

TRAVEL JOURNAL

THAILAND: PARTING THE CURTAIN

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To travel is to pass your hand through a curtain of water; the first contact stings and shocks but if (it) can pierce the servitude of your senses, the strangeness will lay the secret songs of its homely heart at your feet.

A writer once said that to know a people well, it is best to start where they are — literally, without clothes: the public baths.

On the first of June this year, we were a trinity of women about to travel outside our confining worlds for the very first time. Delilah comes from Passi, Iloilo where sugarcanes beat time to the passing wind. Sheila and I work with people's organizations in three southeastern towns, some 100 kilometers from Cebu city.

The three of us had been invited for a week-long visit to two Thai-German rural development projects in Chiang Mai, in the north: Delilah as part of her team's prize in winning a nationwide contest on the production of teaching materials integrating resource management, Sheila and I for an exposure to different approaches in community organizing and monitoring.

It was a wet, dour day in Manila that we left behind. We scurried across the impersonal expanse of the international airport: watching, transfixed by the red flashing dots announcing arrivals-departures-arrivals in mechanically precise monotony, we looked with envy at a giantess of a *norteamericana* slumbering on her spread jacket on the floor, blissfully isolated from the gross humanity surrounding her.

Travel can make you witness the unbelievable: the Philippine immigration officials we met seemed to be observing a moratorium on manners, probably where unaccompanied Filipinas are concerned. "Sex workers on the right line," he barked "domestics on the left." What if indeed we were? And if we were, would that mean forfeiting our human dignity and our quota of respect.

We had not yet left the familiar and already it had begun to get surreal.

Ensnared in the deep comfort of a Lufthansa business-class seat, I pondered on the black humor of the situation: the officers at the immigration counter seemed intent on stripping us of our dignity which we stubbornly clung to. A few minutes before midnight, with the trauma of immigration officers in our heads, arriving at this witching hour, what strange fun had we let ourselves in for?

Clutching on to our bags, jackets and slighted dignity, Delilah, Sheila and I descended and were swallowed once more by another tunnel of wormlike, cavernous terminals. I had already drawn in my stomach muscles, braced as I was for another encounter with Prejudice in Official Clothing. As I approached the pale moonface behind the immigration counter, I gritted my teeth, hunched my shoulders in battle-readiness and thought furiously of the million rational ways of convincing this man that: yes, I am a Filipina; yes, I am proud of being one; no, I am not selling any flesh; and yes, I think people owe each other respect.

Even after the man's polite inspection of my official papers, even when I was holding on the banister of the escalator to go to the luggage claim area, even after a fresh-faced youth courteously escorted us to the hotel limousine and the warm hotel staff's reception at nearly one o'clock in the morning, I was still clenching my insides, ready to spear with fire and venom the first impertinent jackass unfortunate enough to insult women, particularly Filipino women.

It was only after several minutes of lying stiffly on my bed that the anger gradually left my body and my mind cooled. It was then that I ruefully realized how I had thrown away over a measly

unfortunate experience what might have been a whole night's discovery and excitement. That fellow who wrote about the public baths saw something else I had not seen: in entering the baths, it is not only the ones being viewed who are without clothes; it is the viewer as well. To truly live the life of a traveller, it is best to go light and free on one's small fears and petty defensiveness.

### **HOST OF SPLIT FACES**

There seems to be two ways Thailand reveals herself to those who journey to see her. To the tourist, she will fascinate and impress; but if you choose the way of patience and openness to know her, you will find her not ungiving.

The bumper-to-bumper Bangkok traffic is otherworldly in its tranquility, so unlike that of Cebu or Manila where shrill horn-blowing and colorful swearing are legendary. The impressive reverence of the common man for the Royal Family and the saffron-swathed monk who can be seen counselling and blessing devotees in the cool, incense-scented interiors of red-and-gold temples, or walking in the dust and heat along lonely countryside roads, were strangely stirring sights.

The walls inside Bangkok's famous jewelry stores appeared to be coated with gold, so densely packed with the shiny trinkets which sell at half or a third of the going price in the Philippines. Thai food was a treat, not so much for its fiery spell, but its variety! Count at least five or six dishes to go with a bowl of fragrant rice — quite disconcerting for one used to the frugal Filipino meal: a sliver of viand lost in a mound of rice. And the orchids! The "wildlife" in the parks! The fascinating cultural panorama of song, dance and the arts unfolded in golden pavilions! Midnight bazaars! Haggling sessions! And so on and on, Thailand the Temptress whirls, taking along with her the tourist's sensibilities.

**SONGS FROM HOME**

From heady Bangkok, we moved on northward, in a plane to Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai of the pastoral beauty, she who is courted by more and more tourists every year, base of the Thai-German Highland Development Programme (TG-HDP) and the Thai-German Biogas Programme (TG-BP). Sponsored by the Royal Thai Government and the Federal Republic of Germany, both projects involve the communities in discovering and trying out creative responses to meet their felt needs and fit their unique situations.

TG-BP's technology was touted to be a breakthrough in the '80s, some two decades before EARTHWATCH became a fashionable soundbite for the young and the liberal. However, this pioneering effort to tap alternative energy did not exactly spawn a mushrooming of biogas plants all over the region. Why? Hagen, the teamleader of TG-BP's advisers, attributes this to the fact that the technology is still in the experimental stage. Perhaps, the expense has also something to do with it: consider that a family of eight would require four heads of cattle, two buffaloes or ten pigs penned for a whole year, to run a biogas plant which will enable them to cook three meals a day. How alternative is alternative?

Driving along the winding highland roads of Nam Lang with Sim, TG-HDP's agroforestry specialist, we did not see so much as felt the towering knotted trees which formed a silent dark green ceiling threatening to close out the sky forever. Sim said that this was part of the wildlife sanctuary area protected by the government. Used to the blindingly naked moonscape of Oslob's mountainsides. Shiela and I oohed and aahed appreciatively. And then Sim shared a dilemma so hauntingly familiar to Filipinos: of how settlers cleared areas within the sanctuary, and the government's decision to resettle them to save the land from further destruction. Who is more vulnerable and deserving of protection? The trees which are being cleared to make way for villages? Or the people, uprooted to preserve the forest? Sim's answer — let the people stay and teach them to harmonize with the forest — dropped like a lone leaf, falling lightly, slowly in the stillness of Nam Lang's sentinel trees.

In Ban Bo Khrai, a convocation of women including ourselves gathered under a slim young tree with white bark and light green leaves: Nattaya, director of a Thai-German project in Chakarrat, north-east of Thailand; Noi, the agricultural extension worker; some Black Lahu village women; and the trio from the Philippines. Sim was the lone man joining what became a lively exchange of experiences and observations, only slightly inconvenienced by our ignorance of Thai. The talk became a crazy mix of the children's eating habits, our common workload, the Women's Action Teams (WAT) organized by TG-HDP in their Women's Programme, the number of pigs needed to soothe a father for the loss of his daughter, the Black Lahu's practice of living together, the high rate of separations, the pill, vasectomy (with all of us cackling unforgivably over men's superstitions and strange attachments), and, of course, the norplant which is a pill planted under the skin to keep a woman safe from pregnancies for 15 years. (We were so sorry the health station was closed that day.)

How we laughed that afternoon, swaying to the sound of each other's stories. The lighthearted talk was a fine counterpoint to the previous evening's discussion in the staffhouse at Nam Lang. Shiela, Nattaya and I listened to the patter of a gentle rain as we talked about our lives as workers in development, mothers and wives.

Being single and childless, I could yet palpably feel the texture of the voices that night: this voice yearning for a child and that one missing the infant she had to leave behind for her work. Noi joined us and observed how difficult it was to find a kindred spirit who would willingly share with her work in remote villages. On that gentle rain-softened night, the sound of women's voices was not just that of Shiela, Noi, Nattaya and myself but of our colleagues back home as well — Cande, Lucing, Ising, Herme — and the many other women in development, tirelessly building up organizations while they themselves privately braced for the daily separations called for by the alternative lifestyle they had chosen to live.

On that balmy afternoon in Ban Bo Khrai, under a light-barked tree, a convocation of women giggled and communed. Under their feet, the shadows dappled the ground.

**NO MENTAL POSTCARD**

And Chiang Mai came to pass. We took the midnight train which brought us back to bustling and exotic Bangkok. One more day enacting the life of a tourist and then, Bangkok too came to pass.

When I was once more in the deep comforts of my Lufthansa seat, peering at the floating clouds that looked like shredded pieces of cotton, I reflected. I thought how strange departures are. If I had come as a tourist to Thailand, I would have left her as one: probably grumbling that I did not have enough money to cart away the luscious bargains for which she is famous. But my affliction was worse: I came only to leave, distressed that I could experience only so much: the kindness and gentleness of Wannasit who sipped Coke with me and talked about his children while we were stuck in the middle of Bangkok traffic; Nattaya embracing me, so unThai-like and yet so Thai; the small groups of people clustered around cars where a TV played uncut footages of the military shooting unarmed civilians; seemingly endless rows of 90-year-old "holy trees" with saffron ribbons tied around their immense girth, protected by the King from human folly. I rang the huge heavy bells of Doy Suthep because, as local belief would have it, the visitor who does is granted the plea that s/he will be back.

Back? There is no "going back." There will be no filing away of mental postcards, to be retrieved later and found like distant echoes; nearly none. As I sit here, before the stark prosaicness of a computer console, I can imagine that if I ever get the chance to part that curtain of water again, I will find Thailand and then I won't. You figure that out.