

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

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A collaborative research and development project between an anthropologist and a nurse practitioner found that the reinterpretation of tradition within one's own language group can fuel the learning process among Akha and Lahu adults. For several years there was no success in working with primary language programmes to teach malaria prevention to local groups in Southeast Asia. Specifically, the effort was to educate families to use sleeping nets in malaria prevention efforts. The families would readily accept the nets along with instructions in general terms issued by NGOs. However, the family heads would use the rolled-up nets as pillows. To sleep under a net was not part of their tradition. The question became how we could learn enough about the traditions in order to have the story of such traditions reinterpreted and retold to include a new way of household living. This paper details the education process over a two-year period that resulted in the use of malaria netting and the substantial reduction of malaria among three villages in the northern part of Southeast Asia. The critical hermeneutic constructs of language, conversation, story and tradition were played out in this project. Implications for assessment and policy are also addressed as a result of this project.