

A Leadership and Adult Learning Protocol for a SE Asian Health Development Project: History, Culture and Imagination in Action

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Abstract. This paper identifies a series of specific actions followed in the development and implementation of a health project in a cluster of three Akha villages in SE Asia. This small society faces illness and death from malaria, which hinders the development of a sustainable economy. This interpretive orientation toward theory and practice is drawn from critical hermeneutic anthropology. This development protocol relies on leadership chosen from within the group. The narrative covers a span of two years and continues into the present time indicating success of the project. The project portrays a leadership approach toward educating village adults through conversation and ceremony in order to embrace and subsequently live with a new understanding of malaria prevention. The anthropological research categories for action include history, social imagination, and a fusion of horizons.

Keywords: development anthropology, critical hermeneutics, leadership, social imagination, economic development

1. Introduction

This paper divides in three parts with the first part a discussion on adult learning, village leadership, and the anthropological orientation used in this project; the second part an account of the challenge; and the third section a description of the process leading to a new way of living to combat the dangers of malaria.

2. Development Anthropology and Critical Hermeneutics

Anthropological action within a critical hermeneutic tradition has a higher ambition than to simply collect and analyze data. The mainstay of collecting and analyzing data in an interpretive orientation invites the local population to participate in coming to new understandings about a current challenge—in this case, surviving malaria. This project was designed to educate adults, who in turn, educate their children. Adults do not come to a learning activity with a clean slate, rather they carry their history and traditions into any education project which, if not understood and embraced, can be a hindrance to accepting new ideas and actions. Moreover, foreign teachers, while respected to a certain degree, do not have as much credence as one of their own leaders. Leaders in traditional living settings do not long retain their position unless they are valued; hence, the leader is the best person to first educate, provided he (it is almost always a male) is committed to the value of the project and to teaching his villagers. The leader then can delegate work to others, including women, but the origin of the project most often should be led by the village headman or leader. The villagers in the present case are non-literate and live in a traditional manner. Society in many traditional villages in remote areas of SE Asia has changed little in several generations.

Critical hermeneutics (critical interpretation) was chosen as the foundational framework for this project because of basic principles in this intellectual tradition that intimately integrate theory and action and follows an ontological rather than an epistemological direction. Three categories—history, fusion of horizons, and social imagination—, drawn from Paul Ricoeur's work (1983, 1992, 2005) and Herda's (1999, 2007, 2010)

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research protocol, provided the specific concepts that guided both research and development. Each of the three categories contain both an intellectual construct and an inherent guide for action:

- **History:** the history of the villagers is a living history; while it changes slowly, it is not static. It holds tradition, culture, and memories. When people retell their history, they tell it in light of the current times, their current lives. If the anthropologist knows the culture well, he or she can hear in the retelling of local stories the openings for new ways of understanding and doing.
- **Social imagination:** our understanding of the power of imagination significantly changed when Kant introduced the idea of a productive imagination (rather than a reproduction of images), further developed by Ricoeur (1983) who argued that imagination is a constitutively social function based in language and conversation. Through research conversations, villagers and the researcher can imagine new ways of doing things (Herda 2007; 2010).
- **Fusion of Horizons:** Each of us lives within a horizon of our understanding and experiences (Gadamer 1988); when we come upon new ways through productive imagination, we fuse our old ways of understanding with the new. Unless people can see their old ways of doing things (that are part of one's history and culture) in light of the new, innovation has little, if any, personal or social meaning. Without personal and social meaning, new actions will seldom take hold.

History, imagination, and a fusion of horizons provided the framework for holding research conversations the point of which was to figure out how to integrate the proper use of family nets in defense of mosquitos carrying malaria.

3. The Challenge

The project challenge was to reduce the incidence of malaria and other mosquito-related diseases among selected villages through an adult learning program. Disease among poor communities touches on lives most dramatically when individuals who are stricken are unable to work. The inability to work in fields and take care of families prevents people from living a sustainable life. One of the most recalcitrant diseases that affect the poor is malaria, which, in turn, impinges on economic development efforts because of enormous problems resulting from loss of productivity. Due to a paucity of understanding among those living in remote villages on what causes malaria and other mosquito-related diseases, people continue to live with major outbreaks from one generation to another. An estimated 1, 216 million people or 70% of the total population of South East Asia are at risk (http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section10/Section21/Section340_4018.htm). In this development setting, simply a distribution of malaria nets along with instructions was not sufficient for usage. The proper use of nets was not part of their history or culture; hence, there was no understanding or incentive to use the nets and consequently there was no incidence of malaria reduction.

4. Leadership and the Process of Adult Learning Project

During the first year of efforts to work with villagers to reduce malaria, we developed two projects: in the first one, we handed out large mosquito nets, one to each household. We did not involve any of the leaders directly, but assumed that each head of household would appropriately use the nets. We returned six months later and found no reduction in the incidence of malaria. The heads of family would use the distributed nets rolled up as a pillow. The second effort during our first year was to teach the women to cover standing water in order to reduce the number of mosquitos that would hover over these areas especially later afternoon and early morning. The women would often assignment this task to their children who usually did not follow through with their mother's instructions. After several research conversations with the village leader, he was convinced there was a dire need for changed actions in terms of preventing malaria. Further conversations unveiled a potential process for integrating new actions into the traditions of the villagers. The plan we came up with was to educate one or two families at a time, who would in turn tell other families about the importance of using malaria netting on a daily basis. When a majority of the adults started to see the importance of the net usage, it was decided that we would hold a teaching ceremony whereby people would learn how to prepare and use the nets. Ceremony is an integral part of their history and social fabric.

The following aspects of the project took time and commitment on the part of several villagers, who were highly encouraged by the leader. The leader in this case, selected by the villagers themselves, can be

considered more of a social and cultural leader than the leader the government would be working with. Each region of villages, perhaps up to forty villages, needs to select a representative to work with the local government leaders. Often the government officials ask the person they think can work most effectively with the implementation of the new national policies and laws. This government representative leader was supportive of our projects but did not play as an important role as did the traditional village leader.

- **Organization:** The village leader selected several men and women to come up with a plan whereby there would be a ceremony dedicated to teaching adults how to prepare and use the nets. Acknowledgement of improper use of **earlier** distributed nets was the starting point of the conversation and subsequent plan. People taking part of this organization plan already understood the importance and necessity of taking action in view of the high incidence of malaria.
- **Ceremony:** The day was anticipated with food preparation and traditional dress. Only working adults would participate with children and elderly looking on. The ceremony entailed story-telling of the relation between the mosquito and sickness; the dipping of the polyethylene nets into a permethrinemulsifiable concentrate to strengthen their protective power; and, a demonstration of net drying and hanging over the family bed. Each family head came forth to the demonstration table to take part in this ceremony. Many men and women wore their customary dress and men played traditional wooden instruments and drums. The day ended with food, games, and dancing and singing indigenous to their culture.
- **Assessing the Incidence of Malaria:** Six months later, we returned to assess the number of households that reported cases of malaria. There was approximately a 40-50 percent reduction of people contracting malaria. This information was derived from informal conversations with families. During these conversations, it appeared that most people understood what caused malaria outbreaks and were willing to use the mosquito nets properly. More families started using the nets as it became evident that there was a decreasing incidence of malaria outbreaks.

5. Commentary

In the case of this project, there was a trial and error period before the researcher began to see that the well-meaning dictums that came down from the government and NGOs were rarely followed for the simple reason people did not understand the purpose of the actions they were told to perform. Their history did not include such actions and it was more common to blame the demons, luck, or evil deeds against them than to blame themselves for the sickness, and in some cases, death, that so many endured year after year. The adults in this cluster of villages were willing to learn as soon as they saw something in the entire process that was relevant to their lives. It was the production of a social imagination through conversations and the hearing of stories that were told about some families not experiencing malaria as often as others due to the proper usage of mosquito nets. Their horizon of understanding illness, disease, cause of poverty and their own responsibility for their health, had to change. It had to fuse with new information learned in conversation and cemented through ceremony. Once this fusion of horizons took place, they were willing to participate in the appropriate preventative actions. The preventative actions in place opened the door for increased production in the fields and on the farms. Livelihoods became increasingly sustainable and today there are a burgeoning number of organic fish farms and integrative farming projects.

6. Summary

Leadership was a critical aspect of the success of this project. The village leader and later other informal leaders who emerged naturally during the project, were the primary actors in listening to stories of malaria and how to prevent outbreaks. They were highly cognizant of the difficulty of teaching the proper use of nets because there was nothing visible in the connection between a mosquito bite and later illness. The adult learner whether in a contemporary or traditional society comes to the learning platform with their own ideas, history, and memories of what they experienced in life and were taught over time. Whatever new learning takes place needs to find a place in the adult's worldview. It needs to make sense, and if possible, it needs to be celebrated. The celebration aspect of community life solidifies both the old and the new in terms of generational difference and in terms of new learning. The fusion of horizons about the way malaria is

transmitted was the precursor to the idea for a ceremony. Their own history was filled with ceremonies, each one for a specific purpose. They imagined a ceremony with the specific purpose of placing a teaching ritual within the existing cultural medium of the villagers. In imagining this ceremony and all its accompanying procedures and decorum, it turned into a concrete plan that represented a constitutively social function based in language and conversation. The ceremony is repeated about twice a year. The villagers have begun to embrace a new tradition that found a place in their culture, which, in turn, leads to a healthier society, and increasing potential for sustainable economic development.

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