

“THE LAST OF THE PRINCES” :
 A CENTENNIAL REFLECTION
 ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF PRINCE
 DHANI-NIVAT KROMAMUN
 BIDYALABH

Let me appologize for the talk tonight. Had we planned it properly we could have had at least a dance drama of *Inao* here and a lecture illustrating it because Prince Dhani would have loved to see a performance here. But as I said, we were not very well prepared. I have just come back from Japan, very late last night. I am leaving again on Sunday for Europe, which will be a long trip. So this is the only free time that I have to speak about him. In fact his centenary will not take place until the 7th of November. But I invite you to regard this as something very informal and personal. If you want more facts, and something more formal and right, we are honoured that his daughter sits in the audience.

Some of you may recall that in 1982, we gave a series of lectures on the Bangkok Centennial Celebrations. Then I challenged the Government committee on the basis that it was not the Ratanakosindr Bicentennary. It was a Bangkok bicentennary, not Ratanakosindr. After the foundation of Bangkok when the city was moved across on this side of the river, it was still called Ayudhya. Only when the city was completed, with big celebrations, was it then named Ratanakosindr. So this year is appropriately, named the Bicentennial year of Ratanakosindr. Unfortunately the Government paid no attention. I think they were interested in a “*coup*” or “*counter coup*” or something similar. And then as you know, this year is not only the centenary of Prince Dhani’s Birthday, but also that of the first proposal for the Siamese Constitution which was rejected by King Chulalongkorn. Those who proposed the first constitution were princes and officials at the Siamese Legation in London, one of whom was Prince Bidyalabh Senior, father of the late Prince Dhani. This topic is also very interesting. I hope Dr. Sumedh will talk about it on the 16th of November. I believe he will talk about Prince Prisdang. Because Prince Prisdang played a leading role in this proposal. Sumedh regarded this as the height of Prince Prisdang’s career. In a way he is right. Nevertheless, I also believe that was the beginning of Prince Prisdang’s decline, because I think it was the first

clash between Prince Prisdang and King Chulalongkorn. However, that's not my topic for tonight.

As I said, Prince Bidyalabh was at the Siamese Legation as the first Siamese military attache. Prince Siddhiporn's father, Prince Nares, was then Minister to the Court of St. James's, the other princes being Prince Swasti, father of the late Queen Rumbai and Prince Prisdang who was Minister in Paris. He went to London and consulted with those 3 Princes who were mostly senior in rank but junior in age. Again as I said it's not my topic tonight. Only on Prince Bidyalabh's return from London to Siam late that year was Prince Dhani born Hence his name, meaning "Returning to the City" (of Bangkok).

As for Prince Dhani's, I will talk very briefly. For those who can read Thai, a new book has recently been published. As well, there is my own book – released today. It is not really his biography, but a collection of articles, interviews and conversations I had with him. I am sure this book will not be confiscated, but it may be banned in some quarters. When I published the first one, I called it "Conversation with Prince Dhani". It was well received in some quarters, but very much despised in others which is nothing unusual with my books. You may also recall that he wrote his own autobiography when he was 84 years old, called *Seven Cycles of Life* which I reviewed in the Journal of Siam Society. If you read that review, you will have some idea of his life. As I said I will not talk a great deal about his biography, but I will give you a short synopsis.

He was born during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Soon after, his grand-mother became mistress of the robes in the Royal Palace, more or less in charge of the inner domain. In those days there was an inner court where only the King and the ladies, princesses and all the women lived. Prince Dhani's grand-mother was in charge of inner court affairs and so she brought him to live with her in the Palace. Boys were only allowed to live there until the age of puberty. Once you had your top-knot shaven off, you could not live within. You could go during day time but were not allowed to live there. So Prince Dhani was more or less raised within the inner circles of the Grand Palace – perhaps the last of that generation to be brought up there. Being very attached to his grand-mother, he accompanied her everywhere. In fact he even went to some forbidden places. When Queen Swang, grand-mother of the present King, was giving birth to one of her babies, Prince Dhani was also present. When the Queen saw him she called out,

“What? That’s none of your business, get out”.

I think being brought up within the Grand Palace gave Prince Dhani that deep commitment to the Thai culture. It is important to understand that the palace was not only for upper class culture, it was a world within a world. There was the king, the princesses, the nobility and commoners. Everything was going on there. For those who wish to understand life in the Grand Palace of that period - the best book, was written by – the former prime minister. His famous book “*Four Reigns*” (I think) was translated already by Tulachandra, particularly the first part concerning life in the Grand Palace.

At the age of puberty, most young boys in those days would take the robes and become novices. Being a prince, Dhani was ordained at Wat Pra Kaew, the Chapel Royal and then took residence at Wat Bovorn. Again he was much attached to the temple and he thought he might even remain a monk for life. But his father said, “No, no, you must go abroad. You must be educated in England”, as customary then for aristocrats. It was King Chulalongkorn who felt that all the eldest sons of his half-brothers and brothers should be given a chance to be educated abroad at his own royal expense. Prince Dhani, being the eldest son of Prince Bidyalabh, received that benefit from his uncle, King Chulalongkorn. So he was sent very young, more or less straight after being disrobed.

From the temple he went to a prepschool, then to one of the rather good public schools, Rugby, and from there to Oxford. Again as usual – an upper class education. It was unusual though, that he wanted to study archaeology, but instead became the first Thai to study oriental languages in England. He took Sanskrit and Pali. I think that was a kind of compromise between his desire to study archaeology, and the wishes of his royal uncle and the Cabinet who both said, “Well it may be good to study archaeology but what we need now are civil servants or diplomats who can deal with foreign officials to tell them that we can run our own country. We should talk with them as equals, so we need administrators and diplomats. Archaeology may be useful, but not now.”

He did so well with his English education that the then Minister to France, Prince Charoon, asked him to study further in France. He said, “You have a good English education now, but it’s not enough. We want you to be a diplomat, and to be good you must have a command of the French language and to know the French aristocrats”. During the colonial period, in the age of aristocracy, those who were running the empire thought they were aristocrats, even if they were not originally.

Prince Dhani declined the minister's invitation because he was very much attached to his grand-mother and he wanted to return home, (much to the annoyance of Prince Charoon).

When Prince Dhani returned to Siam at the end of Chulalongkorn's reign, he had quite a few offers. In those days, highly educated people were always offered good jobs. Some of you may recall, a talk I gave last year on Phaya Anuman. He only completed standard 4 from Assumption College. Even so, many offered him jobs. So obviously a man with a good B.A. from Oxford would receive many good job offers. But our prince wanted to know his country better by serving in the Provinces and so he went to see Prince Damrong asking to join the Ministry of the Interior. Prince Damrong replied, "We don't want people who are so well educated." Even in his autobiography he indicated that he felt a little upset. It is possible to see Prince Damrong's point of view - "Why should I need an Oxford graduate working somewhere like Ayudhya or Udonrdhani?" But Prince Dhani insisted. So Damrong finally said, "All right, you can work with me but for low pay. We don't pay for your foreign degree. Of course if you go to work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the royal Secretariat or wherever educated people are needed, you can get much more money." Prince Dhani replied, "Money isn't my goal, I want to serve my king and my country. I want to know our people, and to know our people well, I must live up-country with them". To be fair, officials in those days, although few in number, had titles and some of them were nobility, but they knew the people. They mixed with the people much better than today. Anyhow I should not go into that matter.

Luckily for him he was sent to Ayudhya because the Governor there, Phya Boran, was a great archaeologist, not trained in the western sense of the word, but he loved digging and knew the city faultlessly. He knew its history. He read all the chronicles. In fact he started the first provincial museum in Siam. When King Chulalongkorn went to Germany and saw the provincial museum in that country, he sent a cable praising Phya Boran for starting a small museum in Ayudhya. So Prince Dhani was very pleased to serve under Phya Boran and became familiar with the old capital city. Unfortunately he didn't remain there long because soon afterwards King Chulalongkorn had a great illness. A cable was sent to the Governor of Ayudhya saying that the King would go to his summer palace at Bang-Pa-In for recuperation and that he needed somebody from Ayudhya to be in attendance; not necessarily a high official, but someone that the King knew and trusted. So Phya Boran said, "Well, your Serene Highness, this is just a job for you, being brought

up in the Palace. And you are not too high up yet. You should be there". But the next day another cable came, announcing that the King had passed away. So ended his first period in the reign of Rama V.

The new reign started with a great surprise for Prince Dhani. He was called to work in the Royal Secretariat. This of course upset the Minister of the Interior, but what could he do because the Queen Mother herself had instigated this transfer. Since Queen Saovabha became Queen Mother, her son had set up a Royal Secretariat for her and thus she needed a Secretary. Hence Prince Dhani was recalled to fulfill this role. You would observe that because he was brought up in the Palace, she obviously knew him well. He was very young and with foreign education. She must have felt it was a waste to leave a young man in the wild. In those days Ayudhya was more or less wild and the Prince was living on a floating house next to the Governor's office. Thus was he called to work in the Grand Palace.

The Queen Mother was very kind. She said, "I have not much work for you to do but what I want you here for is to help my son, the King. He needs some young people, with ability". From her point of view, the new king was surrounded by all kinds of people. The new King was very shy and he had to comply with the old administration. So I think it was her wisdom to have young able and trustworthy people around the King.

Our Prince was in fact working mostly for King Vajiravudh. I shouldn't say very much about King Rama VI's reign because the case against me last year partly concerned King Vajiravudh. But I must observe from historical evidence that he was surrounded by quite a number of court favourites who unfortunately exploited him. They asked for money, they asked for land, they asked for all manner of things which the King, through his generosity, gave. In fact Princess Sipban, Prince Dhani's sister, told me once that a court favourite told her brother, "You work very closely with the King and if you don't ask something from him he would be annoyed; you ought to ask something from him." Prince Dhani didn't want to be unpopular, as it appeared he would, so he drafted a letter asking for something nominal. Then he heard that the King had granted so much, he was now in debt to many of the grantees. The King told them. "All right, I will pay you in instalment." When Prince Dhani overheard this, he felt so sad that he tore up the letter and remained poor during the reign of Rama VI, unlike those working in the Palace, in the Royal Secretariat who became very rich – some of them very, very rich.

Prince Dhani continued to live a very simple life at the time of the new reign when King Prajadhipok came to the throne as Rama VII, our Prince was ill and Prince Damrong went to visit him at his residence. Prince Damrong was surprised and shocked to see that his house was so small. He said "At least there was an honest man working under the reign of Rama VI." It is important to know that King Rama VI and Prince Damrong did not relate well together and he was (to put it mildly), asked to leave the office of the Ministry of the Interior with the court's favourites and second rate persons remaining virtually in power. So when King Prajadhipok came to the throne, he tried to restore those reliable princes and to sack those officials who were irresponsible in his opinion. Hence Prince Damrong became not powerful but influential with the new King, and he made this recommendation: "This young man, Dhani, you should have an eye on him, he's not a bad chap". I think it was partly through that and some other matter which I don't wish to follow through here, that our Prince was appointed Minister of Public Instructions (now entitled Minister of Education.) That would be more or less the peak of his career during the absolute regime.

He had a wonderful plan. He felt that education now should change, until then, education was to prepare young people to join the civil service, to become clerks and be employed. But he believed that now students should be able to stand on their own feet. They should be encouraged to become good farmers. They should be involved in commerce and so on. Unfortunately his term of office was so short that when there was a *coup* in 1932, all the princes were forced to leave their offices. So, that abruptly ended his career although he was still young at only 48 years old.

After that, he regarded himself as unemployed. Not only was he unemployed, but princes in those days were also unpopular. Luckily he was only a civilian prince and so he was not put in jail or anything similar. Many of his cousins were jailed; many of his uncles and more senior princes were exiled. He took gardening and then, I think, he started writing seriously, mostly for the Siam Society. Indeed he devoted a large share of his life to the Siam Society; being president for 20 years, and doing many good things. Again I will not go into it, but I think that is why it is our duty to do something in his honour.

After Rama VII, King Anant succeeded to the throne, but he remained abroad as a junior. At that time the promoters of 1932 *coup* were in power. Then with the present reign, Prince Dhani came back again to an official position

(although it was more in an advisory capacity as he was Supreme Counsellor of State which later came to be called Privy Council). Later he succeeded Prince Rangsit as President of the Council when the latter died. By the way, Prince Rangsit and Prince Dhani were born in the same year. I believe the Government issued stamps to commemorate both Princes this year.

This is roughly his career – a very long life. He died when he was almost 90 years old. He had a wonderful memory. His grandmother lived to the age of 99.

In the customary Thai tradition, on the old Songkran New Year, you go to pour water on your elders or those you respect and ask for their blessing. He always gave me a blessing saying, “May you live as long as my grandmother”. I said, “Not as long, Your Highness”.

I have entitled my talk, “The last of the Princes”, and some of you may think it controversial. But in fact there is nothing controversial about it. I acquired this phrase from George Coede whom I met in Paris, when he was almost 80. He said, “Mr. Sulak, You should be proud of your Princes; unlike the Khmer Princes, unlike the Laotian Princes, even unlike most European Princes, your Siamese Princes have the tradition of devoting their lives to their country, to serve their King and country seriously. And they also pursued serious scholarship, particularly Thai studies Buddhism, literature and history as well as living noble lives. It is important to know that Coede was very much influenced by Prince Damrong. He worked under Prince Damrong in the National Library. He was our President here.

Coede started by mentioning the names of Mongkut, Chulalongkorn, Damrong, Naris and others as exemplar princes of whom we should be proud, and then when he mentioned the name of our prince, he paused, and said: “Ah, this is the last of those Princes.” I said, “What do you mean?” and he replied, “These people were self-educated, showing devotion, and great learning”. He said, “They were unlike other princes who were educated abroad and then became more westernised, and much less familiar with their own Thai culture. But I said “Prince Dhani was also educated at a prep-school in England, then Rugby and Oxford”. He said, “Even so. Although he didn’t learn very much academically within his country, he was still deeply rooted in his own princely tradition of Siamese scholarship.” He added, “After him, there was nobody and not only that, he was very proud of his own culture.” Even during the time Piboon forced people to change their dresses to follow western fashion. Prince Dhani adhered to the traditional custom of wearing a *panung*. Even though the Government forced people to write about their own

country as “Thailand” and not “Siam”, Prince Dhani resisted. He told me that it was sad for even the Siam Society to change its name to “The Thailand Research Society” just to please the politicians. He said, “Why should we?” Then when he became its President he changed the name back to “The Siam Society” again. So I hope I shall live until I see the name of this country change to “Siam”, partly to please him and partly because I think that it is accurate and appropriate. It should not be changed by the enforcement of a military dictator. Again if you want, I can discuss that with you tonight or later on.

In a way it is sad that on his centenary the Thai Government appears not to be doing anything in honour of Prince Dhani. I don't feel sad for him, but I feel sad for the nation. Prince Dhani would not have wanted people to honour him, to make a celebration for him because he was a humble man. Even his autobiography is hardly about himself. He wrote a book once in English; *The Kings I Served* and he gave it to his English friend to read. His friend said, “Oh, is this your autobiography? But there is hardly anything about you”. This was Prince Dhani, you see. And for this in part, you must thank the *coup d'état* in 1932. Without it, we would hardly have any writings by Prince Dhani. He just was a civil servant working in the Royal Secretariat. He regarded everything as confidential, working so near to the Kings and he would do anything to serve his masters. So he became a non-entity. He was actually a man of great scholarship, as could be testified in – *The Collected Works of Prince Dhani*, which we published 16 years ago on his 84th birthday. King Vajiravudh was a great writer and while translating his masterpiece *Madhanapadha* into English, he consulted Prince Dhani all the time. He consulted with Prince Dhani over many things but our prince never told people because he was very humble. Humility is a great Buddhist virtue, but it is not a national virtue right now. I think nowadays that the most popular are those who boast about themselves. As I said, our prince started writing seriously after he became unemployed. He would't claim to be a creative writer, but he could have been. His grand-mother was a great artist, a great dancer, but she didn't want to dance very much. Similarly, he could write poetry and many creative works, but he chose not to. He felt his job was to create a link through Siamese culture between the older generation and the younger generation; from the Thais to the foreigners and vice versa. So he spoke in English, he wrote in English and he also wrote in Thai for the younger generation of this country. I think he acted as a bridge between past and present and he encouraged other scholars. I think it was a great

contribution. He never felt that anyone was inferior to him by birth, by education or by status. Phya Anuman was educated only up to Fourth Form, but any book written by Phya Anuman, was always reviewed by Prince Dhani in his review of recent Thai publications in the Siam Society Journal. he put Phya Anuman in touch with scholars abroad. He encouraged people in various scholarly pursuits, not only Phya Anuman, but many others.

There was another thing that he enjoyed greatly, but was not able to do. He loved to teach. He taught for a short time in the reign of Rama VI. Subsequently the then Rector of Chulalongkorn University asked him to work either part-time for the university or else as a fulltime professor. He was tempted but he felt that this would betray the confidence of his master, the King. He remained very humble in the Royal Secretariat despite not being a teacher. Even in that brief period of teaching he enjoyed it greatly. When he became Minister of Public Instruction, new teachers appointed asked if he could he would go to listen to see how they performed.

As for his literary works, I don't think Prince Dhani's writings will become immortal. Obviously later scholars will surpass him. I think he would be the first to admit that. But there is one thing very unique about Prince Dhani that will be difficult for biographers to describe and that is his personality. On one hand he was very humble and on the other he had deep scholarship, a deep penetration into human minds which enabled him to treat all as equals. I think I find that a great virtue and I can say that with confidence because I was close to him for many years. I could see the way he treated the servants, the way he treated the monks, princesses and others, so naturally, so simply. I find it a very great value – that commitment to friendship. He would go out of his way for friends. But he wouldn't do anything wrong, such as pushing his friend ahead of someone else if that person was better than his friend or relative. If anything was within his ability, or capacity, if it was right, legal of lawful, he would help you. Concerning the legal and ethical, perhaps some thought he went to extremes. He wouldn't even allow people to use water from the public works for the lawn. He said, "We have water from the pool. We use that because those who use the public works often do not even have enough water to drink. We should not waste water which should be reserved for others". I think if he lived until now he would find it very difficult. If you used water from the pond now, I think the lawn would disappear because pond water now is so polluted.

You see he was very fond of gardening but his best critic was his own son.

He said, "My father is very fond of gardening. It is useless and his garden always looks hopelessly dull." This is his best critic – his own son. His son criticized him not only on this issue but on many others and they had heated arguments. I told his son to at least admit that his father was an honest man. He said, "Yes, I grant you that, but he didn't know how to be dishonest".

I could talk on and on about Prince Dhani as a traditional Siamese Prince. In a way he was. But to me I think Prince Dhani combined the best of English education and the best of Thai traditional culture. This is very difficult to achieve. Many of us were brought up in the foreign culture and after that it is difficult to fix into your own culture again. In fact much harm is done to this country because of those educated abroad. But Prince Dhani had that wonderful spirit which could combine the two cultures and this was partly because of his humility and partly perhaps because of his deep commitment to Buddhism. He would never regard himself as a great Buddhist scholar. He would never regard himself as a great authority on anything. But because of that I think he combined the two cultures meaningfully. This made him quite unique and I am very proud that such a man lived with us. I hope we shall have more of his kind in the future because that would be great for this country.

Sulak : Now I am open for inquisitions, questions, debatable points, as I said, his daughter is in the audience, if you want more accurate facts, she can help me.

Question : If I remember my history correctly, in the end of 1920's, under King Prajadhipok, there was a draft constitution and there were municipal elections planned for the beginning of the 1930's. How did Prince Dhani view the movement to the democratisation?

Sulak : Well, I'm glad you asked. In fact I meant to skip it. On the democratic principle I must be honest with you. Prince Dhani was rather against it. He was confident that he could run the country well but at the same time you've got to realise that during that period the ruling elite felt that way. Not only he but the American advisor to the Foreign Ministry felt equally that Siam was not ready for democracy and that

what the Princes did was right. They were honest, they were good. During the reign of King Rama VI perhaps things went wrong and so the princes were coming back, and doing the right thing without realising that a lot of people resented them. I think that is the main factor for the *cook*; whether the people were educated enough – that is beside the point. There was also a memo that is now released. I think it is in Ben Batson's book. Just months before the *coup* of 1932s, Prince Dhani sent Mussolini's plan, the project on education, to the King. Mussolini felt that democracy could only be available in the Anglo-Saxon culture, certainly not in a Latin culture. So he felt that people must be led and that they must be led by strong dictatorship. Prince Dhani sent that memo to King Prajadipok for comments since he was in charge of education. He sought the King's advice. And in fact he tended to incline towards the elitist and educationalist viewpoint (but not to the same extreme as Mussolini). He believed that while the mass should be able to support themselves, and be self-employed that at least the elites should run the country. King Prajadhipok wrote a very nice comment which was partly typical of the King, saying, "Well, in a way Mussolini was right, but once you allow the free press as happened in the reign of my father and my brother, how could you go backward? Italy was strong and could do it. If we do not pave the way for democracy, the great powers will say that we are half barbarians. So we must, whether we like it or not, pave the way for democracy and then we must educate our public to be ready for democracy." I think that was the king's reply. But, of course they didn't have the chance to do it. The *coup* leaders did that for them just one month after.

Question : Did he do any archaeological research? Did he have any chance to do it in addition to the museum kind of work.

Sulak : Well, it depends on what you mean by research. I mean he was not involved in digging, obviously. He would have done research as far as literary work was concerned. You can see from his writings. He consulted archaeologists and scholars who visited him, experts. such as, the Dutch professor some archaeological site in Java. He was very

fond of the story of Panyi and some of the archaeological discovery here. He inspected them when he was in charge of the Ministry of Public Instructions and later on when he joined the Royal Academy as an academician. Obviously he was involved at that period. Even later on as the president of the Siam Society he was involved, but not directly, I think.

Question : How was his family life?

Sulak : He was a devoted husband and father. I am not quite sure how close he was to his parents. He did not mention them very much. Although he was a strict monogamist and sex did not play a great part in his life, he was very close to some ladies. First of all was his grand-mother; a woman of great character. Then his wife who was an ideal mother and a wonderful supporter of his work – very unassuming and with great charm and understanding. Princess Dhani was never at the forefront, but without her, he would have found life difficult. Again his sister, Princess Sipban Sonakul, was his favourite travelling companion and she helped him much in his literary work. Last but not least were his daughters, especially the one in the audience tonight.

A lecture by S. Sivaraksa
at the Siam Society 29 October 1985