

TWO WEDDINGS AND AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

This morning when I woke up I had a hacking cough and felt sluggish. I got up, made my breakfast [Grapenuts cereal, one of the few American things I want on a daily basis], and then I felt so bad that I thought I would go back to bed. No sooner had I lay down than I was roused by the biggest ant I have ever seen, with pincers so large I could make out the jagged edges, marching menacingly across my pillow. I tried blowing him off the bed, with the biggest breath I could manage, but he was not fazed in the least. When I reached for a book to swat him off the bed, he was saved by the sound of cheering and drumming. I looked out the window and saw a crowd of people down the street.

I jumped up, threw on some jeans, grabbed my camera, and rushed out to see what it was all about. When I got there I started taking pictures, and Isan people (who always love to get their picture taken) posed and smiled as usual. There was one drummer, one male singer, and one man clanging cymbals, but they sang and played so enthusiastically that they made up in energy what they lacked in numbers. Everyone was dancing merrily except for one solemn-looking 22 year old young man, dressed in a white silk jacket with gold braided shoulder cloth. I did not know any of these people, and when I asked I found out they were from a nearby village.

After taking pictures, I decided to join in the fun, so I ran back to my house and got my Isan folk drum that I had purchased when I was here last year. I have used my youthful experience as a rock-n-roll drummer to my advantage more times in ethnographic fieldwork than I can remember. Every known human culture in the world has some kind of drumming, and it never fails that when people see that I can pick up their style of drumming they are surprised and amazed. After following the drummer's beat for a few stanzas, I picked it up readily, and soon I was drumming along in perfect timing with the main drummer. People kept coming by and clapping me on the back, offering a "thumbs up" sign, and saying "dee mak mak" [very good]. We played for a long time, with people dancing all around. I suddenly realized that, in the enjoyment of the drumming, my coughing and sluggishness had completely disappeared. It is amazing how a good party will cure what ails.

Next the crowd started dancing into the yard of my neighbor's house a couple of houses away, and I saw a large tent that had been erected. I knew this meant a feast was going to be held. Sure enough, when I got into the yard I saw the local women were preparing a big feast. Wanting to take more photos, I gave my drum to another man to play, and started snapping photos. When she saw me taking pictures one woman proudly held up a freshly slaughtered cow's leg, with hoof still attached. Isan people are cattle raisers going back to ancient times, but in this village at least they do not actually eat much beef except during feasts. Their more common sources of protein are chicken, pig, fish, lizards, frogs, clams, land crabs, snails, and insects. So I knew, if they had killed one of their prized cows, this must be some especially important event. I asked what the occasion was for this feast, but people said a word I did not know. It is really difficult to

learn the language here because Isan people are totally bilingual in Thai and Lao, and I am not good enough to tell when they are speaking in Lao, or if it is just a Thai word I do not know.

Then I saw something I had seen before, so I knew the meaning of this word: it was a wedding. Two teenage girls held a silver chain blocking entry to the stairs leading to the second floor of the house. I positioned myself underneath the stairs. The solemn young man in the silk jacket said something to the two girls and they nodded yes, and removed the chain. He then started walking up the stairs, followed by other people bearing gift pillows.

I wanted to see what was going on upstairs, but somebody brought my drum back to me. They evidently preferred my drumming style to the other man, and they encouraged me to rejoin the musicians in the yard. Being part of the musical entertainment at weddings was never my remotest thought when I was being trained in ethnographic fieldwork techniques, but my musical skills have come in more handily than many of the instructions I received in such academic courses. I always advise budding anthropologists that dancing lessons and music lessons, as well as good photography skills, are more valuable in successful fieldwork than statistical sophistication or construction of complex kinship charts. If local people can see that you know how to have fun, this mark of humanity makes up for rudimentary language skills and other foreignness more than anything else.

It is this strong desire for “sanook” [joy or happiness] that is, to my analysis, the defining characteristic of Isan culture. That is the thing that really attracts me so much to this place. It is certainly not the fanciness of the material culture, much less the swarms of insects or the swelteringly hot climate. It is the people. They may be simple poor uneducated farmers, but they have a balanced view of what is really important in life that many a philosopher lacks. Their Buddhist approach to life is evident in their daily behavior. Though I have heard a few Thai people in other parts of the country say some disparaging things about this or that group, I cannot recall ever having heard an Isan person say anything remotely intolerant of anyone. For example, they are more accepting of gay people, not just “tolerant” as most liberal Americans pride themselves on becoming, but genuinely accepting. They are kind and generous, caring and solicitous, to all kinds of people. But most of all, they have fun. I have traveled the world enough, and lived long enough, to learn that there are various types of cultures. Never have I found a culture that so replicates the types of things to which I most resonate. I feel that I have found a culture where I fit. Maybe not “fit in” because I am still a “farang” [Westerner], and my house is sufficiently different from the other houses of the village to mark me as a non-Isan. But I fit with Isan people. It’s nice.

Just at the moment when I was being pulled back to join the musicians, my neighbor Aek grabbed my arm and asked me to come upstairs. This was his house. He wanted me to photograph the event. I gladly handed off my drum to a different man, hoping he would be more to the crowd’s liking than the last man to whom I loaned my drum. As I climbed the stairs, up on the second story I saw a crowd of people seated on the floor. There were

so many people crammed in that I feared the whole structure could collapse from the weight, but the old house held tight. Just as I surmised, it was a wedding ceremony in process.

Though everyone in the village is Buddhist, weddings are not considered religious ceremonies. So there was not a monk in sight. Instead, there were two people leading the ceremony: the eldest male relative of the bride, dressed in white shirt and pants, and the eldest female relative of the groom, dressed in a colorful silk dress. Aek's eldest daughter, age 20, was seated beside the groom. They both looked very solemn, never smiling. A fancy banana-leaf arrangement with flowers, of the type that I have seen before at different ceremonies, was the centerpiece. After the elderly man spoke, a bowl was passed around for people to contribute money for the new couple. Then he tied a good-luck string around the wrist of both the bride and the groom. Next, the elderly aunt spoke, and she did the same thing. After her, the mayor of the village tied the lucky strings (like all good politicians around the world, he wanted to make sure I took his picture doing the honors), and other participants followed.

A friend handed me one of the strings, and as I tied the string around the groom's wrist and then the bride's wrist I said: Pom donggon kun mee sanook le dee mak mak toot toot wan. [I want you to have happiness and very good things every day always]. They thanked me. After that, the elderly aunt tied a string around my wrist, chanting a Buddhist prayer as she did so. My thoughts went back to the first time that I visited this village in 2003: when I was leaving to go back to America a number of elderly people tied such strings around my wrists. Their purpose was to protect me on my travels until I could safely return again. Though they are just simple pieces of white twine, I have come to treasure and indeed cherish these little symbolic markers of recognition that my life is also tied to this place that I now consider my second home.

I put a contribution of 100 baht into the money bowl where people were putting 20 and 50 baht notes to give the young couple a financial start. But I knew that the most memorable and unique thing that I could give the couple, beyond money, was a copy of the photographs that I was making. I was pleased that Aek had asked me to photograph his daughter's wedding. But after the people had presented their gift pillows I was quite irritated that my new digital camera ran out of memory. On another occasion last week the battery needed to be recharged just as I was positioning an important shot. This new camera does not hold as many photos as my old camera, so now I realize I need to get an extra memory card and extra battery so that I can be sure to have enough room and power for many photos when there is a ceremony going on. There is also an irritating delay from the time one pushes the button until the shutter flashes, resulting in some lost opportunities of events in motion. This is the first time that I have a camera with a full picture on the back of the camera, which is great when taking photographs inside. But I often find that outside in the sun I cannot see the picture at all, and have to guess blindly at the parameters of the picture. And in the sunlight I cannot see the faint letters telling when the memory is full, or the battery low. I prefer to squint through an old-fashioned viewfinder. Oh, when will designers of technological gadgets learn to get things right!

Now camera-less, I watched the remainder of the ceremony. When at an event I try to memorize as much detail as possible, and get back to a private place soon to record the event. I have learned never to show pen and paper or to take notes during a ceremony. I remember many years ago being so excited when I was invited to attend a potlatch ceremony at the Makah Indian Reservation in Washington State. I had read about Northwest Coast potlatches so many times, that when I actually was watching one unfold in front of my eyes I got so excited that I wanted to record every detail. I was documenting Native American history in action. I was sitting on the side so I did not think people would notice, but later my Makah friend who took me there said he was embarrassed that the participants thought I was recording them like they were some kind of specimen in an entomology collection. He had taken me to this giveaway ceremony, honoring the 90th birthday of his great grandmother, as his guest. His family had totally accepted me as his friend. But I had turned a family's joyous ceremony into an ethnographic exercise. This is the kind of behavior that gives anthropologists a bad name. I was supremely embarrassed by this realization, and have never taken notes at a ceremony (especially one with religious overtones) since then.

Only if I am interviewing a person, and have their permission, do I tape record or take notes in their presence. In fact, I don't even like to do that any more. I much prefer to type my general questions on my laptop computer before an interview, and then type out the person's answers and my more detailed follow-up questions as they speak. I can type really fast, and though my fingers feel like they are going to fall off after a long interview session, I can keep up with many speakers as they talk. If not, I find that most interviewees are comfortable if I simply say "wait" for me have a few seconds to catch up, then "OK" for them to resume. In fact, I have found that if I give them a bit of time to think about what they are saying, they will often give me more thorough responses than if they just talk without a break. My experience has been that people are more comfortable with me typing on a computer than recording them with a tape recorder. Especially if I first show them on the laptop some pictures of me and my family, or me with some of my other research activities, the laptop comes across as more personable than a tape recorder whose only purpose is to suck up their voice.

My reasons for not liking to use tape recorders are four. First, some people do not feel comfortable with a microphone stuck in their face, and they give awkward or unrewarding interviews. I have found that a lot of my traditionalist Native American informants do not like to have their picture taken or their voice recorded, but they do not mind me typing away on my laptop while they talk. Second, one should never underestimate the ability of anything technological to malfunction. In 1982 I conducted one of the best interviews I have ever done, of a Native American Two Spirit person. He was so eloquent, and I was overjoyed at the responses. It was only after that person left that I discovered that nothing after my second and final voice check was recorded on the tape.

Third, there are few more torturous activities in the whole world than transcribing a tape recording. It helps to have a transcribing machine, which will rewind the tape slightly with the click of a foot pedal, but even this device is a pain to use. Endlessly rewinding

tapes to try to understand what was being said, with background noises intruding, drives me crazy. I have tape recordings stuck in file cabinets from years ago that I have never published, just because I hate transcribing so much. I think I would stop doing ethnography if I had no alternative to a tape recorder.

Though I have had my share of frantic fits due to lost word processing, writing on a computer, with its spell checks, ease of revision, and email transmission to editors halfway around the world is heavenly. I must sound like a relic from the Jurassic Epoch when I tell young people they have no idea how difficult it was to be a writer before the use of personal computers. As a student I remember typing a page on a clunky manual typewriter, then having to start over with an entirely new page after just one tiny typographical mistake, and then making another mistake on another word in the bottom line of the revised page. How many thousands of trees must have died as a result of crumpled papers thrown into trashcans by the mangled fingers of frustrated writers! Writers used to have the reputation for either committing suicide or being ax-murderers. Anyone who ever tried to finish a book manuscript on deadline, by typing on a manual typewriter, can well understand those reactions. I used to think that the most significant inventions of my lifetime were the air conditioner and the telephone answering machine. But now I know they are the computer and the internet. So, in the tradition of cranky old fogies who trudged miles in waist-deep snow to get to school, I will say it: you youngsters don't know how easy you have it!

The fourth reason I prefer to type my interviews on my laptop is that I can immediately, or soon afterward, make a printout of the interview to give to the person. This is a big help to me because I can ask them for their corrections or revisions once they reread their words. Many people add to what they originally said, and I have gotten additional data that I would not have received if I had had to wait for transcribing. Moreover, I find that interviewees, especially if I have gotten them to tell me their whole life story, really appreciate receiving their autobiography in written form. I have even bound the printed interview as a little booklet, with an impressive cover, and presented it as a birthday present to the person for them to keep as testament to their life. Some have added it to their papers deposited in an archive, or given it to descendants so that they would have a record of this part of their family history. Others have found it useful to keep for themselves, just to jog their memory as they get older. I am now reaching the age when I realize how much I have forgotten about my own past. As a researcher who has used life-history interviews as my major source of information, it is ironic that I did not follow my own advice. I wish now that I had written down my own life history many years before I did so. I strongly advocate that any thoughtful person should write their own autobiography at least every ten years. Life flies by so fast, so much is lost to the vagueness of memory, and perspectives change so radically, that taking some time to keep a journal or produce an autobiography should be a top priority for any self-reflective person.

Most people in this traditional village have been farmers for their whole life. Many of them have never been outside of this province in northeast Thailand. Lek is the only one in the village ever to have traveled outside of Thailand. They do not have any conception

of what an anthropologist is. I have tried to explain it, but they just don't get it. Plus, they are so disturbed when I leave to go back to America that I have found it is simplest to tell them I have to go back to America to make money, and then I can come back here to live. I tell them (without a word of untruth) that I so enjoy living here that I want to learn as much about their way of life as possible, and that I am just curious. They do know that I want to write a book about their way of life, and they like that. But I think they value the photographic history of their village I am compiling more than anything else.

My thoughts about life history, tape recorders, interviews, computers, and a camera whose memory card is full, were interrupted by the end of the couple's formal wedding ceremony. After they were presented with gift pillows, the bride and groom were led into the sole private bedroom in the upstairs. As the door opened I saw a large queensize bed with new sheets and blanket on it. The musicians had by this time come upstairs, and they were joking and playing with each other. The male singer playfully gave a kiss on the cheek to the male drummer, and I joked that they would be the next couple to have a wedding ceremony. That brought laughs. My other neighbor said no, that the next wedding should be me and my boyfriend Lon. He said this with a smile, but with all seriousness.

Isan people want everybody to get married, and a same-sex couple is just as likely to feel this concern as a heterosexual couple. Thailand does not legally have same-sex weddings, at least on a national level, but I have seen enough evidence of the social acceptance of same-sex couples to know that Isan villagers would consider two males or two females getting married to be just as valid as a male-female couple. What is important to them is not some legal document from the government, but the social ceremony of marriage and commitment to a shared life together that is witnessed and participated in by the village.

After these comments about marriage there was some jostling as the young men tried to get into the bridal suite. I thought to myself that perhaps, as in some cultures, the bride and groom were expected to consummate the marriage right then and there, and they wanted to watch! Then I saw the groom's elderly aunt powerfully push the young men aside with a flick of her wrists, and I wondered if she was there to watch as a witness. I positioned myself strategically by a crack in the wall, less as a voyeur than out of curiosity at what was happening. Through the crack I saw the bride and groom lying down on the big bed, fully clothed, while the aunt was talking to them. Nothing remotely sexual was going on; they were not even holding hands. It was impossible for me to hear what the elder woman was saying, and I doubt if even the bride and groom could hear, because of the loudness of the music and singing just outside the flimsy door. After a while the auntie came out, whereupon the musicians rushed into the small bedroom, playing loudly. I retrieved my drum and used my drumming as an excuse to go inside with them to see what was about to take place.

By now the solemn looks of the bride and groom were gone, and they were laughing and smiling. At the first opportunity, though, the bride escaped the bedroom to join her girl

friends that were waiting outside. During the entire ceremony there was never a kiss exchanged, or any obvious display of emotion at all between the young man and woman. That was in sharp contrast to what happened next. After the exit of the auntie and the bride, only males remained in the bedroom. The young men started playfully pulling the groom around the bed. The drummer was jumping around so excitedly, up and down on the thin floorboards as he drummed, that I really did fear the whole floor would collapse from the weight. I never fail to be amazed at the comfortableness of Isan males in their close body contact and touching each other everywhere. The groom seemed much more comfortable in this room of his male friends than he did with his new bride. During the entire rest of the day, I never saw any exchange of emotion between the bride and groom. Indeed, they did not seem to pay each other any attention in the least. Wow, what a contrast to the companionate marriage of contemporary Americans!

By now the groom had been extricated from his silk jacket, and he seemed much more comfortable in his plain tee-shirt. With the musicians playing constantly, they now led him down the steep stairs and to the waiting drinking party below. Isan people party hard, and the drinks flow freely at any excuse. The early morning hour of the wedding was no inhibition to Isan drinkers; they can put it away morning, noon or night. By the time we came downstairs, most of the people were finishing the feast that is a requisite part of every Isan ceremony. But our musical group had no want for food. What they wanted to get to now was some serious drinking. People kept offering me drinks, but since I am not much of a drinker I demurred. At last, seeing that I was not drinking either whiskey or beer, one of the young men left and soon returned with three bottles of wine. Once they opened one of them and insisted I drink I decided morning wine was not so bad. They were quite excited and they cheered when I finally took a drink. As soon as I let my glass get half empty someone would immediately fill it up again. Thus, it is impossible for a man to be a teetotaler here.

When the dancing started (done, of course, by men only) it was not long before they wanted to see if I could dance to Molum (Isan folk music). A few drinks and one can do things that might not otherwise be done, so though it was still before noon I joined them. Isan people are so totally amazed when a farang can do anything Isan that they react like Moses has just parted the Red Sea, and they did likewise when they saw me dance. We danced out into the street and, after I grabbed my drum again, we danced up to my house. I called all the musicians to come into my house, where I had a fresh store of whiskey. I learned to keep a stash on hand just for occasions like this. As we drummed and danced, with more drinking, the lead singer sang a song toward me. I was surprised when he started motioning toward my groin as he sang, but having learned to go along with whatever ride I happen to be on I just laughed. Isan folksongs can be quite bawdy, and my guess is that this was one of those. Then he took his hand and started touching me, feeling my penis. I had no idea what was going on, but the smiles of the other men let me know this was a good thing. So, I just let it take its course. He rubbed my groin as he sang. This was the singer who had kissed the other drummer earlier, and I wondered if he might be gay. But with Isan men it is quite often impossible to tell. I have had Isan men rub my penis before, in what I thought was an obvious sexual come-on, only to have nothing happen beyond that. Isan men are so free with their touching of each other, and

so relaxed about their bodies, that a dividing line between homoeroticism and friendly comradary is not evident.

After a few more songs a man came into my house and told everyone that it was time to go home. They all piled into the back of a waiting pickup truck outside, drumming and singing all the while. I never fail to be amazed at how many Isan people can fit into the back of a small pickup truck. I counted eighteen adults as they headed out to their own village. The wedding celebration had ended.

After seeing the musicians off, I returned to Aek's house where the groom and a few friends were still drinking. I was really grateful that the entire event had not been marred by any antagonism among the young men, whose "boxing" pseudo-violence had turned off so many villagers. Maybe those boys learned their lesson, and there will be no more of these antagonistic behaviors in the future. Everyone seemed as pleasant as usual, even though heavy drinking had occurred.

By this time the bride was wearing shorts and a tee-shirt, and she remained oblivious to the groom as before. She was returning her rented bridal gown, which had been brought by the four makeup artists and clothiers who had come in from the city for the day. This group of wedding consultants consisted of two attractive young women, plus one very flamboyant gay male and a transgender ladyboy, who were as usual totally accepted by the villagers without comment. I talked briefly with the ladyboy, and found out that she was seventeen and still in high school. She feels very loved by her family, friends, and neighbors. Long hair is strictly prohibited for boys in Thai primary and secondary school, yet this person was able to wear long hair like any female student. She told me she wears a girl's uniform dress each day at school. She said she had never had any problem from school administrators, teachers or other students, even though everyone at the school knows that she is physically male. Hearing this, I hoped to get a substantive interview, but the ladyboy seemed more interested in doing the hair of the two females than in talking with me. So, when the men dragged me back to the drinking area I did not object. However, they were smoking cigarettes by this time, and since I dislike the smell of tobacco I excused myself and headed home to eat.

Though I had many offers to eat I always answer "kop khun kop, im lau" [thanks, I'm full] when at one of these feasts. I do not eat beef, and most of the food is too spicy for me anyway. Plus, some of it is pretty rancid-looking, made out of who-knows-what that has fermented for who-knows-how-long, and covered with too many flies, so I politely decline their invitations to eat. Isan people must have the strongest stomachs in the world, because nothing they put in their mouths ever seems to make them sick, but I have had enough nasty bouts to make me cautious. Both Lek and Lon have learned how to cook for my tastes and to preserve my good health, so I am confident in and appreciative of their delicious cooking.

As I walk home Lek approaches me, and says that the neighbors want me to play the drum some more for them. I do, and afterwards they clap applause (which I realize they are doing because they know Americans like the strange custom of clapping hands, which

they seldom do at their own events). So, with this final flourish I end the day and go home to eat, rest, and write up these fieldnotes on my valued Sony laptop. Strangely, after yak yak yaking all day without a problem, once I got home, my cough returned. Go figure.