

THE ARTS AND CULTURE OF THAILAND : A PERSONAL VIEW*

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PREAMBLE : UNWHOLESOME DICHOTOMY

I could sense its coming, that notorious dichotomy between art and science. At a National Educational Planning Seminar in 1969 I was asked to submit a paper on the subject of "Current Status, Problems and Needs of Thai Culture", (a very demanding theme that only a young man would venture to address), and I made it a point to plead for a more integrative approach to the concept of culture, whereby science and technology should be considered as culture. ⁽¹⁾ I was chary of the art-science antithesis, having been in Europe at the time of the intellectual battle between F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow⁽²⁾ regarding "the two cultures" which I did not find very wholesome.

I am afraid the situation in Thailand has not improved at all over the past 22 years, for we are still locked in that rigid disciplinary *apartheid*. The reason why I have been invited to speak to this distinguished gathering is probably because people like to take me for a "humanist" and really believe that only a humanist has the right to talk about the arts and culture of a country with a long history like Thailand. I, therefore, feel that it might not altogether be a bad idea to begin with a deconstruction of the very theme I have been assigned to address.

Let me illustrate my scepticism of the mode of "thinking in opposites" with a con-

crete example. a sociologist colleague of mine was engaged in a research project on the subject of "Cultural Changes and Ethical Problems Related to Higher Education", which was to constitute a basis for a long-term higher education plan for Thailand. She and her co-researchers went to interview a number of distinguished professionals and executives both from the "humanist" and the "technologist" camps. The overall picture that emerged was rather sombre in the sense that the changes that had occurred under the impact of modernization had engendered serious ethical problems. One distinguished business executive with a science background expressed the view that could be representative of a fair number of decision-makers in contemporary Thailand, namely that it is not the responsibility of technology to be concerned with repercussions of ethical nature : scientists and technologists should be able to pursue their quest for scientific progress and technological advancement without being unduly perturbed by pangs of conscience. Modern society rests on specializations and divisions of responsibilities, and it should be left to non-technological "specialists", especially humanists and social scientists, to concern themselves with ethical problems and to find appropriate solutions therefore. The re-

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searchers finally came to the following conclusion :

... many Thai professionals seem to have been influenced by science and technology to the extent that they feel they do not have any ethical responsibility towards society in their work... Professional ethics seems to be lacking among graduates in many professional fields, as they think more of money-making than any social commitment or social responsibility.⁽³⁾

This is a rather harsh and honest verdict. But those familiar with Thai education can hardly deny that its original sin is probably its consumer character. On the whole we have been educated to become consumers of end-products. We tend to look at technology as a commodity that we can buy, originally from the West, but now from technologically advanced countries in The East as well. (I have heard colleagues in institutes of technology complain that they have trained their graduates to be able to think for themselves, but employers only want them to function as "catalogue engineers", good at "reading catalogues".) As modernization, mechanization and industrialization have advanced rather far, and as an economic boom has set in as a result of the aforementioned factors and flourishing international trade, the educational system readily bends itself to the demands of the "market", and a binary system, based on the dichotomy of art versus science, has ossified to the point of no return. We are now faced with a situation in which an educational segregation is being accepted as a *fait accompli*, with better students flocking into the science and technology stream, and either children of less privileged groups (hence less qualified) or, strange though it may seem, wealthy young ladies of good breeding not overly concerned with employment problems or prospects, filing

into the arts stream. There is no denying that the "cultural" side of scientific and technological achievements remains unknown to most of us. I shall have to repeat the point I made earlier that it is a dangerous thing to look at technology as a commodity, or at best as a tool, and not as culture, not as a way of life. We are paying a dear price for this misconception. The environmental problem alone--and Bangkok is the supreme example of an ecological nightmare--has become so grave as to defy solutions.

POETRY AS ENLIGHTENMENT

Now that I have demonstrated that the organizers have invited the wrong speaker for this session, I should proceed to deal with the topic of art and culture as they are usually conceived in this country, knowing full well that in the context of contemporary Thailand, the kind of salvage operation that colleagues love to assign to me to undertake does not show much promise. In the beginning was the work, and let us begin with a poem. It is called *A Poet's Pledge* written by the "doyen" of contemporary Thai poets, Angkarn Kalayanaphong. I shall quote only the last 6 stanzas which are relevant to the argument I hope to bring forward.

Let them all fly to the end of the firmament,
Taking the moon and the stars as their
illustrious path.

For me I shall continue to love this world,
devoting my heart to this earth till my end.

Never shall I desire to reach Nirvana⁽⁴⁾

But shall travel on in this cycle of birth and
rebirth,

Translating the real value of those multitudinous
stars

Into poetry dedicated to the universe.

For I desire to rid mankind of sufferings
Such that it will live forever in happiness.

Only then shall I disintegrate into dust,
Or fossils, keeping eternal watch on my
creation.

If life is bereft of the charm of poetry,
What other magic values can replace it ?
Every fragment of life will turn to dust
And ashes so frightful and pitiable.
If there is no place for poetry on earth,
I shall switch over to drawing rainbows on
the sky;
Bidding farewell to my beloved fellow
human beings,
I shall set my aim on creating a new uni-
verse of the mind.

Then all heavenly abodes
Will be imbued with the magic of poetry.
Merits can thus be made through artistic
creations
That will last till the end of time.⁽⁵⁾

Some of us might find this poem a hotchpotch of concepts, Western and Eastern, lumped together without much unity or system. Upon closer scrutiny we shall find certain coherent themes. The poem is not an outright rejection of Buddhist values; it merely tries to outdo them. Compassion is present all through, the poet's highest ideal being to alleviate the sufferings of his fellow human beings, which, after all, is the principal aim of Buddhism. But the way he sets about doing this may appear rather un-Buddhist. Angkarn's basic attitude deviates from Buddhism: he counters the Buddhist principle of *detachment* with that of *attachment*. According to Buddhist teachings, attachment is a cause of sufferings, but Angkarn professes attachment to *this* world. In other words, the poem is this-worldly and not other worldly. Life on earth can be blessed with happiness if it follows the dictates of poetry. So literature has usurped the one-time consecrated role of religion. Poetic creation becomes merit-making of the high-

est order. In Angkarn's system, poetry is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. It can even replace *Nirvana*. This is a big claim indeed.

Those who know Thailand well might immediately react: "This is typically Thai. It suits their pragmatic frame of mind. The Thai are a pleasure-loving people and are content with mundane things. They have managed to laicize and secularize Buddhism! But it would be unfair to accuse Angkarn of destructive thinking. The renunciation of *Nirvana* does not leave us with a spiritual vacuum. In its place a new pillar of spiritual strength has been erected, poetry. Although it may be true that even in traditional Thai literature, poets often expressed the wish that their work be blessed with long life, to set poetry against *Nirvana*, as Angkarn does, would have been considered an impertinence, a sacrilege, even. Whence does a contemporary poet in a conservative country like Thailand derive such immense courage to make such an unheard-of proposition? I have elsewhere suggested that although there are elements inherent in Thai culture that might have given our poet the kind of confidence that informs the lines quoted above, the most decisive impetus probably came from his Italian master, Prof. Silpa Bhirasri, founder of the University of Fine Arts, who settled in Thailand in the 1920's, became a naturalized Thai and wielded an immense influence on Thai contemporary art.⁽⁶⁾ In contradistinction to the "import" of Western commodities and technology, the case of Angkarn represents inter-cultural enrichment of the highest order. Foreign culture is absorbed, assimilated, re-thought, refined and integrated into indigenous cultural heritage. Be that as it may, we shall have to admit that such a self-assertive attitude of an artist may have been unthinkable in Thai society prior to 1932. Thai democracy has had a

rather chequered history, and cynics and conservatives like to sneer at it. Artists like Angkarn have done much to brave such backward-looking sneers. Some of us might even go so far as to say that it is not in the political arena, where power-mongers have been rampaging for half a century, that the spirit of democracy has been imbibed and upheld, but in the sanctuary of the arts. Angkarn very subtly expresses such sentiments :

Waste water in gutters by the roadside
Transforms itself into rain-clouds up in
heavens.

We who are from humble origin do aim at
excellence;

Soon we shall achieve wisdom that elevates
us to divine heights.⁽⁷⁾

THE VITALITY OF FOLK CULTRE

In the context of Thai culture, it is worthwhile to look to the arts for constructive changes and for the safeguard of fundamental human values. It would be interesting to see to what extent the strength of indigenous culture has contributed towards the vitality of Thai contemporary art. Let us turn to literature again. It is fortunate that *the oral tradition* has not completely died out. In this respect, conscious efforts on the part of the government, (as represented by the National Culture Commission), as well as the private sector, (as in the case of the Center for the Performing Arts supported by a commercial bank), have helped to keep it alive. I have in an earlier paper characterized the ethos of the oral tradition in the following way :

Much of our great "litterature" is improvised, never recorded, is appreciated and assimilated by the living public. It can even be collective work, a repartee between participants, or between performers and spectators, a testimony of true conviviality. Such a tradition is still alive in our society.

It leaves its heritage not always in the form of written text, for it does not recognize the sole supremacy of the text. It transfers its riches through human experience and contact, each generation seeking to perpetuate what it has inherited and to add to it something of its own. It is thus self-perpetuating and self-renewing. It never regrets its losses : the words that have been spoken have been spoken, they are not to be recovered, they are not regretted. Embedded in this tradition is the extreme confidence in the creative power of man which is not the exclusive property of any particular moment in history, or any particular generation.⁽⁸⁾

Those familiar with Thai history will realize that in the fall of Ayuthya in 1767 almost the entire corpus of written literature was destroyed. The re-writing and the restoration of literary master-pieces during the early years of the Bangkok period was only possible at all because of the oral tradition. Another important aspect of this traditional culture is the art of *improvisation*. Thai performing arts are marked by an improvisational character. Even the highly stylized court drama makes concessions to its "popular" origin and leaves room for improvisation, for example, in the form of dialogue. Folk drama until today relies heavily on improvisation. I can still vividly recall performances of folk theatre that I saw as a child. Audience participation was then a common practice. When an actor, improvising in verse, got stuck because he could not find a rhyme, a member of the audience would shout out a suggestion, which would be accepted or rejected by the actor as the case may be. In this connection, three characteristics are to be observed. First, the commitment to the improvisational nature of Thai art is a profession of faith in the inexhaustible power of renewal in artistic creation. Secondly, the obliteration of the divi-

ding line between performers and audience, sometimes between professionals and amateurs, provides a firm basis for a cohesive artistic community in which the principles of participation and collective responsibility reflect a truly democratic spirit. Thirdly, participation precludes all facile consumerism, for those who produce and those who consume are one and the same people. If only we had been made aware of these indigenous strengths, we would not have fallen a prey to such exacerbating commercialism in the media and entertainment business. That lapses from artistic heights are attributable to a disregard for these fundamental characteristics of Thai culture was more than adequately confirmed at the Ramayana International Festival organized in Bangkok in May 1991. For once we Thai were made aware of our own shortcomings, particularly with regard to the performances of our traditional dance drama. When compared with visiting troupes from South Asia and South-east Asia, Thai classical performers (and their choreographers) seemed to be stubbornly revelling in a stilted antiquarianism which could be explained through a lack of improvisational vitality and a deliberate distancing from the liveliness of folk manners.

AN AESTHETICS OF IMPROVISATION

Moving from literature and the performing arts to the visual arts, we can discern similar principles that underline Thai art. Traditional Thai painting has been conscientiously studied by foreign scholars, and two Western scholars, namely Klaus Wenk in Germany and Jean Boisselier in France, have made great contributions in bringing Thai visual arts, especially traditional painting and sculpture, to the attention of the international community. I do not want to sound too dogmatic, but I think that the vitality and liveliness of Thai mural painting are due to

an appreciable degree to its *improvisational character*. Looking at a Ramayana scene on a mural is like attending a performance of the masked drama *Ramakien*, in which a great deal of action is taking place on stage, accompanied by an equally lively narration (originally improvised). Though assuming the function of telling the grandiose Ramayana story or the pious *jataka* stories, Thai mural painting maintains a commitment to its cultural roots : one can always witness scenes from the daily life of the Thai people depicted with real gusto. This sense of contemporaneity may move in a different direction from a quest for permanence. The values inherent in the great stories depicted were naturally conceived as universal and eternal, but not the works of art in their physical manifestation which were created by mortals. Traditional Thai painters have often been criticized for their lack of interest in technical matters that has resulted in rapid deterioration of Thai paintings. We do not have to exculpate them on account of such technical laxity. They were Buddhists, fully conscious of the transiency of all things. But more important was their faith in *the improvisational power of the arts* : they knew they could always generate new works. The Thai have also been accused of negligence in the preservation of artistic patrimony. Old structures and walls of the former capital of Ayuthya were knocked down to provide building materials for the new capital of Bangkok. This was not considered as vandalism at all. The improvisational mentality was again at work.

Yet this bent for re-creating, for starting afresh, can have its negative effects too. Historians doing research on Thailand have often complained of archival deficiencies. Literary historians have discovered that the published versions of classical Thai literature were not faithfully edited and contain

new concoctions that cannot be philologically justified.⁽⁹⁾ The "improvisational" culture shows little regard for authorship, and the advent of international scholarly culture has not quite succeeded in eliminating "unauthorized" borrowing from university campuses, for they are not recognized as plagiarisms. An excuse can also be found through an analogy with the world of traditional Thai music. The concept of "composition" in traditional Thai music does not mean completely new creation. The court would borrow from folk music, adapt it, rewrite it into "new compositions", while the people would never hesitate to borrow back from the court. Variations on an old theme could be taken as an original composition. In short, we have been living in an artistic community in which a free-for-all give and take remains the rules of the game. It is extremely difficult to change such habits, and Thailand is notorious for cases of violation of patent and copy-right laws. Disregard for the question of intellectual property is becoming an issue of international dispute. I do not think that we can naively pretend that we are still living in a state of pristine innocence, for commercial exploitation thrives on such laxity. Commercialism and consumerism have more than disfigured Thai art. Quality is also affected, as business tycoons, with gigantic machinery of publicity, can easily dictate the tastes of idle consumers. A famous singer, in a recent interview, explained why he had stopped singing for 15 years; he was discussing songs to be recorded and, as usual, expressed his preferences for certain types of compositions to the manager of the recording company. The manager told him bluntly that the success of the recording had nothing to do with the singing ability of the artist but depended solely on the publicity campaign organized and paid for by the company. When techno-

logy and commercialism join hands, it is hard to stop them. What institutions or which individuals could serve as a safeguard for artistic quality? A Western response might be "criticism". The fact remains that criticism in Thailand does not enjoy the same status and privilege as in other more enlightened societies.

THE COURT AND THE PEOPLE

The absence of "quality control mechanism" may be the price one has to pay for "democracy" in the artistic domain. Traditional Thailand perhaps had an easier time in terms of having artistic standards to rely on. Such a situation may have had its pros and cons, but there is no denying that the royal court was at one time the "*Académie Thaïlandaise*" as well as the "*Académie des Beaux-Arts*". The Bangkok period can boast of monarchs who were themselves great artists and generous patrons of the arts. Thai people love to recall the glorious reign of King Rama II, whose artistic prowess and versatility were unrivalled. He was a poet, sculptor, musician, composer and choreographer who, besides, remained close to the people, (for he had been born a commoner). The folk dramas that he composed are deliberately "folksy" and show the kind of *improvisational facility* that I have spoken of earlier. People also remember his son, Rama III, who was called by his father a "businessman", and whose skills in external trade was such that so much wealth was generated for the treasury. He was a devout monarch with a very refined aesthetic sense. Here was a successful businessman who was highly cultivated, a great supporter of the arts, especially religious arts, the likes of whom have since disappeared. The famous stone inscriptions of Wat Pho were made at his behest, he himself contributing a few model poems. Three branches of knowledge were

taken up at this "university in stone", namely didactic verse, models of good poetry and medicinal prescriptions. There was no time to "improvise" then or to depend solely on the inexhaustible genius of Thai poets. Western colonial powers were knocking at the door, and the King had to think of conferring some degree of permanency on Thai traditional wisdom which might be swamped by Western "import". It is worth noting that literature figured prominently along with morality and good health in this cultural legacy. As for subsequent monarchs, they have all been distinguished artists in some ways, the present king being a highly recognized musician and composer. An American scholar of Thai Studies, Prof. William Gedney of the University of Michigan, has the following to say on this issue :

This traditional procedure for selecting a successor is of some interest to literature students because it suggests that it may be no accident that so many Chakri monarchs have had brilliant and creative intellectual and literary talents. One surmises that these qualities were probably among the factors that guided that choice in the process by which kings were selected⁽¹⁰⁾

THE TWAIN HAVE MET

The above remark may be an interpretation that Thai historians might hesitate to endorse. But whether we agree with William Gedney or not, he did help to drive home an important point about Thai culture, namely that the arts have played a very significant role in traditional Thai life. It is true that this is still a long way to the apotheosis of art as posited by Angkarn Kalayanaphong, but it cannot be denied that there are certain elements inherent in traditional Thai culture which could contribute towards everything to Western influence. Much has already been

written on the salubrious or pernicious effects of the West on Thai culture, and I do not propose to add to the confusion. My contention is that we should not generalize too far and blame the west for having caused havoc in the Thai artistic world. I have attempted to demonstrate in an earlier paper entitled "The Thai Popular Song and Its Literary Lineage" that great things have been achieved by Thai composers and lyricists in the genre of popular song which originated through contact with Western music. ⁽¹¹⁾ The new hybrid is not an artistic bastard at all, but a new artistic expression that can fathom great emotional depths. The same could be said about modern Thai painting and sculpture which fortunately have not been so "internationalized" as to have lost entirely their indigenous character. In recent years, there has emerged a new trend, especially in contemporary Thai painting, which tries to revivify traditional Thai painting both in content and style, while maintaining a link with Western techniques. Both these musicians and visual artists have been able to achieve highly satisfactory results because they know their own cultural roots while their grounding in Western art has been very thorough, (a legacy of the renowned Silpa Bhirasri, whom I mentioned earlier). In other words, there is no room for superficiality on either side, and they are in a position to enjoy the best of both worlds and to forge a new synthesis of their own. Angkarn Kalayanaphong, both as a painter and as a poet, is a supreme product of that happy marriage between East and West.

Yet we shall have to admit that there are enough examples that point in the opposite direction, particularly those artistic expressions that come to us through the intermediary of the various media. I do not deny the immense educational and cultural value of the media, if conscientiously managed. But as things stand in this country, the media, on

the whole, do not function as instruments of enlightenment, but with their craze for commercialism, try to blunt our critical acumen and to subjugate us to servile consumerism. The arts do suffer thereby. In one important respect, the media have given rise to a new personality cult that distorts the real value of the works of art. Angkarn Kalyanaphong may be arrogant and aggressive, but he is not trying to project his own image : he is doing his best to secure a rightful and honourable place for the arts in contemporary society. The same cannot be said for those "artistes" whom the media try to propel to stardom in the shortest possible time. We all know how long they can last. I cannot help feeling that Thai artists are, in this sense, being alienated from the ethos of Thai artistry, even from the essence of Thai life. I shall illustrate this point in the following section.

MUSICAL ANALOGY

In a traditional Thai orchestra called a **phiphat** orchestra, two xylophones or *ranads* are placed in the front. One is called *ranad ek* (literally, first *ranad*) and carries the principal melody ; the other is called *ranad thum* (literally, *ranad* with a subdued sound) and is assigned, apparently (and only apparently), a secondary or accompanying role. The latter punctuates or synchopates, but it enjoys the freedom that is denied to the *ranad ek*, the freedom to improvise. The *ranad thum* is often called the buffoon of the orchestra, but I shall accept this term only on condition that we liken it to the Shakespearean fool whose intellectual superiority is uncontested. In fact, *the ranad thum* is often played by the master himself, while his best pupil is assigned to the *ranad ek*. To express this set-up in Western musical terms, one would have to say that the concertmaster in a Thai orchestra is not really leading the

orchestra, for that function falls upon the "buffoon" of the orchestra. (Could one imagine a Western orchestra being led by the principal bassoonist?) We are faced here with a difficulty in translating Thai orchestral structure into a Western context. We cannot possibly compare the respective roles of the *ranad ek* and the *ranad thum* to those of first violin and second violin.

"To Play second fiddle" in English means something different from playing the *ranad thum*. I would venture to say that the functions of the two *ranads* in a Thai classical orchestra reflect the essence of Thai culture. Noawarat Phongphaibun, a distinguished Thai poet, welcomed my interpretation and proposed that we all should think hard how we could espouse a philosophy of life based on what he called "the *ranad thum* culture".

APPLIED MUSICOLOGY AS A SEMIOTIC TOOL

Perhaps we could apply the principle drawn from our analysis of the Thai Classical orchestra to the allied field of the visual arts. The "ranad thum culture" lies at the roots of the visual arts as well. And here for once, I shall indulge in a little cultural tourism. Visitors coming to Bangkok for the first time would normally be taken to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, which is our national shrine. The main chapel of that temple houses the most sacred image, the Emerald Buddha. In the gallery surrounding the temple and on parts of the inner walls of the chapel, you will find mural paintings depicting the story of the Ramayana, known in the Thai version as the *Ramakien*. A scholar of Buddhism, Prof. Frank Reynolds of the University of Chicago, explains, in a very interesting way, the political message that can be read from the sacred image and the murals. The sacred image in the midst of the chapel was the fruit of a conquest over

neighbouring Laos, whereas the painted *Ramakien* story, which tells of the triumph of Rama, a reincarnation of the God Vishnu, over Ravana, was meant to represent the legitimacy of the new dynasty. ⁽¹²⁾ When we turn to art experts and ask for their opinion, they will in all probability say that the murals in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha are not of the finest quality. They might even recommend that you wend your way to the National Museum, which can be reached on foot in less than a quarter of an hour. The museum is housed on the grounds and in the edifices of the former "Palace to the Front", the residence of the second king, known in Thai as *uparaj*. The murals in the central chapel there are considered by all experts to be the highest achievement of all mural paintings from the early Bangkok period. These murals in the Palace to the Front depict the life-story of Lord Buddha: no conquest, no worldly ascendancy, but the path pursued by the enlightened one that leads to *Nirvana*. Was it by sheer accident that better artists were found for the "second palace" than for the "first palace"? Could there have been any correlation between the theme of spiritual abnegation and artistic excellence? Who would venture to give a definitive answer to that kind of question? Perhaps only a tip could be given. Go and listen to a *phiphat* orchestra and watch the man on the *ranad thum*.

To go back to the poem quoted at the beginning of the present paper, we can probably understand Angkarn's proposition better now, since we are beginning to grasp the essence of the "*ranad thum* culture". Is *Nirvana* just a metaphor? If we do not want to fall into the trap known in literary studies as "the intentional fallacy", it might be a better idea not to guess what Angkarn's intention was, but rather to concentrate on what the poem means to us. Be that as it may,

it is still not plausible to liken the sound coming out of A *Poet's Pledge* to that of a *ranad thum*. In other words, Angkarn may not be playing a *ranad thum* at all. His vacation is probably not that of an orchestral musician, but rather that of a soloist, and his instrument happens to be the *so-sam-sai*, the three-string instrument that is recognized as the king of string instruments. It is an instrument that is known for its capacity to convey emotional depths. So we are confronted with a different instrument that tells a different story, that merits a different analytical study of its own. There will be other occasions for the purpose, but for the time being, we shall have to conclude from Angkarn's poem that art is not *Nirvana*: to acquiesce in the realm of art is not necessarily to admit defeat, but to be realistic as to what we can achieve at an earthly level.

HERMENEUTICS OF ART AS HERMENEUTICS OF POLITICS: A TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

The distinguished participants have come to Thailand at the time when hot political issues are being debated among your Thai colleagues. They are caught in a real dilemma. The suspension of the constitution, the use of military force to throw out an elected parliament and a legitimate government what have all these undemocratic measures led to? A recent popular poll showed that the present Prime Minister seems to be doing well in the Thai public's opinion. He was ushered in following a *coup d'état*, and one would have expected him to be bellying out military music at us. On the contrary, he is a master of exquisite *bel canto* (a musical analogy again!) Efficient, determined, honest, sophisticated, eloquent (but low-keyed), we have never had such a prime minister for ages. Certainly, he knows the art of *ranad thum*. But he was not elected

through democratic means; he was *con-scripted* by the military into his present leadership position. How could we, in principle, accept him? But deep in our hearts we do not reject him at all. So we are confused. As an interim prime minister he seems to be improvising very well, and we know that improvisation is a Thai (artistic) virtue. But is it not true that the success of the interim government is a death-toll of Thai democracy? We could do without an elected parliament! The technocrats in the interim cabinet are efficient. By saying all this we are foregoing democratic principles again. We are leaving out the people's participation. (We are forgetting the less learned from the oral tradition!) Although the people may be benefiting from the fruits of good governance, they are merely there to receive alms from above. This is all very condescending. The magnanimity of the giver is upheld, but what

about the dignity of the receiver? Where do we find answers to all these queries?

I maintain that an understanding of the arts will help us understand other phenomena, including political phenomena.

"Never shall I desire to reach Nirvana", says Angkarn Kalayanaphong.

What about a solution like :

"Never shall I desire to reach democracy"? After all, Rousseau admitted in his "Du Contrat social" :

"S'il y avait un peuple de dieux, il se gouvernerait démocratiquement".

But Angkarn is one step ahead of Thai politicians. He offers **art in place of Nirvana**. What do we have in place of democracy? A perpetual interregnum of technocratic oligarchy!⁽¹³⁾

NOTES

1. Chetana Nagavajara, "Current Status, Problems and Needs of Thai Culture" (1969), in : **Towards a Critical Culture : Collected Articles**, Bangkok : Duang Kamol Press 1981, pp. 166-172 (in Thai).
2. See my article "Education without the Concept of Two Cultures", in : **Cultural Heritage versus Technological Development Challenges to Education**, Singapore : Maruzen Asia, 1981 (in Thai).
3. Suphang Chanthawanich, et al., "Cultural Changes and Ethical Problems Related to Higher Education", An Executive Summary in English, Bangkok : Ministry of University Affairs 1989, pp. 3-4 (mimeographed).
4. Emphasis added.
5. Angkarn Kalayanaphong, **A Poet's Pledge (Panithankawi)**, Bangkok : Carat Books House 1986, p. 23 (in Thai). All translations are mine.
6. Chetana Nagavajara, "Art in Place of Nirvana : Western Aesthetics and the Poetry of Angkarn Kalayanaphong", Paper presented at the 13th ICLA Congress, Tokyo, August 23-28, 1991.
7. Angkarn Kalayanaphong, **Collected Poems (Kawiniphon)**, second Edition, Bangkok : Suksit Siam 1970, p. 9 (in Thai).
8. Chetana Nagavajara, "Literary Study and Higher Education", in : **The Teaching of Literature in ASAIHL Universities**, Hong Kong University Press, 1982, P. xxiii.
9. Klaus Wenk. "Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft in Thailand", in : Wenk : **Studien zur Literatur der Thai**, Band I, Hamburg : Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens 1982, pp. 16-19 (in German).

10. William Gedney, "Patrons and practitioners : Chakri Monarchs and Literature", in : **Crossroads**, V. 2 , No. 2 (1984) pp. 11-12.
11. Chetana Nagavajara, "The Thai Popular Song and its Literary Lineage" in **PASAA**, Vol. 19, No. 2, December 1989. A Festschrift for Mayuri Sukwiwat, pp. 168-170.
12. Reynolds, Frank "Ramayana, Rama and Remakien : A Comparison of the Ramayana in the Therevada Traditions, with Reference to Thai Texts and Cults", Paper presented at the Faculty Workshop in Southeast Asian Studies, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, 11 March 1990.
13. The above statement was written in July 1991, but I do not see any need to update it. Anand Punyarachun and his cabinet did so well during their first **interim** term of office that people were only too happy to welcome them back for a second **interim** term following the bloodbath of May 1992. Paradoxically, their achievements would tend to confirm the final remark of this paper. (C.N., August 1992).



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