Appreciating Different Knowledge Systems

Collaboration Needed to Promote Traditional Knowledge

By Christoph Antons

(Professor of Comparative Law, Centre for Comparative Law and Development Studies in Asia and the Pacific, University of Wollongong, Australia)

christoph.antons@gmail.com

Much traditional knowledge about the environment (like plants that are edible or medicinal) may actually stem from empirical observations within a particular physical environment. For people from a different environment and context, this knowledge and its attendant behavior may appear “exotic,” “strange,” or “irrational.” However, it is their fixed point of view that creates this misinterpretation. To me, Education for International Understanding (EIU) allows people to understand cultures in their specific contexts through an appreciation of different knowledge systems. In this sense, EIU entails appreciating different contexts and versatility in different cultures that is similar to the learning of new languages. Such understanding of the symbolism and “language” of a different culture forms the basis for authentic intercultural communication.

Since the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the greater use of traditional knowledge and practices have been on the agenda of policy-makers. Traditional knowledge includes scientific, agricultural, technical, medical, and ecological knowledge, as well as literary, performing, and artistic works used for knowledge transmission. Article 8 (j) of CBD identifies “indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and use of biological diversity” as knowledge holders. The provision requires States Parties to “respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices” of these communities and “promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices.”

Respecting Other People’s Practices

I will examine how culturally derived knowledge enhances intercultural understanding among peoples through greater respect for each other’s practices. Traditional knowledge allows for insights into different cultures through different lenses. However, it may also lead to conflicts when its symbolic value is mobilized for narrow nationalist and/or commercial purposes. The article will also discuss how these dangers can be avoided through the creation of overarching regional institutions, including educational institutions that emphasize multiculturalism, international and regional communalities, cultures, and the human rights of minorities and people that are “different” from mainstream society. One must hope for the creation of “win-win” situations that promote traditional knowledge without undermining cultural rights with their potential for commercialization and other benefits.

Through the years, there has been a laudable shift in the understanding of traditional knowledge and practices. A few decades ago they were often disregarded as superstitious, primitive, and unable to withstand scientific scrutiny. If their benefits are to be shared with originator-communities, it is important to identify “indigenous and local communities.” Judging from the debates on traditional knowledge and related cultural expressions in Asia-Pacific, the identification of knowledge-holders is not easy. Asian countries have often pointed out that their multi-ethnic populations are the result of hundreds of years of migrations and inter-ethnic mingling. Thus, the identification of a particular community as “indigenous” or “local” could become more difficult than in settler societies with recent migration movements or in societies that regard themselves as ethnically homogenous. Recent disputes about heritage, cultural property, and medicinal knowledge show that the promotion of traditional knowledge can lead to cross-border and inter-ethnic conflicts.

Asia-Pacific: Culturally Diverse

In Asia, most modern nation states and their concepts of citizenship are still relatively young. On the one hand, the European colonial empires knew colonial subjects rather than citizens and encouraged migration from elsewhere. Traditional Asian forms of governance and political power were mostly organized around overlapping circles of tributary relationships among smaller and larger political entities, creating simultaneous allegiance to several powers. Traditional knowledge and traditional cultural symbols and crafts, often associated with power, were widely appreciated across regions. Because of war, displacement, and economic opportunities, the mass migration of knowledge holders and artisans was common. As a result, the
Asia-Pacific region is culturally very diverse. There has always been a lot of cultural borrowing and a widespread syncretism, making it more difficult to claim that particular aspects of cultural and traditional knowledge are “owned” by specific communities.

The concept of “tradition,” if interpreted too rigidly, raises similar concerns. If particular “traditional lifestyles” are legally prescribed as precondition for benefits, then there is a danger that essentialized notions of a community’s identity would be performed for an outsider audience of politicians, administrators, and tourists, and become a straightjacket for the development of the community itself and traditional knowledge as such. The utilitarian nexus between use and benefit may also disregard the needs of others. Regional agreements that recognize and protect forms of traditional knowledge and provide mechanisms for dispute settlement would be very helpful. Equally, national governments that represent communities to the outside world should pass on the benefits of traditional knowledge to the communities.

Knowledge Holders

Traditional knowledge—in the form of biodiversity-related, medicinal, or agricultural knowledge or “folkloristic” expressions—may be held by “indigenous” or “tribal” communities. In the same vein, it may be held by mainstream societies of entire provinces or regions of a country. Further, it may be practised at the national level as in the case of Indian Ayurveda or Chinese traditional medicine. Finally, it may even be held by migrant communities that are originally neither “local” nor “indigenous.” The knowledge itself defies easy categorization as well. For example, medicinal knowledge may be transmitted via folkloristic expressions, and agricultural and biodiversity knowledge may be held by both mainstream farmers and forest dwellers that are also swidden agriculturalists.

It is understandable that national governments and communities are seeking greater recognition for their traditional knowledge, demanding compensation and financial benefits, and preventing outsiders from registering intellectual property rights. However, in view of the age of traditions and the widespread migration of knowledge, it is important that rights holders take a regional perspective and acknowledge the potential interests of others. Regional agreements that recognize and protect forms of traditional knowledge and provide mechanisms for dispute settlement would be very helpful. Equally, national governments that represent communities to the outside world should pass on the benefits of traditional knowledge to the communities.

Transparency is Needed

Transparent decision-making structures that involve communities are important in achieving that local and indigenous people and farmers become real “stakeholders,” rather than mere symbols of the locus of traditional knowledge. In this regard, the respect urged in CBD’s Article 8 (j) is very important. Once such traditions are respected, the preservation and maintenance of knowledge and the approval and involvement of knowledge holders will follow.

Hopefully, a deeper mutual understanding of traditions will prevent conflicts over culture and heritage. Such conflicts might ensue from the shift of material from the public domain to private ownership and rights. Long-term understanding at the regional level will hopefully trump expectations for short-term gains from the monopolization of cultural knowledge and expressions. However, due to widespread competition for tourism, royalties from resources, and international recognition, a harmonious outcome may be difficult to secure. It requires national, regional, and international institutions that would demonstrate that benefits from traditional knowledge can also flow from collaboration and not only from exclusive rights discussions about “cultural property.” Further, the mutual learning of culturally derived knowledge will help people appreciate cultural communities and differences.

Interethnic and Interreligious Understanding in Uzbekistan

Diverse Expressions Under a Unified National Consciousness

By Qodir Djuraev
(Executive Director, Center for Peace Education and Intercultural Understanding, University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Uzbekistan)
qodir@quraev@gmail.com

The Republic of Uzbekistan is a multicultural and multinational country where representatives of more than 130 groups live in peace and harmony. Tolerance among Uzbekians in modern times is a phenomenon which has ancient cultural roots. For centuries, the Great Silk Road, which passed through this territory, connected East and West and promoted the development of intercultural and inter-religious tolerance. In more recent history, tolerance has been the result of effective policy on preserving cultural diversity and the sustainability of interethnic relations. The nation’s practices in peaceful coexistence and intercultural dialogue can be models for countries which are dealing with problems in ethnic relations.

The integration processes help to unite representatives of all ethnic groups and preserve ethnic difference based on the recognition of individual rights. Integration is a bilateral process; both Uzbeks and other ethnic groups equally participate to achieve social harmony. More and more Uzbekistan people see their country as a multicultural and multinational society.

Interethnic Relations

The country’s stable political situation is largely due to a national policy that promotes peace and international understanding. This strategy is governed by the following principles: recognition of human rights as a priority; development of each ethnic community in the framework of democratic processes; multiculturalism, where no ethnic group can pursue its interests at the expenses of others; and understanding the idea that Uzbekistan is an organic unity of all ethnic groups.

Uzbekistan carries out an effective policy on harmonious interethnic relations as a precondition for sustainable development. We have analyzed interethnic relations and created different ethnic groups into modern society to create a balanced multicultural society where conditions for the development of different cultures work. The integration processes help to unite representatives of all ethnic groups and preserve ethnic difference based on the recognition of individual rights. Integration is a bilateral process; both Uzbeks and other ethnic groups equally participate to achieve social harmony. More and more Uzbekistan people see their country as a multicultural and multinational society.

Citizenship Education

Development of interethnic relations targets both adult and young populations. In recent years, we have carried out largescale efforts in citizenship education among the young from all ethnic