

Creating Cultural Bridges: Surin International Folklore Festival, Surin, Thailand

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Abstract

Preserving and promoting art and culture is one of the most important roles for Surindra Rajabhat University (SRRU) which is an institute of Higher Education aiming towards the development of the local community. SRRU is located in the South of the Northeastern part of Thailand, also referred to as Southern Isan, an area which surrounds a hub of cultural identity. Hence, the university has performed with strength to display the high potential of the culture. As a result of more than 10 years experience of cultural exchanges from both inside the country and overseas, SRRU has acted as a leader in the pioneering of the Surin International Folklore Festival (SIFF) since January 2006, and we have run this event continually in an effort to maintain this tradition annually. The 4 main objectives are, as follows: performing folk dances on stage, to hold an international academic seminar, present a top model fashion show, and perform the song and peace speech declaration. These

activities are aimed to reflect the way of life of indigenous people such as through the presentation of art, textiles and costumes, music and musical instruments, languages, ethnic culture, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, values, ethno-ecology, and so on. These kinds of cultural activities clearly promote not only friendship, understanding, and commitment but also achieve partnerships, and collaboration for further sustainable development. During the festival, all the arts delegations stay together as a big family, so that they can communicate and interact whenever they wish to do so. This article, however, tries to attempt to show the role of the university to build and develop cultural bridges, and its success and fulfillment are helping to create the SIFF Foundation and the establishment of the International Costumes Museum. The foundation must have a chance to gather financial funding for charity and the general public and the museum is necessary to act as an informal life long learning resource center. Additionally, the



outcomes of the fashion shows should be implemented through magazines and other forms of media towards the international market. SRRU, therefore, plays a significant role in maintaining the cultural identities of people all over the world. The achievements should go directly to the new, younger generation in order for them to realize, protect and conserve the grass roots of their original, cultural identity. On the other hand, the most important thing is creating expressive friendship, and the commitment to building bridges of understanding. Hence, peace will spread across human beings further and further into the future.

Key words: Cultural bridges, SIFF, folklore, GMS countries

Introduction

Surindra Rajabhat University (SRRU) is an institute of Higher Education aiming towards the development of the local

community and plays an important role based on the Government Gazette of the Rajabhat University Act., B.E 2547 (2004), section 7, and section 8. The University seeks to produce teachers, instructors, researchers, and provide educational services for the community as well as to conserve and maintain art and culture. SRRU is located in the South of the Northeastern part of Thailand, also referred to as Southern Isaan, an area comprised of many artistic and cultural attractions. In terms of location, it is around 450 kilometres from Bangkok by road. In the past the University has been involved in the presentation of arts and culture not only from within the learning process in the classroom but also by performing inside Thailand and in neighboring countries as well. The University has performed consistently in a number of other Asian countries and also further overseas, in Europe, the United States of America, and Australia. The University folk

dance group has received invitations from international folk dance organizations abroad annually and, after gaining around 10 years experience from performing overseas, the group's potential concerning arts and culture is considered strong enough now, that we have created our own pioneer program. This is due to the lessons learned from abroad, that the organizing committees of the festival can now apply these to the context of the Surin region in Thailand. To demonstrate its commitment, SRRU has initiated a special program so that well organized and prepared materials can be dealt with beforehand. As a consequence, the first Surin International Folklore Festival (SIFF) was established in 2006. This kind of cultural activity is scheduled annually in January and has run up until the present time in 2009. Arts delegations from all over the world have come and joined the events which last for about 10 days. Methods learned from other countries help us be aware of the different ways of life, textiles and costumes, presentations of traditional arts, music and dance, ceremonial events, rituals, beliefs, religions, food, values, ethno-ecology, agriculture, environment, and so on, of different areas around the world. The gatherings of international artists have interacted impressively, with harmony and unity. Additionally, they have been able to learn about the diversity of culture by being involved in cultural exchanges, and have obtained local wisdom in order to develop art and culture in the coming years. The most important issue is the establishment

of partnerships for sustainable development.

SRRU has been so proud to have handled this schedule for the past 4 years and is willing to continue to run this program. The 4 main aims are performing on stage at different venues, holding international academic seminars, top model fashion shows, and song-peace speech declarations for world peace and for 10 days the participation of the artists is organized by SRRU, with the executive administration, faculty staff, and students acting as hosts. A tentative schedule is provided to join together the activities and additionally, Surin's provincial government office, members of the local community and private sector around Thailand are incorporated into this event. Without this good cooperation, we would not be able to go so directly towards our target. Therefore, we realized that it is important to provide an impressive, high level of hospitality to those from all nations and the by products of the festival must be implemented directly to the university and the community.

Details of activities

SRRU, on behalf of Thai people, is proud to manage this pioneering project, the SIFF, for gathering arts delegations to come and join the event.

These are some brief details of the schedule:

The 1st SIFF in 2006, has 8 countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR,

China, The Philippines, Austria, and Israel. Arts delegations of about 120 participants presenting folk dances, academic seminar on international folk dances, and a top model fashion show.

The 2nd SIFF in 2007, has 10 countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR, China, The Philippines, Austria, Israel, Cameroon, and Italy. Arts delegations of about 150 participants presenting folk dances, academic seminar on Textiles and Costumes, top model fashion show, and song-peace speech declaration at out-door venue nearby Surin City.

The 3rd SIFF in 2008, has 12 countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR, China (main land of China and Chinese Taipei), The Philippines, Japan, Sri Lanka, Israel, Finland, Lithuania, and Italy. Arts delegations of about 200 participants presented folk dances, an academic seminar on Ethno-culture, and top model fashion show. Cultural, elephant, and silk weaving villages are included in a field trip study tour. Moreover, another city nearby is also organized to provide one venue for the local community. A special program for students is also arranged to be presented at the convention hall of the university.

The 4th SIFF in 2009, has 13 countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR, China (2 teams), Myanmar, The Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Israel, and Italy (2 teams). Arts delegations of about 250 participants



presenting folk dances, academic seminar on International Traditional Cuisine, top model fashion show and song-peace speech declaration at the Buraparam Royal Temple Honour His Majesty the King. Elephant and silk weaving villages are included in field trip study tour. Moreover, another city nearby is also arranged to present at 5 venues for the local community. The feedback on the performances at the other venues is very positive from the audiences of more than 31,000 people. A special program for students is organized to be presented at the convention hall of the university.

Success and Achievement of SIFF

From organizing the 4 year program, SRRU is proud to present international folk dances from all over the world onto an

international platform. During the era of globalization, many people have not been too concerned or paid attention to cultural activities, but since the university has run this project, indigenous people of Surin, government offices, and the private sectors have become interested in the festival. This is due to mass communication particularly via the radio and university website. All activities mentioned earlier are promoted and attract mostly the younger generation and this shows clearly that SRRU has a clear vision that is strongly rooted in the local region.

Stage Performances

The end product throughout the 4 years is that there are contexts that can be observed during performances. They are as follows:

1. Reflection that the way of life of indigenous people is simple. Some are from mountainous areas, and are minority ethnic groups. Most have occupations in farming, fishing, and mulberry growing and after harvesting time the villagers in the countryside gathered to join and watch the entertainment, and this is a universal way of life.
2. Presenting the beauty of nature, in terms of, river, ocean, mountain, hill, wind, breeze, and wave, such as the performance songs from Vietnam, China, and Lao PDR.
3. There is a similarity in some of the dances, such as the peacock dance from Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, China, and Thailand. All performances showed their own cultural identity so that in the past,

indigenous people tried to imitate the natural beauty and gestures of animals. They are also dances in Thailand, Lao Krathop Mai that are similar to Cambodia, and the Tinikling dances of the Philippines.

4. Traditional ceremonies and rituals of the beliefs are included in some dances such as those from India, Thailand, and Cambodia. They are performed to tell a brief history or story. This type of dance is performed in order to pay respect as well as worship.

5. Most dances are performed as a courtship with one another and to entertain audiences. A couple of male and female dancers will present a story typically from the countryside, and the dance is followed by the musical instruments that may be slow or fast, depending upon the situation.

6. Dances from Asian countries such as Thailand and Cambodia, are usually very graceful and charming, to be a blessing dance for the audience. In contrast, typical dances from overseas are rather fast and basically use step dancing.

7. The diversity of performance can be seen in those from ethnic minorities from all over the world, and traditional costumes are quite different from one another: Asian countries have lighter clothes because the climate is tropical, humid and hot, but in Europe though, it is a cooler region so some of the cloth is made from thick wool. Costumes from Finland, the Sami people, who live in the Rovaniemi, the heart of Lapland, Finland, are also presented impressively to the audiences. Philippines costumes, on the other hand, are a

combination of native and Spanish, European style, while Israel dance is also a combination from Asia, Europe and Africa.

8. The main musical instrument is comprised of a few pieces. The sound of the music, especially from Thailand, Cambodia, and Lao PDR is quite the same. On the other hand, basically in Europe there is accordion, flute, xylophone, guitar, and violin.

9. At the end of the presentations, certificates are presented in appreciation and also a plaque of recognition. This program promotes dances not only with a certificate of attendance, but also for moral support. All arts delegations will sing hearts of harmony along together with the audiences, and these songs present a symbol of the festival, written by the faculty staff of SRRU.

International Academic Seminar

Each festival is organized with a different theme. The atmosphere of the program includes an exhibition, display, poster, keynote address, special talk, and group discussion. Details of each year are as follows:

The 1st SIFF in 2006 : A seminar on International Folk Dances. Group discussion is organized with those from Israel, Lao PDR, Cambodia, The Philippines, Vietnam, China, and Thailand. In conclusion, the neighboring countries of Thailand, Lao PDR, and Cambodia, performed to show the way of life of indigenous people in almost the same way, in terms of music,



drama, textiles and costume, song, and storytelling and this is because we are from the same ethnic group. Vietnamese patterns tell stories of the beautiful environment and ethnic minority from the northern, middle, and southern regions, while those from China performed traditional dances with strength, harmony and unity. The Philippines dances were actually performed with a combination of traditional dance mixed with Spanish style, while Israel dance is a combination of Asian, European, and African regions.

The 2nd SIFF in 2007 : A seminar on International Textiles and Costumes. There were keynote addresses, with papers presented by speakers from Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Cameroon, Austria, The Philippines, and Italy. During

the presentations, they demonstrated multicultural items about traditional and national costumes which were very attractive for the audiences. On the stage, however, the fashion show of ethnic minority in the Greater Mekong Sub-region is presented by Thailand. In this event the Ph.D. students try to conduct research and development of a learning resource center for hand-woven textiles of ethnic groups in the Mekong Sub-region.

The 3rd SIFF in 2008 : A seminar on Ethno-ecology. This event shows the principle of culture and its impact on the adaptation of the way of life in the community. The keynote address from Israel was about the monitor lizard, while Thailand presented Trends in Ethno-Bio diversity and cultural development for sustainability. Additionally, special talks are presented from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Japan, The Philippines, Finland, Lithuania, and Thailand. On another day, a study tour is organized to go to the villages of an ethnic minority group in Surin, the Kuy people, an elephant village, the biggest in the world, and a silk weaving village. There, artists have direct access to local people who are expert in capturing elephants and have much local wisdom in making some of the most splendid silk in the world. Apart from that, a traditional dance of the Mantis (a kind of insect) and Kin-Heet (the killing of a buffalo for worship) are performed, and these dances are part of a research and development program conducted by students and staff. Therefore, the

Development of the Ritualistic Performance in the Kin-Heet Traditional Ceremony of a Mon-Khmer Ethnic group in the Mekong Sub-region is verified.

The 4th SIFF in 2009 : A seminar on International Traditional Cuisine. There are keynote addresses on understanding traditional world cuisine, a demonstration of traditional food, a fresh organic market, special talk, poster and paper presentation. The country representatives are from Lao PDR, Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea, Sri Lanka, The Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, Italy, and Thailand. The most attractive presentations are from Vietnam, Korea, and Indonesia and a demonstration of Thai food is displayed in front of the convention hall and the audiences are willing to join and taste all the ingredients.

Top Model Fashion Show

Textiles and costumes from other countries are provided to be displayed on the stage. The organizer tried to present a diversity of attires from different countries. This event can show the local knowledge of indigenous people in how to weave typically beautiful styles. Thailand is known as an outstanding maker of Thai silk not only in this country but has also been well known in the international market for a long period of time. The 10 years of experience in styles of presentation were applied year after year and therefore, the organizer was able to realize the benefit of presenting by integrating a diversity of costumes from around the world. Firstly,

we tried to present the importance of the cloth that was related to the way of life of the people, such as for rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, and so on. Secondly, the international traditional costumes have a great opportunity to join with their own identities. Lastly, all the presenters join hands and sing the song 'Hearts of Harmony' which means, 'we hope to see you again'. The final outcome, the university aims to produce a magazine internationally. This hope may come true in the coming year.

Song for peace and peace speech declaration

Nowadays, many places around the world face critical issues such as food, energy, and global warming and everybody tries to do the best for survival. Some situations will cause conflict, and continued fighting, so that peace is no longer in peoples' minds anymore. The University realized the fact that one way we might solve the problems could be by using music and song, and drama accompanied with music, performed as a bridge for creating peace, because they are gestures for the understanding of human beings all over the world. Constructing peace must involve all the artists, because they stay and communicate daily in the same big family, with interactive activities using music and drama which must be beneficial for everybody. This situation, means there are no frontiers for all nations due to no restrictions for gender, religion, young or old, but for everybody. Creatively

conducting peace must be a source of trust, friendship, unity and harmony. For about 2 years, in 2006 and 2009, the experience clearly showed the close relationship among nations with cooperation and networking obtained for sustainable development. The delegations themselves promised to join hands and move forward to create world peace, and they also committed to come to the international road at Surin Province in the coming year. SRRU is proud to present the famous song of the festival, a symbol of harmony and unity under the name of 'Hearts of Harmony'. Furthermore, for those who were unable to attend the live world peace speech declaration in person, they can access directly to it on the university website.

Other important activities

Apart from the 4 main objectives of the program, the mass communication of the schedule is organized by live interview of artists at the local radio station, and the presentation will also shown via the university website, so that people all over the world can join with it. In general, many people in Surin, and the nearby regions came and participated at the event and over the last 2 years the younger generation from schools and the local community have been willing to join the events. According to observations and informal interview of those attending, they enjoyed the folk dances and wanted them to continue every year. The fourth SIFF, performed outdoors, was attended by about



31,000 people at 5 venues, and this is an indication that people from the community are very interested in the show. Moreover, the students from schools were inspired to present their own folk dances and join this international event. This is challenging and helps to make them to maintain their typical culture. Hence, this activity is necessary for the general public, particularly the younger generation.

The official opening ceremony is lead by Surin's Provincial Governor at the heart center of the town. This ceremony is of interest for the head of government offices, private sector, and Surin's indigenous people and some excellent demonstration programs are provided to be presented before all the guests. They are very attractive for the audiences, and after, the marching of the parade performs along the city, passing through the audiences.

Interactive activities are also organized for country representatives to join in together with executive administrators, faculty staff, and students, and everybody in the University acts as hosts. The academic discussion for the international conference will go directly to the point, and the presentation of folk dances from each country's representatives will raise the issue for interactive discussion. The context of each presentation will be identified, such as art and culture, textile and costume, language, religion, music, ceremony, ritual, ethnic group, food, musical instrument, and so on. After the exchanging of information, the representatives created partnerships for cooperating together in the future.

Field trip study tours are provided for outside classroom learning centers and all arts delegations are invited to join the arts and culture attractions. They went to visit villages such as the elephant, silk weaving,

and cultural sites. There, they had direct access to the native ethnic minority groups of Kuy, Khmer, and Lao Surin indigenous people. The most attractive culture for artists is learning about the way of life of the native Kuy, Surin people, who are expert in catching wild elephants. The other traditional rituals of the



native people called Gla-more is also interesting, because they believe that they can cure sickness and fortune tell about fertility. All the arts delegations are very impressed with the warm welcome from the native Surin people.

Data gathering of Research and Development is also a part of the festival and aside from presenting the diversity of traditional dances, researchers have a great opportunity in collecting data through research questionnaires. There are 3 presentations of researches: the Mantis Dance, Nadta Gam Bucha (Kin-Heet, the killing of a buffalo), and Nadtaga Lelar, (a traditional dance of southern Thailand). In this activity, students act as they are research teacher assistants for gathering and analyzing data.

There are 2 outstanding outcomes that SRRU is proud to present. Firstly, the SIFF Foundation, and the other is the International Costumes Museum. The first non-government organization is beneficial to the general public. It was established in

2007 and its co-members are from overseas partnerships including Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, China, The Philippines, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, Sri Lanka, India, The United States of America, Finland, and Lithuania. Once a year the SIFF Foundation is willing to hold a conference to discuss and gather financial support. This income from foundations is necessary for the charities concerning arts and cultural activities. On the other hand, the International Costumes Museum was originated in 2008 and presents a gallery collection, a display of international costumes, and details of research results which are presented for lifelong academic learning centers for the general public.

Important Ideas and Suggestions from SIFF

From the past 4 years' experiences, SRRU has tried its best to research and develop the organization of the event. At



the end of the festival we asked for the thoughts of all the arts delegations to the floor for a question and answer session. This activity is very necessary to improve data for professional management and these are some of the beneficial suggestions that were made.

1. Presentation on stage, the long introduction on stage by the master of ceremony should be briefer. Audiences would like to concentrate on the show much more than listening to a long boring story. The overall performance time should not be more than 2 hours.

2. The stage must be strong enough for the presentations and also of a professional standard. Some dances from westerners need a rigid stage. Nearby the stage there should be a spare room provided for changing costumes.

3. The schedule must be fixed, not having postponements, even though there are a lot of programs, and as the arts delegations are usually in such a hurry to join the event everyday the hosting country

should allocate one free day so that each group has the opportunity to watch some of the other groups' presentations. Moreover, the informal learning process among artists should occur in a relaxed way.

4. Some misunderstandings occur due to the language barrier. The host should organize personnel whose

English proficiency is good enough for them to be a co-coordinator.

5. The academic seminar should be prepared to train technicians because there are often technical errors happening on the stages.

6. Nearby city presentations should not be far away, because some presenters feel tired if they have to present at night time. The stages should be checked and be safe for presentation.

7. Official invitation letters should be prepared beforehand to process and approve, or to find grants for financial support.

8. The hosting country must consider different international foods for the delegations as some of them will probably be of another religion.

9. Accommodation such as coffee break, internet room services or overseas public telephones should be provided.

10. A field trip study tour should be organized to go to a number of different places.

From the above suggestions, we have tried to develop on these ideas and make improvements ahead of the next festival, because we would like all the visiting delegations to feel comfortable, at home, and have a good first impression.

Discussion

Under the era of globalization, no one can reject the power of information communication technology. It impacts on so many things, such as society, economy, and political science. In terms of arts and culture, however, people do not realize the importance of local wisdom. The grass roots level from the former time should be conserved and maintained for the future. Some local wisdom has been passed down from generation to generation, up until the present, but it keeps being ignored and is no longer inherited by the new generations anymore. So that SRRU has concerns about this big issue, on behalf of the leader of the academic institution. Hence, the role of the university will be considered rigorously. In consideration of services of arts and culture, SRRU tries to incorporate these into many different disciplines. The Surin study is subject to learning about the grass roots of indigenous people and those native people have to learn where they are from, so that they can appreciate their own ancestors. Once they know about themselves, they then have to learn more about the context of the surrounding culture. SRRU takes advantage of this to offer and provide graduate students a Master of Arts for

Research and Local Development Curriculum in 2001, while Doctor of Philosophy Program in Regional Development Strategies followed in 2004. At present, the university is attempting to revise the Master of Art in Research and Local Development program, concentrating on another field study, International Folk Dances. SRRU expect to accept student from the GMS countries and also from all over the world as these curriculums have promoted cross culture research and development. Generally, staff and students plan to go on field study trips, particularly in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, once a year, thereby gathering actual data concerning local wisdom and a case study in Sociology, Anthropology, and Archeology which are sources of arts and culture study. Furthermore, in the past 10 years, there has been an MOU between university dealing with institutes from 21 countries, concerning around 44 agreements. Hence, these figures confirm the value of traditional-international culture. The outcome of these studies can be implemented directly into the community by mass communication via, The Articles of Field Trip Study, A Study Tour in Southern Lao PDR and Northern Cambodia, Greater Mekong Sub-region, and the Aspect of Recent Development Trends, Chom Surin Journal of Local Development, Surindra Journal of People and Society in Local Culture. If there is a chance to present the papers, they will be presented at regional and international platforms. The initiation of the SIFF has also created value adding focus to multiple cultural exchanges



amongst nations, collaborative academic projects and other matters discussed and implemented.

Since 2006, the direction of the arts delegations has gone directly to SRRU for the same purpose which is the prominence of corporation between human beings and all the activities are improved in order that they are organized professionally. The end product, in terms of cultural value added is shown in its worth. Once a year the event has been held with a commitment from its partners. So, Surindra Rajabhat University seems to be a hub of cultural centers for people from all over the world. Along the Greater Mekong Sub-region, there are so many ethnic minorities who live in their own identity. In fact, there are 429 tribes: Thailand (75), Myanmar (135), Vietnam (53), Cambodia (20), China (56), and Lao PDR

(90). In the festival, each country's representative illustrated about some of the tribes, so that the audiences could identify their similarities and differences. Moreover, the audience was particularly impressed with the presentation about the Sami ethnic group from Lapland of Finland. This traditional costume is quite different from the others due to them being from the North Pole region. These ethnic minorities should be conserved and maintained for the younger generations, because there is so much local knowledge that has not been studied yet, and this needs researching and developing.

Significant Outcomes from SIFF

It is challenging to deal with the SIFF as a media of understanding and at the beginning it was very hard to deal with its complicated situation. There were only few people to concentrating on it and it was confined only to some target groups. Once SRRU had launched the special events of SIFF, the feedback from outside seemed to get stronger. Therefore, SRRU committed to take part as a host of the event annually. The end products from the SIFF Foundation and the International Costumes Museum are clear results. SRRU tried its best to gather endowment in foundations, particularly from overseas. The museum, however, will be fruitful if the university can assemble much more international traditional costumes, as a gallery. These are the facts of the SRRU achievements and opportunities, engaged in charity and general purposes.



Tendency of Route of Cultural Exchange Activities

Although the traditional culture study is difficult to educate due to the era globalization and its impact, according to the performances of the last 4 years, it has indicated that the agencies involved, in both the government and private sectors, tend to show interest, promote, and support this festival. In the future the most significant point of view is that native people, especially the young student generation, go back to find out and learn more about the local area. The promotion of this kind of activity is not successful if it does not incorporate the relevant person involved. SRRU, plans to enlarge items of ethnic minorities in the museum that will hopefully come true in the very near future. We do hope to express the warmest welcome to guests from around the world, to share experiences in Surin Province. Hopefully, the number of country representatives will increasingly join the festival, but the agencies that support the

project must give financial support to be able to run the programs.

Conclusion

SRRU displayed a clear picture that is powerful in the traditional aspects of the local region and worldwide overseas. These are emphasized in the

findings, as follows:

1. Surindra Rajabhat University is a hub of cultural learning.
2. In the era of globalization, we ourselves should consider the enduring value of cultural identity, 'think locally and act globally', and try our best to link the global to our local community.
3. In order to understand ourselves, we need to understand grass root ethnic culture via cultural identities.
4. We should be proud of our ethnic background even though it changes and is challenged.
5. We need to try every way possible to maintain international understanding.
6. The best outcome of all the activities in the festival, particularly from the Foundation and Museum, is creating cultural bridges of understanding. These are for charity, public awareness and worldwide cooperation and understanding.

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