

LOCAL WISDOM – A PATHWAY TO GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS: CASE STUDY OF THE “RICE-MERIT MAKING” CEREMONY AMONG THE KAREN HILL TRIBES IN NORTHERN THAILAND

SABIDURÍA LOCAL – UN CAMINO HACIA LA FELICIDAD NACIONAL BRUTA:
ESTUDIO DE CASO DE LA CEREMONIA DE “FABRICACIÓN DE ARROZ POR MÉRITO”
ENTRE LAS TRIBUS DE LAS COLINAS KAREN EN EL NORTE DE TAILANDIA

Victor P. Karunan

Mahidol University, Thailand

vkarunan2016@gmail.com

Received: September 24, 2025 · Accepted: October 12, 2025

Critical Journal of Social Sciences (CJSS)

ISSN: 3101-0415



Volume 1, No. 2 | 2025

pp. 225 – 233



Abstract

Among the four pillars of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the one that has probably been the most under-researched is the fourth pillar – preservation and promotion of culture. This is the critical pillar that has particular relevance – not just for Bhutan – but for the local and cultural context of countries in the Global South. This paper attempts to address this gap in knowledge and evidence. The paper will argue that the local wisdom based on indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) of the Karen hilltribe people in Northern Thailand and as experienced in their everyday life experiences over generations, has generated a large body of knowledge, knowhow and evidence that is yet to be fully tapped for peoples' development. It is therefore critical to identify and establish the relationship of culture and local wisdom to development and social wellbeing (happiness) which can contribute to improved livelihoods and sustainable development. Sustainable development, therefore, is only possible when it is based on the foundational principles and values of local wisdom (knowledge and practices) as it exists and is reproduced in the lives of people across generations. The paper will present the local wisdom of the Karen hilltribe communities that has traditionally been the foundation of their cultural and social wellbeing until today. Taking the example of the “rice-merit making ceremony” as practiced among these communities for generations, the paper will show how the principles and values on which this tradition – called the “*religio-cultural approach*” - has become the foundation of individual and social wellbeing – contributing to self-identity, community solidarity, sharing and improved livelihoods. This approach based

on local wisdom is both a worldview and a pathway for achieving – what I call “Gross Peoples’ Happiness” (GPH).

Keywords

hilltribes, local wisdom, indigenous knowledge, happiness, culture, traditions

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the concept of “Gross National Happiness” (GNH) was first developed by H.E. Jigme Singye Wanchuk, then King of Bhutan in 1972, we have seen a wide range of research and studies which have attempted to understand this new concept in development discourse, as well as un-pack its principles and goals to tangible strategies that can be adopted by Governments in both North and the South.

The four key pillars of Gross National Happiness include: (a) sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, (b) conservation of environment, (c) preservation and promotion of culture, and (d) promotion of good governance (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2007). In a general survey of the literature presently available on GNH – as presented during the past seven International Conferences on GNH held over the years, as well as other related articles and books that have been written on the subject (Ura & Galay, 2004), I have come to the conclusion that the one key pillar that is the critical foundation of GNH, especially as it is relevant to the local and cultural context of the Global South, including countries in the Asia Pacific region; viz, the preservation and promotion of culture – has been most under-studied and un-researched as yet.

Why is this particular pillar so important? It is important for a number of important reasons: firstly, because, it constitutes the very identity and shapes the way of live of millions of people in the Global South. We know well the rich traditions and practices of indigenous communities, hilltribes and other ethnic minority groups in our countries that are rooted in long-standing traditions, folklore, mythologies and indigenous worldviews; secondly, we are yet to tap the potential of the local wisdom in local and indigenous cultural and religious practices that are based on basic human values and worldviews that provide up deep insights into the meaning of life; thirdly, local and indigenous values and practices have been the “bedrock of resilience” of local communities in many societies; and finally, because we need to identify and establish the relationship of culture and local wisdom to development and social wellbeing which can contribute to sustainable development of our societies.

2. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

In recent years, there has been increased attention paid to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) especially among indigenous peoples to understand development and the wellbeing of people in society and critique neo-liberal approaches and the imposition of Western

worldviews and value systems on the Global South. IKS is generally understood as the complex set of values, knowledge, knowhows, beliefs and practices developed by indigenous peoples through generations of interaction within their tribal communities and Mother Nature. IKS are often passed down generations via oral traditions and cultural rituals and practices (including "spirit worship") that is deeply embedded in the tribal customs, traditions and worldviews of the indigenous communities (Khupe, 2020). Keya Pandey provides a more precise definition of IKS – "*Indigenous knowledge is developed and adapted continuously to gradually changing environments and passed down from generation to generation and closely interwoven with people's cultural values. Indigenous knowledge is also the social capital of the poor, their main asset to invest in the struggle for survival, to produce food, to provide for shelter or to achieve control of their own lives*" (Pandey, 2014). Thus, the evolution of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan needs to be understood as an alternative development paradigm with its roots in local wisdom and local (indigenous) knowledge systems of the Bhutanese people.

3. GNH AND LOCAL WISDOM

Happiness – at both the individual and collective levels - needs to be understood in the context of one's identity as a human person in the existential context of living in a society – what Frank Branco calls "natural identity" (1994, p.3). Happiness is also based on wisdom. As the Christian theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said "We are not human beings on a spiritual quest – we are spiritual beings in a human experience" (1994, p. 4). Therefore, there is a critical relationship between happiness and the natural environment – which implies that there is a connection between human (people) and the natural environment (nature). This implies that we adopt a "multi-dimensional" vision and approach of GNH to define social wellbeing and human development. GNH suggests that change needs to be seen from a moral and cultural perspective – based on the everyday life experiences of the people, as well as their traditions, social norms and practices that have developed overtime into a body of knowledge and wisdom (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2007). It is in this sense that local wisdom provides the foundation on which happiness of individuals and society can be understood and measured.

4. LOCAL WISDOM AMONG THE KAREN HILLTRIBES - THAILAND

In the mythology of the Karen hilltribe communities in Northern Thailand, there is the concept of the "*Supreme Being*" (*Itatu*) – the creator of earth, stars and mountains. In addition, there are "junior spirits" for water, trees, forest, rice and all living beings of nature (Kaewthep, 1991). *K'la* is the rice spirit. The animistic tradition of the Karen hilltribes is based on this constellation of spirits that live among them and which determine their relationship to the natural environment – water, rivers, trees, forests, etc. Based on this cosmology of spirits, the Karen hilltribes perform a number of rituals during the year. The purposes of these spirit-

rituals are manifold – to give thanks, give offerings to the Creator, to honor a person or group during milestones during one's lifetime (Karunan, 2018).

These rituals are embedded in the culture and traditions of the Karen hilltribes and are passed on from generation to generation. In performing these rituals, the Karen reaffirm their relationship to the Supreme Being, to nature and to the people in their community. It therefore is a strong bond of fellowship within the family and community that contributes to community solidarity and wellbeing. The Karen hilltribes also possess a deep sense of "space" and "placement" where they live. They believe they live in a place or on a land where their ancestors have been buried generations upon generations. Thus, the ancestors' spirits exist and circulate in these sacred spaces. Hence, as their children, they have a sacred mission to protect and care for the space and the land on which they live. It is from this rich cultural and indigenous tradition and worldview that the Karen community draw their sense of happiness and life mission.

5. LOCAL WISDOM AND SOCIAL WELLBEING – THE "RELIGIO-CULTURAL APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT".

The Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC) is a Christian non-governmental organisation working among hilltribe and lowland communities in Northern Thailand since 1975 (Karunan, 2018). Based on its experience of community development it developed the "*Religio-Cultural Approach to Development*" that is based on the local wisdom, cultural traditions and life experiences of the Karen hilltribes. This new approach is based on four key objectives: (a) *Total human development – economic, religious/spiritual, cultural and social wellbeing*; (b) *Support to people's organisations (POs) to help people understand and draw strength from their religious-cultural values*; (c) *Study and utilisation of people's cultures in their daily lives and extension of these values to other communities*; and (d) *Creation of relationships that promote mutual help based on traditional bonds within the community* (Karunan, 1993).

This alternative development approach merges the spiritual/ intellectual traditions and value systems of Christian liberation theology, Buddhism and indigenous knowledge systems of the Karen hilltribes in the Thai context. Among others, this was strongly inspired by what Thomas Berry (1994) called the "three major spiritual resources" necessary to anchor the "historicity of cultural complexes" that informs our way of life today – viz, (a) Ethicoreligious traditions of the modern West – Judaism and Christianity; (b) non-Western axial-age civilizations – Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, Confucianism and Taoism in East Asia and Islam; and (c) the primary traditions – native American, Haaian, Maori and numerous tribal indigenous religious traditions (Barry, 1994).

The "religio-cultural approach" involves people who are dedicated, self-sacrificing and committed to the poor. It is based on an "*Action-Reflection-Action*" method of work which involves both spiritual and material aspects. The approach involves self-criticism, theological reflection, openness to people's values and cultures and an understanding that development

work is evangelisation. It responds to peoples' needs and is incorporated into the peoples' way of life.

Based on this approach, DISAC Chiang Mai has placed emphasis on three key principles that has guided its work over the years – viz: (a) *Option for the Poor – religio-cultural heritage and human development*; (b) *Spirituality and Religion has an important role to play in the present human and social realities of the hilltribe communities*, and (c) *In the implementation of the activities and work among the hilltribes, the principle of "Action-Reflection-Action" will always go hand-in-hand. This means involving people in the process of reflection, learning from one another and analysing with people at all levels - a "dialogue of life"* (Karunan, 1995).

5.1. Methodology

The author has worked since the 1980s with the Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC) – one of the first christian non-governmental organisation that began grassroots-based community development work among the Karen hilltribes in Northern Thailand. Overtime, this work was documented by the author (Karunan, 1993, 1995 and 2018) using participant observation, participatory fieldwork and project evaluations of, among others, the evolution of the rice-merit network among the hilltribes. A highlight of this published research (Karunan, 2018) was the interviews and focus group discussions conducted by a team of hilltribe youth whom the author trained in process documentation which was used to document traditional knowledge and wisdom of indigenous elders and "organic intellectuals" among the hilltribe communities.

5.2. The Rice-merit Making Ceremony

Rice-banks have existed among the villagers in Northern Thailand since the 1970s as a safeguard against the clutches of moneylenders and to overcome shortages of rice during bad seasons. The first Rice Bank was set up in 1978 in Ban Kum Pae in Chiang Mai province. In this village, three prominent families had established control over the villagers for more than 20 years through exorbitant interests charged on rice borrowed by the villagers. The Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC) Chiang Mai – first helped to break this monopoly by working with the villagers to set up rice groups or cooperatives. The success achieved in this village was then replicated in many other villages in other provinces and helped DISAC Chiang Mai to lay the foundation for sustainable development work among the hilltribe communities in the years to come.

The "religio-cultural approach to development" concept is based on the value that "*human persons are fulfilled when they are both "recipients and givers"*". When villagers were running short of rice, DISAC came in to provide assistance. Therefore, when the communities have enough rice to eat, they should also share their surplus to help others. This is the origin

of a new tradition of activities, namely rice merit fund. It is both "development work" and "merit making" – inspired by the Buddhist religious tradition in Thailand - deeply integrated systematically. The fund is revolved to villages where there is not enough rice. Then, the proceeds in rice and cash mobilised from this rice merit making campaign are used to set up a new community rice fund. Given Karen people professed diverse religions, such as Christianity, Buddhism and ancestral beliefs, this rice merit making tradition unites and involved people of all faiths in the same activity with rice as the common concern and awareness of their ethnic and social identity.

The "Rice-merit Ceremony" ("*Pha Pha Khao*") was first conceptualised by Fr. Niphot Thienviharn, then Director of DISAC-Chiang Mai during this period. Its main purpose was to foster community sharing and solidarity – especially among the rural poor. This approach was used to create bonds within the communities and establish solidarity among the people.

The origin of this unique approach is based on the traditional Buddhist practice of believers making donations of rice to the Buddhist temple which has been practiced for a long time in Thailand. Building on the "Rice Banks" that were established in many villages, the farmers from different villages got together to initiate projects both for material purposes (i.e., to respond to the problem of rice shortage) as well as for spiritual purposes (i.e., to encourage the virtue of being a giver and for mutual help and sharing). Farmers set up local committees for these projects which undertakes campaigns and collects rice from different rice banks in various villages in order to give to other villages in need.

This traditional practice was adopted by DISAC Chiang Mai and applied to its development work among the hilltribe communities in the 1980s. DISAC Chiang Mai organised the first-ever "rice donation merit ceremony" in Phayao province in Northern Thailand during which surplus rice in the rice bank in one village was donated to poor families in another village.

The Rice merit network is today a movement formed by a Confederation of rice merit groups in 383 villages in 9 districts in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces in Northern Thailand. They are formally organised as a community/peoples' organisation since 2002 using the name "*Khrua Khai Gong Boon Khao*" (Rice Merit Network). This network is a grassroots organisation with the goal to build mutual aid relationship within and among communities. The network has extended its activities to mobilisation to address other critical problems at community level, such as land, environment, non-chemical farming, drugs, youth, revival and transmission of local cultures and wisdom. They have also fostered collaboration among communities, leading to establishment of networks on specific issues, such as a network on conservation of natural resources and environment, network on river basins, network of women, network of youth, etc.

5.3. Rice-merit and Community Solidarity

The rice-merit network based on local wisdom symbolises the solidarity among the Karen hilltribe communities. In the process, the most important struggle is expression of the identity of ethnic or hilltribe groups, which exhibit capacity to dictate their own destiny and safeguard the strength of the family and community.

Development of the rice merit network clearly indicates the strength that lies in the traditional values and practices (local wisdom) of the Karen hilltribe communities. They have the capacity to manage their own life through social capitals existing in their communities, such as the role of communication in transmitting community value system and extending the social network, or empowering local communities in the struggle against systems from outside that penetrate to weaken the communities, such as consumerist values and capitalist lifestyles. Regarding transmission of value system, the rice merit network has struggled to give definition that is profoundly linked with values of sharing, compassion and solidarity that exists in traditional cultures of local communities vis-à-vis the context of present-day society that is based on individualism, materialism and competition.

The rice merit network has fostered concrete activities on mutual aid and sharing, especially for the poor and the needy families and communities. The rice merit network based on peoples' participation is a grassroots organisation that is involved in a struggle against the dominant development discourse based on capitalism and consumerism in which ethnic people have to live in a situation where competition for resources, soil, water and forest is heightened and amidst accusation that they are the cause of environmental destruction.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The rice-merit making ceremony among the Karen hilltribes in Northern Thailand shows in microcosm the relevance and potentials of local wisdom and indigenous knowledge systems for grassroots community development and sustainable livelihoods. DISAC Chiang Mai in its work over the past four decades has proved that "local people's wisdom" (*"phumi panya chao ban"*) is a social asset that needs to be tapped for community development. Moreover, local wisdom – comprising of local knowledge, experience, technology and insights based on direct life experiences of the people – is also a powerful tool to build community solidarity, mutual sharing and happiness. The rice merit network today in Northern Thailand is evidence of this alternative worldview and pathway to development and community wellbeing.

A key factor in enabling DISAC Chiang Mai to develop the "religio-cultural approach" as a viable alternative to the dominant paradigm has been the integration of local wisdom with progressive academic and intellectual knowledge and research in re-defining development based on the local context. This approach has been effective in identifying the potentials in local knowledge and experience of the hilltribe communities – accumulated over generations – and enriching them with "external" knowledge from other traditions and perspectives (Wongjomporn, 2008).

In moving forward, the lessons learnt from the rice-merit ceremony among the Karen hilltribes in Northern Thailand provide a useful pathway towards achieving Gross National Happiness for families, communities and society as a whole. The principles, values and methods adopted in this approach are also relevant for framing national policies and development programmes that aim to ensure community wellbeing and sustainable development. This is but one example of an alternative development paradigm and pathway – which I call "*Gross Peoples' Happiness*" (GPH) – along with so many other such alternative worldviews prevalent in the Global South today that we need to document and bring into the mainstream of the neo-liberal dominated development discourse.

Finally, we need to re-define and de-construct the concepts of "development" and "sustainability" today, especially as the world moves towards the penultimate phase of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – a global development agenda that is a great improvement on previous development models – but unfortunately, is still framed in the capitalist free-market and individualist neo-liberal paradigm, falling seriously short of harnessing the potential of local wisdom and alternative worldviews in countries of the Global South. This gap will determine the degree of success in SDG implementation in our countries and will continue to pose challenges/obstacles towards achieving real and sustainable development for all – leaving no one behind – in the years to come.

REFERENCES

Alkire, S. (2015). *Well-being, happiness and public policy*. Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research.

Barry, T., et al. (1994). *Worldviews and ecology: Religion, philosophy and the environment*. Orbis Books.

Bracho, F. (2007). *Happiness and indigenous wisdom in the history of the Americas: Re-thinking development*. Centre for Bhutan Studies.

Centre for Bhutan Studies. (2007). *Re-thinking development: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Gross National Happiness*. Centre for Bhutan Studies.

Kaewthep, K., Sewatamara, A., & Vichitporn, S. (1991). *Community existence: Struggling and development process of Chomthong District, Chiang Mai*. Catholic Council of Thailand for Development (CCTD) & CEBEMO.

Khupe, C. (2020). Indigenous knowledge systems. In B. Akpan & T. J. Kennedy (Eds.), *Science education in theory and practice* (pp. 451–464). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43620-9_29

Pandey, K. (2014). Indigenous knowledge system: Concepts and discourses. *Anthropological Bulletin*, 2(1), 17–28.

Karunan, V. (1993). *Synthesis of summary report: Evaluation of DISAC Chiang Mai*. Diocesan Social Action Centre.

Karunan, V. (1995). *PME dialogue process: Southeast Asia partner report 1*. Diocesan Social Action Centre Chiang Mai.

Karunan, V. (2018). *Historical documentation of DISAC Chiang Mai/RTRC: 1975 to the present*. Wanida Press.

Ura, K., & Galay, K. (2004). *Gross national happiness and development*. Centre for Bhutan Studies.

Webb, R. A. F. (n.d.). *K'La and the Catholics of Chiang Mai: Village development in the northwest of Thailand*. Northern Territory University.

Wongjomporn, S. (2008). *Re-creating sacred space through the water spirit ritual: A model for sustainable development in Dokdaeng village, Chiang Mai, Thailand* (Doctoral dissertation). Asian Social Institute.