

# Mamuat Music Healing Ritual

Warawut Ruangbut & Bussakorn Binson<sup>+</sup> (Thailand)

## Abstract

The objectives of this research were to study the Mamuat healing ritual and to compile data on its accompanying music from a case study of the Kraisornpatana Village in the Bua Chet District of Surin Province in Northeastern Thailand. The qualitative research method of participant observation and interviews were utilized. This study found the Mamuat ritual is comprised of four principal steps: An introductory Wai Khru (paying homage), Yiap Rong (spiritual invitation), Khao Song Mamuat (trance) and La Rong or Sapadarn (closing). Music plays important roles as an intermediary in the communication between human beings and spirits while unifying the ritual. In contemporary urban society and culture the Mamuat healing ritual continues to peacefully coexist to this day.

**Keywords:** Mamuat, Mae Mod, Khao Song, Music Therapy, Ritual Music, Beliefs, Thailand

<sup>+</sup> Warawut Ruangbut, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

<sup>++</sup> Dr. Bussakorn Binson, Professor & Dean, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Phayathai Rd, Pathumwan, Bangkok 10330, Thailand. Director, Center of Excellence for Thai Music and Culture. voice: +66 083-089-6070 email: bsumrongthong@yahoo.com website: <http://pioneer.chula.ac.th/~sbussako/index.html>.

## Introduction

Human beings depend on the four necessities of life: Air, water, food, and sleep. Life obstacles in one form or another, including disease and illness, are always present in our everyday life; while some are easy to solve, others may be beyond human control. This latter concept of an uncontrollable event is congruent with the animistic belief that various forms of physical and mental illness may be the work of evil spirits and can only be cured by initiating communication with them to identify the cause of such illnesses (Naris Thongbang, 2010:20). It is also consistent with the Balinese Hindu belief that children who were born in the treacherous weeks, known as *Waku Wayang*, in the Balinese calendar system are prone to have bad tempers and be aggressive. A healing ritual must be performed for such children to exorcise the bad spirits from them (Made Mantle Hood et al., 2014:14). It is widely apparent that many belief that spirits and their powers can bring happiness, misfortune or abnormality while also leading to a variety of rituals paired with them. In Thai society, beliefs are related to superstitions, astrology, animism and the embodiment of sacredness which has influenced the Thai way of life immemorial. (Assanee Pleinsri et al., 2016:101).

Surin is a province in northeast Thailand that shares a border with Cambodia. Since their ancestors migrated to Thailand from Cambodia some groups in Surin can still speak Khmer. These people are academically referred to as Khmer Thais. There have been speculations by historians and archaeologists that the Khmer Thais are likely descendants of migrants who relocated to Thailand between 1781 and 1782 (The Khmer Tribe, 2017: online). The people of Surin still have strong beliefs in malevolent supernatural powers as a cause of people illnesses. They have created many rituals to communicate with the supernatural in order to inform, appeal, and negotiate with them in exchange for a better livelihood and safety for oneself and one's family.

Mamuat is the name of a healing ritual held by these Khmer Thais to treat certain illnesses that cannot be cured by modern medicine. It is a ritual in which a medium, also called Mamuat, acts as an intermediary between the humans and spirits. Moreover, after recovering or being fully cured the patient will organize another Mamuat ritual to express their gratitude to the sacred beings for releasing him or her from illness. The Mamuat healing ritual is a good indicator of the important roles of the folk health care tradition prevalent among the people of the Southern Isan region (Prateep Khaerum, 1992). It represents a tool for health care management through a ritual to deal with illnesses caused by supernatural powers (Teraphon Numthong, 2008). As a social norm, the Mamuat ritual must begin with a Wai Khru step to provide an opportunity for people to pay homage to their teachers. This belief is also transmitted through an annual Wai Khru ceremony which is still solemnly observed by the Khmer Thais in Surin (Wilasinee Srinukhrao, 2001). The Mamuat ritual demonstrates the strength of the community's culture as seen by the mutual assistance community members give to one another during the ritual and its preparations.

### Research Tools and Research Procedures

This is a qualitative research based on data collected from field observations, documents, a literature survey and relevant research findings. Participant observation was used for the study of Mamuat rituals in Surin Province with a specific case study of the rituals held in the Kraisornpattana Village, Ahphon Sub-district, Bua Chet District in the Surin Province. The Mamuat rituals under observation were conducted with Mr. Pisarn Phra-nagram as the ritual master. Unstructured interviews were used to gather additional information from individuals involved in the organizing of Mamuat ritual and from ritual attendees.

### Research Findings

Although Kraisornpattana Village is located nearby the central district with modern facilities such as internet and big street cut across the community including the main district hospital which located nearby, the belief in supernatural ritual such as Mamuat music healing is still remained and conducted throughout decades. The study of Mamuat healing rituals in this location was conducted through participant observation of the Kae Bon ceremony of patients suffering from an illness that cannot be cured by modern medicine and chose to seek treatment by Mamuat rituals. The initial Mamuat ritual was held to identify the cause of illness with a pledge given to the spirit who caused the illness that if the patient got better a Mamuat healing ritual would be held. When the patient later got better the promised Mamuat healing ritual was held as a votive offering to express the patient's and his/her relatives' gratitude the spirit.

There are 4 main elements involved in Mamuat music ritual. The first and most important ritual element that the ritual cannot do without is offerings. The offerings mostly are the items that could be found locally such as banana trees, banana leaves, a variety of flowers, husked white rice, paddy, cooked rice, popped rice, fruits, cooked food and sweets. One significant offering is Juam Khru, which is a figure of a personal guardian spirit that each Mamuat uses for worshipping and is placed alongside other offering items in the ritual. Second, a local folk musical ensemble named Kan Truem is an important element to accompany the ritual. Music is believed to be a medium for the communication between human beings and spirits and a means to set a proper ritual atmosphere of mutual sentiments among the audiences. The musical instruments include Saw Kan Truem (fiddle), Glong Kan Truem (drum), Pee Or (oboe) and Gong. The third ritual element is the ritual master or Mamuat who plays the role as a medium between spirits and human. The forth ritual element are people in the community includes patient, the patient's relatives and the ritual attendants who are generally villagers who come to observe the ritual and to give the patient morale support.

The four significant steps of the Mamuat music healing ritual are:

1. *Wai Kru* (*Paying homage to music teachers*) It began with the house owner presented a representative of the musicians with Khan Wai Kru, a bowl containing necessary offerings to pay respect to the music teachers. The musicians then lighted a lamp, incense sticks and candles for the preparation of holy water to be sprinkled on musicians and the musical instruments. The holy water was meant to protect

both the musicians and the musical instruments from any malicious harm that may arise. The musicians began their performance with Krathong Khru and Javia songs which are special songs to pay respect to the teachers of musicians (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Paying respect to teacher at the starting of the Mamuat music ritual.

**2. *Yiap Rong* (Spiritual Invitation)** This is the step in which the Mamuat or medium invited the village's guardian spirit to exorcise malevolent spirits from the ritual stage and its vicinity. *Yiap Rong* ceremony begins with the medium lighted incense sticks and candles previously placed on an offering tray. Next was the sprinkling of perfumed water over the offering tray, *Khan Wai Khru* and the spot where the *Khao Song* ceremony would take place. The medium then sprinkled perfumed powder over the offering tray and applied it to his face before prostrating three times on a piece of *Pha Khao Ma*. He turned to pay respect to the musicians, the patient and the patient's relatives by giving them a *Wai*. The act of *Khao Song* or a possession of the medium by a spirit started with the sporadic spasms of the medium's body. The musicians provided rhythms to the possession by a light tapping of the gong. The medium's spasms usually rose violently to the extent that the content of the offering bowl was knocked down and strewn around. Upon asking Mr. Anan Sidahom (2013), a ritual participant, for an explanation the researcher learned that the medium was being possessed by the village's guardian spirit. The house owner asked the guarding spirit for forgiveness in holding the ritual on the site and for permission to let the ancestor spirits enter the ritual space. The Mamuat medium who is now possessed by the village's guardian spirit performed the *Yiap Rong* ritual step by putting a small lump of bee wax from the offering bowl on the tip of a sword, held the sword in his hand and walked toward the shelf on which the *Juam Khru* was placed. Once the music began, the Mamuat performed a sword dance to the gong rhythms and walked around the posts to exorcise all the malevolent spirits from the ritual space. This would be followed by another possession of a medium by a spirit.

3. *Khao Song Mamuat (Trance)* After completion of the *Yiap Rong* step, the patient touched the offering bowl and became slightly shaken to the sound of the music. The attending villagers clapped their hands in unison to cheer on the spirit to take possession of the patient. Since there was no further change in the patient, the musicians switched from medium to faster tempos. But since no spirit had possessed the patient, one of his relatives took his place as a medium. He followed the traditional practice of a Mamuat medium by giving three Wai to the sacred beings and one Wai to the musicians. After a spirit possessed the patient's relative, questions were put forward about the spirit's identity while attending villagers together with the patient's relatives tied holy threads to the medium's arms as a welcoming gesture. When the spirit was identified, the medium was dressed in the clothing that the spirit used to wear while still alive (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Ancestor's spirit processed into patient's body.

The medium then got up and danced to the music until the spirit was well satisfied and left the medium's body. The same medium continued with the inviting of various spirits to possess his body and with the dancing until no spirit appeared to take possession of the medium's body. Each time that a spirit was ready to leave the body, the medium would touch the offering bowl on the floor in front of him and began to shake either slightly or violently to the liking of different spirits. Spinning the bowl was the sign that the spirit had now left the medium's body.

4. *La Rong or Chapadarn (Ending)* This is the final step in which a spirit in the medium's body dismantled the coconut-leaf stalks from the roofs and turned over the sitting mats while repeatedly walking and dancing anti-clockwise around the center post. During the first round of encircling the post Khru Prakam placed flowers on the ears of those who were present at the ritual space. During the second round, Khru Prakam or any person who wanted to took down the roofing (of coconut-leaf stalks). During the third round, the sitting mats were turned over or discarded to signify the ending of the ritual while Khru Prakam gave blessings to



the spirit's descendants. This step ended with an inspection of the musical instruments for damage. If there was any damage, the patient's relatives or the ritual host would ask for their forgiveness by offering musicians sweet drinks or other material replacement. The spirits would then leave the medium's body. Those who remained after the ending of the Chapadarn step helped with the tidying up and the returning Juam Khru to its shelf. When all was done, everyone left for their home.

### Mamuat Ritual Music

A combination of participant observation and interview data revealed that music is performed in all steps of Mamuat ritual as a means to facilitate the possession of a medium by spirits. Once a spirit enters the medium's body music is played to accompany the dancing and to entertain the spirits. The folk Thai musical band used in Mamuat ritual is played by folk musicians (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Musical ensemble accompanying Mamuat ritual.

The musical instruments used are the same as listed in the case study above. Short pieces of folk musical pieces are played repeated in loop with no fixed order, depending on a medium's request. If there is no request, musicians will play, at random, any song that they think will better induce spirits to possess a medium. Most of the songs has medium tempo with very few songs in fast tempo.

The research found that residents of Kraisornpattana Village still believe in spirits and their supernatural powers in spite of today's advanced technology and modern medicine. When modern medicine fails to provide an answer to their need for survival or a cure for their illness, villagers will turn to ritual treatment, Mamuat ritual in this case. This behavior is consistent with functionalism which perceives culture as a means to satisfy three groups of an individual's needs: basic physical needs, social needs and emotional needs. Rituals answer to the basic physical needs to survive and the emotional needs of an individual. The patient and the patient's relatives struggle to treat illness, minimize their suffering and

restore happiness through both modern medicine and healing rituals (Ngarmpit Satsanguan, 1995:34). Functionalist theory also states that in general the use of magic cannot predict the outcome. Unpredicted outcome causes uncertainty and drives people toward the use of magic to boost their confidence. Mamuat ritual is one of the magical rituals that rely on an individual's personal belief. Undergoing such ritual can uplift a patient's morale and confidence. It can be observed from the study that after participating in a Mamuat ritual, knowing the cause of his disease and pledging that another Mamuat ritual would be held if his conditions improved, a patient who had been so weak that he was unable to sit up actually became better. The ritual made him more confident and might have improved his immunity system to such an extent that he regained his physical strength and the will to live. The gathering of siblings, relatives and neighbors at the Mamuat ritual enabled the patient to witness the love and unity of these people in their concern for his health, thus, increased his fighting spirit and the will to continue living among them.

Regarding the role of ritual music, Yongyuth Sathanphong made an observation from his study of a spirit called Chae or Mah that the presence of music during a spiritual possession of a medium indicates that it was a means to communicate with the spirits (Yongyuth Sathanphong, 2007:107). Ritual music is comparable to a means of transportation that brings spirits to the ritual. Most of the song played during a ritual are short and repetitive. Chalernsak Pikulsri (1995) stated that folk music must be short and repetitive for ease of memorization since this type of music was transmitted through rote learning and not in written form. The hand clapping of other villagers to the music was meant to entertain ritual participants and to get them deeply involved. Rhythm has significant physical impact over audience, for example, it makes them want to make a beat or to join in with the dance. Hand clapping in Mamuat ritual is prompted by the simple, easy listening and joyous tunes of folk music that made it easy for the audience to feel involved. As accompanying music to a Kaebon ritual (a votive offering to show gratitude) at a Mamuat healing ritual, the music may not directly cure a disease but its latent functions lie in its functions of entertaining the spirits, being a communicative means between human beings and spirits, making the ritual more complete, capturing patient's interest in the ritual and strengthening patient's faith in the ritual which may subsequently alleviating symptoms of the disease (Bussakorn Binson, 2011:158-159).

## Discussion

The belief in Mamuat ritual continues to persist and to be appreciated even in the context of modern urban societies with highly advanced technology as well as convenient transportation and communication systems. The ritual continued to be held on a regular basis. The belief in the benevolent and malevolent powers of spirits as well as in Kaebon ceremony reflect the fundamental fear and the desire for survival that all human beings have. Both feelings contribute to the continuity of Mamuat ritual to the present day. Field observation found Mamuat ritual to

provide an opportunity for relatives, friends and people from different age groups or different social standings, such as village headman and villagers, to meet one another. These are the people who help a patient's relatives hold the Mamuat ritual. Apart from keeping one's pledge to the spirit and showing one's gratitude to the sacred in a Kaebon ceremony, Mamuat ritual reinforces the villagers' alliance and unity. For a patient, Mamuat ritual improves his/her confidence in facing life obstacles and the will to live. This research reflects a picture of an urban society on its path to progress that continues to exist in peace and harmony with a traditional belief.

This research is a study of Mamuat ritual and its accompanying music from a specific case study of Kraisornpattana Village in Buo Chet District of Surin Province. It aims to understand the various steps involved in Mamuat ritual and the accompanying ritual music which can be further developed into future researches on the topic. However, since Mamuat ritual is also prevalent in many other provinces of the Southern Isan region, further study and recording of ritual data in such areas should be carried out for future academic references and benefits.

### Conclusion

The Mamuat healing ritual reflects the belief in ancestral worship as well as in mutual respect, kindness, unity and assistance that villagers in the community have for one another. The introductory Wai Khru step shows respect to teachers of both the musicians and of the Mamuat mediums. In Yiap Rong as an invitation step, the person with the highest rank in the village is usually invited to initiate the ritual or to exorcise malevolent spirits from the ritual space. This practice is meant to honor the village's administrative leader. The spiritual possession of the patient's Mamuat (Khao Song) suggests the use of a ritual process to get the patient to engage in the physical movements of a dance to invigorate the body and induce better blood flow. It also reflects the use of the familial bonds to treat a patient; the ritual also fulfills the desire of living family members to meet their dead relatives again. The ancestors are invited to return and make a conversation through a medium. Furthermore, music plays important roles in making the ritual sacred and in entertaining spirits and ritual participants alike. Music helps connect spirits to the world of the living while stimulates shared sentiment and emotion. Music is an indispensable offering that the ritual uses to satisfy the spirits. This is apparent from the shifts in musical tempo, from fast to slow or vice versa, when a spirit fails to possess a medium. Therefore, music is crucial to the Mamuat ritual because the ritual goals will not be achieved without it.

### Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank Rajabhat Loei University for its generous financial support in the form of a doctoral scholarship. Our sincere gratitude and appreciation also go to all of Mamuats and the villagers of Kraisornpattana Village for their ritual data support as well as to the Center of Excellence for Thai Music and Culture Research, Chulalongkorn University for its support for publication of this article.



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