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THAI MASSAGE AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

BY PIERCE SALGUERO

Recently, there has been much discussion online about yoga and cultural appropriation, and this has spilled over into the Thai massage world as many have begun to wonder about how this critique may or may not apply to our own practice.

What we shouldn't do is simply write off the critique that Westerners practicing Thai massage is cultural appropriation. Clearly it is. Non-Thais traveling to Thailand, learning a traditional medicine technique, and returning to the West to use that technique to make a living is probably the very definition of cultural appropriation. The question is not whether or not this is cultural appropriation, but, rather, how we deal with the ethics of our cross-cultural encounter.

Turning specifically to Thai massage (or Thai Traditional Medicine, or Ruesri Dat Ton, or other Thai modalities), I feel that the same sort of historical analysis can assist us greatly in navigating the ethical issues and deciding where we stand. To begin with, I think it is helpful to remind ourselves that Thai massage is not an ancient practice that "dates from the time of the Buddha," as its mythology would have us think. As I have explored in many publications, Thai massage is a product of a long history of cultural appropriation by the Thais themselves, which incorporates aspects of Buddhist, Tantric, Ayurvedic, Chinese, and indigenous Thai practices. So, yes, we are participating in cultural appropriation, but it is also the case that we are part of a long tradition of the same.

We might also note that the form of Thai massage most often practiced by Westerners represents a very recent synthesis, dating back no further than the 1950s in its current form. This form of Thai massage was "revived" in the 1980s by the Thai government and leading traditional doctors, specifically in order to bolster the tourism and spa industries. So, yes, we are participating in cultural appropriation, but it is also the case that this cultural heritage was packaged, marketed, and fed to us by Thai government and medical officials and institutions.

Lastly, it is worth pointing out that the Thai teacher most responsible for the popularity of Thai massage in the West was Ajahn Sintorn Chaichakan of the Old Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai. Ajahn Sintorn, in fact, repeatedly instructed his Western students to learn Thai massage in order to share it with as many people as possible in our own countries. So, yes, we are participating in cultural appropriation, but it is also the case that we have been actively encouraged by our Thai teachers to share this knowledge outside of Thailand.

So, clearly, it's complicated. But, don't misunderstand my argument: these extenuating circumstances don't absolve us from considering the implications and ethics of our own participation in cultural appropriation. As a practitioner and instructor of Thai healing, I have been thinking about the issue of cultural appropriation for a long time, and discussing it in my Thai massage classes for almost two decades. Here are some of my thoughts about how to approach our practice of Thai massage and the question of cultural appropriation in an informed and proactive way:

1. First of all, don't simply deny the critique. Lean into it. Many aspects of modern Western culture can be critiqued as cultural appropriation. Educate yourself about the issues, the ethical problems, and the history of each specific case. Adopt a proactive approach. Especially if it is meaningful to you (as a hobby, livelihood, etc.), you need to see the issues clearly and be able to articulate where you stand.
2. If you are somehow earning a living from a Thai practice, give a portion back to Thailand in the form of charitable giving. In my opinion, setting a percentage and sticking to it is probably the best way to do this. The argument that you can't afford to give charity doesn't hold water, since even a small sum goes a long way when converted into Thai currency.
3. Honor the traditions and their Thai origins when you discuss, teach, and practice them. Educate yourself about Thai history and culture, and always remember that we have been able to "borrow" this knowledge because of our privileged position as educated, wealthy Americans/Canadians/Europeans.
4. Perhaps most critical is to maintain humility. Constantly remind yourself that we are not the "masters" or "ajahns" of this tradition. We are translators, facilitators, and proponents of Thai massage, but we should always direct our students' and clients' admiration and gratitude back to Thailand as the source of any wisdom we think we have gained from this practice.

I share my thoughts here as someone who has been thinking about the issue of cultural appropriation for a long time, first as a practitioner, then as an instructor, and now as a scholar of Asian medicine. I have discovered that there is no simple, one-size-fits-all answer for the ethical questions this issue raises. Rather, each person needs to think through the issues on their own.