

Report on the International Cultures and Biodiversity Congress (CUBIC 2000), Yunnan, China, 20–30 July 2000

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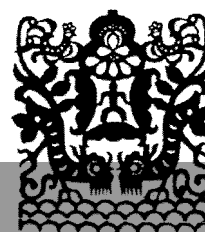
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Report on the International Cultures and Biodiversity Congress (CUBIC 2000), Yunnan, China, 20–30 July 2000



云南苗族 天人合一

COMPAS (Comparing and Supporting Endogenous Development) is an international program based in Latin America consisting of 25 development organizations from 11 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. The main objective of COMPAS is to gain a deeper understanding of the *cosmovisión* (worldview) and knowledge of farmers in order to achieve innovation and strengthen learning processes in agriculture. This is done through dialogue as well as through South–South and North–South exchanges of experience with external institutions that share a perspective on sustainable endogenous development. The Agroecology Program of the University of Cochabamba (AGRUCO) in Bolivia is a coordinating member of COMPAS.

COMPAS, together with the Ford Foundation, the provincial government of Yunnan (China), GtZ, WWF, IUCN, IPGRI, ICIMOD, and Misereor, was a cosponsor of the international Cultures and Biodiversity Congress (CUBIC 2000; see www.cbik.org/congress/Congress_index.htm). The Congress took place in 3 prefectures in the mountainous province of Yunnan: Kunming, Xishuangbanna, and Deqing (Tibet), from 20 to 30 July 2000. It was organized by the Center for Indigenous Biodiversity and Knowledge (CBIK) as well as the Government Provincial Office of Innovation in Genetic Resources, the Kunming Botanic Institute, a branch of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the Foundation for the Conservation and Development of Genetic Resources of Yunnan.

Overall organization, thematic submeetings, and field trips

The scientific committee of the Congress, which was in charge of selecting contributions, was composed of 25 experts including the author, who represented AGRUCO.

The Congress was very well organized, reflecting a great economic and logistic effort to put together an event that took place at 3 different venues with 240 participants from all over the world. The participants represented universities, international centers, national science academies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international cooperation agencies, and the government of China. The Latin American delegation was the smallest one.

The innovative organizational approach of the Congress balanced fieldwork with office work. General guidelines and regional experience were presented in 10 meetings over 7 days, resulting in the formation of 8 working groups that had the task of analyzing “the past, the present and the future of the dynamics of biodiversity and culture.” The groups focused on clear themes and eventually went on a 4-day visit cum fieldwork trip to farming communities in 2 different ecosystems in the province of Yunnan. This province has approximately 40 million inhabitants and 25 ethnic minority groups, who speak more than 50 different languages.

Direct contacts in Xishuangbanna and a visit to the botanical gardens in the subtropical jungle zone as well as the field trips to the higher regions of Tibet allowed us to examine cultural and biological diversity and become aware of the situation of ethnic minorities in several parts of China. The Congress thus made it possible to compare local conditions in different regions of the world represented by participants as well as perceive local knowledge and how it relates to spirituality.

The first 3 days of meetings had 2 fundamental objectives: to specify the sociocultural and economic context of Yunnan and China and to agree on a concept of what biodi-

versity and culture mean, starting with general definitions and approximations, based on experience and cases presented mainly in the submeetings.

On the fourth day, the 8 working groups and field visits were organized, focusing on one of the following topics:

- Local communities and natural reserves.
- Indigenous knowledge and cosmovision.
- Agrobiodiversity.
- Management of natural resources in poor communities.
- Market, biodiversity, and globalization.
- Ecotourism.
- Intercultural communication and participatory methods.
- Indigenous rights and intellectual property.

The Andean delegation participated in work on “Intercultural Communication and Participatory Methods,” a topic that the group eventually redefined as “Intercultural Dialogue and Participatory Processes.” AGRUCO’s institutional experience and the structural changes that are taking place in Bolivia as a consequence of new laws decreed during the last 10 years—of which the Law on Popular Participation is one of the most outstanding measures—enabled us to contribute very actively to the group’s work.

The submeeting on Indigenous Cosmovision and Biodiversity Management

COMPAS partners Zimbabwe, India, and Sri Lanka as well as Bertus Haverkort, the COMPAS General Coordinator, took part in the submeeting on Indigenous Cosmovision. The presentations also included an example from China

and a theoretical reflection presented by Indonesia.

Members of the Indian GREEN Foundation shared their experience of the wide biodiversity that exists in rice, sorghum, and wheat crops. Each agrarian activity possesses its own rituals in which thanks are given for the crops produced. Varieties are selected according to individual criteria and fairs are organized with a focus on vegetable species and traditional knowledge. This process is duly documented and published in the communities. Work is also done in the areas of crop plagues and disease control.

The NGO AZTREC was founded on the institutional experience of a group of veterans who fought for the liberation of Zimbabwe. AZTREC has since extended into other countries in Africa. It was originally based on reflections that emerged from the triumph of the revolution that freed Zimbabwe, in which people decided their future by reasserting the value of their own culture as a basis for their actions. The emphasis placed on spirituality and culture is fundamental in all AZTREC activities related to any aspect of agropecuarian production.

The experience of Sri Lanka, a country that possesses much ancient knowledge about irrigation, demonstrates that the decision to focus on rice monocultures, implemented 60 years ago, had negative results. Accordingly, the people have returned to their ancient religious practices, which allowed and promoted crop diversity. On the other hand, the existing interrelationship between biological diversity (eg, seed varieties), spiritual life, and everyday life has taken on new value. Networks are being formed on the basis of this experience, and recovered knowledge is being documented.

In China, much work has been done to translate ancient manuscripts of the Dongba religion practiced by the Naxi ethnic group in northeastern Yunnan. This work reveals a contradiction between man

and nature. Now, however, religious practice allows for the conservation of nature. A concept known as Zu includes everything but human beings. Humans borrow from Zu as if it were their brother. This ideology has been passed on from generation to generation but is dying out. One belief holds that, if one kills a frog, one's mother will become ill. Such beliefs underlie codes of conduct. They state that everything has a scientific explanation, although based on a different paradigm.

The Indonesian presentation began with an intellectual analysis of world historical development, especially since the Industrial Revolution, which was held responsible for loss of biodiversity and culture. This was a classic lecture along the lines of material and historical dialectics.

To represent the Andean perspective, we offered a paper on "Local Knowledge and Agroecology: A Dialogue on the Conservation of Cultural and Biological Diversity in the State University System" (see the CD produced by the Congress).

In general, the meetings demonstrated the importance of knowledge and culture for regeneration and conservation of life, based on institutional experience with farming families and/or communities. It was agreed that biological diversity is closely related to cultural diversity. This interrelationship is fundamental to the life of the planet since social life, spiritual life, and material life allow for permanent regeneration. The prioritization of material life especially predominant in the West is the cause of environmental degradation, inequality, world poverty, and hunger.

To conclude: The Yunnan Initiative

At the request of the organizers of the submeeting on "The Convergence Between Farmer Knowledge and Science," we also presented a lecture on "Daily Life and Farmer Knowledge Based on University Training and Social Interaction: A Feedback to Science from the Andean Communities."

In contrast with the previous submeeting, which took place during the first 2 days, this one had a strong neopositivist angle, reflecting the prevalence of scientists from international centers. The presentations were mostly limited to the plans and activities of these scientists with respect to biodiversity. They were based on quantitative methodologies rooted in Western paradigms, emphasizing ethnobotanical work on the biological diversity of tea, including its uses and traditions in the Bulang ethnic group in Yunnan.

The Andean perspective we presented was important because it offered the participants a new paradigm unknown to most of them, reflecting experience in the use of qualitative and participatory methods from a multimethodological perspective. This experience was complemented by a lecture by the Dutch Coordinator of COMPAS, who emphasized the importance of cultural and biological diversity in studies of social and spiritual life.

While participation by the Andean delegation was important to the Congress, thanks to the experience of AGRUCO, we also learned much from visits to the countryside and from our colleagues who attended the Congress. Like the other delegations, we also committed ourselves to further carrying out the activities stated in the Yunnan Initiative (see "The Yunnan Initiative: Visions and Actions for the Enhancement of Biological and Cultural Diversity," available at cbik.ac.cn/congress/Initiative/Index.htm) as well as the more specific activities defined in the Regional Strategy proposed by the Andean Group (cbik.ac.cn/congress/Initiative/regional.htm).

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