Cultural Identity and Social Change in Contemporary Thai Society[*]

Sompop Rangubtook
Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand
E-mail: kprungkit@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the transformation of cultural identity in contemporary Thai society amidst the sweeping forces of globalization, digital technology, migration, neoliberalism, and urbanization. It examines how these dynamics influence the erosion of traditional values, the emergence of hybrid and transnational identities, and the negotiation between cultural continuity and innovation. Case studies from Thai adolescents, ethnic tourism in Northern Thailand, and Muslim youth in Southern Thailand illustrate the diverse ways in which individuals and communities adapt to shifting cultural landscapes. The analysis highlights that while some aspects of cultural identity face fragmentation, others are revitalized and redefined through digital expression, education, and political activism. This study emphasizes the need to understand cultural identity as a fluid, context-dependent construct shaped by both global trends and local resilience in Thai society.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the global society is undergoing rapid transformation driven by the forces of globalization and advances in digital technology. These changes have significantly altered human lifestyles, values, and communication patterns on an unprecedented scale (Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 2010). As a result, cultural exchanges have become increasingly open and intense, challenging traditional cultural frameworks in many societies. This dynamic environment raises concerns about the stability and continuity of *cultural identity*.

Cultural identity refers to an individual's or group's sense of belonging to a cultural community, expressed through language, beliefs, values, traditions, and ways of life (Hall, 1996). It serves as a fundamental element that shapes personal and collective identities. However, in today's contemporary society—characterized by cultural diversity, cross-cultural interactions, and rapid consumption of globalized

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culture—cultural identity is no longer static but becomes fluid, negotiable, and subject to transformation (Bauman, 2001).

This situation leads to key academic questions: How does cultural identity function within the context of contemporary social change? How can local cultures preserve their identities in the face of global cultural pressures? What are the emerging forms of identity in an era of globalization?

This article aims to analyze the meaning, role, and transformation of cultural identity within contemporary society. It draws upon conceptual frameworks from the humanities and social sciences, including identity theory, globalization theory, and contemporary cultural studies. The objective is to offer critical insights and recommendations for preserving cultural diversity in an increasingly borderless world.

Conceptual framework and related theories

The study of cultural identity within the context of contemporary social change requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and political theory. This section presents the key concepts and theoretical frameworks used to analyze the dynamics of cultural identity and its transformation in a globalized world.

1. Concept of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity refers to an individual's or group's affiliation with a particular culture, shaped by shared language, beliefs, customs, traditions, and values. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence, but a "positioning" – a continuous process of becoming rather than being. According to Hall, identity is constructed through representation and difference, and it is always historically and socially situated.
This view challenges essentialist perspectives that see identity as rooted in a static, homogenous cultural heritage. Instead, identity is seen as dynamic, fluid, and shaped through discourse, power relations, and interactions with others (Hall, 1996; Woodward, 1997).

2. Theories of Social and Cultural Change

To understand how cultural identity evolves, it is necessary to examine the broader theories of social and cultural change:

Anthony Giddens' Theory of Structuration: Giddens (1991) emphasizes the reflexivity of modern individuals, who constantly reflect on and revise their identities in response to new information and experiences. In the context of globalization, people encounter multiple sources of cultural meaning, leading to the emergence of hybrid identities.

Modernization and Globalization Theories: These theories, particularly as articulated by Appadurai (1996), view globalization as a process that intensifies cultural flows—of people, ideas, media, and capital—across national boundaries. While this can lead to cultural homogenization, it can also create spaces for resistance, adaptation, and new cultural forms.

Bauman's Concept of Liquid Modernity: Zygmunt Bauman (2001) introduces the idea of "liquid modernity," in which social structures and identities

become increasingly unstable and flexible. In this view, cultural identity is no longer rooted in tradition but is constantly renegotiated in response to shifting circumstances.

3. Cultural Hybridity and Identity Construction

Another important theoretical perspective is the concept of **cultural hybridity**, which refers to the blending of elements from different cultures to create new, composite identities. Homi Bhabha (1994) describes hybridity as a "third space" where cultural meanings are negotiated. This space allows for the emergence of novel identities that challenge binary notions of East vs. West or local vs. global.

In contemporary societies, individuals—especially youth—often embody hybrid identities through language, fashion, media consumption, and values that cross traditional cultural boundaries (Pieterse, 2004). This hybridity reflects not cultural loss, but cultural innovation.

4. Identity Politics and Cultural Preservation

From a political science perspective, **identity politics** explores how cultural identity becomes a basis for collective action and political struggle. Cultural groups may mobilize around their identities to demand rights, recognition, or autonomy in the face of cultural domination or marginalization (Taylor, 1994).

Furthermore, scholars emphasize the importance of cultural preservation in sustaining community cohesion and self-determination. UNESCO (2003) advocates for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage as a way to promote intercultural dialogue and protect cultural diversity.

Cultural identity in its original context

Cultural identity in its original or traditional context was deeply rooted in stable social structures and long-standing cultural practices. It was closely linked to the environment, religion, community roles, and intergenerational transmission of values, forming a coherent and relatively unchanging sense of self and group belonging.

1. Cultural Identity as Community-Based and Inherited

Traditionally, cultural identity was passed down from generation to generation through family, religious institutions, and community life. In many societies, especially agrarian or indigenous communities, identity was shaped by kinship ties, rituals, oral traditions, and communal knowledge systems (Geertz, 1973). These cultural markers provided individuals with a clear sense of "who they are" and "where they belong."

In this context, identity was collective rather than individualistic. People identified primarily as members of extended families, ethnic groups, or local communities. Social roles and expectations were determined by age, gender, and caste or class, and rarely questioned.

2. Role of Religion and Tradition

Religion played a central role in shaping traditional cultural identities. In many cultures, belief systems provided moral frameworks, life rituals, and cosmological narratives that gave meaning to daily life and death (Durkheim, 1912). In Southeast Asia, for example, Theravāda Buddhism influenced not only personal values such as

compassion and detachment but also social institutions and festivals, thus reinforcing a shared cultural identity (Keyes, 1977).

Tradition functioned as a stabilizing force. It bound individuals to a collective memory and practices that defined group identity and ensured social continuity. Symbols, myths, language, and clothing were all tied to identity preservation.

3. Identity as Embedded in Place and Practice

Traditional cultural identity was also tied to place—geographic and symbolic. People identified strongly with their local landscapes, villages, or homelands, which held spiritual and historical significance. The connection between identity and land was reinforced through farming rituals, ancestral worship, and sacred geography.

Moreover, cultural practices such as dance, music, dress, and cuisine were rooted in specific regions. These practices served not just as expressions of identity but as tools of transmission and reproduction of cultural norms (Barth, 1969).

4. Cultural Identity and Social Stability

Cultural identity in its original context contributed significantly to social cohesion and stability. Shared cultural values and norms helped regulate behavior and maintain a sense of order within communities. Identity was not something to be "constructed" but rather something one was born into, expected to preserve and perform (Jenkins, 2004).

This stability, however, also came with limitations—such as rigid social roles, exclusion of outsiders, and resistance to change. But in terms of identity formation, the traditional context offered clarity, continuity, and communal belonging.

Phenomenons and drivers of change in contemporary society

In the modern world, cultural identity is increasingly shaped, disrupted, and redefined by powerful forces of change. These forces emerge from globalization, technological advancement, migration, and the spread of neoliberal economic models. While these dynamics create new possibilities for cultural interaction and innovation, they also challenge traditional forms of identity and social cohesion.

1. Globalization and Cultural Flows

Globalization, characterized by the increased interconnectedness of economies, societies, and cultures, is one of the most significant drivers of change in contemporary identity formation. According to Appadurai (1996), globalization facilitates the movement of people (ethnoscapes), technologies (technoscapes), media (mediascapes), ideologies (ideoscapes), and goods (financescapes) across borders. These cultural flows disrupt local traditions and introduce new ideas, values, and practices that reshape cultural identities.

For example, youth in rural communities can now consume global pop culture through social media, altering their tastes, language use, and even self-presentation, often in contrast to their traditional cultural expectations.

2. Digital Technology and Social Media

Digital technology and especially **social media** have accelerated cultural exchange, personal expression, and identity experimentation. Platforms such as

Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow individuals to construct and broadcast their identities to global audiences, often blending local and global influences (boyd, 2014).

This creates what Manuel Castells (2010) calls the "network society," where cultural identity is less about geography and more about online communities and shared digital experiences. The speed and volume of online interactions also increase exposure to diverse perspectives, while algorithms can simultaneously create **echo chambers** that reinforce selective cultural values.

3. Migration and Transnationalism

The rise in international migration has resulted in **diasporic communities** and **transnational identities**. People who live across borders often retain connections to their homeland while adapting to the culture of the host country (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). This dual positioning fosters hybrid cultural identities that reflect both cultural continuity and adaptation.

Children of immigrants, for instance, may navigate multiple cultural expectations—those of their ancestral culture and the dominant culture in which they live—creating complex identity negotiations.

4. Neoliberalism and Individualism

Contemporary capitalism and neoliberal ideology emphasize **individual choice**, **consumer identity**, and **personal branding**. These values shift the meaning of identity from collective belonging to personal expression and economic positioning (Harvey, 2005).

Cultural identity becomes a "project" that individuals curate through consumption choices, lifestyles, and affiliations, often marketed as personal uniqueness rather than communal ties. This shift can weaken traditional forms of social solidarity and promote identity fragmentation.

5. Urbanization and Cultural Anonymity

The rapid growth of cities has also contributed to changes in identity. Urban life often weakens community ties and promotes **anonymity**, **diversity**, and **fluid social interactions**. Unlike in rural or tribal settings, urban residents are frequently exposed to multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural norms, which compel them to adopt flexible and context-dependent identities (Sennett, 1977).

6. Education and Cultural Awareness

Formal education systems increasingly include global history, world religions, and multicultural content, which can broaden perspectives and foster **cosmopolitan identities** (Nussbaum, 1997). At the same time, this may cause tension with traditionalist views or localized cultural teachings.

In the modern world, cultural identity is being constantly reshaped by powerful and intersecting forces including globalization, digital technology, migration, neoliberalism, and urbanization. These dynamics open new avenues for cultural exchange and innovation while simultaneously disrupting traditional forms of identity and weakening long-standing social bonds. Globalization, through the intensified movement of people, ideas, and goods, exposes communities to new cultural influences

that alter tastes, values, and self-perception, especially among younger generations. Digital technology and social media further amplify this change by creating global networks where individuals experiment with identity across virtual platforms, blending local roots with global trends while also facing risks of algorithm-driven echo chambers. Migration gives rise to transnational identities as people maintain cultural ties to their homelands while adapting to new societal norms, resulting in complex negotiations of identity among immigrant families. The rise of neoliberal ideology emphasizes individuality, consumer choice, and self-branding, transforming identity from a shared cultural inheritance to a personal project curated through lifestyle and market participation, often at the cost of communal cohesion. Urbanization contributes by weakening traditional community structures and fostering cultural anonymity, compelling urban dwellers to develop flexible, situational identities in increasingly diverse and impersonal environments. Lastly, modern education expands cultural horizons through global and multicultural curricula, encouraging openness and cosmopolitan thinking, although it may also challenge traditional norms and spark intergenerational tensions. Altogether, these forces collectively reconfigure cultural identity into a more fluid, multifaceted, and contested construct in contemporary society.

Impact on cultural identity

The transformative forces of globalization, digital technology, migration, neoliberalism, and urbanization have had profound and multifaceted impacts on cultural identity. These impacts range from the fragmentation and hybridization of identity to the revitalization of cultural expressions in new forms. While some communities experience erosion of traditional values, others actively engage in adapting and preserving their identities in the face of change.

1. Fragmentation and Loss of Traditional Identity

One of the most significant impacts is the **erosion of traditional cultural identity**. As global media and consumer culture penetrate deeply into local communities, especially through digital platforms, traditional languages, rituals, dress, and moral values can lose relevance among younger generations (Tomlinson, 1999).

For example, indigenous youth may abandon traditional attire, crafts, or languages in favor of modern, globalized symbols of status or belonging. This can lead to **cultural homogenization**, where diverse local cultures become increasingly similar to dominant global cultures, often Western in orientation (Barber, 1996).

2. Emergence of Hybrid Identities

At the same time, the blending of global and local influences has led to the rise of **hybrid cultural identities**—where individuals combine elements from multiple cultural sources to form new, fluid, and personalized identities (Bhabha, 1994). This hybridity allows for creative expression and adaptability, especially among urban youth who participate in global subcultures (e.g., K-pop fans, hip-hop culture, digital influencers).

Such hybrid identities often reflect **"glocalization"**—the coexistence of global and local elements within identity construction (Robertson, 1995).

3. Negotiation and Identity Politics

The pressures of social change also compel individuals and communities to **negotiate their identities**, sometimes through political and cultural activism. Minority and indigenous groups may mobilize to assert their rights to cultural recognition and autonomy (Taylor, 1994).

This is evident in movements for language revitalization, cultural heritage preservation, or resistance to cultural appropriation. In this way, identity becomes both a **site of struggle** and a source of empowerment.

4. Virtual Identity and Online Self-Representation

Social media platforms have created **new spaces for identity construction**, where people actively curate and perform their identities online. While this allows for freedom of expression, it can also lead to superficial identity markers, pressure to conform to trends, or confusion between authentic and performative selves (boyd, 2014; Turkle, 2011).

Virtual identities may not reflect deeper cultural roots, raising questions about **authenticity and continuity** in digital cultures.

5. Reclaiming and Revitalizing Identity

In response to perceived cultural erosion, some communities and individuals have engaged in **revitalization efforts**. These include promoting local languages in education, reviving traditional festivals, using digital platforms to share indigenous knowledge, and integrating traditional values with modern lifestyles.
Such practices reflect a **resilient form of identity**, one that adapts without surrendering core cultural meaning (Smith, 2009).

6. Psychological and Social Impacts

On a personal level, the fluidity and instability of cultural identity in modern society can lead to **identity confusion**, especially among youth or migrants navigating multiple cultural contexts (Erikson, 1968). However, it can also foster **intercultural competence**, critical thinking, and global citizenship when individuals learn to embrace cultural diversity.

The forces of globalization, digital technology, migration, neoliberalism, and urbanization have profoundly reshaped cultural identity, leading to a spectrum of outcomes from loss to revitalization. Traditional cultural identities have experienced fragmentation as younger generations shift away from inherited languages, rituals, and customs, often embracing modern, globalized lifestyles. This has contributed to the homogenization of diverse cultures under dominant global influences. At the same time, these transformations have given rise to hybrid identities, where individuals blend global and local cultural elements to create fluid, personalized expressions of self, particularly among urban youth immersed in global subcultures. Cultural identity has also become a site of negotiation and activism, with marginalized groups mobilizing to assert their cultural rights and preserve heritage through language revival and resistance to cultural appropriation. Digital platforms have introduced new arenas for identity construction, enabling creative self-representation but also raising concerns about authenticity and the psychological effects of performative identity. In response to cultural erosion, some communities actively engage in reclaiming and revitalizing their

traditions, integrating modern tools to strengthen cultural continuity. These developments highlight the resilience of cultural identity, even as its forms become increasingly dynamic and adaptive. On a psychological level, individuals—especially youth and migrants—may struggle with identity confusion in the face of cultural flux, yet this environment also fosters intercultural competence and global awareness, enabling people to navigate diversity with greater openness and flexibility.

Case Study

To further illustrate the transformation of cultural identity in contemporary society, this section presents selected case studies relevant to the Thai context and broader regional dynamics. Each example highlights the interaction between traditional identity elements and forces of modern change, revealing the complexities of identity negotiation and adaptation.

1. Identity Changes of Thai Adolescents in the Digital Age

In Thailand, the identity formation of adolescents is increasingly influenced by digital media, global pop culture, and online communities. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have created spaces where young people explore, express, and even reinvent their identities outside of traditional family or cultural expectations.

According to recent studies (Srisontisuk & Kengganpanich, 2021), Thai adolescents often adopt fashion, language, and attitudes influenced by Korean, Japanese, or Western subcultures. This sometimes creates tension with older generations who value traditional Thai norms such as *kreng jai* (respectfulness) and *sabai-sabai* (easy-going attitude). Adolescents may thus live in a **dual identity** system—balancing expectations from their local culture while embracing a digital cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Moreover, social media also promotes **performative identities**, where youths curate idealized versions of themselves to gain social validation, sometimes leading to identity confusion or pressure to conform to trends (Turkle, 2011).

2. Ethnic Culture and Tourism: The Case of Northern Hill Tribes

The commercialization of ethnic identity is evident in the tourism-driven **representation of hill tribe cultures** in Northern Thailand. Groups such as the Karen, Hmong, and Akha have adapted their traditional attire, rituals, and crafts to appeal to domestic and international tourists (McKinnon, 2005). This adaptation is often seen as a **form of cultural commodification**.

While tourism offers economic opportunities, it also leads to tensions between **authentic cultural preservation** and **performance for outsiders**. In some cases, communities alter or simplify cultural expressions to meet tourist expectations, potentially eroding original meanings. However, some groups have used tourism as a platform for **cultural revitalization**, reviving dances, languages, and crafts that were previously in decline.

The case of hill tribe tourism demonstrates how identity can be both preserved and reshaped through engagement with the market economy and external audiences.

3. Religious Identity in a Multicultural Society: Muslim Youth in Southern Thailand

Southern Thailand, especially the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, presents a unique context of religious identity negotiation. Muslim youth in this region often live at the intersection of Islamic cultural traditions, Thai national identity, and modern secular influences (Liow, 2009).

While the community holds tightly to religious practices—such as Islamic dress, education, and religious law—young Muslims are increasingly influenced by global Muslim media, diaspora connections, and modern aspirations. Some pursue education and employment in Bangkok or abroad, leading to hybrid identities where traditional Islamic values coexist with urban modernity.

In this context, **religious identity becomes a site of both preservation and innovation**, as Muslim youth negotiate their place in a broader Thai society that often privileges Buddhist norms.

Cultural identity in contemporary Thailand reflects dynamic interactions between traditional values and modern influences, as seen in diverse case studies. Thai adolescents increasingly shape their identities through digital media and global pop culture, creating a dual identity that merges traditional norms with cosmopolitan digital lifestyles. Social media platforms encourage performative self-representation, which can lead to both self-expression and identity confusion. In Northern Thailand, ethnic hill tribe groups like the Karen, Hmong, and Akha have adapted their cultural expressions to cater to tourism. While this provides economic benefits, it also raises concerns about the commodification and dilution of cultural authenticity. Nevertheless, some communities have leveraged tourism as a means of revitalizing endangered traditions. In the multicultural context of Southern Thailand, Muslim youth navigate complex intersections between Islamic traditions, Thai nationalism, and modern global influences. Their identities reflect a blend of religious continuity and urban adaptation, revealing efforts to maintain faith-based practices while engaging with broader societal trends. Collectively, these examples demonstrate that cultural identity in Thailand is not static but constantly negotiated, reshaped, and redefined amid the pressures and possibilities of contemporary change.

Conclusion

In contemporary Thai society, cultural identity is undergoing significant transformation due to the multifaceted impacts of globalization, technological advancement, urbanization, and shifting social values. Traditional markers of identity, such as language, religion, and customs, continue to hold relevance, but they are increasingly being negotiated and redefined in response to new cultural flows and global influences. Thai youth, in particular, are navigating hybrid identities that blend local traditions with global popular culture, demonstrating both continuity and change.

While cultural change offers opportunities for innovation and intercultural dialogue, it also poses challenges to national cohesion, intergenerational understanding, and the preservation of heritage. The dynamic nature of identity in Thailand reflects broader global trends, yet it is shaped by distinct national narratives, Buddhist philosophies, and state-led modernization policies.

Ultimately, the evolution of cultural identity in Thailand highlights the need for inclusive policies and educational strategies that respect diversity, encourage critical

reflection, and foster cultural resilience. Understanding these shifts through interdisciplinary perspectives from the humanities and social sciences is crucial for navigating the complexities of identity in a rapidly changing world.

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