

I have never encountered a culture that seems as dedicated to having fun as the Isan people of northeastern Thailand, where I have been living for the past several months. My previous visits to this village for the past five years have been over the holiday and New Year break between fall and spring semesters of teaching at USC. I always thought I did not want to miss this time of year because even though this little village has less than 500 people they really throw terrific Happy New Year parties. Now that I have lived here for half a year I see that New Years is not an exceptional time. There are goings on all the time of many kinds of celebrations, parties, parades, concerts with complex choreography and large dance troupes, and anything else that people can use as an excuse to throw an event.

There are so many parties that I cannot attend, even though many people ask me to attend because they like to watch me dance. I skipped the last concert because I have had a bad skin rash in my midsection, due to sweating in the hot climate, so I did not want to exacerbate that. But the latest event I was told by my boyfriend Lon that I should not miss. He does not speak much English, and so I am teaching him English as I continue to practice my Thai language. He said it was a “dan” and I knew from the way Thai people commonly do not pronounce the end of a word that he was trying to say “dance.” He said it would begin at eight o’clock in the morning, and we must get ready. I questioned that a dance would begin at 8:00a.m., but there are so many things that are done differently in this society that I am not surprised about anything. Besides, Isan people do things quite early in the morning, in the early hours before the heat that becomes pretty intense by 9:00a.m.

Lon is the same way. Neighbors are totally accepting of our same-sex relationship and they wonder why he does not sleep with me at my house. But he wants to sleep at his parents’ house at night to care for his invalid mother, who is a very sweet person but quite ill. He is a devoted son, and prepares her for the day before walking the few blocks to my house between 5:30am and 6:30am. Farmers in the village get up quite early, before dawn, to take the cows and water buffaloes out to pasture for the day. That seems to set the tone for the local society. It is not uncommon for the water meter reader or electric meter reader to pop by before 6:00a.m. to check the gauges that are inside my courtyard, and they look at me strangely if I am just waking up when they knock on the door.

So when Lon told me we should go to this “dan” at 8:00a.m., I got ready. We arrived at the small town of Kaedam, which is the government headquarters for this district of villages, to find that little groups of people were already partying. Groups of musicians roamed around the town, playing Molum music at any locale. Penises are a big thing, so to speak, in Isan culture. The singer of this group had a plastic pipe, and out of this he would thrust a wooden phallus. I am not quite sure why people like to show off these penises so much, but later as I saw a conservative looking policeman I wondered what he thought about all this display. As I looked closer I realized he had a row of carved wood

erect penises around his pistol belt, and he spoke into his walkie talkie that he had shaped like a giant penis. So much for conservative policemen!

But that was not the only surprise of the day. I saw a policewoman who looked equally conservative in her uniform. After she walked past I saw that on the back of her uniform was taped a large very explicit photograph of a woman sucking a man's penis. All of this was done in the broad daylight, as people of all ages—including many children—came to watch. Seeing all these explicit sexual photos being joyfully carried around by people made me realize just how puritanical Americans are. I cannot imagine such a scene being accepted even in most big cities of the USA, much less small town America.

Well, this was just the start. Rather than being a “dance” per se, what I came to realize is that this event that Lon had taken me to was a parade. There were floats with giant carved horses mounted on the back of truck beds, with a classically dressed young woman and young man sitting on the saddle. Invariably, each of these horses had a large prominent erect penis. Groups of little old ladies wearing traditional Isan clothing filed past as if nothing is out of the ordinary as someone walks past them with a whole set of carved wooden penises dangling from a bamboo rod. They mixed easily with transgender people and other cross-dressing individuals, as parents brought their children to be entertained.

As at all these events that I have been attending, I was the only foreigner present, and as I walked around I commonly heard the word “farang” (foreigner) as people express their surprise at seeing a white-skinned person. As I snapped pictures with my camera, people would invariably greet me with the phrase “sanook mai” which means “Are you having fun?” When I would reply “Chai, pom sanook mak mak” [translated “Yes, I am having a lot of fun”] they would scream in delight.

The only thing that Isan people seem to enjoy more than partying is the pleasure of eating. Whenever an Isan person wants to strike up a conversation with me, if I happen to be eating something, they will say “Alloy mai” which means “Is it delicious?” It does not matter if it is a simple bowl of rice that I am eating, they will still ask if it is “alloy.” I think this is indicative of a strong Isan determination to enjoy every pleasure of daily life.

There are so many holidays throughout the year. No excuse is too mundane to throw a party. This large parade, for example, was done to commemorate frogs. Isan people love to eat frogs, and with the large population increase in Thailand during the last half century the frog population has become endangered. About five years ago some environmentalists decided to try to raise people's awareness about not over-hunting frogs or violating frog habitats. Being Isan, they came up with the idea of holding a parade and having parties based around appreciation for frogs. There were displays about frogs at the Kaedam main festival grounds, and frog shaped floats in the parade.

The idea of organizing a parade to spread an idea is so typically Isan. I hope the environmentalist message to prevent the over-hunting of frogs, as well as other

endangered species, comes through. Much more prominent than frogs, however, were the number of transgender people in the parade. I am continually amazed at how well accepted transgender people are in Isan society. Every little village seems to have a few “kathoeys” feminine males. Masculine females are less common, and less prominent in society, but they exist. Butch lesbians and their feminine girlfriends seem to be as easily accepted as feminine males. Given the lack of discrimination, I am not sure why transgender males are more common than females. Male kathoeys are particularly prominent working in beauty salons, in health care facilities, doing farmwork and taking care of relatives at home, but they can be found in many occupations.

Besides the transgender kathoeys who were parading in all their splendor, there were also in the parade large numbers of masculine young men who were cross-dressing in women’s clothing for comic effect. They were quite openly affectionate with each other, with the cross-dressed males happily accepting the kisses of other boys. I saw one boy in a dress simulate oral sex with a masculine man right in the middle of the street, with lots of people looking on. Nobody seemed shocked in the least. Some of the boys in dresses playfully asked me if I thought they were beautiful, and when I said “suay mak mak” [very beautiful] they invariably replied sahm roy baht” [three hundred baht, about \$8 USD] which is evidently the going price for a prostitute. I did not take them up on their offers, but I have a feeling that if I said yes more than a few would have happily agreed. There is a comfortableness about sex, and including the exchange of money for sex, that provides such a contrast between America and Thailand.

Keep in mind that all this raucous display of cross-dressing and sexual innuendo took place not in a counterculture ghetto of some liberated big city like San Francisco, but in a small town in the middle of an agricultural district. It is all considered good clean family fun. Old people, parents with their children, and individuals of all ages from the surrounding villages, participated in this opportunity to have fun. “Sanook” [having fun] is such a strong value in Isan culture that no one wants to miss a parade like this. After dancing all afternoon to the music of numerous roving bands of musicians, I came home exhausted. I wonder how many days will pass before someone tells me of still another holiday event.

It seems to me that Buddhism supplies many joys for the lives of the people here, just by the number of religious holidays on the calendar each year. Add to that the number of celebrations and parties commemorating the ordination of young men as Buddhist monks, and that makes a considerable number of parties going on. That does not even count the non-religious celebrations like the one on May 5 in honor of the lowly frog.

I may have my complaints about the quality of work done by Isan workers, but I have to say that Isan people are unparalleled in their ability to have a good time as they go through life. After much philosophical reflection, I have decided that the ultimate goal of life is to provide as much happiness as possible, for oneself as well as for others. If this is the goal of life, then it seems to me that Isan culture is doing pretty positive things. Of course Isan people have their worries and problems, but they seem to want to focus on and remember the happy things, not the bad parts. Everything is a mixture of good and

bad, positive and negative. Rather than dwell on the negative, I find that my life is better if I can focus on the positives. Maybe that is why I am so attracted to Isan cultural values. There are negatives here in Thailand to be sure, and as I scratch my heat rash and insect bites I am reminded that living in the tropics has its costs. But there are worse things to complain about. I have seen so many people living lives of quiet desperation, or watching their life go past without doing what they really want to do in life, that I feel quite fortunate not to be among that number. Nothing is perfect, but I feel happy with the way my life has turned out. It is my wish that other people will be able to say the same thing as they go through their own journey of life. Do everything you can to reduce suffering and to maximize happiness, is the message of Thai Buddhism. Savor every pleasure, every moment of joy and wonder, because those are the real treasures of life.

ISAN FIELDNOTES May 10, 2007 by Walter L. Williams

Every day I learn a bit more about the events that I am observing in Isan culture of northeast Thailand. I attach here some more photos of the parade that I attended on May 6. I do not have enough space to attach every photo I made, but here are a few more.

The biggest float of the parade is a rocket launcher, from which firecracker rockets are launched. There is also a dragon at the top of the rocket launcher, that has a moveable mouth and the operator can squirt water at people watching the parade. During the whole weekend people were shooting these little Fourth of July firecracker rockets into the sky. What I learned today is that the frog conservation message of the parade was only added a few years ago. This parade, that evidently has ancient origins, was originally focused on these rocket launchers.

What is going on, I learned today, is that the rockets are meant to attract the spirit of the sky to send rain for the land. This parade comes right at the end of the dry season, and is meant to hurry along the rainy season to supply life-giving rain to the parched ground. After suffering through the daily pounding heat of the sun for the past couple of months, I can understand why the Isan people welcome the coming of the rainy season. It not only cools the land, but also supplies rain for the beginning of the rice-growing agricultural cycle.

When I mentioned my idea that Isan culture has a strong focus on partying and having fun, Isan people told me the reason they put so much emphasis on having fun is because they need a mental break from the hard physical labor of farming. They are absolutely correct about this. Out of all the forms of economic organization in human history, agriculturalists work harder and longer hours than any other way of life. Hunter-gatherers on average work much less than farmers, and people in industrial and post-industrial societies work less than farmers.

My conclusion is that the origins of this parade came from a need to appeal to the spirit of the sky to supply rain for the beginning of the rice growing season. This idea of the sky having a spirit is pure animism. This reinforces my belief that much of Thai religion today is a holdover from the animist religion followed by Thai people from earliest times. When Buddhism spread into southeast Asia, it incorporated much of these animist ceremonies. The result is that today, Thai religion is really a combination of Buddhism and Animism. The Buddhist monks took on many of the roles of shamans that led religious ceremonies in pre-Buddhist eras.

This idea of mine would also explain the prominence of "kathoeys" transgender people, and of cross-dressing, in this energetic parade. As I explained in my book *THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH*, and as Randy Conner so brilliantly expanded in his book *BLOSSOM OF BONE*, much of the ancient focus of shamanism involved cross-dressing. Not all shamans were transgender, but

many of the most powerful shamans were transgender. This trend was most likely widespread in many cultures, on all continents, all over the world during early human eras. The fact that transgender shamans among the native peoples of Siberia were virtually the same as transgender shamans among Native Americans tells us that, considering these peoples separated over 25,000 to 30,000 years ago, these traditions of transgender shamanism are extremely old.

I think what is going on in contemporary Isan society, and in Thai culture generally, is that the strong holdover of animist-shamanistic spirituality that has been incorporated into Thai Buddhism makes for a prominence of transgenderism. I think this explains the prominence of cross-dressing in the parade, even for non-transgender masculine men who make no attempt to hide their masculinity as they wear women's dresses. In fact, the extreme raucousness of their behavior, as represented in some of the photos I attach here, shows their "unladylike" character. They are hardly trying to "pass" as women, but gain strength from the cross-dressing. This is, I think, another holdover of shamanistic animist religion in contemporary Isan culture.

I think this also explains the prominence and acceptance of transgender people in the more traditional Isan farming villages. Now, I am not claiming that transgender people in Thailand today are shamans. Over the centuries I think they have lost the high status that transgender shamans held in early human societies. I do not want to create the impression that life for transgender people in Thailand today is perfect. Many Western-educated Thai people look down on transgender people as low class and backward [ie: more traditional]. Yet, compared to the West, transpeople in the Isan culture are a thousand percent better off than transgender teenagers growing up in small-town America. They are generally accepted by their families and communities, they do not have to fear transphobic violence, and they can live their lives as they choose. They have careers in a variety of fields, from health care to beauty salons to teaching. I attach here a photo of a trans nurse in a local hospital.

I have seen Buddhist monks being very affectionate toward kathoeys, and I attach some photos representing this kind of attitude. On the New Year, when I went to a Buddhist ceremony to get rid of the problems of the old year and welcome in the new year with positive energy, a very prominent Buddhist monk spent a lot of his time counseling my kathoey friend and the kathoey's boyfriend who were having problems in their relationship. The whole tenor of the monk's efforts involved an attempt to keep this same-sex couple together, and to help them work out their problems.

Despite this acceptance of kathoeys in Isan society, what is missing in contemporary Thai society is the kind of profound respect for transgender people that was so prominent among early humans. There is tolerance and acceptance of kathoeys, but not the kind of high status that existed earlier in many shamanistic animist religions. As a result, most kathoeys today do not aim very high in their aspirations of life. They seem more interested in superficial things like style and beauty rather than spirituality. Perhaps their prominence in performance, especially in Molum music, is a holdover from the spiritual ceremonies of shamans. Much of shamanistic ceremony was, after all, performance.

As the third millenium dawns, I think it is time for transgender people around the world to reclaim the ancient heritage of respect and high status that existed among early human cultures. I think Buddhism has more potential for developing this respect than the other major world religions. I am trying to spread some of these ideas as I talk with prominent kathoeys here in Thailand. It is my prediction that, if kathoeys in Thailand can move beyond the superficialness of present kathoey society, transgender people are in prime position to become prominent spiritual leaders in the new emerging religions of the 21st century.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD METHODS

Students majoring in anthropology are expected to take at least one class in Ethnographic Field Methods. The usual fare of such courses involves complex information gathering approaches like surveys and other statistical techniques. What is often left out in such courses is the human touch. One individual person relating to another individual person in close intimate settings is at the base of good fieldwork. Based on my fieldwork research over the last thirty-five years with numerous American Indians and Alaska Natives, and in Indonesia, Polynesia, China, and Thailand, I have learned what works in terms of making contact with people in different cultures. If I had to design a class on effective fieldwork techniques, or giving general advice to people who want to go and live in a different culture, it would start with these suggestions:

1. Take dance lessons.

In the cultures that anthropologists have studied all around the world, there are only a few things that every culture shares. One of those few things is dance. Every single culture has some kind of dance to some kind of music. Dance is something that is hard-wired into the human brain. Dance is something very basic to being a human being. Consequently, when going out into a location to do fieldwork, an anthropologist can be sure that the culture they will be studying will have dance. What I have found in the fieldwork that I have done, is that if you are a good dancer, people resonate to that and will more likely accept you as a person they can relate to. In the Isan culture where I am living in northeastern Thailand, dance is very important, and the fact that Isan people like the way I dance is an important factor in my acceptance into the village life. Every time I go to a music performance, Isan people want me to dance for them. If I demur they will literally drag me to the dance area and insist that I dance. They seem to get great enjoyment out of watching me dance American dance steps to their Isan Molum music. Some have even filmed me dancing on their mobile phones with cameras, and others ask me for dance lessons. When I was training as an anthropologist, I never dreamed that my love of dance from when I was a young child would become so important a factor in my fieldwork. If you are a good singer, and can play a musical instrument, that is even better.

2. Learn how to use a digital camera with a window to show pictures taken immediately, and have a printer to print pictures. Purchase a large mirror.

Though some Native American traditionalists fear a camera, most people love to have their picture taken. In my current fieldwork I have found that Isan people especially enjoy posing for the camera. As soon as I go to an event of some kind, if people see my camera they will often ask me to take their picture. People of all ages want to pose. Sometimes groups of kids crowd around me begging me to take their picture. My camera has a window that shows the picture just taken, and Isan people get great enjoyment in looking at their picture. For many of these people, they do not have cameras, and have only a few if any pictures of themselves and their family members. If an anthropologist can make pictures of people and give them these printed photographs, preferably framed

for hanging on a wall, that is a great service that will endear the anthropologist to the people. I get great enjoyment when I visit a household and see a framed picture that I took a few years ago, hanging prominently on the wall.

Isan people seldom have large mirrors, so I put a large mirror on the wall in my house. People will come to my house just to look at themselves in the mirror. Some kids have never had the experience of looking at themselves in a mirror. Acknowledge their vanity, and allow them to enjoy the strange experience of looking at themselves in the mirror. You will be appreciated for providing this unique experience.

3. Learn to sit quietly and be comfortable with silence.

Many cultures do not have the imperative to talk that Americans are so used to doing. Many Americans get uncomfortable with long periods of silence. If you are with some people, and they are sitting there quietly, don't feel the need to say something just to fill the silence. Silence can be very nice. Savor it. Especially if you are not fluent in the language, be patient with sitting in silence as people chat away in their language. Listen and observe. No time is wasted if you can learn something by quiet observation.

4. Establish a personal connection with a local person or a particular family, and do something to help them.

It is better to have a personal connection with someone before moving into a community. My first time in the field, when I was age 23, I had met a person my age who was from the most traditionalist community on the Eastern Cherokee reservation. It was a community of three hundred people, isolated high up in the Smoky Mountains, far from any city. That was precisely the place where I most wanted to do fieldwork. I asked him if there was a little house there that I could rent. He introduced me to his relatives who took an immediate liking to me. They had just built a new house with an indoor bathroom that they prized, and their old house was sitting empty. This old two room house, where a family of six had been raised, had cracks in the walls that one could see through to the outside, and an old wood cooking stove in the kitchen which provided the only heat in the cold mountain climate. There was an outdoor toilet, and no plumbing in the house except a hand pump to draw water into the kitchen sink. Rather than pay rent, they said they would let me live there for free if I would promise to make a daily visit to their elderly grandparents who lived in another little house further up the mountainside. I really lucked out, because I had instant informants. Every day I could sit and talk with the grandfather about what Cherokee life was like when he was young. He had volunteered for the United States Army during World War I, and that is how he learned to speak English. The grandmother could not speak English, except for a few choice curse words, but she and I became close anyway as I learned some Cherokee. When I was young my grandfather had taught me how to hunt, so I brought my rifle and on my walk to their house I usually was able to shoot a squirrel or rabbit, which the grandmother would cook for our dinner. Since that was the only meat they had, my hunting skills made a difference in their life.

Being gay has been a major advantage in my fieldwork experience, because as a minority I have been able to make connections with other gay people wherever I choose to do fieldwork. When I did the field research for my book *THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH* in 1982 and 1983 I met a gay Lakota young man in Nebraska, and he wanted to

visit his relatives on the Rosebud Sioux reservation in South Dakota. I provided him a ride, and he provided me with an immediate connection to Lakota traditionalists who soon had me going through ceremonies of Lakota religion that might have taken other anthropologists years to be admitted into. I met Lakota winkte [Two Spirit transgender people] who introduced me to other Two Spirit people on neighboring reservations. With those contacts I went from one reservation to another, always with a personal connection before I arrived, thus saving me much time in research.

In 1983 I tried something more daring, when I traveled to Yucatan without knowing anyone. I soon had a circle of friends among the Maya Indians, who are some of the nicest and most friendly people I have ever met. This experience in Yucatan gave me the confidence that I could go anywhere and make myself at home. I next went to Hawai'i as a Fellow at the University of Hawai'i East-West Center, and had the same experience in my research with Native Hawaiians.

When I went to Indonesia in 1987-88, I used my connections in the Buddhist organization that I had joined in Los Angeles the year before, and the organization's international headquarters provided me with names and letters of reference to the organization's leaders in Indonesia. As soon as I arrived in Indonesia, they provided me with a room to stay and treated me like visiting royalty. My initial informants were Buddhists in central and eastern Java, and they introduced me to everyone I met.

I had done some research among Buddhist monks in Thailand back in 1987, on my way to Indonesia, but my more recent connections in Thailand are due to my Thai boyfriend. We met in 1994 in Los Angeles and lived together there for several years. When his father died in 2001 he returned to his home village in northeastern Thailand for the funeral. When he tried to return to America, it was just after the World Trade Center catastrophe, and the United States Immigration Service severely tightened admissions into the country. I had gone to the airport to pick him up, but he was not able to get through Customs. He was put on a plane returning to Thailand, while I sat in the airport wondering why he had not arrived. We were both very sad at being separated, and mad because of the U.S. government's discriminatory policies toward gay people in not allowing same-sex marriages. If we had been a heterosexual married couple, my spouse would have been able to get a marriage visa, but gay people are denied this right that other U.S. citizens enjoy. With him not being able to come back to America, he begged me to come visit his village in Thailand. I went there for a month, and his whole family welcomed me with open arms. I immediately fell in love with the Isan people of this little village, who are some of the nicest people I have ever met. One of his cousins is a prominent Buddhist monk, and as I became more involved in Buddhism I drew ever closer to the group of monks in this area. The role of Buddhism in Isan life has been the focus of my research for the last five years, and I continue to enjoy living here. My position in this village is defined by my relations with this large extended family, and same-sex relationships are totally respected by everyone in the village. It is a much more tolerant and accepting atmosphere than is true for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in America, and I feel quite comfortable living here. I am a firm believer that anthropologists should do research in a culture where they feel comfortable and accepted, and that is exactly the way I feel here.

5. Don't be afraid to show your emotions.

Just before I was scheduled to begin my first fieldwork with the Cherokees, my grandmother had a heart attack and died suddenly. She was very important in my rearing, and I was not prepared emotionally for her unexpected death. This was my first experience in dealing with the death of a close loved one, but emotional restraint was the rule. People told me to be strong, and try not to cry or show any emotion. I had a lot of pent-up anger and resentment about her funeral, where the preacher used the opportunity to beg for money for the church instead of commemorating my grandmother's life. I was seething as I left the church, knowing that my grandmother would not have liked her own funeral.

I left for the Cherokee reservation only a week after the funeral. Except for the family that I made initial contact with, the Cherokee people were rather standoffish, but that was alright with me because I was not very sociable. I just wanted to get settled in to the small house with no plumbing and an outdoor toilet where I was planning to live for the upcoming year. Only a couple of weeks after I arrived, a respected elderly Cherokee woman died. The family whose house I was living in said that I should attend the funeral out of respect for her family. Just after having gone through my grandmother's funeral, going to another funeral was the very last thing I wanted to attend. I said I would rather not go, considering that I had never even met the person. But my Cherokee friends insisted.

I went into the small Indian church with great reluctance. This funeral was extremely different from my grandmother's. Relatives were loudly wailing, openly expressing their sorrow. Her sister threw herself on the open casket, yelling, "Sister, sister, how can I go on living without you?" Everyone in the church was crying as the preacher told about what a wonderful woman she was, and how much she had helped people. They sang a song about how much they would miss her. There was not a dry eye in the church, and I started feeling the tears welling up in my eyes but I suppressed myself. The ushers then directed each person to file past the open casket and say a final goodbye to her. I did not want to walk up there at all, but the usher insisted. As I approached the casket I looked down at this person who was a dark-skinned Cherokee, but as I stared at her face I saw the face of my grandmother. I could not believe what I was seeing, but it was clearly my grandmother staring up at me. Wordless communication passed between us. For the first time since my beloved grandmother's heart attack, my emotions came out of me. I could no longer repress myself. I broke down crying, completely losing control. I could not even stand up, but leaned over the barrister as my tears flowed.

After what seemed like a long time I tried to regain control of myself, and was led back to my seat. I sat there in utter shame, thinking that the Cherokees must be wondering who this strange outsider was who had barged into their funeral and was crying when they did not even know the person. I thought I had violated all the standards of masculine restraint, and I would never be accepted as a man after they saw what a crybaby I was. I left the church quickly, and walked home by myself, thinking I had completely discredited myself. How could I be accepted as a professional anthropologist after the way I acted?

What surprised me the next day is that several Cherokee men came to visit me. They said that I had showed myself as a truly caring person at the funeral, and they wanted me to know that I was welcome to be a member of their community. I was in

total shock. The very thing that I thought would discredit me had proved, quite unexpectedly, to be the basis for my acceptance. After that day, the standoffishness that the Cherokees had exhibited toward me was gone, and a new friendliness emerged.

6. Try to figure out something that you can do to help the people in what they want. Even if you do not have much money, you can do things to help the community, and help individuals. It is important that this help be provided based upon what the local people themselves feel is important, not what you think is important. In my first fieldwork, among the Cherokee Indians, I was living in a community of 300 people that was very isolated, high in the Smoky Mountains, and far from any medical facilities. The community had an old ambulance that could carry them to the nearest hospital, which was over a hundred miles away, but this ambulance broke down soon after I arrived there. They asked me if I could locate another ambulance that they could purchase. I had no idea where to buy an ambulance, but I called my father, who enjoyed buying and selling cars as a hobby, and he was able to locate a good used ambulance in no time. The Cherokees were very grateful, and soon accepted me as a member of the community.

In my current fieldwork, the thing that Thai people most want is to learn to speak English. They realize that knowing English is the ticket to a better job, and access to the wider world beyond their small country. The current state of English instruction in Thailand is poor, with many Thai English teachers not being very good at the language. Many Thais understand that learning from a native speaker is preferable.

Generosity is an important value in many cultures. One way that an anthropologist can establish credibility is to show generosity. Whether in buying little gifts for people, or buying a beer for a person relaxing after a hard day's work, or contributing to community institutions like the local religious center, these little gifts can mean a lot to people. I recently saw the monks at the local Buddhist temple laboriously carrying buckets of water to water the plants. I went to a hardware store and bought a long garden hose, two sprinklers, and I fixed a connection to a water line so they can easily water the temple grounds. This little act of unsolicited kindness made me highly appreciated by the monks. Doing these sorts of things is a way to make a good impression on people.

RAIN, CRITTERS, AND LEARNING THAI LANGUAGE

The rainy season has definitely arrived in Thailand. Gone are the bone-dry hot days. Suddenly, it is raining every day. The rain cools things down, and is definitely welcomed by Isan people. Somehow the insects know when it is going to rain. About a day before a big rain, the insects swarm. By evening time I am amazed at the sheer number of flying insects of every possible winged description that fly about the open-air living room of my house. For some reason they dive bomb into my floor. I went outside for about twenty minutes and left the light on. When I returned the floor looked like an old World War II movie, with scads of dead insect bodies strewn across the floor. Brooms get used a lot here. Actually, when the insects swarm I have fun watching what I call the Gecko Olympics; that is, seeing how many insects fluttering around the living room the resident

geckos can grab and eat. Yesterday I even saw a little frog in the living room. The frog was in the process of swallowing a bug that was literally as big as he was. The frog struggled with the still squirming hind legs and wings of the insect sticking out of his mouth. I decided not to interfere, and went on to bed. This morning I saw that the little frog had jumped or fallen into my fishpool, with the insect wings still sticking out of his mouth. Not being able to close his mouth, the frog died. What must that frog have been thinking as he drowned? "Oh, I never should have taken that last bite!" or "Now I really bit off more than I can chew." ☺ Life is cheap in the wild.

Well, the phone rang so I ran, barefooted, into my office. As I rounded the corner I looked down and had to grab hold of the door to keep from stepping on the biggest scorpion I have ever seen. It was huge, and pure shiny black. If the light had not been turned on I would have stepped right on it. After pulling myself back, with my heart racing, I ran to the yard to get a metal digging stick with a sharp blade. I raced back to my office, worried that the scorpion would have hidden itself somewhere by then, but it was right at the same spot. With a sharp thrust I stabbed the digging stick squarely across its midsection. I pressed as hard as I could, but could not cut through the scorpion. Its tail was madly striking at the metal digging stick repeatedly, as it undoubtedly would have done to my bare foot if I had not seen it. I had to make three jabs before I could finally cut through the scorpion's hard body. Its stinger continued to try to sting the metal until I literally cut its body all the way through. I have never seen anything as difficult to kill. After it was dead I measured it, and it was a good five inches.

It was only after the ordeal was over and the scorpion was finally dead, that it occurred to me what this meant. I worked and worked to make my office the one room in the house that I wanted to be insect free. I put a rubber door sealer under the solid wood door, I put a screen door outside that door, and screens on the windows. With a cement floor, and sealed ceiling, I figured this room of all the rooms in the house was critter-free. So, how did this huge scorpion get inside? I have no idea, but what this incident tells me is that nowhere in my house or yard can I be guaranteed safe. After seeing the long snake in my yard last week, which I think probably was a cobra, and this huge scorpion today, I do not feel too secure. I cannot believe that Thai people commonly sleep on the floor, with these kinds of critters scurrying around everywhere. My friend the Buddhist monk told me that scorpions were everywhere at one monastery where he was a novice, and people were often getting stung. He was stung several times, and he said the pain is so bad for about five hours, and there is no medical treatment to be done for it but to wait it out. I am going to clear out the stuff stored under my bamboo bed, and I think I will redesign the garden to make it less jungle-like. More hanging pots and less underbrush. And I will have to redesign the screen that the Thai workers made for the water to drain out of my yard. Today I saw a cat calmly push it aside to creep into my supposedly sealed yard.

I also want to get some hooks to latch the screen doors closed. When the workers installed the screen doors, with little magnets to hold them closed, I asked them to also install hooks to latch the doors securely. The look the worker gave me was priceless. He seemed dumbfounded that I would actually want to latch a screen door. He said there were neither locks for the screen windows or the doors, and he doubted that the

manufacturer even made such things. I assured him that every screen window and door installed in America has a latch of some kind, but he looked like he did not really believe me. After arguing with him, he left and came back the next day with some plastic pieces to secure the screen windows. I thanked him for searching for this, but also asked about the hook for the screen doors. He said nobody at the hardware store had ever heard of such a thing, and he said I should be satisfied with the latches for the windows.

I think he was telling me the truth about the hardware stores here. It often seems that they do not have some simple things that we would expect to find in America. For example, I have only been able to find one store in this area that carries threaded water faucets. In Thailand faucets for some reason are not threaded so that a garden hose can be screwed on. People use simple plastic tubing as a garden hose, and push it tightly onto the faucet. If any pressure builds up at all, the tubing often comes off and water sprays everywhere. To secure this tubing, Thai people will often take some wire and wrap it around the mouth of the faucet, and then if one wants to move the tubing a laborious unwrapping of the wire must be done. When I explain at the hardware store that I want a plastic or metal piece for the end of the tubing that has threads so it can be screwed onto a faucet, workers look at me like they do not have a clue what I am talking about. They offer PVC pipes with threads, but nowhere have I been able to find a garden faucet with threads.

Sometimes it seems that the way Thai people do things makes the simple things of daily living more difficult. This applies to the way they tell time as well. Everywhere in the world I have traveled, people tell time in either a twelve hour or twenty-four hour clock. If you know the words for one to twelve in that language, it is pretty easy to communicate the time. In Thai, however, it is not so simple. The morning hours are listed by the numbers on the clock, so to say 9:00 a.m. it is “gow mon.” Gow is the Thai word for nine, so that is easy. But if you want to say 7:00 p.m., it is expressed as “nung tomb.” Nung is the Thai word for one, so they are saying it is one o’clock in the evening. 8:00 p.m. is “song tomb” using the Thai word for two o’clock. 9:00 p.m. is “sahm tomb” using the Thai word for three o’clock. This is very confusing, and is just one example why learning Thai is so difficult. It is the most difficult language I have ever tried to learn.

LEARNING ANOTHER LANGUAGE: THE DIFFICULTIES OF THAI AND ENGLISH

English is just as difficult for Thai people to learn as Thai is for Indo-European language speakers. Thai speakers do not hear the same way that English speakers hear. When I say “very good” Thai people will often repeat “wery goose” I repeat goo-ddd, emphasizing the “d” sound at the end, but they still say “goose.” I say the number six, and they will repeat “sick” If I repeat the “x” sound many many times they will usually be able to distinguish between the “k” sound and the “x” sound, but it is extremely difficult for them. Before I meet a group of students, I can tell exactly which numbers they will mispronounce: 3, 4, 5, 6, 9. They will pronounce 3 as tree, 4 as fo, 5 as fi, 6 as sick, 9 as ni Thai does not have the “th” sound that English so commonly uses, and if I point to a tree and say “tree” and then point to the number 3 and say “th-ree” they will

still say “tree.” If I work with students a long time, I can get them to insert their tongue between their teeth to say the “th” sound, and they can learn to say “three.” But it is difficult.

Thai has a lot of silent letters at the ends of words (sort of like French), but Thai people will also not hear the ends of words. I will say the word “nice” and they repeat “ni”. I will then stress “ni-ccccccc” and eventually after repeating it twenty or thirty times they will be able to say “nice.” But then if I put it into a sentence like “Nice to meet you,” they will say “Ni to meet you.” This is done so consistently all over Thailand that I can almost predict with certainty which words Thai people will mispronounce. Even Thai English teachers commonly make these same mistakes. In consequence, in teaching English I will use sentences with a lot of words that Thai speakers mispronounce, such as “Ice with rice is nice” and they will say “I wi ri is ni.” They just do not hear the “ce” sound at the end of words like ice, rice, nice. When I first met Lek fourteen years ago when he was living in Los Angeles, it took me awhile to figure out that when he said “ri” he meant “rice” and when he said “how” he meant “house.” I thought he must have some kind of speech impediment. But almost all Thai people make the same exact mistakes. The first time Lek took me to a Thai restaurant in Los Angeles, he asked me “Do you want to eat feet?” I was fearful that there was some special Thai recipe for eating some kind of animal’s feet, but after I asked Lek to draw a picture on a napkin of what he was asking, he drew a little fish and I discovered the “sh” sound is not in Thai language and Thai speakers just cannot say it. They do not hear it the same way English speakers hear a word.

Gestures are another difficulty. Everywhere else I have traveled in the world, I can get along partly by gesturing. But the gestures Thai people use are completely foreign to me, and they do not understand my gestures either.

** Instead of using the word “faucet” in my discussion above about the hardware stores, I originally wanted to use the word “spiket.” When I typed this word, my computers’ spellcheck let me know it is not correct spelling. The spellcheck suggested the correct spelling was “picket” and some other words that were even further astray from the word I wanted. Fortunately I had a good old dictionary in printed paper format, so I was able to look up this word for faucet and found “spigot.” This is a perfect example of the screwy spelling of the English language. Why is the word “picket” spelled this way, but the other word for faucet, which is pronounced just like picket with an “s” at the beginning, is spelled another way? People do not actually say “spi-got,” but do say “spi-ket . This is just one of many examples why English is such a difficult language to spell.

The big advantage of English is that it has such a large vocabulary, with very specific meanings for words. But the bad thing about English is the terrible inconsistency of spelling. There are so many exceptions to the rules that it is hard to know if the rules apply. As English has become the defacto international means of communication, there is a severe need for spelling reform and simplified grammar.

When I have been teaching English to local people here, instead of focusing on grammar and spelling, I stress correct pronunciation and comprehension. That is, if someone can say words that are understandable, and the listener can comprehend them, then that is successful communication. For example, today Lon said to me “I want you kiss I” and then he puckered up. Now, of course he should have said “I want you to kiss me,” but I have not been able yet to get him to understand when to use “I” and when to use “me” in referring to himself. The grammar rules are not easy for him to understand. But because he pronounced each word correctly, I understood exactly what he wanted. I conclude from this experience that comprehension is much more important than grammar.