



## 'External Assistance and Constitution-Building: Reflections'

**Dr Eugénie Mérieau**

Understanding foreign culture and advising a foreign constitution-building process sounds like an oxymoron. Understanding is a fundamentally non-normative, non-transformational exercise, when advising is a normative endeavor.

Yet understanding foreign culture is a necessary prerequisite to anyone providing advice or engaging in comparative work as part of a process of constitution-building. In doing so, it is crucial to adopt a non-judgmental anthropological lens and engage in ethnographic work aimed at comprehending constitutional meanings in their political, social and historical contexts. A constitutional text does not exist in a vacuum, its meaning is being constructed and re-constructed in a dynamic process of interpretation, building on a historical sedimentation of meanings imbued with emotions, trauma, anticipations, etc. It is very difficult to get a grasp of the issues at stake without ethnographic work.

Ethnographic work entails an acquaintance with culture mediated by a physical experience in the country, a learning of its language and participant observation. In constitutional processes, this means a learning of its constitutional language and participant observation with local constitutional lawyers.

Based on my experience in Thailand, I would issue the following recommendations:

- Be serious and do your homework: travel in the country, spend time with local people, get to know the everyday, try, at least, to learn the language;
- Be non-judgmental: aim at understanding the logic of things, always presume the rationality, logic and complexity of the processes you observe; and
- Be empirically grounded and always work inductively: reason from fact to law, from field to norm, from the particular or specific toward the general.

Lawyers engaged in advising constitution-building processes should always be concerned with legal impact rather than abstract norms. How do particular laws and norms affect, even indirectly, even in a rather unexpected fashion, the conduct and attitudes of the people to which they apply?

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**Eugénie Mérieau**

*Eugénie Mérieau has studied Law, Political Science, and Oriental Languages and Civilizations at the Universities of Sorbonne, Sciences Po, and the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations in Paris. In 2017, she completed her PhD on 'Thai Constitutionalism and Legal Transplants: a study of Kingship'. From 2014 to 2017, she held research and teaching positions at Sciences Po in Paris and Thammasat University in Bangkok and was twice a visitor at the Centre for Asian Legal Studies, National University of Singapore. She has lived for eight years in Asia where she held several positions including as researcher for the King Prajadhipok's Institute under the Thai Parliament and as a consultant for the Asia-Pacific Office of the International Commission of Jurists.*