Mobilizing the (Im)Mobile Museum Through Hybrid Curation: A Story of Hybrid Curation of Cultural Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This narrative research report summarizes the experiences of Vivid Ethnicity, a mobile anthropological museum of the Museum of Cultural Anthropology at Mahidol University, Thailand, during the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2022. Although Vivid Ethnicity was rendered immobile and forced to stop travelling during the pandemic, it developed a hybrid curatorial method to stay connected and engaged with its audiences and research partners in two ethnic villages in Chiang Mai province. A key lesson of this experience is that hands-on information and communication technologies can help maintain a certain proximity with the audiences and research partners in times of physical absence. We also learned that an empathetic mindset on the part of everyone involved in the project, along with a human-centric design, are crucial components of what we call the hybrid curation of cultural practice.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; Good Health; Hybrid Curatorial Practice; Mobile Ethnography; Mobile Museum

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COVID-19 IN THAILAND AND NARRATIVE RESEARCH

Thailand was the first country after China to report a confirmed COVID-19 case, on 12 January 2020 (The National Economic and Social Development Council, 2022). The Thai government announced a lockdown in March 2020. This had a significant impact on the economy and resulted in widespread job losses and economic hardship, particularly for low-wage workers and small businesses. From a macro-view, the Bank of Thailand forecasted that the largest contraction would be 8.1% in 2020. The Thai economy was already slowing, with growth dropping from 4.2% in 2018 to 2.4% in 2019. The International Labour Organisation estimated that as many as 3.7 million people (including the informal sector) would

be unemployed by the second quarter of 2020.[1] The hospitality and service sectors, such as hotels, wellness spas, restaurants, and entertainment facilities were hit particularly hard. Estimates of the impact saw tourism revenue fall by 70% in 2020. More than 50% of those employed in tourism were informal, with over 70% of tourism employment being in the food and beverage subsector. This subsector was hit particularly badly due to closures (The National Economic and Social Development Council, 2022). This macro-view matched the micro-outlook witnessed in the field of our work – Ecomuseum Doi Si Than in Phrao District, Chiang Mai. In our case, more than 10 employees had to go back to their hometown because of unemployment, fear of COVID-19, and the lockdowns.

This report is an effort to tell the story of the mobile museum Vivid Ethnicity and to answer two questions: How did Vivid Ethnicity operate during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what role did ICT play in keeping us – the researchers – connected with people in remote areas who used to work with us onsite? Creswell (2018) describes narrative research as a qualitative research approach focusing on telling the story of individual experience. Under this definition, this account is a story constructed by the researchers as well as an example of auto-ethnography and mobile ethnography. Muskat et al. (2017) explain that mobile ethnography is a means of conducting research by using a mobile device to collect data. Mobile ethnography allows the capture and exploration of mobilities as well as the interpretation of boundaries in less dynamic settings.

Vivid Ethnicity was designed to serve as a platform for cultural transformation, which is cultural transmission that modifies or changes cultural practice along with contemporary society. It started to operate in late 2019 and continues until today. For almost two years, Vivid Ethnicity had been planning a long trip to the north of Thailand in December 2020 and January 2021. But everything was put on a hold as the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand started in January 2020 and its peak came during the second wave, which led to a second lockdown in December 2020. Although Vivid Ethnicity had been rendered immobile, multiple other projects had to continue. We hence decided to investigate solutions based on information and communication technologies (ICT) for working with the Karen and Lua ethnic groups 'in' their communities.

This report narrates our experiences with ICT in curating cultural practice. By presenting the lessons we learned, we aim to open a space for a broader discussion around our and similar human-centric approaches.

VIVID ETHNICITY

Vivid Ethnicity, a special mobile exhibition, travels around all regions in Thailand to promote the key message of cultural diversity, understanding, and respect through creative conversation[2] and hands-on activities. Our target groups are students at schools and universities, and in local communities. The aim of Vivid Ethnicity is to initiate critical and creative thinking through multiple sensory media, such as an ethnic food cooking workshop, a dripping coffee workshop, an ethnic accessories and costume

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1   Thailand's workforce in 2019 was 37.6 million.

2   Creative conversation here denotes non-hateful speech, free of bullying and discrimination.

Figure 1. Vivid Ethnicity outside and inside. *Pictures of the Vivid Ethnicity mobile exhibition containing mundane life objects, hands-on activities, educational programs, books, a museum shop, and a coffee shop.* (photo by the authors).

workshop and drawing (Yamabhai et al., 2021). Vivid Ethnicity exhibits mundane life objects donated from ethnic groups in Thailand. Ethnic group members play an important role in co-curating and co-creating the exhibition. The exhibition is presented in a caravan characterized by a cozy living room-like atmosphere. There are both printed and electronic books specializing on the ethnic groups of Thailand. Visitors are invited to handle the objects as social objects[3] (Simon, 2010). As curators and researchers, we encourage visitors to share their experiences with the objects through conversations. The exhibition usually becomes quite lively and allows the audiences to construct their own meaning through conversation and hands-on experience.

The exhibition also comprises a museum shop and a coffee shop, which exhibits materials and products collected during our fieldwork research, mostly in ethnic villages such as Karen and Lua/Lawa. All products offered at the museum shop come from the ethnic communities we have been engaging with over the years. Hence, Vivid Ethnicity acts as a platform, creating a meeting point between various ethnic groups and the public. Generally, Vivid Ethnicity is very flexible in its way of displaying cultural objects and activities. It can curate new stories, exhibitions, educational programs, and activities to suit the audience and place, depending on where the exhibition is traveling to, and the events planned in situ.

VIVID ETHNICITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

The containment and mitigation measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in the cessation of the mobile exhibition activities. Thus, we had to explore other channels to engage with our audiences. During the pandemic, the

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3   According to Simon (2010, pp. 129-133), social objects are objects that provoke a good conversation between two persons and allow for sharing experiences.

Thai government, through the Ministry of Public Health, created the so called DMHTT procedure – **d**istancing, **m**ask wearing, **h**and washing, **t**esting, and *Thai cha na*, the medical online COVID-19 registration and information system (Bureau of Mental Health Service Administration, 2021). Government institutions campaigned and advertised for the public to follow the DMHTT rules (Department of Disease Control, 2021; The Red Cross Society, 2021). As the DMHTT acronym became omnipresent, we decided to use it for a new curatorial practice. We created the so-called DMHTT service innovation for our Vivid Ethnicity mobile exhibition. Here, **D** stands for *drive-through*, M for *museum-ness*, **H** for *happiness*, **T** for *toy* or *trunk*, and the second **T** for *takeaway*.

Our DMHTT service innovation offers a 'vivid' box that consists of a story book about ethnic groups created by our volunteers, a teddy bear with a D-I-Y ethnic dress (the audience can choose the size of the bear), ethnic coffee or ethnic popcorn (the audience can choose either), and a Facebook Messenger channel for the visitors to share their experiences with ethnic groups with us. The vivid box is provided to anyone at the Vivid Ethnicity booth situated at Mahidol University: People can **d**rive through (**D**) and enjoy **m**useum-ness (**M**) with **h**appiness (**H**) by getting the box as a toy (**T**) to **t**ake away (**T**) and play with at home. If the audience is not able to drive through, the vivid box can also be mailed to them. Through this service, we tried to create an authentic experience that enables people to learn about ethnic groups in Thailand through action, smell, touch, and even taste. We used the idea of multiple sensory activities to allow the audience to learn about ethnic groups at different experiential levels. One example of the feedback we received is:

> Who knew that museum-ness can be delivered at home! My kids were so excited to receive a vivid box and be able to learn more about Karen, Lawa, Hmong, Black Thai, Lisu. We got the ethnic popcorn to taste the essence of ethnic group. My kid asked why don't we get the pork or chicken from the story telling book included in the box. We also got the teddy bear with a D-I-Y costume challenging our hands-on skills, let's try it! (a participant who received vivid box by mail)

Another example comes from the manager of a museum who drove through and picked the vivid box:

> It is an amazing and interesting way of connecting with the audiences. Thank you for the package. It's a great example. I will have to develop something like this for my museum as well. (a museum manager who got the vivid box by driving through)

When we became unable to get mobile and reach others physically, we had to think creatively and think the other way around: We can also have the audience travel to us safely by using our DMHTT service innovation. Hence, we learned to think 'in, through, and outside the box' to find solutions.

Figure 2. DMHTT service innovation Vivid Box. *A hands-on experience and an educational box with multiple sensory objects.* (photo by the authors).

A STORY FROM A KAREN VILLAGE

Before COVID-19, Vivid Ethnicity served as a means for helping build and establish the ecomuseum *Doi Si Than* in a Karen community in Chiang Mai province. We have since created a digital archive for collecting cultural heritage data for future use. However, due to the pandemic, we were not able to take our mobile museum to the community and had to rely on our mobile phones to communicate with our research partners in the community and with our participants. We also worked closely with children – always under supervision and with their parents' informed consent. Over the years, we became like family members for them. Before the COVID-19, when we visited the village, we always brought gifts for them on special occasions, such as birthdays or new year. It was like celebrating with our own family. The children always drew pictures to welcome us. During the pandemic, we missed seeing each other very much. We used Messenger video to maintain contact and check in with them every now and then. The children still showed us the pictures they had drawn for us.

Since it was of utmost importance to continue working on our ecomuseum and to see what was going on in the field, we proposed that the children participants photograph and record a video story of their everyday life and send it to us through Messenger. That way we could stay up to date with their lives and collect some data. In return, we offered them some small gifts, such as a radio-controlled car, a football, a robot, or an inflatable swimming pool, which we would have given them on other occasions anyway.

The children liked the idea and started sending pictures and videos to us. But interaction went far beyond daily routines. As one of the kids who had been participating in our ecomuseum project had a skateboard accident, we contacted him using video call to wish him a quick recovery. We phoned him every week to see if he was getting better. After three months, he had fully recovered. Later, another boy

participating in our research project got involved in a car accident. We made sure to video call him to cheer him up every week, and soon he was getting better.

Digital technology helped us to stay in close contact with our research participants. The mobile ethnography (Muskat et al., 2017) approach that complements traditional ethnographic methods with the use of mobile devices proved an important means of keeping in touch with the community that we had been working with. We found the mobile ethnography method useful as it worked well for maintaining contact with the children every week, to cheer them up and to ask questions about how they were doing. We collected and documented photographs, drawings, and videos about their everyday life and are currently curating an online exhibition on the Google Arts & Culture platform.[4]
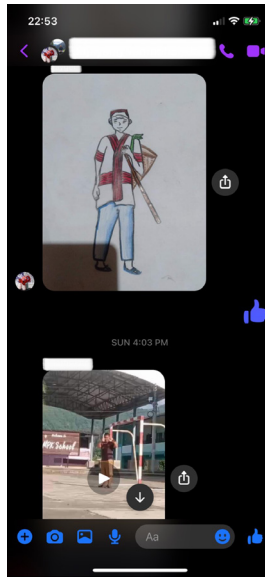

Figure 3. Mobile ethnography with children at ecomuseum *Doi Si Than. A picture of photos and videos created by children in the community, sent through the Facebook Messenger platform.* (photo by the authors).

THE STORY FROM A LUA VILLAGE

The Lua/Lawa are considered the first people of Chiang Mai province (Kunstadter, 1966). This ethnic group lives throughout the Thanon Thongchai mountain range, a border area between the Mae Chaem and Hod districts in Chiang Mai and the Maesarieng and Mae La Noi districts in Mae Hong Son province.

In January 2021, the ethnic group network was planning to inaugurate their own Lua festival to showcase the strength of the group and encourage the new generation to learn about and be proud of their ethnic identity. The first Lua festival was held at

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4 Google Arts & Culture: Discover the life of Karen Community at Doi Si Than Ecomuseum. https://artsandculture.google.com/incognito/story/gQWhQSbMtRgUdw

Bann Hao, Mae Chaem district in Chiang Mai province, which was the field research site of one of our researchers during his doctoral degree research. The head of the village, who had been in contact with the researcher for almost twenty years, asked the researcher to be part of the event as an academic representative for the village.

Since the pandemic was still rampant at that time, it was very challenging to plan the event under such unpredictable conditions, as we did not know if it would be possible to hold the festival onsite or not. The village was closed to outsiders, and even we were not able to travel to the village. To avoid great loss, we agreed to create an exhibition that could be experienced online or offline, depending on the situation, on 29 April 2022, the date that had been set for the festival.

During the preparations for the festival, we convened online meetings with the community. Lua people were familiar with online meetings. Yet, the main issue we encountered was a poor internet connection for those team members who joined the session from the village, which is situated in a remote area in the mountains. Against all odds, after these meetings, the researchers and the Lua participants were confident that the festival was going to happen. They named the festival "The First National Lua Day". For the Lua ethnic group, this was an enormous step forward for their cultural movement.

Eventually, the festival was held as scheduled in the village of Hao. The temporary exhibition we had prepared was printed and mailed to the village in advance as we did not know whether or not we would be able to attend the event. Yet, on the day of the festival, we did manage to attend in person and set up the exhibition. However, the most important aspect for us was that the Lua people had successfully managed to co-curate the exhibition by using ICT as a tool. Beside stories describing their lives,
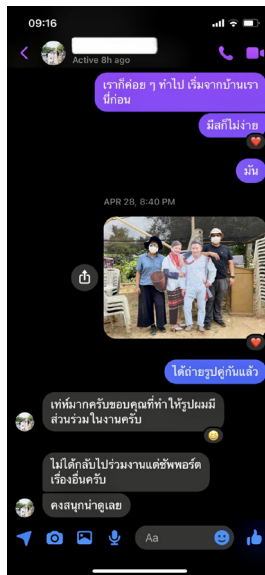

Figure 4. Photos sent by Lua People in the community via Messenger. *Photos of Lua people showing how Lua people helped co-curate the festival by sending us their photos for the exhibition.* (photo by the authors).

Figure 5. Lua Ban Hao Exhibition at the First Lua Festival in Ban Hao, Mae Chaem, Chiangmai. *Exhibition co-curated and co-created with Lua Ban Hao*. (photo by the authors).

they displayed everyday artifacts and objects as well as fresh fruits and herbs, corn, and rice from the harvest. Traditional Lua dresses were worn by members of the community. Next to the exhibition, various other cultural practices were performed, such as a ceremony for a new house, local plays, local cultural performances, and so on. Lua people from ten villages, totaling more than 500 people, attended the festival. It would not have been possible to organize this festival without the prior use of ICT.

LESSONS LEARNT

The Vivid Ethnicity mobile museum was, to some extent, able to function without actually being mobile. It did so by connecting to people in remote areas by using ICT to exchange information, photos, videos, and drawings through affordable online applications such as Messenger, Line, and other social media platforms. Our experiences showed that ICT tools proved useful in connecting to parties who had been cut off in terms of access and travelling, even though ICT had not been considered a solution to communication problems in research and co-creation processes. Mobile ethnography helped us collect data from the field despite the pandemic having suspended all onsite activities related to the ecomuseum project. In response to the circumstances, we resolved to create solutions for Vivid Ethnicity through a threefold *cope-adapt-transform* strategy.
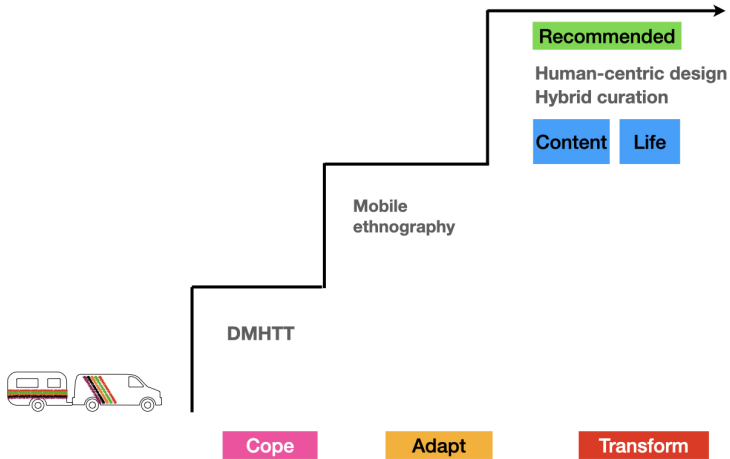
Figure 5. Hybrid curation model: Cope-adapt-transform.

Our DMHTT service innovation Vivid Box was a solution for **coping** in such a situation as the box allowed the audience to learn about ethnic groups individually, at home, through multiple sensory experiences. Continuously working with our ethnic group partners in remote areas with the help of mobile devices and strongly empathizing with them constituted an **adaptation** process. We maintained our links and relationships by remaining close – even at a distance – and learning about their needs as well as the community's capacities. After we had found ways to cope with and adapt to the pandemic, we finally **transformed** our way of working with the communities by using mobile ethnography as a tool to collect everyday life stories and store the data online either for online access or to exhibit onsite. This transformative stage meant that we had to think carefully about how to develop a human-centric research design[5] (Roumani & Both, 2020) despite the absence of face-to-face encounters with our research partners. We transformed our roles from 'distant' researchers to becoming a part of the community, and this way we could maintain relationships of trust. We learnt to be more flexible and broadly concerned about issues, not just pertaining to our project but also relevant to our participants themselves. Being with them (even through mobile devices) as family members encouraged us to take a human-centric and a less academic approach to our work. As a result, we became hybrid curators of an exhibition that transcends the content presented and actively integrates into and merges with our research partners' everyday lives. This became possible through engagement with the community and by showing that museums are not only there to exhibit things and activities, but also to support them, even in challenging circumstances. Vivid Ethnicity is hence a hybrid curation model that showcases a mobile museum working with a disconnected community.

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5   A human-centric design is a concept deriving from design thinking. It is action-oriented, deeply human, and experimental. To understand people's needs is significant to design critical and creative solutions to their problems.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.