DIOGENES

Cultural Identity in the Age of Transculturation

Jungsik Um
Sogang University, Seoul, Korea

Abstract

The term "self" refers to the subject which persists through the changing experiences of a person. We think of it at least as the center of personal identity, or the organizing function within the individual. It may be desirable to examine cultural identity if there is something like "the communal self." Kant believed that there is a "transcendental self" which transcends our experiences. Following him, we may analogously claim that there is a communal self, which transcends the history and the culture of the community, maintaining their identity throughout time by means of providing the unity principle. Korea is a typical example of a nation whose process of transculturation is most dynamically ongoing. Such a nation should apply this concept to her current cultural situations in order to be successful in the age of globalization.

A cultural tradition is a set of ideas which is transmitted with varying degree of accuracy and completeness to each of the members of a cultural system. Although a traditional value may be viewed as a set of instructions, it can hold the allegiance of the membership of a cultural system only if it contains convincing explanation of the correctness of the instructions. However, value systems are hardly static. They are influenced by external conditions and environmental forces. Their internal structure is in a constant state of flux due to changes in the status of individuals and repetitive changes in the status of the community. In many respects, Korea may be a typical example of the nations that have experienced a radical change of value system in contemporary cultural situation.

As had happened only too often in her history, Korea was the location of contending great powers, and her own people by their divisions and rivalry become the instruments of this contention. In particular, since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they have suffered deeply in the discovery that a nation cannot sustain its independence if it will not share in the general development of civilization. Koreans now struggle for the restoration of liberty, traditional values, and national dignity, as well as the reconstruction of national culture and the reunification of Korea based on the national self-identity. In this respect, it may be important to call attention to the conception of so-called "national self-identity."

Corresponding author:
Jungsik Um, Sogang University, 214-103 Mokdong Apt. Mok 5 Dong, Yangchun-gu, Seoul, South Korea.
Email: jsumek@hanmail.net

In this paper, my intention is not to construct a version of cultural nationalism nor Korean patriotism, but merely to call attention to the significance of self-identity in cultural context or cultural identity, which may be unexpectedly valuable in dealing with the problem of identity in the contemporary cultural situation. In order to do this, I shall be mainly concerned with the analysis of self-identity, and its relevance to the solution of the cultural identity problem in the age of globalization, in which transculturation is a dominant phenomenon.

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The word "culture" may be used in a wide sense to describe all aspects characteristic of a particular form of human life, or in a narrow sense to denote only the system of values implicit in it. Understanding culture in the wide sense is one typical concern of historical, anthropological, and sociological studies. The study of culture in the narrow sense is the province of the humanities, whose aim is to interpret and transmit to future generations the system of values in terms of which participants in a form of life find meaning and purpose. As Joel J. Kupperman points out, in either of its senses, culture may be thought of as a causal agent that affects the evolutionary process by uniquely human means: "For it permits the self-conscious evaluation of human possibilities in the light of a system of values that reflect prevailing ideals about what human life ought to be." "Culture is," he adds, "thus an indispensable device for increasing human control over the direction in which our species changes" (Kupperman, 1995: 172). If this is the case, it may be reasonable to assume that there can be such a thing as the so-called "cultural self" as a version of the communal self.

Without assuming that there is the cultural self of a nation or a state, it is impossible to understand what a nation is and how national culture would take place, just as we cannot understand what a person is, unless the personal self is taken to be the criterion for individuation, unity, identity, creation, and destruction of a person. Accordingly, the kind of thing it is will have important bearings on the criteria for the nature of the self, whether it be personal, communal, national, or cultural. In particular, the notion of the cultural self would play a central role in dealing with the problem of cultural identity, since it is logically prior to any particular cultural phenomena.

In order to fully appreciate the notion of the self as a foundation for metaphysics, and the significance of the concept of the cultural self in the problem of cultural identity in transculturation, it seems necessary to examine what kind of theory of the self can provide us with an adequate solution. As is well known, according to Descartes, the self exists as a conscious thing, and the thing to which mental activities belong must be a mental substance, or mind. For Hume, however, when we look inwardly, we find no unitary self, that is, nothing but a bundle of experiences. But Kant provides us with a third alternative, namely, the theory of the noumenal self.

Kant did not rely on the metaphysical principle Descartes used, and he did not believe that the self whose existence he inferred could be considered as a mental substance. He also argues that the elements of the bundle Hume spoke of had a kind of unity. There is an obvious difference between a bundle of experiences and the experience of a bundle; and since the bundles we sometimes experience involve successive occurrences, we must have active selves that impose a characteristic unity on the things we experience. And Kant rightly points out that this subject or the self is a thing, an x, that performs certain functions. Since this x clearly transcends our experience, he called it a "transcendental self." Following his arguments, we may analogously claim that there is such a thing as the national or cultural self which transcends the history of a nation and produces the national culture, maintaining their identity throughout time by means of providing the unity principle and the criteria for individuation in the cultural context (As to the Kantian conception of the self, see Wittgenstein, 1961: 117–119; Korsgaard, 1996.)

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Turning to the notion of culture, we may admit that it is neither clear nor precise. Many of the terms used to define culture are often as vague as the term "culture" itself. Yet, there is enough agreement on some categories of culture to outline fruitfully what a description of a culture should contain. Above all, to learn about culture, we must ascertain what the members' values are and the hierarchical order in which they place those values. We must also learn which values are end-values, such as happiness, and which are means-values, such as work. Values break down into several subcategories, such as personal, economic, political, social, and educational values. In this respect, we may define culture as "an internally coherent and cohesive set of values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and practices by means of which people relate themselves to the world" (Kim, 1990: 11).

According to Yersu Kim, these ideas, values, and practices together constitute some notion of an ordered universe and man's place in it by specifying for man a set of purposes in relation to himself, his fellow men, and nature. As the world is in constant flux, however, it can be said that to be part of the nature of culture is to be in a constant flux. Kim says: "Culture is a kind of living organism with an internal dynamism of its own, looking beyond the boundaries set by itself. As the world and our knowledge of it change, culture too must change so as to make itself adequate to its changing and changed circumstances" (Kim, 1990: 11). For sure, in order to survive and prosper, a culture must constantly adapt its ideas, values, and practices to these changing circumstances.

Cultural changes may occur because of deliberate, thoughtful response to the changed conditions of life; however, many, if not most, cultural changes take place without forethought. They just happen, much as rocks breaking away from their cliffs and falling into the valley below. These cultural "happenings" differ from "deliberate" cultural changes in that we make deliberate changes because they are what we want; we see them as desirable, perhaps because they fit the changed conditions of life. Cultural happenings, on the other hand, occur whether or not we want them. Even though some of these happenings may be undesirable, we are saddled with them once they happen.

In fact, the impetus for the change may come from many different sources. Many cultures have been exterminated by radical changes in the natural environment or by imperialistic imposition of another culture. According to Kim, a transfer of allegiance may be the consequence of "a rational recognition of the need for changes in the culture." He says:

> Cultures of each time and place thus strive to forge a cultural synthesis, sometimes in isolation, sometimes in cooperation, and sometimes in a milieu of conflict. Each strives to forge an optimal synthesis of ideas, values and practices that would best enable it to deal with the task of survival and prospering…. At some point in time and place, the synthesis would be perceived, by those inside as well as outside the cultural synthesis in question, to have reached a point of optimality, a reflective equilibrium in the process of interaction and interchange of ideas and values on the one hand, and the recalcitrant but changing environment on the other (Kim, 1990: 11).

To be sure, such a synthesis would become a model for emulation by other cultures and it may be taken to be an ideal form of cultural change. However, in reality, as mentioned earlier, most cultural changes take place without forethought, and often take a form of cultural happenings, or even of cultural revolutions.

At this juncture, it may be important to bring the idea of cultural identity into the topic of cultural synthesis in order to see what is actually going on in the contemporary cultural situation. As Yersu Kim points out, the idea of cultural identity is emerging as one of the key concepts in our understanding of political, social, and cultural issues of our time. Among others, it is being put forward as an antidote to the universalistic claims of various hegemonic cultures. It provides the

ideological basis for opposition to imperialism. It is closely linked with justificatory grounds for many and varied independence, secessionist, and liberation movements. As such, it is an idea of defiance and liberation (Kim, 1990: 2).[1]

According to Kim, however, there is another sense of cultural identity, which may "provide the philosophical basis for recognition of diversity and plurality of cultures and for advocacy of understanding and respect for these cultures in their uniqueness and irreducibility" (1990: 11). Provided with this idea of cultural identity, he wants to find a new conception of culture and its identity that can preserve respect for cultures in their individuality and uniqueness, while leaving open the possibility of their development and progress. Thus, he eventually understands the idea of cultural identity as the principle of cultural synthesis, which is "bound to undergo a similarly evolutionary process of revision and expansion" (Kim, 1990: 13).[2]

On the other hand, according to In-Suk Cha, the notion of "cultural imperialism" appears somewhat outdated. In reality, no culture of any folk or nation is indigenous. Especially today, culture seems to be a constant assimilation of various alien elements which contribute toward unity. It may transcend its confines and expand its boundaries; besides, modernization through the progress of science and technology precipitates this process. Thus, Cha asserts that there is a universal civilization emerging that would reign from New York to Paris and from Moscow to Jakarta. In Berlin and Seoul, a new universal yet international lifestyle has come about by virtue of global telecommunications, expanding travel, and the multinational economy. He says:

> …we see exchanges being made between East and West and between North and South. We see young white-collar workers in London and Tokyo riding subways to work. They take care of their daily assignments with computers and go to a fast food counter for a quick bite. In the evening they watch videos and listen to CDs (Cha, 1995: 9).

To be sure, technology has made this homogenizing trend of lifestyle possible among young people everywhere on this planet. They seem to think alike, feel alike, and behave alike. Their sensibility toward cuisine, music, and entertainment seems to be uniform. Cha calls these phenomena "transcultural," and he admits that transculturation is the fate of today's world. He even asserts that if ignorance of others breeds intolerance towards them, one should have hope for the ongoing process of transculturation of the contemporary civilization.

As Cha pinpoints, transculturation would provide an intersubjective common ground for communication among peoples of diverse cultures; one may feel relatively at home with others from different cultural communities. However, it is clear that such establishment of a common ground for mutual understanding does not suffice to resolve conflicts among people. He observes:

> Looking at the global economy, it has been said that national boundaries have become less relevant. Nevertheless, whilst we continue to see worker migration, capital, and technology transfer across borders, it can be noted that most of the population carry on their lives within the national boundary. Here, national interests of the populace remain intact and the conflict of interest pursue (Cha, 1995: 10).

> "Today," he adds, "the complexity of the world's problems is indeed enormous and not only keen, but highly rational thinking is necessary for their solution" (Cha, 1995: 10; see also Cha, 2006).

To be sure, the world has finally come to the realization that mankind can only save themselves through cooperation, However, the problem is that people do not behave as they realize they should. Accordingly, it may be reasonable to conclude that the optimistic idea of cultural identity as cultural synthesis is not enough to achieve our ideal culture in the age of transculturation.

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The contemporary cultural situation is this. A ship made of wood and called the "Titanic" is constantly repaired over a long period of time, and its wooden boards are gradually replaced by aluminium ones. The old wooden boards are retained and eventually reassembled. If we want to call the reassembled ship the "Titanic" and say that it is the ship that properly bears the name, one that was built in a certain shipyard and sailed for a certain period, then we shall have to deny that the aluminium ship is the Titanic. But this raises problems. At what time did the aluminium ship begin its existence? At the time "it" became wholly aluminium? If we say yes to this, we shall have to make a decision about the ship that is exactly like the aluminium ship except for one wooden board. Quite clearly, we are faced with a special case in which our unusual principles for establishing a thing's identity conflict, and the only way to resolve the problem is to make a decision. Our attitudes toward two cultures may differ – we may feel a sentimental attachment to one, for example – but such attitudes do not show us that any one decision is more reasonable than the other.

Philosophically speaking, we may be free to choose. In order to choose, however, we need a cultural self, a communal self, or a national self, which may be thought of as a causal agent that affects the evolutionary process by uniquely human means.

To achieve our ideal culture, we must know how to bring about the cultural change in terms of cultural self-identity, in the Kantian sense, which transcends the transcultural situation of contemporary society. In this respect, it may be important to be less idealistic or optimistic, and take a closer look at our cultural situation. As Peter Caws rightly points out, nearly everything that sets cultures against one another at a deep level in the contemporary world seems to belong to the risk-of-offense category rather than to the getting-the-results category. He says:

> They aren't of course independent; […] But I think that a far larger proportion of the disputed territory than professor Kim allows might be shown to belong to the common or universal (or at least pragmatically universal) domain if representatives of conflicting cultures could be persuaded to suspend the particulars of cult for the purposes of argument (Caws, in Kim, 1990: 16–17).

Here he thinks principally of conflicts between the major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but the point is general. And he adds:

> Of course this presupposes the possibility of argument, but for this we don't need prior assurances of global intertranslatability, only a willingness to exchange the first word (Caws, in Kim, 1990: 18).

According to Caws, we can belong to the transcultural community if we like, without necessarily giving up (unless to avoid dissonance) membership in our culture of origin. It is like having dual citizenship: if everyone has it, there is no longer room for conflict. Such is the cultural situation at the present time.

From the above considerations, it may be reasonable to make the following points in order to restore our traditional value and reconstruct new national or regional culture in the age of globalization. First of all, we must exercise our strong "will to attain a cultural self-identity," since our cultural situation is so complicated and cultural changes are so drastic that we need the criteria for the cultural individuation, unity, identity, before it is destroyed. This is not difficult for us, because our countries have been autonomous societies, having unique culture, language, and customs for a long time. Secondly, we must restore our traditional values and interpret them within the context of contemporary cultural situation, so that we would be able to create a new Korean culture, for example, in terms of cultural synthesis. We are obliged to do this, because our ancestors have done it throughout long cultural traditions. Thirdly, we must take the lead in attempting to make

a global synthesis of culture, or cultural shift, which might take place in the near future. We are in the position to do this because our contemporary cultural situation enjoys not only criticism of the current and past culture of the region, but also struggle for a dialectical synthesis of Eastern and Western culture in order to create an ideal one in the age of globalization. Accordingly, at the present moment, it would be important to recognize that our strong sense of cultural self-identity is logically prior to any action we take. Now, self-discovery, self-assertion, and self-improvement should be our principal concerns.

Notes

1. For him, there is a tendency to see the ideal of cultural identity in opposition to cultural universalism, in which man is often seen as going through successive unilinear stages of savagery, barbarism, and finally civilization.
2. Here, he interprets cultural synthesis as a regulative ideal in the Kantian sense.

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