

Plant Knowledge Transmission and the Resilience of Karen Poetics in Northern Thailand

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Abstract

This article reveals the complex cultural meanings of Karen poetics (*hta*), which encode diverse plant names, seasonal knowledge, and ecological ethics among Karen communities in Northern Thailand. The study focuses on the processes of plant knowledge transmission through poetics and related stories that circulate within households, ritual spaces, and community gatherings. Ethnographic fieldwork and local plant surveys were employed to document poetics and narratives that include local plants and their uses. The findings indicate a wide range of plant-related narratives that connect human communities with their ecological systems, demonstrating the deep-rooted relationship between the Karen and their surrounding forest environments as expressed through the singing of *hta*. This also reflects the long-term adaptation of Karen communities to mountainous environments. The collective memory embedded in these poetics supports the resilience strategies of Karen communities and serves as a method for negotiating with government officers by demonstrating sustainable ways of living with nature, highlighting their capacity to manage and coexist with forest landscapes.

Keywords: Karen poetics, plant knowledge, oral poetry, northern Thailand

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Introduction

The Karen community is the largest ethnic group in Thailand, with settlements primarily located in northern, western, and parts of central Thailand. Often referred to by outsiders as *Kariang* or *Yang*, Karen people in Thailand are internally diverse and are broadly classified into two major sub-groups: Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. The majority belong to the Sgaw Karen, who identify themselves as Pgaz K’Nyau, meaning “human being” (Laungaramsri, 2003, p. 23). In northern Thailand, Karen settlements are typically located at elevations between 500 and 1,000 meters, positioned between lowland Tai populations and other upland ethnic groups such as the Hmong, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and Yao (Anderson, 1993, pp. 19–35). Living in mountainous landscapes and forested environments, Karen communities have long maintained close and reciprocal relationships with their surrounding ecosystems. The Pgaz K’Nyau, in particular, are frequently described as attentive and responsible environmental stewards (Forsyth & Walker, 2008). Their ecological worldview positions humans as an integral part of the natural world rather than as separate from it. Karen communities are recognized for their environmental stewardship, grounded in traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual and ethnical obligations to the forest. However, the relationship between Karen communities in highlands of Thailand and other agencies has increasingly become subject to pressure from conservation policies, land disputes and encounter with modernity that have led to erosion of traditional practices. Observing the transmission of plant knowledge encoded in Karen poetics, therefore reflects the deep understanding of traditional ecological knowledge and resilience processes among Karen communities.

This paper addresses this analytical gap by examining plant knowledge transmission through poetics among Karen communities in northern Thailand. Local plant narratives are fundamental to the construction and transmission of traditional plant knowledge. These narratives are expressed through oral poetry (*hta*), everyday storytelling, and practical engagement with plants. Karen poetics function as mnemonic devices that encode ecological knowledge within cultural forms. Plants are not treated merely as passive resources but as relational entities embedded in social memory and ethical relations with the forest. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in five villages, namely Mae Klang Luang, Nong Tao, Khun Pae, Mae Sa-pok, and Pok Ka-long villages, in Chiang Mai Province, the study explores how plant knowledge is transmitted by conveying diverse plant names, seasonal knowledge, and ecological ethics. It demonstrates how Karen communities negotiate, adapt, and construct meanings that revitalize and sustain human-environment relationships and ways of life in northern Thailand.

Literature Review

Plant Knowledge

The study of plant knowledge within indigenous and local communities has undergone intensive research over recent decades, encompassing ethnobotanical, cultural, and interdisciplinary approaches. Salmón (2012) demonstrated the relationship between indigenous communities and plants by showing that plants occupy a position reflecting social categories, with the moral and behavioral attributes of those human social categories projected onto the corresponding categories of people. This perspective moved beyond a purely scientific approach by revealing plants as social actors embedded in human-nature relations within networks of reciprocity.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is an adaptive knowledge and beliefs that passed down across generations related to living beings with one another and with their environment (Berkes, 1999). Traditional ecological knowledge is not only transmitted through practical knowledge such as farming forest management. Traditional Ecological Knowledge can be observed through cultural forms such as oral poetry, ritual and everyday story telling. This paper focus on Karen poetics (*hta*) as a medium of traditional ecological knowledge transmission encoded in the form of oral poetry, functioning both as repository of traditional knowledge and as a mean of transmitting plant knowledge across generations within Karen communities.

Collective Memory

As Halbwachs argued, individual memory is constructed through interaction and communication with others, because individuals must participate in a collective symbolic order to differentiate, interpret, and remember past events (Erll, 2011, p. 15). The interaction of “everyday life practice” and “ritual” generates different forms of cultural memory. Halbwachs’ view of memory is that it serves as a tool to reconnect us with past experiences. “A remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a construction prepared, furthermore, by reconstruction of early periods wherein past images had already been altered” (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 68). Everyday practice and interaction in communicative memory constitute temporary forms of memory that individuals can personally interpret, shaped by the external factors influencing the self-presentation and memory of individuals, which are in turn shaped by collective memory. Individual memory is organic and always interplays with a collective memory of the groups. “One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). The concept of collective memory is particularly productive for understanding Karen poetics which function as sites where individual experience and communal knowledge converge in act of remembrance that are simultaneously personal and collective. Karen poetics are treated as “cultural memory” (Assmann, 2011) that is a formalized form of collective memory that serves as a repository of local knowledge accumulated over generations. The transmission of cultural memory integrating ecological knowledge and collective memories, supports the understanding and reproduction of ecological knowledge across generations, even under condition of the erosion of cultural knowledge.

Methodology

Data collection focused on five primary field sites. In Mae Wang District, data were collected from Nong Tao Village and Mae Sa-pok Village. In Chom Thong District, fieldwork was conducted in Mae Klang Luang Village and Khun Pae Village. The final site was Pok Ka-long Village in Galyani Vadhana District. A multi-sited ethnographic approach was employed to compare Karen poetics across different locations and to analyze similarities and differences in meanings and narratives associated with plants.

The study employed group interviews using semi-structured questions. Semi-structured interviews were supported by detailed field notes and audio recordings. Interviews were conducted between April and December 2025. After each interview, audio recordings were transcribed, and the accuracy of the narratives was verified by revisiting the key informants to reconfirm the content. Data were documented through video recordings to capture local plant narratives in the forms of oral poetry (*hta*) and storytelling. In addition, the author conducted

participant observation in nearby forests and orchard gardens to observe plant species, explore their locations and uses, and listen to narratives related to specific plants encountered during field observation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with organizing and reviewing the compiled list of local plant narratives collected during the fieldwork. The researcher analyzed the data by interpreting participant observations, interview content, and everyday conversations recorded during fieldwork. The narratives were categorized into thematic groups reflecting relationships between humans and nature, including rice, flora and fauna, forests and mountains, and agricultural activities. Narratives were repeatedly examined through field notes and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and themes through a triangulation process.

Results

Karen poetics (*hta*) functions not only as a narrative form describing plant usage but also carries layered meanings within Karen communities. The implications of *hta* can be understood in at least two ways. First, *hta* conveys cultural meanings by transmitting Karen values and ways of life to younger generations. Second, *hta* operates as a temporal indicator, linking specific plants, animals, and natural phenomena to seasonal cycles and agricultural activities. This section elaborates on these two implications by examining how *hta* integrates relationships between plants, humans, and seasonal cycles.

Cultural Meanings and Seasonal Indicators

Oral Poetry in Karen Language	Meaning
<i>La le chri pu ho wo por</i>	Go to the field, flowers of phak i-luen
<i>La le chri pu ho wo por</i>	Go to the field, flowers of Phak i-luen
<i>Se hyeu ba na ho chi nor</i>	Thinking of you, sitting and crying
<i>Se hyeu ba na ho chi nor</i>	Thinking of you, sitting and crying
<i>La le chri pu ho wo pa</i>	Go to the field, flowers of phak i-luen
<i>La le chri pu ho wo pa</i>	Go to the field, flowers of phak i-luen
<i>Se hyeu ba na mae tee ywa</i>	Thinking of you, tears flow
<i>Se hyeu ba na mae tee ywa</i>	Thinking of you, tears flow

Note. * *phak i-luen* = *Isodon ternifolius* (D.Don) Kudo

Composition of Karen Poetic

Scene: Field

Main plant: *Phak i-luen* (*Isodon ternifolius* [D.Don] Kudo)

Action: Thinking of others, sitting and crying

Implications

1. This *hta* expresses a sense of longing and reminiscence triggered by encountering *phak i-luen* in the field. The plant evokes memories of collective labor and shared moments, as *phak i-luen* is traditionally cooked and eaten together after working in the fields. Its distinctive mint-like aroma becomes associated with communal meals and cooperation during agricultural seasons.

2. The planting of *phak i-luen* alongside rice serves as a seasonal indicator. Its presence in the fields signals the rice harvesting period, typically from late October to early November, when community members gather to assist one another in harvesting ripe rice. The plant thus links emotional memory, social relations, and agricultural cycles.

Ecological Ethic

Oral Poetry in Karen Language	Meaning
Ta pwa o di ta mue di	The forest still exists, still lives in happiness
Ta pwa o di ta mue di	The forest still exists, still lives in happiness
Li lu pli bor bo a sui	Squirrels, flying squirrels, wrap themselves, make nests
Li lu pli bor bo a sui	Squirrels, flying squirrels, wrap themselves, make nests
Ta pwa o di ta mue ma	The forest still exists, living very happily
Ta pwa o di ta mue ma	The forest still exists, living very happily
Li lu pli bor bo a sa	Squirrels, flying squirrels, wrap themselves
Li lu pli bor bo a sa	Squirrels, flying squirrels, wrap themselves

Composition of hta

Scene: Forest

Main animals: Squirrels and flying squirrels

Action: Nesting and sheltering

Implications

1. This *hta* emphasizes the importance of forests as spaces that sustain life and well-being. The imagery of squirrels nesting and wrapping themselves parallels how forests provide shelter and security for humans. The poem conveys its ethical message through the behavior of squirrels and flying squirrels, framing forest protection as a matter of shared survival between human (metaphorically represented by animals) and the forest.
2. The poem highlights forest biodiversity and interdependence, reinforcing the belief that humans must protect ecological diversity in the same way animals depend on forests for survival. This poem presents the forest as living entity linked to the human community through the imagery of a forest as “exists” and “lives in happiness,” reflecting a reciprocal relationship between humans and the forest environment.

Discussion

Plant Knowledge Transmission

Based on ethnographic observation and interviews, local plant knowledge, including plant species, growth patterns, surrounding environments, and agricultural practices, is repeatedly referenced and reinforced through oral poetry across multiple contexts. Informants emphasized that these narratives often serve as foundational stories shaping practical knowledge related to seed collection, seasonal agricultural activities, and land use. This integration of practice and narrative reflects how Pgaz K’Nyau culture is constituted through the interdependence of natural ecosystems and cultural practices, highlighting the importance of protecting both tangible and intangible cultural expressions alongside biodiversity (Tamborrino et al., 2022).

Local plant narratives among the Karen articulate a worldview in which humans coexist with a natural world, where all beings possess spiritual owners. This belief system is consistently expressed through oral poetry that encodes ecological understanding, ethical conduct, and social values (Maniratanavongsiri, 1997). *Hta* is frequently recognized as a repository of ancient wisdom and traditional ecological knowledge, illustrating how Pgaz K’Nyau communities sustain harmonious relationships with their environments. Beyond narrating human-nature relations, local plant narratives also identify specific plant species, ecological settings, cultural meanings, and seasonal cycles, demonstrating the multifunctional role of oral poetry in constructing local plant knowledge among Karen communities.

Transmission and Resilient Local Plant Knowledge

Karen poetics can be used as references to observe the biodiversity of plants and animals that closely correspond to seasonal change and agricultural practices, illustrating the community’s deep environmental knowledge and adaptive strategies. These narratives contribute to broader understandings of cultural diversity among ethnic groups in Northern Thailand, functioning not only as cultural expressions but also as repositories of ecological knowledge. Cultural diversity is defined as the variety of expressions, languages, practices, and traditions within societies that supports biodiversity conservation by embedding ecological knowledge in rituals, songs, and everyday practices (Bates et al., 2021, p. 163–174). The findings suggest that oral poetry constitutes a form of ecological memory that integrates lived experience, collective memory, and environmental observation, offering an alternative perspective on human-ecological relationships beyond resource-based interpretations. By foregrounding narrative and performance, this research highlights how intangible cultural practices contribute to food security, ecological balance, and community continuity. The evidence suggests that Karen poetics encode the long-term ecological knowledge required for effective forest management.

Summary

The research sought to connect the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in the form of ecological memory with concrete examples of Karen poetics. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and observation, the results reveal the deep understanding of the relationship between plant, human and ecological knowledge – not only regarding agricultural practice but also in the cultural meaning derived from the specific characteristics of plants, animals, and forest, and to the relationship between humans and flora and fauna in mountainous areas. Moreover, it reveals seasonal cycle to indicate important timeline of Pgaz K’Nyau’s way of life. This research sheds light on the study of narratives that reveal the connection to

collective memory of local people articulated through poetry as one form of oral poetry to inscribe of the close relationship of humans to ecological settings and as reminder of time and an indicator of the initial point to start agricultural activities. This enriches understanding of daily life and plant usage and can be one of models of how people can live sustainably within the forest. This research will be one of the focal points to develop the understanding of how Karen food security works without disrupting the balance the natural world.

Recommendation

Future research may further explore how narrative-based ecological knowledge can advance the study of food security and community resilience through locally grounded strategies that sustain livelihoods while maintaining balance within forest and mountainous environments. Comparative studies across Karen communities and across different highland communities in mainland Southeast Asia would help to clarify which feature of oral poetry-based transmission are specific to the Karen communities and which may reflect boarder patterns in oral traditions and plant knowledge transmission across generations.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Claude, an AI-assisted writing tool, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Claude, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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