



VILLAGE AS STAGE: IMAGINATIVE SPACE AND TIME IN RURAL NORTHEAST THAI LIVES¹

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Abstract

This essay seeks to invigorate ethnographies of rural Northeast Thai-Lao (Isan) villages with a discussion of villagers' imaginative lives. The essay's three parts describe imaginative worlds constructed by the people as part of their daily and ritual lives. It is divided into three parts. The first part proposes that Isan villagers create space and shift time through the annual construction of occasions in which routine spaces become imagined new spaces, exist in different times as well as in the present, and carry new meanings. In the second part I describe a particular series of events in which I participated, which echo to this day, showing that the daily world of the Thai-Lao provides for perceptions of alternate realities with alternate causations. I also mention but do not discuss Isan story-telling and folk-tales as providing a source for alternative images. In the third part I discuss people's daily lives and, rather than seeing them as particularly Buddhist or particularly accidental, show how a Western metaphor implying imaginative space and time has percolated into the deepest understandings of why these people act as they do.

Introduction

The past decade of village-based ethnographic research in Thailand has seen the florescence of studies concerned with more than the people's relations with Theravada Buddhism. Of particular importance have been those studies, such as Mary Beth Mills's *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force* (1999), which have begun to chart the inroads of the mass media and the pull of a Thai-Western urban culture on the imagination and lives of rural young people.

¹ *Acknowledgements*: I owe this paper to the interest of and conversations with my fictive kin and friends in Isan. Thanks also to Dr Richard A. O'Connor who referred me to McKinley (1979) and the possibility of alternative eras in Southeast Asian cultures. Thanks to Dr Wajuppa Tossa who directed my attention to the book *Lakhon Haeng Chiwit* (Arkardamkeung 2472/1929) after my village friends had spoken of the song.



Contrasting with these studies are those, epitomized by Nicola Tannenbaum's *Who Can Compete Against The World?* (1995), which cast doubt on the doctrinal interpretation of Theravada Buddhist beliefs in the village context. Tannenbaum, as she brings ethnography back to its goal of understanding 'the logic that informs people's behavior' (1995:211), shows that power, rather than Theravada Buddhism as doctrine, is a greater concern to the people.

In my research in a Northeast Thai-Lao village for over three decades I, also, have been puzzled and attracted by the extent to which the contemporary mass media and the pull of urban mass culture re-shape rural Thai-Lao village life. At the same time, I have been impressed by the extent to which images coming from Theravada Buddhism provide a context for, yet sometimes do not altogether shape, the worlds of my friends, both 'real' and 'imagined'. As I look at the lives my friends lead, the ceremonies in which they engage, the goals they set for themselves, and the ways their lives—and mine—work, I am struck by how much they live in worlds different from the supposedly rationalistic one that I lead. Following Tannenbaum, however, I hesitate to ascribe all of what I see either to Theravada Buddhism or contemporary mass culture. Of course, I certainly do not subscribe to an explanation based on superstition.² My friends live rich, meaningful lives; much of what ethnographers and novelists write barely skims the surfaces of those lives.

Almost uniformly, Northeast Thailand, also known as Isan (Sanskrit for the northeast direction) because it is northeast of the Thai capital, has been described by both Westerners and Central Thai as a hot, arid, impoverished place. Statistics show that the people of the Northeast are poorer than the national average and that this is the poorest region of the kingdom. At the same time, this region includes one third of the kingdom's area and one third of its population. The majority of this population is Thai-Lao, ethnic Lao who have been incorporated into the Siamese-Thai state since the middle-to-late 1800s. It also holds a significant population of Khmer-speaking peoples in its southern reaches bordering Cambodia. These people tend to live in nucleated villages scattered across an undulating landscape, the majority of whom grow rain-fed wet-rice crops during the wet season and engage in supplementary jobs, often going to Bangkok and, increasingly, outside the kingdom, to earn additional money. The region has been the subject of intense development efforts from immediately after the Second World War to the present. Today it is the focus of the Kong-Chi-Mun project, to channel the waters of the Mekong River down the region's western side to provide irrigation as the water

² I enclose this sentence so as not to be accused of some non-rational neo-Levi-Bruhlian approach. I see the behaviors of my friends as rational; I just do not think we have yet considered all the contexts of this rationality. Certainly, their position in the power-development nexus as members of those 'acted upon' as opposed to the 'actors' is an important aspect of this.

makes its way east across the region. Indeed, one might say that Isan has been a focus for other people's imaginations for a significant period of time.

In this paper I wish to chart some different understandings of the lives of my friends. In a way, this paper is more of a 'think piece' than a fully polished essay, primarily because I am still puzzling through how to present this material in its rich variety. However, I trust that what I write will begin to illuminate new facets of understanding for people who lead complex, meaningful lives.

Alternate times and spaces in Thai-Lao villages

In these days of globalization and modernity one frequently hears Thai villagers, especially teenagers and young adults, complain that village life is boring. 'There is nothing to do in a village; the excitement is in the city.' One cannot contradict that more different things happen at the same time in an urban context than in a single village. It has long been remarked that Thai cities, *muang*, are not only urban complexes (as they might be described in the West), but also, because of the presence of royalty and powerful palladia, are foci of allegiance and faith. One might say that for a villager to travel to a (Thai) city is to shift his or her world not only in space but also in time, to a more 'elevated', realm (cf. O'Connor 2000).

Rural Thai and Thai-Lao people have always seen their lives in conjunction with *muang*. However, with the inroads of Western modernity, cities in Thailand have also become precursors of things modern, imagined to contain the essence of modernity in its complexity.³ The inroads of 'modernity', specifically the input of mass media, such as radio and TV, have brought into sharp focus the possibility of different lives and new disappointments for normal people. However, was village life 'before' mass culture so boring? Did rural Thai-Lao before the advent of mass culture have no imagination?

I wish to focus on two alternating evocative constructions of the world before Buddhism which play prominent roles in Northeast Thai-Lao village life. One of these depicts the world immediately prior to the birth of the Buddha, the other depicts the construction of the environment in which the people live today. These constructions are wrapped in the usual Theravada Buddhist arrangement of making merit, and thus provide occasions for people to participate in the ordinary world they inhabit with the possibilities provided by that religion for seeing better, alternate futures. Additionally, these constructions also bring into existence possibilities for people to imagine themselves in different times and places even while 'here and now'.

³ Cf. Mills 1999 for an excellent depiction of the pull and impact of urban, modern, *than samay*, life on young villagers, especially women.

While the Thai state has engaged in a massive effort to align people's wishes with its goals of unity through development, alternate, powerful universes exist. These alternate models may be aligned with *kaan pattana*, development, but not necessarily to the material expansion proposed by the Thai state. They are often rooted in Theravada Buddhism, but they go beyond Buddhist doctrine to provide alternate constructions of the social spaces in which 'normal' people exist. Thus, while these occasions are wrapped in *tham bun*, merit-making, their construction goes beyond providing ways to see better futures. These occasions create alternate stages in the village on which people act different roles, sometimes apart from Buddhist merit-making.

The *Bun Bang Fay*, 'the rocket festival', receives continuing attention as the prototypical Thai-Lao 'folk' festival. Many outsiders see the events which happen during this festival as wallowing in dirt and a too-open expression of sexual licentiousness. The firing of rockets into the air to provide rain to 'seed' the earth and make it fertile has obvious sexual overtones; the boisterous, often drunken, behavior of both male and female participants can be off-putting; and, since it tends to occur in late May-early June, at the hottest time of the year, it is not an easy festival in which people not accustomed to heat and dust would wish to 'participate'. Let us look, however, at an alternate universe created and celebrated in this festival.

The festival begins under the aegis of Theravada Buddhism, with the parading of important Buddhist statues, the palladia of the community sponsoring the event, at the front of a long, multi-segmented procession.⁴ The procession presents the rockets, *bang fay*, also called *naak* (Sanskrit: *naga*, serpent), to the audience; the procession is called both *hae naak* and *hae bang fay*. Usually a series of *krabuang*, discrete segments of the procession, follows, each duplicating the other, each sponsored by a different community which also sponsors a rocket in the competition. These *krabuang* also participate in a competition for the best performances, the most elaborate floats, the most beautiful women, etc.

Each *krabuang* opens with, usually, young men and women dressed in elaborate Central Thai costume carrying a picture of the Thai king and queen and a placard announcing the name of the community or sponsoring organization. Then follow one or more groups of dancers, dressed in appropriate Isan costume and

⁴ This description comes from a parade in a district town in Mahasarakham Province. The usual village procession would be just one *krabuang*. In this paper's discussion of this event I focus on one of the several imaginative spaces created by this event; certainly the prominence given to Central Thai themes plays on another 'imagined' dimension of the Thai Kingdom and Isan's relations to it.

arranged in neat rows, who perform dances at various points along the parade route. Then come one or more floats (pick-up trucks with wooden frames on which are hung plywood sheets painted with various scenes) carrying beautifully coifed young women dressed in exquisite Central Thai costume. The more elaborate floats have pictures of *naak* on them and may be in the form of serpents with rockets at their fronts. Then follows the float which is the core of each *krabuang*, a wooden model of a white horse on which a young man with another beautifully dressed young woman riding behind him sit. Behind and around these floats, moving as a kind of cloud, are citizens of the community sponsoring this *krabuang* acting in 'inappropriate' ways, reflecting on the hardships of their lives through staged performances that critique and parody their lives and the lives of important people, such as the Thai Prime Minister, the U. S. President, the police, etc. Some of the members of these 'dirty' clouds take this opportunity to engage in usually forbidden behavior, such as going around half-naked, or acting as if they were dogs, rolling in the dirt, or, in a recent famous example shown on TV (June 2004), climbing a coconut tree throughout the duration of the procession prodded by a man with a stick, which not only illuminates the arduousness of getting coconuts, but also graphically illustrates one of the scenes often depicted in Buddhist hell paintings, of adulterers eternally prodded to climb thorn trees.⁵



Pha Daeng and Nang Ai on their royal white horse, Bak Sam. Wapi Pathum Bun Bang Fay parade, 20 June 1992. Photo by Leedom Lefferts.

All of this—from the exquisitely dressed young men and women to the display of licentious, dirty behavior—is part of a text, *Phadaeng Nang Ai*, Prince Daeng and Princess Ai, which is common knowledge in the Northeast and which the *hae bang fay* parade reinforces as part of local cultural understandings. This is the story of the creation of the contemporary physical, named landscape on which the people engaging in the celebration now live. The parade, the licentious behavior, the competition between villages, as well as the white horse on which Pha Daeng and Nang Ai are ‘riding’, are all parts of this story and the re-construction of a past time that has important implications for the people—it gives them many of the circumstances of their present life.

This story is well reconstructed in Dr Wajuppa Tossa’s poetic translation of *Phadaeng Nang Ai* (1990) and does not need retelling here. However, the procession with its *krabuang* celebrate two specific sections which, in the story, are separated by some length of time; together they give the charter for the total current festival and what it shows in terms of time and place.

The first is a competition held by the king/father of Nang Ai, in which princes of various communities are invited to compete for the hand of his daughter. This happens during a festival arranged by the king, when members of surrounding communities are invited to come and compete in the first *bun bang fay*. Pha Daeng, the prince of a nearby kingdom, meets Nang Ai at this event. The king will not allow Nang Ai to marry Pha Daeng, so the lovers take other opportunities to meet. The second aspect celebrated in the contemporary festival is when the lovers gallop away from the collapsing world on a white horse. To lighten the load, Nang Ai discards her jewelry and other precious objects, scattering them across the landscape. Many Isan topographic features and older villages derive their designations from this charter legend; these names are duplicated across the landscape.

The Bun Bang Fay conflates and identifies the present with the past as it provides an opportunity for re-enactment and participation in the construction of the natural and cultural world of Isan. This re-enactment is not simply a staged presentation, but, more importantly, a participatory one. Today, each year, as communities across Isan hold this festival, its people re-establish and re-confirm their understandings of the way their world came to be what it is today by physically re-creating the time, the celebration, the competition, and the chaos of this past time and space. The power of this event is that the people relive the origins of the context in which they live their daily lives.

⁵ This conflation of scenes from different times but from the same story parallels the conflation of scenes from different times that is often seen in Thai and Isan mural paintings. Dr Sandra Cate (2000) has aptly named these parades ‘murals on the move’, seeing them as mobile presentations of the *wat* (temple) murals that the participants are accustomed to seeing visually.

The *Bun Phrawet/Bun Mahachat* develops another model for the creation of alternate space. Observers tend to know this event as the occasion for the recitation of all or a significant section of the Vessantara Jataka, the *Chadok Wessandon*, the penultimate life of the Buddha as Prince Vessantara.⁶ However, rather than focus on the recitation, I wish to describe the constructed environment in which this recitation takes place.

The space of the recitation, the community *wat* (temple, monastery), is transformed into quite another place, the palace, *wang*, of the polity of which Vessantara is the heir apparent. And the community surrounding it, a village, becomes the *muang* for this *wang*, a city and polity in its own right. Furthermore, this whole complex temporally shifts from the present to the era immediately before Buddhism.

This shift, of time and location, is brought about through the dedication and hard work of community members. The shift is agreed to and annually brought into existence by many people over the space of several months. Flags are raised around the *sala wat*, the temple meeting hall, which thus becomes the center of the *wang*, palace. Inside the *sala* an internal structure is erected on which the donations of each household are placed, tubs of water are brought in, representing ponds that play crucial roles in the Vessantara story, and the *sala* is adorned inside and out with products of the woods and forests, and new structures are constructed, sometimes including a temporary *wat/wang* gate. The charter for this revamping is contained in the ending to the Vessantara Jataka, when the procession of ‘Six Kings’ and citizens of the polity return from the Himalayan forest where Vessantara and his family had been banished to preserve the kingdom. The Six Kings consist of the King and Queen, parents of Prince Vessantara, Vessantara and his wife, and their son and daughter. The shortened version of the Vessantara Jataka that is often recited is called *Hok Krasat*, Six Kings, acknowledging that, for the community, the welcoming of Vessantara and his family back to the *muang* is one of the festival’s high points.

The welcoming procession occurs the afternoon of the day before the recitation. It is acknowledgement by the village/*muang*/kingdom’s citizens of their willingness to live under Vessantara’s rule, in which he is bound to give away all that is asked of him. Through their welcoming procession, the citizens of the contemporary community express themselves—by shifting themselves in time and

⁶ *Phrawet* is the Thai and Thai-Lao pronunciation of Vessantara, the name of the prince who is the protagonist in this Buddhist birth story. In Isan the term *Bun Phrawet* tends to be more used than *Mahachat*, which means, in Thai, ‘Great Birth’. The latter term affirms that this story recites the life of the birth of the Buddha’s karma directly preceding that in which he discovered enlightenment (Sommai 2544/2001).

space—from the present to a time when they, too, will live in prosperity in their own polity.⁷ The procession begins at a local water source, where Vessantara and his wife are evoked and welcomed by the community's citizens. They are then escorted to the *muang*/village and the *wang/wat*. This procession may be as simple as a group of elders walking in single file holding the Vessantara scroll, on which the complete Jataka is depicted in summary form (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992), to an elaborate parade, with four of the six kings riding on elephants hired for the occasion. Usually, in order to dramatize the story, the two children are bound together and 'whipped' through the village streets by the brahmin, Chuchok, an event which occurs earlier in the story, before the children are seen and rescued by their grandfather, the king.

The *wang/wat* has been transformed, not only inside the sala, but also outside, by flags and the appearance of a number of games as well as at least one stage, on which a 'dramatic' performance of a story from the past will be enacted. This helps the community depict itself as a *muang* celebrating the return of its future leader. These events last through the night, until early the next morning, when a second procession occurs. At 4 am, accompanied by the usual male ensemble of drums, cymbals, and the temple gong, some women of the village bring 'breakfast' for the Six Kings. This breakfast, made over the previous days, is composed of one thousand balls of glutinous rice stuck on the ends of thin bamboo sticks, making the construction appear to be a sort of overgrown ball. These thousand balls and the one thousand items each of other 'necessities', such as tobacco rolled as small cigarettes, small packages of betel for chewing, paper flags, etc. etc. celebrate the return of the prince and his family as well as symbolize the people's willingness to care of them and follow Vessantara's lead in giving gifts. The rice itself parallels the breakfasts often given to Indian gods in their temples; it 'wakes' Vessantara and his family for the finale of the celebration, the recitation of the Jataka.

These two instances of dramatic time—and place—shifting are not isolated events. They occur during the Northeast Thai dry season; most of the major communal events take place during this period, when visitors from other villages can be welcomed without undue worry about rain or other hardships—except heat and aridity. Indeed, these conditions might make it easy to suppose that the dry season is conducive to the creation of alternate space and time. Other occasions range from the 'traditional' Thai New Year's festival of Songkhran; to the shifting of young men from personhood to *naak*, serpents, to members of the Sangha, *phra*, monks, that occurs in the *Bun Buat Naak*; to weddings. The latter two have long

⁷ The political implications of this are discussed in detail in Jory 2002 and other articles.

been recognized as times for shifting roles in several senses, the first for the recreation of young men as monks, the second when bride and groom become prince and princess for a day outside of any Buddhist context.

In addition, of course, while we focus on the shifting of space and time that occurs at these events, the participants also realize they inhabit the world we know best; they maintain strong links to this world throughout these events. Even as the imagined, constructed world extends its presence through people's lives, life goes on in 'the real world'.

Alternate realities in everyday life

The dry season is not the only period in the annual calendar when time and space shift. Some thirty years after the events I describe below, my village friends continue to remark upon the trips we took to find *hin nay ton may*, stones in trees. While it has been my experience that stones do not normally grow or appear in trees, in Northeast Thailand stories persist that, indeed, stones are found in trees. Interestingly, while discussing the matters below, I was recently told that one had been discovered in a village in a not-too-distant *amphur* and put in the museum there. When I suggested we go see it, I was told that, while the stone had been put there, it had since been removed.

During July through September, 1971, my fellow village men and I, sometimes as driver and always as observer, traveled to several locations scattered over Northeast Thailand looking for stones in trees. Usually, a scouting party had gone ahead, tracking stories. In talking with the members of such parties, it always seemed that they were told a stone was in a tree in the next village, the next *tambon*, the next *amphur*, or that one had been in a tree but it had been cut down and was not available for viewing now, or something like that. No one questioned the veracity of this allegation—that stones could somehow get themselves up into or grow in trees—but that the stone just was not there now.

A larger group of men, sometimes as many as ten plus myself, endeavored to track down some of the more interesting and possibly more valid cases. This group included the village headman as well as the heads of several other households. All of this took place during the transplanting stage of the wet season; part of my interest was triggered by the question of the extent to which these men, all farmers, could engage in activities where they would leave the fields for two to three days at a time and then return to continue farming. Participating in this 'chase' for 'stones in trees' permitted me to observe that wet-rice cultivation is not all that demanding on a daily basis, so long as one can return to it periodically to manage the water and transplant the rice when necessary.

We drove from a village near Khonkaen city on day trips to villages in Mahasarakham, Roi Et, and Kalasin. On one occasion, several of us took the bus to Udon Thani to track down the *farang*, foreigner, possibly a military man (in the summer of 2514/1971 large numbers of U. S. military were stationed in Northeast Thailand), who was offering serious money for discovering a stone in a tree. I went along so that I could translate. Unfortunately, when we got to Udon and the hotel where this man stayed, we were told he had left for a week or two but was coming back soon; we were not told he did not exist or that the story was somehow wrong or misinterpreted.

Along with the belief that a *farang* would pay serious money to see a stone in a tree was the certainty that such things existed. When I asked how a stone could get in a tree—did it fall from the sky, did it grow there, did it somehow get itself up in the tree, or did it become elevated as the tree grew—the only negative answer I received was that it certainly had not been placed there by a person. In other words, it was not a fake.

I recount this series of events not to subject my friends to unwarranted accusations of superstition, or belief in magic, or as irrational. I think it best to see this search as part of an understanding of the world in which not everything is subject to the same laws as members of other cultures experience day-by-day.⁸ My friends are not superstitious; they were then and are now concerned about money, survival, and getting a better life. To some extent, just as with the lottery, they felt they could ‘spend a little money and time’ looking for a stone in a tree just as they spent some money every two weeks on the illegal two-digit lottery—in the hopes of making a little bit more.

But, beyond the entrepreneurship evident in their actions is the point that such an occurrence is believable. Things happen, we may not know why they happen, but they are certainly there and we may be able to take some occasion to make something from these happenings. Such a worldview is in stark contrast to a hyper-rationalistic view which says that everything must be explicable by terms we already know, even though many things happen for which we, with our rationalistic view, have no ready explanation. I contend that the temporal and spatial shifting we have seen in the festivals and events described in the first section of this essay lay a foundation for the willful suspension of disbelief that something such as stones in tress cannot happen. The Thai-Lao of Isan are used to shifting time,

⁸ I am reminded here of stories of Chinese jars which Southeast Asian hill people use to brew alcohol. These jars are certainly ‘miraculous’ to these people; these people give them names and talk about kinship relations among the jars. In other words, something which is quite explicable and understandable in one cultural context becomes inexplicable in another and thus imbued with other-worldly, in these cases, human characteristics.

space, and causation. They move their world through their own constructions into different frames. Would it not be possible for that world to construct itself differently in ways of which we are not usually aware, thus causing stones to appear in trees?

Much the same may perhaps be said of the stories and ‘fairy-tales’ of which Northeast Thailand has a rich heritage (Wajuppa and MacDonald 2004), as well as the stories recounted by Kamala Tiyavanich in *The Buddha in the Jungle* (2003). Kamala describes the disjunction between European explorers and local understandings of how things might exist and how people and animals might act. The stories that children now hear less and less, because they pay greater attention to other ‘realities’ and fables created by mass media emanating from cities, carry similar messages. The world can be different from what we expect; one might want to be in a position to recognize these disjunctions and take advantage of them.

People’s lives: *chiwit khuu lakon*

Some of the ‘stories’ I have heard of villagers’ lives, indeed, the continuing lives of these people in the village context, speaks to the ability of village life to nurture alternative stories. Not all—perhaps not even any—villagers live ‘humdrum’ lives; the lives they lead, even those that appear the most typical, are laced with narration, drama, and imagination.

My village friends, without prodding from me, recently styled these narratives—the narratives that villagers construct for themselves—as *chiwit khuu lakon*, life as a play, life as story. This phrase was initially spoken by my ‘younger sister’ as she described the adventures of a former monk who recently constructed an alternative life for himself. While my ‘relative’ spoke this phrase on her own, I found she used something familiar to many villagers, the title of a song which even some young adult villagers know, *Look Nii Khuu Lakon*. Interestingly, the written words and background music for this song are available as part of the standard Karaoke software package for Thai computers. The song’s words seem only to reflect on the words’ meanings, ‘The World is Like a Play’. They do not parallel or summarize the storyline of the famous novel which motivated the song’s creation, *Lakhon Haeng Chiwit* [Arkartdamkeung 2472/1929, reprinted 2547/2002, translated into English as *The Circus of Life* (2537/1994)].

While Thai sources acknowledge the Shakespearean origin of the concept, I do not believe that people in ‘the West’ are as aware of ‘life as a play’ as are villagers in Northeast Thailand. In neither case do I mean that the citizens of either country are un-reflective, but I am not as aware in the West of ‘normal’ people seeing the abrupt and sometimes unbelievable changes in people’s lives as something that can and does happen with great frequency. In Northeast Thailand, even

though villagers often live extremely close-to-the-margin existences, people 'imagine' different lives and may, indeed, come to live them.

Of course, the monkhood itself provides an alternative for men to the life of the householder. But, attractions outside the Sangha remain and, evidently, play possible roles in the imaginations of monks. In one recent case, one young monk who had been in the monkhood for several rains retreats and who was well-known for the beauty of his voice while chanting, left the monkhood and married a young divorcee in the village of his birth. She had married a fellow villager a few years earlier, but that did not work out, so she and her daughter returned to live with her parents as her first marriage collapsed. Somehow, the monk became attracted to her, he left the monkhood, and they married. Then the former monk went in search of a job and found one in Pathum Thani, near Bangkok, selling machinery. He brought his wife and her daughter to live with him there. However, in less than a year it became evident that he drank too much, so she returned to the village and has proceeded to get divorced from this second husband. He, meanwhile, took up with the daughter of his Chinese employer; the report is that they are going to get married. His former wife has found another man and moved in with him, leaving her daughter in the care of the child's grandparents. By the way, her first husband found, after much looking, a suitable mate in a village two provinces away, so a big wedding party left the village to take him there a couple of years ago. That marriage appears to be continuing peacefully.

Then there is the story of the older couple who accompanied their divorced niece and her three children to live near Bangkok. The wife of this older couple had to return to the village, leaving the 60-plus year old man and the 30-plus year old niece together with the children. The elderly man and the young woman began to sleep together, leading to a divorce by the man's wife. This new couple has since returned to the village; the elderly former wife lives at one end in the couple's original house; the new couple and the children by the previous marriage live in another house at the other end of the village.

Finally, there is the 'story' told to a *farang* friend who was living in a village house with an elderly woman. She saw this woman's daughter-in-law, who lived nearby, daily bring her young child to be tended by the child's grandmother while the daughter-in-law went to the nearby city to work. Eventually, my friend talked with the daughter-in-law through an interpreter and discovered the hard life of a resident daughter-in-law in a system in which inheritance is normally through a woman to her daughters. The daughter-in-law broke down while reciting her story, of finding pleasure in work and the independence she had in Bangkok selling food from a street stall. She certainly had not wanted to return to the village of her husband and mother-in-law, even though that was the only way she could get support to provide for her new baby.

While there are many such stories, the lives of many people also appear relatively stable and planned out. However, the impression one gets is that interruptions in the steady 'progress' of life may appear at any moment. To the villagers these interruptions—disjunctions in space, time, and causation for whatever reason—appear relatively unpredictable; one does one's best to take them in stride. At the same time, one knows that *chiwit khuu lakon*, life can be like a play, and strange, out-of-the-ordinary things, such as winning the lottery or a thirty-plus woman finding herself in love with a sixty-plus man can happen.⁹ How and when do villagers, or anyone, recognize the 'play' in the lives they are leading and see possible narrations in it? We have almost no knowledge of these imaginaries, even with the many studies of life in Thailand.

Conclusion

While the above are stories of individuals with imaginations, constructing lives among the detritus of human existence, they point towards only a few of the major narrative themes of Thai village life. Village life may not be as stagnant as commonly depicted. Perhaps many residents as well as observers do not give due credit to the resources of village imaginations to understand the potential for reconfigurations of social and temporal space that occur as different, village- and individually-based events are constructed and re-constructed through the year. Certainly, the mass media that originate outside of villages and flow constantly through them do not, and do not wish to, take account of such alternative realities.

'The village'—'a village'—'all villages' may look the same but, within constraints imposed by a relative lack of things and a concomitant necessity to engage almost daily and annually in repetitive activities, this paper proposes that villagers imaginatively reconstruct their landscapes and their lives at several crucial points throughout the year, reflecting different realities.

⁹ A recent NESDB survey on *mia farang*, about Isan village women who married foreign men and brought them back to live in their home villages, has gained wide notoriety (Kamon and Sumalee 2004). While the reasons presented in *The Nation's* discussion of the survey concerning the increasing number of such marriages with resulting residence patterns are rationally stated, behind them is the missing question of how it might be possible for strange white men to fall in love with, marry, and then determine to live in poor Isan villages with women whom Central Thai, as well as their own husbands, have been denigrating for years (cf. Stephff 2004)? (Any more than it is possible for other strange white men asking many questions—anthropologists—to spend decades involved with the Isan villages, finding them so interesting that they keep returning.)

This play with scene and actors simultaneously constructs different time frames in village life. Thus, if this is not stretching the point too far, it may be possible to see that rural Thai villagers, if not their urban counterparts, shift time to provide ways to shift scenes in what appears sometimes to be a slowly changing, but at other times unbelievably rapid and possibly unpredictable universe. Many of these shifts in time and space are imbued with a morality, just as modernity is permeated with a particular moral view of time and space. This paper proposes that we chart these varying scenes in the life of Northeast Thai-Lao villages. In initiating a charting of this configuration, this paper has attempted to make a statement about imagination and construction which bestows on rural villagers the possibility of conceptualizing worlds differently from the ones they live in, just as many people elsewhere in the world are accustomed to reading novels and short stories, or looking at TV and imaginatively placing themselves in the stories they read, or see, there.

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