Thai Culture Uncovered: A Cultural Analysis

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Under light circumstances, one can tell that people react to similar situations differently. Typically, it is understood to be something rather than just a nonconforming common sense. An easy decision for one person could be a heated debate for two people with different cultural backgrounds. In light of this, the ideal state of these diversities is, at minimum, tolerance for one another. To accept another culture just as one would want the same appreciation for their own is the beginning of cultural pluralism. Cultural upbringing plays a large roll in our habits and patterns and trickle down into our very understanding of life. Using Geert Hofstede's value dimensions first and Hall's high-, low-context model of communication second, this analysis demonstrates the practices and behaviors of the people from Thailand in Southeast Asia.

With a quick introduction, Hofstede demonstrates five key dimensions of cultural differences that are major influences in other people's values. First, a power distance index measures, "the degree to which a culture tolerates inequalities in power distribution in relationships and organizations" (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, Simonds, 2007:27-28). That is, this first dimension outlines if rank and authority is seen as above others versus if everyone is seen as equal. Following, the individualist or collectivist dimension describes, "the relationship between the individual and the groups to which she or he belongs" (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, and Simonds, 2007:26). This dimension clarifies if an individual's self-image is, "defined in terms of 'I' or 'we' (Hofstede, 2010). Next, the uncertainty avoidance dimension, "measures the degree to which a culture can tolerate uncertainty and ambiguous situations" (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, Simonds, 2007:28). In this cultural aspect, Hofstede's study illustrates peoples attitudes as more structured and orthodox versus relaxed. It outlines if a society puts more emphasis on experience or principles (Hofstede, 2010). Fourthly, the masculinity or femininity dimension doesn't measure if men are valued more than women and Vic versa. This dimension measures the characteristics associated with the gender generally "prevail(ing) in the culture" (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, Simonds, 2007:28). Added later to Hofstede's initial research, the long-term versus short-term orientation is, "society's search for virtue" (Hofstede: Thailand, 2010). It is the way people establish conclusions about the future and truth. These five

dimensions play an essential role in the beginning of understanding cultural differences. Seemingly, it is easily misunderstood to expect someone from a certain culture to act in the same manner. Yet, the information is a clear beginning to understand other's points of view and being accepting of a different approach to a similar situation.

To begin, Thai culture ranks very high on the power distance index (Hofstede: Thailand, 2010). With that being said, Thai people, for the most part, accept inequalities and formalities of rank (Knutson, 2002). To illustrate, the language emphasizes social harmony by having certain words that show different levels of respect (Knutson, 2002). Comparable to other languages, the Thai language has many different ways to refer to oneself or another (Knutson, 2002). The benefit for the culture connects privileges to authority and guidance for those under authority but most of all it overlays accountability for position. That is, everyone has their position in the Thai hierarchy and certain respects are given to every level. Overall, rank is a very important aspect of the culture. To understand where the acceptance of social inequalities originated, it could be drawn from the main religion in Thailand, Buddhism. The Buddhist influence in Thailand is evident as 94.6 percent of Thai people are Buddhist (Central Intelligence Agency). One teaching in Buddhism that relates to the benefits of a high on power distance is about cause and effect (Cultural Information - Thailand). This idea is that what one does now will have an effect on their future. As respecting

authority now, it can be seen as a way to have respect in the future and so forth. The

Thai people carry a quite prudent attitude toward life and it is clear in their respect for

authority that their religion plays a large role in their society.

More in depth, the respect Thai people have for each other communicates the

high score Thailand ranks on the power distance index (Hofstede: Thailand, 2010). This

communicative practice tells that without such a high value to respect others, the Thai

society loses key privileges of having social rank. With privileges for each rank, respect

is given and people communicate respect through action, word, and deed (Knutson,

2002). An example would be the teacher student relationship. Students rarely give

their opinion in class by giving all respect to what the teacher instructs over their

personal estimation (Knutson, 2002). Largely, this leads to a very authoritative yet

respectful society by means of a leader-subordinate relationship with everyone. Thus,

respect is given through rank, which illustrates rank through any interaction. Power

levels are clear to understand. For instance, a teacher is superior to a student just as a

boss to a subordinate and a parent to a child (Website). All relationships place

superiority on one another, even a stranger Cultural Information - Thailand). While

discussing this topic, Aekaphol Langkulsen, an informant, painted a vivid picture

saying, "the clothes they (strangers) wear or how they speak another person will judge

and evaluate where to rank them" (Langkulsen: Interview). These types of social

practices are communicated with or without intention yet find them as the dominant practice of the culture and illustrate the socially accepted inequalities.

With this knowledge, it would be a rather likely deduction that society prizes group associations very highly. The group is understood to be more important than just the individual (Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association). This behavior is practiced in the culture through yet again one of the main influencer of the Thai people, religion (Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association). One of the main beliefs of Buddhism is that family is the basic unit of society (Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association). To preserve social order, the culture vividly displays the need for a communal, interdependent society. Highlighted by Ven. Master Sheng Yen, he believes, "that selflessness should be the primary value for every member of the family" (Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association). In essence, giving is first before receiving. Children respect their parents and elders without daunting consideration. Likewise, parents should give an abundant outflow of love to their children. This promotes generosity in the society and social congruency more than personal ambition. This also promotes tending to the needs of the group before you. Generally, responsibility for one another is more important than responsibility of your personal needs. This becomes a social practice in the way people are attentive to others needs and what they do (Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association). For

example, a typical Thai child will help around the house for the benefit of the group

not for an allowance or individual ambitions (Langkulsen: Interview).

On a macro-level, the Thai society values a collective ideology. To explain, the

King and Royal family in Thailand are seen as a, "an embodiment of their nationhood"

(Thai Embassy. Business in Thailand). Plus, the threat of making a derogatory remark

about the royal family could lead to a minimum of three years imprisonment (Thai

Embassy. Business in Thailand). Thus, these rules and national pride illustrate how the

Thai culture values group over self. Largely, the Thai's behaviors illustrate a high value

on the group rather than an individual member of society.

Next, the Thai culture is quite inclusive to not only avoid confrontation but also

to not focus on competitiveness, a masculine description in Hofstede's research. The

Thai culture is seen as the most feminine culture according to the research with respect

to over 50 countries included in the study (Hofstede: Thailand, 2010). To illustrate this

point, one behavior practice is the very simple act of smiling. Known as the 'Land of

Smiles' by the Thai Embassy, Thailand is known for keeping a cool and calm attitude all

the time (Thai Embassy. Business in Thailand). This draws out some clear conclusions.

For instance, competitiveness is not highly ranked. Keeping away from confrontation

and not bring shame on another person illustrates the value of caring for others over

achievement and success (Hofstede: Thailand, 2010). Also, being polite and admiring

good character are all dominant values of the culture that reflect a highly feminine

society (Thai Embassy. Business in Thailand).

More so, another behavioral practice of the Thai culture is cooperation.

Discussed in Knutson's paper, under a exhaustive list, one of the most important Thai

values is, "associated with interpersonal communication" (Knutson, 2002). Dealing

with others courteously, saving face, and working together as a group all indicate this

truth. As the informant illustrated, "My people would rather keep in doubt, worries,

and debate to not bring shame to the other person or anger out of their heart"

(Langkulsen: Interview). Social relations are valued highly, highlighting the dimension

of being a more feminine culture than masculine. Likewise, avoiding confrontation and

issues directly at times leads to less assertive behavior illustrated through the different

ways that Thai people use to save face. With that being said, the traits of the culture

related to feminism dominate over the masculine.

Following, another cultural dimension outlined in the Thai culture is their policies

and regulations and the way they follow these rules. The amounts of rules that are

spoken and unspoken illustrate how to deal with the future, as it is ambiguous and

unknown. The Thai society leans more toward avoiding uncertainty. This implies strict

rules, policies and procedures to deal with and handle issues in the culture. For

example, with a bent against social uprisings and protesting against the group, the

culture has strict rules for individuals who insult the royal family (Knutson, 2002).

Likewise, this is seen in the way Thai people do business and handle foreign investors exporting products into Thailand. To note, this also relates to the Buddhist influence in Thailand by way of understanding that not following the rules of Buddhism, one will suffer the consequences in the future or future life. A heavy emphasis on keeping control over the Thai society and Thai people are relative to the amount of rules and regulations administers in Thai practices.

With Hofstede's value dimensions, the last dimension is the Long-Term Orientation. This dimension was added after Hofstede's initial research to highlight a cultures future-orientation perspective versus a short-term point-of-view (Hofstede: Thailand, 2010). Characteristics of a long-term orientation include respect for tradition, investing in personal relationships, and protecting face to name a few (Hofstede: Thailand, 2010). Analyzing the communication behavior, especially in the work environment, Thai people, "never confront a colleague publicly on work-related problems" (Cultural Information - Thailand). This practice illustrates a connection between Thai's long-term orientation and communication style by underlining the value Thai people have on friendships (Cultural Information - Thailand). It is seen better to invest in a relationship in the long-term and not bring shame on another person even in a moment of possible social miscommunications and discuss it later. More so, the same article goes on to discuss that confrontation is not avoided but better to be done "privately" (Cultural Information - Thailand). Clearly, the suggestion

from these communication styles reinforces that Thai people think in a practical future-oriented perspective rather than a short-term, quick to respond point of view.

Inclusive in these five different dimensions is the construction of what Hall's model of communication calls a high- or low-context culture. The context of communication taking place involves the situation, the participants, and the setting (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, Simonds, 2007:25). Given the participants, features of a high-context culture include how much the listener knows about the subject under discussion," and, "the listener is already 'contexted' and does not need to be given much background information" (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, Simonds, 2007:25). To summarize, a high-context culture has a lot of hidden messages that are not directly spelled-out in words (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas, Simonds, 2007:25). The environment of this interaction, with the verbal and nonverbal codes exchanged, demonstrates the two opposing ends of the continuum.

Therefore, understanding that levels of authority are normal in Thai culture prescribes how it is a high-context culture. Indeed, if the language and people acknowledge social inequalities through communication, a simple gesture done by an authority to a subordinate could encompass much more than a simple hand motion (Langkulsen: Interview).   Also, the non-confrontational interaction style can send verbal messages indirectly and even, "talk around the point and embellish it" (Cultural Information - Thailand). This communication behavior energizes the interpretation of a

couple words rather than spelling things out (Cultural Information - Thailand). A bit

farfetched yet quite related to the Thai's high-context culture would be the unspoken

rules about the body. Specifically, someone's head is seen to be a sacred place

(Cultural Information - Thailand). It should not be touched even if it is a child, it is seen

as offensive. With that, one's feet should not bare the sole to another person. It

should not be used to point, or be near someone's head (Cultural Information -

Thailand). These nonverbal queues are Cleary communicated when they happen. By

touching another's head or using their feet in unaccepted ways shows a nonverbal tone

of rudeness and offense (Cultural Information - Thailand). Overall, through any

interaction, the high-context of the culture needs understanding and depth to make

sense of the way people react and interact in different situations.

In conclusion, understanding that Thailand's culture is far from parallel and

practically the opposite of American culture is important when communicating with

Thai members effectively. The Thai culture has many subtle notions and nonverbal

communication queues and understandings that it would be very easy and quick for an

American to be impolite and distasteful. The first tip is to understand the culture and

how they are different than Americans. American culture weighs on the other end of

each dimension. Therefore, it is important to use this information in drawing

conclusions in conversation. With that, the next tip is to be respectful in all regards.

Tone of voice, actions, verbal and nonverbal queues, and many more communication

behaviors all tend to send a signal whether on purpose or not. It is important to avoid conflict in conversation even when you disagree, respect others and most importantly authority, and do not use your feet to notion at where you left your cell phone for a Thai person to grab for you. These small-yet-important differences all contribute to a major step of congruency with the culture and not being known as unaware of the Thai culture. The third tip is to not be expectant. From a different orientation on time to the understanding that most Thai people value groups more than individual interests illustrates the often misconception that duration.   To be accepted as one with a group will take longer than in an American culture. That is, letting a stranger, a westerner at that, into family occasions or making quick decisions about a business deal take much more time than the normal American anticipates and is comfortable accepting. Leave your normal expectations outside of this culture and build interpersonal relationships by investing into individuals with quantity of time spent together. With that said, fear should not be an approach to intercultural communication. The fear of disapproval or rejection or most of all, making a mistake all will hinder any natural social interactions. Cultural differences are understood in the first place because people made mistakes. There is a grace for a foreigner to be different. This is not an excuse but a way to not overthink every situation at hand. Overall, the best way of success to communicate effectively in any other culture outside of your own is to not judge but accept, not to

disapprove of but appreciate. Looking at the world through the eyes of the culture

makes sense of problems in intercultural communications.

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