THE PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL PEOPLE IN SOUTHERN THAILAND REGARDING THEIR REGIONAL CULTURE

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Abstract

Culture is a commonly used term, yet what it really means is found complicated because it can convey different meanings in different contexts. Another problem that people consider important but not easy to find the answer is identifying which elements belong to culture and what does not. In addition, while it is rather easy to search for information about the culture of a nation, it is not the same for regional culture. It is the case of Southern Thailand.

This study aims at studying an acceptable definition of culture and identifying elements of culture, and studying the culture of Southern Thailand. The data of this qualitative study are obtained via semi-structured interviews using indicative questions administered in friendly, informal settings. This study involves three local people, one male and two females, aged between 30 and 50. After the interviews were conducted consecutively, the

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transcriptions were coded and organized by themes then categorized for analysis. The findings showed that the regional culture of Southern Thailand is characterized by its diversity, with the coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups, influencing the cultural values, the beliefs, ideologies, behavior, language use, the way of thinking about family, respect, friendship and co-operation.

The study contributes to the understanding of Southern Thailand's culture, providing valuable insights that could enhance effective cross-cultural communication and cultural preservation in this region. The research suggests that further studies should involve more diverse participant pool to obtain more comprehensiveness of the findings.

Keywords: Southern Thailand, Regional culture, Perceptions, Local people

1. Introduction

The word *culture* is often spoken in many different contexts. However, due to its multiple usages, this term is very difficult to define (Barker, 2004; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2008; Hammersley, 2019; Nanda & Warms, 2018; Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Edgar and Sedgwick (2008), and Minkov (2013) state: "'Culture' is not easily defined, not least because it can have different meanings in different contexts" (p. 82), and "Culture [is] an important phenomenon that warrants its own field of study" (p. 10), respectively. The issues do not only revolve around how to define the term, but also to consider the way in which culture is being considered. In addition, as Hammersley (2019) points out, culture has overlapping meanings with other terms. These complicated issues related to culture and what belongs to it make people possibly wonder what culture really covers and what some of essential elements of culture are.

1.1 Definitions of culture

It is worthwhile to learn some important definitions of culture. These definitions are chosen to partially demonstrate how this term has been defined, how similar and different they are, and what they contribute to the understanding of culture as stated by the informants of this current study.

A classic definition is the one by Tylor (1873/2016): "Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 13). This definition, as Hammersley (2019) argues, includes roughly all areas of human life.

Another important definition is the one by Hofstede (2011): "Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 3). These two definitions indicate that culture is what one person possesses from their own society and cultures are different from one society to another.

A third definition worth learning is given by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952):

Culture consists of patterns of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ... ideas and especially their attached values. (p. 66)

Compared to the other two definitions, this one places the focus on behavior patterns and how they are transmitted. This shows that Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) included behavior as a part of culture.

Brown (1991) stated: "Culture consists of the conventional patterns of thought, activity, and artifact that are passed on from generation to generation in a manner that is generally assumed to involve learning rather than specific genetic programming" (p. 40). The definitions by Kroeber and

Kluckhohn (1952), and Brown (1991) share some similar ideas. Both imply culture consists of ideas or thoughts that are learned and transmitted, not by genetics. These ideas are in line with a meaning of culture proposed by Hammersley (2019), saying culture is "a product of learning and adaptation rather than of biological inheritance" (p. 7).

Lastly, UNESCO (2001) stated that: "Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs" (p. 18). This definition is the one that explicitly employes the word 'spiritual', while almost all definitions focus much on physical life.

In conclusion, the various definitions of culture indicate how complicated it is to come up with only one single definition that serves all needs of understanding and using the term. Nevertheless, each definition is not totally different from the others. From these definitions, it can be concluded that culture is a shared property of a group or a society. It exists in the mind of each individual as a member of a society he belongs to. It governs spiritual and physical life, the ways of thinking and behaving of a person. Culture is not determined or genetically inherited, but learned.

The responses on the concepts of culture and what it includes, which are obtained from the key informants of this current study will be analyzed.

1.2 Elements of culture

Besides obtaining a sound definition of culture, it is worth examining different elements of culture so that, to a certain extent, one studying culture and wishing to communicate with a community or society should know what belongs to and what does not belong to a particular culture.

Idang (2015) classified culture into two kinds; namely, material culture and non-material culture, with the former referring to visible and concrete objects; and the latter referring to norms and being more people-related; and the latter being more abstract than the former. This study focuses more on the non-material values. Creswell (2013) suggests: "Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 44). Following are the key elements of culture generated from a variety of literature. These elements play the role of a theoretical framework for studies related to the culture of a nation or of a certain region as the one this study is doing with Southern Thailand.

1.2.1 National culture, behavior, language use

National culture represents "beliefs, learned behavior patterns, values, and institutions shared by citizens of the same nation" (Gezon & Kottak, 2012, p. 31). According to Bicard et al. (2012), "behavior is something that a person does that can be observed, measured, and repeated" (p. 3). Language is defined as "a symbolic system of sounds that, when put together according to certain rules, conveys meanings to its speakers" (Andreatta & Ferraro (2013, p. 114).

1.2.2 Values, respect

Barker (2004) defined: "An item of value is something to which we ascribe worth and significance relative to other phenomena" (p. 206), and argued that "cultural studies has been concerned with questions of value in relation to (a) aesthetics, (b) political and cultural objectives and (c) the justification of action" (p. 206). Dillon (2021) stated that respect is learned from childhood and becomes part of adults' reactions (para. 1). He claimed

that respecting people is considered as "the very essence of morality and the foundation of all other moral duties and obligations" (para. 3).

1.2.3 The family, friendship, trust, gender roles

Andreatta and Ferraro (2013) defined: "A family is a social unit characterized by economic cooperation, the management of reproduction and child-rearing, and common residence. Family members, both adults and children, recognize certain rights and obligations toward one another" (p. 177). Fehr (1996) stated that friendship is "a core aspect of our lives" (p. 1), but "there is no agreed-on definition" (p. 5). This study uses the definition proposed by Hays (1988, p. 395 as cited in Fehr, 1996, p. 7): "Friendship [is] voluntary interdependence between two persons over time, that is intended to facilitate social-emotional goals of the participants, and may involve varying types and degrees of companionship, intimacy, affection, and mutual assistance". Delhey (2014) defined trust as "the belief that others will not, at worst, knowingly do you harm and will, at best, act in your interest".

According to the World Health Organization (n.d.),

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time. (para. 1)

1.2.4 Beliefs, ideologies, religions

According to Newberg and Waldman (2006), "beliefs govern nearly every aspect of our lives. They tell us how to pray and how to vote, whom to trust and whom to avoid; and they shape our personal behaviors and spiritual ethics throughout life" (p. 5). Nanda and Warms (2018) defined: "Political ideology [is] the shared beliefs and values that legitimize the

distribution and use of power in a particular society" (p. 171). Nanda and Warms (2018) defined religion "as a social institution characterized by sacred stories; symbols and symbolism; the proposed existence of supernatural beings, powers, states, places, and qualities; rituals and means of addressing the supernatural; and specific practitioners" (p. 273)

1.2.5 Rural/Urban differences

Surbhi (2017) defined "urban simply refers to the region or area which is densely populated and possess the characteristics of the man-made surroundings" (para. 1), and rural is "a region located on the outskirts... outside the boundaries of a city, commercial or industrial area" (para. 3).

1.3 Information about the study

1.3.1 Purposes and significance

When discussing different aspects of life – both material and spiritual – of a certain country or a region, it is common for people to have a desire to learn and discover the culture of that country or nation. These encourage the researcher to study about the culture and its elements in different places. When learning about culture, it is not difficult to access works or publications about this aspect of a nation. However, there are limited sources about the culture of a particular region, at least through common media and publications of different kinds. Besides, from our observation, many sources - when presenting culture - usually limit their scopes such as heritage, landscapes, cuisine and accommodation, and serving tourism.

Triandis (2000) states: "When people come into contact with members of other cultures, they are often not aware of their miscommunications, because they think the others are more or less like they are." (p. 149). He argues that this unawareness usually happens in the stage of unconscious incompetence of communication and may cause misunderstanding; however, if people obtain training, miscommunication will reduce.

This study discovers the culture and its element in Southern Thailand - one of the most ethnically dynamic regions of Thailand. As implied by Hosagrahar (2017), culture is "at the heart of Sustainable Development Goals" (title) promoted by The United Nations. This study looks into the culture of the region as heritage for people of today's generation and lessons to teach the offsprings, resulting in sustainable development. Findings from the study will contribute to the understanding about the region, increasing the possibilities to have successful communication for visitors to the region, and to the literature of culture and social sciences.

1.3.2 Research question

This study seeks the answer to the question: What are the perceptions of local people in Southern Thailand regarding their regional culture?

1.3.3 Method

Spencer-Oatey (2012) suggested one of the ways to help people to understand the aspects of a particular culture is "to infer [them] by interviewing key members" (p. 3). This qualitative study – a part of the project of the first author for his doctoral dissertation – obtains the data by using interviews.

1.4 An overview of the culture of Southern Thailand

Southern Thailand is the smallest part of Thailand with just about 14 percent of its land area (Ouyyanont, 2017). It extends from Phetchaburi to the border between Thailand and Malaysia and consists of 14 provinces - Nakhon Si Thammarat, Krabi, Phang-nga, Phuket, Surat Thani, Ranong, Chumphon, Songkhla, Satun, Trang, Phatthalung, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat (National Statistical Office, 2023, p. 54) (*See Figure 1*). The region has a total population of approximately ten million (Jones, 2014) and has lush vegetation and rubber plantations as well as beaches. The region's historic dates back about 25,000 years ago (Wangkumhang et al., 2013).

Some historical and oral traditions indicate that this region used to be a hub for cultural exchange and migration (Ouyyanont, 2017), and some Hill Tribes are believed to have migrated to this region from Laos, Myanmar, Tibet and Southern China (Besaggio et al., 2007). A large number of Chinese have migrated to the region in more recent years to work in the tin industry (Halner et al., 2024; Ouyyanont, 2017).

Figure 1: Map of Southern Thailand (Map source: Sugunnasil, 2005, p. x).

1.4.1 Regional culture, Behavior, Language use

Ouyyanont (2017) stated: "The Southern Region's society and culture are quite different from that of the other regions" (p. 228). According to Brooks (2014), Southern Thailand is a region characterized by a rich cultural mosaic influenced by different ethnic groups. The area has a large Malay-Muslim population whose cultural norms are different from the Thai Buddhist in other regions in Thailand. In fact, no other region of Thailand has a higher number of Muslims than this region (Ouyyanont, 2017). The total number of Muslims in Thailand is about five million, in which approximately 1.8 million

live in the southernmost provinces which border with Malaysia (Scupin, 2013). The presence of sea nomads and minority groups adds more diversity into the culture of the region (Srikummool et al., 2022).

The primary languages of Southern Thailand are Thai and Malay. The Muslim minority in this region considers Thai identity neatly associated with Buddhism, and this group believe Muslim identity and the Malayu language are their cultural heritages in need of being preserved (Brooks, 2014). The Muslims in the four provinces (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun) have links in history, ethnic origin, religion and culture, therefore, they find communication with Malaysia easy (Ouyyanont, 2017).

1.4.2 Values - Respect, Cooperation, Acceptance of difference

The values in the southern provinces are deeply influenced by religions, especially Muslim and Buddhism (Ouyyanont (2017). Moreover, the cultural identity of the Malay ethnic groups in this region is deeply rooted in preserving traditional Malay identity, adding a more dynamic picture of the region (Lyndon et al. 2015). It is also worth noting the presence and cultural contribution of Chinese immigrants in the region (Bajunid, 2005). Chinese in the region maintain some aspects of their identities, which have become social values in the region and the nation (Hamiltan, 2008)

1.4.3 The family, Friendship, Trust, Gender roles

The family plays an essential role in the social structure of Southern Thailand. The family is the place where children learn how to behave and how to live in peace and harmony in diverse communities (Ridwan & Sugito, 2021), reflecting prevalent cultural norms and values in the region. The family is also important in caregiving for children and older adults (Aung et al., 2021).

As most people in the region learn from their religion and regional tradition, people in Southern Thailand appreciate friendships which are built upon loyalty and mutual support, and which are often seen in social gatherings and communal religious and cultural events (Ouyyanont, 2017). Studies on community relationships in conflict regions of the area emphasize the importance of establishing and strengthening relationships with communities within and out of the communities to obtain trust and support, resulting in the needs of interpersonal connections and community ties (Vateh & Andriani, 2021).

Compared to the rest of the South, gender roles in southern border provinces of Thailand are fundamentally influenced by Islamic teachings, with clear distinctions between male and female responsibilities. Women play crucial roles in both the household and the community, and there are ongoing efforts to promote gender equality. Women are increasingly participating in economic development projects, leveraging their local kin networks for support. Senior women have greater access to opportunities, resources, and social capital, enabling them to engage in development projects and contribute to social progress (Scupin, 2013).

1.4.4 Beliefs, Ideologies, Religions

Beliefs in Southern Thailand are diverse and influenced by cultural, religious, and historical factors. The southern border provinces of Thailand, especially Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani have many Muslims; therefore, Islamic beliefs are strong in these provinces (Duklim, 2023; Lovichakorntikul, 2013; Wekke et al., 2019). The resistance to modernization in Southern Thailand reflects efforts to preserve traditional Malay ethnic identities, including religion, culture, language, and education (Tuntivivat, 2016).

When discussing religions in Southern Thailand, it is worth considering the remark from Bajunid (2005): "Islam is … a faith or a belief but it is also a religious system, a way of life, an experience, an ideology, a culture and a civilization all at once, depending on how we look at it." (p. 1)

According to Horstmann (2002), influences from Indonesian, Indian, Arab, Chinese, and European migrants and missionaries, which includes animism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Chinese folk religions. The region is influenced by Buddhist and Hindu ideologies. Horstmann also pointed out that Southern Thailand is a center of Theravada Buddhism, and it is a unique region where Buddhist and Muslim villages co-exist, including mixed villages where both communities live together. However, in many parts of Patani, interest in each other's communities has decreased.

1.4.5 Rural/Urban differences

The largest city in the south is Hat Yai. Serving as the center of trade with Malaysia, it is inhabited primarily by Sino-Thai (Hafner et al., 2024). More studies are needed to learn about the differences between rural and urban areas of this region.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach because "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret, phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 43), with natural settings relating to real-world contexts in which the researchers do not prevent things from "unfolding naturally" (Patton, 2015, p. 99).

Patton (2015) outlines that a qualitative study can be based on 1) in-depth, open-ended interviews, 2) direct observations and 3) written communications, with interviews providing "direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" (p. 55). This study seeks for local people's opinions and perceptions of the cultural elements of their region. Based on the outline provided by Patton, and as Spencer-Oatey (2012) recommended, researchers can figure out the values of a culture by interviewing key informants, this study utilizes interviews because they are one of the methods to help us obtain the insights and have more opportunities to ask for elaborations from the interviewees.

Data collection was carried out in late December 2020. The research site was Southern Thailand. This area was chosen mainly because this region has a long history of establishment and development with dynamic diversity (Sugunnasil, 2005), and "the Southern Region's society and culture are quite different from that of the other regions" (Ouyyanont, 2017, p. 228).

The participants of the study were three local people, one male and two females, aged above 30 to under 50. This report refers to the participants by using fictitious names – David, Mary and Susan. David, under 35 years old, is a teacher of Social Studies at a high school, which is about 10 kilometers from the center of Songkhla. Mary, around 40, is a doctoral candidate majoring in Education of a university in Songkhla. Susan, above 45, is a lecturer of social sciences of a university in Songkhla (not the same university where Mary studies). All of them are natives to the region. The participants were involved in the study on a voluntary basis. Following is a brief profile about them.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Name	Gender	Age group	Occupation
David	male	30 - 34	High school Teacher
Mary	female	35 - 39	Doctoral candidate
Susan	female	40 – 49	University lecturer

The interviews were conducted separately, in different locations and at the time chosen by the participants to provide them with the highest comforts. All of the interviewees were informed about the meaning of the interviews. The three interviews met the requirements guided by Patton (2015): "(…) people are interviewed with open-ended questions in places and under conditions that are comfortable and familiar to them" (p. 99). This kind of approach was appropriate because according to Fetteman (2008, pp, 290 – 291, as cited in Patton, 2015, p. 637), "the researcher uses informal approaches to discover how the people conceptualize their culture and organize it into meaningful categories". The procedure of data collection was as follows:

In the first step, the prompts for the interview were established based on literature review about culture and the elements of culture. Then the Thai supervisor assisted the researcher by contacting and making appointments with potential informants who agreed to be involved in the study. Then the three interviews were conducted one by one. David and Mary had informed the researcher in advance that they would be more comfortable if Thai language was used. Therefore, two Thai – English interpreters were employed, one for each interview. Susan, who was interviewed last, preferred to be interviewed in English; therefore, no interpreter was required for the last interview. Before each interview, there was an informal dialogue to create a

friendly and comfortable atmosphere, and also to check the recorder to make sure no technical problems would happen. The prompts were used, and some additional, minor questions were asked for clarifications or elaborations. In the first two interviews, consecutive interpretation was applied. After each interview, the recording was transcribed – the first two were done by the interpreters, who could re-hear some parts if necessary to make sure their translation was the most accurate; and the last one was carried out by the researcher because it was in English. The translation of the first two interviews were checked by the Thai supervisor and also the second author of this article for accuracy. In the next step, all of the transcripts were coded and classified into themes and patterns (Patton, 2015).

3. Results and Discussion

Merriam and Grenier (2019) point out that: "The findings of a qualitative study are supported by quotations from participant interviews … A reader can think of these data as evidence for the findings of the study" (p. 6). This section of the paper presents and discusses the findings from the three interviews.

3.1 Definitions of culture

David defined:

> "Culture is a lifestyle that people in this area create or set by the way of their lives. Moreover, the culture in this region is diverse because of the differences of humans, their beliefs, regions, and so on. Finally, culture is the thing that people do from generation to generation."

Mary stated: "Culture is a good man-made thing, and it must be preserved. People should learn it and appreciate the civilization."

Susan said:

> "By definition, culture is the way of activities, the way of life of people. People have the same core values in the same community or the same group and they want to show how important they are. And culture can be transferred from generation to the next generation by a model. Culture does not happen in one day, but it happens for a long time in group or same community. Culture is passed from generation to generation, each generation contributes to their culture. In my opinion, culture can be changed. It changes a little bit when time passes by or can change because the people in the group or in the community accepts other cultures. They exchange by activity like movies, music, and so on or what they accept, they learn from other cultures and adapt it into their own culture."

The three interviewees used slightly different words and phrases when they expressed their concepts about culture. However, they shared important points in defining culture and/or the way they defined culture. David included some features of his region into the definition by saying: "The culture in this region is diverse".

The definition made by Mary seems very simple. She said: "Culture is a man-made thing" and did not further elaborate *thing*. However, she mentioned *civilization* – a concept that Hammersley (2019) regards having overlapping meaning with culture and the two terms are not exactly the same.

Susan included the term *core values* and explained what it means. She also raised the idea that culture needs a long time to be fully developed. She argued that culture does not remain the same all the time. In contrast, it gradually changes and receives new values as it adapts those from others.

David mentioned religions, beliefs and lifestyle or ways of life in their life, which were considered core values by Susan.

Though there are some differences in the concepts or definitions, the three informants mentioned that culture is established by (groups of) people to show their lifestyle, and it includes people's religions and beliefs. They all claimed that culture should be preserved and transferred to the offsprings. This message is truly important because it meets the requirement of sustainable development. The definitions of culture defined by the three informants consist of both physical and spiritual life, which is similar with definitions that we presented in the previous sections.

3.2 Regional culture, Behavior and language use

Right at the beginning of his first answer, David identified: "The culture in this region is diverse because of the differences of humans, their beliefs, regions, and so on.". In a latter part of the interview, David said: "Some traditions of this area are a combination of different traditions because this region is multicultural". This idea is agreed by Susan, who said: "We are in a multicultural region and country". These comments are in line with the comments by Brooks (2014) that we discussed in the previous section.

David stated: "The way of showing our respect to a person is raising our hands and saying *Sawasdee* or *Hello* in English, and we pray or wish and then make a promise when we respect to the holy thing."

Mary added: "Thai Buddhists and Thais of Chinese origin will *Wai* (the respecting gesture in Thai culture). Also, Muslims have their own respecting gesture".

And Susan commented: "If we have a party with a Muslim professor, a Buddhist professor, a Chinese Thai professor, we should order the food without pork because Muslims do not eat pork."

These sharing shows that people in Southern Thailand are very cautious in the way they establish set of appropriate behavior in different situations and different context.

David associated language use with beliefs. He said:

"The language in the region will be different according to their beliefs. For example, people who believe in Islam in the three provinces, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, mostly use Yawi or Malayu. Other people always use the official language, which is Thai."

He also commented that: "In this region, most of us always talk in Thai. English is hard to us, so people like to send their children to Malaysia to learn it. They can receive both English and Malay cultures". This comment is important because it implies that English seems to be not popularly taught in the region. It also shows that people in Southern Thailand recognize the importance of learning English, and they also perceive going overseas to study as a good way to learn the culture of another country.

Mary stated: "The people from the Southern Thai provinces such as Satun, Yala, Songkhla, or Narathiwat are recognized by the language that goes with their accents and their dialects.". This remark is echoed in the Susan's response: "A person from the South can be identified by the vocabulary and the tone of the language they use. People, such as those from Songkhla, have an accent that is very special". The comments show the special aspects of the language of the region – the accents and the vocabulary.

Discussing language use, Susan compared:

> "People elsewhere may always try to say nice things to please people. But southern people do not try to use language to hide their real thoughts. If we have something negative or positive, we just talk about it. In other words, we are sincere. That is our identity."

This comparison implies that the people in the southern provinces of Thailand were straightforward and always show their real thoughts and emotion. This is a very important remark, offering us more knowledge about language use compared to what we have obtained from other resources.

3.3 Values, respect, Co-operation, Acceptance of difference

David stated:

> "We respect holy things because we believe that this can improve our life. We respect the authority, and our parents who look after us. Family is the most important thing that respect because this is the first institution that we met when were born."

Mary said:

> "Thai Buddhists and Thais of Chinese origin will *Wai* (the respecting gesture in Thai culture). Also, Muslims have their own respecting gesture. There are some important groups of people that we respect: those of the religions, parents, teachers, older people and acquaintances. Respect is what we teach from generation to generation."

Mary also provided an example to show that people respect others based on their real characteristics. She commented: "Monks are the representatives who propagate Buddhism. In Thai society, there are good monks and bad monks. People should respect the way those monks behave, do not respect the monks personally."

Susan emphasized:

> "Respect is a key value, or it is very, very important in this area because we have different cultures of people here. Respect for me is not just respect your parents in family but respect people who have different backgrounds or different cultures, too. I think without respect, maybe you have problems. We need respect because we have different cultures."

One idea raised by Susan is that because the region is a multicultural area, people appreciate the culture of people of other cultural backgrounds. In other words, Susan's comments once again show the readiness to accept the differences among people of the same community and of other places.

This idea is similar to the sharing from Mary:

> "Southern Thailand's region is a multi-cultural society. People should live peacefully and help one another. For being a person of this area, people must have the consideration about receiving news, and I want the people in this area to be united and live peacefully and carry the culture on."

In summary, when discussing the importance of respect, the three interviewees shared many similar ideas. According to them, respect is "an act to honor somebody, manner, and a part of culture" (Mary), and it is "a key value" (Susan). They classified what and who should be respected.

These categories included (1) holy things, (2) people who held high positions in society, (3) the representatives of religions such as monks, (4) the elderly, (5) people of certain jobs as teachers or policemen, (6) and parents in family. One of them (Mary) mentioned benefactors and acquaintances as those deserving to be respected as well. They shared the idea that children or younger generations were taught to show their respect. People in the region respect the elderly (David, Mary and Susan), and they considered this kind of respect a "social manner" (Susan) – as something that they take for granted.

The three informants emphasized that people in the region do not respect people just because the latter belonged to the groups supposed to be respected, but because of their real values. For example, monks are people who may or may not be respected depending on whether they were "good monks" or "bad monks" (David, Mary and Susan). Similarly, people showed their internal respect (Susan) to those who performed their responsibilities well. Susan stated: "I respect someone depending on whether he is good or bad, not on his position. In fact, I respect people not only because of their positions but also how good they are".

In the previous section when describing these elements of culture, we referred to Ouyyanont (2017) about the in fluences of religions, especially Buddhism and Muslim. The responses from the three local people have illustrated and provided more concrete examples.

3.4 The family, Friendship, Trust, Gender roles

According to the three respondents, children are taught to respect their parents and relatives "unconditionally" and be grateful to their parents (Susan) because "family is the first institution we met when we were born" (David). This comment is echoed in Susan comments: "In the southern provinces, people live or spend their life in family. They think that family is

very important. When they have festivals, they have family time. Holidays and festivals focus on people spending time together with their family."

These ideas obviously show that families are very important to people in the region and these are the places people show their respect and love without hesitations.

Besides, Susan said: "Children are allowed to argue with their parents. The matter is how they do it. ... Sometimes children are right, but they cannot make their parents hurt, but they should please them, believe them and compromise with them".

The comments from the three local people are in line with Ridwan and Sugito (2021), and with Aung et al. (2021) that we referred to in the previous section, and provided more elaborations on how these elements are really shown in the region.

David also commented that families and friends are "dominants values of the regional society". He told that when people think of family, they think of the people who have passed away as well. He said:

> "In the five southernmost regions, we have a tradition that we called *Sart Duen Sib* or *The Festival of Tenth*. Most people always go to the temple, and they dedicate to their forebears and ancestors for showing their respect and giving them a new life."

Regarding friendship, David, Mary and Susan all agree friendship is important – a 'dominant value' (David). Mary commented: "The people in the society help one another. They are like brothers and sisters though their religions and religious ceremonies are different. They are all Thai so that they love, share, help, and harmony with one another."

Trust, in the three informants' perspective, is also important. David commented: "From my perspective, people in this region always believe in friends. They believe everything that their friends do. We will take a side whether do not know if that is good or bad like they belief in their honesty."

These discussions are in line with Ouyyanont (2017) about friendship and trust in Southern Thailand.

Regarding genders, David stated:

"The roles of men and women can be divided clearly. A man will always be the head of family who works for his family. Moreover, men have more authority and power than women. We can see obviously in Muslim. Men always important roles than women. The roles of women are taking care of their children, preparing food, cleaning the house and so on. We can also call women 'housewife'. In the way of culture, women always are a person will retain or treat tradition more than men."

In society, men have a higher position than women. On the other hand, women are a person who talks with a child more than men, but when they have to decide it, they will make it together.

Mary commented:

"Nowadays the role of men and women are equal. Women can have jobs that work outside of the house as the same as men can do. The role is not quite different. Both men and women have to treat their families. Men and women can do the same jobs."

Susan said:

"In society, the boys and girls do not do the same things. In the Southern provinces, people believe that men can do many (more) things than women, or they have right. In principle, men and women are equal. However, in reality, this depends, partially because of the religions. In Buddhism, men and women, we say, are equal. But the Muslim community, men here and women here (*When she says 'here' and 'here' she used her two hands to show high and low – men high; women low).* And I think not in everywhere that men and the women have the same status. I say in the urban area where I work, we consider men and women equal. But I know that local people in the countryside - who do not have high education – in the society that people do not have high education, there is a big gap between the statuses of men and women there is a big gap. Let me give you an example. The status in family, in the family with high education they believe that the 'assignment' like the responsibility in the house, we have the same thing - women can cook and men can cook, too. The house work they help each other, husband and wife, or daughter and son. But in the family that they do not high education, they think the responsibility in the house, like cooking or laundry is just for women; and men do the things outside like fixing the house, or they are mechanics, for example. In the kitchen or laundry that for women... Both men and women can be university lecturers. So, I think education makes people open-minded."

There are some important points figured out from these responses. While Mary thought men and women are equal, taking the same jobs in family and society, David and Susan offered some examples to show that the status and tasks or jobs that men and women do are not always the same. Susan gave a lot of examples to illustrate her points. They do not claim anything about inequality, though. One very positive comment from Susan is that she recognized the people living in the urban areas are more open with gender equality. Another remarkable comment stated by Susan is that education has an important role in helping people more open-minded, accepting the roles of women in society. These comments and examples supplement more ideas on gender and gender roles in the region that we found from Scupin (2013).

3.5 Beliefs, Ideologies, Religions

While discussing the other elements of culture, the three interviewees mentioned some significant remarks on beliefs, ideologies and religions. For example, David talked about Islam and Muslim, and about the *Sart Duen Sib* (The Festival of the Tenth) as a part of belief – people go to temples to pray for ancestors. Mary talked about Thai Buddhists and Thais of Chinese origin, and about Muslims, and mentioned different religious practice among different groups. Susan discussed the different behavior that people have in an eating place. People will not order meat if there are some people following Muslim in their group. She also showed observations about the different between the roles of men and women as results of their religions.

When asked to talked about beliefs, ideologies and religions, David said:

"This region is multicultural. People have their own identity with their life-style, beliefs and religions. The identity can partially be shaped by the nature of the place where they live. For example, those living by the river have their traditions and practice related to the river."

Susan stated:

"We have so many holidays and festivals, so we have different food. For Muslim, when they have the New Year they have goat curry and some dessert. Chinese Thais have food for Chinese New Year like Chinese pancake. I think the food is a part of their life, and the food relates with culture. In this region, we have holidays that are related to religions. For example, we have local holidays, Muslim holidays, Chinese Thai holidays, and Thai holidays."

These discussions show that people in the Southern Thailand region have a variety of religions. The three respondents also had some comments about their multicultural society, resulting in different kinds of beliefs and religions. These are similar to the literature in the previous section and provide further explanations and examples. One of the new things added by the interviewees is the origins of some local holidays and festivals.

3.6 Rural/Urban differences

While answering the question about gender roles, Susan commented on some differences between urban and rural areas. She said:

"I say in my environment – I mean in the urban area where I work, we take action of men and women in the same level. But I know that local people in the countryside - who do not have high education – in the society that people do not have high education,

there is a big gap between the statuses of men and women there is a big gap."

While in the literature analysed in the previous section we found information about urban area, this discussion by Susan provides some comments on the rural area, adding more information about the differences of urban and rural areas.

4. Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, to support Southern Thailand's rich cultural diversity, this study recommends fostering cultural awareness, preserving traditional practices, and enhancing cross-cultural communication. Southern Thailand's coexistence of Buddhist, Muslim, and Chinese communities suggests educational programs to promote understanding and respect, and mitigate potential conflicts. Initiatives that document and celebrate local languages, customs, and religious practices are essential for passing cultural heritage to future generations. Moreover, training in cross-cultural communication is vital, especially for local leaders and service providers, to address miscommunications if any in the region. Recognizing the importance of family and community bonds, the study also suggests activities that reinforce social cohesion while encouraging gender equality through education and policy. These measures can enhance social stability, preserve cultural identity, and promote sustainable development across the region.

5. Conclusion

This research has reached the objectives of the study. The participants have provided a lot of useful insights with a lot of details, examples and explanations or clarifications to make their responses complete. Even though the interviews were conducted separately, their responses showed a lot of similar ideas and almost no contradictory perceptions, proving that the answers are highly reliable.

The study has answered the research question about the perceptions of local people regarding their regional culture. The study has contributed to the understanding about culture of this particular region. This kind of study can be duplicated in order to explore the cultures of more regions, serving the need of studying and increasing the opportunities to preserve the culture with unique features and elements.

The limitation of the study is the small number of participants. Further studies may include more people with different age groups and with diverse backgrounds in terms of their living place, their occupation and even positions in society so that the descriptions of the culture of the researched regions would be more complete.

In summary, bearing some shortcomings, basically with a small population of participants, this study meets the aims of the research and provides a rather deep description of the culture and its elements of Southern Thailand, opening new doors for research tendency.

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