

Weddings, Wealth, Pigs and Coca Cola: *farang* Tourists in an Akha Village*

Duangta Seewuthiwong

The village is not far from Chiang Rai city, only 20 or so kilometers but the distance seems much greater. There is a great gulf between this rural setting in which I work as an untrained teacher and student of Akha culture and that urban environment in which I was brought up. I have been working here for only three months. When I am here, I miss the comforts of city life and no matter how many times I tell myself that I am lucky to be wealthy amongst so many poor people I do not like to be cast in the role of the privileged. People are always asking me for things. Whisky for this or that celebration, thread, needles and beads. A constant stream of people come asking for medicine. The 3500 baht I am paid per month by the project marks me apart as a rich person, how can I refuse?

Ban Akha village does not have electricity. There is no Government office here. A Baptist missionary has set up a school with two teachers. One is principally a trader, who at the moment is busy with the rainy season business of buying bamboo shoots in the village and selling them on the city market. He lives in Chiang Rai and travels up to the village each day on his motorcy-

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cle. The other teacher is an opium addict. The women still dress in traditional Akha style and members of the community maintain their old customs.

This is a preferred isolation in which we live. The road has been sabotaged to make it difficult for police in search of people engaged in activities like smoking opium, distilling alcohol and so on. This way the residents are more likely to be left in peace. The village headman also supports this isolationist policy. He maintains the only guest house in the village. If pick-up trucks could come in easily, that would be good-bye to overnight guests and hello to hordes of day trippers.

This chapter is largely about these visitors, trekkers tourists, world travellers, who pay us visits. How do they behave? What impact do they have on the village? How are they received? How do they fit into the ritual life of the village?

To provide a professional social science answer to these questions is beyond my capabilities at present. I can't talk about the Akha in the way I have read about them or heard researchers talk about them. How I know them does not always fit with the experts' reality. True, I am an observer in this village sent to learn but I am constantly reminded that I am not Akha. I am their student who for a few months will stay and then most probably leave forever; my reason and their reasons for being here are quite different. I know only events that I can understand and to me these are facts. What I will write may be quite wrong. But my reader can feel confident that I am much more than an ordinary tourist. I already know these people as individuals. I know their names. I know from which household they come. I know their children who come to my bamboo house to learn to read and write and stay to draw and talk.

When I first came to the village I was wary of contact with anybody involved in the trekking business. I did not contact

Thai guides. I kept my head down when faced with *farang* and waited to see how I would be seen and treated. It became a game which my Akha hosts began to enjoy as much as I. Once at the washing place when I was taking a bath with a group of Akha women, a girl addressed my companion in recognizable Thai,

“Hello, I stay in Chiang Rai, understand? I can speak Thai, understand? I’ve come to rest in this village, understand?”

My companion could not understand and after dropping her head forward looked at me quietly. We smiled: a conspirators smile. It filled me with pleasure. I was at home. For a moment I could be Akha in the *farang* eye and share a place in common with the Akha around me.

Passing, passing. When I saw them with their cameras I sometimes hated them. “Do you not have eyes with which to see? Why do you have to take something?” The Akha seemed to be much more charitable. Then there was the patronizing, the humouring as if they were talking to fools, children or both. In those first few months tourists and all that came and went with them seemed to make-up the bizarre side of village life.

I can remember sharing the shock of one of the girls in my school when she looked out to see a *farang* making ready to leave. He took a hefty hunk of bread from his pack and threw it towards one of those low-slung pigs that are always scavenging around the village. She wanted that bread. She emitted a small, high pitched groan from the back of her throat to repress her real feelings. The visitor wanted the amusement of seeing the fight for the bread. As the pigs chased, chomped and chewed she drew her hands to her mouth, she was swallowing saliva. The *farang* laughed at the skirmish.

Who are these people? What do they expect and how are these expectations served in an Akha village? How are they

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received? These are questions I cannot answer from my own experience but according to the statistics they are reasonably well educated and most hold university degrees, they are young and males outnumber females. Clearly they are on an adventure. The chances are pretty high that they will try opium, stay only one night in any one village, leave with a lot of photos and some good stories. They'll recommend the journey to their friends.

The first day Ian and Gay came into the village I didn't take much notice of them. There had been so many tourists in residence when I got back from Chiang Mai that I played my old avoidance game until the *farang* quotient had thinned out and I was mentally prepared for them. This New Zealand couple I soon found out had come into the village with Amanda who turned out to be the *farang* who had accosted my Akha companion when we'd been taking a bath a month or two ago.

No resentment harboured. Amanda is a woman of enterprise and by that I don't mean anything bad. She has a jewellery business in Chiang Rai, she's trying to learn about the trekking business and already owns four MTX bikes for hire. She is guide and tourist in one.

The three of them Ian, Gay and Amanda were in Bot'u's house when I first met them. A wedding ceremony was in progress. Amanda was using her Thai to find out what was happening. She had made herself well known to the headman who also speaks business Thai. He is perfectly able to communicate on matters that are likely to have a profitable outcome. Amanda is on the look out for those who can help her establish her business. It's an arrangement that suits the headman. His guest house relies on people like her to bring tourists in. Last year he made a good profit, this year has been even better.

On the woman's side of the house a group of older women were sitting around a big bamboo tray waiting for the

ritual to commence. On the other side of the house the elders, all men were also ready. The bride and groom sat down in front of the fire place set up between the two rooms. The bridegroom's mother split open a boiled egg and shared it out between the couple. The groom ate first then the bride. The son of the bride played in the circle of the old women.

The men in our circle talk casually of many things, about what was happening in the village. Occasionally one or two of the men turn to me and tell me what is happening and what is coming up.

But the groom looks at me and smiles shyly. He is wearing an earring in his right ear. He looks very smart. Yesterday he was in my house and it was then I learned that he was to be married today. I was surprised. Last month he often disappeared from my evening classes. Nobody told me he was courting. He spent the time getting over to a neighbouring village about four kilometers away. He was absent often. Now I understand. But not altogether. The girl he is marrying was also much admired by another of my students who had also planned to take her as his wife. Now, there she sits beautifully dressed in Akha finery, a mother who divorced her opium addicted husband, making a fresh start.

Amanda, Ian and Gay start to take photos. The sharp light of the cameras snaps again and again. The hosts are pleased. An old woman of 70 has tears in her eyes from laughing, "a flash light in her house". The owner of the household tries to tell the guests to place themselves in a better position but communication breaks down. Are they being told not to disturb the peace? They stop taking photos and for the first time I intervene.

"You don't have to stop. They like it. They're just telling you to put yourself in a better position"

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And Amanda is amazed.

“You speak English very well, is your house here?”

Ian and Gay position themselves close to me and begin to ask questions about what is going on.

Once established communication becomes an asset to all. The man sitting in front of me suggests that it may be possible to ask these guests if they'd like to contribute two or three bottles of whisky so that they can participate more fully in the ceremony. I'm only too glad. Whisky is such an important element in all such celebrations. For once I am not being asked, now it is another guests' turn.

A vigorous squeal heralds that the pig is about to be bought in. When there is a young man in the household;parents tend it in preparation for just such an event as this. Gay is frightened. “Murder or worse is being done” is written on her face. She is pale and must be shaking.

Enter the pig well trussed up. Smmio, the elder who is playing an important role in the ceremony produces a sharp knife ready to make the offering. This is too much for Gay who retreats to the far side of the men's room and puts her hand over her eyes. What terror is she dreaming? Ian and Amanda are made of sterner stuff and continue to prepare their cameras for the kill.

The stage is set. The men in charge of the pig arrange a space so that the event can be properly recorded and wait for Amanda to lift the camera to her eye. Knife ready. Cameras ready. Action. Smmio plunges the knife deep into the throat of the pig. The screaming stops. Blood pumps and gurgles into an old cooking pot. The bride and groom sit quiet and calm in front of the hearth.

A quivering liver is laid on a board to be read by the elders. Good omens. The couple's first child will be a boy. They will have good luck. It can be read plainly from the streaks of fat which run through it in three, or is it four directions?

The whisky has arrived. A bottle is broached and cups sent to everybody in the room. One cup and I feel like a fire breathing dragon.

Now everybody can relax. The first step is completed. The old men resume their talk and fill their glasses. After the hair is scraped off and the entrails removed, the pig is butchered. Gay tells me that copies of the photos will be sent back later, much later because they are headed for Kathmandu and other countries before they reach England, their first fixed destination on a long journey.

Amanda remarks again on my English. I'm painfully reminded of some facetious remarks I made to a young Akha man who was slightly drunk and slurred some of his words.

“Your tongue has a mind of its own.”

I had not thought he would be sensitive about his ability in Thai. When I recall his answer, it still hurts.

“My tongue is clumsy but make your mind clear before you speak.”

The meal begins. People are still crowding into the house. There are three tables. The guests are invited to sit with the elders.

Now I have become an expert. I am asked to explain the proceedings. What can I say? Here I am a student. Should I be seduced into the pretense of knowing? I respond and feel uncom-

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fortable in the role. Here, tonight we are strangers sitting around a small bamboo table. We are individuals who are eating together. We come from different cultures. How can we make sense of what is true for others?

When the meal is finished, the *phi'ma*, the ritual leader begins to recite a long text from the wedding *zang*, the name given to the corpus of oral literature, law and learning which lies at the heart of Akha culture.

The old women who sit on the other side of the house throw rice over the heads of the wedding couple and into the men's side. I am told to instruct the guests to follow suit. It is cooked, broken rice rolled into balls. It was borrowed from a lowland trader who must be paid back after the new rice is harvested. It is thrown again and again. The men throw to the women and the women throw it back again.

The host approaches Carol and Gay with the tips of his fingers smeared with soot taken from the hearth. He touches some on the cheeks of both girls and tells Ian to take soot from the fireplace and to touch the cheek of every woman present.

The *phi'ma*, continues to recite his prayer.

The faces of the bride and groom are darkened by the soot blessing of many people.

The headman talks louder and louder. He is drunk.

I run away.

The people say that this year more *farang* tourists have come than last year. Ten years ago when the first group came they were divided up and stayed in different houses. The headman was especially hospitable. He was wide awake to the commercial possibilities. He has the character of a *chin haw*, a Yunnanese Chinese. If there is anything going that looks

profitable, he will be found there. He worked for the Baptist mission as a health worker. Later he was happy to join the project I'm now working for. He is reasonably familiar with *farang* behaviour and he could see where hospitality might pay off. Seven years ago he made the right decision to build a guest house in his compound. Since then he's enjoyed a monopoly. He gets to know the guides. He adjusts his services and his price according to what circumstances dictate. The rate varies according to what is thrown in. The basic rate varies between 20 and 50 baht. Extras such as a pipe or two of opium (cooked or raw), massage, *ganja* or other products guests might ask for are charged separately.

Not everybody is happy. There are critics in the village, especially this year when so many visitors have come. The critics don't mind the guests sitting up late at night smoking *ganja* or opium as long as it doesn't attract policemen who would come and harass them. Besides, so many of the married men smoke opium what difference does it make if a few outsiders come in? They pay well. A *mu* of opium about the size of the end of a little finger costs 15 baht. This can be sliced into enough pieces for 10 small pipes (one *bao*). At 10 baht for one pipe it is good business. Then there are the guests who come for one night but stay for two or three. The headman told me that he often earns several hundred from such guests.

Most of those who criticize are put out by the fact that they don't get a fair share of the trade. But this is not to say that others in the village miss out altogether. Because *Ban Akha* village is the first settlement on most visitors itinerary, guides employ people as porters. The returns from this can be quite good, 50 to 70 baht a day.

This month my students are more eager than ever to study at night. Three months ago when I first came the young men and women who are literate in Thai expressed a wish to learn

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English. Enough to enable them to speak to foreign visitors. It is remarkable how quickly they have developed their skill. In between my departure and arrival this time, an absence of ten days, they have added new words to their vocabulary. They come and ask me if this or that usage is OK. When they see the surprise written on my face they tell me they've been talking to *farang*. One new student has presented himself. These students are very serious.

Next morning I learn that Amanda has returned to Chiang Rai. Ian and Gay are still here and they will go to the Boqt'u family swiddens about 3 kilometers from the village to spend a day in the fields. This is the month of weeding (August) and it's a good thing to be doing. Everybody can work at their own pace. It's easy to see what ought to be done and avoid making a mess.

In the fields Boqt'u's wife is worried that the visitors will soon be exhausted.

“Tell them both, if they cannot work in the field then it's better to rest in the field hut.”

When I tell Ian and Gay, they smile and reply that in New Zealand they both worked in apple orchards and potato fields. In their country there are also mountains like the North. They're used to walking up and down steep slopes.

As we work, pulling the grass from between the rice stalks, we talk and laugh. Gay works very well. Everybody has questions for them and I am the interpreter rather than the expert.

Boqt'u asks if there are mountain people in their country. Ian replies to the negative but adds that there are communities in the hills. People live and farm but they are not like the Akha.

We all lunch together in the field hut eating fresh vegetables, pumpkin and corn. When it's time to return to the village lan carries *saka*, Boqt'u's wife's field basket back to the village and she reciprocates by carrying his camera. These two *farang* emanate a sense that they are acting properly. A certain pride is being displayed. We, the people.

Next morning they leave and we say good-bye.

Tomorrow Saboq will be married. A second marriage ceremony in so few days. I feel well done by. Another chance to learn. This is not the usual time for weddings, not the optimum time. Other villagers say that it's quite strange how so many young men have decided to get married. People prefer to arrange weddings after the harvest. Everybody is agreed that it's regrettable that every year, about May-October, many households have to borrow poor, stale rice which must be replaced with good fresh rice. Still it is good to see weddings taking place. It is always useful to have extra labour in the household to help out in the fields.

Women are a great asset in any house. They do most of the work. Saboq's mother for instance works very hard. She feeds the pigs, carries the water, collects bamboo shoots and firewood, works in the field and household. As Saboq works alone in the field it would be good for him to have a partner.

A'ja, his father, told me with a laugh that the bride is a woman from Sa Laep village. The same village from which Bot'u took his wife. Like Bot'u's wife, Saboq's wife has been married before, in fact three times. She has divorced all of her husbands. The last was a Thai, an opium smoker. Saboq will be her fourth husband. Until last week she had two children living with her. She exchanged her three month old baby for a radio-tape machine. The three year old remains with her and will be brought into the marriage. A'ja is full of plans for his son. After the wedding he, his son and some other men in their lineage will build a guest

house of their own in front of his house. He's sure that this year tourists will continue to come, especially after the rainy season finishes.

He seems to be asking for my opinion but he does not ask directly. I don't need to say anything. Their minds are made up. All the inhabitants of the village assume the right to do as they wish and as they are able. Perhaps there is some sensitivity here relating to the change this will bring by breaking the monopoly of the headman. How will the challenge be mediated through the village social structure and political situation?

It is another wedding day. A'sur, my best student and the younger brother of Saboq the bridegroom, is going to escort a couple of French tourists to a neighbouring village. Two new groups of travellers have arrived. Many are pleased to witness their arrival, especially A'ja who will host the wedding ceremony.

It is a replay. The bride and groom beautifully dressed in full Akha gear are photographed again and again. A guide who knows enough about me to make me part of his itinerary introduces me as a teacher, a runaway from civilization devoting my life to the service of the people.

Three months has become a lifetime. Am I already part of an instant mountain mystique? What can I say in the face of this projection? Tell everybody the truth that each morning I wake up and pray to any caring god who may be listening to send me back under the protection of the almighty electric light bulb in close proximity to a good bookstore.

I need not worry, nobody is interested. They are all watching with fascination the squealing pig which is being carried into the room. The knife is poised and drops. There is a gasp. A male guest has collapsed. He recovers and retreats with his right hand exploring his face as if in hope of finding a place where the experience has lodged and from which it may be wiped away. We will not see him again tonight. What will

he dream?

These guides are cross-cultural entrepreneurs. They know how to turn their experience to profitable account. Most have a good knowledge of the cycle of village rituals. They know who is who, or make it their business to find out. At least they know when something interesting is going to happen. What is expected of them and so forth. But they are definitely not either anthropologists or sociologists or any other kind of “olies” or “ists” because if they were they would not be the guides I have overheard.

One of the most important obligations faced by guides is to provide answers to questions. They do not know the phrase “I don’t know”. Perhaps that would be a sort of betrayal. Betrayal of a guesswork conspiracy to the doubts of science. Only the ignorant can be confident for they have not learnt anything of much significance and therefore do not have any idea of how much they do not know. It is a pretentious role within which the mind flatters the ego. The all knowing preacher, teacher, guru steps out of the soul. A naive figure emerges full of false pride. They overflow. They bask in their own importance ordering villagers to do this and that like colonial masters I have seen, running Hollywood plantations from wooden verandas.

Michael, a 20 year old medical student from somewhere in the USA comes to my house to help me teach conversational English. He starts, “What is your favourite movie?” Nobody can answer.

In the morning the wedding is still going. The guides and their visitors have already departed. They have left a story behind. The guide got drunk. What a bastard. If the story is true, I wonder if he’ll be welcomed here again. In the middle of the night he made a public announcement that if the bride would sleep with him he’d give her new husband 500 baht. I can only imagine what these quiet and patient people think of my fellow lowlanders. I am ashamed and angry and ask who he works for.

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I tell nobody but I intend to write to the manager with their complaint.

A'sur arrived back this afternoon. He looks tired but his eyes are bright.

The wedding at Saboq's is still going. Many more guests and more provisions than for Bot'u's ceremony. The elders, both men and women, remain ensconced in the house for the whole day.

A'sur tells me that he's done well. He was paid 200 baht for working as a porter for the guide and was given 500 baht by a French couple he had befriended. This is the first time he has had so much money in his pocket and he will give it all to his mother. Now many other young men have decided to take up the study of English seriously.

The day I left the village for a project meeting building materials were beginning to pile up outside A'ja's house. The materials look quite substantial. Wooden posts but mostly bamboo. I stop and talk about how three months ago they'd collected materials to build a house for me. That was before we were friends and I can't stop myself from saying that this guest house will be much better than my dwelling. I am assured that my next house will be well built and strong. I reply that it's too late, I'm already hurt. I need to be honest: I don't mean to be cruel.

It is still early morning when I walk the seven kilometers down the hill to catch a pick-up. It's the 12 August, a good day, no rain and the walk is easy. Coming down it's possible to see much more than on the way up.

In front of me a private movie. Hills running down to the Chiang Rai plain. All is green, quiet, calm.

No, this is not a picture. I am part of what I see. I am also a tourist of sorts, a long-term guest visiting the highlands. I am glad a meeting has been called. I have had enough. I am tired and on an escape route. Where have I been living and why? What have I learned? The *farang* come in search of a reality outside the comfort afforded by their wealth, stumble when the knife falls, collect photos that will attest to their sense of adventure, make friends along the road. How different it is to live the daily reality of poverty. There is nothing romantic about life in an Akha village. No privacy, too much mud and everything is damp. My house is already yielding to gravity. I do not like fleas and sometimes I ache to be alone. Will I be able to face the return?

There is a new shop on the last ridge before the descent into the top northern Thai village. This must be the frontier to some other civilization for there are crates of Coca Cola and soda bottles piled up outside. Four minibuses are parked along the road. The drivers are inside eating. They invite me to join. They're waiting to pick up a group of tourists who are visiting a Mien village in the vicinity. I wait with them to catch a ride down to the bus stop. After one and a half hours the tourists begin to trail in. For ten baht they can get a ride back to town that will only cost me seven.

We're off. Many roads to many hill tribe villages. As we bounce down the road I look back at the Coca Cola bottles and think of pigs, weddings and wealth. I am looking forward to my book shop and comfortable nights spent reading under an electric light bulb.