

The Cultural Identity in Lao Textbook

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Abstract: The Cultural Identity in Lao textbooks in historical period received early influences from Animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism. Education was primarily carried out within the family and Buddhist temple and remained unchanged up to French Colonial rule. During the French occupation, very little was done to develop Laos, education wasn't encouraged and no importance was given to Lao Nationalism except that France was a good protector of Laos and Thailand depicted as enemies of the State. The Independence movement and Socialist Revolution in 1975 brought major changes to Laos. Textbooks were used early during this period as instruments to convey Socialist and Marxist ideology to the nation. Cultural Identity had been melted to serve the Socialist party. But as Socialist governments in the west started to deteriorate in the late 90s, Laos had to adapt and revise various aspects of policy. Foreign investments were approved and reforms initiated at all levels. In 1994, Laos initiated educational reforms which aimed for students to approach situations with a scientific view. This policy was carried out by modifying educational systems to include studies in Science, Technology and Foreign languages. Other factors that contributed to the change of the Cultural Identity in Lao Textbooks included Nationalism, Socialism, influence from Socialist groups, Globalization, Communication, Tourism and Consumerism. Changes were put in motion and policies were adapted to modernized the country and accept the mechanics of a capital market economy and free trade. Former enemies are now regarded as neighboring friends.

Key words: Lao, culture, identity, textbook, socialism

INTRODUCTION

Every political state in general develops human resources to be a mechanism of the state or country. If the task of providing education remains the responsibility of the state, then the educational system will always be catered to serve the current political system.

Human resources development is an important factor for all countries. Educational institutions are responsible for the arrangement of study programs to improve human resources of the nation. Therefore, political parties and governments must regard and uphold the importance task of educational reforms. The ministry of education of the people's democratic republic of laos is the principle institution responsible for the education on all levels starting from kindergarten, elementary, high school, university and distance learning systems (Suwankum, 1998).

The people's democratic republic of laos has a long history of development dating back to ancient times. Starting from the emergence from state building to a prosperous kingdom, then becoming a protectorate under

french colonial rule and finally under socialism in modern times. Educational textbooks were used to convey ideology and portray laos cultural identity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research area: The primary research area was conducted in vientiane and luang prabang city in the people's democratic republic of laos during September 2003-April 2007.

Research method: The study on cultural identity in laos textbook aims to study the dynamics of cultural identity figures in lao textbook and social extent. Both internal and external factors were also considered that contributed the cultural identity. The methods used were literature reviews of historical research method. Lao textbooks were selected and analyzed that relate to cultural life circumstances. Information and interviews of scholars involved in textbook compiling were documented and analyzed. Results were presented in the form of descriptive analysis from both inside and outside perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Laos textbook function is different at each level. Textbooks in the elementary level focus around discovering, knowing oneself and the introduction towards Nationalism. In the high school level, textbooks emphasize on knowing others and becoming a model citizen of Laos and the world. Analysis of the current status of Cultural Identity in Laos textbook can be explained historically from the different periods of government that Laotians have experienced. This can be divided into 3 periods as follows.

Period 1 cultural identity from the historical Lan Chang kingdom: Historical records indicate that Laos in the early 14th century exists as the Lan Chang Kingdom (Auguste, 1999). Early influence to The Cultural Identity of Laos was Animism and Brahmanism. Knowledge was transferred and handed down from generation to generation. Mythology and Adage Fairy Tales were passed on orally and through Palm leaf scriptures. The arrival of Buddhism later brought with it the Buddhist educational system text and scriptures. Male youths were taught at temples while females were taught arts and crafts within the household. The diversity of minorities within the kingdom was unified under the talent of numerous remarkable kings. Buddhism continued to have influence on shaping the Cultural Identity of Laotians throughout the Lan Chang Kingdom and then later under the influence and governing of Thailand and throughout French Colonial rule in 1893 (Dusadee, 2006).

Period 2 cultural identity during French colonial rule: During the French occupation, very little was invested towards the development of Laos. Local customs were not banned and the Laotians were free to conduct every day life as usual. But education and development in many areas of government were not encouraged. Laos was ruled as a protectorate and so was the Educational system. Government and Institutions were forced to use the French language with no importance to the Lao Language. There were only 2 schools. One located in Luang Prabang City and the other in Vientiane City. A third school was built by the French in Vientiane in 1923, but only accepted foreigners and the upper class gentry. Laos was viewed as an under developed country. The most noticeable adjustment to educational textbooks, were the inclusion that France was the righteous protector of Laos and Thailand was the enemy of the State (Dararat, 2005). Religious teachings and followings were left untouched and retained their original roles and importance since historical times.

The oppression under Colonial rule did however give rise to strong leaders which would eventually lead the country towards Socialism. The many years of struggle and conflict for independence from France, Japanese and American aggression had erased much of what was The Cultural Identity of Laos. Therefore, after gaining freedom and establishing a stable government, The People's Democratic Party urgently cultivated Nationalism and Cultural Identity.

Period 3 cultural identity during socialism: In 1975 Laos changed to a Socialist government ruled by a single party. The People's Democratic Party was the most single important factor in shaping Laos Cultural Identity. Religious institutions which had much role in shaping Lao society and culture was lessened and monks were included into the People's Democratic Party to revolutionized the country towards Socialist ideology.

The Socialist party used Educational Institutions to convey Socialist notions to citizens. This was done by using educational textbooks to instruct Lao youths to new qualifications that were in accordance with what the People's Democratic Party desired (Prapat, 1999). The educational curriculum was divided into 5 groups. They were Ethics, Wisdom, Health, Physical and Transgression Studies. All textbooks were filled with Marxist notions and ideas (Wongduan, 1991). This new ideology required textbooks to be modified. Lao Nationality was noticeably merged in with the curriculum. Categories related to Social Sciences such as Geology, History and Population Studies were also promoted.

External factors that contributed to the Lao Cultural Identity also came from foreign aid. Further adjustments were made to textbooks with the acceptance of foreign aid from organizations such as Foreign Community Funds, UNICEF and The Toyota Foundation. New textbooks were created to include Population Study, Environmental Study, Family Qualities, Social Development and Female Roles in Development. These changes were implemented at the Elementary, High School level, Distance Learning System and also at the Teacher's Institution. The acceptance of foreign aid and the changes in foreign policy indicated that The People's Democratic Republic of Laos acknowledged that the country was confronted with the same crisis similar to many other under developed countries such as pollution and transportation problems.

History textbooks focused mainly on how to be a good citizen of the state. Content was passed on by using examples of heroic struggles for liberation by ancestral heroes and Lao youths that cooperated with the state in the revolution and protection of the nation. History books during this era included chapters on how various

indigenous tribes were in cooperation with the state in the freedom movement and their combined cooperation eventually expelled foreign aggression and influence from Laos. This inclusion of minorities added diversity to textbooks and indicated that the state had accepted the existence of many minority groups within Laos and regarded that they are all part of the Lao family. Historical heroes included commoners, nobleman and those of royal lineage that had developed and created a prosperous nation from past to present.

The fall of Socialism in Western Europe in 1991 meant that the level of foreign aid that Laos received from Russia, China and Vietnam was to decline. This led the People's Democratic Party to adapt an economy based on free trade and ushered in the Neo-Marxist era. Restrictions against citizens were declined and Laotians were allowed to travel to foreign countries more conveniently (Grant, 2002). Foreign investment also received approval from the state. The New Vision Policy was initiated in 1994 and Educational Institutions were reformed giving importance to the development of Human Resources.

To be consistent with the new policy, textbooks were modified to revive Laos culture from historical periods. The People's Democratic Party had a slogan saying *Laksana Khong Chaut Kaw Kue Laksana Wattanatum* meaning, The appearance of the nation, is the appearance of the culture, if the culture is lost, then so is the nation.

The Cultural Identity proposed in textbooks portrayed the importance of the Lao language and alphabet as the universal language that overarches all groups within the nation. New words were created and borrowed from foreign languages. Geology included issues on the abundance of the nation's natural resources, rivers, mountains and forests, but stated that Laos still lacked the aptitude due to fact that the country was a landlocked nation and was still underdeveloped. Also included in the texts were conscience reminders that all groups within the country are all family and related to one another and that they had united together to expel foreign aggression and save the nation. Politics and Government studies emphasized the superiority of how the People's Democratic Party is the only institution capable of delivering true Socialism and the country will eventually become a prosperous Communist state. Population studies were unchanged and still emphasized Marxist values and the state's ideology.

Current status: Internal factors contributing to the publishing of textbooks included Nationalism, Socialism and Cultural Traditions. Nationalism was created by the People's Democratic Party for the unity and harmony of all citizens by communicating it through national symbols such as, The Laos National Flag, The Party's Emblem and

Monument Flags. Socialism is an idea which is conveyed to all levels of society in order to guide the nation towards the ideal social state. Cultural Traditions were revived and practiced in accordance with religious values expressed through various festivals and traditions. Examples are such as the Phra Taht Luang festival and ceremonial rituals during the opening of National Monuments and Statues.

External factors included Neighboring Socialist allies, Globalization, Communication, Tourism and Consumerism. These factors have had a direct impact on The Lao Cultural Identity in Textbooks due to the fact that The People's Democratic Party had to rely on original core cultural capital as a protection against the encroachment and technology advancements from foreign trends and customs. The difficult control of globalization has led Laos to adapt towards modernization while preserving valuable traditions and customs. The status of Thailand as an enemy has been dropped and regarded in modern textbooks as a friendly neighbor.

Before 1975, it is estimated that 90% of Laotians were illiterate. But after the initiation of The People's Democratic Republic of Laos, The government realized that the major task was to provide education equally to all citizens and raise that level to international standards. During the celebration of 30 years of effort at the People's Democratic Party's headquarters in 2005, current figures regarding education were proudly announced as follows:

- There are currently 967 kindergarten schools with 45,166 pupils accompanied by 2,676 teachers.
- In the Elementary level, there are 8,607 schools with 890,821 students and 27,618 teachers.
- In the People's Democratic Party level, there are 926 schools with 388,053 students and 4,687 teachers.
- In the Vocational level, there are 34 colleges with 24,632 students and 2,512 teachers.
- In the Teacher's college level, there are 11 institutes with 13,600 scholars.
- In the Graduate and University level, there are 22 campuses with 37,569 students and 2,013 teachers.

CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Current trends are pointing towards increased influences from globalization and interaction with neighboring countries and the global community. The Cultural Identity of Laos is increasingly following the world society and textbooks are increasingly being affected and adapted to keep up with current circumstances. Many foreign languages are being taught and encouraged in schools and institutions. Tourism is also advancing at a prosperous rate.

The People's Democratic Republic of Laos is developing the country by using Science and Technology. Educational Institutions are continually being reformed and the country is has been opened to foreign aid and counsel. Textbooks are being adjusted to these new concepts and policies while retaining core Socialist values.

Further research into The Cultural Identity in Laos Textbook will provide insight into the integration of ideology that the People's Democratic Party is trying to illustrate to the world to the cultural uniqueness of Laos. And also to demonstrate that The People's Democratic Republic of Laos is peacefully making headway towards Modernization and Internationalism.

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