

The Cultural Identity through Folk Performance of the Khmer Ethnic Group along the Thailand-Cambodia Border: A Case Study of Ayai Folk Performance in Sra-kaew, Thailand

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The social fabric around national border areas often involves immigration, migration, and relocation. This social fabric varies by area, where each ethnic group's livelihood is unique, reflecting the group's lifestyles, beliefs, traditions, and cultures. Thailand's border has seen the migration of the Khmer ethnic group, which is an important phenomenon marking the beginning of the settlement and the cultural construction of the Khmer ethnic group in Thailand. This is most obvious along the border, where the heritage of Thailand and Cambodia connects. This research aims to study the ways by which the cultural identity of the Khmer ethnic group is built through the folk performance which appears in the Thailand-Cambodia border area, and the social, cultural, and economic impacts on the identity-building process of the Khmer ethnic group. The research adopts the mixed methods approach and the focus group technique applied on the heirs and the understudies to folk performers, local sages, community leaders, and academics studying cultures. The research shows that, for the purpose of identifying their cultural identity, the diaspora living in a multi-cultural society, as evident in the Thailand-Cambodia border area, have adopted folk performance as an important instrument to showcase the identity of the Khmer ethnicity as they participate in power relations and co-exist with other ethnic groups. The folk performance along the border, therefore, reflects the efforts to preserve and recover the Khmer ethnicity by showing the cultural identity built jointly by people in the community through social interactions aiming to preserve and recover artistic values of the performance and music, and the identity which

remains in Thailand until the present day, albeit differs from other ethnic groups.

Key words: *Cultural Identity, Multi-Culturalism, Khmer Ethnicity, Ayai Folk Performance.*

Introduction

Thailand and Cambodia are neighbouring countries sharing the border, which spans seven Thai provinces. Arts and cultures of the two countries are found to be similar, and steps have regularly been taken as regards cultural cooperation to foster relationships and understandings around the border areas between Thailand and Cambodia. Task forces have been appointed for the two countries to work together on the issues of culture, history, and tourism. There are exchanges of musical and traditional dance groups. Learning of the Thai language has also been promoted in Cambodia. Development has been made to create a route for tourism of Khmer culture, whereby stone castles, which are similar in artistic representation in both countries, are connected. While all of these activities are phenomena which happen based on past cultural relationships, migration into Thailand of the Khmer ethnic group marks the beginning of cultural relationship at the civil level. The border areas between Thailand and Cambodia have interestingly become the areas with overlapping cultures between Thailand and Cambodia, which also encompass several other ethnic groups.

Located along the Thailand-Cambodia border is the province of Sra-Kaew, an area which is ethnically diverse due to past migration and relocation. Lao, Yo, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer are the five ethnicities having been accepted and publicised as the main ethnic groups in the province¹ through publications and activities conducted by official agencies. There have been efforts to build cultural identity and image of the province in the sphere of public administration, as shown in the form of folk performances at several important events held in the province. The Eastern Culture Fair, the ASEAN Magha Puja event to foster the relationship between the two countries, and the Aranya-predesh Five Ethnicities Fair show that the five ethnicities have been hailed as the cultural identity of the province which lies at the Thailand-Cambodia border. Among the identity-building process along the Thailand-Cambodia border is the Khmer ethnicity, the cultural heritage of which has been promoted by government agencies of both Thailand and Cambodia. Both countries have cooperated and joined hands in the preservation and the promotion of cultural heritage by creating a classification to be used as a tool for raising cultural awareness among the people in the area. At present, there is an

¹ Cited from Sirikamol Saisoi et al. (2002). *Local History and Ethnic Groups in the Province of Sra-kaew.*

effort from both the government and the private sectors of both countries to recover and push the Ayai folk performance, one of the folk performances which belongs to the Khmer ethnicity and contains traditional lyrics and music of the Khmer ethnic group, to become a tool for building the Khmer identity as part of multiple ethnic groups in the multi-cultural society along the Thailand-Cambodia border. This is consistent with the music of those who speak the Thai dialect of the Khmer language, which Direk Hongthong has described for the southern part of the north-eastern region of Thailand as having evolved in terms of style, content, and language use. The consistency can also be seen with the changes in social, political, and cultural contexts. Such evolution demonstrates the dynamism of the identity of this ethnic group and that it is a cultural combination and interactions of the Khmer and the Thai cultures as well as other ethnic groups who speak the Thai dialect of the Khmer language. The sources of cultural combination of those who speak the Thai dialect of the Khmer language include the awareness in the Khmer ethnicity, the political influence of the Thai government on building the awareness of Thai-ness, the influences of other ethnicities, and globalisation (2016, p. 316).

When the term “identity” is mentioned, academics often define it as an individual or a unit which is connected and related to the society, to which the society itself defines the role, the responsibilities, and the values. The identity is, therefore, a symbol, where identity is the thoughts and feelings of “who am I?” projected by an individual on oneself through the lens of oneself and other people. Identity needs awareness of oneself, so that a person can identify oneself as having the same identity as one group and differing from other groups or from “who I am” seen from the eyes of the others. Apinya Fuengfusakul (2000, p. 4), spoke of the case of folk performances along the Thailand-Cambodia border before supports were provided by the government and the private sectors of both countries. He found that the folk performances belonging to the Khmer ethnicity were once in decline as heirs as well as understudies of dances or music once decreased in number. Now, the intergenerational passing of such knowledge in the community has become more popular and received more attention. Supports and sponsorship have regularly been given in terms of expenses and platforms for the performances. As a result, the community of Ban-Dan, Aranya-Pradesh, Sra-kaew on the Thailand-Cambodia border, which is a Khmer community stand out of the Ayai performance, is now confident in the cultural power of the Ayai performance as a unique tool to build the identity for the community.

The researchers see that amongst the relationships in the multi-cultural society along the Thailand-Cambodia border area, the simple folk performance has been selected as an important tool to build a cultural identity of the Khmer ethnicity. This role of folk performances can explain the social phenomenon which is linked to the building of a new identity and can be used as a way to sustainably promote cultural stability.

Research Methodology

This research adopts the mixed-method approach of both quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative research method is used to collect numerical data to assess the impacts on the identity-building process of the Khmer ethnic group in the community. The qualitative research method is used to describe social phenomenon, where the researchers collect the data from in-depth interviews, observation, and analyses. The approach follows the population-setting and the sample selection process from the group of local sages, community leaders, academics on culture, and understudies of folk performances. The researchers process, examine, assess the reliability of the data, and analyse them. The focus group interviews are also employed to assess the information and learn about the culture of the Khmer ethnicity through the lens of Ayai folk performance in such components as language, lyrics, music, costumes, choreography, beliefs, traditions, and the social, cultural, and economic impacts on the identity-building process of the Khmer ethnicity.

Research Results

From the in-depth interviews of the subjects associated with the Ayai folk performance, a folk performance of the Khmer ethnic group, it is found that the cultural identity through the Khmer folk performance along the Thailand-Cambodia border emerges from the relationships between ethnic groups living in the same area along such border. This cultural identity is born out of a combination between the Khmer culture and the Thai culture but maintains the Khmer identity via a folk performance influenced by the arts and culture of Cambodia. The performance has transcended across generations, and appeared in the present social trends where it can be performed for other ethnic groups sharing the same border areas, making the Khmer identity along the border fluid while grounded upon the social context. The social process has forced the Khmer ethnic group to build and inherit their own identity. Together, the ethnic subgroups combine their respective identities and make up a clear, unified domain of Khmer ethnicity. The identity then represents the image of the ethnic group and creates self-identification as well as unity, and, with specific characteristics, becomes a new status for their social relationship. Symbols are created and reflected in behaviours, livelihoods, and communications with their own local language and folk performance, which indicate the clear identities of the Khmer ethnic group along the Thailand-Cambodia border. The social structure is built demonstrating the roles, responsibilities, and social relationships along the border area, which allows the ethnic groups to live together without one culture dominating the identity of the ethnic groups. It also creates a combination of cultural identities, which is adapted alongside the wave of globalisation but remains clearly reflective of Khmer identity and self-identification. This finding is consistent with Anan Kanchanapan who says that “the identity is a power-shifting attempt, and the showing of the identity is a response to say that one is not like the way other people see oneself. It means that in order to show oneself, the identity is the way to show human dignity” (2015, p. 207-208). In summary, the identity of the Khmer ethnic group who migrated

into Thailand can be divided into four aspects as follows. First, cultural identity is in the costumes used in folk performances that reflect the connection with how people are dressed up in the original Khmer ethnic group's ways of life. This has been applied and adapted to be consistent with the current social trends, with the use of colours symbolising the provinces in Thailand in the design and colour of costumes. Sabai, a Thai-styled breast-covering cloth, has also been used in the performances, which shows that not only does the Khmer ethnic group try to preserve and recover the Khmerness through the artistic value of the costumes worn by Ayai performers and musicians, but has also adapted such that it can co-exist with other ethnic groups. It shows that the Khmer ethnic group feels the importance of peaceful co-existence in the border area by accepting the culture of other ethnic groups as exhibited in the dressing in their folk performances. This is consistent with Supang Chantavanich who says; "the acceptance of multi-culturalism are the cases where laws and regulations used in the administration are not too strict, which creates an opportunity to operate with alternatives without any one culture dominating or being subordinated" (2007, p. 6). Second, Ayai performers and musicians still uphold cultural identity in terms of beliefs and religions, whereby they pray to the holy figures before the performance and offer sacrifices for the teachers and the holy figures in hopes that the performances go smoothly. Sutut Fuengprakorb, a community sage, said that "doing it in the ancient way without failures is for the smoothness of the performance and for the performers to recall the good deeds of the teachers who have passed along the knowledge as well as to recall their ancestors who allow the current generations to inherit folk performances in conformity with the tradition of the Khmer ethnicity" (Interview, 15 April 2019). This reflects the identity awareness and the recognition of one's own ethnicity. All the while, performers and sages also have faith in Buddhism, as seen from their regular visits to the temples or their fears of sin as taught in Buddhist dharma. The children of new generations also have the opportunities to enter the educational system in Thai schools, where Thai-ness and religious beliefs are instilled. Third, the cultural identity on music and lyrics in the Ayai folk performance involves playing music along with the performance in traditional Khmer manner and in new adaptations. Via migration, Khmer music from Cambodia has been brought into Thailand, and such music has been performed at various opportunities, where the distinctly identifiable characteristics of the music and the lyrics have turned into identities in the eyes and the ears of the ethnic groups (other than one's own). Fourth, the cultural identity in the performance and the dance moves of the Ayai folk performance, one of the Cambodia's folk performances has evolved from dancing and singing back and forth between men and women. As it arrives at the Thailand-Cambodia border, the Ayai performance has been adapted to dancing along the music and the lyrics in the Khmer language, with the dance being similar to the Thai choreography and from the applications from the moves found from the stone castles in Cambodia. The authors found that the community has developed the dance moves in two ways, namely, the development from the community's own origins and the development by study from dance moves of the Khmer people, which is done via media technology and adapted to fit properly with the music.

In the identity building of the Khmer ethnic group through the folk performance in the Thailand-Cambodia border, several factors have been found to affect such identity building socially, culturally, and economically. Socially, the identity-building of the Khmer ethnic group has been affected by the social contexts along the Thailand-Cambodia border, where migration, immigration, and relocation have forced the Khmer ethnic group to live with other ethnic groups, expediting the process of identity-building for one's own ethnic group as a response or a fight to have an outstanding and accepted identity. Folk performances have been selected as a tool to build an identity amongst the ethnic groups, big or small, around the border area. This is consistent with Pinkeaw Luengaramsri, who posits that "within the complex relationship between various groups, which have been organised to interact in ways that one group is dominating the others, there is an attempt not only to combine the likes, but also to change the different fringe identities to make them the same as the central society and to drive away the fringe identities which do not fit into the classification of international identities" (2003, p. 2-12). Culturally, in the identity-building process of the Khmer ethnic group, it is found that along the Thailand-Cambodia border there are diverse cultures born out of the co-existence of multiple ethnic groups with differing beliefs and traditions. Therefore, the Khmer ethnic group utilises the fulfilling process for their own culture by importing knowledge on folk performance arts in music and dance from the present day's Cambodia. This is done to fulfil their knowledge of folk performance in order to create a guarantee and a confirmation for the specific identity of their own ethnic group. A focus is for an ethnic group to be aware of the importance of intellects and heritage of their own ethnicity and push for a unification of people of Khmer ethnicity in the Thailand-Cambodia border area. This demonstrates the maintenance of their own local culture and the continuous existence of the Khmer identity even though the culture is dynamic along the globalisation trend and contingent upon the political and the administration system in the border area. Wanwilai Jaiklieng has said along this same line that "the modern culture often consists of members from different ethnic groups, which gives rise to cultural competition between ethnicities reflecting the diversity of languages, norms, religious beliefs, traditions, and rituals. Such diversity may be rooted in a variety of reasons, especially globalisation trends and the political system in that country" (2007, p. 18-19). Economically, in the identity-building of the Khmer ethnic group, it is found that there are folk performances of the Khmer ethnic groups along the Thailand-Cambodia border, for which there are efforts to add values to such performances so as to make it a way to earn a living. The performances have been developed in a format to make it consistent with the desires of audience and hirers. The performances have, therefore, been adapted in a format according to the desire of hirers who set the budget for each performance. As the budget is a determinant of each performance, the components of Ayai folk performances, which include musicians and performers, have been reduced. There are needs for the Khmer ethnic group to then re-strengthen the folk performances along the line originated from their own ethnicity in order to make it clearly identifiable with their own identity once again.

A study of the cultural identity of the Khmer ethnic group reveals that the policies to promote multi-culturalism in the province of Sra-kaew enable Ayai and the Khmer community to create a mechanism to build and display their own cultural identity based on the idea that the Khmer ethnicity shall be maintained and accepted as a group of population in the province of Sra-kaew. The Ayai performance has regularly been used as a tool by the Khmer ethnic group to preserve the original rituals and traditions that are related to beliefs of the Khmer ethnic group through the Ayai performance itself and the associated rituals. Community members are able to live together peacefully and maintain the power to manage the display of their own cultural identity as they possess the knowledge of the Ayai performance. The policies on multi-culturalism are also considered a success as they are able to push for the recovery of the Ayai performance, which is equivalent to a recovery of the overall culture of the Khmer ethnic group. The government supports with cooperation the Khmer community in the district of Aranya-predesh, Sra-kaew, to demonstrate multi-culturalism in Sra-kaew which emphasises the acceptance of dominant characteristics of each culture as upheld by each ethnic group since before migration. The multi-culturalism in Sra-kaew, therefore, reflects the society to which migrants come with culture and language from their motherland and in which cultural exchanges have taken place, turning the area into one with a diversity of ethnic groups and an ability to protect cultural freedom among the ethnic groups with tangible results.

Discussions

This research found that the cultural identity of the Khmer ethnic group in the Thailand-Cambodia border area emerges from the awareness-building, love for and protection of the culture of their own Khmer ethnicity through folk performing arts which have been inherited from their ancestors. They have also extensively preserved their identity and image through the cultural identity of the Khmer ethnic group in the area, which is reflected in the language, lyrics, music, costumes, choreography, rituals, beliefs, and traditions. The use and the spelling of the word “Ayai” itself and to call the performance as such, has a specific meaning for the Ayai performance among the Khmer ethnic group in the aforementioned geographic area only, as it has a hidden, symbolic meaning for the Khmer ethnic group in the border area. The term “Ayai” as it is written in the Thai language, while is homophonic with the original term for such performance, is also similar in spelling to the term “close knit” in the Thai language, referring to the love and the close relationship between the Khmer ethnicity and their roots in Cambodia as well as pride for their own ethnicity. This is consistent with the idea of Apinya Fuengfusakul (2003) which suggests that identity is a connection between an individual and the social aspects derived from a variety of signs in the society, such as language, religion, costumes, or consumption. The identity may be determined by oneself or by a position of an individual in the society. The author finds that even though the Khmer ethnic group has long migrated into Thailand, their livelihood remains the same as it was in Cambodia. They still



communicate in the Khmer language, and perform folk dances to Khmer lyrics, which is in line with Pichet Saipan who says, “people use cultural qualifications to explain and confirm the status of a social group or of oneself in order to differentiate oneself from other related surrounding groups. These qualifications enable them to build and define the characteristics of an ethnic group” (2012, p. 7). As a result, traces of Khmer folk culture can be seen in the areas along the Thailand-Cambodia border. Given the ethnic identities in a diverse, multi-cultural society, each of the ethnic groups living together in the border area has to build its own symbol to show off its identity, leading to a demonstration of international cultural identities. This can be seen in folk performing arts which have been developed and made more interesting in terms of music, lyrics, and costumes so as to promote an ethnic group’s cultural identity for other ethnic groups to be aware of and acknowledge that the Khmer ethnicity in particular is not inferior to the other ethnic groups living in the Thailand-Cambodia border areas. People in the community still practice and uphold as important the rituals, the beliefs, and the mediums for medical treatment, with the Ayai folk performance serving as a connection between the descendants of the community and the ancestors who already passed. The aim is to teach the younger generations to have gratitude for their ancestors and fear for wrongdoings because such wrongdoings may result in bad luck or illnesses. However, for a congregation of people with the same ethnicity while still living with other ethnic groups along a border area, it is important to have a tight bond between relatives and communities that live together. Otherwise, their ethnicity would see its identity and its importance minimised and eventually vanish.

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