

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: EXTERNAL SIGNS, “INTERNAL CONDITIONS”¹

Post-World War II Thailand appears in Nikom Rayawa’s short stories and novels as people, animals, plants, places, things, and, sometimes, nothing. It appears in political and economic studies and articles as a tiger, a dragon, the color gold, an ax, a map, Bangkok, but most often as numbers, colors and lines in figures and tables (Pasom, Manit, Wyatt, Muscat, Medhi, Pasuk and Baker, Schlosstein). This study is an analysis of Nikom’s² symbols and of how they describe modern³ Thailand in areas and ways that the medium of numbers and maps usually does not or cannot. It is an attempt to look at the cultural history of the country (specifically, ideology, mentality, and emotional impact), rather than the economic or political history (which usually focuses on physical changes or physical impact), through the comparison of two sets of images: one from Nikom Rayawa’s fiction and the other from various non-fictional accounts in public media and scholarly research and studies.

In order to better understand the force and implications of these two sets of images, narrating differently the history of Thailand, I situate Nikom Rayawa’s texts

¹ “Internal conditions” is translated from the Thai “akanpainai” explained by Khamsing Srinok in an interview (Hom Kam 27). All translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² I use the author’s first name here in accordance with the Thai convention of referring to people by their first names. Nikom Rayawa is known by readers, scholars and critics as Nikom rather than Rayawa or Mr. Rayawa. All references to Thai authors or people in this paper will be by their first names. Foreign names will follow the English literary convention.

³ What modern Thailand is and where it starts is controversial. I use the term here and throughout this paper for convenience’s sake to refer to post-WWII Thailand though various studies of Thai literature and history define the era differently. Mattani Moj dara Rutnin in her preface to Modern Thai Literature, for example, defines the period as beginning in King Mongkut or Rama IV’s reign in 1851. One reason for these diverse interpretations may also be the terminology: the English word “modern” is variously translated into Thai ex. *pajuban*, *samaihmai*, *yukhmai*. There is no clear equivalent for the term.

within the various non-fictional accounts—economic and political discourses—which are the contexts for his work. The period since 1945 in Thailand is symbolically interesting for a number of reasons. The end of the war saw the increasingly apparent rise of the middle class, which became more involved in politics, in the economy, and in education (Pasuk and Baker 120-34). Within a decade since 1960 the number of universities more than tripled and student enrolment rose from 15,000 to 100,000, bringing unforeseen diversity which significantly transformed university life and intellectual activity (301). Staggering rates of forest depletion and clearing of land for large-scale farming transformed the physical landscape. Thailand's greater involvement in the international arena after joining the United Nations, the World Bank, and the IMF as well as the growth of global trade marked its implicit sanction for capitalist economy and concepts. Policies to modernize and urbanize the country created a desire and demand for internationalization that pushed local wisdom and cultural heritage into temporary oblivion. Cultural tradition does not seem to belong as part of development and is perhaps seen as even detrimental to it. In this transition, therefore, a thriving center of civilization and rich cultures once proudly calling itself *suvarnabhumi* or “the golden realm” became a backwater country struggling to justify itself on the second rung of developmental stage—developing—rather than the third or last—undeveloped.

The positive view of this national reconceptualization is of Bangkok, “emerg[ing] out of the delta swamps to become one of Asia's leading port cities” (Pasuk and Baker 45). In either picture, backwater country or emerging giant, a reinvention of the country's identity has taken place. And in either case, the newly conceived images are but external garments that cover negotiations with change not always corresponding to those outer views. The first National Economic Development Plan

began in 1961, and by 1966, as Khamsing Srinawak indicates in a Sangkomsatparitat article, the farming communities were falling apart (30-36).

For the literary world, open boundaries meant increased access to foreign literature, and this has resulted in greater international influence on Thai writing. Adding to already existing Indian, Chinese, and Javanese exposure, Western literary movements (such as Romanticism, Existentialism and Marxism) made their way into popular Thai writers' consciousness, mostly through translations. Postwar literary activity showed more and more signs of having entered the age of commerce. Several writers' groups and prizes were established after the pioneering Varnakadi Samosorn or Literary Club in the reign of King Rama VI (ex. the Writers' Circle, the Writer's Club, SEA Write, PEN Thailand), and literature acquired a significant monetary value apart from aesthetic, moral, or entertaining ones which have traditionally been associated with it. Middle class interests and commercial forces, therefore, became more prominent in the production of literature and in its popularization, gradually redefining the concept of art and its function in society.

The first six years after the war saw a proliferation in socialist literature. The government relaxed its surveillance on communist activity as Thailand sought membership to the United Nations of which Russia is a vetoing member. A new literary wave quickly formed which called into question the nature and function of art. Eventually, this social consciousness that critiqued capitalism and concerned itself with the plight of the common folk proposed a new slogan to replace the Romantic, abstract, and impractical "art for art's sake." The phrase "art for *life's* sake" or "art for life" was coined and held as the ideal of literature—an art that served and spoke to the people.

In his influential book Art for Life, Art for the People, Dheepakorn (Chitr Phoumisak) defines the new phrase and identifies its mission:

Art for life's sake means art created to produce certain effects on public readers, listeners, viewers. It is art which has a significant role in the lives of the people who consume art. It is art which is related to the social life of the general public. Art for life's sake, in the opinion of the people, is art which creates a useful effect in the social lives of the general public, that is, art that points to the people a way out in life that is correct and at the same time stimulates them to fight and move toward a goal in life that is better. (Chaisiri 13)

This radical questioning of the place and role of art effectively brought literature down from its pedestal. Distinguished institutions of higher learning, most notably Chulalongkorn University, were targets for the call to awaken from “the powerful spell of literary studies which has been displayed on a shrine for a long time” (Sangkomsatparitat 39). At the other end of the prestige spectrum, romance novels were also attacked for their non-constructive social engagement: “the book market in our country is full of lusty porn books, action killer murder-the-family books, dreamy novels of the type that puts daughter-in-laws with mother-in-laws, foreign-educated bachelors with market women, M.R.s⁴ with village girls” (Chaisiri 34-35). Progressive writers, despite their activity and urgent questioning of social powers, were a very small group in literature compared to the book industry as a whole. And their works, although large in number, were small in terms of sales (43). Their intellectual impact was great but ineffective in dissuading romance-addicts from their support of commercial novels.

This antagonism between Thai fiction of the romance group and the social group is important in that it embodies a pervasive historical tension in Thai literature and culture. Literature, until the decade of the 1932 coup, had been the relative

⁴ M.R. is short for Mom Rajawongse which is the title for the children of M.C.s (Mom Chao which is the equivalent of Prince in English).

domain of an elite group that consisted of royalty, aristocrats and the educated upper-middle class. The contents of these pre-Constitution narratives, therefore, had to do with the domestic life and concerns of privileged people. Modern and contemporary romances are a direct descendant of these early Thai novels and their romantic origins in terms of plot and style, and symbolize the exclusive literary past in their escapist sensational orientation and aloofness from society. The post-coup and postwar educated middle class who took up social writing, found themselves once again struggling to be heard against an apathetic and well-to-do class of literary entertainers. The relationship between “high” and popular culture in Thai literary history is, therefore, a somewhat distorted divide and an ambiguously chiasitic one. The antagonism is rather one-sided because the social group resents the popularity and commercial success of the romance group despite the latter’s apparent lack of intellectual merit which the former deems valuable and worthwhile in literature. Occasionally, romance writers and associated cultural producers will deny the intellectual inferiority of their work (Warayuth), revealing that they too feel an anxiety about not meeting certain literary standards. These intermittent pangs of guilt often are soon forgotten, however, as market demands and public appreciation turn their attention to more practical concerns. The rise of socialist consciousness through “art for life’s sake,” popularized by Sriburapa and Seni Sawapong (Trisilpa 147), was nevertheless significant. It fueled the progressive movement⁵ which produced some of the most urgent and creative works of literature in modern Thai history.

⁵ Different accounts disagree on this. Saithip Nukulkiy’s survey of modern Thai literature cites the period of “statism” (1933–45) as giving rise to the progressive movement. Chaisiri Samudavanija, however, places it much later, as more contemporary with the two October uprisings (1973, 1976). I prefer to consider it as belonging to the postwar period rather than before as Saithip suggests.

Anti-capitalist literature and activity during the immediate postwar period, with Kularb Saipradit as one of the prominent leaders, increased to such an extent that on November 10, 1952 the Phibun government, in power since 1948, decided to arrest its leaders. This quelling of what came to be known as the “Peace Revolt” and the law forbidding all communist activity that followed it effectively dampened this brief burgeoning of political literature.

The Marxist ideas that the movement publicized, however, had taken root. They can be seen as the modern continuation of political writing that Cholthira Satyawatana points out may have begun since the Tribhumi Praruang in the 14th century or even before (Chaisiri 21). In the earlier case, she argues, being written by a king, the aim was to keep people under control, teaching them to fear insurgency. Religion was used to appeal to people’s moral consciousness. Political uprising was equated to religious sin, and any undesirable political action was assigned the appropriate religious punishment. It was a potent formula and seemed to have worked for centuries.

In the 20th century, the new religion was the state, and the triangle of symbols that upheld the modern Thai nation-state-nation, religion, sovereign-was used, much as religion had been used before, to dissuade people from questioning authority. The slogan acquired a religion-like sanctity and became a convenient weapon and excuse for the state rulers to assume and to maintain power.

Such a tidy and hierarchical structure of government and world view had not always been part of the Thai consciousness, however. Thongchai Winichakul mentions this in his book Siam Mapped (20-36), and Dheerayudh Boonmee argues in his paper for the Social Research Institute Annual Conference in 1986 that Thai society, or rather the communities that lived before the advent of Buddhism in the

geographical space that is now Thailand, had their own system of beliefs and cosmology that was in many ways very democratic (34). No group of fellow human beings was elevated to god-like status, and tolerance for local community culture was high (31). Traveling families and merchants observed the local custom, revealing a sensitivity that would be a useful model for pluralist studies today.

Buddhism introduced a heroic cult (Dheerayudh 21) and patriarchy into a polytheistic and essentially matriarchal society. It replaced parochial law and community cosmology with a new set of symbols and a hierarchical paradigm. Symbols, therefore, entered Thai literary history with roots in religious, philosophical and political narratives, and have changed with the changing context in which they are used. The political writing of the immediate postwar period continued to use literature as a powerful intellectual medium. The writers this time, however, were the people as well as the state. And symbols, for this newly voiced group, were used as an effective means to criticize.

Symbolism acquired a greater political significance during the postwar dictatorial regimes of Phibun, Sarit and Thanom in the 1950s-1970s. The extreme political instability in this period made the literary circle victim of the government's whims and desires for control and power, and writers lives were very often in serious danger (Trisilpa 2). Several coups brought the country into eras of complete dictatorship in which writers were closely watched and censored, several were imprisoned, and others had to flee the country. Symbolism took on more and more political tones and to serve more and more political functions. The idea of using something to refer to something more than itself became a handy concept in the face of constant political threat and censorship, allowing, to however small an extent,

writers to continue producing. In a sense, symbolism itself can be seen as a sign. It stands for a kind of liberation in times of dictatorial rule.

By the 1970s, social realist literature produced by young writers and university students made regular use of symbols. Social realism began as a Romantic revolutionary movement among the young generation of writers (Chaisiri 49) and became more philosophical as existentialist writings and translations became available. Symbols gained currency in early experimental writing influenced by the surrealist movement because of their ability to shock. Seksan Prasertkul's once popular "Ode to the Papaya" (1973), for example, uses the common papaya tree as a symbol for people in society. The plant is so common it is overlooked; it is so useful it is taken for granted; it is so close to people's lives, they forget to identify with it. The poem shocked readers to this realization and demanded of its audience an active and critical engagement with literature and with social happenings. It was during this period and alongside these writers that Nikom Rayawa came of age as a writer.

Nikom's heritage is a blend of old and new literary traditions, of social consciousness and political anxiety. Two popular authors he grew up reading, P. Indrapalit and Rong Wongsawan, showed him various ways in which socially responsible work could be created. The former's combination of good storytelling and humor with political and social topics wittily parodied city life and the very rich elite of the time who were mostly the *nouveau riche* and aristocrats. The latter told of life in the temples, slum and village communities with verbal ingenuity, fearless abundance and abandon. In Nikom's own work, local life is prominently figured, in spare poetic language, and symbols are deceptively innocent. These last I will examine as critiques of a changing Thai society.

The effects of modernization or, as Thais understand it, westernization⁶ of Thailand in the past 50 years, have been vigorously studied and well documented by both Thai and foreign scholars, researchers and economists.⁷ The fact that the majority of Thai people living outside of Bangkok-farmers, villagers-are adversely affected by this westernization is also well-known. It is not this counterexample to the development myth that I wish to focus on but rather the effects of this very myth on the people's mentality and ideology. And these will be read as they are portrayed in Nikom's symbolism.

While the political and economic history of modern Thailand is studied and reviewed by many research groups, the cultural history of the country, as is prominent in Nikom's fiction, is little investigated. Although non-academic and unreferenced by other works of scholarship, Nikom's stories as well as a group of Thai literature⁸ are critically perceptive and rooted in the culture(s) they observe. These literatures have emerged alongside economic policies and analyses, providing different records and critiques of the effects of Thailand's adoption of an industrial capitalist economy.

⁶ The meanings of modernization, urbanization, westernization, and Americanization are often conflated for Thais. This can be seen in the similar contexts in which occurrences of words like "tun samai" [modern or fashionable], "muang" [city], "pen tawantok" [western or western-like], and "pen American" [American or American-like] appear in Thai media and literature. Occasionally, industrialization will appear in similar contexts but this word, being associated with the economy, has less of the general cultural ring than others. Modernization and urbanization is a Western concept and, therefore, equivalent and interchangeable with Westernization in the Thai perspective (Muscat 286). And as the concept of Western has more recently been chiefly applied to America and all things American, the term Americanization, creating the same anxiety toward this particular kind of "development" (Pasuk and Baker 385), can be said to fall into the group as well. Most recently, however, the term "lokapiwat" [globalization] has come into current use. It has quickly replaced many of the other usages as a more general and convenient umbrella term.

⁷ Some of the more recent include Robert J. Muscat's *The Fifth Tiger: A Study of Thai Development Policy* (1994), Medhi Krongkaew's anthology *Thailand's Industrialization and Its Consequences* (1995), and Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker's *Thailand: Economy and Politics* (1995).

⁸ I restrict my discussion to literature, that is, fiction and, more specifically, social realist fiction of the progressive group and particularly Nikom Rayawa although several other forms of writing and cultural expression have emerged. To include poetry, songs, drama, television series, films, and the visual arts, among others, would be to extend this discussion beyond the scope of manageability.

Their accounts contrast and contest those narratives whose preoccupation is with effects as described by money and measured with Western standards.

Moreover, I will argue in this paper that Nikom Rayawa's fiction, similar to others in the social realist group, focus on the people rather than the country, and specifically on their consciousness rather than their changed physical surroundings. His works explore how the capitalist economy transforms both the physical *and* mental landscapes of the people. They examine what Harvey calls "an urbanized human nature" (199)—a "second" human nature with a particular concept of time, space, and money—and what Khamsing Srinawak calls "the internal condition" (Hom Kam 27)—the mental effects or psychological implications of external change.

Symbols have been used as powerful tools by authority often to affect such a change, to gain and to maintain political power. They have been used also by writers to evade that power and to publicize against it. Nikom's work is generally seen as highly symbolic and socially conscious as well as philosophical.⁹ Its critical reviews focus almost exclusively on the symbolism to the extent that one periodical offers a "key" for several of the major images during his SEA Write boom.¹⁰ This is a view of symbols as absolute and static. I will contend, however, that Nikom's symbols are dynamic and that their many layers of meaning makes them open to multiple interpretations. In rethinking Nikom's symbolism, I look at how his symbols defy a

⁹ The SEA Write committee itself declares his distinctive use of symbols (*Matichon* 6 Sep. 1988, 22). Head of the Committee, Nitaya Masavisut, writes at length about Nikom's symbols in a separate article compiled in the 15th anniversary of SEA Write publication of Thai PEN (1993). Virtually every article on his work or novel High Banks, Heavy Logs in Siamrathsabdawichan and Matichonsudsabda, two leading weeklies, discusses his symbolism (see References for page details). V. Vinichaikul, an author herself, predicts increase in popularity of symbolism following Nikom's SEA Write fame in her review of literature from 1978-1997. Saithip Nukulki, in her Contemporary Thai Literature (1996) cites Nikom Rayawa as an example symbolist author (34). Kobkul Ingkutanond discusses his philosophical merits in addition to the signature symbolism (1990).

¹⁰ Kam Pong [pseud.], "Talingsoongsoonghnuk: kanchakayoerawangjuddenkabkodoy" ["High Banks, Heavy Logs: Tug of War Between Key Character and Weak Point"]. Matichon sudsabda 30 Oct. 1988: 39-40.

one-to-one correspondence with a “key” meaning and resist Romantic coding. This study is an attempt to read the symbols as a play with several historical meanings, arguing that their significance lies more in their engagement with cultural and literary movements than in their usage as an allegorical tool. Furthermore, I propose that they are more internal-oriented—a mental description and critique—than artistic portrayals of the abstract through the concrete or of certain objects through others.

My thesis, therefore, presents Nikom’s work as an active text that engages in literary and historical change rather than as a passive code waiting to be decoded. I focus on the *refamiliarizing* demands that the novels and short stories make on the reader. The dynamism of the symbols defamiliarize well-known images and contexts, asking the reader to reevaluate them in their changing meanings. In this, Nikom is not far in spirit from the principles of symbolism as it originated in France. A century earlier, Baudelaire had declared in his *salon* that “*le beau est toujours bizarre*” (“beauty is always strange”) (Fowlie 5), perceiving the attractive quality of the strange before defamiliarization came into currency in literary criticism. Through defamiliarization, Nikom *refamiliarizes* or reconciles readers to a myth of modern Thailand. And this new myth lies very much in our manner of perception and in the state of people’s psychology. It is a mapping of a new consciousness.

The reading of Nikom Rayawa’s texts that I attempt here runs against the grain of many traditional Thai studies of symbolic literature in my insistence of the historical dynamism of symbols and of the cultural meaning that may be invested in them. Their interpretation in this paper is new historicist in this acknowledgement, and conscious of the “dual process” Paul Lauter points out in studying “marginalized cultures” where “neither separation nor integration provide wholly satisfactory methods” (Wong 15). In the case of Nikom Rayawa’s fiction, I separate or

“marginalize” the author from his context not because of his racial identity but in order to more closely examine his work. At the same time I align him with his cultural setting as the conditions in which and in response to which he worked. Nikom’s fiction is situated in an evolved and evolving symbolic tradition, yet it is also significantly an individual’s work; it is one writer’s coming to terms with the changes in his society and his critique of them. With this in mind, I try to avoid universalizing the symbols to the extent that they conflate the local culture with other cultures into a single universal model which tends to oversimplify and misinterpret. The relevance of this reading of symbols to other writings will be the decision of other comparatists working in other literatures who would like to consider also a Thai author’s texts.

Furthermore, this paper treats the work of only one author and does not claim to speak for Thai literature as a whole or to typify Thai literature. My discussion is interpretive and does not seek to provide definitive paradigms or conclusions. Only the novels and short fiction by Nikom Rayawa will be focused upon. His two novels are The Monitor and the Rotten Branch (1983) and High Banks, Heavy Logs (1984), and the majority of short fiction come from Man in the Tree (1984), a volume of 13 short stories beginning with the short story “Man in the Tree,” published in a magazine in 1967. There are earlier works published since 1958 in various popular magazines and periodicals but these are lost to the archival system. There are also his writings for children which I have excluded and a translation of Luigi Pirandello’s existentialist play “The Man with the Flower in His Mouth” which does not fit into the scope of my investigation. Different versions of a work (from various reprints) will be brought to attention in cases where the changes are significant and insightful for interpretation.

The study is divided into three parts (chapters 2-4), each roughly framing a group of symbols that variously describe the physical landscape and the mental atmosphere of Thailand in the late 20th century. Chapter two looks at a number of images Nikom uses as population for the fictional world he creates, and attempts to show their deviation from the capital industrialist set of images projecting the country's future publicized by the government. The images, products of Nikom's social context and his response to them, provide an alternative focus on literary and historical development by offering a less human centric paradigm of world conceptualization. Chapter three moves away from the inhabitants and focuses on the world itself. The city and the country are imaginative contexts in which to visualize modern Thailand, and Nikom's portrayal of these landscapes tend to shy away from hierarchical models implied, ironically, even in ideologies of free trade and democracy. Chapter four explores the cultural information imbricated in signs of the mental states of the inhabitants within these worlds. Social transformation is justified in government propaganda by positivistic narratives. Symbols in Nikom Rayawa's work, however, undermine this rationale, offering additional views not easily dichotomized. The views presented are not always positive and therefore not necessarily negative either. He does not simply counter the positivistic narratives but offers a different tool, approach, and language with which to understand the culture altogether.

The terms symbol and symbolism as applying to a literary technique in Thailand, although imported in the early 1900s from the French symbolists, their use today only bears the faintest consciousness of their European origin. Thailand never had a symbolist movement in the spirit of the European one. In the sense that symbolism is an aesthetic movement that refuses involvement with the socio-political

world, the trend in Thailand has been the opposite. Symbolism, especially in the 50s-70s, was vigorously engaged in the politics and history of the country. It, however, sparked debate about the definition of art and its role in society much in the same way that *l'art pour l'art* inspired discussion of the function of art in late 1800s and early 1900s France. Studying Nikom Rayawa's symbols is an opportunity to combine literary examination with historical inquiry and to show connections rather than polarizations. The concrete and the abstract, the external and the internal, the old and the new, the rich and the poor are critiqued by Nikom's symbols as mere conceptual terms that not only change over time but also hold different meanings for different people, often under another configuration and with many more associations.

