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# Tying the Hand: Life Sustaining Technique in Northern Thailand

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**Abstract:** In Thai folk thought, human life is believed to be sustained and animated by a life essence or soul spirit called *khwan*. At certain times of crisis, the *khwan* tends to leave the body, and its temporary absence causes suffering including sickness and misfortune. Thai people therefore perform rituals to recall the *khwan* to their bodies when they are in a state of suffering. They also perform rituals to bind the *khwan* to their bodies in order to contain it within the body and prevent it from leaving when they are in a state of transition. This article explores these rituals concerning *khwan* in northern Thailand. The focus of anthropological studies on *khwan* and the related rituals has been on the meaning of the words and the function of the whole process of the rituals. In contrast to this, I demonstrate the importance of the body techniques, routines, and sensory experiences as well as the spoken messages of the recitations in the rituals. In these rituals, elders or healers bind *khwan* to the body of the participants by tying a piece of cotton thread to each of the participant's wrists. I argue that this action – *mat mue*, which means “tying the hand” – forms the heart of the ritual.

**Keywords:** *khwan*, northern Thailand, body technique, routine, sensory experience

In Thai folk thought, human life is believed to be sustained and animated by a life essence or soul spirit called *khwan*. *Khwan* has been variously interpreted and translated as soul, life force,<sup>1</sup> vital essence, among others.<sup>2</sup> Anuman Rajadhon describes it as “something in the nature of a principle of life, vital to the welfare of man and animals”.<sup>3</sup> He presumes that it originally had the same

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<sup>1</sup> Tannenbaum 1995: 172.

<sup>2</sup> Eberhardt 2006: 181.

<sup>3</sup> Anuman Rajadhon 1962: 119. As in conventional usage, Thai names are referred to by their first names in the text and are entered in the list of references according to first names with full surnames after that.

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meaning as the Chinese word *hun* (魂) which means soul or spirit.<sup>4</sup> There are two Thai words that can be translated as soul. One is *khwan* and the other is *winyan*. *Winyan* is derived from *vinana*, a Pali word which means consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Tambiah explains of the two contrasting concepts that “[*k*]hwan is associated with life and the vicissitudes of life; *winjan* is associated with death and the vicissitudes after death”.<sup>6</sup> As Kato and Kawano describe, *khwan* is thought to vanish at death, while *winyan* is thought to survive after death.<sup>7</sup> Tidawan even explains that *khwan* is changed into *winyan* after death.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it is believed that everyone is a reincarnated soul of an ancestor, and that the identity, character, behaviour, fate and karma of the reincarnated ancestor are embedded in a person’s *khwan*.<sup>9</sup> Stressing this relationship with the idea of reincarnation in northern Thailand, Davis translates *khwan* as “psychic energy elements”.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to humans, some animals, plants, and inanimate things useful to humans such as buffalo, rice, boats, house poles, and drums are treated as having *khwan*.<sup>11</sup> Thai people say that a human being has thirty-two *khwan* corresponding to various parts of the body, although no one can actually name the thirty-two *khwan* or the body parts in which they reside.<sup>12</sup> These thirty-two *khwan* collectively comprise a unity for each person.

The connection between the *khwan* and the tangible body is, however, unstable. At certain times of crisis, the *khwan* tends to leave the body, and its temporary absence causes suffering including sickness and misfortune.<sup>13</sup> In the Thai Government Dictionary that Kingshill quotes, it is said of *khwan* “... if the *khuan* is with the person, everything is in excellent condition, the person is happy and well, has a steadfast mind; if a person is frightened or sorrowful, his *khuan* has left his body – this is called ‘loss of *khuan*’ or ‘escape of *khuan*’ or ‘flight of *khuan*’; this causes the person to receive all sorts of evil”.<sup>14</sup> The evil includes spirits (*phi*). For Northern Thai people, there are various kinds of spirits including guardian spirits such as ancestor spirits (*phi pu ya*), village spirits (*phi chaoban*), and the spirit of *mueang*, or the guardian spirit of the

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<sup>4</sup> Anuman Rajadhon 1962: 120. Anuman described as ‘*khwan*’, but it should be ‘*hun*’.

<sup>5</sup> Anuman Rajadhon 1962: 121, Davis 1984: 61.

<sup>6</sup> Tambiah 1970: 59.

<sup>7</sup> Kato/Kawano 1992: 20.

<sup>8</sup> Tidawan 2006: 145.

<sup>9</sup> Tidawan 2006: 150.

<sup>10</sup> Davis 1984: 61.

<sup>11</sup> Anuman Rajadhon 1962: 119, Kato/Kawano 1992: 23.

<sup>12</sup> Tambiah 1970: 223.

<sup>13</sup> Tambiah 1970: 223.

<sup>14</sup> Kingshill 1976: 201.

traditional state (*pojaoluang*). People also say that there are evil spirits (*phi taihong*) which are the spirits of those who have died in ways considered particularly tragic such as dying suddenly or by accident when young. Illnesses are thought to be caused either by a guardian spirit as punishment for a patient's misconduct or by an evil spirit which desires something. Some people, especially children and women, who are perceived as more susceptible to soul loss than others, are said to have weak or soft souls<sup>15</sup> (*khwan on*). Eberhardt explains that “[w]eak *khwan* are easily frightened off, vacating the body and making it easy for a hungry *phi* to enter. [...] In contrast, strong *khwan* stay put in the body and, as long as they are there, no *phi* will enter”.<sup>16</sup> Based on this perception of the weakness and strength of *khwan*, Kato and Kawano suggest that the word *khwan* refers not only to life energy or essence, but also to a psychic particularity or state.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Eberhardt states that the invasion of *phi* into the body sometimes causes *khwan* to flee.<sup>18</sup> *Khwan* loss is thus sometimes caused by *phi* invasion, while *phi* invasion is sometimes caused by *khwan* loss.

Based on the logic above, Thai people perform rituals concerning *khwan* at various occasions. There are two kinds of rituals related with *khwan*. The first are the rituals to recall lost *khwan* to bodies when people are in a state of suffering. The second are the rituals to bind the *khwan* firmly to people's bodies in order to contain it and prevent it from leaving when people are in a state of transition. This article explores these rituals in northern Thailand.

The beliefs and practices concerning the *khwan*, as well as those concerning *phi*, are said to be indigenous to Tai<sup>19</sup> peoples, and are often contrasted with Buddhism and Hinduism which were introduced to the area at a later date. It should be noted, however, that the beliefs and practices of these religions and those of the indigenous Tai peoples influence one another in many respects. For example, Brahmanical spells, medicine and ritual techniques, as well as Buddhist texts and symbols are found in the practices associated with *khwan* and *phi*<sup>20</sup> as will be described in this paper.

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<sup>15</sup> Eberhardt 2006: 41.

<sup>16</sup> Eberhardt 2006: 44.

<sup>17</sup> Kato/Kawano 1992: 21.

<sup>18</sup> Eberhardt 2006: 33.

<sup>19</sup> Tai is a term referring to an ethno-linguistic group of people from Assam in India to the Gulf of Tonkin and from the Malaysian peninsula to Southern China. It includes Shan, Lao, Isan, Northern Thai, Central Thai, Upland Tai (Black, Red and White Tai) found in Southeast Asia (Sparks 2005: 225).

<sup>20</sup> Sparks 2005: 4–5.



There are a number of anthropological studies on *khwan* and the related rituals. Tambiah,<sup>21</sup> for example, analyzed the *su khwan* ritual, a northeastern version of the “calling the *khwan*” ritual, which is very similar to that of northern Thailand, as a communication device. He focused on the words recited rather than the physical acts and the manipulation of objects during the ritual, arguing that the words recited differentiated one kind of *su khwan* ritual from another and suggesting the content of the recitations was the most important and essential part of the rite for villagers.

The studies on *khwan* in northern Thailand tend to focus on the notion of rebirth. Based on the description of the *mat mue* ritual for babies, that is, the rite in which a white cotton thread is tied around each of a frequently crying baby’s wrist to bind the *khwan* to the body, Kato and Kawano demonstrate that the ritual is the occasion on which the ancestor who has been reborn in the child is identified.<sup>22</sup> Tidawan, who conducted fieldwork in the village in Mae Jaem where I have been working, reveals how personhood and identity are transmitted through *khwan*, and how the formation of kinship is a process that occurs through the struggle of illness and healing management.<sup>23</sup>

Tannenbaum, who deals with Shan rites of passage such as the first month bathing ceremony for babies and the wedding ceremony, mentions that compared to other Tai groups, having one’s wrist tied is unusual for Shan, except for small children, newlyweds, or the ill. He also noted that “what is important for Shan is the blessing rather than the *khwan* calling.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Eberhardt examines the *khwan* calling ceremony of Shan as a healing ritual to show how the process of the ritual recovers the proper separation of *khwan*, which belong to the living, and *phi*, which belong to the dead.<sup>25</sup>

The focus of the studies above is on the meaning of the words and the function of the whole process of the rituals. In contrast to this, I demonstrate the importance of the body techniques, routines, and sensory experiences they elicit as well as the spoken messages of the recitations in the rituals. While Eberhardt mentions some sensory aspects including spectacularity, balance, and audibility, these were not her principal focus. Where Tidawan argues that kinship ideology in Mae Jaem is “not conceptualised in terms of blood or substance, but a spiritual essence which is intangible and immaterial”,<sup>26</sup> I will demonstrate that

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<sup>21</sup> Tambiah 1970.

<sup>22</sup> Kato/Kawano 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Tidawan 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Tannenbaum 1995: 172.

<sup>25</sup> Eberhardt 2006: 28–45.

<sup>26</sup> Tidawan 2006: 161.

villagers treat *khwan* as if it is a substance as well as an agent. I will also analyze the ritual chants, but I will focus on the performative aspects rather than on the meaning of the chants. The conditions of the rituals concerning *khwan* can be seen as what Chau defines as “social sensorium”, a “*sensorially rich social space*”.<sup>27</sup> Chau highlighted “*the active participatory role of human agents as makers of the social sensorium*”.<sup>28</sup> In particular, in all of these rituals, elders or healers bind the *khwan* to the body of the participants by tying a piece of cotton thread to each of the participant’s wrists. I argue that this action – *mat mue*, which means “tying the hand” – forms the heart of the ritual. Indeed, Northern Thai people often call all these rituals just “*mat mue*”.<sup>29</sup>

## 1 Fieldwork location

This paper is based on my anthropological fieldwork since 1995 with a group of Yuan (Khon Mueang) or Northern Thai lowlanders living in a rural village in Mae Jaem District in Chiang Mai Province. The village had a population of 781 and 182 households in 1995, and a population of 820 and 212 households in 2010. Villagers speak Lanna (Kham Mueang), which is said to be originally the language of Lanna Thai, a conglomerate of Thai city-states which covered about the area of modern north Thailand between thirteenth and early twentieth Century.<sup>30</sup> Lanna has its own script, although very few people can read and write it today. During fieldwork, I speak Kham Mueang, but I do not read and write it.<sup>31</sup>

Lanna means “one million rice fields”. Almost all the villagers in Mae Jaem are farmers, although a large number of young villagers are away from the village to work or to study in the city of Chiang Mai, in other provinces, and even abroad. Villagers grow rice and soybeans for household consumption, vegetables and fruits both for their daily meals and for markets, and corn, which is a recently introduced cash crop. They grow rice on irrigated fields called *na* in the lowlands, while they grow corn and some vegetables on the unirrigated fields called *hai* on the hills. Soybeans are grown on *na* after harvesting rice. Other vegetables and fruits are grown in gardens and orchards

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<sup>27</sup> Chau 2008: 489, emphasis original.

<sup>28</sup> Chau 2008: 488, emphasis original.

<sup>29</sup> Anuman Rajadhon 1962: 158.

<sup>30</sup> Penth 1994: v.

<sup>31</sup> I once studied reading and writing Lanna, but I could not acquire it because of the scarce opportunity of using it.

called *suan* in and near houses. The villagers' staple food is sticky rice. They make liquor as well as various kinds of sweets out of it. Soybeans are also a staple for villagers as they use soybeans to make a fermented food called *thua nao* to use for various kinds of dishes such as soups and chili paste.

The village is built in a clustered fashion. Although I do not deal with the Northern Thai kinship system, the subject of much debate,<sup>32</sup> in detail here, I mention some points related to this volume. Khon Mueang consider their kindred bilaterally with children inheriting the property of their parents equally. However, it is generally the youngest daughter who lives with her parents after marriage and inherits their house. When the eldest daughter marries, the new couple initially lives with the bride's parents, but when a younger daughter marries, the eldest daughter and her husband build their own house in or near her parents' residential area. As a result, their residential pattern tends to be matrilineal. In addition, male villagers tend to prefer village endogamy so they can keep their previous social relationships although they have to move into the houses of their fathers-in-law.<sup>33</sup> The head of household status tends to be transmitted from a father-in-law to his youngest daughter's husband. However, the succession of ancestor spirit (*phi pu ya*) is matrilineal. Children worship the same *phi pu ya* as their mother, but not their father, who worships the same *phi pu ya* as his mother.

Villagers used to live in raised-floor houses made of wood or bamboo, but almost all houses were rebuilt using the money earned by the younger generations working outside the village during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Today, most villagers live in two story houses, with the ground floor made of bricks and concrete and the first floor made of wood. While building materials were modernized, villagers' houses reflect their traditional worldview and social order. Khon Mueang social space is structured in terms of both high and low, and four directions. High as well as north and east positions are auspicious and highly valued, while low, south and west positions are considered inauspicious. In a house, the bedroom of the household head and his wife, which is called *nai huean* (in a house) is located in the east of the first floor. There is a shelf for *phi pu ya* attached to the upper part of the post on the eastern wall of *nai huean*, where the ancestral spirits are believed to stay and protect the household. A Buddha image is usually placed on the shelf in the east outside the bedroom. The kitchen is located either inside or outside of the house. The kitchen of the family with whom I stayed is in the northeast of the courtyard adjacent to the granary where they store their rice. Davis states that "[t]he kitchen area is in one

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<sup>32</sup> Potter 1976, 1977, Hinton ed. 1984, Rhum 1994.

<sup>33</sup> Potter 1976.

sense the focal point of the household, since a ‘family’ consists of a group of people who share food cooked on the same hearth”.<sup>34</sup>

I conducted long-term fieldwork there from September 1995 until May 1996 and from January until November 1999. In addition, I undertook a short period of fieldwork of a week or two in 1997 and have continued to do so almost every year since 2003 until today.

In the following description, I focus on two subjects. First, I will demonstrate how the soul substances are sensorially enacted and expelled. I will show this with regard to *phi* through the description of an exorcist ritual. Second, as other contributors to this volume, I will focus on another kind of technique for fortifying a person by keeping soul substances in the body. Rituals concerning *khwan* are examined to explore this.

## 2 Exorcist rituals

### 2.1 *The tat koet (cut the birth) ritual*

The following description is an example of an exorcism ritual called *tat koet* (cut the birth), which means “to exorcise the spirits of the parents in former life”. In March 1996, a nine-year-old girl had been ill for several days. She went to the hospital but her condition did not improve. A divination revealed that her parents from her former life were trying to take her to their realm. Her family decided to ask a local healer to conduct the ritual in their house. Healers in this article refer to the male villagers called *mo* (professional, doctor). Every healer has his own specialty including bone setting, fortunetelling, and exorcism. Healers are also knowledgeable about herbs. They have acquired their knowledge through apprenticeship and experience.

First, facing east and holding a bowl of offerings including flowers, betel nuts, and candles wrapped in a banana leaf, the healer recited charms to call his teachers to help him exorcise the evil spirit successfully. His voice was so low that no one could hear it. Next, he blew charms, again inaudible, into a bowl of water to make it holy, as well as into rice dough. He gave the dough to the patient’s grandfather who smeared the dough over the patient’s body and made a doll out of it. The doll, called “the white man” (*khon khao*), was a substitution for the patient and was put in the offering box placed in front of the entrance of the house. The healer explained later that the child was smeared with the dough

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34 Davis 1984: 51.

so as to rub the “bad thing” (*khong bo di*) off her body. The healer used cotton thread of three colors (white, black, and red) to tie the patient’s left leg to the offering box. He wrapped a banana stem around a section of the thread between the patient and the offering box so that the thread was on the inside of the stem and put it on a chopping board. The grandfather lit a candle in the offering box.

The healer then chanted Pali and Thai spells while holding a sword in his left hand. Using a branch with leaves, he sprinkled holy water from the patient’s body on the healer’s right towards the offering box on the healer’s left, encouraging the spirit to move from the patient to the offerings. In contrast to the charms recited earlier in a very low voice, the spells during this procedure were chanted very loudly, indicating that the healer was trying to exorcise the spirit from the patient’s body. The main body of the chanting says “the white man is yours, while the black man is mine. Take all of these offerings and let my black man go.” After five or ten minutes, the healer poured a cup of liquor into the offering box. He explained later that the spirit had come out of the patient’s body and had gone into the box at that very moment, so he made it drunk. After blowing spells into the offering box in a very low voice, the healer brought his raised sword down on the thread wrapped in the banana stem on the chopping board so as to cut the thread and the patient ran inside the innermost room. Villagers explained that the healer’s success in exorcising the evil spirit from the patient’s body depends upon being able to cut the thread with only one swing of the sword. If the healer failed to do so, he would have to repeat the entire ritual until he succeeded. The separation of spirit was thus enacted as a bodily felt multi-sensorial experience; the patient was smeared with the rice dough, the spell was shouted loudly, the water was sprinkled over the patient and some of the gathered crowd, and all participants heard the loud sound of the sword hitting the chopping board and witnessed that the thread was cut.

The patient’s grandfather brought the box with the drunken spirit outside of the inhabited area. The healer followed him to sprinkle sacred water outside before going back inside the house to recite charms for his teachers again and to turn the offering bowl upside down. According to the healer, the act of turning the bowl upside down indicates that the teachers can go back to their realm because “to turn upside down” in Northern Thai is “*pik*”, which also means “to go back”. Finally, the healer washed the tricolor thread with holy water, blew spells onto it, and hung a loop of it around the patient’s neck for protection from the spirit. He then tied the patient’s hands with white cotton thread and blew charms onto the knot of the white thread. I will explain the act of tying the hands with white cotton thread in detail in the next section.

In the *tat koet* ritual above, there were not only the patient and the healer but also the patient’s grandfather, grandmother and sister. Among them, it was



the healer who was most actively producing the social sensorium, chanting the spells, blowing the charms, tying the thread, sprinkling the holy water, pouring the liquor, and cutting the thread. The grandfather, however, also played an important role in making the sensorium by helping the healer. In addition, the grandmother was always beside the patient, so the nine-year-old girl would act properly without being frightened by the healer's loud voice. Just before the moment of cutting the thread on the chopping board, the climax of the ritual, the grandmother whispered to the patient that she needed to run into the innermost room soon. When the thread was cut, everyone reacted quickly; the patient ran, the grandfather brought the offering box outside, the healer sprinkled the holy water, and the patient's sister laughed. The laughter of the sister indicated relief after the tension. In Chau's words, when the participants in this ritual responded to the healer's swing of the sword with "multi-sensorial attention", we witnessed the "active sensorial production of the social".<sup>35</sup> It was after this separation of the spirit that the healer tied the patient's hands assuming that the *khwan* had returned.

Next, the technique for fortifying the person by keeping soul substances in the body is explored. It is used both to heal the body and to keep it healthy. In the following, I will examine rituals for calling back soul substances in the body before describing a ritual act for keeping the soul substances in the body.

### 3 "Calling the *khwan*" rituals

#### 3.1 *Hong khwan* (calling the *khwan*)

When a person becomes ill, Khon Mueang often perform *hong khwan* (calling the *khwan*) ritual. There are two kinds of *hong khwan* rituals depending on the symptoms of the patient: if it is not so serious, an elder socially close to the patient simply ties a piece of five-ply<sup>36</sup> white cotton thread to the patient's wrists to recall his/her *khwan*. White cotton thread is ubiquitous in Thailand. For example, it is employed for weaving clothing and bedding. Apart from the daily use cotton thread, the villagers of my fieldsite prepare sacred cotton thread for use in a variety of rituals. They bring a bundle of cotton thread to the shrine of the spirit of *mueang*, the guardian spirit of the traditional state (*pojaoluang*), at a New Year's ritual every year. The spirit medium possessed by the guardian

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<sup>35</sup> Chau 2008: 492.

<sup>36</sup> Sometimes they use three-ply thread.

spirit blows on the thread to make it sacred. Villagers use that sacred cotton thread for the “calling the *khwan*” rituals and other rites during the following year. For instance, one end of a piece of cotton thread was tied to a Buddha image and the other to a bowl of holy water to convey the power of the Buddha to the bowl during certain Buddhist rites.<sup>37</sup>

In the *hong khwan* ritual for a not severely ill patient, the patient sits with his/her hands, palms together, in front of him/her. The elder, while reciting set phrases, first uses a short piece of cotton thread to brush the patient’s hands from the wrists towards the fingertips (Figure 1), throwing the cotton thread away when finished. Villagers explain that they do this to get rid of misfortune (*kho*). The movement of brushing, wiping, rubbing, or sprinkling holy water as described above, starting with the center of the body and ending at the tip of the limbs, is often observed when villagers try to get rid of something including misfortune, poison, and evil spirits.<sup>38</sup>

Next, the elder ties a double length of cotton thread to the patient’s left wrist while reciting phrases such as “tie the left hand to make *khwan* come, tie the right hand to make it live well, eat well, and be happy” (*mat mue khang sai hue khwan ma mat mue khang khwa hue yu di kin di mi suk*), although a variation is also recited. The right is usually recognised as superior to the left in Khon Mueang’s space classification. In contrast to this, Davis states that the left is given precedence in “calling the *khwan*” rituals.<sup>39</sup>

The elder then breaks the thread using his/her hands as cutting the thread with scissors is not allowed. The elder repeats the tying and breaking of the thread procedure with patient’s right wrist (Figure 2). Finally, the patient joins his/her hands, palms together, in front of his/her breast to thank the elder. This entire sequence is called *mat mue*, meaning “tying the hand”. Following Humphry and Laidlaw, I consider this sequence the “archetypical action”<sup>40</sup> in the rituals concerning *khwan*, which repeatedly appears in the descriptions which follow here.

If the illness is relatively severe and a divination has revealed that it is caused by the loss of *khwan*, people make offerings of meat, typically boiled chicken, rice and water to the *khwan*. This usually happens in a bedroom (*nai huean*) on the first floor on a day chosen according to the lunar calendar. A cotton thread is placed along the offering tray. The patient holds one end of this

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<sup>37</sup> Davis 1984: 118.

<sup>38</sup> Iida 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Davis 1984: 80–81.

<sup>40</sup> Humphrey/Laidlaw 1994.





Figure 1: Getting rid of misfortune.



Figure 2: Tying the thread.

thread and the elder the other end as the elder does a recitation. Appendix 1 is an English translation of the chant used in a *hong khwan* ritual recorded in 1997. The words suggest that the *khwan* was seen to have left the patient's body and to have gone to the place or the world of spirits in the forest or river. The chants also suggest that the villagers tried to persuade the *khwan* to return to the body by making offerings. After this first chant, the elder performed *mat mue* while chanting (Part 2) and concluded, as mentioned above, by reciting phrases chanted in Buddhist ritual.

The words in Appendix 1 were chanted with melody. There are very few villagers today, however, who can chant like the elder in the recording. Most villagers only recite “tie the left hand to make *khwan* come, tie the right hand to make it live well, eat well, and be happy” without melody while tying the hands, as described in the ritual above without offerings. In contrast, more aged villagers could chant long spells with melody in the past. When the elderly man whose chants form Appendix 1 passed away, his family asked me for a copy of the recording. They said that this was not because they were interested in the words but because they liked his voice. This suggests that not only the meaning of the words chanted but more so the act of reciting and of *mat mue* that is important to the villagers.

After tying the hand, the patient eats the foods “together with *khwan*”. The patient must eat various parts of the animal offered to *khwan*. It is as if the patient tries to take the *khwan* that has come to the offerings into his/her body with the food.

### 3.2 *Hiak khwan* (calling the *khwan*)

In very severe cases, the *hiak khwan* (calling the *khwan*) ritual, which involves divination, is performed by a local healer at a patient's bedside.

The following is a description of a case I observed in 1997. The patient, a young man in his twenties, had severe diarrhea and stomachache, and, having lost his appetite, had lost a lot of weight. Villagers knew that the young man was HIV positive, because his partner, who had worked as a prostitute in another province, had died of AIDS. At that time, little treatment was available for HIV/AIDS and the treatment the young man had received at the hospital had proved ineffective. He visited a local healer in the village and, based on a divination, the healer told him that he had been bitten (*kat*) by an evil spirit. The young man visited another local healer to conduct an exorcism (*kae phi*), an adult version of *tat koet* ritual described above. Afterwards, his family decided to ask yet another healer to do the *hiak khwan* ritual.

The family arranged at the patient's bedside three kinds of fishing nets, a chain, a branch of a tree, food including rice, and a rice-steaming pot. This was, they said, to ask their ancestors to catch the young man's *khwan*. A rice-steaming pot, which is regarded as the centre of the hearth, is necessary for this ritual, because in it resides the most important spirit of the household called the Steaming Pot Old Woman (*phi ya mo nueng*) whose duty is to retrieve and watch over the departed *khwan* of ailing household members.<sup>41</sup> At night, relatives and neighbors gathered to watch the ritual. One end of a piece of cotton thread was tied to the offering box and the other was loosely wound around the patient's head. The local healer chanted the words for calling the *khwan* which were written in his notebook (Appendix 2, Part 1). The words suggested that they asked their ancestors to bring the *khwan* back from the world after death, namely the world of spirits, demons, giants, Garuda, Naga, and Erawan, to the human world.

Next, the healer recited in Pali, "*Namo tasa paka wato arahato samma samphuthasa*", meaning "we worship the blessed one, Arahato, supreme Lord Buddha", while holding a cup of rice. He said, "if the *khwan* comes, then give me an even number; if the *khwan* doesn't come, then give me an odd number". He put some rice on his notebook and counted the number of the grains. Then, he started chanting again (Appendix 2, Part 2).

The healer repeated the same procedure, reciting the words for calling the *khwan* and counting the rice grains, until he got an even number of grains three times in a row. This meant that the *khwan* had come back to the patient's body. While the villagers looked bored and sometimes chatted with each other while the healer was chanting, they were curious about the result of the divination, asking "was it even?" "was it odd?" After the third even number, the healer announced to the gathered crowd "many *khwan* have come." At the end of the ritual, the healer tied the patient's hands. Although the patient had been lying on the bed until that point, he woke up and sat for *mat mue*. The entire *hiak khwan* ritual was performed for three nights in a row.

## 4 Tying the hand (*mat mue*)

Villagers perform *mat mue* to bind the *khwan* firmly to their bodies in order to contain it within the body and prevent it from leaving when they are in a state of transition such as in the course of healing rituals and rites of passage, and when

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<sup>41</sup> Davis 1984: 51–52; Tidawan 2006: 143.



departing from home. In fact, *mat mue* is a rite that can be built into any ritual for keeping the soul substances in the body.

At the end of healing rituals, villagers bind the *khwan* which had left and then returned to the body to contain it within the body. For example, *mat mue* is performed at the end of various rituals concerning spirits (*phi*) such as a ritual to console the spirit (*liang phi, suma*). When a ten-year-old girl in the village was suffering from fever for several days in September 1997 despite the fact that she had gone to the health centre and the district hospital, a divination was performed which revealed that she had been bitten by the village spirit and the *mueang* spirit because of her misconduct. Her grandmother therefore prepared a pair of boiled chickens, betel nuts, flowers, rice, and holy water (*nam sompoy*) as offerings for the spirits and asked local healers to conduct *suma* (apologizing) rituals at these spirits' shrines. During these rituals, the patient was at school. But at the end of the ritual performed at the shrine called *dong* which is for the *mueang* spirit, the patient's grandfather brought the patient and her sister from school and asked the healer to do *mat mue* with them. This indicates that it is very important for villagers that the patient him/herself actually participates in *mat mue*, in contrast to the other procedures and parts of the ritual in which the patient's participation is not necessarily required.

When someone is easily tired and feels weak, Buddhist monks are invited from the village temple to conduct the “*suep chata*” (prolong the fate<sup>42</sup>) ritual at the patient's house. In this ritual, after chanting sutras and sprinkling holy water, the monk ties a piece of cotton thread to each of the patient's wrists. People are also seen to accumulate misfortune (*kho*) and need to get rid of this occasionally. The villagers sometimes explain that it is misfortune that causes illness and hence perform “*song kho*” (dismissing the misfortune) rituals. They bind the *khwan* at the end of this ritual as well.

It is possible that villagers contain the *khwan* in these rituals because they think or hope that the *khwan* has returned after the danger to it – spirit attack, meeting one's fate, and misfortune – has been removed. It is also possible to interpret “tying the hand” as an essential ritual act to finish a healing ritual by (re)integrating the person into a state of health.

When a person is experiencing transition from one social state to another, *khwan* tends to leave his/her body. Villagers therefore tie the hand in various kinds of rites of passage to bind the *khwan* to, and to prevent it from leaving from, the participant's body.

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<sup>42</sup> Some translate *chata* as “life” (Kingshill 1976: 247), and others as “fate” (Kato/Kawano 1993: 23; Tidawan, 2006: 143).

Binding the wrists is an important component of marriage proceedings and of ordination into monkhood.<sup>43</sup> In Khon Mueang society, as described above, it is usually the bridegroom who moves to live in or near the bride's family home. Villagers tie the bridegroom's hands before he leaves his home, and tie the couple's hands after the bridegroom moves into the bride's house. During the ordination ceremony, an ordinand is made up to represent the transition from secular man to a neuter monk. He visits the elders in the village before going into the temple and at each house, the elder ties his hands (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Visiting the elders before ordination.

Villagers perform *mat mue* at the end of funerals as well. After cremation, the mourners return to the deceased's house and the elders tie the mourners' hands so their *khwan* would not be taken by the spirit of the deceased. On New Year's Day, Khon Mueang visit elders close to them to offer thanks and pay respect, giving them offerings including some food and holy water. After receiving these offerings, elders tie a piece of cotton thread to each visitor's wrists, wishing that the visitor's *khwan* is bound to his/her body during the new year.

A ritual for containing *khwan* within the body is also performed before a person departs the village to go elsewhere and travel. When someone leaves to

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<sup>43</sup> Tambiah 1970: 224.

work in Bangkok or a foreign country, for instance, the family members prepare offerings to do the rite in the bedroom, just like in the severe cases of *hong khwan* ritual, before departure to contain the traveller's *khwan* within the body so she/he can be healthy after leaving.

## 5 Discussion

The centre of the efficacy of religious healing, Csordas has argued, is the transformation of the self, focusing on perception and practice as the locus of the self.<sup>44</sup> The rituals concerning *khwan*, with the practice and sensory experience of tying the hand at its heart, appears to bear this out. The “calling the *khwan*” ritual recalls the *khwan*, located in the social, natural, and supernatural worlds, in order to reintegrate the self into a state of health. At the end of a healing ritual, the rite binds the *khwan* to the body to reintegrate the self to a healthy state after eliminating misfortune. This same rite ties the *khwan* to the body during times in which the self is in transition in other rituals such as weddings or farewell ceremonies. In all cases, the meaning of the words recited in the ritual is secondary in importance to the routinised practice of tying the hand and the sensory effects of this action.

In the ethnographic description above, I have demonstrated that a focus on embodiment sheds light on the following aspects of the ritual.

First, although the message carried by the recitations is important, it is not the only nor most important factor associated with the ritual in the eyes of the villagers. As Tambiah states in his later work,<sup>45</sup> the effect of the words recited in rituals is performative rather than communicative. In *hong khwan* rituals, most villagers today only recite the shorter version of the chants. In other rituals, words are sometimes whispered and may be hardly audible, or may not be understood by the gathered crowd. The *act* of reciting, then, is more important than the meaning of the words spoken. This speaks to Csordas' statement that “meaning is not *attached* to experience, but is constituted by the way in which a subject *attends* to experience”.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, from my experience, even the act of reciting may not be the most vital part of the ritual for villagers. Giving me a bundle of cotton thread, a villager suggested I should do *mat mue* in Japan. When I replied that I did not know how to recite the words, she assured me that just tying the thread to the

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<sup>44</sup> Csordas 1994.

<sup>45</sup> Tambiah 1985.

<sup>46</sup> Csordas 2002: 57, emphasis original.



hand without chanting was enough. From this interaction, it becomes clear that the act of *mat mue*, “tying the hand”, rather than the recitations or linguistic content of the chants, is considered central to the ritual. The fact that the villagers plan and prepare the sacred thread for the year and have continued to do so until now also indicates that it is the thread and the tying of the thread that is of utmost importance.

Tying the hand is a routinised body technique essential for the health and life sustainment of Khon Mueang. This body technique, both tying and being tied, is developed through learning by doing, and becomes routinised as the villagers become adults. A female villager in her sixties told me that she learned how to tie hands following other villagers and memorised the words they were reciting when she was young, believing she would need to tie the hand as an elder. Most villagers, however, learn in a much less intentional fashion, picking up the *mat mue*, one of the most frequently performed rituals, from childhood by attending, participating in, and mimicking the ritual. In this way, they gradually learn the rules concerning the ritual including the fact that elders are the ones who tie the hands. On several occasions I witnessed small children in the village imitating adults tying the hands. When a ten-year-old girl gave her right hand to her grandmother before tying her left hand in a *hong khwan* ritual, the grandmother asked “which hand?” in a slightly scolding voice, and the girl quickly gave her left hand. Children are thus expected to acquire the body technique first, not the chants.

The act of tying the hand embodies the idea of binding the *khwan* to the participants’ bodies in order to contain it within the body and to prevent it from leaving it. It is practiced “in the ‘as if’ mode, in order to create a virtuality through which (or within which) the transformations can occur”.<sup>47</sup> The villagers tie the hand “as if” they are binding the *khwan* to the body, integrating a person into the new state, such as a state of good health with *khwan* and without *phi* or misfortune in his/her body. This ritualistic act of tying the hand thus contributes to the dynamism of the ritual through the sensory experience it induces in participants. Tying is enacted in multi-sensorial way; it is a tactile and visual as well as sonic experience with the chants. As those who are tied are not allowed to cut the thread off from their wrist for three days, this experience remains with participants in a materialised form for some time. As part of many rites of passage, *mat mue* rituals are frequent occurrences in the lives of many villagers and provide a repeated sensory experience where villagers bind themselves to a community in tying the hands and being tied.

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<sup>47</sup> Lindquist 2005: 158.



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## Appendix 1. Words chanted in a *hong khwan* ritual

### Part 1

Today is a good day – a day of Phaya Wan,<sup>48</sup> a day of the great ceremony. This is a day of happy heart so do not be sad; a day of great auspicious sign under the sky umbrella that is a happy heart day; a day that King Phaya Wisarataracha enters the state. There is no devil to trouble the world. Today is a really great day that the relatives share the big house for you to stay. And a couple of elephants belong to you. Today is a very good day. The relatives have come and sat to watch over *khwan*'s spittoon. There is chicken meat, boiled chicken, cloths, ornaments, beddings, and stuff of the world. There is also a big gold ring put in the offering bowl and the alms ring with precious stones. It looks extremely beautiful. There are also precious stones of the state.

Please let me invite thirty-two *khwan* of your body. Don't be sad, don't have a sorrowful heart; don't look for bad words that spark tension; don't have any self-aborrence. Please come, all the *khwan*, *khwan* of your head and hair, *khwan* on the back, *khwan* on the side, come and stay with yourself. Don't worry, don't be sad. At night your heart is weakening, so, *khwan*, don't cry. *Khwan*, don't go to the place of spirits in the forest, *khwan*, don't go to play in the forest, *khwan*, don't go far walking in the jungle, along the stream, and to the steep cliff. *Khwan*, don't go and stay in the big forest, cashew forest, *khwan*, don't go and stay in the golden paradise. *Khwan*, don't starve, *khwan*, don't be frantic with the wood on the horizon and rain. *Khwan*, don't go and stay at the lemon tree where the fire of Phaya Thon<sup>49</sup> belongs. *Khwan*, don't go and walk in the fog. Do not escape from

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<sup>48</sup> The new year's day of the northern Thai lunar calendar.

<sup>49</sup> A supernatural being with a divine power.

the sky. *Khwan*, don't visit a young man in the lowland. That land is not joyful, admirable, and sacred like here at all. Offerings there are not like those of the human land at all. The name of the state is Underwater *Kata*. May I invite your thirty two *khwan* to come up, oh, *khwan*. Come, *khwan* in the west, *khwan* in the east, *khwan* in the south, come, every *khwan* which have fallen down on the dry land and water land. Today, we have found a good day to welcome you to stay in the house with the thick roof. Come and stay in your house, the proper human big and wide house which is better than the sky but do not come more than thirty-two *khwan* of you. Come, come, come, every *khwan*.

## Part 2

Thirteenth misfortune, fourteenth water (*kho sipsam nam sipi*), the misfortune of the year, month, day and time, misfortune while sleeping, while awake, while walking, misfortune on the back will come and stay. The misfortune in front will go to Tai state and La state on the horizon. The misfortune falls to the land that is called religion by the Lord Buddha. Come, come *khwan*, come to Tai state. *Khwan*, come to Kwak state. *Khwan*, live well, eat well, live well, and be happy. Don't have pain and illness. And the Lord Buddha saves you, dharma saves you, monks save you, auspicious Lord Buddha, Buddhist monk, Buddhist monk, auspicious supreme dharma. Wish you a long life.

## Appendix 2. Words chanted in a *hiak khwan* ritual

### Part 1

Today is a good day, a stable, auspicious day. It is a sacred day and a good day that brings good things to us. Today is greater than any days.

Flowers are arranged. There are a boat, rowers, and memories. And in the jar, there are firestones. There are also a sword and a spade ready in the sky. So, grandmother, please go to find and return the *khwan* of the young grandson. Let the grandmother eat a full dish of rice and water, because grandfather and grandmother rush to visit *khwan* soon. Hurry up, don't go slowly, grandmother. She has a way to look for silver and a necklace.

If the young grandson enters inside the big stone in the forest, grandfather and grandmother, please use a hook to lift it up and use a hammer to hit it. If the *khwan* escapes and enters inside the stomach of a crab whose name is forest, grandfather and grandmother, please use a small sword to cut it. If the *khwan*

escapes into a small pond, grandfather and grandmother, please bring a pole to hold. If the *khwan* falls in the water, grandmother, please search for it under the water. If the *khwan* falls into the mud, grandmother, please seek it. Wherever the *khwan* goes, such as a cliff and a trap, please seek it and bring back the young grandchild who provides tools for you. If you are tired, do not be afraid. Seek *khwan* carefully around the fields beside the stream. Please go to look for it in the forest of big trees, in the ever green jungle of the great mountain. In the morning, please go to seek for *khwan* in the giant's forest. In the evening, please visit the waterfall fallen into the valley. Find the *khwan* and get it, visit the place where water falls gently, the place where tadpoles croak, the place where the river in the forest widens. Please look for the *khwan* in banana forest, taro field, and other fields. There might be spirits and demons teasing humans. So, please go to find the *khwan* along the pathway heading to the giant town. Please seek for it at the place of guardians, the village guardian, and the state guardian. Please go to look for it at the place of ditch spirit. The spirits and demons often call and take the *khwan* of human away, they often hide the *khwan* of human away. So, grandmother and grandfather, please find it in the state of spirits with long hands and big eyes. Please go to seek for it at the place of elephant spirits, spirits with long black legs and contorted mouth, and lecherous female spirits that like biting. Please look for *khwan* at the pond's spirit, and two female spirits that are the ocean guardians. Please go to find it in the paradise between the moon and the stars. Please go to seek for it in the middle of the sky where the fog falls down to the grass. Please go to look for it in the state of giants, the state of Garuda, the state of Naga. Please seek for the *khwan* around the grass and forest areas, even in the nook of grass, please explore them too. If the *khwan* goes to the moon then call it (the moon) the sun (to deceive the *khwan*). Even if the *khwan* went into the stomach of Erawan,<sup>50</sup> come back, *khwan*. If the *khwan* goes to bathe in the Kongka River and the beautiful lotus pond Anoma in the big Himmaphan (Himavanta) forest, come back. Even if the *khwan* went into the water that falls from the mouth of an elephant or lion, come back. Even if you went near Vaishravana, we will let you come. Come, *khwan*.

## Part 2

Today is a good day. The grandfather and grandmother are elderly people with long lives and are skilled at catching it. Let them go up in the sky, then they will go through the stars, let them go down in the water, then they go through the

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<sup>50</sup> The three-headed elephant that Indra rides.

state of Garuda, the state of Naga. We have them as nimble people. Even if the *khwan* of my grandchild, whose name is Mr A, has escaped to the big tree at the shrine of the guardian spirit of the village and the state, grandmother goes to find elephant, horse, cow, buffalo as rewards to repurchase it. If grandmother sees the *khwan*, bring it back. I don't regret. Even if the *khwan* has escaped into the dam, deep in the water where the river widens, tie the *khwan* and bring it back. Grandmother, go quickly, don't go slowly. Let the illness in his body go. Don't let the worry become true. Grandmother, go quickly. Kick the elephant and go quickly. Tell me if you get it, I want to know the news that the *khwan* has really come back. A stick would help grandmother's strength. There are also a sword, a chisel, an ax, fishing net, a boat, a raft, and a pole. So, grandmother, go to search along the big creek in the forest. Even if they say the price is one million, grandmother, please give them the ring. Even if they say the price is a hundred thousand, grandmother, please buy it back. Even if they say the price is one billion, grandmother, please buy it back. Don't feel sorry for losing those properties. They work hard to get it back. Go and look for it, don't go long, grandmother, come. Relatives, brothers and sisters have come and wait for thirty-two *khwan*. So, please come back, it is good time. Grandmother, please bring all the *khwan*, the *khwan* of head, the *khwan* of eyes, the *khwan* of nose, the *khwan* of breast, the *khwan* of heart, let them all come together. The *khwan* of the head, come and stay at the beautiful head. The *khwan* of ears, come and stay at the ears. The *khwan* of the eyes, come and stay at the beautiful, lovely eyes. The *khwan* of cheeks, come and stay at the cheeks as usual. The *khwan* of nose, come and smell the lovely smelling flowers. The *khwan* of feet, don't walk away. *Khwan*, don't go away and play. *Khwan*, don't go away anywhere. *Khwan*, don't go to other place. Please come back to the body. Don't be absent. Please come to get rid of the illness and danger. *Khwan*, come to the big house with many floors. *Khwan*, come and stay permanently with grandfather, aunt, uncle, children, grandchildren, brothers and sisters. Let your life last more than 120 years. *Phawa saja taro thamma wathan ayu wanno sukhang phalang*.<sup>51</sup> Come, *khwan*.

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<sup>51</sup> These Pali words are also chanted in Buddhist rituals, meaning "all four blessing – long life, beautiful body, health, and energy – are effective and make persons with five precepts of Buddhism flourish".

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