

'The taste of knowledge': Workshopping in Northern Thailand

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Introduction

Living and working as an anthropologist in Northern Thailand and in the MMSEA Region (Mainland Montane South East Asia) provided me the opportunity to be part of several encounters with different existing networks of indigenous peoples. These are loose and temporal relationships among individuals who exchange information or undertake joint activities but maintain partial autonomy from development and donor organizations. Indigenous networks focus on themes like ethnic identity and rights, or share customs and traditions according to age groups, joining the elders network or the youth network. Other networks undertake activities about special knowledge, for example the Hmong herbal medicine interact directly with groups who are interested in identifying plants and setting community medicinal gardens. The Karen network of shifting cultivation aims at influencing state policy by advocacy in alliance with academics, the media and several environmental NGOs.

During three years I had different roles – attending, facilitating and documenting network meetings, which gradually assumed the character of knower-centred interactive spaces that I call workshops. That is, group events in which the power of defining the contents relies on the indigenous participants' discourse. Workshops have a different character than official meetings. The latter are designed with the purpose of conveying unilaterally the knowledge of development and donor organizations to indigenous participants. The developers define the topics considered as crucial to plan development actions and they assume a main active role in such events. In spite of the overwhelming and extensive use of meetings as development tools, knower-centred encounters slowly spread with the purpose of communicating and sharing knowledge within a specific network, among several networks, and also with outsiders in situations like Academic Congresses, Indigenous Peoples Forum, fieldtrips, training, bringing together students, development workers, scientists and indigenous people. Generic topics that repeatedly appeared in the workshops concerned practices that express ways of dealing with natural resources: shifting cultivation or rotational farming in forests, health and herbal medicine, indigenous seeds, ecocultural tourism, midwifery, weaving or playing music.

This chapter reflects upon workshops as possible settings for dialogue, in which indigenous knowers communicate orally and visually what is in their minds, generating and narrating their specific ideas and practices rooted in day-to-day survival and the conservation of life. These processes take place in different time frameworks of more than one day in villages or different locations, where the knowers feel confident to recall, imagine, demonstrate, tell their dreams, express their feelings about what and how they know.

On the basis of workshops I would like to highlight how these interactive encounters, where multiple intelligences meet, are epistemic spaces for the knowers to construct and attribute meaning to what they know. They link their local practices with global issues from their particular sentient explanations and cultural values on practices that nurture the regeneration of life, including themselves. These interactive sessions trigger mental interconnectedness between the indigenous knowers, who feel affirmed in their ways of knowing and cultures and the non-indigenous, students, scientists, development practitioners who let themselves nurture with open minds, empathy, intuition and other cognitive capacities beyond the rationalist critical examination of facts.

My motivation in presenting this chapter on workshopping is to converse about manifold entry points leading to insightful mutual learning experiences and dialogue that might possibly stimulate common actions regarding the affirmation of cultures as a basis for biodiversity conservation for the survival of our planet.

Amazing diversity

Northern Thailand's omnipresent mountain forest and great rivers belong to the bio-cultural 'hot spot' of the Eastern Himalayas, comprising one fifth of Thailand's national territory. This mountainous region, with hilly forest landscapes is irrigated by watershed systems formed by rivers and its tributaries like the Mae Kong, Salween and Mae Ping, and encompasses the home of peoples whose languages belong to the Austro-Asiatic or Mon Khmer language family like the Luwa, Thin, Mlabri and Khamu and the speakers of Karen languages. They consider themselves as 'people of the place' as a generic name and not 'hill tribes' (*chao khao*), as they are pejoratively called. Contesting the official ethnic classification, people known as Karen do not accept the exonym (external ethnic denomination) and prefer the ethnonym (self-denomination) *Pga K'nyau*, which means children of the forest to stress their strong ties with nature in the construction of their identity. These cultural groups constitute about 1 per cent of the total population of the country, together with the recent migrants Hmong, Mien (Miao-Yao language family) Akha, Lisu and Lahu (Tibeto-Burman language family) (Keyes, 1987).

Ethnically diverse people of Northern Thailand amalgamate Buddhist traditions with various spiritual beings who are the product of their particular cosmovisions. The Luwa – pre-Mon and pre-Thai indigenous population – especially transmit oral traditions in which they offer food to Buddha and his monks. After becoming Buddha followers, the Luwa no longer needed to irrigate their fields with a waterwheel. Everything turned to gold and the places Buddha visited are recalled with a magical aura (Swearer, 2004). Since the beginning of the century, local people's beliefs and livelihoods have been heavily influenced by Christian missionaries. It is very common to mingle identified bible passages in the oral discourse of Karen peoples and observe that Akha agricultural ceremonies that belong to the complex cycles of rotational farming have been suppressed.

This image contrasts with the official representation of a Buddhist kingdom and the modern nation state as a fairly homogeneous society. A vast majority of the peoples, more than 80 per cent, speak related languages belonging to the Tai or Daic language family. More than 95 per cent of the population are Buddhist and nobody doubts of the moral authority of the King.

Diversity exists also among most of the Tai people of the northern provinces. For example, they recognize and name their local languages as Kham Muang (language of the principalities) differentiating it from the standard Thai. They also follow a distinctive Buddhism with more commonalities with Lao traditions, as well as sharing the custom of cultivation of glutinous rice varieties as a main staple food.

Among other official representations, this area and its peoples are considered as one of the major tourist attractions of Thailand. Ethnicity is a great source of revenue to the tourism industry. Visitors – national and international – can experience adventure riding on an elephant skilfully conducted by a Karen *Mahud* in the forest-like landscape of an elephant camp. Ecotourists lodged in fancy village resorts are encouraged to buy colourful embroideries from the Mien, Hmong and Akha or join exotic ceremonies consuming wild vegetables, mushrooms and can even be healed by Hmong traditional medicine.

The Thai state also associates this area with the illegal traffic of narcotics that boomed in the first half of last century in the shifting cultivation fields derived from a state-driven promotion of opium production and trade to supply the international market. From time to time, police campaigns set forth to clean the area of the production and dealing of drugs which include hemp, a cultural plant used as fibre, purposely mistaken as marijuana. The social costs of these anti-drugs raids usually are paid with the lives of village leaders.

In addition to exotic image and the stigma of being drug dealers held by the ethnic peoples living in the mountainous forest of Northern Thailand, they are considered a threat to national security due to the ongoing cross-border migration of peoples from Burma and Laos, escaping from violent repression. In order to legitimize its power, the Thai state excludes a majority of ethnic peoples from general citizen rights, declaring the customary forms of access and control of natural resources out of the frame of legality. These are considered as primitive and ecologically detrimental practices. Indigenous peoples are blamed for the increasing frequency of floods and land erosion in the lowlands as a result of swidden agriculture, for example. These Thai ethnocentric views are dominant perceptions towards indigenous cultures (McCaskill and Kampe, 1997).

'Cultures of development'

For the past 30 years, government policies have been modernizing and implementing systematic programmes and projects to exercise power in conformity to the official 'culture of development'. As Ken Kampe (1997) has formulated, this complex social organization comprises the 'developers' who have different understandings of the most sacred concepts of power, money and statistics, depending of the type of institution they belong to. Their cosmology is based on the only value of economic growth to which the 'developers' serve, playing different roles according to the type of knowledge they exert as project managers, consultants, advisers, evaluators and so on. They relate to the 'developees' in highly ritualized forms, such as in the design of the project, the formalization of agreements, field visits, seminars and village meetings. The communication between the 'developers' and the 'developees' responds to a design so 'nothing impromptu or in a highly person to person setting' can take place (Kampe, 1997).

Since the 1990s, international development agencies have focused their attention on biodiversity issues. As a consequence, there is growing national awareness among scientists, NGOs, development practitioners and environmentalists of the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in order to add new qualities to sustainable development. Despite this, development intentions regarding biodiversity remain within the framework of economic growth, and not as the ultimate goal but as one of the areas of structured programmes. It is considered that the expert's identification and systematization of local knowledge have a greater value than the community role. Environmental protection and biodiversity conservation are included in the development agenda in many cases after a short period of analysis of the situation, by which time the developers feel they have enough background knowledge to implement project activities for the 'developees' as co-managers.

Scientists have produced significant lines of research identifying striking features of biodiversity, which can be seen in Thailand's rich collections of rice varieties, with more than 700 wild rice varieties and 20,000 locally adapted landraces. Biodiversity surveys quantify a great number of varieties of useful plants. For example 120 plant species collected and consumed from forest areas and at least 240 varieties of local vegetables that are sold at the markets (Santasombat, 2003).

This type of information acknowledges that ethnic groups play an important role in ensuring the regeneration of biodiversity but there is still much to be done in terms of productively situating the multiple directions of the wealth of indigenous ideas and the legitimacy of the different ways of living the world – the cosmovisions – to possibly arrive to a common understanding.

Workshopping

A workshop facilitated on the basis of the cognitive capacities of the knowers invites them to express their multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) orally with the support of demonstrations and visual means. The sessions address common sense, metaphoric capacity and wisdom, structured by sequences of tasks that involve the knower's capacities of recalling, demonstrating and dreaming.

Facilitation creates open-ended communication moments similar to a knowledge cycle in a broad sense. The knowers focus on their practices from the cultural universe that originate in their minds without detaching themselves from their life experiences. They construct and interpret their practices embedded in their cosmovisions, reflecting the values and traditions that they consider important for the continuity of life in their community. The knowers get involved in a 'reality-making' process that takes place when the mind contemplates or transforms the experiences and creates a new, more reflexive dimension of reality (Skolimowski in Gottwald and Raetsch, 1998).

In a workshop, the greatest challenge is to guarantee that the flow of knowledge is communicated in oral modes, that the knowers feel comfortable expressing their intimate interconnectedness of words and thoughts in a variety of subjective oral fashions (Ong, 2003). This can be possible if they talk in their mother tongue, which gives the workshop a peculiar pace and rhythm. The 'conversations' in a workshop are multilingual and many times take original forms, like singing in a cross cultural mode. Among improvise songs in which the tone, volume, modulation of the voice suggests in a subtle way the characteristics of the singing style of Karen. Lisu do the same with

Mien, and the Lahu with Hmong. In another communicative moment, the knowers of a workshop convened to speak the language of their domestic animals. They were amused and astonished to hear the differences of sounds of the cockcrow or the barking dogs in their respective ethnic villages. Besides underlining the fine capacities of observation of animal behaviour and imitation skills, this showed how orality brings out the temperament of the knowers, making the sharing of experiences about diversity an insightful experience. It also revealed that in daily life, nature is assumed as animated and that the sounds made by animals are at least as meaningful as human language. These are significant communication knots that bring into mind the sense of reciprocity and participatory mode of experiencing the world with the senses (Abram, 1996).

Each knower enters into a dynamic narrative and imaginative visualization of their skills, recalling, demonstrating and surfacing multiple dimensions of what they know. At the end of the workshop, different perspectives have been communicated and shared synergistically, by which each one can see himself or herself and the others in a different fashion than at the beginning of the process.

Knowers who join such workshops are proposed and selected by the members of the networks due to social acknowledgement of them as specialists in their communities. This procedure contrasts to the conventional ways of inviting via the official development channels that perpetuate the same list of participants attracted by the 'sitting fees' system. Stressing the importance of the role of active specialists in the community of origin brings about a group dynamic of knowledge generation. The participants in such workshops are willing to present their skills rooted in sustainable livelihood practices based on a balanced interdependency with nature as midwives, shifting cultivators, seed-keepers, healers, weavers, embroiderers, dress makers, musicians and more.

These specialized knowledge forms do not coincide with the fragmentation of scientific disciplines. It can be better understood in terms of how an epistemic community is structured. The 'epistemic community' is, in general terms, how concepts, values and meanings are shared and understood by a specific group of individuals to be able to act. For instance, in an epistemic community, everyone acts according to common knowledge that is applied in everyday life (Childe, 1956). Every individual learns how to cope with agricultural tasks, such as selecting seeds for sowing, getting organized to set the fire for the shifting cultivation, or collecting wild vegetables and mushrooms in the forest, in an intuitive, rapid and accurate manner. Common sense is the cognitive ability that invokes practical application but already addresses complex areas of intelligences shared by many generations and orchestrates a distinguishable repertoire of knowledge fields that are brought together in a desirable form of individual competence. Anyone with common sense develops a sense of self-identity vis-à-vis intrapersonal interactions and can transmit his/her world of ideas.

Embedded in this common knowledge, some individuals driven by curiosity, experimentation, age, family status, gender or by virtue of ritual or political authority have developed original skills and inclinations. These are specialists, such as Karen men who like to remember the qualities and properties of seed varieties by improvising songs that are transmitted to the rest of the family but specially to the children who memorize the songs in an admirable speed. Or persons who can feel the changes of direction of the wind before it happens and transmit it to the family group

who is burning a shifting cultivation field. Some Lisu musicians have developed the capacity to play an instrument in ceremonies that bring everyone in a spiritual mood for worshipping nature. It is a capacity that goes hand in hand with the agricultural ceremonial calendar. Specialists are also Karen women who, describing their daily cycle, refer to the 'mother of rice site'. Very early in the morning they go to spot the fields. While collecting vegetables and spices for breakfast, they recall the varieties of rice that are no longer available in the paddies or in the shifting cultivation fields. That personal moment is called the 'mother of rice site'. It is not a worship place, it is a memory exercise repeated in the hope that naming the rice varieties will bring them back to the present.

Furthermore, there are individuals that due to critical life experiences gain confidence and cognitive abilities to express their knowledge with originality and metaphorical capacity. This is wisdom. For example, Hmong healers are highly experienced in communicating and following the rules of the plant spirits. Listening to their life histories, we see how they have attained these skills by fashioning a particular realm of practice with other domains of knowledge. They can surpass facets of reality smoothly like trance and other states of mind (Narby, 2001). That is the case of a Hmong healer whose awareness of her skills was revealed after a serious disease was cured with herbal treatments that triggered new domains of mental connections. After that experience, she expressed herself in cultural images about how the 'couple spirits' conduct her to the healing plants, how the plants signal to her their properties and how she feels like a mediator or interpreter of the plant's healing capacities (Pollan, 2001). She constructs analogies combining analytical thinking with speculative relationships, forging a language that transmits the power of her wisdom:

My father's mother was a healer. Before she took me to the forest we worshipped the medicine god couple named *pojtxoov kuab abd yaumtxoov kuab*. We ask the medicine god couple for permission to enter into the knowledge of the plant world, since everything not only the healing plants has an owner who helps recuperate life. When I treat people I experience the feeling of returning to life again. The owner of herbal medicine cures them and at the same time I get cured too. It means that curing with herbal medicine is like generating life, is returning to life again.

Below, I present the communication process and indigenous ideas of bio-cultural diversity generated in the context of workshops.

The taste of knowledge

A Karen midwife transmits the idea of biodiversity saying that when a child is born, she puts rice milk on the baby's lips so that the taste of rice will remain as the first and unforgettable flavour as long as this person lives in this world. Her intention is to ensure the memory of the senses not as a purely mental or subjective sphere but as a cultural practice (Serementakis, 1996).

Plants presented in the oral cultures are animated beings that unfold their properties contained in diverse sites. A Hmong healer uses a plant to treat female fertility, other ethnic healers apply it against snakebites, and others cure headaches. The same plant does not cure the same illness everywhere; it depends of the emergent

curative powers of the places where it is growing, combined with the subjective knowledge of the healer and the cultural traditions that have been transmitted over generations.

As for Karen shifting cultivators, they perceive the forest, gardens, orchards, swamps, swidden plots and paddy fields as their 'natural supermarkets', an analogy that expresses the essential interplay between natural and cultural landscapes. They cultivate and collect according to the seasons' innumerable varieties of plants that can be used as food, spices, medicine, for dyeing, weaving, wrapping and binding as well as for artistic, ceremonial and spiritual purposes: 'It is our way to live in balance, we and nature'.

Remembering the past and the present

Orality gives the knowers in a workshop a space to talk about their life experiences, reflecting on their knowledge in very personal ways that transport us to many different worlds. In the following passages of a workshop with indigenous women in Mae Sa Valley, Chiang Mai (October 2005) a glimpse into these complexities is given.

Wipa Srilimpanon (Lisu)

After trying to produce my own herbal medicine for the market I learned how to sew Lisu traditional costumes. To make a good Lisu wife, one must know dressmaking, otherwise you are blamed for not learning this skill. My friends and relatives, my parents, uncles and aunts taught me. A government organization also helped me to learn some related skills. Now I modify traditional costumes to crafts for modern demands.

When I was young my mother gave me everything. I remember during the New Year's celebration she called the spirits and gave me a very beautiful dress. This inspired me to learn how to make beautiful clothes and now I can teach my daughter. My older sister told me the proper way to dress, the meaning of colours for men and women, when to wear the silver applications as well as not to overlook people due to their dress.

Nor-ari (Karen)

I learned from my parents and from my own experience. The elders blame young girls if they cannot make any crafts. So I was challenged to learn the skills of weaving and dyeing.

My family, especially my mother and grandmothers, taught me good things such as the plants for dyeing, how to grow the cotton in the forest. When we collect, we take only what we need, no more and refrain on certain Buddhist days. We perform a ceremony after dying the cloth. The dye is poured into bamboo containers and burned to avoid any evil from coming to the village. This ceremony also ensures that the person wearing the cloth is protected from any negative effects or being overpowered by the dye plants.

My grandmother told me many stories about the colours, motifs and meanings of the clothing. New Year festival is the occasion when Karen men and women give each other a Karen dress as a symbol of the renewal of

peaceful relations. We Karen believe that the daughter has to follow her mother. So I will transmit all my knowledge to my daughter.

Amima Saenmi (Lisu)

I learned to be a midwife from my mother at the age of 18 years old. I also accumulated my own experience as a midwife. The materials for birth giving include a sharp bamboo knife, scissors and a red thread. I have assisted more than 50 women giving birth.

Some of the rules associated with giving birth include: after giving birth, it is not good for the mother to lie down, better to sit, because it is feared that all the blood will go to the brain. She also has to eat alone. It's not good for the mother and the baby to be touched by the smoke of the fire.

At the beginning, I worried when I assisted a woman to give birth. But after a baby is born, what a joy! The household then performs a ceremony to name the baby and a man is appointed to inform the rest of the village of the newborn baby. By then, I felt relieved that my duty is done. I help the woman giving birth with my knees lifting the back of the woman. It is exhausting afterwards; both have to exert effort to deliver the baby. The husband stays home during the delivery and I get a dress from the mother, for having helped her to have a healthy baby. She should eat blackboned chicken to produce milk.

Babies are wrapped tightly for seven days to align the bones and make the legs straight. It also protects them from being scared. There are different ways to wrap baby boys and girls.

We believe that when a child is born and cries immediately it means that the spirit of the baby comes from somewhere nearby if s/he cries one or two hours later, his/her spirit comes from the distance.

I learned from my mother how to protect the life of a child by massaging the mother so that the placenta is expelled. As long as I live, I will continue to help other women if they need me and also share my knowledge with my daughter but since there is a hospital almost nobody comes to learn with me.

Ipu Siyamo (Pga K'nyau – Karen)

I learned to be a midwife before I was 20 years old. It is a rule in Karen community that it has to be learned by a mother, not a single woman. Mostly, this knowledge is transmitted from mother to daughters, and also some elders who have this knowledge. The hand is the most important tool for this work, aside from the other implements – a sharp bamboo instrument and a big bowl for the placenta. I am available 24 hours, together with two other women. It is a quite dangerous work. Once, after helping give birth, a baby became blind when touched by the dirty hands of the midwife. So, some midwives are sometimes hesitant to transmit the knowledge to others.

I accompanied my mother when she delivered her babies. From that time, I learned how to deliver babies and I gave birth myself. The baby is still alive! My husband prepared herbal soup for me and hung the umbilical cord in the tree. The tree is integral to Karen's life, a symbol of the cycle that goes this way: a mother gives birth, a daughter learns from her mother, the husband takes the

umbilical cord to the tree – the tree is preserved. This is the cycle of life for the Karen.

When a woman giving birth is having difficulty delivering, the husband should bring a wooden weaving tool and rub the woman at her sides to assist in her delivery. A ceremony is performed wherein the relatives wash their hands and the woman drinks the water. Everyone stays in the village when a woman gives birth in the community.

Other rules related to giving birth include that a pregnant woman cannot eat roasted banana or wild animals such as snakes since this will make delivery difficult. She also should not step over a dog and no one should step over any part of her body. She cannot carry heavy things. She also should not eat chicken or eggs after delivery.

When the child is born, I put rice milk in her/his lips so the baby learns the taste of rice.

It is also a practice that the woman should drink a herbal brew of pepper and a special ginger right after giving birth. They should not take a bath for one month after delivery and when she does, she uses herbs.

When I was 20 years old, I got pregnant and helped myself. Afterwards, I helped a woman to deliver. The woman did not follow my advice in terms of food to eat and it had an impact on the child. The growth of the child was stunted so I gave her a blue herbal medicine. I also found medicinal herbs for my mother whose health was impacted by so many women she attended. It was medicine to cool down her head, not to drink but to swallow, like pearls.

Village children always come to look when a child is born. Many are afraid to help and don't want to learn because most women now prefer to go to the hospital. I accompany the women to the hospital but I cannot perform my function as a midwife.

Prapraisi Dejudomwongsa (Lahu)

I started to collect seeds when I was 15 years old, learning from my parents. Other families did not have enough rice to eat, while my family had sufficient food to eat. I think this is because they forgot to thank the Mother of Rice god. After harvesting, I will collect a bunch of rice seeds, put it in a special place and nobody can touch this.

I know that papaya seeds can be used for healing stomach pain and there are seven species of rice seeds that stop someone having long menstrual periods.

When I see tall rice plants and feel the wind blowing over the fields in September, the red chilli, the sound of the frogs and the water from the stream, I am happy. When the rice is ready for harvest, I think about my parents and villagers. It is time for the rice ceremony. I go to the villagers to look for the chicken or pig for the ceremony, and they eat together with plates and chopsticks made from nature.

The night before the first of January, they bring water in the gourd twice to clean the hands of the mother and other elders. In the night, they go to the church to give thanks. During this time, everyone wears his or her best attire. They gather to share their life stories. It is also a time for courting among young

people. I think that the youth have the decision whether or not to continue this life.

Seed keeping is a specialized knowledge of women. So in the ceremony for seed keeping, all women attend but not men. Men don't keep seeds. There is a ceremony for growing rice held every May. Women bring all kinds of seeds that they grow. They only bring the best seeds – women would know from the plants and the seeds if they are the best. These seeds are only harvested during full moon and dried under a strong sun.

It is a belief that pregnant women and menstruating women should not touch the seeds since both mother and baby are relatively weak and this affects the seeds. Seeds cannot be stored in plastic bags because this affects the energy of the seeds.

Among the Lahu, the first meal of harvested rice is offered to the parents whereas for the Hmong, it is offered to the ancestors to acknowledge the source of life.

From my parents, I learned what kind of seeds should be kept, identifying the strong plants, how to dry them, how to keep the seeds in a safe place. My mother showed me how to stop the children from crying.

The church in my village taught me to respect my parents. The Lahu ceremonies convey the values of saving the seeds and not wasting them. From IMPECT,¹⁶ I learned how to grow plants without chemicals and how to take care of the environment to get healthy seeds. Once, I went to Lijiang (China) and observed how they use organic manure. I have adopted this practice to get good healthy plants and seeds. Since then many people come to visit me and I teach them. I keep ideas in a notebook where I write everything I learn including in meetings like this. I am collecting the seeds from the elders to show all villagers the value of diversity.

Jia (Hmong)

I was the eldest of 10 children. When my father died, no one helped my mother in the farm so I had to look after my brothers and sisters. I got married at the age of 14 and had a first child the following year. It hurts a lot giving birth; afterwards I could not even walk. I looked for herbal medicine and consulted herbal experts. At that time I weighed only 29 kg. Later with herbal medicine, I recovered and gained up to 52 kg. After that I gave birth to three more children. Now I know that herbal medicine is the best, not 'modern' medicine. I went to the hospital afflicted by some pains but in the hospital they could not cure me so I went back to the shaman in the community. The shaman found out that I was being called by the spirits to be a healer. Now I am a healer. Before giving any medicine to the patient, the person needs to offer some sacrifice (for example, a chicken) and some money (Bt20–100) to the spirits.

Both men and women can be healers; the spirits can empower either to become healers. The spirits look after the herbal medicine in the fields and

¹⁶ Intern Mountain Peoples Education and Culture Association of Thailand (IMPECT) is a hilltribe NGO in Chiang Mai formed by representatives of communities and professionals from the seven main ethnic groups.

forests. To cure ill people, I worship the spirits and dream of the cures. I have built an altar for the medicine gods in my house. The presence of the altar helps me cure and find the herbal medicine. When I first built the altar, I sacrificed a chicken and offered Bt100. Thereafter, the villagers have to offer 'paper money' to the altar when they come for healing. I cure Karen and Hmong people.

I learned the most from my grandmother. When I was five years old, I was a naughty girl. I climbed a tree and broke my arm. My grandmother took me to the herbal healer. Everyone who had a health problem in the village came to my grandmother, but if she could not heal someone she would take the villager to the healer. I followed my grandmother very closely.

After giving birth, I felt sick, so I went to the healer and paid Bt1,000 for many medicines that did not work. So I asked for help to another person who demanded a dress in exchange for the service of healing. Then I went to a hospital in Chiang Mai and the doctors detected womb cancer. They operated on me but I did not get well. So I travelled to Isan seeking a healer who had cured a person from a village nearby. His medicine helped me recover and I gained insights from the healer's treatments. This knowledge made me famous and many people came to me to be treated but everyone who is healed worships the medicine god couple in the altar.

I will transmit my knowledge to anybody who wants to learn herbal medicine.

Visualization and oral presentation

These short fragments of life histories show the interplay between visualization and oral presentation. Both support a genuine cultural understanding as defined by the knowers. Visualization does not substitute orality. It serves as helping aid to organize the messages and to provide a cultural depth interpreted by the authors. Visualization can remain as a materialization of collective and subjective memory for the knowers and for the outsiders as points of departure for further dialogue.

All drawings can be considered as cultural representation, some reveal a metaphoric quality that, besides the particular meanings attached to the images, possess an aesthetic value, the beauty of indigenous forms of expression. In the former life histories we can read a recurrent evocation to the spiritual dimension of knowledge in each case; it is stressed in particular symbolic cultural images of nurturing life. The Karen midwife suggests the tree as an image for the perpetuation of the life cycle in the respectful behaviour towards the trees from which the umbilical cords hang. The Lahu seed keeper talks about the 'mother of rice' as a concept that underlines the female role in the revival and protection of local rice varieties. The Hmong symbol of couple gods brings to mind that the healing power of plants conceals human and beyond human efforts to regenerate life. The behaviour of taking only what is needed from the forest is a moral approach to the utilization of resources coming from the Karen weaver.

These metaphors are part of complex cosmovisions. If we experience affection and appreciation for the values they convey, this sets up fruitful conditions for dialogue, many forms of conversations exchanging insightful meanings.

The present and the future

Workshops are many times mental and sensitive breakthroughs to define and express willingness to engage in action. But that does not resemble a planning session, derived from the rationale of problem identification and then technological solutions. It is a process of envisioning where the regeneration of community life with a community's own skills, capacities and identity is constructed by multiple intelligences and cultural constructs. Particular views of sharing power and authority within local people and the rest of the society are imaginatively outlined.

Children should not forget what a cotton plant looks like

The group of Lisu, Karen, Akha, Mien and Kachin dressmakers and weavers brainstormed a situation in which they were willing to engage their communities to continue the transmission of knowledge from and to the members of the family, especially youth. They want to regain the practice of using natural materials, even if this takes a long time and the materials are now difficult to find. For example, how to grow cotton. Children should not forget what a cotton plant looks like. They should stay with their parents to learn this knowledge and not migrate to the city to go to school; and they also should wear traditional costumes. Cotton and also hemp should grow in the fields, governed by the ceremonies and beliefs that some elders still know.

The leaders of the villages could strengthen the awareness of the young generation to sustain their interests and the values of knowledge that make each ethnic group proud to wear their traditional clothes and proud to produce them in a self-reliant and sustainable manner, organizing fairs to showcase competitions among the young so that they learn the meaning of different ethnic dresses. This way the children can be motivated to learn handicraft skills.

The market alone is not a solution; it makes people act quick and fast. This mode is not sustainable since the production of industrial materials creates pollution and can poison or affect the men or women who use them. Buying these products will benefit the factory owners and middle persons more than the community. Producing and using the dresses made with the communities' natural resources is a self-reliant and sustainable manner of life.

Seeds revive in the villages

The Lahu dream of seed conservation starts with sharing knowledge with children and with housewives: many people from other communities will ask about the seeds that are getting lost, collect them and give them to the housewives to propagate. The husbands will ask where the seeds come from since they will be better than the high yielding varieties.

As done in the past, the New Year celebration will revive the knowledge about seeds involving other villages, discussing the seeds, and selecting the best ones. The schools will host these seeds in demonstration fields and housewives can teach the children about the seeds. Eventually, the teachers will learn that the seeds come from the Lahu. The teaching should also include learning about the ceremonies required when different seeds are collected. Children can then learn all this about the different types of seeds in schools.

Before, people used mortar and pestle to pound rice. Now many use a machine and the rice does not taste as good. There are two collective mortars and pestles in the Lahu village, so villagers can collectively mill their rice. Families can get income from these seeds and many people interested in how to grow and eat rice, for example, women who give birth can only eat pounded rice, not rice milled from the machine.

People did not use chemicals in their farming before because they did not know about them nor how to use them. Some organizations have come to the village, promoted other seed varieties and other techniques of farming. Now the use of chemicals for agriculture has been introduced in the village, and many have adopted them since they are easy to use. It is believed that all members of the family who are involved in using the chemicals become ill.

Many villagers have to use chemicals because they have limited land now. The land near their settlement has been converted into the fields of a royal project, and there are also more conflicts over land.

The elders from the village say that chemicals cause many illnesses. One suggested some herbal medicine to cure them, but when some people were not cured they had to go to hospital, but as they still could not be cured, it was believed that the chemicals had already reached 'their hearts'. Organizing the villagers would lead to the exchange of knowledge on the value of organic farming, since biomaterials are available in the village and the traditional seeds need to be revived.

Natural healing is more than just applying herbs

'Children are naughty; they often break their bones so we do take them to the forest when one collects herbal medicine so they can learn too'. Persons who often get sick also need to learn. If they are not cured in the hospital or by some ceremony, they can be treated with herbal medicine.

In dozens of Hmong villages, the people have created a herbal medicine garden near the community forest. The housewives, daughters and other members of each family take care of the garden each month. They are fined if they do not take care of the garden. While taking care of it, they also learn about herbal medicine. Members of the village have access to the garden, and other villagers can come and pay or ask permission to have access to it. They also share the herbal medicine with guests that visit the village. If there are other herbal medicines from other villages that are good, they request that the plants be allowed to grow in the garden in their village.

Some herbal medicines cannot be cultivated in the garden. Since they grow in the forest there are regulations on the collection of these herbs. Other villages have to ask permission before they can collect from the forests and they can only collect what they need. If there is a serious case, other healers should get involved to ensure that the healer does not 'lose face' and the patient is cured.

It is also important to worship the altar before curing an ill person with herbal medicine. For New Year, the first patient of each year has to offer a chicken and some money. Those who are being cured have to offer *Saa*¹⁷ or paper money to the altar.

¹⁷ *Saa* is paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) and a weed bush growing widely in South East Asia, and its bark is transformed into paper.

For the Lahu, the sick person has to pay Bt20, some tobacco and rice. If the sick person is cured, she or he has to pay Bt200.

If a healer is menstruating, she cannot sleep with her husband or take herbal medicine. A pregnant woman can go to the forest with the healer but cannot collect the herbal medicine herself. For the Akha, a good healer is over 50 years old, since she is no longer greedy. Also, a woman who has reached the end of the reproductive age can be a healer. Every religion should not only allow the use of herbal medicine but also allow people to perform the ceremonies that are part of the healing process.

The tree of life must go on

The midwives transmit their knowledge to daughters and daughters-in-law by telling them and by showing them using practical means. They ask the daughters to come along when a woman is delivering a baby. The teaching includes tracing the bloodline, and the dos and don'ts for pregnant women.

Women now believe that giving birth in hospital is more secure. The birth certificate for the child is also easier to obtain in the hospital and then they can request citizenship. Giving birth in the village is more complicated, so Karen midwives have decided to inaugurate a new practice of presenting the document and umbilical cord to the hospital to obtain the birth certificate, but the umbilical cord has to be taken back home and hung on the tree. The villagers cannot cut this tree. If this is not done, people will cut the trees and the sacred forest will be damaged.

The Lisu midwife hopes that awareness of the villagers will grow and she invites hospital staff to learn the skills and processes of the midwives. This way they can understand each other better. There is also a need to simplify the process of obtaining birth certificates.

Regarding the umbilical cord of the child, it is important to follow some cultural rules. The Lahu remember that the umbilical cord is kept under the stairs. For the Hmong, if it is a daughter it is kept under the bed, if a son, in the main post of the house. For the Mien, it is kept in a basket and hung in a tree. For the Lisu, it is buried under the house in the room of the mother.

For the Hmong, if the person moves outside of the village and she or he dies, they have to perform a ceremony to find his/her umbilical cord since the dead person and the umbilical cord have to be buried at the same time. For the Karen, the person never really dies if the umbilical cord is kept in the tree. The cycle of a person continues as she or he joins his or her umbilical cord in the tree of life.

My vision

I am convinced that options for dialogues within and between different knowledge systems and science are possible if we share the assumption that all forms of knowledge are social constructions of meaning, particularly significant for diverse peoples in this world. Meaning is not just an intellectual act; it is manifold encompassing at least sentient, cognitive, moral and symbolic levels. These can be shared building equal-to-equal relationships between knowers. This gives rise to the communication of personal and cultural cosmovisions, possibly leading to mutual

understanding, a recognition and satisfaction that something insightful and valuable has been experienced. That can be the basis to reinforce life styles committed to the flow and continuity of diversity as a human value for humankind.

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