

I am back in the small Isaan village near Maha Sarakham where I have been doing research for the last several times I have come to Thailand.

This village is such an interesting juxtaposition of the modern and the traditional, it is amazing. The very evening I arrived with my friend Lek, who grew up in this village, there was a big celebration at the school grounds. All the students performed, in musical production numbers ranging from traditional Isaan folk dances to modern Thai pop music. Then as the evening wore on, a professional band played. First it was Thai rock and roll music, complete with blaring loudspeakers, smoke and light show. Then it was traditional Isaan music, then traditional music modernized. It was a professional Broadway-type production, which is far more sophisticated than what I would expect to be held in a small village of a few hundred people in the outback of America. Two singers, a large band and eight to ten backup dancers continued the show most energetically until 4:00am.

Every village in Thailand seems to have its resident group of “kathoeys” who are feminine males who sometimes dress as women and sometimes dress kind of in-between women and men, but who act very feminine and campy. Sure enough, at this event, there was a section of the crowd where the kathoeys gathered. They danced energetically to the music, and I watched closely to see the reaction of the Isaan villagers to their outlandish dancing. Over and over I saw people simply looking, but no smirking or criticism as one would expect to see in a small town in America. If indeed any group of transgendered people would even dare to show up dressed in drag at a general entertainment event in America, they might be threatened with death threats. In contrast, as in every other event where I have seen kathoeys gatherings in these villages, everyone seems to accept them as just another segment of the village. The elders, the police who patrol the grounds, the teachers who organize the event, the young men who openly flirt with them and ask them for a drink, and the kids running around all take a very accepting attitude toward the kathoeys. The singers and announcers on stage took particular note of them, always in a complementary way. What consistently impresses me about Isaan villages is how well people seem to get along. Everyone accepting everyone else, seems to be the dominant attitude.

#### ANIMIST BELIEFS

Only a few nights later, I was called by some friends to attend a very different kind of event. Without question I jumped into the truck that was going to this event that I thought from my limited Thai language skills was some kind of comet or some unusual event in the sky. We drove through the countryside on dirt roads until we got to another village that I had not been to before. People were coming from all around to see this amazing thing., I saw people walking with incense sticks and folded leaves as prayer offerings. When we parked and walked down a crowded lane, there was a crowd of people leaning over a small makeshift fence. Everyone was straining to see this thing on the ground. When my friends led me up to the front of the crowd, the thing I saw was a root of a tree that they said looks like a snake. On looking at it closely, yes, it does

indeed look like a snake. Someone had obviously dug away the dirt around the root to expose its snake-like shape.

But what was more amazing to me than the likeness of the root to a snake, was the Isaan people's reactions. People were taking photos of the root with their mobile phone cameras and digital cameras. They tossed coins to the root. And they lit incense sticks and bent down on their knees and offered prayers to it. I was taken to the owner of the house, and was introduced to him. He explained that he had a dream of a snake, and the snake told him to go and dig up the root in that particular place. The dream told him that if he did this, he would be able to provide help to poor people. The way he would help the poor is that the snake would come up with winning numbers in the lottery. According to what I was told, a lot of people had won money in the lottery by the lucky numbers given to them when they prayed to the root.

In my dealings with American Indian shamanism, I have been exposed to a lot of spiritual things that I had never experienced before. But I must say that I have never seen people pray to a root before. But if praying to a root helps them win the lottery, who am I to say that it is wrong. An American friend of mine always says that if she sees a white dove land near her, she takes that as a good omen of something good that will happen. When friends of hers scoffed at the idea, she said simply that if she wants to consider a white dove to be a good omen, then what harm is it to anyone if she believes this. So, I guess my attitude is that if praying to a root that looks like a snake gives these people a sense of hope or enjoyment or excitement in their mundane daily life, then what harm is it to anyone?

#### **BUDDHIST – ANIMIST SPIRITUALITY**

These beliefs in lucky spirits show the juxtaposition of Buddhism and a holdover of what I imagine is ancient Thai pre-Buddhist shamanistic religion. Even Buddhist temples will have decorated poles placed next to a sacred tree on the temple grounds. I was told that these poles would bring good luck from the spirit of the tree. That is animistic spirituality of the most ancient sort.

The more I learn about Thai religion the more I realize that Buddhist ideas are overlaid on these ancient pre-existing folk shamanistic/animist spiritual forms. So, to accurately describe Thai religion it is not enough to say that Thailand is Buddhist, but also to say that it is a combination of Buddhist philosophy and animism. If Buddhism appeals to the mind, animism appeals to the heart, and together these two forms of spiritual expression seem to fill the void in many peoples' lives. As far as I can tell, I have not seen any attempt by Buddhist monks to decry or criticize these animistic beliefs. Indeed, Buddhist monks fulfill some of the roles of shamans. They lead religious ceremonies, they are teachers of youth, they conduct both mental health healings and physical healings (though not to the extent of Native American shamans), and comforters of the sick and dying. So, Thai religion is more complex than simply labeling it as Buddhist.

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As Halloween approaches, I realize how completely foreign and otherworldly is the western world that I have left behind. Halloween, like all other American holidays, has no meaning here. My attempts to describe it fall on deaf ears. The people here have no context to understand it.

### BUDDHIST MONKS

My understanding is also limited. This morning I woke up early, and as I saw the monks walk past the house, I ran inside to find some food for them. I grabbed a bunch of bananas, which was the first thing that I saw, and ran out to give to the monks. Each one solemnly opened their alms bowl, and I put some bananas into each empty bowl. As I did this, all the neighbors laughed and talked excitedly. I thought in panic that I must have done something wrong or inappropriate. When I came back to the house I asked my friend and translator Lek why everyone laughed. Lek said it was because they were surprised that a Farang (Westerner) would know to give food to the monks. To my relief, it was not a derisive laughing at all, but an appreciative laugh.

Mainly because of the villagers' love and acceptance of me, I have made a crucial decision. I have decided to move from the Buddhist monastery where I have been living up to now, and move to the Isaan village in northeast Thailand where I have been doing research for the last several years. Though I have made close friends with the monks and novices at the monastery, and will leave there with great regrets, I feel the draw of this village that seems to be the place where I am destined to do my work. At the monastery, at least there are some other English teachers who can carry on the work that I began there, but in this village I am the only one who speaks any English at all besides Lek.

### INTEREST IN LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The villagers recognize the value of English in the outside world, and they really want me to be here to help the young people learn English and computers. My laptop computer is a real hit in the village. With my digital camera I included in the computer photos of the village that I took when I first started coming to this village in 2002, and people are thrilled to see the photos. They are especially interested in the pictures of people who have died since I took the photos.

### HOUSE CONSTRUCTION

I am really grateful for the level of acceptance that I am receiving in the village. People are excited that I have decided to build a house in the village, and they are already referring to it as "Ban Walter" (Walter's house) even though the land is Lek's. They are surprised at the different style that I am building the house, which is different from traditional Isaan housing. But if I am going to be here for a long time in the future I feel the need for a house where I can keep out the insects that torment me. The villagers think it is funny that I want to put screens on all the windows around the whole house, to keep insects out. I am not sure why, but probably because they see insects as an inevitable part of life, and any attempt to keep them out will be doomed to failure. But for me, if I can have an insect-free house, that will be a major factor in making life more pleasant for me here. I will try and see if it will work.

## RESPECTED ELDERS

In building the house, I am so glad that I have had the benefit of anthropological training. Because to Isaan people, as to most people in the world, the most important thing in building a house is the spiritual aspect. First, we could not start the construction until a lucky day. Luckily for me, a lucky day was coming on October 27, so that is the day that construction began. We had to rush to get to the building site at dawn, as a whole group of elderly men and women was already congregated. Elders are considered to have the greatest ability to give strong prayers, because of their long life experience. This is an example of how different cultures give power and status to the elderly, and give them a sense of purpose for living, by knowing that the power of their prayers can help younger people.

This is very similar to the extremely respectful attitudes toward the elderly that I found when I was doing my research in Java, and which I discussed in my book *JAVANESE LIVES: WOMEN AND MEN IN MODERN INDONESIAN SOCIETY*. I remember in particular one elderly lady who was so old and frail that she could hardly move around at all. To a secular American she would appear to be a drain on her family, and useless. However, to her Javanese relatives she was considered to be the most crucial member of the family because she would spend all day, every day, offering prayers for the success, health and happiness of every member of the extended family. Far from being a useless drain on the family, she was the fulcrum around which the family's whole existence depended. To me, that is such a good way to conceive of the elderly that I think we should try to incorporate such beliefs into American culture. For materialistic Americans, perhaps the best way to do this is to expand the mentorship programs for retired people to advise younger people in their field of occupation. I think those mentorship programs are excellent, and should be emphasized even more than they are now.

## HOUSE CONSTRUCTION

I digress, and want to describe the opening ceremony for the house construction. When the holes were dug for the supporting pillars of the house, Lek and I dropped coins into the holes with prayers for a happy life in this house. Then an elderly shaman cut a young banana plant and stuffed the leaves into the end of a long fish trap that seems to have spiritual power. He asked me to insert a 100 Baht money (worth about \$2.60 in US dollars, but for the Isaan people more value than what that small sum suggests) for good luck. I have noticed such fish traps in Buddhist temples and in prominent places in front of houses. The shaman took some leaves in a bucket of water, and sprinkled water on each of the posts that will support the weight of the roof. Then he attached the fish trap and banana to the top of the central pillar that will be placed at the front of the house. After saying a prayer, then I and all the men joined in raising the central pillar and placing it into the hole that had been dug that morning. Everybody chanted "oh, oh, oh, oh, oh," for good luck as we lifted the heavy pillar into place.

Then on the back pillar a tumbler of thread was attached, with another set of banana leaves, and a similar chanting was done as that back pillar was raised. I think this symbolized both men's work (catching fish), and women's work (weaving cloth) that is

important in economic survival for a household. After this second pillar was raised, everybody stops for a meal. Having food together seems to be a part of practically all Isaan ceremonies, and this is a good way for the old people to get a good meal. So, as the owner of the house, I am expected to pay for the food for the crowd. I am told that I should also plan to throw a feast when the house is completed, to invite all the neighbors and friends and people who helped on the construction. Fortunately for me, the cost of food is very cheap in Thailand so this is not a burden for me. But I imagine it could be for a Thai person who was building a house. Including the cost of parties is just considered part of the building cost for Isaan people. Throwing a party at every possible occasion is not a bad philosophy of life.

I decided to use modern aluminum for the roof instead of grass thatch because of the danger of fire, and also to keep insects out of the house. When I went to talk with the woman who ran the construction company with her husband, she delighted in practicing her English. As I asked question after question about the best way to build the house, Lek thought that I was taking too much of her time. But she assured me that she enjoyed the opportunity to speak English, and we talked for a long time. This is what I like about doing fieldwork; no matter what subject you are talking about, you are always learning something of value. She ended up telling me her life story, and said her dream as a young woman was to become an engineer. But, she said, her father told her that her destiny as a woman was to get married and have children, and so he refused to pay for her education. She felt very bitter about this. She did get married, and now works with her husband in running the construction company. She told me the work is very boring, she is not happy in the marriage, and she said that she is not living the life that she wanted to live. I told her that at USC there are now many women engineering students, and young women are being strongly encouraged to enter all fields of occupation. She was happy to hear that, but still feels bitter that all this happened too late for her. She does not seem that old, maybe about 40, so I told her she should think about pursuing some kind of engineering work if that is her great love. She seemed inspired, and said she wants to talk more with me. I will pursue this with her later.

She told me that she liked my ideas of house construction better than the traditional Thai way of building. Lek wanted to put wood all around the top of the building. That is the way that Thais traditionally built their houses. But the problem is that wood is scarce in Thailand today, because of the increase in population and demand, and therefore has become extremely expensive. It is a lot cheaper to build a wall out of concrete block with a metal frame for the roof, than wood. I was thinking that fiberglass sheeting would be cheap, as it is in the USA, but found to my surprise that it is very expensive here because it is imported. So, the most economical way to build is to use concrete block and a metal frame for the roof. Since labor costs are so low, it is not expensive to build a wall out of concrete blocks. That is fine with me, because cement is the most ecological-friendly construction material in common use today. I am trying to avoid using wood because it is becoming so scarce.

As I am working with the construction crew, in all the details of building the house, they really seem to admire me getting in there with the labor. I have made a construction plan

on my computer, and they are mystified because they have never seen this kind of layout. Yet, they are extremely careful in their construction techniques, using plumbs, tape measures, and levels as any American construction crew would do. As I am involved in the construction details, I am grateful that my father taught me to pay such close attention to detail, which makes all the difference in the end result. Though he was not well educated, his lessons of the importance of detail helped me develop the patience to edit my words carefully in my writing. It was always his dream to build his own house, and he finally did that when he was in his 50s. Now that I am in my 50s, I find that I am doing the same thing. I have purchased and owned four houses in my life, but they have all been pre-existing. This is the first time I have built a house from scratch, and I really do feel the spirit of my father with me as I do this work. I have long dreamed about building my own house, but did not think that this would occur in Thailand. Yet, in the strange way that life works out, I find myself here and doing this.

Yesterday the head of the construction crew (a really nice man) said that, now that I know how houses are built in Thailand, that he and I should form a construction company together. He strives to do everything I want, no matter how strange to his way of construction, and wants me to teach him to speak English.

I must stop for now, to get back to the construction work. I will send more reports later.

OCTOBER 31, 2006

#### RESPECT FOR TRANSGENDER

The main thing I like about Isan villages is the complete acceptance of gay and transgender people by the villagers. They treat Lek, who is flamboyantly androgynous, wearing women's shoes and painted toenails, etc., with great respect. Lek is seen as an authority figure, and after a motorcycle accident killed a person from a neighboring village, Lek gave his teenage nephews a stern lecture about driving safely and being careful on their motorcycles. I thought he was mad at them, but when I found out that he was only trying to protect them I was impressed that his whole family sees him as an authority figure.

I am also impressed and grateful that the villagers are so nice to me. They all know I am gay, and I have never had even one word of disrespect or derision. This is how people would react in the kind of ideal non-homophobic society that I envisioned, that actually exists right here in this little isolated Thai village.

I do not want to create an impression that life is ideal here. There are problems, just as there are anywhere. A major problem for me is the insects, which I hope to address by having my house enclosed with screening. But this does not seem to be a problem for the local people. One problem that is a problem for everyone in the village is that the main highway into the village is paved almost all the way, but then the pavement stops just a small distance before reaching the village. Cars have to go through mud and deep sand to

struggle to get into the village. I want to talk to village leaders to find out if there is any possibility of getting the local government to pave the road, at least enough to connect to the main road inside the village which is paved.

#### ALCOHOL DRINKING

One thing though that is obvious to me is the extent to which both adult men and teenage males get sloppily drunk. They certainly work hard as farmers, and understandably want some relaxation, but I worry that the drinking may be causing problems. I want to talk to more people about this. And also to find out if drug use is a problem among the village youth. Cigarette smoking is common, and I want to see if I can exert any influence in an anti-smoking campaign.

#### ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Another issue is the local economy. Like any farming village, life is a struggle for farmers. Lek's family was very poor, until they constructed a small rice mill, to process the rice of the farmers. Then Lek's sister came upon the really brilliant solution of making gravestones for Buddhist cremations. They became so successful that now many families switched from farming to making the grave monuments, which are sold all over the area. Lek's brother in Bangkok even exports them into the city.

The main problem with this construction work is that Lek's family cannot get workers during the times that the farmers are busy with the rice planting or harvesting. They can only get much work done during the off times for the farmers.

#### INTEREST IN LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Lek wants me to give English lessons. His niece and her husband Dang (an electrician) want me to give English lessons to their two young daughters. But they have no money to pay. I might ask Dang to give me massages in exchange, since he gives really good massages. He can also do work on the house and garden.

#### HOUSE CONSTRUCTION

I want to plant banana trees, bamboo by the front electric pole, a bougainvillea by the carport to grow over and shade the car. And papaya in the front in front of the windows. That is used to weave the grass mats. And bigleaf climbing philodendron to cover the cement blocks. And papaya in the back side garden. And other tropical fruits to eat and enjoy watching grow. Tomatoes, cucumbers, frogs, fish, silkworms, crickets, ants, etc. Maybe an insect production company, to grind up the insects and sell as high protein food.