



Preserving Cultural Identity in an Interconnected World : The Case of Thailand

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Abstract

Cultural identity is an individual's consciousness of one's own culture which nourishes oneself as a unique human being and a social member of one's culture which is different from other cultures. In order to preserve one's cultural identity, one needs to know one's own root, learn to appreciate one's own culture, understand oneself and others, and lead one's life through wisdom. In Thailand, most of Thai people are Buddhists. By means of Buddhist knowledge and practices, they learn to preserve their Buddhist lives and live peacefully with others in this interconnected world.

Keywords: Culture, Interconnected World, Identity, Buddhism.

Introduction

People today always take it for granted that western culture is superior to other cultures in the world and should be taken as the model of world civilization. Ruth Fulton Benedict (1887-1948), a leading American anthropologist, present her theory of cultural relativism that no culture is either better or worse than the other. Every culture is valuable and useful for its maker and user. In order to clearly understand one's culture, we should not evaluate it by means of other cultures. Benedict's work is a psychological study of culture especially on the relationship between culture and personality. Her most famous work is *Patterns of Culture* (1934) which emphasizes on an analytic and comparative study of culture and personality. She introduces 2 opposite poles of cultural personalities :

1. Apollonian type which shows modest and optimistic personality
2. Dionysian type which shows violence and self-centeredness

Nevertheless, Benedict's theory is criticized by some anthropologists that it is rather vague because no society possesses its members of any particular type. Each human being always changes and adapts his/her personality according to a situation (The Royal Academy 2549/2006 : 34).

Culture is a system of knowledge, belief, art, morality, regulation, and tradition that can be learned and transmitted. The meaning of culture and its value change according to periods of time. In the 19th century C.E., E.B. Tylor (1832-1917), an English anthropologist, explained that culture was an intended invention of human rationality. Culture thus depended on the progress of human education. This is the reason why some believed that western civilization was more progressive than other cultures and western colonization was the means of progress for other lands (The Royal Academy 2549/2006 : 83).

Ruth Fulton Benedict was interested in the Thai culture. She wrote a book called *Thai Culture and Behavior* (1952). The book was important for the Anthropological Studies Course in U.S.A. at that time. Thai society in which Benedict did her research was that in 1943 C.E. She then concluded that, according to the Thai culture, male played dominant roles. Men were social leaders. Women were followers and inferior to men. Generally, Thai people (or Siamese) were friendly, easygoing, and peace-loving. Since culture is dynamic, whatever known by Benedict at that time may be different from today. It is thus important for the Thais to search for Thai cultural identity to preserve in order to survive happily and peacefully in this interconnected world.

The Significance of Cultural Identity in Thailand

As Thai people, they are all influenced by Thai culture and share cultural identity. They are conscious of themselves as unique or distinguished from other nationalities. Being Thai is being under the Thai culture consisting of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas, and especially their attached values (*Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963 : 357*).

Thai cultural identity has been transmitted by older generation to younger generation, no matter what religions they profess, in order to form a learned behavior shared by all social members in Thailand. It is one of the important factors which permits us to live together in an organized society, giving us ready-made solutions to our problems, helping us to predict the behavior of others, and permitting others to know what to expect of us.

An example of Thai cultural identity is its close relation to rivers and canals. Thai people make use of them for consumption, agriculture, and other activities. So a waterway is regarded as a lifeline bringing people of different languages, races, cultures, and faiths to become as one in a community. Thais usually build their homes along waterways and use boats as major means of transportation, which reflect their way of life in harmony with nature. Thai houses along canals also reflect their cultural identity. They are raised on pillars to protect the main structure from flooding and to facilitate ventilation. The open area under the raised main structure is also used for storing farming tools and fishing instruments. Thai lifestyle and consumption habits have changed in accordance with the modern world. Even so, early in the morning everyday, one can find vendors selling their fruits and vegetables along canals and at local markets (*Kinnaree, 2007 : 64*)

Thai Culture Under Buddhist Influence in Today Interconnected World

Since the advent of Buddhism in Thailand, Buddhist teachings have been the foundation of Thai culture as follows:

1. **Moral Culture.** Buddhist teachings and practices according to the Buddha's guidance lead the Thai ways of life to happiness and prosperity. For example, loving kindness and generosity to each other turn Thailand into the land of smile as praised by many foreigners. Buddhism urges people to have compassion on all beings, animals as well as humans. This implies tenderness of heart that enables them to look into others' feelings, to understand their troubles and consequently to forgive their faults (Punyasingh, 1981 : 17). Besides, Buddhism praises the virtue of generosity, both in material matters and in spiritual ones. For it is through this virtue that the goal of peaceful co-existence can be attained. Moreover, Buddhism stresses the virtue of gratitude. This connotes the endeavor to repay kindness whenever possible. This virtue is said to be indispensable quality of a good person (Punyasingh, 1981 : 19).

2. **Legal Culture.** Buddhism encourages all Buddhists to obey law and traditions of their countries, Buddhist teachings always lead followers to hold to their Buddhist precepts, e.g. the Five Precepts and the Eight Precepts, because those who follow their precepts will certainly not transgress the laws (*Tongprasert, 2547 : 38*)

3. **Material Culture.** Buddhism promotes self-sustainability. A person should try to help himself or herself as well as his/her society to survive and live happily. S/he should contribute to social harmony through giving (*dāna*), friendly speech (*piyavācā*), helpful action (*atthacariyā*), and social participation (*samānatatā*). In addition, s/he should know how to earn his/her living.

4. **Social Culture.** Buddhism propagates one's duty as a social member, e.g. the duty of husband to wife, etc. Generally, Thai culture is Buddhist culture. It is acceptable to adopt western culture in the country. Nevertheless, it should be applied to fit Thai ways of life in order to preserve the Thai identity and peaceful happiness of the people.

How to Preserve Thai Cultural Identity in This Interconnected World

Approximately, 95% of Thai population are Buddhists. Buddhism thus mostly influences Thai identity and culture. Through Thai non-extremist policy during the European colonial expansion in the 19th century, the country became the only one remaining independent in Southeast Asia while all others were subjugated by foreign powers. Through the Buddha's teaching of the merit of wisdom, Thai rulers and intellectuals have been able to lead the country to its best possibility. Though Thailand has always welcomed modern and western life and technology, it can still be able to preserve its cultural identity and life-style.

Some examples of the preservation of Thai cultural identity in this interconnected world can be found in the development of Thai art and Thai life. In the reign of King Rama IV (2394/1851-2411/1868), who was known among westerners as King Mongkut, the most critical changes in Thai painting took place. Khrua In Khong became the first Thai painter who accepted the impact of the western style of painting. He was the first Thai painter who applied the concept of linear and atmospheric perspective into Thai paintings. Khrua In Khong worked on two different kinds of subject matter : conventional scenes from the previous lives of the Buddha and esoteric scenes about western life. He had never been to the West, but he created the work from his experience of seeing westerners, western styles of buildings, western boats, and western paintings (*Punyasingh, 1981 : 76*).

Social and cultural change in Thailand took place in the early twentieth century. Religion was not the main source of inspiration as it was in the past. The new environment of westernized Thailand, the modern system of education and the application of modern technology became three important factors affecting the development of Thai painting. The western idea of expressing individual personality of each artist was introduced to the new generation of Thai art students. Technical knowledge and concepts of artistic expression from both East and West were taught. Thus, the new generation of artists had a much wider range of choice in style and technique than the old one. It is obvious that modern Thai painters are not compelled to depict the scenes from the lives of the Buddha. Each painter chooses his own theme, context, subject matter and viewpoint on Buddhism from his own personal experience, philosophy of creation, and aesthetic judgment. The stories from the Jataka and the conventions in Buddhist architecture, however, are still rich cultural sources that nourish Thai cultural identity in this interconnected world.

In Thailand today, Thai people clearly owe much to the guidance of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej who encourages his people to make the best of their Thai lives instead of trying to turn the country into an industrialized country as those in the west. He first introduced the Theory of Sufficient Economy to his people in C.E. 1974 in order to solve economic problem of the country. Sufficient economy promotes self-reliance of a person. A person who is economically secure can survive and help others. The practical dissension of the sufficient economy aims at economic sustainability of one's community through living in moderation. It is not to be mistaken as a form of localism which is the antagonistic view to modern capitalism. In fact, sufficient economy can be applied to all levels of life. In other words, sufficient economy is a philosophy that stresses the Middle Path as an overriding principle for appropriate conduct by the populace at all levels. It is holistic concept of moderation and contentment which can be applied to all conducts in family, community, and nations (*Bhumibol Adulyadej, His Majesty King, B.E. 2551 : 9*). Moreover, His Majesty the late King also emphasizes that Thai people should preserve their agricultural life and make the best of it. He is certain that if all Thai people preserve their cultural identity as peace-loving people, agricultural workers, and so on, they can survive happily in this land.

Conclusion

It is crucial for an individual to thoroughly know himself/herself in order to firmly stand in this changing world. Today, we are living in an interconnected world with different types of people and various kinds of beliefs. If we do not know our own selves, our cultural identity, and our own values, we will drift out to nowhere. In order to preserve our own cultural identity, we need to thoroughly understand it. Its weak point should be corrected. Its good point should be more developed. Apart from understanding of our own culture, we need to understand other cultures too. Through our good understanding of others, our generosity and our wisdom, we can surely preserve our cultural identity in this interconnected world.

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