



The Fabric of Stories

A Project with Indigenous Artists in Taiwan

Baobab Books has made intercultural dialogue its mission: We want to enable children and teenagers to experience the diversity of our world, and we want the voices of people from different cultures to be heard. Books are an excellent medium to do both these things.

For many years, besides translating children's books into German, we have been working together with suitable partners abroad. In places where books are not yet readily available, we encourage book production and promote reading. Baobab Books pays special attention to the cause of indigenous peoples, who often have to fight for recognition and the survival of their culture, and whose living environment is rarely depicted in books. In 2013, a new initiative got off to a promising start in Taiwan, where Baobab Books hosted a workshop for indigenous artists on cultural identity in children's books. A report from Sonja Matheson.



An-Sheng Saporang is 26 years old. He is Taiwanese, and also belongs to the tribe of the Rukai, one of the smallest indigenous groups in Taiwan. I meet An-Sheng in the mountain village of Liquiu in the south-eastern province Taitung. About 50 families live here; only two of them still consider themselves members of the Rukai tribe. The Paiwan are more numerous, but their knowledge and traditions, too, face the threat of extinction.

In total, there are 14 officially recognized ethnic groups in Taiwan; Taiwan's aborigines are, however, barely known outside of the country. Today, they make up a mere two percent of the population, that is approximately 500,000 people. Their history is complex. Each ethnic minority has its own language, traditions and cultural techniques, depending on whether its people live in the mountains, the lowlands, or by the sea. The UNESCO's "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger" lists 22 languages in Taiwan that are on the verge of extinction or that have already disappeared. The language of the Rukai is considered to be in severe danger, as a mere 2000 people continue to speak it.

Loss of land and identity

This situation is the result of several centuries of foreign rule and systematic oppression. Han and Hakka Chinese people immigrated to Taiwan from the Chinese mainland in stages from the 17th century onward. The Japanese occupants who came later regarded the indigenous people of Taiwan as "evil and violent", and committed gruesome massacres between 1895 and 1945; some scholars, however, studied the customs and traditions of the indigenous tribes meticulously. Finally, the mid-20th century saw European missionaries take a stand for the impoverished indigenous communities, but also propagate the Christian faith.

In this process, the indigenous peoples lost not only their land and their traditions, but often also their language and cultural knowledge – and with that, their identity. They were forced to renounce their origins, do heavy and poorly paid labor and live in extremely poor conditions.

The fight for recognition

Taiwan, a small country which itself is fighting for international recognition, has realized that it must protect the rights of its own minorities. Since 1995, the indigenous peoples are officially recognized. In Taipei, a "Council of



Indigenous Peoples” has been established, and there are several support programs.

This is no doubt admirable, but even today, the situation is far from satisfactory for many of the indigenous communities. School is in Mandarin Chinese throughout Taiwan, the unemployment rate among indigenous people is high above the national average, nuclear waste repositories have been built in areas mainly inhabited by indigenous communities, and the question of land ownership and rights remains largely unsettled – restitution in due form is almost impossible now because of the migration between communities and into the cities.



An-Sheng’s family, for example, had to leave their village in the mountains 50 years ago. They packed all their belongings into boxes and carried them on their backs, An-Sheng’s father tells us. They traveled for several days downstream until they finally reached their new settlement area Liquiu, a few miles inland from the coast. An-Sheng’s father was a child at the time. He is happy that his son is interested in the history and traditions of the Rukai. They recently added a floor to their house and now offer guestrooms for rent. Here I stayed during my one-week trip to Liquiu in August 2013.

Rich traditions

The invitation was extended to me by the “National Taitung Living Art Center”, an institution funded by the Taitung provincial government. Its task is to promote local culture, and indigenous culture in particular. The building with its distinctive architecture is located in the city center of Taitung and hosts courses, exhibitions and festivals. Every Friday and Saturday there is an open stage for concerts, and the center’s small store sells arts and crafts. These are just some of the center’s many activities, the most important probably being director Chi-Chung Lee’s untiring personal commitment.

I had the opportunity to travel to Taiwan in 2012 to search for children’s books by indigenous artists. After hearing about the concerns of the indigenous population and seeing pictures of impressive works of art, I had come to Taiwan to look for books for the Baobab series. But although there are many rich forms of indigenous art – stories, woodcarvings, textiles, glass, ceramics and paintings – I learned that despite a flourishing book market, there were few children’s books dedicated to these traditions.

And yet, books are a critical medium when it comes to transmitting values and traditions, as they offer children and teenagers an opportunity for identification.

Mr. Lee was interested in the topic and put me in touch with several members of indigenous communities. In these conversations an idea was born: to hold a workshop for indigenous artists in Taitung on the making of children’s books. After all, older people of all ethnic groups share a common concern: that children no longer know their own culture. Most of them no longer learn the language of their ethnic minority, because Mandarin Chinese is the official national language. Children’s books would be the perfect vessel to combine high-quality art work with the transmission of cultural traditions and values.

Many messages are sent back and forth until finally, I arrive in Liquiu one and a half years later, invited by the Living Art Center. The tiny village is nestled in the hills. The narrow roads leading to the houses are steep and disappear into the jungle. The former village school now serves as an evacuation center in times of storms and as a meeting place. It is in this old school that we hold our workshop.



Let the work begin!

First, I meet with Sheng-Hua Xie to discuss the final details. Sheng-Hua heard about the project through the Living Art Center. He enthusiastically took the initiative of contacting interested artists and planning the workshop in Liquiu. Sheng-Hua is a member of the Paiwan and was born in Liquiu in 1976. After graduating from university he returned to the village, where he is now



engaged as an activist for the preservation of his culture, because he knows that the indigenous population of Taiwan has no time to lose.

The old school building has been beautifully decorated; an impressive poster hanging on the door announces the workshop with the guest from Switzerland. The village children perform a welcome ritual. Now the work can begin.

The group is made up of five women and five men.

A few participants have a university degree in illustration; others are traditional artists and work with wood, clay or textiles. Some of them live in Liquiu, others have traveled here from further afield. There are members of the Paiwan and the Rukai tribes, but also ethnic Chinese and people who don't know their exact family history.

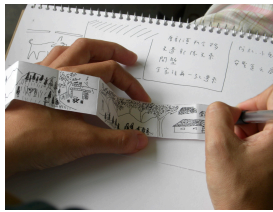
There follows an intense and unusual week of work. We communicate in English and Chinese. Translating takes time, but it slows down the process, which is helpful. Nobody in the group has ever illustrated a children's book, but most are willing to try. What actually characterizes a good children's book, anyway? My goal is to demonstrate how diverse the possibilities of creating books are, and how they can be made by hand with simple means. I want to sharpen the group's perception of what we call quality. To do this, I have brought with me a collection of children's books from all over the world. Books from Taiwan are added to my selection. The discussions are intense; the group proves to be an inspiring mix, especially when it comes to the question of how to depict cultural identity in an authentic way. The atmosphere in the room grows denser with every hour. All results are noted in English and Chinese on large sheets of paper and pasted onto the walls to visualize our progress.



The fabric of stories

On the third day, it is high time for some hands-on work. I present different methods of bookmaking. Then participants apply themselves to sketching a story of their own choice and bringing it into a suitable form. After a day of hard work and intense concentration, the results are presented. There follows a long discussion about form and content, but also about authenticity. The wide range of work produced on this day is impressive. And we don't stop here: After dinner, we have an appointment with An-Sheng's father. He tells us tales of the Rukai tribe, among them the story of his own family that had to leave the village in the mountains.

The next morning, the participants are given the task of illustrating An-Sheng's family story. They may use whatever form they choose, but the facts must be accurate. The artists start by consulting An-Sheng. And An-Sheng himself, who on the first day said that making a children's book had never occurred to him, picks up his pencil.

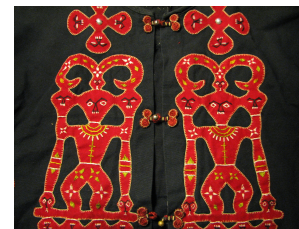


Thus we end up with ten different versions of one Rukai family's story. The books are folded or bound, large or small; the same story is told from a bird's-eye view and from the perspective of a dog. Even though these are just first sketches, many an idea is already very mature. Again, the discussion that follows is interesting. An-Sheng makes corrections and explains why this detail or that is not accurate. There are many moments of insight,

and the meaning of authenticity and identity is suddenly no longer an abstract question, but has become palpable for everyone in the room.

Age-old knowledge, new ideas

In the evening, all of us are invited to sit in on Sheng-Hua's evening classes for the village children. They take place in his living room. He teaches the Paiwan language, as most of the children speak only Chinese. But he also shows them traditional handicraft techniques. Tonight the class is about the traditional clothing of the Paiwan. Each family has its own emblem, and every detail counts. Sheng-Hua explains the meaning of the stitched patterns, lets the children feel old pieces of fabric and shows them how they are made by hand. The younger children are given some homework: They must ask their parents or grandparents to tell them a traditional story. The homework is related to an idea that came to Sheng-Hua during this week: He wants to establish a library in Liquiu.



This provides the perfect transition to the last day of our workshop: How does a sketch become a book? How does an idea develop into a successful project? How do I devise a project plan? We start once more with some theoretical input before the participants go on to plan their own project. Two groups are formed, and both present their plan at the end of the day. An-Sheng's group wants to work on a reappraisal of the history of the Rukai and write it down. Later, the results are to become a book. The group plans to interview the Rukai families in the village. An-Sheng will then transform the stories into art using traditional woodcarving techniques. His artwork will provide the starting point for illustrations to make a children's book. The project's kick-off date? Tomorrow!



Sheng-Hua's group plans to collect and record recipes, traditional handicraft techniques and stories that have been handed down from one generation to the next. He wants everyone in the village to be able to join the project, including the children from his night school. Under the artistic direction of the two experienced artists in the group, the collected material will be turned into hand-made books. At the same time, the

group wants to cultivate a plot of land in order to gather hands-on experience and to secure the seeds of traditional plants. The library is to be opened in two years.



Friendly, but firm



At the end of the week, we are all reluctant to say good-bye. The time we spent together was moving. The atmosphere during the workshop was not only friendly and open, but grew more enthusiastic each day. The seclusion of this mountain village made it possible to delve deep into the process. Everyone agrees that something fundamental happened in Liqui this week.

Now it is up to me to tell the world about Taiwan. To speak not only of the beauty and friendliness of this small country, not only of its struggle for independence and recognition, which the People's Republic of China in particular is not willing to extend. But to speak also and mainly of its unique indigenous population that has lived closely with nature for thousands of years. Of the people who, after centuries of oppression and displacement, are raising their voice. In a friendly and gentle way, as is their nature, but with determination.

If beyond this, Baobab could publish a book written and created by indigenous artists, this would be a most beautiful opportunity to draw attention to the artistic diversity and cultural traditions of the Taiwanese indigenous population and support them in their existential cause. These people not only deserve recognition, they also have much to say to the world.



Sonja Matheson, September 2013
Translated from the German by Stephanie Morris

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