

# SACRED POWER TRANSMISSION AND THE NETWORK OF PHU THAI FOLK HEALERS IN TAMBON NONYANG, NONGSUNG DISTRICT, MUKDAHAN PROVINCE<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to study the ways the sacred power of “Moh Yao,” Phu Thai folk healers, are transmitted and to study the network formation between the Yao healers and their followers through ritual in Tambon Nonyang, Nongsung District, Mukdahan Province, Thailand.*

*The research results reveal two methods of how the “Yao” healers inherit their sacred power: first, through the maternal descent line, and second, through a certain ritual called “Yao Khum Phi Ok”/*

*เหยาคุมผีออก, which must be performed annually for three consecutive years in order to obtain and sustain the sacred healing power. A “Yao” healer completing these rituals is then regarded as being spiritually empowered with a “healing license.” After that, Yao practitioners will be authorized to transfer their sacred power to heal patients. Those patients who fully recover can decide later whether or not they would like to pursue the goal of becoming a Yao practitioner themselves, which is how the network is formed. This study illustrates the relationship between the ritual and folk healing methods of the Phu Thai ethnic group in northeastern Thailand.*

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study the Yao healing ritual/พิธีเหยา of the Phu Thai in Tambon Nonyang, Amphoe (District) Nongsung, Mukdahan province. The paper will focus on the transmission of the sacred power of the *Mor Yao*/หม่อเหยา, folk healers or ritual practitioners, and the formation of networks among Yao healers, their disciples and their followers. The research methodology consists of data collection from existing research on the Phu Thai people and the Yao healing ritual and also from field research conducted in 2008–2009, which consisted of participant observation of the Yao ritual and in-depth interviews with Yao ritual practitioners.

The paper argues that the status of Phu Thai Yao healers is acquired through the maternal descent line and also through participating in and a certain ritual successfully completing as a rite of passage. In addition, the paper also attempts to illustrate the Phu Thai system of forming networks among Phu Thai

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ritual practitioners. This kind of network reflects a very interdependent relationship among *Yao* practitioners, which in turn enhances and sustains the transmission of Phu Thai traditional healing rites.

### **Background of the Phu Thai people**

The Phu Thai, or Black Tai, originally resided in Mueang Thaeng or Dien Bien Phu, in the Sib Song Ju Thai region of northern Vietnam. This region is adjacent to the southern China and the northern Laos. The Black Tai resided in the areas along the Black River. Their dress has typically been black or indigo-blue wrap-around skirts with dark shirts which have collars that cover their necks (Siraporn Na Thalang 2002: 37). After Mueang Thaeng, they moved to Laos in the reign of King Anurutraja (1803–1828) of Vientiane city. The Black Tai were allowed to settle in the town of Wang, which had been the land of the Kha (a Mon-Khmer indigenous ethnic group in central Laos). Later, the Black Tai had conflicts and had war with the Kha. After the war, the Black Tai migrated to Thailand through the northeastern part of the country during the reign of King Rama III.

In Thailand, the Black Tai people are called the Phu Thai. Three main groups of Phu Thai migrated from Laos and settled in various provinces in northeastern Thailand. The first group was from Wang town. The second group was from the town of Sae Pon, and the last group was from the town of Ga-pong. The Phu Thai from Wang came to Thailand across the Mekong River through Mukdahan province and then separated into five groups. The first group settled in Pang Prao village, which later became Pannanikom district, Sakon Nakhon province. The second group settled in

Dongwai village, which later became Renunakorn, Nakhon Phanom province. The third group settled in Kud Sim City, which later became Kuchidnarai, Kalasin province. The fourth group settled in Phu Lan Chang town, which today is a sub-district of Khao Wong district, Kalasin province. The fifth group settled in Nongsung district, Mukdahan province (Suwit Theerasasawat 1995: 19–22).

The Phu Thai who settled in Nongsung were the first group of Phu Thai that moved from Wang and Kham or in Laos. This group crossed the Mekong River and entered Thailand through Mukdahan province. There, the people met the ruler of Mukdahan province to ask for permission to settle. This was granted and the group went to the west side of Mukdahan city. They found an abundant and fertile land that they named “Ban Nongsung,” which was later changed to Nongsung district, Mukdahan province (Pullsawasdi Artwichai 1994: 38–39).

Currently, the Phu Thai in Nongsung district, especially those in Tambon Nonyang, still adhere to their culture and traditions, such as the *Bun Phrawethu* พระเวส, the chanting of the Vessantara Jataka ceremony, and the *Yao* healing rite. Phu Thai people hold the *Yao* rites more often than any other groups, with many ritual practitioner attendants at each rite. This may be because the Phu Thai still strongly believe and have faith in *Yao* rites and *Yao* ritual practitioners, and they have continually tried to preserve their original Phu Thai traditions. The other reason is that Nonyang is located on a plain that is encircled by hills, so it is a closed area which makes it more difficult for modern technology and innovations to penetrate.

### Background of the Phu Thai belief in spirits

The Phu Thai are a people whose villages have always been located in areas surrounded by forests and mountains, making their way of life close to nature. This has led to a belief in supernatural beings since the Phu Thai believe that supernatural powers help them live safely. When there is an illness, the Phu Thai believe that it is caused by spirits because they believe that there are spirits everywhere. Thus, healing can be done only by people who can contact the spirits. The Phu Thai actively perform their tradition of spirit worship. The important spirits that the Phu Thai worship are:

- *Phi Thaen*/ผีแทน<sup>3</sup>—the sky god. They have supernatural powers and can do good or harm to people and crops.
- *Phi Ban Phi Mueang*/ผีบ้านผีเมือง—spirits protecting towns and cities. They also bless towns and cities with fertility. In each city, there should be a city pillar to show the boundary of the city spirits. In some cities, people build shrines in which these spirits reside. The Phu Thai in

Nongsung district call their city spirits *Phi Chao Pu Thala* /ผีเจ้าปู่ถลา.

- *Phi Pa Phi Na*/ผีป่าผีนา—spirits residing in forests and rice fields. These spirits make people sick when someone displeases them. Therefore, if a member of a family becomes ill, the family will invite a ritual practitioner, *mo song*/หมอsong, to visit them and check which spirit has caused the sickness. Then, the practitioner will hold a traditional healing rite for the patient.
- *Phi Chuea*/ผีเชื้อ or ancestral spirits—spirits of ancestors who have passed away. Ancestral spirits are summoned to the altar which is installed in a special room called a *hong hong*/ห้องsong. The altar will be beautifully decorated at a particular time of the year. The Phu Thai worship their ancestral spirits because they believe that ancestral spirits can cause illness if they do not correctly worship them. (Sumitr Pitiphat 1992: 28–30)

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<sup>3</sup> The word *Phi*/ผี means spirit. The word *Thaen*/แทน means sky. *Phi Thaen* refers to a sky spirit or sky god and also the highest god. In Laotian belief, it may be called *Phi Fah*/ผีฟ้า; *Fah* also means sky. In Phu Thai belief, it is usually referred to with compound words: *Phi Thai Phi Thaen*/ผีไท้ผีแทน, meaning the Great Sky God.

With respect to the Phu Thai in Nonyang, most elderly people prefer the traditional healing rites to modern medical treatment since the Phu Thai believe that illnesses are caused by spirits. When the practitioner knows the cause of the illness, e.g., the wrongdoing of the patient against which spirits, the practitioner will contact

the spirits that can cure the illness with a proper rite.

The Phu Thai who live in the northeastern part of Thailand and in the Sawannakhet region of Laos; the Lao Song in Petchaburi, Ratchaburi, Nakorn Pathom, Suphanburi, and the central part of Laos; and the Black Tai in the northern part of Vietnam share the same belief in *Phi Thaen*, or *Thaen* for short. The spirits are believed to have divine powers which enable them to do anything to human beings on earth. They are also the ones who determine who will be the rulers of the cities (Srisak Wallipodom 1991: 22). The belief in *Thaen* has been passed on among the Phu Thai for generations. In fact, the Thai-Laotian people, the majority of the local people in the northeastern part of Thailand, also believe in *Thaen*, just as the Phu Thai do.

### **Sacred power transmission of Phu Thai folk healers**

The Phu Thai in Nonyang regard *Yao* healing rites as very important. In Nonyang there are more *Yao* ritual practitioners than in any other area. Each year, 30–50 *Yao* ritual practitioners join the annual feast for spirits. This is an indication that the Phu Thai in Nonyang still adhere to their custom regarding the inheritance of divine power by Phu Thai *Yao* ritual practitioners.

The findings from this research reveal that the Phu Thai *Yao* ritual practitioners in Nonyang have two ways to inherit sacred power from *Phi Thaen*:

- Inheritance of sacred power through the family line; and

- Inheritance of sacred power through the *Yao Khum Phi Ok*/พญาอุ้มผีออก rite.

### **Inheritance of sacred power through the family line**

*Yao* healers of the Phu Thai in Nonyang tend to be women who have inherited their power through their maternal line. Below are case studies of how certain persons in Nonyang became *Yao* ritual practitioners:

**Case 1:** Mrs. A, <sup>4</sup> 89 years old, is the oldest *Yao* practitioner in Nonyang. In her family, her mother's sister used to be a *Yao* healer. Mrs. A was married for the first time to a Laotian from Vientiane. She had five children with her first husband. Then, she married a Phu Thai from Nonyang, and had another child with this husband. When Mrs. A was 17 years old, she became a *Yao* practitioner. Regarding how she became a *Yao* practitioner, Mrs. A said that she liked the sound of the bamboo mouth organ '*khaen*'/แคน and Thai pipe '*pi*'/ปี่. Whenever there was a ritual for the spirits, she would go to see the ritual despite her parents' disapproval. Then, shortly afterwards, she said that she often became easily distracted. She cried when she saw a leaf shaken by the wind. She also cried when she looked into the dark woods. Thus, her parents and relatives invited a *Yao* ritual practitioner to check her. The *Yao* ritual practitioner told everybody that *Phi Thaen* had selected Mrs. A to be a *Yao* ritual practitioner, and told her family to give offerings to receive the spirits. Thus, Mrs. A's family did what the spirits wanted. Now, Mrs. A has 12

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<sup>4</sup> Interview, Mrs. A, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

followers, all of whom are Nonyang residents, but, in fact, she regards all the villagers as her patients. She said that she was willing to receive the power of a *Yao* ritual practitioner. She said that *Phi Thaen* selected her to be a medium with the power to heal all Phu Thai patients. Even though Mrs. A is old, she is healthy enough to visit her patients and cure their illnesses.

**Case 2:** Mrs. B<sup>5</sup> is a 56-year-old, Nonyang villager. Her mother's mother used to be a *Yao* healer. She married when she was 17 years old and has three children. Mrs. B became a *Yao* ritual practitioner when she was 47 years old. She said that she had never thought of becoming a *Yao* ritual practitioner and did not like being one because she had seen her mother-in-law, who was a *Yao* ritual practitioner, worshipping the spirits after having done something wrong. Later on, her husband had a serious stomachache and her eldest daughter had a nervous breakdown without any apparent cause. She took them to the hospital and the doctor could not diagnose the causes of the illness and prescribed some medicine for them. When they arrived home, their illnesses became more severe. Therefore, Mrs. B and her relatives invited a *Yao* ritual practitioner to check the patients. The *Yao* ritual practitioner told Mrs. B that the ancestral spirits wanted Mrs. B to be a medium. Then, the practitioner told Mrs. B to prepare herself for a spirit reception ritual and Mrs. B decided that she would be a spirit medium. After that her husband and her daughter recovered, but later Mrs. B forgot her promise to become a medium. One day, her wrist ached as if her arm

were broken, so she went to an herbal doctor, but her wrist did not get any better. Her relatives told her that the spirits wanted to be with her but she did not believe it. Thus, a *Yao* ritual practitioner was invited to diagnose her illness. The practitioner told her to hold a spirit reception ritual for the spirits which were going to come down; otherwise, she would die. Mrs. B consulted her relatives and decided to receive the spirits the next day.

**Case 3:** Mrs. C<sup>6</sup> is 58 years old. Her maternal grandmother was a *Yao* healer. Although Mrs. A, the oldest *Yao* practitioner in Nonyang is not her real mother, Mrs. C regards Mrs. A as her real mother. Mrs. C said that before she decided to become a *Yao* ritual practitioner, she had breathing difficulties, along with fatigue and a stomachache. She also felt dizzy. Her relatives took her to the hospital and doctors could not diagnose the cause of her illness, and although the doctors prescribed some medicine, her condition deteriorated. Whenever she heard the sound of a bamboo mouth organ, she would dance to the music. She was like this for three months before her relatives invited a *Yao* ritual practitioner to diagnose her illness. The practitioner told everybody that the ancestral spirits wanted to have her as their medium. When Mrs. C received the spirits and became a *Yao* ritual practitioner, she became healthy again and everybody has been living happily since then. Mrs. C inherited the powers of *Yao* ritual practitioners from her maternal grandmother, who had been a *Yao* ritual practitioner before passing away.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview, Mrs. B, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2009

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<sup>6</sup> Interview, Mrs. C, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2009

Given these three cases, we can see that the inheritance of *Yao* ritual practitioner status runs in families or is passed on among relatives. In case 1, it was passed down from a maternal aunt to Mrs. A, in case 2, from maternal grandmother to Mrs. B, and in case 3, also from maternal grandmother to Mrs. C. Spirits that come to possess a practitioner are ancestral spirits of the ritual practitioner. If the spirits select a person to be their medium, the selected person has to receive them and become a *Yao* ritual practitioner; otherwise, the spirits might harm that person or that person's family, even to the point of death.



Figure 1: Yao ritual practitioners invite *Phi Thaen* to come down through the white cloth to enter their bodies so that they have sacred power to heal patients.

### **Inheritance of Sacred Power through the *Yao Khum Phi Ok* Rite**

Most *Yao* ritual practitioners are selected by their ancestral spirits or have some ancestors who were previously *Yao* ritual practitioners. The most important thing is that each *Yao* ritual practitioner has to pass a *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite, which is the most important rite for a *Yao* ritual practitioner.

*Yao Khum Phi Ok* is the ritual whereby a person's status is changed from an ordinary person to that of a *Yao* ritual practitioner who can cure illnesses. Each *Yao* ritual practitioner must pass this rite in which it is believed they receive divine power from the spirits in order to become a true *Yao* healer with increased curative powers.



Figure 2: A scene in the *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite when the *Yao* healer (the woman in the center) asks *Phi Thaen* whether they would accept the novice (the woman with white thread on the left) to be their follower.

The process and steps of a *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite start when a sick person whose illness has been cured decides to become a *Yao* practitioner. Then, that person's relatives prepare two sets of offerings: one for the *Yao* healer and the other for the cured person or the novice. The offerings for the novice are placed in a tray with a white sheet of cloth laid underneath to support them. The offerings consist of a bowl of uncooked rice, candles, flowers, some money, an egg (the offering to the *Yao* healer contains two eggs), two swords placed side by side, and a bottle of Thai vodka.

The rite starts at 18:00 pm. The *Yao* healer, musicians, and the novice take their positions. The *Yao* healer and the novice wear sacred thread around their heads. When the musicians start playing, the practitioner invites the spirits to possess her and asks them whether they will accept the novice as their follower. If the spirits accept that novice, the *Yao* healer asks the spirits to possess that novice. Then, the novice starts trembling and stands up and dances to the music. This symbolically indicates that the spirits have possessed the novice. Then, a guitar and drum are played in a more tempting tempo. At this moment, the status of the novice changes to that of a *Yao* ritual practitioner.

The following are cases of interviews concerning the spiritual experiences of *Yao* practitioners during the *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite.

**Case 1:** Mrs. D,<sup>7</sup> a 68-year-old *Yao* ritual practitioner from Nonyang, said that when she attended the *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite, she could hear only the sound of the music. She said that the music was very beautiful and she unconsciously danced to it, not knowing what steps she was taking throughout the rite.

**Case 2:** Mrs. E,<sup>8</sup> an 82-year-old *Yao* ritual practitioner, said that she had to wait for one night before the spirits came to possess her body. The rite had to be halted many times before her body became possessed. She said that she waited until 2:00 a.m. for the spirits to possess her, which then made her become a real *Yao* ritual practitioner.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, Mrs. D, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Mrs. E, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2009

**Case 3:** Mrs. F,<sup>9</sup> an 86-year-old *Yao* ritual practitioner from Nonyang, said that the spirits that possessed her in her *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite were *Phi Thaen*, consisting of *Phi Phraya Mueang*/ตีพระชาเมือง (the king of the city spirit) and his subordinates, such as the village guardian spirit and soldier spirits.

The Phu Thai believe that *Yao* ritual practitioners who have passed the *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite still have to be the host of the *Yao Liang Phi* ritual, an annual rite for spirit worship and making offerings to *Phi Thaen*. They need to hold this ritual at least three consecutive times in order to receive enough divine power from the spirits to be able to contact the spirits and know various ways to cure different kinds of illnesses. This kind of rite continues to remain important for *Yao* ritual practitioners in Nonyang, and is held many times a year because there are more *Yao* ritual practitioners in this district than in any other district. In other areas this kind of rite is generally held only once a year.

### **Altar for spirits: the symbol of the *Yao* healer's status**

Any *Yao* ritual practitioner, whether she has become a healer through the *Yao Khum Phi Ok* ritual or through her family line, will become a complete *Yao* healer only when she has a *hing phi*/หิ้งผี 'an altar for the spirits' of her own. A *hing phi* indicates the complete status of being a *Yao* healer, and is as important as its owner's life; therefore, a *hing phi* is the "treasure" of a *Yao* ritual practitioner family.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, Mrs. F, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009



A *hing phi* is made of mulberry wood, painted with dye made from curcuma only, not with any other dye. When *Yao* healers invite spirits to stay at their *hing phi*, they have to hold at least one annual rite for the spirits, a custom of the Phu Thai. Ritual practitioners have to adhere strictly to the protocol of this rite. They cannot ignore any single detail, not even the most insignificant; otherwise, either the practitioners themselves or their family members, or both, may have an accident or get more seriously ill than an ordinary person. Whenever *Yao* healers feel that their *hing phi* are old or look disgraceful, they will install a new one. They have to invite the spirits from the old *hing phi* to the new ones.

The spirit altar is the shrine for *Phi Thaen*. When *Yao* healers visit their patients, they have to tell the spirits and invite the spirits to possess their body; thus, *Yao* healers treasure their altar for the spirits. *Yao* healers install their altars for spirits in their bedroom, and contact the spirits whenever they have important activities to perform. Each year, *Yao* healers make offerings to the spirits in order to ask them to give or to boost their supernatural healing powers.

In the past, the Phu Thai had to move often due to many causes, such as war, so they did not build solid houses in case they had little time to pack up their things and flee. The spirit altar was made in the form of a triangle with cotton threads tied at each end so that it could be easily carried. This spirit altar would only be owned by a *Yao* practitioner because it symbolized the life of a Phu Thai *Yao* ritual practitioner. Thus, when the Phu Thai *Yao* healers change their location, they must take the altar along with them.



**Figure 3:** A *hing phi*—spirit altar, the symbol of *Yao* ritual practitioner's status

### **Network formation of Phu Thai *Yao* ritual practitioners**

For practitioners involved in the *Yao* ritual, there are three important terms: *mae mueang*/แม่เมือง, *luk mueang*/ลูกเมือง and *luk liang*/ลูกเลี้ยง. These three terms are used only in the ritual context of the annual feast for spirits held by *Yao* ritual practitioners. Each of these three terms has a different meaning.

*Mae mueang*, or the master, is a *Yao* healer who has a great number of disciples (*luk mueang*). A *mae mueang* has the power to protect those who need to be healed. A *mae mueang* would like to have as many *luk mueang* 'disciples' and *luk liang* 'followers' as possible.

*Luk mueang* is a patient who has been cured by a *mae mueang*, and decides to be a *Yao* ritual practitioner by receiving the spirits and passing a *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite. *Luk mueangs* are like the real children of their *mae mueangs* in that the *mae mueangs* have to take care of them.



*Luk liang* is a patient who has been treated by a Yao healer. If the healer can cure the illness of the patient, the patient, as well as her family, may agree to adhere to the “protective power” of that *mae mueang*. When a *mae mueang* is going to give an offering to the spirits, *luk liang* will prepare all the offerings, as well as food for all the guests of their *mae mueang*.



Figure 4: A *luk mueang* (the woman on the left) is giving a bottle of whisky as a gesture of respect to her *mae mueang* (the woman on the right).

Any Yao ritual practitioners who have passed the *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite and the annual feast for spirits, and own a *hing phi* of their own, will call themselves *luk mueang*. This is because they still have to go with their *mae mueang* to see patients, since these new *luk mueang* do not yet know how to treat illnesses using magic spells, which are the essential media for Yao ritual practitioners. Accordingly, since there are no classes to teach people about the magic spells, they must memorize, learn, and observe the performance of their *mae mueangs* when they treat their patients.

*Luk mueang* learn about spells when they go with their *mae mueang* to give treatment to patients. *Luk mueang* have to memorize all the steps of the rituals, as

well as the spells that their *mae mueang* use in order to cure illnesses. *Luk mueang* have to memorize everything until it is rooted into their minds because both *mae mueang* and *luk mueang* know that “when spirits possess a practitioner, the practitioner has to cast all spells as smoothly as if they automatically came from their sub-conscious.”

### **Relationship among *mae mueang*, *luk mueang*, and *luk liang***

The relationship among *mae mueang*, *luk mueang*, and *luk liang* is different. *Luk mueang* are very close disciples of their *mae mueang* because *luk mueang* have to pass the *Yao Khum Phi Ok* rite with their *mae mueang*, who are obligated to take care of their *luk mueang* as if they were their real children. Accordingly, *luk mueang* have to be respectful to their *mae mueang* as if their *mae mueang* were their second mothers, although their *mae mueang* can be younger than they are. Thus, the relationship between a *mae mueang* and a *luk mueang* cannot be severed because it is a life-long bond. This type of relationship is like one between a master and his disciples. *Luk mueang* have to go with their *mae mueang* to cure the illnesses of patients, and they have to give instructions of all the steps of the ritual to the families of the patients who may know nothing about the healing ritual by a Yao practitioner. If a *luk mueang* is asked to cure the illness of a patient, she has to go with her *mae mueang* because the *mae mueang* will tell her all the steps in the ritual until the *luk mueang* has undergone the rite to separate her spirits from those of the *mae mueang*.

*Luk liang* is a patient whose illness has been cured by a *mae mueang*. When the patient recovers, she may become a

follower of that *mae mueang*, but she does not have to become a *Yao* ritual practitioner. However, both the *luk liang* and their family will hold a ritual to receive that *mae mueang's* spirits. The patient and all members of the family will place their shirts under their *mae mueang's* spirit altar in order to symbolize that they have agreed to be under their *mae mueang's* protective power since they are certain that the power will protect them. However, *luk liang* can abandon their *mae mueang* at any time. *Luk liang* have to prepare offerings for spirits in annual feasts for spirits held by their *mae mueang*. They have to tell all villagers to attend the feasts and prepare food for all the guests, other *Yao* ritual practitioners and normal villagers. In addition, on every Buddhist sabbath, *luk liang* have to offer betel nut chewing sets to the spirits of their *mae mueang*.

This information reveals that both *luk mueang* and *luk liang* are under the spiritual power of their *mae mueang*. *Mae mueang* have to take care of their *luk mueang* and *luk liang* because these followers need the spiritual powers of the *mae mueang* to protect them from threats from all evil spirits. The more *luk mueang* and *luk liang* a *mae mueang* has, the stronger the spiritual powers of that *mae mueang*. Therefore, *mae mueang*, *luk mueang*, and *luk liang* are mutually related because of the system of mutual benefits and patronage.

Thus, the formation of a *Yao* practitioner's network is the relationship between a *mae mueang*, *luk mueang*, and *luk liang*, which tends to expand without end because a *mae mueang* will try to have as many *luk mueang* and *luk liang* as possible. A *luk mueang* whose powers are strong enough can later become a *mae mueang* and then,

in turn, she will try to have as many *luk mueang* and *luk liang* as possible. As for *luk liang*, they cannot have their own *luk mueang* or *luk liang* because they do not have healing powers. They only can stay under the protection of their *mae mueang*. However, *luk liang* can abandon their own *mae mueang* and find a new one when they think that their *mae mueang's* powers have weakened.

### **“Protective power” and *Yao* healer**

Phu Thai have a special word for the “protective power” of the *Yao* healer. The word is *khong raksa*/ของรักษา. *Khong raksa* is the center of the faith and morale of all members in a family; it is the sacred entity that blesses all members of a family with safety, health, and well-being. The Phu Thai have a traditional belief that when they take a journey to lands far away, there is something sacred that protects them. However, if at a certain time, the *khong raksa* of a family does not have enough power, it can bring danger or sickness to the members of that family during a journey.

If a Phu Thai patient has had a *Yao* healer cure their illness, that patient has to adhere to the *khong raksa* of that healer. A healer whose *khong raksa* is very powerful is trusted by a great number of patients. Therefore, all *luk mueang* and *luk liang* of a *mae mueang* have to adhere to their *mae mueang's khong raksa* as well. *Luk mueang* have to respect their *mae mueang* heartily and seriously, which can be regarded as a mark of respect to their *mae mueang's khong raksa*. Any wrong-doing that leads to illness is believed by the Phu Thai to be wrong-doing against a *khong raksa*, which deserves punishment from that supernatural power. As for *luk liang*, even though they must respect their *mae*

*mueang's khong raksa*, the degree of seriousness is much lower than that of *luk mueang* because *luk liang* and their families can abandon their *mae mueang* whenever they think that the spirits of their *mae mueang* are not sacred or powerful enough.

## Conclusion

In the past, *Yao* ritual practitioners had to know about herbs because illnesses were cured by using both spells and herbs. Therefore, in the past, *Yao* ritual practitioners were reliable medical service providers for villagers. Furthermore, there were few public health service centers available; for instance, until recent times, there was only one hospital, with only a few physicians in charge, in Amphoe Nongsung, so patients could rarely access government medical services, either at Nongsung Hospital or better hospitals in Mukdahan city, which is quite far from both Nongyang and Nongsung. In addition, there were several other obstacles, such as the fact that the villagers were not accustomed to wearing shoes when they had to contact government officials, making it seem difficult and inconvenient for them; as well, they did not have enough money to afford modern medical treatment. Thus, traditional medical treatment fit their way of life.

Today, although public health in Thailand has advanced considerably and the Phu Thai people have been provided with modern medical care, many people still strongly adhere to *Yao* healing rites as evidenced by the continuing role and the number of *Yao* ritual practitioners in Phu Thai society. Despite the fact that modern medical technology has facilitated disease diagnoses, since some illnesses can not be cured with medicine, many Phu Thai still

rely on traditional healing methods and continue to believe that certain kinds of illness are caused by evil spirits. Therefore, they continue to depend on *Yao* ritual practitioners, traditional healers who can contact *Phi* in order to cure their illness.

Therefore, given this continuing need, *Yao* healers must still inherit supernatural powers from *Phi Thaen* and *Phi Chue* who transmit their supernatural powers to *Yao* ritual practitioners. To acquire these powers, *Yao* ritual practitioners persist in holding annual feasts to appease the spirits. Accordingly, the Phu Thai *Yao* rituals regarding the inheritance of the *Yao* divine supernatural power of ritual practitioners manifests and reflects the relationship between religious beliefs and traditional healing practices of the Phu Thai.

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