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"THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL ARTS IN MODERNIZATION AND NATIONAL
INTEGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA"

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As an area including a number of "the developing nations" or "new states", Southeast Asia has not been spared from that search for agreement upon an idiom to develop the materials she has inherited.

The materials have been inherited through historical developments. Systems of local government, local languages, varieties of social values and norms, various forms of faith, various forms of cultural expression, all are dimensions of a nation's heritage.

In the decision (or at least the desire) to become free from the restrictions of the past--from the negative effects of foreign colonization and/or other restraints--the developing nations have turned to re-examine their heritage, hoping to select elements for building a new system which is more satisfactory and cuts a shorter path to development. It is this process of re-examination and re-selection of meaningful elements from the nation's heritage and the effort to discover new and useful elements which, I believe, is called "the search for a new idiom". And this also, I believe, is what is called "the process of national integration".

The process is not always smooth, but on the contrary often faltering and painful. This comes from the very nature of the process itself which must sometimes be "discriminating": rejecting one element and incorporating another, discarding an element judged obsolete, part of an old encumbering culture, to receive an element valued as more durable and more open for development. We can understand that the process is not always smooth. And it isn't hard to understand the anxiety of the ethnic group who have this culture as their heritage, when at a certain point--as a consequence of their own willingness to give new allegiance to a larger identity--they have to renounce part, perhaps even all, of their heritage. Sometimes the anxiety is shown in open protest--perhaps dangerous--against the national language which originated with another culture group, as in India and Ceylon. Or the anxiety (which has luckily not been too much of a problem) of one culture against national symbols derived from another, as we see in the uneasiness of the non-Javanese with the Javanese symbols of the Indonesian state; or perhaps in the non-Malay races of Malaysia who must accept Malay symbols for the nation. Fortunately in Southeast Asia this anxiety has not usually taken a hard line of opposition, although we do have examples of "disharmony", such as Malaysia in May 1969, Indonesia's PRRI, the ethnic tensions in South Thailand or Philippine Mindanao or North Burma, where we see demonstrated the latent dangers of these tensions.

II

The concept of "developing nation" has many dimensions. As well as the integration of traditional elements into a national solidarity, it means developing the products of integration for the welfare of the people. In the same way the traditions--now considered inadequate--which once regulated their material lives are re-examined in an effort to draw new life from their resources. Peasant land too scarce, population overcrowded, human progress increasingly unable to cope due to inadequate knowledge, demand for more objective differentiation, the need for a government which can compel change and innovation, all this is part of the process we described above--developing the products of integration. All this is implied when we speak of a "developing nation". And this, I believe, is also what is often meant by "modernization".

This process like the process of national integration is not smooth. Modernization also produces tension and anxiety. Anxiety appears especially with the reorientation of values. The peasant's son who goes to study and finally to work and live in the city because his village can no longer provide him a living, is forced to leap across great cultural gaps in order to adjust to life in the city. The challenges of the city are far different from the challenges of peasant society. For some time the old ties still bind him to his village culture. He experiences the tug of war between the two conflicting environments. His tension and anxiety result from an effort to adapt himself harmoniously to both. The experience is the same in schools, offices, political parties, departments, governments, laboratories, plantations of the developing nation all involved in the problem of orientation to new values.

Although in different proportions, the anxiety of the transition from a peasant society to a modern society is characteristic of the whole region of Southeast Asia today. Even the island nation of Singapore, regarded as the most modern of Southeast Asian nations, is by no means out of the transition period.

III

Traditional art in Southeast Asia developed as part of the traditional folk culture. As a result, the traditional arts have the character and qualities of the traditional peasant society. First, they are limited to the cultural environment of that peasant society. Second, they reflect a culture which develops very slowly because their supporting society develops very slowly.

Third, they are part of the traditional cosmos which is a totality without specialized compartments. Fourth, they are not the work of individual creativity but are produced anonymously by their collective society. We find an example in the folk dances of many culture areas of Indonesia and Malaysia, created anonymously and reaching only a limited audience, developing very little, and in a real sense reflecting the totality of life in a peasant society. These folk dances are a form of utilitarian art, art which is functional for the society. The themes, expression through movement, the moment of performance are never separated from the imperatives of their peasant cosmos. We find the dances addressed particularly to the circumstances of life in the village. They depict the peasants themselves, their rice fields and the spirit which guard them.

With the development of peasant societies into kingdoms, the center of their cosmos shifted to the king, and the traditional arts followed, shifting their orientation to a new center. At this point we see the development of what is called "palace art", essentially through the refinement of folk art meeting foreign elements (regarded as "progressive") under the umbrella of the kingdom. In the process, folk dances underwent a change from the simplicity of peasant art to dances far more refined and complicated. The new choreography, developed behind the palace walls, was a choreography subject to the stipulations of much more complicated customs and manners. Look for example at the palace dances of Java, Malaya, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma.

The same is true of the development from "folk literature"--not actually literature in the literal sense but oral poetry--into "refined literature" through a parallel process of refinement. Elements of folk literature were selected, combined, and blended with foreign influences. The Javanese epics of Panuluh and Sedah must have been preceded by a process somewhat like this because it is difficult to imagine that they were adapted directly from India. I think we can see the same process in the palace literature of Malaya, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia.

While we can say there was a considerable development process between traditional folk art and traditional classical art, the two still have much in common. First, they are both essentially "functional art". One obeys the cosmos of the peasant; the other, in a cosmos which is much broader, obeys its center in the person of the king. Second, and as a result of the first, both traditional folk art and traditional classical art are anonymous. Of course the Kadiri palace had its poets Panuluh and Sedah, and Madjapahit had Tantular, and later Surakarta had Jasadipura and Ranggawarsito, but they were more instruments to translate the inspirations of the king--and hence of the cosmos--than they were actively creative artists in the sense that we know them today.

Similarly, choreographers of palace dances were not known of themselves but were "claimed" by the king. For example in Jogjakarta, the sultans from Hamengkubuwono I to the present sultan were known as creators of a repertoire of serimpi dances. Of course it was the choreographers who composed the dances, but they were merely the translators and were not significant in the cosmic balance. The dances were composed in the name of the king, the center of the cosmos, who alone bore the responsibility for the equilibrium of the whole. Third, traditional folk art and traditional classical art were both still part of a single totality which could not be divided into specialized compartments.

IV

When traditional societies begin to change into non-traditional or less traditional societies, can they bring with them the arts which were sewed to fit their traditional needs? When peasant farmers move to the city and become urban workers (whether it be in a factory or driving a betjak), what forms of art or recreation will they have? When the small kingdoms of Southeast Asia begin to shrink (and with that also the palaces and homes of the princes and nobility), who will take over as sponsors of the classical arts?

The key to these questions may be in the "pace of life" in the new environment. It is hard to imagine that the peasants who become urban workers can still maintain the time cycles which they knew in the village. Working hours are different, and resting hours are different, so that time for recreation is different too. Can they still exchange pantuns or dance in the city as they did under the full moon or at harvest time in the village? In other words, the arts--which could not be separated from the total cosmos of life in the village--must be separated now. It is no longer possible to embrace an art form as part of the whole like the Balinese peasants can do with a performance of the ketjak dance. Like it or not, in this new setting there must be a curtain separating the art from its audience. The pace of life in the city forbids the totality of the all night village performances, permitting the urban worker only 2½ hour shows.

And the same process appears to be going on with the traditional classical arts as well. When the kings and nobility begin to decline--both the aura and (especially) their funds--classical art follows, and begins to produce "on demand". Hence portions from the Ramayana at the plush hotels in Bangkok, and from the Mahabharata in commercial dance drama by Sriwedari and Ngesti Pandawa on Java, and from Peking opera in various night clubs around Southeast Asia.

Perhaps this process is what the critics call the birth of kitsch, "commercial art" or "art of the masses".

V

It seems paradoxical to claim that traditional art has a role in national integration and modernization. On paper it looks like there is no possible way for the traditional arts to adjust to the developments of this age. But quite the contrary is true.

To be sure processes of national integration and modernization set the dynamic of change. National integration stretches the existing solidarity to establish a solidarity far more broad in its reach. Modernization demands a more objective and traditional approach to life, focusing far ahead on the problems of development. Modernization tears up the totality of the cosmos into compartments of specialization and expertise. While traditional art is fashioned in appreciation of an agrarian and feudal landscape. It is not particularly concerned with the increasing pace of life or change. It serves an eternal harmony and cosmic equilibrium. What possible way can an art, which serves the needs of a cosmic equilibrium, contribute to a process which is dedicated to change? Here we seem to reach a deadlock.

But the record of Southeast Asian history indicates something else simply by-passing the deadlock we have just described.

From the beginning Southeast Asia has been a crossroads for numerous cultures so that confrontation with differing values is nothing new. At the time it arrived, each new influence involved a kind of reorientation. We see Buddhism for example entering various cultures of Southeast Asia. Also Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam and Christianity, one after the other planting their influence in the cultures of the area. As the various religions arrived, none of the Southeast Asian states failed to provide gracious reception. At the same time none of the religions remained fixed in their "original" form. They lived and developed in harmony with the cultural milieu. The religions were nurtured by the cultures of Southeast Asia with an open attitude and a penchant for synthesis of the new into the existing value system. As a result we now speak of Burmese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Balinese Hinduism, Javanese Islam, Philippine Catholicism and so on.

We see the same penchant for synthesis in the "confrontation" between Southeast Asia and "Indianization". Those cultures scattered among the rice fields which were the "village republics" of early Southeast Asia received the concept of the god-king from India with an attitude of "assimilation and creativity". They continued the traditions of the village republic with all its rituals and customs but at the same time accepted a new center of ruling authority so that their concept of the cosmos took on several layers.

They accepted the "danjang desa" (village guardian) and collectivism of the village, but at the same time accepted the idea of king as manifestation of god on earth charged with the mandate of maintaining the cosmic equilibrium.

This approach to life is indeed the "spirit" of Southeast Asia.

In all areas including the arts this spirit is manifested. The puppet play called wajang is a good illustration. Finding in wajang a means to commune with their ancestors, the cultures of Java, Bali and Sunda shaped the arts of wajang over the centuries. It passed through numerous styles while maintaining its essential function as a medium of communication for the society. The Mahabharata and Ramayana were taken into the Javanese wajang kulit and the Sundanese wajang golek, and in the same way the legends of the Kadiri dynasty and the Islamic past were received. The Ramayana and Mahabharata were assimilated, the epics becoming their own property, to the point that Ardjuna and Parikesit are regarded as assential links in the geneologies of the Javanese kings. The Javanese so believe the Mahabharata and Ramayana to be part of their own lives that all associations with India, the homeland of these epics, have long since disappeared. The Pandawa and Kaurawa live in Java, not in North India. Another example is the propagation of Islam in Java through traditional channels (the wajang, gamelan and storytelling). The Javanese simply took the new elements of Islam into their cosmos, assimilating them, and creating a uniquely Javanese Islam. Similarly Djakartan gambang kromong music was created through the mixture of cultures in Djakarta: the Chinese rebab, Thai bonang, Sundanese kendang, Javanese gambang, and Dutch trumpet, producing a uniquely Djakartan form of music, yet one in which we can still hear the musical traditions of each instrument. The Javanese Pandji legends wandered to the far corners of continental Southeast Asia, in Thailand becoming the very popular "Ino" legends. The pocelain arts of continental China slipped south into the area of Vietnam (Annam) where they developed into the school of Annam porcelain still bearing clear traces of Chinese influence but now specifically Annam in style. And when the porcelain arts reached Thailand they developed into the art of Savangkalok pottery now acknowledged to have an artistic beauty equal to that of the Ming porcelain of China. And Angkor Wat, Borobudur, and the pagodas of Rangoon? They too reflect the assimilating and creative style of Southeast Asia.

In a cultural area like Southeast Asia, where dialog--and not confrontation--is considered the highest wisdom, the role of traditional art will be all the more meaningful as it serves to draw together the diverse elements. In the past every meeting with new influences in Southeast Asia has been an effort to avoid a crash, to arrange the inevitable collision so that it is less painful, so that it becomes instead something new and enjoyable.

The primary role of the traditional arts in Southeast Asia today may be just this--as an agent of synthesis in the process of national integration and modernization.

Unavoidably there are painful moments in national integration when old loyalties must be sacrificed for the sake of the new consensus. And at such points the traditional arts may be the most appropriate and pleasing mediator. We see an example in the "come-back" of lenong as a social and artistic phenomenon. Lenong is a form of Djakarta folk theater which developed around the end of the nineteenth century (when Djakarta was called Batavia or Betawi). The popularity of lenong began to decline when new forms of entertainments like the movie theaters and bands appeared. Lenong was shoved aside and for some time played only at the outskirts of the city. But during the last three years lenong seems to have come back to life. Possibly the "come-back" has been speeded by the support of the Djakarta Arts Centre where it has been given a "respectable" place in the public eye. But what is interesting is that lenong now appears to be "more Indonesian" than in the past. Lenong is no longer ethnically Djakarta Theater, but belongs to all the groups living in Djakarta. Another interesting phenomenon are the young people from every cultural background who crowd the lenong theaters. Perhaps this phenomenon is part of the process of "Indonesianization" which we observe today in all forms of artistic expression--and in regional identity. Young people from the provinces who now live in Djakarta have begun to break with their cultural roots. Very possibly they find new roots, more comprehensible roots, in lenong.

So we discover that the traditional arts--somewhat paradoxically--can function as mediator in the meeting of old and new elements in integration and modernization. This has been the case with wajang kulit. In recent years it has been useful in propagating the new consensus of wider loyalty called "Indonesia". The same wajang kulit has been effective in persuading the peasants to receive new technology, as once it was used by religious leaders to spread Islam.

Social scientists studying the processes of development and modernization have long been occupied with the problem of "minimal conditions" required by a developing nation for "take-off". An interesting theory of "minimal conditions" was put forward by David Apter. He claims that two minimal conditions must be met: first, a social system which can continue to innovate without revolting in mid-course; and second, a social framework which can provide the skills and knowledge necessary for life in this world of technological progress.

It may be a little tricky to find a place for the traditional arts in Apter's model. But if by "a social system which can continue to innovate without revolting in mid-course" he also means a social system which can creatively make use of old elements in the process of continuing innovation, then traditional art must be involved.

The same is true of his second condition. If the "social framework" that he means is also one which can encourage the ingenuity of old elements to find ways of developing the "skills and knowledge necessary for technological progress", then the traditional arts are relevant.

Other observers are fascinated with the problem of kitsch. It is feared that as the agrarian-feudal societies move toward urbanization, the purity of their traditional arts will degenerate into merely commercial production. But in fact we find, growing up in the midst of urbanization a "new city art" -- call it kitsch or not -- which might be able to grow healthily if there is sufficiently open dialog with the traditional arts.

Perhaps the experience of the Balinese culture today is a case in point. Here we confront a traditional society that is being torn up by the introduction of radically new elements in the form of hotels, restaurants, stores, tourists, airports, new management, new services, and everything which has followed them into Bali. So that the art and handicrafts of this island people--wood carvings, leaf weaving, sculpting, dancing, music--all functionally inseparable from the unity of the traditional cosmos--have in a relatively brief space of time been set dangerously free by the introduction of these new elements. Instead of folk arts we find art "for sale". This creates a double crisis. First is the status and function of the traditional arts. Second is the nature of the society itself. In the first, the very life of the arts is threatened by the shifting function of art in the Balinese society. In short, the arts are being coaxed to produce kitsch. In the second, the totality of Balinese life is being undermined by forces for greater differentiation of the society. They are being persuaded to develop new skills and the facilities that these require.

The shift in Balinese society is underway. And I think there is no way of turning back. What remains is to examine just how far this dual crisis can stimulate Balinese society to be innovative and to what degree the old elements -- those very elements which first drew the attention of the outside world -- can play a constructive role as new inspiration for development. And it is very possible that the key to what Apter describes as a "society which can continue to innovate without revolting in mid-course" will be found in the ability to synthesize these old elements. I think it is not particularly relevant to discuss whether Balinese art (or Javanese or traditional arts of any society) will become kitsch or not. (Isn't any art which is produced and packaged commercially actually kitsch?) What is relevant is the adaptability of the old elements (classical or otherwise) for new development, and the ability of the old aesthetic values to provide new inspiration. (We should remember that the enchanting *Kebjar Frompong* dance was created by Mario at the very time he was being "torn apart" by the tourists before World War II).

So I think the focus of our concern should not be on how much classical Thai dance will be corrupted by Bangkok hotels or how commercial the Philippine Bayanihan have become. Rather we should be concerned whether "new city art"--or whatever you call the new art in Southeast Asia--will be able to continue shaping an environment which is conducive for development.

CONCLUSION

Traditional art is a manifestation of traditional society, meaning an agrarian-feudal society in Southeast Asia, and therefore would seem to be totally divorced from the commitment to national integration and modernization. But the record indicates that societies develop not by distinct unilinear steps but rather through multilinear processes, complexly interrelated and fed from numerous directions, in which case the traditional arts definitely have a part.

In a sense Southeast Asia has just emerged from her traditional cultures, from "old societies" to become "new states". Hence her resources for national integration and modernization are what she brings with her from the old societies. The penchant for "assimilation and creativity" so often described as part of Southeast Asian syncretism, appears to be one of her greatest resources--as we read the history of the area. The history also reveals an agility, a flexibility and a willingness to develop creatively without radically breaking from her roots.

The traditional arts of Southeast Asia are an integral part of her old societies. As in the past, the traditional arts can still promote synthesis in their societies, in this case specifically for the processes of national integration and modernization. They can serve as the mediating agent when diverse elements must be mixed (or sometimes completely dissolved). They are suitable media for translating new ideas, as we see with wajang kulit and wajang golek in Java today. They can even generate new elements and new potential for the processes of integration and modernization with which we are particularly concerned at the moment.

This does not mean, however, that the traditional arts will always appear in some "pure" form. On the contrary they must be prepared to appear sometimes "deviant" or be labelled "corruptions of true art" if they are also going to continue discovering new possibilities, a process which we know is a crucial part of integration and modernization.

So kitsch--as a logical outcome of urbanization, as one result of efforts to make the traditional arts relevant to a wider cultural circle--is going to turn up in many parts of Southeast Asia. But growing up with it we will also find new forms of art which we can call "avant-garde" or "experimental". Because the "avant-garde", I believe, is just another way to relate to historical roots which are found in the traditional arts.