

Co-Cultural Identities of Thai-Lao: A Guideline for Cultural Curriculum Development

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the Thai-Lao co-cultural identities and develops guidelines for integrating these identities into cultural studies curricula. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 stakeholders in education and cultural preservation from both the Kingdom of Thailand and Lao PDR. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, focusing on historical, literary, and belief systems that characterize Thai-Lao co-cultural identities. The findings highlight key aspects of these identities and propose a curriculum framework that addresses cognitive, psychomotor, and affective learning domains. This framework is designed to enhance students' understanding of their cultural heritage and to foster intercultural competence. The study contributes to the fields of cultural studies and education by offering insights into the integration of co-cultural identities into educational practices, promoting a richer, more inclusive educational experience.

Keywords: co-cultural identities, Thai-Lao studies, cultural studies, curriculum development guideline

1. Introduction

The concept of the nation-state has profoundly shaped human lives and social structures since its emergence around the 16th century (Wimmer & Feinstein, 2010). This idea posits that individuals are primarily organized under a single governmental authority, defined by clear territorial borders and sovereignty (Lauren et al., 2013; Opello & Rosow, 2004). As such, the nation-state has influenced everything from personal identities to economic systems, aligning a group's identity with specific geopolitical boundaries and often promoting a unified national culture (Vesselinov, 2010).

However, despite the pervasive influence of the nation-state, social interactions across these boundaries have continued unabated (Hwang, 2014; Rosilawati et al., 2020). People in proximity, regardless of national divides, engage in exchanges that transcend these artificial borders. These interactions contribute to the development of shared cultural practices, values, and norms. Over time, such exchanges have led to the formation of co-cultural identities, which persist as significant elements of study in cultural studies (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). These identities illustrate how cultural characteristics are not confined by national lines but are shared and propagated through continuous social interaction, evolving over generations.

For the background of the study, it is important to note that Thailand and Laos PDR are neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, sharing historical ties. Thailand, formerly known as Siam, was formed from the ancient kingdoms of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Rattanakosin, which is now known as Bangkok, the current capital. Meanwhile, Laos PDR, located to the north and northeast of Thailand, lies on the right side of the Mekong River. This nation originated from the Kingdom of Lan Xang. Historically, parts of the Lan Xang kingdom were occupied by the Thai kingdoms (Murashima, 2015; Sregongsang, 2010; Viraphol, 1985). As a result, some ancestors of the Lao people were forcibly resettled to what is now the northeastern region of Thailand, also known as the Isan area, which is on the left side of the Mekong River (McCargo & Hongladarom, 2004). Consequently, the people in Isan and Laos PDR continue to share similar cultural traits (Wisaijorn, 2020).

In Thailand, cultural studies are part of social studies issued in the national core curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008). This is to educate students about diverse cultures and foster an understanding and appreciation for the rich

cultural heritage within and beyond their borders. For students living in northeastern Thailand, knowing the co-cultural identities between Thais and Laotians may help them develop a deeper sense of identity and belonging, enhancing their ability to interact with and appreciate the nuances of their shared histories and cultural practices. Moreover, multicultural awareness is a part of 21st-century skills. Therefore, integrating such awareness into the curriculum supports students in becoming more empathetic and globally competent individuals, prepared to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world (Díaz & Moore, 2018; Rapanta & Trovão, 2021).

In summary, the historical and cultural ties between Thailand and Laos PDR have led to the formation of unique co-cultural identities, particularly evident in regions like northeastern Thailand. These identities are not only a testament to the shared histories and interactions across the Mekong River but also reflect the ongoing cultural exchanges that continue to shape the social landscape of both nations. Recognizing the significance of these co-cultural dynamics is crucial in educational settings, where understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural backgrounds are essential. Consequently, the purposes of this study are twofold: to examine Thai-Lao co-cultural identities in detail and to provide a guideline for cultural curriculum development. The results of this study could contribute significantly to the enhancement of educational strategies and content, ensuring they are culturally responsive and inclusive. By doing so, this research aims to benefit educators, curriculum developers, and ultimately students, by fostering an educational environment that deeply respects and integrates the rich cultural nuances of both Thai and Lao communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Co-Cultural Identities

The concept of cultural identity is multifaceted and dynamic, encapsulating the various ways individuals and groups navigate their social worlds through identities that are continually shaped and reshaped (Chen & Lin, 2016; Joseph, 2012; Kim, 2007). Defined broadly, cultural identity involves the status, experience, enactment, co-creation, renegotiation, and contestation of group memberships and social identifications, often mediated through communication within specific contexts. This complex construction is not static but is continuously influenced by interactions and communications that reflect and reshape group identities within particular social, historical, and cultural settings.

Scholarly approaches to understanding cultural identity vary widely, each framing the concept through different lenses and assumptions. Social psychological approaches often focus on the internal processes influencing how individuals perceive their group affiliations, suggesting a degree of personal agency and choice in their cultural identities (Yan, 2018). In contrast, interpretive cultural approaches emphasize the role of ongoing social interactions in the creation and expression of cultural identities, viewing them as narratives co-constructed through communication (Chen & Lin, 2016). Critical and interpretive approaches delve deeper, critiquing how power dynamics and societal structures influence identity formation, and arguing that cultural identities are not merely personal choices but are significantly shaped by external factors such as colonialism, history, economics, and geopolitical relations (Szkudlarek et al., 2020). These approaches highlight the tension between individual agency and structural influences, exploring how macro forces shape perceptions and experiences of cultural identities. Understanding these diverse perspectives is crucial for grasping the complex nature of cultural identities and their implications for individuals and societies.

Therefore, the term co-cultural identity could be synthesized to the shared identity characteristics among people from different cultural backgrounds as a result of historical, social, or geographical interactions (Orbe & Roberts, 2012). It emphasizes the blending and coexistence of diverse cultural traits to form a unique hybrid identity that is distinct yet inclusive of its constituent elements (Fong & Chuang, 2003). This concept is particularly relevant in regions where borders, languages, and histories intertwine, leading to a complex cultural interplay.

2.2 Cultural Studies

Cultural studies are interdisciplinary field that examines cultural phenomena in their socio-political and historical contexts (Miller, 2001). It explores the ways in which culture manifests and influences identities, social practices, and power structures within societies (Rodman, 2017). The subject draws from various disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and media studies, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural forces that shape individual and collective experiences.

For learners, cultural studies offer crucial insights into the complexities of cultural identity and social dynamics (Johnson, 1986). It equips them with the analytical tools needed to critically evaluate the cultural norms and values that permeate their daily lives (Momir et al., 2015). This understanding is essential in fostering critical thinking, enhancing communication skills, and promoting a more profound appreciation for diversity within and across

societies. Moreover, by engaging with cultural studies, learners are better prepared to navigate and contribute to a rapidly globalizing world where cultural literacy and sensitivity are indispensable.

For Thai learners, specifically, delving into cultural studies—and particularly into Thai-Lao co-cultural identities—holds significant benefits. First, it helps them recognize and value the nuanced cultural heritage shared across the Thailand-Laos border, which is a testament to centuries of historical and social interactions. Understanding these co-cultural identities can strengthen social cohesion and foster mutual respect among communities that share both distinct and overlapping cultural traits. Furthermore, learning about these co-cultural dynamics can empower Thai learners to better understand the regional diversity within Thailand itself, especially between the mainstream Thai culture and the distinctive cultures of the northeastern region. This awareness is vital for promoting inclusivity and equality within educational and social institutions. Lastly, such knowledge can enhance learners' ability to participate effectively and empathetically in both local and international contexts, where intercultural competence is increasingly crucial for personal and professional success. By integrating the study of Thai-Lao co-cultural identities into educational curricula, Thai learners can gain a richer, more inclusive understanding of their own identities and those of their neighbors, paving the way for more harmonious and productive interactions across cultural lines.

2.3 Previous Studies on Co-Cultural Identities

Previous studies (Chung, 2019; Harb, 2016; Matsunaga & Torigoe, 2008; Razzante et al., 2021) have examined co-cultural identities in various global contexts. Chung (2019) explored the identities of Hong Kong and Canada as parts of the British Empire in the past. Matsunaga & Torigoe (2008) investigated the co-cultural identities in terms of language, culture, and way of life between people of Korean heritage in Japan and the natives. Harb (2016) analyzed the cultural identities of Arab Americans originating from different countries. It is noteworthy that the issue of co-cultural identities is widely discussed in the field of social studies, emphasizing that understanding the cultures of people within a society can foster coexistence and mutual understanding. Therefore, applying this knowledge from social science studies to education is crucial. The current study examines Thai and Laotian cultures to identify their co-cultural identities and presents a guideline for the development of a cultural curriculum.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, gathering data from a diverse group of participants including educators, local philosophers, officials from both governmental and private cultural sectors, monks, and stakeholders involved in cultural heritage preservation in both the Kingdom of Thailand and Laos PDR. The qualitative data collected were analyzed to address two key issues: the exploration of co-cultural identities between Thai and Lao populations, and the development of guidelines for managing a cultural curriculum that reflects these identities.

3.2 Informants

The key informants for this study were 14 stakeholders involved in cultural heritage preservation in both the Kingdom of Thailand and Laos PDR. This diverse group included: 5 educators who teach in schools and universities, providing insights from both primary and higher education perspectives. 3 local philosophers, renowned for their extensive knowledge and understanding of regional cultural practices and histories. 2 officials from governmental cultural sectors, responsible for implementing and overseeing cultural heritage policies and initiatives. 3 officials from private cultural sectors, involved in promoting and supporting cultural heritage through private and non-governmental organizations. 1 monk, whose role in preserving and teaching cultural and spiritual traditions offers a unique and vital perspective on cultural heritage. They were selected using a purposive sampling method based on several criteria: 1) having at least ten years of experience in the field, 2) residing in a province bordering the other country, 3) possessing experience in educational management, and 4) actively participating in cultural events. Throughout the data collection process, ethical considerations pertinent to human research were meticulously observed to ensure the integrity and respectfulness of the interactions.

3.3 Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview form designed to collect data on co-cultural identities between Thai and Lao populations, as well as to assist in the development of guidelines for managing a cultural curriculum. Regarding co-cultural identities, the interview questions were focused on historical perspectives, literature, and beliefs. For the curriculum development component, the questions were designed to explore the potential for integrating this knowledge into curriculum design, aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy

(1956). This approach aimed to demonstrate how co-cultural identities could be utilized to develop students' knowledge across the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains. The instrument comprised six questions in total, each with an Index of Content Validity (IOC) of 1.0, as evaluated by three experts in education.

3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data collection occurred from August to October 2023, during which key informants were interviewed face-to-face. Prior to the start of each interview, informants were fully briefed on the project's objectives and the ethical considerations involved. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then subjected to thematic analysis to identify and elaborate on the main issues discussed by both the interviewees and interviewers.

4. Results

4.1 Thai Lao Co-Cultural Identities

4.1.1 Historical Identities

The national histories of Thailand and Laos have been intertwined for a long time. The southern Lao provinces, which include Savannakhet, Salavan, Sekong, Champasak, and Attapeu of Lao PDR, share borders with Ubon Ratchathani Province in Thailand, an area collectively referred to as the Mekong River Basin. The people residing in this region share ethnic characteristics, ways of life, and cultural identities with the people of Isaan in Thailand.

The relationship between the people of southern Laos and northeastern Thailand involves shared ethnicity, history, and culture, including lifestyle interactions among community members on both sides of the Mekong River. These interactions are linked at all levels from local to national policies. The largest ethnic group in the Mekong River Basin, on both the Thai and Lao sides, is the Thai-Lao ethnic group, consisting of the Isaan people in Thailand and the Lao people in Laos, who share familial ties. This common ancestry fosters ongoing visits and cultural activities because the communities in the Mekong River Basin have similar origins.

The similarities include a shared culture making it difficult to distinguish between the Thai and Lao ethnicities. Viewing Ubon Ratchathani in Thailand and Champasak in Laos PDR, the understanding takes into account both sides of the Mekong River, with Ubon Ratchathani considered Thai and Champasak viewed as part of Laos PDR, divided by the Mekong River. Despite this division by governance, the root of their shared ethnic and cultural identity remains strong, with language and culture serving as enduring indicators of their identity.

4.1.2 Literature Identities

The results could be summarized that the shared cultural heritage in literature is highly significant and beneficial. Literature clearly reflects the shared cultural identities of Thai and Lao people. The literary language found in folktales evident in both Thai and Lao nations shows that the Thai-Lao people are skilled poets and storytellers, using phrases and expressions to make the stories more interesting, clearer in meaning, and more emotionally engaging for the listeners. The language used in these folktales describes the linguistic characteristics of both nations, showing some similarities and differences in words, demonstrating common features in language use and expressions in each locality. The literary language identity between the Thai and Lao ethnic groups is linguistically interconnected, yet not entirely identical. Therefore, literary language serves as an important cultural medium that reflects the unique ethnic identities or the essence of a group's identity.

Literature includes the recording of religious scriptures on palm leaves, which document stories related to Buddhism, folktales, and medical treatments. These can be categorized into two types: one related to Buddhist teachings, which include chants and practices, and another consisting of stories and folktales focusing on morals such as gratitude, merit-making, and nurturing religion. Monks or scholars would use the language from these palm leaf scriptures to convey teachings, using stories as educational tools because there was no formal curriculum in the past. Hence, this method of transmission is considered a curriculum through memorization and has been passed down as a cultural practice. The people of northeastern Thailand and Champasak in Laos use this form of communication and performance as an art form derived from palm leaf scriptures, which include teachings about Buddhism, transmitted in a way that allows people to listen and see, thus becoming a culture through performance.

4.1.3 Identities of Beliefs

The research found that the shared cultural identity between Thailand and Laos includes beliefs in Buddhism, Brahmanism, spirits, and enduring cultural traditions of the Thai-Lao ethnic group in the Mekong Basin. This includes adhering to traditional norms and practices; everything must follow the traditional customs of "Heet 12 Kong 14." Heet refers to the 12 monthly cultural practices that reflect the beliefs of the Thai-Lao ethnic group in venerating Buddhism, respecting ancestral spirits, and sacred entities that protect the people. Kong 14 represents

14 social norms that northeastern Thais and Laotians are expected to observe. Heet 12 involves maintaining and transmitting practices that share similarities and differences in methods or ceremonies, yet the core cultural identity remains intact. Examples include the Pha Wet festival and the recitation of the Great Birth Sermon, which are traditions that preserve the cultural identity of the Thai-Lao people in the Mekong Basin.

The idea or policy in Heet 12 is to foster unity within the community, created in ancient times to ensure people do not abandon the virtues of each month. It involves gatherings and creative interactions that build goodness according to Heet 12 and Kong 14, which are sets of practices according to Kong. If everyone adheres to these norms, peace and harmony will prevail. Although many traditions have become tourist attractions today, this is still a way for the new generation to preserve and pass on the beautiful cultural heritage so that it does not fade away over time.

4.2 Guidelines for Cultural Study Curriculum

4.2.1 Cognitive Domain

In educational settings, it is essential to incorporate comprehensive knowledge that captures the rich historical background of Thailand and Laos, emphasizing how these two countries share intertwined cultural narratives, outstanding literary contributions, and foundational elements of co-cultural identities, such as the “Heet 12 Kong 14.” This curriculum component should be integrated into social studies courses at the school level and extended into general education programs at the graduate school level.

The primary aim of including such content is to enlighten students, particularly those from the Isan region of northeastern Thailand, about their deep-rooted cultural origins and the intricate relationships that exist between their local customs and those shared with neighboring Laos. This educational approach helps cultivate a profound sense of identity and belonging among these students, fostering an appreciation for their unique cultural heritage.

Moreover, this curriculum is also designed to educate individuals from other subcultures or regions within Thailand and beyond, about the Thai-Lao co-cultural identities. By doing so, it promotes a broader understanding and recognition of the cultural complexities and the shared historical and cultural ties that influence these communities. This educational strategy not only enhances cultural awareness but also encourages respect and empathy among students from diverse backgrounds, facilitating a more inclusive and harmonious societal interaction. Through such an informed educational framework, students can develop a well-rounded perspective on the regional dynamics and the symbiotic cultural relationships that define the Thai-Lao borderlands.

4.2.2 Psychomotor Domain

The integration of co-cultural identity skills into the music and arts curriculum offers a unique opportunity to enrich educational experiences and deepen students’ understanding of their cultural heritage. By including traditional Thai-Lao musical performances, such as Moh Lam, and teaching the use of regional instruments like the Khaen (a woodwind mouth organ made of bamboo), Phin (a string instrument), and Saw (a bamboo fiddle), students can gain a practical and theoretical understanding of these cultural art forms.

Additionally, the curriculum should encompass traditional dancing and the distinctive style of singing known as “Lam.” This traditional approach not only enhances the students’ artistic skills but also serves as a conduit for cultural transmission. Through learning about and practicing these arts, students become more connected to their community’s activities and traditions.

The origins of these performances are deeply rooted in the beliefs and lifestyle of the Thai-Lao ethnic group. By exploring these elements, students can appreciate the cultural significance behind the music and dance, seeing them not just as entertainment but as expressions of community identity and historical continuity. This educational approach aims to foster a sense of pride and belonging among students, helping them to understand the cultural underpinnings that shape their community and influence their everyday lives. Through this curriculum, students are not only learning about the arts; they are also engaging in a broader dialogue about their heritage and the shared cultural landscape of the Thai-Lao region.

4.2.3 Affective Domain

Incorporating the study of Thai-Lao co-cultural identities into the educational curriculum notably enhances the affective domain of learning, which involves the attitudes, emotions, and values of students. By engaging with materials and activities that reflect their cultural heritage, such as traditional music, dance, and communal practices like Moh Lam, students can develop a deeper emotional connection to their community and its history. This emotional engagement is crucial for fostering a strong sense of identity and pride. Furthermore, understanding the shared cultural nuances between the Thai and Lao people helps students appreciate the richness of their cultural

landscape, promoting empathy and respect for cultural differences. Such educational experiences empower students to value their own cultural traditions while also respecting the diversity within and across communities. This not only reinforces a positive self-concept and community belonging but also prepares students to interact more harmoniously and compassionately in a diverse world.

5. Discussion

The study reveals that the co-cultural identities of northeastern Thai and Lao people encompass historical identities stemming from common roots, literary identities related to Buddhism and the language used in storytelling, and the traditions encapsulated by “Heet 12 Kong 14,” which stand out as a significant shared cultural belief. It is noteworthy that these co-cultural identities originate from the people and their ancestral connections. Located around the Mekong Basin, these communities continue to interact and share cultural practices despite being divided by national boundaries in terms of governance. This ongoing cultural exchange fosters the formation of co-cultural identities, underscoring that such identities are not merely a consequence of shared history but are actively maintained through continuous interpersonal interactions. This pattern of identity formation aligns with findings from previous studies (Chung, 2019; Harb, 2016; Matsunaga & Torigoe, 2008; Razzante et al., 2021), which have similarly identified the significant role of cultural interaction in shaping co-cultural identities across different regions, emphasizing that such identities flourish among communities regardless of political geographic divisions.

The study also provides guidelines for integrating co-cultural identities into curriculum development across cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains. The primary objective is to increase learners’ awareness of their roots and the culture that surrounds them in daily life. This awareness aids in cultural preservation by facilitating the transfer of co-cultural identities to future generations, ensuring that these rich traditions are not lost but rather continue to evolve and inform community identities. According to Momir et al., (2015), the benefits of cultural studies include enhancing critical thinking and analytical skills, promoting empathy and ethical understanding, and fostering a greater appreciation for diversity. These outcomes not only enrich students’ academic and personal lives but also prepare them to participate more effectively and respectfully in an increasingly interconnected global society.

6. Conclusion

The study is a qualitative study aiming at identifying Thai-Lao co-cultural identities and providing a guideline for cultural study curriculum development. The data were gathered from 14 stakeholders in education and cultural preservation in both kingdom of Thailand and Lao PDR using an interview form. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis method. The results of the study identify Thai-Lao co-cultural identities in terms of history, literature, and beliefs and the guideline for curriculum development in terms of cognitive domain, psychomotor domain, and affective domain.

The study employs a qualitative approach with the goal of identifying Thai-Lao co-cultural identities and providing a framework for the development of a cultural studies curriculum. Data were collected from stakeholders involved in education and cultural preservation from both the Kingdom of Thailand and Lao PDR. The findings of the study delineate Thai-Lao co-cultural identities through historical contexts, literary expressions, and shared beliefs. Additionally, the study offers guidelines for curriculum development, specifically addressing the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains. This framework aims to incorporate these co-cultural elements systematically into educational practices, enriching learning experiences and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural heritage.

The implications of this study for pedagogy and academic discourse are significant. By integrating Thai-Lao co-cultural identities into the curriculum, educators can create a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment that reflects the diverse cultural backgrounds of students. This approach not only enriches the educational experience but also encourages a deeper engagement with the material, as students see their histories and cultures represented in their studies. Academically, this research contributes to the broader field of cultural studies by providing a model for how co-cultural identities can be systematically explored and integrated into educational frameworks. This can spur further research and encourage educational institutions to consider similar approaches in other culturally diverse settings, promoting a more holistic understanding of cultural interdependence in a globalized educational context.

This study has specific limitations that should be noted. The research focuses exclusively on the southern region of Laos and a single province in Thailand, which may not fully represent the diversity of Thai-Lao co-cultural identities across the broader regions of both countries. Additionally, the study relies solely on qualitative data, which, while rich in detail and depth, limits the ability to generalize findings across a larger population. This

qualitative focus provides in-depth insights into the specific contexts studied but may not capture the full spectrum of variations in co-cultural identities that quantitative data might reveal. These limitations suggest the need for further studies that expand the geographical scope and incorporate quantitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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