

SOWING FOR A RICH HARVEST

“World in Books” Taiwan – Project report 2014

Baobab Books promotes diversity in children's and youth's literature. We focus specially on the situation of indigenous peoples, who have to struggle for recognition and the survival of their culture. This is the case in Taiwan, an island state in East Asia. The nation may have a multifaceted publishing industry and an animated book market, but the country's indigenous cultures, in particular, do not figure very prominently in its children's and youth's books. This Baobab Books initiative aims to bring the multifaceted culture of native peoples into the limelight and to not only stimulate the production of children's books, but to actively support it too. To this end we held two more workshops on the east coast of Taiwan in 2014.

There are 14 recognised ethnic groups in Taiwan; the indigenous peoples themselves define far more than these, however. Every ethnic group has its own language, has differing traditions and cultural techniques. But this diversity is under acute threat: The indigenous population accounts for a mere 2 to 3 per cent of the country's total population; that is to say it encompasses around 500,000 people. The government recognised them around 10 years ago, and that was certainly an important step in slowing the irrevocable loss of their language and cultural traditions.

The situation is complex, however, and the issue of land and water rights that have not been settled is but one of the key issues. Though self-confidence may be growing in certain ethnic groups, there is still a distinct lack of structures and societal recognition. The absence of indigenous authors of children's book and illustrators is one more expression of the imbalance. The indigenous populations' children will not find any reference to themselves in the books they receive in school or get out of the library.

Together with the National Living Art Center Taitung, Baobab Books has now launched a programme to counter this situation. On the basis of the extremely rich indigenous culture high-quality children's books will be produced that authentically reflect life today and traditions, transmitting mythological stories handed-down through the generations. A lot has already been done in a short time.

Fine illustrations, practical questions

In October 2014 an exhibition was opened in Taitung. It showed the works of artists who had participated in a five-day workshop in 2013, staged by Baobab Books. The pictures show smiling faces; installations and illustrations show that intense work was carried out. The exhibition includes sketches, mature illustrations and an installation with books made of stone. A finely illustrated set of post cards documents traditional millet cultivation, work in the field and dishes of the Rukai. The printed cards are sold in various places in Taitung.

After a joint stroll through the exhibition we had three days in which to discuss the works, evaluate what had been attained and look into unanswered questions. The issues addressed are practical too. How are sketches transformed into a finished book? How can one find a publisher and how does one negotiate a fair author's fee?

But inspiration is another focal point. We look at differing picture books and try and put quality into words. We talk about how to deal with setbacks, about group dynamics and writer's block. Jien-Wei, one of the participants, put it rather succinctly: creating a book and publishing it is a complex process. The spark of inspiration for his book came to him when he was ploughing a millet field.





The group is involved in intense and concentrated hours of work. Book projects are created through extremely careful and profound work – and it is as if what was sowed in the millet field is ready for harvesting. But the stones have to be removed from the field first... Baobab Books will accompany the artists in future too, as per their requirements, providing contacts and expert knowledge.

We take our leave and I travel further, in order to work with another group on the east coast. This time I visit a community of the Ami, one of Taiwan's largest indigenous ethnic groups.



Between tradition and tourism

Sumi Runi welcomes me in her house in Shitiping, about a two-hour trip by car from Taitung. It is simultaneously her residence, a café, studio and guesthouse. Shitiping is nothing but a small collection of houses, but is nevertheless easy to find on the map. The coastal strip with its extraordinary and impressive rock formations is one of the landmarks on Taiwan's east coast, which remains largely free of housing. Tourists arrive in large busses, climb the rocks in groups and leave again rather soon, after an obligatory photo session. Probably not many of them know that the surrounding villages have been the home of indigenous communities for centuries, and hardly any tourist passing through grabs a bite or a swig in the small roofed in open air restaurant which Sumi's aunt runs by the side of the road.

Sumi was born in Shitiping. As the oldest daughter she inherited her parents' land, in accordance with the Ami's traditions. She has successively added extensions and adapted the small house to her needs, and integrated a café with guest rooms. She isn't only a host, but also a textiles artist. She works with plant fibres, bamboo and rice straw.

Sumi lets us use her studio house for our workshop. She's thrilled by the idea of elaborating a book project that will illustrate the Ami's environment. Whilst it's true that the Ami are Taiwan's largest indigenous group, the community is experiencing strong migration to the cities and the concomitant loss of its linguistic and cultural knowledge base. The small coastal villages are frequently only still populated by the elderly.

Good stories are universal

We start working the next morning. We have five days. The 12 participants are between 29 and 54 years old. Their biographies are multifaceted, but they have one thing in common – they all call themselves artists and would all like to make children's books, in order to keep



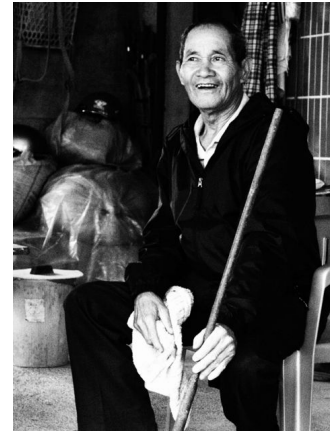
the community's cultural inheritance alive and vibrant. Right from the beginning the atmosphere is open and warm-hearted, there's a lot of laughter as well as concentrated work. Exchanges are direct and uncomplicated. First we focus on some theory, then we engage in an analysis and finally we create our own works. We read picture books from every corner of the world, and discover that good stories are universal in terms of materials, form, content...



Love of the land

On the third day I open the box containing the materials: paper, cardboard, bookbinder's thread, pens and paints... Everything is possible, the subject and the story can be freely chosen. Before supper we pause briefly, present our draughts, and discuss difficulties and the answers to many questions. The joint meal is short today; everybody wants to continue to work on his or her book. Some of them stay at it until long after midnight, as I'm told the following morning.

On the fourth day we visit Faki for the first time. Faki is one of Shitiping's village elders. He heard about the children's book project and is ready to tell us all about the Ami's traditional life. Sumi translates for us, as Faki is a member of that generation that only knows a little Chinese. For almost two hours he tells us about differing cultural techniques, the hunt, nutrition, rituals. So many details and so much knowledge is imparted by Faki, a sober, modest person who talks quietly and prudentially. I ask him what his message is for young Ami. "Live modestly and respect the earth on which you live."



A colourful palette

Back in the studio the participants are given the job of choosing an element from Faki's stories and of turning it into a children's book. After a creative writing exercise everyone dives eagerly into the task, and again the evening becomes long... On the last day every artist presents his or her work. What a colourful palette! A few draughts are almost ready for publication. The artists worked with very varied techniques, some of them teaming up in teams of two. The life of the Ami has been seen through so many facets in such a short time



– fantastic, poetic, realistic facets.

There's no question that the past few days saw far more than just the first few steps. The studio house was a veritable hive of activity. Now we just have to make sure that the energy, enthusiasm and creativity aren't lost in the humdrum of everyday life. Mr Lee, the director of the Living Art Center in Taitung, reported that the exhibition rooms have been reserved for December 2015. I describe the cornerstones of our project plans.

Groups form, elaborate plans, define targets. Sumi would not only like to make a children's book out of traditional materials, but also open a bookshop in her house in the long term.

Yin-Ru wants to document the Ami's

traditional stories in hand-made books with the village elders. All the others also have very concrete ideas of how they want to implement the material and knowledge generated this week. All project plans have been put down in writing and photographed. We're ready to meet again in a year.

Sonja Matheson
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