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Media and identity creation in contemporary Thailand

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MEDIA AND IDENTITY CREATION IN CONTEMPORARY THAILAND

A Thesis

Presented To

the Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

By

Nickolas E. Jorgensen

December 1995

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ABSTRACT

MEDIA AND IDENTITY CREATION IN CONTEMPORARY THAILAND

by Nickolas Jorgensen

This study addresses the relationship between national identity, systemic integration, and the mass media in Thailand. Research determined that the articulating principles of Thai identity, i.e., Nation, Religion, and Monarchy, have not been the focus of the same self-conscious articulation and promotional process as in other Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Indonesia, Singapore). The characteristics of the Thai mass communication system have contributed to the absence of defined policies regarding national identity.

Three tendencies or themes motivating mass communication policies in Thailand were identified: authoritarian consumerism (circumscription of media's discursive sphere coupled with emphasis on commercial messages), spectacular traditionalism (coverage of public ritual and the use of mass media to reinforce "culture" in a sanitized, commodified form), and developmental public relations (wherein heavily promoted development programs serve the dual purposes of preemptive counterinsurgency and enhancing government legitimacy).

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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Second World War, mass communication scholars have devoted considerable attention the idea of using mass media technologies to promote development in the Third World. The first wave of development communication scholars (Lerner, 1967; Pyc, 1963; Rogers, 1976; Schramm, 1964) and others, posited a model wherein radio, newspapers, magazines, and eventually television would be used by Third World governments to extend administrative reach and promote modernization. The hope was that countries long on development needs but short on resources and trained personnel could use the mass media as a low-cost means of promoting education and literacy, health and sanitation information, agricultural innovations, and so on. One radio station could do the work of a legion of teachers, agricultural outreach workers, and civil servants, and provide wholesome, culturally appropriate entertainment as well.

The early models of development communication assumed that development was synonymous with reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationships between increased urbanization, heightened media exposure, rising literacy rates, universal enfranchisement, and the gradual but inevitable replacement of subsistence agriculture with a cash-based, “modern” economy. To break the real or imagined stranglehold of tradition and inertia, wholesale social changes were required on material and ideological levels; mass media were an indispensable catalyst of such change:

[The] theories propounded by Lerner and others during the First Development Decade attempted to explain the phenomenon of underdevelopment from a wholly psychological approach. They indicated pathways towards social change through mass mediated messages of modernization and development (Lent, 1979, p. 10).

Traditional ways of thinking needed to be supplanted not only for purposes of economic development; the new governments of the post-colonial era also needed to replace old loyalties and political identities based on sanguinal, tribal, ethnic, and religious ties with a more abstract modern theory of citizenship based on the nation-state. Ideally, mass media

could instruct a nascent polity in the meanings and duties of national citizenship as effectively as they could disseminate information on low-cost hygienic means of sewage disposal. This process, known variously as nation building, systemic integration, or national integration, was considered to be a prerequisite of overall development and modernization, since it was assumed that only those societies which possess the rudiments of a common identity and purpose can survive and thrive in the face of the turbulence and dislocation which accompany rapid political, economic, and social change (Huntington, 1968).

Unfortunately, many newly independent countries had no national history or tradition upon which to draw, and attempts to use media to create such an identity out of whole cloth often failed miserably since those attempts were operating in a historical and political vacuum. Most of the new nations of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, could not be considered nations in any sense of the word: they were political mirages which had been handed flags, anthems, and a handful of pounds or francs in seed money and sent on their way. Mali, Chad, Tanzania, and Guinea-Bissau were not national communities but rather the products of French, British and Portuguese colonial administration. Even nations with a more articulated sense of cultural identity such as India found themselves beset by religious, ethnic, and linguistic strife. If political institutionalization was a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of development, then the developing world faced daunting handicaps both material and immaterial that no amount of well-intentioned development communication shortcuts could possibly overcome.

Despite these limitations, mass communication technologies have been used by governments to inculcate and refine notions of national identity and citizenship in the Third World. Some of these campaigns have produced flawed but intriguing results, as is the case with former Indonesian strongman Sukarno's synthetic ideology, known as *Pancasila*. *Pancasila* advanced a secular model of Indonesian citizenship that acknowledged that

country's linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity and emphasized the common political ground to be found in spite of that diversity. However, the unstated premise of *Pancasila* was that, while Indonesians were all equal in the eyes of the state--whether Sumatran Batak, Balinese, Ambonese, or Moluccan--Javanese were just a little more equal than the rest (Jackson, 1978). However, examples of more exclusionary and even genocidal "national identity promotion" campaigns have been depressingly common in the Third World, from Uganda, Burundi, and Rwanda in Africa to Cambodia and Burma in southeast Asia.

This study's research questions were deceptively simple: What are the components of national identity and political integration in contemporary Thailand? How has that country's government used to media to promote national identity and political integration? Has it in fact used mass media for this purpose? What policies (if any) has it formulated? What obstacles to systemic integration has the country faced, and how has the government altered its media policies in the face of those problems? What conceptual models could be created based on this examination of Thai media policy and performance?

This study was by necessity exploratory, qualitative, and descriptive in nature. It should be viewed as a rough map of the Thai culture-media matrix, more akin to the fanciful atlases of the New World produced by sixteenth century cartographers than to the hyper-detailed LANDSAT images which are now commonplace.

Thailand was an especially apt focus of study given the dizzying speed with which the country has developed over the past ten years. It offered an ideal combination of pervasive mass media, convulsive and tangible changes in the political, religious, economic, and social spheres, and a national identity that, on the surface, seemed static and immutable but which was and is in a state of flux. Industry is replacing industry, Honda scooters and Toyota minitrucks are replacing buffalo carts and pedicabs, and every year more Thais are forsaking the ancestral village for the larger provincial cities or the capital.

The kingdom was, is, and will continue to experience a quantum identity shift which might throw the role of media into sharp relief.

Field research for this study was conducted from June 1 through November 30, 1989 during a stay at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. Thai media, including radio, television, newspapers and magazines, were studied in relation to government media policies regulating same. Those policies in turn were analyzed in relation to the overall political and economic context of modern Thailand. Since the country has not experienced any substantive political change (other than a military coup in 1991, which hardly represents a departure from the norm in Thailand) and the media infrastructure has not been substantially reformed or modified, the findings herein can still be considered generally relevant to the situation prevailing today. Additional information was gathered on a return trip in September 1992. Finally, this study incorporates anecdotes and general comparative observations from visits to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Burma in 1987, and a visit to Vietnam in 1993.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mass Communication and the Nation-Building Process

One of the duties assigned to mass media by the proponents of development communication was that of “nation-building,” creating a climate of consensus and abstract political coherence where none had existed previously. This implies the adoption of a common set of cultural, linguistic, and political symbols, a common historical tradition, the assertion of a state’s permanent control over an accepted territorial space, and the evolution of nebulous but indispensable interconnections of state and nation (McAlister, 1973).

Philip Jacob and J.V. Toscano (1964) describe the process of political integration as the product of the interplay of the following integrative factors: geographic proximity; a minimum degree of homogeneity; extensive and routinized social and economic transactions; mutual knowledge (also referred to as cognitive proximity); functional interest; communal character; political structure; the sovereignty or autonomy of the political unit; governmental effectiveness; and the “integrative experience.”

For the developing nations, political integration was problematic. The infant political systems of the Third World faced a dual challenge: to establish quickly formal administrative structures which could effectively implement governmental policies, and to create a coherent, national polity to replace traditional configurations of power and social relations without disrupting those traditional configurations of power too quickly and drastically. Social change which was too rapid carried an attendant risk of upheaval or revolution. Huntington (1968) and Pye (1963), among others, have chronicled the dilemmas faced by Third World governing elites trapped between the rock of necessary development and modernization on one side and the hard place of instability that such social change so frequently engenders.

For the purposes of this project, nation-building or integration is understood as the result of a widespread shift from a subsistence-level economy to one based on exchange;

the rise of increasingly densely populated “core areas” which are characterized by intensified exchange-related activity; a concomitant rise in urbanization; the development of basic communication grids, which includes both information circulation as well as transportation; increased concentration of capital and skills, with an accompanying reduction in barriers to social mobility; the formation of discreet interest groups; the awakening of ethnic awareness and the acceptance of national symbols; and the fusion of awakening nationalism and political compulsion (McAlister, 1973).

Newspapers, radio, and eventually television, were originally understood by the development communication school as potential transmitters of a singular and unifying national culture, which was a particularly important consideration in those countries which had previously been a contentious agglomeration of competing linguistic, ethnic and tribal groups united only by the presence of a colonial power (Habte, 1983). Communication scholar Michael Kunczik argued:

In ideal cases the media make a determinant contribution to the creation of a nation-state. If “nation” is defined as an aggregation of individuals sharing a conscious identity and loyalty, and if “state” is defined as a bureaucratic administrative unit extended over an identifiable geographic area and monopolizing legitimate forces of violence, then there is existence of a nation-state when sentiments and culture overlap with such an administrative unit....If development is seen... as a three-stage process, in the first stage the mass media have the function of disseminating symbols and information promoting national identity... (Kunczik, 1984, p. 206).

Some nations faced more daunting integration challenges than others. India, for example, has no fewer than sixteen major languages, in addition to hundreds of mutually unintelligible dialects; it is also the home of a number of mutually hostile social, ethnic, and religious factions (i.e., Bengalis vs. Assamese; Muslims vs. Hindus; “untouchables” vs. upper castes, etc.). Perhaps the only thing about which the Indians eventually agreed was that the British had to go--once the Raj pulled up stakes, though, the long-simmering conflicts boiled over once again. In the former Belgian colony of the Congo, which had no unified national tradition and was riven by tribal animosities, independence was

immediately followed by separatist challenges in the southern region of Katanga and elsewhere throughout the country, aided and abetted by mineral mining interests and elements of the former colonial power's government (Luttwak, 1979).

Even in countries which were not the arbitrary creation of colonial mapmakers, the political and cultural disruption engendered by Western imperialism dealt grave blows to efforts to construct new national entities upon the edifice of the alien *anciens regimes*. In Vietnam, for example, the old ruling elite was so thoroughly discredited by its collaboration with the French colonialists that it could play no significant role in the creation of a new national polity. The problem became not how to create a sense Vietnamese identity per se, but rather, how to create a Vietnamese identity that was simultaneously linked with, but separate from, a past that was both indispensable and disreputable. This is discussed further in Anderson (1983).

The imperatives of political integration were no less central to the modernization process in those countries which, although more homogenous in composition than the polyglot ones mentioned previously, were also making the difficult transition from traditional polities to modern nation-states. Entrenched forms of decentralized social and political organization based on loyalties to tribe, clan, locale or religion were prevalent in the predominantly rural, agricultural village-based nations of the Third World. Such forms of organization were incompatible with rapid development along the lines envisioned by Schramm, Lerner, and other first-wave development communication scholars.

Nation-building necessitated either the voluntary abandonment or forcible elimination of "primordial ties," those parochial bonds which linked individuals to local institutions or power structures (McAlister, 1973). Centralized, vertically-oriented, urbanized patterns of political integration, coupled with acceptance of strong, nationally-recognized formal government structures, were seen as necessary components of the modernization process.

Mass media have been used to further a government's legitimacy and authority in a number of ways. By the very act of broadcasting or publishing in the official language of a country, print as well as electronic media are helping to break down, or at least to counter traditional, pre-modern behavior and attitudes, as well as furthering the creation of a commonly-held set of social values (Pye, 1963). Promotion of official languages at the expense of local dialects or rival languages also furthers the creation of political hegemony (Anderson, 1983).

Media content frequently contains explicit, hortatory messages directed at the inculcation of national identity, pride and patriotism (often indistinguishable from propaganda); such messages frequently make use of commonly held cultural symbols and seek to invoke a climate of singular purpose, identity, and social mobilization. In addition, these appeals are intended to level or neutralize extant differences in religion, language, and culture (Habe, 1983).

Of course, the form and content of national identity promoted in newly-independent states is seldom the product of popular consensus. As Leong (1989) described the process of "manufacturing" tradition and history in modern Singapore, the official creators of national identity (the state) often create a specific set of traditions (understood here as a custom or set of customs with deep cultural significance or roots) which are modified, refined, and bowdlerized for official purposes. Occasionally these traditions are used to provide a modern bureaucratic state a veneer of historical legitimacy or continuity. In this way, states seek to establish a link between a glorious, exalted past and a contemporary cultural and political present. Other social forces within a community, such as ethnic or religious minorities, or economic classes, also have a stake in determining what exactly constitutes a nation's "official" identity and the canon of tradition. Naturally, media figure strongly in the modern state's attempt to construct such a political *imaginaire*. Those with

access to and control over the means of mass communication clearly possess an advantage in the struggle to determine a community's "character" or identity.

Sadly, nationalistic themes have often been used by ruling elites to promote their interests and legitimize their hegemonistic position at the expense of ethnic, political or religious "enemies": witness the conflation of Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism with opposition to Zionism, native Fijian nationalism directed at the economically powerful Indian population, and the attempts of Hindu fundamentalists such as the Bharati Janata Party in India to equate Indian national identity with an implacable hatred of Islam in particular and other non-Hindu faiths in general.

Communication, particularly that originating from the political center, ideally acts as a legitimation device as well as a potential feedback mechanism. That is, public reaction to media content, as well as content describing situations about which the central government may not be aware, helps keep political authorities informed about events in a country. As a result, a state may indicate its ostensible interest in outlying, contested, or marginal areas through media content targeted upon those areas, and can make use of the media's audience surveillance function (as described in Wright, 1986) to adjust its messages and policies accordingly. This assumes, of course, that the audience has at its disposal some means of making known its feelings about media content (e.g., radio call-in programs, letters pages in newspapers, "on the street" interviews).

Theoretically, mass media can easily and cheaply extend a government's presence or reach even in the face of budgetary and personnel constraints (Habte, 1983). It costs considerably less to install a relay transmitter in a remote area than it does to implement expensive, complex policies aimed at that area's material development. However, propagandistic or palliative use of mass media is not an effective substitute for face-to-face, active communication in the political socialization and legitimation process (Keune, 1978; Sargent, 1978).

Mass Media Policies and the National Integration Process

While there is a general recognition on the part of communications researchers as well as governmental agencies that mass media can and do play a significant role in the political integration and socialization process, few non-communist countries have adopted conscious, deliberate policies that use media to this end. Many, if not most, developing countries lack both the political will as well as the material resources to adopt comprehensive mass media policies. Low literacy rates also limit the number of communicative channels available to policy makers, and rural poverty has served to prevent those who would benefit most from development communication programs from being able to purchase the means of receiving those programs (e.g., radios and television sets).

In spite of this disagreement on the actual power of mass communication in modernizing societies, it has been recognized that mass communication policies are inseparable from other policies, that it is unrealistic to expect television or radio to replace traditional forms of education, and that development models created by Western scholars are often neither useful nor applicable in many Third World contexts (Goonasekera, 1987; Jayaweera, 1987). Media researchers have also reached the conclusion that the roles, significance, and effects of mass media in modernizing societies have been woefully understudied, and that further research is needed in virtually every area of mass communication scholarship.

Mass Media Policies and National Integration in Thailand

To say that Thailand's mass media system and policies vis-a-vis the national integration process has been understudied would be an understatement; despite a handful of earlier studies, most of which quite limited in scope, the field remains terra incognita for unwary researchers. A literature search revealed no published or unpublished studies describing the Thai government's mass media policies regarding national integration and identity formation; the handful of discussions of Thai media that were available were often

sketchy and obsolete. Other studies were too narrowly descriptive and failed to place media policies in the larger political context. None of the available material analyzed Thai attempts to use mass media to create and promote national cultural identity and integration in as sophisticated and comprehensive a manner as Leong's 1989 study, for example.

One study of radio and provincial newspapers suffered from being too dated; furthermore, its subject matter was only peripherally related to the topic in question (Mitchell, 1964). Other studies, like Yunjanondh (1979) were too narrow in scope; Yunjanondh's study was limited to a content analysis of three provincial radio stations and was based on field work which was more than a decade old by the time this project was conceived. Scandlen and Winkler's 1982 study of the role of the press in Thai society, while interesting, did not address the press's role in identity formation and political integration. However, Boonrak Boonyaketmala's chapter on the evolution of the Thai press did provide useful information about the mercurial relationship between an often heavy-handed, censorious Thai government and the freewheeling Thai press (Boonyaketmala, 1982). Once again, however, there was no discussion of the press' role (if any) in the nation-building or identity creation process except in the most tangential sense.

Two papers which did concern themselves, albeit peripherally, with the relationship between mass media and the nation building process. The first, written by Suchit Bunbongkarn (1983) examined campaigns by Kings Rama V (Chulalongkorn) and Rama VI (Vajiravudh) to centralize the Thai state at the expense of local princes and noblemen, install a unified religious hierarchy (the *Sangha*, or monkhood) under the control of the monarchy, and create a national identity that was uniquely "Thai". What was once a decentralized kingdom incorporating both a Siamese center as well as autonomous princely states on the territorial was eventually to become a nascent modern nation-state, complete with a national flag, national anthem, and a single history promulgated through a single

educational system. The integrational and nation-building activities described by Bunbongkarn, however, did not make extensive use of mass media for the simple reason that radio and television had not yet been introduced to Thailand on a mass scale and newspaper publishing was limited to Bangkok. Vajiravudh's well-known use of newspapers to advance his vision of Thai national identity (discussed in Vella, 1978 and Wyatt, 1984) was pivotal, to be sure, but only among that small segment of Bangkok's population that was literate and had access to newspapers in the opening decades of the twentieth century.

Later in the same paper and in a follow-up effort (Bunbongkarn, 1985) Bunbongkarn described the use of rival media networks and communication techniques (including informal and alternative media such as songs, plays, and posters) in the vicious ideological struggles which rocked Thailand in the early 1970's. This time, both the use of nationalist iconography by pro-democracy students and their right-wing opponents as well as the importance of mediated dissemination of the two groups' respective ideologies was discussed in light of the relationship between media and identity. These issues are also analyzed in Morell and Samudavanija (1982) as well as in Anderson (1977). Bunbongkarn addressed policies following the October 6, 1976 coup which were adopted to neutralize this ideological polarization:

Several attempts have been made by the government and the military to solve this conflict. One is an attempt to establish a 'national ideology' which centers around the nation, the religion, and the monarchy but it is rather vague and hardly appealing to the liberal and progressive elements. Radio and television are consistently employed to transmit nationalism, patriotism, the importance of the monarchical institution and anti-communist propaganda. What the government is trying to do is to rally the masses against the communists and other leftist elements through a more conservative ideology which places more emphasis on national security, the monarchy as a unifying force, and religion... (Bunbongkarn, 1983, p. 198)

Bunbongkarn's discussion of the mass media's role in Thai political struggles have been echoed elsewhere (Girling, 1984; Girling, 1981; Samudavanija, 1989a).. As far as

mass media campaigns in the cause of national identity formation, promotion, or maintenance are concerned, though, Bunbongkarn admits that

[The] mass media are also of vital importance with respect to the development of the national identity, but due to a lack of a long-range and clear-cut policy of the government regarding the role of communication in this respect, the media are not utilized to full capacity for the purpose of national integration (Bunbongkarn, 1983, p. 193).

However, the struggles of the 1970's were years past by 1989, the external internal communist threats either moribund or dead outright, and whatever insights Bunbongkarn and others had provided were in need of updating. Still, the tensions which had produced sectarian and factional strife in the past would likely have contemporary counterparts, counterparts which might be amenable to mass mediated responses on the part of the Thai government.

National Integration and Identity Issues in Thailand

Lacking as it does major or obvious challenges to its political or territorial activity, national identity and integration issues in Thailand were bound to present a challenge as far as locating and articulating those challenges was concerned. Thailand's modernization and development process has not been complicated by ethnic conflict, severe sectarian strife, or outright civil war as has been the case elsewhere in the developing world. This is especially apparent if one compares Thailand's modern history with that of its neighbors, such as Burma, Laos, or Cambodia. Thailand possesses a high degree of ethnic and cultural homogeneity (at least superficially) and a highly articulated sense of national identity and history; moreover, Thailand was one of the only southeast Asian country to avoid direct colonization with the attendant social and political dislocation. In addition, the country has a strong agricultural base, widespread literacy, an extensive primary and secondary education system, and one of the fastest growing economies in the world (Euromonitor, 1990; Keyes, 1989; Wyatt, 1984).

Finally, Thailand has a long tradition of centrally-directed social and economic change (change which, it should be noted, did not necessarily improve the lot of the average Thai peasant and has not yet contributed to significant public access to political power) dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, which started with the cautious reforms of King Mongkut, also known as Rama IV. Those interest groups which have resisted vertically-directed reform such as the provincial noblemen and administrators who had amassed wealth and political capital under the decentralized feudal system have been unsuccessful in their attempts to resist such change. In fact, one could strongly argue that the flexibility, pragmatism, and relative openness of the Thai elite were what enabled Thailand to resist Western imperialism and implement comparatively successful modernization and reform programs.

This tradition of change from above has continued through the post-1932 military-bureaucratic era (Keyes, 1989; Wright, 1991). Policies aimed at promoting nationalism and state consolidation were pursued by the military dictatorships which displaced the absolute monarchy, particularly the governments of Generals Phibulsongkram and Sarit Thanarat (Charoensin-o-larn, 1988; Dhiravegin, 1985; Samudavanija, 1989a; Samudavanija, 1989b; Samudavanija, 1989c; Wright, 1991). Phibulsongkram's regime in particular was characterized by an activist campaign of "identity creation" known as the *Sammai Sangchat* or "Era of Nation Building" wherein official nationalism which found expression in the issuance of *Rataniyom*. The *Rataniyom* were state pronouncements of officially-sanctioned "Thai" institutions. The *Sammai Sangchat* saw the introduction of now commonplace Thai customs as the *ram wong* dance performed at state and private functions across Thailand as well as the adoption of the "traditional" Thai greeting *Sawat-dii*, which means either "hello" or "good-bye." While this term, which is the first and last Thai word most travelers encounter upon entry into or exit from the country, was certainly a legitimate word, it was archaic and thus hardly part of most Thais' everyday lexicon.

Revisionist plays and patriotic songs composed by the Phibulsongkram regime's chief ideologue and de facto Minister of Culture, Luang Wichit Wathakan, were also deployed by the state as a means of stoking the flames of militant patriotism and irredentism. Part of Phibulsongkram's vision of Thailand, it should be noted, included the reincorporation of "lost" Thai territories in southern China, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. The *Rataniyom* were the clearest example yet of a Thai government's attempt to construct an explicit state ideology and identity. Thai radio and government-controlled newspapers were extensively employed by the state to promote Phibulsongkram's vision of Thai culture (Wright, 1991).

Such attempts to create a national identity which would pay lip service to the country's nominal democratic system of government, while at the same time legitimating the system of extraparliamentary dictatorship which held sway throughout the country, were feasible during the 1950s and 1960s, when the military-civilian bureaucratic axis wielded maximum power and faced few meaningful challenges from other interest groups such as labor unions, peasant organizations, and student groups. Such challenges, when they arose, were excoriated as "communist plots" aimed at the destruction of revered Thai institutions and were neutralized decisively and severely. Since neighboring Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were in the throes of revolution, and since the People's Republic of China was a source of virulent rhetoric calling for the overthrow of the Thai government and the abolition of the monarchy, Thai ruling cliques could point to external as well as internal threats as justification for oppressive policies towards dissent; press censorship and tight control of electronic media were commonplace during this era (Girling, 1981). Following the student-led revolts of 1973 and 1976 and the right-wing response in 1976, though, it became clear that the new social forces which had emerged in Thailand, such as dissident student groups, the nascent native Thai bourgeoisie, and labor unions, were posing a significant threat to the stability of the Thai political equation as it had previously

been understood. As Chulalongkorn University political scientist Chai-Anan Samudavanija wrote in a *Bangkok Post* article in 1989,

The identity of the state was challenged by these new forces on all fronts. The state power elites responded by making a series of attempts to revive the spirit of 1940s nationalism which included the establishment of a National Identity Board. But in the 1970s, Thai society was buffeted by multifaceted pressures. It was beyond the ability of the state to arrest all the forces of change as it used to do by simply issuing *Rataniyom* or resorting to old-style military statism a la Phibulsongkram or Sarit. The modern media which remained relatively free even in authoritarian periods was an important source of social and political diversity (Samudavanija, 1989b, p. 4).

It is precisely this historical pattern of hierarchically-oriented reform, enforced ideological consensus, and increasingly problematic identity modification campaigns on the part of the Thai ruling elites which prompted this study.

In order to understand the issues and obstacles inherent in modern Thailand's national development and integration processes, as well as the role played by the mass media in that process, it is necessary to examine how the concepts of cultural and political identity and the citizen's relationship to state and nation have changed over the past few decades. For while Thailand has never experienced the convulsive break with the past which has scarred its neighbors, notions of national identity and culture have undergone considerable change as the result of both internal and external pressures (Keyes, 1989). Although the country has faced some minor assimilation problems with certain groups which have not yet been incorporated into the Thai mainstream, national integration and cultural identity issues involving ethnic or linguistic minorities are not matters of burning concern: no one in 1989 would argue that the country was suffering from an ethnic or religious factional crisis, or that the nation is in danger of falling apart along socio-cultural fault lines.

The challenges to Thailand's self-image and identity are instead more subtle and insidious: How does a historically agrarian, Buddhist society maintain its tradition and heritage in the face of industrialization, urbanization and secularism? How can the fruits of

development be distributed more equally, and how can the rapidly widening gaps between rich and poor, and urban and rural, be bridged? What forms of political organization will not only be compatible with Thai notions of power and authority but will also give the disenfranchised a modicum of self-empowerment and control over their own lives?

Finally, what are the salient identity and integration issues in Thailand if one takes into account the revisionist scholarship of Anderson (1983), Keyes (1989), and Samudavanija (1989a, 1989b, 1989c) who, *inter alia*, have posited a model of identity formation in Thailand which challenges the organic, static model of a stable, historically contiguous Thai identity with one in which the state has consciously used its resources to construct a Thai identity which subsumes or co-opts regional cultural and linguistic distinctions to create an illusion of seamlessness? Remember, "Thailand" so understood did not exist before 1939, when Prime Minister Phibulsongkram changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand (Dhiravegin, 1985). In the view of these scholars the Thai "nation" and its official identity are just as contingent upon deliberate state cultural formation policies as Singapore is, at least in Leong's 1989 analysis. The challenge this revisionist, anti-mythic approach sets for the research topic in question is obvious: how to divine the hidden hand of the state's cultural apparatus with regard to the most widespread means of cultural and totemic dissemination, that is, radio, television, and print media.

METHODOLOGY

When conducting a cross-cultural study, care must be taken to base that study's research on as broad a range of sources as possible. Face-to-face interviews may be hampered by lack of time, funds, or uncooperative subjects; primary sources may not always be forthcoming from official entities, documentary sources may be unavailable or nonexistent; and previous studies may be flawed, culturally biased, poorly conceived and executed, or irrelevant to the research questions.

A combination of sources, using an integrated mixture of interviews, government documents and official statistics, previous studies, supplemented by newspaper articles and other secondary sources is an effective approach to these limitations. Ideally, each source not only fills gaps in the other two sources but also serves to check those sources' reliability and validity. This is particularly important when language barriers, political constraints, lack of funds, and social taboos may be involved, and when one is investigating a subject which is thus far under-studied.

This thesis is based on three types of sources: face-to-face interviews; government documents and similar primary sources (what little was available); and secondary analysis of previous research. In addition, further information and insights were gleaned from fact-finding missions to:

- Prachuap Khiri Kan/Khao Sam Roi Yot in the mid-southern region;
- Archeological sites such as Phimai, Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, and Lopburi;
- Northern Thailand, including Lamphun, Chiang Mai, Mae Sai, Tak, Mae Sot, Chiang Dao, Phrao, Lampang, Phitsanulok, and Chiang Rai;
- Northeast Thailand, including Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima), Khon Kaen, Loei, and Nong Khai;
- Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi in the west.

Interviews

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with members of the following groups: government officials (N = four); Thai communication researchers and academics (N = 25); and employees of media institutions (N = four).

All subjects interviewed were guaranteed confidentiality. Those subjects who agreed to be identified and to have their comments attributed will be identified. Most subjects did agree to be identified for attribution, but a few interviewees who contributed potentially controversial remarks did ask that those comments not be attributed to them.

Interviews were usually scheduled in advance, with appointments made either directly or through a third party. Interviews were taped. Interpreters were used in a few of the interviews but were generally eschewed by the subjects. Most of the formal interviews were quite useful and did not suffer for want of interpreters, but a few could definitely have benefited from such assistance.

Questions were formulated to balance the need for simplicity with the need for optimal explanatory power and incisiveness. The interests, background, and professional specialization of each interview subject had to be taken into account and that subject's questions developed accordingly. Also, certain cultural traditions and norms of interpersonal communication had to be observed in order to prevent embarrassing the subject. For example, asking a subject a question he or she did not know or understand could cause the subject to "lose face," that is, to suffer a loss of prestige or status. A subject who has "lost face" would not be too interested in helping the interviewer, even if his or her inability to answer the question was the fault of the interviewer. As a result, there was no single, standardized list of questions asked of the subjects.

Frequently-asked questions included general inquiries into the changing role of mass media in Thai society, environmental and social constraints inhibiting media performance, and speculations on the future of mass communication in a rapidly

modernizing Thailand; there were also more specific questions concerning taboo subjects in the media, the role of corruption in media performance, and specific national icons featured prominently in newspapers, on the radio and on television.

Discretion had to be exercised when asking questions about sensitive subjects such as the position and role of the Thai monarchy, religion in general and Buddhism in particular, official corruption, and the political role of the army. There were certain historical events which also called for circumspection, such as the now-defunct communist insurgency, the 1976 military coup which put an abrupt end to three years of democratic rule, and related topics. Thais as a rule do not care to discuss negative aspects of their society, and they are even more reluctant in the presence of a foreigner.

Some words and phrases were considered inappropriate and had to be used with care. One such phrase, unfortunately, was “national integration,” which in Thailand referred to recent counterinsurgency efforts in the northeast and far south of the country, not the historical process of nation-building. As a result, study advisors Prof. Joomphol Rodcumdee and Prof. Jaranai Glaegosol recommended the more cumbersome and less precise phrase “nation-building process” be used instead.

Academics usually expressed little overt hesitation when discussing these subjects, and some were surprisingly frank and outspoken in their responses. Other interviewees, however, were less comfortable with these topics and would subtly but firmly indicate their desire to talk about something else.

Interview Subjects

The largest group of interview subjects was composed of communication researchers and professors from Chulalongkorn and Thammasat Universities. Interviews with these subjects yielded insights on both historical as well as contemporary topics. These were almost always the easiest interviews to conduct, since most of the respondents

had attended graduate schools in the United States or elsewhere in the West, and consequently could converse in English.

In addition, their relatively high level of familiarity with Western culture reduced the risk of cross-cultural misunderstandings during the course of the interviews. They were also more familiar with the abstract theoretical issues under scrutiny and could speak more frankly on other, more touchy subjects, since they were not speaking in any official capacity and were not suspicious of the interviewer's motives.

The other two groups interviewed were media personnel and government officials. The media personnel interviewed were television station employees; the government officials interviewed included the Spokesman of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Secretary-Director of the Public Relations Department, and a Royal Thai Army colonel currently attached to the *Isaan Sii-Kiao* ("Green Isaan") Project, a royally-sponsored development program and public relations campaign conducted by the Royal Thai Army with extensive corporate sponsorship.

There were more problems involved in conducting interviews with media employees and government officials than with communications researchers. They were more difficult to schedule, since the subjects were already highly pressed for time. Also, travel to the subjects' offices was complicated by Bangkok's infamous traffic. Appointments had to be made far in advance and often had to be rescheduled. The subjects also had to be more circumspect in their responses, since they were speaking on the record as state employees or government spokespersons.

While they were not formal interview subjects, undergraduate and graduate students provided invaluable assistance, whether by acting as interpreters, helping to schedule appointments, arranging transportation, providing directions to interview locations, and translating or explaining difficult concepts. Their contributions were pivotal to the conduct of the study.

Government Documents and Official Statistics

Face-to-face interviews and consultations were valuable sources of historical information, anecdotes and data, insights and suggestions for further research. However, statistics, organizational information, and raw facts in general were necessary to fill in the gaps left by those interviews. For example, interviewees frequently referred to the network of radio and television stations operated by the Thai military, or could offer anecdotal, impressionistic descriptions of radio and television content. However, when the time came to determine how many radio and TV stations were owned or controlled by the military, or what percentage of total radio and television programming was devoted to education, entertainment, and so forth, then it was necessary to find additional sources of information.

Most of the additional data needed could be found in: the 1989 edition of UNESCO's *World Communications Report*; in the UNESCO-commissioned 1985 study of Thailand's communication policies; in Sanan Padmadin's 1984 overview of mass communication in Thailand; and in a number of other sources. The Tourist Authority of Thailand contributed maps and a variety of brochures and handbooks. Additional information on the Public Relations Department and general statistical data on Thailand were available from the PRD and National Statistics Office.

While promotional materials, statistical data, and general, abstract official policy pronouncements were all readily available, intra-agency operational documents and similar materials were not. This kind of information was almost always considered secret, particularly where national security matters were concerned. For example, information on the counterinsurgency aspects of the Village Loudspeaker Program (a psychological warfare/public relations operation which placed government-operated radio loudspeakers in towns and villages throughout the country, with emphasis on areas where communist guerrillas had been active in the past) would have been highly relevant to this study, but such information was not forthcoming from the agencies involved in the project.

Government employees were reluctant to release sensitive information to a foreign researcher. Thais tend to be discreet when confronted with inquisitive foreigners and guard even innocuous information closely (according to one interview subject, they are no more forthcoming when dealing with employees of rival agencies). There is no Freedom of Information Act in Thailand, and civilian and military bureaucracies are not constrained by sunshine laws.

It should also be noted that, even if such information were available, document translation would have been necessary, which in turn would have made the usefulness of those documents dependent on the integrity and competence of the translator.

Additional or Supplementary Literature

General information on Thailand and a smaller amount describing its mass communication system was available during the initial preparation of the study; however, much more material was needed to round out and supplement the information gathered during this initial period. Most of the additional literature used in the course of this thesis was found in Chulalongkorn University's main and departmental libraries; other information was found at the Thailand Development Research Institute in Bangkok.

Another useful source of information was the English-language press in Bangkok, specifically the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation*. While much of these two papers' content was comprised of international wire service news directed at Bangkok's large but transient *farang* or "foreign" community, they periodically ran in-depth analyses of local political issues, such as the annual military command reshuffle (where Thailand's top heavy army brass jockey for those key top positions which could lead eventually to cabinet posts, or even more lucrative and prestigious positions), corruption scandals (a bottomless source of news in Thailand), controversy within the monkhood (a subject so sensitive that the vernacular press scarcely mentioned it, according to several interview subjects), and developments in the mass media infrastructure and legal status.

Limitations

The primary limitation was the author's inability to speak Thai. Although as the study progressed that particular skill gradually improved, for the most part the Thai hosts had to provide linguistic assistance. Furthermore, the author did not learn to read Thai which rendered printed material unusable in the absence of translation.

Other obstacles included the aforementioned reluctance on the part of government agencies to provide information on subjects which they defined as sensitive (which seemed to coincide with anything that could be defined as "useful" or "interesting") and a limited research budget which limited travel opportunities in-country. Furthermore, the over-reliance on "official" or elite sources such as academics and government officials had the unfortunate result of presenting the views of social actors possessing significant "centrality" or communicative access privileges at the expense of members of other socio-political strata (e.g., peasants, service and industrial employees, members of minority faiths such as Islam) whose views were not sought due to the aforementioned linguistic barriers. Finally, this study was hampered by the dearth of previous research on communications, nationalism, and government information policies in Thailand in particular and southeast Asia in general.

In a more abstract sense, there were vexing epistemological concerns when conducting and interpreting the research for this study. For instance, there were the dual imperatives of avoiding "Orientalism" by viewing the host country as inscrutable, mysterious, and impenetrable to Western rationalist analysis; while the author is inescapably a product of that same Western intellectual tradition, pains have been taken to avoid as much intellectual bias as possible.

The other tendency the author has sought to avoid, though not always successfully, is the irritating "gee-whiz" attitude that too often compels the Western observer to point out every jarring dichotomy between "quaint and traditional" and "modern": "Ooh look, an

animist spirit house next to a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet! Akha tribeswomen in bejeweled headdresses hawking Madonna cassettes! A saffron-robed Buddhist monk blessing a new Thai Airways Airbus! They may be wearing *lakhon* court dance costumes but they're drinking Pepsi!" While these visual paradoxes may make for interesting anecdotes, they have become so common in Asia that they are now little more than clichés. Their usefulness would now appear to be limited to demonstrating the insidious penetration of multinational capitalism and to demonstrating the lack of imagination of too many travel writers and commentators. It is hoped that this thesis is at least partially successful in avoiding these two pitfalls.

FINDINGS

Welcome to Thailand: Behave Yourself

After the weary traveler disembarks from the pressurized can full of bad air which has deposited him at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport, collects his personal freight, and clears the usually cursory customs check, he is greeted by a large sign, in English, reading "*Sawat-dii: Welcome to Thailand.*" The only gauntlets to run are those at the baggage carousel and the one which passes through the various state-sanctioned money changers and the enthusiastic taxi drivers who cluster around the Arrivals exit. The greeting, then, is pleasant enough; however, should the traveler decide to arrive by land at the border crossing at Sungai Kolok, at the Thai-Malay border, the greeting is decidedly more stern:

NOTICE

By virtue of Section 16 of the Immigration Act, B.E. 2522 (1979), the Minister of Interior issues the following Order to identify an alien with "hippy" characteristics:

1. A person who wears just a singlet or waistcoat without underwear.
2. A person who wears shorts which are not respectable.
3. A person who wears any type of slippers or wooden sandals, except when these are part of national costume.
4. A person who wears silk pants that do not look respectable.

A person who has long hair that appears untidy and dirty.

A person who dresses in an impolite and dirty-looking manner.

An alien with such characteristics will be prohibited from entering the Kingdom. If an alien has the above characteristics after entering the Kingdom, he will be immediately deported.

Of course, the signs on the Malaysian side of the border are even more sinister: one, which bears the figure of a noose on a stark black field, warns would-be smugglers

that drug trafficking will result in the death penalty under Malaysian law. Thailand and Malaysia, it would seem, are concerned as much about the appearances and personal hygiene of their foreign guests (to say nothing of their recreational pharmaceutical habits) as they are about the national identities they present to those same guests.

The State of the Kingdom: 1989

In 1989 Thailand, the first freely elected civilian government was approaching the end of its first year in office. Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, a former general and bon vivant, was presiding over a country that was enjoying one of the highest economic growth rates in the world. Thailand's gross national product had increased from 828.6 billion *baht* (\$33.1 billion US) in 1982 to 1,833 billion *baht* by 1989 (United Nations *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific*, 1993, p. 440). Foreign investment, much of it from Japan and Taiwan, was pouring in steadily; construction sites were springing up all over the country like mushrooms after a rainstorm; the streets were rapidly filling with late-model Mercedes, BMW's, and Volvos. Every year, millions of tourists were stepping off the tarmac at Don Muang, on their way to leaving billions of dollars in foreign exchange in Thailand. Annual tourist arrivals increased from 2.2 million in 1982 to 4.8 million in 1989, and tourist receipts more than tripled from 1982 to 1989, from a little more than 1 billion dollars U.S. in 1982 to 3.75 billion in 1989 (United Nations, 1993, p. 447).

However, along with the economic boom Thailand was experiencing a good deal of turmoil, or at least angst, just under the surface. While the military was no longer formally in power, it still pulled many of the political and economic strings and the possibility of a coup made for a perpetual uneasiness on the part of the government. AIDS was gradually being recognized as a slow motion health care apocalypse that threatened to derail the country's modernization campaign. Rapid development was also making much of the capital unlivable, as noise levels increased daily, the air became more and more filthy, and Bangkok's *klongs* (canals) and even the waters of the mighty Chao Phraya river began to

turn black from untreated sewage and industrial effluent dumping. Coping with Bangkok's traffic required a chess master's strategic sense, an indestructible clutch, and the patience of the Buddha himself.

Upcountry (what Thais call anything outside of metropolitan Bangkok) the situation was little better. Most of Thailand's once lush tropical forests had been cut down by profit-crazed loggers. Developers were turning once-verdant coastal paradises like Phuket into miniature Rivas, complete with swimming pools, architecturally incongruous high-rise hotels, traffic jams, and untreated sewage discharged directly into the sea from waterfront resorts. Pollution and prostitution were also beginning to make their presence felt in these areas.

The peasantry found itself increasingly squeezed between government policies which favored rapid industrialization over agriculture (the historic mainstay of the economy) and increased joblessness in the hinterlands. Northeast Thailand, known as Isaan, found itself especially hard hit. Always the poorest region of Thailand, it was suffering a seemingly endless drought and accompanying soil erosion and salinity. Each year, more and more of Isaan's sons and daughters were heading to Bangkok and the provincial capitals to seek work as construction workers, cab drivers, factory hands, and prostitutes.

This headlong rush towards modernization had also triggered an existential or spiritual crisis in the country as well. As the country became more industrialized, urbanized, media-saturated, "modern," as Nissan minitrucks and Sony Walkmans replaced water buffalo and *khaen* (small pan-flutes featured prominently in northeast Thai folk music), those elements of culture that had defined what it meant to be "Thai" (Theravada Buddhism, an agrarian, rice-based economy, traditional clothing, classical and folk music, etc.) began to lose their organic connection to Thai society. The art forms might still be practiced, of course, but their historical context was being lost. Thai pundits were

worrying aloud that the country was losing its spiritual bearings in its relentless pursuit of Mammon, Madonna, and Mercedes-Benz.

National Identity and Ideology in Southeast Asia

To paraphrase Mark Twain's philosophy of weather, Thai cultural and social identity was something many people discussed but about which no one ever did anything. Elucidating the "official" ideology of nationalism in Thailand presented more difficulty than it would have in other southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Burma or Singapore. For example, Indonesia's official *Pancasila* movement is promoted in part through a system of monumental architecture which can be seen in major Javanese cities such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya. These sculptures, all rendered with a rough-hewn socialist realism which calls to mind Stalin-era public statuary in Minsk and Sofia (with a few notable exceptions like the towering monolith of the *Merdeka*, or Independence, monument in Jakarta), are intended to glorify heroes of the anti-Dutch independence struggle and to reinforce a unifying, abstract nationalism rather than local identities based on Balinese, Madurese, or Sumatran culture. These sculptures were decidedly secular in nature, though, making little or no reference to Islam in a country whose population is overwhelmingly Muslim. Curiously, though, these paeans to *Pancasila* were most apparent in Java, where intuition would suggest Indonesian nationalism to be stronger by virtue of Java's centrality to the Indonesian political structure, and were less in evidence in Bali, which is linguistically and religiously distinct from Java and presumably more deserving of attention from statist symbol mongers.

Similarly, Singapore demonstrated an explicit concern with national self-awareness and official identity construction. On a 1987 visit by the author, huge banners in the official colors of red and white were slung from the facades of many of Singapore's ubiquitous shopping malls. The sprawling Cold Storage supermarket was festooned with one such banner which declared in bold sans-serif type "We Are Singapore." In a country

whose existence barely predates the Beatles' appearance on the Ed Sullivan show and which boasts no real cultural history of its own, perhaps such reminders are necessary. Singapore also faces the difficulties inherent in simultaneously reinforcing the political and cultural superiority of one demographic group, the Mandarin-speaking ethnic Chinese population (itself an amalgam of Hakka, Cantonese, Fukienese, and others sub-groups), without losing at least the tacit acquiescence of the Muslim Malays. Multicultural corporate Confucianism perhaps does not lend itself to monumental architecture and public rallies, though, Singapore's self-promotional efforts borrowed extensively from modern marketing techniques, eschewing the clumsier quasi-socialist agitprop of *Pancasila* statuary. For example, as part of the "We Are Singapore" campaign a promotional trailer for the Republic of Singapore was shown prior to feature attractions in some of the major cinema houses there. This clip, which bore the imprimatur of the Singaporean government, featured dozens of photogenic children, all impeccably groomed, most of them Chinese in appearance but with some Indian- and Malay-featured as well, danced and sang to a bland jingle which would not have been out of place in a commercial pitching hamburgers, minivans or feminine hygiene products. "We are Singapore, Singaporeans..." The spot had the banal aesthetic of something developed by a marketing committee after extensive focus group research.

Burma's national identity para-ideology under General Ne Win and the Burmese Socialist Programme Party was even more idiosyncratic, the so-called "Burmese Way to Socialism." An admixture of Theravada Buddhism, animist religious practices which predate the arrival of Buddhism, ethnic Burman nationalism (which was especially virulent in the economic sphere), astrology, Marxism, and personality cultism devoted centered on the General, the Burmese Way to Socialism sought to isolate a fragile Burmese culture both from the contaminating influences of the outside (Western) world and to preserve the supremacy of the ethnic Burmans of the Irrawaddy River valley. Part of this drive towards

ethnic particularism was motivated by the Burmans' long-standing resentment of colonial-era economic practices which vested significant power in the hands of the Chinese and Indian minorities, though simple self-aggrandizement on the part of the architects of nationalist and exclusionary policies cannot be discounted. The iconography of Ne Win's program relied heavily upon Buddhism, manifestations of which are ubiquitous in Burma. Every town, village, and hamlet from Rangoon to Mandalay and back again boasted at least one brilliant white pagoda; rain or shine, the gleaming gold *stupa* of the Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon attracts a constant stream of pilgrims.

"The Burmese Way to Socialism" might as well have been called "The Burmese Way to International Isolation and Bankruptcy," an ideological hash which reduced one of the richest nations of southeast Asia to utter penury by the early 1980's. In 1987, few consumer goods were available in Rangoon, save for those smuggled into the country and sold on the black market; Burmese traders were desperate to trade nearly worthless *kyat* notes for American, British, or even Thai currency, and were willing to trade wads of those notes for manufactured goods brought in from abroad. For example, the author was paid nearly \$100 dollars U.S. at the official exchange rate for a package of AA batteries, a small flashlight, and a grimy UCSC "Banana Slug" t-shirt. Some Marxist iconography was in evidence during a 1987 visit--one of the two English-language newspapers available in Rangoon was the *Working People's Daily*, and hammer-and-sickle-adorned posters featuring smiling peasants harvesting rice could be seen on the side of the potholed road which snaked from Mandalay to the former British hill station of Maymyo.

Finally, Vietnam's Communist government resorts to a state identity which makes full use of the iconography of the now-moribund international socialist movement. Vietnamese political iconography is characterized by the heroic narratives of socialist development, coupled with the legacy of the country's decades-long struggle for independence against French, Chinese, Japanese, and American aggressors. This iconic

system has been juxtaposed against any *anciens regimes* which might have been tainted by contact with or control by those colonial powers (e.g., the French-supported emperor-manqué Bao Dai). Therefore, those who would forge a national identity and an integrational mythopolitical axis on which Vietnam might turn could draw upon the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin as well as those of *Bac* (Uncle) Ho. Even in 1993, four years after the near-total collapse of international communism and two years after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., the cornerstone of that ideology, public agitprop statuary and billboards still featured smiling, forward-looking workers and peasants flanked by hammers and sickles, or steely-eyed soldiers holding predatory imperialists at bay, or they featured the avuncular countenance of Ho Chi Minh.

The Evolution of National Identity in Thailand

But what about Thailand, which has a long, though somewhat contrived, tradition of political continuity, was never directly colonized, and has never needed either to create an alternative national identity to replace one displaced by colonialism, or to forge one in response to political amorphousness as is the case in Singapore? Even the Thai government has relied upon an invented tradition, or historical *imaginaire*, to forge the “imagined community” of the Kingdom of Thailand. This social narrative might have deeply historical roots and require less subsumation of extant differences than might be the case in Singapore (whose existence as a nation dates back only to the mid-1960s) or Burma (whose official national identity necessarily ignores the multinational or multicultural nature of the country and whose name actually refers only to ethnic Burmans), but it nevertheless is the result of a deliberate process of political synthesis. Thailand has only been a cohesive, centrally-administered nation state since the middle of the last century; before that, it was a more loosely-organized kingdom where local princes and provincial notables enjoyed considerable autonomy under the quasi-feudal *sakdina* system (Wyatt, 1984).

This desire to codify “Thai-ness” has taken a variety of historical forms, including the previously discussed statist campaigns of Phibulsongram and the establishment of a National Identity Office. According to Suvit Yodmani, the Official Spokesman for the Prime Minister’s office and a former member of the National Identity Office,

The NIO was established in 1978 in order to present examples of positive behavior for the youth; it has 14 subcommittees, representatives from the Department of Public Relations, the Ministry of Legal Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Investment, and so on (Yodmani, personal communication, September 1989).

Yodmani continued, without elaborating, that this need was being felt especially strongly in the late 1970s; perhaps the loss of so many of the kingdom’s students and intellectuals to the Communist Party of Thailand’s insurgency after the 1976 coup compelled the country’s government to take a stronger role in ideology and identity formation than it had done previously. The NIO was still in existence in 1989, so presumably the need to provide young people with positive role models had survived the disappearance of the communist menace.

Another former NIO member, Col. Sommart Jantanop, said that the NIO’s effectiveness was limited by the perennial tendency of Thai bureaucracies to fragment. Jantanop explained that in the Thai bureaucracy, conflict is avoided by bureaucratic expansion--there is an endless proliferation of working groups, which of course leads to duplication of functions and eventual bureaucratic paralysis. According to Col. Jantanop, Thai bureaucrats are intensely jealous and territorial and defend their positions and privileges fiercely. The need to remain in good graces with department heads, even those in redundant or unnecessary positions, militates against eliminating or consolidating those departments. Sommart did add, however, that the NIO had made a number of positive contributions to the country, including a heightened appreciation for national aesthetic forms and an increased sense of national pride (Jantanop, personal communication, August 1989).

Lak Thai: The Three Pillars of Thai Nationhood

Thai national identity, according to most of those interviewed for this study, is inseparable from culture, and this identity is based on the “Holy Trinity” of Nation, Religion, and King (*chart, satsana, ratana* in Thai). These principles, a mutually reinforcing triad known as *lak Thai*, codify the official Thai identity and provide one another with mutual support, protection, and/or legitimation. “Identity is not a problem and does not require extensive promotion,” according to Sommart. “Thai-ness,” or *kwamphenthai*, the feeling of nation-based connection uniting Thais from Chiang Rai in the north to Nakhon Sri Thammarat in the south, was a given, an ever-present ambient nationalism.

Furthermore, this attachment runs deep; as southeast Asian scholar Niels Mulder summarizes in his study of Thai culture and society, *Everyday Life in Thailand*,

In the Thai national, ‘civic’ ideology of Nation (the encompassing ritual community), Religion (common ritual and beliefs), and King (uniting *phrakhun*, or moral goodness, and *phradecha*, or righteous power) the national community celebrates itself and is seen as the ‘safe’ home in an unruly wider world (Mulder, 1985, pp. 180-81).

A professor of journalism at Chulalongkorn University echoed this sentiment: “I think Thai people in every part of the country have a sense of identity, everyone feels that they are Thai, maybe because of the king; even if your part of the country has a different culture, you’re still a Thai” (Tenasoporn, personal communication, July 1989). This sentiment was shared by most of my other informants and which was confirmed time and again.

Deeply rooted though those unifying principles might have been, their historical pedigree was not particularly long. The idea of Thai identity as a centered upon a national polity rather than one constructed around loyalty to the person of the sovereign, and based on the “Three Pillars” dated back only to the turn of the century. One Thai communications

scholar, Professor Sukanya Theerawanit of Chulalongkorn University, briefly described the genesis of the pillars:

King Vajiravudh introduced the modern concept of nationalism to Thailand from England, and was very successful in that respect. Of course, at that time there was no electronic media. After the revolution that overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932, the new government tried to use the media to propagate this concept, and they used the electronic media to promote national identity. The government used this concept against communism so there were two concepts fighting against one another, nationalism and communism. Since that time, the government has understood that it was its duty to strengthen national security by promoting the god, king, country concept around the nation. Even now, the government controls broadcasting stations nationwide, and the god, king, country concept is still the unifying theme (Theerawanit, personal communication, July 1989).

The Role of the Thai Monarchy

Whether it was known as Siam or Thailand, the kingdom has always rotated around the axis of monarchy, and even in contemporary Thailand there is no shortage of evidence of the centrality of the Thai monarchy as a universal national institution. It should be noted, however, that the monarchy did not achieve its current level of political and ideological centrality until the administrative reforms and consolidation campaigns of kings Rama IV and V during the nineteenth early twentieth centuries; before these campaigns the power of the monarchy was limited by the competing influence of provincial nobles and rival princely states (Wyatt, 1984).

The present monarch, King Bhumiphol Adulyadej (also known as Rama IX of the Chakri dynasty) is a constant presence throughout the kingdom. His face adorns the currency and countless billboards, and the royal couple's portrait stares down from the wall in nearly every home, office, restaurant, coffee shop and tavern in the Kingdom from Surat Thani in the south to Mae Sai in the north. Every traveler's guide to Thailand, it seems, carries some warning or another to prospective travelers to avoid any utterance or gesture that could carry even the faintest whiff of disrespect towards the monarchy. The Tourist Authority of Thailand's "Thailand Travel Guide" informs readers that "...Thais revere their royal family. Even social malcontents who ignore legal and community standards refuse to

tolerate a faintly implied slight on the royal family.” (*Thailand Travel Guide*, 1991, p. 14)

An institution which commands the fierce loyalty of social malcontents who otherwise ignore legal and community standards is deeply rooted indeed. The persistent and prurient coverage of the British royals which characterizes the tabloid press in the United Kingdom would be inconceivable in Thailand (no newspaper would even dream of running topless photos of any member of the royal family), and a spoof of monarchism such as the recent John Goodman vehicle *King Ralph* would probably find a cool reception among most Thai moviegoers. Even Anna Leonowens’ *The King and I* is held in low esteem by the Thai political and intellectual establishment due to its irreverent treatment of Rama IV, who is depicted as something of a buffoon and a simpleton.

So sensitive a subject is the royal family that the study’s advisors strongly recommended changing possible interview questions and eliminating language which discussed the king in a materialist or functionalist manner or in terms of social and historical processes. It was thought that such an approach, which departed from the classical Thai “great man” narrative discourse, might be confused with deliberate irreverence on the researcher’s part. The author was encouraged to purge phrases like “symbol,” “legitimation device,” and “iconic function of royalty” from any discussion of the monarchy. The royal family itself would not mind or even notice such language, the advisory team said, but there are those who use even the appearance of disrespect and *less majeste* to squelch any examination of the institution which is not sufficiently imbued with *grengklua*, or sufficiently reverent and awed in tone. It was distinctly possible that those who would raise objections to this perceived lack of reverence might have ulterior motives for these objections which would have little to do with shielding the monarchy from insult, and more to do with preserving the boundaries separating acceptable from unacceptable discourse. Unfortunately, these suspicions could be neither confirmed nor disproved.

Examples of the king's centrality were ubiquitous. For example, before every movie shown in Thailand, whether American, Thai, or Chinese in origin, a short clip devoted to the King would be screened. A message in Thai would appear on the screen and the crowd would respond by rising to attention. The clip was composed of a series of still photos showing the King as a young boy, in the orange robes and shaved head of the Buddhist monkhood, in military uniform, and in full ceremonial regalia.

The Thai monarchy is theoretically supposed to remain aloof from political involvement, especially regarding the personnel and policies pursued by specific government agencies, but this does not translate into that institution's complete withdrawal from contemporary affairs in Thailand. In fact, it is the royal family's active and widely publicized participation in public and state ritual and their sponsorship of various social development programs which makes the monarchy such a potent force in establishing political and social consensus. According to Thai political scientist Chairat Charoensin-o-larn's 1988 study of development policies in postwar Thailand,

The Palace successfully rejuvenates its popularity by making direct appeals to the Thai public at large. For example, the king, queen, and members of the royal family make extensive trips throughout the country, especially to visit rural inhabitants, state officials, soldiers, and Border Patrol Police in the countryside. Besides, since Thailand is a highly status-conscious society, the monarchy, which is the highest social institution and symbol, has rapidly been identified as a source of social legitimation and recognition for those who want to upgrade their status within the society. Business leaders start donating money to charities patronized by the royal family in order to get recognition. Other social groups seek recognition by making such associations with the Palace as having an audience on various occasions or obtaining royal patronage for weddings, funerals, etc. (Charoensin-o-larn, 1988, p. 198).

Although several interview subjects indicated that there were no explicit policies mandating Thai media coverage of royal activities, at the same time they pointed out that the monarchy's activities held pride of place when coverage was allotted. Certainly there was no shortage of film footage of royal activities on the television news programs, although no determination of the substance of the programming could be made since the audio feed was

in Thai. Royal activities and participation in public ceremonies were also ubiquitous in both vernacular and English-language print media, one example being front-page coverage of the king's audience at Chitrlada Palace with the visiting Chinese Armed Forces Chief of staff, who had traveled to the Palace to present the king with manuals for heavy machinery to be used for the Green Isaan redevelopment project sponsored by the king ("King grants audience," 1989). Given the level of adulation and reverence accorded the monarchy elsewhere, though, it is safe to assume that these attitudes would be reproduced readily in the vernacular media.

Since the Sarit era of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Thai monarchy has been a prominent and highly visible booster of the modernization and national development processes. Since education, particularly collegiate and university level education, is viewed as a cornerstone of national development, the royal family has extended its patronage to the university system nationwide. The king presents the graduates with their diplomas at every university graduation ceremony in the country, which, given the number of universities throughout the nation, must make June and July particularly grueling for the peripatetic monarch.

Public rituals such as the annual Ploughing Ceremony, which is held in mid-spring at Sanam Luang near the Grand Palace, also serve to reinforce the centrality of the monarchy within Thai culture. The Ploughing Ceremony is actually Hindu in origin, a Brahmanistic rite which marks the official start of the annual rice-planting cycle. The king's participation in the ceremony is representative of the pivotal role the throne plays in the Thai cosmology, with the king representing the *devaraja* or divine monarch. Other public holidays which center around the monarchy include the birthday celebrations of the royal couple. All such holidays are extensively covered in the electronic and print media, according to several Thai communications scholars interviewed for this project.

The royal family has also committed itself to publicly supporting the integration of Thailand's hill tribes into the mainstream of the country's social life. The nomadic hill tribes of the far North and Northeast, concentrated along the Thai-Lao and Thai-Burmese frontiers, have presented a more serious obstacle to national integration than have other minority groups for a number of reasons. Most of these tribes, such as the Meo, or Hmong, Akha, Lisu, and Yao, still lead semi-nomadic or migratory lifestyles, speak their own languages (some of which, such as the Akha tongue, lack written alphabets), and practice animistic folk religions rather than Theravada Buddhism. They are "fourth world" peoples insofar as they cross political borders at will and do not consider themselves to be subjects or citizens of any particular country; as a result, the amount of government control exerted over these tribes by southeast Asian governmental authorities has been minimal and erratic at best. In Thailand and elsewhere in the region, the various tribes are dispersed over a vast and topographically hostile area; furthermore, the territories occupied by these groups often overlap one another. In the Mae Sot district of Tak province, for example, one can find settlements of Akha, Meo, and Lahu tribespeople; in the far northern province of Chiang Rai, clusters of Karen, Akha, Lisu, Palong, and Lahu villages lie within walking distance of one another (Cummings, 1992; Keyes, 1989).

In October 1989, during a visit to several hill tribe settlements in the rugged hills south of Chiang Mai, near the town of Chiang Dao, it was apparent how difficult it would be to use mass communication techniques to facilitate the integration process. Linguistic differences alone would render such a campaign cumbersome, since all programming would need to be produced in at least five languages to be maximally effective; broadcasting programs in Lisu or Meo might actually prove counter-integrational, since it would reinforce those groups' cultural difference as opposed to minimizing it. Furthermore, most of these villagers appeared to be too poor to afford

radios or televisions and too concerned with daily subsistence to be able to devote any significant time to watching or listening to such programming. In the Karen, Lahu, and Akha villages visited, there was no evidence of electricity or television antennae, though one television in the tiny market which lay between the Lisu and the Akha settlements could be seen. This shop was operated by a family whose physiognomies appeared Chinese; the presence of a small altar holding a Buddhist image and a plaque inscribed with some Chinese characters reinforced the probability that the store's proprietors were not tribespeople.

Moreover, some of these tribes practiced animistic beliefs or alternately had been converted to Christianity by missionaries. Many Karen, for example, are Baptists, not Buddhists or animists. The small Akha settlement visited had no Buddhist temples or other trappings in evidence, and the Lisu village which lay about one mile further along the path centered around a small Christian chapel. Therefore, the use of Buddhist iconography as a means of creating and reinforcing the hill tribes' primordial attachment to the Thai state would probably be ineffective.

There was no visible Thai government presence in evidence beyond a tattered, faded Thai flag which hung limply next to an open-sided structure which may have served as an assembly hall. There were no officials, no schools, not even any of the pole-mounted loudspeakers which were found in other remote parts of the kingdom and were used to broadcast daily government news broadcasts. (These speakers also aired the national anthem twice a day at earsplitting volume, during which time all activity was expected to cease and all citizens were expected to stand at attention.)

As a result of the hill tribes' geographic isolation and cultural heterogeneity, the Thai government has historically had little success in delivering adequate services to the tribal population. During the CPT (Communist Party of Thailand)-led insurgency of the 1960s and 1970s, the tribal highlands often proved fertile ground for communist

recruiting campaigns, since party cadres could capitalize on tribal peoples' resentment of Thai government policies, especially in the area of counterinsurgency. Rather than pursuing a subtle, "hearts and minds approach," the Royal Thai Army frequently resorted to wholesale destruction of tribal villages and indiscriminate aerial bombing (Kerdphol, 1986). With candor that seems entirely uncharacteristic of high-ranking Thai military officers, Kerdphol refers to Thai government policies towards tribal minorities as a form of internal colonization and places the blame for communist recruiting success on the back of those policies, rather than laying it at the feet of externally-based subversives.

Although the communist insurgency was long in its grave in Thailand by 1989, lack of funds, mutual suspicion, insensitivity and outright prejudice on the part of those responsible for delivering government services continued to hamper efforts to integrate the hill tribes into the social mainstream. Tensions centering on tribal agricultural practices such as slash-and-burn agriculture and opium cultivation also proved obstacles to majority-minority relations.

However, though campaigns such as His Majesty the King's Royal Project, these groups are slowly being integrated into the economic and social mainstream of Thailand. The Royal Project in particular has claimed significant success in weaning hill tribes from opium cultivation through a gradual process of crop substitution. According to the director of the Royal Project, Prince Bhisadej Rajani, the Project "has been successful in stabilizing national security along the northern border and diverting highlanders from poppy cultivation to cash crop farming and 'we now have 40-50 crops which produce better profits than poppy'" ("Government should handle Royal Project," 1989, p. 1) The Royal Project, which was initiated by the king in 1969, won the Ramon Magsaysay award in 1988 for "demonstrating a concerted national and

international effort in northern Thailand to eradicate opium poppy farming among hilltribes” (“Government should handle Royal Project,” 1989, p. 1).

The monarchy also promotes rural development through the queen’s Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (also known by the acronym SUPPORT). The putative purpose of this foundation is “giving rural Thais alternative sources of income and also of reviving some of the kingdom’s traditional crafts”. These handicrafts include silks, T-shirts decorated with motifs designed by Princess Sirindorn, and embroidered handbags (*Thailand Travel Guide*, 1991, p. 28).

Chulalongkorn University Professor of Mass Communication Kantima Tenasoporn, elaborated on the pivotal role that the royal family has played in contemporary Thai culture:

I think that even if the way of life changes, the traditions of Thai culture will still be there. For the last five years, the people who have helped preserve or encourage the preservation of Thai culture are the princesses. [Crown Princess Maha Chakri] Sirindhorn goes to every Thai dance festival, classical music performance, and she goes to meetings to preserve historical monuments. If she does not attend, the media will not cover the story. You already know that the top priority of the news media is the coverage of the royal family, so the princess is an inspiration to the people, and the people love her, and whatever she is doing, people will follow her, and the news media will have to cover her activities (Tenasoporn, personal communication, July 1989).

Coverage of those activities included photographs of the princess lighting candles to initiate a ceremony consecrating the casting of Buddha images at Wat Boroniwet in Bangkok, a ceremony attended by the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Buddhist monkhood and by senior government officials. These Buddha images were then to be sold to raise money for workers who had suffered on-the-job injuries (“Homage by candlelight,” 1989). This particular ceremony incorporated a beloved public figure (the princess, who may be second in popularity only to the king himself), a revered site (Wat Boroniwet), and representatives of key national institutions (the monkhood, the government). Furthermore,

those in attendance were engaged in an act of merit-making by sponsoring the creation of sacred images for purposes of charity. Other royal activities covered in the English-language press include rehearsals for the annual trooping of the Royal Guards, where infantrymen from the various units which comprise the Guard conduct a ceremonial march to demonstrate their fealty to the king on the occasion of his birthday ("Royal Guards rehearse," 1989).

The present royal family has distinguished itself as an indefatigable promoter of national development, deeply committed to the well-being of the nation and the betterment of its citizenry. It is this attitude of engaged benevolence in action which has probably contributed most to the king's reputation: the king is not merely a ceremonial figurehead to be trotted out in ritual livery for periodic ceremonies, but rather a dynamic, competent monarch who demonstrates his commitment to the development process by personally overseeing projects in the remotest areas of the kingdom. The king is often portrayed in motion, wearing civilian clothes and carrying maps and a camera. The royal family has through its activities amassed a vast store of *bun*, or merit, with the king representing a locus of *barami*, which might loosely be defined as charisma acquired through accumulation of *bun* in this or a past incarnation. Media coverage of the king's activities could be understood as a means of diffusing that *barami* throughout the kingdom. Of course, at times this coverage is indistinguishable from outright hagiography, as this passage from an article announcing the publishing of a collection of the king's photographs attests:

His Majesty the King has long been praised worldwide of his supreme talent in various arts, especially photography. An impressive image of the King that is recognized among Thais, is his devotion to rural development and wherever he goes to the provinces, the people will see that he wears a camera around his neck...The introductory pages [of the collection] also state that there are many pictures that reveal His Majesty's profound thoughts and philosophy ("New book of His Majesty's photographs," 1989, p. 27).

In a more general sense, the monarchy also represents the continuity of Thailand's dynastic past with the present, the line of royal embodiments of the kingdom stretching from the possibly apocryphal King Ramkhamhaeng and the thirteenth century kingdom of Sukhothai through the 36 kings of Ayutthaya to the current Chakri dynasty. King Bhumiphol in many ways embodies the Ten Kingly Virtues which are inscribed under the figures of the Vedic Gods in the Boromabiman Building of the Grand Palace: *danam*, or giving; *silam*, right conduct; *pariccagam*, material and spiritual self-sacrifice; *ajjavam*, honesty and freedom from pretense; *maddavam*, which is gentleness and humility; *tapam*, concentration of effort; *akkodham*, freedom from anger; *avihimsa*, freedom from malice; *khanti*, or patience; and *avirodhanam*, which is avoidance of wrongdoing (*Guide to the Grand Palace*, 1987).

Another aspect of the king's position as one of the three pillars of Thai identity is his role as protector of religion in general and Buddhism in particular. Ishii (1986) describes the mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationship between the monarchy and Buddhism (particularly the monkhood, or *Sangha*) as follows:

The relationship between the king and Buddhism is embodied in the structure of traditional rule in Thailand: in his capacity as 'defender of Buddhism,' the king supports the *Sangha*; with the king's support, the *Sangha* functions as maintainer of the *Dhamma* [the collection of the Buddha's teachings]; maintained by a pure *Sangha*, the *Dhamma* provides the king with a norm of rule; and the king that rules in conformity is legitimated as a *thammaracha* [a monarch whose rule is guided and legitimated by the *Dhamma*] (Ishii, 1986, p. 153).

Theravada Buddhism and Thai Identity

It is difficult to understate just how deeply woven into the fabric of Thai society the Buddhist religion actually is. Nearly 95% of all Thais are estimated to be Theravada Buddhists, according to Keyes (1989). Evidence of Buddhism's ubiquity is apparent in the thousands of temples, or *wats*, which may be seen nationwide; in the saffron-robed monks one sees collecting alms every morning; in the religious amulets worn around the

necks of taxicab and pedicab drivers to protect them (and hopefully their passengers) from harm. Buddhist rites mark every significant event in Thai life: birth, death, marriage, ordination into the monkhood, and so on. The Chulalongkorn summer term was inaugurated with a solemn rite presided over by five or six monks whose function, according to one faculty member, was to bless the upcoming term and to allow students and faculty alike to receive merit through their participation in the ceremony. Rituals such as this one also served to protect the enterprise in question from mischievous or hostile supernatural forces.

Even within Thai Buddhism, though, significant plurality and syncretic borrowing exists--there is little evidence of a centrally-enforced Buddhist orthodoxy. Thailand's large Chinese population supports a large number of temples which owe more to Taoist custom and Mahayana Buddhism than to Theravada Buddhism. Many of the customs observed by Thais who are practicing Buddhists are not derived from Theravada Buddhism at all but rather from sources like folk religion, Hinduism, and Taoism. For example, the enormous Shiva *lingam* known as the *Lak Muang* or City Pillar, located near the Grand Palace, is a Hindu or Brahmanic icon in which resides the *phimuang*, or territorial spirit protector. The famous shrine of Phra Phom (the Thai representation of the Hindu creation god Brahma) in front of the Erawan Hotel, is not of Buddhist origin at all. This shrine was built to placate the troublesome spirits who were plaguing the construction of the Erawan through a series of accidents. According to local legend, the accidents ceased once the shrine was constructed. The *phra phim* amulets described above are also probably a manifestation of folk belief rather than a practice sanctioned by Buddhist orthodoxy. Furthermore, the ubiquitous spirit houses which may be found in front of countless homes, restaurants and office buildings throughout Thailand are dedicated to the local animist spirits, or *chaothii*, rather than to the worship of the Buddha.

Just how heterodox a belief system Thai Buddhism is finds vivid illustration at Wat Putthama Makasamakhom, referred to by locals as Wat Khaek (*khaek* is a Thai term meaning, variously, “Indian,” “south Asian,” or “Mideastern,” generally used to denote those persons or things non-local in origin; see Cummings, 1992). Wat Khaek, which was established by the venerable Laotian holy man Luang Pu Bunleua Surirat, lies a few miles outside of the northeastern city of Nong Khai, a sleepy burg which abuts the sluggish, muddy Maekhong and lies across the river from the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

Within the grounds of Wat Khaek one may see a host of idiosyncratic sculptures of Buddha as well as Hindu deities, as well as a few that defy categorization. Figures of Shiva, Vishnu, elephant-headed Ganesh and the Buddha under the protective hood of a five-headed *naga* or snake are interspersed with rough statues of dogs driving cars, dogs riding scooters, dogs copulating with other dogs or in various stages of sexual arousal, and dogs carrying M-16s. Hidden throughout the carefully landscaped temple grounds are stereo speakers which pump out a steady stream of disconcerting, heavily distorted electronic Thai music. The overall effect is simultaneously enchanting and eerie, with the whimsicality imparted by the anthropomorphic dogs counteracted by the implacable blankness of the larger religiously inspired statues. The result is a temple neither wholly “Thai Buddhist” in the commonly understood sense, nor wholly Hindu but rather a lysergic synergism of two, overlaid with a “modern” veneer. As compelling and picturesque as Wat Khaek may be, though, it represents a radical departure from “traditional” Thai religious and cultural iconography--the Buddha images bear only a superficial resemblance to those cast according to the more formalized Ayutthaya and Sukhothai schools, and it’s not at all clear where the dogs with the M-16s fit in.

There are limits to the state’s tolerance of pluralism and idiosyncrasy within the official religion, though, and those limits apply both to challenges to the ecclesiastical supremacy of the state-controlled *Sangha* and to media coverage of those challenges. The

case of the Santi Asoke sect and its charismatic leader Potirak is illustrative. Potirak, a former member of the state-sanctioned *Sangha*, established the Santi Asoke center in 1975 five years after his ordination. The sect grew steadily and by 1989 had attracted thousands of followers. Potirak's brand of Buddhism espoused a fundamentalist approach to the Buddha's teachings, advocating asceticism and a vegetarian diet. After a series of clashes with the *Sangha* leadership, Potirak was defrocked; among other things, he was accused of telling followers that he had achieved enlightenment and was also charged with giving advice to a political party, actions which constituted serious transgressions of monastic regulations. However, even after being ordered to disrobe (figuratively speaking), Potirak continued to sport a shaved pate and to dress in garments that looked remarkably similar to a *bhikkhu's* (monk's) robes ("Potirak goes on trial," 1989). The government's reactions to Potirak underscored their fear of spreading sectarianism, especially in Bangkok. Not only was the sect leader brought to trial for the aforementioned offenses, but the government also tried to suppress as much media coverage of the story as possible. Such coverage did not necessarily have to be critical of Buddhism--the very existence of such coverage was considered reason enough for its suppression. While the print media did follow the Santi Asoke saga, one source employed by Thai TV said that little if any coverage of the matter could be found on television. This claim could not be independently verified.

As for foreign coverage, when the *Asian Wall Street Journal* published a story on dissent within the monkhood focusing upon the Santi Asoke case entitled "A Sectarian Dispute Roils" in its 21 July 1989 edition, the Police Special Branch responded by banning the newspaper on 16 November 1989. According to the *Bangkok Post*, certain unnamed Thai authorities found the story "annoying" and demanded action against the Hong Kong-based paper ("Ban on *Journal* lifted," 1989). The Special Branch accused the *Journal* of "insulting the Supreme Patriarch" and threatening to cause disunity among Thai Buddhists; following an appeal to Police Chief Sawaeng Thirasawat and Interior Minister Pramarn

Adireksarn by AWSJ editor Barry Wain and a pro forma expression of regret for the unintentional misunderstanding, though, the ban was lifted (“*Journal* banned for story on monks,” 1989; “Lift *Journal* ban, recommend Police,” 1989).

Another case demonstrates just how limited a sense of satire and fun some parties within Thai Buddhism possess when confronted with representations of the national religion which place a higher priority on irony and iconoclasm rather than deference and reverential piety. The scandal started innocently enough: a Bangkok magazine, *Bangkok 30*, ran a cover story in its August 1989 issue on the decline of monastic organization and internal discipline within the *Sangha*. The magazine’s choice of cover art could have been more subtle, though, as it featured a smirking monk-manqué in monastic mufti, albeit with a few deviations from the uniform code: the “monk” sported a thin mustache, a pair of sunglasses and a portable cassette player clipped to his robe, and a white t-shirt worn underneath the robe. It was perhaps the bogus *bhikkhu*’s choice of reading material that pushed the envelope of propriety too far, though: the cover model clutched a copy of *Playboy* under one arm with the magazine’s title plainly visible (“Monk students urge action,” 1989). To further complicate matters, the model portraying the worldly monk bore a close resemblance to Sorasak Pornrattanasomboon, alias “Jiab,” a monk who had recently been charged in a fake ordination and forgery scandal (“*Bangkok 30* editor gets police warning,” 1989).

Outraged monks and lay people alike were aghast at such impiety and demanded that Thai authorities take action against the magazine’s personnel. The student committee of one Buddhist university asked the Special Branch Police to confiscate all issues of the offending magazine; in addition, the committee submitted a complaint to the Interior Minister and requested that the relevant authorities invoke National Administrative Reform Council Article 42, which proscribes the printing of any document that damages or insults the country, religion, or the king (Sooksomchitra, 1985). The monks also insisted that

Bangkok 30 editor Somchai Leethongkul be held personally responsible for the offending publication and that he issue a public act of contrition coupled with a solemn promise to commit no further sins against Buddhist sensibilities.

Some more liberal quarters rallied to the magazine's defense. In an editorial, "*Krungthep* [Bangkok] 30 and Buddhism," the *Nation* daily recommended that those most outraged by the putative blasphemy implicit in the cover temper their brio and consider the magazine's possible motives for courting such controversy; the editorial also contained a tacit suggestion that there might in fact be some substance to the charge that the monkhood was indeed beset by problems too pressing to be dealt with by crying "blasphemy" and sweeping the mess under the rug:

It would be too serious a punishment by authorities had they closed down the controversial *Krungthep 30* magazine for its August edition cover photo of a model wearing saffron robes and holding Playboy and listening to a Walkman cassette recorder with headphones on his shaved head. Authorities should carefully study the inside story and consider the intentions of the magazine's editor when he printed the story. The subject of the religious story might give readers an understanding of the current decline in the monastic organization ("*Krungthep 30* and Buddhism," 1989, p. 6).

Finally, though, the flap ended with more of a whimpering warning than with the bang of a cell door slamming shut. The *Bangkok 30* editor was summoned before the Special Branch and sternly warned to never, ever commit such an offense again. Lt.-Col. Samphan Settaporn of the Special Branch told the *Bangkok Post* that, since it was the magazine's first offense against Article 42, a warning was more appropriate than fines, imprisonment, or closing the magazine outright ("*Bangkok 30* editor gets police warning," 1989).

The *Bangkok 30* scandal was not only another battle in the interminable struggle over the amount and degree of freedom granted to the Thai press, though it was certainly that too; it also represented a conflict between two sets of values, two aesthetics, two systems of mediated signal decoding. One mindset, which for convenience's sake could be

termed “modern,” was the one which produced and which was probably the intended audience of the parody. This worldview possessed a sufficient degree of cosmopolitan sophistication to perceive the subtext of the cover: the real message was perhaps not one of derision directed toward the monkhood, but rather a sardonic commentary on the pervasiveness of modern distractions and the enormous difficulties inherent in maintaining the “unworldly” detachment required of the *Sangha*. The other pole saw such a cover as unalloyed blasphemy towards the monastic institution, the merit of which was far outweighed by the harm caused to the aura of sanctity which traditionally should be accorded such a pivotal institution.

Islam in Thailand: Challenge to National Integration?

Aesthetic deviations from traditional Thai iconography like those seen at Wat Khaek, as well as disputes over the propriety of critical or sardonic coverage of Buddhism still take place within the discursive sphere of Theravada Buddhism. There are groups, however, who inhabit a symbolic universe that shares none of the common lodestones of Thai culture. One of these groups, the Thai Muslims, represent one of the most serious challenges to the process of national integration. In fact, this was the only national integration issue acknowledged at all by the interviewees. One such informant, Chulalongkorn University Professor of Mass Communications Darunee Hirulrak, downplayed any potential challenge to the political integrity of the Thai state; furthermore, she hypothesized that the absence of any meaningful challenges explained the lack of coherent government media policies regarding Thailand’s ethnic minorities:

Media don't do much for minorities. Of course, we don't have much problem with minorities or ethnic strife. Only in the south, where the people are Muslims. The way they live and their traditions are very different from ours. And the south is very close to Malaysia, maybe they don't know which country they belong to. That's why it is the government's duty to make them think that they are Thai, not Malaysian, and one way they can do that is through mass media, radio and TV, to try to promote national unity. These problems are only in the south (Hirulrak, personal communication, July 1989).

The Muslims, some of whom are ethnic Thais whose ancestors converted to Islam, the rest being ethnic Malays, are the second largest religious community in Thailand and comprise about five percent of the total population (Keyes, 1989). Based on the total population figure for 1987 of 53,600,000, this translates into a total Muslim population of about 2,600,000 (United Nations, 1990, p. 399). The Muslims of the far south, who are concentrated in the four southernmost provinces of Yala, Satun, Pattani, and Narathiwat, represent the most tangible obstacle to national integration. By cleaving to a faith other than Buddhism, which as noted above is one of the pillars of Thai identity, the Muslims fall at least partially outside the umbrella of “Thai-ness.” Surin Pitsuwan has pointed out that religion represents a possible source of counter-integrative tendencies in the south:

Islam is the major determinant of ‘alienation’ among the Malay population in this part of Thailand. It has become what anthropologists refer to as an ‘articulating principle,’ creating unity among fellow believers and alienating them from worshippers of other religions (Pitsuwan, 1987, p. 84).

Also, this population is linguistically distinct from the rest of the country, since inhabitants tend to speak Yawi, a dialect related to Bahasa Malaysia which uses a form of Arabic script. Furthermore, the local education system is based on religious schools known as *pondok* rather than on public schools operated under the aegis of the Thai government. As Wyatt (1984), Keyes (1989), and Morell and Samudavanija (1982), inter alia, have discussed at length, the primary school system has been a critical tool in the construction of national identity and the consolidation of state control nationwide. Schools have been the medium through which a common history, language and set of articulating symbols have been disseminated, and the existence of a parallel system of education can be seen as a partial negation of that medium.

Finally, the Thai government has a sorry history in its relations with these politically volatile provinces. The fact that these provinces were once independent or autonomous political entities, coupled with the central government’s remoteness, has

aggravated the Thai state's efforts to integrate its citizens in the far South into the mainstream of Thai society. The far south has also historically been used as a dumping ground for government bureaucrats whose performance has been substandard, so the Malays have found themselves confronted by officials whose incompetence is compounded by their resentment of their professional exile. This population has deeply resented certain policies aimed at assimilating the Muslims and diluting their cultural distinctiveness.

As for education and culture, the fact is that about 65% of Thai Muslims cannot understand thoroughly the Thai language, but government policy has tried to forbid the use of the local Malay dialect for security reasons. The various mass media, all official pronouncements, instructions for agricultural development, etc., are all in Thai. Villagers do not understand what the officials want - and reciprocally. This creates lots of misunderstandings, as well as a rift between the state and the people. The people do not want to contact, deal with, or support the officials and their activities...When they want to listen to the news or acquire knowledge, they tune in to Malaysian radio and TV programs (Madakakul, 1987, pp. 74-75).

One interview subject, an editor for Thai TV who declined to be identified for this study, told me that few programs were broadcast in any regional dialect; the total figure was somewhere in the neighborhood of 5%. The Public Relations Department's Center Six operates a television broadcast facility in Hat Yai, Songkhla province, which carries a limited number of programs in Yawi. Not all interviewees were impressed by the concerns of the southern Muslims, though; one professor of journalism at Chulalongkorn, Orawan Pilun-Owad, dismissed these concerns, saying

If you interview people in the south they will say they are alienated, but they are just one or two percent of the total population of the country [*sic*]; most of the rest of the people are Buddhist. I think that the only minority group that could claim that there has been any persecution, and they couldn't even claim it, are the Muslims, but the king just treats them equally (Pilun-Owad, personal communication, July 1989).

Though his effectiveness would appear to be limited both by geographic distance as well as by his role as official patron and protector of Buddhism, the king has taken a variety of highly publicized steps to demonstrate the importance of the Thai and Malay Muslims to the kingdom's integrity. The king is charged by the Thai constitution with the

protection of all religions, not just Buddhism (Ishii, 1986). Furthermore, the king has periodically met with Muslim leaders and has presented awards for Koranic studies to students from Muslim schools (Keyes, 1989).

Prime Minister's Spokesman Suvit Yodmani opined that differences in competing legal systems also represented an obstacle to smooth relations between the majority Thais and the Muslims. One of the duties of the mass media, Yodmani said, was to advise women of their rights in divorce cases under Thai civil law, which was considerably more liberal than Islamic law where divorce was concerned (Yodmani, personal communication, September 1989). The latent responsibility of the Thai media system in the south would appear to be that of bolstering the legitimacy of civic authority and to neutralize or at least counteract the effects of native legal codes.

Given the depth of antipathy between the central government and the Muslims of the south, it should not be surprising that this antipathy has often translated into armed challenges to the government on the part of disgruntled southerners. Armed struggle against the government has been facilitated not only by local opposition to Bangkok's rule but also by the region's rugged topography and distance from the capital. These armed challenges have ranged from the religiously motivated Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), to support for both the Communist Party of Malaysia (CPM) and Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), to more mercenary-minded armed bandits (Cummings, 1992; Keyes, 1989; Kherdpol, 1985). The seriousness of these insurrections has waxed and waned over time; by 1989 the CPT was moribund, and the CPM was reduced to a few ragged cadres skulking about the mountainous region near the Thai-Malay border. There was little military or police activity in evidence at the Thai-Malay border crossing in 1987, at least not at the official crossing station in Sungai Kolok, and security on the train which snaked up the Isthmus of Kra was limited to a handful of uniformed conductors. Nevertheless, separatist groups still occasionally blew up rail lines in the

south and conducted hold-ups to finance their activities; other illegal activities centered around illicit logging and smuggling operations conducted by local organized crime elements (known as *ittiphon meud*, or “dark influences”), who often operated in active collusion with corrupt officials and the police (Tarr, 1991). As a result, the Thai government has viewed the region as a security concern as well as a political one .

In order to address these security concerns, the Thai government has instituted a variety of programs conducted under the auspices of the Royal Thai Army (RTA) and other security agencies; these programs were designed to promote “strategic development” as well as “development for security” (Tarr, 1991), p. 40. One of these programs, *Harapan Baru* (“New Hope”) was a multifaceted campaign aimed at simultaneously improving the material infrastructure and addressing law and order issues. *Harapan Baru* succeeded another program, *Tai Rom Yen* (“Southern Peace and Prosperity”) which had similar putative goals. However, emanating as it did from the distant halls of government in Bangkok, the program was viewed with suspicion on the part of the southerners, its ostensible beneficiaries. Some local officials felt that the entire project was little more than a publicity stunt. As the *Bangkok Post* reported on September 9, 1989,

The project involves both infrastructure development programs and military reinforcement in areas where Muslim terrorists have been active. The goal of the project is to create better understanding between the Muslim and Thai Buddhist communities in the Muslim dominated region. Politicians and local officials have criticized the military for staging a one-man show in order to gain popularity (“Army seminar to seek backing for ‘New Hope,’” p. 2, 1989).

Harapan Baru offered a number of object lessons on how not to conduct a “hearts and minds” campaign to win the trust of a distrustful community. The *Bangkok Post* also reported on August 4, 1989, that even the music commissioned by the Army to publicize the project backfired:

The song ‘Abdullah’ by the band Zuzu has been banned from Army television and radio because it irritates many Muslims. The Central Islamic Committee of Thailand requested that the Army consider the matter and the Army Television and Radio Administration Board chaired by Deputy Commander-in-Chief

Wanchai Ruangtrakul agreed that the song is not suitable for broadcasting (“‘Abdullah’ banned from Army media,” p. 3, 1989).

The failure of the song to win favor with Muslim listeners underscored the need for producers of public relations and marketing campaigns to conduct careful audience research before releasing such materials. Still, the architects and executors of the development project were committed to its goals, at least when the microphones were turned on:

Fourth Army Region Commander Lt.-Gen. Yutthana Yaemphand yesterday stressed his priority was to develop the five southernmost provinces under the ‘Haraphan Baru’ (New Hope) project.

At a press conference at Fourth Army Headquarters in Nakhon Si Thammarat, he said he had sought cooperation from southern governors to solve problems in the south and to emphasize that the Harapan Baru project would bring happiness and well-being to southern people. Lt.-Gen. Yutthana said the Fourth Army would cooperate closely with provincial authorities and police to crack down on crimes and influential people, especially those involved in forest destruction. He said he had sent letters to the forestry chief and the Agriculture Ministry, asking them to deal severely with people who destroyed forest reserves (“‘New Hope’ 4th Army’s priority, 1989, p. 2).

Haraphan Baru , then, offered the Thai military an opportunity to demonstrate to the nation as a whole its commitment and indispensability to the national development process. It is important to note that Lt.-Gen. Yutthana emphasized that the military-sponsored project “would bring happiness and well-being to the southern people.” The Thai military has played a key role in the development process, a role which has either consciously or unconsciously paralleled that played by the king. The military’s view of development sees that process as not only a means of extending its own reach throughout the country, thereby increasing its influence and standing with the population, but also as a means of quelling insurrections and armed opposition to the state stemming from popular frustration with poverty and state neglect. The military, perhaps more than any other extra-monarchic or extra-religious institution, has sought to position itself as protector and custodian of the nation, its defender against opponents internal (communist subversives and “influential people”) and external (expansionist governments in Hanoi and elsewhere), political and

meteorological. The army's role in another "strategic development" project, the *Isaan Sii-Kiao* or "Green Isaan" campaign, will now be addressed.

When certain cultural artifacts become too controversial and threaten the delicate relationship between Islam and the Thai state, the state does take steps to placate Muslim outrage. When Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* became an object of militant Islamic wrath from South Africa to the U.K., the Thai Special Police acted to remove the offending object from the kingdom's bookshelves. The move followed a request from Anat Saeng-ari, president of the Muslim Youth Association of Thailand, who submitted a letter to the Police Department calling for action against the book; Saeng-ari claimed that the book might complicate Thai relations with other countries. This was probably shorthand for Islamic republics like Iran and Malaysia as well as the princely satrapies of the Persian Gulf. Thai relations with those countries were particularly sensitive for several reasons: Thai dependence upon imported oil from the Gulf; government concern for the safety of the large population of Thai migrant workers in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the region; and the government's desire to head off any potential sub rosa foreign aid to dissident Islamic groups in the restive far south. A spokesman for the Special Branch said that the book was unsuitable for sale since it could cause national disunity and justified the seizure by invoking Article 42. As was the case with the flap over the *Bangkok 30* cover, aberrant decoding on the part of a traditional or conservative polity resulted in a crackdown on the source of that polity's discomfort ("Police Seize 'Verses' from bookstores," 1989).

Besides the Buddhist and Muslim communities, there are a handful of other faiths in Thailand, including small groups of Hindus (mostly concentrated in the capital) and Christians, as well as nomadic practitioners of shamanic traditions in the tribal highlands. However, these groups are numerically tiny and their religious affiliations do not in themselves constitute a threat to Thailand's integrity.

The Enigma of Contemporary Thai Nationhood

The role of the “nation” in the three-part identity schema is perhaps the subtlest and most difficult to articulate. The nation in the context of modern Thailand is not necessarily the abstract political community posited by Western theorists, where the rights and responsibilities of the national citizen supplant those of the political subject. Rather, the nation is the collectivity of those born as Thais, united by the “Pillars” and the sense of *kwamphenthai*. As a result, the definition of “nation” in its Thai context is simultaneously vague and tautological: The Thai nation is made up of Thais, and those Thais are who they are because of the prevailing sense of “Thai-ness.” King Vajiravudh’s formulation of Thai nationalism, to which Professor Theeravanit referred previously, relied on a definition of nation which did not exist prior to his reign.

To aid in that comprehension [of nationality] he coined a word, heretofore lacking in Thai, for nation. The word was *chat*, from the Sanskrit *jati*. The word *chat* had desirable connotations of common ancestry, common origin. It was easy to extend the meaning to ‘nation,’ used in the sense of ‘race’ in terms such as ‘Aryan race’ or ‘French race.’ In the King’s usage the word played an important role in fostering an idea by giving that idea a name. Siam was no longer just a country [*prathet thai* or *muang thai*] with a Thai population [*chao thai* or *phonlamuang thai*], it was now also a nation [*chat thai*] with its own national identity (Vella, 1978, p. 177).

That nation encompassed a people who had a variety of regional identities and origins traces of which persist to this day.

People inhabiting Thailand today share rich ethnic diversity--mainly Thai, Mon, Khmer, Laotian, Chinese, Malay, Persian, and Indian stock--with the result that there is no typically Thai physiognomy or physique. There are petite Thais, statuesque Thais, round-faced Thais, dark-skinned Thais, and light-skinned Thais (*Thailand Travel Guide*, 1991, p.5).

This somewhat glib formulation echoes conclusions reached by Keyes (1989). Ethnicity is not considered to constitute a major stumbling block to identity formation in contemporary Thailand. Even though the country’s name connotes an ethnic particularism (Dhiravegin, 1985), there seemed to be little evidence of serious regional movements tending towards secession as is the case in Burma or Sri Lanka, nor have the Thai ruling

elites resorted to any discriminatory campaigns designed to pit “majority” against minority groups. The ideological structure of *kwamphenthai* seems less like a citadel and more like a *sala*, an open-sided structure found in many *wats* which serves as dining room, sun shelter, and temporary housing for itinerant pilgrims.

Regionalism in Northeast Thailand

The one area which best illustrates the limitations of traditional notions of Thailand’s ethnic homogeneity is the northeast third of the kingdom, known variously as Isaan, Isan, Esarn, or E-san. This region has long been the poorest and least developed part of Thailand. Cursed with sandy, barren soil with a high degree of salinity, only one growing season per year, deforestation and frequent droughts, Isaan has also suffered from long-standing policies of benign or malign institutional neglect as well as from a certain amount of cultural disdain on the part of the Thais of the central plains. *Khon isaan*, as northeasterners collectively refer to themselves, are culturally and linguistically distinct from the rest of the kingdom: their dialect, though similar to “standard” Thai (that is, the dominant dialect spoken in Bangkok and the central plains region) is closer in pronunciation to Lao, their cuisine is based upon glutinous or sticky rice (*khao niao*) as opposed to the “beautiful rice” (*khao suay*) grown in central Thailand, and *khon isaan* have historically developed their own cultural forms in the fields of music and dress.

Furthermore, central administrative control was imposed by the Thai government in a manner as overweening as it was decisive: first power was stripped from the local feudal aristocracy, then a millenarian revolt by local peasants in the thrall of a charismatic ascetic known as Ong Man was ruthlessly suppressed by the Bangkok authorities (Ishii, 1986). Also, until the advent of direct U.S. military involvement in Indochina, which resulted in the construction of numerous highways connecting American airbases in Khorat, Udon Thani, and Nakhon Phatom, the region was geographically isolated from the rest of the

country as well as culturally (Bamrungsuk, 1988; Charoensin-o-larn, 1988; Kerdphol, 1986; Keyes, 1989).

There are similarities uniting *khon isaan* with the rest of the kingdom, however. Like the Thais of the north as well as the central plains, northeasterners are Theravada Buddhists, and one of the paradoxical results of the northeast's chronic poverty has been to spur an exodus of hundreds of thousands of the region's denizens to Bangkok and other large cities throughout the country to find work, resulting in a wider geographic diffusion of Isaan culture and further integrating the northeast into Thai culture (Ekachai, 1990).

The region has lagged behind the rest of Thailand in the political as well as the social sense, and horizontal attachments have not yet been completely subsumed by the vertical attachments presupposed by nationalist theory. One Thailand specialist has noted that regional primordial affiliations persist despite a series of development and integration campaigns originating from Bangkok:

Changes in social differentiation in rural northeastern society since the 1950s have not been as great as those found in much of central Thailand or in parts of the north. Northeastern villagers still tend to see themselves as united both as villagers [*chao ban*] and as Lao with reference to the central Thai government and its locally appointed officials, whom they feel have done little to alleviate the poverty of the region (Keyes, p. 167).

As has been the case in the south, this combination of developmental backwardness and nascent regionalism has resulted in a variety of security threats in the northeast. The northeast was fertile ground for the CPT during the 1970s and early 1980s, and until the recent regional rapprochement between erstwhile enemies the Thai government viewed with alarm the possibility of armed conflict in Isaan, supported by unfriendly socialist states to the east. Therefore, both civilian and military agencies in the Thai government have attempted to use development projects as a means of short-circuiting potential insurgencies by attacking contributory factors on a pre-emptive basis (Buntrigswat, 1982; Girling, 1981; Kerdphol, 1986; Morell, 1982).

One such developmental intervention was the *Isaan Sii-Kiao* or “Green Isaan” project, which was initiated by then-Royal Thai Army Commander Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh at the king’s behest in March of 1987. During an interview with Col. Sommart Jantanop at the Internal Security Operations Command Building, a promotional videotape for the project was shown; though the audio portion of the tape was in Thai, the footage of emaciated farmers gloomily running sandy, barren soil through their fingers and staring expectantly at relentlessly dry skies needed little narration. These scenes of drought’s devastation were followed by stirring footage of RTA trucks delivering water to grateful villagers, stalwart troops digging wells, operating medical clinics, and delivering emergency food supplies.

Isaan Sii-Kiao was at first merely a short-term disaster response which sought to alleviate acute water shortages stemming from even more severe droughts than usual. However, the campaign’s scope soon expanded to encompass long-term development projects to lift the region from its slough of chronic economic despond. These projects included aquaculture promotion, a public relations campaign for natural resource conservation, rural village cooperatives as development tools, raising snails in baskets, tourism promotion training for local officials, animal husbandry training, and dozens of other projects aimed at broadening the economic base in Isaan (“Funding for University Projects, 1988, pp. 1-2).

Awareness of *Isaan Sii-Kiao* benefited from royal as well as corporate patronage. The king’s involvement in the project facilitated extensive media coverage. According to Boonlert Supadhiloke, Director of the Office of the National Public Communication Board, the privately-owned Thai press had been very supportive of the project and had consistently offered prominent coverage of the campaign. In addition to coverage in the Thai press, the project was the subject of a fund-raising concert in Bangkok where “popular Thai entertainers from the past and present donated their time and energies to make the televised

concert and accompanying telethon a great success” (“Funding for University Projects,” 1988, p.2). Another gala fund-raiser, a fabulous televised charity dinner, featured none other than Miss Universe Porntip Narkhirunkanok (“Miss Universe Lends Support to the GREEN ISAN Project,” 1988, p. 4). The project also attracted major corporate backing from the Thai Military Bank (“The Bank For All People”), the Siam Commercial Bank, Boon Rawd Breweries, and CALTEX (Thailand). Sponsoring the project not only provided corporate patrons with an invaluable public relations opportunity but also gave those patrons the opportunity to acquire merit by supporting a royal charity (“Private Business Committee,” 1988).

The project clearly increased the army’s political and social capital. By tackling such a daunting task with competence and élan, the army, and in particular its Commander General Chaovalit, was able to communicate its continued indispensability to the nation’s development and security. So versatile a body was the army that it could near-effortlessly transform itself from the vigilant sentinel holding back the communist horde to the beneficent bringer of *mae nam*, “mother water”, a semiotically powerful image in Thailand. Let the politicians and dilettantes in Bangkok dither and temporize while Isaan withered under cloudless skies--the military would selflessly contribute its manpower and resources to make the northeastern desert bloom. The military, then, did not need a communist threat to be relevant to the nation’s security, since trouble could come from the skies as easily as it could from across a border. Since *Isaan Sii-Kiao* was a royally-initiated project and not the product of any particular government agency, the RTA’s participation could also be viewed as demonstrating a disinterested altruism rather than venal opportunism. That General Chaovalit had been contemplating the formation of a new political party (the New Aspiration Party) and had been looking to the northeast as a potential locus of support for his party was no doubt mostly coincidence (Dhiravegin, 1992).

Key economic players have entered into a strategic alliance with the military by underwriting the Green Isaan project. Isaan's "greening" could refer not only to its reforestation (usually with eucalyptus, which is generally useless for anything other than wind breaking and paper pulp) but also to its subordination to a military-directed development campaign. Altruistic though its motives may be, the project actually perpetuates the center's paternalism in relation to the periphery--in this case, the capital is supporting Isaan from the outside even as it attempts to coat the project with the veneer of self-help.

In spite of climatologic, political, and economic challenges, though, Isaan regionalism should not be conflated with separatism. Cultural and linguistic proximity to Laos has not translated into a movement aimed at redrawing of the Thai map. No armed challenges to the administrative or territorial integrity of the state are to be found in the region either. Provinces which were once hotbeds of communist guerrilla activity like Loei and Nong Khai are now completely open to tourists. River traffic between Thailand and Laos is steady, with ferry and cargo boats regularly shuttling back and forth. There was and is no indication that feelings of cultural difference between the center and the northeast are exerting centrifugal forces upon the Thai fabric.

Not only is Isaan becoming less the perennially poor relation of the more prosperous central region and more an integral player in the development of the kingdom, Isaan's cultural distinctiveness is slowly being co-opted and transformed into a component of a new, diversified Thai identity. For example, in an interesting case of national recuperation of archaeology in the name of tourism and cultural heritage preservation, the Thai tourist industry is actively trying to promote the northeast's Khmer ruins in order to bolster the regional economy. The ruins at Phimai, which originally lay on the road from Angkor Wat, feature dozens of carvings and a host of statues in classic Khmer style which bear little resemblance to the Thai ruins elsewhere in the country. It scarcely matters that

these ruins, at Phimai as well as at Phanomrung near Buriram, were constructed by the Khmer empire which once ruled Thailand--their presence within the nation's current borders makes them as much a part of the nation's identity as the "Thai" ruins at Sukhothai and Ayutthaya. Furthermore, evidence of a fallen imperial power within the healthy body of the former tributary state might also serve as a psychological buttressing of the contemporary national-territorial entity. Also, as noted above these ruins also serve to attract tourists and archaeological scholars alike, and as is the case from Machu Pichu to Tikal and from Athens to Cairo, antiquity is an invaluable commodity in the international tourism industry.

Economic and Social Challenges to National Identity

Perhaps the most significant obstacle to national integration in Thailand is not religious, linguistic, or ethnic at all, but rather the fast-widening gaps opening between rich and poor and between urban and rural Thais, which has been accompanied by a split between "modern" and "traditional" attitudes. This process is hardly unique to Thailand, of course; every economic system which has shifted from an agricultural base to an industrial- and service-based one has contributed to a concomitant change in the social fabric. Life is no longer organized according to pastoral seasonal rhythms but rather becomes synchronized with urban and industrial routines. Though Thailand's population is still overwhelmingly rural (the 1993 United Nations *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific*, p. 439, puts Thailand's rural population at 44,325,000 versus 10,207,000 city dwellers), as industry supplants agriculture within the nation's economy this balance is sure to change.

That demographic shift in turn is bound to exacerbate social differences, differences which the media is more likely to accentuate rather than alleviate. According to Public Relations Department official Boonlert Supadhiloke, the possibility of mass media being used to bridge urban-rural cleavage was deemed possible but unlikely:

Bangkok's centrality has led to an information monopoly, rural people are better informed about events in Bangkok than Bangkokians are about the countryside. At the same time, Bangkokians are receiving more information from the provinces, so there has been a positive trend in recent years (Supadhiloke, personal communication, August 1989).

Chulalongkorn professor Swanit Yamaphai was less optimistic and cited the centralized character of the Thai radio and television system as one serious impediment to using that system to increase public awareness of national issues.

Most of the programming is urban oriented, and very few of the programs are locally produced. Of course, there are some stations that use dialects in their broadcasting, but the contents are derived from what they receive from the central stations. Only the language is different. They use northern dialect, northeastern, and southern dialect. Most programs are in standard Thai, but some entertainment programs are in dialects. The programs from the Public Relations Department are designed for the whole country, so they force every station to carry those programs at the same time, especially the news programs (Yamaphai, personal communication, August 1989).

Media expansion into the yet-untapped hinterlands would not only fail to guarantee that programming would become more edifying, lifting all boats in a rising tide of expanded public consciousness, it would also fail to reverse Thai media's unidirectionality. As a tool of public communication and a means of decreasing social distance, mass media are really only as effective as their feedback capabilities. Unfortunately, the hierarchic, reflexively authoritarian nature of the Thai bureaucracy is replicated in the performance of the country's mass media. According to Thammasat University professor of mass communication Somkuan Kaviya,

One of the biggest problems with Thai media is that they don't care about feedback, or feedback mechanisms. All the media do is send out information, and that's all. No feedback. Of course, some media people try, for their commercial purposes, to bring members of the audience into their studio, to allow letter writing from the audience, but only for commercial purposes, not really for the feedback and interaction between the media and the audience, not really for its own sake. One of the weak points of mass media in Thailand, and one of the weak points of Thai government public relations in general, is that they don't care too much about feedback. This is second rate. So, public relations most of the time becomes propaganda, one-way communication (Kaviya, personal communication, August 1989).

Chulalongkorn professor Darunee Hirulrak disagreed with Kaviya's assessment of Thai media's feedback capabilities, though :

One-way communication is for the communist world, we are in Thailand, we have two-way communication, and it's much better than before. In third world countries, the government tries to use the media for public relations, not propaganda though. It happens in every country: media are used for public relations all the time. The choice is limited, sure, but our country is much better [in this regard] than some other Asian countries, like India or the Philippines. Our people get more and more information, even if it's from the government, it's better than getting nothing. People have the chance to make comment on the government, what's good and bad...Some programs on radio and TV will broadcast complaints about street repairs, or garbage collection, and this will pressure the local administrator to fix the problem (Hirulrak, personal communication, July 1989).

Conspicuously absent from Prof. Hirulrak's analysis, though, is an acknowledgment that public-affairs programs which broadcast reports of government inaction or malfeasance such as deferred street maintenance or delays in garbage collection will only benefit those who have both the means of making such complaints known as well as the social influence to make such complaints meaningful. Villagers dislocated by logging companies or resort developers in the provinces lack the means of attracting media attention, nor are they socially powerful enough to attach any sanctions to their complaints.

When asked if the accelerated pace of economic development would increase the penetration of mass media into the provinces, Prof. Yamaphai agreed that there would be more media content available, but was quick to point out that more was not necessarily better:

[There will be] more newspapers, more radio, more TV, but they are going to support business, they won't be enriching the minds of the people. The government doesn't have any policy to deal with this, just on paper, they don't do anything (Yamaphai, personal communication, August 1989).

It is perhaps this impulse, the mad rush to capitalize on Thailand's booming economy, which may play the largest role in muddying the waters of Thai identity, and it may also play a central role in deepening social divisions between classes which even *lak Thai* may be hard-pressed to bridge. Allegiance to the three pillars will no doubt continued

to be paid, but the formula will likely become less and less compelling. Some Thai communication scholars see the mass media as one of the culprits in this often disorienting process, not as a means of smoothing the transition from an agriculturally-based economy to an industrial, urbanized one. One subject, when asked about the media's role as a buffer against social dislocation caused by modernization decried the media's role in that process.

I'm not sure whether the mass media helps the transition or not, it may in fact be counterproductive. If you look at the content of the newspaper, or of radio and TV programming, the content is mostly entertainment, not modernization- or development-oriented. And if they do have some modernization- or development-oriented content or programming, it won't reach the poorest sectors of the population, but rather those who already have access to media and are already becoming more affluent. So the media will in fact widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Besides, mass media in Thailand are operated in a capitalistic fashion. The majority of the newspapers' income derives from advertising...The purpose of advertising is to reach those who can buy, and the one who can buy is the one in the city who is better off. Besides, I believe that advertisement in the mass media make people consume more...The ads in the newspapers don't tell people how to make money, but how to spend it (Cheyprathub, personal communication, August 1989).

Professor Yamaphai echoed this sentiment. Like his colleague cited above, Yamaphai worried that the critical faculties and self-preservation instincts of the more impressionable and less educated peasantry upcountry would be overwhelmed by the tide of seductive programming streaming out of Bangkok.

They want to own, and they want to buy, and that's very bad. They see those things as more important than food, things that are necessary for their health; basic education for their kids. They want to have refrigerators, electric kettles... There are too many advertisements. I don't think it causes too much frustration, though, it just encourages them to buy. Even people in Bangkok want to buy cars, Adidas shoes, 1000 *baht* for a pair of shoes made in Thailand! Most of the people in Thailand are very bad consumers, because there are too many advertisements, they go to McDonald's and Pizza Hut... (Yamaphai, personal communication, August 1989).

In one sense, the future of the pillars as central unifying institutions seems secure-- there are certainly no political forces in Thailand agitating for an end to the monarchy, or calling for the abolition of Buddhism, or actively promoting the nation's destruction.

However, the effectiveness of the pillars as a unifying ideology may diminish over time for a variety of reasons.

First, the very vagueness which has made the pillars such a convenient articulating principle or tool for the Thai ruling elite will become a liability as the population grows more educated, cosmopolitan, and “modern” in its outlook. This evolution, which may be the result of the very development process which the traditional Thai elite has promoted as its own brainchild, may in fact lead to the negation of Thai cultural patterns which reinforce the ideational power of *lak Thai*. In other words, the wholesale modernization of the country, including the spread of higher education and increased access to information across the social spectrum which has characterized the development process may in turn engender a sophistication and refinement of political attitudes which may not be amenable to simplistic appeals to “Nation, Religion, and King.” *Grengklua* and reflexive obedience will give way to a more skeptical attitude and a decreased respect for the benevolent or despotic paternalism and arbitrariness of the Thai state in its civilian and military guises.

Second, this cosmopolitanism is part of a broader process of social pluralization and evolution which has accompanied Thailand’s modernization and integration into the capitalist system. Though this process is by no means complete and has proceeded unevenly across the country, nevertheless Thai society will be less amenable to statist responses or appeals to ideological conformity as it grows more complex and differentiated and rival interest groups and elites begin to make their own demands upon the system. As Samudavanija (1989b) noted in his discussion of the future of Thai identity and the state, an increasingly emboldened civil society will over time prove resistant to attempts by the traditional elites to assert a vision of Thai identity that does little more than repeat the mantra of “Nation-Religion-King.”

Chulalongkorn journalism professor Satien Cheyprathub bluntly dismissed the utility of the pillars as the foundation of a national ethos:

Nation, king, and religion is a cliché, not an ideology, and the people who use that expression don't really understand it. The word nation is very confusing, and they don't know the true meaning of the word. They confuse it with state, government, and other terms, so they don't know what it is (Cheyprathub, personal communication, August 1989).

Professor Theerawanit was similarly disinclined to attach to much importance to *lak Thai* where modern Thailand was concerned, at least among members of the Thai intelligentsia (Theerawanit, personal communication, July 1989).

Finally, the absence of a meaningful threat to traditional Thai notions of identity and to the institutional embodiments of that identity reduces the usefulness of appeals to defend those institutions. When the country was menaced by a roiling insurgency within as well as by hostile communist governments without, the state could rely upon appeals to *lak Thai* as a means of limiting the acceptable boundaries of political discourse and short-circuiting dissent as well as a way to negatively define opponents of the Thai state as “un-Thai” (Girling, 1981; Samudavanija, 1989a). Since the communist insurgency in Thailand has been a lost cause since the mid-1980s, and since the external communist threat has diminished year by year to the point where the only communist states left are either pariah states like Cuba and North Korea or hybrid systems like Vietnam and China (where official lip service paid to the shibboleths of socialism is matched by increasingly enthusiastic adoption of market reforms), *lak Thai* is losing its appeal as a means of rallying the populace against mortal threats to the nation. It is difficult to maintain a bunker mentality when there is so much money to be made.

Government Media Policies in Thailand and National Integration Issues

Identity in Thailand, then, is an amorphous and vexatious prospect at best. Even more nebulous, though, are government media policies regarding national identity and integration issues. What policies that do exist are a tangle of what the authors of the 1985

UNESCO study of the Thai communications system refer to euphemistically as somewhat scattered, ill-defined regulations, laws, constitutional provisions, and *ad hoc* policy recommendations (UNESCO, 1985). The piecemeal or incremental development of the mass media in Thailand, coupled with the myriad agencies and regulatory bodies responsible for media operation and performance, have hindered the development of a coherent, development-oriented mass communication policy. The endless proliferation of bureaucratic sub-committees, working bodies, and advisory councils, all of which are duty-bound to guard their respective territories against inter-agency encroachment, has also served to forestall the formulation and implementation of a coherent mass communication policy. The infrastructure of mass communications facilities also militates against effective use of media for meaningful national integration, particularly where center-periphery relations are concerned.

Media Policies and the Thai Press

Newspapers and magazines are privately owned and operated in Thailand and therefore are not under any compulsion to promote government policies with regards to national identity promotion or political integration (Chirasopone, 1989). As Professor Tenasoporn pointed out previously in the discussion of the role of the royal family in the construction of Thai identity, the private media voluntarily promote royal activities without any specific mandate to do so.

Getting the press to support government policies in general can be more problematic, though. According to Boonlert Supadhiloke,

Electronic media are obligated to cooperate with government when the need arises. Newspapers cooperate as well, but sometimes it is difficult to get this cooperation, since the newspapers don't have to support the government. For example, the newspapers generally cooperate when the Royal Family is concerned. Frequently, though, business and political pressures interfere, and the relationship between private and government media is often competitive (Supadhiloke, personal communication, August 1989).

Most of the government policies pertaining to national and cultural institutions are ostensibly designed to set limits on coverage of a few sensitive issues, but these regulations have been liberally interpreted in the past, depending on the prevailing political climate. This regulatory flexibility has proven useful to censorship-minded tendencies within the Thai government for reasons that should be obvious. In 1989, the press was still subject to censorship, closure and similar sanctions under the provisions of the Press Law of 1941 and the even more heavy-handed National Administrative Reform Council Declarations 42 and 43 passed in the aftermath of the October 6, 1976 coup. In addition to mandating all newspapers published in the kingdom be owned by Thais and be licensed by the government, these regulations empowered the government, through the office of the Director-General of the Police Department, to take any and all necessary steps against newspapers or their personnel which are deemed to have committed offenses contrary to public order, good morals and national security (Bijayendryodhin, Cusripituch, & Kongpricha, 1985; Sooksomchitra, 1985).

Articles 42 and 43 expressly forbade the publication of material promoting communism, or material which defames or causes harm to the reputation of the Thai government, or “any faulty matters or pictures or newspaper headlines ... which tend to panic, worry, or frighten the people ... or prophecies concerning the fate of the nation which might upset the people...” Lewd pictures, acts of *lese majeste*, and “any matters using coarse language tending to lower national morals or culture” are also prohibited under these acts (Sooksomchitra, 1985, p. 432). The orders also proscribed “statements or pictures which are offensive to Thailand or the nation, or statements which destroy confidence foreigners have in Thailand, the government of Thailand, or Thai people in general” (Bijayendryodhin, Cusripituch, & Kongpricha, 1985, p. 82; Sooksomchitra, 1985). Even in the relatively benign political atmosphere of the late 1980s, with the communist threat to the nation’s pillars disintegrating like the transmission of an East

German Trabant, years of repression had set very clear limits on what the press could cover safely.

These constraints notwithstanding, the Thai print media have historically enjoyed the highest degree of operational freedom of any press system in area. Of course, like any press system, the Thai private media must operate under a variety of constraints not related to state-imposed ones, such as funding, sponsorship and advertising pressures, all of which could affect their usefulness as vehicles for identity promotion. Within the Thai political system, newspapers are often “paper pit bulls” with which rival political factions attack one another. Boonlert Supadhiloke observed that the absence of direct government control did not ipso facto render the Thai press free from various forms coercion:

The political parties own or control newspapers, and their rivalries extend to the pages of the papers themselves and these conflicts are often exacerbated by this activity. Newspapers are controlled by politicians and business interests. Many newspapers were set up specifically to promote certain business and political interests. One problem is that many times the media focuses on individuals and attacks individuals rather than concentrating on the issues. The newspapers don't focus too much on motivating the people unless the issues have great repercussions. Sensitive issues include foreign relations, which have to be reported very cautiously. Since the Thai government is trying to improve relations with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, news relating to Thai relations with those countries is either very circumspect or non-existent. Also, domestic policy issues are very sensitive, such as situations affecting political parties, corruption and bribery scandals. Newspapers have been very helpful in combating corruption in Thailand. The newspapers expose corruption, but they must be very cautious. They too often focus on personal affairs and individuals, and Thailand has very weak libel laws. Reporting on military-civilian rivalry is very sensitive, but simply reprinting military press releases is not. News relating to the monarchy, religion, and national issues such as Thailand's reputation abroad are very sensitive and have to be reported very cautiously. Security issues are also very sensitive (Supadhiloke, personal communication, August 1989).

Other, more mundane limitations on the power of the print media in Thailand include the relatively high cost of distribution from the capital, where the overwhelming majority of newspapers and magazines are published, to the provinces, which results in higher prices for these products. In the larger provincial towns like Chiang Mai and Ubon

Ratchathani, this does not affect distribution too much, at least based upon an informal survey of the wide variety of newspapers and magazines available at newsstands in those cities. Same-day editions of the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation* were available in Chiang Mai and Ubon Ratchathani, though this was not always the case in border towns such as Mae Sot and Nong Khai. Farther afield, though, the choice of print matter contracted dramatically. Several interview subjects also pointed out that even the cheapest daily newspapers were prohibitively expensive for rural dwellers, which limited their appeal.

Broadcasting Policies: Radio and Television

Unlike newspapers and magazines, radio and television stations theoretically have a more explicit mandate to act in the national interest since they are under administrative control and are owned outright by the state (which obviously presents a variety of problems where the definition of national interests is concerned). Radio and television stations under the direct control of the Government Public Relations Department (PRD), which was originally known as the Publicity Division under the control of the Thai cabinet until 1952, when it acquired its present name. Radio and TV stations under the administrative control of the PRD are charged with, among other things:

Publicizing the policies, projects, and achievements of the government, national institutes, and state enterprises through publications, broadcasting and other media... Disseminating and furthering the democratic form of government with the King as Head of State and also giving active contribution [*sic*] to the maintenance of national security and unity ... Presenting news about Thailand to the world at large through the various media of information including printing so as to create a favorable image of the country...(and) Providing non-formal education through radio and television broadcasting (Public Relations Department., 1989, pp. 88-90).

In addition, the PRD broadcasts material intended to enrich and preserve the kingdom's aesthetic heritage:

Cultural programs are also presented with the aim of preserving and promoting national culture and introducing local culture to audiences nationwide [Note: The distinction between "national" and "local" culture is never made clear in this document.]. The programs are expected to help create better understanding

among the people, living in different areas (Public Relations Department, 1989, p. 91)

Additional programming is dedicated to Buddhist holy day broadcasts, and sermons and lectures presented on Sundays (PRD, 1989).

Radio and television are theoretically controlled by the provisions of the Radio and Television Broadcasting Act of 1955 and the Radio and Television Broadcasting Regulation of 1975. The 1955 broadcasting act provided for the mandatory licensing of all radio and television stations; it also empowered the government to confiscate or inhibit the use of movement of radio and television receivers during periods of national crisis (Bijayendryodhin, Cusripituch, & Kongpricha, 1985; Sooksomchitra, 1985). While the government still enjoys this confiscatory power, the near-impossibility of confiscating millions of radio and television sets renders this power somewhat moot. It is much easier to simply censor communication at the source through direct control of radio and television stations.

The 1975 regulation established the Broadcasting Directing Board and the Radio and Television Executive Committee, which technically controls, advises and supervises the operation of every radio and television station in the country. The Executive Committee is composed of 17 representatives from 14 government agencies (*World Radio TV Handbook*, 1991). The Broadcasting Directing Board is empowered to: establish operational conditions and procedures, approve the establishment or relocation of broadcasting stations, consider criteria for commercial and service advertisements, and to formulate and implement broadcasting schedules. The Board emphatically enjoins its charges to “promote culture and education, national unity, and political understanding” (Bijayendryodhin, Cusripituch, & Kongpricha, 1985).

However, the possibility of a single regulatory body exerting such influence upon the Thai broadcasting system as it is currently organized is remote at best. Counter-

pressures from advertisers, military programmers who may have their own ideas about what constitutes proper programming and broadcasting operations, and the Board's remoteness from the daily operations of most outlets have prevented the 1975 Broadcasting Act from fulfilling its original purpose. Advertising pressures in particular constrain the operations of government-owned media outlets.

Boonlert Supadhiloke warned against the assumption that government ownership of radio and television stations automatically equaled complete hegemony over the activities of those stations:

Businessmen cannot own radio or television stations directly, but they have indirect control by investing money in individual stations. Most radio stations are controlled by advertising revenues. Ironically, businessmen control daily radio station operations more directly than the government does. Sometimes I think the government is powerless to control the business interests (Supadhiloke, personal communication, August 1989).

Increased business control over daily operations of radio and television stations, even in the absence of private ownership of those stations, is probably inevitable-- considering that advertising expenditures in Thailand increased by 128% from 1982 to 1987 (and will no doubt continue to rise along with the country's economic growth rate), with over two-thirds of that expenditure directed at radio and television, the power of the purse will eventually be the tail that wags the dog (Euromonitor, 1990, pp. 406-07).

Radio stations are funded either by government subsidy, advertising revenues, or a combination of the two. Some stations are nearly completely dependent upon advertising revenue, and as a result are more vulnerable to the pressures of commercial sponsors (see above); furthermore, according to Padmadin (1984) and a number of interview subjects, the government prefers to allow radio and television stations which accept advertising revenues to derive as much of their necessary funding as possible from advertising. This has resulted in chronic budgetary shortfalls for many broadcasting outlets.

The organization of radio and television stations also works against any centralized direction of programming except in cases where the military decides that only one set of stations (its own) needs to be on the air (i.e., during coups). For instance, radio stations are controlled not only by the Public Relations Department but also by various universities, various military branches, and a host of government ministries (Fisheries, Education, etc.) (*World Radio TV Handbook*, 1991).

Riggs (1966, p. 198) briefly discussed the Thai radio and television networks as subsystems of the larger bureaucratic polity; that is, the electronic mass media were best understood as arms of the government. However, they were not part of a monolithic, centralized state apparatus, as is the case in totalitarian communist states, nor were they agents for organized public interests. Rather, they operated with a great deal of substantive operational autonomy (this could be generalized to most Thai bureaucracies, which are under ultimate control of the center but can and do act according to their own factional interests). Therefore, it is not really correct to refer to radio stations as being government-controlled in any totalizing or monolithic sense.

Government information activities, Riggs concluded, were motivated by three factors: a) a desire to impart information; b) public relations; c) financial gain. Advertising sales would appear to be a convenient means for government agencies and the military to generate revenue outside the normal budget allocation process. This factor, coupled with the government's and the military's instinctive desire to hold the commanding heights of the means of information production, goes far in explaining the Thai government's reluctance to privatize radio and television stations. The table on the following page gives some idea of how fragmented radio station control is in Thailand.

Table 1

Radio station administration in Thailand by Responsible Agency

Responsible agency	% of stations controlled
Royal Thai Army	40.7
Public Relations Dept.	27.4
Royal Thai Air Force	9.7
Royal Thai Navy	5.3
Police Department	3.5
Other Government Agencies	13.4

Note: Data adapted from *Mass Communication in Thailand: An Overview* (p. 29) by S. Padmadin, 1984, Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center.

At any one time, a certain percentage of each agency's complement of radio stations may be wholly controlled by that agency, sub-contracted to a private company, and may or may not receive income derived from advertising revenues. Moreover, operational arrangements frequently change due to suspended or expired contracts, funding or logistical difficulties, or political exigencies (Padmadin, 1984).

The imbalance between Bangkok seen in various other development indicators such as number of telephones, access to magazines and newspapers, access to health care, and per capita income (London, 1980; United Nations, 1993) is replicated in the number of radio stations servicing the metropolitan Bangkok area. Though the capital is home to only about ten percent of the kingdom's population, like many other Third World primate cities (e.g., Rangoon, Cairo, Lagos, Mexico City) it holds the lion's share of media resources such as radio stations. As Table 2 shows, a disproportionate number of stations, nearly 30% of the national total, are located in Bangkok. It should be noted that the data cited in

the table were derived from a study which was nearly five years old by the time the initial field work for this project was conducted, the situation may have improved or deteriorated since then.

Table 2

Number of Radio Stations, by Region:

Region	AM	FM	Total
Bangkok	42	36	78
Central Reg.	33	8	41
North	28	11	39
Northeast	43	15	58
South	37	16	53
Total:	183	86	269

Note: Adapted from *Communication Policies in Thailand* (p. 118) by Bijayendryodhin, S., Cusripituch, S., and Kongpricha, T., 1985, Bangkok: Thailand National Commission for UNESCO.

This high level of radio station concentration has, not surprisingly, resulted in yet another bottleneck in the capital: wavelength congestion. So many stations compete for frequency space that broadcast quality inevitably suffers. Furthermore, the high density of radio stations has exacerbated Bangkok's already dire energy consumption dilemma (Padmadin, 1984). The problem in Bangkok would appear to be too much information rather than too little.

As for the number of radio receivers, the 1990 edition of Euromonitor's *International Marketing Data and Statistics* gives a figure of 9.3 million receivers for 1986, representing an increase of 63.2% from 1977, when there were 5.7 million radio receivers

nationwide (Euromonitor, 1990, p. 418). Given the continued rapid growth of the Thai economy cited earlier it is not unreasonable to assume that this number has grown apace.

Even though Bangkok's radio system is far more extensive than that throughout the rest of the country, the Thai radio infrastructure is still physically extensive enough to serve the purpose of a centrally-directed national integration campaign or any other mass communicated information campaign if such campaigns were actually carried out. However, as both interview subjects and other sources pointed out, current patterns of radio programming in Thailand suggest that such campaigns are not a regular feature of the Thai radio system. The nature of radio programming is heavily skewed towards entertainment-oriented programming rather than "serious" content, which is another factor rendering Thai mass media an unsatisfactory means of national integration. Professor Yamaphai dismissed most radio programming as insubstantial, claiming that over 90% of it was entertainment-oriented, though this was probably an exaggeration (Yamaphai, personal communication, August 1989).

Radio Thailand's Regular Service, the national radio service operated by the Public Relations Department, devotes approximately 45% of its air time to news and informational broadcasts, 40% to entertainment, and five percent each to sports, religious programming, and public announcements (Public Relations Department, 1989). Radio Thailand's Regular Service news broadcasts are relayed to every station in the country four times a day.

Table 3 below summarizes radio programming by function as of 1989. It should be pointed out that the source of this table did not provide any rationale or operational definitions for its categories; why some programming was classified as "cultural" and other features listed as "entertainment" or "educational" was not explained.

Table 3

Radio programming by function:

Category	% of programming	# hours/year
Entertainment	13.7	889.6
Cultural	5.4	350.6
Educational	56.1	3,643
Informative	21.9	1,422
Religious	2.9	188.3
Advertisement:	NA	NA
Total	100.0	6,494

Note: Adapted from *World Communications Handbook* (p. 405) by UNESCO, 1989, Paris: UNESCO.

Advertising figures were not available in the source document for this table, but if advertising expenditures in Thailand have increased by 128% from 1982 to 1987 (see above), with nearly 20% of that spent on radio advertising, one can extrapolate the presence of at least some advertising on Thai radio. Also, the source for this table states that in 1986 total annual expenditures for radio advertising in Thailand totaled 1.05 billion *baht*, or 42 million dollars US (UNESCO, 1989, p. 486). Furthermore, other sources cited (Padmadin, 1984; Supadhiloke, 1989) have discussed the importance of advertising revenue in radio station operations.

The situation in the television industry is little better where purposive, serious, “socially responsible” programming is concerned. The “centralized autonomy” which characterizes the organization of the radio industry is replicated within the television system. As of 1989 there were three government agencies which owned or directly controlled the nation’s five television stations: the Public Relations Department, which

controlled Channel 11 in Bangkok as well as a network of local stations elsewhere in the country; the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT), which owned Channel 9 and Channel 3 in Bangkok but had delegated operation of the latter station to its franchisee, the Bangkok Entertainment Company; and the Royal Thai Army, which owned and directly operated Channel 5 but franchised Channel 7 to another private company, the Bangkok Broadcasting and TV Company (*World Radio TV Handbook*, 1991). The Public Relations Department also operated local broadcasting stations and relay networks from regional headquarters in Khon Kaen, Pitsanulok, Surat Thani, Ubon Ratchathani, Lampang, and Hat Yai (Public Relations Department, 1989). All television stations operated a variety of relay stations nationwide to supplement their broadcasting ranges.

Though one source, a long time American resident of Bangkok, said recently that tentative steps are being taken to establish additional privatized television stations using UHF and cable broadcast technologies, this source also said that the overall structure of the Thai TV system had not undergone substantive reorganization or reform since the field work for this study was conducted (Taylor, personal communication, 1995).

Despite the high level of government and military involvement in the television industry, all stations save for the PRD's Channel 11 are partially dependent upon advertising revenues. Channel 11 is almost completely subsidized by the government. However, since it favors educational and cultural programming over entertainment, Channel 11 is considered something of a poor relation to its more commercially-oriented competitors. One subject, Chulalongkorn professor Orawan Pilun-Owad, bluntly summed up the troubles which beset the PRD's television programs: "Channel 11, which mostly broadcasts educational programs is facing a serious problem, because they don't get any advertising and their programs are kind of boring..." (Pilun-Owad, personal communication, July 1989).

According to UNESCO (1989), government funding accounts for approximately 48% of total budgetary requirements, with advertising providing the other 52%. In 1986, advertisers spent over \$104 million on television commercials, nearly two-and-a-half times the amount spent on radio advertising, and that figure has grown steadily since then (Euromonitor, 1990; UNESCO, 1989). In Thailand as elsewhere, the influence of advertisers and sponsors upon television operations is profound and pervasive. PRD Director Boonlert Supadhiloke's observations of advertiser control over radio station operations could just as easily be applied to television (Supadhiloke, personal communication, August 1989).

Television programming by function is summarized in Table 4 below. As was the case with the table summarizing radio station programming, this table does suffer from the same failure to operationally define the categories used. As a rough guide to determining the priorities of the Thai television system it is useful, however.

Table 4

Television programming by function:

Category	% of programming	# hours/year
Entertainment	64.8	2,392.4
Cultural	5.4	199.3
Educational	16.9	623.9
Informative	11.3	417.1
Religious	0.7	25.8
Advertisement:	4.9	180.9
Total	100.0	3839.4

Note: Adapted from *World Communications Handbook* (p. 407) by UNESCO, 1989, Paris: UNESCO.

Foreign Content and Cultural Change

As noted in the table above, Thai television programming emphasizes entertainment-related content even more heavily than does radio. Such programs include interminable game and variety shows, soap operas, Chinese martial-arts shows, cartoon programs from Japan, and dubbed American and European programs. According to the 1989 *World Communications Report*, 80% of all televised fiction programming on Thai TV is imported (UNESCO, 1989). This state of affairs has prompted some Thai intellectuals, including a number of those interviewed for this study, to express grave doubts about the steady erosion of native values among Thai youth due to this flood of foreign programming. This uneasiness, like that expressed by Professor Yamaphai, among others, often took the form of a generalized anxiety about Thai cultural forms like Thai classical music, *lakhon* dancing and *likae* dramas being displaced by the aggressive cultural kudzu of Pepsi, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, *Batman*, Madonna and Michael Jackson, coupled with a virulent consumerism and materialism which could potentially distract the young from the richness of their own culture. Chulalongkorn professor Porama Sitawedin considered much of what passed for Thai television programming to be an enormous waste of time, but at the same time was reluctant advocate any draconian steps to limit the availability of such programming:

I think the influence of the mass media is like this: if the people watch the same type of program, and that program acts like a cultural invasion, then it will be harmful in the long run. But... it is up to the people themselves. As for me, I don't watch Chinese opera, or Chinese films, because I believe that it is nonsense for me, but I also believe that it's up to personal selection. For the people who are uneducated, it can be very harmful if they watch it quite often and if the programmers offer it quite often (Sitawedin, personal communication, August 1989).

Thai Buddhist dissident Sulak Sivaraksa has similarly expressed his dismay over Thailand's whole-hearted embrace of materialism, materialism which has distracted the country from its spiritual tradition:

Today Bangkok is a third-rate Western city. The department stores have become our shrines, and they are constantly filled with people. For the young people, these stores have replaced the Buddhist temples as centers of social life. And the shadow of Bangkok is spreading over the countryside...Development has become a euphemism for greed (Sivaraksa, 1992, pp. 4-5).

For the moment, however, it seems unlikely that the Thai government will take any drastic steps to curb the amount of foreign-produced programming on Thai television or to impose any “cultural tariffs” on exogenous content.

What steps it has taken to limit disruptive cultural imports have been limited to erratic and arbitrary seizures of magazines or newspapers which publish articles which portray key institutions in an unfavorable light (e.g., the *Asian Wall Street Journal's* coverage of dissent within the *Sangha*), books like Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* which are pre-emptively banned to placate restive groups within the country, and pornographic materials which are expressly forbidden by Thai law. Banning these items does not eliminate them, of course, it merely drives up the cost and increases the amount of effort required to procure them. There was no shortage of pornographic material for sale on the streets of Bangkok, for example, with shabbily-packaged videotapes sold openly at the bustling night market on Patpong and ferociously expensive glossy magazines furtively hawked on street corners along bustling Sukhumvit Road. Marked-up copies of *The Satanic Verses* were available at better-stocked bookstores in Bangkok even after the ban, though as intellectual contraband they were sold discreetly from under the counter rather than being stocked openly.

The Parallel Media Network of the Thai Military

The one political force in Thailand which has made extensive use of its mass media resources has been the military, in particular the Army. As noted above, the Army and other branches of the Thai armed forces and police control their own radio and television network; those stations are largely immune to control by civilian authorities. Furthermore, since the Army collects advertising revenue from those stations, as well as franchising fees,

radio and television stations represent a steady source of extra-budgetary revenue (Padmadin, 1984). The Army has sponsored three radio programs and one television program as part of its ongoing public relations campaign. Its radio programs, *Ta Pok Pra Cha Chon* (The Army Meets the People”, produced by the RTA Directorate for Civil Affairs), *Pua Paen Din Thai* (“For the Thai Nation”, produced by the Armed Forces Information Office), and *Sayama Nusti* (named after the title of a patriotic song penned by King Vajiravudh and sponsored by the Internal Security Operations Command’s Civil Affairs Center), are broadcast daily on all military-owned radio stations nationwide. The Army also produces a television program, *Sontana Panha Ban Muang* (“Talks on the Nation’s Problems,” a weekly current affairs program produced by the RTA’s Capital Security Command).

The ostensible purpose of these programs is “to link the Army with the public and to publicize military activities, achievements, views and policies on political, economic, and social issues” (Bunbongkarn, 1987, p. 65). A Chulalongkorn University professor described those programs as a means of promoting patriotism and inculcating a positive attitude towards the military on the part of the Thai public:

[These programs are] psychological warfare, broadcast by the government.. Every morning and evening, to make people love and be loyal to God, king, and country, and the army...They create a sense a patriotism and nationalism. They try to portray soldiers as remaining aloof from politics... (Pilun-Owad, personal communication, July 1989).

Another Chulalongkorn professor echoed this position:

Those programs are broadcast around the country. They are for military security and stability. They want people to listen to the same concepts, they want to lead the people to the goals the military has set for the country. They want to encourage people to be faithful to the country, to help themselves, to live a good life, and so on. They do not have any direct educational value, but indirectly they do. Very few people listen to these programs, though, they just turn them off...These programs aren't propagandistic, they're boring (Yamaphai, personal communication, August 1989).

However, these programs might also be understood as a means of continuous ideological penetration and reinforcement on the part of the military. This process of hegemonic preservation has paradoxically become more crucial, not less, to the military's continuing relevance within the Thai political system. In a more prosaic sense, these programs have often been pressed into service by the army to oppose government policies like the 1984 *baht* devaluation and to attack politicians with whom the military establishment has feuded (Bunbongkarn, 1987). With the continued receding of the immediate threat of communism, the military must continue its ideological offensive to rationalize its participation in the political process. Within the community of Thai communication scholars, that role is by no means secure. Some interview subjects were highly critical of the Army public relations broadcasts. One subject dismissed the programs outright:

I think well-educated people avoid the propaganda broadcasts on the radio, the very obvious military propaganda. Everything that the military has done for broadcasting has been obvious propaganda. My brother used to write the scripts for these programs, and he told me that they're very stupid. I think that the army has very narrow minds concerning this country, and they think they can convert everybody with their propaganda, and I think that it's very stupid (Theerawanit, personal communication, July 1989).

The military has been slow to respond to criticism from the civilian intelligentsia regarding the hortatory and bombastic nature of its programming. One interview subject who had actually attempted to help the military develop and refine its media programming to reflect the increasingly cosmopolitan, sophisticated nature of the Thai audience, told of the brick wall of official unresponsiveness he encountered despite his efforts.

Long ago, when we went to lecture the military and government officials I asked them to conduct a small research investigation on their audience; they did not listen to me, they did not listen to my advice. They are now trying to develop or improve these programs, but it is a slow process, because the main programmers do not understand the difference between public relations, propaganda, and psychological warfare. I always told them that if you try to convince people, if you try to persuade people, if you try to change people, you cannot do that in modern Thailand. You have to motivate people, by giving them news, current affairs... I said that you can motivate people by informing

and occasionally interpreting the news, and they will agree with you, you don't need to try a lot to change them...If necessary, you can talk about the meaning of the news and development of situations, but you should not try to insert your opinions, your ideology, in to your program. This is what happened (Kaviya, personal communication, August 1989).

Criticism of the military's agitprop apparatus has come from other quarters as well. The August 19, 1989 edition of the *Bangkok Post* quoted Armed Forces Information Office director Lt.-Gen. Naruedol Detpradiyuth's response to remarks by Pratchakorn Thai Party leader Samak Sundaravej, who during the course of a lecture at Chulalongkorn University stated that not only had the military perpetuated a vicious circle in Thai politics through its periodic seizure of power, but that its radio programming had grown tiresome. General Naruedol responded somewhat prematurely that "he would like everyone to regard coups as a thing of the past now that unity is required for the country's development" ("Thai coups a thing of the past," 1989, p. 3). As for criticisms directed at military programming, Naruedol replied that

because the radio stations belong to the military it is normal that they should tell the people about the military...But we do not limit the program to propagating only military works. It also widely presents projects that benefit the majority or are for national security...We have tried to improve our program. We take criticism as a good sign. It shows that those making the criticism listen to our program...If Khun Samak wants to present his articles through this program, we shall be glad to oblige on condition that the articles are screened by the Broadcasting directing board, do not impugn any individual and are for the promotion of national security and unity of the people ("Thai coups," 1989, p. 3).

Thai Media Policies and the Tourism Industry

There is one area where private and government media agencies have used media to promote a specific Thai national identity in a somewhat coherent, deliberate fashion, and that is the tourism industry. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the industry to the nation's economy: arrivals reached five million per year by the late 1980s, and the industry constitutes Thailand's largest earner of foreign exchange (Cummins, 1989; UN, 1993). Tourism was one of the engines powering Thailand's rapid economic growth,

though it did distribute its developmental benefits such as infrastructural improvements and job creation unevenly. The government agency responsible for the promotion and maintenance of the tourism is the Tourism Authority of Thailand, or TAT. The TAT produces maps, brochures, and a variety of other marketing literature for international distribution; in addition to its 12 offices within Thailand, the TAT also has branches in the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, Singapore, and in six other countries (*Thailand Travel Guide*, 1991).

The Thai media have extensively participated in promoting the tourist industry, according to a number of interview subjects and documentary sources (e.g., UNESCO's *Communication Policies in Thailand*, 1985). The media's efforts in this sphere did not necessarily garner universal approval--Professor Yamaphai dismissed the use of media to promote tourism as both a waste of time as well as one of the causes of the degeneration of traditional Thai culture. Promotion of tourism had a corrosive rather than conservative effect upon traditional art forms which had been dragooned into the service of the Thai tourist industry:

The TAT promotes building resorts and luring tourists. The Thai art forms they promote are very superficial, they make fools of these traditions for the tourists' entertainment. Have you visited that place in Pathaya, it's supposed to be traditional Thai dance for the tourists? It's not Thai, it's just sort of fake (Yamaphai, personal communication, August 1989)

Tourism and the Commodification of "Official Culture"

Certainly there does exist an element of contrivance and bowdlerization in the presentation of "traditional" cultural forms in Thailand, and to the extent that the media participate in the promotion of the tourist industry they are complicit in that process of commodification. For example, the "traditional" Thai dances witnessed during a visit to an upscale Thai restaurant in Bangkok probably bore little resemblance to its authentic or organic antecedent. No context was supplied to the audience, which seemed to be composed mostly of *farang* tourists with a smattering of Thais: the audience not told what

these dances were called, where they had originally been performed, what the significance of the clawlike finger ornaments worn by the dancers was, whether the dances had any seasonal or ritual significance. For that matter, no mention was made of the region of the country had given birth to this type of performance. It was simply “traditional Thai dance.” It may have been derived from the *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, or it may have had some other source. Though technically impressive, the performance had a stiff, antiseptic quality to it—one got the sense of being in a terrarium.

Compare this “traditional Thai dance” with the performance witnessed one night at Suan Esan, a northeast Thai-style nightclub and cabaret near Chulalongkorn University. Suan Esan specialized in cheap beer, breathtakingly spicy Isaan-style cuisine, and Thai dance performances which were unlike any of the others seen in Thailand. The dining area was arranged so that all of the tables offered a view of the stage, which was festooned with a variety of lights. A troupe of glum-faced young women dressed in modest flared skirts and puffy-sleeved shirts were executing a desultory, shuffling step while waving gloved hands at the audience. The audience appeared to be overwhelmingly male. After a few minutes of this uninspired dancing, the women were joined onstage by a heavily rouged master of ceremonies who mounted the stage with a haughty and mincing step and began to shout what appeared to be a series of choreographic commands to the dancing women. The MC, who was dressed in an aquamarine jumpsuit and sported an impossibly tall pompadour, made his way to stage right and began marching in place while delivering a staccato rap in Thai. The dancers shuffled and waved more energetically but still wore the same taciturn expressions. The men in the crowd, though, were absolutely transfixed.

Suan Esan would never appear on an “official” cultural itinerary as a place where one might see “traditional” Thai dance, and yet the performance would seem to be possessed of a greater degree of authenticity, or at least a higher degree of connection with the audience’s aesthetic, than would the sanitized, decontextualized dance show at the

restaurant. Such manifestations of folk culture are conspicuously absent from the TAT's promotional materials, which lean more towards images of "classical" art forms without acknowledging that such images are distillations of such forms, shortened and shuffled to accommodate the needs of a transient audience with limited time and mobility coupled with a lack of cultural capital upon which to draw which might place those performances in their aesthetic and historical context.

Thai Media and the Advent of the Internal Tourism Industry

Other respondents took a more generous view of the media's role in promoting the tourist trade than those who decried its deleterious effect upon traditional art forms.

Internal tourism, characterized by mostly middle class Thais using increasing reserves of disposable income and leisure time to travel within the country for recreational purposes, has been a product of the country's economic boom and has consequently been the focus of increased media attention. Chulalongkorn journalism Professor Tenasoporn described the mass communication system's role in this process:

I think Thai people in every part of the country have a sense of identity, everyone feels that they are Thai, maybe because of the king; even if your part of the country has a different culture, you're still a Thai; I think the media have been doing a good job in this area, and also in helping the tourist organizations as well. In the last ten years, the tourist organizations have not only been trying to convince foreigners to come to Thailand, and travel, but also to convince Thais to travel to different parts of the country and see what those regions have. The broadcast media, for example, air news of different festivals around the country, like the flower festival in Chiang Mai, and the governor of those provinces will try to get news of the festival on the air.

Regarding the role provincial officials had come to play in promoting tourism in their home provinces, Tenasoporn continued:

The governors' jobs are becoming more and more important. Ten years ago, there wasn't too much about what was happening in the provinces, but now every province has to do its own public relations. Most of the governors are doing PR work, so you see more of them on TV or on the radio, announcing that their province is going to have some festival on some date. It's now a must for every province, or village, to have some festival once a year, a fruits festival, or a handicrafts festival. Now the news broadcasts have a few minutes

for provincial official to make announcements about their provinces (Tenasoporn , personal communication, July 1989).

According to another source, other local festivals which were amenable to local publicity include the Phichit boat races held on the Nan River in northern Thailand, the Narathiwat produce festival in Narathiwat province in the far south, the Yasothon rocket festival, where homemade rockets are traditionally fired into the sky to ensure a fertile harvest, and the Chonburi buffalo races held in October.

National Identity and the Imperatives of Tourism

Tourism requires a nation to “package” itself, to present those aspects of its own identity which will attract a maximum number of visitors both internally as well as from abroad. Such identity promotion on the part of the Thai state and its media auxiliaries is characteristic of the state-tourist industry nexus found in many developing countries. As Leong wrote in his 1990 study of “manufactured traditions” and the Singapore tourist industry,

A given nation-state always seeks to be a cultural and political entity, distinct and separate [emphasis original] from other nation-states. And national tourism presents images to the international world of the distinctiveness of the nation-state. The cultural image of the nation-state as presented in tourist paraphernalia and travel brochures is therefore political and economic. National tourism projects to the international polity a distinctive image of what the nation is and to the international market a selling image for drawing visitors and travelers into the country (Leong, 1990, p. 359).

For Thailand, this has led to the TAT dubbing the country “The Most Exotic Country in Asia,” though this appellation is never adequately qualified or explained. Exoticism here would appear to mean quaintness, or strangeness, perhaps, or “difference.” However, exoticism requires constant refreshment, constant expansion of the frontiers of attraction. Eventually the faux court dancers and shopping opportunities in Bangkok grow uninteresting to more intrepid travelers (the Grand Palace tour takes less than a day, and how much time can one devote to buying silk and jewelry?), so sub-categories of tourism are devised: nature tourism, which seeks to draw travelers on the hunt for mountains to

climb, rivers to traverse, and reefs to explore; archaeological tourism, which offers up remnants of the imperial past in Ayutthaya and Sukhothai; ethnotourism, showcasing a nation's "diversity" in the form of its colorfully garbed tribal peoples (who in the process undergo an amazing metamorphosis from opium-growing despoilers of the environment to quaintly-garbed exemplars of exoticism); cultural tourism in the form of less adulterated artistic performances of *khon*, *lakhon*, and *likae*, which are still available though more difficult to find than the packaged versions; and more unsavory manifestations of the tourist impulse such as sex tourism.

The process of cultural reinvention mandated by the tourist industry has curiously enough expanded the definition of "Thai," at least as far as the TAT is concerned. The people of the northeast, for example, have been transformed from being on the political and economic margins of Thai society, speakers of "improper Thai" and eaters of glutinous rice to being celebrated as "colorful inhabitants who speak their own melodious dialect, have a delicious, highly-spiced cuisine, and a hospitable, vibrant and often boisterous folk culture" (*Northeast Thailand*, 1986, p. 2). In the south, the TAT touts the charms of Phuket, where, the agency's literature states without a trace of irony, one may visit "a 'Thai Village' where twice daily cultural shows give a splendid insight into the traditional way of life in southern Thailand. Settlements of 'Sea Gypsies,' the island's oldest inhabitants, provides further sightseeing opportunities" (*Thailand: Phuket and the Andaman Coast*, 1990, p. 11). For obvious reasons, the brochure does not go into further detail to discuss how the tourist industry might have played some part in transforming the "traditional ways of life" of the southern Thais and "sea gypsies" into theme park attractions through population displacement and ecological destruction. For example, there is no mention of the effects of resort development on the local fishing industry, which forms a significant part of the material base of the "traditional way of life" in southern Thailand; nor is there any discussion of how resort building has fueled real estate speculation in the region,

resulting in yet another threat to the local population's "traditional way of life" (Ekachai, 1990). Obviously such social criticism is outside the purview of government-produced tourist literature--the objective of such material is to convince tourists to visit the locales in question, not to imbue them with a sense of guilt or outrage, nor to encourage potential visitors to contemplate the effects their leisure activities may have upon the quaintly garbed local population. Still, the use of "colorful traditions" as a marketing device represents a calculated effort on the part of the Thailand Tourist Authority to remove those cultural expressions from their context and their material surroundings, presenting them in a vacuum as discrete manifestations of "exotic Thai culture."

Likewise, the TAT's literature covering northern Thailand devotes considerable space to the ethnotourism opportunities available there, where the intrepid traveler can trek into the rugged mountains to encounter colorfully garbed tribal peoples, who, despite their chronic poverty will welcome the visitor with traditional hospitality. The hill tribes have proved to be such a favorite with foreign travelers that enterprising lowland Thais in areas populated by tribal peoples have taken to wearing tribal costumes in order to attract the attention and hard currency of gullible tourists. During a visit to the northern Thai border town of Mae Sai, for example, hordes of young girls in a variety of quaint costumes, some of which may have been Akha, some Lisu, some Hmong, some an admixture of all three, all clamoring to have their pictures taken. Such photo opportunities carried a price, though, as each photogenic smile metamorphosed into a mercenary scowl and demands for compensation. As noted earlier, these tribes have been transformed from a source of political instability and incomplete assimilation to another trailside attraction, another means of extracting tourist dollars. The tourist literature does not sully itself with the grim material details of the hill tribesfolk's lives as actually lived: phenomena like disease, political marginalization, landlessness and opium addiction might prove excessively "authentic" and spoil otherwise rewarding "sightseeing opportunities."

Paradoxically, though, this venal opportunism on the part of the official as well as unofficial tourist industry has necessitated a broadening of the definition of Thai identity, identity which is no longer telegraphed by means of a few over-used images (The Temple of the Dawn, the Grand Palace, the photogenic lotus-bud ruins of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, orange-robed monks, a smiling Thai woman dressed in traditional raiment offering a *wai* and a shy smile). Rather, the Thai image bank has been enlarged to include images of *khon isaan* at Wat That Phanom, the most revered Buddhist shrine in the northeast, Akha tribeswomen from the mountains of the north in their silver-trimmed headdresses, and perhaps even the Dali-esque Bhramanic Buddhism of Wat Khaek, where a smiling Vishnu watches over a cement dog clutching an M-16.

CONCLUSIONS

Any attempt to analyze a country's "national identity" necessarily founders upon the shoals of Godel's paradox: describe the system in sufficient detail and the description becomes as complex and unwieldy as the system itself. So it was with this attempt to tease out the linkages between national identity, systemic integration and mass media in contemporary Thailand. As Thai society grows more complex, differentiated, and "modern" every year, it is less and less possible to discuss that society in terms of a "traditional" peasant society being transformed into a "developed" modern one. Try to include all the elements which comprise Thai society and form that country's identity and one's analysis collapses under its own weight, a victim of intellectual hubris and the contradictions of the society in question. Through this lens contemporary Thailand becomes a traditional agrarian society with a burgeoning industrial base, simultaneously dynamic and static, a deeply religious secular polity, a land of pious licentiousness possessed of a peculiar disingenuous candor when it comes to self-disclosure before strangers. Such contradictions are by no means limited to Thailand, but the contradictions nevertheless are more sharply drawn when one looks beyond the smile, the *wai*, and the shrugged *mai pen rai* (never mind).

Judging from the limited information available, the author would conclude that there really is no mass communication policy in Thailand intended to promote national integration. There are a variety of proscriptive policies designed to prevent intended or accidental attacks or slights against national institutions like the monarchy and Buddhism, but there are no prescriptive policies which would seek to promote those institutions. The emphasis placed upon protecting national institutions from mediated insult, even insults as seemingly trivial as a satirical magazine cover portraying a lapsed Buddhist monk, suggests that those charged with protecting those institutions fear the chaos which might be released if the Pandora's box of social criticism in media was opened too far. This concern with

protecting the nation's key institutions from harm seemed closely related to the government's disproportionate reactions to foreign coverage of dissension within the monkhood and to Thai press laws which make frequent references to sanctions resulting from the publication of material deemed detrimental to public order. For example, the Thai government's decision to ban the *Asian Wall Street Journal* following its coverage of the Santi Asoke dispute seemed to have little to do with the truth or falsity of the *Journal's* article and more to do with the fact that the article appeared at all and that it exposed the existence of dissension within the *Sangha*. The government's decision to ban *The Satanic Verses* similarly seems to have stemmed from a fear of potential political instability rather than any quarrel with the material contained within the book's covers.

There are a number of possible reasons for this lack of prescriptive mass communication policies: first, those institutions are so deeply ingrained in Thai culture that promoting them would be an expensive broadcast version of carrying coals to Newcastle. With the monarchy occupying such a central role in the country's political life, successfully subsuming and neutralizing social conflicts which otherwise might erupt into civil discord, and with Theravada Buddhism continuing to offer a functional means of social organization, and with the prevailing model of Thai citizenship managing to skirt the edge of the precipice separating sanguinary or ethnic particularism and a non-ethnic ideal of citizenship, there is less need to promote the ideals of *kwamphenthai* or Thai-ness than might be the case in a less well-defined political community like neighboring Malaysia or Singapore.

Second, there are currently no obvious threats to the pillars of *lak Thai*--as some argued was the case during the *Kulturkampf* of the 1970s--which would necessitate any such explicitly nationalistic policies; there are no more communists worth mentioning, the militant student movements of the 1970s are little more than memories (though the 1992 pro-democracy demonstrations proved that such militancy can still be summoned at will),

and Thailand is positioned to become the linchpin of an Indochinese trading bloc, rather than a bulwark against socialist subversion in the region. The Thai ruling elite may now have to worry about the Laotians and Vietnamese luring Reebok and Panasonic manufacturing plants to Saigon and Vientiane, rather than worrying about revolutionary cadres abolishing the monarchy and nationalizing the sex industry.

Those threats which do exist are too insidious to be dealt with through the sort of shrill anti-communist agitprop which characterized the Thai media during the Cold War--these threats include materialism, venality, anomie, and the disruption of traditional social structures based on the village and the communal *wat*. The media are ill-suited to respond to these threats because the media are actually a component of those threats--through constant advertising, radio and television encourage the compulsive consumption and fixation on material well-being that Thai social critics like Sulak Sivaraksa have derided as distracting Thai society from its "organic" roots. Televised game shows and soap operas likewise offer Thai viewers an alternative conception of reality. "Traditional" Thai roots are based upon patterns of village organization and subsistence agriculture which Thailand's development policies have sought to displace in the name of large-scale agribusiness, export-oriented agriculture and commodity production, and progressive industrialization.

Third, the labyrinthine structure of radio and television broadcast networks , coupled with those networks' dependence upon advertising revenues for their daily operations, acts to thwart the formulation and implementation of a unified, prospective set of policies for the use of mass media to promote and refine an inclusive and effective national ideology. This fragmentation is not necessarily a disadvantage as far as Thailand's political development is concerned: though it does thwart any attempt to use the mass media in a concerted fashion to promote government informational or ideological campaigns, it also hampers any push towards complete political conformity or mediated totalitarianism.

The Army's programming would appear to be the only exception to the rule, since the military sponsors a number of radio and television programs whose explicit purpose is that of disseminating the military's version of what constitutes Thai national identity. However, if understood within the context of Thailand's para-ideological, factionally-based political system, the Army's agitprop endeavors are not so much a unique attempt to promote its "traditionally" based vision of national identity but instead just another example of a political clique wrapping itself in the Thai flag to further its own political interests at the expense of potential rivals for power and spoils. The military establishment's programming also tends to replicate the structure of power relations and principles of authority promoted by the political system in general: conservative, pro-establishment messages, emphasizing tradition, respect for the authority of the state (but not necessarily for individual representatives of the state), and the inherent legitimacy and appropriateness of the military's central role in Thai politics. By positioning itself as the disinterested protector of the national interest, beyond both institutional self-promotion and political self-aggrandizement, the military can use the media to further its campaign of (anti-) politics. The advertising revenue generated through its media network further increases the military's clout by placing the Army out of budgetary harm's way.

Thai media policies and patterns of activity, then, can largely be described in terms of three categories or tendencies: *authoritarian consumerism*, *spectacular traditionalism*, and *developmental public relations*. These categories are not mutually exclusive and can furthermore be seen as mutually reinforcing; furthermore, these tendencies should be seen as provisional analytic tools rather than hard and fast epistemological categories.

Authoritarian consumerism has simultaneously encouraged the frenzied materialism which has taken root in Thailand while at the same time narrowly defining the limits of ideological discourse within the media. Authoritarian consumerism favors commercialism over controversy, sedation over stimulation, style over substance. The Thai electronic

media matrix manages to combine the worst features of commercial broadcast systems (heavy advertising content and an emphasis on light, entertaining programming geared towards sponsors' priorities) and state-run systems (self-censorship, lack of public accountability, excessive deference towards entrenched political interests) at the same time. There is little regulation of content within state-defined programming parameters, and the state similarly takes a laissez-faire approach to the influence of commercial sponsors over the amount and the nature of advertising. With regards to print media, the Thai government has been less heavy handed than its counterparts elsewhere in southeast Asia, but nevertheless has demonstrated its willingness to use its coercive resources to limit the press's reach when it sees fit.

Authoritarian consumerism is a dominant trait within the Thai mass media system for more than the expected and rather prosaic exigencies of the Thai state's desire to keep dissent at a manageable level in the interests of stability. The problem with such sober topics of public debate as national identity and the evolution of Thai society's relationship with the traditional pillars of identity is that such self-examination is so foreign to that society. Discussion of deeply rooted social problems, or critical analyses of the role of national institutions in creating, aggravating, or solving those problems, is antithetical to Thai traditions of *grengklua*, *grengjai*, and *sanuk*. Questioning the axes of power and examining social phenomena in terms of processes and ideological demonstrates insufficient *grengklua*, or reverential awe and obeisance to those in power; imposing upon the powerful by means of such interrogation violates laws of *grengjai*, which has no real English translation but is roughly equivalent to deference and avoidance of any social interaction which may cause or exacerbate conflict; and such discussions are too serious, too freighted with potential social dislocation and collective loss of face to be any *sanuk* at all.

Spectacular traditionalism represents the transmission of an officially-defined “national culture” through mass media channels for purposes of situating the Thai state and its activities within the context of primordial spheres of power. Examples of spectacular traditionalism include heavily covered royal ceremonies such as the Ploughing Ceremony, the changing of the Royal Guard, exhibitions of officially sanctioned “national culture” such as *lakhon* and shortened presentations of the Ramakien, and the sort of theme park cultural exhibits which serve to give short term visitors a taste of “traditional Thai culture.” What spectacular traditionalism seeks to achieve is not only correspondence between a pre-contact, “authentic” Thai culture and the present, with its ubiquitous reminders of the kingdom’s Westernization, but also an even more vital concurrence between the pre-1932 absolute monarchy, with its attendant pomp and royal majesty, and the present-day bureaucratic Thai state. By cloaking itself in the trappings of the past, the state and its clients can tap into the wellspring of primordial attachments to that past. By tapping into that wellspring, in turn, the state may avoid the possibility of “disenchantment” and further capitalize on Thai concepts of the unaccountability and implacability of power.

In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes the function of myth in the construction of the modern political spectacle. Though he was writing about France on the cusp of its post-war imperial divestiture, not about Thailand, his observations on the centrality of myth in the age of political disenchantment is worth quoting at length:

Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal...What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality. And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the word ‘bourgeois,’ myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things; in it, things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, is has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it literally a ceaseless flowing out, a

hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence (Barthes, 1972, pp. 142-43).

Barthes continues:

Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from. Or even better: it can only come from eternity: since the beginning of time, it has been made for bourgeois man, the Spain of the *Blue Guide* has been made for the tourist, and 'primitives' have prepared their dances with a view to an exotic festivity (Barthes, 1972, p. 150).

By extension, the post-1932 Thai praetorian-capitalist state has always existed with the king as its titular head and has not been the result of a particular set of historical circumstances (such as the centralization of the state at the expense of local elites during the latter part of the nineteenth century, or the parade of military juntas which have ruled the country intermittently since 1932, or the steady concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a native capitalist class and various foreign investors); the *lakhon* dances have always been performed just the way they are presented at Silom Village in Bangkok, and the snake milking exhibition performed at Ratchaburi's reptile farm has remained unchanged since time immemorial. But the *lakhon* one sees at Silom Village, while technically enthralling, has a denatured, inorganic feel to it--historically, these dances based upon the *Ramakien* and other traditional Thai sources were performed for the entertainment of the royal court, not for tourists and well-heeled Thai spectators. Furthermore, they were often performed within the context of special occasions or festivals, and they certainly were not performed twice nightly at restaurants in shopping malls.

The third tendency, *developmental public relations*, is certainly not exclusive to the Thai mass media. This last category is closest in meaning to what other communication scholars have described as "development news," or the use of mass media to broaden a government's base of support and consent through the publicizing of that government's

development-oriented activities. Whether in the form of the Thai monarchy's support for rural development projects among the hill tribes of the north, the queen's SUPPORT program for impoverished rural dwellers, or for the RTA's drought relief campaigns in the northeast, developmental public relations aims at demonstrating the Thai government's *bun* and its *metta* (loving kindness) and thereby reinforcing the paternalistic relationship between rulers and ruled. This is not to take issue with the real or perceived altruism of those involved--those who have conceived and publicized domestic aid programs may very well feel a genuine concern for the beneficiaries of such programs. However, the actual alleviation of chronic drought, landlessness, and ecological catastrophe is secondary, in the developmental public relations equation at least, to the perception that the state is acting in the interests of the less fortunate.

Furthermore, by covering charitable programs as the disinterested results of the Thai power elite's sense of *noblesse oblige*, the Thai media actually naturalizes the existence of such a hierarchic structure--those who bring aid and succor to their less fortunate brethren deserve their exalted position in society, since they are the only ones capable of responding to social crises. The photographs of the grateful recipients of the RTA's attentions during the Green Isaan campaign are particularly telling, telegraphing as they do the social and political hierarchies predominant in Thailand. The villagers are invariably prostrating in thanks and often presenting visiting military officers garlands of flowers, their bowed heads and upraised hands indicative of gratitude, perhaps, but also of their recognition of their position in the social system relative to their military and corporate benefactors. Finally, government developmental public relations makes extensive use of the visual language of spectacular traditionalism by granting pride of place to the participation of traditional Thai sources of social attachment and affiliation such as the monkhood and the royal family.

How then do these results relate to development communication theories of the media's role in the formation of national identity? These theories, particularly those of the so-called "first wave," have posited national identity and integration as necessary (though not sufficient) condition of development. Media institutions have theoretically been viewed as focal players in the creation of such identity--however, in the case of Thailand television, radio, and the print media have played a secondary role to institutions like the educational system, Theravada Buddhism, and the military in weakening local, horizontal affiliations and substituting an attachment to a more abstract "national" locus of affiliation. It appears that the process of state consolidation and national integration initiated by the two modernizing monarchs of the nineteenth century through the agencies of the educational system, a national system of military conscription, and a centralized monkhood under state control was well-nigh complete by the time that radio, television and print media were available on a national basis and that the mass media have been less central to this process than they might have been in other countries in southeast Asia which have had to construct post-colonial identities nearly from scratch. In Thailand, the media have not served to foster the creation and maintenance of a coherent national identity except in the most latent sense, though they have reinforced the centrality of the three pillars. In functionalist terms, the mass media in Thailand appear to have played a role in system maintenance and discursive delimitation rather than system creation and promotion. Government communication policies seem to pay lip service to the notion of deliberate cultural preservation and promotion, but such programming as exists for these purposes appears to be aimed at the cultivation of culture for commerce (i.e., tourism).

The connection between government media policies and the continued viability of the Thai state in the form it has taken since 1932 is at best coincidental--the state has survived and expanded to penetrate the entire geographic space that is now Thailand while pursuing a given set of communication policies through a welter of government agencies.

No causality has been demonstrated, in other words. This study has perhaps revealed one of the limits of development communication theory particularly in the area of political organization. The limited evidence gathered suggests that Thai mass media have not played more than a peripheral role in the creation and refinement of national identity and the assimilation of marginal or subaltern cultures--however, due to time, linguistic, and methodological constraints, it was not possible to examine the relationship between the media and other institutions which have been more instrumental to systemic integration in Thailand: schools, social clubs, political parties, traditional art forms, the monkhood, and so forth.

This problem was reflected in much of the development communication literature reviewed for this study--examining a country's mass media as such without paying more attention to historical and cultural context can result in crucial omissions of pertinent details which might affect mass media performance in promoting national identity; there is always the danger of analyzing communication systems in a vacuum, as independent rather than dependent variable. Such decontextualization may result in methodologically tidier studies which nonetheless reveal more by what they omit than what they include. For example, there has been little discussion in the literature of the role played by patterns of state coercion in the formation of national identity, though such coercion has sometimes been acknowledged in the guise of studies of censorship patterns in developing nations. Such activities on the part of state authorities in Thailand with regards to the hill tribes in the north and towards the Muslims of the south was conspicuously absent from the handful of previous studies of developmental communication in Thailand which were available for review.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As for further research, given the lack of existing studies in this area it would perhaps be easier to mention topics which do not warrant additional study rather than those which do. As it became apparent during the literature review, the little mass communication research that has been conducted in Thailand has been either too narrowly focused or is in need of updating. Furthermore, additional research needs to be conducted by Thai scholars whose language skills would grant them insights which undoubtedly escaped the author during the course of this project. One constraint which would hamper work by native scholars, though, is the possibility of censure or sanction which might result from said hypothetical scholars' work being considered too controversial. A Thai communications scholar might be reluctant to compromise his or her social or professional standing in the interest of pushing the intellectual envelope.

Promising foci of future studies might include the role of the Thailand Tourist Authority in promoting Thai arts and crafts and how those cultural expressions are selected for preservation, resurrection, and promotion; a more in-depth of the significance of the military's communication networks, the use of mass media in hill tribe assimilation, and studies of representations of power and legitimacy in Thai radio and television and how those representations have changed along with Thailand's political and social system. In addition, the role of mass media in the integration of the Muslim population of the south represents a fascinating topic of research since it could address issues of minority identification and the reconciliation (if any) of the contradiction between social affiliation and political citizenship. How, for example, are those contradictions expressed in local media programming, and what alternate sources of programming do marginalized populations seek when the dominant mode of discourse excludes them? Ideally, such studies might spend less time exploring the Thai elite's definitions of identity and delve into

processes of political and social self-identification among those less-accessed voices within Thailand: members of minority groups, women, and the peasantry.

Sadly, this project did little more than generate questions, questions about the nature of “identity,” the role of mass media in the shaping of notions of citizenship, the appropriateness of tourism and the relationship between tourism and cultural forms, and impossibility of penetrating a linguistic citadel when armed with the underpowered weapons of curiosity and intellectual hubris. Consequently, the author cannot grant Chulalongkorn University Professor Satien Cheyprathub’s waggish request: “When you find out what Thai identity is, will you let us know too?”

LIST OF INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Prof. Jaranai Glaegosol, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Darunee Hirulrak, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Vijpa Utamachant, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Joompol Rodcumdee, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Boonlert Supadhiloke, Director, Office of National Public Communication Board,
Government Public Relations Department

Suvit Yodmani, Official Spokesman for the Prime Minister's Office

Prof. Somkuan Kaviya, Ph.D., Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication,
Thammasat University; Communication and Public Relations Consultant

Prof. Anchalee Leesavan, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Khun Anuri Chimwonno, Telemarketing and Research Manager, BIG Intl. Co. LTD

Sutee Ratananakin, Managing Director, BIG International Co. LTD

Prof. Peera Chirasupone, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Yubol Benjarongkij, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Rajitluk Sang-Urai, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Kantima Tenasoporn, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Orawan Pilun-Owad, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Satien Cheyprathub, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Swanit Yamaphai, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Porama Satawedini, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Nuntawan Suchato, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Kwanroen Kitiwatana, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Sukanya Theerawanit, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Suraphol Vilrurak, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Col. Sommart Jantanop, RTA, Spokesman for His Majesty the King's Royal Compassion

Project for the Development of Northeast Thailand (Green Isaan)

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