

## PREFACE

I began learning Thai in 1987 while participating in the University of Wisconsin's College Year in Thailand (CYIT) program in Chiang Mai, in the North. During this year, I did ethnographic research on prostitution, interviewing sex workers in the local brothels (DaGrossa, 1989). I was, and continue to be, interested in studying sex and gender-related topics because, like eating, sex is a fundamental part of all cultures but has not been adequately studied. Sex as a topic of study has been problematic for anthropologists in part because some expressions of it occur in private, but also because of the cultural baggage we carry with us into the field.

What I knew about prostitution in Thailand intrigued me. Domestic (i.e., Thai for Thai) prostitution is present throughout Thailand and is very similar from place to place. Even in Bangkok, most of the women come from the North and Northeast regions. I began to look at prostitution as a reflection of, and model for, sex roles in Thailand. The girls and women were considered good daughters by many people, including their families. Yet they were engaged in a practice that explicitly violated behavioral ideals for young women. Many of the women did not tell their parents exactly what they did, though some of them thought they probably knew anyway. I concluded that the value of what they were doing was greater than the value of their virginity and reputation. I now believe I was only partially correct. I failed to understand the cultural values in play. The significance of maintaining appropriate social appearances to protect social harmony facilitates the transition of women from prostitutes to village wives and mothers (Peracca, Knodel, & Saengtienchai, 1998). What for Americans would be a "lie" does not carry the same meaning for these women. I only later realized this. The significance of the effort to uphold a good appearance was lost on me. It wasn't simply a "lie" for self-preservation; it was the appropriate action for social preservation. It allowed the girls, their families, and their villages, to accept things and move on without causing conflict or loss of face. Is this also true in Isan? How

does it relate to the larger concept of sex? Does it facilitate the occurrence of other kinds of socially unacceptable sexual behaviors?

I arrived in Mahasarakham in 1989 to teach English at Srinakharinwirot University. It was my first experience in Isan. The endless rice fields delineated by berms and village roads and cut by the main highway were spectacular shades of gold and green. The small towns where the bus stopped along the way felt downright lively after miles of paddies. I rode into Mahasarkham's municipal district on an air-conditioned bus in the evening. It looked familiar, like Chiang Mai, but smaller. I soon learned that there are many other differences.

Mahasarakham is small, largely rice-farming province in the middle of the northeast region of Thailand. The Northeast is commonly known as "Isan" throughout Thailand, and it is the preferred name locally.<sup>1</sup> It is the poorest, most rural, and most largely populated of the four regions in the country.<sup>2</sup> Isan is linguistically and culturally distinct from the rest of Thailand though Isan people have a strong national Thai identity. People in Mahasarakham and throughout much of Isan speak "Thai-Lao," often simply called "Isan." It is a dialect of Lao and local variations in vocabulary and pronunciation are found from province to province. Additionally, all Isan people can understand Central Thai (called simply, "Thai"), the official language of the country, and most can read, write, and speak it.<sup>3</sup>

Isan has attracted fewer cultural researchers than the other regions of Thailand, though notable ones include Keyes (1967), Lefferts (1993, 1997, 1999), and Tambiah (1973). Current researchers working on sex-related topics here include Mills (1992, 1999) and Lyttleton (1999). Much of the attention given to AIDS-related issue in Thailand has gone largely to the areas

---

<sup>1</sup> The official name of the administrative region is *phâak tawanòk chǎng nǔa* (northeast region), though one rarely hears this used in Mahasarakham unless being listed or compared to another administrative region.

<sup>2</sup> The other regions are central (surrounding Bangkok), southern, and northern (including the well-known city of Chiang Mai).

<sup>3</sup> Those who are not literate in Thai, are also generally not literate in Lao. Very few Isan people can write in Lao and so use the Thai writing system, even when rendering Isan words.

around Chiang Mai and Bangkok, the two epicenters for the HIV virus. This may be warranted, since Isan has demonstrated lower rates of infection for HIV. In other areas, such as education, Isan has, for various reasons, traditionally received less financial, political, and other attention than the other regions.

I was only 22 when I first taught at SWU, the same age as some of my students, but the differences between them and my classmates at Drew University seemed huge. Most of the prostitutes I had talked to also fell in this same age group. At the time, there weren't many anthropological studies of Thai and even fewer of Isan youth. Since then, researchers such as Mills (1990, 1992, 1995, 1999), Lyttleton (1994, 1999), and Hesse-Swain (1992, 2001) have contributed to the scholarship on Isan youth. Ethnographic studies of sex and gender most often focus on adults. But in many countries, including Thailand, young adults represent the largest segments of the population (East-West Center, 2002, p. 57-58). Thailand is just now easing out of a "youth bulge," in which "20 percent or more of a population is in the age group 15 to 24 years" (East-West Center, p. 57). With Srinakharinwirot University and seven other colleges in a small area, Mahasarakham seemed an excellent location to study the sexuality of students.

My second trip to Mahasarakham was in 1993-1994 to conduct this research and teach English at Srinakharinwirot University. Evidence of the government and non-governmental organization sectors' excellent HIV and AIDS educational campaigns during the previous few years was abundant. This is an excerpt from my field notes describing a parade on the King's birthday, which falls near World AID's Day (December 1):

There were many banners and signs and kids wore skull and crossbones, needles, whiskey bottles, and condoms on their heads like Burger King crowns. One kid wore a cigarette .... There were kids dressed as HIV (scary, monster-like beings), as AIDS, and as condoms. Blow-up condoms colored the parade like a spread of party balloons. The Tesaban [municipal] group walked along in beautiful *phâasîn*.<sup>4</sup> The men carried 2 or 3 foot long wooden phalluses with condoms on the ends. There were signs touting monogamy (*râk diaw jay diaw*)<sup>5</sup> and family.

---

<sup>4</sup> a sarong-like cloth worn by women

<sup>5</sup> literally "one love, one heart," a popular expression suggesting faithfulness/monogamy

... Even the little *àníban*<sup>6</sup> kids carried signs about condoms. Three or four boys from Padungnari School dressed as women with big boobs wearing *phâasîn*. As they passed, the boys standing near me squeezed one of his [sic] boobs and asked "*aw máy?*"<sup>7</sup> One of the odder parts was the band playing "When the Saints Come Marching In." [field notes 12/5/94]

This particular selection highlights some of the many concepts related to sex that I observed during this fieldwork: masculinity and femininity, marital relations, sexual behaviors, festivities, family roles, health, and modernity. All these are sexed, and all contribute to an understanding of sex in Mahsarakham. This study set out to delve deeper into the meanings of sex among university students, whose experiences and opportunities are quite different from less educated villagers. A more in-depth understanding of sex, particularly in this under-studied area, seems important, especially given ongoing international interest in sex-related issues such as human rights, women's rights, prostitution, and AIDS. I hope this study will contribute to this understanding.

---

<sup>6</sup> kindergarten

<sup>7</sup> "Want (some of this)?"