

Nurturing Culture – A Balancing Act?

By Dr. Juree Vichit-Vadakan

**President, The National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA),
Thailand**

First of all, I would like to thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts with you today and to congratulate you as young leaders for having achieved something which is quite remarkable at your age. Congratulations also to the organizers for putting up such a wonderful occasion. I think investing in youths is the most enduring and profitable investment one can make.

I would like to begin by talking about what culture is, as a follow up to what Dr Saisuree has so cleverly, beautifully, and eloquently expressed.

In many quarters of Thai society, as elsewhere in the world, the word culture is taken to mean manifested aspects of a society, especially in expressive forms that have their antecedents in the past. Hence, culture is taken to mean traditional music, traditional songs and dances, and even traditional rituals and ceremonies. In fact, other forms of expressions that reflect continuity from the past such as poetry, arts and crafts can also be celebrated as “culture” of a society.

But is culture restricted to only what we had mentioned above? While traditional songs and music, arts, dances, poetries and crafts all reflect the

creative expressions being preserved and transmitted over time, culture could also be much broader and more dynamic.

Culture includes both material and non-material aspects. Although material culture is tangible and visible like all the lovely artifacts and pieces of creation one finds in museums around the world, we cannot deny however the non-material aspects of a culture that serve as the driving forces behind the evolution of a culture. In fact, the non-material components of a culture are so rich and varied, complex and so intricately woven into the lives of a people - like all the threads and yarns that are so delicately woven into a piece of fine tapestry.

Some of the richly diverse, non-material aspects of a culture may include the spiritual dimensions of a culture. As a starter, the moral and ethical principles set a framework which people in a culture perceive and order the world and the universe.

How this moral framework assigns duties, obligations, rights, privileges legitimacy is very crucial. Without it, meanings and justifications for the conduct of human relationships and social interaction would be problematic and challenged. Likewise, this moral framework is also imbued with a powerful system in providing emotionally and psychologically compelling and convincing explanations as to why we exist, where we came from, and where will we go eventually.

This framework addresses all the transcendental questions of the human existence: - that human life is not an existence devoid of meaning and that human existence is not a sheer accident. Consequently, through our culture, we will attain a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. The emotional

bond that binds us to our culture may be evoked at certain moments by the most unexpected or unlikely provocation of one's senses, be it a smell, a visual scene, a sensation, a taste, or whatever else.

Culture also has its core values or core essence – that culture is the depository from which values are drawn, that culture, through its socialization processes, brings about dominant personality characteristics of a people. Some would go as far as asserting that culture could determine a composite set of common characteristics of a people that is called a “national character”.

The purpose of this speech is not to validate or argue any of the above, but only to put forth the complexities that we have attributed to what is culture.

Now - on to the aspect that the organizers have assigned: **Nurturing Culture: A Balancing Act.**

Just as society is dynamic, evolving and changing, culture is not static either. For as long as human beings live, think and create, culture will be processual and evolving. It is not surprising therefore that culture as a system continuously modifies, adapts to new conditions that impinge on it, and adopts new mechanisms and methods, not only to survive but also to thrive if possible.

From time immemorial, most cultures have confronted, at one time or another, external forces and internal problems that may threaten to disrupt and even destroy them. The tenacity of some cultures protected them from being transformed totally or destroyed completely. However, the process of survival is not without some sacrifices or compromises. The acts of modification, adaptation, and adjustment often require great skills in both

“nurturing” the “desirables” in a culture and “balancing” against forces, especially the “undesirable” ones that sweep on one like the torrential tides in a big storm.

In Asia today, we are swept almost off our feet by the tides of globalization. We see before our eyes the transformation of our cityscapes and country landscapes. Not only do we confront the information and technology revolutions that help to shrink the world, we also feel the onslaught of western cultures and ways of life in our societies. McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets, pizza parlors, ice creams parlors, supermarkets, and shopping malls are some manifestations of the westernization of Asia. More than that, we witness new business takeovers and also new business cultures assuming a central place in our world. As things “western” assume spaces in our society, will our culture be pushed further to the margin?

Without a shadow of doubt, most of us welcome the conveniences and opportunities provided by the new technology and especially the internet. We may even embrace them as they give us access to information and even knowledge. But at what cost? Should we be careful not to lose what is our core values and core essence that constitute our culture and identity?

In particular, I am speaking about the need to balance against the total domination of global culture. If all human cultures were swallowed by the global culture and merged into one, humankind would reach a sorrowful stage. Just as biodiversity is needed for a rich and sustainable ecosystem, cultural diversity is needed for rich human experiences.

Human innovations and creativity have thrived since the beginning of time because of diversity. As an example, a country like the United States of

America is rich and powerful because of the dynamic drives and energies from the constant influx of immigrant groups from around the world.

Asia is a continent blessed with diversity of cultures and peoples. This diversity and richness of cultures ought to be preserved. Given the complexities and diversities that exist in Asia, perhaps there are some common themes that run through them. In particular, I have in mind a few aspects of our cultures that still persist in spite of social change and forces of globalization.

The first common theme is the family. Although the family institution has been weakened in the past two decades or so, but when compared to the western context, family as an institution is still strong, enduring, meaningful and powerful to individuals in most Asian societies. The financial crisis in Thailand in these past three years would attest to the strength and viability of the family as a social safety net for their members.

The second element I wish to talk about is the character of interpersonal relationships that differentiates Asians from Westerners. Basic human care and concern, warmth and trust in social relationships and fellow human beings may seem naive and outdated in the modern competitive world. But I would argue that the lack of it presents much greater harmful effects on the psyche and well being of a society. Asian cultures still emphasize care and concern for others from within the family outwards to others in our social networks and social world. We use fictive kinship terms to signify closeness and solidarity with others. As a result, there is some sense of harmony that under cuts social alienation and loneliness in society.

The third interesting characteristic of most Southeast Asian cultures is the value of “gentleness” “softness,” humble and non-aggressive presentation of self in the social context. Like a ripe mango, the meat of the fruit is soft but the pit of the seed is never soft. In Thailand, desirable external behaviors are never over-assertive or aggressive behaviors. Nonetheless, determination and strength of character could be maintained under politeness and gentleness. In fact, it would be a test of the strength of one’s character.

The fourth characteristic is tolerance for differences and acceptance of diversity. Southeast Asian history reflected constant fluxes where diverse cultures intermeshed and diverse ethnic groups co-existed. Most Southeast Asian societies found a balance in attaining some unity in its diversity. Thailand would be at the forefront of tolerance of differences and acceptance of diversity. Other ethnic groups continue to be assimilated into Thai culture and society. I hope the trend goes on.

To come to my concluding remark, the balancing act that we need to do is to carefully pick and choose aspects of globalization to improve our society, culture and lives. But most importantly, resistance and conscious efforts are needed so that we need not be overwhelmed or swept away by the tides of globalization. The strength and positive aspects of our culture need to be maintained, highlighted, and lovingly nurtured so that they will continue to exist and thrive. From the indigenous strength in our own culture can we draw pride and satisfaction, and also immunity from forces of globalization that mercilessly dilute and reduce pre-existing cultures into a boring “oneness”.

Let us take heed and make special effort to cultivate and nurture diversity of cultures in the era of globalization. Thank you very much and I look forward to an exchange of views.

Blurbs:

“through our culture, we will attain a sense of identity and a sense of belonging”

“the process of survival is not without some sacrifices or compromises”

“As things “western” assume spaces in our society, will our culture be pushed further to the margin?”

“cultural diversity is needed for rich human experiences”

“Asian cultures still emphasize care and concern for others from within the family outwards to others in our social networks and social world”

“determination and strength of character could be maintained under politeness and gentleness”

“the balancing act that we need to do is to carefully pick and choose aspects of globalization to improve our society, culture and lives”