



Queen Sirikit and Traditional Thai Arts and Culture

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Abstract

Her Majesty Queen Sirikit has worked with great pragmatism, to help the poorest rural communities to earn extra income; a sector of society, which so often struggles to subsist on a farm income alone. The Queen, has consequently promoted the traditional Thai arts and crafts, especially Thai silk and Thai costumes, which have become world famous. Her Majesty the Queen, also promotes tolerance and understanding of the Muslim minorities, in the southern provinces of Thailand. The Queen pays special attention to the indigenous cottage industries and handicrafts, supporting all kinds of regional projects, through Her Majesty Queen Sirikit's 'SUPPORT Foundation'

Keywords: Queen Sirikit's promotion of cottage industries, traditional handicrafts, tolerance and understanding.

Queen Sirikit's birthday, in 2016, ushered Her Majesty into the unparalleled history of 'Thai Queens.' Her Majesty has always been much loved and revered, but she joined, the now late King Bhumiphol, in a world record for being the longest reigning royals, at that time. The Queen, like King Bhumiphol, is particularly revered in the more remote and traditional parts of the country, where the monarchy is regarded as semi-divine. King Bhumiphol, during His Majesty's reign, always adhered to the tenfold moral code of kingship. Her Majesty the Queen, likewise, has also been a tireless humanitarian, adopting a pragmatic approach to the setting up of projects, which have always centred on inclusive community building initiatives. Evidence of Her Majesty's work, promoting tolerance and understanding of the Muslim minorities, in the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, have been particularly popular amongst the local Muslim populace. The Queen has a strong bond with southern Thailand, having spent months in the Muslim-majority provinces every year, always reaching out to the local communities and serving as a quiet diplomat. The focus of this article is to pay tribute to Her Majesty the Queen's work, by looking more closely at the projects, which have raised the profile and attempted to sustain, the traditional Thai arts and crafts. Her Majesty has particularly championed the revival of Thai silk production and costume design, which in the recent past has achieved universal acclaim.



Her Majesty the Queen, noted from her various visits around Thailand that the majority of farmers find it difficult to subsist, on a farm income alone. While His Majesty the King launched many agricultural projects to relieve the farmers' hardships; Her Majesty the Queen sought extra income-generating occupations, as a way to supplement the farmers' basic earnings. The Queen concluded that as most Thai people are dexterous, industrious and meticulous; these skills combined with the appropriate use of each region's indigenous raw materials and linked to cottage industries, could raise the standard of living in rural communities. The Queen has always firmly believed, that If these local handicrafts could be promoted and their utility emphasized; the rural poor could have additional occupations and incomes. The Queen has always paid special attention to the local cottage industries and crafts, by providing help, to a wide range of regional projects, through the 'SUPPORT Foundation'.

Isan, the north-eastern region of Thailand, makes up one third of the country's total area. The region consists mostly of a large plateau with some small river tributaries of the 'Mekong', such as the 'Songkhram', in the north and the 'Mun' and 'Chi' in the south. The short stream rivers and sandy, friable soils, have often in the past, influenced the problem of drought in the dry season. 'Isan', was an important cradle of civilization several thousand years ago. Archaeological evidence has revealed that it is the place of origin for diverse races, including the 'Tai', 'Lao', 'Khorat Tai', 'Khmer Tai' and 'Phu Tai', scattered around the region. The varied mixture of racial groups and their inherited ancient civilizations, are reflected in the unique handicrafts and architecture in existence; many examples, have now deteriorated over time, through natural attrition and climatic conditions.

The 'Phuphan Range' or the 'Phuphan Forest', as it is called by the local communities, stretches across three provinces of the north-eastern part of Thailand: Sakon Nakhon, Kalasin, and Mukdahan. The range makes up a large tract covered by fertile evergreen forests.

In 1975, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, ordered a survey of Isan, to determine a site where the Royal Family could stay, during their travels in the region, which led to 'Phupan Palace' in Sakon Nakhon being built. His Majesty expressed his wish to build the palace on a plain next to a mountain and not far from the 'Tatton Waterfall Forest Reserve'. The area having once been seen as a 'communist hotbed', commands a breathtaking view, with a stream passing through it. His Majesty was adamant about building a palace in this location, due to his express wish to help and protect the local people.

As a means to support the Sakon Nakhon local population, Her Majesty, within the grounds of 'Larn Khamhom Palace', set aside a place, where the weaving group of Sakon Nakhon, could have an audience with the Queen, to present their handicrafts. The 'SUPPORT' Foundation members in the north east, were also given an opportunity to receive royal awards



for an annual silk competition. The silk festival developed into the year's biggest exhibition of silk products, eagerly awaited by many Thais, as well as, distinguished foreign guests and representatives of haute couture fashion houses.

Another project initiated by Her Majesty in Sakon Nakhon, is at Ban Saithong, in Tambon Pathumwapi, Amphoe Songdao. Established in 1981, the project began when Her Majesty visited the village and donated her personal funds to support the reforestation programme and to promote silk weaving among the housewives. In 1992, the Queen gave more assistance by giving 101 dairy cows, to boost the local communities' income through supplementary occupations. Since the first silk weaving promotion, the project has been further expanded to include more activities for the members, including embroidery, bamboo basketry, dairy farming and beetle-wing decoration.

Her Majesty has also supported environmental problems in Sakon Nakhon, with a replanting project, begun by the 'Kutnakham SUPPORT Centre', located in 'Amphoe Charoensin'. Two chronic problems were apparent, infertile soils and flooding in the rainy season and a shortage of water in the dry season. His Majesty, to counteract the problems, built a reservoir in 1984, for use as the village's own source of water. The people have relied solely on agriculture and despite their poverty, the people of 'Kutnakham' have maintained a strong sense of unity. The community has continued to participate in the 'forest preserving water' (Pa-Rak-Nam) project, under the auspices of Her Majesty's foundation, since 1983.

The 'Kutnakham SUPPORT Centre', also teaches additional occupations, such as artificial flower making, silk weaving, carpet weaving and water- hyacinth basketry.

The 'SUPPORT Foundation' set up a project in Ban Chan, which is based in Tambon Muang, Amphoe Ban Muang, Sakon Nakhon. Much of Ban Chan is covered in forest, but also grows rice on low lands. Most of the villagers are farmers and their rice yields, prior to any royal support, were greatly reduced by the excessive tree felling for logging. It was also an area previously over-run by guerrillas, who were communist sympathisers. The villagers, however, were strongly united as a group, encouraged by Their Majesties' support and in 1983, they worked together in launching the 'Forest Preserving Water' project in their locality, in response to Her Majesty's 'SUPPORT Foundation' initiative. The villagers were, consequently, accepted as members into the 'SUPPORT Foundation' and for the first time began mulberry cultivation, silkworm rearing and they formed a silk weaving group.

Her Majesty's work also extends to other provinces. In the northern provinces, the Queen has launched several hand-weaving projects, involving silk, brocade and thick cotton cloth. Other crafts that have been promoted in this region, include decorative coat hangers



and embroidery. Weaving in the southern provinces, has also been promoted, encouraging the use of the distinct traditional patterns, some of which are modelled on the local varieties of flowers, such as jasmine, while others are more abstract. Popularity for the handicraft had been on the decline; a phenomenon that prompted Her Majesty to zealously take up its cause, in exactly the same way, projects had been instigated in other regions.

Her Majesty's efforts to help the under-privileged have attracted large number of donors, whose contributions formed the basis of the 'Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques', or 'SUPPORT Foundation'. 'SUPPORT' was founded in 1976, under Her Majesty the Queen's patronage and leadership. Promotion of the foundation has been highly effective, particularly since 'SUPPORT' provided outlets for local wares and handicrafts from all the regions of the kingdom.

In 1979, the 'SUPPORT Foundation's Chitralada Training Centre' was originally set up to train the children of villagers without land, in Thai arts and crafts. Through this charitable incentive, Her Majesty the Queen has succeeded in preserving some of the dying arts; the doll-making project, for example, besides being a source of supplementary income, helps preserve a near-extinct aspect of Thai culture and popularizes Thai traditional culture overseas. The 'palace dolls' do, in fact, faithfully portray traditional manners, clothing, aspects of everyday life and other ancient traditions and customs. There are also other centres that have been set up at Her Majesty's request, such as the 'Bang Sai Centre', in a beautifully landscaped compound, by the 'Chao Phraya' River in 'Ayutthaya' Province.

Ever since Her Majesty the Queen launched the 'SUPPORT' project, the works of all the 'SUPPORT' members have been publicized far and wide and enjoyed considerable popularity, in addition to being highly admired for the workmanship, value and fair prices. The primary reason the 'SUPPORT' products gained popularity and admiration so quickly, is due to Her Majesty the Queen's complete dedication. Her Majesty has always supervised the various facets of the operation and under a critical eye for detail; every category of the 'SUPPORT' products have undergone dramatic improvements, reaching a very high standard for workmanship and aesthetical value. Her Majesty always seeks to boost the morale of the members, artisans and producers, by regularly using 'SUPPORT' products for her personal use, including outfits and accessories.

Publicity and marketing for the 'SUPPORT Foundation' have always been carried out through Her Majesty the Queen's regular exhibitions of products, including various fairs and fashion shows around the country. In 1990, a major publicity launch was held under the title '*Rangsan Pantaeng*' (Pottery Creations). The government organized a special exhibition of 'SUPPORT' earthenware and ceramics at the 'Santi Maitri Building', in the compound of



the 'Government House'. All the pottery on display, in various shapes and designs, came from the 'Kutnakham SUPPORT Centre' and other branches around the country. During the auspicious celebration of the fifth-cycle birthday anniversary of Her Majesty the Queen, on 12 August 1992, the 'SUPPORT Foundation' organized a fair, 'Silp Phaendin' (The Arts of the Land), at the 'Anantasamakhom Throne Hall', in the 'Dusit Palace' compound, on August 8-10 and 14-30. Featured at the fair were 'SUPPORT' products from many parts and regions of the country, for the public to enjoy. Her Majesty, in her speech on the occasion commented: "the majority of the 'SUPPORT' membership has only a primary education, but even with such modest educational credentials, they succeeded in preserving the heritage of the Thai nation; reproducing the ancient tradition of noble arts that date back to the 'Ayutthaya' period and all the while, turning themselves into world-class artists. When I have taken the 'SUPPORT' products and showcased them before the public in New York or Washington, hardly anyone believed that such works as these, could come from the hands of people, who had only primary schooling to their credit. Now that their works have been put on display at the 'Silp Phaendin' fair at the 'Anantasamakhom Throne Hall', if you avail yourself of a chance to view them, you will be as proud as I am that Thai people are also truly great artists."

At present, 'SUPPORT' handicrafts are a well-established product line in domestic and overseas markets, comprising a broad array of such handiwork, including, 'Matmi' silk, 'nielloware', gold and silverware, 'yan liphao' and 'khit' pattern basketry. These goods are entirely the handiwork of farmers, but to ensure that finished products are ultimately perfect and worthy of being displayed as the highest calibre of fine- arts, Her Majesty has always inspected each item herself. In all journeys overseas by the Queen, sample pieces from the foundation are put on show, to generate more publicity. In 1980, during the Queen's visit to the United States, a fashion show was organized, to promote dresses made from 'Matmi' silk and hill tribe embroidery and an exhibition was also arranged, to showcase other 'SUPPORT' goods. Her Majesty also requested that an exhibition of products be displayed in Dallas, Texas, on the occasion of the presentation of the 'First Distinguished Award' to Her Majesty, by the 'Save the Children Federation'. The award was in recognition of Her Majesty's assistance to refugees and personal devotion to the promotion of Thai handicrafts. In 1985, Her Majesty, was once again invited to the United States, for the purpose of publicizing 'SUPPORT' products. This time, the 'Asia Society' presented her with the 'Humanitarian Award', in New York, to honour Her Majesty's work for the preservation of Thai folk arts and for raising the status of women.

In 1981, she was invited by Japanese businessmen to visit Japan, together with H.R.H. Princess Chulabhorn. During the trip, she organized a display of 'SUPPORT' products, to enhance the reputation of Thai arts and culture in Japan. On that occasion, the artistic products that were the most popular, included the 'yan liphao' bags and the 'Matmi' silk. The product categories were limited, but the Japanese clients were full of enthusiasm and placed a large



quantity of orders. Japan has long expressed tremendous interest in 'SUPPORT' products, ranging from the high-level members of the Imperial Family, to the ordinary Japanese citizen. In 1993, from 8th to 20th April, Her Majesty the Queen, once again, requested a promotional campaign and exhibition of the foundation products and activities, in Tokyo and in the former capital, Kyoto. The goal was to publicize the 'SUPPORT' products and to promote cordial relations between the people of Japan and Thailand, through the artistic creations that Her Majesty's foundation had produced for the Japanese public. The promotional event was a resounding success, with record numbers of Japanese visitors in attendance; all motivated by their intrinsic interest in handicrafts. Demonstrations by the artisans, also attracted large crowds. The exhibition rooms put on displays of textiles, royal costumes, paintings, artificial flowers, ceramics and embroidered screens, which were equally appreciated and enjoyed by the Japanese.

Her Majesty also showcased the work of the 'SUPPORT Foundation' in Europe. On 2 June 1993, Her Majesty paid a visit to Vienna, Austria, to officiate at the opening of the 'Seven Hundred Years of Thailand: Treasures from the Kingdom' exhibition, at the 'Museum of Ethnology', in the compound of the 'Hofburg' Palace. The fair was the result of the cooperation between the Thai government and the Austrian government, to commemorate the fifth-cycle birthday anniversary of Her Majesty the Queen in 1992. The exhibition recounted the story of Thai archaeology and history, featuring ancient artefacts and objets d'art from various periods. The 'SUPPORT' products were also put on show for the public; displaying the silver and golden 'Suphannahongsa' royal barges; beetle-wing collages and brooches; 'yan lipao' and 'khid' basketry; embroidery and textiles and a royal costume collection. From 16 April to 25 May 1997, Her Majesty, held another major exhibition to promote 'SUPPORT' products, this time, at the 'Eiffel Tower', in Paris. Important figures from France and many countries in Europe attended the opening ceremony. The fair was attended by a phenomenal number of French citizens and visitors, attracted by the extensive publicity in the European media, for this fascinating spectacle.

'SUPPORT' exhibitions and grand-scale cultural performances were launched in Beijing and Shanghai, in China, in October 2000. The fair served as a vehicle to strengthen the friendly relations between Thailand and the Eastern superpower and in a very distinctive way; the event had the same profound influence in China, as elsewhere in the world. The 'SUPPORT' exhibition in Beijing was greatly praised and reaffirmed that Thailand is another Asian nation that has a long, well-preserved, cultural tradition, which is uniquely its own.

Her Majesty's long-standing activities, untiring efforts and devotion, to the cause of providing supplementary income for the most disadvantaged people nationally, serve dual interests. Her Majesty's original intention was to help the Thai people, particularly the under



privileged, find opportunities for material progress and self-reliance, by taking advantage of the existing local resources and the people's native artistic gifts. The result has been greater security in their own lives and in society as a whole. The entire enterprise has also served as an excellent means of preserving Thailand's artistic and cultural traditions. All of these efforts and accomplishments fully justify the title given to Her Majesty, 'The Mother of the Land.'

Through Your prudence and care, Sweet Queen
We have the glitter of Thai silk, in the orient sun
We wear Your graces in our heart's esteem
- For through Your caring, we dignity have won
Creating art and things exquisite You have worked
Alongside Your people, to teach them new skills
Years and experience have new bounties yielded
Hence on this birthday our joyous thrills
For history in Thailand has dawned anew
In minds that recall your benevolence
Eighty-four years of your life with blessings no few
Your people invoke with astute reverence
Thus time enfolds virtue and beauty beyond earth's sway
Celebrating our Queen's grandest birthday

(Dedicated to Her Majesty Queen Sirikit on Her 84th Birthday, the 12th August 2016,
by Glen Chatelier, Director of the Office of International Affairs, Assumption University of
Thailand)



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