Getting to the heart of the matter

Day three of the conference was a day of diverging opinions and reactions to both panelists and sessions. Issues included the role of women and terms such as “matriarchy”, “agroecology” and “sustainability”, and whose voice is speaking when we hear these terms. While anthropologist Dr. Peggy Sanday expressed appreciation for this unique opportunity to engage with custodians of the land directly, rather than speaking to other academics, there was a feeling that our indigenous representatives were still not heard fully. Yet, many of their stories were documented during breakout discussions. In this edition, we attempt to address both the controversies and complimentary stories captured during the day, both by farmers and their allies.

“We must stand up taller”

Ms. Sonia Migdalia Diaz, United Confederation of Taino

Women’s Role in the Future of Food

The word patriarchy is not relevant for understanding what matriarchy means, said Dr. Peggy Sanday at the opening plenary of day three at ITM 2015. Rather than a system of female power that simply replaces a system of male power
Writing Our Own Narratives

Just as Edgar Hinge demonstrated through the sand drawings of Vanuatu, the stories we tell are constantly shifting and turning, sometimes coming back to the start in order to tell the whole tale. China Ching, an indigenous Hawaiian, promoted storytelling “as a process of reclaiming culture”, and since culture is not linear or static, our narratives are always evolving and must continue to be told.

Rita Banerjee reminded us that stories are not peripheral to communities, but are central and valuable. Ms. Banerjee described many incredible digital storytelling projects she has been involved in over the years, painting for the audience beautiful pictures of honey hunters hanging from ropes and sari-clad women diving in the ocean for seaweed. Her most recent project, Green Hub, seeks to expand the capabilities of community storytelling by training young fellows from all over the North East of India in filmmaking basics and then placing them strategically in growing environmental groups where their cameras can amplify and document local projects.

This was complementary to the work of InsightShare, which trains indigenous communities in Participatory Video so that they can tell their own stories and then, in turn, pass this toolkit along to other indigenous people through the practice of “each one, teach one.” As a show of support for community-driven media, an audience member from Uganda stood up at the end of the session to say that, through the training provided by InsightShare, his community produced a video that has allowed them to successful advocate for their rights with local governments, and continues to serve them in their efforts to raise funds for projects in their community.

Bruce Pascoe opened his speech with a musical performance, reminding the audience of the centrality of performance in storytelling. He cautioned us that the stories that other people tell us about us can often be tools in oppression. We have to tell our own stories and refuse to abide the false narratives that people would use to dominate us. He uses the example of the label “hunter gatherer”, which was falsely applied to the aboriginal people of Australia and how the nomadic lifestyle the term implies aided colonists in land-grabbing. He has begun the process of recultivating ancestral crops that had disappeared from the aboriginal narrative, and proudly shared how his family now plants fields of crops that were once thought to be lost from his homelands.
Agroecology as an Intercultural Practice

In the session on agroecological practices, we learned that changing our ways is not only about changing production, but about the ways we are thinking, as Ramasamy Selvam from Keystone foundation emphasized. Mayumy Chiemi from Peru called upon all to understand that food is more than productivity and that we must start creating the “human plot of land”, indicating the importance of values in any agricultural system. But how do we turn these messages and philosophies into practice? Mr. Ramasamy Selvam impressed the audience with his example of a farmer-to-farmer learning circle that has so far enabled as many as 1000 women and men to share best practices amongst communities as barefoot trainers.

One agroecological practice that emerged as a controversial issue was shifting cultivation. IFAD Northeast representative Vincent Darlong began by stating that shifting cultivation is not only a productive method but also a cultural practice. This idea was echoed by numerous community members such as Bah H.H. Mohrmen and many delegates from the Garo, Thai and Khasi audience. “We have a chanting and singing practice connected to shifting cultivation, to show we honour the earth and carefully select our forest sites for cultivation and burning” said Mohrmen. Others emphasised the importance of seed sovereignty that is ensured in this practice, while commercial alternatives cannot guarantee freedom of choice in what to grow. Inspirational stories such as the community based protected area in showed how conservation and sustainable use of wild edibles, sacred forests and freshwater resources can create harmony between man and nature in this system. “To make swidden agriculture sustainable depends both on individual and collective choices. We cannot only talk about community, or only about women or men, we need all of these elements to work with the same approach of ecological sensibility - this is agroecology,” said Darlong.

However, some community members argued that swidden agriculture is harmful to the environment. Many weighty questions that were raised by the audience could unfortunately not be answered fully, such as how political economy affects the custodianship of women in shifting agriculture and how a growing global demand to produce for an international market can be satisfied. Perhaps we need a more radical approach? In the plenary sessions, Pat Roy Mooney identified the false focus of thinking about “more quantity” instead of “more diversity”. This clearly indicates that this practice has huge potential but is misunderstood and undervalued by many.

With leads back to China Ching’s appeal to reclaim indigenous narratives, as she shared her frustration about the common narratives of indigenous peoples. She implored allies and supporters of indigenous peoples to stop talking about how indigenous culture is disappearing - that perspective is overwhelming and, furthermore, false. We have not “lost” our culture, she says; we must “trust in the magic again.” Harkening back to Winona LaDuke’s opening remarks, she added, “trust that the rice will come back.”

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Women’s Role........

found in a patriarchy, a matriarchy is instead an egalitarian system marked by consensus, cooperation, cosmology and caring, added Dr. Solot Sirsai, a researcher from the matriarchal Karen people. It therefore should not be measured against the metric of a nonequivalent system, but rather seen as an alternative that offers us the possibility to develop new mechanisms of governance and land stewardship. One representative of the Maori tribe in the audience suggested that Euro centric view of matriarchy fails to capture its essence.

Matriarchal societies are not hierarchical but “a shared custodianship,” said Dr. Aurelius Kyrham Nongkynrih, and women and men have equal roles to play in maintaining the equilibrium in society. Instead of continuing to tell the same narrative of loss on indigenous knowledge and culture, Dr. Juliane Friedrich said we must practice “positive deviance” where we look to matriarchal societies for solutions that can free us from current oppression.

Based on the show of hands at the end of the opening plenary, this is a topic that certainly is in need of further explanation, which delegates at an impasse and researchers acknowledging the gaps in understanding. Today raised the question of what agency women’s values have in a society and do what degree this agency can build resilience to external socio-economic and political ecological forces. Is it not people but people’s values, particularly that of women, that make decisions? And how do these values, as agents, mediate agrobiodiversity and nutrition in a changing society?
“Be a bee ambassador”
Chubanungla Shilu
Nagaland Beekeeping and Honey Mission

“Shoot with cameras instead of guns”
Rita Banerji
Film maker, green hub dusty foot production, India

“Leaders must emerge from the ground – we must not be lead by others.”
Ms. Mayumy Chiemi Villegas Huaycama
Tlaola Nahua, Peru

“We must “fight for our rights, fight for our food and fight for our culture”
Rinchin Garmaev
Lake Baichal Pastoralist

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