

I love living in Thailand, but oh, the bugs here! As I write this I have to swat them off me. They do not bite or have any evil intent, but are everywhere including crawling on me. Everywhere on me. My boyfriend Lon was using the flyswatter a little while ago to swat some of the many bugs in the house. He just came into my office as I am typing, and I tried to explain that I wanted him to bring the flyswatter from the next room. I could not think of the Thai word for flyswatter, but I thought he could figure out what I meant since he had just used it. So I motioned to describe a tiny fly and then the shape and size of the flyswatter, and the act of swatting a fly. He said "Kow jai" [I understand] and left the room. He just came back and handed me a fork. I have no idea how he concluded that I wanted a fork, but this is what I mean when I say that even gesturing is often of little use between Thai and English.

When I went out to get the flyswatter I recently bought I discovered that he, or somebody who had used the flyswatter, had managed to knock out part of the plastic in the middle of the flyswatter. How does one go about knocking out a piece from the middle of a flyswatter? Isan people always seem to be breaking things, with the rough way they handle items.

Oh, great. Now, after I had swatted the bugs in my office and was beginning to type again, my hanging bookshelf that workers installed on the wall of my office just came crashing down! And it was not even full of books. So much for the quality of Thai craftsmanship. Earlier today a worker was getting some leftover lumber out of my yard, and as he picked up and swung around the boards, without looking where he was swinging them, he literally destroyed a beautiful plant that I was growing. That plant was already suffering from being hit a few days ago by another neighbor who started cleaning my fish pool with the skimmer, trying to be nice but doing this without asking me first. He did the exact same thing with the other end of the bamboo skimmer pole.

This sort of thing has happened many times. I planted a mango tree that was full of tiny mangos. The workers and visitors were so careless in hitting it that one after another of the little mangos was knocked off (in the spirit of full disclosure, to my horror, on one occasion I also inadvertently knocked a mango off). At this point there is just one single mango left on the pathetic little tree. I live in terror that that final survivor will be knocked off too. For some reason Isan people prefer to eat green mangos, before they mature. Several visitors have asked me why I don't pick this one, and I explain that I only like to eat the ripe mature ones. I am continually afraid that one day I will come into the yard to find that a "helpful" visitor will have picked and cut up the green mango for me to eat. I know they are trying to help, and I want to keep my good relations with people, but sometimes I wish they would just take a hands off policy toward helping me in my house and yard.

The mangos are not the only casualty. I cannot count the number of times that workers would crash something into a piece of furniture or a plant during the house construction. The people here are just so careless, in the extreme. The worker today was quick to apologize and say "mai dee" [no good]. There is never any denial of the sort that you sometimes see Americans do when they make a mistake and are clearly in the wrong. The Isan people always are so sweet in their apology. Then, as I know all too well from experience, they will turn around and make the same mistake doing the same exact behavior in the future. They know that I as an American am more exacting in my attention to detail, and they try to satisfy. But they just do not think about aesthetics.

For example, before I came to this village Lek had purchased a load of lumber, in preparation for building the house. It is really ugly used wood, with lots of nails sticking out and paint splashes all over it. I was trying to be ecological, and not use wood in the building of the house. Except for two wood doors, I only purchased one long board which the builder said was necessary to attach the rain gutter (I later learned from the rain gutter installer that he could have made the gutter easily without the wood, so I wish I had not used even that one board). Consequently, the only use for Lek's lumber was to make scaffolding for the workers to lay the concrete blocks and to

paint. Since I was thinking I might need this scaffolding later, I just let the scaffolds remain in the back part of the yard.

Lek is here these last two weeks, and yesterday he decided that he wanted to build a carport to protect the paint of the car from the heavy rays of the sun, and also to have a dry carport during the rainy season. Since I did not really want the carport, and since I had paid for building most of the house, Lek said he would pay for the carport. But he wanted to use his lumber. Not wanting to waste wood, and to save money, I agreed that this was acceptable. But I asked that he stress to the workers that—given the limitations of the lumber—they try to have the best side of the wood facing down, which is what we will be looking up at. Today when the work began I was busy with my writing inside and when I came out to check on things I found that the worker had actually done a pretty good job on the lower part of the carport, furthest from the house. The piece on the end, which is next to the wall at the end of the property, and which is furthest from our view, was the best looking lumber of all. Feeling reassured, and complimenting the worker for making sure the best looking wood was used, I went back into my office to work.

About forty minutes later I came out again and, looking up at the pieces right next to the house, saw that the workers had placed the ugliest pieces of wood imaginable. One piece of wood was not long enough, and the worker had nailed it together with a short piece of wood that had bent nails sticking out and ugly paint splattered all over it. I asked Lek if he intended to paint this wood and he said of course not. So I asked why use such ugly pieces of wood right next to the house, which is in the most noticeable location in the whole carport. No answer from either Lek or the worker. I looked through the remaining lumber and found two relatively nice pieces of wood that happened to be almost exactly the right length to reach the central beam. Only one piece would have to be sawed a few inches. I asked why he didn't choose these pieces, since they would require less work to put up with no connecting piece necessary. No answer. Some neighbors came by to see, and I think they did not understand what I was upset about. After all, they do stuff like this in their own houses all the time. It just does not seem to matter to them having ugly things in their residence.

Another example: I had put some plants in a concrete block planter near the entry, and people were always sitting on the edge of the planter (rather than on some chairs that were unoccupied nearby). This repeated sitting destroyed the fragile leaves of the plants. So last week I laboriously dug up all those plants and replanted them elsewhere, and replaced them with some ferns that I bought at a nursery. The ferns cover the edge of the planter, so I figured no one would try to sit there. Today Lek sat a pair of heavy shoes squarely on top of some of the ferns I had just bought and planted. When I took the shoes up and in exasperation said "Does this look good to you?" Lek looked at the smashed fern and just stared at me with a blank stare. It was not hostile in any way; he clearly recognized that he was wrong. But he just did not think of this when he put the shoes there. They just don't register, at all, with this sort of thing.

I am completely mystified by this characteristic of Isan people. Lek can pay such attention to the detail of cutting every hair of a person who comes to his salon. He does a great job, and they look beautiful. But he has absolutely no attention to detail in things regarding interior décor. He tapes a poster to the wall; it is crooked in the extreme. He sweeps the floor and throws the sweepings, including pieces of colored plastic that had been torn off water bottles and tossed on the floor by someone, into a potted plant in which I have put polished stones over the dirt. I used to think all of this was just Lek's quirkiness, but now I see that he is typical of everyone here.

Isan workers can construct a beautiful float for a parade, or a carved wall at a Buddhist temple, with so much attention to detail. And then they will build something in their home, that they have to look at every day, and the shoddy construction is just overwhelming. Or, they will spend a lot of money on something that is frivolous, and not cover the basics of a house. For example, a neighbor down the street redid the lower floor of his house, with beautiful inlaid tile and all sorts of intricate detail. Then he ran out of money and did not have any money to install the windows. So he closed the window openings with the most rusted ugly tin roofing you can imagine. It is ugly in

the extreme. It has been sitting like that for the last three years I have been coming here. Why he did not do the basics of the house, such as installing the windows or improving the decrepit kitchen or bathroom, before doing such frilly but unnecessary things like intricately designed inlaid tile, I do not have a clue.

What is interesting is that Lek is so typically Isan, and yet he reacts against his own culture. He is continually complaining about "Isan people are no good" and he prefers American style furniture to traditional Isan. When I wanted to have an Isan traditional bamboo platform instead of an American-style couch in the living room, he threw a fit. And he says the little grass hut I had built in the yard is totally ugly. I think it is adorable, something that might be seen inside a fancy Polynesian restaurant in America, and other Isan people here like it. But to Lek, it is an unpleasant reminder of his childhood, when his family was so poor that that kind of house was all they could afford to live in. He remembers trying to sleep as rain leaked on him through the grass roof, or insects swarmed around him. Poverty, not exotic style, are the associations he has with these traditional Isan houses.

Each of us is a product of the things we reacted against in our childhood. It is understandable to me that Lek would not like these things, so out of concern for his feelings I avoided decorating the house with a bamboo ceiling as I originally planned. He insisted I buy a manufactured white panel ceiling, and I have to admit it does look good in the house. I tried to compromise with his wishes as much as possible, and put many of the traditional Isan things into the little grass hut in the yard, instead of inside the house. But Lek complains about it anyway. In material things he aspires toward American styles, but in his attitudes and way of living he is thoroughly Isan.

In making this statement, I have to also acknowledge that I am the same way. I react against so many things in my own American background (I think that is the case with many anthropologists, who were attracted to the study of different cultures because of dissatisfaction with their own culture). And yet, by living here in such a different culture, I am becoming more aware of how much I remain an American in my outlook. In self-reflection I see this especially in my attention to detail. I learned the importance of attention to detail from my father, who was so extreme on some details that he was slow in completing a project due to being so immersed in the details. When he built a house, every nail was nailed perfectly, and every wire was carefully placed, but it took him forever to finish. Now I see the extent to which I absorbed those childhood lessons.

While I certainly have things to complain about here, especially the carelessness and lack of attention to detail, there are so many positives that I like about Isan people that the good outweighs the bad. I am sure if an Isan person went to America they would have plenty of different things to complain about. I have to remind myself that I would rather deal with these sorts of frustrations than to have to deal with the hostility, easily riled feelings, and violence of Americans. When I criticize an Isan worker they just laugh, whereas an American worker might grab a crowbar and attack. This Isan laugh is not a nervous laugh, or a derisive laugh in any way. I think humor is their way of defusing potentially confrontative situations. I see this same pattern with children. A ten year old neighbor boy last week who was playing with a nice traditional drum I had mounted on the wall of my living room carelessly let it fall to the floor. When I gave him a dirty look, he laughed. He clearly realized he should have been more careful, and he was not in any way being dismissive toward me (though I am sure most Americans would interpret these laughs in this way). In fact, later that day he brought me some plants from his yard as a gift, which I think was his way of apologizing. Among the Isan, laughter seems to be the preferred way to deal with the situation when an accident or mistake occurs. Though I am frustrated by their carelessness, I think we Americans could learn something from Isan non-violence.

No culture is perfect, and everything has its positive side and its negative side. The Isan emphasis on "mai ben lai" [it doesn't matter; it is not worth getting upset over] is frustrating when it is used as an excuse for shoddy work or lack of attention to detail. But it is great when it is the

response by which Isan people avoid stress, confrontation, and violence. So, my conclusion is that my complaints are tiny as compared to the things I like about Isan people and their culture.

Now if I could only come to the same conclusion about the bugs!

May 17, 2007

It is swelteringly hot. I was dreading the coming of the rainy season, because I usually like sunshine. But during rains the temperature drops and it is actually quite pleasant. The problem is that after the rain stops and the sun comes out again it is just as hot, but now with a lot of humidity. Thank goodness I installed an air conditioner in my office. I set up a bamboo bed in there, and that is now my retreat from the heat and humidity. I love to be out in my garden and open air house, but cannot stay there in the middle of the day. Today I visited some Isan workers who were working happily under a tin roof. I was sweating profusely, but they were not. Southeastern Asian bodies are obviously different and more adapted to the heat than my European-descended body. Thus, I need the air conditioner more than I would have thought, because I usually adapt well to hot weather. But my body has not been accommodating. I have developed a heat rash, first in my neck and now in my midsection, that just does not go away. I have been to three doctors and the latest doctor, a dermatologist, gave me pills and liquid that stings when applying, and said it will take about two weeks to go away. Ugh.

It has been raining a lot lately. I am so pleased that the drainage system that I designed for the yard works perfectly. The workers did a great job in making sure the water goes into my fish pool, and then the drainage ditch is big enough and slopes enough so that the water goes out before flooding the floor of the house. In the heaviest rain yet, as it was coming down by the bucketfuls, the water level of the fish pool was only two inches from the floor of the house. I put anything on the floor that could be damaged by water up on the bamboo platforms, but thankfully that precaution was not necessary.

Isan houses typically have an ugly piece of tin roofing curved to catch water as it comes off the roof, and into large pottery storage vats.. Instead of that, I installed a rain gutter with a flexible plastic tube that I can move to fill up the three large pots that are next to the house. These pots are beautiful and almost large enough to lie down inside, and would be incredibly expensive in the USA. I bought the largest one for 800 baht [\$22 USD]. I positioned them artistically to make them into a large artistic display, rather than just in a plain row as most houses have them. People here see them as utilitarian, and seem surprised that I was able to make these pots into a beautiful display. I enjoy doing that, as well as interior décor and gardening.

After filling all three pots to the brim by the second day of raining, I decided to replace my water. After having gotten sick last year from drinking water from one of these pots, I have been buying large 2 liter plastic bottles of water. I have a large number of the empty plastic bottles sitting around, so in the last rain I decided that rain water is probably safe (hopefully no acid rain here!) and I directed the water gushing out of the flexible tube from the roof into everything I could find to fill up. Now I have plenty of water and can save a trip to the city to buy more water.

I can find virtually everything I need at the city of Maha Sarakham, except for the following:

1. Thai people eat rice at every meal of the day and do not eat cereal for breakfast, so the selection of cereals for sale in the stores is very limited. The few brands they stock are all packed full of sugar, which I do not like. In America I eat Grape-Nuts and wheat-chex without sugar, but neither of those are anywhere to be found in Thailand. In Bangkok I found a German cereal without sugar, so anytime I go to visit Bangkok I load up on that cereal.
2. Vitamins are very expensive, so I brought a number of large bottles with me when I came from Los Angeles. I still have enough of everything but have run out of Vitamin E, and need to have a bottle of about sixty capsules sent to me from America.
3. Aftershave lotion. I use either rubbing alcohol, or hand lotion, so that is ok. .

A day before a rain, the insects swarm. But today there are not many insects at all. I was able to take a shower without having to swat any bugs at all, and put on my bathrobe. When I went to sit down on a chair I checked for insects as I always do now, and seeing none sat down. However, evidently one bug I did not see was on my bathrobe, and when I sat down he was underneath my thigh. I felt a sharp sting and jumped up to see this strange insect of a type I have never seen before. Now my thigh has been hurting for the last couple of hours. The sting eventually went away but it was not pleasant. I have to wear bedroom slippers as I walk around the house to keep my bare feet from stepping on the bugs. As I have done that several times the bugs sting my feet. They are not aggressive, and are only trying to protect themselves, but when there are so many swarming it is hard to avoid stepping on them. Some species seem to have no other purpose in life than to flutter about aimlessly, crashing into lights and walls, and then falling to the floor and flapping their little damaged wings until they die. Sometimes they are interesting to watch. One species I have never seen before run across the floor head to rear end, making little rapidly moving long trains. I am not sure if this is a mating pattern, or maybe insect oral sex, but whatever it is they go at it intently. Life on this planet is so incredibly varied it is amazing.

I have tried to figure out how so many insects get inside my office that has sealed screens on the windows and doors. Tonight I saw how they do it. They head straight for any light. The workers left a small space under the door, and when the door is closed a thin sliver of light shines through from the inside light. That is enough for the insects to find their way by crawling through the small space. But I still do not understand how that huge black scorpion got inside my office. Thank goodness I was able to kill it after smashing it with a metal digging stick many times. Now I see that a large lizard, about the size of a small kitten, has taken up residence in my office. I like it because the lizards eat insects, and because his alligator-shaped body is beautifully colored with pale green spots. But unfortunately his head is shaped just like a copperhead snake, so if I come into the office and just see the head sticking out, I get a jolt of fear before remembering that it is a lizard. There is a whole family of sleek striped lizards out in the yard, that sometimes come into the living room. They know by now that I am not going to harm them, and so

they just sit there and look at me as I look at them. Maybe they are a family of lizard anthropologists!

Well, just after typing this paragraph, I went out to the living room to get some water. I feel like an ecological overconsumer using the air conditioner all the time, but when I am outside for more than ten minutes I am covered in sweat. I am still suffering from an itchy heat rash, but I think I discovered a way to help prevent more heat rashes in the future, and that is to do what a lot of Thai people do and cover themselves in baby powder. I always thought that looked strange, to see all these powdered white faces and necks, but if it will keep my skin from getting a heat rash then I am all for it. Funny how a threat to health will get me to change my attitude toward some style faster than anything else!

When I came outside this time, I noticed the spotted green lizard, or another one about the size of a small kitten that looks just like him, beside the fish pool. I hoped that it was the one from my office, and that he had moved outside. But as I looked closer I noticed he was staring extremely intently at my little koi fish in the fish pool. Just then an Isan neighbor dropped by holding one of these spotted green lizards he had caught. He asked if I wanted to have it for dinner. I said no, that I liked them because they eat insects, and besides he is too beautiful to eat. Lek said it looked hideous, like a little monster, and he wanted the visitor to kill it. He said that the lizard would probably eat my fish. I did not believe him, and the visitor left after I told him not to catch the one in my yard. Big mistake. Later I saw this same lizard, sitting in the same spot, suddenly make a lunge toward the fish near the edge of the pool. I ran over to scare the lizard away, but he did not budge. He did not seem afraid of me in the least, and his only thought was to catch the fish. Fortunately, the fish got away. But later at night, when I came out of my office again, I saw to my horror that the slim remains of one of my beautiful koi fish was lying by the edge of the pool. The spotted green lizard is of course the prime culprit. Now my whole attitude toward him changed. Since this lizard ate my fish, it is only poetic justice that I should eat him! That seems to be the Isan way of thinking, anyway. Some creature is unpleasant or disruptive, then the solution is to eat it!

Speaking of eating, yesterday I decided to eat one of the large Banin Tong [orange Talapia] fish that I had bought live at the fish market and placed into my fish pool. I chose them because they are my favorite fish to eat, and also they are quite pretty to look at as they swim back and forth. Two of the five that I bought had died a few days after being put into the pool, I imagine due to what they went through at the market and the shock of being put into the new water at my house. Lek cooked them both for dinner and they tasted delicious. I did not eat any of the surviving three, and they adjusted and seem very happy swimming around in the pool. Yesterday a neighbor boy playing in the pool caught one of the three in a bamboo basket, so since he had it already I asked Lon to cook it for dinner. Lek was strangely silent. Later, Lek asked me not to catch any of the remaining Banin fish. I asked why and he said he liked to watch them swimming in the pool, and he had grown attached to them. Lek is so funny with things like this. He complained and complained about me insisting on building the fish pool, and said it was

a waste of money. Now he admits that he likes it very much. He does this all the time, complaining about something that later, once he gets used to it, he ends up liking.

Lek's main concern is that I am spending too much money on the house, and especially on the tropical garden that I am enjoying designing. He does a really good job in trying to persuade workers to reduce their prices. Yesterday, when Lek's nephew the electrician, who did so much work installing all the electricity in the house, finally presented his bill of 8,000 baht for his labor, that was less than I thought he was going to charge. Nevertheless, Lek got him to reduce his price to 7,000 baht [about \$195 USD ]. Lek really does try to look out for my interests, even when asking his relatives to charge me less.

Lek complains that I pay the workers too much. I feel in something of a moral quandary, because I want to pay a fair price for both them and me, but I recognize that the world economy is not fair to people in poor countries. I pay Lon between 100 and 200 baht a day to cook two meals for me, keep the house clean and wash the dishes and clothes. That is between \$2.70 to \$5.55 per day. Since that is the usual salary that adult men make for a full eight hours of labor, Lek says I am spoiling Lon by giving him so much money for the house work that he can easily finish in two or three hours. But I figure that Lon gives me so much happiness here every day that this amount is small compared to the enjoyment I get from Lon's presence. He arrived here today at 5:00am, waking me with one of his broad smiles, much earlier than necessary, just to spend time with me. When my mother phoned from America and he answered the phone, he was so excited to be able to say in English "Good morning. How are you? I am fine thank you." that I had taught him to say. The idea that he had talked to someone all the way across the world in America was something he bragged about for days.

I do not think I am spoiling Lon. I want to help him, not primarily by the money I pay him, but by teaching him English. When we first met he spoke practically no English at all, despite having taken English classes at school. I stress to him that he will likely need English at some point in his future life, since the world is getting smaller and the best jobs will go to people who are multilingual and computer literate. He does not have much interest in learning to type on a computer, despite my efforts. But by consciously speaking English to him every day, he is picking up things fairly fast. Lately I have been stressing numbers, and now he (usually) pronounces the numbers correctly, for example saying "six" instead of the almost universally stated "sick" that Thai people say for the number 6. He now says "three" with the tongue between the teeth in the "th" sound that is so difficult for Thai speakers, rather than "tree" that most other people here say for the number 3.

Besides the money I pay him, I have also bought some clothes for Lon since his shirts and pants have holes in them. As often as not, however, when I visit his house these clothes are being worn by one of his nieces or nephews, and he continues to wear the old clothes. But even with holes in his clothes Lon has a sense of gay style about how he dresses himself and carries himself. He is proud of being kathoey, and with a number of older kathoey as role models he is lucky not to have to torment himself in isolation about

his feminine nature. I also provide the food that Lon eats with me after he cooks a meal, and often I will send some of this food with him home to his family. Like other Isan people he is careful not to waste parts of the food. When he cooks a chicken he can make a full meal for himself just from the parts of the bird that I will not eat. As I see Isan people eating the head, the feet, the neck, and every other possible tiny morsel of food from the bird's body, I realize how really wasteful we Americans are. I cannot bring myself to eat the head and feet of a chicken, but I think of that as a limitation in my own cultural background. In this regard, for eating every part of the body of the animal killed, I admire the Isan people.

Except for buying an inexpensive wristwatch for himself, most of Lon's pay goes to provide medicines and soymilk for his sick mother. The last time I visited her house I took a beautiful orchid since she likes to look at them, and a case of soymilk, which is the only thing she can consume now. She throws up any food she tries to eat, and has lost a lot of weight in the last couple of months. She looks close to death, and if she does die I know that Lon will be devastated to lose his sweet dearly beloved mother.

Lon's sister just gave birth to a baby boy last week, so I am glad the mother was able to see the new baby while she was still conscious. Now she just sleeps practically all the time. When I went over to their simple concrete block house with grass thatch roof a few days ago, they asked me to take photos of the baby with my camera. I need to get the pictures printed out and framed. The framed pictures of the family that I gave the parents last year are proudly displayed on the shelf next to the mother's bamboo platform where she lies outside the house. I think my pictures must be the only photos that they have of family members for many years. I think taking photos and giving them in frames with glass coverings to informants is one of the nicest things that anthropologists can do for people. In the five years that I have been coming to this village and giving framed photos to people, I already see that these photos have become treasured family heirlooms, especially after a family member dies and my photo is the only one they have.

Yesterday Lon's sister asked him to accompany her back to her husband's family home in Saraburi, near Bangkok, and to help her take care of the newborn for the next couple of weeks. When Lon came to my house for the last time today, before they leave in the morning, he burst into tears saying that he would miss me so much. I was so touched with his reaction, and pointed out it will only be two weeks, and he will be back here soon. He asked me to promise to call his sister's phone every day so he can hear my voice. I feel so fortunate to have people like Lon and Lek who care about me so much. The reactions of the Isan people is what is so good about living here. The name of this sub-district "Mitraphab" means "friendship" and that is what truly characterizes the people of this village.

It is the sweet character of the Isan people that is so wonderful, but in other aspects of life a person has to have a lot of patience to live here. Technology does not work efficiently. Many times the water system for the village stops working. That is why people here keep large tanks of water (I bought two large plastic garbage cans) on hand so they can use water when the public water supply does not work. If the electricity stops working,



with no air conditioner, my response is to go take a cool shower, and hope the electricity comes back on by the time I finish. A few times both the water and the electricity stop working at the same time, so the only alternative to avoid the heat then is to jump in the car and take a ride with the car air conditioner going full blast.

Things that would be so simple to accomplish in America take hours here. For example, just trying to connect to the outside world by email can waste a huge amount of time. There are no telephone lines to this isolated village, so the only way I can connect to the internet is via a Nokia mobile phone. I was told that Nokia phones have the best reception here, so that is what I bought, but sometimes the phone does not work. If the phone is working there are several steps to the process, and at each stage there is a good chance that it will not work. Here is what I have to do:

1. I go to the little store in this village and buy a card with a code number on it. Sometimes the code works and sometimes it does not. The store will not give a refund if it does not work.
2. If the code works, then I have to get the mobile phone connected to the computer. Sometimes that works and sometimes it does not.
3. If the phone connects to the computer successfully, then I have to try to connect it to the internet connection via satellite. Sometimes that works and sometimes it does not.
4. If I make a successful internet connection, and try to send and receive email from my university server, sometimes I can send emails but cannot receive them from others. Sometimes I can receive emails but cannot send any that I have written. Many times I cannot send or receive. In that case, after trying several times I have to disconnect and start the whole process over again.

Americans take all of this for granted, so that when we sit down at our computer we push a button and send and receive emails. But I can spend literally hours trying to connect. Many times I have to give up and wait for another day. So if someone sends me an email and wonders why it takes me so long to reply that is often the reason. Patience is absolutely necessary. I think this is one reason Buddhism is a good philosophy for this setting, because it emphasizes patience and not letting things worry too much. “Mai ben lai” is the saying I hear all the time [it is not worth getting upset over].

But I am upset over the green spotted lizard eating my koi fish, so in a future report I hope to tell about how much I enjoyed my lizard meal.

#### May 23, 2007 GENDER RELATIONS BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN, AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN ISAN SOCIETY

Just as suddenly as the rains began, now they have stopped. With the rains gone, the swarms of insects disappear. I can walk through my living room without stepping on massive numbers of fluttering bugs in the throes of death. Yesterday it was so not so hot, and I was able to live without the air conditioner. This morning it is pleasant. I awake to the sounds of Isan music that people play on the radio or CD. I like it. Unlike the

plaintive music of some cultures, Molum music is pleasant to listen to; it gives a message of “sanook” – have fun and enjoy life. I hear the sounds of neighbor children laughing as they play. It seems to me that a major way to evaluate a society is the happiness level of its children. If children are happy, then that society is working well. Despite the heat and the problems, I feel that it is a good life here. I am happy.

In the last few days I have even had good experiences with some workers that I hired to finish some work on the house. In the heavy rains of last week it became obvious that I needed to put a finishing coat of concrete on my west wall. I originally did not do this when the house was built because it is so close to the wall of the neighbor’s house that no one can see it. What I did not account for is that the water from the roof of the neighbor pours directly onto my wall. A concrete worker who saw it told me that my wall will soon collapse with all this water pouring on it. By all rights my neighbor should take responsibility for this and install a rain gutter on his roof, but he does not want to do this. I even offered to pay to put a gutter between the houses so it will catch the rain from both roofs. He refused. Well, I could insist, but it is important to me to keep good relations so I said nothing.

#### GENDER ROLES AND LACK OF VIOLENCE IN ISAN SOCIETY

Instead, I hired a husband-wife team of concrete workers to put a smoothing coat of concrete over the whole side of the house, and also to pave a concrete floor for the little grass thatch hut that was constructed recently. I notice there are a lot of husband-wife teams who do this work together. The women do just as hard physical labor as the men, lifting heavy bags of concrete and shoveling gravel, etc. When they came to begin the work, the first thing the woman did was to compliment how beautiful the yard looked. Then right after making this observation she picked up a huge chunk of concrete that was lying on the ground, in the way, and threw it squarely into the middle of the courtyard. I was surprised at her strength, but I was not pleased. I had spread nice looking crushed rock over this area, and now the dirty chunk of concrete had made the whole area messed up. Rather than say nothing, as I previously did when Isan workers would destroy the beauty of what I had made in the yard, I immediately said “mai dee’ [not good] and showed her and her husband how much dirt had been thrown on the ground. She apologized profusely. Irritated, I brought out the hose to wash away the dirt, and asked them not to make the place dirty as they did the work.

After that, they did a pretty good job of keeping the place clean and being careful, though they left some smudges of wet concrete on my screen door. At one point the husband needed something to stand on, and without asking me what he could use he took a new plastic chair that I had just bought, and used it. Of course later, when I discovered what he had done, there was concrete all over it. His response, of course, was “mai ben lai” and he quickly washed it off. But there were still concrete smudges left on it. I told him if he would ask me before taking something out of my house, I would be happy to give him a chair that is not new. I have two other chairs that were also grabbed without my knowledge by Isan workers, and were damaged. Isan people are masters at using whatever materials are at hand, but the way they will take anything, no matter how new,

and use it for dirty construction work is very irritating. But, with this husband-wife team, once I pointed out my desire to keep things nice they were a hundred percent better than the previous workers who were constantly making nice things ugly. But I still had a problem when the husband's mother visited, because as she sat and talked with them while they worked she spat the remains of the beetlenut juice that she chewed constantly all over my courtyard. Later I had to hose that area off again.

Isan people will look at my house and yard, where I have been so careful to make every detail beautiful, and tell me how beautiful it is. Then they will do something to destroy that very beauty that they admire. People will visit and eat an apple that I keep out on a table for visitors, then throw the apple core into the courtyard and stick the little glued paper sticker from the apple onto a nice chair. Later, when I see this, I have to peel it off. A visitor who was trying to be helpful when the electricity stopped working one evening lit a candle and placed it on a plastic tray. By the time I discovered this, the candle had burned down and melted an area on the plastic tray, ruining it. Someone putting on makeup one time thought nothing of smearing the extra makeup off her finger onto the white wall of my living room. There is no malicious intent here; Isan people do the same thing at their own house. They just literally do not pay attention to these kinds of details. If I point this out, they are embarrassed and apologize, and try not to do it again. But they forget.

Though I am not impressed with Isan people's aesthetics, I am impressed with the gender relations I see between women and men. I think it is this sameness of labor roles that results in a basically gender egalitarian society. Southeast Asian cultures are traditionally patriarchal, but what I see here is women and men interacting fairly equally. Women have their particular kinds of work they do, and men do as well, but with new kinds of work like concrete construction that is a specialty of many people here, the workers are chosen not according to their gender but in regard to the quality of their work.

It is this gender nonspecific nature of labor that I think is the main determinant of relations between women and men. This is reflected in the lack of gender violence against women. I have never seen or heard of any violence against women in this village. At one point I saw a young woman with a black eye bruise, and having been alerted by my feminist training to watch for gender violence by telltale signs like this, I asked about it. Nobody seemed to know how she got her black eye, but a couple of people said they would not be surprised to find out that her boyfriend hit her. They said "He is crazy!" which they attributed to the fact that he uses drugs. This is not normal behavior for a man to do to a woman, and no one felt that this was more than a single exception.

Though I have never seen one instance of a man hitting a woman, I have seen women hit their husbands several times. They don't hit too hard, but enough to sting, if the husband drinks too much or goes out partying when the wife wants him to stay at home. The husbands invariably just sit there and take the abuse silently, with no response. Last week one wife hit her husband several times as the three of us sat in my living room. Her complaint was that he drank too much the night before. There was a Molum performance, and he was drinking and dancing just like many others there (including

me). I have seen him drunk a number of times, and he always is just very happy and dances with abandon. He is a really sweet person. I remember the first time I came to this village five years ago, and on meeting me he climbed up a tall coconut tree with such speed and agility that amazed me, just to get a fresh coconut for me to drink. Over the years, whenever there is a dance, he always wants to dance with me. Like many of the men here, I think he uses the drinking as an excuse to let loose his emotions and have fun.

After seeing his wife hit him several times I spoke up and said sharply “Yud!” [stop]. I said I did not see anything wrong with his having fun after working hard all day long, that he works hard every day, and having fun is good to unwind and relax. I told her that I do not like any kind of violence, and I would not allow that in my house. She laughed, but at least she stopped hitting the poor guy. Later, when he came to my house by himself, he said that the way his wife hits him is “mai dee” [not good], and he clearly does not like it or the way she criticizes him for having fun, but he never does anything in retaliation when she hits him.

I also saw his teenage daughter yell at him in a very insulting way, in front of a group of others, in a way that I certainly would never have spoken to my father, but again he did nothing. A month ago he left the village for three days, and went back to his parents’ house in another village, due to a previous altercation with his daughter. She was very sad while he was gone, crying a lot, and evidently realizing she was wrong. Lek and I took her to see him to let her apologize, but he was not there when we got there. This young woman, aged 17, is very nice, and I was shocked when I saw her yell at her father like that. But in a way I am not surprised that she would do this, considering that she observes how her mother treats the father.

I have never seen a man do any threatening behavior toward a woman. One time at a Molum concert I saw some teenage boys throwing some rocks at boys from another village, due to some kind of rivalry or altercation between the boys of the two villages. I tried to find out about the reasons for this, but no one seemed to know, or to care much, so it is not a big deal. That is the only time I have seen actual violence in all the times I have been coming to this village. At parties when people are drunk, there may be some kind of drunken altercation, but it is quickly suppressed when a lot of people move in to separate them. Everyone thinks this is awful, and they say the people are “boxing” but I have never seen any actual serious fighting of the sort that is so common among Americans. The lack of violence here is one of the most attractive things about living with the people here.

#### TRANSGENDER KATHOEY

My writing the above was interrupted by the arrival at my house of a male to female transgender kathoey, who are common in Isan villages. I had seen this person dancing in the Frog Parade that I attended a few weeks ago, and as I took pictures of the other kathoey she was dancing with, she gave me this intense smile that let me know she is attracted to me. She was brought here by another kathoey I have befriended, a really sweet and beautiful transgender teenager whose nickname is translated as “cool water.” Coolwater is so feminine in appearance and manner that one would never even suspect

that this person is male bodied. On an earlier visit I had mentioned to her that I wanted to meet and interview more kathoey as part of my research in gender studies, and so she brought this kathoey for me to meet. This new person is also very femininely dressed, but has some facial features that are more male than female. She introduced herself by the English name “Lucy” and speaks a little English. I asked where she learned this, and she explained that she had a farang [westerner] German boyfriend when she lived in the tourist destination of Phuket on the beach in southern Thailand. I started speaking German to see if she understood, but she did not. She said her German boyfriend always spoke English with her.

She asked to see the pictures that I had taken of her, and as we looked at the photos, she pointed out this person and that person who are kathoey. Some of them I did not realize were kathoey, and because they were so feminine in looks I thought they were biologically female. But some of the people she pointed to as “kathoey” were dressed in men’s clothing. What this points out is that kathoey are defined in Thailand not by the way a person dresses, but by their character. A kathoey is a male who is feminine in character. Some of them dress in women’s clothing and some dress in men’s clothing, and some with an androgynous mixture of clothing styles. It really does not matter what clothes they wear, they are still considered to be kathoey in their character. Likewise, a masculine female is called a “Tom” [from the English word “Tomboy”], and that person is also defined not by their dress but by their character. This is very similar to the way American Indians define Two Spirit persons, by what they define as their androgynous character or “spirit.” It does not matter what kind of clothing they are wearing. They do not have this focus on dress that a Western term like “transvestite” indicates.

Thai people get very confused about what pronoun to use “he” or “she” when speaking about kathoey or tom in English. Thai and Lao do not have gendered pronouns, so people are referred to without regard to gender, like the English pronoun “they” is not gendered. I have taken to using “they” even when referring to a single person (just like “you” can refer to one or many persons), and think that English standards should make this change to accommodate the reality of transgender people in society. But I do not feel uncomfortable referring to a male-bodied person as “she” if that person dresses in feminine clothing and lives their life like a woman. On the other hand, I am not sure that “she” is the most accurate term to use for a kathoey who dresses in men’s clothing and is more an androgynous mixture of genders than just feminine alone. That is why I prefer an ungendered “they” instead of having to choose “he” or “she.”

Native American languages also typically have ungendered pronouns. Two Spirit persons are considered to have both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman combined into one person. That is why they are called Two Spirit. When I explain this to Thai people, they have never heard the term before but invariably understand. It is like something basic clicks in their brain to understand this. I think this is an indication of the extremely ancient age of these transgender traditions, which existed in the hunting-gathering societies of early humans, probably all around the world. The fact that transgender shamans showing almost exactly the same characteristics existed among both Native Siberian peoples and Native Americans, when those two groups separated over

25,000 years ago, indicates this ancientness. I think Thai society has this cultural memory of the ancientness of transgender persons in Thai history, and that is one reason why kathoey are so accepted throughout Thailand today. Far from being seen as some new and alien threat, kathoey have always been here. Thai society has not lost that memory the way that Western society has.

As we finished looking at the photos of the parade, Lucy started touching my leg tenderly. I knew where this was leading, and though I was not particularly attracted to her I thought it might be nice to experience some sexual fun together. We did, and I focused on giving her a good time. It was obvious she enjoyed herself.

Then after getting dressed she said that she wanted me to drive her into the city, because as she said in English "I want to eat pizza!" I had just made the journey over the bumpy dirt roads into the city yesterday, to go to the doctor about my heat rash that does not go away. The doctor assured me that the medicine he gave earlier is indeed working, and that I must be patient before it will go away. So I did not want to make that trip again now. I said I was sorry, but I was busy with my writing, and could not go into the city. She gave me this look of consternation, by which I assume she wanted me to pay for the pizza and gas as well, so then she asked for 100 baht (\$2.70) to buy beer. I said I have beer here and will be happy to give her some. Then she changed moods, and said, "No, I want 100 baht for the sex." I replied, "Well, I do not pay for sex, but if you will give me a massage I will happily pay you 100 baht for that." She said OK, but after about five minutes of a rather limp massage she tired of that, and again demanded 100 baht. Lucy really wanted me to give her money. The payment of money was important in and of itself. Giving up, I looked in my wallet to find only a thousand baht bill. I asked her if she had change and she said no. So then I asked Coolwater to drive me down to the local store on her motorcycle and Lucy impatiently said "Lol lol" [hurry up]. At the store I bought some food just to be able to get the change. I told Coolwater what had happened, and that I did not like Lucy's rude manner. What was the necessity for such great hurry when her plan was to have me drive her into the city to eat pizza. I was very disappointed because this is the only time I have met a kathoey here who speaks any English at all, and I thought maybe I could use her as a translator to help me interview other kathoey.

## MONEY AND SEX

The more I later thought about Lucy's insistence on me paying her money for sex, the more I realized that the payment of money is indicative of gender in Thai society. Kathoey have a wonderful acceptance in the villages here, and they can live their lives openly without hiding or suppressing themselves. But many of them are not happy. Their main complaint is that the handsome young men that they find attractive always want to be paid money from them for sex. This is parallel for beautiful young women to expect regular payment of money from their boyfriends. This is a longstanding tradition in Thai culture, and something that is deeply engrained into the way that men and women interact. Some have told me that a young woman would never consent to marry a man unless she had proof through experience that he would regularly pay her money each time they had a date or sex. After they marry, Thai men are expected to bring money to the

wife as soon as they are paid. I found this pattern not only here with the Isan, but also in northern Thailand when I lived in Chiang Mai. But whereas men are expected to give money to their girlfriends, on the other hand kathoey are expected to give money to their boyfriends. This is a major difference, highlighting the fact that kathoey are not seen as women, but as a distinct gender different from both women and men. The dream of many kathoey is to find a stable man to marry them, and bring them money as a man brings his wife. The fact that they have to pay money is not only a financial burden for kathoey, but also a recognition that they are not really women. This is the major complaint that I have heard kathoey make, leading them into unhappiness. I keep telling them that they should be happy to live in a society that is so accepting of them, and when I tell them about cultures where there is so much discrimination and violence against transgender people they are surprised.

I think what has happened with Lucy is that she must have gotten used to being paid by her German boyfriend. I do not know, but I would not be surprised to find out that she engaged in prostitution as well, while living in the tourist destination of Phuket. The Thai people there see the enormous amounts of money that the tourists lay out, and think that all farang are rich. I think that view of rich farang permeates even to this village. Lek is continually warning me that Isan people will take advantage of me financially, and charge me more than they would to a Thai person. I think this may be true sometimes, but in contrast I have had the experience where an Isan person will give me “a discount” because they like me as a farang. When people in Thailand ask me where I come from, and I say America, their face often lights up in a very positive way. “America!” they exclaim excitedly. People who are politically aware may not like the American government, but the reaction of Thai people to Americans in general seem quite positive.

I interviewed some female prostitutes when I was in the beach resort of Pattaya last November, and they said they like Americans best of all the tourists who come there. They especially emphasized that American men are the best customers. When I asked why they think that, they said the Americans are polite, treat them respectfully, and pay them dependably as promised. Some of them think the Germans and Japanese are offish and rude, and they like the Russians even less. Since a lot of the Russians who come to Pattaya are rough mafia-types, this reaction may be understandable. They say the Russians are not friendly, which after living in a majority-Russian apartment building in Los Angeles in the 1980s I would tend to agree with. I think a lot of the Russian experience under communism made them suspicious and distrustful of people they do not know. Or maybe suspiciousness of strangers is a longstanding Russian trait, I don't know. But even below the Russians in the eyes of Thai females, both sex workers and others, is Arab men. They universally feel that Arab men are extremely sexist and exploitive of women, and that Arab men are more likely to lash out in violence against a prostitute after having had sex with her. Many told me they would never consent to go with an Arab man for a date or a hookup because of the abuse and outright danger, no matter how much they needed the money.

Getting back to kathoey, what I see is that kathoey have tolerance and acceptance in Isan society, and that is a thousand percent better than what transgendered people have in many countries. But, after being exposed to Native American views that transpeople are especially gifted healers, teachers, and religious leaders, my perspective is that Thai kathoey seem to have a lot of wasted potential. Many of them just stay at home, and although they may perform valuable service to their family by taking care of nieces and nephews as well as parents and other elderly relatives, otherwise they are not doing much of anything with their lives. Because they do not have much money, it is difficult for them to have an active sex life. So life here is not perfect for them despite the incredibly accepting attitude of society toward transgender people. I have tried to encourage nice ones like Coolwater to learn English and I volunteered to teach her how to use a computer so she could get a better job in the future, but she does not seem much interested. She is so pretty that I am afraid she might migrate to the tourist areas and get sucked into prostitution and never focus on her education or advancement.

In fact, Coolwater and many other teenage kathoey have left school before they graduate because the government high schools have a strict policy that all boys must have very short haircuts. Since the kathoey teenagers want to have long hair, they will stop going to school just so they can grow their hair long and dress femininely. What a pity. In contrast to the rigid policies of the high schools, if a kathoey manages to graduate they can freely grow long hair and dress femininely in college. It is common to see kathoey in college classes, and there is no discrimination on that level. I wish the high schools would also be adaptable. It is especially tragic that many young kathoey's entire future life will be affected negatively after they leave high school because of their strong desire to grow long hair and dress femininely. Everyone in the high school, including the teachers, realize that certain boys are kathoey, but the problem is the rigid haircut policy and dress code. All male students must have very short hair and dress in a standard shirt and shorts, whereas all female students must wear a standard dress and blouse (though at least girls can have different hairstyles!) No other alternatives than these two gender styles of dress is allowed. That rigid rule is the problem.