

*A Barthesian Analysis of Semiotic Practices in an Indigenous School in Taiwan
– A Case of a Bunun Elementary School*

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Abstract

This study explores the role of totems and decorative texts in shaping cultural identity among Indigenous students at an elementary school in Taiwan. By employing Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, this research aims to uncover the cultural meanings and social functions of visual symbols, focusing on the Bunun woodcarving calendar, diamond totems, the phrase '禮義廉恥' (Li, Yi, Lian, Chi), and symbols of multiculturalism. The study utilizes qualitative methods, combining observations, interviews, and document analysis to explore how these symbols perform as carriers of hidden meaning and contribute to educational and cultural settings. The representative semiotics were selected based on their frequent appearance across the campus and their cultural relevance to the students. Observations were conducted over six months, with interviews involving students, teachers, and school administrators. The findings reveal that semiotics play a crucial role in connecting Bunun students to their school environment and enhancing their cultural identity. However, the study also highlights the challenges these students face in navigating the cultural conflicts between their indigenous heritage and the dominant mainstream culture. This study underscores the importance of integrating minority cultures into education and addressing the tension between cultural identity and mainstream practices in Taiwan.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, Semiotic, Cultural Identity

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Introduction

In contemporary society, schools are vital spaces not only for knowledge transmission but also for identity construction (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). This is particularly crucial in Indigenous education, where teaching practices nurture identity and cultural confidence. In Taiwan, Indigenous education addresses educational equity, cultural preservation, and social diversity (Nesterova, 2019a). Since the Dutch invasion in 1624, Taiwan's Indigenous peoples have faced colonization and oppression, leading to challenges in cultural, social, and educational rights (Van Bekhoven, 2016; Yi-Shiuan Chen et al., 2018). Despite policies like the Indigenous Education Act (1998), which emphasizes teaching Indigenous knowledge, and secured admission regulations for Indigenous students (Ministry of Education of Taiwan, 2019; Taiwan, 2021b), Indigenous schools often prioritize general education, relegating cultural content as supplemental (Nesterova, 2019b). Research suggests curricula have not fully achieved goals, calling for greater integration of Indigenous history and values (Chen, 2012).

To explore how educational practices promote identity and cultural confidence, this study examines the symbolic practices at a Bunun Indigenous elementary school in Nantou County. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, it analyzes cultural meanings and social implications of school symbols, focusing on their influence on Bunun students' cultural identity.

Barthes' semiotic theory provides a suitable framework as it emphasizes the cultural significance of symbols and their social contexts (Barthes & Lavers, 1993). Unlike earlier Western positivist frameworks that often disconnected Indigenous knowledge from culture (Ali et al., 2022), Barthes' approach delves beyond literal meanings, uncovering deeper connotations. Indigenous cultures are rich in symbolic stories passed down through generations (Cameron, 2015). This study seeks to contribute to more inclusive and culturally sensitive educational policies by revealing the role of symbols in Indigenous identity formation and education.

Literature Review

This chapter is going to review the relevant research on Taiwan's Indigenous education and semiotics employed within educational and cultural research. Additionally, since this research discusses school symbols within educational settings, the researcher will explore concepts related to campus symbolic space, aiming to discuss how symbolic spaces influence students' behavior and identity and to construct an educational space that positively acknowledges culture. Lastly, this study explores the traditional culture and society of Taiwan's Bunun people.

1. Semiotics and Indigenous Education

Semiotic theory has been widely applied in education, offering insights into how meaning is constructed through curriculum design, teaching processes, and educational content. Saussure defined semiotics as the study of 'the life of signs' in society, while Pikkarainen (2011) and Olteanu (2014) highlighted its role in understanding learning, communication, and teacher-student relationships. Classrooms are thus seen as semiotic spaces where signs—from textbooks to gestures—shape knowledge and meaning.

Barthes' concept of 'mythologies' reveals hidden ideologies in cultural phenomena, influencing curriculum analysis. Studies like those by Bourdieu (1990) and Bullivant (1983) applied Barthes' theories to explore how curricula perpetuate power structures and social inequalities. Visual analysis of educational materials, as emphasized by Aiello (2006), further uncovers how visual elements shape student perceptions.

In Indigenous education, cultural symbols are central to identity and confidence (Hapeta et al., 2019). Incorporating Indigenous totems, songs, and stories into school curricula enhances students' understanding of their culture. Semiotic theory helps analyze these symbols' educational significance and their role in shaping cultural identity.

Although semiotics is not yet prevalent in Taiwanese Indigenous education research, Lin (2022) emphasized the richness of traditional symbols as learning materials. By focusing on Indigenous cultural characteristics, semiotics offers a way to connect cultural values with educational materials, fostering a culturally responsive teaching environment that bridges mainstream values and Indigenous identities.

2. Indigenous Education and Cultural Identity

Education in Indigenous communities serves as a tool for cultural identity preservation, but it often fails to meet their specific needs. Policies shaped by colonial mindsets, as Said (1978) noted, marginalize Indigenous peoples and suppress autonomy. In Taiwan, public school teachers unconsciously transmit mainstream values through uncritical curricular practices (Hsu, 2017). To address these issues, Indigenous curricula must reflect their unique cultural characteristics and encourage educators to adopt critical and reflective approaches.

Indigenous education is deeply tied to collectivist kinship systems, emphasizing communal participation over individualism (Yeo, 2003). Learning occurs naturally within families and communities, where children acquire essential skills by observing and interacting with tribal members (Turner-Jensen, 2019). This dynamic process, rooted in traditions and values, integrates education into daily life and strengthens cultural identity (Samson & Gigoux, 2016).

Cultural identity is vital for Indigenous students' development, especially in a globalized world. A strong cultural identity correlates with improved academic and social performance (Fryberg et al., 2013). Integrating Indigenous cultural elements into curricula fosters students' self-identity while balancing mainstream values, enhancing confidence and motivation (Lowe et al., 2021; Reedy, 2019).

Barthes' semiotic theory provides a framework for understanding cultural identity through signs, which carry both denotative and connotative meanings. In educational practices, cultural symbols help students internalize their heritage. For example, Bunun totems embody myths and values, allowing Bunun students to deepen their cultural understanding and solidify their sense of belonging.

3. Indigenous Education in Taiwan

Taiwan is a multicultural nation with Han Chinese (over 95% of the population) and 16 recognized Indigenous groups comprising 2.5% (Ministry of the Interior of Taiwan, 2024). Indigenous peoples, part of the Austronesian language family, have distinct cultural and

linguistic traits, having lived in Taiwan for thousands of years before colonial powers arrived (Huang & Liu, 2016).

During colonial rule (1624–1945) and Nationalist governance (1949–1987), assimilation policies marginalized Indigenous cultures and identities through forced relocations and education systems promoting Han Chinese values (Nesterova & Jackson, 2018). While democratization in the 1990s introduced multicultural reforms to address these inequalities, challenges persist. Biases among predominantly Han Chinese teachers, resource shortages, and curricula favoring Chinese values over Indigenous heritage hinder the progress of Indigenous education (Nesterova, 2019b).

Standardized curricula and testing, based on Han Chinese norms, fail to reflect Indigenous knowledge and values (Fenelon & LeBeau, 2006; Ho, 2021). In response, some Indigenous communities have established educational spaces rooted in their languages, mythology, and traditions, aiming to revive cultural practices and foster culturally relevant learning environments (Ho, 2022). These efforts highlight the diversity within Indigenous approaches to education, shaped by distinct historical and social contexts.

4. Bunun Traditional Culture

In the Bunun language, "Bunun" means "people," a term reflecting their self-identity and emphasizing tribal exclusivity (Huang, 2006a; Tien, 1992). Residing in Taiwan's Central Mountain Range, the Bunun faced constant challenges, shaping their resilient and non-submissive character. They resisted assimilation and were among the last to yield to Japanese rule during the occupation (Tien, 2002).

The Bunun's lifestyle, rooted in hunting and shifting cultivation, reflects their reverence for nature and strong community values. Their cultural practices, including rituals, music, and dance, express their bold, cheerful spirit and artistic identity (Tien, 2019). Social status in Bunun society depends on contributions to the tribe, fostering mutual support, cooperation, and a collective consciousness evident in practices like sharing harvests and work exchange (Chen, 2005; Huang, 2006b; Tien, 2002).

Bunun religious beliefs center on reverence for "Heaven" and ancestral spirits (hanitu), which guide moral order and daily behavior (Huang, 2006b; Tien, 2002). While some traditional rituals have declined, significant ceremonies like the Ear Shooting Festival continue to embody cultural and educational values.

The Bunun's collective consciousness, respect for nature, and cultural practices sustain their identity and provide a foundation for preserving their traditions in modern society.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines the significance of campus symbols from a semiotic perspective and their impact on Taiwan's Indigenous education and students' cultural identity, drawing from semiotic theory.

Semiotics, as defined by Saussure (2011), studies signs and their role in society. A sign consists of a 'signifier' (form) and a 'signified' (concept), with their relationship established through social conventions.

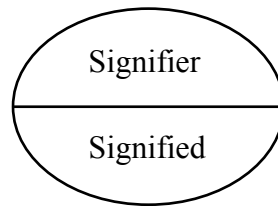


Figure 1: Saussure's Signs in Semiotics

Resource: Drawn by the researchers; quote from de Saussure et al. (2011)

Saussure (2011) also distinguished between synchronic (present context) and diachronic (historical evolution) aspects of signs. Barthes (1993) expanded on Saussure's ideas, introducing myth as a cultural system of communication, where signs function on multiple levels. Barthes emphasized two layers of meaning: denotation (explicit meaning) and connotation (cultural and ideological meaning). Consequently, Barthes constructed an intersecting relationship between language and myth within his semiotic theory, as follows:

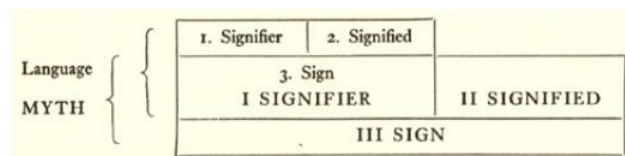


Figure 2: Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Resource: Barthes (1993)

Barthes' semiotics critiques social and cultural ideologies, uncovering how myths serve class domination by transforming history into nature. His approach reveals hidden cultural meanings in symbols, making it particularly relevant for analyzing Taiwan's Indigenous education system.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore symbolic practices within Bunun Elementary School A in Taiwan and their impact on Indigenous students' identity formation. By observing and analyzing totems, texts, and decorations on campus, the research uncovers their cultural significance and meanings.

Bunun Elementary School A is located in central Taiwan, deep in the mountains, and closely connected to the Bunun tribe. The school has 53 students and 14 faculty members, most of whom are Indigenous. Its remote location limits cultural assimilation with Han Taiwanese culture.

Data collection methods include observations, interviews with students and teachers, and analysis of relevant materials. Four key campus symbols were selected for study: the Bunun woodcarving calendar, diamond totems, the phrase "禮義廉恥," and multicultural celebration signs. Observations noted the prominent display of these symbols across the campus environment.

For analysis, Roland Barthes' semiotic approach is used to decode the visual messages of campus symbols and their connotations. Semiotic analysis reveals the cultural and ideological meanings embedded in these symbols, viewing them as carriers of myth. Barthes' framework helps uncover the second-order meanings of these signs, linking them to socio-cultural

contexts and Indigenous perspectives. The two order of signification by Roland Barthes as the following diagram,

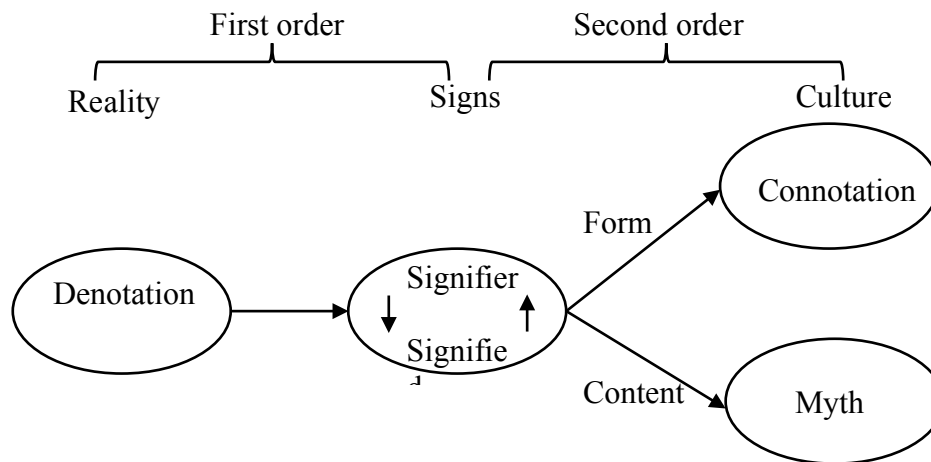


Figure 3: Roland Barthes's Two Order of Signification
Resource: Drawn by the researchers; quote from Roland Barthes (1993)

This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic practices in Indigenous schools and their role in shaping students' cultural identity.

The Meanings of Symbols in the Bunun Elementary School A Campus

This chapter conducts a Barthesian analysis of the meanings of the symbols and signage present in the Bunun Elementary School A campus, which is the focus of this study. The researcher selected and analyzed four physical symbols and signs that repeatedly appear in various locations on the campus and have close interactions with students, including totems, texts, and decorative items.

1. The Bunun Woodcarving Calendar

As one enters the campus, the traditional Bunun woodcarving calendar is prominently embedded on the wall beside the school entrance, painted in bright yellow on stones. When approaching the staff office, the woodcarving calendar reappears on a nearby stone wall. Figures 4 and 5 below show the locations where the traditional Bunun woodcarving calendar appears on the campus.



Figure 4: Campus Wall
Resource: Taken by the researchers



Figure 5: Stone Wall Outside the Office
Resource: Taken by the researchers

In terms of denotation, the woodcarving calendar features a horizontal baseline with continuous diamond shapes marking days. Symbols like square and circular points denote key agricultural dates, hunting results, and festivals, such as planting millet, harvesting, or hunting. In ethnic classes, terms like malaqtainga (ear festival), minpinang (sowing festival), qanup (hunting), and maduq (millet) are taught to represent significant Bunun activities and rituals. Malaqtainga in April or May involves rituals for hunting abundance and annual tribal affirmations. Minpinang, held in November or December, prays for millet harvests, with men singing the Song of Prayer for Millet Harvest. Qanup reflects communal hunting traditions, with shared spoils. Maduq, a staple food alongside sweet potatoes and corn, is vital for both sustenance and trade in Bunun livelihoods.

In terms of connotation, the woodcarving calendar reflects the Bunun people's concept of time and social structure. The traditional Bunun notion of time emphasizes temporality and human activities rather than an abstract concept of time that references precise locations or calculations (Huang, 2006b). Additionally, this temporality represents the order and status within traditional Bunun society, indicating that members of the same community must adhere to a shared timeline and fulfill their obligations.

From a diachronic perspective, the calendar evolved from a practical timekeeping tool to a symbol of cultural heritage and revival. Under colonial rule and Han cultural influence, its role shifted, aligning with Barthes' idea of myth as a neutral tool transformed into an ideological symbol. During the 1990s, as part of Taiwan's localization movement and the Indigenous cultural revival, the woodcarving calendar was re-endowed with significance, transforming into an emblem of Bunun cultural revival. In modern educational contexts, its presence is a signifier of cultural continuity and a marker of the Bunun people's broader efforts to reclaim their traditions.

From a synchronic perspective, the Bunun woodcarving calendar symbolizes Bunun culture within schools, coexisting with symbols of multiculturalism like bilingual displays. This creates tension between cultural preservation and globalization. As a mythical tool, the calendar signifies time while embodying the struggle for cultural survival and identity. It challenges students to balance cultural pride with the competing values of mainstream society and globalization. According to Barthes, it serves as a mythological signifier, reflecting efforts for cultural revival while highlighting tensions with modern educational goals such as academic success and multicultural inclusion.

2. Bunun Diamond Totem

When walking around the campus, one can clearly see the diamond totems, characterized by continuous diamond shapes, geometric patterns, symmetry, and black-and-white alternation, appearing in various places such as on the columns at the school entrance, the exterior walls of classroom buildings, and decorative boards. The following Figures 6 to 9 show the locations where the diamond totems appear on campus:



Figure 6: Outside of Classrooms



Figure 7: School Gate



Figure 8: Decorative Billboard
Resource: Taken by the researchers



Figure 9: School Auditorium Wall
Resource: Taken by the researchers

In terms of denotation, the diamond totem usually consists of one or more diamonds, which may include various details and decorations such as dots, lines, and patterns. According to the Bunun oral tradition, the diamond-shaped totem was originally drawn from the head shape of a viper. The diamond totem is commonly seen in traditional Bunun clothing, tools, implements, and ritual items. In both cultural and art classes, the term 'kaviaz' (viper; friend) is used to describe the totem, with teachers and students discussing its roots in ancient Bunun mythology.

The connotation of the diamond totem originates from a Bunun legend where a woman, inspired by a viper's patterns, used them for weaving. This sparked a conflict, resolved when the viper allowed the use of its patterns in exchange for respect and protection from harm (Tien, 1995). The viper's names, gavit (oath) and kaviaz (friend), symbolize reconciliation and coexistence (Rimuy Aki et al., 2021). Beyond its literal meaning, the myth embodies Bunun values like respect for natural law, harmony between deities, nature, and humanity, and core social virtues such as bravery, wisdom, unity, and respect.

From a diachronic perspective, the diamond totem evolved from its mythological roots into a symbol of the Bunun people's respect for nature and cosmic order. Despite colonial disruptions and Han cultural dominance, it remains integral to rituals and daily practices, embodying resistance to cultural erasure. As Barthes' theory highlights, the totem's transformation into a cultural myth perpetuates ideological values, affirming the Bunun's harmonious relationship with nature and ancestral beliefs as enduring and "natural" truths amidst modern cultural challenges.

From a synchronic perspective, the diamond totem in contemporary Bunun schools symbolizes the balance between cultural continuity and globalization. For students, it aids in exploring their Indigenous identity while staying rooted in their heritage. Integrated into activities like painting, weaving, and storytelling, the totem serves as a living emblem of identity and ethical values, reflected in terms like "gavit" (oath) and "kaviaz" (friend). Barthes' semiotics reveals its evolution into a modern cultural myth, bridging the past and present, and helping students reconcile their Indigenous identity with the demands of a globalized world.

3. The Characters “禮義廉恥”

Before entering the classroom, the researcher noticed the prominent and clearly visible characters “禮義廉恥” (Propriety, Justice, Integrity, and Shame) made from aluminum sheets on the wall, as shown in Figure 10. Moving further inside the building, the same phrase

appears again, this time made from acrylic panels, securely attached to the wall in the public reading area, as shown in Figure 11.



Figure 10: Office Exterior Wall
Resource: Taken by the researchers



Figure 11: The Wall in the Public Reading Area
Resource: Taken by the researchers

In terms of denotation, 禮(Lǐ) refers to propriety and etiquette, emphasizes respect for others and adherence to social norms; 義(Yì) signifies righteousness and justice, underscores fairness, honesty, and the defense of rightful interests; 廉(Lián) means integrity and honesty, stresses the importance of trustworthiness and refraining from wrongful gain; and 恥(Chǐ) denotes shame and disgrace, highlights the need for personal shame after moral failure and the effort to amend one's behavior. Although "禮義廉恥" is not formally part of the official curriculum, teachers often invoke terms like "忠孝" (loyalty and filial piety), "仁愛" (benevolence), "信義" (trust and righteousness), and "和平" (peace) when explaining these values. These terms act as extensions of the core principles, further enriching the ethical landscape that "禮義廉恥" encapsulates.

In terms of connotation, "禮義廉恥" reflects Confucian ideals of personal cultivation and societal harmony, emphasizing self-restraint, self-reflection, and social order. These values were central to maintaining social cohesion and ethical conduct within a structured hierarchy. After the Kuomintang (KMT) relocated to Taiwan in 1949, Confucian ethics were promoted to strengthen national identity and support anti-communist ideals. These values were integrated into education to cultivate loyal citizens aligned with the state's interests. However,

since the 1990s, as Taiwan embraced democracy and cultural diversity, the influence of these traditional values has gradually declined.

From a diachronic perspective, '禮義廉恥' (Propriety, Righteousness, Integrity, and Honor) evolved from Confucian teachings to a tool used by Taiwan's authoritarian government to promote ideological control (Lee, 2017). Adopted as a school motto in 1939, it became a symbol of national identity and anti-communist ideology. Barthes' concept of myth applies here, as the phrase reinforced dominant ideologies. After Taiwan's democratization in 1987 and education reforms in 2001, '禮義廉恥' lost prominence, shifting toward more pluralistic values (Lee, 2017). However, it still influences education, blending traditional Confucian values with modern ethical ideals like responsibility, kindness, and self-discipline.

From a synchronic perspective, while '禮義廉恥' originates from Confucian thought, its presence in Bunun Indigenous schools creates a clash between Confucian and Bunun cultural values. Barthes' theory highlights how symbols like '禮義廉恥' reinforce dominant ideologies while being reinterpreted in new contexts. For Bunun students, the concepts of respect and harmony may align with Confucian ideals, but their deeper meanings—such as loyalty to state authority—conflict with the Bunun emphasis on collective, egalitarian traditions. This symbol becomes a tool for integration, subtly encouraging students to conform to mainstream norms, potentially compromising their cultural identity.

4. Signs Celebrating Cultural Diversity

On staircases and in hallways, the school had placed English words promoting international education, as shown in Figure 12. Since the school's students are all Bunun, the opposite side of the hallway features Bunun language words aimed at enhancing the students' proficiency in their native language, as illustrated in Figure 13. Additionally, introductions to other Indigenous groups were found, as seen in Figure 14.



Figure 12: English Words in the Hallway
Resource: Taken by the researchers



Figure 13: Bunun Words in the Hallway
Resource: Taken by the researchers



Figure 14: Introduction to Taiwan's 16 Indigenous Ethnic Groups
Resource: Taken by the researchers

In terms of denotation, the English slogans display simple everyday phrases, such as "My iPad is dead," "Trick or treat," "Keep in touch," and "My honor," which are familiar expressions in daily life. The Bunun slogans, on the other hand, feature words related to the Bunun language, such as "friend(kaviáz)," "stream(vaqlac)," "hunting(qanup)," and "filial piety(madaidazis)." These are key terms in the everyday life of the Bunun people. In additionally, the school also showcases information about Taiwan's other 15 Indigenous groups, including population statistics, distribution areas, and social systems.

In terms of connotation, in the past, Taiwan's education system heavily emphasized Han culture, which led to the risk of assimilation for Indigenous students and sometimes triggered violence within the school environment, whether related to gender or ethnicity (2018). Nesterova (2019b) points out that Indigenous students' dissatisfaction with the national education system stems from the curriculum and teaching methods lacking cultural sensitivity, marginalizing Indigenous peoples as "the Other." Since the 2014 introduction of Taiwan's 12-year curriculum that includes "Multiculturalism and International Understanding" as part of core competencies, multiculturalism has become a critical issue in education policies. The Bunun school's cultural diversity signs reflect this policy (Ministry of Education of Taiwan, 2021a). These slogans not only acknowledge contemporary education's recognition of multiculturalism but also further promote the implementation of human rights and diversity strategies, ensuring the realization of social justice. Moreover, the Bunun slogans symbolize resistance to the pressures of globalization, reminding students to maintain a connection with their own culture while reinforcing their awareness of their group's history and culture.

From a diachronic perspective, the bilingual slogans reflect the historical blending of Bunun and international cultures. English symbolizes globalization's influence, while the Bunun language embodies historical memory and traditions. Once transmitted orally, the Bunun language faced challenges due to colonialism and Han cultural dominance. Today, its presence in school spaces like corridors and staircases represents language revival and cultural identity affirmation.

The coexistence of English and Bunun highlights dialogue between globalization and local culture, showing how students navigate both worlds. Over time, these slogans have evolved from communication tools to symbols of cultural resistance and identity. Within Barthes' framework, they form a cultural myth, embodying the tension between global and local cultures and reinforcing the Bunun language's permanence and the importance of cultural diversity.

From a synchronic perspective, the bilingual slogans reflect the Bunun school's cultural reality and multicultural challenges. Displayed daily, they expose students to both global and Indigenous cultures. English phrases like "My iPad is dead" and "Trick or treat" highlight the influence of Western consumer culture, while Bunun slogans emphasize traditional practices, such as "hunting" and "mountain." This duality familiarizes students with their roots while confronting them with global integration, creating a coexistence of cultural continuity and tension.

These slogans transcend language displays to become mythic symbols of cultural identity. Drawing on Barthes' theory, they evolve into cultural myths, representing Bunun students' negotiation between global and Indigenous identities. While promoting multicultural ideals, the slogans subtly affirm the equal value of Bunun culture in globalization, reinforcing students' cultural identity amidst these challenges.

The Influence of Campus Symbols on Indigenous Students' Cultural Identity

This study analyzes the significance of signage and symbols on the campus of Bunun Elementary School A in Taiwan using Barthes' semiotic analysis. The study suggests that the analysis of these samples reflects the current situation of ethnic minorities in Taiwan and provides three insights: (1) Cultural symbols connecting Bunun students to school; (2) The struggle for cultural identity in education; (3) The myth of multiculturalism in Indigenous education.

1. Cultural Symbols Connecting Bunun Students to School

At Bunun Elementary School A, cultural symbols like totems and Bunun vocabulary help students connect with their heritage, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. Displays of the Bunun language provide daily opportunities for students to practice their mother tongue, while teachers subtly integrate cultural elements into lessons, validating Indigenous traditions. However, this inclusion is often performative, as deeper cultural content remains absent from the curriculum, which prioritizes mainstream Han Chinese and Western knowledge. This disconnect can leave students feeling embraced socially but alienated academically.

Non-Bunun teachers, exposed to these symbols, develop an appreciation for Bunun culture, promoting cross-cultural understanding. Such interactions encourage multicultural harmony and prepare students for a globalized world.

2. The Struggle for Cultural Identity in Education

Despite visible cultural symbols, Bunun students face a deeper struggle within an education system rooted in Han Chinese norms. They are pressured to excel academically while

maintaining their Indigenous identity, often feeling disconnected from a curriculum that overlooks their heritage.

Globalization and academic success exacerbate this tension, as students navigate dual pressures from their families and the system. Teachers, though sympathetic, lack resources to integrate Indigenous knowledge, leaving students emotionally and intellectually strained. Barthes' semiotic analysis reveals that while visible symbols validate identity, the system's structural inequities persist.

3. The Myth of Multiculturalism in Indigenous Education

The display of Bunun cultural symbols creates a façade of inclusivity but fails to achieve genuine integration. Barthes' concept of myth highlights how these symbols promote the illusion of diversity while masking systemic marginalization.

Symbols give Bunun students a sense of belonging but remain disconnected from the curriculum's dominant focus on Han Chinese and Western content. This superficial approach fosters a false sense of cultural respect, leaving the deeper needs for curricular transformation unmet. Students encounter Bunun symbols without critical engagement, perpetuating shallow understanding rather than meaningful interaction. True multiculturalism requires moving beyond symbolic gestures to integrate Indigenous knowledge into education.

Conclusion

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory offers valuable insights into the relationship between signs and their socio-cultural contexts, providing a lens through which to examine the impact of campus symbols on Bunun students' cultural identity. This study analyzed the denotative and connotative meanings of key symbols at Bunun Elementary School A—the Bunun woodcut calendar, diamond totems, the phrase "禮義廉恥," and signs promoting cultural diversity—and their influence on students' cultural identity.

The *Bunun woodcut calendar* serves as a tangible link to traditional cultural practices, reinforcing the Bunun worldview through its emphasis on natural cycles and social order. The *Bunun diamond totem* reflects Bunun cosmology and aesthetic values, subtly shaping students' perspectives and enhancing their cultural pride. However, the presence of "禮義廉恥," a symbol of mainstream Han Chinese culture, highlights the dominance of mainstream values in the curriculum, often creating cultural identity conflicts for Bunun students. Finally, symbols celebrating cultural diversity promote inclusivity and highlight Taiwan's focus on human rights and multiculturalism, yet their impact often remains superficial.

This study highlights three critical insights. First, culturally significant symbols like the woodcut calendar and diamond totems strengthen Bunun students' cultural identity but lack deep integration into the curriculum. Second, Bunun students face cultural identity struggles, navigating the pressures of mainstream education, globalization, and their Indigenous heritage. Third, multiculturalism risks becoming a myth in Indigenous education, with symbolic inclusion masking the marginalization of minority cultures in Taiwan's educational system.

In conclusion, achieving genuine cultural integration in education requires meaningful curricular reforms that balance Indigenous and mainstream cultural values. Addressing this challenge is vital for fostering equity and cultural recognition in Taiwan's education system.

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