Dynamic cultures,

Some thoughts on teaching permaculture in other cultures.

Story & photo by Robyn Francis

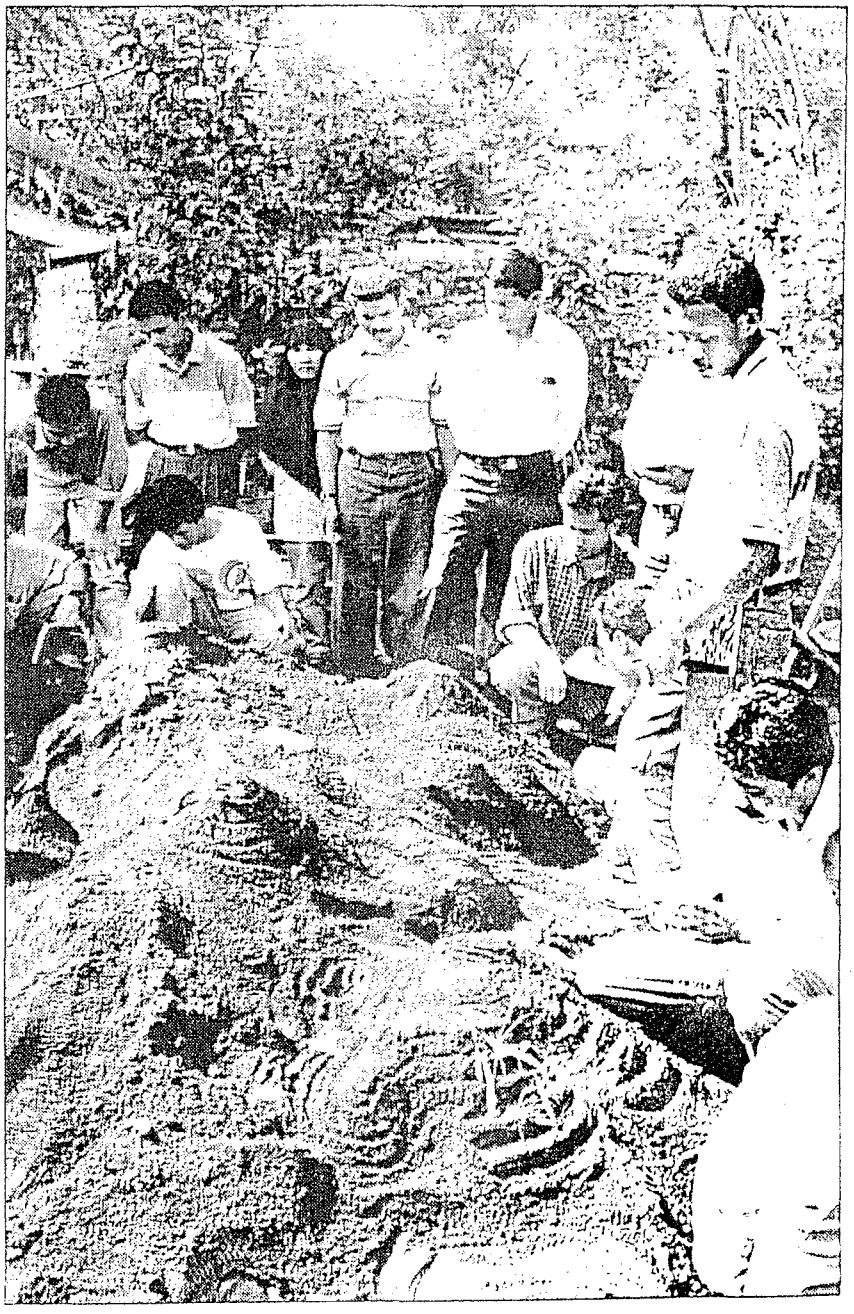
CULTURES ARE dynamic and human memory short – I have been alarmed at the rapidity of change, at the loss and erosion of sustainable traditional practices as "Green Revolution" techniques and concepts, introduced only a few decades ago, have been accepted and applied unquestioningly in the "developing" world.

This has been compounded with the introduction of centralised education and schooling which gives the young little opportunity to learn traditional skills in the traditional way, together with the infiltration of the cash economy and the general devaluation of farming as a profession.

These developments are largely a result of the shift from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture. It's exacerbated by the corruption of local wealthy families and governments, their exploitation of the poor, and the control of international markets which keep prices artificially low – especially at the producer end – in the name of the "free market" economy and globalisation. The end scenario is that the rural poor are poorer than ever before, the young are increasingly alienated from their culture and see little or no future in farming or village life.

Old folk work the land

In the Indonesian island of Bali, one rarely sees a young person working in the fields or rice paddies – it's the old folk out there, and one wonders what will happen when they are simply too old to continue such hard physical labour. I'm informed that it's not only in the relative affluence of Bali that this is happening, it's a phenomenon occurring in all too many places, countries and cultures.



Participants in the Indonesian PDC course work with a sand-model.

I was invited to teach a Permaculture Design Certificate (PDC) course in Indonesia in March 1999. Thirty-five participants from all over Indonesia, who lived in very different cultures and climates, from Sumatra to Kalimantan to West Timor, converged on Bali for the course. There was concern amongst some participants and organisers as to whether the course would be truly appropriate or whether it was just another kind of

dynamic teaching

colonialism – an Australian concept taught by an Australian teacher. This is a trap and a risk that I am acutely aware of and careful to avoid. In many respects it depends upon how the teacher sees permaculture as well as the way it is taught.

Perma-colonialism?

The risk is greatest when the teacher sees permaculture as a kind of formula and teaches sheet-mulching, banana circles, mandala gardens and Zones 1 to 5 – there are a lot of ideas and design strategies in permaculture that people can readily turn into perma-dogmas. When this happens then – yes – it's a new perma-colonialism. You don't need to do a PDC to make a herb spiral, chook-tractor or create a food forest – these things can be easily done from the plan, from the books.

What I see as the most valuable thing about permaculture, and the greatest challenge for a permaculture teacher to teach, is the process of lateral thinking and questioning. Students must be encouraged to develop the art of analytical observation – not just of things, but more importantly of the processes at play; to seek and interpret information and apply it appropriately to the situation at hand. These "process" skills cannot be simply taught in the way one can simply teach how to make a tyre pond.

The best one can do as a teacher is to try and facilitate the student's own learning of these process skills through example and by providing opportunities for the students to practice, explore and interact.

At the end of the Bali course the most rewarding feedback from students was, "Thank you for teaching me how to think," along with, "Thank you for helping me see my culture in a new way and the importance of our sustainable traditions which are being lost."

As Westerners we take so much for granted, especially our freedom of thought. It was a cultural shock for me to fully appreciate how repressed human thinking and creativity can be. My Indonesian course participants explained how their education is all rote learning with no room (and severe penalties) for original thinking, questioning or creativity, and how this is re-inforced by the day to day reality of living in a controlled and corrupt socio-political environment.

Living in a traditional culture can also be ruthlessly thought-repressive: the young (including young adults) have no say, they do as they're told, and you do it this way because this is the way it's done and because it's what you've been told to do. There are no other reasons why, and to question is to defy authority. The opportunity for innovation is severely limited.

Understanding why

This lack of analytical questioning and creative thinking leaves a culture exceptionally vulnerable, especially when an expert, respected as a figure of higher authority, comes along and says, "Don't do it that way – do it this way." Change can be, and frequently is, accepted without question or thought. People may feel intuitively uncomfortable with some of the changes and concerned about the results as they manifest over time, but lack the knowledge to understand why it's not working and lack access to information to look at alternatives.

Permaculture as a process of analytical observation, lateral thinking and creative problem solving together with a basic understanding of ecology and natural process certainly draws upon examples of sustainable traditional systems from around the world. Yet it pays to remember that most of these systems evolved countless generations ago as a result of trial and error without understanding the whys, or if the whys were initially understood that information has not been passed on. (Beware of the "noble savage" syndrome.)

I have found when teaching permaculture in developing countries, and with indigenous peoples, that my students are exhilarated with their awakening awareness of process and creative thinking. They are excited to have a framework of the principles of sustainability by which to look afresh at their culture and to measure the relative sustainability of remaining traditions and introduced practices. They have a fresh enthusiasm to rediscover the traditional practices, knowledge and wisdom that are being rapidly lost.

Evolving and adapting

Culture is dynamic, just like an ecosystem is a dynamic system, continuously evolving and adapting to new influences and changing factors. The risk in human culture is that the good practices that have sustained in the past can be so easily lost and replaced with techniques and values that erode human security, well-being and the environment and resource base it depends on.

In the same way, permaculture also needs to be seen and taught as a dynamic system of thinking, planning and design which is adapted and reinvented in each new culture and context into which it is introduced. Permaculture needs to constantly adjust and adapt to the changing needs, perceptions and demands of a changing world. Indeed, this is the only sustainable future for permaculture as a concept and as a movement or it risks stagnation and becoming frozen in the dogmas created by its well-intentioned perpetrators.

Robyn Francis is well known as a designer and teacher of permaculture since 1985 and was founding director of Permaculture International Limited. She continues to pioneer new frontiers in her work and share this accumulated experience through her courses. Robyn established and manages Djanbung Gardens Permaculture Education Centre and the ERDA Institute Trust at Nimbin in Northern NSW, Australia.