

## Diffractions of Traditional Herbal Medicines in Thailand: Reading for Greater Difference in the Diverse Economies Debate

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**Diffractions of Traditional Herbal  
Medicines in Thailand –  
Reading for Greater Difference  
in the Diverse Economies Debate**

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## **Abstract**

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The paper introduces diffractive reading to economic geographic thinking and suggests to add a further understanding of what diversity can mean in the debate about diverse economic practices and their geographies. Drawing on field work in Thailand the paper shows how free trade policies and protection of traditional knowledge and biological diversity acts have reconfigured traditional herbal medicine heavily in recent years. These regimes do not simply work differently – one as opposed to the other – but diffractively. That means both regimes coevolve in interaction. Diffractive reading helps to understand how capitalistic and non-capitalistic practices co-constitute in transnational and relational geographies and allows to read for greater difference in the diverse economies debate.

Iris Dzudzek (Dr. Phil) is a researcher and teacher in human geography at Goethe-University Frankfurt a. M. with an interest in geographies of knowledge and practices. In her post-doctoral research she engages with the worldings of Thai Traditional Medicine. For her work on the governmentalities and power effects of the globally circulating creative policy script she was awarded the prize for the best PhD thesis in German Human Geography.

## Problematization

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Traditional Medicines are *en vogue*: Who hasn't tried the promises of acupuncture, ayurveda, or yoga? They travel the world: German homeopathy is commonplace in India, Traditional Chinese Medicine is practised all around the Western world. And they make markets. The expenditure for traditional and alternative medicines has skyrocketed during the last decades.

In Thailand traditional medicine celebrates its revival. After being officially abandoned in 1936, it regained momentum in the late 1990ies. It re-entered hospitals and pharmacies and conquered supermarket shelves since.

How can we conceive of herbal Traditional Medicine in economic terms? Is it a story of marketization? Is it a diverse economy as announced in my title?

In this talk I want to show the diverse economic entanglements of herbal Traditional Medicine. With the help of “diffractive reading” I will show how these diverse herbal entanglements transgress the boundaries of hegemonic capitalocentric thinking. This is how I want to add a new strategy to the cannon of the diverse economies project.

I will proceed in five steps: First, I will illustrate the economic history of traditional medicine, second, I will shortly introduce the diverse economy project and its strategy of reading for difference. Third, I will introduce “diffractive reading” before I

will fourthly discuss its added value for understanding the diverse economic entanglements of traditional herbal medicine. Finally, I will draw a conclusion.

My case study on Thai Traditional Medicine is part of my research project on “*Worlding Medicine*”, which is funded by the German Research Community. It is still in the beginning and relies on fieldwork in Thailand.

## **1 Economic History of Traditional Herbal Medicine in Thailand**

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Politically, Thai Traditional Medicine is a highly contested project. In the early 1990ies Thailand engaged enthusiastically in the free market doctrine as well as in inter- and binational free trade agreements. The patent friendly environment made modern medicine, especially HIV antiretrovirals, unaffordable and lead to a deadly conflict over access to essential medicines.

During this time a lot of anti-globalist NGOs were founded who put the problem on the agenda and quested for more self-reliance in the supply for drugs. In this time Traditional Medicine came back on the agenda.

It was the success of health activists and especially the “Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine” (ITTM) who feared biopiracy of common knowledge that in 1999 “The Protection and Promotion of Traditional Thai Medicine Wisdom Act” (Kingdom of

Thailand 1999) and the “Thailand Plant Varieties Protection Act” were passed. In 2002 the Institute became part of the National Ministry of Health (Department for the Development of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand 2017, 4). In addition, Traditional Medicine became part of the National Health Development Plan and the royal “Sufficiency Economy”-Strategy.

During the last 30 years Traditional Medicine has transformed from a criminalized, heterogeneous practice into an activist practice in the first place and into a national project thereafter. At first glance, the story of TTM reads as a story of success against the evils of the free market discipline: Activists and government officials saved common knowledge from dispossession and biopiracy through common policy advocacy.

During my field work I asked about 20 activists, government officials, university researchers, private research and development institutions if they knew any case of biopiracy by a foreign company in the field of herbal traditional medicine. The answers were mostly like: “Yes, some Japanese company tried something like that some years ago. It was difficult to bring them to court, but they stopped it anyway.” Transforming traditional medicine into a national project did not prevent dispossession or biopiracy in the field of herbal medicines because they were rarely brought to court.

Instead, the nationalization of traditional medicine reconfigured the traditional herbal medicine radically.

Traditional herbal medicine was reinvented as a national project through

- the offer of Traditional treatment in hospitals,
- the financing of research on active ingredients, the safety and efficiency of medical plants,
- the establishment of national university curricula for the education of Thai Traditional Medical Doctors and Pharmacists,
- the establishment of a database that lists all traditional herbal recipes in order to protect them from being patented
- and many more.

Traditional Medicines can only be used in hospital, if they meet the standards of the Food and Drug Administration and if their safety and efficiency is biomedically proved. In this process old wisdom is conserved, but effectively also new drugs are invented. There are the different technological levels of processing medical plants in Thailand. Level one and two are the traditional ones (collecting, crushing, extraction and concentration), level three (purification) and especially level four (chemical conversion) are technologically new ways of processing traditional herbal drugs (Wongyai 2007). These

methods are innovations that can be patented. They form the basis for a new national market for traditional herbal drugs.

The protection of Thai Traditional Medicine is in the end not the protection from economic exploitation but forms the very basis for its marketization. Only since these protection policies are in force a national market for Traditional Medicines established. This reinvention of traditional herbal medicines finally enrolled them into the national market.

But what does this about the diverse economic entanglements of traditional herbal medicine? Before I can answer this question, I will first introduce diffractive reading as complement to the diverse economies debate.

## **2 Diverse Economies and Reading for Difference**

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The diverse economy as proposed by Gibson-Graham and the community economy collective is a “theoretical proposition that economies are intrinsically heterogeneous spaces composed of multiple class processes, mechanisms of exchange, forms of labor and remuneration, finance, and ownership” (Healy 2009, 338). They comprise of all “activities that produce and distribute material well-being.” (Gibson-Graham 2015, 106).

In order to render economic diversity visible the collective applies different strategies such as action research, collaborative mapping, assemblage research, developing new metrics, reading



for difference, reframing or learning to be affected (Gibson-Graham and Community Economies Collective 2017).

One of the most elaborated of these methods is “reading for difference”. “To read for difference, we must abandon a capitalocentric conceptual frame in which all economic activity is measured up against capitalist forms and seen as basically the same as, the opposite of, a complement to, or contained within capitalism” (Gibson-Graham 1996, 6). We must construct a different vocabulary and language of the economy that can register the variety of ways in which economic goods are produced, transacted, distributed, financed and owned” (Gibson-Graham 2015, 106). Gibson-Graham follow an anti-essentialist approach which conceives of difference in a deconstructive manner. That means, they try to transcend binaries rather than reifying them.

When you look at how the community economies collective empirically works, you more than often find, that differences are again discussed as (static) binaries: Be it the “culturally inflected practices” that they find in Monsoon Asia that “have survived the rise of a cash economy” (Gibson et al. 2018, 3), be it the “hidden economic geography” (Gibson, Hill, and Law 2018) in Southeast Asia, ‘other worlds’ (Gibson-Graham 2008), or “non-capitalist-futures” (The Community Economics Collective 2001) in contrast to the capitalocentric mainstream: Despite all deconstructive efforts reading for difference remains to find fixed binaries, e.g. the “other” in contrast to capitalism.

I share Gibson-Grahams theoretical ambition of deconstructing the dominant capitalocentric discourse by transcending its scientific categories towards a post-capitalist future (Gibson-Graham 2006). In order to articulate this ambition into a more resonant research frame I want to add “diffractive reading” to their existing research strategies.

### **3 Diffractive Reading**

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In order to think differently about difference feminist technoscience scholar Donna Haraway moved her optical analytical device from reflection to diffraction. Whereas reflection means seeing the other as opposed to the self, she adopted diffraction as a tool for feminist research to rethink difference/s beyond binary oppositions.

In physics diffraction describes the bending of waves. In science studies, it means the “interpenetration of boundaries” between existing scientific taxonomies and unexpected others in order to explore “possible worlds” (Haraway 2004, 70).

Haraway draws on postcolonial feminist scholar Trinh Minh-ha who conceived of the “inappropriate/d other” as difference beyond binaries. “To be inappropriate/d is not to fit in the taxon, to be dislocated from the available maps specifying kinds of actors and kinds of narratives, not to be originally fixed by difference” (Haraway 2004, 69). “Trinh was looking for a way

to figure ‘difference’ as a ‘critical difference within’” (Haraway 2004, 70) and not difference as binary opposition. Thus, diffraction is a method “that enables a genealogical analyses of how boundaries are produced rather than presuming sets of well-worn binaries in advance.” (Barad 2007, 30)

A diffractive reading of Thailand’s health sector allows to reveal the difference “inappropriate/d others” make in the capitalist economy, since “[d]iffraction is a material practice for making a difference, for topologically reconfiguring connections” (Barad 2007, 381).

#### **4 Economic Entanglements – Protection and Commercial promotion of Thai Traditional Medicine**

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Why is a diffractive lens for reading economic diversity in Thai Traditional Medicine helpful? Because there is another story to the economy of Traditional Herbal Medicines in Thailand that it reveals and that I now want to tell. Therefore, I want to take you with me on a field trip I made to the Thai Burmese border where I met traditional healers. I accompanied the founder and head of the Chao Phraya Aphai Phubet Hospital Foundation who engages in the protection and promotion of Thai Traditional Medicine. She works with local healers all over Thailand and tries to conserve their knowledge which is on the brink of extinction. The healers in the border region are old, a new generation is missing and it took years to gain their trust. The

foundation tries to make sure that the common knowledge remains a common good. This is why they do not only collect the knowledge but also distribute it publicly: In publications but also in regular radio shows, TV-shows and their own exhibition.

She says: “I was always engaged in the conservation of the rainforest. When I was graduated as a pharmacist I worked in a project where I had to tell traditional healers how to make their treatments more safe and efficient. When I met these people I understood that I had learned nothing about pharmacy in all those years. I was the novice, not them. And it became clear to me that we can only preserve nature, if people recognize the value of the forest: that is through experiencing its healing force. Since then, I am engaged in the preservation and promotion of traditional herbal medicine.” (Interview with the founder and head of the Chao Phraya Aphai Phubet Hospital Foundation, March 2017).

What do we finally see through the diffractive lens? The example shows that the rays of economic valuation are bending here. The implementation of free trade policies in Thailand provoked resistance. The establishment of a protection regime enabled the development of a national market for traditional drugs. But at the same time, it also led to a revival of interest in traditional medicine that was already on the brink of extinction before the free-market doctrine was imposed in Thailand. It fostered cooperatives and practices of commoning. This interest in a sustainable future transgresses the market force.

Knowledge making in the field of traditional medicine is not only a source of value creation in the sense of hegemonic capitalocentric discourse, but also a “material practice for making a difference, for topologically reconfiguring connections” (Barad 2007, 381). It shows that the “inappropriate/d other” in the form of traditional knowledge does not get fully integrated into the exploitation circles of national capitalism. The boundaries of classic economic discourse diffract when knowledge commoning gains momentum under the regime of national economic valuation.

## 5 Conclusion

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In my talk I tried to add diffractive reading to the canon of the diverse economy research strategy. I did this by using diffractive reading as a visual strategy. It brings those material practices of knowledge making to light that topologically reconfigure dominant discourses of economic valuation and exploitation.

Whereas reading for difference brings alternative economic practices into vision, diffractive reading reveals “the interpenetration of boundaries” between existing scientific taxonomies and unexpected others. With this strategy we can explore “possible worlds” (Haraway 2004, 70) or to speak with Gibson-Graham “build together an ethical practice of economy for living in—and beyond—the Anthropocene” (Gibson-Graham and Miller 2015, 16).

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## **Acknowledgment**

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