

THE ROLE OF THE GOETHE INSTITUTE AND ITS CULTURAL POLICY IN THAILAND*

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* The speech of Dr. Klaus Neuser delivered at the Faculty of Arts on the occasion of its 10th anniversary. It is printed on his permission

First of all I apologize for speaking in English and not in Thai to you. For the director of an institute which among other items stands for the promotion of the German language in Thailand the use of the Thai language would be more appropriate. Although being able to speak and write Thai fairly well, I am afraid I would not manage to speak in Thai about a subject which even in German would require a brainstorming team.

I have been asked to lecture about the Goethe-Institut in general and its cultural policy in Thailand in particular. The first thing is easy, because I am already 24 years in the service of the Goethe-Institut. The second is difficult unless I give you just a matter-of-fact description of what we do and what we don't do. Speaking before an academic audience, however, I prefer to present the above-mentioned topic from a more academic point of view, that is to say, I shall try to x-ray things a little. Whenever in the course of my lecture

things reach beyond my mental horizon I shall honestly admit it and just leave the question with you. Then everyone has to find the answer for himself, because I don't know it or at least am not so sure of it.

The Goethe-Institut is an organization founded in 1932 with the aim to promote the teaching of German abroad and to promote international cultural cooperation. I mentioned the teaching of German in the first place and the promotion of international cultural cooperation in the second place. I did this on purpose, because the knowledge of foreign languages serves the international understanding among nations. The knowledge of foreign languages favours the cooperation and exchange among nations in the cultural, scientific, economic and technical field. Being able to speak a foreign language helps the individual in his or her development. Language is in my opinion the most important key to a thorough understanding of a foreign people and their

culture. Learning a foreign language is consequently the best way to do away with prejudices and to create friendship. Therefore, the teaching of foreign languages plays an eminent role in all educational systems all over the world.

Apart from the promotion of teaching German abroad the Goethe-Institut has made it a task to promote international cultural cooperation. The numerous branches of the Goethe-Institut abroad, therefore, offer information about the social and cultural life in the Federal Republic of Germany. They plan various activities and put them into practice together with counterparts in the host-country. As far as the counterparts are concerned the knowledge of German is not necessary, lectures, discussions which have been prepared, may be held in any language whatever.

All this may sound a little bit theoretical to you. In practice, a branch of a Goethe-Institut abroad helps to arrange tours of theatre and music groups; it arranges theatre performances of its own (for instance "Mugnok", a play for children from 7 to 70 years old); it arranges lectures and seminars by outstanding scholars (mostly in English); it arranges workshops and exhibitions of all kinds (paintings, toys for children, history of medicine), film shows; it grants scholarships, and it gives information about universities and living conditions in the Federal Republic of Germany. Finally, the Goethe-Institut in Thailand as well as in other countries maintains a comprehensive library including not only books,

but also films, tapes, records, slides etc. Most books in our library are intended to give up-to-date information about the cultural and social life in Germany. So-called "hot news" is excluded. This is the business of the Embassy. To underline the necessity of a mutual exchange of information our library also includes a number of books about Thailand, her people and culture, mainly for the use of the German community in Bangkok.

Altogether there are Goethe-Institutes in 69 different countries. In some countries you will find 5 or 6 Goethe-Institutes. Up to now there are no Goethe-Institutes in Communist countries.

Now I want to deal with some aspects of our cultural policy in Thailand. I just pointed out what the Goethe-Institut abroad is engaged in. I do not want to this enumeration, but rather talk about repeat the underlying problems.

1) A lecture about cultural policy in Thailand leads to a dilemma, unless we agree upon what cultural policy really means. What is culture? Personally I do not believe in culture as being confined to the so-called Fine Arts, that is music, literature etc. I conceive the term culture in the widest sense of the word. Culture, as I understand it, is everything that matters in life, that which enables people to live together in harmony. An example may explain what I mean: In our programme this month we have an exhibition of toys for children and at the same time a lecture on "Mass-Spectroscopy of Heavy Organic Molecules Their Application to Medicine and Environment Rese-

arch; If culture is defined the way I defined it, it is alive, something which is subject to continuing change and therefore cannot be standardized. So the Goethe-Institut has to keep its doors wide open for cultural developments within the host-country. It has to adapt itself to constantly changing problems and conditions.

2) It is of eminent importance for the Goethe-Institut not to limit its activities to a self-representation of what is German, but to respond also to questions and needs from the Thai. Why? As you all know, Thailand receives economic and financial help from Germany and other industrialized countries. This help in the economic field, however, does not contribute to a better understanding. It is apt to create distrust rather than confidence. The Goethe-Institut on the other hand does not want to play the part of the giver and our Thai friends should not play the part of the takers. To make it quite clear: the Goethe-Institut does not give cultural aid in the same way the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany grants financial aid to develop certain technical or agricultural projects in Thailand. The word cultural aid should not be used at all, because it is not synonymous with development aid. Financial aid given to develop projects in a developing country is to me completely different from the promotion of a better understanding between two peoples. Only a mutual give and take guarantees genuine partnership.

3) Such a firm, selfconfident partnership can only be reached if Thailand

succeeds in maintaining her cultural identity. We want one world, but we do not want a uniform world. Mankind needs multiformity. Mankind needs the specific contribution which each culture can contribute to the solution of the common problems in our world. We should bolster up the cultural identity of all nations and thus preserve the cultural heritage in its multiformity. Upon returning to Thailand after 15 years absence I feel deep concern about the decline of Thai Cultural identity. Can a country be industrialized at all without the loss of its cultural identity. Curiously enough, nobody seems to worry about the problem.

A foreign cultural institute like ours cannot close its eyes in the face of this development. The Goethe-Institut must encourage Thai artists, musicians and writers to find their own way of expressing their thoughts and feelings. So we have concerts of Thai music almost every month. An exhibition of paintings done by Thai artists can presently be viewed in the Institute, another exhibition featuring pictures done by a well-known Thai painter will be on view in January. An exhibition of Thai paintings was sent to Germany last year and was on view in all big cities of the Federal Republic. During the recent Metamusic-festival in Berlin Thai music was equally well represented. Finally we welcome a close cooperation with all institutions and persons who are doing research work on Thai culture.

4) The Goethe-Institut in Thailand works in a country with a language and

culture different from that of Germany. Germany is far away. This necessitates a comprehensive offer of information about Germany and a Thai-German dialogue. One way to meet this demand is the library. The other way must take the Thai language into account. It is important to stimulate translations from German into Thai and vice versa. Moreover, German journalists visiting Thailand should drop in on our institute, interview the director who on his part arranges contacts with interested Thai people. This fosters objective newspaper-articles and avoids one-sided, biased sensational stories in the German boulevard press. There is an inequality among the nations in the dissemination of news and all kinds of information. Most information is nowadays transmitted by news agencies working for either a western or eastern industrialized country. The news and opinions, therefore, stem from western or eastern mass-media. Consequently the world is split between those who give information and those who receive or consume information. This is a bad situation which has to be improved. There is, of course, little the Goethe-Institut can do about it. But I would like to stress that people in Thailand, for instance, should learn about the German way of life through their own mass-media.

5) The Goethe-Institut is not the only German institution working in Thailand. There are also many German technicians and experts working on different development projects. I think it

worth-while for Thai people to know why all these "farangs" are here and that these experts did not come to Thailand to amuse themselves in Bangkok they came because they are needed here. At the beginning of next year we shall launch an additional series of lectures about some of the development projects German experts are engaged in. The lectures will be given by Thai counterparts in the Thai language. One lecture will deal with the psychological problems stemming from Thai-German cooperation.

6) The Goethe-Institut is located in Bangkok. We are wondering whether it is possible to have some of our activities extended to the provinces. Thailand is a country in which the rural population makes up 85% of its people. People living up-country are culturally deprived. Perhaps they might be motivated to paint, to play on Thai musical instruments, to do some writing, to see a good film etc. Many a famous artist or author started his career in a lonely village.

7) Since my arrival in Bangkok I am surprised to observe that most people attending a lecture, an exhibition or a concert in our house belong to the upper class of society, to the elite. I often wonder if it is possible to attract also other groups of the population and have them participate in the process of development. 56% of the population in Thailand are under 21.

8) Speaking to Thai people I very often notice that to them I am first of all a "farang" a European and a German only in the second place. Perhaps we

should have not national cultural institutes but European institutes instead. There is much talk about European unity and the Common European Market, but in the cultural field things remain as they were. Nobody seems to reflect upon our common cultural heritage. A European Cultural Institute would be prepared to offer the best possible programme, because it would have at its disposal a budget, which would exceed by far the budget of each single foreign Cultural Institute.

I would like to finish my lecture

with a few sentences which may summarize all I have tried to say. The history as well as the evolution of mankind gives the industrialized countries no right to claim their culture as being exemplary or even superior to any other culture. The material superiority of the Western countries is due to an earlier beginning of the process of industrialization and was gained at the expense of many countries of the Third World. Genuine partnership is to me the only moral basis on which cultural policy abroad can thrive.