Dongkhuai Water buffalo Forests

Kenichi Nonaka
To all residents of Dongkhuaï village

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all sincerely for your kind hospitality during our visits to your village. I remember the day we arrived there for the first time. You must have been apprehensive at first, wondering what on earth these strange visitors could want and why we had chosen your village for our research. You kindly accepted us and treated us very well throughout our stay. Our visits to your village and the precious time spent in your warm hospitality have been instrumental in helping us to understand the way you live.

What the photos in this collection represent is perhaps for you just normal daily life but, for others around the world, it is a source of fascination and wonder. Your way of life serves as a model and inspiration to us all, and it is with the utmost respect and admiration that I dedicate this photograph collection to you. I hope that our continued friendship will enable an even greater understanding between us and our respective worlds.

Kenichi Nonaka

Photo: Khouanethong Phoummathep
On July 10th 2004, I arrived at Dongkhui during a visit to the villages of Xaythani district in Vientiane, Laos. I asked the mayor all sorts of questions about the way of life in the village. Many of the villagers kindly gathered to show me around and explain. They were all very friendly and helpful. In the gardens, there were a variety of basket traps. I was fascinated because I’d never seen ones like these before. The villagers told me that they’re used for catching frogs, and showed me how to set them up. Just beyond the houses, there are rice fields where the villagers catch frogs in the small strips of land between them. Fishing implements were also being made in the village. They were very intricate and neatly made.

The sound of the rain in the village was like a natural symphony performance that evoked images of the precious harmony that exists among the villagers, the rice fields, and the creatures that live there. This is the moment I realized that Dongkhui would be the perfect place to discover the region’s natural environment and learn about its abundant diversity.
Having gained permission to stay in the village, we promptly set about building a house. We wanted to see how the villagers adapt to the various environmental changes throughout the year. The monks prayed for us and many of the villagers gathered to celebrate, helping to break the ice and make us feel at home.
Farming

“Farming” is a little difficult to define, here. It does involve growing rice, but that's by no means all. It involves a sense of assuredness and acute perception that enables the villagers to predict and successfully adapt to the rapid and radical changes in their environment. It’s a kind of unspoken way that continues through successive generations. That’s the real essence of the farming way of life in this village.

The people largely invest their know-how and capabilities in the rice fields. These paddies are vital in terms of subsistence, but are not used exclusively for rice production. They are the source of a great variety of food resources.

A villager showed me that we could get stinkbugs from the trees. In Japan, trees in among the rice fields would be considered an obstacle, but the villagers here know they are a mine of resources. They help to support the rice growing in the fields and attract a whole variety of insects. The villagers eat both the leaves and the fruit of the trees, and even the insects that live there.

Farming
Stinkbugs may be destructive and do a lot of damage to rice plants and fruits trees, but they’re good to eat. The villagers found some in the trees at the bottom of the garden and cooked them for me. I can really see why they eat them – they make a great bite-sized snack and they’re just brimming with energy and nutrients.

Far from unwelcome guests, termites are a vital addition to the area. Their mounds protect the trees from water saturation, allowing them to grow and flourish. And, of course, you can eat the termites that live in them.
The villagers don’t remove the rice plant stalks. They leave them for the water buffalo to eat. Dung beetles visit, attracted by the buffalo dung. The villagers eat the dung beetle pupae. This is the kind of food chain that exists here.

Dongkhua is a village of woodlands and water buffalo, and this is reflected both in the name of the village and the lifestyle of the villagers. The water buffalo have always lived alongside the villagers, each providing for the other. It’s a mutual relationship that has always existed, and still continues today. These water buffalo are truly guardian deities here. I want to tell people around the world just how wonderful this way of life is.
Rice needs an accompaniment, and fish are an essential part of the diet. The villagers catch fish not only for themselves but for others, too. Traders make daily trips to the markets, providing the townspeople with a regular supply of local fresh fish.

Food is available even in the dry season. Frogs and crabs can be found sleeping underground, and the villagers find them by digging damp ground or where there are holes. The surface may look a bit barren, but there’s food below.

The older boys see a young girl digging and come to help. They show her how to dig properly.
Digging for frogs

Even dried up rivers are damp in the shade of the trees. If you dig a little, you’ll find moisture below the surface of river beds, even where the ground is so parched that it’s cracked. The villagers find one frog after another.

Collecting weaver ants

In the mid-dry season, the women of the village go out collecting weaver ants. They’re really adept at using the long poles and catching the ants while skillfully dodging their vicious jaws. Carefully selected ant larvae and pupae are the pick of the crop.
The villagers produce rice in remote fields, and I was surprised to find that they actually live away from the village at times. While living away, the family stay together and even raise livestock. There’s plenty of food available, and even running water can be arranged. The villagers find a variety of food along the way. The children can play here, too.
Eating
Laap

Laap is served on all manner of social occasions such as discussions and celebrations. Apparently, its properties help to keep people feeling amiable. The taste spreads, blending with the various other ingredients to produce unique rich flavors. In this way, it symbolizes potential.

I learned how to make a broad variety of dishes. The food here is very seasonal, and the ingredients can be used in many ways.

Children start to learn from an early age. They must learn how to adapt to the changing environment. They need to be very imaginative and develop a sense of ingenuity. This kind of know-how should be passed on to people in other parts of the world, too.
Pa Dek

Pa Dek is an essential part of Lao cuisine, and forms the base for all dishes. It’s made using fish caught in the village, and pickled using salt that’s made there. They say it just doesn’t taste the same if you use salt from elsewhere. Salt is an important aspect of mutual relations among the different villages, too. It is sold or exchanged for rice.
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ແມ່ນພູມປັນ ຍາ ສະຖານທີ່ ແລະການຮູ້ໃຊ້ເວລາທີ່ສືບທອດມາແຕ່ຄົນຮຸ້ນນອນ. ການຜະລິດຈະວ່າປະຖົມປະຖານກໍບໍ່ແມ່ນ, ແຕ່ສິ່ງທີ່ມີຄວາມໝາຍທີ່ສຸດຄືພະຊັດເຂົ້າເຮັດສືບເນື່ອງມາຈົນເຖິງປັດຈຸບັນ.

Salt making

The villagers here make salt from the mud in dried-up river beds! I was truly amazed when I saw this for the first time. Passed on through successive generations, this kind of know-how involves being in the right place at the right time. So-called “primitive” practices like this are certainly not out of date and it’s very significant that it continues even to this day.
Thanks to the villagers, I was able to experience a broad variety of dishes. One morning, they brought a bowl of insects and used them to make some cheo paste. There’s a whole host of food resources right outside the door. You just have to keep your eyes open for them.
Rice production stops in the dry season, but that doesn’t mean the village comes to a complete standstill. The villagers are busy making tools and farming implements, and they also need to rest. The rhythm of life here is not twenty-four seven like it is back home.
The moment-to-moment changes in the natural environment through the wet and dry seasons bring a whole variety of creatures to the region. The people that live here have a truly ingenious knowledge of how this ever-changing natural environment can be utilized.
Acknowledgements

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Finally, I would like to sincerely thank the villagers themselves, who warmly welcomed the members of our ZUBZUB team. All of the team members who have lived in the village will always treasure the memories and experiences gained there. I pray for the happiness and prosperity of the people of Dongkhuei village, Xaythani district, and the nation of Laos.

Kenichi Nonaka March 1st, 2010
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This is a special time and place for me. It evokes so many images. Villagers fishing in the swollen waters, and cattles grazing in the fallow fields. You can even get salt here. All this activity is watched over by the protective eyes of the temples. The place is so full of imagery and creativity, and wonderfully stimulates the imagination.

Knowledge that comes from living alongside nature gives a kind of assuredness that Mother Nature can provide everything we need to live. This trust in nature is somewhat lacking in the modern world, and I’m sure there’s much we can learn from it. The world is full of diversity. It’s possible for us to learn to accept and use such diversity effectively, and I believe this is the key to understanding human potential and limitations.