LEARNING TO BELONG, ONE STEP AT A TIME: VISITING THAI THERAVADA BUDDHIST TEMPLES AS SPACES FOR INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION

การเรียนรู้ที่จะเป็นส่วนหนึ่งทีละก้าว:
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Abstract

Intercultural adaptation is often examined through large-scale models that emphasize outcomes such as adjustment or integration, yet these approaches can overlook how adaptation is living through everyday experiences. This study explores intercultural adaptation as a gradual and embodied process by examining my own engagement with Thai Buddhist temples as a Filipino Roman Catholic living in Thailand. Adopting a micro-autoethnographic approach, the study focuses on small, ordinary moments. Data consist of reflexive narrative accounts written following repeated temple visits and were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Findings show that intercultural adaptation emerged through cycles of uncertainty, learning, and growing familiarity rather than through linear progression or assimilation. Engagement with Buddhist practices occurred alongside the maintenance of religious identity, illustrating integrative adaptation shaped by embodied participation and emotional resonance. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of micro-autoethnography for capturing subtle, lived dimensions of intercultural adaptation that are often missed in macro-level research. By foregrounding author visibility and everyday experience, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of adaptation as an ongoing, partial, and deeply human process.

Keywords: Lived religion, Micro-autoethnography, Intercultural adaptation, Reflexive thematic analysis, Thai Buddhist temples

Introduction

Intercultural adaptation is commonly examined through broad patterns of adjustment, integration, or acculturation, often assessed through surveys or large-group observations. While such approaches offer important insights, they tend to underrepresent how adaptation unfolds as a gradual, lived, and embodied process in everyday life. This study addresses this gap by examining lived intercultural experiences of engagement with Thai Theravada Buddhist

temples within the context of a Filipino migrant background shaped by Roman Catholic upbringing.

Within autoethnographic traditions, author visibility is understood not as a threat to rigor but as a methodological and ethical commitment to making the researcher's position explicit (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography is recognized as a qualitative research method that employs systematic self-reflection to connect personal experience with cultural meanings (Ellis, 2004), and as a methodological approach that integrates data generation, analysis, and interpretation through reflexivity and cultural analysis (Chang, 2008). From this perspective, lived experience functions as analytic data rather than anecdotal illustration. In this study, reflexive first-person narration is therefore employed in the Findings and Discussion sections as part of the analytic process rather than as a stylistic feature of the Introduction.

Because the study examines intercultural adaptation as it unfolds through ordinary, moment-to-moment participation rather than through extended life narratives or major turning points, a more focused autoethnographic scale is required. Accordingly, the study adopts micro-autoethnography as conceptualized by McArthur (2019), which directs attention to small-scale, situated encounters that reveal broader cultural processes. Through reflexive narratives, everyday moments such as pausing at a temple entrance, observing ritual gestures, participating in merit-making (tham bun), or listening to chanting are treated as sites through which intercultural adaptation is examined as it is lived and negotiated.

The empirical focus is on repeated visits to two local Theravada Buddhist temples, Wat Rai Taeng Thong and Wat Pracharat Bamrung, located in Kamphaeng Saen, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. These temples function as accessible, practice-oriented spaces of worship and communal gathering, allowing for sustained engagement and observation of adaptation through routine participation. In this study, "Thai Buddhist temples" refers specifically to Theravada Buddhist contexts; while Thailand includes Mahayana and Chinese Buddhist traditions, the practices shaping these experiences are grounded in Theravada temple life.

The analysis is theoretically informed by Kim's (2001) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, which conceptualizes adaptation as an ongoing process of stress, learning, and growth rather than a linear outcome. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework further illuminates how cultural participation can occur alongside the maintenance of prior identity, reflecting an integrative mode of adaptation. The spatial and relational dimensions of these encounters are understood through Bhabha's (1994) concept of Third Space, highlighting how participation unfolds within in-between spaces of negotiation rather than fixed belonging.

To account for the emotional and sensory dimensions of these experiences, the study also draws on scholarship on lived religion, which emphasizes religion as practiced and felt in

everyday life rather than solely held as doctrine (Orsi, 2003). Methodologically, the study combines micro-autoethnography with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), enabling a systematic yet reflexive examination of narrative data. Rather than aiming for generalization, the study seeks to demonstrate how intercultural adaptation emerges through everyday engagement, embodied practice, and reflexive meaning-making.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine intercultural adaptation as a gradual, lived, and embodied process rather than a linear or outcome-based phenomenon.
2. To explore how everyday engagement with Thai Theravada Buddhist temples shapes intercultural adaptation within a context of religious and cultural difference.
3. To analyze lived intercultural experiences through micro-autoethnographic reflexive narratives, using reflexive thematic analysis as an interpretive framework.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by an integrative conceptual framework that brings together theories of intercultural adaptation, acculturation, cultural space, lived religion, and reflexive qualitative inquiry. Rather than treating these theories as variables to be tested, they are used as interpretive lenses that help explain how intercultural adaptation is experienced and negotiated in everyday life.

At the center of the framework is the idea that adaptation is not a fixed outcome, but an ongoing, lived process shaped by repeated encounters, emotional responses, and embodied participation. This understanding aligns closely with the methodological orientation of micro-autoethnography, which focuses on small-scale moments of experience as meaningful sites of analysis (McArthur, 2019).

Intercultural Adaptation as Process

The primary theoretical anchor of the study is Kim's (2001) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, which conceptualizes adaptation as a dynamic process involving stress, learning, and growth. According to Kim, individuals entering a new cultural environment often experience uncertainty or discomfort, which can prompt reflection and adjustment. Over time, repeated engagement leads to increased psychological comfort and functional competence.

In this study, Kim's framework helps explain how initial hesitation, confusion, and self-consciousness gradually transformed into familiarity and ease within Thai Buddhist temple spaces. Adaptation is understood not as complete assimilation, but as an internal process marked by growing confidence and emotional stability.

Acculturation and Identity Maintenance

To further clarify how cultural participation relates to identity, the framework draws on Berry's (1997) acculturation model, particularly the strategy of integration. Berry argues that individuals can engage with a host culture while maintaining their original cultural or religious identity. Integration allows for participation without requiring cultural replacement or abandonment.

This concept is especially relevant to the study's religious context. Engagement with Buddhist rituals did not involve religious conversion or rejection of Roman Catholic identity. Instead, adaptation occurred through selective participation and respectful engagement, illustrating how integration can be enacted in everyday practice.

Cultural Space and Partial Belonging

The framework also incorporates Bhabha's (1994) concept of Third Space, which refers to spaces where cultural interaction occurs without fixed boundaries or total belonging. Third Spaces allow for negotiation, hybridity, and partial participation rather than full inclusion or exclusion.

Thai Buddhist temples are conceptualized in this study as Third Spaces—public, practice-oriented environments where cultural learning occurs through observation and participation rather than formal membership or linguistic fluency. This perspective helps explain how the temple functioned as an accessible site for intercultural engagement despite religious and linguistic differences.

Lived Religion and Emotional Experience

To account for the emotional and sensory dimensions of adaptation, the framework draws on scholarship in lived religion, particularly Orsi's (2003) emphasis on religion as something practiced, felt, and experienced in everyday life. Lived religion shifts attention away from doctrine and belief toward bodily actions, emotional responses, and ritual rhythms.

This perspective is essential for understanding how feelings of calm, familiarity, and spiritual comfort emerged during temple visits. These affective experiences supported adaptation by creating emotional bridges across religious differences, even in the absence of shared theology.

Reflexivity and Meaning-Making

Finally, the conceptual framework is grounded in reflexive qualitative inquiry, which recognizes the researcher as an active participant in knowledge production. Drawing on autoethnographic scholarship (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011) and reflexive thematic analysis

(Braun & Clarke, 2019), the framework acknowledges that meaning is produced through interpretation rather than discovered as objective fact.

Micro-autoethnography, as conceptualized by McArthur (2019), provides the methodological link between theory and lived experience. By focusing on small, situated moments, the framework allows adaptation to be examined as it is felt, enacted, and reflected in everyday life.

Framework Summary

Together, these perspectives form a coherent conceptual framework in which intercultural adaptation is understood as:

- Processual (Kim, 2001),
- Integrative rather than assimilative (Berry, 1997),
- Spatially situated (Bhabha, 1994),
- Emotionally and sensorially experienced (Orsi, 2003),
- Reflexively interpreted through micro-autoethnography (McArthur, 2019).

This framework provides a clear lens for interpreting how intercultural adaptation unfolds through ordinary participation in culturally meaningful spaces.

Methodology / Research Design

This study adopts micro-autoethnography as its central methodological orientation. The term is used following McArthur's (2019) articulation of micro-autoethnography as a deliberate methodological synthesis of autoethnography and microethnography. Drawing on established traditions of autoethnographic research (Ellis, 2004; Ellingson & Ellis, 2008; Maréchal, 2010; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Spry, 2001) and microethnographic approaches that attend closely to situated practices and interactional detail (Giddings, 2009; Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Streeck & Mehus, 2005), McArthur conceptualizes micro-autoethnography as a way to render visible the researcher's own participation within narrowly defined, everyday moments of cultural engagement.

In this formulation, micro-autoethnography foregrounds the analytical value of small-scale, embodied experiences while retaining the reflexive and narrative commitments of autoethnography. Rather than aiming for comprehensive cultural description or generalized claims, the approach focuses on how meaning, identity, and adaptation emerge through brief, repeated encounters. This methodological orientation is particularly well suited to the present study, which examines intercultural adaptation as it unfolds through ordinary interactions within Thai Buddhist temple spaces.

Research Context and Researcher Positionality

The research context consists of Thai Buddhist temple spaces that I visited regularly during my residence in Thailand. These temples functioned as culturally meaningful, publicly accessible spaces where religious practices, social norms, and embodied behaviors were visibly enacted. Temples were not treated as static cultural sites but as lived environments shaped by routine participation, sensory experience, and social interaction.

As a Filipino Roman Catholic living in Thailand, I occupied the position of a cultural outsider engaging with a host religious tradition. This positionality shaped both my experiences and my interpretations. Reflexivity was therefore central to the research process, not as a limitation to be controlled, but as a source of insight into how adaptation is felt, negotiated, and embodied over time.

Data Generation

Data were generated through reflexive fieldnotes and narrative reflections written immediately after temple visits over an extended period. These reflections documented emotional responses, bodily actions, moments of uncertainty, interactional encounters, and evolving perceptions of familiarity and belonging. Particular attention was paid to moments of hesitation, learning through observation, emotional resonance, and routine formation, as these moments aligned closely with the study's theoretical focus on adaptation as a process.

Rather than treating experience as raw data, the narratives were produced through an ongoing reflexive process in which memory, interpretation, and meaning making were acknowledged as inseparable (Ellis et al., 2011). This approach is consistent with autoethnographic scholarship that views writing itself as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). RTA was chosen for its flexibility and compatibility with reflexive qualitative approaches. Rather than seeking coding reliability or theme saturation, the analysis emphasized the researcher's active role in meaning-making and interpretation.

The analytic process involved repeated reading of the narrative reflections, initial noting of patterns related to uncertainty, learning, emotional response, and participation, and the gradual development of themes that captured how intercultural adaptation was experienced over time. Themes were refined through recursive engagement with both the data and the theoretical framework, ensuring coherence between empirical material and conceptual interpretation.

Importantly, RTA served not as a distancing analytic tool, but as a structuring mechanism that supported reflexivity while maintaining analytic clarity. This allowed the study

to move between lived experience and theoretical interpretation without collapsing one into the other.

Theoretical Integration

Throughout the analytic process, findings were interpreted in dialogue with Kim's (2001) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, particularly the stress–adaptation–growth dynamic, which provided a lens for understanding how initial uncertainty evolved into familiarity and psychological comfort. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, especially the integration strategy, informed interpretations of how cultural participation occurred without identity replacement. Bhabha's (1994) concept of Third Space guided the understanding of temple spaces as sites of partial belonging, while scholarship on lived religion (Orsi, 2003) supported analysis of emotional and sensory dimensions of religious engagement.

Rather than testing these theories, the study uses them as sensitizing concepts that illuminate how adaptation is lived and negotiated in everyday contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Given the autoethnographic nature of the study, ethical considerations focused primarily on self-representation, cultural respect, and reflexive responsibility. No identifiable information about other individuals was recorded. Descriptions of temple practices were written with care to avoid misrepresentation or evaluative judgment. Reflexivity was maintained throughout to acknowledge the partiality and situated nature of the account.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study through a reflexive thematic analysis of my micro-autoethnographic narratives. I focus on how intercultural adaptation unfolded for me through repeated engagement with Thai Buddhist temple spaces. Rather than treating adaptation as a measurable outcome, I foreground my lived, moment-by-moment experiences to show how uncertainty, learning, emotional resonance, and embodiment shaped my adaptation over time. Throughout this section, I interpret my experiences in dialogue with established theories of intercultural adaptation, acculturation, and lived religion.

Initial Encounter and Cultural Anxiety

My earliest encounters with the temple were marked by hesitation and cultural anxiety. I remember standing at the entrance of the temple compound, unsure whether I was allowed to enter or how I should behave once inside. In that moment, I became acutely aware of myself as an outsider, uncertain about unspoken religious and cultural norms. My pause at the gate was not simply physical; it reflected an internal negotiation between curiosity and fear of transgression.

When I reflect on this experience through Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory, I understand my hesitation as a form of adaptive stress. For me, this discomfort was not purely negative. Instead, it signaled the beginning of my adaptation process, where awareness of difference prompted heightened observation and self-monitoring. At this stage, I did not yet adapt through visible behavior; rather, I experienced adaptation internally, as uncertainty, caution, and self-consciousness.

Observational Learning and Acceptance

As I continued visiting the temple, I relied heavily on observation as my primary learning strategy. During merit-making (tham bun), I joined in by mimicking the actions of others. I copied gestures and movements even when I felt awkward and unsure. What stood out most to me was that no one corrected me or expressed discomfort with my imperfect participation. This quiet tolerance reduced my anxiety and encouraged me to return.

From my perspective, this experience reflects Kim's emphasis on learning through interaction and Berry's (1997) view of acculturation as a negotiated process shaped by both the individual and the host context. My learning was largely non-verbal and embodied. I learned by watching rather than asking. The acceptance I perceived from others functioned as an enabling condition for my adaptation, allowing me to participate without fear of social sanction or embarrassment.

Shared Spiritual Experience and Emotional Resonance

One of the most emotionally striking moments for me occurred when I entered the temple hall and heard the rhythmic chanting. As I stood there listening, I felt a sense of calm that reminded me of moments of silence and prayer in Catholic churches back in the Philippines. Although I was in a different religious tradition, my emotional response felt familiar.

This experience resonates strongly with scholarship on lived religion, which emphasizes religion as something practiced and felt rather than solely believed or doctrinally understood. For me, emotional resonance did not depend on theological agreement. Instead, it created an affective bridge that made the temple feel less foreign. Within Kim's framework, I experienced this moment as contributing to my psychological adaptation, as the sense of calm reduced perceived distance between myself and the host cultural space.

Learning Through Observation and Behavioral Adaptation

Over time, I noticed that my engagement with temple practices became more fluid. I learned when to remove my shoes, how to approach the main hall, and how to position myself during rituals. In my early visits, these actions required conscious effort and constant reference to others' behavior. With repetition, however, I began to perform them with less hesitation.

For me, this shift illustrates behavioral adaptation through embodied learning. I did not receive formal instruction. Instead, I adapted through doing. I watched, imitated, and gradually internalized patterns of action. These experiences align with the functional dimension of adaptation described by Kim (2001), where competence develops through sustained exposure rather than explicit teaching.

Internalization of Cultural Norms and Emerging Familiarity

As temple visits became part of my routine, I noticed a subtle but meaningful change in myself. I no longer needed to pause and observe others before acting. I knew what to do upon entering the space and moved with greater confidence. While I did not feel like a full insider, I no longer felt like a hesitant outsider either.

When I interpret this experience through Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, it aligns with an integrative mode of adaptation. My participation in Buddhist temple practices did not replace my Roman Catholic identity, nor did it require conversion. Instead, I maintained my existing beliefs while selectively engaging with the host culture. For me, adaptation was additive rather than substitutive.

Language as Bridge and Hindrance

Language played an uneven role in my adaptation. When I used basic Thai phrases such as sawasdee khrap and khop khun khrap, I often received smiles and warm responses. These brief exchanges made me feel acknowledged and momentarily connected. At the same time, my limited Thai vocabulary prevented deeper conversations about rituals or meanings. There were moments when I wanted to ask questions but remained silent.

These experiences highlight for me the dual role of language in intercultural adaptation. While minimal linguistic effort functioned as a social bridge, deeper cultural understanding often remained out of reach. This tension reminded me that adaptation can remain partial and incomplete, even as comfort and familiarity increase.

Taken together, my findings show that intercultural adaptation unfolded for me not as a linear progression or clearly bounded outcome, but as a gradual, processual experience shaped by repeated encounters, emotional negotiation, and embodied participation. Through Kim's (2001) stress–adaptation–growth framework, I can see how my initial uncertainty gave way to learning and increased psychological comfort through micro-level experiences. Berry's (1997) integration strategy helps me explain how my engagement with Buddhist temple practices occurred alongside the maintenance of my religious identity. Bhabha's (1994) notion of Third Space allows me to understand temple environments as sites of partial belonging rather than fixed membership. Finally, lived religion scholarship clarifies how sensory and emotional experiences supported my adaptation without requiring doctrinal alignment. For me, adaptation emerged as an internal, ongoing transformation enacted through everyday practice..

Final Reflection

Writing this study through micro-autoethnography forced me to slow down and notice moments I might otherwise have dismissed as insignificant. Kim's idea of adaptation as stress followed by learning and growth became real to me not through theory alone, but through my own hesitation at the temple gate and my gradual ease in crossing it. That early uncertainty was not a failure to adapt; it was the beginning of the process.

As I returned to the temple repeatedly, my body seemed to adapt before my thoughts were done. I removed my shoes automatically, sat quietly during chants, and followed ritual movements without needing to watch others closely. These embodied actions reflected the kind of functional adaptation Kim describes, while also reminding me that adaptation does not require complete understanding to be meaningful.

Berry's notion of integration resonated deeply with my experience. Participating in Buddhist rituals did not weaken my Catholic faith. Instead, it revealed how cultural engagement can coexist with personal belief. I did not feel torn between identities; rather, I felt expanded by the ability to appreciate another tradition without abandoning my own.

The temple itself became a kind of Third Space, as Bhabha suggests—a place where I could belong partially, temporarily, and without formal membership. Within this space, lived religion mattered more than doctrine. The calm I felt while chanting connected me to something familiar, even in difference. That emotional bridge made adaptation feel possible and humane.

Through this micro-autoethnographic lens, I now understand intercultural adaptation as unfinished and ongoing. It is shaped by small actions, quiet emotions, and repeated returns. By placing myself within the research, I was able to see adaptation not as a destination, but as a lived process—one that is partial, evolving, and deeply human.

Limitations and Future Directions

As a micro-autoethnographic study, the findings are not intended to be generalized beyond the specific context examined. However, the analytic insights offered here may inform future research on intercultural adaptation in other everyday cultural or religious spaces. Future studies could extend this approach by incorporating dialogic perspectives from host community members or by examining how linguistic development shapes deeper forms of cultural engagement over time.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Reflective Narratives Based on Thematic Analysis

Narrative	Reflection	Interpretive Insight	Emergent Theme
I hesitated to enter the temple compound the first time, unsure how I should behave or whether I was allowed inside.	This hesitation reflected a lack of familiarity with local customs and an internal negotiation between outsider status and cultural curiosity.	Initial encounters in a new cultural setting can be marked by uncertainty and a need to understand unspoken rules and social boundaries.	Initial Encounter & Cultural Anxiety
I joined in, mimicking the actions of others during merit-making (tham bun). I felt a bit awkward, but no one seemed to mind.	Observing and copying local practices served as an informal way to learn cultural norms, reducing anxiety over making mistakes. The acceptance of my initial awkwardness by locals fostered a sense of ease.	Non-verbal learning and the tolerance of the host community play a crucial role in early stages of cultural immersion and building confidence in participation.	Observational Learning & Acceptance

Entering the temple and hearing the rhythmic chants brought a sense of peace, similar to moments of reflection in churches back in the Philippines.	Familiar emotional responses to sacred environments highlight the universal nature of spiritual comfort across different traditions. This recognition of shared human experiences helped bridge cultural differences.	Despite differing religious backgrounds, the sensory experience of sacred spaces can evoke similar emotional and spiritual responses, facilitating a sense of connection and shared humanity.	Shared Spiritual Experience
I observed other temple goers placing offerings before the Buddha and followed their lead.	Learning by imitation allowed respectful participation while minimizing cultural missteps. Direct observation provided practical guidance on how to engage in religious rituals.	Visual cues and the behavior of locals serve as accessible and immediate resources for understanding and participating in cultural practices, especially when language barriers exist.	Learning Through Observation
I removed my shoes before entering the main hall and became more aware of proper temple etiquette during subsequent visits.	Behavioral adaptation emerged through observation and repetition, reflecting a growing sensitivity to cultural practices and a desire to show respect. Each visit reinforced learned behaviors.	Repeated exposure and conscious effort lead to the internalization of cultural norms and the development of culturally appropriate behavior, demonstrating progression in adaptation.	Behavioral Adaptation & Respect
Returning to the temple became a routine. Over time, I noticed I no longer	The transition from passive observer to confident participant indicated an	The development of routine and the ability to act without constant observation signify a	Internalization of Cultural Norms

had to observe others first—I already knew what to do.	internalization of cultural norms and a growing sense of familiarity and comfort within the temple environment.	deeper level of cultural understanding and integration into the practices of the host culture.	
I found solace in the Buddhist chants and began to appreciate their calming effect. This did not conflict with my own beliefs.	Religious rituals offered spiritual comfort while bridging belief systems, illustrating adaptability without assimilation. Appreciation for another's spiritual practices can coexist with one's own faith.	Engagement with the spiritual practices of the host culture can provide unexpected personal benefits and foster a sense of connection without requiring a change in one's own core beliefs.	Spiritual Resonance & Openness
The use of basic Thai phrases (e.g., sawasdee khrap, khop khun khrap) often elicited positive responses from locals.	Attempting to communicate in the local language, even at a basic level, was generally well-received and encouraged further interaction, fostering a sense of connection and reducing the feeling of being an outsider.	Even limited linguistic efforts can serve as a significant bridge in intercultural interactions, fostering goodwill, and facilitating initial social connections.	Language as an Icebreaker

There were times when I wanted to ask more about a specific ritual but lacked the Thai vocabulary to do so, leading to moments of silence.	Language barriers occasionally limited deeper engagement and understanding, highlighting the importance of language proficiency in achieving a more profound level of cultural immersion.	While initial interactions can be facilitated by basic language, deeper cultural understanding often requires a more nuanced command of the language.	Language as a Barrier to Deeper Understanding