

HOUSE CONSTRUCTION

I have been back in Ban Sia Gen Wua for the last two weeks, staying busy on the construction of my house. I am now staying at Lek's sister's house, and it is very unsanitary. Even Lek's relatives complain about how dirty it is. Lek got into a fight with his sister because he paid for all the improvements to the house, and she let them deteriorate so that the house is not nice. Lek is disgusted with her, and wants to move to our new house as much as I do. Lek's nephew Tong age 13 has a new puppy in the house, and of course the puppy pees on the floor. I asked repeatedly that the door be kept closed to keep the puppy out, but Thai people seldom close their doors, so they are always forgetting to close it. As a result the puppy is often in the house, and two days ago I stepped in a puddle of his pee and slipped and fell hard upon my left knee. Since this is the knee that I had surgery on a few months ago, I was fearful that it might dislocate the knee again. But after a day of pain the knee seems alright by now, thank goodness.

Later I felt bad when I found out that Tong gave the puppy away, to a friend in another village. I heard that Tong cried when he gave away the dog. I did not mean for that to happen. I only wanted the puppy kept at Lek's other sister's house until I could move into my new house. I know how much Tong loved the puppy, and I was sad to find out I was the cause of his unhappiness. But I could not take a chance of falling again, since I have already fallen twice in this house due to slippery floors.

I want to get the house built quickly, and I am actually enjoying the house planning and construction very much. At every step I realize how much I owe to my father for training me in so many practical things like construction. His attention to detail and concern for doing a quality job is something that rubbed off on me and has helped me a lot. The biggest problem I am having is communication with the construction crew, none of whom speak any English. I had arranged for a person I met in Chiang Mai to come here to translate for me, but he reneged and did not come as he promised. I have tried repeatedly to hire an English major from a nearby university to be my translator, but have had no success in getting someone.

The only person who speaks any English in the village is my friend Lek, but Lek repeatedly misunderstands or misinterprets my questions to the contractor, and Lek gets frustrated easily and refuses to ask the questions for me that I need to know. I tried repeatedly to get Lek to understand that the roofer was doing the roof edge in the wrong way, but Lek refused to talk to the contractor and the roof was done in a way that was not right. Now I am having many problems with the new contractor who is building the walls, because the roof edge was not done correctly and there is a problem in how to fit the wall with the roof. Lek is a hairstylist and has never had any experience in dealing with house construction, and does not have the expertise in English or the patience to be a good translator. Lek and I both realize this, but until I can locate someone else to translate for me there will be problems.

ANIMISTIC BELIEFS

Thai people's animistic heritage includes a belief that no one should move into a new house until a "lucky day" arrives. I have no idea how often one of these lucky days comes along, but I hope there will not be much delay. I really want to get out of Lek's sister's house as quickly as possible. In addition, Thai people have the belief that someone should not sleep in a new house until it is completely finished, and has had a blessing ceremony by the Buddhist monks. And of course there has to be a feast for all the neighbors (paid by the owner of the house) as part of the move-in ceremony. As a consequence, sometimes people cannot move into their new houses because it is not completely finished or because they do not have enough money to provide the feast for the neighbors. It is sad to see these vacant houses, with the owners living in another location because they do not have enough money to do all the moving-in expenses.

Today I talked to a visiting monk about these problems, and he agreed with me that it would be OK for me to move in as soon as the house part is completed, even if Lek's salon is not completed. The monk, who speaks pretty good English, also helped me a lot today in translating for the contractor. I wish that monk could be here in this village more often. He also has an awareness of ecology and environmental concerns, and he likes my ideas for living in harmony with the environment. I am looking forward to more conversations with him.

HISTORY OF BAN SIA GEN WUA

Later that day, the monk asked me to walk with him around the village. While we walked he told me about the history of Ban Sia Gen Wua. There was originally one village, about two kilometers from the present village, that was founded about a thousand years ago. The monk remembers visiting the ruins of that village when he was a child, but that site is now under water of a lake that was created a decade ago. About one hundred and fifty years ago (ca. 1850 CE) there was a bad disease epidemic, perhaps of malaria, and many people in that village died. Those who were healthy and able to leave fled the village and established three new villages:

Ban Nong Bua [Lotus Lake village]

Ban Wha Na Kom [Gold Head Field village]

Ban Sia Gen Wua [Village where the tiger ate the cow]

MALE FRIENDSHIP

Even today, people in these three villages consider themselves as related, and they often hold celebrations together. The subdistrict of these villages is called "Mitapop" which means "friendship." That name reflects both the heritage of connectedness of the villagers, as well as the friendly nature of the villagers. Just looking at someone with a smile will almost always generate a smile in return. Thailand is called "The Land of Smiles" very accurately, and Isaan people are some of the friendliest people I have encountered anywhere in the world.

This friendliness was reflected in the New Years parties that have been going on for several days in the village. Every time I walk around, people are always beaconing me to "come here" in the limited English that some of them know, and welcoming me to join

them in drinking beer. They really consume a lot of beer, and I cannot drink that much. I am also a bit queasy because they invariably share one glass from which everyone drinks. I have had to drown my scruples (literally) in beer, and do not seem to have suffered any sickness because of this drinking from the same glass. On New Years the villagers make a special coconut wine, that is really delicious. It is my favorite thing to drink and it is not too strong in alcohol content. Unfortunately, this drink seems only to be made around New Years, sort of like eggnog at Christmastime in America.

I seem to be especially popular among the young men. This is surprising to me the affection that they show to me, because everyone in the village knows that I am gay and that does not seem to be a problem for them. They all want me to come to their party. They like the way I dance, and they want me to sing English songs, and to take their picture. I have only met a couple of people in the village who shy away from my camera. When I show up with a camera, most people crowd around begging me to take their picture first. At New Year parties, I am surprised at the affection the young men show toward each other. As they dance enthusiastically, shirts come off, and they are touching each other and hugging and dancing. The behavior looks like the wildest party in a gay bar, yet none of these young men identify as gay or homosexual.

The extent to which males in Isaan culture show affection for each other is striking, and one of the endearing things about their way of life that I find so appealing. If a gay or transgender person does come on the scene, they can join in and dance just like anyone else, and there is not the tension or nervousness so evident among American males. I have never seen one instance of any straight Isaan male showing the least bit of hostility toward gay or transgender persons.

Despite the friendliness of the people, the name of the village “where the tiger ate the cow” is rather frightening. When I say the name to other Thai people, sometimes they react that it is a scary name. Ban Sia Gen Wua got its name because it was located in the middle of extensive forests, which were full of wild animals including tigers. After a tiger ate a cow the village became known by that name. Villagers still proudly call themselves “Tigers” even though there are no tigers left in this area at this time. But the heritage of tigers is felt in more than name.

HOUSE STYLES

For example, villagers strongly prefer to sleep upstairs on a second floor, and do not feel safe sleeping on ground level. I think this is because they formerly had to retreat to high places at night to protect against tiger attacks. Even today, a prosperous house in the village is one that has two floors. When I ask people if they mind going up and down stairs all the time, especially at night if they have to go to the bathroom, they invariably say no, and look at me strangely as if not even understanding why I would ask such a question. The practice of having two floors might also serve the purpose of insulation from the heat.

Isaan people seldom go to their upstairs sleeping rooms during the day, because they are so hot. But at night the heatedness is beneficial for having a warm sleep when the

temperature drops during the nighttime. During the day they stay on the first floor, which is noticeably cooler than the second floor. The brilliance of Thai architecture is that they live most of the time outside, underneath their house, where the cross breezes can cool them, and the house itself serves as insulation from the heat. But the disadvantage, especially for someone like me who has a bad knee, is going up and down stairs all the time. Their solution is to use their second floor only at night for sleeping.

DOGS

Another heritage of this danger from tigers is the fact that every house seems to have a few dogs. The people do not seem very affectionate to the dogs, and only a few will even bother to pet a dog. But the dogs are extremely protective of the household at night. I can walk around the village all day long, and into the night when other people are about, and the dogs never bother me. But I made the mistake of walking around the streets late one night after everyone else had gone to bed, and the dogs barked viciously at me. They seem to know that it is not proper for someone to walk around after their family has gone to bed. I think Isaan people think it is good to have dogs around the house, not because they prize them as pets, or as “man’s best friend,” but because the dogs served as protectors from wild animals like tigers.

DEFORESTATION

There are no tigers left in this area. The reason for the disappearance of tigers and other wildlife is of course because, over the last century, the forests were gradually cut down to supply the villagers’ need for wood. All over the world the same process has occurred: as human populations increase, forest lands get cut down. More people are using more wood for burning fires to cook and warm themselves on cool nights, and for building houses.

Considering that half of the world lives in farming communities like this one, the ways that Ban Sia Gen Wua contributes to world pollution is symptomatic of a big problem facing the future of the world. A big problem is that the villagers are continually making fires, to burn trash. They daily sweep their yard of leaves fallen from trees, and burn them along with all trash. The resulting smoke from millions of small fires burning all around the world is a major contributor to air pollution. Between deforestation and burning, farming communities contribute significantly to air pollution.

I think this village is a microcosm of the problems facing the world, in the massive destruction of forest lands. I want to see if I can persuade them to stop using so much wood in their house construction, and to stop burning so much trash and especially wood for fires. There are now economic incentives to stop using so much wood, because the scarcity of wood has made the price very expensive. Poor people no longer use wood on their houses, and build out of concrete block which is not expensive. I wish I could persuade prosperous people that they should use other materials, preferably locally produced materials like sprayed concrete over wire mesh, instead of using wood as a status symbol. I tried to locate a concrete sprayer machine, but no one in this area has ever heard of such a machine.

For cooking more people are starting to use natural gas in tanks that they can refill at gas stations. Yet even people with gas stoves will still have a wood burning small stove for outside to cook. There are many cows all around, and when I point out that many Plains Indian tribes used dried buffalo dung as fuel for their cooking fires, people laugh. They think it is dirty to use dung as cooking fuel.

The monk agrees with me that deforestation is a big problem in Thailand, and he likes my idea of encouraging the villagers to plant rubber trees on their lands instead of rice farming. The King of Thailand is strongly encouraging reforestation, and has been publicizing rubber trees as a good solution for Thai villages. The problem is that rubber trees take five years to mature enough to produce rubber, and people need to have some way to survive in the meantime. I suggested that the villagers should make ponds and raise fish to sell, with a pond supplying water for the rubber trees all around it.

One idea is for the village to form a village corporation, in which everyone in the village is a shareholder, on the model of American Indian tribal enterprises. The corporation could get a loan from a local bank to begin buying up land from impoverished rice farmers, and then plant that land in rubber trees. The former landowners who sold could be hired to do the work of planting and caring for the rubber plantation and fishponds. An added advantage of this idea is that when villagers no longer had rice fields they would sell their cows and buffalos, so that the cow population would be reduced.

The monk said that the biggest problem facing the village today is the lack of harmony. He thinks this is mainly because there are rival producers of Buddhist grave markers and spirit houses, and each producer will strive to undercut the price of others. This intense competition makes for a lot of strife in the village. The monk thinks a solution is for the villagers to form a co-op or association to divide up the market so there is not so much competition. When I told him what American Indian tribes are doing with tribal corporations he really liked that idea. He wants me to go with him to talk to the leader of the village.

The former leader of the village, who served as mayor for many years, developed a big ego and refused to listen to the ideas of others. The new leader is a young man, and he lacks experience. But people like him because he consults widely with others and wants to do a good job to help improve the village. The monk thinks he will like some of my ideas.

ENGLISH INSTRUCTION AT THE SCHOOL

The monk also says the Headmaster at the primary school in the village is quite good, and he wants to go with me to influence the headmaster to accept my ideas on English instruction. I suggested making signs in both English and Thai all around the village, to promote people being familiar with the Roman alphabet and English spelling.

On January 3, with a student interpreter I visited the headmaster and the English teacher at the school. They were both very polite to me, but I was surprised that they

seemed a little defensive and questioning about my desire to help improve English instruction at the school. The headmaster kept asking my interpreter why I wanted to know about the school curriculum, and he told my interpreter that two hours of English instruction per week was too much. Of course two hours per week is much too little. He realizes the English skills of the students are poor, but he thinks it is a higher priority for the students to learn to read Thai than to learn English. Most of the villagers are not literate in Thai, even though everyone speaks both Thai and Isaan languages. The headmaster said the biggest problem is that the caretakers of the students do not make them do homework after school is over, and so few students do any homework. I will ask the monk to talk to the other monks here, and to the mayor, and try to convince the adults to force the kids to do their homework.

This is the curriculum for grades one through six, hours of instruction per week:

Thai reading and writing 6 hours

Math 5 hours

Science 2 hours

Social studies, religion and culture 3 hours

Physical education and health 2 hours

Art 1 hour

Vocational and Technology 2 hours

Foreign language (English is the only foreign language taught) 2 hours

Scouting activities to improve the character of students 2 hours

I will ask the monk to talk to him, to try to convince him of the importance of English for the future of these students. If they want me to work with the students, I think I will concentrate on times other than English class. I can teach more English skills in the lunchroom, teaching students how to ask for things and order food, than I can in a classroom. I would like to investigate using English in the Scouting period (marching around, using simple commands etc.) and in math, art, health, vocational training, and maybe a bit in science and social studies. I want to talk to the teachers of those subjects, to see their English skills and if they are good enough to translate for me. If not, I will try to get a translator.

BUDDHIST CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LIFE OF THE PEOPLE

On New Year's Day, Lek, Lek's boyfriend Jing and I drove about an hour to the hermitage of a famous monk, to get his blessing for the new year. The monk seemed very nice, but when he read my signs (birthday, looking at the lines in my hand, and measuring different parts of my body, he grew very serious and said that this year could be very bad for me. He said someone might try to hurt me, or I could suffer a serious accident. He said that either Lek, Jing or I might die during the year. When I heard this I wished I had never come to hear such bad news. But then he told us that there was a way to avoid this calamity. He said if we would come back three days later, on Thursday, that he would do a blessing ceremony that would insure these bad things would not happen to us. Lek is very superstitious, and so Lek was anxious to return. So was I, both to observe the Buddhist ceremony of spiritual protection, and also to protect myself from this calamity. There are so many people coming to this monk for blessings, that he is

very busy. So Lek said we should drive down there on Wednesday evening, and stay the night so that we could be the first persons to see the monk in the morning. I agreed that this was a good idea. Jing decided to stay with the monk for the full three days, but Lek and I had to get back to the village to oversee my house construction.

BUDDHIST NUNS

When we reached the monk's residence, on returning on Thursday January 4, we were invited to sleep on the bamboo cot of one of the two nuns in residence at the hermitage. I liked this idea both because the cot had a mosquito net and also because it would give me an opportunity to talk to the nuns. No one there spoke any English, so I had to depend on Lek as translator. Lek was more interested in talking with them about problems that Lek is having with Jing. I repeatedly tried to get Lek to ask the nuns questions, but without success. Finally, I was able to persuade Lek to ask a few questions, and I got some good information but I was extremely frustrated at not being able to learn more from the nuns. Lek is great as a cook, caretaker, and haircutter, but translation is not one of his skills. He just does not have the temperament for it, and I know it is not fair to him to expect him to keep doing it but I have not been able to find any alternative person so far.

The two nuns were ages 58 and 69. The older one had been married, but had many problems with her husband and children. Finally, after the children were grown, she left the marriage and became a nun. She said that her life has been much happier since then. She said that she has very little stress, and she enjoys the simple life of being a nun and doing simple chores around the hermitage and helping people. She intends to remain as a nun for the rest of her life. The younger nun was the single mother of several grown children, who lost all her money when her business went bad. She made a vow to the Buddha that if her children would be able to start a new business and become successful, then she would devote a year of her life to being a nun. Her children started a mobile telephone business, and it rapidly became very profitable and they became wealthy. When this happened, the mother fulfilled her vow and became a nun. She has now been a nun for more than a year, and she said that she enjoys it so much, living a simple life without stresses and family problems, that she has stayed on longer than she originally planned. She said that she will probably remain as a nun for another year, and then decide whether she wants to continue or not.

I asked her how the monks treated them, and both of them said that all the monks were very kind to them. I asked why there seem to be no young women who become nuns. They said that if a teenager or young woman became a nun, that it might be dangerous for her because there are no male relatives to protect them as there would be in a family. They seemed to think it would be a bad idea for young women to become nuns, because they might be sexually exploited. But older women would not have that danger that young pretty women might face.

When I attended a ceremony in the temple, the monks sat on a level above, and the nuns on a level below. When I later asked the nuns about this, they said the man monks are above the women nuns. When I asked why, they simply said that was the way it had to be. I tried to pursue this line of reasoning further, but Lek became frustrated at my

questions and insisted I was stupid to be asking such things. It was very frustrating to me, because I really wanted to get the opinion of the nuns about this obvious patriarchal inequity. Male monks are so prominent in Thai society, but I hardly ever see female nuns and I wanted to learn much more from them.

What I was able to discern, even with Lek's impatience regarding my questions, is that the nuns do not feel mistreated or oppressed by the monks, even though the monks are considered to be a higher level. The nuns pointed out that laypeople have to follow five rules of behavior (don't kill, don't steal, etc.) and nuns have to follow eight rules, but monks have to follow two hundred and forty rules of behavior. Because the monks have to live with much greater restriction, the nuns reasoned, they should be accorded higher respect.

As we talked that evening, the nuns constructed a foot-long triangular holder from the bark of a banana tree, and then put little bowls made from folded leaves inside. Early the next morning, before the ceremony began at dawn, they put some small pieces of fish inside each folded-leaf bowl. They explained that this food was an offering for my deceased father and other loved ones who had passed away. The monk then appeared and took some black thread and measured a piece from my handspan, then another piece of thread from my index finger to my elbow, and another around my head. He explained that these lengths of thread were so that my ancestors would know that the gift of food really came from me. Next he did the same thing with Jing, two women and another man who were there for the ceremony.

The kind monk spoke at length with Lek and Jing, trying to get them to work out their problems. It struck me that the respect he showed for this same-sex relationship is something that would not occur with most Christian monks or preachers. After he finished talking with them, the monk led all of us to the edge of the hermitage, where we were told to sit down on the ground with the banana-bark offering of fish in front of each of us. The monk then went off to the side and did a long prayer for our benefit, asking the evil spirits to leave us alone and allow us to live in peace. Then he came back and made another long prayer in front of us. We sat in prayer with our hands folded in front of us. After that, we were told to take the offering to the edge of a rice field and to leave it there with a prayer to relieve us of all our troubles and worries.

After we were finished the monk said that our departed loved ones had received our prayers, and they would take on our burdens for us, and that we would be protected for the upcoming year. He then told us to turn around and walk away from the offerings, not looking back at all. We were to face the new year as the start of our new life, and to forget about the problems of the past.

At this point I had a realization that a major purpose of religion is to provide psychological assurance to people that there is some stronger force that is looking out for them and protecting them from life's vicissitudes. After hearing the bad news of New Year's Day, I was certainly relieved to go through this ceremony. But I was to find that this was not the end of the ceremony. After that, we were escorted into the temple, where

the monks had another banana-bark vessel, which was larger and rectangular in shape, with all sorts of offerings inside (lighted candles, incense, flowers, fruit, etc.). The monks took a big ball of thread, and strung the string in front of all of them and around to each of us to complete a circle. Within this spiritually-protected circle, they now started long chanting in Pali, the ancient language of the Buddha that has been passed down orally for the past 2,500 years.

The chanting went on for a long time, and was beautiful and relaxing in its comforting melody. After this was finished, the monk made a special blessing to me and Jing, painting sacred symbols on our foreheads just as he had done with Lek a few days before, insuring that we would have a successful and happy year ahead. This was certainly good news for me. At the end of the ceremony, the monk presented me with a small stone carved Buddha. It is beautiful, and something that I will always treasure not only because of its beauty but also as a reminder of this moving ceremony. I see now why Thai people are so devoted to their religion, because Thai Buddhism does so much to address their fears and worries. This, I think, is the proper role for religion, to serve as comfort for people, instead of being condemnatory or judgmental.

TRANSGENDER KATHOEY

After the ceremony ended, I was struck by the exceptional friendliness of the monks toward Lek, a kathoey. In so many ways, monks and kathoeyes are at opposites. Yet, the monks seem to take a particular liking to kathoeyes who are around them. Several of them requested that I take their picture with Lek, with them holding Lek affectionately. Keep in mind that monks cannot even touch a woman, so they clearly recognize that a kathoey is not a woman. But kathoey are not men either. They are in between, “ladyboys,” combining both masculine and feminine as a different gender from either men or women. This tradition in Thai society is very similar to ancient traditions among Native Americans and many other animistic cultures around the world.

Later, I attended a young woman’s birthday party. They were drinking, eating a roasted pig, and singing karaoke as usual at Isaan parties. The person who everyone wanted to hear sing was a kathoey. This person’s voice did not seem any better to me than anyone else present, but the others seemed to like her singing better than other people. They were all especially friendly and accommodating to the kathoey. This is exactly what the world would be like without transphobia. It is very heartwarming to see in action the goals of the transgender liberation movement in operation in this small village.

The richness of Thai culture suggests what the world would be like if there had been no Western imperialism. Thailand is one of the few countries in the world that was never conquered by the Western imperialists. As a result, Thai culture retains its uniqueness and richness in ways that are not true in many other areas of the world that were colonized by the European powers. And yet, even today, there are outsiders who are busily trying to convert Thai Buddhists to Christianity or Islam, and in the process destroying the uniqueness that is central to Thai ways of life. As we drove back to the village, passing the rural scenery that by this time has become quite familiar to me, and

listening to Thai popular music which I really like, I felt a joy and serenity in being here and living my life in ways consistent with Thai Buddhist ideals.

THAI AVOIDANCE OF CONFLICT

Thai people do not like to say no, and they avoid confrontation whenever possible. Even the word for “no” is MAI CHAI (not yes) rather than a direct declaration of disagreement. The way that Thai people are so agreeable is that they agree to everything, then do otherwise if that suits them. Accordingly, it is very hard to get a promise from a Thai. They will readily agree to anything that I ask, but then later when they do not follow their promise, and I ask why, they will explain vaguely that “something came up.” Anything to avoid saying no, or disagreeing. Promises mean nothing, I am learning. Even children do this. They will agree to do something, anything I ask, but then later they may or may not follow through. This is a frustrating aspect of Thai culture that I find hard to adjust to, but it is pervasive.

ISAAN STYLE OF BUILDING A HOUSE

January 10, 2007

I am learning much about Isaan ways of doing things by watching the workers who are building my house. They are masters of ingenuity, in figuring out a way of doing something with a minimum of tools. The disadvantage is that a lot of time is wasted in the process. I have seen a worker spending a lot of time trying to straighten a nail that is hopelessly bent, which shows the relative value of nails versus labor costs. The workers built a scaffold to work on, but did not measure it carefully and it was too big to take inside the door to do the inside walls. As a result, a worker spent nearly four hours taking the scaffold apart and putting it back together in a smaller size. But after it was inside the room the new scaffold was good for the length of the room but too long for the width. So all four legs had to be sawed off, wasting valuable wood, so it would fit in the width of the room. Careful measuring would have prevented all that lost time.

Likewise, one day when I had to be away the workers did not clean off the wet cement from the very nice metal windows that I bought. By the next day, when they tried to clean the hardened cement off, it was a lot more work and their scrubbing took off much of the fine finish of the paint on the window frames. When I complained about this, they said not to worry, that they would just paint it again. They did not seem to understand that I wanted the original fine finish of the manufactured frame.

On another day, I was horrified to see that the workers left a space of about six inches between the joints of the roof, where one section overhung another. They spent time cutting the bottom of the roofing, even though I asked that they extend the roof upward as far as it would go. Again, they told me not to worry. Later, when I asked them how they were going to handle the open space, they said they would put in a ceiling that would cover the view so that no one could see the open space. When I said I wanted to prevent birds and insects from coming into that space above the ceiling, the worker asked me, “Why do you care if birds are up there, no one will see them?” I tried to explain that I did not want bird droppings, which are suspect in transmission of bird flu, as well as smells from animal waste and dead animals. But that did not seem to register with him. He gave me a look of questioning. I could not get him to see why open spaces should be

sealed. The whole Thai way of building a house does not try to seal off the house from insects or animals. The whole idea is completely foreign to them. This has been very frustrating in my attempt to build a house where I can keep insects out. Sealing a house is just not within their thinking.

I wanted to build a house with a lot of natural cross-ventilation. But Lek complains about the dust in the village which is a product of trucks driving on unpaved dirt roads, the dust that blows from the farming fields, and the dust generated by the manufacture of Buddhist spirit houses and grave markers which is the major form of employment in this village. So Lek does not want me to have cross ventilation. Lek wants everything sealed off and closed. I worry about the heat more than the dust. Lek also thinks it is crazy of me to want to sleep on the ground level without a locked room. My plan for the house is to have a high wall all around the yard, and with a locked door as the entryway, but that is not enough for Lek. Other villagers feel the same way, and worry that I am subjecting myself to danger by sleeping on the ground level without a locked room. I have mollified them by saying that I decided to sleep in my office, which does have locked doors. I will put a bed in my office, and see how that works out. But if that is too hot, I may still sleep in the open.

LACK OF VIOLENCE IN THE VILLAGE

Everyone seems excessively worried about my safety. There are nightly patrols of adult men, ten of whom patrol the village each night from about 8pm until 2am. When I asked if I could go along on one of these patrols, the man said, "Oh no, we don't want you to be in danger. It is too dangerous!" I then asked when was the last time there was a murder in Ban Sia Gen Wua, and of the group of about ten people, no one had ever heard of a murder happening in the village even generations ago. The lack of violence is astounding given the amount of drinking that goes on daily, but Isaan people seem to be more relaxed and happy when they drink than many belligerent Westerners. They seem to want to sing, dance, and talk while drinking, rather than engaging in violence.

I then asked about other violent crimes, and they told me about an incident "many, many years ago" in which a villager killed another person's cow, in order to get something to eat. But after further questioning by me, no one could name a single incidence of human to human violence. I then asked them why they think it is so dangerous for me to go with them on patrols, and no one could offer a reply. I said I live in Los Angeles, where there are murders and many violent crimes every day, and yet I do not feel afraid in Los Angeles, and many other cities around the world where I have traveled. And, I told them, I certainly feel much safer in this village than I do in a big city. The biggest fear I have in this village, I said, is the insects, whereupon everyone laughed.

I never have figured out why people are so concerned about sleeping inside a locked room, given the lack of violence. Things are left outside all the time, and it is almost unheard of that someone would steal something from another villager. People are extremely honest, and if a teenager steals something there is hell to pay, as Lek's sixteen year old nephew found out when he took some money that Lek had left lying around the house.

YOUNG MEN DRINKING

The men who serve as volunteers for the nightly security patrols are in their thirties and forties. I asked why the young men do not participate in these patrols, and no one had an answer. I explained that in the villages that I studied in Java, the nightly security patrols were done by young men in their late teens and twenties. I said that I thought this was a good idea, to give more responsibility to the young men, so that they could learn habits of taking responsibility early. One thing I worry about in this village is that so many of the young men spend their afternoons and evenings just sitting around drinking. They don't seem to be doing much with their life.

Even one nice young man who graduated from Maha Sarakham University, with a B.S. in Economics, seems not to do too much except drink with his friends. He repeatedly tells me that he wants to study English with me, to improve his halting use of English, but every time I offer to give him a lesson, or ask if he wants to go with me and listen to me speak English with others, he says "Oh, right now I am busy drinking with my friends." He often invites me over to drink with him and his buddies, so I know that he is not trying to avoid me, but he has not once followed through with his repeated statements of intent to improve his English. Once again I find Isaan people really nice and agreeable, but follow-through is not their strong point.

The next time the English-speaking monk comes to the village, I would like to go with him to talk to the leader of the village, and I will bring up this aimlessness and excessive drinking among the young men and see what they say. The monk is concerned about this problem of overdrinking, and he told me that he thinks they drink so much to forget about their problems. I asked what problems they want to forget, and he said their lack of money. But of course they are not going to make much money if they spend every day and evening getting drunk. I am going to suggest the idea of Java villages using the young men for security patrols, and see what they say.

ECOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENTS

I would like to suggest to the leader that they should reduce the number of nightly security patrols from ten men to five or six men, and then ask the other men to spend time improving the village. For example, the wall around the Wat is almost falling over, and could be fixed with some work. The streets could also be cleaned of trash. Yesterday I saw a man shoveling cow manure from the street, and said excitedly to someone, "Oh, that is nice that he is cleaning the street of cow dung." But the other person explained that the man was not doing that work to clean the street, but to get manure to fertilize his rice fields.

This makes me think there might be a chance to reduce environmental destruction in the village, by appealing to their profit motive. They all understand that if cow and buffalo dung is spread in the fields, that the rice crop will be better. What I want to try to convince them is that they are losing a potential source of fertilizer by their daily burning of trash, garbage and leaves. When I move to my new house, I want to try to convince my friendly neighbor Wit for him and me to start a compost pile, and let him take the fertile soil that results to his fields as fertilizer. If I can convince him, and he and I can be

a model for others, I am hoping that I can convince people to stop burning their trash, leaves, and garbage. I am already heartened to find out that Lek's nephew Som has already started collecting glass bottles, plastic, paper, cardboard, and metal for recycling. Som offered to share with me his income from this recycling, but I said I would be happy to give him all of our trash if he will take it away. I convinced Lek to recycle, and to start a compost pile when we move into the new house. Lek wants to have chickens, so we will let the chickens scratch through the garbage as they now do, but then instead of burning the garbage we will compost it. If I can stop the burning that daily fills the air with smoke, I will consider that a small victory for the environment, and maybe let Ban Sia Gen Wua become a model for other villages to stop doing so much burning there as well.

If villagers will stop burning, and will plant more trees instead of raising so many cows, then they will make a significant decline in environmental destruction. What is interesting is that, while they raise many cows to sell, I seldom see the villagers eating beef. They do eat pork sometimes, but mostly eat rice, vegetables, fruits, and small animals (chickens, eggs, fish, eels, frogs, insects, etc.). Except for pork, they are pretty ecological in their diet. They also are good in reducing population growth. Families usually have only one or two children. So, to help ecological progress, the main thing the main things that can be done here are to try to convince them to stop burning, and to switch from rice farming to tree farming and fish raising.

If they make that change, they will not have an economic incentive to keep cows and buffalos, and so those environmental dangers will be reduced. But whether or not they can be persuaded to change I do not know. A few days ago I had a conversation with Bunlute, who has been very kind and helpful to me, and I thought I had convinced him that burning was bad for the environment. He seemed very attentive and aware that it is good to help reduce air pollution. Yet, yesterday when he came to my house site, he set fire to the trash left by the construction crew, I can only suppose thinking he was being helpful. And today, I noticed a fire at his yard. So I am not sure if my environmental concerned registered with him or not.

Everyone is being very nice to me, but sometimes I do feel lonely with the lack of people to talk to in English. I can only carry on very basic conversations in Thai, and even Lek does not deal with any kind of intellectual conversation that I want to have. The English-speaking monk is the only person I have encountered here who has intellectual concerns at all, and he is only here once a week.

HOUSE CONSTRUCTION January 13, 2007

The house construction continues to progress, but slowly. The contractor originally promised that he would have ten workers to finish the house quickly. But when he showed up to begin the work there were only four workers. They are all very nice, but many times one of the four does not show up, and there are only three working. Today one of the three was not feeling well, and he left early in the day. The two that remained worked on the walls of Lek's salon, even though I have repeatedly asked that they finish the house part first so that we can move in, and then he can finish the salon later. Each

time I or Lek tell the contractor this, he gives a look of understanding as if this is the first time he has heard any such statement. He agrees to do it tomorrow, but each day passes and he keeps doing things that are not my top priority. Of course, it all has to get done eventually, but I am getting impatient to be able to move in.

Today there was a breakthrough, in that Lek suggested a way to stuff insulation into the cracks between the different sections of roofing, in order to seal it from insects. When I showed the workers how to do this, they did it, being ever helpful and wanting to please me. But they would never have come up with this idea on their own. I am very grateful to Lek for suggesting this idea, which as far as I am concerned is Lek's most beneficial action to date on the house construction.

When I was stressing the need to seal the whole house to keep out insects, and showing them the multiple insect bites on my arms and legs, one of the workers suggested that if I was so bothered by the insects that he recommended a very soothing cream that would soften the sting. He did not seem to understand when I said I would highly prefer to avoid being bitten in the first place. I think Lek understood when I said it was not just a question of insect bites, but also of sanitation in wanting to keep flies out of the house and away from food preparation. When I talked about the flies walking all over the cow manure and then coming into the kitchen and walking over my food, I think that finally registered with him.

It is so strange to be in a place where I am considered eccentric and somewhat crazy for wanting screens in my house, when I know that every house in America is built with the idea of keeping insects out. It is useless for me to try to persuade people here that this is the usual way of constructing a house in much of the world.

The contractor is not building the house the way I wanted, but I am reluctant to complain too much because I am afraid he will just leave the job unfinished. The crew is already complaining that they need to get paid, even though they all agreed at the last payment that I would not pay them again until the work was finished. They work hard, but spend so much time redoing things that could have been done right the first time and thus saving a lot of time and work for them. For example, if they had just cleaned the concrete droppings off of my window frames on the day that they did the cement finishing, it would have been quite quick and easy to clean it. Instead, they left at 5pm without cleaning it, and the next day when they arrived the cement had hardened and they spent hours scrapping the hard cement off, ruining the finish of the metal window frames in the process. I was livid about that, but had to bite my tongue. When I said something about it, they replied that the window frames should have gone in last, after the concrete work was finished. I was exasperated, because they never suggested that option earlier. At this point, with the frames already ruined, I don't know what more complaining would do.

The contractor said he will be happy to repaint the window frames, but of course I will be expected to buy the paint and the extra work will cause more delays in finishing the house. Even Lek was very upset about the window frames being ruined. Still, this

contractor is giving me a very low price, so how can I complain? He is very nice, and he works hard. I just wish he would work smarter, so he could get the work done more efficiently. I guess I am seeing the American emphasis on efficiency coming out in my own personality. There is nothing like living in another culture to make one appreciate the good things about one's own native culture – even if I have many critiques about my own culture.

Still, despite my desire for faster completion, the work is progressing every day. And two major problems have now been solved, so I am very happy about that. I realize now that I made two fundamental mistakes at the beginning of the construction. First, the two back supporting columns should have been placed closer to the back of the house. The original contractor assured me that those spots were the correct place to put them, but now I realize he was wrong. Second, I repeatedly asked the original contractor to build the roof at an angle to conform to the property line, and he assured me that he would do so. When I showed up on the day he built the back of the roof, I was shocked to find that he was building the end of the roof at a conventional 90 degree angle, rather than the unconventional angle that followed the property line. When I protested that a 90 degree angle would make the house too small, he assured me that it would be “no problem” to build the wall at the different angle, different from the roof. Lek took the side of the contractor, and yelled at me that I was causing too many problems and I should be quiet. Like a fool, I accepted their assurances.

Now I realize what major problems the second contractor is having, because the first roofing contractor did not build the roof the way I wanted. In summary, if I had placed the supporting columns further back, close to the property line, I could have gotten the bigger house that I wanted, while still keeping a conventional 90 degree angle. It would not have lost much space, and would have made the subsequent construction much, much easier. What I have learned in hindsight is the need to stick to my original conception, and not believe people when they tell me that “it will be no problem” if something is not done right at the beginning. Mistakes made at the beginning of the construction multiply the problems later on.

Well, considering that this is the first house I have ever built from scratch, I think this is a valuable lesson to learn if I ever build another house in the future. My father had always wanted to build his own house, and he did so in his 50s. By the time he was completing the construction, however, he got so sick of it that he could hardly complete the house, and he never built another house after that one. Now I find that I, in my 50s, am building a house, and I wonder if I will feel the same way my father did by the time I finish it.

The construction is also more expensive than I thought it was going to be. Lek assured me I could build a house for 100,000 baht (about \$2,777 USD), and maybe he was right if I had wanted to build a small conventional Thai-style house at right angles. But at this point I have spent about 190,000 (about \$5,000 USD) and the work is still not complete. This is drastically less than it would cost to build a house in America, I have to keep reminding myself, but still it is more than I originally planned.

January 16, 2007

Today all four workers showed up, even though one of them did not do much work and I learned that he had a bad headache so I cannot blame him for not working much. When I arrived this morning I found that one of the workers was building a concrete block wall that was way off center, and it leaned dangerously. I made him take out several rows of blocks and do them over again the right way. I thought he would be mad at me, but instead I think he gained a new respect for me and at the end of the day he told me that my critique now made the wall much better. It is still not completely straight up and down, but it is one hundred percent better than before. I showed them how to use a string with a weight at the end to guild them as they placed the concrete blocks. I also told them to put steel reinforcing rods into the cement as they build the concrete block walls, and they did it just as I directed.

Incredibly, I think they are learning things from me about how to build a better wall, than they knew before. Later, as the lead contractor was pulling out a nail against the wood door frame, and making marks in the wood, all I had to say was “mai sway” (not beautiful) and they got the point. I showed him how to insert a piece of wood between the frame and the hammer, as I learned to do from my father, so the nail could be pulled out without marking the fine door frame. After that, he did it the way I directed each time.

The other worker did a really excellent job, placing the blocks very carefully so the wall is straight. They now see that I know some things that they do not know, and I think they are not dismissing my ideas as they did before. Today when we needed some U hooks, and there was no time to drive all the way into the city to a large hardware store, I showed them how to cut off the head of a long nail and bend it into a U shape, then hammer it into some wood. After the contractor said “mai dee” (no good) when I described the idea, I went ahead and did it anyway, and it worked beautifully. He then saw that I was right. So, all in all, it was a good day, and more progress is being made. I am not feeling as discouraged as I was a few days ago, when I was about ready to give up on the idea of constructing an insect-free house. As I sit here typing in my temporary quarters at Lek’s sister’s house, and the mosquitoes are biting me, I think it is important that I follow through with my original goal and make sure that it will be done right.

As Scarlett O’Hara said in *Gone With the Wind*, “tomorrow is another day.” So I will wait and see what that brings.

