



## Visual Art for Life's sake : Constructing Identities of Esan Artists

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### Abstract

This study research is a qualitative research with the following objectives; 1) To study the process of constructing identities of Northeastern or Esan artists through their works of visual arts for life's sake. This deals with Esan localization, nation state and globalization which influence the process of constructing identities of Esan artists. 2) To study the interaction of individual artist and groups of artists who made influence on the process of constructing identities of Esan artists. The result reveals 3 points that influence the process. They are as follows;

The first point is "**Esan Localization**". It is found that being a unique artist with an identity is constructed by social process. This means being Esan region has mixed up with modern technique methods provided.

The second point is "**Thai Nation State**" which contains 2 factors. The **first factor** is educational institute. It is found that the uniqueness of most Esan artists is mostly constructed by "**social process of linking interaction**". As we can see the phenomenon of ideal imitation "arts for life" by Tawee Rajaneekorn who is the master. This transfers the process and it inherits identities to students. Then it becomes "**visual art for life's sake of Korat school**". The **second factor** concerns with **politics, society and environment**. It is noted that the visual art for lives of the Esan artists apparently appeared during the political crisis period of 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976. Soon after the political situation was calm down, the uniqueness changed according to the society and environment.

The third point is "**Globalization**". It is obvious that Esan artists have developed themselves along the movement of globalization trends. They have interaction with some groups of artists in outer location, in Bangkok and overseas. They have a purpose to promote themselves to be known in the area of post-modern arts in wider areas.

In conclusion, Esan artists adjusted themselves by mixing Western and Eastern styles. They took Esan localization and some philosophies of the Buddhism teaching to link with the Western patterns. So the compromise keeps maintaining their identities.

**Keywords :** Visual art for life's sake, Constructing, identity, Esan artists

## Introduction

The change in major arts field of Thai society occurred from ideas and outcome products of "art for life's sake". There was some disputation on the basis of arts works i.e. meaning and the target of the arts works. This caused some changes in arts creation. Idea limitation, that used to define artists' ideas and feelings, was gradually destroyed. It created more complicating changes. That means it creates; the appearance of artists' new identities, arts production and arts addiction. In addition, some new groups of artists appeared. These artists fixed on their unique meaning in their peers. So we can say that new "World of Arts" was born. This event created meanings and linked new arts to the world and society.

The interest in this change comes up from the researcher's experiences when he was a student in the Department of Arts in Technical and Vocational College or Northeastern Technical College in the former time. He got familiar with the atmosphere of songs for life's sake as well as the paintings which reflected people's hunger. These kinds of things inherited from his lecturers and his seniors. During that time, the atmosphere of creating students' outcome works was dealt with types and contents of miserable people on cracking paddy fields and wicked natural environment. Though he did not deeply understand why most students' paintings appeared in this way, he roughly understood that it was the "identity" of Korat arts during that period. However his comprehension of "creating that kind of arts

is only the specific identity of the educational institute" could not reach the important role of arts for life's sake. So his selection of visual art for life's sake in the content of "Esan region" can make him understand the process of constructing identities of Esan artists how it reacts with Esan localization, nation state and globalization.

At present, there are many Esan artists from various places, sources and qualities. Such artists link their arts with Esan region, and integrate with nation state and globalization. They reflect themselves in various ways of Esan artists. However, seven Esan artists were selected. People accept these famous artists as they have apparent guidelines to create arts for life's sake. They can be human resources for the study of "being Esan artists" as well as their ideal background of what they work for. In addition, the researcher wants to know their main ideas and philosophies to create their specific works. Finally, he wants to investigate their interaction with outer societies among the trends of globalization. These subjects become factors to construct their identities.

## Aims

1) To study the process of constructing identities of Esan artists through their works of visual art for life's sake. This concerns Esan region, nation state, and globalization which have influence on the process of constructing identities of Northeastern artists.

2) To study the interaction between individual and group artists which influence the process of constructing identities of the Northeast artists.

### **Research Concept Criteria**

The study is based on the major main idea of identity. The researcher selected and considered the meaning of Clifford Geertz. That is artists change their identities due to contents infinitely. So an identity is a kind of property that someone borrows or creates at his urgent situation. Moreover, the researcher selected idea trend of identity according to post-modern. He regards "individual" as an artist's identity. Hence the individual emphasizes on "a social process of constructing an identity" more than "the core or pitch of property that has specific characteristic". They researcher only takes such main idea to be his guideline in order to clarify the process of constructing identities of Esan artists. Such identities move and change according to the trend of their society integrately. It is done under the subjects of Esan region, state nation and globalization which are major complex substances.

### **Research Methodology**

The researcher selected a qualitative method for his study. He developed the idea flame of his study from the idea trend of identity. Such idea was the guideline to study the process of constructing identities of Esan artists. It was done under the subjects of Esan region, state nation and globalization which complexly related. The researcher selected and studied some works of visual art for life's sake which belong to some Esan artists. He considered the points of the origin of their idea trends, theories, philosophies, methods and arts structures. In addition, the

factors that influenced on artists' creation were the guidelines to define the questions for this research. These factors were also the guidelines to collect data from both documents and from outdoors activities. The methods included observation and key information interview. Later, the data collection was done to be the guideline to analyze the result at the final stage. The research methods were at the following steps;

#### **1. Sampling Group of Population**

The researcher collected his population in the Northeast at random. He used the method of purposive sampling in order to get sample persons who were appropriate to his aims and objectives of the study. The random aimed at outcome products and biographies of Esan artists. That means some papers, arts works and primary interviews were considered. Such data were consulted by some qualified persons. The objective was to screen the representatives of the popular group who were in accordant with the subjects of Esan region, nation state and globalization. Finally, 7 artists were selected. Such artists had important roles and guidelines to create apparent works of visual art for life's sake. The selection included Tawee Rajaneekorn, Chokchai Tukpoe, Sanam Junkoh, Suksun Meunniruth, Surapol Punyawachira, Kietkaroon Thongpromraj, and Wattana Pomchai.

#### **2. Data Collection**

The researcher collected primary data from concerned historical documents, theories, researches' articles and media printings. Then outdoors collection was done. The collecting steps included observation and note taking. The researcher studied authentic paintings in authentic location. He also observed artists' behaviors at

work. It included his participating observation. His objective was to study the process and techniques to create outcome products of arts works. A kind of qualitative interview was included. This kind of the interview was classified into 2 types. The first type was the interview to “create information”. That is both an interviewer and respondent had their roles in composing information with compromise. They had good relationships to each other from the beginning to the end of the interview. The interviewer took the main role more than the respondent. Another type of interview emphasized on interaction and participation. That is both sides were in active condition. They both participated in the interview in order to reach the same goal. It can be clarified that they created stories or some information. The researcher himself defined questions from the idea trend as mentioned. Then he ran the interviews with the group of key informants. The delegation included Esan contemporary artists, arts educationists, and the representatives of the group of Esan artists.

### 3. Data Analysis

During the period of data collection, the researcher needed to analyze the data in order to check with the idea flame. There may be some adjustment of idea flame. The analyzing steps are as follows; 1) Collect all data by taking notes of all recorded voice and then edited. Then, the researcher arranged the data in good system and saved in his computer or in a CD. This method would lead to the interpretation of data, category and final analysis. 2) Conceptualize the data by interpreting the primary data. The interpretation could reflex on respondents' ideas. 3) Categorize the concepts. The researcher collected all meaning of the information and data

to categorize. After that he interpreted to get the conclusion of analytic induction. That means he made the conclusion from the concrete or phenomenon that he had already studied. 4) Analyze data and conclude the meaning. This step would provide the researcher knowledge according to the research's objectives. Various data were linked with one another until the structure of the conclusion appeared. This could give answers to the research's questions.

## Research Results

**Dynamic and Evolution of Contemporary Arts in Esan Region** It is found that the contemporary arts in Esan region has evolved from the beginning period of the extension of educational opportunities. The educational extension occurred from the Governments policy. It directly came from the central part, that is Bangkok. The objective was to expand more opportunities of arts education in provincial parts and to upgrade. In order to make arts promotion, in 1966 courses for modern arts were officially provided in the Northeastern Technical College in Nakhonratchasima province. The institute was counted as the first institute in Esan region and the forth in Thailand. There, the instructors graduated from the centre part, Silpakorn University, and from overseas. This was regarded as the trend of modern arts movement that officially settled down in Esan region for the first time.

Then, there were arousing trend of some artist groups who were outcome products of this educational institute. Some groups presented their works continuously for a long time. However, some groups showed their works just only for short time. Then they ended up their action. Nevertheless, the artists tried to set up more new groups. At the very beginning period, it was obvious

that the amount of Esan artists was very little. In contrast, nowadays there are many groups of more than one hundred artists. However, the majority of the groups still hold their identities of Esan region with their substances snuggled up with other factors. Such factors especially concern with politics, society and environment. The factors occurred under Thai nation state. Since some artists got pressure from the politics, they created their visual arts works according to the trend of “arts for life’s sake”.

In the mean time, some competitors of Esan artists appeared. These competitors created arts works in the trend of “arts of arts”. Some of their works were sent in contests and they got rewards. After that they became famous and the public accepted them. Most of them finished their studies in higher arts level from Silpakorn University. This institute created monopolized systems of arts contests and had influence on other arts institutes. So these competitors gained more advantages in creating their celebrities and they were more accepted at national level than those who graduated from other arts institute. Hence the identities of these artists were constructed by their educational institutes or some organizations that provided rewards.

However, when turning back to study the events during the decade of 1987, we found that the group of Esan artists adjusted themselves to the trend of globalization more and more. They had relationship with some foreign artists e.g. Lao, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Japanese, and American etc. The reason was that they wanted to extend areas to present their works more widely. In other words, they wanted to present themselves to be known in outer societies. They also wanted people to learn that Esan artists were ready to fight or compromise with arts influence which

occurred around outer area of Esan region. It was regarded as an attempt to construct a process of one’s identity to be equal with the other’s both at national and international level.

**Process of Constructing Identities of Esan Artists : Social Interaction** According to the study of the process of constructing identities of Esan artists in overall image, it was found that the period of 1932 - 1957 was regarded as “the duration of ripening and cultivating realization of responsibilities to the society”. Later, during 1957 - 1963, it was noted as the duration of silence which had significance to visual art for life’s sake in Thailand. The situation caused from the problems which occurred from the impact of U.S. army base in Thailand in 1961. Then, in 1963 - 1973, people found that the power to control the society was in the hand of the dictating government. So the artists could only express their symbols. This period was noted as “the duration of searching for answers to the artists who had social realization”.

Despite the fact that Thai artists were defined their right and freedom to express their visual arts for life’s sake during the beginning decade of 1967, still there were some arts works that opposed the dictation and U.S. army base in the Northeast. This kind of visual arts belonged to Tawee Rajaneekorn who built up the Department of Fine Arts in the first higher education institute in the Northeast. As we can see that he and his Korat artists friends e.g. Dumrong Wongupparaj, and Phitoon Komgka etc. set up S.C. Gallery in 1967 in order to present their arts works. It was the first Gallery in the region. During that time, his works reflected current social problems. He said, “I drew a picture of an American soldier walking arm in arm with a skinny Esan woman. And I also drew other pictures concerned with

real society. Then I exhibited at S.C. Gallery. When American soldiers visited the gallery and saw the pictures. They got cross. They accused me of abusing them. Those kind of soldiers had no taste. Every artist could not sell any picture. Finally, we had to end up our business in that year. And we regarded it as **the beginning of arts for life's sake.**" (Tawee Rajaneekorn, 2009: interview).

Tawee Rajaneekorn was counted as the first person who had ideal in apparently creating works of visual art for life's sake. He also played a role of an arts teacher. That is he transferred his ideal and guideline of creating arts works for life's sake to students. Many students became famous e.g. Sanam Junkoh, Suksun Meunniruth, Thedkiet Promnok, Surapol Punyawachira, Mongkol Utok, Thongkarn Tana, Lephong Puthichat, Jakkree Harnsuwan, Ongart Chartmontree, Phongthep Kradonchamnam, Matee Bureepukdee, Kietkaroon Thongpromraj and Nikhom Kubkaew etc. Then after, Tawee Rajaneekorn, with his students, played an important role in setting up **"the ally of Esan artists"**. The purpose was to take **"arts of political cutout"** to exhibit with **"the ally of artists in Thailand"**. The exhibition took place in the area of Royal Plaza or Sanam Luang and on Ratchadumnoen Road during 1974 - 1976. The objective of the exhibition was to make people recall the event of 14 October 1973. This activity was regarded as the first interaction with the artists groups in Bangkok. In addition Chokchai Tukpoe was the artist who played an important role in the ally of artists in Thailand. Hence the process of constructing identities of Esan artists was built up with political situation. Such political situation caused from someone who had power in the dictating government. And that one offered "identities" of visual art for life's sake to Esan artists.

There after the political situation eased up, the allying groups of Esan artists set up "Esan artists group" in 1983. The group included Chokchai Tukpoe, Kietkaroon Thongpromraj, Wattana Pomchai, and some more Esan artists. The group was noted as consisting of the most artist members in Thailand. There were almost 100 members in the group. They continuously have kept presenting their arts works in Esan region, in Bangkok, and overseas for many times until now. Moreover, some of Tawee Rajaneekorn's students, as mentioned above, separated to set up a new group of **"Earthwalker Group"**. Their purpose was to have a movement of arts for life's sake in Bangkok. In addition, they made an extension of interaction in overseas. In a nutshell, the process of constructing an identity of individual Esan artist was set up with social interaction that moved along with the major trend of globalization.

## Discussion

Due to the result of the study, it was found that the process of constructing identities of Esan artists was set up from the subjects of Esan localization, nation state and globalization.

1. **Localization** Sociologists and humanists pay attention to "localization". They regard it as "a phenomenon of social culture" which is complicated and full of movements and changes. Moreover, it deals with groups of people, institutes, systems and many other phenomenon (Pattana Kittiasa, 2003: 17). Due to the study, the term "Esan localization" represents political factors, society, arts, culture and environment. Without avoiding, they exist in the substance of Esan region and have influence on constructing identities of Esan artists. For example, Tawee Rajaneekorn gained his inspiration and idea trend from the ways of lives of local people, as well as the



existence of U.S. army base, poverty, dam construction, and protestation. Even little things that happened in Esan region appeared in his arts works. In addition, Chokchai Tukpoe got his inspiration from nature, ways of lives, ancient stories, paintings on cave walls, temples and from some places where people practiced the dharma in Esan region. Furthermore, Suksun Muenniruth gained inspiration from Esan farmers' lives. Sanam Junkoh also had inspiration from the Southern arts and culture. At the same time, Surapol Punyawachira got inspiration from cracking paddy field whereas Kietkaroon Thongpromraj reflected ways of lives and living through chameleons, grilled fish and wide forests in the imagination of Esan region. Finally, Wattana Pomchai reflected the ways of lives of modellers and other local people who were living in his vicinity.

According to Clifford Geertz, the term "identity" can be explained as the infinity of the change of human identity. So identity is a kind of quality that people borrow or create in an urgent situation (Apinya Fuangfoosakul, 2003: 32 - 33). So we can say that artists only borrowed "being Esan region" which came from stories and materials of local people's intellect. Then they presented the materials only in their works of visual arts. However, the outstanding characteristics of their works appeared in the type of modern arts with high level skills. It is said that they changed "being Esan region" to "being international" in the type of integrated modern arts. The change moved along with the situation. In another point, it can be explained that individual or uniqueness, as an artist's identity, is constructed by social process or "being Esan region". It consists of complex with modern technique methods. Artists' identities change regarding to the situation of idea, and strategies in creating their images. At the end,

their works came out as visual arts with specific characteristics.

2. **Nation State** The term "nation state" refers to the policies of Thai government which has influence on Esan region. The purpose is to make local people follow in the matters of politics, governance, and education system. The nation state has begun running since the period of King Rama V. It has influenced on constructing identities of Esan artists. It can be divided into 2 apparent factors as follows;

2.1 Factor of "Education Institute" Arts curricula in an educational institute are defined by the government and some authoritative persons. As we can see that Tawee Rajaneekorn is an artist who graduated from Silapakorn University which produced many artists who created arts works for the country at the beginning period. Tawee Rajaneekorn was also living in that period. In addition, Chokchai Tukpoe got influence from his old educational institute of Thailand, that is Poh Chang College. It was the source place to produce fine artists with high skill level from the very beginning period. During his study period, Chokchai Tukpoe gained knowledge of arts techniques which focused on manual skills. The knowledge consisted of mixture of core subjects of Western arts. Until now, the influence still exists in his arts works. Moreover, Suksun Meunniruth, Sanam Junkoh, Surapol Punyawachira and Kietkaroon Thongpromraj are the outcome results from the arts educational institute in Esan region, that is Northeastern Technical College. They were instructed by Tawee Rajaneekorn. The location and atmosphere of the institute were surrounded by urban nature with cracking paddy fields, as well as local people's poverty. In addition, it included the atmosphere of the existence of U.S. army. Such things were the factors that

influenced learners. The influence offered “institute specific identity” to the students. Lastly, Wattana Promchat was the only one who did not finish his study from any arts institution. So his arts works only consisted of wide fields, nature and the ways of lives of local people. Such things were his instructors and his life university.

For a symbolic interaction thinker, the term “identity” emphasizes on individual as a subject or agency. However, they regard “identity” as something that occurs in the process of social interaction. And if we clarify “Esan artists’ identities” regarding the social interaction, we will see a social process of linking interaction appear in Esan artists. As we can see the imitation phenomenon or idea influence of “art for life’s sake” by Tawee Rajaneekorn who is the master. This transfers the process and it inherits identities to his students who became famous later on, for example; Saman Junkoh, Suksun Muenniruth, Surapol Punyawachira, Kietkaroon Thongpromraj, Thedkiet Promnok, Lephong Puthichat, Mongkol Utok, Thongkam Tana, Phongthep Kradonchamnam, Jakkree Harnsuwan, Nikhom Kubkaew, Jarun Chaiprathum etc. In addition, Wattana Pomchai is counted as his out of system student. So this “**phenomenon of linking interaction**” created identities with educational system under Thai nation state system.

2.2 Factor of “**Politics, society and environment**” Since artists got pressure from the governing system of Thai nation state, especially during the period of 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976. Almost all artists had participating roles in presenting their works of “Arts of Political Cutout” in order to oppose the dictators. According to the concept of Geertz, an individual identity changed infinitely due to the subjects. An identity is a kind of property that people borrow or create

in their urgent situation. So the process of constructing identities of Esan artists can be explained. That is to say visual art for life’s sake was mainly created by wicked political situation. The artists are ready to change their identities infinitely due to subjects. For example, when the political situation eased up, they changed their styles of paintings. Their paintings consisted of more subjects about society, environment and religion. The paintings’ contents were lighter than before.

3. **Globalization** Globalization represents processes that occur from current global trends. The process of constructing identities of Esan artists gets influences from private and government sectors as well as from individual. It exists in the region, in the country and overseas. Having some arts presentation in wider areas of public acknowledgement is very important for artists to make themselves famous. However, Esan artists have some **disadvantages**. They do not have any stage or supporter for their presentation. Unlike the artists in Bangkok, they have supporters, contest participation, and rewards among the group. All activities are planned and systematically set up. Then it becomes righteousness among their peers. Therefore the artists who live in the North-eastern part become “**marginal artists**”, excluding Tawee Rajaneekorn. He himself can stick firmly to the world of arts with major trend.

As “identity” is clarified as something that occurs in a social interaction process, Charles Cooley believes that society and individual is an inseparable phenomenon. A society occurs from the mixture of mental selves which belong to many people who have interaction to one another. The feeling about ourselves develops from our reaction to other people’s ideas about ourselves. We call “selves” that occur from this process



“selves in a mirror” (Apinya Fuengfoosakul, 2003: 25). According to this idea, Tawee Rajaneekorn’s identity can be explained. The reason why he is accepted and became famous in the country causes from his qualified works, as well as his status of senior student of Silapakorn University. So he has some partians. And other artists feel courteous on him. Most of these artists finished their studies from Silapakorn University. In addition, Tawee Rajaneekorn does not stick to his former educational institute. He gives honors and regard importance on other institutes. So he is well admired from everyone in every institute. This means there is an interaction, which he has developed, between himself and other people’s ideas. So it is an inseparable phenomenon.

However, besides 3 points of findings in the study, one subject matter was also found out. It was the subject about “idea trend, theory/philosophy” which conceal in seven Esan artists. These artists have different ideas from the Westerner’s. That means they take the main principle idea of philosophy and Buddha’s teaching to be their main trend of ideas. The purpose is to create their arts works to look Eastern or be in harmony with being Thai.

In addition, they want to keep “selves” and original believes. As we can see Tawee Rajaneekorn create his arts works by fixing the principle belief of hell and heaven which relate to Buddha’s teaching. He has especially created a lot of works of this type at his final period of his life at the present time. Moreover, Chokchai Tukpoe is the artist who sticks to Buddhism in all his life. So the philosophy of “Buddhism Theravada Nikaya” appears in most of his arts work. He tried to make his works approached to the Buddha’s teaching as much as possible. He wants to present that after he practiced the dharma, his

concentration and intellect appeared. And then the Buddhism intellect would also occur in his arts work. However, not only Tawee Rajaneekorn and Chokchai Tukpoe bow and take the Buddha’s teaching, but other 5 artists also stick to the principle of Buddha’s teaching. They voluntarily take the teaching to fill in their works. It exists in most of artists’ works.

In conclusion, according to the process of constructing identities of Esan artists, we can see the overall image of **occurrence, existence and the end**. According to the rule of Three Characteristics, nothing is immortal. Everything is impermanent. It is obvious that the styles and strategies of every artists flow along with the changes of globalization. Such changes are in accordance with individual factors. The cause comes from shortage of some factors that keep life going on. Many Esan artists tried to perform and follow their ideals at their best. However, such factor shortage pushes them to change the trend to create arts products according to the needs of consumers. So self-adjustment to flow along with the trend of society and globalization is the only way for the artists to exist in the world of post-modern arts.

### **Suggestion**

According to the result of the study “Visual Art for Life’s sake: Constructing identities of Esan Artists”, some new knowledge was found out. It is useful for understanding. The new knowledge destroyed the idea ceiling which used to define artists’ ideas and feelings in only one characteristic. The findings make people in the field of visual arts in Esan region and in Thailand realize the result of more complicated changes. The purpose is to make new “World of Arts” occur equally. However, what the researcher

should do in the future is to study on poor urban Esan artists or grassroot artists, e.g. local Esan artists in various fields. However, some government sectors in Esan region began to administer and manage on these local artists. They gave rewards

to the artists in order to praise them more. They also search for the ways to support Esan artists to step into the acceptance of people in the arts field which is wider more and more.

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