



## **Integrating Local Perspectives in Cooperative Watershed Research**

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# Integrating Local Perspectives in Cooperative Watershed Research

An Interview with Uraivan Tan-kim-yong of the Sustainable Management in Upland Tropical Ecosystems (SAMUTE) Consortium



**FIGURE 1** Uraivan Tan-kim-yong in an upland tropical forest environment. (Photo courtesy of Timmi Tillmann)

Uraivan Tan-kim-yong is a dedicated woman professional busy advising the government of Thailand on water issues, teaching resource management topics, and supporting nongovernmental organizations concerned with the ethnic heritage of mountain communities and biodiversity. She participates in meetings and congresses dealing with mountain development, social forestry, irrigation, and cultural survival in China, Laos, and Vietnam and travels frequently in search of funds to develop mountain areas and to fulfill commitments to several forums that address biosafety and the ethics of genetic research.

Uraivan is energetically committed to the survival of mountain people and their environment and has gained great respect among some of the ethnic communities with which she has been involved, such as the Naxi people in Lijiang in southwestern China.

Uraivan was born to a family with different backgrounds. Her mother's roots are in Lampang, a mountain forest region in the north of Thailand, whereas her father was an aristocrat from Bangkok.

These two sources have been a perpetual source of power within me. The mountains and the city energize my memories and have sometimes caused conflict in my life. This is similar to the male–female relationship: conflicting as well as complementary.

As a young child Uraivan enjoyed visiting her mother's father, who had logging concessions in the mountains of Lampang. She remembers the fantastic skills shown by the Karen and the Khamu people in dealing with elephants. Although her parents expected her to become a medical doctor—a profession appropriate for a young woman who had finished high school at the age of 16 and was allowed to attend college despite social constraints—she decided to study social science and move to Chiang Mai, closer to the mountains and the hill peoples.

Uraivan studied anthropology and sociology, encountering topics introduced

by North American scholars, such as conflict analysis and social stratification, which were practically unknown to Thai college students from upper-class backgrounds.

She admits that her original motivation for studying social sciences was to “help the poor.” She soon experienced a process of self-discovery.

Studying ethnicity helped me understand my own ethnocentrism. Thinking of myself as Thai, I recalled images of the Karen and Khamu people. Gandhi introduced me to the meaning of human dignity, and Buddhist philosophy reminded me that simplicity is the path of life ... that the great values in life are beyond the material world.

Social science based on critical thinking, an inquiring mind, discussion, and a talent for accuracy aroused Uraivan's interest in theory building, although an interest in urban and rural topics led her to develop qualitative approaches to the study of cultures. Reflecting on her studies, Uraivan says:

The Graduate Program on Planning and Development had a strict urban orientation. Technical development was the highest goal, and approaches to problematic subjects such as relocation of people, urban slums, city traffic, etc, favored the quantitative and mathematical models for solutions designed by development planners from the London School of Economics and MIT. The most interesting aspect of this period of my studies was interdisciplinary exchange. I was one of very few social scientists among economists and civil engineers. I have since favored interdisciplinarity in academic programs and in the practice of development work.

Uraivan subsequently received a Ford Foundation scholarship to conduct a study of rural women. This research, a pioneering effort in the 1970s, focused on the economic contribution of women in rural households in the periphery of Chiang Mai.

Although one member of my thesis committee initially refused to accept the topic, the study brought to light results that were so innovative from the point of view of econometric and monetary analysis of lowland women that soon UNESCO, FAO, and ILO were interested in my research approach. After I completed the study I returned to Chiang Mai University to teach, putting more emphasis on research methodologies and social topics related to development. One day, my academic routine was interrupted when I saw hundreds of people cleaning the main canal of Chiang Mai. I watched them, observing the dignity with which they worked. After many hours of observing them I was curious about why people would do this, so I asked one of the workers. I will not forget the simplicity of his answer: "My grandfather did it, my father did it, my son and my grandchildren will do it. We don't earn anything but we keep the water flowing."

This motivated Uraivan to study the sociocultural aspects of the traditional irrigation system. In Walter Coward's writing on Laotian water management, she found key concepts that gave her the theoretical premise for a research grant proposal in the United States. The Ford Foundation again supported her, this time in a PhD program at Cornell University, where she studied water-related issues under the friendly intellectual inspiration of Walter Coward.

Coming from a society where it was an exception to find women in academic roles, I was looking for a woman professor at Cornell with whom to share my interest in Asian anthropology and the water management skills of Asian peoples. To my surprise I found myself with a wealth of literature by militant women but no women academics dedicated to my concerns. Hence, my theoretical framework has been largely shaped by male writers. Thomas Kirsch introduced me to the issue of women and Buddhism; Edmund Leach opened my eyes to the process of political dynamics between lowlanders and highlanders; Clifford



**FIGURE 2** Peruvian anthropologist Maruja Salas interviewing her Thai colleague in May 2001 in northern Thailand. (Photo courtesy of Timmi Tillmann)

Geertz sensitized me to the links between religion, rituals, ecology, and ethnicity and the role that water allocation plays when it is guided by the principle of equity. Rapaport's fascinating work *Pigs for the Ancestors* alerted me to the multidimensionality of power between groups, and J. Lin Compton taught me to be concerned with indigenous knowledge among Asian farmers.

Uraivan completed a PhD dissertation on the irrigation water system in northern Thailand and proposed a model of water management in a framework of interactions where beliefs, technology, and organization create a field of dynamic tensions. Returning to Chiang Mai in 1985 she translated her academic concerns into action. The Ford Foundation financed a long-term project on water management to generate proposals for dealing with conflict resolution between upstream and downstream users. A focus on the analysis of the effect of downstream regulations on the lives of hill tribes made it possible to assess the important role that water federations play in the conciliation and convergence of diverse interests.

Since 1986 I have been part of an interdisciplinary team of professionals with a

long tradition of participatory action research. Jeff Fox from the East West Center, Honolulu, reinforced qualitative analysis of land use and disputed zones based on mapping by villagers, which provides basic information for geographical analysis. Aerial photographs and contour maps were also used. Later, we utilized tridimensional models to exact scale in order to assess the legal status of territories and establish criteria for negotiations with the state. Our work with ethnic people from the mountains eventually involved international cooperation in implementing this type of participatory work in the highlands. We did not have a trendy name for our work nor did we systematically publish our results. We slowly learned from the different actors involved in watershed management, especially the local people.

I now see that we failed in the area of training. Training was supposed to transmit values and skills for institutional and cultural empowerment to the development staff, but it remained at a technical level. Nevertheless, partners such as Care International succeeded in improving methods of social contact among all stakeholders in the southern district of Chiang Mai. They supported processes that were free of tension despite the legal constraints in most national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

Participatory land-use planning and conflict resolution took Uraivan to areas inhabited by the Lisu and the Karen people. Their wisdom in dealing with natural resources has shaped Uraivan's professional outlook. She has walked through 200 villages in the western mountain ranges, guided by village leaders and clan heads. She never felt threatened, although wild elephants and steep slopes were real risks.

Going to villages in the mountains, walking slowly with a heavy load, was the best opportunity to make friends with mountain people and their environment. Some-

how I was reliving the memories of my childhood from a different perspective. Direct and continuous contact with the history and culture of ethnic groups relieved me of the guilt feelings that drove me to help them. Their dedication to a life without machines and free of exploitation had preserved their environment from ecological damage. This was an important lesson. I noticed that territorial conflicts escalated when animals began to be killed. This was a sign that conflict resolution was needed.

Support of mountain people requires you to be based in the field. That is why I have been working with selected officials of the Forest Department since 1987. Junior and midlevel staff live in mountain forests far from corruption. Many of them sympathize with mountain ethnic groups. These two qualities are the basis for working together to keep ethnic areas free of territorial conflict. Peace is a basic requirement for generating grassroots ideas among ethnic groups. For grassroots ideas to influence policy, it is not necessary to rely on sophisticated methods to generate discussion and dialogue. In particular, issues concerned with environmental conservation can reach the policymaking level if they are raised by people who still manage resources according to customary laws and ancestral knowledge.

We outsiders can make certain humble contributions, working in interdisciplinary teams, meeting frequently with villagers, listening to what they have to say, registering and documenting their concerns, and jointly analyzing options for relevant action. The idea of resettling people, for example, has never been mentioned as the product of dialog between external professionals and ethnic villagers. At least the Community Forestry Law in protected areas seriously considered the environmental role of ethnic groups. This is a small but meaningful step in opening up opportunities for the continued survival of ethnic mountain people in Thailand.

Dr Uraivan Tan-kim-yong is a senior member of the Faculty of Social Science at Chiang Mai University, Thailand, and a coinitiator of the Sustainable Management in Upland Tropical Ecosystems (SAMUTE) Consortium. She is currently engaged in research on the role of local institutions in watershed management in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Yunnan, People's Republic of China. This project aims to document the lessons learned and to indicate opportunities for future policy design in consultation with researchers, officials, and development practitioners from each country.

Maruja Salas is a Peruvian anthropologist based in Kunming at the Centre for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK). She is also a visiting professor at the Kunming Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Science, Yunnan, China. She interviewed Uraivan Tan-kim-yong at Phu Lan Ga Mountain, between Phayao and Nan, Thailand, in May 2001. Her professional and personal contacts with Uraivan Tan-kim-yong have covered mountains and water, urban and rural areas, politics and spirituality, biodiversity and cultural landscapes.

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