

CALLING THE SPIRITS

an observation of its practice among the Kui in Thailand

Introduction

Together with my friend and partner Brigitte Woykos I had--and still have--the privilege of living and working in a small Kui village called Ban Bing. This particular village has a population of about 300 people and is situated in the northeast of Thailand, Sisaket province, Prangku district. We have lived here for a total time of about 3¹/₂ years, from March 1979 until June 1985.

After a general introduction to the Kui people (section 1) explanations are given of the most important words used in describing spirit calling ceremonies (sec.2). Then follows a section called "official spirit calling ceremonies" (sec.3) and a section called "unofficial calling of the spirit" (sec.4). Under section 3 fall all those occasions which the Kui call *riit* and the Thai *phiti*. The distinguishing elements seem to be that a *riit* or ceremony always has a "bowl-of-decorated-spirit-strings" and a "teacher" (see the explanations), though 3.6. and 3.7. are exceptions. The conclusions follow in section 5.

I have used a simple part-Roman, part-phonetic transcription of the Kui words involved, which people who hear these words should be able to recognize.¹

1. The Kui people

1.1. Area

The Kui people--variously spelled Kui, Kuy, Kuoy--live in the southern part of northeast Thailand, as well as that part of Cambodia bordering the area in Thailand; there are also some reports of Kui in southern Laos. Maps 1 and 2 show the approximate areas inhabited by the Kui people in Thailand and Cambodia. Richard H. Johnston who made a survey of Kui speaking people in Thailand in 1954 estimated the total population at 150,000 for that country. No figure is known for the Kui living in Cambodia and Laos.

¹For a description the Kui sound system see Smalley 1976

1.2. Language

Kui (the Thai call it Suay) is a Mon-Khmer language, belonging to the Katuic branch.¹ Beulah M. Johnston distinguishes two main Kui dialects in Thailand: Kui Kui and Kui Mla, with many sub-dialects "showing marked differences in vocabulary."² Through personal contacts we so far have encountered the following dialects: *Kui Mla* (or Mloa) in the districts of Khunhan, Sangkha and Chomphra (all superficial contacts); *Kui Na* (or Noa) in Samrongthap district; and *Kui Mlua* in Prangku district. This paper is written about the Kui Mlua.

1.3. Social Structure

As a group the Kui are very loosely structured. It seems that language is the only cohesive element. And even the language is not looked upon as something to be treasured. Most Kui people can speak Lao--the trade language of northeast Thailand--, some Thai (through school and radio) and many can speak some Khmer as well.

¹ Smith, Kenneth D. (p. 182)

² Smalley, William A. ed., 1976 (p. 259)

Map 1 The Kui people in Thailand and Cambodia

Map 2 Showing the Thai provinces and those districts where Kui speaking villages are located (from: Language Map of Thailand 1977, Office of State Universities), Also shown is Ban Bing, the location where this paper was written.

It can be said in general that Kui people tend to let their own cultural possessions (like language, customs) go for the sake of another culture perceived as higher or better. This agrees with what Grabowsky writes about the Kui in Cambodia: "DieKuoy sind sprachlich und kulturell nahezu vollständig integriert die relativ starke Volksgruppe der Kuoy wurde in Statistiken einfach den Khmer zugerechnet." (p.26)¹

The family is, of course, the strongest cohesive social unit. Together they work the fields which are inherited through the mother or wife.

¹ Grabowsky, Volker "Die kabodschanische Tragödie", Münster 1982

Next is the extended family. There are clearly visible obligations to help each other--either in deed or with money--and to share all that is acquired (either food or money), even if the relatives live in another village. If someone has gone into the woods to look for, say, mushrooms and comes back with a bucket full, half of it may be gone while walking through the village: relatives are allowed to take their share.

The next and only other social unit--as far as we can see--is the village. This becomes especially visible in two areas:

1. on special occasions like a wedding or a funeral *all* the families are invited to come and help; for relatives helping consists of actually joining in the preparations (cooking, etc.) as well as making a money contribution; non-relatives only need to do the latter;

2. to help *ntroh* (Thai: *long khaek*); this means to hold a bee for field work or any other work; when someone goes to "beg for help" (*thial*) at every village house people are obliged to help (except for a valid excuse). We were told that this practice used to be much more common than now.

Authority is not a well defined idea among the Kui. People seem to like to be independent and go their own way, even though everybody agrees that one should obey one's older relatives. As Woykos says: "... zur sozialen Kontrolle in der Dorfgemeinschaft ist die Gruppeneinigkeit wohl die wichtigste Autorität"¹ (translation: the most important authority in social control in the village is group opinion). Problems and other matters within the extended family can be decided upon by a circle of elders (*khot wong*). The Thai government sponsors the village head (*phu yai*), who is chosen by the villagers. He encourages and guides development as directed by the government. People can also go to him with minor quarrels.

¹ Woykos, Brigitte (1983), p. 7

1.4. Economic System

All the Kui people--except for those who have gone to live in a city--are rice farmers. Since Prangku is one of the driest districts in Thailand only one harvest per year is possible--and some years not even that much. All the people go and gather their daily food. The Thai government has encouraged the planting of vegetables

and most people tend a small patch during the rainy season. If anything needs to be bought people usually sell some rice to get money. Common things that need to be bought are: fish sauce, salt, clothes (although the women do some weaving as well), some tools and petrol for the lamps. Clothes and supplies for the school children use up a lot of money, as well as the “helping” in various ceremonies. Because the rice harvest often is not enough to fill all food and money needs, many Kui people live in constant debt, usually to the Chinese ricemill owner. Partly because of such debts, partly because of growing land scarcity, and also because of modern society’s pull on especially the youth (via radio and t.v.), more and more people seek work in the cities or other areas during the dry season (February through May) or even for longer periods.

2. Explanation of words

2.1. R-wiay (spirit/soul)

R-wiay is the Kui word for spirit/soul. We understand that the Kui do not have the distinction which exists in Thai and Lao: *winyan*-spirit and *khwan*-soul. Kui has only one word, *r-wiay*, to denote the essence of human life (called spirit in this paper). It is this spirit which is called back to the body by saying “*chuung r-wiay*”, meaning roughly “come back spirit”; often the name of the person in question is added, as well as personal wishes or blessings. The word *chuung* is only used in this context and people do not know its meaning apart from this usage.

2.2 Spirit strings (*phriay r-wiay*)

This is the most important implement in calling the spirit of a person. When calling someone’s spirit a person usually--if it is at hand--takes a piece of string and binds it around the other person’s wrist. For a piece of string to become a spirit string it has to consist of three cotton strands (*phriay k-pah*); and it has to be knotted in the middle, maybe so as to signify the binding of the spirit, as suggested by some of my sources). Often, for ceremonies, the pieces of string will be dyed yellow with ginger. Any person can prepare the spirit strings.

2.3. Bowl of decorated-spirit-strings

For special spirit calling ceremonies the spirit strings are brought along in a nicely decorated way. It is only happily married ladies who can prepare such a bowl (See diagram 1.)

Diagram 1

Husked, unboiled rice is put in a bowl (its size can vary). Many things are stuck into the rice or put on top:

- 1 = red flowers, stuck into a banana leaf
- 2 = rolled banana leaf (*truuy*)
- 3 = white flowers
- 4 = rice cakes
- 5 = bananas
- 6 = rolled betelnut and tobacco
- 7 = puffed rice stuck on the whip of a coconut leaf
- 8 = yellow dyed spirit strings, also stuck on a whip
- 9 = a large *truuy* put over boiled egg, a bracelet put over it

If there is room the following things are also put into the bowl: a mirror, a comb, a silken sarong and an all-purpose cloth (*s-baay*), a ring, some candles and some money. If there is no room, those things are put on a tray together with the bowl. A white, folded cloth is put around the bowl and it is put on a tray to be brought out to the ceremony. After the ceremony the teacher (see sec.2.5.) keeps as his payment; the money, some rice cakes, bananas, betelnut, tobacco and rice. These things which the teacher keeps are called *kliay*. The number of banana leaves (*truuy*) seems to be important. Usually 5 pairs plus 8 pairs of *truuy* have to be stuck into the rice (*khan haa khan paet*); but the number may vary some, depending on the instructions of the teacher. I was unable to find out if there is a difference between the two pair-groupings; my sources did not know. For three nights after the ceremony the person(s) in question will keep this bowl at the end of their bed.

2.4. Phae

The *phae* is a kind of spirit house which is made of the bark of a banana tree. The outside has to consist of 7 layers as in diagram 2. Inside it are stuck a few sticks with either coloured paper glued to the ends or a yellow silk cocoon. Put inside are further:

2 forms of people (1 male, 1 female, signifying spirits of ancestors or also called *Arak*), coloured boiled rice (black and yellow), chili peppers, salt fermented fish (Thai: *pla ra*), a piece of betelnut chewed by the person for whom the ceremony is held, often after a ceremony the nails of a finger and a toe of the person in question are put into the *phae*.

2.5. Teacher

In official ceremonies containing spirit calling usually a teacher officiates who is called “*achan*”, which is the Thai word for teacher or professor. The distinction of such a teacher is that he has been a monk in a Buddhist temple and can recite from a Pali book.

3. Official spirit calling ceremonies

3.1. House warming ceremony¹

When our next-door neighbour built a new house--about four years ago--we were invited to the house warming party to “help” (with money). This gave us an opportunity for observation; but, as I did not make detailed notes at the time I had to check the details extensively. Most vivid in my memory remained the start of the ceremony. The teacher led a procession of about 10 to 15 people around the house. Each of them carried a household item, like a folded mattress, a bucket; a pregnant lady carried a cat, and a young girl carried the bowl of decorated spirit strings. Some also carried weaving implements. After one circuit around the house the teacher stopped at the bottom of the stairs. I was told that the following conversation is held between the teacher and some people standing there: Teacher is asked: where are you all going?

Teacher: We thought we could stay here happily.

Others: Let's wait first.

Teacher: Then we go again.

¹ Sources: my own observations, checked with S2 and S3, later with S4, and some details checked with S5.

After the second circuit around the house the little conversation repeats itself. But the third time the response of the people is: You can stay (*kuu buun*).

Then a rice basket (*ntaoh*) full of unhusked rice is placed at the bottom of the stairs, with a banana leaf covering the rice, and a flat stone on top of the leaf. The teacher, hunched next to it, sprinkles holy water over the feet of each person who steps on the stone. Each one has to put his foot three times on the stone. Once everybody is upstairs the ceremony can start. The family of the house sits together and the teacher in front of them. There is a bowl of decorated spirit strings and a bowl with a boiled chicken. The head of the house (husband, wife or both) holds a sickle in his/her hand; the spirit is supposed to be hooked by it.

I still remember when the teacher started chanting, it was very hard to hear him, because most people were chatting and some of the men were drunk. Asked what language the teacher was using to chant most people said it was Pali, interspersed with stretches of Lao, when he calls the spirit, saying *maa khwan*. When he calls, all the people respond in Kui, calling the spirit and throwing rice into the air. S2 and S5 said: the spirit should come like rice from the air. And the teacher sprinkles holy water over the family and all people near.

As soon as the teacher finishes the chanting all the people come in turn to the family of the house, and, taking strings from the bowl, bind these around the family members' wrists, saying things like: "come spirit, may you be happy in this house, may you become rich and have no problems." Some people bind strings around the house posts, saying "you used to be a tree, but now you are a house post; may you be happy." Before or after the binding they will greet the one they bind, and that person greets back. Some people greet both before and after the binding, if they want to show extra respect.

During the binding some people take the jawbone from the boiled chicken and look at it to see what it says about the future of this house. Others take the boiled egg from the bowl, take its shell off and look at the flat end which also says something about the future. When the binding is finished everybody eats together.

3.2. Wedding ceremony

My partner Brigitte Woykos had been asked to be photographer at three different Kui weddings and was able to observe the proceedings in detail. She wrote as follows.¹

During the part of the ceremony which takes place at the bride's house the scene is as pictured in diagram 3.

Diagram 3

¹ translated from Woykos, Brigitte "Hochzeitsbräuche und -riten der Kui in Thailand"

- 1 = tray with the offerings of the groom
- 2 = tray with the offerings of the bride
- 3 = groom's bowl of decorated spirit strings
- 4 = bride's bowl of decorated spirit strings
- 5 = bowl with the female candle
- 6 = bowl with the male candle
- 7 = bowl with holy water
- 8 = bottle of rice whisky with spirit strings around it

The teacher is now given a small burning candle, which he uses to light the female and male candles. Then he is given a bowl of water. He pours a little over the groom's offering tray. He calls the groom's ancestors to wash their hands before partaking of the meal. Then he gives the bowl of water to four older women who do the same thing. Now he is given a bowl with whisky of which he also pours a little on the tray and he drinks a little himself. And again the old women repeat this. In this way not only are the ancestors given whisky, but the people drink with them as well. Now the groom's ancestors are invited to eat.

The whole procedure is repeated on the other side, with the bride's offering tray, calling the bride's ancestors.

An older woman then takes some rice, chicken meat, tobacco and betelnut in her hand and takes it to the rice storage where she just puts it down. The teacher now takes a sickle and a candle and sprinkles both of them with the holy water. Then he puts the hands of the bride into those of the groom and puts the sickle through their fingers. At the sharp point of the sickle he sticks a little ball of rice. Two older women support the arms of the couple. Now the teacher starts with the liturgical part. As he mumbles he lets the candle wax drip into the holy water and stirs it with a leafy twig. Now and then he lifts the twig and sprinkles the young couple. None of those present listen to him; everybody chats. Only the couple sits, bent forward, saying nothing. When, in his chanting, the teacher changes from the Pali language to Lao, a few people urge for silence. Then the teacher (in Lao) calls

the spirits of the young couple, and all the people join in calling, while they throw rice into the air (signifying where the spirits are expected to come from: from the air). The calling is repeated two more times and then the ceremony is over.

Then the older relatives surge forward, take spirit strings from the bowl or from the whisky bottle and bind these around the wrists of the couple. Some people also bind a money bill with the string. The meaning of the binding is that the spirits of the couple have been called and now they are being bound to the owner. A few people also bind strings around the teacher's wrist and those of some other relatives. This is more a sign of joy and friendliness.

3.3. Ceremony to cure misfortune¹

A Saturday in the 5th lunar month is the time when people cure their misfortune (in Kui: *sot chekhrao*'; in Thai: *kae khrao*'). If necessary it can also be done in other months, but it has to be on a Saturday.

Sometimes people have bad dreams, which makes them believe they will have bad luck that year unless they *sot chekhrao*'. Sometimes they go to a seer who tells them they will have bad luck so they have to do something about it. Sometimes they perform the ceremony when they have been unwell for a long time or when they have had a time of many troubles or bad luck: *koot khrao*'.

The purpose of the ceremony is to drive bad spirits out of the person into the *phae* (see sec.2.4) The *phae* is standing on a flat rice basket (*khriang*) and has a candle burning on each corner. The person with the bad luck is sitting on the floor with the legs stretched forward to the *phae*, but not touching it. A piece of white string goes around the *phae*, attached to the little sticks, and around the shoulders of the person. The teacher sits on his heels next to the person. In front of him is a small bowl of ginger water. In his one hand he holds a candle, in his other hand a branch. As he chants in Pali he lets the candle wax drip into the water and stirs the water with the branch. Now and then he sprinkles the water over the person and all the people nearby. (Later, after the ceremony is over, some people may come and wash their faces in the holy water.) The teacher has to finish chanting three times (*cop pay duang*), before all the bad spirits have gone out of the person into the *phae*. Then some nails of hand and foot of the person are cut and put into the *phae* as well as two old pieces of cloth which were stuck between the two largest toes of each

¹ S1 wrote up an outline of the ceremony. S2, S3 and S4 filled in many details

¹ S1 wrote a rough outline. S2, S6, S7, S8 and S9 all provided additional information

foot. An older person then takes the *phae* on the rice basket outside the village (the *phae* should not be touched) and throws it beside the road. (We must have seen some six *phaes* at various village entrances in the time span of November 1984 till June 1985.) The only thing taken out of the *phae* and back into the house is a small bowl or coconut shell with spirit strings. Without looking back the person hurries back to the house. The people in the house quickly grab the bowl, loudly calling "come spirit", and right away everyone starts to bind the strings around the wrist of the person in question. As they bind the strings, they utter appropriate wishes to the person's spirit. Like in the case of a lady whose husband had died recently and who was unwell: *chuing r-wiay mae' Iphat, aon kuu ch-aop doo, aon sii mae kaon, k-yaa' chii tah laew, muang chii thay laew* (come spirit of mother-of-Iphat, may you be happy; look after your children, your husband has left, you are on a different road now).

S4 thought that sometimes after a *sot chekrao'* ceremony--instead of having only a small bowl with spirit strings--people hold a full-fledged spirit calling ceremony, with a bowl of decorated spirit strings and the teacher conducting the ceremony.

3.4. Ceremonies for a soldier¹

Whenever a young man has to go into the army a double ceremony will be arranged for him by his parents. This is in order that the young man may have a good time, be courageous as a soldier, may not be upset by anything and may not be hurt by a bullet or anything else. That is why bad spirits in him have to be taken care of (the first ceremony), before his own spirit is called, encouraged and blessed (the second ceremony). I was told by all those I asked that exactly the same double ceremony is performed when the soldier comes back out of the army. We heard the proceedings of two such ceremonies, both at a distance of about 50 metres from our house, but we could not see much.

The evening before the ceremony will be held one member of the family goes to every house in the village and invites them to the ceremony by giving them two short candles and greeting them in the traditional Thai way (by putting the palm of both hands together before the face). A small pavillion (*r-saal*) is made near the house with some poles and a roof of palm leaves. This is where the ceremony is held.

The first part is--if I understood it correctly--exactly like the ceremony to cure misfortune. Except there is no little bowl with spirit strings to be brought back when the *phae* is thrown out. When the *phae* has been thrown out, a bowl of decorated spirit strings is put in the center. The new (or ex-) soldier sits on a partly folded mattress, facing the bowl. It is certain that at least the ex-soldier holds a sickle in his hands. The teacher sits beside him, with the holy water in front of him. He does his chanting and interjects in Lao according to S4: *khwan yuu hay koa hay maa, khwan yuu naa koa hay maa, maa yoo khwan ooy* (wherever the spirit is, in field or forest, let him come, come, spirit, come). It is for these words everybody is waiting--though by no means quietly--because this is the moment they can join in with their own calling, in Kui. As they call, as usual, rice is thrown into the air and the teacher sprinkles the water. Then the teacher continues his chanting in Pali, until the next interjection. We asked various people how often this calling happens in a certain ceremony, but no one could tell us. We know that in the wedding ceremony it happens three times; and in the calling of an ex-soldier's spirit six or seven times (we were able to hear it and count along). After the chanting is finished, all the people come to bind strings on the soldier. Sometimes they bind money bills as well; others put the money in a small bowl in front of the soldier. The money helps toward the feast which follows right after the binding. It should be noted that this ceremony is usually called by its Thai name: *suu khwan th-haan*.

3.5. Ceremonies for monks or novices¹

The man (or boy) who wants to become a buddhist monk (or novice) has to go first to the temple for one or two weeks to learn some chanting. During that time his parents have to prepare for that part of the ceremony which takes place in the house. Depending on how big a feast they want, either the whole village is invited, or only relatives, by handing over two small candles like in the previous ceremony. A teacher comes to conduct the ceremony, but I was not able to get a clear picture of the proceedings. S3, whose son had just become a novice, could only tell me that there was indeed a *phae*, but no ceremony involving it; it was there *chuu chuu* (for nothing). It is certain that it was thrown out later, because we saw it at the village entrance. There also is a bowl with decorated spirit strings and the main ceremony seems to involve this bowl; probably in the same way as for a returning soldier. S1

¹ S1 wrote a rough outline, which I tried to fill in by asking S2 and S3, and later S10.

and S3 mentioned that the teacher has different chants for a monk or for a novice. A man whose grandson just had become a novice (S10) said that as they bind the spirit strings they say things like: *aon chii buud aon ch-aop, aon ch-laot, aon koot khruu* (may you enjoy the priesthood, may you be wise/clever, may you become a teacher). Afterwards they look at a boiled egg to see what his future will be. Following the calling of the spirit comes the ceremony of hair cutting. More ceremonies follow in the temple where he is taken the following morning. When a monk or novice comes out of the monkhood similar ceremonies are held.

3.6. Ceremony for fieldwork¹

At the time when they start transplanting the rice each family performs a little ceremony called *saeng sae* (literally: go down to the field). Not every family does it in exactly the same way; some do a more elaborate ceremony than others. No teacher is present. Only the family members, father, mother and some children, perform it. Sometimes some older relatives who happen to work nearby are called to join in.

At home, in the morning of *saeng sae*, they will kill a chicken and boil it. Rice cakes are prepared, rice, vegetable dishes, and the *truuy* (rolled banana leaf) with flowers. Also taken along to the field are: bananas, water, liquor, tobacco, betelnut, a comb, a mirror, some clothes (silken sarong and all-purpose-cloth), a bracelet, some things of silver and gold, some long and some short candles, and spirit strings.

In the field--in a convenient spot--they make a tiny house, or put down some boards, to put out the food, water, liquor and rice cakes, bananas, tobacco and betelnut. The candles are lit next to it. Everything else is put into a bowl. Four hands of rice seedlings plus some grass is put beside the bowl. Then--sitting on his haunches--the father lifts the bowl up high in front of him and calls on the angels and ancestor spirits, saying something like this: *thewabut thewadia k-mooc khunnu' khunmae' ya'chuh, aon chaw khumkhong mohay doo, aon uay phon sae, aon uay phon trii', thu' aon ii yuung, aon uay phon r-nah, thu' aon t-khiih, aon uay phon kuuy, thu' aon t-koh* (angels, spirits, ancestors, please come and look after us, bless our fields, bless our buffalo--may it not get sore feet, bless our rake--may it not break, bless us--may we not become sick). Then the father gives the bowl to the

¹ S11 provided all the information. I did check it with S2, S3 and S4, but nothing needed to be added or changed.

mother and she lifts it in the same way as the father and asks for similar things. The bowl is put on the ground and then it is time for the ancestors to eat: "come here, ancestors, drink and eat, rice and nice sweet things." First water is poured out for the spirits to wash their hands, and some liquor is poured for them to drink. After a short while--spirits are supposed to eat fast--water is poured out again for hand washing, and liquor for drinking. Then the father says: "If anything is going to happen, let us see it in the chicken jaw bone." He takes it out of the chicken and everyone looks at it and they discuss what it looks like and what it might mean for the coming rice harvest. Then they take the spirit strings, and everyone binds them on the neck of the buffalo (a special long piece of string), on the plough and the rake. To the buffalo they may say: "May you have strength, and don't be obstinate." And to the rake: "You were once a tree, but now you are a rake; do your work well and don't break." Finally, the people all bind strings on each other. After that the father takes the four hands of rice seedlings, breaks off the tops and says: "Don't be startled, we have to take your top off; when we replant may you have strength and become big bushes." Finally, everyone eats all the food.

3.7. Catching-the-spirit ceremony¹

In Kui this ceremony is called *riit nchiang r-wiay*; *nchiang* means to go look for or catch something; *nchiang akaa* means to go and find fish by pushing a basket through the water.

When a person is very tired or has been unwell for some time, and he or she dreams of seeing someone plant something, then this means the spirit has left him or her. Sometimes another person may have this dream and she will go and tell the unwell person that her spirit has left her. So then a spirit-catching-ceremony needs to be held. S2 said that it is *Arak* (spirits) who takes someone's spirit away.

¹ S1 wrote most of the information, which I checked with S2 and S4.

Two or three women put the following things on a tray: rice, vegetable dish, a boiled egg, betelnut, some clothes, a bracelet and some string with a knot in the middle. They take all this to a hillock far away. The person who is unwell does not

go along. Then they offer the food to the spirits (Arak); the other things are there to attract the spirits, so that they would let the *r-wiay* go. A child is ordered to catch a grasshopper close to the hillock and this grasshopper is bound on the string. Then they go back and--close to the house of the sick person--they call "your spirit has come back already." And they bind the string with the grasshopper to the wrist of that person. They also look at the boiled egg to see if there will be health to hope for.

3.8. Other occasions

1. S11's younger brother broke his leg while playing football. The leg healed well--with plaster, as well as the village healer's help. But a few weeks later the parents organized a spirit calling ceremony. No *phae* was used, so it was not to expel misfortune. But a bowl of decorated spirit strings was there, and a teacher conducted the ceremony, probably similar to the ones described above. S11 said that the purpose was to calm the upset spirit.

2. S4 said that a bowl of decorated spirit strings can also be used by a *tham*-teacher (*achaan muut tham*). Whoever needs healing or wants help goes to see such a teacher. The teacher will then--at his own home--prepare the bowl. He takes the bowl into his hands and tries to "enter *tham*" (*muut tham*). Sometimes it takes a few days before he is able to enter, i.e. to go into trance. Once he gets into trance, he drops the bowl and people nearby have to catch it. The unwell person can then take the bowl home and he should get well soon. (I am not sure at which point the spirit strings are bound around his wrists.)

3. In May 1985 a vicious storm blew through the village, causing some damage here and there. Near one house a coconut tree was blown over and in its fall touched the edge of a roof. A few weeks later a teacher came and conducted a spirit calling ceremony. I was unable to find out if it was done for the house owners only or also for the house.

4. Unofficial calling of the spirit

4.1. Funerals

S2 and S4 separately told me that at a funeral people tend to do a lot of spirit calling. There is no official ceremony for the calling. But the older women will bind especially the bereaved. And also a lot of mutual binding is done, while they say things like: "Come spirit, let there be no more funerals, from now on may there

only be weddings.” We were unable to observe any of the funeral-related ceremonies. It is certain that buddhist monks play an important role in them.

4.2. After a wedding

After a wedding ceremony is over (usually around 3 p.m.) the older women start binding spirit strings to all those still present at the party. S11 told us that the old women-binding her had said something like: “Come, spirit of Buu, come; today was the wedding of Muun, you should be the next one; you have helped with this wedding and it was so happy, much nicer than a funeral; you have helped until you had hot hands and feet; don’t wait too long with your own wedding, you’re old soon enough; may you marry an ex-novice or ex-monk.” Then, after the older women finish binding, the young people bind each other also. I asked S11 whom she bound--everybody? No, she only bound those she wanted to bind, those she felt close to and happy with.

4.3. Birth¹

Right after birth the midwife will say to the newborn: “Whose child is born today? Let him take it right away. When the day is over it’s my child.” She says it three times and then takes strings and binds both the baby’s wrists, calling “Come, spirit, come. Come and be happy; stay and become big, like a dog or a pig. May nothing bad happen.”

4.4. Name giving (p-saa’ kaon)²

When a baby is a few weeks old there is an official name giving ceremony. The midwife, some old people and close relatives are present. First of all they will offer food to the ancestors, saying: “Come, ancestors, come and eat. Today is the name giving of the child of ... (name of the parents).” After that the midwife--who is the one to think of a name for the child--goes to the child, binds strings around the wrists and says: “Come, spirit, I have given you the name May you be happy and healthy.” Then everybody binds a spirit string and calls the spirit. They also bind some money along with the string.

¹ Information from S4, confirmed by S2

² Information mainly from S12, confirmed by S2 and S4

4.5. Offerings to the village ancestors³

In Kui this offering is called *saen phao' thuut*, or *saen yaa' chuuh*. At least twice every year the village ancestors receive offerings from all the villagers: in the 3rd lunar month, on the 3rd day of the waxing moon (to inform the ancestors that parts of the forest will be burned to look for food: *boo' kaoh kruung*), and in the 6th lunar month, on the 6th day of the waxing moon (to inform them that the field work starts, to ask their blessing and their prognosis of the rice harvest). Also, every time there is an important happening in the village, like a wedding an initiation rite, etc., the ancestors have to be informed and offered to.

On such offering days each family involved boils either a chicken or an egg (depending on the size of the family). One family member takes this early in the morning to the *rian*, the spirit house of the village ancestors. This *rian* is a little house (about 1 × 1.5 m.) and stands on stilts in what seems to be the highest spot of the village. Inside the *rian* are some roughly cut pieces of wood, some vaguely resembling a human shape, while others are supposed to be forms of a knife, a gun, an elephant and a horse.

The offerings (food, betelnut, tobacco, candles, flowers, sometimes rice seeds and other seeds) are put into the *rian* while they call: "Come, ancestors, come and eat; we're going to start the fields; give us a good harvest this year, etc." (or whatever the occasion). Then they bind spirit strings around the wooden shapes, signifying acceptance (S4). They also sprinkle ginger water over the wooden forms--this is cool and will make the spirits feels good. One or two older people sit in the *rian* and after the things have been offered they will take out the chickens' jaw bones and peel the eggs. Then they--with everybody standing around--will study the jaw bones and the eggs. A great discussion ensues as to what the future will be like.

4.6. Upset

Our neighbour (S2) went to see ner sick brother in a far away town. While she was there he died and she came back very upset. That same evening many

³ S4 and S11 were my main informants for this section

people (mainly older ladies) came to see her to hear the news and to bind strings on her wrists. Her wrists were full of strings, she told us later.

4.7. Startled (1)

One evening, in March 1984, the house of one of our friends burned down completely. The family moved in with relatives living next door to us. I stayed with them for a long time that night and was able to observe many villagers come who expressed sympathy and offered help. Many of the old women who came broke off a piece of string (which they had in their betelnut basket) and--while everybody continued chatting--knotted the string in the middle and bound the wrists of all the family members, including the baby of 3 months. I could not hear what they were saying while they bound the strings. However, S4 was also present and she told me later they say things like: "Come, spirit of mother-of-Abaan, don't be startled and fall into the water (these words rhyme); it has burned down, so leave it be; we'll make a new house, more beautiful than before."

4.8. Startled (2)

One evening we were talking with some young people about calling the spirit. A boy of about 16 said: "I remember once when I was still small and I was very shocked by something. Then my mother said: '*chuung r-wiay*, come back spirit.'" It is interesting that there was no binding of strings at this occasion.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Extent of the spirit calling practice

It should be quite clear from all that has been observed under secs. 3 and 4 that spirit calling pervades Kui society. It seems to be part of all rituals--sometimes only a small part, but at other times a major part. So far I have not come across any ritual practice where there was no spirit calling at all at some point (although there may be such, of course). Unofficial spirit calling is also very commonly practised. In addition to the occasions described under sec. 4, it can also be done when a person comes back from a far place or a long absence. S4 said this was because the old women fear his or her spirit may like to stay in that far-away place; they want to

invite and welcome the spirit back and make him feel happy.

My sources agreed that in general people are afraid that their spirits may leave them for some reason. S1 described how, when she left the village for the first time to go to the city to work, old people warned her not to look back as she walked away--otherwise her spirit might flee back to the village. When S11 was working in Bangkok there was a time she was homesick: "I really felt my spirit had left me," she told us later.

In official ceremonies all the people present will bind the person in question, but usually they are all grown-ups. However, at *saeng sae* the children will also bind the other family members. Unofficial spirit calling, however, is initiated always by older women, usually the very old. Asked why older men do not do it, S4 and S12 said: "They don't think of it. It is only the older women who think of it. Even younger women like us do not think of it." So, in unofficial binding it is not the upset person who wants to be bound; it is the old women who initiate the practice. In official binding, however, it can be either male or female who expresses a desire or need for a spirit calling ceremony.

5.2. Its meaning for the Kui people

As was said before, Kui people fear the flight of their spirit. They say that--when their spirit has fled--they will become sick and die. This shows how deeply it affects them.

By grouping the occurrences of spirit calling we can have a closer look at what causes the spirit to flee.

1. In rites of passage:
 - wedding
 - in/out of – the army (soldiers)
 - the temple (monks, novices)
 - housewarming
 - starting fieldwork
 - funeral
 - birth
 - name giving
2. To restore health or a broken spirit:
 - after curing misfortune

after catching spirit of an unwell person
 after accidents, upsets
 at funerals

3. To show happiness with and acceptance of others:
 after weddings
 when offering to the ancestor spirits

At times of great change, such as rites of passage symbolize, a person may experience anxiety, uncertainty, or similar emotions. At these instances spirit calling seems to be "prophylactic" (Tambiah, p.223)¹: trying to forestall anxiety, the participants are encouraged to accept their new status or situation. Spirit calling is used in a "therapeutic"¹ sense at those times when a person experiences anxiety about his health, about bad fortune, etc.

The unofficial spirit calling following a wedding (sec.4.2) could be occasioned by anxiety that the spirit might flee because of extreme happiness. We heard of a man who wanted an official spirit calling ceremony, because he was so happy: he got a son after five daughters. However, it seems that spirit calling is sometimes practised to relieve the anxiety of the binder rather than the person bound. When the spirits of new-born babies are bound it might show anxiety on the part of the binder about the survival of the little one; people often express fear about whether the baby will live or not. The binding of housepoles, ploughs, rakes and buffaloes can be explained by anxiety also, but rather anxiety about the future, since they are all most important for survival. The calling and binding of the ancestor spirits (together with the offerings) can equally be explained by fear of an uncertain future.

¹ Tambiah, S.J., Cambridge 1970

Anxiety, then, seems to be the common denominator of all spirit calling occurrences; more specifically, anxiety about being unable to cope with life.

Finally, it is important to note the meaning Kui people attach to the binding of a spirit string around the wrist: they see it as a means of showing their acceptance of that person. I have used the word acceptance for what my sources described as *oo'lung naaw* (I am happy with him/her)

5.3. Some suggestions

We have seen that the Kui people fear the flight of their spirit. And I have argued that the force behind this fear is anxiety about being unable to cope with life. We have also seen that the Kui people set out to allay someone's anxiety by showing acceptance, pictured in the calling and binding.

Could it be then that the flight of the spirit is a picture of rejection? Could it be that, in a state of being rejected, they feel inadequate to cope with life? Acceptance would be the perfect antidote for rejection.

Rejection is experienced by most 2 or 3 year old children. Kui mothers tend to reject their child as soon as the next baby arrives. We have often observed such mothers irritably push away the older child: there is no time or strength left to show love to that one. Fathers, even though they have less time for their children, do not seem to have this tendency to reject their child.

Could this be why old men do not think of expressing acceptance toward upset people, while old women--free from the care of children, but with some old guilt nagging--do ?

These will have to remain suggestions, until someone can prove whether or not they are true.

Feikje van der Haak

Sources

- S1 = Dad, female, 19 years
- S2 = Sa, female, about 52, a Christian
- S3 = Mother-of-Aron, about 50
- S4 = Peng, female, about 42, a Christian
- S5 = Tong, male, about 40, a Christian
- S6 = Mother-of-Iphat, about 32
- S7 = Mother-of-Ikung, 27
- S8 = Father-of-Ikung, 27
- S9 = Khan, male (ex-soldier), 23
- S10 = Chan, male, about 55, a Christian
- S11 = Buu, female, 20
- S12 = Mother-of-Inam, about 38

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