

Editorial

A Call For Partnership – A Climate For Change

Kjell Skyllstad⁺ Editor in Chief

In a poem the Poet Laureate of Norway Henrik Wergeland envisages an encounter in the desert between a Muslim Mullah, a Jewish Rabbi and a Christian Priest. The sun is rising and all are eager to meet the new day with a prayer. But being of different faiths they hesitate, afraid of offending each other. Suddenly they discover and are overwhelmed by the polyphonic choir of birds singing in the tree above them, and they join in the chorus of praise to the Creator.

The vision and hope of our poet that our common links to nature would overcome religious divisions has many decades after this poem was written still remained a utopian dream. And this in spite of many of the Holy writings containing not only similar visions outlining a way of regeneration of life and restitution of the balance of man and nature, but also containing prophecies and graphic warnings of an approaching ecological disaster.

In line with the Biblical creation myth, Islamic literature abound in descriptions of the paradisaical garden with the Celestial Tree, the Tube or Sidra. The ninth century Abu Bayad of Bistam calls this garden “the Field of Eternity” where he beholds “the Tree of Oneness” Thus the ecological vision is tied up with the concept of the integration of man, the oneness of mankind, the ultimate real mode of being for which the soul thirsts.

⁺ Dr. Kjell Skyllstad, Professor Emeritus, University of Oslo, Department of Musicology, Norway

The 14th century poet Hafez paints this picture:

On the holy boughs of the Sidra
High up in the heavenly fields,
Beyond terrestrial desire,
My soul-bird a warm nest has built

The Tree of Life is associated with man re-finding a center, establishing a new order. As a means of re-finding this order the Islamic mystic philosophers conceived of a world of vision (alam-al-mithal) or a world of imagination (alam-i-malakut) mediating between the realms of intellect and sense perception. Imagination to these men is a central human faculty bridging sense and intellect.

All societies in ecological balance have of course attached the greatest importance to the role of artistic creativity in maintaining the ecosystem. Throughout the long history of human existence it is through this activity of artistic and symbolic interaction that social and ecological attitudes were being formed in an innovative process. In the artistic manifestations of different civilizations we find artistic forms that were modeled in this process, thus containing incentives and stimuli for ecological and social reconstruction.

During my travels and research among tribal peoples of Southeast Asia I have found this very foundation to be threatened through the blow to natural habitats, the brutal destruction of the tropical rainforest, and the forced relocation, or the modern expulsion from paradise so to speak, of the very peoples that possess the wisdom that could save us from the final disaster. Among these tribes every dance, every song now becomes a potential manifestation of the resistance to processes that within a few years threaten to turn their country into a wasteland.

During my first visits to the upper tributaries of the Rejang river of Malaysian Sarawak and the Batak tribes of Lake Toba in Northern Sumatra it became evident how artistic activities are linked to the idea of nature preservation, not least through the ceremonies where contracts with nature are being renewed. These rituals are often, like in the Tunggal Panaluan rituals of Northern Sumatra centered around the ceremonial planting and veneration of the Tree of Life.

It all brings us to the question of building partnerships. For me it meant involving myself in the activities of NGO's working to protect traditional habitats and natural resources like our pristine forests and threatened rivers The Rejang, Salween and Mekong. For an ever growing part of the worlds population in Asia and elsewhere it also means building partnerships to fight climate change. At the recent flooding disasters affecting Bangkok our Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts at Chulalongkorn University joined forces with the Urban Research Plaza in exploring ways to help affected artists and restore endangered art monuments and disrupted cultural venues.

But there are accounts of other reactions to a similar disaster. Some forty years ago I was asked to introduce a new opera for Norwegian radio listeners: Hans Magnus Enzenberger's and Hans Werner Henze's play "The End of a World." The cultural and artistic elite is seen gathering for a congress on an idyllic island outside Venice, They are discussing the latest finds like the rediscovery of two Baroque flute sonatas considered lost. During a performance the water begins to rise, and at the end of a beautiful Adagio movement the island and its distinguished festive visitors slowly disappear. As the text goes it only later turned out that the acclaimed sonatas for which the audience was risking their lives in fact were fake.

The question we should consider is: What partnerships are we willing to build? Motivation for the arts community is everywhere to be found. The interplay of man with nature was an often overheard theme of classical composers, nowhere more touchingly and emphatically expressed than in Haydn's oratorio *The Creation*. In this magnificent work Haydn in his Finale voices a warning to man not to transgress his own bounds by misusing his power over nature. In fact the ensuing European Romanticism in music may be interpreted on the backdrop of a reaction against the rising industrial age with its factories belching poisonous smoke, and thus bringing the relationship between urban and rural development into focus.

Many will mean that the times are now ripe for the arts community to invite to forming a comprehensive urban-rural partnership engaging in solving our cultural, social and not least environmental challenges. Creative ideas are needed that could confront the rise of divisiveness on the local, national, regional and international arena. The Urban Research Plaza therefore cordially invites all our journal readers to attend the 14th Forum hosted on the Chulalongkorn University campus on March 3-4 with the theme: Urban Culture - Rural Culture: Overcoming a Dichotomy. Wergeland's vision should come true.