

## OBITUARY

M.C. Sipban Sonakul (1894–1985) an appreciation

H.S.H. Princess Sipban Sonakul would deny that she was a scholar. Yet all Siamese students and foreign professors interested in Thai studies would know her in her own right, as well as knowing her as the favourite sister and constant companion of H.H. Prince Dhani Nivat, Kromamun Bidyalap Bridhiyakorn. Prof. W.J. Gedney, for instance, regarded her as one of his best Thai teachers.

Indeed, Princess Sipban would love to be remembered as a teacher. Only a few foreigners very advanced in Thai language, literature and culture were fortunate enough to be her students. They all found her polite, friendly and humble. Yet she really knew her subjects and was articulate in passing on what she knew to those who were ready to receive it. There was no pretension or beating about the bush. In fact she could tell people a great deal about court etiquette and history since the reign of Chulalongkorn to the present one. One only knew how to ask the right questions and her answers would always be honest, to the point and charming.

Princess Sipban was brought up by Queen Saowabha, and her grandmother was Mistress of the Robes to Her Majesty, besides being the best court dancer. She was the third daughter of H.R.H. Prince and Princess Bidyalap Bridhidhada, the first Siamese military attaché in London, who was later Minister of the Royal Household during the Fifth Reign.

Princess Sipban was mainly educated at Rajini school for Girls and she was a full time teacher there from 1935 to 1948. She taught several classes and almost every subject, except gymnastic, music and flower arrangements. She enjoyed teaching history, literature and cooking. Her numerous students remembered fondly that she was a very dedicated teacher, always with good manner, gentle and polite, yet the students were all in awe of her. They did not want to do anything to upset her. Although they never found her in a bad mood, they felt if they misbehaved, or were slack in their work, she would be sad and would feel sorry for them, and they did not want this to happen. They found her kind and considerate to everyone. They thought she took great pains in preparing her lectures and that she enjoyed teaching. Especially during her cooking classes before the Second World War, she would spend her own money buying all kinds of ingredients. She also invented quite a few dishes—one of which is still known as *Khanom Sipban*.

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Princess Sipban was a good writer. She would be the first to admit that her literary work was not great, but every piece had its own merit. It was because of her love of teaching Thai history that the Ministry of Education asked her to produce a series of textbooks on the subject. And because of her dedication to cooking, both Siamese and western dishes, friends encouraged her to publish recipes in four Thai volumes and one English edition. And due to Princess Dhani's illness which prevented her from accompanying her husband to several places, she asked Princess Sipban to be with the Prince on his many official and semi-official tours of duty. Hence she was able to write many travelogues, which were first serialized in her school's magazine and later became separate volumes in their own right — one of which she wrote in verse form to carry on the poetic tradition of the past.

Future generations may find Princess Sipban's books out of date, but those of us who have read the books now find them factual and well written. They were good records of our period.

For those of us who had the opportunity to know her well, we regard Princess Sipban as a testimony of Siamese aristocracy — practising Buddhism mindfully (not boastfully), loyal to the throne and to the country quietly and performing her duty diligently. She had a good sense of humour. She criticized herself more than others, and she would go out of her way to help others — whether they were her friends or not, if she thought the cause was just and worthwhile. Both members of the nobility and commoners held her in high esteem.

Princess Sipban was a life member of the Siam Society. Although she was never a Council member, nor did she ever write for JSS or lecture, she was one of the main supporters of our Society throughout her active life.

When she passed away at the great age of 91, our Society lost a good friend, and Siam lost one of the important links to our cultural heritage.

*S. Sivaraksa*

