

Tradition and New Ways of Learning Among Akha and Lahu: Reinterpreting Malaria Prevention

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SUMMARY

We want to tell you a story in one setting. This is a new way of learning – how to prevent the high incidence of malaria. Our aim was to work out a way to get people to use mosquito nets.

Hermeneutics, this is the key to narrative and story.

As an anthropologist and a nurse we tried to reduce the incidence of malaria in three hill tribe villages in northern Burma. We used narrative and identity. We got to know the people. This was an adult learning programme, based on anthropological study.

We spent over three years working with the Akha and Lahu villagers on education and health projects, visiting three times a year. We built a relationship with these three villages.

As they became aware, they found the keys to adult learning lie in the stories and narratives of the people. People have to be open to learn, to come to a new understanding. Children are different from adults when it comes to learning.

Over 70 percent of Southeast Asia suffers from malaria. When struck down by malaria, the people are unable to work and therefore the incidence of poverty increases.

The obvious answer was the provision of family size mosquito nets. But given the villagers did not link mosquitoes with malaria, how could they prevent people rolling them up and using them as a pillow?

Narrative and a new conversation needed to be introduced. Adults practice, reinterpreting what malaria is. They were aware that they are sick.

We have to look at who they are, their story, and create a new story.

We had to look at storytelling, what it takes, and who they are, and the importance of ceremony in their lives.

The people are aware they are sick, but they did not attribute their illness to mosquitoes.

So we had to develop an adult learning program. We had to be good storytellers. What might it be like if there were no mosquitoes? We planned for the ceremony. There was a sense of anticipation.

We held the ceremony, the handing over of the nets, the dipping of them in disinfectant. During this day there were games and food, but all of it followed a traditional approach.

Their story changed. People talked about the ceremony, began using the nets, saw incidence of malaria reduced, and children learn about the nets.

There was a 40-50% drop in malaria infection. Half of the people used the nets. Why not all? We are not sure and will have to look into that.

This was a release of their imagination, culture and understanding.

DISCUSSIONS

Question: What will you do with your paper, your study?

Answer: The paper will be published. We first went into the villages with a pre-school program, as there was no school in the area, and with a health program. We spent time getting to know the people. We were then able to start with adult learning and the malaria eradication program. Trust had to be developed first.