our professional schools than in our libraries or archives, for being pragmatic as we are, we need tangible results to convince ourselves of our own prowess. Stupendous advances have been made by our universities in such fields as the agricultural and the medical sciences. It appears that the kind of aristocratic and leisurely pursuit of cultural enrichment envisioned by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj might not be the ideal the contemporary university man would be looking for. Deeply engaged in a "project" of staggering complexity and sophistication, would he have time to think about the role of his University in the preservation and promotion of culture?

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mostly in the provinces, they have always maintained an intimate link with local communities and have imbibed the riches of local cultures, the intermediaries being the students themselves who are almost entirely "provincials" in the best sense of the word. The same pattern may be discerned in some of the universities, especially those in the provinces. Judging from the data submitted by the universities in their Status Reports on the Fourth Five-Year Development Plan (1977-1981),<sup>(8)</sup> provincial universities seem to have been more active than their Bangkok counterparts. The Universities in Konkaen, Mahasarakam, Chiengmai, Songkla and Pattani have reported extensively on their activities in the preservation and promotion of culture, particularly of local culture. One particular feature about the activities undertaken by the Universities as distinct from those of the Teachers Colleges is that the Universities tend to place a great deal of emphasis on the "scholarly" type of activities such as research. This may have happened by design as well as by default. With the main bulk of the student body coming from Bangkok or from schools in Bangkok - the "original sin" of our secondary education system and the joint university entrance system -

the provincial universities have not yet been able to integrate with the local communities as the Teachers Colleges have been able to do. This factor may partly explain the "scholarly" approach adopted by our provincial universities. Universities in Bangkok, on the other hand, being more cosmopolitan in nature, do take a great deal for granted by way of cultural development and have not felt an urge to institute or organize cultural programmes as have the institutions of higher learning located in the provinces.

It can be concluded that with or without policy directives, our institutions of higher learning have been performing the function of cultural preservation and promotion, but this has been an i m p l i c i t function. It was only in the process of formulation of the Fourth Educational Development Plan (1977-

1981) that this was made an explicit function of higher education. When the concept emerged with the recommendations of the "Educational Reform Committee", it was defined as "activities in art and culture to inculcate aesthetic and moral values among the students and the people".<sup>(9)</sup> This rather "arty" interpretation of culture was to lead to a number of confusions as well as resistance from hard-core technocrats within our own higher education system, but one has to admit that it is an interpretation which is in keeping with the traditional way of thinking of the Thai.

The term "culture" as it is used by most people in Thailand has an evaluative and normative ring. Culture evokes in their minds select customs and habits, exemplary patterns of life that ought to be perpetuated. Being an old kingdom which has survived the threats of colonization, Thailand looks back into history with a certain national pride, and when M.R. Kukrit talked about "the consciousness of being Thai" and of "Thai values", he was being unabashedly traditional, conservative and patriotic. So when we assign the function of "preserving" culture to our educational institutions, like the university, we expect them to know what they should be doing. The "preserving" function, indeed, does not present theoretical and conceptual difficulties as does the "promoting" function, but there exists a fallacy that not all educators have been able to avoid, and that is the usual temptation towards indiscriminate antiquarianism. In some circles, a new trinity of values has emerged, namely, that of "the old, the good and the beautiful."

This leads to the usual pairing of "art and culture" which figures prominently in policy formulations. It has never been the intention of Thai scholars, administrators or policy-makers to head for that notorious polarity of "two cultures", which has been the subject of heated debates in the west.<sup>(10)</sup> The high

estimation of "art" does not necessarily entail a denigration of science. "Art" to the Thai means everything that is a manifestation of the creative urge of man, and this could include technology. Artistic creations are then the supreme expression of culture.

Since Thai traditional artistic creations could easily be subsumed under the western category of "fine arts", some people have jumped to the simplistic conclusion that "art and culture" is a notion that excludes science. Another factor has added to the confusion: since the scientific revolution and the industrial revolution are not indigenous to Thailand, it has been assumed that the frontier of Thai "culture" does not extend to cover science and technology.

#### CURRENT ACTIVITIES

The information contained in the Status Reports submitted by the various Universities on their Fourth Development Plan does reflect the definitional uncertainties as described above. The kinds of "projects" in the preservation and promotion of culture undertaken by the Universities show a certain bias for a few distinctive types of programmes, such as those related to the fine arts and folklore. Prince of Songkla University operates an "Institute of Southern Studies" whose programme includes the development of a museum of ethnology; research on the "art and culture" of the South; and tourist promotion for the South.

Konkaen University Report contains data on the activities of the "Centre for North-Eastern Culture" which include such projects as seminars on north-eastern culture; filming of local customs and festivities; research on folk-literature; and publications on Thai culture. One can discern definite patterns in the activities of these two Universities, which are markedly "provincial", relating to the local communities and in certain respects, folkloristic.

Reports from the Universities located in Bangkok do not give such a clear picture, and it must be admitted that the information

provided is rather scanty and may not represent what is actually going on. Thammasat University, for example, gives a list of research projects proposed to the "Institute of Thai Studies" for funding support, and it is not possible to glean from this list any discernable orientation, since it contains such titles as "An Index of Literary Works", "Thai Worldview as Reflected in the Didactic Literature of the Sukothai Period" as well as "The Ayuthya-Style of Thai Painting." Projects classified under the category of cultural preservation and promotion submitted by Chulalongkorn University include cultural tours to historic sites, dramatic performances of exclusively western plays, and an engineering survey on the inundation of the Royal Chapel. Silpakorn University (originally the University of Fine Arts) proudly announces the opening of its very first Art Gallery after 36 years of existence. Srinakarinwirot University (formerly the College of Education) recounts with a measure of self-congratulation the successes of its classical orchestra during its European tours. This kaleidoscope of efforts made by our Universities to fulfil its function of cultural preservation and promotion testifies to the fact that they have become conscious of the importance of this "new" function of the University. Some of them, however, are still at a loss as to how to organize these activities and to put them into a coherent "development plan". One unifying thread runs through the Reports of all Universities: they all report that although the various "projects" have been approved by the Government, funding has not been made available by the Budget Bureau. Perhaps only lip-service is being paid to the strengthening of this new function of the Thai university. <sup>(11)</sup>

A number of questions arise as to the extent to which the university should be expected to assume the responsibility of cultural propagation and preservation. It has to be realized that the university cannot carry out fully the function of an

operating agency. To cite a specific example: the Rector of a University which runs a programme in archaeology was questioned by the Parliamentary Finance Committee as to why his University had not taken over projects in the restoration of historical monuments. It took him some time to explain the function of his University and the responsibility of the competent authority in this field, namely, the Department of Fine Arts. This does not mean that a university should not accept "commissioned" projects if equipped to do so. But in the area of cultural preservation and promotion, the university cannot aspire to act as the engineer in the actual operation work. It should be content to perform the duty of a designer, planner and architect. It should be fully aware of the cultural heritage; it should be able to analyse, appraise, evaluate and synthesize the cultural riches of its own society and other societies. It should serve as a repository of great thoughts and values. It should have the courage to offer intellectual leadership even when nobody asks for it. To be able to do this, it needs to refine its own internal mechanisms as well as to open its doors to all winds of change. But it must know what it wants. It must be firm in its pursuit of the ideal. Higher education in Thailand is comparatively young when viewed in an international context. Credibility cannot come over-night. Thai students may have overreached themselves in trying to redress the wrongs of their society. Our analysis of the current activities in cultural preservation and promotion contains an internal flaw: the official reports tell us far too little about student activities in the way of cultural activities and promotion. We ought to know more.

#### A NEW DRIVE TOWARDS LIBERAL EDUCATION

A freshman entering a university for the first time may be told by his Adviser that he has 30 credits of the "General Studies Curriculum" to complete and that these requirements are set by the

versity that one learns to educate oneself "informally". A great university is a cultural forum where one learns how to learn (13) and where one enriches others intellectually and spiritually. A vigorous campus life is an integral part of the process of education. Liberal education cannot be interpreted solely in terms of curricular offerings. It is only when a university takes full cognizance of its role as the conservator and promoter of culture and cultural values that it can respond positively and constructively to the call of liberal education. No false move of any kind was made when the function of cultural preservation and promotion was officially adopted for the Fourth Educational Development Plan. It should have been adopted much earlier!

#### THE THAI UNIVERSITY IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

A western scholar of Thai higher education once remarked that the "utilitarian stream is here to stay...But it is a utilitarianism that must make room for the humanities, lest it be reduced simply to vocationalism without education." (14) Experience has shown that our students are not particularly concerned as to what belongs to the realm of the humanities, what constitutes the social sciences, or what can be classified under the natural sciences or the applied sciences. Apart from their concern for job opportunities, they would only be attracted to the kind of intellectual experience that means something to them. The charge levelled against a humanist not knowing how to teach science students is usually countered by a criticism against scientists who do not know how to teach generalists. The most critical problem confronting Thai educators today is how to make members of the university community, be they teachers or students, accept the basic educational philosophy that there is a common pool of cultural experience which they all can share and to which they all can contribute. There may be various ways of arriving at that goal.

Scholars of higher education have been trying to eliminate that notorious dichotomy of "two cultures". One British scholar, Sir Eric Ashby, has something to say that may be of relevance to the situation in Thailand as well:

"A case could be made, therefore, for including technology among the ingredients of a liberal education. But technology in universities could be made to play a far more important part than this: it could become the cement between science and humanism. Far from being an unassimilated activity in universities, it could become the agent for assimilating the traditional function of the university into the new age. For technology is inseparable from men and communities...technology concerns the applications of science to the needs of man and society. Therefore technology is inseparable from humanism."<sup>(15)</sup>

It is not altogether impossible to strive for a happy union between humanism and technology in the Thai context. Under the section "Current Activities" above, there are some cultural programmes undertaken by the Universities which can well illustrate the point. Engineers from Chulalongkorn University who made an engineering survey on the inundation of the Royal Chapel cannot possibly have remained immune to the cultural and aesthetic value of that historic edifice. Lecturers and students of Konkaen University who appreciated the local customs of the North-East and wanted to record, analyze and disseminate the cultural manifestations of the local people would not have been able to achieve their purpose without technology and the co-operation of technologists. Some traditional "humanistic" disciplines like archaeology now involve the use of sophisticated technology. It is in the particular area of the preservation and propagation of culture that the role of technology is being fully appreciated and

Office of University Affairs. If the Adviser is not particularly sympathetic to this programme of General Studies, he may in all probability intimate to his Advisee that the whole thing had been "imposed" from above. Very few Advisers take the trouble to explain the philosophy underlying the General Studies Curriculum, and some of them may not even know that such a philosophical basis does exist. A Dean of Science recently remarked that "we have lost 30 credits!" It has to be admitted that on the whole the General Studies Curriculum has been tolerated rather than accepted in Thai university circle.

Yet the original architects of this scheme were serious-minded educators who knew what they were aiming at. The new drive towards liberal education, which found one of its expressions in the instituting of the General Studies, was part and parcel of the aspiration to make the university the conservator and propagator of culture. To achieve that end, we must work towards the ideal of the "complete man". Some of these educators were talking about de-emphasizing the role of the university in training "manpower" and re-emphasizing the task of the university in creating "manhood" (sic), by which they were re-introducing the old concept of "Bildung" into Thai higher education. All the institutions of higher learning do not interpret "liberal education" in the same way. Strange revelations and even confessions were made at a recent Seminar on the General Studies Curriculum (August 1979) attended by representatives of all Universities and Private Colleges. Ingenious ways had been found to comply with the Guidelines laid down by the Office of University Affairs; for example, one Institute of Technology included a course in Industrial Management as part of its "liberal education" programme, since the course could be classified under "Social Sciences" in keeping with the requirements for General Studies. But on purely philosophical and theoretical grounds, it is not altogether impossible to devise broad guidelines for such General Studies. The nebulous

idealism of the following set of objectives proposed by a Thai University will serve to illustrate the point:

"General Objectives

1. Create an awareness in the self, the relationship between the individual and his environment; create an understanding of the underlying principles of human society; and encourage the exploration of ways and means of ensuring the survival of mankind.
2. Instil confidence in man's ability to create and awaken the consciousness of the various obstacles impeding intellectual and spiritual growth; create the ability to solve problems through rational, peaceful means and in consonance with moral principles.
3. Create open-mindedness, thirst for knowledge, intellectual curiosity and an understanding of the important foundations of human knowledge; develop the capacity to apply one's knowledge to leading a good life and contributing positively towards one's society.
4. Create the ability to communicate, to foster a good understanding among individuals, groups and communities both at the national and international levels." (12)

If these are to be the ideal objectives for educating the "complete man", the mechanisms for such an "education" will not be found in the conventional classroom. Formal modes of instruction will certainly prove to be defective. Can one really "teach" such a programme? The problem facing the contemporary Thai university is that it is not as yet sufficiently equipped to engage in such ambitious educational endeavours. Where would they find the right "teachers" with such breadth of sympathies and depth of understanding? It is more from the "cultural life" of a uni-

utilized. Great works of art are now accessible to the international public through reproductions. We can no longer say that in a university community, subjects in the fine arts are of particular concern only to art students and humanists. Without the work of technologists, we would not be where we are today. Technology has become an integral part of our learning process, and it is here to stay. The great challenge for Thai higher education, with the advent of the "open" system, is how to utilize technology effectively in the education of a great mass of learners. The cultural life of the university will certainly change, and new patterns of relationships, different from those depicted by M.R. Kukrit, will emerge. But it is in the fulfilment of the function of cultural preservation and propagation that the Thai university may hope to make great strides, but on one condition - that it knows how to humanize technology. (16)

#### EPILOGUE

We may have travelled a fair distance from the ideal of intimate clannish transmission of culture described by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj to the technology-based system of cultural and educational transmission proposed by the pundits of the "open university". But there are certain characteristics which mark our efforts at all stages. Unlike some of our neighbours who have had to adopt highly structured cultural policies to serve as a prop for the building of a new nation, the Thai may not be so culture-conscious and tend to take things for granted. This attitude is reflected in the way the Thai university has been dealing with the preservation and promotion of culture, namely, nonchalantly and without over-exerting itself. Mindful of the elusiveness of culture, we tend to be chary of having to organize, or direct, or worst of all, to "institutionalize" cultural activities. To have to "plan" a "project" according to a set format

is loathsome to many of our university people. We still adhere to the "informal" nature of cultural transmission. The many abortive efforts at the "official" level recounted in the first section of this paper bear witness to this characteristic trait of Thai life. The rather scanty reports submitted by the various Universities cannot be taken to mean that little is going on in the way of cultural promotion. It must be admitted that one can go too far in this direction. It cannot always be assumed that the self-generating, self-perpetuating and self-correcting devices inherent in our own culture will always continue to function smoothly along their own natural course. The self-congratulatory attitude of being the only uninterrupted culture in Southeast Asia may lead to pernicious parochialism. The Thai university has a "critical" function to perform here. The astronomer-philosopher Ravi Bhavilai has argued this point most convincingly:

"The university

Being a repository of the intellect, wisdom and skills  
Must take over a heavy responsibility  
Through its depth of perception and breadth of knowledge  
Which it has been accumulating in accordance with its goal  
To know exactly and clearly  
The roots, conditions and evolution  
Of Thai civilization and culture  
Embracing what is timeless  
And what is conditioned by time  
So that what is known may determine  
The desirable path for the civilization and culture  
Of Thailand today."<sup>(17)</sup>

This, in a nutshell, may represent the latest thinking of Thai educators on the role of cultural preservation and promotion of Thai universities.

## NOTES

1. The National Cultural Committee Act (1979), Article 9(4).
2. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj: Education and Culture, in: Education in Thailand - A Century of Experience, Ministry of Education, Bangkok, 1970, p. 52.
3. See: Chetana Nagavajara: The Problems of University Education in Thailand, in: Southeast Asia in the Modern World, edited by Bernhard Grossmann, (Schriften des Instituts für Asienkunde in Hamburg, Volume 33), Wiesbaden, 1972, p. 92.
4. Ibid., p. 94.
5. Ibid., p. 97.
6. See: Sir Eric Ashby: Technology and the Academics - An Essay on Universities and the Scientific Revolution, London, Macmillan, 1959, p. 80.
7. The Australian National University (A.N.U.) divides up responsibilities between the School of General Studies and the Institute of Advanced Studies. The new Tsukuba University of Japan appoints its faculty to the various "Institutes".
8. Advance data were accessible to the author of the present paper through the kind co-operation of the Planning Division of the Office of University Affairs.
9. Report of the Educational Reform Committee (Thai version), Bangkok, 1977, p. 158.
10. On the controversy between F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow, see:

Lionel Trilling: The Leavis-Snow Controversy, in: Beyond Culture, Peregrine Books, 1967.

11. The "Special Fund" of ₩ 20,000,000 is destined for the support of student activities in welfare and rural development only, and must be treated separately.
12. Quoted from the Curriculum for General Studies, Silpakorn University, October 1979.
13. Ray C. Downs: The Meaning and Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education in Thailand Today, in: Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue, May 1979, p.23.
14. Ibid., p. 23.
15. Sir Erich Ashby: op. cit., p. 82.
16. Experience in Thailand has confirmed Sir Eric Ashby's argument about the distinction between pure science and technology, for resistance to the drive towards liberal education has come more from natural scientists than technologists. Sir Eric has an answer which could as well apply to the Thai context:

"In this respect, technology differs from pure science. It is the essence of the scientific method that the human element must be eliminated. Science does not dispense with values but it does eliminate the variability of human response to values. It describes, measures, and classifies in such a way that variation due to human judgment is eliminated." (op.cit., p. 82)
17. Ravi Bhavilai : The University and Culture, Paper presented at a Seminar on the Fifth Development Plan organized by Chulalongkorn University, December 1979, (advance mimeographed copy), p. 7. (The translation is by the author of the present paper).