

# 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 organization of Mamuat rituals and from ritual attendees.

### Research Findings

Although Kraisornpattana Village is located near the center of the district with modern facilities including the internet, the district's main hospital and a main thoroughfare bisects the community, the belief in a supernatural ritual such as the Mamuat music healing ritual remains and has been conducted for decades. The study of Mamuat healing rituals at 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 whom chose to seek treatment by a Mamuat ritual. An initial Mamuat ritual was held to identify the cause of the illness with a pledge given to the spirit who caused the illness that if the patient improved another honorific Mamuat healing ritual would be held. When the patient later indeed got better, the promised Mamuat healing ritual was held as a votive offering to express the patient's and his/her relatives' gratitude to the spirit.

There are four main elements involved in the Mamuat music ritual. The first and most important essential ritual element is the offerings. These are primarily local items such as banana trees, banana leaves, a variety of flowers, husked white rice, raw rice kernels, cooked rice, popped rice, fruit, and other cooked food and sweets. Another significant offering is named Juam Khru, which is a figure of the personal guardian spirit that each Mamuat uses during worshipping and is placed alongside other offerings in the ritual. Second, a local folk music ensemble called Kan Truem is an important accompaniment to the ritual as music is believed to be a medium of communication between human beings and spirits. Moreover music is a means to set the proper ritual atmosphere of mutual sentiments among those in the audience. The musical instruments include Saw Kan Truem (fiddle), Glong Kan Truem (drum), Pee Or (oboe) and a Gong. The third ritual element is the ritual master of ceremonies or Mamuat who plays the role as a medium between spirits and humans. The fourth element are members of the community including the 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 as follows:

1. *Wai Kru* (*Paying homage to music teachers*) It begins with the house's owner presenting to a representative of the musicians a bowl known as Khan Wai Kru, that contains the essential offerings to pay respect to music teachers past and present. The musicians then light a lamp, incense sticks and candles in preparation for holy water to be sprinkled on musicians and their musical instruments. The holy

water is meant to protect both the musicians and the musical instruments from any malicious harm that may arise. The musicians begin their performance with special songs known as Krathong Khru and Javia that show respect to the teachers of musicians (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Paying respect to music teachers at the beginning of the Mamuat ritual.

**2. *Yiap Rong* (Spiritual Invitation)** This is the step in which the Mamuat or medium invites the village's guardian spirit to exorcise malevolent spirits from the ritual stage and vicinity. The *Yiap Rong* ceremony begins with the medium lighting incense sticks and candles previously placed on an offering tray. Next there is the sprinkling of perfumed water over the offering tray, *Khan Wai Khru* (bowl) and the spot where the *Khao Song* ceremony will take place. The medium then sprinkles perfumed powder over the offering tray and applies it to his face before prostrating three times on a piece of cloth known as *Pha Khao Ma*. He turns to pay respect to the musicians, the patient and the patient's relatives by giving them a respectful gesture known as a *Wai* (A hand gesture made by bringing both palms together before one's face and bowing slightly). The act of *Khao Song* or a possession of the medium by a spirit begins with the sporadic spasms of the medium's body. The musicians provided rhythms to this possession by a light tapping of the gong. The medium's spasms usually rise violently to the extent that the contents of the offering bowl are 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 then performs the *Yiap Rong* ritual step by putting a small lump of bee wax from the offering bowl on the tip of a sword, holds the sword in his hand and walks toward the shelf on which his *Juam Khru* (guardian figure) was placed. Once the music begins, the Mamuat performs a sword dance to the gong's rhythms and walks around the place 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*, the patient touches the offering bowl and slightly shakes with the rhythm of the music. The attending villagers clapped their hands in unison to cheer on the spirit to take possession of the patient. The term Mamuat also refers to the spirit possessing the patient. If there was no further change in the patient, the musicians may switch to faster tempos to encourage possession. In one observed case where 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 Wais to the sacred beings and one Wai to the musicians. After a spirit possessed this patient's relative, questions were put forward about the spirit's identity while the villagers, together with the patient's relatives tied holy threads (white strings) to the medium's arms as a welcoming gesture. When the spirit was identified, the medium dressed in the clothing that the spirit used to wear while still alive (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Medium being possessed by spirits of ancestor.

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 inviting various spirits to possess his body and with the dancing until no spirit appeared to remain in 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 previously placed coconut-leaf branches previously placed overhead and turn over the sitting mats while repeatedly walking and dancing counter-clockwise around the ceremony's center post. During the first pass of encircling the post the Mamuat places flowers behind the ears of those who were present in the ritual space. During the second round, the Mamuat or any person who wants to takes down the "roofing" of coconut-leaf branches). During the third round, the sitting mats are turned over or discarded to signify the



end of the ritual while the Mamuat gives blessings to the spirit's descendants. This step ends with an inspection of the musical instruments for damage. If there is any, the patient's relatives or the ritual host would ask for forgiveness by offering musicians sweet drinks or other material reimbursement. The spirits would then leave the medium's body. Those who remained after the ending of this Chapadarn step assisted with tidying up and returning the Juam Khru to its shelf after which attendees were free to return to their homes.

### Mamuat Ritual Music

Data from the combination of observing the ritual, its participants and subsequent interviews indicated that music is performed during all steps of the Mamuat ritual and serves to facilitate the possession of the medium by spirits. Then once a spirit enters the medium's body, the music continues to both accompany their dancing and to entertain the spirits. A Thai folk music band during a Mamuat ritual is pictured in figure 3. The musical instruments used are the same as listed in previously. The drummer is on the left, gong center with oboist and fiddler right.



Figure 3. Musical ensemble accompanying Mamuat ritual.

Short passages of folk songs are played repeatedly 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 assist in inducing spirits to possess the medium. Most of the songs has medium tempo with very few songs in fast tempo.

The research found that residents of Kraisornpattana Village continue in their belief in spirits and associated 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 turn toward a ritual treatment – the 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: physical, social and emotional. Rituals address the basic physical

needs to survive and the emotional needs of an individual in a social context. The patient and their relatives struggle to treat illnesses, minimize their suffering and restore happiness through both modern medicine and traditional healing rituals (Ngarmpit Satsanguan, 1995:34). Functionalist theory also states that in general, the use of magic cannot predict the outcome. Unpredictable outcomes creates uncertainty and drives people toward the use of magic to boost their confidence and optimism. The Mamuat ritual is a magical ritual that rely on an individual's personal beliefs. Undergoing such ritual can uplift a patient's morale and confidence. It was observed during this study that after participating in a Mamuat ritual, "learning" 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 immune system to such an extent that he regained his physical strength and the will to live. The gathering of siblings, relatives and neighbors for the Mamuat ritual enabled the patient to witness the love and unity of these people in their concern for his health, and this perhaps 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 songs played during this type of rituals 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 inter-generationally transferred through rote learning and not in written form. The hand clapping of other villagers to the music was meant to entertain the ritual's participants and to get them more deeply involved. Rhythm has significant physical impact over an audience. For example, it makes them want to keep the beat or to join in with the dance. Hand clapping in the Mamuat ritual is prompted by the simple, easy listening and joyous tunes of the folk music that makes it easy for the audience to feel involved.

Just as the accompanying music to a Kaebon ritual (a votive offering to show gratitude) the music during a Mamuat healing ritual may not directly cure a disease but has a latent function of entertaining the spirits, providing an unifying communicative pathway between human beings and spirits by capturing the patient's focus and strengthening patient's faith in the ritual that may subsequently alleviate their symptoms. (Bussakorn Binson, 2011:158-159).

## Discussion

The belief and faith in the 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. This ritual continued to be held on a regular basis. The belief in the benevolent and malevolent powers of spirits as well as in the Kaebon ceremony reflect the fundamental fear and the desire for survival that all human beings have. Both feelings contribute to the continuity of the Mamuat ritual to the present day. Field observations

found the Mamuat ritual provides 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 also the people who assist the patient's relatives in conducting the Mamuat ritual. Apart from keeping one's pledge to the spirit(s) and showing one's gratitude to the sacred in a Kaebon ceremony, the Mamuat ritual reinforces the villagers' alliance and unity. For the patient, a Mamuat ritual improves his/her confidence in facing life obstacles and their will to live. This research reflects a picture of an urban society on its path towards progress that continues to exist in peace and harmony with a traditional belief.

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

### Conclusion

The Mamuat healing ritual reflects the belief in ancestral worship as well as the mutual respect, kindness, unity and assistance that villagers in the community have for one another. The introductory Wai Khru pays homage to teachers of both the musicians and the Mamuat mediums. In the Yiap Rong invitational 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 one of honor for the village's administrative leader. The spiritual possession of the patient during the Khao Song stage suggests the use of a ritual process to get the patient to engage in the physical movements of a dance to invigorate their body and thereby induce better blood flow and oxygenation. It also reflects the use and reaffirmation of the familial bonds to treat a patient as the ritual also fulfills the desire of living family members to "meet" their dead relatives again. The ancestors were invited to return and make a conversation through the medium. Furthermore, music plays important roles in making the ritual sacred and in entertaining spirits and ritual participants alike. Music is the conduit to connect spirits to the world of the living while stimulating shared sentiments and emotions. Music is an indispensable and integral offering that the ritual uses to satisfy the spirits. This is apparent from the shifts in musical tempo, from slow to fast or vice versa to encourage spirit possession. Therefore, music is crucial to the Mamuat ritual as its goals can not be achieved without it.

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