

***“Thainess” in the Face of Universal Human Rights Protection
of Cultural and Linguistic Identity.***

Introductory comments by Assistant Professor Dr. Kirk R. Person, panel moderator

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this panel discussion entitled ***“Thainess” in the Face of Universal Human Rights Protection of Cultural and Linguistic Identity.***

This topic lies very much at the heart of Thai studies: what does it mean to be Thai? What is “Thainess”--or *khwaam pen Thai*.

This morning we are going to look at Thainess through a slightly different lens. As Dr. Reynolds stated during our welcome reception, each host university leaves a unique imprint on the conference. This year’s host, Mahidol University, has a deep interest in Thailand’s ethnic minority groups, so it is from that perspective that our speakers will address this issue of Thainess.

I would like to set the stage for our panelists’ comments by saying that, at least in my view, we have seen a renewed discussion of Thainess in recent years. Thainess was supposed to be a unifying factor for the nation, but with the massive social changes Professor Klausner noted in his keynote address, questions have arisen. Is it Thai to hold protests? Can a Thai educated abroad truly be Thai? Why cannot all Thais just love each other? And in the midst of last year’s violence, “Can foreigners (especially foreign journalists) ever understand Thainess?” (That is still being debated online--My personal answer is, “No, but it is fascinating to try.”)

Nonetheless, renewed discussion of Thai-ness among Thai intellectuals and some government officials preceded the yellow shirt-red shirt conflict, prompted by an interest in the place of ethnic minority peoples in Thai society, particularly among the Muslims of the South. Because of that conflict, a country that tends to think of itself as being monolingual and monocultural was being faced with its true diversity--ethnic, religious, linguistic.

I know that all of this is very subjective, but for those of us involved in ethnic issues, the past six or so years have been fascinating. Here are some things that have happened:

- When discussing reconciliation plans for the South with Prime Minister Thaksin on national television in 2005, former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachon spoke at length on how Thailand was home to 60 ethnic groups--noting that he himself was part Mon and Taksin Chinese. This was the first time that many Thais heard just how richly diverse their country is.
- Many of you are aware of Thammasat University Professor Charvit Kasetsiri’s campaign to rename the country “Siam,” feeling that old Siam did a better job at embracing ethnic diversity.
- At one point the yellow shirts’ “New Politics” agenda included a seat in Parliament for each ethnic group.
- The Thai word *klum chat pan* “ethnic group,” which was rarely heard in the past, is now seeing increased usage in the public square.
- Thai PBS has been producing an impressive array of documentaries on ethnic issues on Thailand (although many of them broadcast late at night), and newspaper accounts of ethnic matters seem to be on the rise.

- The Ministry of Culture has increased their support for ethnic minority cultures; last year hundreds of ethnic people came to the National Cultural Center in Bangkok to set up cultural exhibitions, sell their food, and perform on the stage usually reserved for the Bangkok Symphony.
- Ethnic people themselves have become more active and united on issues of common interest. Next month the Network of indigenous Peoples of Thailand will convene for their fourth annual meeting--typically about 30 groups send representatives to discuss areas of common interest, including land rights, citizenship, and integration of ethnic culture and language into the education system.
- The Royal Institute has spent the past four years researching the language situation in Thailand, and has drafted a National Language Policy supportive of the linguistic and cultural rights of ethnic minority persons, to the point of advocating multilingual education--using minority languages in the classroom, alongside Thai and English.
- For the first time since 1960, the 2010 National Census included a language question intended to shed light the link between ethnicity and education, income, health, etc., to measure progress on the UN Millennium Development Goals.
- Finally, in May 2011, Khun Anand's National Reform Committee concluded that issues of ethnic identity and culture were crucial to long-term social reform.

In the light of all of this, some Thai intellectuals and concerned government officials are calling for a "new vision of Thainess," one which can go beyond the political, ethnic, social, and religions boundaries, a way to give the country a sense of unity in the midst of its diversity.

Nonetheless, much needs to be done to see these good intentions produce lasting change, and for that we turn to our speakers. We will first hear from linguist Dr. Suwilai Premasri of Mahidol University, who has pioneered language revitalization and multilingual education programs in a number of ethnic groups, particularly in the deep South. Next, we will hear from Dr. Coelli Barry of the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, examining the situation of Thailand's ethnic peoples in the light of human rights legislation. Finally, we will have a response from one of Thailand's most prominent reconciliation advocates: Dr. Gothom Araya of Mahidol University's Research Center for Peace.

In conclusion, I think that the discussions we will have today will be very significant on how this large element of Thainess--the place of the "others" in Thai society--is being played out even as we speak. And I know that all of us here, foreign and Thai alike, whether we understand Thainess or not, would hope that today's discussion will benefit this wonderful kingdom that all of us here have come to love.