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The Role of Communication in Preserving Cultural Identity in Northern Thailand

by Chongchit Sripun Tiam-Tong

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During the past three decades, communication technology development has tremendously changed human lifestyle all over the world. Total new environment has been created (McLuhan, Marshall, 1964) through satellite and information superhighway (Canter, A. Laurence and other, 1995). The rapid change in the information society is pertaining to cultural identity and becoming a-de-massified society (Tofler, Alvin, 1980). All societies do not use the same similarities and differences in the same way. A study shows some impacts potential of the communication technologies on cultural identity in rural Asia (Jamais, F. Juan, 1993). However, it was found that the media has not always been neutral. Sometimes, the program and information create some impacts in which the public are misguided toward certain values and negative attitudes. Positively, a mass communication system has a critical role to increase public awareness and effort to strengthen cultural identity.

This paper will discuss the need to explore some communication methods and technologies for re-enforcing a community participation process in the attempt to sustain local cultural identity. The author also intend to discuss that the communicator should be well aware of how local communities are changing. Current local responses of rural communities are varied. Therefore, different Communication tools and programs should be applied. It is essential that communication strategies and methods be identified and applied under varying local situations.
Local Cultural Responses

Globalization process creates a certain degree of impact on lives and living of rural people. Also, rural communities in Asian countries have demonstrated their capabilities and adapted new social and cultural mechanism to cope with current rapidly changing technology, institution and lifestyle. The observation has been made and discussed in relations to some applications of communication methods.

The community organizer takes a key role as communicator and educator to work with local ethnic groups and networks to manage the watershed forest and environment. Local ethnic group has been formed and encouraged as key institution. It works to bring together several ethnic groups to be forest aliens and managers. This needs a communication technique to encourage different cultural groups to work together to conserve the watershed forest.

Under the globalizing intervention, there are different responses among communities as followed.

1. Revitalizing Indigenous Knowledge and Culture.

Since the advanced technology has been widely accepted, people in northern Thailand also gain advantage from it, in the mean time, there are number of people are rethinking about their own traditional ways of living for sustainable development. Organic gardening, the use of herbal medicine, traditional dress, speaking dialects, etc. are becoming more popular in the Information Society nowaday.

* Thanks to Dr. Tan-Kim-Yong, Uraivan, Director of the Chiang Mai University Research Management and Development Centre, Thailand, to share discussion with the author on January 17, 1996.
A study on "Socio-Cultural and Psychographic Research in Northern Thailand (Tiam - Tong, Chongchit and others, 1995) finds that northern people including minority groups namely: Tai Yai, Lue, Karen, Hmong and Lisu are willing to preserve their own identities. They speak their own languages, have their own traditional dress and prepare their own traditional ceremonies on special events such as new year and wedding ceremony, etc.

In upper north of Thailand especially Chiang Mai is now celebrating 700 years anniversary. At provincial level, people are encouraged to speak local languages and dress in Lanna styles every week at least on Friday.

2. Restructuring Social Organization

Many effective community development projects in northern Thailand provide community organizers for strengthening the community activities so as to meet the people participation. The project of Doi Sam Muen Watershed Forest in Chaing Mai is one of an example of development projects to work effectively with different minorities around the area. They are Karen, Lisu, Hmong, La-hue, Chinese minority group and lowland people. Each ethnic group has their own watershed network coordinator to deal with their own people and the government implementors.

3. Bridging the Gaps Between Generations

At Chiang Rai province, a group of Igor provide elderly people to visit their young generations who are staying and studying in town. The aim is to tell stories about and ways of living of Igor in the past so that the young people will not get lost their own identity.

Interviewed Mr. Samer Lim-Choo-Wong, Department of the Royal Forestry, working for the Sam-Muen-Watershed Forest Project in Chiang Mai, December 22, 1995.
4. Leadership role strengthening

New generation leadership pays attention to their own tradition. This indigenous innovator encourages colleagues or the community committee to bring in their own tradition for both economic and cultural purposes.

A Karen community of Om-long district, Chaing Mai Province, produces traditional textiles to sell for the lowland people and tourists. On a special event, Karen villagers are encouraged to dress up in their traditional costumes.

5. Policy support

The Thai government has made announcement to support the idea of the Thai identity in both national and local level. In northern Thailand or Lanna including Chiang Mai province, people are encouraged to dress and speak their own cultures. Other minority groups also to do the same but in their own ways.

6. Increasing private sector's role in strengthening cultural identity promotion.

Now the business marketing is very critical. There are very high competitive in product advertising. To attract attention and gain support from the consumers and general public, advertising firms try to combine the idea of product advertising and social marketing in accordance to the government policy. Some private organizations help support the the government policy to emphasize the Thai identity in different approaches: Thai children's folk play; New generation speaks fluent Thai; We love

* Interviewed MS. Busabom Chamtalert, Research Management Development Centre, Chiang Mai University, January 4, 1996.
Thai culture; WAI is our Thai Culture, etc. National tourism policy encourage minority group to preserve their cultures such as female Karen wear in white dress when married and in red when married.

Communication as a Key Role

1. Inter-personal Communication

In this situation, one person (or group) is interacting with another person (or group) without the aid of mechanical device. The source and receiver in this form of communication are within one another's physical presence. (Dominick, R. Joseph, 1996)

A study (Tiam-Tong, Chongchit and others, 1995) finds that the minority groups prefer listening to the entertainment program especially the music from radio rather than other media. They are also interested in general information including news similar to other groups.

In inter-personal communication, minority groups receive more information on health and family planning from health care staff from GO and NGO.

A focus group on Tai Lue in Chiang Mai on July 1994 (Tiam-Tong, Chongchit, 1994) shows effective inter-personal communication between elementary school teachers and students. They practice speaking Tai Lue. They are offered special rewards for students who speak fluent Thai Lue language. Among Karen in Chiang Mai, through elderly relatives, they keep communicating by using their own language. On Sunday, they learn Karen language in the church. On a special day, such as wedding ceremony, Karen wear on their typical dress as well as on Sunday when they go to the church.
Igor in Chiang Rai province preserve their cultural identity to young who move down to study downtown by sending elderly relatives to tell the young Igor histories about the way of living, language, dress, as well as other traditional activities.

The social organization, consists of coordinator, committee and community is part of communication role to create understanding among the community and the working groups involved. Basically, implementors are advised to study the community's way of life, in particular, such as Yao, Karen (Chanbamroong, Mongkol) as well as the national policy for the hilltribes (Bhrusasri, Wanat, 1991).

Machine-Assisted Inter-personal Communication combines characteristics of both the inter-personal and mass communication situation. In this setting, one or more people are communicating by means of a mechanical device with one or more receivers. The source and receiver may or may not be in each other's immediate physical presence. It allows the source and receiver to be separated by both time and space. The machine can give a message permanence by storing it on paper, magnetic tape, or some other materials (Dominick, R. Joseph, 1990).

A case on AIDS Precaution for the hilltribes in northern Thailand demonstrates the tribal language usage through the audio-cassette. Radio Scripts for Hilltribes (Chongchit Tiam-Tong and other, 1992), in cassette tapes also show the communication role to reach the particular group of hilltribe to learn Thai language, but, still encourage the Karen to keep their own culture. The content and situation appeared in the scripts maintain the hilltribes's cultures.
2. Mass Communication refers to the process by which a complex organization with aid of one or more machine produces and transmits public messages that are directed at large, heterogeneous, and scattered audiences. The program package in cassette tape are prepared for both machine-assisted interpersonal communication (within a small group) and mass Communication through radio broadcasting for the hilltribes and other minority groups.

Table 1 illustrates communication to reach different groups in northern Thailand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media owned</th>
<th>Teenagers</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Ethnic</th>
<th>Hilltribes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radio/cassette</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>73.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>63.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading Newspapers
- Never       | 20.7       | 48.8   | 60.9   | 61.9       | 50.1  |
- Thai Rat    | 31.9       | 34.4   | 20.5   | 36.4       | 40.7  |
- Daily News  | 13.8       | 11.2   | 3.1    | 1.7        | 7.4   |
- Others      | 4.6        | 1.6    | 1.5    | -          | 1.8   |

(local newspaper)

How/where to read
- Purchase    | 38.9       | 53.8   | 42.2   | 58.1       | 46.9  |
- At a village reading centre | 17.9 | 23.1 | 40.0 | 9.7 | 21.8 |
- Others (borrow, library)      | 4302       | 23.1   | 18.8   | 32.2       | 31.3  |
The survey of communication study also shows that the respondents (500) favour and trust the interpersonal communication including close persons or government personnel. Television, radio as well as newspapers and magazines are identified as the tools to provide information which is accepted and believable. The study also demonstrates Tai-Yai and Tai-Lue own radio/cassette tapes 79.9%, hilltribes 55.9%. Therefore, radio seems to be the best channel to reach the minority groups in this case.

Table 2 Illustrates the sources of information for minority groups in northern Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Teenagers</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Ethnic (Tai Yai, Tai Lue)</th>
<th>Hilltribs (Karen, Hmong, Lisu)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Radio/cassette</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- TV</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Newspapers/Magazine</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap Opera</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Radio/cassette</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- TV</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>93.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Newspapers/Magazine</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Radio/cassette</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- TV</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Newspapers/Magazine</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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</table>
The study also finds that the music program is more favorable for Tai-Yai, Tai-Lue, Karen, Hmong and Lisue. Therefore, issues on culture can be put in the music radio broadcasting program.

The Department of Public Relations of Thai Government has been broadcasting radio program for the hilltribes from Chiang Mai since 1968 aimed at hilltribes in northern area from 05.00 a.m.-07.00 a.m. and from 5.30 p.m.-8.00 p.m., 8.30 p.m.-10.00 p.m. The purpose is to create understanding between the government and the minority groups and to help them preserve their own cultures. The target audience are Yao, Igro, Karen, Lisu and La-hu. The programs consist of News, talks as well as music for the hilltribes. All the news and talks are relating to their own culture and tradition. The Public Relations officers at Radio Thailand, Chiang Mai prepared the scripts for the selective hilltribes to be on air. Some well-trained hilltribes are now allowed to prepare scripts by their own.2 The announcers of all programs are the hilltribes who are trained to radio broadcasters.

3. Community Education

Experiences from the Sam-Muen Watershed Forest and Environment Project illustrate the role of communication to bring in people from different cultures: lowland people, Chinese minority group; Lisu, La-hue, Hmong and Karen to participate in the project. The project organizers are working as communicators to extend networking committee by using two-way communication to create mutual understanding and manage equity for all.

* Interviewed MS Boonsome Vichajarern, Radio Thailand Officer in Chiang Mai, on January 17, 1996)
The strategies to reach the minority group must concentrate on the cultural responses of different communities based up on revitalizing indigenous knowledge and culture, restructuring social organization, bridging gaps between generation, leadership's role, policy support and increasing private sector's role in strengthening cultural identity promotion.

Accordingly, communication techniques and people are the key to preserve cultural identity.
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