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by Smita Magar, Nepal

United Nations Decade of FAMILY FARMING 2019-2028

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Stories of Change

Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems

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Stories of change:

Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems

In December 2017, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming (UNDAF, 2019-2028) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the Family Farming Knowledge Platform in collaboration with the Barefoot Guide Connection organized a series of "writeshops", writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

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Mushroom hunters: foraging mushrooms with my dad in Jhumlawang

by Smita Magar, Nepal

It was a good day. Sun and cloud were playing hide and seek creating a *komorebi* (sunbeam) effect in the forest near Syaubaari, Jhumlawang, where my dad and I were looking for edible wild mushrooms. It had rained the night before, so the ground was damp and squishy, giving leeches a chance to try to climb up my gumboots and onto my legs.

But I was not concerned. I had put on thick, long socks. The squelching earth under my feet felt soft as I took a deep breath of air that smelled of woods and decaying leaves. Then I noticed an unusual looking mushroom in the distance. I walked towards it quickly and crouched next to the big decaying log on which it was growing. Hidden behind the inner parts of the log's bark was a bunch of whitish-coloured mushrooms with branches that had blunt roundish tips. I realised I had never seen such a mushroom before. I wondered if it was edible. "Should I pick it or not?" I bent down looking closer. "What if it is poisonous?" I thought.

'Baba!'

'Babaaa!'

'Babaaaaa ooooooo!'

I called for my dad, louder each time, because the nearby Tumbasha rivulet had swelled up and was making too much noise for us to hear each other. He had gone a little further into the forest, where he used to look in previous years, to check other logs for *horma* (oyster) mushrooms.

"Is it edible?" I asked as I pointed at the mushroom. He crouched next to me, checked it and smiled.

"You have found the perfect mushroom!" he said proudly, "It is a coveted one."

My feelings of doubt and confusion were replaced with happiness when I saw how delighted and proud he was of my find. All morning we had not found enough mushrooms to have as a *tarkari* (curry) for our dinner.

"We call it *musakane* (mouse-ear)," he laughed.

He showed me the blunt looking tips of the bunch which were shaped like the ears of mouse. "Do you see the similarities?" he asked.

Photo by instagram.com/teentaare

I nodded happily. The similarities made me laugh. A warm feeling rose inside me, and we stood together. "I wonder what it tastes like?" I asked quickly.

"It is slightly crunchy and tastes divine with chillies, onions, garlic and tomato", he explained while my mouth watered thinking about the delicacy

we were going to have for dinner. "Mmmmm, adding 'timmur (sichuan pepper) is a must!" my father continued as he licked his lips.

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My dad asked me to check the log for more *musakane* mushrooms. He explained that they are usually found in abundance. I walked round the log, crouched on my knees, and checked underneath it and lo and behold! There were more!

I was so excited!

"Just find the root of the bunch and give a gentle tug," my dad advised when he saw me struggle to pick them up. As we picked one bunch after the other, our bag was also getting full. I was about to pick the last one when he stopped me.

"Let's leave this one," he said, smiling. "We need something for next year too, don't we?"

I was happy to do so. If it was like a 'seed' for next year, then that was good. But if someone else came foraging and found it, then they would also get some *musakane* mushrooms like us for their dinner.

When we returned home that day, I was extremely pleased with myself for finding a full bag of mushrooms and a new species at that. But this was not an unusual feeling. With each visit to the forest with my dad, I had always learnt something different about mushrooms. He would take me to the forest areas where varieties of mushrooms could be found and in great detail, he would describe the type of trees and logs which would have a particular type of mushroom and in which month of the year they flourished. He taught me how to distinguish between the mushrooms which were edible, and which were not. He was also cautious when it came to certain mushrooms and insisted that I not touch the ones which were poisonous. He would go into great lengths to explain how to recognise them, to look for subtle differences in colour and shape and distinctive markings. I always felt safe with him around.

As we walked together, each with our hand woven bags and walking sticks, he would tell me stories of how he learnt to recognise edible and non-edible mushrooms from his parents, his shepherd uncles, or his cow-herder cousins. He would show me the mushrooms and tell me about their nutritional and medicinal values, and how we could make them tastier for our tastebuds.

Photo by instagram.com/teentaare

"To find mushrooms, you must be familiar with forest, trees and know your logs," he would repeat on each visit we took. I enjoyed these moments immensely with him. So, I grew up eagerly waiting for mushroom season, for my mushroom hunting walks with him in the nearby forest and stories of mushrooms that followed.

Therefore, on the day I found *musakane* in August 2019, it was like reliving my childhood with my dad. After decades of separation, we were connecting again over wild mushroom foraging.

Photo by instagram.com/teentaare

As a young girl, I had been sent to Kathmandu from Jhumlawang, Rukum when Maoist insurgency began in the country, to continue my further education. With the ongoing civil war and no other means of connection except unreliable postal system, the learning about mushrooms stopped. When I was finally able to return to my village during a cease fire, nine years had already passed. And it was not the mushroom season. To my disappointment, the other few visits I could make in the following years were in different seasons too.

However, in this gap, I had a profound realisation. While I was studying in Durham, England I used to take long walks in the woods behind the Durham University looking for familiar herbs, flowers and fruits, trees and bushes, landscape, and mushrooms. And when I found the mushrooms, the thrill and comfort I felt made my homesickness a little less and breathing a little easier. I realised that finding mushrooms was like connecting with my dad, my village, my roots. No matter which part of the world I was in, the physical distance no longer mattered. When I saw the mushrooms I would be happy because it brought back memories of me walking with him in the forest, foraging mushrooms, bonding over mushrooms, learning about mushrooms, and listening to stories about people and mushrooms of Jhumlawang.

But I could never dare to touch the mushrooms found in the forests of Europe. Even when they looked so very similar to the ones found in Jhumlawang, I never had the confidence to give a gentle tug and pick them up for dinner. I could only look, take pictures, and experience the happiness of my find. There was no one to pat me on the back and look at me with pride and smiling eyes for my discovery. No one to stand next to me to tell me which months of the year, which trees and which logs held the most delicious mushrooms on this side of the world. In fact, to my utter disbelief, I came to learn that in many countries foraging mushrooms was highly discouraged and in some it was illegal. So, while finding mushrooms in a foreign land took me to my happy childhood of foraging with my dad in Jhumlawang and gave me a sense of being closer to the home, it also made me feel not quite at home.

Having spent too long feeling not quite at home, to my delight, I was able to return to Jhumlawang in March 2021 for a longer stay. It was a just few weeks before the six-month-long wild mushroom season was to begin. Right after the dry spell of winter when people of Jhumlawang struggle to find vegetables for curry, the mushroom season

is welcomed with excitement and relief. Then the forest comes alive with different types of mushrooms throughout the season, as if it is taking turns to feed the locals one after another, as if it is ensuring they recover from the dry spell of the winter. So, children and adults alike make plans for foraging tours. They go alone or in groups as soon as it rains for a few days in May and the forest is alive with not only the chirping of birds but also their giggles, sounds of calling each other and singing. A sudden rendezvous can happen amongst friends and checking each other's bags to see what was found, then exchanging and sharing of mushrooms to ensure that all will get to eat enough is a common occurrence. Once they return from the foraging, mushrooms and other wild vegetables are also gifted to the elderly or the ones who no longer manage to go foraging.

Photo by instagram.com/teentaare

Not to miss this chance, my dad, now older, slower, and weaker than I remembered he used to be, excitedly planned for our mushroom foraging walks.

"What is there for my vegetarian daughter to eat but mushrooms!" he laughed and insisted on going foraging. I was concerned for him as he was not well, and COVID -19 cases were on the rise. But he was adamant about it. So, one fine day, we strolled off into the forest, our bags over our shoulders, our pointed walking sticks prodding the earth as we checked every log. He walked in front as he always did, looking for the logs he knew that used to have mushrooms. Many of the logs were no longer there.

"The ones I knew have long decayed away" he sighed during our search and then he philosophically added, "Reminds one of own decaying away, doesn't it?"

I smiled at him, trying to reassure him, but feeling like a giant against his now smaller frame.

Even after half a day of searching, we could not find enough mushrooms to even fill the pot for the day's dinner. My father could see my frustration and disappointment.

"The eight-months' long drought of last year must be the reason that there are not many mushrooms this season," he spoke softly, summarising our frustration. But we did not give up hope of finding more. We walked further to the log where we had found *musakane* two years back. But to our disappointment, there was no *musakane* nor other types of mushrooms either. The log had almost decayed away too.

"Don't you worry," he consoled me, "We will find something." True to his prediction we found some *mauripane* mushrooms on our way back. *Mauripane* is popular amongst locals with its woody flavour and is generally cooked with chillies, potatoes, garlic, tomato, and Sichuan pepper. I had easily recognised it on the bark of a rayesh tree as I had been introduced to it by him during one of our foraging walks in my childhood. I raised my head and looked at him for confirmation and there it was: a smile and pride at my find.

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