

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Baan Muang Naam
Roi-Et Province
Thailand

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Isan Khieo--The Green Northeast

- I. Baan Muang Naam
- II. Isan Khieo
- III. Scenes from Roi-Et

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Dear Peter,

To reach Muang Naam village you take the rickety bus that runs north from the provincial capitol, Roi-Et. After leaving the main road there is a three kilometer walk on the red, clay road through the rice fields now withered yellow by heat and drought. A late afternoon breeze brings the musty smell of ripening rice and stirs the clumps of tall bamboo, whose knocking trunks sound like the tinkle of a stream long gone. On either side of the track men and women, dressed against the sun in hats and long-sleeve shirts, bend over to harvest the rice with rhythmic motions. It is a time of joy and sorrows. The rice fields yield the bounty of months of hard work, the water buffalo are sleek, and ducks are growing fat for village feasts. It is also the second year that the harvest has been blighted by the worst drought in a decade.

Frequent drought has made the 17 Northeastern provinces, called Isan, Thailand's most impoverished region. One third of Thailand's people live here with an average per capita income one seventh that of Bangkok's, 8,000 bhat or \$320. Located in the middle of the Northeast, Roi-Et province, once the seat of a proud kingdom, is now Thailand's third poorest province. Yet the 300 families (over 2,000 people) who live in Baan Muang Naam are relatively prosperous due to their proximity to the provincial capitol. And as its name implies, in Baan Muang Naam (literally, village of mangoes and water) mangoes are plentiful and drinking water is never too deep for a well to reach.

Almost everyone in Baan Muang Naam is foremost, a rice farmer. And for rice farmers, water is everything. Without

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the rains that transform the hard, cracked clay into ploughable mud, planting cannot begin. Without rain, the small fish, frogs, and snails--key sources of protein--do not emerge. Before the rains come, lizards and grasshoppers are an important part of the diet: in some areas a family's daily meal consists of a handful of fried grasshoppers with sticky rice.

Despite the hardships, or rather because of them, Northeasterners are proud of their toughness and ability to bring food from their own unyielding soil. (Unlike in the Northern and Central regions, landlessness and tenancy are not associated with poverty in the Northeast.) While people from Bangkok and Central Thailand may turn their noses up at Isan food, locals relish eating various insects, tadpoles and red ant eggs, partly due to necessity and partly due to choice. While movies in Bangkok parody the country bumpkin, Isan people are proud of their distinct Laotian culture and dialect, sometimes calling themselves Lao (sao lao) as opposed to Thai (sao thai).

Four years ago, I spent the rice planting season, June through August, in Baan Muang Naam. On my return for a brief visit, I was struck by how little seemed to have changed. Compared with Bangkok's fast pace and new array of sparkling tourist hotels (built primarily by migrant Northeastern laborers), change comes slowly to Baan Muang Naam in traditional forms. Many of the of the newly-married couples now have a child with more on the way. A seventy-year old grandfather, who wove light yet sturdy split-bamboo baskets, passed away; a nine-year old boy, whom I remembered as a naughty and rambunctious child, died of asthma due to lack of proper medical attention. Thus, for the most part, the daily cycle of work, intermeshed with the ageless cycle of Buddhist festivals, continues.

Work begins at dawn, with villagers walking single-file out to the fields of chest-high rice (waist-high if the rains are poor). Harvesting is often done in small groups, but is more enjoyable in large groups singing songs, flirting, or just listening to a transistor AM radio. When done by a skilled person, harvesting rice is a thing of beauty--the two hands moving gracefully in small circles with an economy of motion that belies their speed. The left hand grasps a clump of four or five stems at knee-height while the right, holding a serrated sickle, cuts the dry stalks with a tight circular motion, turning the blade downward at the last moment to avoid cutting the hand. Four or five such clumps make a mat that is shaken to remove the excess straw and then laid down in groups of five to be bundled up and carried off for later threshing.

When the sun reaches halfway toward the zenith (about 10 a.m.), it's time for breakfast, which consists of glutinous rice, the ubiquitous tham makhung (a very spicy green papaya salad that requires considerable pounding to soften up the hard fruit), finger-sized fish boiled in tamarind soup, and perhaps a duck egg. Lunch is taken during the hottest part of the day (1 or 2 p.m.) and might include more fish plus lotus stems gathered from a slow-moving stream. Work continues toward

dusk, when families return home for supper and conversation.

In a good year, Roi-Et's farmers might harvest as much as 250 to 280 kilograms of rice per rai (1600 sq. meters). According to provincial agriculture officials, last year's drought reduced the harvest by about 20%. This year is worse, with the heavy rains coming three months late, and if lucky, farmers will get 75% of their normal yield.

II. Isan Khieo

The Isan Khieo (Green Northeast) program is heralded as making the arid Northeast a veritable greenbelt in five years. Designed by the Royal Thai Army and the Internal Security Command, the plan sets ambitious goals: increasing forested area in the Northeast from 14% to 25%; raising the standard of living for the 18 million people living in the region; constructing a massive irrigation system; and most immediately, drilling numerous wells to solve a drinking water shortage in four critical provinces, including Roi-Et. The five-year budget for the program is slightly over 14 billion bhat, or \$560 million. To date, foreign assistance for the program is limited to small amounts from West Germany and Great Britain.

The program originated when His Majesty King Bhumiphol Adulyadej privately informed Royal Thai Army Commander in Chief, General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, last March about his concern for the plight of the Northeasterners. Rapidly acting upon the royal directive, Gen. Chavalit had a master plan draw up that was unveiled in July by Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda. The entire program is under Royal auspices and involves ten government ministries with the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Wanchai Rerngtrakul, coordinating 16 other government departments and agencies.

Although the Isan Khieo program has been generally praised since its inception, the Army's leading role has drawn criticism from some Members of Parliament and academia. In response, Army officials point out that they merely coordinate the overall program under Royal initiative and that the King selected the Army as the lead institution. As for why the Army was selected, Col. Wirodth Khiriphan of the Center for Administering Royal Assistance to the People gave me three reasons. First, the discipline of the Army is stronger than that of civilian agencies, civilians follow the orders of their superiors only half-heartedly. Second, Thailand's large standing Army (over 160,000 personnel) is an untapped pool of trained manpower. Third, the general populace tends to respect soldiers more than civilian officials, "if a soldier says, 'Do it.' The people do it."

It is too early to forecast to what extent the Isan Khieo program will fulfill its targets or what its impact will be. Yet, two major considerations are already clear.

It offers tremendous potential. Economists in Bangkok say that this is the first comprehensive development plan for an entire region and may reduce the perennial conflicts between different government agencies. Similarly, the military clout behind the program can command swift action from local development officials who are often viewed as more concerned with pleasing their head office in Bangkok than in responding to local officials and local needs.

In addition, some Thai academicians claim that this is the first time that the Army is involved in large-scale economic development that is not explicitly tied to counter-insurgency. This may imply a new role for one of Thailand's most powerful, and recently, most cohesive institutions. Related to this, Gen. Chavalit, who is due to retire next year and is widely viewed as a potential Prime Minister, has a large, personal stake in the program. He has announced on television that, "If (we) cannot develop the Northeast, (we) would rather die." To the extent that the Isan Khieo program brings prosperity to the Northeast, its success will enhance Chavalit's already considerable standing.

The governor of Roi-Et province, Pramote Kaewphanna, is a native of the Northeast. Thus, unlike most Bangkok-appointed provincial officials, he brings a depth of understanding to the problems of the Northeast. An afternoon's conversation with him revealed a man who knows his province forwards and backwards, which crops do well and which don't.

Rice is the staple of Roi-Et; cassava, corn, kenaf, and peanuts, are also planted but in relatively small quantities. Farmers are totally dependant on the rains for their single, yearly rice crop since less than 3% of Roi-Et's 3 million rai of cultivated land is irrigated. To spur economic development, Governor Pramote is constantly looking for new crops or industries that can grow out of Roi-Et's agricultural sector. It's not easy: coconut palms grow tall here but don't produce much meat, mangoes are oversupplied on the market, the mulberry trees for Roi-Et's modest silk industry require ample water, Khorat province has the cassava market cornered, and there's no local market for charcoal from Eucalyptus trees. The Army is reforesting with Eucalyptus under the Isan Khieo program, but farmers don't like the trees because, unlike bamboo and other trees, they are only good for charcoal and their long roots tend to steal nutrients from other plants.

Governor Pramote has been more involved than most governors in the early stages of the Isan Khieo program and he's pleased that Roi-Et is one of the program's six priority provinces. Due to the water shortage, water for drinking and irrigation are key areas with reforestation a lower priority. Governor Pramote described how under Royal orders, last March a fleet of water trucks was dispatched to Roi-Et, and other provinces, bringing 11 million liters of water for 200,000 needy families in Roi-Et. The trucks bore large placards reading "From the generosity of the King," a powerful, almost sacred message that is now emblazoned on all objects connected with the Isan Khieo program.

The program is also welcomed because, as Governor Pramote believes, for too long, the central government has focused on developing Bangkok and not the rural areas, particularly the Northeast. It is a valuable effort, but the five year plan is much too short. From his years of experience in the Northeast, he concluded that perhaps in ten to fifteen years a concerted effort could realize about one quarter of the program's goals.

After speaking with the Governor, I later visited the provincial Army commander, Special Colonel (equivalent to Brig. Gen.) Prawit Makkarun. On one wall of his command center are four large maps of Roi-Et's priority amphur (provincial subdivisions), each map studded with bright, neon-pink pins representing a village well dug by the Army. A few silver thumb tacks mark larger projects. The plans are impressive, calling for the construction of numerous drinking-water wells in each village and some 86 large-scale projects of which six are already completed and four are in progress. Long-term plans include an irrigation system bringing water from the Chi and Mun rivers that bisect the Northeast.

This is the first time that Colonel Prawit has been involved in development work and he's doing it practically on his own. According to him, there is little consultation about Army-built projects with the multiplicity of departments that are engaged in separate projects under the Isan Khieo program. Said Col. Prawit, the provincial and amphur officials tell the soldiers where to dig and they dig. Naturally, he added, there is a certain amount of jealousy among some of the government agencies that the Army has the lead role. As to whether the Isan Khieo program will boost Gen. Chavalit's standing among the citizenry, Col. Prawit didn't know. But it would certainly raise his high standing within the Army.

A short trip by pick-up truck around amphur Caturaphakphiman, one of Roi-Et's four target amphur hardest hit by the drought, offered a glimpse at the Army's efforts. The amphur chief (a native of Bangkok) was visibly proud of the work done by the Army in his district, comparing the speed and efficiency of the Army with the long delays by private contractors hired by civilian agencies. The showpiece of amphur Catu (as it is more readily called), is a medium-sized water reservoir 213 meters long, 80 meters wide and 3 meters deep. Fed by diverting a small stream, the reservoir will provide irrigation for three nearby villages. The clay banks of the reservoir are bare except for where grass has been planted to spell "From the generosity of the King."

The amphur chief noted that a 54-man Army team had finished construction in just three months, and that two of the nine other large development projects slated for Catu were completed. Yet, as other government officials would later point out, erosion on the exposed clay banks was already evident and, it seemed to me, might require dredging in a few years.

While travelling between various projects in Catu, we passed many barren patches of land where the yellow-clay soil had been bleached white and covered with a fine crust of dazzling bright salt. The slightly saline soil in Roi-Et and four other Northeastern provinces, is both a blessing and a potential curse. In large quantities, salt leeching upwards has traditionally provided a valuable commodity for the landlocked region. In addition, Thailand's tastiest rice, Khaw Hom Malit 105 (found in markets from New York, to Manila and Jakarta), grows most flavorful, say locals, in the Northeast's saline soil. Yet, the continuing increase in soil salinity threatens large areas of the Northeast. Government officials are worried and said that at best they can contain the spread, not reverse it. According to non-governmental experts, the construction of many small, Japanese-style, "tameike" fish ponds, can help control ground water salinity. Apparently, however, such projects will not be constructed under the Isan Khieo program.

Later, talks with local agriculture, irrigation, and development officials added words of caution about the Isan Khieo program. While the program has certainly increased the number of development projects, it is not clear how much of this represents a real increase in development work. For example, the Royal Irrigation Department, which is slated to do 8 billion of the 14 billion bhat in construction, had budgeted 600 million bhat (\$24 million) for a series of small-scale irrigation projects throughout the Northeast. With the advent of the Isan Khieo program, half of the funds for the small-scale projects were transferred to new, larger projects that are labeled Isan Khieo projects. In this case, irrigation officials said they are doing the same amount of work but less efficiently.

Local irrigation officials add ammunition to their turf battles with the Army by claiming technical incompetence on the party of the Army. One official pointed out how the Army's emphasis on big, showy projects, such as large reservoirs, was expensive and wasted the arable land taken up by the reservoir. In contrast, the Irrigation Department tries to improve existing natural water reservoirs, such as swamps, at low cost. One official said with uncharacteristic vehemence, "the Army doesn't know how to help the Northeast...[They] aren't engineers. They only know how to operate a bulldozer or a drag-line."

Another government development official with years of experience also claimed that the Army's irrigation plans "are not appropriate," leading to erosion and siltation. The lack of technical advice on where to construct reservoirs, he said, meant that local officials, naturally desiring a project in their area, would request one even if there was no suitable location. Asked if he gave advice, the official smiled, "I don't dare. They have the gun, [after all] they are the soldiers." He claimed that the Army was running the Isan Khieo program as a psychological move to gain public support.

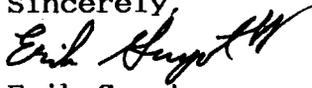
What will be the long-term results of the Isan Khieo program? Will it make the dry Northeast green? And will the people appreciate the Army's efforts? If nothing else, the program signals an unequivocal government commitment to addressing in comprehensive fashion the problems of the Northeast. Many of the local officials who criticize the Army's lack of consultation hope for, and expect, closer cooperation bringing greater results. The program holds out the promise of a comprehensive response to a very persistent problem.

The Isan Khieo program also has the potential for boosting the popularity of the Army, especially that of its commander in chief. If the program has demonstrable success, the Army's prestige will increase for reasons more profound than just delivering services. Fundamentally, the Isan Khieo program taps powerful values surrounding the two pillars of traditional Thai society: the rice farmer and the king.

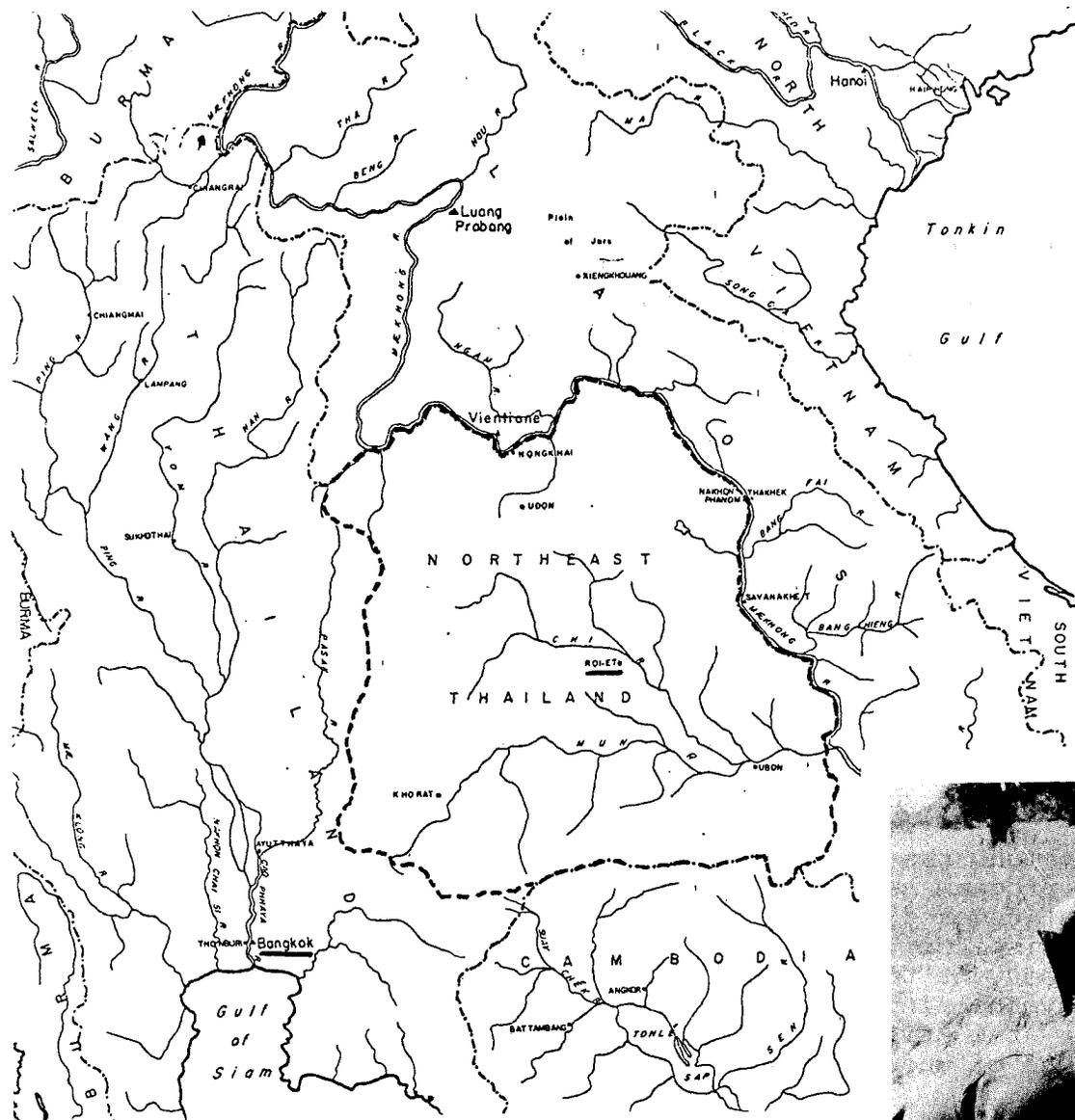
There is an old Isan saying, สิบพ่อค้าตองไหวพอนา (sib pho kha tong way pho na): one farmer is worth more than ten merchants. Literally, it translates as ten merchants must way (pay respects to) one farmer, for, in the old days, merchants depended upon farmers both to buy and sell their products. The expression also reflects the long-standing ethnic and economic tensions between rural, Thai, rice farmers and Bangkok's Chinese merchants. In recent years, the Army has implicitly assumed the role of defending the interests of the Thai farmer against the Chinese businessman and his minions--Bangkok's politicians. The Army's lead in the Isan Khieo program subtly reinforces this populist role.

From the moment the King expressed his concern to Gen. Chavalit, the program has been closely associated with Thailand's most revered institution. By carrying out the King's wish with due dispatch, the Army is reaffirming its special role as loyal servant to the crown. Thus, by serving the two institutions symbolizing idealized Thai society--the crown and the farmer--the Army is also upholding traditional Thai values in an age of uncertainty and change.

Sincerely,


Erik Guyot

III. Scenes from Roi-Et



Northeastern Thailand

From Cornell Data Paper, no. 65
(Ithaca: 1967) p. x.

Khun Suk Buasong harvesting rice,
Baan Muang Naam.



Nangsaw Muk harvesting rice, note how younger generation wears gloves.



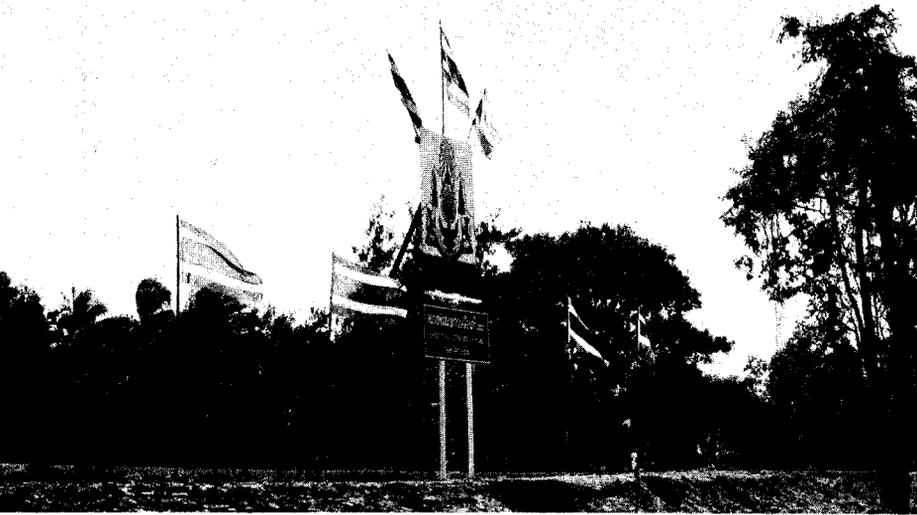
Preparing tham makhung, staple of Isan diet.



Threshing rice at dawn.



Sign announcing
Isan Khieo
project.



Medium-size
reservoir, amphur
catu.



Salt flats,
amphur catu.

