

CHAPTER 3

NEGOTIATING MODERNITY IN A CHANGING RURAL CONTEXT

3.1 Ban San Maha Po: A Heterogeneous Community that is Experiencing Migration

When I entered Ban San Maha Po for the first time in August 2003, it gave me the impression of a Northeastern Thai village. This was not only because of the hot and dry weather, but also because of the style of the houses. The traditional houses looked different from the houses I was used to seeing in Northern Thai villages. These houses were raised on approximately two-meter-high stilts and were simply built. Inside a typical house was a large raised floor, with a Buddha image in the eastern corner and a kitchen in the southern corner. Two bedrooms were located towards the back of the house. The impression I got of a Northeastern style house was based on its similarity to an open pavilion, or *sala*. The Northeastern housing style was perhaps due to influence from the local craftsmen who had built almost all the houses in this village. These experts were people who had migrated from the Northeast of Thailand, and lived in a village about ten kilometers from Ban San Maha Po.

The sizes and styles of the houses in this village vary—old wooden houses, luxury teak houses, small cement houses and big Western style houses. Local people explained that the size and style of a house probably indicates the career and economic status of its owners. Old wooden houses tended to belong to farmers who worked mainly in agriculture close to home. Simply built cement houses formed the majority in this village. They represented the families whose members worked—or used to work—as laborers in big urban cities such as Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Chonburi, or Songkhla. Most of them had worked in construction. Some of these cement houses were not completely finished, but people already lived in them. The owners, who had built the houses themselves, explained that this was the only way

they could have a new house. They began by building floors and roofs, and then added temporary walls, which was enough for them to live in. When they got more money they would build the other parts. It might take three to five years to complete a house. The owners of these houses were mainly farmers who earned money from growing mono-crops. Luxury teak houses and the large well-designed Western style houses belonged to people whose daughters worked or had worked as commercial sex workers abroad or whose sons or husband worked as laborers in foreign countries. The owners of luxury teak houses could also be local policemen who had easy access to illegal teak.

Daily Life in Ban San Maha Po

The villagers in Ban Mae Lan mainly stayed at home to work in agriculture. This seemed to be the pattern during the whole year. Life in Ban San Maha Po seemed to vary little from day to day. There were generally two periods, defined by the rice growing season, in which one could meet people of all generations in the village. This period was from May to August. The paddy fields were plowed by young and middle aged men from the early morning until evening. Using a mechanical plough instead of a buffalo was harder work that required the labor of strong men. Women prepared food at home and carried it to the paddy fields at lunch time. After plowing, the next stage of rice growing is sowing and transplanting, which is mainly the task of women. Nurturing the rice plants until they are ready for harvest is the work of men. It includes weed and pest control and maintenance of the irrigation water supply. This period takes about three months. The process of harvesting rice was still labor-intensive in this village. Villagers grouped together and went from field to field to help each other. Only a few families employed their neighbors to harvest rice. Rice is harvested by use of a sickle. It is gathered and tied in bundles, then left in the field to dry. These bundles of rice are finally threshed by a machine. During the nearly four month period when people lived in the village to work in their rice fields, the village appeared crowded and lively. After the rice harvest from November to late December, the village turned quiet again, as males and some females would go to look for jobs in the city of Chiang Rai or other provinces.

Everyday life in this village is in general similar to that in other rural areas. People normally wake up in the early morning. Some housewives go to the market to buy fresh food to cook. Many people go to the market only occasionally. They can save money by fishing or growing their own vegetables. The village market was thus less crowded than markets in urban or suburban areas.

During my fieldwork in November of 2003, a few weeks before the rice harvest, I found that the village was full of people of all age groups. Younger persons and all those who worked in the cities had stopped their wage labor temporarily to help with the paddy harvest. Rice, the staple food, is still crucial for life. “First rice, then the rest comes as [we] go on” (*kho hai mi khao kon, yang uen khoy ha ao khang na*).” While they waited for the rice harvest, older males prepared bamboo strips to bind the rice stalks in bundles, whereas the younger ones went to fish in the river or got together under the floors of the raised houses. In the evenings they might gather at small liquor shops or at their friends’ houses to drink liquor. This village and the adjacent area were quite famous for homemade rice liquor. Several villagers knew how to make liquor. They normally produced it for ceremonies and celebrations, especially during the Northern Thai New Year. The wide distribution of this knowledge was evidenced by the widespread custom of liquor drinking.

While I was collecting data in April 2004, during the Songkran festival or the Northern Thai New Year, all villagers who worked outside the village came back home. I was rather surprised to see, both men and women of all ages (with the exception of children) enjoying drinking and dancing throughout the whole week of the Songkran celebration. All ceremonies conducted during this period were joyful, or *muan* (*sanuk sanan* in the Central Thai language). This was quite different from the ceremonies conducted in Ban Mae Lan during the same period, which were mainly focused on worshipping the ancestors, paying respects to the elderly and making merit at the village temple. It is remarkable that the ritual ceremonies in Ban Mae Lan were mostly conducted in a solemn atmosphere. After the festival, most of the Ban San Maha Po people who worked in construction in the cities would stay in the village another three or four months to help with ploughing, sowing and

harvesting. Only those who worked in factories or the sex industry would hurry back to the cities.

When the rice harvest began, people worked in the paddy fields from dawn until late evening. In this area, the work of harvesting rice was very important and labor-intensive. Farmers still exchanged their labor rather than spending their money to hire wage laborers. Machines were only used for threshing. This differs from farmers in Ban Mae Lan, who used machines for both harvesting and threshing rice, since they did not have sufficient labor. Every paddy field owner in Ban San Maha Po had to provide food and liquor to those who helped him to harvest. While I collected my data during this period, it was quite common to see men who had worked very hard in the bright sunshine during the daytime become drunk in the evening.

After a short break following the rice harvest, these workers started to look for jobs outside the village again. They might contact friends in new places or go back to former construction sites. In the case of those who were already married, both the husband and wife normally worked together outside the village and left their children in the care of their elderly parents. The reason why women followed their husbands was not only to earn more money, but also to control their husbands' sexual behavior so as to avoid the risk of HIV infection. At present, it is still easy for villagers in this area to find work, especially in construction. A few job brokers would come to the village after the rice harvest and offer their services, sending villagers to various construction sites. One foreman, whose workers came from this village, said that he preferred lowland Thai laborers because they were better skilled and easier to supervise than laborers from ethnic minority groups. Since the ethnic minority laborers were not able to speak and understand Thai fluently, lowland foremen often had problems communicating with them. Given the fact that wage labor in Thailand is rather cheap, many skilled people make an effort to find work in foreign countries. Workers normally leave their home villages in groups in late September. A quiet atmosphere then covers the village; only next April during the Northern Thai New Year will life in the village be cheerful again.

3.2 Reproduction of Northern Thai Beliefs in Ritual Ceremonies and Storytelling

The way in which people of this village implicitly practice their traditional beliefs in the course of daily activities, for example through bodily practices, spoken language and routine worship of the Buddha and protective spirits, is generally similar to the way it is done in Ban Mae Lan. The only important distinction between the two villages lies in the deep belief in spirits related to *tua* (body) and *khwan*. Whereas this belief is only implicitly and occasionally seen in the daily life of the people of Ban Mae Lan, it is explicitly and collectively practiced in the everyday practice of the people of Ban San Maha Po.

Ritual ceremonies conducted in Ban San Maha Po seem to reproduce the existence of spirits and *khwan*, the life essence that is connected to the *tua* (physical body). This belief was not only conveyed through ritual ceremonies that were conducted at important life transitions or whenever people faced extraordinary trouble, but was also embodied in everyday conversation. In the one and a half years I spent visiting this village periodically, nearly every week people organized an explicit ritual ceremony known as *phi thi su khwan*. This ceremony was the most popular ritual and was frequently conducted, for example, after recovery from a chronic illness by *Ui* Gong, the owner of the house where I stayed during my fieldwork, or after recovery from a motorcycle accident by Kaeo, a son of *Ui* Nang who is the other female bone healer of my study. It was conducted during wedding ceremonies, before a conscripted son entered the armed forces, or when a daughter or son returned home from abroad. The villagers also organized this ritual ceremony to honor a monk who had graduated with a Masters degree from a Buddhist University. The belief in spirits and *khwan* was also embodied and reproduced in everyday language and storytelling.

“I have pity on his or her *khwan* (*en du khwan khong khao*)”. This sentence was frequently used to express sympathy with somebody’s disappointment or sorrow. It was commonly said that the *khwan* of parents who had passed away was attached to a newborn baby. Some children knew from their parents whose *khwan* became attached to their body when they were born. Villagers identified whose *khwan* was attached to the body of a baby through specific characteristics that resembled those of

a person who had passed away. For example, a birthmark on the baby's leg might be similar to a scar that had been on one of his or her ancestors. A female ritual specialist, called *phi mo nueng*, might be able to tell who the baby had been in a previous life. This ritual specialist could invite the spirits (*phi*) that inhabited a *mo nueng*, a pot and container used to steam sticky rice, to indicate whose *khwan* was attached to the baby. Traditionally, villagers would consult a *phi mo nueng* when a baby was chronically ill or continuously cried during the night without any physical symptoms. It is believed that an ancestor inform relatives of his or her rebirth through the illness of a baby. A simple ceremony is then required to accept this rebirth. The *khwan* of the baby is tied to his or her body by a certain person indicated by the *phi mo nueng*.

Stories about *phi* are also a common topic of everyday conversation. In October of 2003, during my second visit to Ban San Maha Po, I heard a popular story about a *phi tai hong tang klom*—a pregnant women who died from a violent death. She lived in another village, about seven kilometers from Ban San Maha Po. Her tragic death had happened only a month before I arrived. *Lung Som* or Uncle Som, a traditional healer and also a magic specialist and an undertaker, was invited to organize a very rare ceremony, which had not been held for almost fifty years. The villagers' story was that a woman who was eight months pregnant had died unnaturally when she was accidentally shot during a *kathin* ceremony—a ritual ceremony for offering robes, money and other requisites to monks at the end of the Buddhist Lent. She was immediately sent to the district hospital. The bullet had however penetrated her womb and ended up in the baby's head, so both the mother and baby died. The woman's parents asked the doctors to separate the two dead bodies, but they refused. They called *Lung Som* and a meticulous ceremony was prepared. The woman's parents strictly followed every step of the ceremony as directed by *Lung Som*. It was believed that this tragic event not only brought great sorrow to the woman's parents, but that it might also bring disaster to the whole village if the ritual ceremony to send the spirit of the woman and the fetus to the spirit world was not successful. People were frightened that the spirits would become malevolent. The woman's parents told me that they must strictly practice all ritual

ceremonies as directed by the ritual specialists to reassure the anxious public that the spirit of her daughter and unborn grandchild would not harm any of the villagers. The cremation ceremony was attended by people from many nearby villages. When I stayed in the village, I also heard many rumors about the existence of spirits related to this event. For instance, it was said that someone had heard the sorrowful cry of the woman on the day she passed away, and that the dead body had smiled at *Lung Som* while he was separating the dead infant from the woman's womb. Most serious was a rumor that *Lung Som* had stolen a secretion extracted from the woman's corpse. This secretion is referred to as "magical oil". This "oil" is, according to popular belief, a love potion that can be used to cause members of the opposite sex to fall head over heels in love with the person who drops it on his/her skin. They said that *Lung Som* sold this secretion to some commercial sex workers who were going to leave the village to seek their fortunes by risking their lives doing sex work abroad.

In sum, through everyday conversation, storytelling and ritual practices give the local people a sense of *khwan*, the karmic life cycle, death and rebirth. In the same manner, the beliefs in spirits, *khuet* and black magic are revitalized.

3.3 Leaving Mother and Children Behind

Because the people of this village were rather poor, the majority temporarily, and a few permanently, had to migrate to find jobs in other areas. The first out-migration began in the early 1970s, which is about a decade after the village was established. At that time, only a few male villagers left the village for a longer period to work as wage laborers in the Central and Eastern region of Thailand, and a few young female villagers went to work as commercial sex workers in Bangkok and Pattaya. Heavy out-migration in the village started in the mid 1980s, the period of an economic boom in Thailand. Those who migrated during this period mainly worked in construction, since there was a high increase in the demand for unskilled construction work. Moreover, the growth of the tourist business induced also some younger girls and widows to follow their neighbors and relatives to work as commercial sex workers in Bangkok, Pattaya and even in foreign countries. Some men also worked as laborers in Japan and Taiwan. This change caused a weakening

of family ties. Elder persons and children were not only left alone, but they had also to take care of each other. Without doubt there existed a great generation gap between them. A teacher at the primary school said that more than half of her students lived with their grandparents, and that almost half of those were HIV/AIDS orphans.

When I visited the village in December of 2003, I heard another tragic story. It was a topic of conversation in every household. A sixty-year-old man had attempted to rape a twelve-year-old girl, an HIV/AIDS orphan who had migrated with her grandmother from an adjacent district to stay with him. He was the grandmother's brother. Villagers talked about the change in sexual morality and related this change to the widespread distribution of pornographic films and VCDs presenting semi-nude dancers. This event caused anxiety among parents and grandparents with young daughters or nieces. It seemed that in addition to the uncontrollable changes affecting the village, parents now had to be concerned about protecting their children from sexual harassment. Before this tragic incident happened, villagers felt safe to let girls play at their friends' houses or in the village's public areas. Sometimes the girls would come back home in the late evening.

Not only have the social ties and morality in this village been undermined, the Buddhist religion that used to bring social coherence to this heterogeneous community has also changed. At the beginning of the last decade, when the population significantly increased, the village was divided into two villages, each with its own Buddhist temple. People who previously performed religious activities at the same temple were no longer connected. The two Buddhist temples have different religious activities and objectives. The older and bigger of the temples, Wat San Nong Bua, has changed its role and now provides formal education to Buddhist novices from poor families from different districts and provinces. The new temple is located in a public area that has been used as a cremation ground (*pa cha*). This temple, with a young abbot and a strong temple committee of laypersons, is the place where local villagers practice their ritual ceremonies. Moreover, there is another huge meditation temple located on the top of a mountain near the village. This temple seems to have

been established for the benefit of a few relatively rich families in the village, and for people outside the village who wish to practice meditation.

It can be concluded that the great degree of mobility in working male and female villagers considerably affects changes in family ties and morality. Although the economic problems of the family can be largely addressed through the income that migrants send home, those who are left behind have to cope with complicated social problems.

3.3.1 History of Change and Migration

Ban San Maha Po is a rather new village compared to Ban Mae Lan. Although it was a small village when it was established in the 1960s, it is now administratively divided into two villages. The first village goes by the old name of Ban San Maha Po, and the second village is called Ban Nong Bua. According to the official district survey of 2005, the two villages have about 300 and 250 households, respectively. The name Ban San Maha Po is a combination of two words, *san* and *maha po*. *San* means ridge and *maha po* is the name of a huge tree. Ban San Maha Po or San Maha Po village indicates a village located on a knoll with a prominent big Po tree. The age of the village is about fifty years. Villagers refer to it as Ban Gang Kae. *Gang kae* is a popular dish in the upper northern region of Thailand. It is composed of a variety of vegetables cooked with chicken, pork or fish and chilies. The name of the village refers to the mixed characteristics of the people and cultures in the village. Since villagers migrated from several districts in Chiang Rai and from various provinces in Northeastern Thailand, the village has a mixture of Northern and Northeast Thai culture. The first village headman explained that in the 1950s, this was a sparsely populated forest area. The first people who had settled here were mostly landless villagers and had left their natal villages to find new land here. The forest was cleared and turned into numerous paddy fields. Seeing the success of the pioneer migrants, other groups were stimulated to migrate to the village. In most cases, they were relatives or former neighbors. According to the history of the village as related by the first village headman, the different groups of migrants tended to

settle in clusters. This must be one of the reasons why we find numerous clusters in the village, and why each cluster is quite heterogeneous.

In 1960, about ten families that had moved from Ban Ta, a large village located at the other side of the Ta River, had collected enough money to buy land from the Tai Lue, an ethnic group that possessed fertile land in the settlement.¹ The present site of the village used to be land that belonged to the Tai Lue people. In 1965, a village temple, Wat San Nong Bua, was set up at a location that once was a village spirit house of the Tai Lue. It is significant that before the early 1970s, Ban San Maha Po was situated along the administrative border of Mueang district and another large district of Chiang Rai province. It was therefore located at the periphery of the administrative centers of these two districts. During the first years of settlement, the village was most likely an area that the government could not easily control. Some of the first settlers explained that fifty years ago the area was full of people who had broken the law or had had serious quarrels with their neighbors. In 1975, Ban San Maha Po changed from a peripheral village into a central government district when it was integrated into a newly established district, the San Maha Po District. The establishment of various government offices, such as the district office, police station, hospital and agricultural bank, including the construction of new business buildings, brought considerable change to the village. Although few people moved to settle in the center of this new district, those who did so in this period became rather rich. They bought land from villagers and some developed businesses such as groceries, a small hotel and restaurants.

The two-lane highway from the provincial city of Chiang Rai to the Lao border, which was constructed in the 1990s under the Economic Quadrangle Project, did not have a large impact on the social and economic life of the villagers.² An indirect impact of this development project came from the connection of the village road to this highway. Some villagers sold their land near the road and then occupied

¹ The Ta River or *Mae Nam Ta* is a branch of the Wang River, one of the four main rivers of the Northern Region—the Ping, Wang, Yom and Nan. These four rivers flow southward and later become united in the Chao Phraya River.

² The Economic Quadrangle Project was set up in the 1990s by China, Burma, Laos and Thailand and was aimed at the cooperative development of a special economic zone.

forest land close to the village, where they built new houses. Since the whole village was situated a great distance from the city of Chiang Rai and the Lao border, and the villagers possessed only a small amount of flat land, they could not get rich from selling their land, as happened with villagers in Ban Mae Lan of Chiang Mai. The road that connected the village with the highway did, however, have a big impact on the nearby forests. Over the past decade, more and more of these forests have been converted into small orchards, farms and houses.

Although villagers have been more exposed to local government interventions, the most extensive change in Ban San Maha Po and adjacent villages has been the out-migration of labor. Generally, the land in this area was not fertile enough to support agricultural production throughout the whole year. Only people with land near the river could grow other crops after the rice harvest, such as watermelons. Not only the aridity of the land, but also the necessity of high financial investments and the uncertain price of agricultural products were factors that influenced people in this area to become wage laborers. Most villagers have therefore migrated to other areas in search of work, either temporarily or permanently. After the rice harvest, villagers who are able to work leave the village. During this period, the village is occupied by older persons, children and a few middle-aged villagers who prefer to work in agriculture. At present, villagers continue to move to other places, both in Thailand and overseas. Some of them leave for a long period. Men and married women mostly work in construction, whereas young girls often become sex workers far away from home, some in Singapore, Korea and Japan. But people do not only migrate out of the village. Some villagers have married and returned to live at home with their partners and children. The village thus has great variety, with marriage partners often coming from different places or even from foreign countries, while permanent residents and less mobile villagers mostly come from the Northeast of Thailand.

3.3.2 Towards a Better Life Amidst Unpredictable Threats

The villagers refer to *khwam thansamai* (modernity) mainly through the tangible objects that came with the road and represent what grocery shops, video and VCD shops, internet and playstation shops, and beauty salons can offer them. Through these concrete modern objects, life in the rural areas seems to become less boring. Teenagers may be happy with the internet and playstation, whereas the men and sometimes the married women may choose to spend their free time watching videos. They may rent or buy cheap movies from the mobile market (*talad nud*) that comes to the village once a month. Government officials and a few rich women can enjoy making themselves more attractive in the beauty salons by means of the latest hair colors and hairstyles. DVD players, stereos, refrigerators, motorcycles and washing machines have become basic necessities of life. These modern facilities certainly put people in debt. It should be noted that the villagers of Ban San Maha Po have more experience with the dark side of modernity than those of Ban Mae Lan. In the 1990s, a large number died of HIV/AIDS. Most of them had worked as construction workers or commercial sex workers. Some of them disappeared after they went to foreign countries. There are therefore many HIV/AIDS orphans at present. Although people are accustomed to seeing and experiencing the dark side of modern life, they tend to link these negative consequences to the individual's bad fate or bad karma (bad luck or *chok mai di*). It is not modernity itself that causes the problems. It seems that for the villagers, *khwam thansamai* is the same as progress and a better (economic) life. It therefore forces them to take risks to earn more money. This can be concluded from the fact that they make every effort to access modern life.

To avoid bad luck or *chok mai di* and to acquire good luck or *chok di*, people need supernatural powers and/or ritual ceremonies to overcome the obstacles that can hinder in their search for a better life. They tend to pay much attention to preventing uncontrollable influences on their journey to a better life. The result is a proliferation of ritual ceremonies conducted by ritual specialists or magical healers. A better life in this sense means a life that is better than that of a farmer or construction worker, in Thailand with their constant work and economic hardships. Becoming rich and

leading a comfortable life seems to be the index of success. People therefore still dare to take risks in order to grasp the bright side of modern life.

3.4 Articulating Modernity

Being involved in a fluctuating economy, having full knowledge of the high risks to be faced and feeling powerless, the villagers of Ban San Maha Po find themselves forced to look for traditional ways to get the inner strength to withstand unpredictable threats.

The local people who have left the area are now widely dispersed and have become involved in various kinds of risks. Those who have worked abroad as commercial sex workers, for example, not only ran the risk of being infected with HIV/AIDS, but also of being exploited by brothel owners, harmed by clients or killed by criminals. Similar situations might affect illegal or legal laborers who go to work in foreign countries. They might return home rich—or insolvent because they have been cheated. It seemed that villagers who worked within Thailand felt less risk than those who worked abroad. Although almost all of the villagers were aware of the negative side of becoming a migrant laborer abroad, they were nevertheless still eager to take the chance. They were strongly motivated by the economic success displayed in the big Western style houses or traditional teak houses, together with cars and other modern facilities that were the result of outcome remittances from overseas.

Compared to the villagers of Ban Mae Lan, those of Ban San Maha Po and nearby villages reproduced their familiar beliefs as a means of coping with uncertainties in numerous and explicit ways. Furthermore, almost all ritual ceremonies practiced by the local people were done so in response to individual problems. Most of these ceremonies functioned to strengthen the inner power of individual persons to withstand daily threats. These rituals included, for example, *phi thi su khwan* and *phi thi seub chata*. There were also several magical healers who could conduct a ritual ceremony whenever a villager needed help. Collective traditions reproduced by the entire village and aimed at reconnecting divided villagers as found in Ban Mae Lan, however, were quite rare.

3.4.1 Reproduction of *phi thi su khwan*

One day in December of 2003, I followed *Lung nan* Soet, a famous ritual specialist in soul calling (*mo su khwan*) in the village, as I wanted to observe how he performed his ritual ceremonies.³ This day was the most auspicious day (*wan maha mongkon*) of the past three months. Several people had therefore invited him to perform an individual ritual ceremony. Four *phi thi su khwan* were planned for different purposes. In fact, there were four *mo su khwan* in this area, but *Lung nan* Soet was the busiest of them all. The gentle and charming rhythm of his chanting in Northern Thai language was an important reason why he was chosen to perform the ritual. Moreover, he was believed to be most effective and was able to perform the whole set of ritual ceremonies, including expelling bad spirits and misfortune (*lai phi* and *sado khro*), and calling *khwan*.

At seven o'clock in the morning, I arrived at *Lung nan* Soet's house. His simple single storey concrete house was near the cremation grounds (*pa cha*). Today he did not go to work in the paddy fields since he had to perform *su khwan* rituals for individuals who had requested his services in advance. *Lung nan* Soet was dressed in a formal white shirt and trousers. A middle-aged woman entered with *suai dok mai*, an offering composed of flowers with candles and joss sticks kept in a small conical container made of a banana leaf. It is a symbol of respect and with it, she intended to invite *Lung nan* Soet to perform the ritual ceremony. He received this offering and told me that this woman was the wife of Tun, a man who had been sick for nearly three years and whose illness could not be diagnosed by the doctors at the hospital.

After a cup of coffee, *Lung nan* Soet took a black case that contained his ritual elements (among them old money such as cowrie shells and one-satang coins, fangs

³*Lung* means uncle. *Nan* is a traditional Northern Thai word used as a prefix for men who have been previously ordained as Buddhist monks; *noi* is a prefix for those who have been previously ordained as Buddhist novices. In the old times, Northern Thai monks and novices had to learn Northern Thai language (*kham mueang*) and all of them learned *khatha*. The *khatha* or magical spells are believed to convey supernatural power. Each *khatha* has a specific function, such as expelling bad spirits, removing toxic substances from the body or healing wounds. Since most of the *khatha* are recorded in Northern Thai language or Pali, people who have access to these magical spells are mostly Buddhist monks, *noi* and *nan*. It is believed that *nan* have stronger *khatha* than *noi* since they have spent more time in the monkhood and have had the opportunity to learn more *khatha*.

and horns of wild animals) and Northern Thai manuscripts in the form of ritual manuals (*pab sa*). His dressing style and the manner in which he carried the case and the ritual manuals made him more look like a businessman than a ritual specialist. He was planning to visit Nuan, a fifty-year-old Northeastern woman who was married to a man from Ban San Maha Po, and was expected to blow *khatha* over her dislocated right shoulder-joint and her infected right leg. While driving his old pick-up truck to Nuan's house, a man on a motorcycle with his daughter on the back stopped us. He had been headed to *Lung nan Soet's* house to request a bottle of magical water (*nam mon*) for his wife, who was one of *Lung nan Soet's* patients. *Lung nan Soet* asked about the wife's stomach-ache, which now appeared to be much better. Since I sat in the front seat of his car, I could clearly observe the simple ceremony that he pulled over to conduct near a narrow muddy lane. He blew magical spells (*khatha*) into a bottle of water and gave it back to the man. The man received the sanctified bottle of water and returned to his sick wife, while we drove on to Nuan's house. Her house was a small, roughly built cement house with a cattle-stable in the back. When we arrived, *Lung nan Soet* had a short talk and then blew *khatha* over Nuan's dislocated right shoulder-joint and her swollen right leg. He said that five days ago it had been more swollen and red. I had learned from Nuan that she had had a motorcycle accident a few weeks ago when she and her deceased son were traveling from work in the city of Phayao, a nearby province. She had already been treated in the hospital but did not have enough money to pay for surgery. She did not want to be in debt and decided to save the money instead for the surgical fee for her little son. Despite her disability, she was still able to work in the paddy fields near her house and take care of a herd of cattle.

At nearly ten o'clock in the morning we arrived at Tun's house. He was approximately forty years old and looked pale and thin. He was lying on a reed mat spread on the floor outside his bedroom when we arrived. His wife, his mother and a few relatives were busy preparing ritual offerings and food. *Lung nan Soet* conducted a ritual ceremony to expel bad luck (*sado khro*), which took quite some time. He loudly recited *khatha* for chasing away bad luck and bad spirits from Tun's body. This *khatha* could be understood because it was said loudly in Northern Thai and not

in Pali language like the chanting of Buddhist monks. The *khatha* was blown into a plastic water bucket. He stirred the water with leaves from a special tree, *bai nad* or the leaves of a plant called *nad*, which are believed to expel bad spirits. The morning's ceremony finished with another bath for Tun with this magical sanctified bathing water. Before noon, *Lung nan* Soet finished another ceremony, calling *khwan* for a newly married couple at the house of the bride. After lunch at this house, he continued to another house to perform another *phi thi su khwan* at an unfinished house for a twenty-year-old male who would travel the next morning to work at a famous orange juice factory in Bangkok. We went back to Tun's house at nearly four o'clock in the evening to conduct another ritual ceremony to call Tun's *khwan* back.

The account of *Lung nan* Soet's day presented above shows how local people reproduce their familiar beliefs to articulate themselves within the context of modernity. Traditionally, the *phi thi su khwan* is organized in transitional periods of life when people need social and spiritual support. It is conducted, for example, during wedding ceremonies, before a bride or a groom move in to live with a new family, or when people experience serious threats of their lives such as an accident or severe illness. *Phi thi su khwan* in this traditional sense are still practiced in combination with modern style ceremonies. A couple may, for example, engage in a *phi thi su khwan* on the morning of their wedding day and hold a modern party in the evening. Patients go to hospitals for treatment by modern doctors and then have this ritual ceremony performed to strengthen their life essence or *khwan*.

The *phi thi su khwan* is perceived differently by different groups. For persons who feel that they face threats or risky situations, the *phi thi su khwan* is very meaningful. It not only gives a person the feeling of being empowered because a ritual specialist has called their *khwan* back into their physical body (*tua*), but what they experience is precisely the feeling that their family members love them and are concerned about them. These family members and relatives prepare all ritual objects and engage themselves in the ritual ceremonies that are performed by this specific type of specialist. After the ritual specialist has finished chanting to call the *khwan* back to the body, parents and all elder relatives tie the wrist of the person with cotton

threads that hang over the *bai si* tray and wish them good health, happiness and good luck.⁴ When the whole ritual ceremony is finished, the chicken and rice liquor used in the ceremony is distributed to relatives in the belief that it is sacred. Additional food and whisky that has already been prepared also forms a part of a special meal. Traditionally, the cotton threads are kept tied to the wrists for three days. After that, the threads are kept near the Buddha image or under one's pillow.

We can interpret this ritual ceremony as a way of culturally empowering villagers before they leave their village to face unpredictable threats or after returning from facing such threats. In the *phi thi su khwan*, not only is the *khwan* repositioned and connected to its *tua*, but the social body is also repositioned so that the *tua* and *khwan* are reunited and tied to their families and societies. People who leave the village always carry these cotton threads and/or keep them in their bedrooms.

People who are not currently facing uncontrollable threats or risky conditions interpret this ritual ceremony as an expression of the love and care of parents and beloved ones. They still keep the cotton threads on a respected place, as they have internalized the belief of *khuet-mongkon*. The cotton threads used in a ritual ceremony are sacred objects that should not be thrown away or kept on an inappropriate place such as on the floor. Moreover, through this ceremony, the *khwan* is re-attached to the physical body through those threads. Proper care of the threads means taking good care of the *khwan*.

Chai, a thirty seven year old male, said that every year, he, his brothers and their families return home for the Northern Thai New Year's day. His mother *Mae Nguan* would arrange a *phi thi su khwan* for all of them. This is his opinion about the meaning of the *phi thi su khwan*:

⁴ *Bai si* are made into a high tray with layers of banana leaves decorating a silver bowl. On the tips of this leaves hang spun cotton threads. Inside the bowl is a boiled chicken, a small lump of sticky rice and a ripe banana. The bowl is placed on a long-foot tray.

My mother lives alone. I know that she feels lonesome, but we have to work in Bangkok. She waits for us every [Northern Thai] New Year and feels happy to see us come together at the house. Arranging the *phi thi su khwan* for us means giving me spiritual support (*hai kam lang chai*, literally means providing power to the mind). This support is not only provided to me but to her as well. She is worried about our trip back home since we have to drive a car for nearly ten hours. For me, it does not matter whether or not we are involved in this ceremony. But it is a golden period for the *mo su khwan* to earn extra money. When I arrive at my home in Bangkok, I just take the sacred white threads off from my wrists and keep them on the Buddha shelf.

3.4.2 Proliferation of Magic-Related Healers

Since the people in this and the adjacent villages were continuously faced with the uncertainties of life, they did not feel fully satisfied with the ritual ceremonies conducted in the Buddhist temples, as these ceremonies were mainly directed at a better next life. They seemed to prefer the ritual ceremonies conducted by magical healers and ritual specialists to cope with 'this life's here and now problems'. There was therefore an abundance of magical healers and ritual specialists. It is remarkable that a large number of traditional healers in this and surrounding villages had provided their services openly for more than two decades since 1985. The reason is that their work constantly has been legitimized by the San Maha Po district hospital and the local academic institute of Rajaphat Chiang Rai University through a long-term cooperative program that intended to revitalize traditional and alternative medical treatment. Besides the previously mentioned *mo su khwan*, there were other traditional healers, for example the *mo sa-ne* or love potion specialists, the *phi mo-nueng* or *ya mo-nueng* and the *chao song* (in Central Thai *rang song*), or spirit mediums.

Mo sa-ne literally means a specialist who concocts a love potion that makes people fall in love. He holds ritual ceremonies and provides amulets to commercial sex workers, merchants and women who are confronted with bad marriages. *Chao*

song or spirit mediums perform various ritual ceremonies. Besides services that are similar to *mo sa-ne*, they give ritual and herbal treatments to chronically ill persons. Two female healers, known as *phi mo-nueng*, expanded their services to alleviate new problems, for example calling back disappeared offspring (such as daughters who work as commercial sex workers abroad) by disturbing their *khwan* that was partly attached to their belongings. Traditionally, *phi mo nueng* provide services by asking spirits to stay at a *mo nueng* (the pot and container set used to steam sticky rice) to give a diagnosis and suggestions to the parents and the relatives. Another famous ritual specialist was *Mae Ya*, an older female healer who provided a complementary form of ritual healing. While the ritual ceremonies carried out by the *mo su khwan* were rather traditional in form, they were expanded to serve people who felt uncertain in the modern era. The ceremony conducted by *Mae Ya* was basically an integration of various ritual ceremonies. Her ritual practices also included ceremonies traditionally conducted by male ritual specialists or Buddhist monks. The whole range of *Mae Ya*'s services thus included fortune telling, ritual ceremonies to address clients' bad fortune such as extending life (*seub chata*), expelling bad luck (*sado khro*, traditionally conducted by male ritual specialists) and offering food to deities or to deceased ancestors (traditionally carried out by Buddhist monks).

3.4.3 Reinvented Local History

Not only was this area rich in traditional healers and traditional treatments, the district government had also constructed a ritual ceremony related to the glorification of the myth of Phraya Meng Rai, a famous ruler of the Lanna Kingdom (r.1261-1311). A statute of Phraya Meng Rai was built and housed in a small building called *san chao po meng rai*, a spirit house of Phraya Meng Rai. This concrete building replaced a local spirit house, a small old wooden spirit house without statues that the local people called *san pu tong*. It was located in a sacred forest surrounded by rice fields. Not only was a new building constructed, but a newly invented yearly tradition of paying respect to Phraya Meng Rai (*wai sa phraya mang rai*) during the Northern Thai New Year's day was also officially established in a big communal ceremony. The history of this sacred forest as a resting place for Phraya Meng Rai's troops was

related to the history of the province. *San chao pho meng rai* became a sacred place of worship for local people and those residing in adjacent districts and provinces. It was, however, only when the bureaucracy organized the ritual ceremony that the *san chao pho meng rai* was attended by government officials. Normally local people could easily access this place. An old man who lived nearby was hired by the local government to play the role of a ritual medium. He not only instructed people in preparing suitable offerings, but also invited the spirit of Phraya Meng Rai to receive the offerings. The people expected to receive a blessing from the spirit of Phraya Meng Rai that would help them to successfully cope with life's problems, such as help with an application for a work permit in a foreign country or an application for further education, a decreased risk of harvest failure, or assistance in finding of a daughter who works as a commercial sex worker abroad.



Phi thi su kwhan



Phi mo-nueng



Phi thi sado khro



Worship of *san chao pho meng*

Figure 3.1 A variety of ritual ceremonies conducted by the people of Ban San Maha Po

3.5 Conclusion

With a life span of approximately fifty years and a population that continuously migrates near and far, the social cohesion of Ban San Maha Po is rather weak compared to that of Ban Mae Lan. While Ban Mae Lan has experienced a gradual introduction to modernity, Ban San Maha Po has faced rapid change due to temporary and permanent migration of young and middle-aged villagers. This change is certainly the result of modern government projects, which are implemented on a national scale to turn Thailand into an industrialized country. Constant labor migration has destroyed the social cohesion of Ban San Maha Po and has led to destructive change. The Buddhist monks and temples offer no substantial help in the restoration of weakening social ties and morality. Eclectic Northern Thai beliefs, especially the belief in spirits, which has been continuously practiced and is embodied in daily activities, offers crucial principles to the people of Ban San Maha Po to cope with their massive physical, social and spiritual displacement. This revitalized belief tends, however, to serve 'individual' persons in their efforts to succeed in the context of modernity.