

Title: Identity, Cultural Interference and Intentional Choice?

Author: Dr Aung Myint PhD (Clin.Psych. & Psychother.)

Position: Clinical Psychologist, Mae Tao Clinic, Mae Sot, Tak 63110, Thailand

Paper presented at The 11th International Conference on Thai Studies

Vision of the Future

July 26-28, 2011

Siam City Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand

This paper asks about the question of whether identity and its transformation or change has been caused by external conditions or internal intentions.

1. Firstly, an attempt will be made to define what an identity is.
2. Then the question will be asked whether the defined identity stays the same or transforms into something completely different by intentional choice or external interference.
3. In addition, the question of whether the sameness or transformation is good or bad for the identity of the individual self and/or the society will be raised.
4. Lastly, what values constitute good and/or bad in making such choices will be asked.

Some questions will be put to you while discussing the perspectives that might be different from our usual way of thinking or a habitual mind set. Hopefully, some answers or more questions may arise in you from this exercise.

What is an identity?

Identity is a complex issue of identifying by attaching a characteristic label to someone or something. Identity may simply refer to an individual, a group of individuals, a particular culture and language, a country and so on. All or some of which may be categorized on your country of birth or affiliation. Usually, your identity card or passport shows your name with your picture, sex, date of birth, nationality etcetera. Such identifications identify the uniqueness of an individual and/or society she belongs to. The use of feminine gender refers to all possible allocations of genders in this paper.

Then, you might ask whether this uniqueness refers to a variation of the same, for instance, variant features of mankind, or perception of different races or ethnic groups. Furthermore, do you perceive people from the same ethnic group as being genetically different? If you think you are unique, in what aspect are you unique and to what extent?

Because of our evolved ability to use complex language concepts in comparing and contrasting, we identify our uniqueness against others according to visible physical/biological, psychological, sociocultural and spiritual (PPSS) qualities.

Sameness or Transformation of Identity

Then another question arises: Are these unique qualities of a person, an ethnic group, a cultural practice or characteristic behaviors of a country unchanged over time? If you answer yes, does it follow a predictable pattern of change?

These qualities may be manifested as valued feelings, actions and thoughts (FATs). A person may identify herself with certain valued thoughts, feelings and actions and display them as her PPSS qualities. Likewise, a cultural group or the government of a country may characteristically display certain thoughts, feelings and act in a certain manner at a given time.

The idea of values needs some clarification. Values are concepts we create at an individual and/or societal levels according to our survival and/or emotional likes and dislikes. Although emotional likes and dislikes are real concrete

experiences, values are only their abstract representations. When printed in any language, these abstract concepts appear as though they have an unchanging unique quality.

If we insist on arguing that there still is unchanging underlying quality of everything that exists, we may be arguing against the natural law of change or what the Buddhists call impermanence (*annica*) of anything that is physical and/or non-physical.

Let's ask a question, even if there is a smallest quantifiable change in your physicality what would happen to your psychological, social and/or spiritual qualities? For example, think about a quantifiable change in your body weight or shape. Would it change the way you think, feel and act in personal, social and spiritual contexts? Would you be very happy or very unhappy with your body shape?

Interestingly, we do like changing our idealized or valued qualities depending on whether the given situation is in our favour or not. We desire to identify ourselves with that of power and control to make things eternal or changeable to suit our situation. The Buddhists call this insatiable desire (*tanha*) or the desire that can never be fulfilled completely.

Intentional Choice or Influential Interference

In addition, you may ask whether any of these changes come as a result of:

- Intentional personal choice,
- Being interfered with or conditioned by external environments such as your own culture or cultures of others, or
- From reaction against such an external conditioning or pressures.

Let's stop and imagine openly for a minute:

Would you like yourself, your country or your culture to identify with a very popular and/or powerful person, country or culture? Your answer might be a

“Yes” if you like the actions and values of the dominant person, country or culture.

Of course, if you dislike these actions and values, your answer might be a “No”. Or, you might even say, it depends on the specific situation or aspects of the popular and powerful identity.

On the other hand, are we generally vulnerable to copying the values of popular and powerful cultures in order to be like them? Yet each of us desires to have our own valued feelings, actions and thoughts. Therefore if we say “Yes” to this statement, then the question that is raised is: do you really have feelings and thoughts that are purely your own?

I remember a critical Japanese youth who I met in India years ago said we copied everything; we did not have anything original. My response to her statement was that who had the original of anything.

This led to a discussion about the Buddhist idea of dependent origination which explains the arising of each and every phenomenon as the result of more than one causal condition coming together simultaneously as well as successively. For example, sprouting a seed is produced by nutrients, water and sunlight at the same time. According to Buddhists no single phenomenon exists on its own. Each phenomenon exists in relation to and being supported by other conditions. Therefore, speaking of black without white or similarly our own original thought or a feeling without a relational contrast is meaningless language game to the Buddhist.

On the other hand, is your so called unique identity a reaction against “being a carbon copy of another culture”? If you are reacting, are you still being imprisoned by their rules of reference you dislike? I had a German friend who hated German ways of feeling, acting and thinking. So, she behaved completely opposite to ordinary German social behavior.

In a number of non-Western countries in the world, most people wear Western clothing, speak some English and sing Western tunes in local languages. Even if you normalize it by saying that it is an international dress code, international language and music, are they being culturally colonized?

On the other hand, would you like to keep identifiable differences separate like the Caste system in India and the Class system in a country like England, likewise the rich and the poor or mainstream and sub-cultures in contemporary society, in order to preserve their unique identities? If you think that you are not the same as them, then are you being caught up in an “Us and Them” game?

Re-statement of Questions

Before I end this presentation, let me re-state (on the screen as well) some of the main questions we have discussed:

- Is identity an attachment of a label to someone or something?
- If you think you are unique, in what aspect are you unique and to what extent?
- Do these unique qualities of a person, an ethnic group, a cultural practice or characteristic behaviors of a country remain unchanged over time?
- Even if there is a smallest quantifiable change in your physicality what would happen to your psychological, social or spiritual qualities?
- Would you like yourself, your country or your culture to identify with a very popular and/or powerful person, country or culture?
- Are we generally vulnerable to copy the values of popular and powerful cultures or to be like them and yet each of us desires to have our own valued feelings, actions and thoughts?
- Do you really have something purely our own?
- Is our own original thought or feeling without a relational contrast is meaningless language game?
- Are you still imprisoned by the rules of reference of the culture you dislike?

- Are a number of countries being culturally colonized?
- Are you being caught up in an “Us and Them” game?

The Remaining Question

Even if your answers to this point lead to such a conclusion as: an identity constitutes a combination of internal intentions and external interferences, the question still remains whether the production of basically the same identity versus changed or transformed identity promotes a sustainable self and a society for all living and feeling beings.

On the other hand, the Buddhists might simply ask: Is your “same” or “changed” identity contextually competent to sustain peace within yourself and live in harmony with the rest of all living and feeling beings in this world?

What is your answer?

Thank you for your attention and reflection.