

## ISAN FIELDNOTES 2008-2B      PARTYING IN ISAN

February 7, 2008

What continues to impress me most is Isan people's enjoyment of life. Knowing how much I enjoy dancing, several people today made a point of telling me that there was going to be a big concert tonight in the next village. When I said I want to go, Lek of course said, "no, no, no. It's much too dangerous." Lek is obsessed with my safety, and is convinced that every concert has fights. When I insisted that I was going to the concert whether he liked it or not, and that I would drive the car myself, Lek reluctantly went along and drove. As we arrived in the tiny village, motorcycles and trucks were coming from all directions. We parked a good distance away from the event, at a house of a friend of Lek's, since Lek said he did not want any drunk party animals to damage the car. There were plenty of uniformed police all around the concert grounds, looking quite intimidating with their helmets, stormtrooper high-top boots, and billy-clubs. When they saw me approaching, the only foreigner in the whole crowd, a few of them smiled and said "hello" in English. That is often the only word many Isan people know how to say in English. English language usage in this village is so pathetically low, that I now take it as a great victory when I can get my neighbors to respond with "hello" when I say hello to them. As I ride my bicycle around the village, the kids commonly call out "hello" to me, or "Walter, Walter" as they run laughing behind me. The kids pick up English words much faster than the adults, of course. To those who have studied with me at school I say "How are you?" and they proudly reply "Fine, thank you. And you?" with a big grin.

As Lek and I approached the concert field, we saw a huge stage and lots of banners flying. I am reminded how large the parties are in even the tiniest Isan village. I am also reminded how really queer this culture is. There were ladyboys out in force, as at every concert I have ever attended in this area. They are so accepted that their presence is just not a matter of comment or note. Having ladyboys around is just part of life. I met one ladyboy who was so incredibly beautiful I would never in a million years guess that she was really male. Thai ladyboys are the most convincing in the whole world. But beyond that, there were also lots of people like Lek, who dress more or less halfway between masculine and feminine clothing. Then there were other, more masculine boys in flaming red lipstick and purple fingernail polish. There were boys wanting to dance with me, and when they did they were dancing very erotically with obvious sexual overtones. Three actually groped me. I have basically gotten used to that in Isan culture, but it is still surprising to me when it happens. Where on earth could a man pushing sixty garner this kind of attention from young men in their teens and twenties?

When I was dancing suddenly I was grabbed by Nope, a young man I have known for the six years I have been coming here. I was surprised, because I had not seen him since I came back from America. A week ago I wondered where he was, and asked his father. His father, who is extremely thin (I used to wonder if he might be HIV positive, but he has been that way ever since I have been coming to this village), said that Nope was working at a cement plant in Bangkok. So I was pleasantly surprised to see him. He danced very close with me, even though he had come onto the dance area with another

handsome young man before spotting me. He introduced this young man to me as his “friend” which has sexual overtones when Isan people use this word. The use of the English word “friend” is more properly translated as “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” in Isan usage, which could suggest a sexual relationship or a romantic relationship that is not sexual. In any case, his use of the word “friend” to me was interesting, because though Nope has made sexual come-ons to me several times he identifies as straight. But, as with so many Isan males, the dividing line between gay and straight is blurry or non-existent.

After dancing a bit, Nope abandoned his friend and grabbed my hand, leading me across the crowded field of people. He took me to the spot where his mother and some friends were seated on a reed mat. He introduced me proudly to them, even though I had seen the mother many times since coming back from Los Angeles. He said, (in English) “sit down” (the schools commonly teach the students English commands “stand up” and “sit down”, and that is one of the few things they remember), and held me closely to him. It amazes me how Isan males have absolutely no reluctance in showing their affection for their same-sex friends, even surrounded by a large crowd of people.

Nope said he had no money, and asked me for a hundred baht. I gave it to him, and he disappeared into the crowd. Soon he reappeared with two large bottles of beer. He opened both bottle tops with his teeth. I always wince when Isan guys do this, in fear of the damage they are doing to their teeth, but they seem to do it with relish, as sort of a macho mark of pride in their toughness. He presented one of the bottles to me, and since I had not drunk anything all evening I was thirsty and drank it pretty quickly. Nope was very pleased at this, and offered me the rest of the beer that he was drinking. I said that one bottle was enough for me, and he gave me this disbelieving look. Of course he knows from experience that I am a light drinker, but he still wonders why I don’t want more. Nope himself, just like his father, drinks heavily. He is such a sweet person that I really hate to see him drink so much. I have told him many times that if he does not moderate his drinking he will quickly age and damage his health. He listens politely, agrees with me, but his behavior does not change. I look at his father, thin and emaciated, staggering around drunk, and realize with a sigh that this is what Nope will be like in a decade or so. Though I love these people, I wish there were something I could do to get them to moderate their drinking.

At one point I saw Lek in the distance, dancing energetically. I was glad to see Lek enjoying himself, despite his earlier fears that there would be “boxing” violence. I never saw any violence at all, and the crowd was very well behaved even though a lot of drinking was going on. I told Nope that I wanted to go check on Lek, but he insisted that I stay with him, and he held me closely. His mother sat next to us, smiling at me. She is such a sweet person, but I do not see how she can tolerate both her husband and her son drinking so heavily.

As we sat there, a particularly obnoxious ladyboy who I had met last year, saw me and loudly approached calling out “Walter Walter” as though I was her closest friend. It was impossible for me to ignore her, though I tried. Knowing that I am attracted to ladyboys,

she asked how I could be sitting there arm in arm with the very masculine Nope. I said Nope was my longtime friend, and left it at that. I may be a confusing enigma to Isan people, in that I am attracted both to feminine and masculine males. To me, my attraction depends on the looks and personality of a particular person, not their gender identity. This ladyboy, who had on entirely too much makeup, to the point of looking like a clown, would not leave me alone. So I made the excuse that I had to go to the bathroom, and Nope came with me as we went to a side street. He was not hesitant at all in urinating in the street, even though people were walking back and forth. Following his example, I did likewise. After all, there were no toilets anywhere around the concert grounds, and the beer was going right through me. Though I was a bit embarrassed, this tactic at least got rid of the ladyboy, because the “lady” part of being a ladyboy is never doing masculine behavior like peeing in the street. So, just like any proper female, a ladyboy would never urinate in public.

The singers in the Molum (Isan folk music) concert were being their usual lewd selves. The main singer, a man perhaps age 30, at one point squatted on his knees and pretended to lick the genital area of the woman singer. She looked down at him with mock surprise, but she did not move away. Then, she just laughed and danced away. Next, the singer turned and, while also on his knees, pretended to lick the genital area of the male kaen musician. The kaen is a large wood flute that is a mainstay of Isan folk music, and it is a lead item in every Molum concert. Not satisfied with that, then the kneeling singer pretended to masturbate the kaen flute-player. All this happened so fast that I could not get a photo of it, but no one in the audience—neither the jackbooted police nor the grandmothers with their little kids in arms—offered the least bit of shock or chagrin. This incident, as well as the scene of all the young men dancing erotically together, while the ladyboys carried on in their area of the dance grounds, reminded me of just how comfortable Isan people are about sex. I was probably the only person in the audience with the least bit of shock on their face. If a typical puritanical American had stumbled across this scene, I can only wonder at their reaction. What a place!