

Nurturing Culture - A Balancing Act?

by

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What is culture?

It is generally accepted now a days that culture means a total way of life. It specifically means “the sum total of the material and spiritual activities and products of a given social group which distinguishes it from other groups.” Those include, inter alia, types of foods, living quarters, architecture, language and literature, music, dances, object of arts, other accumulated material heritage, artistic and scientific creation, system of values, symbols, customs, traditions, beliefs, and set of practices of particular human groups.

Culture, viewed as a whole, is not static but dynamic which implies that it changes over time. Some cultures change rather slowly while others change rapidly. Certain specific elements within a culture may be well preserved while other aspects are capable of incorporating changes. But with all these changes, in total that culture is still capable of having its own distinct identity.

A culture is in a constant stage of being constructed, reconstructed, invented and reinvented by its people who also change because of their interaction with a changing environment and accumulated knowledge, their social interaction and their own creativity.

“Nurturing culture,” our topic for today, already implies the process of change, development and growth of a culture together with the possession of constant elements and streams of distinct identity.

Now let me open up a Pandora’s box of difficulties which, I think, will demand a very intense “balancing act” to nurture one’s own culture:

- 1) Rapid economic growth and interdependence, coupled with new information and communication technology, has created a Global Village whereby contact among peoples becomes closer and more immediate.

Thus, the transferring of some elements from one culture to the other has been more readily possible and even accelerated, through various processes, including the so-called free trade, through the wider uses and spread of printed media, TV and radio and other electrical media.

In addition, the planning of economic development in developing countries was patterned after the external model of the industrialized countries whereby the emphasis is on free trade (not necessarily “fair” free trade), division of labour based on processes rather than on whole products, the sense of competitiveness and an urban-based work force.

In the past 40 years, the philosophy or the value of “producing more,” “selling more,” and “having more” has been the basic thrust, being influenced by international organizations which are usually unduly influenced by more developed countries. What is worse is that many of our countries were not fully prepared for such undertakings; the industrialized model was adopted without proper consideration of the importance of the cultural dimension and its implication for the people. Therefore, some of our countries have experienced distress and have suffered from economic disaster accompanied by economic downturn, the ever widening gaps between the haves and the have-nots and social ills that were un-thought of before.

It has been observed that the globalization process and the transmitting of elements of culture, most of the time, are mainly a one-way street: from the highly developed countries to the rest.

What do we see in our countries today? The intrusion of “foreign” cultural influences has resulted in the weakening and “stunting” of capabilities of local cultures. Can we rightly say that cultural anomalies or those unsuitable for our environment are manifested in, for example, clothes designed for different climate, supplanting of local staple foods by those which are based on products which need to be imported, the construction of skyscrapers in tropical countries which really were designed to conserve the heat. The transformation also includes the changes of values, attitudes and life styles such as faster pace of living, impersonal interpersonal relationships, and an emphasis on materialism and consumerism.

Perhaps we should not blame the developed countries for our failure. I am reminded of a description of Africa by a Kenyan academic, Ali Mazuni, who said that Africa has failed to integrate the Western development model into its cultural assumption: “Africa as a whole borrowed the wrong thing from the West-even the wrong component of capitalism. We borrowed the profit motive but not the entrepreneurial spirit. We borrowed the acquisitive appetites for capitalism but not the creative risk-taking. We are at home with western gadgets but are bewildered by western workshops. We wear the wrist-watch but refuse to watch it for the culture of punctuality. We have learned to parade in display, but not to drill in discipline. The West’s consumption patterns have arrived but not necessarily the West’s techniques of production.”

In most cultures, there are elements derived from their own creativity, elements arising from the exchanges, and elements borrowed. How, then, do we do a “balancing act” to be able to adopt

those elements which are the best for us and yet at the same time to retain our distinctive identity? Are we going to continue to be passive players or is it possible for us to try to be more proactive and develop our consciousness towards cultural change that is inevitable? Can we or are we determined to have development with cultural dimension in mind? How can we avoid being defensive to external forces and influences, and know how to borrow the right things, avoid being gullible and easily led and at the same time being culturally confident and open-minded?

- 2) It has been estimated that the world has about 200 independent states. However, based on linguistic differences alone, there are almost 10,000 distinct ethnic groups. Moreover, of all these, only a dozen languages are spoken by 100 million people.

This means that, in many instances, within a geographical national boundary, there are ethnic groups who have languages of their own. As stated in the UNESCO's World Commission on Culture and Development:

“A country need not contain only one culture. Many countries, perhaps most, are multicultural, multi-national, multi-ethnic and contain a multiplicity of languages, religions and ways of living”

The concept of one “national culture” often times has been put in question because of such diversity. Has this so-called “national culture” been politicized over time by the majority, the elites, the dominant or the hegemonic group? How and to what extent can this “mainstream” culture assert its influence on other “cultures” within their national boundaries? As the UNESCO paper continues to state: A multi-cultural country can reap great benefits from its pluralism, but also runs the risk of cultural conflicts.

Cultural conflicts may arise over issues such as official language or languages used and accepted, or education, (e.g., what to be included in the curriculum, the choice of the medium of instruction, and the religious teaching or practices in schools), or the issues related to cultural policy and development which at least will have its implication for allocation of resources.

Some cultural conflicts may trigger political actions or become political conflicts. Many of our countries have witnessed the unfortunate occurrence of violence among peoples arising from cultural differences within the national boundaries.

- 3) Related to previous discussion is the question on the cultural rights.

In the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 27 states:

“In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group,

to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.”

The trouble with this statement is that some countries are not yet signatories to or have not ratified this International Covenant, and more importantly, some states refuse to acknowledge that they have “minority” groups within their border, based on their own political interests.

But with or without the formal or official acceptance of the statement, the principle of non-discrimination and equality in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that most countries have joined, can still be applied. Thus, every cultural group has the right to maintain and develop its own culture.

Related to minority group is another cultural group: indigenous peoples, who in the past two decades have received much attention in terms of their basic rights and their cultural rights as individuals as well as a collective group. These rights include, inter alia, the right to self-determination, representation and full participation, rights to special measures to control, develop and protect their sciences, technologies and cultural manifestations, including human and other genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literature, designs and visual and performing arts.

Again, many of our countries, Thailand included, do not acknowledge or accept that we have “indigenous” peoples on our land. Some academics have pointed out a certain group, though very small in number, called “Pi Tong Lueng” who are nomads roaming about in the forests in the lower part of the Northern region in this country.

The following questions are asked: How do we treat these various cultural groups who live within our national boundaries? How do we protect their collective or individual rights such as their traditional or indigenous knowledge (e.g., medicinal knowledge and conservation of biodiversity) against globalization and world trade that attempt to have access to these rich heritages and to claim their “scientific discovery” as their intellectual property rights?

4) “Negative” cultural elements and universal human rights.

Cultural relativism vs. universal human rights has been under serious discussion for some time.

The term “negative” already implies the use of criteria or standard for evaluation and thus a value loaded concept. The standard comes from various international instruments on human rights such as the two international covenants (on Civil and Political Rights, on Economic, Social and

Cultural Rights), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

The concrete examples are those traditional practices that violate basic human rights. For example, female circumcision, imposed or forced marriages, the caste systems, other forms of systemic discrimination such as gender discrimination, gender inequality, and those values which view children as property (e.g., as in the case of forced child labor, allowing children to work in intolerable forms of work, allowing severe punishment or violence against children).

In most of the global and international fora, the main opinion is to condemn such practices while the groups who are practicing them seem to think that human rights are not universal and that they have the right to continue these practices which are cultural specifics.

Do we need a “balancing act” on this issue? Do we want to reconcile? Is harmony possible between universality of human rights and the need for a domestic standard related to a particular cultural specific? Or are we of the view that on these “negatives” cultural elements, the universal human rights should over-rule the cultural specifics?

5) The rights for cultural expression and cultural creativity.

Most countries recognize and respect freedom of expression through verbal presentation, printed matter and other types of media, through literature and through other artistic medium. The difference may be in the degree of freedom with different mediums. However, there are some social or legal controls, e.g., the respect for the rights or reputation of others, protection of national security (unfortunately this is sometimes overused!), public order, or public morals.

But where do you draw the line? Where do you draw the line between artistic works of art (of all forms) and public indecency and pornography? Would some literatures which are critical of certain religious practices or political institution be confiscated? (And the authors or the artists have to run away into hiding?) Would some literatures or movies related to the images of some social institutions, considered as sensitive subjects, be banned?

I hope you can see that a balancing act is needed for all of the issues I have raised (with limitation because of the time constraint). You can also see that this balancing act is not going to be easy.

Now that I have opened a Pandora’s box, I regret not having the Aladdin’s lamp to call on Genie to help you.

Before I conclude, I would like to offer you some thoughts regarding the balancing act as you go on in this complicated interwoven process of nurturing one's culture:

- _ Be proud of your own culture and heritage
- _ Recognize the cultural changes and factors influencing the changes
- _ Respect the cultural rights of individuals as well as collective rights
- _ Commit to cultural pluralism through becoming open-minded, non-discriminatory, more "inclusive" in your dealings with others who are "different" and recognize the richness of "multiculturedness"
- _ Recognize that it is possible to have harmony within diversity but one has to work at it
- _ Realize that development must be pursued without losing cultural identity and with the basis on the cultural dimension
- _ Consciously work towards cultural peace through non-violent and fair negotiation.

I hope that your further discussion on this topic will bear fruitful results, which will be beneficial to all of you and to all of us as well.

Blurbs:

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