

ISAN FIELDNOTES FEB. 29, 2007

Well, my lucky day has come at last! Lucky, that is, in terms of Isan belief that it is only possible to move into a new house after it is finished on a designated "Lucky Day." The Lucky Days during a month are chosen by the oldest man in the village, who serves as sort of a shaman role. He holds court at all ceremonies, and nothing can be done in terms of moving into a new house without his approval of the day. I was told that if a family moved into a house on any other day than the Lucky Day, then they would surely have a miserable future, with terrible accidents and even deaths. Plus, no one would ever consent to buy or live in such a house.

Given this strong belief by everyone in the Isan village where I am living in northeastern Thailand, even though I was impatient to move into my new house that I have been building in the village, of course I consented to wait for the next Lucky Day. I have been doing fieldwork research in this village for the past four years, and I made a major decision in December to continue long-term research here. Everyone is so wonderfully hospitable and friendly here, that I decided this is where I want to continue working and living. I intend to be here for the rest of my sabbatical, until August, and then after that I will return to Los Angeles to teach for a semester at USC, and then come back again before New Years' Eve to welcome in 2008 (because New Years celebrations go on for days and there is constant partying by the villagers). Then my plan is to stay until August 2008. After that, my plans are to continue coming here any time that I am not teaching at USC. So, this is now my second home, and I feel very happy here.

Getting this house finished, though, has not been easy. In late January the oldest man in the village announced that the next "Lucky Day" would be on February 19. So I pushed the workers to finish the house by that date, because I was told that a move-in could not occur until the house was completely finished. One delay after another occurred. I cannot convey how incompetent some of the workers were. The contractor I hired to oversee the work was a very pleasant person, and he did some things well. But he did not oversee the other workers, as they made one mistake after another. Plus, I don't think he could build a straight wall if his life depended on it. I showed him how to use a plum bob, to make sure the wall was perpendicular as he built it. He always smiled and said, yes, that is a good idea and he would do it. Then the next time I came to watch, he was again not using the plum bob. When I complained that the concrete block wall was dangerously leaning, he said "Neat noi" [only a little]. "Mai chai" [no] I replied, it is not "a little" but "a lot." And so it went.

Things that he said would be easy to do turned out to be anything but, and I watched each day go by with increasing irritation. By the middle of February I realized it would be impossible to finish by the Lucky Day.

Then suddenly it was announced by the oldest man that February 19 had become unlucky. So it would not be possible to move into the house until the next lucky day of February 26. I felt like all my efforts to hurry along the construction had been for naught, but there was no way the house would be ready to move in by the 19<sup>th</sup> anyway. Work

proceeded, I fired the incompetent contractor and hired some other workers who I directed myself. Things went more smoothly after that, despite many problems using my friend Lek as a translator. I was hoping to have everything finished by February 26.

Lek had to return to Bangkok immediately, because someone was interested in buying his hair salon there. Even though I had been having many problems with Lek as a translator, I was worried about being left in the village with no one who speaks English. Fortunately, at the last minute, I met a English major recent graduate from Maha Sarakham University who speaks excellent English, and I hired him to be my translator. The Isan villagers are completely bilingual, speaking both Thai and Lao, but they prefer to speak Lao. Since I have been trying to learn Thai, which is the most difficult language I have ever tried to learn, I am hopelessly confused when they start speaking Lao. This translator is Isan, so he is fluent in both Thai and Lao. I am fortunate to have found him. We were all set to go, for him to translate for me with the workers.

Then it was announced that the son of a prominent family in the village was getting married. A wedding is, of course, a call for days of partying, and my workers announced they could not work until after the wedding ceremony. Isan people seem to use every event as a justification for several days of partying. Men start drinking whiskey and water, or beer, shortly after breakfast, and continuing during the day until nighttime. Needless to say, they are not able to work in that condition. Isan men hold their liquor well, I suppose because they drink so much, but all work came to a stop.

In desperation I went to an English-speaking Buddhist monk who sometimes visits this village, and with whom I have become friends. He kindly interceded and convinced the oldest man that I do not have to have the house completely finished in all details in order to hold the Lucky Day ceremony. The same day I found out that February 26 was declared unlucky again. Fortunately the next Lucky Day came only two days later on February 28.

I was invited to attend the wedding, but it was in another city a hundred miles away, so I declined to go along with the scores of people who made the journey. I stayed at my house and did work that I could do by myself. Six workers promised me that they would work on the second day after the wedding. I did not even try to convince them to work on the day following the wedding, knowing they would be too hung over. On the second day, one of the six showed up, and despite my pleas he only worked half a day. I have found that my appeals that I want to move in quickly make not one bit of difference to the workers here. They are sweet, wonderful people, but clearly their priorities are other than my house.

The next day, when I hoped the other workers were going to return, I found out that no one would be working for the next three days because they had to prepare for a major Buddhist holiday festival. Why I had never been told previously about this, I have not a clue. At this point I just gave up on completing the work by the Lucky Day. Not to worry, the Buddhist monk told me, because the house was close enough to completion. My Lucky Day ceremony could still take place.

Having no workers, and having already hired the translator, I decided that it would be best to use his talents to take me to places I had never been before. On one day we went to a museum of Isan culture in Maha Sarakham. Since I do not read the difficult Thai script, he translated all the museum display texts. We spent the whole day there, and I learned a lot. It is an excellent museum, and also has a research center of Isan culture. It is definitely a place that I want to return to.

On another day, I asked the translator to take me to the town that is closest to this village. I had been through there before, but had never spent much time there other than going to the local hardware store and the outdoor evening market. I asked to be taken to the Buddhist temple there. To my surprise, the abbot at the temple has a Ph.D. from a university in India, and he speaks some English. We spent the day together, and he gave me and the translator a personal tour of the town. During the tour he took my hand and we held hands as we walked along. I am continually amazed at the close expressions of physical touching by Isan males with other males. We had long talks about the town, about Thai Buddhism versus other forms of Buddhism, and about Isan society. It was a great day. As we prepared to leave he gave me a beautiful woven bracelet that I now wear every day.

On coming back to the village I found out that there would actually be two ceremonies for my house opening.. The first would be on the evening of February 28, for the people

of the village. The second ceremony would be on the next morning, when five Buddhist monks would come to bless my house.

The next day my translator had to be absent because he had to go to Maha Sarakham to help his mother prepare for her own Lucky Day ceremony, as it happens that she is completing a new house as well. Having no workers, and nothing to do at the house, I accepted the invitation of the English-speaking monk to come with him to Mahachulalongkorn University in Koen Kaen, where he is a professor of English. He asked me to give a lecture on international trends in Buddhism, and my predictions for the future of Buddhism. About a hundred monks attended, and they asked many excellent questions. At the end of this three hour lecture and discussion, they presented me with a book and a beautiful Buddha necklace.

My lecture had such a good reaction that the monks at the other campus of Mahachulalongkorn University, in the city of Roi Et, also invited me to speak at there. This group of monks were not English-speaking, so my friend the monk did the translating for me. After that speech I was given a nice bright yellow shirt with the symbol of the King of Thailand on it. Yellow is the royal color. I feel good about wearing this shirt, because I highly respect this King.

I was lucky to see the King in person several years ago. I was amazed at the sincerity and caring attitude that the King showed toward me and every person he met. There was something special about him, that I knew I was in the presence of an especially gifted

person. I began to understand why Thai people so venerate him. He is a very forward-thinking leader who is genuinely committed to helping the poor people of his country, and he is particularly progressive in his concern for the environment. In his youth he was a Buddhist monk, and it shows in his personality.

I came back to the village, intellectually rejuvenated, and ready for my Lucky Day. On the day of the first ceremony, my translator and I worked hard on the house all that day, and at five o'clock I rushed to take a shower and dress for the occasion. That morning I had given the money for a feast to Lek's sister and her husband, and they expertly handled all the details of the food purchases and cooking. When I emerged from my shower and dressing, I found a crowd of people already waiting for me. I was given a monk's shoulderbag, inside of which was placed my Buddhist necklace, Buddhist prayer candles, some coins from my pocket, a hammer and nails and file from the house construction, plus some herb leaves. As I walked down the street, people cheered and patted me on the back. One woman had taken a large empty plastic paintcan from my house, and was using that as a drum. With this rousing beat, people were cheering and yelling. The oldest man in the village was waiting for me, holding a large umbrella even though there was no rain. He took me by the hand and led me to the front door of my house.

There I was asked to kneel at the entryway. Because they knew of my bad knee, someone shoved the upside down paintcan under my rear so I could sit comfortably. Waiting inside the entry was the leader of the village along with several other elderly

people. The oldest man ceremoniously introduced me, even though I have met the leader many times before. The leader asked the oldest man if we came with any bad spirits. The oldest man said no, that we came with only good spirits. The oldest man then presented a plate, with some herb leaves on it, and a stone. He told me this was the stone of sorrows. He then took the stone in his hand and threw it backwards. He told me he was throwing away all my past sorrows and worries, and to have only good feelings and spirits from this time onward.

After this the leader made a speech, welcoming me into the village and into my new house. He called on the crowd to be good neighbors to me, and for me to be a good neighbor to them. He emphasized the harmony of this village, and the need to keep the harmony. It was very moving. They then led me into the house, and going room by room throughout the entire house, with the entire crowd following. After the tour, Lek's relatives brought in tray after tray of food, and everyone sat down on the floor for a big meal. They knew that my favorite food is Talapia fish, which they call Benin, and that was their choice for the main dish. Practically every Isan event ends with a common meal together, which I think is an experience bonding people together closely. After the meal, people relaxed and chatted into the evening. It was a lovely experience.

While the ceremony itself was wonderful, I told my friend the monk that I thought the Lucky Day custom could be very oppressive to people. The idea that someone cannot move in to a new house on any day that is convenient to them, but only on certain days—and days that repeatedly change with little prior notice, no less—severely restricts the



freedom of people. Especially considering the undependability of Isan workers, it seems quite difficult to coordinate a Lucky Day with a plan of finishing construction. In addition, I told the monk, the added expense of hosting a large feast for the village is onerous for someone who has just gone through all the expenses of building a house. I fed a whole crowd of people for less than one hundred dollars, so it was not difficult for me on an American salary. But for a Thai person, the expense of holding a feast can be a factor in deciding when the family can move into their new house. I have seen new houses sitting empty because the owners cannot afford to host a feast, and have to delay their move until they can save enough money for a feast.

I told the monk about the American custom, where each person brings a dish for a potluck meal, or buys a gift of household items to give to the new homeowners. I suggested this custom was much more sensible and humane. The monk said he had never thought of it like that before, but agreed with me. He pointed out that the Lucky Day custom has nothing to do with Buddhism, but is simply an ancient Isan tradition. I said the tradition is great, but people should be able to go ahead and move into their new house when it is most convenient for them. Then they can hold the ceremony on the next Lucky Day, whenever it happens to occur.