

THE SOCIETY OF SIAM*

by

Puey Ungphakorn

On this auspicious occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Siam Society, I am very grateful to the Council for having granted me the opportunity to submit to this distinguished assembly my views on the Society of Siam. Coming from a social scientist, this presentation could be expected by my audience tonight to be essentially subjective in contents. And, ladies and gentlemen, you will be absolutely right in this expectation. Coming from one who is not in the habit of telling lies—at least not too often, and from one whose finesse in the choice of words is sometimes unintentionally and at other times deliberately, non-existent, this presentation runs the risk of appearing to be unduly critical. I would however plead that since this Society of Siam is the one to which I have belonged for the whole of my fifty-eight years, to which I hope to belong for several years yet to come, and to which my children and grandchildren will belong in the future long decades and centuries, I owe to this Society of Siam no other sentiment than love, loyalty and devotion. And true love, true loyalty and true devotion, we all know, must not be blind, and must not be allowed to blind us to the possible defects of our beloved.

In the short time at my disposal, therefore, I propose critically to examine the various aspects of our Thai nation: ethnic, social, cultural, economic and political.

In the course of our national history, we Thai people have been generous in welcoming immigrants from neighbouring countries; the Chinese, the Mons, the Burmans, the Khmers, the Annamese, the Singha-
lese, the Indians. Our Northerners and Northeasterners have close ties with the people in the Kingdom of Laos; our Southerners with the Malay-
sians. The ancestors of the vast Bunnag family, whose members were

* Address delivered at the Dinner to Celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the Siam Society, Erawan Room, Erawan Hotel, Wednesday, 27 February 1974.

most prominent in the Government in the nineteenth century, originated from the Middle-East. The roles played by a Greek, and a band of Japanese in our Ayudhya period are well known, and even nowadays some of our Thai names can be traced to Portuguese and other European origins. I submit that this ethnic variety enriches our national heritage and enables each of us to adopt a wider and wiser outlook in life, on one condition: that there should be harmony and cohesion among us. And harmony and cohesion there have been in our Society of Siam thanks to two important factors: the good fortune that our nation has never succumbed to the colonial conquest of Western Powers, and the wisdom of our Kings and rulers successfully to encourage and foster assimilation and cross-breeding among the various ethnic groups.

However, this happy state of affairs began to deteriorate in the 1930's, with the advent of militarism, nationalism and chauvinism. People of Chinese or Vietnamese origins began to be viewed with suspicion and apprehension because it was believed, with some truth, that they were allowed too much control of the national economy and trade. It has been thought, especially since the 1950's that people of Malayan race, professing Islamic religion, should be forced to come into line, in religious, cultural, educational fields, with the majority. More recently, the various peoples known by the generic name of hill tribes, were again forcefully interfered with in their habitats and ways of life. The emphasis has been wrongly placed on discord, instead of national unity, or national cohesion, as in the good old days. The result is that in the current grave insurgency problems, quite a big proportion of those who fight against the government troops and police are not really communist fanatics, but those minority groups fighting for the freedom to be left alone in their ways of life.

In my mind, national unity is imperative in this country at this critical time in international affairs. Every effort must be made to bring it about through negotiation and reconciliation. The task will not be easy and different approaches must be adopted in different cases. One thing is certain: the use of force for repression will not be successful, it

is very wasteful of human lives and properties. The discrimination against Thai citizens from foreign parentage in the matter of electoral and civic rights as drafted in the new Constitution will make the situation worse, not better.

Mr. Chairman, my appeal for national unity and reconciliation must not be taken as an advocacy for national uniformity or unanimity. Far from it. Unfortunately, the Society of Siam is in many respects, excessively conformist, superficial and contemptuous of ideals.

Our own upbringing and educational system fosters conformity which beyond a point, becomes obsessive. Much of the nonsensical events in our life happen in the name of custom and very few dare challenge them. Births, marriages and deaths are the occasions when somebody or other will be ruined because ostentatious customs are blindly observed. "The dead ruin the living", as we are able to reflect in our wiser moods. Our wedding ceremonies look charming and full of meaning and purpose in their original, simple forms i.e. an intimate affair for family and close friends. Nowadays this ceremony has gone out of hand and has become grandioser and grandioser. If you cannot invite the whole cabinet, the whole bureaucracy, the whole Bangkok business community, the diplomatic corps to your son's or daughter's wedding, then you will die of shame. It does not matter whether the cabinet ministers, privy counsellors, high officials, bankers, millionaires, businessmen and their wives have ever heard of the young couple or their parents; it does not matter if some of your guests are notorious crooks; it does not matter how much and for how long you submit bride and bridegroom and the queuing guests to the utmost inconvenience and discomfort; it does not matter if this superb wedding causes traffic jams for half of the Bangkok streets, this is the custom and one has to conform. Worse still, Thai couples are only allowed to get married in certain months of the year. The rest are taboo. And during those allowable months only certain days are superbly auspicious, others mildly auspicious, yet others unauspicious. Of course everybody has to plump for the superbly auspicious dates and times. Result: guests, i.e. the whole of

Bangkok's elite, have to jump like monkeys from one wedding to five other weddings, and traffic jams spread all over the great metropolis.

Now, if a young man or woman or his or her parents, for that matter, wish to depart from the custom in the slightest degree, like getting quietly wedded as and when and how the couple feel like it or find it convenient, the non-conformist will be ridiculed, attacked, cut from inheritance, or deemed to be a communist, which is thought to be the worst insult imaginable.

The wedding ceremony is only one example of the abuse of good customs, and of the urge for conformity. I leave you to imagine other instances: housing, clothing, drinking and eating habits, golfing, etc. Talking about clothing, I wish, Mr. Chairman, that you would not have told me to come here in a lounge suit. While parking my car tonight outside this hotel, I discovered that I lost my top shirt button. If my necktie now sways to the left or to the right, I can assure you that this is no reflection on my personal political affiliation. To my way of thinking, conformism tends to impoverish society materially, intellectually and spiritually. By tolerating non-conformity, the society will give itself a chance for fresh ideas and inventiveness. But then the non-conformist needs to have not only initiative and intelligence, what he needs most is courage.

Our society is superficial in character. We are unable to distinguish between substance and form. A young man with long hair is deemed to be a baddie merely because his hair is long, irrespective of his moral and intellectual worth. The aim of education is to obtain a certificate, not necessarily knowledge or wisdom. A marriage certificate and a pompous party are required, not necessarily a harmonious and affectionate family life. To give alms and offerings to the priest in full public view is much more important than to serve society. Truth, justice, kindness and honesty are not as useful as your neighbours's opinion of you.

In our Society of Siam, furthermore, pragmatism reigns supreme. Ideal is synonymous to foolishness. Look at some of our proverbs which are seriously and religiously observed in our daily behaviour:

น้ำเซวอฆ่าขวางเรือ
 วิชาต้วรอดเป็นขอดค
 อยาเอมื่อไปชุกทับ

Do not place your boat in the way of fast currents.
 The most profound wisdom is to save oneself.
 Who is going to bell the cat ?

In this convenient way, oppression, tyranny, corruptive practices, injustices are often tolerated in the guise of wisdom. And when young men and women are fired with enthusiasm to improve our society with new ideas, to change our society to suit their present and future circumstances, they are gravely discouraged by ridicules, calumnies and insults.

In the field of economics and commerce, there is a large gap between the rich and the poor, and this gap tends to widen more and more. In Bangkok and other cities, more and more luxurious buildings, more and more expensive eating and spending habits are conspicuously developing everyday and everywhere. In the nearby slums, more and more people and their children go to bed everynight feeling hungry. In spite of the success in the overall growth in income and wealth, the rural people are not perceptibly better off and their livelihood and health are at the mercy of the vagaries of the weather and the fluctuations in the farm prices. Money flows one way from country to towns most of the year. Inferior health, nutritional and educational services in the rural areas perpetuate and aggravate the disparity.

Long years of dictatorship, albeit benign dictatorship, have left us with two deep scars in our society. We have almost lost our love for freedom, in spite of the proud meaning of our name: Thai. Civic and political freedoms are delicate plants to be cultivated, preserved and tended with loving care and strong determination. We must begin to learn that discipline means self-discipline, not rules and regulations or decrees imposed by the people in power. We must get into the salutary habit of challenging authority whenever the latter is arbitrary and lacking in justice and decency.

The other political scar in our society is the excessive centralization of administrative power in the Cabinet and bureaucracy, civilian as well as military. When everything depends on a small group of people, how-

ever wise and public-minded, the rest of the society cannot adequately be cared for. Every effort should be made to open the way for each member, each group of members, of our society to play his part in his own way in the conduct and care of our society. Every man and woman should be respected as a human being, endowed with personal dignity, not to be debased or discarded by another human being, however "superior" this latter might be.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, in my ideal Society of Siam, there should be unity without forced uniformity; there should be room for the non-conformist, the unique, the idealist even the cranky; members of the society should be able to discern truth, beauty and goodness and cherish them and discard superficial and false values; material and spiritual welfare should be available for all, not for the few; human dignity and freedom are each individual's sacred due, however humble he be. Let us all work towards this end and transform the ideal into a reality.

Long live such a Society of Siam, and
Long live the Siam Society.