

Johan Pottier, Alan Bicher, Paul Sillitoe (Eds)
Negotiating Local Knowledge : Power and Identity in Development
(London: Pluto Press, 2003, 332 pp.)

Dario Novellino sets out clearly the framework of this collection of anthropological essays on the role of local knowledge in conditions of social change. *“While the involvement of local communities in developing projects is today recognised as a necessity, there is still a tendency to underestimate the role of the factors that jeopardise successful communication between development workers and local people. The conditions under which people may decide to ‘disclose’ their ‘knowledge’ and make their needs explicit, are very difficult to create. Interaction between community members and project workers (for example, developers or conservationists) seldom leads to mutual comprehension. Frequently, negotiation builds upon a number of misunderstandings that may be fostered intentionally or spontaneously due to differences in cognition, expectation, background knowledge, language and attitudes.”*

Local knowledge related to development and social change includes empirical knowledge of plants, animals, weather, the environment, but also moral values and conduct. Local knowledge is not a fixed body of facts but rather a pool of ideas which is drawn upon for specific purposes and to meet specific needs. As with all pools, there are flows of new ideas from outside. Local knowledge never stands still; it is dynamic and strategic, giving rise to a plethora of diverse knowledges which are socially embedded.

All knowledge is power. Knowledge is acutely political because what is excluded and who is qualified to know involves acts of power, authority, and legitimation. Thus the importance of knowing gender relations and class-status differences when looking at expressions of local knowledge.

Local knowledge is also ideology. Raminder Kaur in his essay studies the way attitudes toward the nuclear weapons of India and Pakistan are reflected just three months after the nuclear weapons tests of 1998 in the Ganapati festival in Mumbai (Bombay). Within the Ganapati festival there are parades with floats or fixed shrines which display socio-economic tableau which are presented to Ganapati, the elephant-headed deity also known as Ganesh, who is considered ‘the remover of obstacles.’ As Kaur notes *“The public Ganapati festival as we know it today was started by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in the 1890s as a means to circumvent colonial laws prohibiting collective gatherings. By using the pretext of a religious festival and the British reservations against interfering in the religious affairs of indigenous communities, Tilak was able to disseminate his political views to large audiences. Similarly, today’s political uses of the festival represent dynamics of nationalism with differing political motives and contexts.”*

Here we see local knowledge and values integrating a new political factor — the nuclear weapon tests of India and Pakistan — into a religious framework — the idea that a god can remove obstacles which men have created — and the expression of different attitudes to nuclear weapons in a religious festival which had already been transformed so that political views could be expressed.

Two other essays deal with the use of local knowledge — or what is said to be local knowledge — in cases of political violence. Johan Pottier, one of the editors, presents a study “Modern Information Warfare Versus Empirical Knowledge: Framing ‘The Crisis’ in Eastern Zaire, 1996”. The United Nations has been increasingly drawn into the violent political situation of Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo, in part as a consequence of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, its spillover effect in Zaire, and the political-economic rivalry of the new leadership in both Rwanda and Uganda. Knowledge of the local situation in eastern Zaire held by academic writers was largely overlooked by the ambassadors at the UN while they accepted the position of the Rwandan government that the Tutsi in Kivu were persecuted because of their ethnicity by Rwandan Hutu who had fled Rwanda and continued the genocide. As Pottier states *‘The events in eastern Zaire, 1996, illustrate the danger — already well understood in debates on technology — that ‘local knowledge’ is still treated as homogeneous, incontestable and applicable over fairly extensive areas.’*

Another essay dealing with the consequences of violence is Alex Argenti-Pillen “The Global Flow of Knowledge on War Trauma: The Role of the Cinnamon Garden Culture in Sri Lanka”. The Cinnamon Garden is an area of the capital Colombo where are housed many NGOs dealing with mental health, humanitarian aid workers and other Sri Lankan intellectuals. There is a growing awareness that war and armed violence leaves deep scars upon people which influences their future behaviour. These scars are called in the largely Western mental health vocabulary “post-traumatic stress disorder” and are thought to predispose peoples to further violent upheaval and ongoing cycles of violence. This action and its consequences is what is known in both Hinduism and Buddhism as *karma*. The problem facing modern Sri Lankan mental health workers is to translate terms from English and its Western analytical framework into terms understandable by rural Sri Lankans who had been caught up in the violence and counter-violence of the Government versus the leftist JVP insurgency in the south of Sri Lanka. The same problems of war trauma exist in the better known conflicts of the north between the Government and the Tamils.

Much of the terminology for mental health states exists in Buddhist philosophy. However, in practice, many rural Sri Lankans, while Buddhists, have not studied Buddhist philosophical thought. When a religious service or rite is needed, people go to find a monk who will do the ritual. Thus when some mental health words are translated into Colombo-style ‘high Sinhala’, even though the term has Buddhist roots, it is understood with difficulty by the people who are to be helped. Yet at a popular level in rural Sri Lanka “mental illness” is seen as a total inability to function and so the lasting but subtle forms of post-conflict trauma are not seen by village people as a mental illness requiring care.

In this Sri Lankan case, there is a need for three levels of approach. The first is an understanding of the ‘local knowledge’ — the way people understand their feelings, ideas, motivations, the consequences of action. The second level is an understanding of Buddhist philosophical thought which colors but is not identical with popular perceptions. Buddhism has long been concerned with the way in which feelings and ideas arise and how they influence action. However, time and practice has given Buddhist monks and their institutions a crust which makes the healing aspects of Buddhism largely unrecognized. The third level is Western mental health, especially those elements which arise from a study of war-torn societies. While it is difficult to be a ‘cultural broker’ or a ‘cultural facilitator’, in order to be helpful, one must feel at ease with these three levels of analysis.

These essays are a useful presentation of the ways in which local knowledge is used in the development process. As has been pointed out, development is “*often a messy business of decisions that have to be taken in difficult circumstances on the basis of inadequate knowledge, reactions, counter-reactions and compromises, and it always constitutes a learning process for all involved.*”

Rene Wadlow



Drawing: Garretta Lamore