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## SEAMEO SPAFA Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts

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# SPAFA Journal

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# Contemporary Thai Theatre

Thailand has long been known for its traditional masked, classical, and puppet theatre. It also has an active, diverse, and growing contemporary theatre scene, as Michael A. Denison discovered.

The traditional theatre of *khon*, *lakhon*, and others in Thailand have been accompanied by not only the huge commercial theatres offering tourist extravaganzas, local and imported musicals and operas, and cabarets specialising in sex and transgender shows but also, from the seeds planted by Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University in the 1960s, a vibrant independent alternative social and political theatre scene.

## Academic Theatre Programmes

During the late 1960s, Professor Sodsai Pantoomkomol established her Department of Dramatic Arts at the Faculty of Arts of Chulalongkorn University, and offered plays by Shakespeare, Brecht, and other Western playwrights in a non-air-conditioned room with minimal equipment. From that modest beginning, she built a department that now features a modern new theatre, named after her, with the latest technical equipment and a faculty of nine full-time teachers as well as a varying number of part-time instructors. Although somewhat conservative generally in the choice of plays that were usually presented, and focused on the technical skills of acting and directing, the Department of Dramatic Arts has been instrumental, over the years, in establishing the concept of non-traditional or post-traditional theatre in Thailand, theatre that deals with contemporary people and their everyday problems. The department has also provided a steady stream of highly trained and dedicated theatre professionals who have dispersed all over the country, and who have formed some of the academic and independent theatre groups that comprise Thailand's current contemporary theatre scene. These graduates have also filled the needs of local advertising, film and television companies. Notably, the



*Macbeth at Chulalongkorn's Sodsai Theatre  
(Photo: Chulalongkorn University,  
Faculty of Arts, Dept of Dramatic Arts)*

department is now Thailand's sole member of the UNESCO-sponsored ITI (International Theatre Institute) Asia Pacific Bureau of Theatre Schools. Professor Nopamat Veohong, now retired, served the department for many years as teacher, stage director and translator. She is also a film critic for the Matichon Thai-language newspaper.

Shortly after Professor Sodsai founded her department at Chulalongkorn University, Dr. Matani Rutnin Moj dara established her Department of Drama at the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Thammasat University. That department has, from modest beginnings, also provided a steady stream of trained theatre professionals who have, likewise, spread out over the country, and established academic and independent theatre groups. Thammasat University has always been a traditional rival of Chulalongkorn University – Thailand's oldest – and has usually been more in the forefront of the economic and social issues that have rocked Thai society in the past fifty years. As such, dramatic productions coming out of Thammasat University were more Brechtian, and focused on social issues; many of the Thammasat University graduates have ended up in the small independent theatre groups.

Dr. Rutnin, the author of *Dance, Drama and Theatre in Thailand*, Dr. Chetana Nagavachira, and Dr. Parichat Jungwiwattanaporn are Thailand's pre-eminent academic historians and scholars on contemporary Thai theatre. Current professional theatre critics are Pawit Mahasarinand of *The Nation* newspaper, and Amitha Amranand of the *Bangkok Post*. They and previous *Post* critic Alongkorn Parivudhiphong are all members of the IATC, the International Association of Theatre Critics. Professors Mahasarinand and Pornrat Damrhung, both teaching at Chulalongkorn University, contributed the Thai sections in the *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre*, the most up-to-date reference book on this subject.

Further support for the early development of contemporary theatre in Thailand, and exposure to Western and Eastern performance forms, was provided by international organisations such as the USIS, the United States Information Service, the British Council, Germany's Goethe Institut, the Alliance Française, and the Japan Foundation who provided varying degrees of financial support and a more-or-less steady stream of Western and Eastern music, theatre, ballet and modern dance performance groups and advisors. Among the advisors were Elizabeth

LeCompte, a MacArthur Genius Award winner and director of the Wooster Group in New York City, and Richard Schechner, Professor of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts, who presented a workshop at Chulalongkorn University; and Gary Carkin, who introduced the ideas of Grotowski's poor theatre and Artaud's ritual theatre at Thammasat University in the Seventies. The Goethe Institut brought in Wolfram Mehring of the Théâtre de la Mandragore in Paris and Norbert J. Meyer, an expert on Brecht, who directed Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* in a memorable production with local group, Crescent Moon. The Goethe Institut also provided massive support for the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra while the Thailand Cultural Centre, which serves as Thailand's current national theatre, was built as a gift from Japan.

Today, there are many other universities in Thailand offering non-traditional theatre programmes. Bangkok University, Silpakorn University, and Srinakharinwirot University all offer promising programmes. Chiang Mai University in the North also has a small programme. Bangkok University currently offers over 40 courses in their Department of Performing Arts, and will present the "BU Playfest 2012" (featuring 11 different plays over a period of nine weeks, including productions of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *True West*, *Marvin's Room*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Miracle Worker*). Srinakharinwirot University offers B.F.A. programmes in acting, directing, and theatre design while Silpakorn University's Department of Music and Dramatic Art offers a B.A. in theatre, and Chiang Mai University offers theatre courses within their Mass Communication B.A. programme. The value of acting courses in developing public speaking and rhetorical skills has led to these courses also being offered in various business schools and education faculties throughout the kingdom.

In Thailand's theatre scene, Patravadi Mejudhon occupies a unique niche somewhere between the academic and commercial spheres. Since childhood, she has worked as an actor, dancer, director and producer. Her Patravadi Theatre served as a training school for young Thai theatrical artists, and is one of the prime theatres in Thailand that imported avant-garde artists and theatre groups. Mrs. Mejudhon is perhaps the Thai theatre artist most widely known outside of Thailand, and is featured on many tourist "must see" lists. Her theatre and work have been continually publicised in the West. Germany's Goethe Institut provided her with



guest artists to perform at her Patravadi Theatre in Thonburi, Bangkok. She now also runs the Patravadi High School Hua Hin and the continually growing Vic Hua Hin Arts Complex in Hua Hin, south of Bangkok.

## **Professional Coaches and Training Schools**

Thailand's massive advertising, film and television production industries, have created the need for high-level professional drama coaches. These coaches also serve the needs of Hollywood film companies that shoot in Thailand. Onchuma Yuthavong, a former professor at Chulalongkorn, is one of the top coaches in the country now, and has served as the personal coach of martial arts actor Tony Jaa (*Ong Bak* hit film) as well as many other top film and television personalities. She is also an advisor to the Thai government's Ministry of Culture, and is writing a textbook on acting style, which will be Thailand's only second book on that topic, after the one written by Sodsai Pantoomkomol. Mrs. Yuthavong is an award-winning actress, director, and producer of children's shows; she travels widely as an international spokesperson for Thai fine and performing arts.

Mom Luang Bhandevanop Devakul, a Chulalongkorn University graduate and director of the 1987 film, *I Am a Man*, also runs a private acting school, mostly to develop actors to use in his own films.

## **Commercial Theatre Programmes**

The Chalerm Krung Royal Theatre, the Muangthai Rachadalai Theatre, the Aksra Theatre, the Siam Niramit, and the M Theatre all offer a continually varied programme of locally produced and imported "big" shows. In addition, the Thailand Cultural Centre, Royal Paragon Hall, Impact Arena, and Center Point Playhouse at Central World, are all huge rental houses that feature major events of many different types.

Muangthai Rachadalai Theatre has presented *Four Reigns*, a much-loved Thai historical drama, and *Tawipop*, a typical romantic musical, as well as *Tea Leonga* in a road show production of *Cinderella*. They have also hosted road shows of the international hits, *Chicago* and *Mamma Mia!* The Siam Niramit offers a huge tourist-oriented Thai culture show on its

Guinness World Record (highest proscenium arch) stage complete with dozens of live flying *theptida* (angels).

Takonkiet Viravan, who produces, directs, and serves as Thailand's Andrew Lloyd Webber, often offers his grand romantic musical hits such as *Banlang Mek*, *Fah Jarod Sai* and *Tawipop* at the Muangthai Ratchadalai Theatre.

**Dreambox** is a major production company which presents original Thai language plays, and Thai versions of international hits such as *Fame* and *Dreamgirls*. It was originally named DASS, an acronym for the names of the three college girls who founded it, and worked out of rented theatres all over Bangkok. Their home now is the M Theatre, which was once called the Bangkok Playhouse. Suwadee Jakravoravudh is the resident director at Dreambox. Daraka Wongsiri, one of the three founders of DASS, and current artistic director at Dreambox, is now one of Thailand's best, and most popular and active translators, playwrights and lyricists.



Student set models at Srinakharinwirot University (Photo: Michael Denison)

Located around Bangkok are several small theatre spaces, which are rented on a rotating basis by the various independent groups that do not have their own home theatres. Some of these are the Democracy Theatre Studio on Soi Sapan Koo, the BlueBox studio at M Theatre, and the Crescent Moon space at the Pridi Banomyong Institute. The Nakarin Theatre at Srinakharinwirot University is also available to outside groups, but is usually used by music ensembles.

In 2009, the Democracy Theatre Studio presented *Love and Money* and Eugene Ionesco's *Chairs*, directed by Adjima na Patalung who attended workshops in London with original production director Matthew Dunster. In 2011, the studio presented *A Thread in the Dark* and Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*, and in 2012, 8x8's *Beauty to Hell*, based on Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. The theatre has also hosted an annual International Butoh Festival for several years.

The niche transvestite and transgender "LadyBoy" shows also fall into the commercial theatre category, with the longest-running and most famous being the Calypso Cabaret at the Asia Hotel. The show will soon move to the Asiatique, a new river front shopping and dining promenade.



Sumonta Suanpolrat in 8x8's *Beauty to Hell* (Photo: Michael Denison)

## Dance Theatre Groups

The two major forms of Thai traditional theatre are forms of dance. The *khon* traditionally featured masked all-male dancers in stories from the *Ramakian*, the Thai version of the *Ramayana*. The other form is the *lakhon* that features all female dancers, sometimes masked, in a wider range of stories. Although contemporary Thai theatre is typified by the development of various forms of spoken drama, or *lakhon phut samai mai*, Thai dance drama has also shown development along similar lines in the use of subject matter and new expressive techniques. Currently typical of these developments is the work of Pichet Klunchun, whose fusion of Thai *khon* and modern dance forms have dazzled audiences both in Thailand and overseas. His current production, *Black and White*, most recently seen in Singapore, is due to be presented in Switzerland and is a study of the balance in human relationships.



*Pichet Klunchun (left) and colleague rehearsing Black and White (Photo: Michael Denison)*

Another important contemporary fusion dance act is the **18 Monkeys** dance group. After getting a degree in engineering from Chulalongkorn University, group member Vitti Chompee trained in classical ballet and eventually achieved a full-time scholarship to study at the Alvin Ailey

School in New York. The group travels internationally and has presented a version of Bizet's opera, *Carmen*, with traditional Thai puppets, as well as *Sudsakorn*, a version of Sunthorn Puu's *Phra Apai Mani*. Their other performances included *In Tune*, a work about technology in contemporary life; *A Love Song*, an homage to Jean Genet; and *Demon in Venice*, based on Thomas Mann's novel *Death in Venice*.

## Independent Theatre Groups

Perhaps the most exciting area of development in contemporary theatre in Thailand now is the growth of independent theatre groups. The most important of these is the **Crescent Moon Theatre Group**, formed by Kamron Gunatilaka in the 1970s, and originally dedicated to commentary on political and social issues arising out of the student-led protests of the Seventies. It was also dedicated to experimental production techniques based on the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. The group's original production, *The Revolutionist*, was based on the life of former Prime Minister Pridi Banomyong. Crescent Moon is now in the hands of Sineenadh Keitprapai, who also teaches at Chulalongkorn University and Dhurakij Pundit University.

Another significant group is **Makhampom**, one of the very first independent avant-garde groups in Thailand. With its international connections, the group has travelled widely, and hosts international artists and workshops. The group is developing its Living Theatre Centre in Chiang Dao in Northern Thailand, providing community, theatre training and refugee programmes.

**Moradokmai**, which began as an educational television programme in 1990, has evolved under the leadership of Professor Janaprakal Chandruang (Kru Chang) into the Moradokmai Home School, which is an accredited secondary school, theatre training school and performance group, and self-supporting commune. Kru Chang integrates theatre training with personal



*Kru Chang and wife, Ju, of Moradokmai  
(Photo: Michael Denison)*



*B-Floor in Flu Fool at the Pridi Banomyong Institute (Photo: Michael Denison)*



*Babymime performing at the Bangkok Theatre Festival (Photo: Babymime)*

self-development, philosophical and religious discourse, and life skills. The group is often invited to travel and perform internationally, and also works with theatre groups appearing on world tours in Thailand. Its home campus and theatre in Pathum Thani, although still active, was recently severely damaged in the floods of 2011. A larger campus and theatre facility are being constructed for future use in Loei Province. Kru Chang and Professor Pornrat Damrhung of Chulalongkorn University were among the first to experiment with the mixing of Thai and western theatre forms, and they continue to do so today (internationally known composer Bruce Gaston has done the same with Thai and western music forms).

**B-Floor** is an extremely active group that specialises in what they call “physical theatre”, a combination of mostly dance and pantomime integrating ideas from Jerzy Grotowski, Butoh, and Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints. Under the leadership of Teerawat Mulvilai, B-Floor has presented a steady stream of very popular avant-garde performances, and each of their new performances is widely anticipated. They have appeared overseas in the US, France, Denmark, Egypt, India, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan.

**Babymime** has become increasingly popular over the last many years. Its three principal members, Thong-glur Tongta (Glur), Nuttapol Kummata (Ta), and Ratchai Rujiwipatna (Nging) have been entertaining children and adult audiences in Thailand for years. The group appeared at many of the major theatres here, and has been invited to perform at international mime festivals.

Nikorn Saetang’s **8x8 Theatre** has been around since 1998, and has a varying number of members. Like many other small independent groups, they suffer from insufficient financial support, and had to close the 8x8 Corner, which was their own theatre space in Bangkok. Following some other groups, they make use of various venues in the city, particularly the Blue Box Studio, the small experimental theatre space at the commercial M Theatre. The last three productions of 8x8 Theatre were *Desperation of God* in 2010, *Meeting Love* in 2011 and *Beauty to Hell* in 2012, which is based on Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. The next production of the group will be *Reincarnate*, a reprise of a show that premiered in 2011.

Monthatip Suksopha's **Wandering Moon Performance Group** of Chiang Mai, Thailand's northern metropolis, was founded in 1999, and has developed a modern form of Thailand's traditional *nang yai* and *nang talung* shadow puppet theatres. Khun Monthatip studied at Chiang Mai University and at the Patravadi Theatre in Thonburi. She worked with the Makhampom group, and has travelled with her shows all over Southeast Asia and to Europe.

Obie Award-winning designer Manuel and Orapan Lutgenhorst's **Empty Space – Chiang Mai** is located near the Burmese border; it is an artists' community offering training and creative work opportunities in theatre studies and international performance, film, Thai traditional arts and crafts, Asian puppetry, ceramics, and the visual arts. The group hosted the yearly Dhamma Theatre West workshops, worked with many international artists, and is especially active in related Asian art forms. Orapan has worked with local theatre groups Theatre 28, Makhamporn, Crescent Moon, B-Floor, Wandering Moon, and Patravadi Theatre. The interchange of artists and cooperation between groups is very common in Thailand, and everyone seems to know one another.

**Life Theatre** is run by Bhanbhassa "Ning" Dhubthien, Sasithorn "Heen" Panichnok, and Shogo "Sho" Tanikawa. Productions by the ensemble – Professor Bhanbhassa also teaches at Chulalongkorn University; Sasithorn studied theatre in New York City – feature a digital translation marquee on the theatre wall that translates the dialogue into Thai or Japanese language as needed. Nikorn Saetang's 8x8 theatre also uses this technique, and added this feature to their production of *Beauty to Hell*, which featured a running English translation on the wall of the theatre. Life Theatre's most recent productions were *Water Time* (2009), *The Story of Footprints* (2009), *The Four Sisters* (2010), *Green Concerto* (2011), and a reprise of *Water Time* (2012). Upcoming in August of 2012 will be a gay version of Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*.

**4Daruma** is a small theatre group made up of Malinda Phamornsuwan, Napak Tricharoendej, Pacharakamol Chantri, and Suwalee Wichaiwuttikun, all Chulalongkorn University Drama graduates who shared interest in acting, directing, playwriting and design. Among the plays they have done are *Details Cannot Want a Body*, *Hard Women* and *Rak Tidtor*, a play about a gay Thai man with AIDS, done in collaboration with Shogo

Tanikawa of Life Theatre, and Kabuki-La, another independent group. The most recent production of 4Daruma was called *The Day Before Tomorrow*, performed in 2012. Shogo's participation in this production is an example of the friendly interchange of artists, and the cooperation between groups, that are very common in Thailand.

Damkerng Thitapiyasak's **New Theatre Society** has done Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* in 1900s Siamese style. It was directed by co-founder director-actress-playwright Parnrut Kritchanhai. The group also performed Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* and Michael Christopher's *Shadow Box; Freeze the Dream; Hamlet, the Techno Drama; George Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man; Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot; Push Up; Push Up Returns; and The Blue Room*. Furthermore, New Theatre Society presented *Waiting for Godot* in collaboration with Crescent Moon, *Push-Up 1-3* and *La Ronde* in collaboration with the Goethe Institut, and Damkerng's own *Breaking the Surface*, an "anti-romantic musical" based on a mix of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man; Hamlet; and Nang Nak the Museum*, a comic version of a much-loved Thai ghost story, and other original works. Ms. Parnrut is also a part-time lecturer at Bangkok University, Rangsit University, and Dhurakij Pandi University, and served as a producer of Bangkok Theatre Festival in 2009.

**Saosoong** Theatre was founded in 1997 by Nut Nualpang, Damkerng Thitapiyasak and some graduates of Bangkok University. It specialised in satirical comedy, presenting social satires *Tu-ma Mangku, Three Girls Confirmed Bad, The Princess of the Ocean* as well as the innovatively staged hits *Haunted House, Mod Tood, and Same Same*. Other works included the musical *Rak Siam Sathani* and the two-part *Wi-Fi Project Version 2.0* which was presented at the 2009 Bangkok Theatre Festival, where it won an audience popularity award.

Chulalongkorn graduate Pattarasuda Anuman Rajadhon has formed a new group called **NUNI** (Never Underestimate New Ideas), and will be directing imported French singers for a production of Jules Massenet's opera *Cendrillon* in 2013 for the annual French Fête de la Musique in Bangkok. She has worked previously on productions of operas for the Bangkok Opera, *Threepenny Opera* and *Dido and Aeneas* for her own NUNI productions, and Silpakorn University. Pattarasuda also worked on *Cleopatra, the Musical*, for Mahidol, and *The Chairs* at Democracy.



**The Naked Masks Theatre** supports youth-centered network, youth and development programmes, and has presented a play about the modern generation's search for identity, *Hold on Me (Daite)*, at their Naked Masks Phayathai-Ratchathewi Theatre.

**Theatre 28** was formed in 1985 by Rassamee Paoluengthong, film director Yuthana Mukdasanit, advertising producer Buranee Ratchaiboon and several friends. It was a spearhead in experimental non-traditional theatre development in Thailand for several years until they disbanded around 1995. Among their most successful productions were Brecht's *Galileo*, Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, *Man of La Mancha*, and Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*. They also produced a less successful musical version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which was directed by M.L. Bhandevanop Devakul, with a cast of well-known stage and television actors.

The **Bangkok Theatre Network** is a loose amalgam of independent theatre groups (B-Floor, Babymime, Bang Play, Bangkok Theatre Festival, Crescent Moon, Makhampom, Moradokmai, the New Theatre Society, Saosong, 8x8 Theatre and others) that collaborate in expanding and developing the independent theatre scene in Bangkok, as well as organising the annual Bangkok Theatre Festival.

## **Annual Bangkok Theatre Festival**

Each November, Thai theatre artists gather at Santi Chaiprakarn Park to attend the Bangkok Theatre Festival (BTF), which is organised by the Bangkok Theatre Network. The event is held to provide spaces and opportunity for theatre people to create and perform exciting new theatre works.

At several permanent and temporary outdoor stages in the park, the festival presents Thailand's leading traditional and contemporary artists, including national "Silpathorn" award-winning artists, and artists with international reputations. Opportunities are offered for young artists from academic institutions to present works in collaboration with their theatre teachers. Puppet theatre, singing theatre, stories adapted from renowned literary works and plays for children are also presented, along with juggling, games, sports, street and music performance and audience participation activities. The Riverside Stage is reserved for experimental and creative new works.

With the financial support of the Thai government and private organisations, plays are free of charge at the BTF. At various other theatres around Bangkok participating in the festival, admission is charged at reasonable prices. Pornrat Damrhung of Chulalongkorn University has been actively involved with the BTF since its inception, and most of the independent theatre groups in Bangkok try to become involved, one way or another, in the annual event.

## National Awards in Theatre

The **Thailand National Artist Award** recognises notable Thai artists in literature, fine arts, visual arts, applied arts and performing arts, and represents the highest level of recognition in these fields – the sole winner in theatre, so far, is Sodsai Pantoomkomol.



*Sodsai Pantoomkomol (centre, wearing glasses) with cast of Macbeth  
(Photo: Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Arts, Dept of Dramatic Arts)*

The **Silpathorn Award** is for mid-career artists and those who have already made notable contributions to Thai fine arts and culture. Artists who have received this award included Janaprakal Chandruang of Moradokmai Theatre, Sineenadh Keitprapai of Crescent Moon Theatre, dancer and choreographer Pichet Klunchuen, Manop Meejamrus, 8x8 Theatre's Nikorn Saetang, Nimit Pipithkul of Crescent Moon Theatre, and Pradit Prasartthong of the Bangkok Theatre Festival and Bangkok Theatre Network.

The **Silpathorn Kitikhun Award** is for artists over 50 who, because of controversy or unconventional works, would likely not be considered for the more conservative Thailand National Artist honour. The sole winner in theatre of this award, and the only non-Thai to ever win the award, is Bruce Gaston.

## Epilogue

Thailand's contemporary theatre scene is dynamic and fluid and, that being the case, at any given moment new groups are forming and appearing, and old groups are re-forming, and disappearing. There is also a continual interchange and combining of artists and ideas, and a spirit of shared artistic adventure.

There are websites connected to almost every person and group mentioned in this article, but, the Internet being what it is, many of these websites may become obsolete or out-of date. There are also hundreds of related video clips on YouTube and other sites of varying levels of quality. Several of these websites and clips are in the Thai language because the academic and independent theatre scenes are concerned mostly with the needs of Thailand itself.

What is most exciting about Thailand's contemporary theatre scene is that, rather than just maintaining traditional old art forms, Thailand's new generation of theatre artists are trying to create new forms specific to the needs of contemporary Thai society and culture. If art is a search for meaning in life, then this search is well under way in Thailand in the hands of the latest generation of young Thai theatre artists.

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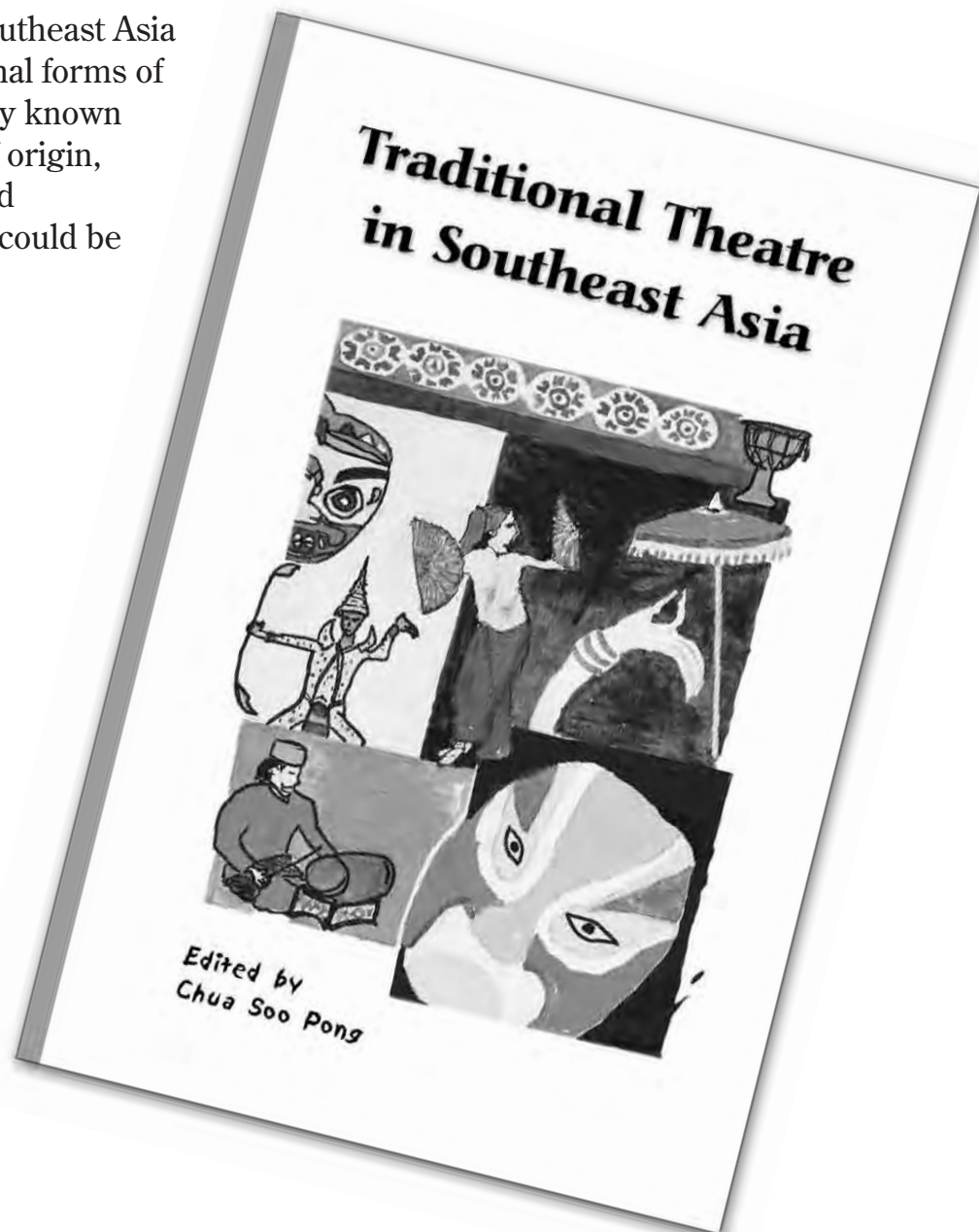
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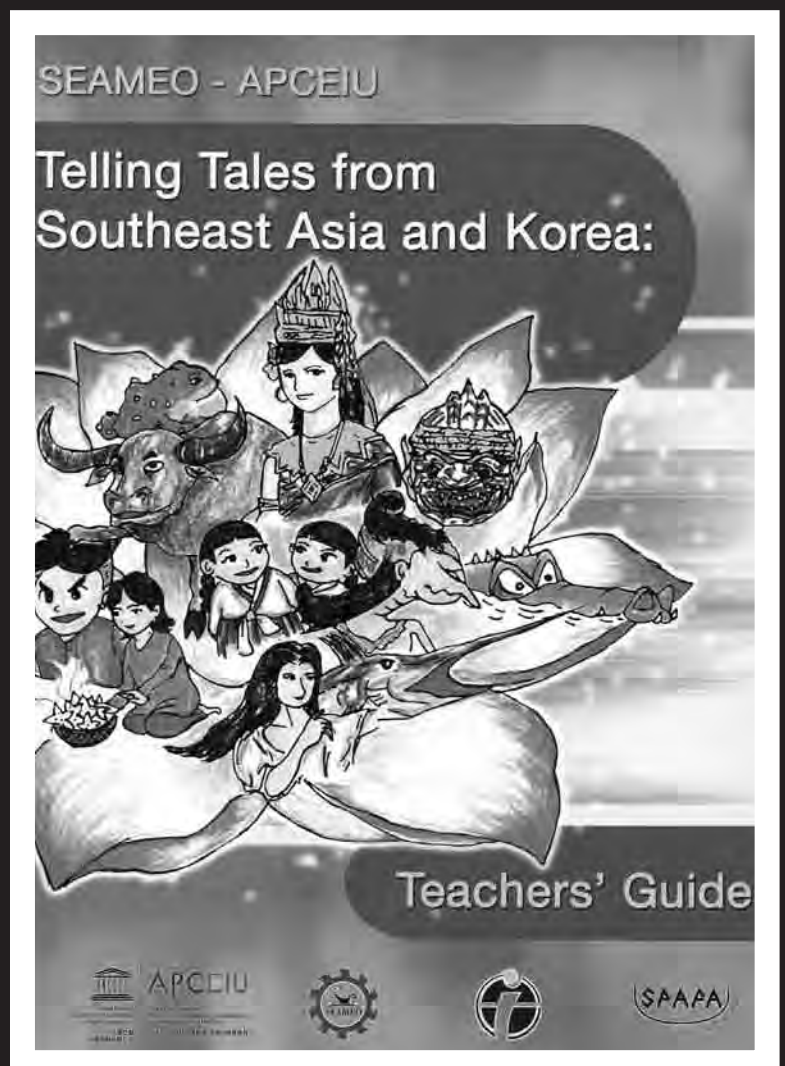
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# Likay Goes to Japan

## *Folk Theatre of Thailand*

Likay is a form of popular folk theatre performed in Thailand that combines glitzy costumes and vacillating plot narratives, thus relying on the actors' skills of improvisation and audience imagination. In this article, **Sukanya Sompiboon** focuses on the performance of likay in Japan, and the conceptual framework and practical principles for a performing troupe in a likay performance.

### Introduction

In October 2008, Makhampom Theatre Troupe (Thailand) was invited to perform in Yokohama, Japan. Its contemporary *likay* performance, entitled *The Message*, had previously been held at BankART 1992 and Kazu Ohno Dance Studio, through the sponsorship of the City of Yokohama and Agency of Cultural Affairs of Japan. It was also performed at Makhampom Studio, Bangkok, in 2007 and later at the Lido Multiplex Theatre, Bangkok, during the Bangkok Theatre Festival in November 2008. The performance, developed from *Naga Wong*,<sup>1</sup> focuses on local

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<sup>1</sup> Naga Wong, the legend of Naga that is deeply connected with the local people residing in the basin of the Mekong River, was an initial collaborative work of artists from 3 nations, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Performances were given at the Siam Society in Thailand in 2005; Cambodia in 2006; and Nong Khai province, the border of Thailand and Laos, in 2006. The performers spoke in Thai, Cambodian, and Lao dialects in the repertoire, while English subtitles were provided. *Naga Wong* reflected the changes of the Mekong River and the human lives associated with it. Thais represented the greedy people who were influenced by capitalism. They needed to catch a Naga to free them from suffering caused by the disaster. In this parody, the characters created an exhibition called 'Unseen Thailand', through which they gained more money from tourists. They hunted the Naga using an evil magic spell. By contrast, Laotian performers took the role of people who always respected the Naga, while the Cambodians performed as the Naga and his wife.

and global social concerns, about people being threatened and victimised as a result of industrialisation and economic developments. It illustrates the negative aspects and self-interest of humans, with a theme based on the sufferings of people living in the Mekong River area in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. The lives of these people are made miserable by the drought resulting from a dam project in China, and they manage to survive only through self-interest. Various groups hatch their own plans to steal the Naga to benefit themselves (the Naga is believed to be a good luck charm, bringing prosperousness to the land).

## **Makhampom's Contemporary Likay Performance**

Having been developing for more than a decade without interruption, Makhampom has become a prominent troupe of contemporary *likay* in Thailand. Its performances signify the cooperative (re)interpretation of selected Thai myths, legends, and literature in a contemporary socio-cultural context and through a contemporary socio-cultural discourse. It features melodramatic and comic styles, along with contemporary staging, in a *likay* repertoire. Makhampom's scripts represent a hybrid form of theatrical elements (A. Amranand, personal communication, September 26, 2011), with its roots in the folk tradition. Its form of *likay* has developed via a social-efficacy route that goes beyond artistic form. This inroad into the reinvention of *likay* performance brings various challenges in terms of socio-cultural reconceptualisation.

Makhampom's contemporary *likay* provides perspectives on the ability of *likay* to promote the transformation of performance discourse and practice in a socio-cultural context that currently, and to some extent, encourages a dialogue on social efficacy. In addition to employing a combination of Eastern and Western approaches to performing, Makhampom's contemporary *likay*, which developed within a cultural frame of reference in Thailand, exemplifies the coalescence and crystallisation of traditional and contemporary forms in the creative process. The group adopts modern performing approaches, techniques, and designs, and blend conventional *likay* elements, such as *ok khaek* (a prelude dance in Indian style), with audience participation. For that reason, its contemporary *likay* productions, which are well-scripted and well-produced, can be precisely understood and appreciated by a wide range of audiences.

Makhampom has attempted to develop an innovative type of *likay* that incorporates issues of local and global concerns, featuring characters who represent proponents as well as victims of materialism and selfishness. This thematic content, very much tied to the middle class, reflects earnestness, realism, and interpretation of values. Makhampom's contemporary *likay* is therefore both entertaining, and provokes serious contemplation. As writer Amitha Amranand (2009) states: "the jolly traditional *likay* is capable of the kind of depth and perceptiveness that Pradit gives his creations." Pradit Prasartthong is an actor-director and playwright of contemporary *likay* performances, including *Naga Wong* and *The Message*. "What makes his *likay* stands out, however, is the artist's daringness to venture into the dark side and stay there. You come out of Makhampom's *likay* remembering as much about how it had made you laugh as how it hadn't. Watching a *likay* by Pradit hardly feels like sitting cosy on a couch," says Amranand.

Performing in *likay* limits the psychological viewpoint of the actors, due to the stylistic requirements of playing a *likay*-type character involving specific movement, dancing, and singing. Despite this, personalisation of a character is used in *The Message*, achieved through the performers having to find the characters' objectives, and thereby making the cameo roles more realistic. Prasartthong wanted to demonstrate an intolerable situation with the trapped people managing to survive only through self-interest. Each group hatches their own plan to steal the Naga as it is believed to be a good luck charm to bring prosperity to the land. As a result, the character types were usually performed with a more explicit human sensibility, achieved via the acting dimension through the actors' expressions. For example, the aggression of the Naga Malan and his wife, Jantia, when they transformed into human beings, had to be clear and strong. This, therefore, was reflected in their vocal and eye communication. In the same manner, the character Princess Busadi, who was always modest and pleasant in the virtuous manner of a typical fairytale princess, would look wicked when she thought about her country and her people who had been destroyed by another kingdom. Boonporn, who played Princess Busadi, switched the 'performing' role to that of 'acting' as a person, representing a real problem of undeveloped countries that were overwhelmed by more powerful countries. This acting approach, together with the stylising approach of *likay*, added more layers to the performance.

## ***The Message Begins* and *The Message*: Two Performances in Japan**

*The Message Begins* was the introduction of *The Message* which was performed on the first day of the 4-day event. The performance took place on a floating stage, at a pier near BankART Studio, part of Yokohama BankART space. Temporary seats were set for an audience of more than three hundred. The Japanese producers' intention was to make a remarkable and stunning performance by which a random audience of passers-by and those who had just left work would be persuaded to see *The Message*, which followed *The Message Begins* at BankART 1992 studio.

In both performances, the full *ok khaek* dance was presented, as an introduction.<sup>2</sup> This exciting introduction followed the *likay* convention, drawing attention and preparing the Japanese audience, who were not familiar with the percussive, flamboyant, and flirtatious style of a *likay* performance. Although the production maintained this *likay* identity, modern dance and music were also part of the show, including an English song. This song was created from a mix of Thai folk music from *tareekipus*, a Muslim fan dance and rap beat-style music along with the *piphat* classical Thai music that features wind and percussion instruments. A mocking Indian-style dance in the first section was followed by a hip-hop dance style in the second part of the song, returning to an Indian style again in the concluding section. The last sentence of the song were sung in a traditional *likay* prelude style melody. The lyrics are:

(the first section, a *tareekipus*)

*Hi everybody, come to see likay  
that we proudly present as entertainment for you today  
Please enjoy this popular Thai folk opera  
we call likay*

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<sup>2</sup>The *ok khaek* language used in *The Message Begins* was English while the Thai language was used in *The Message* except for the *ok khaek* song.

(the second section, a rap beat)

*Welcome everybody - it's time to see likay  
Likay is exciting; it's more than I can say  
You will be amazed by the great likay  
Enjoy Thai songs, Thai dance, Thai music, and Thai play  
Life is too crazy; be happy anyway  
Forget your crazy life; leave it behind, throw it away*

(the third section, *tareekipus* and *likay* prelude)

*Follow me, let me share my stories  
Take it easy; you will be OK.  
Whatever will be, let's see likay*



*“Ok Khaek”, or Indian-style dance, is presented as a prelude dance in The Message, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008.  
(Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*

Apart from the *ok khaek* prelude dance, a brief narration is typically used in *likay* performance. The performer summarises the show by narrating the story. It can also be used as a synopsis after the *ok khaek* has finished or as a linking narration between each scene.

In *The Message Begins*, Princess Busadi of Suwannakorn Kingdom is looking for a man to protect her kingdom, which suffers from lack of rain and water in the river, increasing poverty. Her kingdom also comes under attack by the Dragon King of the Great Kingdom. The one who can protect her kingdom from disaster and war will become her husband.



Audience participation is one of the main elements of a *likay* performance, and is also normally used in Makhampom's contemporary *likay*. In the same performance, the audience was invited to take part in the singing, allowing an interaction between an actor and spectator. The audience was persuaded to say "Hai" at the end of phrases of the lyrics.

Another example of audience participation was in a comical scene in *The Message*. Here, a clown named Oishi, performed by a cross-dressing actor, demonstrated to the audience how to mix a prescription, conveyed through very droll gestures. After finishing the demonstration, he asked for a volunteer amongst the audience to come onto the stage to help him compound the medicine, again conveyed by funny movements and a swaying-of-hip gesture.



*The atmosphere of the floating stage which has Yokohama city's night as its backdrop in *The Message Begins*, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photos courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*



*Princess Busadi asks her servant, Oishi, to announce the search for a prince to be her mate in *The Message Begins*, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*



*The three competitive princes show off their talents to Princess Busadi in *The Message Begins*, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*

*The Japanese butoh performer leads Makhampom's likay actors to the floating stage's exit.  
(Photos courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*



## Development of Space and Stage Modification

As a result of space limitation, and also design experimentation, the backdrop and props in *The Message*, performed at Makhampom Studio in 2007, reflected minimal set design. A plain backdrop replaced the decorated wooden one in order to project light, enhance effect, and impose English subtitles upon it. Wooden steps, painted white, were used as a throne bench and cliffs, a change from the wooden stool that is always placed in the centre of a stage in traditional *likay*. Although a large space was available at the Lido Multiplex movie house when the performance was held there in 2008, this contemporary design, which used only some of the indicative props of a *likay* performance, continued to be used for both the artists and the audience to explore and nurture creativity through a minimalist design.

The steps were replaced by a black-step platform, used as a backdrop that divided the front and the back of the stage. The stage floor was black as well, allowing the necessary lighting and visual effects to be employed in this shadowy atmosphere. Director Pradit Prasartthong, somewhat shrewdly, took advantage of a big movie-screen behind the stage for projecting images onto it. Such images, which related to the specific scene, were projected onto the back screen to abridge an action that linked with the following scene. An example of this can be seen in a throne hall shadow image, projected in a wedding scene, and designed to lessen the scale of stage-prop decoration, whilst simultaneously providing the *likay* convention to the audience. Additionally, a leather shadow-puppet of a Naga sketch was utilised with clear light, indicating the appearance or disappearance of the Naga Malan in each scene.



*A character disguises herself by wearing sunglasses. A kettle is humorously used as a conch shell in the water blessing of a wedding ceremony scene in *The Message* at Makhamptom Studio (2007). (Photo courtesy of Makhamptom Theatre Troupe)*

*The *Message* productions at Makhamptom Studio and at Lido Multiplex in Bangkok Theatre Festival (2007). (Photo courtesy of Makhamptom Theatre Troupe)*

The stage design was changed again when *The Message* was performed in Japan at the BankART, Yokohama in 2008. At this location, the performance took place on a floating stage in the river, and used the scenery of Yokohama night as a stunningly large natural backdrop. The Japanese stage crews had the creative idea of using a boat as a small backdrop, dividing the boundary of the floating stage and the river, as well as providing an empty space in the boat as the changing room. Unfortunately, they were unable to implement this due to the boat being unable to be used as a screen for projecting Japanese subtitles; consequently, they built white steps with a white plain screen for that purpose. The steps could also function as a throne and a cliff as well, with the spare space behind this abrupt architecture functioning as the back area of the stage. However, as all the performers were not able to use this space as a changing room, more space was provided on the bank behind the audience.

The slope of the bridge was fixed in relation to the flow and ebb of the tide. On the second night, the tide was very low, causing the bridge to be extremely sloped, and walking and running across was undertaken with difficulty. Notwithstanding the unexpected circumstance, solutions to such problems were found through improvisational skills that lie at the heart of performing *likay*. Light and sound effects were wholly employed during the show. A red light, for example, was used to indicate the appearance of a wicked character that had been transformed from his or her previous good character. When the Naga was angry, a thunderclap of light and sound was applied. The most difficult aspect of the production's effects was using them in a sequential order. A controller had to remember the gestures and movements of the actors, cues that were not familiar to him. However, after ten rehearsals, he was able to operate the effects accurately.



*The other floated stage for The Message. There are only 4 rows of seat for the audience (2 rows are on the left side and the other 2 rows are on the right side. The stairs for entrance and exit are in the middle) The Message, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*



*Japanese subtitles are projected onto the wooden backdrop in The Message, Yokohama, Japan, October 2008. (Photo courtesy of Toshio Mizohata)*

## Lesson from Japanese Audiences

Japanese audiences offered lessons in terms of understanding the differences in appreciation of a performance. There is no sharp dividing line that define who are the actors and audiences in viewing *likay*; on the other hand, audience participation is always encouraged by the performers. In the context of Thai folk-popular theatre, audiences do not need to be connoisseurs, but to some degree should participate in a show in many possible ways of interaction such as laughing, shouting, talking, acclaiming or clapping during a performance, which could invigorate a mood of

viewing and acting. Japanese audiences often stay calm and quiet because they do not want to break the performers' concentration. This reaction is undesirable for a *likay* show. The *likay* performance needs constant audience interactions. A passive audience diminishes a *likay* performance.

On the first night of performing *The Message*, the audience kept silent, and did not react at all, neither laughing nor responding even when asked. Such is the Japanese viewing culture that the actors and group learned much about how to meet the challenges of playing to audiences of various cultures. The performance troupe adapted its performance by adding a short section of Japanese language in the dialogue on the second night, bridging a gap between performers and audiences. For example, as the character (Naga's wife) was looking for her husband, she asked the audience in English, 'Do you see my husband?' No one laughed or reacted. When they were asked in Japanese '*Watashino Danna Sang Mite Ma Sang Ga?*', the audience smiled or giggled in response. More audience participation was solicited by inviting some of them onto the stage to join a funny scene, explaining to them in simple English and Japanese. The mood of the performance changed drastically in the last two rounds when Thai audiences residing in Yokohama participated by presenting garlands and flowers to performers, yelling and clapping their hands throughout the performance, which encouraged Japanese audiences to join in. The reaction of the audiences boosted the performers' energy. *The Message* was eventually well-received by the local audience in Japan.

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# Looting at Archaeological Sites and Museums

Famous world heritage places around the world – Ban Chiang, Banteay Chhmar, Bamiyan – share a common plight: they have been pillaged or damaged due to widespread looting, political/religious violence, or instability. Roberto Gozzoli shares his thoughts on the looting of such sites and museums as well.

In Southeast Asia, Thailand's Ban Chiang is a well-known archaeological site discovered during the 1960s by an American anthropologist who literally fell over the rim of a pot (Higham 2003 pp. 133-134; White 1982 p. 15). The joint excavations between Thailand's Fine Arts Department and the University of Pennsylvania, led by Pisit Charoenwongsa and Chester Gorman, found a past civilisation, that purportedly introduced bronze-smelting in the region around 1,100 BCE (Higham & Thosarat 2012 p. 121).

Better dating, on a wider range of material gave more precision about the actual chronological span of the Ban Chiang civilisation, and dismissed the assumption of it being the first bronze-smelting civilisation.



*Ancient tombs discovered by looters and illegal diggers (Photo: Monica Hanna)*

From a heritage point of view, however, the discovery created an interest in the Ban Chiang ceramics. As American military bases were located in Thailand's Udon Thani region during the Vietnam war, many of the American soldiers returned home with some of the pots from Ban Chiang for souvenirs. Local inhabitants were quick to appreciate the importance of the place, and helped in digging for new pots. Today, visitors at the site, which was registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992, can only admire some of the tombs which are now part of the Museum (Peleggi 2002 pp. 47-48). Most of the other tombs in the region were completely looted by hunters in search of objects to sell. A recent American investigation noted that American art dealers were complicit in the looting of Ban Chiang pottery, and it occurred over a long period of time.

In Cambodia, systematic looting took place at Banteay Chhmar, a Khmer heritage site. Entire walls of monument were dismantled (Nagashima 2002), and most were transported to Thailand, where they were sold at River City (a modern shopping complex), or through a triangulation with Singapore and re-imported into Thailand (Nagashima 2002 p. 108). The site is now under the supervision of the Global Heritage Network, which is developing its own strategies for site and tourism development.

Cambodia's heritage, including the major site of Angkor Wat, was susceptible to damage and looting, in particular during the civil conflict between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese who supported a national government.

The author is also quite struck by the number of heads that had been cut off Buddha statues in various temples, especially Wat Mahathat in Ayutthaya, the city in Thailand on which the author has recently completed a report.

Similarly in Afghanistan, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha images testify that religious hatred can bring about great loss and damage of precious heritage. As the Taliban destroyed what they considered symbols of a pagan/lesser religion, they culturally impoverished their own country (Gillman 2010 pp. 9-14).

It is, however, in Baghdad and Cairo that examples and reminders are offered starkly of the fragility of heritage in times of conflicts and wars, when political events determine the fate of thousands of heritage objects.

## **Iraq and its heritage**

Iraq was the centre of the Mesopotamian civilisation, which is considered the cradle of civilisation (Maisels 1999 pp. 80-185). Mesopotamia spanned over 3,000 years (Frankfort 1970) with various political and cultural entities (Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Chaldean) in the region. The first urban developments and the earliest forms of agriculture appeared, due to the presence of Tigris and Euphrates and the alluvial plains that they formed. The cuneiform writing arose there, and part of this civilisation was connected with Western culture. Biblical references speak of splendid cities, such as Babylon, Niniveh, and Ur, which is the birthplace of Abraham, the founder of Israel (Woolley 1958).

The archaeology of Mesopotamia started during the 1850s, with the decipherment of the cuneiform language. From the excavations led by scholars searching for biblical connections rather than artefacts, some of the major cities in the area were discovered. Those excavations brought a great amount of objects to European museums, such as the Louvre, British Museum and Berlin Museum in particular. Benefiting from the disinterest of the local rulers, Western archaeologists had an easy task in claiming most of the artefacts found during the excavations.

In 1924, an Antiquities Department was established, thanks to Gertrude Bell, an English archaeologist and antiquarian who was a phenomenal force in Mesopotamian archaeology, and helped found the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. In her role, however, she did not stop the sharing of archaeological objects between the local museum and foreign missions.

Nevertheless, Iraq was the most advanced in having indigenous archaeologists dealing with their own antiquities after the Second World War.

It can be said that Saddam Hussein helped archaeology in Iraq prosper after the military establishment declared Iraq a republic in 1958. Identifying himself with Nebuchadnezzar and Sargon, two of the major kings of the Mesopotamian civilisation, he re-created links with the past, bypassing the Islamic background. The punishment against looters, some sentenced to the death penalty, was harsh; and the employment of soldiers as guardians at sites/collections also served to deter looting.



Up till the First Gulf War (1982-1988), budget and attention were allocated to heritage conservation, with emphasis on the nationalistic and personalistic elements. The Iraq-Iran war during the 1980s led to some cuts in the budget given to archaeology, and the Kuwait invasion in 1990 as well as the subsequent war against US-led armies brought archaeology to a complete stop. No foreign missions came to Iraq for the entire decade of the 1990s. Moreover, the severe sanctions against Iraq threw many Iraqis into poverty. The situation deteriorated, and resulted in a declining level of education amongst the population. In the 1980s, the level of education was one of the highest in the region, but a decade later saw a general decline in school attendance and, inevitably, education.

The archaeological services suffered too, as there were many redundancies in the archaeological personnel. Consequently, Iraqi archaeological sites were looted. In 1992 and 1993, Western archaeologists issued two volumes relating to missing objects.

The situation seemed to improve toward the end of the 1990s and up to 2002, as major controls were tightened by the Iraqi archaeological service, in spite of the economic limitations. As 2003 marked 13 years of troubled economic and social conditions since the first Gulf War, the Iraqi population encountered food shortage and lack of primary goods. American troops entered Baghdad in April 2003, but there were serious flaws in the American planning of post-war Iraq, which are evident now. Patrolling of controlled zones by American forces was not fully considered, and it proved costly in the destruction and loss of heritage. In spite of warnings from archaeologists from the University of Chicago in US, one of the major centres for Mesopotamian archaeology, as well as other scholars from Britain, precautions were not taken (Rothfield 2009).

While the National Museum was one of the targets American troops avoided to attack or bomb, the presence in the museum compounds of paramilitary forces fighting for the regime of Saddam Hussein, and firing against the American troops from the adjacent Children's Museum provoked an exchange of fire, leading to an American tank blasting a hole in the Museum facade.

The National Museum was neglected by the American troops, and many of the museum officials had already fled, fearing for their lives. The majority of the objects were fortunately secured in storerooms in the museum

basement. Most of the gold objects from the excavations of the tombs of Ur were kept in the Bank of Baghdad safes. Some important objects were still on the displays within the museum, however.

As the museum laid virtually abandoned for a couple of days, it was invaded and devastated by looters and vandals. From the damage done to the objects, it is clear that some of the invaders were vandals aiming to destroy some of the sculptures just for the sake of it, and most possibly, as revenge against Saddam Hussein, who celebrated the ancient Mesopotamian civilisation for his own benefit. Museum offices were also destroyed, and stripped of their contents, from computers to chairs.

Spoliations targeting some of the major objects still on display or kept in the storerooms took place. The famous harp of Ur was heavily damaged on its frame, but the original golden bull head at the base of the harp was under custody. The Uruk vase was stolen from the museum, only to be returned later, but a particular loss within the collections was the disappearance of thousands of cylinder seals; these are very valuable in the art markets, and have yet to surface among art dealers.

While the number of objects actually missing has been estimated to be about 170,000, the actual number of groups of artefacts registered in the museum was set at a few thousands. The definite number of looted relics was finally 15,000; however, flawed assessments were made by some of the museum curators, who simply ignored that a number of the objects actually missing were kept in safes.

Some of the Iraqi officials were keen to blame the Americans for their failure to control Baghdad (Rothfield 2009). Nine years have elapsed, and yet many objects are still missing from the museums; the list includes one of the finest ivories from Nimrud, the representation of a lioness mauling a Nubian man.

The looting of the museum was, however, only the tip of the iceberg. Much more general and widespread pillaging is still going on at many archaeological sites in various parts of Iraq. Some of the Iraqi pieces have been found in Jordan, and others reached as far as New York and Tokyo.

There are a few factors that determine the fate of Iraqi antiquities: the existence of an art market trading in Mesopotamian relics, seals in particular. The highly prized seals, and the fact that they are very small,

made them the ideal choice of objects to steal. A number of the looters were and are armed professionals capable of fighting security personnel or guardians present at the archaeological sites. The vast majority, however, were local peasants who found that they could enrich themselves through archaeological looting. This group of looters uses antiquities as a means to lift themselves out of poverty.

As Iraq remains in a sort of civil war, its archaeological sites are still under threat, and the prosecution of any activities detrimental to them is virtually impossible. The fight over Iraqi antiquities has also become a motif for religious hatred: Donny George, Baghdad Museum curator at the time of the American invasion, and later elected as head of the museum itself, was threatened with death, both as a Christian in a Muslim country, as well as a “friend” of the Americans (Rothfield 2009). He fled the country, and became a professor at Stony Brook University of New York (George died of heart attack on March 2011 in Toronto as he delivered a presentation on the current state of Iraqi antiquities). Several recent publications highlighted the existence of looting and vandalism (Rothfield 2009), as well as the fact that the issue of preservation/loss of antiquities is used by Iraq in asserting its independence (Chiodi & Pettinato 2009).

In sum, as long as order is not restored in Iraq, no solution for its antiquities can be easily found, and fears that anarchy, poverty and ignorance will doom one of the most ancient civilisations in the world are justified.

## **Egypt and its antiquities**

Ancient Egypt has drawn much attention since the 1920s when Egyptomania developed after the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb. The golden treasures from the tomb, the Curse of the Pharaohs (Lupton 2003), and a general interest in the arts and architecture, temples, tombs and statues of ancient Egyptian civilisation (Schulz & Seidel 1998), turn the country into a cultural tourism destination.

The discovery of ancient Egypt began during the Napoleonic expedition in Egypt in 1798 (at the Battle of the Pyramids, Napoleon told his army: “Forty centuries are looking at you”). Napoleon’s army was accompanied by a group of scholars, whose task was to catalogue antiquities and nature in the Encyclopaedic spirit born in France (Schnapp 1996

pp. 295-298). During the expedition, the French army found the Rosetta Stone, a trilingual document (hieroglyphs, demotic and Greek) from the reign of Ptolemy V and written in 196 BCE (Parkinson 1999). The French expedition was defeated by the British fleet at Aboukir, but the drawings of the various antiquities survived, and stoked interest in ancient Egypt, rousing it from its millenary torpor.

Explorers and treasure hunters created private collections, which formed the core of the major Egyptian collections at the British Museum, the Louvre, and Berlin Museum. In 1822, Jean-François Champollion was able to decipher the hieroglyphs, and initiated “scientific” Egyptology (Fagan 1982).

The antiquities of Egypt were substantially unprotected by any national archaeological service until 1858, when the French Auguste Mariette was able to convince the Khedive (Lord) to institute a museum as well as an antiquities department, with Mariette as head.

With a French as the Head of antiquities, French influence continued until 1952 when Etienne Drioton was obliged to resign after Nasser’s revolution ousted the last king of Egypt. Until 1920, however, the number of Egyptian Egyptologists within the antiquities service was very limited, with the middle ranks filled by Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans and Italians (James 1982; Reid 2002). Before the change in the Antiquities Law dated 1924, the foreign excavations were entitled to half of the discoveries found during the excavation – the laws were changed after Tutankhamun’s tomb discovery. This division of the finds supported the establishment of many North American museums. It was only in the 1950s that the Egyptians started to be the protectors of their own Pharaonic heritage (Haikal 2003).

As the importance of Pharaonic Egypt grew from a tourist point of view, so did that of the head of the antiquities service from a political point of view. Zahi Hawass’ involvement in the discoveries, along with his ability to communicate through the mass media, and the profound respect President Mubarak’s family had for him, enhanced his position within Egypt.

Hawass had been vocal about the problem of restituting Egyptian relics held in various world museums, and urged that five objects kept abroad

be returned to Egypt, stressing the security of Egyptian museums in keeping those objects. The restitution claims were reiterated as late as mid January 2011, and referred to the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum; the Ankhaf statue at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Nefertiti bust at the Berlin Museum; the Hemiunu seated statue at the Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim; and the Dendera Zodiac in the Louvre.

What happened by the end of January put Hawass' claims in a different light. As demonstrations against Mubarak went on in January, following the earlier stance of Tunisia, Tahrir Square was the centre of the demonstration. Egyptians demanded freedom from the Mubarak's regime, and fought against many symbols of what they considered an oppressive regime; demonstrators burned the building of Mubarak's party, immediately adjacent to the Egyptian Museum.

On 29<sup>th</sup> January, a group of people penetrated the museum precincts at night, and pillaged the ground floor of the building. The incursion and damages were widely reported in the media. Many of the details about how the looters penetrated the museum are still not clear – and maybe they will never be – but who the looters were actually is just as controversial. Several objects were smashed, and 42 items disappeared from the museum. Amongst them, a standing statue of Tutankhamun was stolen, and returned in pieces recently. A trumpet – part of a travelling exhibition to US and UK in 1960 and the 1970s (Edwards 1976 p.103 and colour plate 8) – was also lost, but it has now been recovered. A statue of queen Nefertiti holding an offering altar has gone missing, as have some other statues of Amarna princesses. Bronze statuettes of the Late Period, and ushabtis (funerary figures) were the other looted artefacts. The looters simply grabbed what they found available.

The number of objects stolen at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo is less than that in Iraq years earlier but the looting itself should have been prevented. UNESCO conventions and Egyptian law forbid the sale of antiquities, and the Egyptian museum objects are impossible to sell since they are registered in the museum database, thus dissuading potential public buyers. If the relics have entered private collections, it is possible they will never be seen again.



*Nefertiti Head (now in Berlin). Amarna period objects were highly sought after during the looting of the Egyptian Museum in January 2001. The head of an Amarna princess is still missing (May 2013: <http://icom.museum/resources/red-lists-database/>) (Photo: Egyptological Collection, Berlin Museum)*



*The Antinoupolis temple (Photo: Monica Hanna)*

The media-smart chairman of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Zahi Hawass, complained about being abandoned in dealing with the spat of robberies throughout the country, and resigned from his position as Minister of Antiquities. While power plays might have possibly cost Hawass his position, the actual situation concerning antiquities in the country remains even more uncertain. Foreign missions have halted their excavations for the season; storages in Saqqara and other parts of the countries were attacked and looted. It will take some time before a full assessment of the actual losses can be made.

As far as the Egyptian situation can be ascertained, the looting is associated with vandalism and a more general attack on antiquities, perhaps as remnants of the past regime. Cemeteries have been now built over old sites, and removals of reliefs continue.

The looting happening in Egypt is a tragedy, as it deprives humankind of those important and invaluable artefacts. Yet, what is really disconcerting is the fact that the Egyptian people are not protecting their own past. While ancient Arab writers, such as Abu Jaafar al-Idrisi (died 1251 CE), highly

respected their Pharaonic predecessors (El-Daly 2005 p.19), many Muslim countries prefer to disregard any link with cultures that precede Islam.

For Egypt, the attack on antiquities at the local level can be explained, though not justified, by the way the Supreme Council of Antiquities imposed its decisions on the local populations. In 2004, for example, a new village was built at Qurna against local opinion and scholarly advice, to prevent the local inhabitants at old Qurna from encroaching the tombs at the site. The local communities forced out of the area had lived there for generations, and were naturally the keepers of the necropolis. There has,



*The new cemetery at Dahshur (Photo: Monica Hanna)*



*Dahshur pyramids on the background (Photo: Monica Hanna)*

rarely, been communication between archaeologists and local inhabitants (Moser et al. 2010). At Luxor, similar developments will damage their relations even further.

There is much to learn from the Egyptian experience. Many archaeologists in the West remain adamant that archaeology should maintain its specialized and isolated field, separate from the social issues of the day. Archaeology, however, needs financial resources, and it can interact with heritage tourism in creating sources of incomes for its work as well as for the local inhabitants. In award-winning journalist Sharon Waxman's book on stolen antiquities, *Loot*, she makes the link between archaeology and tourism. In describing the looting of Minoan tombs at Aidonia in Greece, she wrote that the plundering involved the local inhabitants with the complicity of the local police, and included a quotation by a Greek journalist, Nikolas Zirganos, who said that their accomplices sold their past for nothing, while the nearby town of Nemea can live off the tour-

ism generated by the tourists visiting the site, as well as the local farming products (Waxman 2010 p. 348).

Today, the conditions of Egyptian monuments have not improved. The government has been slightly slow to implement new laws protecting the heritage, and police control over the monuments themselves has been lacking.

Encroachment and site damage continue. Archaeological sites have become increasingly vulnerable to illegal digging and land encroachment. The sites of Dahshur and its pyramid field and the Roman site of Antinopolis in Middle Egypt have been under threat from the building of new cemeteries and illegal digging.

## **Lessons for Southeast Asia**

Frustratingly, justifications for the antiquities trade have taken the line that Egyptians and Iraqis (and for that matter, Cambodians, Thais, Italians, etc.) are unable to take care of their own heritage, and thus artefacts should be kept where they can be appreciated – outside their countries of origin. Another justification offered the notion that art belongs to humankind in general, so opportunities to appreciate them should be provided to anyone interested in antiquities, if they are able to afford them (Cuno 2008).

Cultural creations are fruits of specific peoples and places, and they can be best understood within their original environments. A mummy at the British Museum can be a curiosity and source of interest for someone keen on ancient civilisations, but such a mummy is part of a set of elements (tomb, funerary beliefs) that are wholly part of a country's history. Taking something from someone else's land only for the purpose of possessing something exotic to exhibit is certainly far from being ethically right.

It may not be plausible to demand the return of every object to its country of origin. The Rosetta stone, the Elgin marbles from the Parthenon in Athens, the Mona Lisa at Paris reached the British Museum and the Louvre following treaties or circumstances that allowed them to do so. Taking marbles away from the Parthenon, for instance, may provoke intense debate on appropriateness but modern technologies can be employed to make replicas of them to allow the Elgin marbles to become powerful ambassadors of Greek cultural heritage in United Kingdom.



Egypt and Iraq are developing countries experiencing difficult political conditions. As long as there is economic inequality between different countries, money will place buyers and traders in a stronger position. Essentially, two elements are involved: the existence of an antiquities market, and buyers at regional or international level. Prohibitive national and international laws and controls should eventually stop such trafficking, through which Western museums have for long periods impoverished the heritage of many nations.

Laws can be a powerful deterrent against greedy traders but laws cannot be enough. A possible solution entails the cultivation of a different perspective on archaeology and heritage. Firstly, archaeology should be both an academic and a social field. It should be an academic field, as a place where the latest scholarly achievements and theories are studied to understand particular civilisations. Yet, this academic knowledge should be re-employed toward making the local people understand the relevance of archaeological discovery to them, and help them realize how to gain from it economically. In essence, the marvel of discovery should be shared within local communities.

Involvement is another issue: as long as outsiders from distant political lands dictate how a heritage site should be maintained, without consultation with local stakeholders, such endeavours will be detrimental to the heritage itself.

Education is the magic word: if local people are educated and appreciate their own past, looting or vandalism would cease or be reduced at least. Appreciation is obviously not sufficient because there must also be economic benefits for the local entities at the archaeological site. Such economic benefits can assume various forms and levels, from simple guardianship to tourism activities. The approach implies that local inhabitants should contemplate on the issues with a long-term perspective, and reject the immediate advantages by opting for sustainable benefits.



*Exposed pottery shards after illegal excavations  
(Photo: Monica Hanna)*

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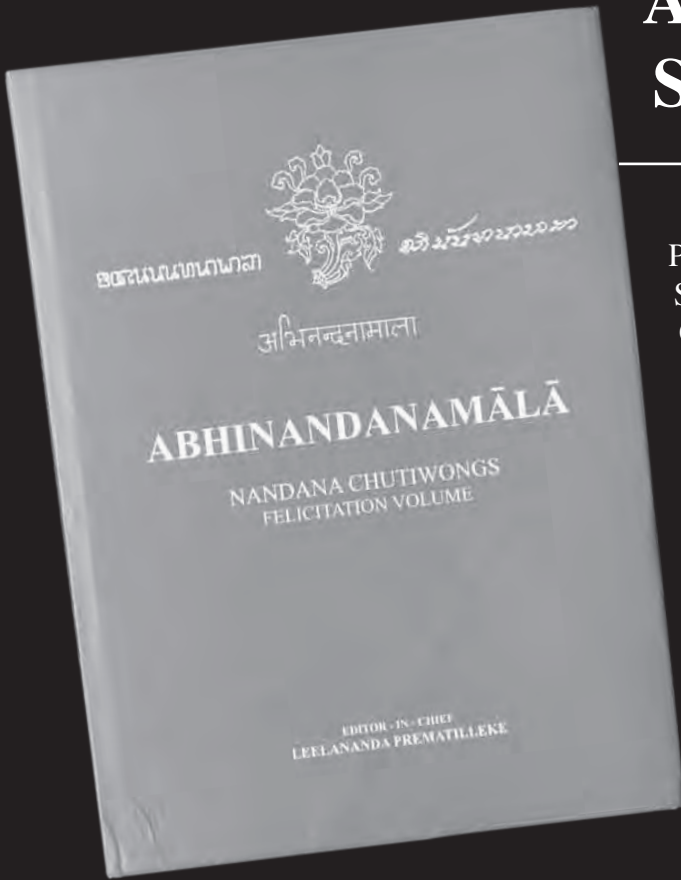
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# Abhinandanamala and Supplementum

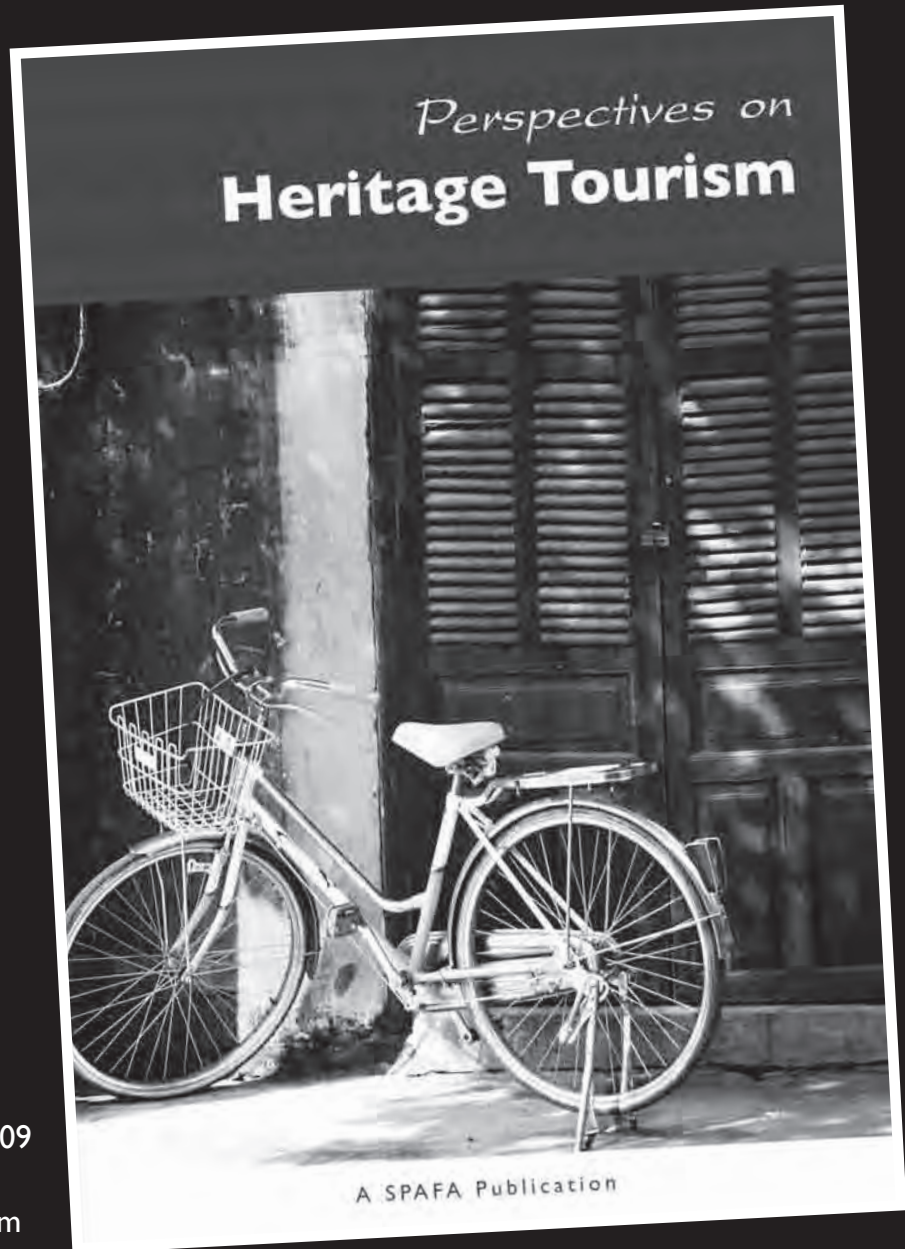


Published in 2010 under the joint auspices of SEAMEO SPAFA and the Abhinandanamala Committees in Colombo and Bangkok, Abhinandanamala and Abhinandanamala Supplementum constitute a felicitation volume dedicated to Dr. Nandana Chutiwongs by her colleagues and friends. The volume was compiled under the editorship of Professor Leelananda Prematilleke (Peradeniya and Colombo), Professor Pisit Charoenwongsa (Bangkok), Professor Kalpakam Sankarnarayan (Mumbai) and Professor Timbul Haryono (Yogyakarta).

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