H uay Hin Lad Nai is a Karen Sgaw community located in a National Forest Reservation in Chiang Rai Province, Northern Thailand. With a population of 108 people or 21 households, this small community represents an example case for a sustainable and self-determined development approach. The villagers continue to practice traditional shifting cultivation (Rai Mun Van), while government policies aimed at eradicating this form of agriculture have already forced other ethnic highland communities in Northern Thailand to replace hill rice farming with permanent cash crop cultivation.

The project ‘Living with and in the Forest in Northern Thailand’ of the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD), Chiang Mai University, Thailand, aims to enable the Karen youth of Huay Hin Lad Nai to study their own community history, their everyday knowledge and practices related to their life in the forest and to their traditional shifting cultivation practices, as well as the past struggles of the villagers for their right to live in the forest.

The CESD’s project is part of the Humanities across Borders programme (HaB), which looks to develop alternative pedagogies across disciplinary, institutional and national borders, with a focus on production sites of humanistic knowledge practices in four regions of the world, Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and West Africa. As HaB’s local project partner in Southeast Asia, the CESD focuses on knowledge production in the Huay Hin Lad Nai community in Thailand in order to contribute to HaB’s larger vision of creating expanded humanities along the Asia-Africa axis of knowledge.

Empowering the ethnic youth

In order to understand the CESD’s approach of enabling learning processes among the youth as well as of strengthening the existing intergenerational transmission of knowledge in the community, it is crucial to look at Huay Hin Lad Nai as a community composed of three main generations, each with different experiences with the Karen way of life and with the outside world.

The first group, i.e., the generation from the age of 55 onwards, did not study in the formal education system. This generation has in-depth knowledge of nature, life in the forest and Karen culture. As ritual leaders and role models for the villagers, members of this group play an important role in determining the direction of today’s community development.

The second group includes villagers aged between 30 and 55 who have started attending school at a relatively young age. With a population of 438, 650 the Karen form the largest ethnic minority group in Thailand. They can be divided into two major sub-groups, Karen Pwo and Karen Sawg, or Pghk N’nyaw [human being]. The Karen’s cultural life and production activities are deeply embedded in a spiritual and holistic worldview. The forest is not only perceived as the source of all life, but also a dwelling place for different spirits, and thus treated with great care and respect.

Living with and in the forest

Engaging Karen youth in participatory community research

Chayon Vaddhanaputhi & Malee Sthitherkongkrai

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Learning through interactions with community outsiders

A second focus has been placed on the villagers’ learning to negotiate state policies through different measures, e.g., through joining movements and networks, and through engaging in research and community mapping. The traditional lifestyle of the Huay Hin Lad Nai villagers has been greatly threatened by development projects and state policies aimed at replacing their traditional shifting cultivation system with permanent crop cultivation. Moreover, the community faced a policy intent on exiling forest communities between 1993 and 1997, in line with the dominant conservation paradigm, which based on ‘Western’ ideas and concepts, emphasized the establishment of protected areas without human inference. Through this policy, the state sought to expand reservation forests in the country and to prohibit communities from living in those areas. Highlanders were labelled as non-Thai ‘hill-tribes’ who practice environmentally destructive slash-and-burn practices.

Even though the Huay Hin Lad Nai villagers have faced state power in various forms since 1983, they have been able to maintain their traditional rice production system until today, through a number of different actions and strategies. For example, the community has set-up networks with different forces in society to enhance bargaining power towards the state for the recognition of their community rights. In 1999, ethnic groups, academics and NGOs jointly drafted a Community Forestry Act proposed by the Forest Department in 1989. Even though this Bill has not been passed, the movement created greater understanding among the youth back then (today’s 2nd generation) of their community rights and the need for action. NGOs and academics also began to support ethnic groups in conducting research and in producing proof that their community was living in the area prior to the announcement of protected areas. The
An unconventional approach to the co-production of knowledge

Accordingly, the CESD makes use of an empowering pedagogical approach that allows the ethnic youth not only to gain deeper insights in and learn about their own culture, ecology, and identity, but also to reflect upon and meaningfully contribute to socio-economic changes occurring in some of their communities, including the rapid and profound state repression, changing socio-economic and political conditions, and mobility patterns over the last one hundred years. Based on this information, a detailed knowledge map and digital timeline of the Karen community were produced. The project also studies and records the knowledge and cultural traditions and to foster social political context. The FTD project makes use of a high-level education to create a better understanding of how the youth comprehend their own learning from local history, the CESD’s project encourages them to learn from the older generations, and thus enables them to deal with development and state policies based on evidence-based research.

Youth researchers learning from their grandparents. Image courtesy of authors.

The youth group has started to conduct in-depth interviews with community elders, particularly on the historical background of the community, family and kinship structures, the villagers’ local knowledge on natural resource use, and their encounters with state policies. Supported by academicians from CMU, they transcribed, edited and discussed the recorded material. In collaboration with visiting international students, they further recorded biographies of selected villagers and collected them in a booklet. First analyses of the collected data centered around community transformations and mobility patterns over the last one hundred years. Based on this information, a detailed kinship map and digitized timeline of the community were produced. The latter highlights the close intertwining between community-internal events and the broader socio-political context.

Film Making. The young Karen were invited to produce a visual documentation of the Karen traditional forest life and resource management practices. In line with this, they have started co-producing a short documentary with international students in order to present their own narrative about Huay Hin Lad to community outsiders. Documenting Learning through Practice. Traditionally, the Huay Hin Lad youth gain knowledge on community life in the forest and on land via face-to-face. The youth also learn from their grandparents and the local youth through practical learning, by doing and on-site action engagement. For example, children learn about the rotational farming system and respect for nature through observation and engagement in parent activities. The shifting cultivation form thus represents a socio-cultural sphere to transfer knowledge and cultural traditions and to foster transgenerational relationships. Also other sites of interaction serve as ground of learning in which young people acquire knowledge from community elders, e.g., ritual performances, such as funerals or the New Year ceremony. Thus, the CESD project teaches and encourages the Karen youth to observe, systematically document and reflect upon these practices.

Learning through Traditional Hta Noses. The Karen traditionally use oral and visual channels rather than written materials to transmit their knowledge. Besides their own experienced knowledge from ‘Field’, the youth also learn from sung or spoken traditional Hta verses, or quasi-realistic spoken expressions of the ancestors. Handing down through generations, Htacentered around Karen values, their particular sense of nature and society. They serve as culturally appropriate means of aspiration when a subject is of basic social importance or considered controversial. Accordingly, the CESD project also studies and records the use of traditional Hta verses in the community.

Exchanges with Other Communities. CESD is further facilitating exchanges with other ethnic communities in order to create greater understanding and interpersonal associations about the meaning and threats of mainstream development. For example, the young Karen from Huay Hin Lad visited the Karen community Nong Tao in Southern Thailand, which has replaced shifting cultivation by cash crop production. Other than in Huay Hin Lad, the village has lost much of the young people and migrated outside of the village, faces problems with drug abuse and has little pride in their ethnic group. Some time, the government’s Long Ban Nong Tao has expressed the wish to revive traditional Karen culture in their community. Since the Huay Hin Lad youth has been gradually chosen to live and work with their parents in the community, they shared their experiences with the village. This integration model explains and described their daily learning experiences in the forest and shifting cultivation forms: “Why should we be shy or not proud of our culture? When we stay at home, raise pigs and chicken and practice Raun Mun, we are happy. But if we have to go to school, our life will be the same. We wake up early, have breakfast, sit in the classroom, do homework, and go to bed. This will be the same pattern from elementary to secondary school, and even better, when we stay at home, however, we learn a lot in different ways, and we are able to do many things”. The youth of Huay Hin Lad highlight that the visit in Nong Tao was of great importance for them to see and understand the rapid and profound socio-economic changes occurring in some ethnic communities, but also to reflect upon their own community situation and on ways how they are able to deal with themselves with such transformation processes.

Socially engaged research on rice cultivation in Asia and beyond

The CESD’s project makes use of a pedagogical approach that helps the ethnic communities learn about rice cultivation, their knowledge, and their own way of learning. They are encouraged to reflect upon all-day life community practices in a systematic way in order to become aware of, reflect upon and strengthen existing knowledge-practices and their transmission processes. From the elders and their experiences, they are able to gain new understanding of their own community context and of dealing with state policies. This can help them to defend their traditional lifestyle and knowledge against prevailing prejudices and misconceptions shared by government authorities and the wider public who continue to perceive rice cultivation as a backward agricultural practice and as a major cause for deforestation and environmental destruction.

In line with the HAB’s overall objectives to develop new pedagogical frameworks at both local and national levels, the CESD project not only opens insights into context-specific learning related to rice cultivation as both knowledge-practises, but also contributes to critical reflections on rice, its meaning and related practices, that transcend institutional, national and regional borders, e.g., in other Asian or African contexts.

Accordingly, at the 6th Conference of the Asian Borders Network, held in Bhubaneswar, India from 13-15 August 2018, CESD researchers and other HAB members from South and Southeast Asia and West Africa presented their paper ‘Learning rice cultivation across borders: a comparative study of rice-spheres’ through different modalities of rice cultivation in a double panel titled ‘Agriculture and Forest Cultivation: Recognition and Technological’. The different papers analyzed interconnections and divisions between hill communities in Southeast Asia and the local integration of rice knowledge-practice based on three different ecological systems – water-based, lowland and upland – and their different rice cultivation techniques, such as irrigated or rainfall, settled or shifting cultivation as well as shifting cultivation, or the rotational use of land plots. Participants had the chance to jointly reflect upon the development of a rice syllabus based on these ecologies, by drawing on the presented local examples from different parts of the world. Comparisons across borders revealed the importance of the research process as a crucial element for the development of an alternative rice syllabus that allows unconventional approaches and perspectives and that can be reproduced in different regions and contexts.

Accordingly, the CESD project proposes a syllabus for an ethnic youth training on rice cultivation. It aims to combine theoretical and practical knowledge, with the objective to equip participants with the skills to maintain and preserve their traditional culture and cultural cultivation practices against challenges they face in their communities. Rice is facing growing pressure worldwide due to the impacts of climate change, the large scale expansion of urbanization, the need to maintain their traditional lifestyles and cultures as well as the shrinking of arable land. Future transnational and regional collaboration in a rice project may center around further compromising process and content of different ecological and regional approaches to rice pedagogy that ultimately feeds into the dearth of means. Comparisons across borders’ curriculum as an overall outcome of the HAB programme.