

After a frantically busy but rewarding semester of teaching at USC, just before New Years' Eve I returned to live in Thailand. Quite a number of people have expressed interest and appreciation for me sending my fieldnotes to them during my last year of research in Thailand, and so I am offering this opportunity for those who are interested in reading further about my travels to do so. However, I understand that people have too many emails to read to keep up with everything. Therefore, if you would prefer not to receive further emails from me regarding my travels in Thailand please do not hesitate to let me know. Since I receive too many emails to keep up with my own inbox, I know firsthand how burdensome emails can be. Therefore, I will not at all take it personally if you opt out. So please let me know and I will remove you from my list of receivers.

The following is my report of my earliest days back at my field site.

#### GIFT-GIVING AND RECIPROCITY

One of the main concepts that I have learned from anthropology is the importance of reciprocity and exchange. Giving gifts, which then create bonds of reciprocity, is extremely important in many cultures. The Isan villagers where I am living understand this concept intensely. They are quite comfortable in relationships, whether it is as simple as receiving payment for a service, or in terms of longer relationships, where gifts and services are exchanged. I am grateful for my learning of this concept from my anthropology teachers, because it has made my time here much more productive. Relationships in Thai society are structured as patron and devotee, where the patron is expected to help out the devotee in material ways, while the devotee is expected to show care and concern in exchange. Because I pay attention to this cultural norm, I am well respected in this village. Lek tells me that everyone in the village really likes me a lot, and is fearful that I might go back to America and not come back. For one thing, they love the house I built here, and always come to bring visitors to see what they say is the loveliest house in the village. They invite me to so many events that I hardly have time to do everything. It is nice.

One thing, though, that surprised me after my arrival was the lack of New Years parties. After attending randy celebrations in past years, I found only one small party this New Years eve. Shortly after midnight, the host turned off the music and said goodnight to everyone, sending them on their way home. Later I asked people about this sudden lack of partying, and they told me that they did not want to sponsor more parties because the young men start fighting while drunk. I have seen some of these incidents, which they call "boxing." They really amount to little more than a few shoves of testosterone-fueled adolescent male blustering while under the influence of too many beers. As soon as the shoving starts, lots of people rush to intervene by separating the hostile parties. But to these villagers, who are so committed to Buddhist non-violence, even these meager bursts of violence are too much for them to bear. They find such outbursts to be terrible, and they are ready to cancel their partying rather than put up with even a small amount of violence.

The decline of partying, though, is in my opinion a loss for the village. An ethos of partying and enjoying life is one of the things that is most endearing about the Isan culture. I hope that the boisterous adolescent males who engage in this “boxing” behavior might be sufficiently chastised so that they will avoid such violence in the future, so that the partying can continue. If people would not drink so much at these events they might be less inclined to this disruptive behavior. I hope they will not throw the baby out with the bathwater, and lose a major joy in life. Their lack of tolerance for even a small amount of violence, though, is commendable.

Getting back to my gift-giving theme, before I left last year I printed out many photographs of friends and neighbors and bought inexpensive frames to present them as gifts. I had made a photo of a woman who died, and I presented the framed photo to her husband. He did not have even one photo of her, so he was very grateful for that remembrance that I gave him. I think documentation by photograph and film is one of the major advantages that anthropologists can offer to the communities they study. I saw this recently when the mayor of the village asked me to take a picture of him presenting a gift to an elderly woman. The people here are always anxious for me to take their picture, and they seem to understand the importance of documenting village life. I am the village’s resident photographer.

When I left and told people that I would be returning for the New Year, and asked them what they would like me to bring them as a gift from America, several mentioned that they wanted a watch. Watches are considered a prestige item, which most people do not purchase because it is considered a luxury. When they told me this, I thought, oh I would not be able to afford that many watches. However, when I was packing to come back to Thailand I realized I did not have much room in my luggage. Small items like watches were the only things I had room for. My mother suggested I go to the Swap Meet at Palm Desert, so on the day before I left America she and I went in search of watches. What we found were several sellers who had nice looking watches for only ten dollars each. When I bargained with them to purchase 22 watches, I was surprised that they reduced the price to five dollars each. Plus, they included an extra battery for each watch, and a pretty gold pouch as a giftwrapping.

In the days after I arrived I presented the watches to my neighbors and friends, and they were extremely grateful. The watches have been a real hit. I am so grateful that my mother suggested this idea, and I wish I had bought more. Four people visited me for no reason, I surmise with the hope that I would give them a watch as well, but all of the watches have now been given out. Still, for a little over a hundred dollars, I have been able to create a lot of people who are quite happy with these gifts.

A cynic might say, “Oh, Walter is just buying his way to social acceptance.” I do not think that is accurate, because the villagers were extremely friendly and accepting of me right from the start. It was not until after I had been coming here for a couple of years that I started bringing gifts to friends. This is not onerous, because the amounts that I spend on gift-giving to these villagers are much less than I would spend for American friends’ birthday and holiday gifts. Plus, I think it is the duty of first-world people to

spread the wealth to third-world people. The economic systems of the world are not fair, and just the accident of what nation a person is born in makes a huge difference in how much money they can make. One of the reasons I support international tourism is that it is today the world's largest transfer of wealth from rich countries to poor countries. Thailand could not survive without the money brought in from tourists. If tourists can enjoy their vacations while helping poor people, and the destination nations can put up with the cultural ignorance of many tourists, then why not encourage this behavior? Some tour companies are acting responsibly, by supporting educational institutions and making charitable donations in the nations where they lead tours. I would much rather visit a country like Cambodia or Laos, two of the world's poorest, than give my tourist dollars to a rich place like Japan or Singapore.

With this attitude, I am happy to offer gifts as a way of giving back for the many kindnesses that people here have shown to me. I have been especially touched by the welcome back that I have received from my friend Lon and his family. He was so happy to see me when I arrived, and expressed his sadness at my being gone for the last five months. I gave him and his father watches, as well as some pendants and necklaces that my mother no longer wanted, and Lon wears them proudly.

While I was gone Lon was taking care of his mother around the clock. She has been sick for the last several years, paralyzed from the waist down, and in and out of the hospital. At times she was in great pain. Nevertheless, she was the most wonderfully positive person I have ever seen in such trying circumstances. She always had a smile for me, and reiterated her joy at my and Lon's relationship. I visited her many times when she was in the hospital, and did Buddhist chanting to help her deal with the pain. I paid the hospital bill when her husband had no money to pay it. Because the Thai government provides basic medical care for all citizens, the bill was not onerous for me to pay, but medical costs can still be more than what many Thai rural farmers can afford.

A month ago, while I was gone, Lon's mother passed away. I remember how I felt when my father died, and Lon was devastated when his dear mother died. But he understands that it was for the best because she was relieved from her suffering. It is in this regard that Buddhist belief in reincarnation helps people accept the reality of death. Because Thai people believe that their departed loved one is reborn into another life, they can put their focus on giving strong prayers for the person to be reincarnated into a good new life. As I have listened as Lon gives daily prayers to his mother's spirit, he talks to her just as though she was there alive.

Rather than an all-or-nothing choice of heaven or hell that is presented by Christian belief systems, the karmic idea represents a more careful accounting of the totality of all the good and bad things that a person does in their lifetime. One thing that I have learned in life is that no one is all good or all bad. Every person has both their positive and negative sides. People are a mixture. No one is perfect, but even the most awful persons have at least some redeeming characteristics.

I was so touched by Lon's loss, and his father's loss, as they showed me the spot in the field near their house where Lon's mother was cremated. With tears in his eyes, Lon bent down and picked up a tiny fragment of bone that was the only remains left of his mother. I knew that purchasing the casket for the cremation ceremony represented a financial hardship for Lon's family. I asked him how much all the funeral expenses cost, and he said it totaled four thousand baht (about \$117 US dollars). I decided to offer this money as my contribution to recognize Lon's mother's kindness to me, and I presented four thousand baht to Lon's father. He was shocked by this amount of money, and immediately phoned Lon's sisters, who talked to me by phone and were very grateful. Lon told me later that his father likes me very much, as did his mother, and that they considered me to be part of the family.

I asked Lon and his father not to tell anyone else other than his three sisters and one brother about this gift that I made. They both solemnly promised not to tell anyone. Of course that promise went unheeded, and Lon went around bragging to people how his American friend is so generous to his family. A few days later I heard that everyone in the village is talking about my gift. Lek is upset that I gave so much money to Lon's father, because Lek wants me to stay closest to his family. When Lek confronted me about this gift, and asked if I gave 5,000 baht to Lon, I told a white lie and said "No, I did not give 5,000 baht to Lon." That is, literally, true, since I only gave 4,000 baht to his father. "Good," said Lek, "because if you did that then other people will start asking you for money as well. Everyone here thinks you are rich, and wants your money. I will have to tell them that Lon is lying." Now I am distressed that Lek thinks Lon is a liar, but this conundrum resulted because of Lon's inability to keep his mouth shut. So it is really his own fault. This incident shows the complications that can result even from a simple generous act, which was prompted only by my feelings toward Lon's family.

The day after I gave the money, Lon's father asked me to come to his house. With tears in his eyes he asked me to promise that if he died that I would take care of Lon. I did so.

This represents a commitment on my part, but it would not be onerous. Lon is, after all, able to work and support himself. My agreement to make this assurance is not without my own self interest. I cannot imagine anyone who would be a better caretaker for me in my old age than Lon. Lek is also a good caretaker, but Lek is closer to my own age, and he and I may need care at the same time. With Lon's experience in lovingly caring for his mother in her illness, and his personal devotion to me, I think this is a good investment for my future. Part of the problem facing someone who does not have children, is the question of who will care for the person if they become incapacitated in old age.

I have become conscious of that factor in my own future, and as a result I decided to purchase long term care insurance from Met Life. This company is one of the few that will pay for care while I am residing outside the United States. Since I can easily see myself retiring to a place like Thailand, this was a factor in my choosing Met Life over other insurance companies. Like my investment in this house in Thailand, I consider these modest sums to be a good insurance policy for my future. Of course, I might suddenly drop over dead of a heart attack, or be run over by a truck, and may never need

any longterm care. But it is better to be safe than sorry. As one wise elder in Indonesia told me years ago, "As you approach each day, live it as if it is going to be the last day of your life. But as you approach your finances, prepare financially as if you will live to be a 100." That is good advice for anyone, and has been the philosophy guiding much of my behavior. Enjoy each day to the max, and do everything I want to do in life, but also be preparing for the eventualities of the future.

## THAI GOVERNMENT

The Thai government seems to be trying to do things to benefit the people. The other night everyone was excitedly talking about the government's distribution of blankets. It has been unusually cold at night during the last couple of weeks, and many Thai people do not have blankets for sleeping warmly. Unfortunately, the government cannot afford to provide enough blankets for everyone, so the village decided to hold a lottery. People arrived at the wat, where the name of each household was called out. A member of the family then went to draw a card from a bowl, and learned if the card they chose was yes or no. If yes, then they were presented with a new blanket. It might have been preferable for the government to allow the village leader to distribute the blankets to the poorest families, but that would have opened the opportunity for corruption.

Thai people are such hucksters for economic gain that they are not above using subterfuge to get advantage. For example, there are some villages in this district that have two names. When I asked why they have two names for the same village, it was explained to me that the government awards a certain amount of money for economic development to each village. Those village leaders who are not above lying make two names so that they can receive twice as many grants. There must be some officials who receive graft payments to overlook such untruths. As in many representative governments, corruption is a problem in Thailand.

I have been so busy with writing on my computer, for publication deadlines to finish journal and encyclopedia articles that I committed to write, that I have been spending most of my time at home. I have started hearing reports that some people are complaining that I am not coming out to see them and talk with them as much as I did on my last research trip. While this puts some pressure on me, I am complimented that people here want me to spend more time interviewing them and talking with me.

I think this is not only a matter of friendship, but also that they realize that I am documenting this village's life more than anyone else. While I was gone the old Buddhist temple was torn down, to make way for the building of a new temple. My photos are probably the only ones showing both the exterior and interior of that temple's use. Though it was only a simple building, with no particularly beautiful architectural style, I am sad to see it gone.

This would not be a factor if a new and better temple were constructed soon. But there is a lot of controversy right now about the funds that were collected to build the new temple. The English-speaking monk, who is now in charge of this temple, collected much money from the villagers. Since they are poor, this collection represented a major

sacrifice for many people here. But they made the sacrifice to build a new temple. However, I am told that the monk took the money and refuses to show a complete accounting of how the money is being used. Part of it was used to build a larger roof over the existing outdoor building. This is a legitimate use of the funds, to provide a temporary place for worship and meetings while the new building is under construction. But people are saying that the monk is using part of the money to support himself. Especially notable is the fact that he has bought a new car, and hired a driver. He does in fact need a car, since he is continuing to teach at Mahachulalongkorn University in Roi-et. Since it is not considered proper for monks in Thailand to drive a vehicle, it is also necessary that he has a driver. I do not know if he used the villagers' contributions for his transportation expenses or not, but that is what people are saying. This controversy is ultimately his fault, though, because if he would be open with a careful accounting of the money that is spent, then any accusations could be disproved. But because he is being so secretive, he is suspect. Even his relatives are very upset with him, and a number of them will not even speak to him. They told me that I should not speak to him as well.

I don't know what to do, because last year he was a major source of information for me. He also arranged for me to be invited to attend the 4<sup>th</sup> International Buddhist Conference, which was one of the highlights of the year for me. I helped him also, in proofreading some of his writing in English to correct mistakes. I also helped design and decorate the temporary wat. My vision was to work closely with him once he became the abbot of this village's wat. I thought he was a person of high moral character, but if the rumors are even partially true then that is a major stain on his reputation. What this shows is that, no matter how good a religious ideology may be, human beings still have the capacity to screw it up. I hate, however, to see the decline of respect for Buddhism because of the behavior of some monks.

The other day I was surprised that the former abbot, who had been in charge of the wat for over seven years, came to visit me at my house. After the death last year of the former head monk for this district, he was appointed to oversee all the wats of this district. He is highly respected by the villagers. The fact that he took time to come and talk with me, in his limited English and my limited Thai, tells me that he respects me. He is the one who led the blessing ceremony when I first moved into my house a year ago, and he gave me a healing massage when I was having a backache shortly before I left.

This monk asked me to go with him to another house, where villagers were carefully preparing a nice meal for him. Several women were there as guests. I took photos of his attendance at this event, which shows the respect in which he is held. People wish he could be back in charge of this village wat. I asked if he has been told about the controversy with the current monk. People said, "He has been told everything." They hope he will pressure the current monk to be more open about the use of the money, and more careful with the poor villagers' hard-earned money.

After returning home I found Lek's sister's dog sprawled on the floor of my living room. He is a decrepit looking animal, not much to look at, but like some people who are less than good-looking compensate by being extremely nice to others, this dog is always very

pleasant and welcoming. Though I never once fed him while I was living at Lek's sister's house, every time he sees me he wags his tail so vigorously that I think he is going to fall over. So, now that Lek's sister has left for a job in Bangkok, it appears that this dog wants to take up residence here. I am conflicted, since I do not much like animals in the house, but how can I object when he was so friendly to me when I lived at his house? With that indecision in my mind, and such a matter distracting me from the problems of global warming and other impending catastrophes facing humanity, I will end this writing for now. I send all my wishes for 2008 to be a wonderful new year for you.

Best regards,

Walter Williams