

MAKSIDA LA DUH

**THE
LAO
ISAN
SMILE /S**

Secrets of the Sticky Rice People

Hugh Watson

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The Lao Isan Smile/s

Secrets of the Sticky Rice Lao Isan Folks

1st edition 2013

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eISBN 978-616-222-237-5

Published by www.booksmango.com

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THE AUTHOR

I have only found three people in Smile Land who have a clue about Thai culture in over two decades. By ‘culture’ I do not mean the words to the national anthem or a volume on Ubon flower arranging. I am talking about taking culture to the theory level: time for paradigms. In this case, one of the three people is a NY expat called Ken-do. He rides a chopper motorcycle, wears black clothes and a German helmet. He adds to Thai World the theory of a worldwide drop in testosterone. This is amazing as it explains the large number of male Omega (lowest in the pack) Barbarians coming to the country: they leave their testosterone at home. They come to Thailand creepy and kowtowing. Next of the three is Lars from Sweden who had a bar six years in Chiang Mai: his co-owner was a local Mafioso. No matter how wild the felony story I tell Lars, he laughs and tops me. He always has a case more outrageous than anything I can come up with. You see, normally, most *Farang* nearly faint when you point out locals are bamboozling them or have untoward agendas. Lars and Kendo-o are the huge exceptions. Unfortunately, Western people come drifting into S.E. Asia these days fully in denial, simple, and Nice with estrogen taking over where testosterone used to rule. The visitors have a chocolate-coated version of Nice Smile Land and dodge reality like it was a new and lethal bird flu. Anyway, the final person of the three is a Chinese-Thai lady who got her PhD in linguistics in the US. Her specialty is cultural linguistics. At one point, she actually went to northern Vietnam to study the Tai Dam. She is head of a linguistics department at a Bangkok government university. She really knows everything. The three can answer any question on Thais and go to the theory level. Nothing Thai surprises the three. I must add there are a fair number of Brits who in six weeks to six months figure Thais out but nothing theoretical. In comparison, many Yanks even after fifty years in Thailand do not have a clue about anything. All of which makes residing in Thailand all the

more interesting and amusing. After all, a guffaw a day keeps the mortician at bay. In the end, S.E. Asian behavior is subtle and a lot – good and bad – goes unnoticed. To enjoy a place like the northeast part of Thailand – Isan, it is necessary to be aware of a few things so as to catch the humorous aspects provincial life.

Actually, though Thai behavior is interesting, it pales in a comparison to the antics of Western people, the Barbarians, who never catch onto anything including constantly being over-charged and tricked. So, studying denial behavior and Nice becomes a rival as to what Thais are up to. In this work, however, the focus is more on the Laos who brighten up an otherwise gloomy piece of S.E. Asia. This in reference to my day-four long time girlfriend from Phayao who said Central Thais (Klang) were “*jai dam*” black-hearted. The north seems to agree and Central and Bangkok people are not welcomed in many villages and even towns. But Laos are welcome. They truly brighten things up.

Before getting to the Isan Laos in particular, there are a few points to consider: a bit of theoretical background. First, Western people, Barbarians, tend to be occularcentric, Other, and Alpha. Laos, Central Thais (Klang), Malays, and Khmer are generally kinescentric, Me Only, and Gamma people. Chinese, however, are auralcentric, Me First, and Beta people. In epistemological terms, Alphas have access to level 4 Adult Thinking, Betas to level 3 Concrete Operational Thinking (age 11-12), and Gammas to level 2 Preoperational Thinking (age 6-8). Gammas and Betas are in bio-modal-stasis but Alphas are not. Alpha society, for example, is about constant change. Beta and Gamma societies, on the other hand, resist any kind of change. Anyway, another way to understand this is Gammas are right-brain thinkers; Alphas left-brain and Betas in between. Jean Piaget, the Swiss epistemologist, assumed we all develop from stage 2 (Gamma), to stage 3 (Beta) – in-between right- and left-brain thinking – to stage 4 (Alpha) which is all left-

brain analysis: Adult Thinking. His finding was correct for 70% of Western people generally but not for Gammas who stop at third grade regardless of country when teaching becomes more Beta. Betas and Gammas both try to get out of schools if they encounter an Alpha curriculum. Thai curriculum, though, continues at the Beta rote memory level through junior high to high school and through the university level. In contrast, in the US the 15% minority of Gammas significantly drop out as early as junior high where course material becomes increasingly Alpha. Thai Gammas massively drop out after *por hok* sixth grade. In the US, the ones dropping out are the African Americans, Amerindians and Hispanics: Gammas. In a word, Gammas are locked into right-brain thinking, touchy-feely stuff their entire life. Before getting upset by Gammas in stasis at age 6-8, keep in mind that Albert Einstein was a Gamma: there is a high and a low range. A recent documentary shows his brain was highly developed on the right side, kinescentric, not on the analytical left-side. An example of his stasis thinking was the **Lambda cosmological constant** mistake wherein he posited the universe was not moving; i.e., in stasis. He was wrong. He felt if he was in stasis, then he could assume the universe was also in stasis. This is a perfect example of a Me Only person who feels he is the world. He, like most Gammas, hated secondary school and even after university studies could not get a single recommendation for graduate work. In the end, most geniuses are Betas with their great memories. Alphas, on the other hand, go from Genghis Khan to Kant: mass murder to impeccable ethics. There are nuances to the cognition levels. Anyway, the quick way to sort out the differences is simple vs. complex as follows:

Chinese and Romans are/were complex. They and other Betas created much of classical civilization and have/had hierarchies with rank and status as all-important. Central Thais have uniquely tried to follow the Chinese in the pursuit of the 'complex.' On the other hand, Alpha Barbarians are simple. On

the higher level, they can *simplify* which is a step into level 4 cognition. Gammas, like Laos, are also simple and have ended up being ruled throughout history by Betas (or enslaved by Alphas). At this point, in simple vs. complex, Alpha Barbarians hit it off better with Laos and hill tribe people (inherently simple) than with quasi-Beta Klang Thais and Beta Chinese. In a word, Betas always have agendas, Alphas and Gammas rarely do. Whereas the Beta world can be tricky and sly, the Alpha-Gamma world is often foolish and ingenuous.

The great mystery of Western civilization is the period of Greek Enlightenment: 300 BC. How did these ‘simple’ Alphas become the highest thinkers on the planet? The answer is geography: the Greek Peninsula is poking out into the Mediterranean like a strange hand. International shipping and trading were what they were about. The Greeks came into contact with myriad cultures professing different religions, cultures, and customs. Greeks were then the first simple Barbarians to become complex. Eureka! Forest Germanics, on the other hand, did not come into contact with complexity. When Barbarians met the Romans, they were kept out of the Empire and not integrated. This eliminated assimilation of the complex. But dealing extensively with multi-cultural trade, activated many Greeks to become simple and complex at the same time; thus a synthesis that was neural but culturally introduced. This combination brought about a period of the highest level of Western thinking. A British philosopher stated, “Western history is a footnote to Plato.” Anyway, Socrates was aware of this international complexity, spotted religion (dogma) as something to be eliminated and to be replaced with a firm teaching in ethics: think for yourself and abandon the herd. The famous Platonic Dialogues are aimed at activating the neural capacity of the brain: stimulate the left frontal cortex with ethics via dialectics, and you have a potentially ethical person. Asians, though, traditionally bypass discussions on ethics as topics that are ‘overly serious’ and ‘impolite’ thus eliminating