

# Participatory Engagement for Sustainable Innovation in Karen Communities

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This paper reports on heritage fieldwork by the Mahidol Cultural Anthropology Museum, carried out from 2019 to 2020, with a group of four Karen villages in Doi Si Than, or 'Four Creeks Mountain', a valley in the remote Northwest of Thailand. The research aimed to find and introduce sustainable business models in Karen ethnic communities using essential heritage products and intangible practices. Additionally, the community offers an example of Thai integrated farming, which we analyzed as a case of innovative, intergenerational heritage practice, and that we helped turn into a more sustainable economic mainstay of the community. The method used throughout the process was participatory action research blended with social design, as well as building on a long-term engagement. As a theoretical framework, we adapted Design Thinking to Paulo Freire's Education of Liberation model to create an eclectic 'Four Creek Mountain' approach in order to do justice to local circumstances and establish a shared set of explicit social values. We compared the results with de Varine's concept of the ecomuseum to find a suitable action perspective. The findings show that local heritage practices can successfully be used to re-engage communities with today's broader society on the condition they are embedded in intergenerational co-operation based on trust, and with social designers (urban curators) acting as connectors, thus ensuring the community's ownership of the process.

**Keywords:** Ecomuseum; Heritage; Karen; Social Design; Sustainable Engagement



## INTRODUCTION

iCulture is the name of a working group within the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA) at Mahidol University (Nakhon Pathom, Salaya Campus, Bangkok). Using the collection and databases of its in-campus Cultural Anthropology Museum, iCulture has developed and now operates a mobile museum for social engagement based on the philosophy of RILCA as an academic institution committed to sustainable social development across Thailand.

As part of a university institution, iCulture aims at using a cultural approach for the benefit of mankind in the fields of rural development, museum studies, and social engagement. iCulture started this integrative endeavor by carrying out anthropological research in the Doi Si Than area, Phrao District, in the Northeast of Chiang Mai province in Northern Thailand. From 2009 onwards,

we have visited this particular region five times, together with some 60 students in total in the course of our yearly fieldwork training. In addition, we defined the research subject to include social inequality, which is of high concern in the area, caused by a dwindling agricultural sustainability of the community. This is one of the major challenges in Thai society and considered by many the main obstacle to sustainable development. iCulture has integrated its academic research and learning mission through ethnic community development projects, creating what we called an *ecomuseum community*, and by carrying out participatory action research for and with a Karen ethnic group that call themselves *Pgaz K 'Nyau* (*S'gaw* or *Skaw* in written English).

This participatory action research is an example of optimum participation (Mikkelsen, 1995), which means the people involved became partners in the research on an equal footing. According to Britha Mikkelsen (1995), participants at this level are both “self-mobilizing” and “catalyzing change” (pp. 58-61). To us researchers, this meant we had to act as much as possible in symmetric relations. Our research participants acted as free agents in analyzing their issues and exercising ownership of the solutions. We only helped in conceptualizing problems and proposing appropriate conceptual frameworks to share in an intergenerational way.

In iCulture, we applied de Varine’s and Riva’s (2017) elements of the *ecomuseum* concept, developed since the 1970s as part of the New Museology, to a Thai context. The basic idea is to use museums and museal tools for community development, whether rural or urban. In addition, the word ‘development’ is taken here in the definition of Nederveen Pieterse (2010), namely as a form of collective learning. In that sense, development does not mean the transfer of knowledge and/or technology from experts to a (lay) community, but rather describes the very process of creating knowledge. Instead of a finite, modernist project in a transactional sense, it is an ongoing process geared towards enduring social impact.

From such a developmental perspective, this research project can be considered a pedagogical practice regarding the cultural heritage of the members of an ethnic community. Since we operate within the Freireian educational framework of the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2014), the participants are invited to freely act and reflect in order to find solutions to their problems. This process of knowledge co-creation Jack Mezirow called transformative learning (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). We strive to enhance the capacities of the people in the area towards full competency and ability to perform the ‘design’ of a new way of life and live their lives in a consciously valued manner.

*Doi Si Than* (Four Creeks Mountain) is the name of a Karen cultural district in Phrao district, Chiang Mai. Karen people settled there in the 1960s, in a group of four villages dispersed along four creeks. Nowadays, the people living in the area are facing severe socio-cultural disruptions. They indicated at the start of this research project that the need for increased cash income is slowly destroying their cultural assets. One of the factors exacerbating this process is what may be regarded as ‘cultural passivity’, consisting of only little-developed 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills such as critical and creative thinking and problem-solving abilities. Their absence hinders innovations and contributes to a silent cultural disruption. iCulture endeavored to counter this situation by creating conditions for the development of critical thinking and creativity skills,

with a view to enabling the Karen villagers to find solutions for their families' and community's daily problems. We found that what works for the people involved in this situation is to create a community platform as well as learning tools with which to develop a better quality of life. For this reason, we proposed an ecomuseum approach as a platform for cultural innovation. We worked on the assumption that the Karen villagers have a potential to find ways based on these sustainable transformations to more successfully live their lives.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

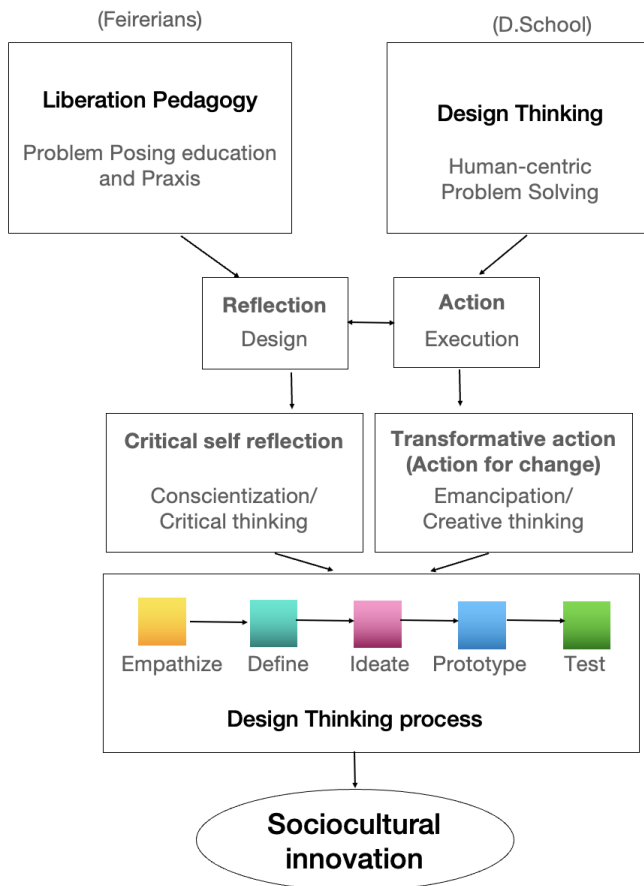
The direct goal of this project was to find ways to contribute to the emancipation of the Karen villagers who find themselves in a state of social/economical oppression, deriving from a lack of choices in the realms of being and doing, and who are facing restrictive living conditions not under their own control. Adopting an ecomuseum approach, we focused on the idea of a museum as a learning platform for and with the community. Therefore, educational programs became the main tools. The idea of a Freireian school, developed in the 1970s (Freire, 2014), fitted the context because of its educational aim of liberating people. In it, problem-oriented education is used for letting participants acquire the competence to solve their own problems. Nowadays, Design Thinking is the approach for communal problem solving. Design Thinking processes encourage teams of creators together with clients to discover their problem on the go and to learn and share in an integrative way. It is in this conceptual framework that we tried to combine and, wherever possible, to integrate Paulo Freire's vision on education of liberation with Design Thinking (D school, 2020). Our innovation is that, together with the Karen villagers, we developed a fusion by applying this framework to dealing with heritage (objects, place making, economy) – a sort of action research, which Schwarz (2016), and Schwarz & Elffers (2010) call sustainist heritage enhancement.

More practically, in our approach we discerned three stages of pedagogical heritage practice, which echo both Freireian pedagogy and Design Thinking. Combining these two, we tried to encourage our participants to take back control of their conditions starting with their own heritage practices (see Figure 1). This involved a process of action and reflection. We made sure our spokespersons first identified key-elements in the tangible and intangible cultures that link with urgent economic issues for their community. Subsequently, we asked them to select which of these they considered essential for their identity and way of life, and then to work on them going through the following set of steps.

First of all, the Design Thinking concept was brought in for solving the problem at hand. We invited the participants to find alternatives to the actions they had selected. This was part of the empathizing stage, aimed at trying to understand deeply. Then, villagers had to come up with new ways to preserve cultural heritage. This we may call *conscientization*<sup>1</sup> (Freire, 2014), referring to the use of critical and creative thinking. This is the stage of defining problems and ideating a way to solve them that

1 Conscientization is a translation of the Portuguese term *conscientização*, which is also translated as consciousness raising and critical consciousness. The term was popularized by Brazilian educator, activist, and theorist Paulo Freire in his 1968 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

urges the villagers to think about what they want to do in order to re-include cultural heritage into their daily lives. After that, villagers created quick prototypes based on eye-opening alternatives. As a means of working with villagers who best learn by first doing and then reflecting, Freireian techniques are well suited. The focus was on the possibility to develop products based on Karen traditional heritage knowhow and then to create a prototype for real-life products and services in the community. We made sure all possibilities of economic value enhancement were present. For the last step, testing the prototypes, much attention was paid to underscoring the heritage value of the activities and products. User experience processes were launched several times in order to determine whether the respective product and service were satisfying. The cyclic character of our Doi Si Than approach both reflected the ethically progressive nature of the Freire educational model and used the potential for solving concrete local situations that is so prominent in the Design Thinking method. The result may be considered sociocultural innovation.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework for participatory research in the Karen community. (figure by the authors).

## CO-CREATING ACTIVITIES WITH THE COMMUNITY

The following section describes the activities that were organized with the Karen community at Doi Si Than from 2019 to 2020 – that is, exploring essential heritage practices and objects suitable for addressing key community concerns and prototyping them to the next level. We also report and analyze how, in doing so, an ecomuseum-like environment was created by curating cultural objects, stimulating placemaking, and empowering sufficiency farming, all contributing to a new, sustainable economic model. Before this, however, it is necessary to briefly sketch the background and physical context of the Karen location and our relationship with it.

### The Karen Community in Doi Si Than

The villagers of Doi Si Than, at the northern end of Srilanna National Park between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, belong to the S'gaw Karen ethnic group, who speak a Tibeto-Burma language established some 2,000 years ago. Of the around half million Karen people in Thailand, around 300,000 are S'gaw Karen, living in the northern part of the country along the Myanmar border. In the villages of our research, rice crops are the subsistence staple. Yet, most of their income derives from commercial agriculture such as corn, vegetables, and fruits. Middle-aged villagers and teenagers also work in big cities, for example Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Household expenses run to around THB 150 per day, or THB 55,000 per year. Against a median yearly family income of THB 100,000 to 120,000, this means not more than one child can get proper education, as schooling fees run between THB 30,000 to 50,000 per person a year. Through education, children are expected to emancipate themselves from agriculture and advance to higher levels of income, preferably in the city. That poses a challenge. Previous research (Ichikawa, 2019) points out that Karen people in this area strongly believe in traditional culture. In the beginning of the research, we had a conversation with participants about the present situation of Karen life, which showed that most Karen are Thai citizens, which means they have access to formal education, primary health care services, and infrastructure for basic needs. As one of their defining virtues, Karen people indicate the freedom to follow their own beliefs and values. Their former self-subsistence mode of agricultural production has been transformed through inclusive government projects, by which most Karen have been assimilated into Thai society. In that wider context, they face social inequity and poverty, and have to work hard at high risk, low income, and comparatively high levels of uncertainty. Since there are not many alternative choices, many have had to migrate to the city even though common labor wages are low there. Due to the economics of scale, the village agriculture has turned to monocrops based on the predominant use of chemicals, which are also detrimental to the environment, especially forests. The yield from agricultural produce has been uncertain, causing the villagers to additionally buy food and life necessities.

Our research intervention was aimed at restoring economic resilience through a cultural approach. In response to our invitation to articulate which aspects of local culture they appreciate most, research participants showed themselves proud of a whole range of cultural objects and practices connected to ways of living that

harmonize with the natural environment: spirit drink,<sup>2</sup> food preparation, bamboo handicraft, natural dye, and weaving. They agreed that they wished to transmit cultural knowledge but were also willing to transform it to have it better suit the next generations and the sustainability of their lives. They expressed the belief that preserving cultural roots will help their offspring to better live their lives in a transforming society. They made us conclude that the way to conserve intangible heritage is to develop a whole range of objects that, though new, will remain related to the current physical Karen context, thus affording meaning sharing with future generations. For this, we adopted a pedagogical heritage practice on the cultural platform of an ecomuseum – as we shall now show.

After we had been working with the Karen ethnic community at Doi Si Than for over a decade, in 2019, a Thailand Research Fund grant enabled us to expand our experiences. It was entitled 'Developing Ethnic Groups Through an Ecomuseum Approach', our choice of words indicating we were developing, in a co-creating process, a learning place that would rely on and be about the natural, cultural, and economic living environment of the community. We closely adhered to the three pillars of ecomuseology: territory, or sense of place; broad participatory governance, or community involvement; and opening up the heritage discourse to global contexts in a flexible way – the three being connected on a process basis, not through any given project (Davis, 2011, p. 134; de Varine, 2017, p.194). We shall deal with this point in more detail below.

### Prototyping an Ecomuseum

The main result of this pedagogical heritage practice is that participants created an innovative cultural heritage preservation method using the ecomuseum concept. We developed a learning route through three of the four villages involved. A map (see Figure 2) with a strong visual design articulated the idea of the Doi Si Than territory. In it, each village has its own engagement (learning) center for both tangible and intangible heritage through participatory workshops. Outside visitors were expected to and did learn about local heritage practices using multiple sensory approaches, whilst creating their own meaning of the experience(s) they underwent.

The tangible and intangible cultural heritage aspects most valued in the Karen communities we dealt with can be analyzed under three headings: objects (material culture), placemaking, and economic practice. During conversations, discussions and participatory observations, we found aspects of material culture – the first category – especially significant to the people of the community to be the mortar for producing *mue sa to* (Karen chili paste), home-made bracelets and necklaces. Taken together, the villagers said these three categories of objects well represented their life. At the same time, these items seemed to easily lend themselves to receiving added value and up-marketing. If supported by local branding, we assumed it would not be difficult to have them function within a successful, creative local economy. The second category, placemaking, here means a way of creating a learning place. It consisted

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2 Cultural drink: in Karen culture, spirits play an important role in every ritual, therefore, drinking is a cultural practice.

of converting a private house into a public platform for engagement with local values through distilling a local cultural drink. Lastly, as an example of cultural practice, we found one family of participants in the village that had created their own sufficiency farm. Below, we explain in detail what it is, how it works, and why we think it is successful.

**Objects: From Object to Cultural Product**

Of the tangible cultural objects, mortar and pestle are an everyday household article. Old-style mortars used to be hand-made from teak wood, and some families in the village still possess one of these although most are now made from bamboo. Mortar stands for the Karen way of food preparation, in particular *mue sa to*, which is made by pounding chili and mixing it with other ingredients. Given the predominance of eating together, the mortar is a key household object in every Karen family. The pestle used for pounding ingredients in the bamboo mortar is made from an even harder kind of wood.

*Mue sa to* is the signature Karen chili paste (see Figure 3) included in almost every meal and food combination. There are two kinds of *mue sa to*, wet and dry. Karen chili has become popular with a degree of spiciness. The chili is mixed with garlic, salt, and *ma-kan*, a local pepper. To prepare it, grilled chili and grilled garlic are mixed and pounded in the mortar. After other ingredients are added, together with almost any kind of meat or vegetable, it is pounded and served. *Mue sa to* comes in seasonal varieties,



**Figure 2.** Map of Doi Si Than Ecomuseum. It covers four villages (Bann Lom, Bann Mae pa kee, Bann Pang bua, Bann Kee mha fah)<sup>3</sup> with an indication of intangible and tangible heritage aspects in each of them. (drawing by the authors).

3 (1) Bann Lom has a check-in spot for visitors, from which to join workshops for making natural dyes, or brewing cultural drink, while conversing with local Karens or visiting the site (rice field, temple, coffee plantation). (2) Bann Mae pa kee has an exhibition ground and hall. Karen kitchen and coffee house offer cooking and tasting experiences. Through a check point community, forests, and orchards can be visited. (3) Bann Pang bau offers an exhibition on rice processing and Karen crafts (weaving, bamboo). Karen lifestyle can be undergone at a fireplace in a traditional home. (4) Bann Kee mah fah offers learning opportunities of Sufficiency Economy farming (orchards).



**Figure 3.** *Mue sa to*, signature Karen chili paste in a bamboo container made by a villager. A version based on local recipe, with logo and packaging designed by iCulture, is sold on Facebook and in iCraft, the museum shop of RILCA's Vivid Ethnicity museum caravan. (photo by the authors).

depending on typical ingredients, leading to various types the year round. It is safe to say *mue sa to* represents the essence of Karen food culture. During this research, the Karen of Doi Si Than modified the meaning of the mortar and *mue sa to* to serve as cultural products that could be marketed and sold to the public.

Bracelets and necklaces are traditional Karen handicraft products. There are different kinds of bracelets and necklaces, the older ones having beads made from the seeds of local trees. In our research project, we invited women to co-create stylish accessories. As a result, after four interventions over the course of one season, half a dozen village women were able to revive their almost forgotten knowhow, and created accessories in new forms (see Figures 4 and 5).

We found that this process helped villagers to put their memories to use in the present world. The process showed how the women engaging in this handicraft were able to build on their own art, expanding it into different designs, shapes, and sizes. These bracelets and necklaces have become popular gifts for Karen and Lua ethnic groups in other villages in Chiang Mai, too. They are displayed in our mobile *Vivid Ethnicity* museum caravan and shop.

### ***Placemaking From Consumption to Place***

A highly praised S'gaw Karen heritage practice is the preparation of a local alcoholic cultural drink used in numerous rituals. Every family makes their own for different occasions, such as praying to the nature spirits before sowing and harvesting, welcome and leave-taking rituals, and in wedding and funeral ceremonies. All of our participants agreed that, over time, the cultural drink had become the most





**Figure 4** (left). Different styles of handmade bracelets designed by women in the village. (photo by the authors).

**Figure 5** (right). A Karen woman who re-created Karen necklaces in new forms. (photo by the authors).

significant feature of the group's heritage, representing the core of their ethnic identity. In order to tease out some storytelling, we created a learning workshop about the Karen cultural drink by turning a private home into a cultural place. In the living room, a check-in point was created for visitors to learn about the process of cultural drink distilling, overseen by women. Visitors were invited to experience the distilling process on their own. During the lengthy boiling stages of the process, they could wander around in the village and learn about Karen horticulture, visit a village temple, or play a game with kids. On returning to the cultural drink check-in point, they could take a sip of the fluid just made. We gathered information on how visitors had learned from the hands-on experiences, participating in the making of the drink and the conversations accompanying it. We also observed how they engaged in spontaneous conversations with the Karen people. We found that they enjoyed, appreciated, and were impressed by these interactions.

### ***Cultural Practice: Sufficiency Economy***

While conducting the Ecomuseum research project, at the margin of one of the villages, we came across a family that practiced farming on the basis of sufficiency economy.<sup>4</sup> The family concerned, consisting of five members, had chosen to live away from the village and had transformed their former mono-crop fields into something based on a different model. The family owns nine buffalos, and plants different kinds of edible trees and vegetables. They breed three kinds of fish in different ponds and

4 Sufficiency economy is a philosophy based on the fundamental principle of Thai culture. It is a method of development based on moderation, prudence, and social immunity, one that uses knowledge and virtue as guidelines in living. Significantly, there must be intelligence and perseverance, which will lead to real happiness in leading one's life.

raise a handful of pigs and a score of chicken.<sup>5</sup> As a result, they spend very little on daily food, except for feasts. All members of the family help to create such integrated farming,<sup>6</sup> commonly referred to as an aspect of sufficiency economies (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2007). The son had graduated from a vocational school in Chiang Mai, but allegedly was not happy with living in the city and, atypically, had decided to come back to his home village to start experimenting in ecological agriculture. It was he who reintroduced the rotating crop and the mixed, diversified ecology, in co-creation and on an equal footing with his father.<sup>7</sup> Their project had started two years previously and both had been aware it was a long-term undertaking, professing to be familiar with and admirers of the concept of sufficiency economy.

### Engaging in Conversations

From numerous dialogues we had with the villagers,<sup>8</sup> we were able to get an idea how they conducted heritage activities in the past. “This one I made when I was a child ... I can do this”, said one woman who had fashioned traditional Karen bracelets (Doi Si Than, 19 October 2019). Over the course of three months, she created a range of new designs, mixing multicolored beads in a process we think she just experienced as a fun play. Reminding her of her childhood and connecting her to enjoyable experiences, the work with the objects, or so we understood, enabled her to add value to them and share her creations with other people.

Process is an important notion here. During the making of the chili paste *mue sa to*, many things are happening. The father of one family told us that, during the process, he sings a *mue sa to* song of his own creation. He added:

Mue sa to is the heart of food for Karen people. We are happy to make this. Every house will always have it in most of their meals. It is us. The most important part is that we, as a family, will be together and eat together at each meal. Many conversations will take place during the meal. (Doi Si Than, 14 September 2019)

When we talked to the woman who ran the cultural drink distillery in the village, she explained that:

Being Karen, you need to use the cultural drink in all rituals . . . As long as you are able to make the liquor, the rituals will survive. Most important is that cultural transmission takes place in the village. If we do not do it, the younger

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5 Karen people count only big chickens, and small ones are left out.

6 Integrated farming means working on the basis of a broad diversity of livestock, vegetables, and fruits as a condition for sustainability through risk diversification.

7 The equal footing is important. In other families, we found a hierarchy among generations. Mostly, the father would be master of the house and in charge of all and everything. In this case, father (age 50) and son (age 23) worked together on something they both believed in, trying to learn from their experience.

8 We took notes during and after unstructured conversations; songs we occasionally recorded on videotape. Both were used with the consent of the persons involved.

generations will not know about the process of making this cultural drink. It will fade away. (Doi Si Than, 7 December 2019)

These two examples illustrate our broader deduction that, for the Karen, one of the key values of food lies in its social quality of bringing people together.

The dialogues offered points that led to a new business model. We found that when the Karen villagers in our project were seen to be trying to preserve their own culture and at the same time to encourage outsiders to come and visit their ecomuseum. The most important part was marketing: how to reach an audience and get them to visit the village? Here, a new way of thinking about existing and novel business models is key. In the beginning, we assumed we could rely on younger generations in the villages to take care of connecting to new audiences, but most of them had already left for the city. It was we, therefore, who had to serve as their platform to reach a wider public.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, from the many conversations over the entire duration of our project, we came to understand that Karen people prefer to live somewhat removed from the competitive, argumentative mainstream of today's society in Thailand. We feel this spirit of Karenness needs to be recognized in our Vivid Ethnicity presentation of it. The Karen stressed the importance of living with nature and relying on natural resources within an ecological system that is in balance with itself. In communicating with outside visitors to the ecomuseum, they often expressed their wish to communicate this specific aspect of the Karen way of life.

## **BUILDING BLOCKS FOR AN ECOMUSEUM**

In the next part, we provide an interpretation reflecting on the following three points: pedagogical heritage practice, cultural transformation, and culture as social design.

### **Pedagogical Heritage Practice**

iCulture has brought what we call pedagogical heritage practice as an intervention for community development. Since the project was aimed at helping ethnic groups develop themselves through an ecomuseum approach, the museum aspects we introduced were primarily meant as learning tools. As to development, we worked at getting a transformative learning process under way. The intended impact of this is increased human capacity in the field of economic self-determination. Such capacity would consist of the power for self-transformation, the ability to design one's own life, and the freedom to live a life of one's own choosing. This ecomuseum project, therefore, is a true human development project.

The way the Karen communities have dealt with their heritage issues is not confined to knowledge or knowhow transmission from one generation to the next. It is rather a process of knowledge co-creation for social impact. What mattered were

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<sup>9</sup> Ecomuseums need audiences. In order to have audiences, we needed to promote the village, tell stories of ethnic groups, and have them engage in the value of the place. COVID-19 made us postpone our plans in 2020 to create a digital platform, similar to a mobile application for reservations and payments for the community business.

innovation and branding of traditional products, and opening up of private spaces to the public, all with an eye to social change. Intergenerational learning was key in co-creating this knowledge and knowhow. In addition, we found that, in this process, conversation and dialogue are important, as opposed to more formal instruction. As this is a transformative learning project, a logical question would be what form is best suited for transformation. That is the area of cultural transformation.

### Cultural Transformation

The participatory action research we undertook has offered Karen participants the opportunity to truly make a difference. We may say that it brought about social innovation in the community at three levels, as follows.

The process was one of innovating material culture starting from tradition. As ecomuseum expert Hugues de Varine (2017) aptly said: “It’s not about valuing a heritage by *giving it* an economic dimension, but to diversify and to grow the local economy by *building on heritage*”<sup>10</sup> (p. 194 ; emphasis added). In addition, it can create even more value in today’s global world, with participants being able to substantially enhance their income from a renewed daily life practice.<sup>11</sup>

In the project, we had been building not only a public cultural place but also a platform to communicate and share Karen values of being together. Participants showed pride in their tangible and intangible heritage. There occurred a transcultural learning between producer and customer, mediated by first-hand user experiences.

Another finding is a change of the modes of production. We observed a process of cultural transformation, from subsistence farming to mixed cash crop farming, and then work according to the philosophy of sufficiency economy agriculture. This process is not so much about transferring knowledge or cultural heritage as rather involving the skills of unlearning and intergenerational co-creating.

### Culture as Social Design

With the iCulture ideas of engagement approach, focus on people, and low-threshold tools such as a caravan, we acted as social designers (urban curators) in communities we had known and worked with already for a decade, and with whom we had a chance to develop meaningful relationships. The community involved and the iCulture team are partners, with iCulture gaining crucial trust from the community. The Karen participants have come to know us as friends and believe we will bring them something good, a sentiment of faith that is underpinned by the awareness of RILCA’s mission to use its resources, while conducting research, to help them develop.

Receiving trust from the community enabled us to develop our research project, which they were willing to participate in. Our role has been to encourage our Karen

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10 Authors’ translation, original quote: “Il ne s’agit plus de valoriser un patrimoine en lui donnant une dimension économique, mais de diversifier et de faire croître l’économie locale en s’appuyant sur le patrimoine” (de Varine, 2017, p. 194).

11 During the prototype testing phase, we sold cultural products at the Museum of Cultural Anthropology’s shop, Mahidol University, worth THB 150,000.

partners, work with them, and fully involve them in thinking, deciding, and acting out the potential for changes that presented themselves. We have been a catalyst for them starting to think about their cultural heritage, to deal with it and take next steps.

The results are deemed satisfactory according to the pre-set criteria of expected changes in the mindset and new ways for the Karen to sustainably deal with their cultural assets. Participants in the community have shown to transform attitudes and actions with regard to the value of their cultural heritage. They have added value to handicraft products, while the application of traditional knowhow (local wisdom) has changed their perspective. On this basis, and after we checked with the villagers during evaluations, we found it safe to conclude that iCulture worked as an instrument to convince communities to think and act in a way that fits better with their local contexts. We are confident and have confirmed that they are better equipped now to find their own way of living.

### Synthesis

When trying to analyze what made the initiatives we just described successful, we noted that the three categories (objects, place making, and practice) are quite different, yet have something in common. All objects singled out as significant are important because the process of making them turns out to be socially meaningful. Key is not the finished product, an object, but the qualities of the process of making it, in this case food, as a process of intangible heritage. The importance of the preparation of cultural drinks demonstrates this as the essence of Karen life. It signifies the prime place of belief and ritual in the wider culture. Learning about the cultural drink is incorporated into the participatory action workshops. Participants learn through multi-sensory experiences and have a chance to shape individual meanings from them. Lastly, integrated farming that follows the philosophy of sufficiency economy is a true sustainist practice because it is an exercise of sharing in the family and community, providing a living from local resources while connecting with a broader context (Schwarz, 2016; Schwarz & Krabbendam, 2013).

### THEORETICAL REFLECTION

When a scholar intervenes in a community for the purpose of both unravelling particular socio-cultural issues and effecting social change, she follows a long-standing practice in sociology. Whilst the former is no more than participatory observation to formulate and then test a hypothesis about the – often alien – social reality that is being encountered through study (Geertz, 1973), the latter resides in the realm of social design, which is increasingly being applied by urban curators. Introducing artistic networks, knowhow, and new practices into underprivileged or otherwise challenged areas (communities, neighborhoods), urban curators are catalysts in developments that are characterized by being grassroots, participatory, and localized, and based on principles of reciprocity, connectedness (inclusion), and scale (Schwarz, 2016). At the same time, these initiatives are neither nostalgic, romantic, nor regressive. What we clearly see nowadays – at least up until the COVID breakout

– are indicators of a movement, massive and stretching across the globe, in place-making and social design.<sup>12</sup>

In museums worldwide, this long-term development appears in two shapes. Emanating from the Romance languages area, the idea of an *écomusée* has taken hold, now for half a century, as a countermovement. Deriving from a post-World-War-II revolutionary wave that made itself felt in all parts of European society, a democratic turn also spread over museums, part of a *nouvelle muséologie* that went hand in hand with the rise of community museums (Corsane et al., 2008; Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010; de Varine, 2017; Riva, 2017; Potter, 2017). Born in France, the ecomuseum took a radical step away from universal museums as symbols of the power of the status quo – which we would now call colonial – and proposed instead an idea about museums as local platforms about culture (heritage), nature, economy, and the people constituting it in the territory, the community in fact embodying the very museum and being mirrored in it. Not confined to but especially taking root in the Spanish and Portuguese speaking parts of the world (in French and Italian areas it remained largely national), it later found footholds in Japan, China, Korea, and isolated other places (Riva, 2017). The second shape of this topographic turn, as it were, and separated by surprisingly strict linguistic boundaries, is shown in Anglophone parts of the world. With an often much weaker formal position of government and administration in cultural affairs, museum democratization there developed along different lines and, perhaps, also with some retardation. With precursors in the 1960s, a landslide change was reached relatively late, most visible in the work of Californian museum activist Nina Simon in the early years of this millennium. She brought precisely the requirements and ownership of local communities to the fore that had been already explored by ecomuseum experiences elsewhere (Simon, 2010, 2016). It is perhaps no coincidence that at about the same time, in 2012, an international Association for Critical Heritage Studies came into being, heavily relying on Critical Theory and borne mainly by Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian museum and heritage theorists.<sup>13</sup>

Though use of the term *écomusée* and its derivatives have proliferated over the decades to the point of becoming a meaningless all-purpose word, it is clear that the present intervention-research into the Karen communities of northern Thailand has enough characteristics to qualify as an ecomuseum development. Central to any such process is finding a new balance between society and its environment, or, in the words of the movement's founder de Varine (2017, p. 33):

The primary meaning of the prefix 'eco' in the term 'eco-museum' as opposed to its use in such general terms of reference as 'economy' and 'ecology', is one that connotes a balanced system between society and the environment: people are central to the existence of social groupings or societies, as they are to human livelihoods and any consequent progress. This was the original meaning of the concept of the ecomuseum as invented in the 1970s.

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12 For an introduction to placemaking, see: <https://youtu.be/FmKH7lxt4HQ>. For an introduction to social design, see: [https://www.dieangewandte.at/socialdesign\\_en](https://www.dieangewandte.at/socialdesign_en)

13 See: <https://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/>. Amongst the founders are Laurajane Smith (Australian National University, Canberra), Cornelius Holtorp (Linnaeus University, Sweden), and Rodney Harrison (UCL, London).

These basic notions are echoed in the Ecomuseum Charter, adopted during the 2016 International Council of Museums (ICOM) General Assembly, which underlines – despite countless local, cultural, and managerial variations – that ecomuseums consider themselves participatory processes that recognize, manage, and protect the local heritage in order to facilitate sustainable social, environmental, and economic development (Davis, 2011; Su, 2008, p. 29-39). It is easy to mistake this for just preservation efforts on a new, now participatory basis. A stern admonition is therefore required that turns the management into an active mode that at the same time is non-exploitative but rather conducive to integrating it into a new, sustainable socio-economic fabric.

But there is perhaps more to it than just analyzing the Doi Si Than project in terms of recognized ecomuseum developments and ticking various boxes to prove so. Analyzing placemaking initiatives across the world<sup>14</sup> has made it clear that (1) the act of making things by yourself is a condition for ownership and significance and (2) heritage-making is part and parcel of participatory, inclusive processes geared at creating sustainable living environments for all (Knoop & Schwarz, 2017). Requiring awareness of a sense of place then is just another way of acknowledging the role and potential of heritage – not as any external given but as an emergent quality of a participatory meaning-making process. Things do not have meanings by themselves, they acquire them in human interaction processes.<sup>15</sup> Social designers then function as catalysts for engagement and connections, initially providing platforms (sometimes maintaining them durably) for new narratives to be performed on. Community members act as experts of their own knowledge and knowhow production and of their own tangible and intangible heritage practices, being engaged in co-creating processes as a base activity. This trend has been recognized as a *socialization* of heritage (Janssen, 2014). The result, it appeared unequivocally, is characterized by a very long trajectory, often as long as a decade, of engagement, commitment, and building of trust – leading to the recognition of the platforms as safe places (Knoop & Schwarz, 2017). The platform, in this case the iCulture caravan Vivid Ethnicity, was in fact spontaneously referred to, both by the Karen villagers and educational visitors in the city, with precisely that term.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research concerned a project of local community development. Our aim was and is to help people to have more choices of lifestyle, which will increase a community's sustainability in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The researchers engaged with villagers at Doi Si Than in order to enable them to investigate and identify problems, then create and find solutions based on their own heritage. In the end, the villagers did create ideas and prototypes. These regarded new cultural objects, places, and new ways to perform and share cultural practices. We claim this to be sociocultural innovation, with which to improve the quality of life, through sustainably shifting life conditions from a survival to a sufficiency mode.

In both the Pedagogy for Freedom and the Design Thinking that we applied,

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14 See for example: [https://www.dieangewandte.at/socialdesign\\_en](https://www.dieangewandte.at/socialdesign_en) and <https://opensource.com/business/10/8/openideo-new-experiment-open-innovation>.

15 For a similar rethinking of meaning, see Russell and Winkworth (2009).

critical thinking played an important role. The participants actualized their ‘pain points’ and scrutinized them in a critical reflection of the reasons why these may have occurred. A major cause was found in the inability of their own culture to adapt to a contemporary context. They felt this needed to be acted upon. Participants tried to design and execute a new way of life by creating objects and engaging in placemaking and new cultural practices. For many, transforming their traditional heritage-making in this way offers a remedy to problems they experience. Critical thinking is here, therefore, seen as helping them to open up tradition and rituals to the future.

We researchers acted as facilitators who both co-created with the local community and encouraged their members to do so. We acted as mediators to connect to a broader public. The entire village became a place for the new cultural practices, turning into an ecomuseum. The villagers’ acting and reflecting in the research can be interpreted as balanced and sustainable self-determination.

Among the many things we learned there are some that others may pick up and adapt elsewhere. We phrase them below as recommendations.

1. A social-design intervention is about the future, not the past. Using 21st-century skills is therefore key, especially problem solving, and creative and critical thinking.
2. Engaging with communities requires long-term (10 years) and step-by-step strategies for growing authentic relations based on mutual trust.
3. Communities are not to be told what to do, but rather pointed in a general direction on the basis of trust. If the core target is to have people regain autonomy, they have to be able to decide for themselves and set their own pace.
4. The ecomuseum is a means, not an end. The trick is that *context* is part of the *subject*, the margin becomes the center. The critical success factor consisted of creating affordances that induce villagers to develop themselves and live in a more sustainable way by using their heritage and knowhow to create new services and products not only for their own community but also benefitting the outside world.
5. Curatorial skills are needed to keep the community alert. For the ecomuseum to work as a strategy for self-development, an actor is required to run the museum and to connect public audiences and villagers. Facilitators guide processes with a view to the longer term.
6. Narratives should be kept open for continuous meaning making (branding, heritage, signification) and by diverse storytellers.

Our own position is that we wish to put our institution, network, knowledge(s) and knowhow to the benefit of a sustainable development of mankind, driven by our passion – as exemplified by our iCulture team in the Vivid Ethnicity caravan – and based upon the idea of doing, thus connecting to an activist maker culture that we see growing around us all over the world. The Karen groups we have connected to and that now work with us teach us how we can live more sustainably with nature. In reverse, we assist them to gain respect and to exercise their human rights by providing a platform and interface for sharing knowledge, knowhow, and insights, thereby contributing to their becoming less unequal.





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