Introduction

Manual Castells’ in his book Internet Gallaxy (Castells 2001) calls for a new pedagogy of the internet, an internet where over 80% of its content is in English. This new way of learning is pedagogy where everyone develops a processing and knowledge-generation capacity, it is the installation of information within us all. Castells’ new pedagogy is a pedagogy based on interactivity, personalization, and the development of an autonomous capacity for learning and thinking. The Zhoa ia web site http://www.gsu.edu/~antccb/ is an attempt at creating such a learning environment. It is an attempt at reaching an audience, a community that might otherwise remain anonymous and inaccessible. The goal for this web site is to set-up links with community centers, health care facilities, and schools throughout the United States that have contact with the Asian community. By creating these links the hope is that it will help to reinstate forgotten indigenous knowledge about the proper use of Zhoa ia (it should be used by older people only and with great caution) within the Hmong community and help to rekindle a desire to know about traditional ways of thinking and acting, i.e. traditional ways of being Hmong. It is an experiment in utilizing the internet as a teaching tool to increase and correct community held traditional knowledge.
How it all Began

In the fall of 1990, as an undergraduate student in Anthropology, I participated in an Urban Anthropology class that was a mix of undergraduate and graduate students. The professor assigned a field project (go out into the urban jungle, research a group, and produce a paper and presentation from your efforts) and then he proceeded to assign an undergraduate and graduate student to act as fieldworker companions. Serendipitously, I was paired with Deborah Duchon a now famous nutritional Anthropologist (she appears frequently on the Food Channel’s series Good Eats with Alton Brown). While taking a group of kids on a nature/foraging hike Deborah had met a young Hmong girl and was intrigued with the girl’s knowledge of wild plants (Deb’s specialty) and by her Hmong heritage. Deborah’s interest in the Hmong became our shared topic of research for this class (and for years to come) and it was here that I was first introduced to the Hmong community¹. The Hmong are a tribal, patrilineal clan group indigenous to the highlands of Southeast Asia (Laos, Thailand, Burma, and China). In the early 1960’s the Hmong were recruited by the C.I.A. and the U.S. Army to fight in the Vietnam War. The Hmong fought with the Americans for the duration of the war. Beginning in 1975, during the fall of Saigon and the corresponding pullout of American troops, the Hmong having allied themselves with the Americans were forced to flee Laos. Large refugee camps were set-up in Thailand to house the thousands of fleeing Hmong refugees. Many of these refugees found their way to the United States. The largest concentrations of Hmong people in the United States today can be found in California, Wisconsin, and North Carolina.

¹ Deborah has made a career out of working with refugee communities in Atlanta, Georgia, I on the other hand have made a career out of going to school.
It was also through this initial encounter that Deborah realized that the Hmong were consuming Zhoa ia. Zhoa ia is the Hmong name for Black Nightshade. Black Nightshade (known as Solanum nigrum to botanists) is a bitter herb that is used medicinally and nutritionally throughout the Asian continent. It can also be found in fields and wastelands throughout the United States. The Hmong traditionally foraged for wild foods and medicines and foraging is a practice that continues today. Unfortunately if taken alone or in conjunction with Western medicines there can be unexpected side-effects (including but not limited to dry mouth and gastrointestinal irritation). Although Hmong herbalists recommend Zhoa ia for those of advancing age consumption by younger individuals has been observed. Pregnant and/or lactating women should be especially wary of consuming Zhoa ia.

Fast-forward 10 years to the spring of 2000. Here you will find Deborah and myself once again paired as fieldworker companions doing research and filming with the Hmong community in Fresno, California. Deborah had made numerous trips to Fresno in previous years (one of the largest concentrations of Hmong people in the United States is in Fresno) and had made friends with a group of women from the Hmong American Women’s Association. These women happily and graciously helped us produce hours and hours of film footage. The uncut and unedited film consisted of interviews with people in the refugee community including several shamans, one of whom was kind enough to allow us to film her performing a ritual where she was trying to call her spirit.

Also accompanying us was our cameraperson Les Johnson.
helper back home (spirit helpers sometimes wander off, get lost, and the shaman must call to them in order to help them find their way home), but most importantly there was scripted footage of Hmong women warning the community of the dangers of consuming Zhao ia. Traditionally Zhao ia is recommended by shaman and herbalists for older individuals suffering from a “dry heart”. A “dry heart” is an amorphous illness that only a shaman or herbalist with extensive knowledge could diagnose. Deborah witnessed first hand Hmong women gathering Zhao ia and using it as a pot herb (cooked as a vegetable and/or added to other cooked foods for flavoring) so the traditional use seems to have expanded to include riskier consumption by younger, reproductive age individuals and children within the community. An article in The San Francisco Chronicle about Hmong farmer’s in Fresno mentions how farmers are actually cultivating black nightshade. The farmer being interviewed says “…black nightshade, poisonous in large quantities. Don't eat it raw. It is bitter, but it is popular among the older people, who believe that as you get older, the bitterness goes away.” (Nolte 2001) The idea of actually cultivating black nightshade is testimony to the possibility that people other than the aged are eating it.

The idea behind all the filming in Fresno was to ultimately produce a group of videos that could be distributed to health care providers to show to their clients (especially Hmong clients and those of Asian descent) in an attempt to assuage the medically undesirable consumption of black nightshade. The intended outcome was never realized and the videos were shelved (up until now).
The Interactive Video Workshop

Three years later in the spring of 2003 while taking an interactive video workshop I picked up the videotapes that had been sitting collecting dust on a shelf since they were shot and resurrected them in the hopes of fulfilling our initial objective, i.e. informing the Hmong community about the possible dangers of consuming black nightshade. The focus of this class was to become familiar with new media and its possible uses. Learning about and using the internet was a major focus. So, the nightshade video project morphed into a community service project that utilized the internet. The internet was a means of disseminating the much needed message that Zhoa ia can be dangerous. Instead of requiring a large video inventory and a means of distributing that inventory to health care providers (necessitating financial backing), the internet became an inexpensive alternative solution for reaching a target population and teaching them what their tradition already knew, i.e. that Zhoa ia is okay for (some) older people to eat, but it really should be avoided whenever possible.

What Was Really Involved

The Internet Zhoa ia Project included my learning Dreamweaver MX to set-up and design the initial website. I had a little knowledge of Dreamweaver 4 so the learning curve was tolerable. Creating the edited videos was another matter. It was initially necessary to convert some of the film from analog VHS video into a digital format using an ADVC100 video converter box to capture it on my laptop computer. This was fairly painless, but time consuming. Then the captured video needed cutting and editing. The Macintosh iMovie on my laptop was fairly straight forward, but it took hours of watching, cutting, and pasting to produce two separate movies (an English and Hmong
version). I converted the final products into Quicktime movies (suitable for video streaming) and uploading them onto Georgia State University’s Hollywood streaming server. The web site now has two streaming videos, with the possibility of adding others in the future. The final touches include a flash animation of a tumbling pndau (traditional needle work) on the home page, and a static pndau version on all subsequent pages (I didn’t want to over-do the animation). The static pndau graphic I created freehand in Flash (a rough replica of a design the Hmong call an elephant foot), and then I animated the graphic using two motion tweens (a 180 degree turn, followed by a 90 degree turn). Finally, PDF file of this paper was created and can be found on the home page along with the general information about the site.

**Final Words**

As I said earlier the Zhoa ia web site is an attempt at creating a learning environment and an attempt at reaching an audience, a community that might otherwise remain anonymous and inaccessible. The hope for this web site is that it will help to reinstate forgotten indigenous knowledge about the proper use of Zhoa ia within the Hmong community and the possibility of rekindling any waning interest by young Hmong in traditional knowledge. It is an experiment that is utilizing the internet, as a teaching tool to increase and correct community held knowledge, and as a vehicle for future experimentation. The Hmong American Women’s Association has been contacted, a first step in creating links to the Zhoa ia web site, as well as the beginning of a new “Castellsian” pedagogy.
References
