

## ARAHMAIANI in TIBET

by Sue Ingham

In 2010 Arahmaiani undertook a new direction. She developed a friendship with Tibetan Buddhist monks that has led to ongoing environmental projects together.



Yushu after the earthquake, 2010  
[photograph: Arahmaiani]

Arahmaiani had been invited to participate in a group exhibition of Indonesian art at the Museum of Contemporary Shanghai and she chose to develop a community project as had been her practice for some time. She had been working with communities in earthquake prone areas, particularly since the earthquake in her home town of Yogyakarta which experience a deadly earthquake in 2006. It was suggested she might travel to Yushu in a remote area which had been almost completely destroyed by an earthquake two months previously.

The following summary of her activities is derived from a report Arahmaiani (Yani) wrote in 2011, an interview from an on line magazine, **Creative-i** and subsequent conversations held with her.

Cinematographer and film maker, Stefanie Platen, proposes to make a film of Yani's work titled *Bridging the Worlds*. She is seeking crowd funding for her project, see the **Platen website**

Yushu is in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, a region that is also known as the Kham region on the high Tibetan plateau. Yani encountered numerous difficulties for the Chinese authorities had isolated the area from foreign aid and visitors and she was treated with suspicion. She suffered breathing difficulties and altitude sickness and on subsequent trips she now flies in by stages to acclimatize. As well, the assistant who first accompanied her, a young Chinese artist, was prejudiced against Tibetan people. But Yani is the product of a hybrid culture and has led a nomadic life which has made her tolerant of different belief systems. She respects the Dalai Lama for his non violent principles and sympathizes with the situation of the Tibetan people.



[photograph: Arahmaiani]

Two and a half hours from Yushu, Yani found herself in the village of Lab in an area of dramatic natural beauty yet visibly degraded by garbage and pollution. She was greeted by a large number of Buddhist priests who were surprised by her visit but nevertheless were courteous. She was concerned as to how they would respond to a women in their midst and initially she was not allowed to stay in the monastery. Yet

she was delighted to find that the monks were open to debate for they had daily discussions that seemed part of their Mahayana Buddhist tradition. She then conducted a series of interviews with both lamas and priests concerning the teachings of Buddha on the natural environment – she mentions Khadeng Lama, Geshe Lharampa Sonam Lobsang, (Lama and Geshe Lharampa being titles indicating academic degrees) and priest Sonam Rinchen.



Arahmaiani with Sonam Rinchen

She began by raising the issue of the garbage in the monastery, asking the monks to clean it up for she thought that this would be her only visit and her one chance to propose a program. The initial response was embarrassment and, as she wrote, ‘It may be that I was the most obnoxious guest that the monastery had ever received’. The revered position of priests in Tibetan society made it difficult for them to accept the idea of cleaning up garbage themselves. Sonam Rinchen suggested that people be paid to do it instead. Yani argued that each individual should take responsibility for the natural environment, but by the time she left, the issue had not been resolved.

Communication was difficult as the monks did not speak English and Yani had no Tibetan. But the monks were familiar with modern technology and eventually they corresponded regularly by SMS which, Yani found, worked reasonably well for mutual understanding, after translations.

Some two weeks after she left, she received a SMS saying that the priests would themselves clean up the garbage in the monastery and village and to prove it, they sent photographs. Furthermore, as almost 70% of the forests in the area had been felled, the priests also accepted her suggestion to plant trees. At the beginning of Spring, under the leadership of Sonam Rinchen, 60,000 pine trees and thousands of medicinal herbs and flowers were planted on the slopes and in the valleys around the monastery. The concept was not entirely new for some 100 years previously the revered head of the monastery, the 13th Lab Rinpoche, had with great difficulty transported and planted poplar trees, which he had learned were the best variety to grow in the soils and climate of the plateau.



Arahmaiani greeted at the airport in 2013

Ten months later Yani returned for another visit and this time she was invited to stay in the monastery. The monastery, the village and the creeks were free of garbage, garbage management and recycling programs were in place and the trees were growing. Further programs were proposed, such as reusable shopping bags and water bottles, and a plan for the conservation of plants and animals for biodiversity. There is an increasing awareness that global warming and



climate change is affecting the Tibetan plateau and there is concern for the major river systems, such as the Yangtze, the Mekong and the Yellow River, that originate in this high plateau area. Glaciers and the permafrost are melting which has caused flooding and mudflows and eventually the water sources may even dry up.



Tree planting in and around Lab, photographs, 2014



Arahmaiani with the 15th Lab Kyab Gon Rinpoche

The head of the monastery, the 15th Lab Kyab Gon Rinpoche, has spoken about his concern for environment around Lab and on the high plateau. Since the middle of the last century there has been a change in the main livelihood of the local people, he says, from traditional farming and herding to trading. The people have been moving to urban centres, rare and precious plants have been harvested for sale, the water and soil has become degraded and herds of yak have declined.



Referring to the monks' environmental work, he stated: "I would like to thank Arahmaiani for contributing to this project by visiting us, organizing cleanup projects and planting new trees and bringing awareness to the local people....Artists getting involved in protecting the environment is special, it is through art and performance that the message is sent to the public..."

Lab Kyab Gon Rinpoche joined Yani at the exhibition of her work in the Singapore international art fair, *Art Stage*, in 2013.



Her work, *The Memory of Nature*, involved an installation of stones laid out in a pattern on the floor, photographs of the monks and their projects in Lab and a performance with a flag. Here Yani's work is clearly seen as art but the question arises as to how her excursions to Lab can be defined as an artistic activity. In a piece she wrote, titled *My Second Life in Tibet*, she hoped that, depending on the direction the monks and the local people took, this may become another of the

community-based projects she had been involved in, such as the Flag project. She is interested in concepts that bridge art and life and which are very similar to those of Joseph Beuys whose work she admired as a student. She seeks to foster collective rather than individual creative projects in an 'open art system' where the definition of art expands to encompass multiple disciplines and challenge established values. She says her methodology is to begin with a dialogue to identify the important issues and then to encourage collaborative works which may be art or take other forms.

In an email dated May 2014, Yani reported, "We have good news for you from Lab. The environmental project is progressing well. This springtime we have planed more than 100,000 trees (willow, pine tree, poplar). This time we have support from the local government."

In August 2014, beside Lab village which had been fully rebuilt after the earthquake in 2010, there was planned a celebration to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original tree planting by the 13<sup>th</sup> Lab Rinpoche.