

HOUSE CONSTRUCTION

I spent the last part of January constructing my new house. Every day makes me more glad that I decided to build this house rather than just continue living in Lek's sister's house. That house, like other Thai houses, is just not designed to keep insects and animals out, and to try to make it so would require so much major reconstruction that it makes more sense to build a new house. For example, a few days ago Lek found a cat doing a bowel movement on his bed. Tonight I was horrified, since I am extremely allergic to cats, to come into my room and find the cat on my bed. Sure enough, the cat had also done a big bowel movement on my sheets, as well as urinated. Lek was as disgusted by this as I was, and Lek's solution is to put poison out to kill this cat. For some reason the cat seems to delight in using beds as its sandbox. Maybe the cat hates humans. I do not like killing animals, but I have to admit I will not be sad if this cat dies. There is no way to keep cats out of the house, the way houses are designed.

KATHOEY

One thing about fieldwork is that, no matter what the ethnographer is doing, much can be learned about the culture. In dealing with all these very macho construction workers, I have never once seen any of them treat Lek disrespectfully. They certainly respect Lek more than they do me, since I am asking them to do things that are quite different from the way they usually build a house in the Thai style. The acceptance of kathoey by everyone continually amazes me.

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The contractor did not show up for two days, and when he did he promised not to miss any more time. I emphasized that it is going much too slow, and I want the house finished soon. When I arrived at the site, he was building still another wall that was crooked, leaning dangerously toward the street, and this is AFTER I got him to correct it! I had shown him several times how to use a plumb bob (which I learned from Dad) to make sure a wall is straight up and down. He was very sweet, and said he would do that in the future, but then here he was again doing the same sloppy work. When I complained, showing him how uneven and leaning a previous wall he built was, he actually had the nerve to say that it was *neet noi* (just a little). I said, no, it was much more than a little, and that I did not want any more walls done so sloppily. He promised (once again) to do it right the next time. But the same problems occur. I have to ask the same thing over and over again.

One of the workers told me I was wasting my time to be stabbing the concrete foundation as it dried, to make sure the air bubbles come out. I said that I had read books on construction, that emphasized how important doing this is when making a concrete foundation. One of the workers actually came over to me and took the metal I was using out of my hands, and told me to go sit down. That was the last straw. I told him I know I was doing the right thing, and that he was wrong. He just laughed. They are very pleasant and friendly, but not good workers.

Lek has been much more cooperative lately, and is seeing that I am right about a lot of things that he previously trusted the contractor. Now he realizes the contractor is wrong. He has found some other workers who are much better, and he bargained hard with them to get a good price. He really does not want to waste my money, and I appreciate how he even got into an argument with a neighbor because he thinks they were trying to charge me too much for their work. Lek is paying some of the workers himself, in order to save my money.

Anyway, the result is that now the work is going much better with the new workers, and I am enjoying the building process again. With better workers, and Lek being nice and supportive, it

makes the whole process much better. The new workers like my ideas, and are trying to do it the way I want. Let's see if this attitude continues. I hope.

I realize I could try to hire more top quality workers, but it is difficult to get them to come out to this isolated village, and besides that they would be much more expensive. Where would they stay? Plus, I just do not have the budget to spend that much on this house. My whole reason for building here is because it is so inexpensive, so if I had to spend much more money it would defeat my purpose of getting an inexpensive place to live. So I guess it is a case of "you get what you pay for" and I should not complain.

The current style in house building in this area of Thailand uses a huge amount of wood, which is wasteful to the environment. Lek and other Thai people think this style is beautiful, but I think it is ugly, and certainly not easy to live in, with so many stairs to climb and the bathroom in a separate building. This is the style that I am consciously trying to avoid, even though builders have showed me their construction with great pride. I was pleased to get a cheap price for some large clay pots used for storing water in the dry season, when the village water supply is not dependable

January 24, 2007 My father's birthday. I was thinking of him, and the frustrations he felt when he was building a house, when I got this news:

ISAAN BELIEFS IN "LUCKY DAYS"

Well, guess what? I have been working hard to coordinate all the workers at the house that I am building in the village in Thailand, so that everything will be done efficiently and the house can be finished as soon as possible. Things were finally humming along fairly smoothly today, until I got the news that it is not possible to move into a new house until a "lucky day" comes along. To move in on an unlucky day will condemn the residents of the house to a bad future. Lek and all Lek's relatives are totally convinced that to move into the house on an unlucky day would be

courting disaster. Two other houses are being constructed in this village, and when I heard the news I went to see those builders. Sure enough, in both cases construction had come to a dead stop. Exactly which day is the next lucky day is decided by the oldest man in the village, who serves as sort of a shaman. He announced yesterday that the next lucky day is not until February 19, and for every day in the week after that. Well, at least there is a little leeway. So now I feel totally drained. All my work and hurry was for naught.

Today, to my great surprise, the contractor showed up with two workers. He has not appeared for the last two days, and since I had heard nothing from him I assumed he had quit. Not wanting to waste any more time, I hired other people to do the work for which he has been partially paid. The other workers pointed out the many ways that his work was not right, finding even things that I did not already know. This morning the man who is laying the tiles in the kitchen tried to move the sink, and the whole front part of the concrete to hold the sink came crashing down! But when the contractor and his two workers arrived, and I asked them to work on the back room of the house first, they objected that they did not want to work because there were other people there working!!! Well, I almost blew a gasket, but tried to stay calm. One of the two workers then said he was quitting, and he left. The other one was about ready to leave, but I told him if he wants to work on the salon, then who am I to object.

The fact that I am paying for all this, seems not to enter their brains. Their non-appearance is why I hired the other people to begin with! From the very beginning I had emphasized to him that I wanted the residential part of the house finished first, so we could move in, and that Lek's salon could wait until after we had moved in. Every day I have said this, and every time it is like I am telling them the first time. Yet every day, for reasons that I do not quite fathom, they want to work on the salon. At this point I am almost to the point of not objecting, because the salon is close to being finished while the residential part of the house is nowhere near being finished. So, once I found out we cannot move in for another four weeks, there is no point in rushing. I figure if they

want to work in an inefficient way, then I don't give a flying f--k!!! So I told the two remaining workers to work wherever their little hearts desire. Then I went home and took a nap.

So, all my plans to move into the new house soon are gone up in smoke. Lek is wanting to go to Bangkok to try to sell his salon there. So I may just go with him and take some time to relax. Maybe I might go back to Pattaya. But I need to get my medicines that I left in Chiang Mai with my friend Porntip, not wanting to take it all with me as I traveled around Thailand. Today I called Porntip, and she said she will try to come soon. I thought she would have come before now, and I am really running low on the other medicines as well. She was busy at work and could not talk and wants to talk tomorrow. I need to get that soon, because I cannot get that medicine for my leg cramps that I have not been able to find anywhere in Thailand. So I have been in some pain at night. Boy, that is not a good feeling to be so dependent on a little pill. Now I am wondering if I should go back to Chiang Mai to get the medicines right away? The plane ticket to Chiang Mai is about \$50 one way. If she cannot come soon I might have no other choice.

January 26, 2007

I ran out of the prescription Mirapex, and just one night without it and my legs and arms hurt terribly. I spent three nights in misery, and could not sleep because it hurt so much. I asked at the hospital, and the doctor checked and said they do not have this medicine in Thailand. Thankfully, my friend Porntip, just came to bring my things and the woodcarvings that I purchased from her. Included in my things were the vitamins and medicines that I needed. I took two tablets, and did not have any pain last night. It is scary to be so dependent upon a little pill, but that is life, isn't it. So now I have enough to last me about another two months. That makes me feel better, just knowing I have enough. But it also makes me realize I cannot just "go native" and live like Thai people. If for no other reason, medicines tie me inextricably to America.

January 28

I decided to continue with the construction, even though we cannot move in until February 19, because the new workers are making good progress and I want to at least get the house built so it is ready to move in on the lucky day. Lek has worked hard to get the best price from the workers, and has saved me a lot of money as a result. His sister and her brother have also helped out with the house construction, saving more money. When I complained about all the problems with this house, they said I should finish this house and sell it, then build another house on their land next door to their house. They said they would give me the land to build a house on. It is nice to know that they like me this much, but it would also be in their longrange self-interest because after I died my house would go to their children. Actually, I would love to have a house there, because it has a beautiful view of the rice fields and the rolling countryside that my current house does not have.

Lek chose a very beautiful floor tile for the house, and the only problem is that Homemart ran out of that style so we do not have enough. We are doing the bathroom and Lek's salon in another style. Today the man who Lek hired to lay the floor tiles gave me a problem. He does very good quality work, laying the tiles carefully in a straight row (but in the process showing how the previous contractor's walls are NOT straight), but he is rather arrogant. At the beginning I told him that I wanted the tile behind the kitchen sink to slope toward the sink so water would not stand there. He promised to do that. Sure enough, he put the tiles in flat. Today I poured a little water on those tiles, and showed him that the water just stands there and does not drain. Again, I asked him to put another tile on top of the ones he installed, this time slopping like I asked. He agreed, but

when he went into the next room I heard him groan. I know he was complaining about me, and the other workers laughed. I know that Thai builders do not care about these kinds of details, but I still want to have it done the right way so water does not stand all over the place as it does in other Thai houses. That is very unsanitary, as well as looking bad. So I am sticking to my guns.

This morning he was starting to lay the tiles for the living room. I told him not to lay a tile in the corner, because I wanted to install a shelf there and it would be a waste of the precious tiles which I do not have enough of. I thought he understood. But then I had to go to the hardware store to buy some things, and when I came back there was a tile installed in the corner where I told him not to put it. When he saw that I was pissed, and I told him to take it up, he said OK, he would do it. I said I wanted it “*dounee*” (now), and he said OK, then he continued going about his work. I waited a few minutes as he finished the tile. Then he got more cement to do the next tile, and I said I want him to remove the tile now, before the cement hardens. I repeated “*dounee*” and gave him a hard look. He said “*dounee mai?*” like he really did not understand I meant right now, and again I said *dounee*. He came over and tried to remove the tile, but as I feared it was too late and the cement had hardened. I then gave an exasperated look and said to forget it, that I would not be able to install the corner piece now. Lek was very critical of me about all this, and said I was stupid to want to install that anyway. I got really mad at Lek for his lack of support and almost constant criticism. Here I am spending all this money to make a nice house, and he does not appreciate it because he wants a house built in the traditional Thai style. So we have a real conflict.

Lek's sister's husband drove us to the hardware store and, to my surprise, he took my side. He told Lek that he likes the different style that I am building, and that I was right to insist that the worker should do what I said. He said that if he had employed someone he would expect them to do what he wanted if he was paying them. He likes the house the way I am building it, and repeated his offer that I could sell this house and build another house on his land. I said I might be interested in doing that, but only if I could find another person to translate for me because I would never do this again with Lek. When I say something, Lek does not respect it, but if his sister or her husband say the same thing then he does respect what they say, and will change his mind. For example, I wanted to find out about a sliding glass door at the hardware store, and Lek was very critical that it was too expensive. Later, when he told his sister and her husband about this, they said it was actually a very good price. After that, Lek was in favor of purchasing it.

The other day Lek said he wanted his shampoo stand in his salon to be a certain way. I had planned it to be in a different place, to give Lek more room in his sleeping area, but Lek insisted in a nasty voice that it was his salon and he could put his shampoo stand anywhere he wanted. I told him that was a mistake, but I went ahead with his idea. So the workers poured the concrete floor with the waterline and drain where Lek wanted. Then later, after he saw the layout, he saw that the way he did it left him too small a space for his sleeping area, just as I said, and he admitted that he wished he had put the shampoo stand in a different place. I pointed out that that is exactly why I had planned it

in the place I did, and he realized I was right. But now it is too late, and he will have to live with it the way it is.

Later this afternoon, Lek apologized and said he was wrong to yell at me and to take the side of the worker. He promised he would not do that again. I greatly appreciate his apology, but he has done this before, where he apologizes and promises not to treat me disrespectfully. Then the next day he talks to me in the same disrespectful way. He says that is just the way he talks, and I should accept that. I know the whole house building process is frustrating for him.

Lek's relatives all seem to be taking my side. This evening, Lek's two nieces and their husbands came over to where we are staying, and both couples said that they liked the way I was building the house, and that they would like me to sell it and build another house on their land. Lek was amazed that I now have three offers of free land to build my house. Of course, I realize that their offers are not entirely disinterested, since the house would eventually go to their children, but still their offers were generous.

I took the opportunity to repeat that I might be interested in doing such a thing, but only if I could find someone else besides Lek to be my translator. I think Lek felt chastised, and since then he has been trying to be polite. All I can say is that I hope he will learn from this. I think we would get along much better if I were not so dependent upon him to translate all the time. I am trying my best to learn the language. But it is complicated by the fact that the people here are totally bi-lingual, speaking both Thai and

Isaan (which derives from Lao). So when someone says something to me, I am never sure if they are speaking in Thai or Isaan. I would rather learn Thai, since I can speak it all over Thailand, whereas Isaan is spoken only in this area of northeastern Thailand.

COWS AND ECOLOGY

Today, in talking with Lek's sister's husband, I learned more about cows in Isaan culture. I think he was trying to change the subject to get me away from my worries about the house construction. Isaan farmers often have cows. They are these scrauny white cows with little meat on their bones, and I wondered how they would sell as food. What I learned today is that these cows are prized for certain characteristics: a big hump on their back, and big ears (that look like a character from the Star Wars movie series). They are so expensive that they cannot be sold as food. So, these cows are not used for either their meat or their milk. Instead, their value is that when they produce a baby, the young cow can be sold at a high price. So, the cows are economically valuable for Thai farmers, but they are essentially breeding pets. Farmers keep strict records of their pedigree, and that is part of their value. This is an example of the arbitrariness of human cultures. What is economically valued in one culture is not necessarily valued in another culture. Isaan farmers do not care about the pure breed of a dog, which might fetch a high price in America but in Thailand would as likely be a meal as a pet. But they do care about their cows. Houses often have posters of prize cows on their walls, and men talk about cows a lot. It is this high interest that creates the demand for cows, which leads to their high price. There is nothing intrinsically valuable about a hump or big ears,

but because of Isaan people valuing these things and selective breeding, that is what the cows look like.

Of course, while selling young cows is economically profitable for Isaan farmers, it is not good for the environment. As I have noted before, cows are now even more overpopulated in the world than humans, and as they eat they burp methane gas, which is very harmful to the ozone layer of the earth's atmosphere. Moreover, forestlands are being cut down to provide pastureland for cows, thus doubly harming the environment.

I try to get across the message that we should only eat small things. In fact, that is what the usual Isaan diet involves. People may raise pigs and cows to sell, but they do not often eat them except on special occasions. The usual meal involves protein from either fish, chicken, clams, snails, frogs, or insects, as well as various vegetables that people grow around their houses ("eat your yard" is the operating assumption), and lots of rice. They eat everything and do not waste much.

The other night I was invited to a special meal at a house in the village, and was given a prized piece of duck. I bit into the fried piece, felt something pop and squash in my mouth, and only then realized I was eating the head of the duck. The squashing sound was the eyeball popping when I bit it. Many Thai people consider the eye to be a special delicacy. They also prefer the tougher meat of the free-roaming chickens that live around their houses, instead of the tender but unexercised bodies of chicken farm chickens. Tonight I watched a neighbor catch two of his chickens, slit their throats in a quick cut of

a sharp knife, hold the still squirming birds upside down to drain their blood into a bowl. The blood, like all other parts of the chicken, is not wasted, but is included in the soup in which the chicken is cooked.

I explained that American Indians give a prayer of thanks to the spirit of the animal that they are eating, and I gave a little prayer of thanks to the spirit of the chicken, and a wish that the chicken that had sacrificed itself for our consumption would be reborn into a good and happy life. The man looked interested in this idea, and did not dismiss it as I thought he might do. I do not like to see any animal die, but I think it is hypocritical for many people to be repulsed by the killing of an animal that they then eat. Since I eat chicken and fish, I think it is my responsibility to watch those animals being killed so that I can give a prayer of thanks to the living being whose life is being given up for my own needs. I like the quick and relatively painless way that the chicken was killed, but I do not like the way market people take a live fish and hit it on the head to kill it. If they hit it hard enough, the fish dies instantly. But I have seen careless fishmarket workers hit the fish so softly that the fish is still alive while they rip the scales off the body and cut off the fins and tail. That really bothers me when I see an animal suffer. Kill it quickly and with as little pain and fear as possible, which is the moral thing to do. I think people who eat intelligent animals like pigs and cows should be forced to watch those beings, who clearly recognize that they are about to be killed, being slaughtered. If more people did see those slaughterhouses and the cruel way the animals are treated, I think more people would at least stop eating cows and pigs.

My neighbor who had killed the two chickens then expertly plucked the feathers off the bodies, cut up the carcasses into small pieces, emptied the intestines and the stomach, pulled the skin off the feet and cut off the claws so the feet too could be eaten. Then his wife gathered some tree branches and built a wood fire to do the actual cooking, but he did most of the work in preparing the chickens for the meal. He also washed off the pots and pans and cutting board that he used.

GENDER ROLES

It was interesting to see the gender roles, and to note that both the husband and the wife were equally involved in the meal preparation. I see this pattern of gender equality in other aspects as well. I hired a husband-wife team to do some work on my house construction. To my surprise the wife was out there using a pick ax and doing all the heavy work that her husband was doing. I have seen women lifting heavy equipment, pounding sticky rice with a large wood mallet, and doing other heavy labor similar to what men do,. All in all it seems that Isaan culture is fairly gender egalitarian, with husbands and wives interacting equally, even though the culture is clearly male-centered. I have not seen the kind of oppression of women that is so much of a problem in many areas of the world.