

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

*Phlaeng Khorat* has always been connected with the story of grandmother *Mo* (*Thao Suranari*), the local spirit in *Nakhon Ratchasima* province. The local people know that she fought against Laotian enemy with a brave heart like a hero. The monument of *Thao Suranari* in the city honors her of the heroic act in helping to defeat the troops of *Chao Anouvong*, the king of Vientiane, who had launched an attack on Siam in 1826 (Keyes, 2002: 113). The term of “grandmother” is used to establish a kin relationship between her and the Thai people.

“*Phlaeng Khorat* is the handed-down property of my parents. It is the legacy of the poor. We’ve got no money. It is only the valuable knowledge of *Phlaeng Khorat* that we’ve got”.

*From an interview with a votive Phlaeng Khorat performer*

“With my two hands I prostrate myself onto the feet of *Ya Mo* image.

Since I was a child, I have seen you standing there loftily.

Now I will go on with my life no matter how much difficult it is.

And to stay being your niece here in *Khorat*, I will do it”.

**From “I prostrate myself at *Ya Mo*’s Feet (*Kraab Tao Ya Mo*)”**

**Lyric: *Kruu Lerd Srichoke* / Singer: *Sunari Ratchasima***

The first citation from above was recorded from an interview of a performer of *Phlaeng Khorat*; the second one was presented by a famous female singer of *Thai* country song or *Phlaeng Lukthung* who was born in *Nakhon Ratchasima, Sunari Ratchasima*. These citations implied that *Phlaeng Khorat*, grandmother *Mo*, and *Khorat* people are parts of the modern Thai society. In the citation, *Khorat* people are bravely fighting the economic pressure that leads them to work both for their needs and for their future desires. While *Phlaeng Khorat* could be represented as the last property, or the last security, of those poor people who are *Phlaeng Khorat* performers; grandmother *Mo* as the mother who supports the poor (local) people to fight against the insecurities of modern life. To fight against the insecurities, the performers and the local people create the meaning of ‘kinship’ within *Phlaeng Khorat* as the grandmother’s song. They usually worship the grandmother with the song. They call the song “*Phlaeng Khorat Kae Bon*,” or votive song. The song signifies the past as being a cultural root; while it also signifies the future as “manageable” if one properly asks the grandmother to assist in one’s wish.

### **1.1 Background and Rationale**

If *Phlaeng Khorat* performance is identified as the culture of *Khorat* people, it is also identified as grandmother *Mo*’s song. *Preecha Uitragoon* (1993) explains that *Phlaeng Khorat* was transformed from “*Phlaeng Kom*” or “short versed song” that local people both male and female used to sing it back and forth as a style of dialogue between them during their time of working in rice field or in ceremonial events. In the past, its performer, called “*Maw Phlaeng*,” both male and female, usually sang with words referring to sexual organs or sexual behaviors as a playful contestation to the opposite sex (*Preecha Uitragoon*, 1993: 15-16). Charles F. Keyes (2002) explains that *Phlaeng Khorat* is a form of dancing and singing using the *Thai Khorat* language. It became votive *Phlaeng Khorat* when men and women who vowed to make offering (*kae bon*) offer it to the spirit of grandmother *Mo* whom they begged for assistance to reach some desired goals. This is because *Khorat* people worship the spirit as ancestor spirit, or as powerful local spirit, rather than as the ‘national’ historical person (Keyes, 2002: 124-125). When *Phlaeng Khorat* became votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, it dropped the

part of dialogical sexual interplay but sang instead in polite verses only in praise of grandmother *Mo*, who is the national heroine, created by the central state.

Differently from Keyes, *Saipin Kaewngamprasert* (1995) emphasizes the 'historical personhood' by focusing on the political images of *Thao Suranari* rather than the benevolent characteristics of grandmother *Mo*. She classifies the images of *Thao Suranari* as (1) representing the heroine which is made out of ordinary people in national history, (2) the manifestation of centralized power of the central state over *Nakhon Ratchasima* region, (3) the modern woman who possess the qualities of man, (4) the nationalist spirit, and (5) the local goddess (*Saipin*, 1995: 109-145). All these meanings of *Thao Suranari* or grandmother *Mo* represent different discourses constructed by the central state, and by local people.

The votive *Phlaeng Khorat* discourse is constructed alongside with *Thao Suranari* history. Local people believed that she was patriotic since she would never grant favor to any man who asked to avoid military conscription. The performance is known by local people as the song of *Thao Suranari* whom the people define in kinship term as grandmother *Mo* (*ya mo*). The votive *Phlaeng Khorat* praises her kindness and brave heart because she is represented as a brave modern woman who works hard and fights against all crisis like a man. Even in modern time, the votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is worship for the bravery of grandmother *Mo*. For local people, to worship this spirit makes them feel that she belongs to them as they are "her descendants".

In the 1990s, after the economic crisis, the cult of spiritual worships of historical important persons became widespread. The most worshipped cult was King *Chulalongkorn* worship. *Nidhi Eoseewong* (2003) explains that the worship was identified as the spirit or god in kinship term of fatherhood which is called *sadej por*. The statute of the King *Chulalongkorn* was transformed from the statute to become a sacred representation. The King cult was worshipped by the middle class to gain material interests (*Nidhi*, 2003). The 1990s witnessed also the cult of *Thao Suranari* as a response to economic crisis amidst the Thai pursuit of modernization (Keyes, 2002: 128). The statute of *Thao Suranari*, apart from being symbol of localism and nationalism had become sanctity to ask for an economic gain.

I notice that the votive performance is usually acted at many places related to the grandmother *Mo* spirit. It is performed at the monument in the city, at *Wat Salaloi* temple, and in many villages, but they are performed differently. The heroine monument in the city is in the public space managed by the municipal government; and the most formal votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is performed there. However, the stage of votive performance was moved from the place in front of the monument to another place behind shop stores so that the monument can be seen very prominently. *Wat Salaloi* Temple is located in eastern suburb where the relic of *Thao Suranari* is kept, and well known for its ultra-modernistic congregation hall built in 1967 (Keyes, 2002: 125). It is administrated by the temple committee which does not belong in government sector. It can be conceptualized as a ‘traditional’ sacred space. When people vowed for grandmother *Mo* there, they usually offer in “*Phlaeng Khorat Thawai*”. The word ‘*Thawai*’ means to offer with great respect. In recent years, the miniature replicas of *Thao Suranari* monument are also constructed in many villages. Votive performances also take place at village level. This signifies the widespread and popularity of the cult in *Nakhon Ratchasima* area.

In March 2010, I noticed that votive *Phlaeng Khorat* performers who performed at the monument were mostly ignored by audience or clients. My observation is in accord with *Saipin Kaewgnamprasert's* observation (*Saipin*, 1995: 138). Though the performance is important for worshipping the spirit of *Ya Mo*; it did not seem to draw attention from the audience. My questions are; if the audiences pay the performers to perform for *Ya Mo*, why not listening? Why do audiences ignore performance who are “mediator/medium” between themselves and the sacred spirit? This seems to be a contradiction.

Apart from the votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, another development of *Phlaeng Khorat* is exciting performance called “applied *Phlaeng Khorat*” (*Phlaeng Khorat Prayuk*) or “*Phlaeng Khorat Cing*” and is usually performed in villages. Since migrant workers visit their home in *Songkran* Festival on 13-15 April, they often make a votive ritual at their village, not in the city. The performance at villages is less disciplinary, engaging in more free play than in the city and at *Wat Salaloi* temple. Thus, after the votive ritual is finished, the clients often make a request to the performers to do more

exciting type of *Phlaeng Khorat*, i.e., the modernized patterns of faster rhythm, lustful story, or performing with a use of electronic musical instrument or *Phlaeng Khorat Cing*.

However, the ‘traditional’ *Phlaeng Khorat* and votive *Phlaeng Khorat* had been represented as the ‘authentic’ *Khorat* culture rather than *Phlaeng Khorat Cing*. For instance, a performer of ‘traditional’ *Phlaeng Khorat*, Mr. *Yai Wisespholkung*, was honored by the Office of the National Culture Commission for being a National Artist in 1996 (Office of the National Culture Commission, 2011). In addition, On July 3rd, 2009 the ‘traditional’ *Phlaeng Khorat* and votive *Phlaeng Khorat* were shown on TV, by Thai TV Channel, in a program called the “*Thai Show*” with a purpose of cultural preservation (suggesting romanticism and conservatism of Thainess). The TV program classified *Phlaeng Khorat* as ‘Thai art’ rather than local art which represent the practical value in everyday life.

*Boonsom Sangsuk*, one of *Phlaeng Khorat* performers, defined *Phlaeng Khorat* as “song of grandmother *Mo*”. Here is his interview from the show;

“When *Ya Mo* was alive, she favored *Phlaeng Khorat*. After she had conquered over *Chao Anouvong* of Vientiane and come back to town, *Khorat* people celebrated their victory with *Phlaeng Khorat*. In addition, after she died and her memorial building was later constructed in 1934, *Phlaeng Khorat* was firstly performed for celebrating *Thao Suranari*’s victory. Since then, it has been performed every year.”

“To the question if *Phlaeng Khorat* will disappear, the answer is “no”; may be it will survive. But to the question if it will decrease in popularity, the answer is “yes”. It will exist because *Ya Mo* “exists”. They will live together, surely. I believe that it will coexist with *Ya Mo*” (cited in *Thai Show* Program, 2009).

*Boonsom Sangsuk* expressed that *Phlaeng Khorat* had existed together with the history of *Ya Mo*. This explanation showed that the value of *Phlaeng Khorat* is in its

representation of Thai value at local level. He suggested that the existence of *Ya Mo* gave reasons for the conservation and survival of this ‘traditional’ local performance. In other words, the importance of *Ya Mo* in national history (constructed by the state) allows for the survival of relating local performance such as *Phlaeng Khorat*, which is ‘the song’ of the Grandmother.

Actually the ‘traditional’ *Phlaeng Khorat* in the past was an entertainment, a sexual and mundane entertainment. However, when it becomes sacred acts of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*, and tries to construct polite monologue characteristic, it does not interact with the audience. When it is transformed into *Phlaeng Khorat Cing*, it has been questioned whether it maintains the ‘proper’ value of *Khorat* culture. This is its contradiction of adaptation. In town, monologue performance is the norm but in rural area though monologue is performed in votive, people show more enthusiasm towards *Phlaeng Khorat Cing*. It is not only a difference of forms. It may also be different power relations, relating to different places.

Votive *Phlaeng Khorat* can be interpreted as sign communication of the performers, clients, and places. Because it is usually claimed that it is the song for *Thao Suranari* spirit, this communication means that people talk to the spirit in “imagined community”. It is not only about preservation of a tradition, but it is also about how people try to manage the risk in their future living. The question is: How was the votive *Phlaeng Khorat* created from traditional *Phlaeng Khorat*, in order to cope with changes in modern Thai society.

## 1.2 Research Questions

I am interested in the transformation of *Phlaeng Khorat* into votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. I am also interested in how it is differently performed in different votive places. I will focus on the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* in different places: (1) the monument of *Thao Suranari* at the center of *Nakhon Ratchasima* city where I define as “the public place” formally manipulated by the central state through municipal power, (2) *Wat Salaloi* Temple which is a ‘sacred’ place but also a place of ‘contestation’ between the beliefs in the spirit of *Thao Suranari* and other spirit, and

(3) a site at village level defined as the ‘mundane’ place. All these places can indicate symbolic construction of the central state appropriation and different local responses represented through votive *Phlaeng Khorat* and *Thao Suranari* cult. My key questions are the following:

- 1) How was votive *Phlaeng Khorat* constructed?
- 2) Why do performers perform differently in different locations? What is the different power relation in each different place?

### 1.3 Research Objectives

- 1) To study the significance of votive performance in relation to different places, i.e., the public space, the ‘sacred’ space, and the ‘mundane’ space.
- 2) To explain the process of power contestation as manifested themselves in cultural practices.

### 1.4 Conceptual Review

#### 1.4.1 Appropriation of “Local Culture” by the Central State

In the 1930s, *Luang Wichitwathakarn* attempted a project of Thai cultural construction, by selecting certain traits of culture as representation of Thainess. He admired the ‘Thai’ dance such as “*Ramsu*”, “*Ram Mae Sri*” and “*Ram Kew Khao*” in both the north and the northeast. However, he did not promote the regional ‘peripheral’ cultures as representative of ‘Thai culture’ because the government at that time was focusing on homogenization of “Thainess” relying mainly on the standards of the central culture rather than regional peripheral cultures. In the opinion of *Saichol Sattayanurak*, this implies the hierarchical construction of Thai culture into a unity, where the culture of the elites in the center of the state becomes superior to other regional cultures in the periphery (*Saichol Sattayanurak*, 2002: 120-133).

*Phraya Anuman Ratchathon* was the elite intellectual of the government in the time of Field Marshal *Por. Pibulsongkram* during the 1940s and 1950s. He offered

knowledge about Thai society and culture which sustained the belief of hierarchical culture, in his book “Evolution of Culture” published in 1952 (*Saichol Sattayanurak*, 2007: 307-308). According to *Phraya Anuman Ratchathon*, local people were still uneducated; and lack material progress; therefore, they would need to be developed by the elite governor. He proposed the idea that the main function of the national culture should be to promote unity such as the use of central Thai language. But at the same time, local characteristics must be preserved because they were “subset” of National Culture (*Ibid.*, 371-372). He tried to install the concept of “spiritual culture” (*wattanatham thang chit jai*) praising the goodness of Thai people of their spirit of warrior, spirit of unity, and spirit of duty (*Ibid.*, 353). In his other work in the 1960’s, he argued that people who worshiped ghost, gods, and goddesses, were non-progressive or underdeveloped people. This definition usually signified people in the rural area. The value of local art was not equal to the national art, though he identified local traditions as part of a “main pillar of Thai culture” for reproducing the image of “Thailand is good” (*Ibid.*, 409-422).

After the state regulation of culture initiated in the time of *Luang Wichitwathakarn* (Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture), other middle level agency also tried to set up a standard of polite Thai civilized culture. Educational institutions such as the College of Dramatic Arts, the Teacher College, and private Thai traditional dance school are some of the example. The attempt to establish ‘standard’ is sometimes successful, but sometimes not.

During the 1960s, appropriation of culture was done through public radio and the central state-owned television. The government’s mass media, created a difference between urban and rural - the urban represented modernity - in contrast, the rural represented underdevelopment (*Pinyaphan Pojchanalawan*, 2009: 33). Both mass media played the rural culture such as Thai country song (*Phlaeng Lukthung*); but propagated to the people while they were listening to the songs about the central state’s legitimacy in modernizing and developing the country. At that time, the bands of *Phlaeng Lukthung* traveled to perform around the country, or at villages where the highway or road had connected them to the central state. The *Phlaeng Lukthung* song had been popularized through the rural people’s consumption, and transformed into



modern music. Most of the content of *Phlaeng Lukthung* songs did not represent the rural people's worldview, but it actually represented ideas and visions of people in the central of Thai modernity – Bangkok. For instance, rural people was represented as comical and not yet 'developed' such as the song "the village headman *Li*" in 1964 which presented that rural people do not know what was "development" (*Pinyaphan*, 2009: 152-154).

During 1960s - 1980s, the College of Dramatic Arts took the role of constructor of national culture, by publishing a book on "official art performance". They established private drama school which became the cultural agency of "Thainess". They also publicize their views of national art on television programs. Their knowledge standardized 'Thai traditional art and performance' as to what is 'proper' national standard (*Anchala Phochanasomboon*, 1991: 103-114).

Another example of the appropriation of culture is the case of *Pha Sin Tin Jok*, or the traditional tube-skirt. During 1971 to 1973, *Pha Sin Tin Jok* was attended by the development project of the Arts and Crafts Project in the Queen *Sirikit*. Some weaver from *Mae Cheam* district, in Chiang Mai province, went to the project workshop to learn a weaving in new pattern which had called the "modified design" (*Lai Pra Yuk*). The new pattern was highlighted on the natural colors and simple textures. This situation reflected that the local identity was being re-created to match a certain standard (*Pramote Pakdeenarong*, 2004: 93-95). *Pha Sin Tin Jok* in the handle of the Arts and Crafts Project in the Queen *Sirikit* could be represented as a form of national standardization over 'traditional' local cloth production.

An effect of the central state appropriation on traditional musical culture is discussed by *Chutipong Kongsantia* (2013). During the 1930s - 1970s performers of *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* in *Nan* province had freedom in composing the lyrics that challenged social norm. However, after that period, the performance was dominated with Thai cultural standard through the Office of the National Cultural Commission, Ministry of Culture. Its pattern was frozen into a fixed style and some meaning of sacredness had been added (although *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* in tradition society was entertained by using rudeness and obscenity of normal life) (*Chutipong Kongsantia*, 2013: 56, 135).

We can see that cultural appropriations to comply with certain national standard have succeeded in making local people feel that their local culture is inferior to national cultural standard. Moreover, the control of local culture is not only from the state agencies, but also from the educational institutions.

#### 1.4.2 Local Profanations

*Pattana Kitiarsa* (1999b) suggests that since the late twentieth century the issue of local culture has caused interests not only by the central state, but also by academic researchers and non-governmental developers. There are at least six themes of studies. The first is a study which aims to verify the essence in Thai centralized national history of the central state. The second is a study of ethnic, religious, ritual, ideological, and gender; particularly, a study which investigates changes towards Thai modernization. The third is a study of the relationship among community/village, city, communities' culture, and local wisdom. The fourth is a study of local economic, local politics, and natural resources management. The fifth is a study of local people's movement and organization. And the sixth is a study of localism and nationalism in the struggling process during economic crisis. *Pattana* however suggests that local culture in Thailand has never been static and immobile; in contrary, it is always complexed and diversified (*Pattana*, 1999b: 72-78).

*Nidhi Eoseewong* (1993) studied changes in the festival of sky rocket merit (*Boon Bung Fie*), in *Yasothon* province. The changes in the sky rocket festival imply a meaning shift of the festival from something sacred towards something more mundane, to serve the commercial purposes of tourism. This, however, does not mean that local culture was destroyed. *Nidhi* explains that the new *Boon Bung Fie* festival is also a local attempt to insert the local culture into national and international levels.

*Boon Bung Fie* becomes a show in the 'public space' where villagers affirm their cultural value to tourist. The quantity in number of tourists represents the success of the local politicians who can manage this big festival to show to the public. So, local culture can insert itself, though in commercialized, mundane form, in the national space. *Nidhi's* study also showed how local politicians tried to become

patronage of local culture in order to gain support from the local community (*Nidhi*, 1993).

*Kriangsak Chetpatanavanich* (2007) studies the new genre in Northern folk music, where he finds that *Phlaeng Lukthung Kam Mueang* is popular among new rural people, as a result of the hybridization of tradition verse with modern music. He suggests that *Phlaeng Lukthung Kam Mueang* created a third space where rural customs, traditions, and morality are interpreted as civilized as urban culture. After *Chiang Mai* rural area has been transformed under new conditions of modernity since the early 1990s, the rural social structure is not only composed of agricultural producers but also included with industrial and construction workers; employees of shops, restaurants, department stores, middle and low-ranking employees of bureaucratic organizations and private enterprises; taxi drivers and peddlers; and so on. *Phlaeng Lukthung Kam Mueang* responds to the consumption desire of these new rural audiences. It becomes a third space where “new rural people” contest their modern identities; the actors could construct knowledge, meanings or identities of their own within the changing rural structure. Thus, their identities are different from the identity constructed by the central state. The “new rural people” are contesting with the various meanings and identities, and they mix and hybridize their cultural composition, as the third space or identities. In the content of *Phlaeng Lukthung Kham Mueang* as a cultural space, for example, women who are usually represented as “irrational subjects”, and whose social position is often lower than men, can now express their power - to punish the “rational men”; and they can position themselves as equal to them. Thus, *Phlaeng Lukthung Kam Mueang* presented contents containing diverse and unfixed identities of the “new rural” people who are not dominated by the meaning and identity of national institution (*Kriangsak*, 2007).

Sometimes local culture can be applied to serve political agenda. An example is a study of how *Isan* folk opera (*Mawlum*) - the performance of the Northeastern people with singing in the Lao language was broadcasted on Radio as a continuation of cultural practice from *Sarit Thanarat* period (1954-1963) to attract *Isan* people’s interest and loyalty to government. It can be seen as the local response to uphold local culture.

To perform the traditional pattern of the opera, *Mawlum* performers sang about the local myths and the stories of a sacred writing of temple - the palm leaf book. Before 1957, *Mawlum* performers took both religious and social norm to perform in front of, as well as to teach, the audiences (*Phornsuang Thaothawee*, 2000: 13-25). Each performance was performed by only one or two performers who dress with casual clothes, singing together with *Isan*'s traditional musical instrument, made from bamboo called “*can*”. The audiences were impressed on the performers’ knowledge and rhetoric outwitting. During this time, performers were only men (*Ibid.*, 37).

During 1947 to 1969 *Mawlum* became vocational; if the teacher was not monk, women could practice the *Mawlum* performance together with men. In addition, a new style *mawlum* - called “*Mawlum Moo*” emerged. This *Mawlum Moo* was performed by many male and female performers who dress in luxurious clothes; they performed together with the modern musical instruments; with the light and sound, to excite the audiences. Although *Mawlum Moo* sang stories of the local myths and a sacred writing of temple, they touched on the secular life of ordinary people rather than religion. Thus, each actor must present each character of the mundane story such as the hero, the leading actress, the jealous actress, the villain, and the comedian (*Ibid.*, 74-80). Particularly when they applied the young female dancer’s show of *Phlaeng Lukthung* or the country song concert, they could incorporate ‘modernity’ in *Mawlum* (*Ibid.*, 97).

During 1969 - 1989 this modern identity of *Mawlum Moo* gained popularity. *Mawlum* performers could make money from selling their cassette-tapes. As they became popular, *Mawlum Moo* was used by the government to sing against the communist movement; it was also used for advertising election campaign as well as in promoting health care policies (*Ibid.*, 107).

Later there had been attempts by local artists to develop “*Lukthung Mawlum*” or “*Mawlum Plearn*”. The “*Lukthung Mawlum*” entertains its audience more with the exciting rhythm of music rather than with the highlighting on the intelligence of the performers. However, some ‘traditional’ *Mawlum* convince the local schools to conserve the traditional *Mawlum*. They constructed another new style - with the purpose to preserve the “traditional *Mawlum*”, called “*Mawlum Vieng*”. This *Mawlum*

*Vieng* highlighted the intelligent verses; though performers usually dressed in luxurious glittering clothes (Ibid., 108-118).

Performers of *Lukthung Mawlum* and *Mawlum Vieng* did not directly study from their teachers but they studied from teachers' recorded tapes. The performers usually sing about updated "news" of the country, instead of the traditional verses and morality. These two types of *Mawlum* are expensive to hire; therefore most sponsors would be teachers, police agents, and village headmen (Ibid., 121-123).

During 1989 - 2000, another new style of *Mawlum* emerged, called, "*Mawlum Cing*" which stressed on the enjoyment and excitement of sex, nudity, exotic dance, and obscene speech. It emerged alongside with the phenomenon of the young worker movement from the rural area to the urban area. These young workers became the main productive providers of the family; they became supporters of *Mawlum Cing* during their merits making at temples (Ibid., 147). However, elder *Mawlum* was feeling so difficult and ill at ease to perform *Mawlum Cing*.

According to *Phornsuang*, the changes of *Mawlum* represent the construction of fragmented local identity by *Isan* rural people. The first phase of transformation is a change of traditional *Mawlum* to *Mawlum Moo* which is a self-adaptation to modernity and to emphasize the mundane story. The second phase is a transformation of *Mawlum Moo* to *Lukthung Mawlum* and *Mawlum Vieng*. This period of transformation is a response to the structural change in rural society caused by a support of politico-cultural leader in teaming with rich people as a substitute for the former cultural role of morality by monks and elder *Maw Phlaeng*. It is also a tool exploited by the state for a propagation of the state's policy. The third phase is a rise of *Mawlum Cing* which is a response to a variety of taste in entertainment and a need of new identity in *Isan* new generation people. This new identity is differentiated from the older identity of the elders that is traditionally influenced and controlled by the cultural standard from the central state. Particularly, they as migrant young workers become eager to gain income for family and community.

An idea of Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975), according to Courtney Bender (1998), is the concept of 'participatory thinking'. It represents a unique self in lived

experience which is related to other acts, ethics, and history (Bender, 1998: 182). The participative thinking is within specific actions that exist in relation to the subject and locations in which it happens. Participatory thinking created dialogue base on encountering new ideas and acting during intersubjective acts (Ibid., 190-193).

*Suriya Smutkupt et al. (2001)* applies the dialogism concept of Mikhail M. Bakhtin for studying the interaction between performer and audience in the live performances of the *Isan* modernized performance “*Mawlum Cing*”, focusing on the interactive relation. *Suriya et al.* gives more weight of the art of folk performance as verbal dialogues and interactions between performers and client/audiences. The fun and laughter of secular feelings is the core of *Mawlum Cing*. They consider this performance as the equality of interactive communication of language between performer and audience - interplay, rejection or acceptance, bantering, and mocking are the values of its performance. In addition, its texts and dialogues are multiplicity of voices and meaning. This live performance has no superior power of master story produced by performer because the dialogic process will be balanced by the audience’s voice (*Suriya et al., 2001*).

According to the study of *Suriya Smutkupt et al. (2001)*, the value change of the performance and the “trans-subjectivity” (or the changed subjectivity of performers and audiences as the aftermath of the dialogical process) should rise from this dialogical process. The value of *Mawlum Cing* is a reflection about suffering and destiny of *Isan* young workers, who are affected by the development of economic-politics. It is presented in terms of comedy, satire and irony combined with exciting rhythms of electronic instrument. While the values of *Mawlum Cing* are formed from the exciting dialogue, the subjectivity of performers and audience are developed out of the structure of suffer feeling. Another value is that it can support *Isan* people for solving an emotional crisis in modern Thailand. *Suriya et al.* suggest that the value interpretation of *Mawlum Cing* should not be interpreted as dominated by a single person but it represents the dialogical process of balancing relation between performer and client: audience and host.

*Suriya Smutkupt et al. (2001)* also shows that the institution of place can control an expression of *Mawlum Cing*. The fast rhythm and sexually excited *Mawlum Cing*

must never be performed at the sacred place where the spiritual house is located. But in other places, *Mawlum Cing* can celebrate with the audience for their economic achievement and charity. The host shows their wealth by the hiring of *Mawlum Cing* to perform to give the audience relaxation and enjoyment. *Mawlum Cing* presents gratitude of the host to neighbors, parents, and the spirit of ancestor. In addition, all of these persons are supporting and praising one another in a position of equality. The performers share the stories of sufferings and hard works of the host to the audience in terms of jokes. The audience cheers the host up by expressing happiness when they are watching and interacting with the performance. All actors in this votive place are equally exchanging the values of votive *Mawlum Cing* (Suriya et al, 2001: 342-365).

### 1.4.3 Sacred Cult as a Local Response

An example of local response through the construction of sacredness is the reverence of the relic of the Buddha in *Lanna* or Northern region. *Thianchai Aksrondit* (2002) offers an explanation about an old Thai tradition of performing a reverence to each essential *Phra Dhātu* (Buddha's relic, a stupa where the Lord Buddha's relic is housed) which is related to each constellation year. The tradition is considered, in the study, a political protest movement from the pre-existing local culture. It is a construction of local culture from a diversity of beliefs, such as Buddhism, animism, antecedent spirit, astrology, legendary tales of *Dhātu*, and the sacredness of *Phra Dhātu* that is considered relevant to a hierarchy of cities that exhibits a pattern of selection.

In the period of King Rama IV (1851-1868), cities in *Lanna* region were in a confrontation with the appropriation of Siam. This tradition was used by the landlords for building a connection of cultural networks among those cities. It was done by referring to each site of twelve *Phra Dhātu* spreading all over the main cities of the region. There were two meanings inferred from the tradition; (1) the city of *Chiang Mai* was centralized in this connection of cultural network because three of *Phra Dhātu* in *Chiang Mai* were included in the list, (2) *Phra Dhātu* in the central region of Siam were not included, which it could be inferred that *Lanna* was not homogenized culturally with Siam (*Thianchai Aksrondit*, 2002). Therefore, the practice of this

tradition was not meant to be a direct eradication of Siam's political power, but it could integrate the collective consciousness of *Lanna* people within the folk's religious practice that was considered popular. But still, to a certain extent, it is a latent form of political action.

In "*Protest and profanation: Agrarian revolt and the little tradition, part I & II*" published in *Theory and Society*, James Scott (2013) offers an explanation why some traces of new belief co-exist with the old one; for example, the tradition of Christian orthodoxy reflected in Catholic prayers is used in a superstitious way by Hatian Voodooists. To some extent, it can be considered that the great tradition of Catholicism is "contaminated" by the lower tradition of Voodoo. But for local people, to incorporate Catholicism into the form of their pre-existing norm of sacredness makes it easier to accept Catholicism. Scott reports that "little traditions" can be found incorporated in some religious and political reception and form a new context. Folk people can find their own way of expression in some performance with "profanations" for their advantage in gaining some dignity and respect (Ibid., 46). Scott concludes that the little tradition will always find its own way of designing a pattern of profanations which are "symbolic reversals of the existing social order" (Ibid., 60). From this conceptualization, it can be seen that to some extent the central state's appropriation of some cultural norm can be reacted by some pre-existing latent cultural traits with some depiction of profanations.

On the other hand, Oscar Salemink (2004) discusses that secularization of social progress can result in the emergence of folkloric commodity, a spirit cult, and nostalgia. When economic desire and religion cult are tied together, people will desire wealth in the present world, not in the afterlife world. They push people to work hard for a material wealth, especially in the period of rapid economic change in Southeast Asia (Salemink, 2004: 126-129).

Philip Taylor (2004) studied economic transformation and the rise of Vietnamese Goddesses and the pilgrimage and popularized religious practices in the 1990s. The religious activities were performed amidst political, economic, ideological, and cultural transformations. These activities reflect a local cultural survival linked to the government's policies of "opening the door" to the capitalist world. They also



reflect the scholars' concerns about the loss of the cultural roots of such sites and of religious practice (Ibid., 7-10). In cities "the pilgrimage was shaped by processes of touristic consumption, cultural commodification, entrepreneurship, and mass culture". They reflected "Vietnam's integration into global capitalist markets" exploring spirits' role in the encoding and negotiation of local histories or the "past" (Ibid., 15-18).

Focusing on the concept of nostalgia, Rosalind C. Morris (2002) read the supernatural act of urban ritual as the recalling of pastness. She explained that a rite of extending the fate of *Chiang Mai* city (*sup chata müeang*) was "the sign of the tradition taking place as an ironic reclamation of tradition from ritualism" - the valuation of ritual in/of itself (Morris, 2002: 73). She suggested that the medium, possession was indeed a sign of the ancient (Ibid., 77). The ritual could lay claim to being of the past, affecting suffering subject of modernity. In addition, it had been supported by sentimentally nostalgic bourgeois in late capital world of *Chiang Mai* (Morris, 2002: 87). For Rosalind C. Morris, the worship is the struggle site of classification of the pastness and the tradition that treats the suffering people separate from a crisis of modernity.

When *Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool* (1998) studied votive *Lakhon Chatri* in front of City Pillar in Bangkok, she found that performers dressed up in traditional costume, utilizing the familiarity of the past to please the spirit of City Pillar who belonged to the past. Performers must perform with respect because they were performing in front of City Pillar which was a sacred spirit.

For Shigeharu Tanabe (2002), the sacredness was classified with human consciousness of "intersubjectivity" between inner spirit and "sacred spirit". Its subjects symbolically communicated with the "sacred spirit" and reproduced locality-base security for self-imagining in modernity.

According to Michael Herzfeld (1991), place and monument could shape the feelings of people. He discussed this in reference to a Greek town. With his suggestion in mind, we could make a comparison with a Thai context. King *Chulalongkorn* monument was situated at the heart of Bangkok in front of *Anantasamakom* Palace which since 1932 had been used as the national parliament.

The cult of King *Chulalongkorn* worship, according to *Nidhi Eoseewong* (2003), could express the emotion of social members who identified with the sacred spirit of the King together with the significance of the central state power. They turned it into the popular sense of fatherhood called “*sadej por*”. It represented the de-territorializing of the classes’ boundary between elite and ordinary people. However, the worship was not manipulated by the central state but by people who freely interplay their forms of ritual practice. The cult had many forms of ritual practices which could be representations of freedom and democratic features. Moreover, the King was also symbolized as a modernist by the media and the education curricula. Therefore, this cult became a representation of the imagined modern community of Thai citizen who identified their own citizenship through the same imagination and participation of the national ancestry worship (*Nidhi*, 2003: 37-45).

A sacred cult serves ‘secular processes’ of folkloric commodity, nostalgia, and self-image ‘reproduction’. On the one hand, it expresses local identity which is fragmented from the central state appropriation. On the other hand, its local identity can cooperate with the appropriation of polite ‘civilized’, ‘modern’ culture constituted by the central state.

#### **1.4.4 Symbolic Interpretation of Social-Cultural Experiences**

Culture is, according to Clifford Geertz (1973), symbolic structure and webs of significance. Therefore, human action or behavior is symbolic action which is socially constructed. Geertz suggests that we can search for the structures of signification by beginning with a differentiation of the frames of the interpretation in such situation. Since culture is socially established structures of meaning, therefore the meaning is accorded to the pattern of life referred to the actor’s point of view. In addition, he suggests that we should begin the study of culture with both our own interpretations of what our informants present and the interpretative description of actors (Geertz, 1973: 5-15). In the study of Balinese cockfights, Geertz suggests that deep cockfight is the transition of “the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight”. It is a dramatization of status, kin group, and village concerns (*Ibid.*, 436-437). The Balinese read and experience their symbolic story by their own interpretation (*Ibid.*, 448). The

symbolic structure of interpretation allows Balinese play with such power within cockfight context. Geertz takes this interpretation that it is as “seeing things from the actor’s point of view” (Ibid., 14); and takes the symbolic action as ‘saying’ about the role of culture in human life (Ibid., 27).

Referring to the “Deep Play” concept of Clifford Geertz, Brian Fay (1996) explains that understanding of culture should be a thick description that portrayed an intention and a rule expressed through the physical movement. While a thin description of any acts would merely depict a physical movement, an action, a thick description describes something an agent does, something performed for a purpose, that some act will have some particular meaning. We would say that intentional action requires a reason-explanation. But, a reason in itself cannot possibly be the cause of everything. An agent comes to have a reason to act as a result of engaging in a practical reasoning process. Thus, the practical reasoning process is one in which agents’ antecedent beliefs and desires are modified and brought together to form the basis for his/her actions. Actions are by definition rational, so that irrational acts are ultimately just a subclass of rational ones. Thus, agent may have reasons for actions even though these reasons may be irrational. But such reasoning processes can be discovered only by assuming that the agents and their activities are intelligible (Fay, 1996: 92-110).

Culture is performed with an intersubjective and social action of an individual. It is possible for the experience of multi-reasons which are locally and globally created by each individual. That means that the individual has to pay attention to “the truth” according to his/her experience. The culture can be understood as a web of reasonable meanings that individual intends to while ignoring others. The intended meanings/things can be supported by the powerful institution. Although the institution can construct the web of meaning, there is no guarantee that it dominates all human acts. The other meaning or the subclass of rationality has sometime been used by individual for solving a crisis that the institution cannot solve. The thick description depends not only on the hierarchy of power, but also on the intersubjective consciousness of an individual, both at local and global levels.

Bearing this in mind, I intend to use Geertz's symbolic interpretation as a methodology to interpret the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*.

## 1.5 Conceptual Framework

1) I explain the transformation of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* as an interaction between the central state appropriation and local responses. The explanation is inferred from *Thianchai Aksrondit* (2002) and James C. Scott (2013) on local response as a form of both protests and as selective incorporation of dominant culture into local culture.

2) Ideas of *Nidhi* (2003), Taylor (2004), and Morris (2002) are valuable in my discussion of rising sacred cults in modernizing countries as social sanctity to obtain social/psychological security in a world of rapidly changing economic condition as a baseline to provide understanding of the social context in Thailand. Morris (2002) suggested that by laying claim to the past, ritual performance can help undo the 'suffering' of modernity (Morris, 2002: 87).

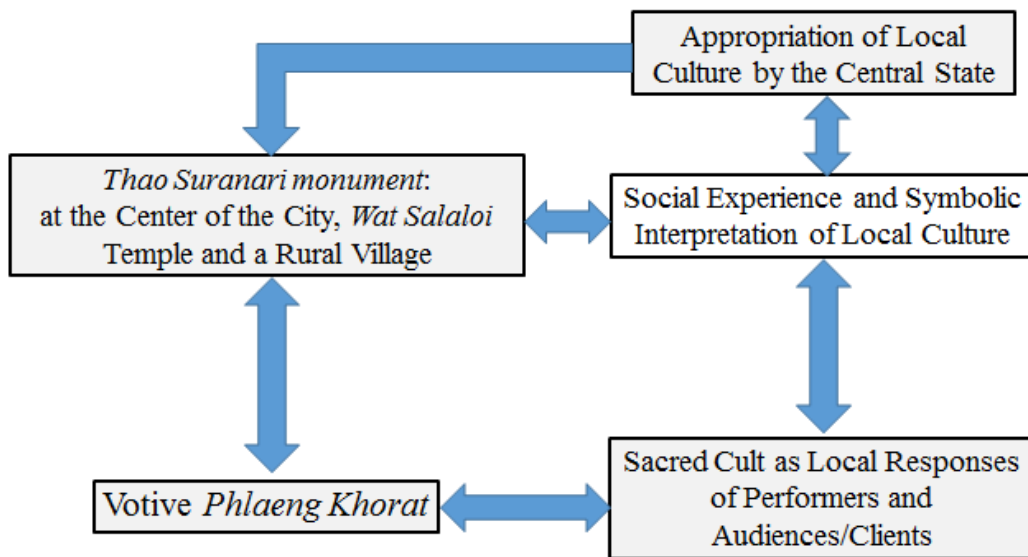
3) The physical space is also important in influencing how culture will be interacted. The town center of ancient town, and monuments, (such as in Greek ancient towns) can convey a sense of the past which can be meaningful to the construction of identity and feelings of individuals. In Thai context, *Suriya et al.* (2001) observed that when votive performances are performed in front of a sacred shrine, performers had to express respects and politeness. Bearing this in mind, I intend to make a comparative study of votive performance of *Phlaeng Khorat* in the public space in the city of *Khorat*, *Wat Salaloi* temple which is a sacred religious space; and in villages where mundane lives, only loosely controlled by the state, predominate.

4) However, culture is a field of contestation. On the one hand, culture can be manipulated from above, for example through the central state regulations and sanctions, controlling the message and symbols, curbing behavior to be 'respectable' and 'manageable' in order to achieve maximum control (*Saichol*, 2002; 2007). On the other hand, culture can be contested from below, for example, *Suriya Smutkupt et al.*

(2001) suggests that enjoyment and laughter of secular feelings is the core of live performances of the *Isan* modernized performance *Mawlum Cing*. The performance has no superior power of master story produced by performer because the dialogic process will balance the powerful voice of the texts with audience's voice. The performer and client sing/talk about suffering of *Isan* young workers who were affected by the political economic development. But it is presented in term of comedy, "rude", and satiric singing combined with excited rhythms of electric instrument (Suriya et al., 2001: 437-467).

5) Referring to Salemink (2004), Nidhi (2003), Morris (2002), and Suriya et al, (2001)), a secularization of social progress can result in folkloric commoditization, a spirit cult, and nostalgia. The votive *Phlaeng Khorat* signified the relation between people and Grandmother *Mo*, and gives its audiences/clients nostalgic signs with a hope to ask for economic favor. To live in the modern time of risk, the people keep its traditional form; but they eventually redefine its meaning.

*Khorat* people usually interpret *Thao Suranari* as the local spirit in the sense of motherhood, they call her grandmother *Mo*. However, the spirit sometimes signifies the fatherhood in the sense of national heroism. Motherhood or womanhood of grandmother *Mo* in the realm of the local subordinately coexists with fatherhood or the king's manhood in the realm of the nation. While womanhood is generally meant to have loyalty to her husband, the locality of grandmother *Mo* is reflecting loyalty to the king's power as the nation's ruler. If the fatherhood of *sadej por* is being represented as the signs of modernization and nationalism at the national level, the motherhood of grandmother *Mo* could be represented as these signs at the local level. These signs can be within the webs of meanings or within the social structure of modernizing Thailand.



**Figure 1.1** Conceptual framework

## 1.6 Research Methodology

The methodology of interpretative theory of culture is employed here. I will focus my analysis on the central state's appropriation of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* and local responses as a reflection of Thai modernity. There will be a consideration of the votive performance as sign communication; here I try to look for its deep structure, or webs of meaning, or classification of rationalities. This methodology is likely to reveal the meaning and 'rationalities' of practices that performers and audiences/clients do. Moreover, there will be some interviews from *Maw Phlaeng* about their roles both on the stage and at the back of the stage. An analysis of signs of places that reveal the association between places and performances will also be made.

I will interview some people in these three groups as follows;

- 1) The members of the Association of *Phlaeng Khorat* and the leader of *Chen Huarotfai* Group (as the non-member of the association).
- 2) Male performers and female performers. Apart from the interview, I will also observe representation in sign communication.

3) The audiences/clients in different votive places.

## 1.7 Research Sites

Generally, there are three places of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*: at *Thao Suranari* Monument in a public space in town, *Wat Salaloi* Temple which is a sacred space and in villages as ‘mundane’ space.

At the monument of *Thao Suranari* in city, the votive stage has been officially regulated by municipal government. The place represented authoritative power of the central state’s power. The second place is at *Salaloi* Temple that has been managed by *Sangkha* and temple’s committee. This stage is established after the stage at the monument in town. It is supposed to be the most sacred place of *Thao Suranari* since this temple was founded by her. The third place is at village level which is the space where mundane traditional *Phlaeng Khorat* used to be very popular.

## 1.8 Organization of Chapters

Chapter 1, I review how local identity has been reconstructed in the globalized world. I describe the process of construction both from above (i.e. the central state’s role in the construction) and from below (i.e. people’s construction of their identity both in compliance and resistance to the central state’s construction). I also touch on the perception of the role of “pastness” in the construction of local identity, and how the heroic deeds of past characters had been turned into sacred power to provide mental support to modern individuals in the modern world of rapid economic change and instability.

Chapter 2, combination of ethnic groups in *Nakhon Ratchasima* is delineated. I discuss relevant literatures concerning the strategic involvement of *Nakhon Ratchasima* in political contest in the period 1934 which resulted in the construction of the monument of *Thao Suranari*. I discuss how the symbol of *Thao Suranari* monument is subjected to the contestation of interpretations. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a symbol of nationalism. On the other hand, natives of *Mueang Khorat* interpreted the monument as a symbol of localism and of ‘Khoratness’. The

symbol was further elaborated as local sacred power when *Thao Suranari* was given a spiritual existence as *Ya Mo*.

Chapter 3 discusses traditional *Phlaeng Khorat* in order to demonstrate how traditional/folk singing takes the form of a dialogical contest in verses between male and female *Maw Phlaeng*. Verses in traditional singing consist of “rude” words (by modern standard) but it reflected a cultural pattern of mundane living in agricultural society where wits in verbal audacity were a quality to be admired; and where men and women could be on equal terms in expressing their sexual advances. I also discussed how these local performances have been later appropriated and constructed into a body of ‘knowledge’ of ‘traditional’ performance.

Chapter 4 discusses the cult of *Thao Suranari* and the emergence of votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. After the economic crisis in 1997 the monument of *Thao Suranari* has become a “sacred” place in the public space where people come to pay respect and pray to her spirit to ask for favors, both for everyday life problems and for economic gains. I discuss the complexity of how *Thao Suranari* monument became a sacred symbol as people came to ask for favor. Things that were constructed as a national symbol became a local symbol and then a symbol of sacredness. Compared to other spirits, where contact with spirit have to be made through the spirit medium, the contact with spirit of *Thao Suranari* was made through prays and vows.

With other local spirits, one can talk, discuss problems with, and ask questions through medium. But with *Thao Suranari*, one only asks, and she either grants or not, but one does not ‘talk’ to her. This signifies a hierarchical relationship. Yet within this hierarchical relationship one can notice the family-based endearment term that people call her as *Ya Mo*. In this chapter, I also discuss certain co-existence and contradiction of forms and ideas in the worship of the cult and in votive *Phlaeng Khorat* as a characteristic of modernity.

Chapter 5, I use the concept the ‘plaza of signs’ to describe how various signs can be perceived at the public space at the center of the city. Although the monument has been constructed as a symbol of nationalism or either loyalty and submission of the local to the central power of Bangkok (in 1934) which made it a place of political



symbol, later it is turned into a place of local worship in times of economic crisis. As a place of worship of spirit, the role of *Maw Phlaeng*, as a ‘medium’ or mediator of *Thao Suranari* and as the ordinary people in making offering through votive singing, is needed. However, I demonstrate the marginality of *Maw Phlaeng*, by showing the marginal space they have been allocated. Their stage for the performance of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is situated in a small lane, rather than attaining a prominent place in front of the monument. The municipal government also assigns regulations to govern their performance, for example, that they must perform with polite words and polite manner. Fees for performance worship are also regulated. This “sign” implies a regulation of ‘authority’ to govern ‘local free play’ behavior; hence a signified hierarchical/authoritarian structure of Thai society. I also discuss the significance of place, or geographical space in relations to different votive performance. In the public space in town where the monument is situated as a representation of central state power, appropriate, formal behavior, and polite monologue votive performance must be observed.

In *Wat Salaloi* Temple, there are displays of various signs which imply the eclectic beliefs of the supernatural, together with the more ‘rational’ Buddhist teaching. The multiplicity of supernatural symbols and a lot of donation boxes imply the scale of commerce in connection of the worship of how supernatural and even Buddhism are being commercialized. I discuss that recently there are also claims of spirit of *Thao Suranari*’s possession, though some people have expressed doubts about the genuine of the possession. People say that if the medium used “aggressive/rude” words/tones, it cannot be the true spirit of *Thao Suranari* because she was a polite and high-class lady.

At the village level, I discuss how votive offerings organized by local politicians have been arranged in a ‘formal’ manner, to replicate the formality of the scene in the monument at the city center. However, local politicians cannot afford to be too distant from their voters, so they have to bring in more ‘mundane’ and ‘modernized’ fast-rhythm modern folk singers to provide entertainment to the voter/villagers. *Maw Phlaeng* must also perform “applied *Phlaeng Khorat*” where male *Maw Phlaeng* and female *Maw Phlaeng* return to singing with “sexually implied” words to contest the

wit of the opponents; in order to entertain. Village as a “space”, therefore, manifests the ‘sign’ of co-existence between “formal” controls of authority in contestation with villagers’ demand for mundane entertainment.

Chapter 6 is a reiteration of the analyses which suggest co-existence and contradiction of forms and ideas in modernity.



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