

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Bangkok Diary: The Seato Round Table on Asian Culture

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Philippine Studies vol. 6, no. 3 (1958): 338–347

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Notes and Comment

BANGKOK DIARY :

THE SEATO ROUND TABLE ON ASIAN CULTURE

3-9 February 1958

I

BANGKOK is fast becoming in Asia what Geneva is in Europe: the city of international conferences. It is the seat of SEATO and the headquarters of other international bodies; the conversations sponsored by these groups are generally held there. Such a situation of course presents a challenge to any city, but Bangkok has risen to the challenge by providing adequate facilities for such international gatherings: a good airport, excellent hotels, a free port, a brisk emporium, a thousand and one attractions for the tourist, and a large and well-appointed convention hall, the Sala Santitham.

Bangkok enjoys other and more basic advantages not always found in eastern cities. It has a happy, friendly, contented population. Though vice abounds (like opium dens), there is a low crime rate. And there is an air of established aristocracy in a country that has never been the colony of another, and that has been under its own kings for over a thousand years. In this respect, Thailand differs from other countries in Southeast Asia.

Perhaps this is why its art forms are so well developed. Thai dancing is much admired, as is Thai metal work. Thai pottery from the Sawangkhalok kilns were among the world's finest. Most charming of all is Thai architecture, both in its pure Asian forms and in its Eurasian adaptations.

In this connection there is an interesting experiment, of a Catholic church built in the shape and style of a Thai buddhist temple. It belongs to the American Redemptorists and is attended mostly by the Anglo-American and the Filipino communities. The experiment, praised by some, detested by others, is by the witty given an expressive nickname. The buddhist temples are called *wat* and every such temple has its individual name: the Wat Po, for example, or the Wat Aroon. The Redemptorist church, half American, half Thai, combining Christian essence and buddhist accident, is called by the wags the "What-Ho!"

Such things as these make Bangkok an interesting city, and it was the appropriate location as well as an interesting object lesson for the SEATO-sponsored Round Table conference held last February on "The Impact of Modern Technology upon the Traditional Cultures of Asia."

II

The conference was well organized, efficiently run, lavishly financed. The participants came from twelve countries and were housed in the best hotel (the Elawan), were provided adequate transport, were entertained, dined and feasted, and were otherwise shown a hospitality that did credit both to SEATO and to the royal city of Bangkok.

Two conducted tours in particular were memorable. One was a visit to the ancient ruined capital city of Ayudhya, now being restored, to which the participants were conveyed in a motorcade of eleven cars hurtling through the roads at 120 kilometers an hour, a siren-screaming police car in the lead. The other was a visit by chartered plane to the neighboring country of Cambodia, to the town of Sien-Reap to see those miracles of ancient architecture—the magnificent Angkor Vat and the colossal ruins of Angkor Thom. These two excursions alone were worth the visit to Bangkok.

These however were side interests. The main work was the daily meeting from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the large session hall of the Sala Santitham. Behind the scenes, the offices of the large

building were manned for the occasion by a corps of executives and assistants working with charming smoothness under the direction of the executive secretary of the conference and the director of cultural affairs for SEATO, M. Jacques Rollet-Andriane. One takes pleasure in noting that among his assistants, one of the most efficient was a young Filipino journalist, former editor of the Manila *Sentinel*, Mario Gatbonton.

III

The participants were not *sent* by their respective countries but were invited to the Round Table by the chairman, His Highness Prince Prem Purachatra, a professor at the Chulalongkorn University and a regular contributor to an English weekly magazine edited by his wife, the very charming Princess Prem. Five occidental countries were represented, (the United States, Australia, Britain, France, New Zealand) and seven oriental countries (the Philippines, Japan, India, Pakistan, Sarawak, Thailand and Vietnam).

If the conference was not always interesting, the conferees were decidedly so. Dr. Bernabé Africa came from the Philippines, Professor Yamamoto from Japan, Dr. Pham Bieu Tham from Vietnam, Dr. Hussain from Pakistan, while India was represented by two men, alike in complexion, unlike in all other things, one of whom came from India itself, the other from the United States. The former wore native costume and spoke in a ranting, vehement manner reminiscent of the political vote-seeker; the latter spoke softly, with the imagery of the poet and the accents of the mystic, but though he himself wore western clothes, his wife, a blonde Scandinavian, wore the costume of Indian women. It seems that she had met Rabindranath Tagore in Europe and had then gone to India to make it her home, though now she lives in Boston where her husband teaches comparative religion.

Of all the Asian participants, the Thai delegates seemed the most impressive. They were of course the top scholars of the country. One of them, Prince Dhani Nivat, is President of the Privy Council and former Prince Regent. The other, the Phya

Anuman Rajadhon, is the President of the Royal Institute of Science. Both have written extensively, in English and in Thai.

Prince Dhani, though of the highest nobility, belongs rather to the true aristocracy of disciplined minds who wear their dignity with quiet grace and without the slightest hint of pomposity. Though elderly he has the enthusiasms of the young, and this writer felt highly honored when the Prince, learning that the writer possessed all His Highness' works but one, forthwith sent to the writer's lodgings at the Jesuit house an autographed copy of the missing work; it is now a valued possession of the editor's office with all the others—likewise autographed—but alas, this last he cannot read, for it is all in Thai!

While Prince Dhani learned English in England, Phya Anuman learned it in Bangkok at the Brothers' College of the Assumption. Though of the lesser nobility, he is no less a scholar and no less a charming and companionable gentleman. And though elderly (his son is the Thai ambassador to Cambodia and was on hand when the party visited Sien-Reap), he keeps young by running daily in the park in every weather.

The western participants were no less interesting. From France came Professor Lonchambon, the mineralogist turned senator. From England came Sir George Allen, formerly of the Methodist College in Belfast and of the University of Malaya. From New Zealand came Professor Beaglehole, historian, now engaged in his second volume of the papers of Captain Cook. From Australia came His Excellency, Professor Walter Russell Crocker, Australian high commissioner in Canada. The writer recalls with particular pleasure the many private talks he had with Professor Crocker—at lunch, in a bus or on a walk—whose views quite often coincided with his own. And likewise the writer recalls with pleasure one long and interesting conversation with Professor Beaglehole when they found themselves alone together at lunch at the Royal Hotel in Sien-Reap.

Perhaps the most outstanding participant in the conference (at least two members of the conference have called him that) was the Englishman who represented the Asian country of Sara-

wak in Borneo, now a British crown colony. A scholar from Harrow and Pembroke, and a soldier and guerrilla leader in the last war who received the D.S.O. and other decorations, Mr. Tom Harrison is now Government Ethnologist and Curator of the Sarawak Museum at Kuching. He knows Borneo and Southeast Asia as few know the region, and his statements were made against this solid background of factual knowledge. Perhaps because of this knowledge and this military background, there was a certain bellicosity in Tom Harrison which often gave a droll turn to the otherwise boring sessions. He spared no one in his castigations, not even his fellow Britisher Sir George Allen who complained that the world was full of "pseudo-bilinguals." "Sir George is being snobbish," said Harrison; "I assure him that in Borneo hundreds of illiterates are perfect bilinguals. As for me I am a pseudo-trilingual. The point is, it is better to speak a language badly than not to speak it at all." Dr. Africa had made a similar remark earlier when he said that in the Philippines despite our imperfect multilingualism, we did manage to get ourselves understood. When the American delegate expressed the opinion that mathematics was unknown in China till very recent times (forgetting, among other things, the work of Ricci, Schall and other Jesuit astronomers in China), or when the Japanese delegate deplored the lack of historical or other scientific work in Asia outside of Japan (forgetting the enormous amount of archaeological and anthropological research being carried out in Borneo, to mention only one instance), Harrison jumped at the offender with alacrity.

It was the American professor, whose pronouncements were often quite open to exception, who drew fire oftenest from Harrison. The American delegate unquestionably knew Asia well. He had gone to China as a Christian lay missionary (YMCA) and had then proceeded to Bangkok where he became converted to Buddhism. His books on East and West are well known; their merit is for the reader to judge—*legenti patet*. His statements at the conference reflected no glory on his country or his university, both of which deserved much better representation as both abound in scholars of the first order. The good professor, incredible as it may seem, lectured to his confreres on some rather elementary notions of philosophy, apologizing the while for having to go so

profoundly into the matter. Profundity is of course relative: what is waist-deep for the child may only be ankle-deep for the adult, and the professor's lecture as well as his subsequent statements exhibited a less-than-total mastery of his own field. The problem of universal ideas was explained without any apparent awareness of the great medieval debates that turned upon that issue; and elementary notions, known to all philosophers for centuries, were explained as if they had been private discoveries of Alfred North Whitehead communicated personally to the speaker: ("As Whitehead said to me..."). This writer cannot recall a similar performance anywhere.

Which points up a serious defect in the conference: it was well planned, well run, well financed, but the right people were not there. Or rather, some of the right people were there but others should have been there who were not. To mention an example: at the great university where the American delegate is a professor of philosophy and law (many have remarked on the oddness of that combination), there are at least two men whose presence at the conference would have immeasurably enhanced it. One is Karl Pelzer, the anthropological geographer who is an authority on Southeast Asia; the other is Kenneth Latourette, the historian, if indeed he is still about. There are others.

And from the Philippines, several names come up: Father de la Costa or Professor Zafra or Professor Zaide among the historians; Otley Beyer or Fathers Lambrecht and Vanoverbergh among the anthropologists; Dr. Benito Legarda Jr. or Sixto Roxas or Father Francisco Araneta among the economists; or Raul Manglapus—to mention only a few. There are many others.

There was another defect in a similar direction. Christianity surely is one of the great spiritual and cultural forces of South-east Asia. Yet the Japanese delegate could speak eloquently on the need for a new Asian religion that would fuse the good points of the old religions; and the Pakistan delegate could speak of the glories of Islam, attributing to it all social improvement including (oddly enough) the liberation of womanhood; and many of the delegates could speak eloquently of the glories of Buddhism, and none more vehemently than the American delegate; and Hinduism

was not without its apologist; but this writer watched with dismay from the sidelines as some of the Christian delegates, one after another, declined to speak on behalf of Christianity because they "knew little about it."

This hesitancy to speak for Christianity, or perhaps this failure to appreciate its spiritual and cultural values, spoke volumes. It gave color to the oft-repeated Asian charge that the West has nothing to offer but atom bombs and Coca-Cola. The West *does* have much to offer, but the westerners themselves don't know it. They are ignorant of their most priceless possession. It seemed, in this context immensely significant that the most vocal of the western delegates was a convert to Buddhism. And it seemed an odd coincidence that the chief interpreter for the United Nations who came to Bangkok for the occasion—and whose magnificent command of both French and English was spectacular—was himself a European converted (so it was said) to Hinduism.

The SEATO, incidentally, was under heavy attack from the leftist press in Bangkok (particularly the Thai-language newspapers) for sponsoring an international conference at such enormous cost. Of course SEATO is not liked by the leftists; its very *raison d'être* is to fight communism, for which the leftists have a liking. Consequently, nothing done by SEATO can ever be good in leftist eyes. Nevertheless there was one thing in which the leftists may have had a point, although the point was really not against SEATO or the Round Table but against the huge inequality in standards of living in Thailand itself. One of the members of the Round Table discovered that each member of the conference was paying for each night's lodging at the hotel the equivalent of a month's salary of a Thai university graduate employed at some clerical work in the hotel.

In other respects the conference was an unqualified success. It was perhaps one of the few times when Asians and Europeans sat together at a round table conference without the injection of any bitterness or the intrusion of politics, and without even the word "colonialism" being used or hinted at. This was truly remarkable.

IV

One leaves Bangkok with regret. One carries away many pleasant impressions: of friendly people and the happy smiling faces of children; of a Thai woman, a doctor of the Sorbonne, who has spent fortune and energy in reclaiming fallen women and in educating orphaned children; of the cheerful and ready kindness of the Jesuits who teach incognito at the university and live on their modest earnings in less than frugal comfort; of the friendliness and hospitality of the Filipino community in Bangkok, especially Lt. Col. and Mrs. Castillo of the Philippine embassy and Lt. Col. and Mrs. Leon of SEATO, all of whom, with Father John Magner S.J., met me on my arrival and saw me off at my departure; of the cordial kindness of the British Ambassador to Thailand, Mr. Whittington, and the graciousness of Mrs. Whittington; of Kan Akatani, the genial second secretary of the Japanese embassy who knows almost all the Jesuits in the Philippines and the Carolines. One remembers the lad in Dhonburi who took the trouble to go in search of someone who had a key, to let us in to a temple which we wanted to see after hours. "Do you know English?" I asked him. Quick as a flash he answered—in English: "No. Do you know Thai?" Or the other lad who sold stone impressions near the temple of the Sleeping Buddha, who smiled from ear to ear as he offered his wares. "What is your name?" I asked. He gave me his and asked in turn, "What's yours?" Then I asked again, "How old are you?" He replied, "Twelve. How old are *you*?"

I shall spare the reader the answer to that one.

V

Above all, one remembers Pridhi. Pridhi is a young man of about twenty, usually dressed in khakhi, with a dark brown face but a very bright smile. He is a chauffeur employed by SEATO and was one of the seven or eight drivers detailed to provide transport for the foreign guests. Pridhi took care to be on hand on any possible occasion when he thought I might conceivably need the car. We were generally two or three in the car and Pridhi never injected himself into the conversation, merely concentrating on his driving, which was spectacular. But on one occasion, finding that

we were alone (he at the wheel and I in the back of the car) without turning around (and without lessening speed) he announced without preamble: "I have three babies."

"Oh do you?" I said. "I did not know you were married, Pridhi. How long have you been married?"

"Four years," he said. "And now I have three babies."

"How old are the babies?"

He replied: "Oldest baby, three years old; second oldest, two years old; third oldest, one year old."

He was silent for a while. Then he laughed. And stepping further on the gas he said, "Many babies and no money."

That was Pridhi.

I left Bangkok on a holiday. There were several kind friends at the airport to see me off, and we were having coffee when through the glass doors I saw someone in khakhi looking wistfully in. It was Pridhi. I jumped from my seat and opened the glass doors, and since he felt ashamed to come in, I went out and shook his hand, and though he was not a Catholic I gave him my blessing. It was a holiday and he did not have to report for work and therefore he did not have the car which he usually drove. But he got on a bus and took the long ride (over an hour) to the airport to see me off.

That was Pridhi.

I shall not forget Pridhi. To me he is Thailand.

VI

There are many other impressions of Bangkok, some of them worth recording; but I must be content with just one more. It is remarkable that the persons who wield the most influence are not always those who hold the most important positions or who are always before the public eye. Among the Filipinos in Bangkok perhaps the most influential person was not a general nor a financier nor a politician nor even a scholar. She was a nun, a reli-

gious of the Congregation of Saint Paul de Chartres. She belonged to a well known family in Manila but she went (in the self-imposed anonymity of the religious life) under the name of Sister Wilhelmina. She had been five years in Bangkok, working among the schools girls of Thailand, most of them Buddhist. We visited her at a very inconvenient hour, when she was herding some fifty little girls into the dining room. She showed no annoyance at our intrusion and entertained us instead with the greatest gaiety. We were informed afterwards that her gaiety was proverbial and that the Filipinos of Bangkok when in need of advice would go to the college and talk out their troubles to Sister Wilhelmina, knowing that she would listen quietly and comfort them with her gaiety. We speak in the past tense because, as this goes to press, we learn with sorrow of Sister Wilhelmina's death in Bangkok. To her brother, Mr. Justo López, to her relatives, and above all to her Congregation—the Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres—we offer our condolence, and also our admiration.

VII

In Hongkong on the way back, one is overwhelmed by the kind hospitality of the Jesuit Fathers both at Wah Yan College, Kowloon, and at Wah Yan in Hongkong. The Jesuit superior, Father Byrnes, took a day off to show me the town, and Father Chan, the Chinese Jesuit, and Father McCarthy, the English Jesuit, gave up two days to help me in my travels. But one night, until quite late, we spent in talking shop with the editor of the *China News Analysis*, Father Ladani S.J., one of the most learned of men and one of the most scholarly of publications. An evening with these men is both a pleasure and an education.

And then one came home to Manila to find waiting at the airport one's friends and one's students at the Ateneo. And one realizes that all the good people are not in Bangkok or in Hongkong. There are still many wonderful people left in the Philippines.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD