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The Cultural Traditional Media

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THE CULTURAL TRADITIONAL MEDIA OF ASEAN. A Project of ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information. Manila, 1986.

This handsome and hefty book of 503 pages consists of essays, glossaries, bibliographies, and directories relating to the folk media of ASEAN countries Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. (The nonparticipation of Brunei Darussalam is not explained).

The ASEAN cultural traditional—preelectronic age—media are explained in the introduction:

Because they were and are used to express the world-view as well as the values and norms of a group through literary and theatrical genres using artistic criteria acceptable to that particular group, these media are called "cultural." Because they were and are continuously created not by a select few but by the ordinary members of a given cultural community, they are known as "folk" . . . because these communication forms have been practiced, evolved, and popularized by the majority over long periods of time—many for centuries, they have acquired that permanence and legitimacy which characterize them as "traditional." (p. v)

They are communication media important in countries undergoing transformation and modernization because they are not only accepted, familiar and accessible to the people, but "embody the people's beliefs, their self-concepts, their perceptions of their relationships, their philosophy of life and their social ethics" (p. v). They are alive in small and rural communities, and have traditionally woven entertainment and education. They are therefore valuable and viable channels for education and information.

Among the forms discussed and illustrated are the Indonesian *barong*, *ketoprak*, *ludruk*, and *wayang kulit*; the Malaysian *berbalas*; *pantun*, *ghazal*, *boria*, and *bangsawan*; the Philippine *balagtasan*, *pasyon*, *komedya*, *sinakulo*, and *sarsuwela*; the Singaporean *dodang sayang*, *Chinese wayang*, *bangsawan*, and *Kuei lei hsi*; the Thai *moh lam*, *manohra*, *likay*, and *nang talung*.

Among these can be found dance dramas, poetic jousts, puppet plays, folk dramas, songs, comic performances, stories told to music, verse debates, musical theater, shadow plays, etc.—all the combinations and transmutations of Asian folk entertainment. Because the book is written in English, translations have been found for these various, individual, and related forms, although the Western words (opera, play, performance, drama, etc.) do not quite describe the character of these media born of Asian soil and nurtured through centuries in village centers by folk writers and their audiences, by the native ethos and traditions.

A glance reveals at once the value of the study to the ASEAN reader or researcher. Shadow and puppet theater crosses national boundaries. Almost all the cultures have some kind of musical theater, some form of verse debate. The comic strains are related. Even though the Philippine *sarsuwela* drew from the Spanish *zarzuela*, it is clearly related to Malay *bangsawan*. Songs so often come with dances; dances with drama; drama with songs and dances;

drama with verse. In these essays discussing ASEAN folk theater forms, ASEAN/Asian theater is being defined, being shown in parallel growth (even through colonial travails and transformation), in brotherhood and Asianness.

To the government or development worker, however, another facet of traditional media is suggested. If these are the forms people have laughed with, been entertained by, supported and staged through decades, even centuries, might they not be the best media for development messages? Might they not be equally or even more effective, and possibly less expensive than brochures, radio programs, posters, film and video, and the like? How can they be preserved, propagated, and made to bear new messages? What updating can or must be done? Can development go hand in hand with the preservation of folk culture?

The book is the result of a project for the Study and Documentation of ASEAN Cultural Traditional Media. It had been agreed that two handbooks would be published in tandem: Book I an inventory of the media, accompanied by a glossary and a directory of media performers, researchers, and institutions; Book II an annotated bibliography. When the results came in, it was found possible to combine the two.

Thus each country section starts with a description of the media forms: performance (content and production), origin, developments and variations, meaning to and function in the community, type of audience. This is followed by a glossary, a directory of performers, researchers and institutions, and finally a bibliography (generally annotated) of books, unpublished but significant research, and periodical articles. All are lavishly illustrated with prints, photographs and sketches—in black and white within the sections, in color in a central folio/album. The research is thus supported by visual representation of masks, costumes, props, conventions, performers, and performances in village centers and on stage.

The project was conceived in 1980, with the Philippines assigned as country coordinator of the project. The research was pursued from 1980 to 1985, and included an ASEAN Seminar and Study Tour on Cultural Traditional Media (Yogyakarta, 1982); the book was published in 1986. The editorial staff was Filipino, headed by Nicanor G. Tiongson assisted by Jovenal Velasco, with Josefina Patron and Jerry M. Reyes as advisers. The authors are: Saisuree Chutikul, Pathraporn Sumransuk, Supang Chantavanich, and Wira Bambroongraks of Thailand; and E. Arsenio Manuel and Nicanor G. Tiongson of the Philippines.

As might be expected of an anthology to which five countries, five crews of researchers and informants, and several writers contributed, there is an unevenness in the style and quality of the essays, the detail of documentation, and the thoroughness and annotation of the bibliographies. Still, it is undoubtedly a major accomplishment of great value to ASEAN governments, planners, scholars, researchers, writers, cultural workers, drama groups, and artists. The data on traditional media gathered for each country are collated and coordinated—possibly for the first time. Certainly a first is the assembly of so much ASEAN data in one volume—inviting cross-cultural examination

and study, the drawing of parallels and distinctions, an inevitable cross-fertilization.

The editors see commonalities and their implications in ASEAN folk media:

. . . e.g. the preference for the narrative, specifically, the narrative which branches out into myriad subplots, resulting in what is often criticized by Western critics as looseness in plot structure; the fondness for incorporating supranatural, magical, fantastic elements or forces into the narratives, which often figure as "dei ex machina" in the unravelling of complex problems; and the preference for "shows" or extravaganzas, which feature song and dance, mime and music, action and dialogue, as well as glittering, bright costumes and headdresses, sometimes with masks.

The realization of such commonalities leads to the insight that ASEAN member-nations do, indeed, have analogous cultures because these cultures seem to be traceable to common well-springs and to have been shaped by parallel economic, political and social realities. (p. vi)

Thus, although some of these media may be on the decline in the competition with electronic media, the conclusion is inevitable, that they are valuable sources of information on the individual countries and on the region, aside from being viable conduits of communication, and therefore of importance and concern to these ASEAN nations grappling with the problem of tradition versus and vis-a-vis modernity and development.

A postscript to the publication is the fact that a Symposium/Workshop on ASEAN Cultural Traditional Media was called in Manila in July 1988, for the purpose of discussing development messages and their transmission in particular folk media chosen by each ASEAN country. This was the start of the implementation phase, showing that the research and publication have started to bear fruit.

The book is available not in bookstores, but with the ASEAN Committee of Culture and Information in each country (in the Philippines: the Cultural Center of the Philippines library). It is a unique resource, one that will long enrich the worlds of ASEAN development and scholarship.

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