



The Siamese Heritage Protection Program

to Commemorate the 84th Birthday of

His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Patron of The Siam Society

With coordination of The Senate Standing Sub-Committee on Religious, Moral, Ethics, Arts and Culture for Studying and Facilitating of Cultural Heritage Management

conducted a panel discussion on

Tourism and Heritage: A Tense Relationship

On Tuesday, 17 January 2012 at 12:30 – 4:30 p.m. at The Siam Society



Keynote speech

By Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary General of ASEAN

Tourism is an industry and a very important commercial activity for many countries and economies around the world, including in the ASEAN region.

One reason for the discussion and debate on this subject, and the cause for concern, is because tourism is a growth industry that thrives and prospers but also has the potential to bring about negative changes in a country's culture and national identity.

More convenient travel; telecommunications that provide access to more information; freedom of movement and ever increasing frequency and volume of travel; increased purchasing power – all of these factors make individuals who think they are being limited by the boundaries of their culture and community feel a thirst for knowledge and so are eager to find out what is interesting, different or diverse beyond that which is familiar to them – things that are considered to be exotic, strange or unusual.

His Majesty the King once remarked: “They are interested in the strange and bizarre aspects of Thailand. Think nothing of it because by nature mankind is curious and keen to encounter, experience and learn.”

However, once tourism becomes an industry and a commercial activity, profits become the driving factor that decide which activity or cultural product, or form of performing art, appeals most to consumers and the market. In this way, cultural treasures are transformed into commodities.

For as long as something exists in the form of a cultural treasure, we can apply our own standards which are based on cultural excellence. But as soon as cultural heritage becomes commodities that are exchanged – bought and sold – they become products defined by what sells well or in great volumes and what appeals to the consumer most. This is the inherent source of conflict in the tourism versus heritage protection debate.

Many countries have met with great success albeit superficial or short term. Let's take an example from within the ASEAN region – Phuket in Thailand and Bali in Indonesia. Let us see what the difference will be between these two destinations in a period of, say, 50 to 70 years.

In terms of the quality of their beaches, natural surroundings and air quality, both Phuket and Bali are about the same. Neither is superior to the other. Some might even claim that the beaches in Phuket and Phang-nga are magnificent and clean, and still retain their charm – perhaps even more than those found in Bali.

What Bali has that Phuket does not are the elements of culture and daily rituals – aspects that visitors can experience without having to pay an entrance fee or purchase a ticket.

As you walk around the market, the hotel, or even along the beach and along the roads, what you see is the preservation of religious rituals and ceremonies which the Balinese believe in, observe and practise. These are still living features of the culture today.

If we are to go in search of such “values” in Thailand, regardless of any particular cultural group, The Siam Society would have to organize an excursion or study trip.

When we travel to Myanmar – be it to Mandalay or even Yangon – we see these religious rituals and ceremonies in everyday life – still living [still alive and well]. They live the rituals. They live the culture.

This is something for managers, senior executives and operators to consider with regard to tourism in Thailand.

But then again, these are not the sort of thing that can be decided or controlled by those in authority or government.

The tourism authority does not go out to the Balinese people and tell them how to live – how to wear costumes or to wrap around cloths in certain ways; or how to present ritual offerings consisting of palm leaf containers with candles, incense and flowers at the sacred Hindu shrines found on every street corner.

Walk along any path in a hotel and you'll see baskets of offerings hidden discretely among the shrubs. They are not intended to be displayed for everyone to see. This is everyday life and it is this that has intrinsic value because it is “exotic” life – a distinctive aspect of their daily ritual and ceremony that is still being diligently observed.

In Thailand, it may be more difficult for us to find this in Bangkok or in city communities. It still exists in rural communities but is increasingly becoming a commercial activity. This is an area that needs to be given increased attention.

Further away in Marrakech, southern Morocco, is an area that is largely a desert. Situated on the fringes of the parched Sahara, it is home to many tribal peoples, a place tourists find most impressive – much like Chiang Mai. Its art, culture, rituals, ceremonies, architecture, traditional folk games and performances are all alive and well, and they are able to carefully nurture all this.

What is of increasing interest to tourists and travellers is the purity of the environment – a clean and pristine environment. They come in search of exotic places but in Thailand these are becoming fewer and fewer by the day.

We used to go up the hill to visit hilltribe villages. This is getting to be easier and easier to do. However, once we're there, we see hilltribes dressed in hilltribe costumes but they now use cellphones to communicate with their children and relatives. Whether this is in Bangkok or Chiang Mai, the charm disappears. But in our neighbouring countries, there is still an abundance of exotic destinations.

So formidable are the strength and dynamism of the Thai tourism industry that its impact is felt even in neighbouring countries. Some say that Thailand is rapidly running out of exotic destinations that are sufficiently unusual, different and diverse for world travellers to want to experience. Hence the need for them [operators] to venture out into other markets in search of attractions beyond our borders.

If we have poor internal management, and do not strive to protect and preserve anything within our own country, what we offer to our neighbours, be it Myanmar, Laos or Cambodia, will be the same. The same experience will be repeated in those countries and destinations and that would be a shame.

In addition, everyone is going in search of exoticism and purity of environment, such as secluded beaches devoid of human footprints. If they happen to be private beaches, all the better. Everyone wants exclusivity – something that is exclusively ours. Hence there are exclusive hotels – the more exclusive they are, the more expensive. Therefore the people who can afford to consume these services are individuals of another “bracket” for whom the unusual and different matters even more. As a result, what is offered becomes an increasingly commercial product.

People also seek cultural diversity. We talked about this earlier on. ASEAN is one of the world's most culturally diverse regions. It is home to the only largest Catholic country in Asia – the Philippines. The largest Muslim country, Indonesia, is also situated here. In Indonesia, there are many more sub-cultures.

The whole of the island of Bali represents “fossilized Hinduism”. It is as though Hinduism in Indonesia retreated back to the island of Bali. The form of Hinduism on the island preserves Hindu characteristics that are unique. Visitors from India who visit are intrigued that this is not the Hinduism they know in their own country. It is as though the evolution of Hinduism on the island stopped in its tracks and is frozen in time – and hence it is all the more fascinating and of great interest to visitors.

Diversity. The varied rhythms of dance and the various performances appeal to our senses. It is what we feel.

One special segment of travellers find slums such as Klong Toey of interest. If in Cairo, one travels to see the community behind the big masjid which is also a slum. And if one goes to Beijing, one goes to Hutong, a district that was always inhabited by the poor and still is. They have managed to preserve its original form. This is “exotic” in another sense of the word. Such visitors travel there to see for themselves. They find it interesting provided that they do not have to live there.

It triggers a sense of guilt. They begin to wonder: why do these people live like this? How can we help them? Is there no fairness or equality in society? They ask themselves these questions.

If there are voluntary organizations to facilitate travel, such visitors are keen to visit and want to be of help in some way. There are travellers who find this type of experience appealing just so long as they are not really part of the situation because if they were, it wouldn't be much fun. But because they are on the outside looking in, and have only come along to volunteer for a day or two, or maybe a week, they feel they have done some good and contributed to the community and humanity in some way. They walk away with a sense of fulfilment.

When tourism, culture, values and ways of life converge, can we avoid conflict and confrontation? Can we find some way to minimize the negative impact that tourism and commercialisation has on all aspects of artistic and cultural heritage?

Yes we can, provided that such efforts are undertaken with wisdom (*panna*). Co- operation from all sectors must be forthcoming.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand needs to be aware that what we promote is heritage that belongs to all of society and is “social capital”.

If we are not careful and allow our heritage to become tourism commodities traded, bought and sold, market forces will be the determinant. The colourful variety being offered must appeal to visitors. The rhythm and pace will no longer be what they used to be. The form it takes will no longer be the same, but will be one that appeals to a larger market – an external market with high purchasing power.

Tourism may lead to cultural integration, and if we are not careful this mixing of cultures can ultimately lead to cultural change to the extent that the original uniqueness is lost forever.

Take Thai food for example. In New York, there are some 70 to 80 Thai restaurants all serving *tom yam*, yet none tastes the same. It is the same for *khao pad Thai* – Thai fried rice. The uniqueness has gone because the dish has evolved according to market needs and individual preferences and tastes.

Do we need standards? Who will set the standards?

No doubt, the TAT will not be able to do it all alone. But TAT needs to present opportunities for cultural experts, sociologists, social anthropologists, historians and members of The Siam Society to ask questions about what is taking place. Is it right? Is this the best that it can be? What needs to be changed? How do we slow down the process to prevent changes that can impact cultural heritage and cultural commodities so quickly that we can no longer preserve uniqueness, cultural integrity, purity or beauty?

There is tremendous reliance on “selling the old” and we have not developed what is new to the same standard as the old. And the new that is being created is not as ornate and beautiful, or as worthy of admiration, as the old. But neither do we protect and preserve what we have. We let the old deteriorate, change and be modified.

The owners of this heritage in rural upcountry areas have no say in deciding which of their cultural treasures are to become a tourism commodities – be it a *chedi*, *wat* (temple), *bot* (chapel, ordination hall), or an ancient city wall – because they have no control. All is decided, or not decided, by being left to free for all, open market, free market competition.

Local people lose control – even though these treasures belong to them.

If you ask me about the structure that stands opposite the front of Wat Phra Mahathat in Nakhon Si Thammarat, I will say do not build a petrol station right there because it diminishes the grandeur of the Phra Mahathat stupa. No one thinks about these things. It doesn't occur to them. How did this (idea) come about? Central government – it is a franchise of the central government.

Who decides? Who determines this? Not the locals. It just happens to be an excellent location for a marketplace, an ideal refuelling stop for motorists driving away from the municipal district, but it is an eyesore – painful to behold and emotionally unsettling.

The local people – the actual owners of this inheritance – have no say in the way in which their local cultural treasures and assets are put to use or transformed into cultural products. One needs to take this into account as well.

Here's a quote by Mom Rajawongse Kukrit Pramoj about the Department of Fine Arts. “Dance movements and artistic forms, everything that's found in the regions (of the kingdom) or upcountry, all possess qualities that are beautiful, enchanting, fascinating and intriguing. Any time the Department of Fine Arts steps in to set standards, it's a disaster. It takes the life out of it,” he observed. “The reason for this being it loses its liveliness and charm, and is neither delicate nor dainty.”

Hence in countries that have a successful track record in protecting and preserving art and culture, they leave it to the locals– they leave it to the real owners. Others can behold and appreciate, but should not be allowed to decide, change or modify anything.

If something appeals to your senses, admire it in its original form. Naturally it will not always be possible to do this 100 per cent of the time but at least for us to be aware that whenever central government ventures out to establish standards, there will be nothing left in the end. It will conform with the standards set by the central administration and all the original charm will be lost.

Hence the vital role of involvement from the local community. This will help to guarantee artistic and cultural distinctiveness and the uniqueness of the various cultural treasures that form part of their lives and existence.

Do not be enamoured with growth figures. Thailand has 16 million visitors a year. I have just been to Cambodia. They say that when one speaks of tourism growth in Cambodia, one in actual fact refers to the growth of tourism in Siem Reap. There are 2.6 million visitors representing growth of 20 – 25 per cent per annum.

But part of the growth that takes place, includes “costs” that one needs to pay for – the various components that are purchased in order to promote tourism. Many restaurants are part of overseas franchises. Visitors expect the same level of comfort they are always accustomed to. As we go for visitor arrival numbers, we agree to having these restaurants and the import of various ingredients from abroad. Additionally, travellers fly in on foreign flag carriers and perhaps stay at hotels that are part of international chains. It is all part of an international network. Hence in the final tally, what we end up with in terms of benefits for society and the economy are not all that significant.

It is better for us to go for quality tourism, sophisticated tourism – a sophisticated form of tourism that values cultural experiences over pure consumerism – indulgence – to indulge, to see, to spend during their week-long stay and then to depart, with little to be gained. This is what I believe we should be aware of and be concerned about. And we must try our best to steer towards achieving a balance.

ASEAN itself hosted the meeting of the ASEAN Tourism Ministers in Manado on the island of Sulawesi recently.

ASEAN is reporting 60 million visitors who travelled to the region. How do we ensure that this 60 million individuals are quality visitors? How can we promote intra-regional travel within ASEAN? How should we share our cultural values, experiences and ways of life with these people if they are not to merely be transient visitors who arrive in the country, consume services and then depart leaving nothing of value for the owners of these cultural treasures, assets and resources. (Everyone in) Thailand needs to give serious thought to these considerations. (We) should not solely focus on growth and growth rate because in the end if we leave it to market forces that arise out of competition and are only driven by profit, there will be nothing left. Nothing that international visitors will find appealing or of interest.

Therein lies the conflict and contradiction.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand has to ensure that there is a system in place to manage tourism and see to it that it functions effectively. Furthermore, TAT needs to ensure that standards are achieved. But at the same time, excessive management will result in a loss of diversity. Society needs to find a balance. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports needs to listen to the public at large – the people, cultural leaders, spiritual leaders, historians, academics, social anthropologists, sociologists, and art and cultural experts.

In many countries, certainly in Thailand, many of the activities are being undertaken inside “silos”. Whoever is responsible for tourism promotion does only that. Those who oversee culture solely focus on culture, and the same applies to town planning. We lack integration, co-ordination, and linkage between the different elements and entities to ensure effective protection and preservation of what constitutes our heritage.

What I hope The Siam Society will do in addition to heritage protection is to ensure the effectiveness of such actions. How does one make everyone feel that it is our individual duty and responsibility to be

involved in heritage protection? (This is) not just attempting to push this agenda in isolation independently of other organizations and entities, and without being able to drive a campaign or movement that encourages all sectors of society to feel they are co-owners and involved.

These feelings of ownership and involvement are vital because anyone who does anything without trying to involve all sectors of society will not be successful and will not receive support. In the end, instead of making things better, this may lead to conflict, aggravating the situation through lack of trust with each party placing self-interest above all else.

Therefore what needs to be jointly considered is what makes for “humane tourism” – that is to say tourism that takes into account mankind and humanity more than profits, more than volume and more than growth.

Humane tourism should be about learning about each other’s values.

When they come to Thailand, what actual values and what way of life will we share with citizens of the world? Buddhist ways? Thai ways? Rural ways? Those of the various sub-cultures and sub-sectors that exist must be allowed to manage and present their own heritage and values because these are their living legacy. They are aware of these things. They treasure and cherish them. They practise them.

Many of you may have seen the movie Eat. Pray. Love. starring Julia Roberts.

It captures the essence of modern day tourism in which an individual’s awareness of various experiences is categorized by country, community and culture.

The question for Thailand is what can Thailand offer to individuals like (the) Julia Roberts (character)? Or will she find that when she comes here, there’s nothing here that sets Thailand apart – nothing that reflects the uniqueness of Thai society in terms of wisdom (*panya*), in terms of thoughts and beliefs, in terms of awareness (*sathi*) or other values. Nothing that will enrich her upon her return home. Nothing that sets Thailand apart from anywhere else.

If we ask ourselves this question and respond by saying that from now on humane tourism in Thailand will cater to those who come in search of uniqueness and “Thainess”, this is how everyone can become involved with and contribute to heritage protection and preservation, while not forgetting comfort, convenience, the various facilities and amenities that we are capable of offering. Hence they still have the opportunity to experience, to savour the human touch of Thailand, its culture and society within the framework of Thai society. This increases the value of Thai tourism.

This form of tourism will help preserve the diversity of the human race and will not lead to a world community as described by Marcuse who wrote the book One Dimensional Man.

What this suggests is that consumer culture in this world will lead to uniformity across every culture and every society, and everyone in this world. Wherever one ventures, there’s a McDonalds; wherever one goes, there’s Coca Cola. Wherever we travel, we go in search of Starbucks. We dress like everyone else and our tastes and preferences are just like everyone else’s. We watch the same movies; we listen to the same music; we eat the same food – the one-dimensional tourist. The one-dimensional man or woman. What an extremely boring world this will be. And prior to arriving at this point, there will be conflict and confrontation and violence because everyone wants to protect their individual identity and if they are unable to have a voice or become involved in this process of one-dimensional consumption, then there will be resistance, and this can lead to confrontation, conflict and violence. This happens worldwide.

Hence the discussion is not all about tourism. It is not just a matter to be explored or analysed only within the realm of tourism. This impacts society and culture as a whole. It also impacts individuals employed in the cultural industry or culturally-related industry sectors that produce, present, package and sell what is considered to be cultural heritage. If we are not careful, these things will disappear. They will deteriorate to such an extent that we will be left without anything that is culturally unique, special, different or distinctive.

We'll run out of exoticism – from the word “exotic”, meaning something distinctive, diverse and worthy of admiration because of its unique appeal.

This is all of great concern to the United Nations. To minimize such conflict and prevent losses in cultural diversity, the organization is working to come up with the UN Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of the Heritage of Indigenous Peoples. This covers hilltribes, various tribal peoples with diverse cultures, tribespeople with unique characteristics around the world and also those within the ASEAN.

Today in the 17,000 inhabited islands of Indonesia, over 400 dialects are still being spoken. Furthermore, each of these communities takes pride in this fact and is attempting to preserve this. It is much the same in the Philippines.

As far as I know, and the following may be of interest to The Siam Society, we too have much diversity but this is disappearing by the day. We are in great danger of losing this impressive diversity, and being left without anything that is different or diverse.

Therefore we should undertake studies and conduct research and try to benchmark our efforts with those being undertaken worldwide and regionally, including efforts undertaken by the UN, ASEAN and the European Union. What are they doing? How does one protect, preserve and nurture these aspects? What measures are being implemented to preserve this for future generations and for the future of world heritage?

Life is not all about materialism. It is not all about wealth and competition – the race to acquire worldly possessions, what we have in the bank or our possessions and belongings.

Life imbued with value is one that enables us to admire and appreciate diversity – both in terms of cultural heritage as well as history. Pristine nature is an inherent right for all to enjoy.

Without realising it, the people of Bangkok are having to purchase the air they breathe, except perhaps in The Siam Society with its wide open spaces. This morning, the 500 people in a meeting room needed air-conditioning. If those indoors are kept cool, those outdoors will invariably feel the heat as heated air is drawn out of the room. We therefore have to “purchase” the air we breathe by paying for electricity.

Thais no longer drink water from the wells, or even tapwater. We all drink bottled water. While I was still active in parliament, a friend who is a member of parliament told me that he spent 300,000 baht stocking water for funerals and weddings so that those in need can come to him for supplies. As an MP, this was one of his duties.

Values have changed, hence the material possessions that we accumulate are not indicators that guarantee our happiness. Given that we are presented with the opportunity to immerse ourselves in our rich heritage and legacy passed on to us to cherish, protect and preserve, should we choose to sell any part

of this, it must be done with awareness. It must be packaged with awareness of how best to present things to avoid adverse impact.

We also need to ensure that growth is not the enemy of all that is beautiful, intriguing, valuable, fascinating and worthy of admiration. If we do not act with awareness, the balance cannot be maintained and will be lost, and in the end we will become the one-dimensional man as observed by Herbert Marcuse.

The one-dimensional woman will use the same brand of handbag and lipstick. Men will wear the same brand of shoes and dress in the same way. Everything will be decided for us by others leaving us without individual identity. In my eyes, this is hardly the type of society Thais should be proud of.

I believe that we should place far greater importance on the process of cross-cultural exchange and the exchange of values, of which tourism is a key part. How can Thais, Thai society and Thai culture successfully maintain a distinctive identity? What I mean is to be able to speak Thai clearly – not that we are unable to speak other languages, but to be able to speak Thai well and to be ready to embrace Thai values, Thai culture and all that is good that society offers. Only then can we stand proud in the world community.

If we fail to do so, we will be just like everyone else and will not be able to stand on our own two feet. We will lose the Thainess we should all be proud of because of its inherent value.

This is not about resisting the forces of development, change and globalization but about being intelligent enough to be able to withstand these pressures and preserving integrity. This will be the best way forward for Thai society and that should be the goal of Thai tourism.

Thank you.

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