

# Social Cohesion under the Aegis of Reciprocity: Ritual Activity and Household Interdependence among the Kim Mun (Lanten-Yao) in Laos.

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the interdependence between ethnic Kim Mun households that is necessitated by ritual activity. Kim Mun ritual activity is underscored by a religious contract formed between a Kim Mun household and the celestial bureaucracy, a relationship that has significant bearing on social cohesion in Kim Mun villages. The paper argues that, due to the precepts of their religion, when a household performs a ritual, it requires the assistance of other households and as a result incurs obligations to those households—an interdependence born from reciprocity. Furthermore, the system punishes those who do not fulfill their obligations, not only in the religious sense but also in the social sense. As Laos continues its economic modernization, this system is coming under strain from new external forces. The consequences of these forces vary across different levels of social formation—be it the household, village or ethnic community—with divergent implications for Kim Mun ritual activity, community and ethnic identity.

## A Letter to Our Kin

In early 2012, I was shown a manuscript by a Kim Mun ritual practitioner as we sat resting in his home in Namdy Village, Luang Namtha District. The manuscript was a copy of a *kjen* (信 story, narrative) that was sent to Kim Mun villages in Lai Châu, Vietnam, in 2004.<sup>2</sup> There are many kinds of *kjen*; some tell histories or apocryphal tales while others are narratives about love, family or personal events. The author of this *kjen* composed it with the purpose of describing his village to Kim Mun in Vietnam and eliciting a reply in kind. It included information about rituals, marriage and funeral ceremonies, clans and kinship, demography, the environment, and societal issues pertaining to his village and the broader Kim Mun community in Laos—the same information I had been documenting in my fieldwork. I begin this paper with a selection of paragraphs taken from this *kjen*, which offer a perspective on how the Kim Mun view their own culture, and reveal information that they deem important to understanding Kim Mun society.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My transcriptions of Kim Mun words (both vernacular and literary) are provided as a rough guide. They are based on the IPA, but I have not included tone marks. There has been little research conducted on the Kim Mun literary and vernacular languages in Laos, and, as Strecker (1990) shows for the vernacular language, the tone systems are both complex.

<sup>3</sup> I have reproduced each excerpt to follow the original manuscript as closely as possible. Both simplified and traditional Chinese characters are used, as are variant characters that are found in Chinese variant character

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*We live in the provinces of Luang Namtha, Oudomxay and Bokeo.*

安在南塔猛紂總                      庀校省里有云親

*There are thirty villages with four thousand people, young and old.*

每寨再來有三十                      大小有齊四千們

*We have people of the Pan, Tang, Li, Wong, Kiang and Dang clans.*

盤鄧李黃蔣騰姓                      齊在老國少本根

.....

*In your villages which clans do you have, and are they the same as ours?*

知之親山有己姓                      洞姓能愁有己枝

.....

*We perform the tɛŋ-θiu and θam-tæu rituals; they are performed in any house suffering misfortune.*

清醮三朝恩修似                      何家有冤苦解分

*The tu-pu, kɔŋ-woŋ and hɔŋ-lau rituals are performed to address illnesses, but if no one is sick then they are performed every three years for the spirits of the mother and father.*

土府貢王紅樓會                      三年敬奉武公婆

*Families with enough money can perform ai-ma:n rituals, but those who are poor can only do small na:m-ma:n rituals.*

何家有钱淨得似                      何家無錢空喃分

*We perform our rituals how we think we should; but we don't know if we're right as there are no elders to teach us.*

空亂淨得成形相                      行教不齊親口親

.....

*Families that have money will arrange for their son(s) to undertake the initiation rite of both the θai-kɔŋ and tɔu-kɔŋ traditions.*

何家富財有钱使                      便是三元三清經

*Families without means will only arrange for the rite of the θai-kɔŋ tradition.*

何家貧難無錢使                      空受三元一教分

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dictionaries. Where it is not possible to reproduce a graph I have indicated it with a “□.” I was first given an exegesis of the *kjen* in the Lao language by the owner of the manuscript, which is presented here translated into English based on the principles of a communicative translation (Newmark 1988). The Lao language exegesis was not given to me as a direct translation but as a loose interpretation of the *kjen*—meaning being the principal objective. I have not provided a direct translation from the manuscript as there is insufficient space for details of the translation method and procedures; the *kjen* includes graphs with meanings that do not align with their Chinese equivalents: for example: 安 “to reside,” 齊 “everyone together” and 蚁 “my.” The purpose of reproducing the following excerpts in this way is to present the themes, questions and ideas of the author via the English translation of the Lao language exegesis, and attempt to show the excerpts in their original form.

*In the past we studied our rituals and texts, but now after youths undertake the initiation rite they learn nothing.*

前世應孝前法書                      授戒已男為修陰

*These days, youths do not study our rituals or texts, they only study Lao ways.*

今世不孝旧法書                      空孝提民新里行

*They only think of studying the Lao language, and getting a job in an office with a salary.*

空孝民新里理上                      座在朝廷吃官糧

.....

*Our elders have passed away, and the youth are abandoning our traditions; so we will lose all our knowledge.*

老枝良齊罷命了                      必定旧法轰了完

*Now when people are ill or suffering, they can only go to the doctor for medicine.*

何海病口多受苦                      空遛揚官玉藥齋

.....

A key theme linking these excerpts, and the *kjen* in general, is the author's perception that religion is central to Kim Mun culture and plays a critical role in the Kim Mun ethnic community in Laos.<sup>4</sup> This resounds not only in his descriptions of ritual practices and their importance to the social vitality of his own community, but also in his attempt to acquire corresponding information from Kim Mun elsewhere. It is evident throughout the *kjen* that the author recognizes the changes transpiring in his community, but he appears less perturbed by the changes themselves and more with how they correlate with the loss of ritual knowledge. From my fieldwork experience, it is apparent many Kim Mun are aware that modernization and development are effecting change in their culture, community and identity, and their perceptions agree with and vary from that in the *kjen*. They are influenced as much by their own individual interests and needs as they are by the expectations of their household, village and community.

Recent research on highland ethnic groups in mainland Southeast Asia has explored the dynamics of ethnic identity by examining the interplay of exogenous forces, patterns and structures (e.g., the state and the market) with the endogenous agency of ethnic groups and local multiethnic populations (Michaud and Forsyth 2011; Robinne and Sadan 2007). Jonsson (2009; 2005) has produced two studies on the Lu Mien in Thailand and Laos that examine how external (historical and contemporary) settings

<sup>4</sup> This *kjen* may be said to represent a form of auto-ethnography as well as being a record of the Kim Mun in Laos. It is illustrative of the highly literate nature of Kim Mun culture in both the religious and secular domains. Since arriving in northern Laos, this literacy has been maintained endogenously, i.e. within the ethnic community, and has operated without state or other external administration. Research on the Kim Mun has largely approached their religious system – in particular its textual aspect – as either an ancillary component subservient to a dominant oral culture, or as something that should be viewed through a Sinitic lens framed by Taoist studies. The results have either been a downplaying of the textual facets of Kim Mun ritual and in particular the literacy competence of ritual practitioners, or a tendency to present their ritual system as a deviant form of Taoist ritual.

have prompted varied socio-cultural formations and self-fashionings of ethnic identity among Lu Mien populations. Évrard (2007) and Petit (2013) write of similar processes among the Khmu in Luang Namtha Province. The Kim Mun in Laos have also undergone transformations wrought by external forces; their migrations to Laos, experiences of war, and citizenship in a (post-)socialist state are just some of the potential catalysts. This topic requires further investigation, but is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I work on the belief that Kim Mun people themselves articulate a shared sense of ethnic community, which allows me to explore one aspect of Kim Mun social life, ritual activity, and attempt to understand its impact on their households, their villages and their community in Laos. The establishment of contracts between households and the celestial pantheon via ritual practice is a well-known aspect of Kim Mun religion, but how the continuation of these contracts shapes the social interrelationships between households is less understood. Consequently, this paper is less concerned with how the current interface between ritual activity and social relationships came to be and more with how it manifests itself *now*. I hope this paper can provide means for larger abstractions about ethnicity, religion and community in Laos, and between Kim Mun—and Yao, a broader ethnonym to which the Kim Mun are assigned—populations across national borders.

### **The Kim Mun (in Laos)**

What do written sources on the Kim Mun tell us about the Kim Mun? The problems associated with conceptualizing ethnicity, and its ascribed traditions and beliefs, as a closed system are well known. Nonetheless, concepts of ethnicity and notions of ethnic identity remain relevant, particularly among minority groups. Research on the Yao has attributed political, social and economic causes to processes that delineated a people as ‘Yao’ and as an ethnic group; and similarly, the agency of Yao actors in relation to (historical) external forces and their effect on the cultural symbols and social patterns that (are used to) identify the group has also been explored. For example, Faure (2006) has proposed that in the Ming Dynasty, it was land and status boundaries marked by state and local interests that were instrumental in ‘making’ the Yao people. Litzinger (2000) has explored the discourses of Yao elites in the People’s Republic of China and their framing of a Yao history and identity that is related to, and ultimately compatible with, Chinese state ideology. Jonsson (2005) aims to counter the notion of the Lu Mien as a “self-explanatory” ethnic category, and instead focuses on how Lu Mien have aligned with and resisted external forces (such as the forces of war and the state), with consequences that instigated alternative social and cultural formations and self-fashionings of ethnic identity.

In linguistic terms, the Kim Mun constitute the second largest sub-group of the Mienic branch of the Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao) linguistic family—‘little brother’ to the Lu Mien. At present, there are Kim Mun in northern Laos, northern Vietnam and in the provinces of Guangxi, Yunnan and Hainan in southern China.<sup>5</sup> They are counted as a

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<sup>5</sup> The Kim Mun in Hainan are classified under the Miao group (苗族) despite having linguistic ties to the Mienic branch of the Hmong-Mien language family and similar cultural and religious practices. For descriptions of the Mien linguistic group, see: Ratliff (2010), Mao (2004); and Niederer (1998). For the Yao ethnic group, see: Li (2001); Pu and Guo (1992); and Mao, Meng and Deng (1982).

minority ethnic group in each state, usually grouped under the *Mien* or *Yao* ethnonym on the basis of shared language and culture.<sup>6</sup> In Laos, they live in Luang Namtha, Oudomxay, Bokeo and Phongsaly provinces, and are popularly known by the exonyms *Lanten* and *Lao Houay*, but are officially grouped with the *Iu Mien* under the *Mien* ethnonym (Department of Ethnic Affairs 2008). *Lanten* is a derivative of the Chinese word for indigo (*landian* 藍靛), and use of the appellation likely arose due to the striking indigo color that the *Kim Mun* dye their clothing. *Lao Houay* (*Lao of the Stream*) reportedly emerged in *Lao parlance* due to the proclivity that the *Kim Mun* have for establishing villages alongside mountain streams. The endonym *kim mun* means ‘mountain people.’ In the second line of the *kjen* above, the term *mun* (們) is used in self-reference, as simply ‘people’; it appears often in *Kim Mun* literary texts.<sup>7</sup> The term also dominates *Kim Mun* spoken vernacular; for example *mun-wa:* means the *Kim Mun* vernacular language and *mun-sa* and *mun-tɔn* mean an unmarried girl and boy respectively. Conversely, *iu* (瑶) is typically used by *Kim Mun* in specific reference to group (and nowadays ethnic) identity, often as *iu-nin* (瑶人).<sup>8</sup> For example, a line from the *kjen* discussed above reads: 真是遥人有己姓 “How many *iu nin* clan-names are there [in *Lai Cháu*]?” There is a semantic duality with this term, for while the *Kim Mun* use it, as in the example above, in reference to *Kim Mun* only, they also use the term to include *Iu Mien* and other *Yao* groups.<sup>9</sup>

Historical sources indicate that the *Kim Mun* (and *Yao* in general) originally inhabited a region in modern-day southern China, with some scholars locating their homeland in the south of Hunan Province (Xu 2001; Wu 1993). It was in this area that *Kim Mun* communities first came into contact with Taoism, and its ritual texts and liturgies were incorporated into their religious system (Zhang 2002: 67–70). At present, historical accounts of the *Kim Mun* (and *Iu Mien*) are tied to the *Yao* ethnonym and largely drawn on via Chinese historical texts, official documents and early 20th century anthropological surveys.<sup>10</sup> As both antagonist and collaborator in China’s historical dealings with its southern regions, these documents report *Yao* rebellions against imperial tax and corvée demands and banditry in response to loss of land caused by Han-

<sup>6</sup> The term *Mien* henceforth refers to both *Kim Mun* and *Iu Mien* groups. The term *Yao* is used when it appears in references to Chinese historical sources or contemporary works. Care must be taken when using both the *Mien* and *Yao* ethnonyms as the *Yao* group (瑶族) in China includes non-Mienic-speaking communities as well as people with disparate religious beliefs and practices. *Mun* and *Mien* both translate as “person” or “people” in these groups’ respective languages.

<sup>7</sup> Where possible, I have given the graph(s) used by *Kim Mun* in Laos. However, for other cases the vernacular and literary terms differ or a graph is not represented in Unicode, and is therefore not given.

<sup>8</sup> There are several variant graphs used for the term *iu* in both *Mien* and Chinese sources, including 瑶, 遥, 僛 and 猺 (Alberts 2007).

<sup>9</sup> In Luang Namtha, the *Kim Mun* make distinctions within their own group, using terms such as highland *Kim Mun* (*kim kjaŋ mun*) and lowland *Kim Mun* (*kim ha mun*), or clan names, for example *kjaŋ mun* (people of the Kiang 蔣 clan) who are known for their good looks and propensity to prattle. The Namtha *Kim Mun* call themselves lowland *Kim Mun* and the *Kim Mun* in Phongsaly Province highland *Kim Mun*. Many *Kim Mun* use the terms *phao iu* and *phao lanten* when discussing ethnic identity in the Lao language, but deem *Lao Houay* to be pejorative. Nonetheless, *mun* is the *locus classicus* of self-reference in everyday discourse.

<sup>10</sup> Some argue *yao* is a Chinese phonetic transliteration of the Mienic term *iu*. Others believe it was acquired from the Chinese, either linking it to *moyao* (莫徭 “exempt from corvée”) which originated in the Tang Dynasty as an administrative designation for communities not required by the state to pay tax or provide corvée labor, or to *yaoren* (猺人), which appeared as an ethnic classifier in the Song Dynasty.

Chinese migrations into Yao areas, as well as cooperation with local officials and their attempts to administer the region (Faure 2006: 172–85; Shin 2006: 56–99; Yang and Mo 1996: 347–60; Yang 1996: 514–616).<sup>11</sup> Events such as these led some Kim Mun to seek new lands and greater autonomy in areas beyond the reach of the Chinese empire.

The Kim Mun first arrived in Laos around 150–200 years ago. While they did not depart from the same geographical area and their migrations were not contemporaneous, they often migrated in multi-household groups. In the mid-1800s, Kim Mun communities were already dispersed throughout southern China and northern Vietnam, and the pressures of war and social turmoil drove some Kim Mun communities into northern Laos, whereas others came in search of fertile land. Kim Mun elders tell of moving into an abandoned Namtha valley around the 1880s (along with Sida and Bit communities), where they built permanent settlements and established political and economic leadership over the locale (Badenoch and Tomita 2013: 38–54). The Kim Mun community in the Namtha region was formed from two groups; one was led by a *Tang* (鄧) clansman and came from the Sipsong Panna area, the other came from Lai Châu and was led by a *Li* (李) clansman (Badenoch and Tomita 2013: 38–42). This area quickly re-emerged as a zone of competing local and regional interests as Tai-speaking groups returned to the valley and European colonial powers pushed farther north (Grabowsky 2008, 2003; Walker 1999). By the early 1960s, the Kim Mun were engaged in the Second Indochinese War. During the conflict in Namtha, the Kim Mun sided with the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces, while the Iu Mien sided with the Royalist forces.<sup>12</sup> Victory by the Pathet Lao led some Iu Mien communities to migrate to Thailand, while others sought refuge in the United States and France. Conversely, the Kim Mun remained in the area to resettle old villages, open new lands, rebuild their lives, and, in their own eyes, take their due place in a new Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).<sup>13</sup>

In spite of their turbulent history, the Kim Mun have maintained a complex, highly literate religious system.<sup>14</sup> It is unclear how this system developed; Taoism may have been brought in by Taoist missionaries, adopted in reaction to Han-Chinese civilizing projects as an act of cultural self-preservation, or appropriated in the pursuit of spiritual salvation and higher learning (Xu 2006; Holm 2004: 32–4; Lemoine and Chiao 1991; Strickmann 1982: 23–30). Whatever its origins, Taoist ritual practices and beliefs are a core foundation of Kim Mun religion and society.

In Laos, the Kim Mun community, as a group with shared linguistic, cultural and religious practices, is a multifaceted entity; it should not be conceptualized as homogenous and bounded. The Kim Mun community can be articulated in terms of a

<sup>11</sup> Such accounts also feature in the collective memory of Kim Mun groups throughout the region.

<sup>12</sup> For further information on the conflict in Namtha, see Dommen (1964: 213–19) and McCoy (1972).

<sup>13</sup> Relations between Kim Mun and Iu Mien in the area soured after the war, probably because they fought on opposing sides. The reasons for this are most likely bound up in the various socio-political relationships extant before the war. As Évrard (2007) highlights, Khmu groups also fought on different sides during the war for reasons that were influenced by socio-political, cultural and environmental factors. I have been told that another reason for this animosity stems from the role of Iu Mien combatants in the loss of Kim Mun ritual texts and paintings; many were destroyed during the fighting or sold in Thailand after the war.

<sup>14</sup> Although earlier research mentions Taoist elements, it was only in the 1980s that Taoist mythology, liturgy and ritual practice became widely associated with Mien religion. See: Strickmann (1982: 23–30); Lemoine (1978: 811–14); Shiratori (1975: 7–13).



collection of Kim Mun villages, with the village an administrative unit of the state. Many Kim Mun villages include varying numbers of households that identify themselves as belonging to a different ethnicity, not to mention individual household members. Consequently, some Kim Mun village-communities also exhibit intra-village relationships that differ from other Kim Mun village-communities, which has important implications for ritual activity. In a few Kim Mun villages, the Kim Mun population is numerically a minority. Such multiethnic settings have significant bearing on political, administrative and religious leadership. Hence, calling a village a 'Kim Mun village' is perhaps inappropriate and misleading, but I do so for simplicity. This increase in multi-ethnic villages is mostly due to government policies of resettlement and rural development established after the war (Baird and Shoemaker 2005; Évrard and Goudineau 2004). Prior to the war, the movement of households (or groups of households, however linked) was much more limited and so the motivations for binding households into larger groups would have also differed. As a Kim Mun elder repeatedly told me, "you cannot think of Kim Mun villages back then like you see them now." The Kim Mun 'community' can also refer to the accumulated Kim Mun population from all villages in the area, forming a self-defined ethnic community, but this classification also has its own problems. Nonetheless, at present, the primary social unit in a Kim Mun village is the household.<sup>15</sup>

Kim Mun households are linked, not only by kinship and marriage, but also through pursuit of the shared objective of attaining prosperity and well-being for the household in the material world and ensuring salvation for their ancestors in the afterlife. Kim Mun religion provides the means to achieve this objective through ritual, and ritual practice necessitates mutual support between households. This support defines roles and responsibilities and unites households in reciprocating obligations, the effect of which, along with marriage and kinship, forms the social body of Kim Mun village-communities and the Kim Mun ethnic community in Laos. This is evident in the examples presented below: in the *ai-soŋ*, whereby households relinquish a degree of autonomy and grant authority to three ritual practitioners to act on their behalf, in the *txai* and *θiu*, which require households to depend on the support of other households and incur obligations to reciprocate, and in the *txei-sei*, which creates pseudo-filial relationships that bind men through each generation and across lineages. The data used in this paper were mostly obtained from Namdy Village, Luang Namtha, though data from other Kim Mun villages has also been incorporated.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Interface of Ritual Activity and Social Life** **An Outline of Ritual Practice<sup>17</sup>**

Kim Mun religion is often described as a composite of Taoism, ancestor worship and shamanism, and although facets of all three are evident in Kim Mun ritual activity,

<sup>15</sup> I identify the household as a family unit which makes offerings to their ancestors at a single altar; a household may encompass two or more houses, but I know of no instance of two households, defined this way, which occupy a single house.

<sup>16</sup> The examples used below are to some extent idealized, however in the accompanying footnotes I attempt to also provide, where space allows, counterpoints or alternatives to the arguments made below.

<sup>17</sup> The following description does not encompass all Kim Mun rituals. I have left out other Kim Mun rituals such as divinatory *ai-kwa* rituals and blessing rituals akin to the *bacii* or *sou-khouan*.

Kim Mun ritual practitioners do not explicitly make these distinctions.<sup>18</sup> Instead, ritual practitioners employ criteria based on ritual liturgy to describe and classify their religious beliefs and practices. Kim Mun rituals can be divided into two categories according to the absence or presence of texts during a ritual: *na:m-ma:n* (喃神) and *ai-ma:n* (做神); this distinction also correlates with the objective of the ritual. *Ma:n* is a broad-spectrum term for entities not of the mortal world, and encompasses deities, spirits, demons and ghosts, and implicitly the spirits of the ancestors. *Na:m-ma:n* may be rendered as to feed and clean or purify the deities and spirits, while *ai-ma:n* means to work with, entreat, or command the deities and spirits. Formally, a key difference, other than the size and complexity of the associated rituals, is that *ai-ma:n* rituals require direct action or presume explicit results from the deities or ancestors with regard to an objective specified during the ritual, while *na:m-ma:n* rituals do not. In practice, these categories are not so tidy.

The *na:m-ma:n* rituals are mostly small rituals performed by a single ritual practitioner and last up to a few hours. They primarily focus on a household's ancestors as well as on household and mid-level functionary deities pertaining to daily life; they do not feature supreme deities of high office or groups of deities whose positions are macro-social. These rituals typically entail offerings to the ancestors and/or deities to ensure their continued contentment and favor, but can also address household matters such as minor illnesses (caused by the presence of wild spirits or the effect of the accumulation of ill deeds on the soul) or inauspicious events and bad omens (such as finding a green snake in the home).<sup>19</sup> The instructions and verses used in *na:m-ma:n* rituals are written down in manuscripts, but these are not considered liturgical texts and are thus never present by the ritual altar. The contents for each ritual are instead memorized by the ritual practitioner. The ability to mediate between a household's members, ancestors, and household deity is crucial as it ensures the basic protection of the family lineage in the terrestrial world and its well-being in the afterlife.<sup>20</sup> All ranks of ritual practitioner, from *apprentice* to *ritual master* and *senior master*, need to be proficient in the *na:m-ma:n* rituals necessary to manage household affairs.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Scholars of Taoism posit that the southern sect of the *Tianshi* (Celestial Masters) and *Zhengyi* (Orthodox Unity) Taoist schools shaped the framework of Mien religion, and further scholarship has linked Mien ritual with the *Meishan*, *Lüshan*, and *Tianxin Zhengfa* revelations (Xu 2006:17–69; Yang and Yang 2000: 1–84; Obi and Müller 1996; Strickmann 1982). Similarly, anthropological research has identified cultural characteristics, such as patrilineal descent and an egalitarian social structure with high esteem for community elders, that interlink with Mien religious life (Lemoine 2002; Lemoine and Chiao 1991; Guangxi Zhuangzu zizhiqu bianjizu 1987, 1984; Miles 1978).

<sup>19</sup> An example of a *na:m-ma:n* ritual is the *na:m ðan lɔŋ* (喃神農 Ritual for the Deity of Agriculture), which is performed every year or when it is deemed necessary by a household to make offerings, express gratitude for past harvests and request the protection of future crops.

<sup>20</sup> It is customary that any man who serves as head of the household be able to perform these rituals, although at present this is not always the case. There are also instances when the head of the household is a woman or young man, neither of whom can perform *na:m-ma:n* rituals. In such instances, a relative or neighbor is often available to perform them as necessary.

<sup>21</sup> Kim Mun ritual practitioners distinguish three levels of proficiency, which are, in descending order: *senior master* (*ðin-θeŋ* 先生), *ritual master* (*θai-fa* 師父), and *apprentice* (*tai-ði* 弟子). Higher ranks are achieved through the accumulation of ritual knowledge and proficiency in the requisite ritual practices.



In contrast, *ai-ma:n* rituals require the presence of ritual texts, both as functional and symbolic instruments of ritual practice.<sup>22</sup> These rituals, while incorporating functionary deities, ancestors and household deities, also engage powerful macro-social deities and may comprise elements of worship, celebration, protection, healing, transformation and fealty. Examples include addressing serious illness or calamity, large offerings of gratitude and expressions of veneration, village-centered rituals which ally the village under tutelary deities, and initiation rites, all of which run a number of days and nights and require multiple ritual practitioners. Only ritual practitioners who have mastered the requisite skills and have therefore risen to the rank of ritual master or senior master can lead *ai-ma:n* rituals. Although apprentices can assist in them, and often do so as a method of instruction, they possess neither the necessary texts or knowledge to conduct *ai-ma:n* rituals, nor have they received sanction from the deities of the ritual practitioner (*θai-fa ma:n* 師父神) and *lou-kwən* (老君 –the deification of Laozi, highly venerated in Taoist traditions) to conduct rituals that incorporate macro-social deities. In Kim Mun society, any individual can become a ritual practitioner through initiation and proper study and can perform rituals of any form—there is no religious or social distinction between a ritual practitioner performing a *na:m-ma:n* ritual and one performing an *ai-ma:n* ritual. Only the level of study and rank achieved determines the types of rituals they are able and permitted to perform.

Kim Mun *ai-ma:n* rituals are also categorized according to ritual tradition: namely, *θai-kəŋ* (師公 Ritual Master) and *təu-kəŋ* (道公 Taoist Master). The criteria include the texts, patron deities and functions of the ritual as prescribed by each tradition. This classification is fraught with inconsistencies; nevertheless it is a distinction that Kim Mun ritual practitioners make. For instance, larger *ai-ma:n* rituals utilize rituals from both the *θai-kəŋ* and *təu-kəŋ* traditions which are performed in tandem—often intertwining—and so require the roles of *θai-kəŋ* and *təu-kəŋ* each to be filled by a ritual practitioner. However, as long as a ritual practitioner is of adequate rank and proficiency he may take up either role. When a Kim Mun youth undergoes the initiation rite he will ideally undergo initiation for both traditions. This permits him, after proper study, to perform *θai-kəŋ* and *təu-kəŋ* rituals. The division between ritual traditions does not pertain to the individual ritual practitioner but only relates to their role within the ritual; a ritual practitioner can serve as a *θai-kəŋ* or *təu-kəŋ* as required.<sup>23</sup>

The two ritual traditions also possess distinct textual repertoires.<sup>24</sup> The *təu-kəŋ* tradition has more texts than the *θai-kəŋ* tradition, which holds the *kjau wan hu* (救患科)

<sup>22</sup> Ritual texts can be classified in terms of the audience and the recitation language: —*kəŋ* (經) and *hu* (科) with *pei-jui* (秘語). The *kəŋ* and *hu* texts can be thought of as ritual texts containing instructions, lists and narratives, which are vocalized for the audience seated at and around the ritual altar, both human and non-human. The *pei-jui* secret texts are the dialogues between the ritual practitioner and the deities and ancestors present during the ritual. The *kəŋ* and *hu* texts are recited (chanted or sung aloud) in a southern Chinese dialect to the accompaniment of music from a drum and cymbal, whereas the *pei-jui* texts are recited (voiced but directed internally) by the lead ritual practitioner in the Kim Mun vernacular language.

<sup>23</sup> Despite this, the lead *θai-kəŋ* ritual practitioner can only conduct and perform the *θai-kəŋ* components of the ritual in question, and likewise for the lead *təu-kəŋ* ritual practitioner. However, other ritual practitioners may perform or help according to need, and during a ritual can be seen helping both the lead *θai-kəŋ* and *təu-kəŋ* (though never simultaneously). If the number of ritual practitioners is sufficient this crossing-over is avoided.

<sup>24</sup> For a catalogue of Kim Mun and Iu Mien ritual texts, see Höllmann and Friedrich (2004).

supreme over all others, but rituals in both traditions utilize multiple texts. The distinction between the two traditions is also revealed in their patron deities. The *θai-kəŋ* revere the *θam-ɲun* (三元 the Three Generals<sup>25</sup>), who are honored as the founding masters of their ritual tradition, while the *tɔu-kəŋ* revere the *θam-tɛŋ* (三清 the Three Pure Ones). Despite this, the *θam-ɲun* also occupy a secondary position in the rituals of the *tɔu-kəŋ* and the *θam-tɛŋ* in rituals of the *θai-kəŋ*. The Kim Mun hold the *tɔu-kəŋ* tradition to be superior to that of the *θai-kəŋ*. One reason offered for this is that caring for the ancestors in the afterlife is paramount in Kim Mun religious life. In Kim Mun ritual, it is the *tɔu-kəŋ* tradition and associated rituals that incorporate the ancestors and deal with matters of the afterlife. Conversely, the *θai-kəŋ* rituals focus on household or village affairs in the terrestrial realm, a domain mediated by deities of various offices and positions. Hence it can be reasoned that *θai-kəŋ* rituals manage affairs of the living and *tɔu-kəŋ* rituals manage affairs of the afterlife.<sup>26</sup>

### Village Ritual and Political Authority

The *ai-soŋ* (做衆) is a calendrical village-level ritual performed on the first and second days of the second month of the lunar year.<sup>27</sup> In Namdy Village, the *ai-soŋ* is performed every third year, unless the village has experienced a period of extraordinary misfortune. For instance, in 2012, in order to address a succession of deaths through accident and illness and the destruction of rice paddies due to flooding in 2011, the village leaders decided an *ai-soŋ* was required to ensure sufficient offerings were made and that protection from the village deities was secured for 2012.

The primary purpose of the *ai-soŋ* is to reaffirm the relationship of the village with the village deities (*pun-kɛŋ* 本境).<sup>28</sup> The ritual re-establishes the fealty of the village, and theoretically every other Kim Mun village in Laos, under the tutelary village deities. In return for offerings of worthy goods, the village deities protect the community from harm, whether natural or supernatural. The village deities are reportedly the same throughout Kim Mun villages in Luang Namtha, Oudomxay and Bokeo, and include Kim Mun ancestors of old who performed great deeds. For example, the head of the Ancestral Chiefs group includes *Tang Yon-Hak* (鄧玄學), the Kim Mun leader who oversaw the establishment of Kim Mun settlements and held significant political influence in the Namtha locale.

<sup>25</sup> See Holm (1993).

<sup>26</sup> An example of the inconsistency in this division is that a *tɔu-kəŋ* ritual for cleansing the soul, *wa-ji* (化衣), is often performed for the living.

<sup>27</sup> This ritual is not performed every year; the *na:m-soŋ* (喃衆) often substitutes for it during lean years, as it requires less of the community's time and resources. Hence, in 2012, simply honoring and feeding the deities and spirits were deemed insufficient; more direct action was required. Nonetheless, the overall objective is the same and one of the two rituals will be performed at this time each year.

<sup>28</sup> Households of other ethnic groups in Kim Mun villages are also often invited to participate in this ritual.

**Table 1:** The Village Deities

Names and Divisions <sup>29</sup>		Identities and Roles
地主官	Divine Masters of the Land	Patrons: Protect and care for Kim Mun villages, lands and people.
	Divine Sages	Deities of Taoist/Chinese origin – includes the three lords of the three realms (celestial, terrestrial and underworld): Oversee Kim Mun villages and lands.
	Ancestral Chiefs	Ancestors of Kim Mun and Iu Mien in the Namtha region: In charge of the village deities.
	Spirits of the Land	Traditional (autochthonous) deities of the land: Of the Nyuan ethnic group. <sup>30</sup>
本境名	Village Spirits	Guardians: Protect and care for each village.
	Counsel Spirits	Ancestors of Kim Mun and Iu Mien in the Namtha region: Advise and monitor the village spirits.
	Sentinel Spirits	Defend the village perimeter.
	Officer Spirits	Spirits of other ethnic groups – known by different names: Administrative officials.
各家香火名	Spirits of the Household	Titular spirit of the household and spirit of the village (here viewed as a group of households).
各人家先名	Spirits of the Ancestors	Titular spirits of the ancestors: safeguard children and grandchildren. <sup>31</sup>
众人阴阳师	Hunting Spirits	Ensure advantageous conditions and protection for hunting.
各人神农名	Agricultural Spirits	Watch over the paddies, fields and harvested crops.

Another major objective of the *ai-soŋ* is to re-affirm each household's relationship with their household deity, *pjau-ma:n* (家神). The main responsibility of the household deity is to watch over the household's members in matters of health and prosperity.<sup>32</sup> Typically a single deity is chosen from a group of five, called *ja:ŋ-hu* (香火).<sup>33</sup> As each Kim

<sup>29</sup> I was not given precise names for each sub-group, so I have adapted names from the descriptions provided to me.

<sup>30</sup> For the link between the Kim Mun and Nyuan in Luang Namtha, see Badenoch and Tomita (2013: 44).

<sup>31</sup> These four spirits are not the actual ancestors but spirits who care for the progeny of all family lines.

<sup>32</sup> As noted, Kim Mun families may be spread between two or three houses, however it is the members of the house (those who consistently dwell within) that constitute the household and therefore it is only these members who are under the watch of the household deity. Households of a single lineage may have a different household deity for each respective household.

<sup>33</sup> Two deities are also permissible, and there are instances where deities outside this group of five have been selected. The group name *ja:ŋ-hu* precedes the name of the deity to indicate that it belongs to the group, i.e., the deity is performing the role of household deity. Deities can occupy numerous positions simultaneously and assume various names and titles. The household deities differ in Laos, China and Vietnam, however their status is more or less identical.

Mun household has an altar where the household deity and souls of the ancestors reside.<sup>34</sup> The *ja:ŋ-hu* deities can thus be thought of as protectors of the family lineage.

As described above, basic *na:m-ma:n* rituals involve the provision of goods and services to the ancestors and household deity in exchange for continued health and prosperity. While an individual ritual practitioner can perform the appropriate rituals to maintain his household's wellbeing, he cannot individually perform the *ai-ma:n* rituals necessary to ensure that his household is properly positioned under the aegis of the supreme deities, nor can he fully address his household's affairs in the spiritual and material worlds. For example, rituals to release the ancestors from the underworld (e.g., the *tɕai*) or to maintain harmony between a household and the spiritual world (e.g., the *θiu*) require several ritual practitioners. Transmission of the knowledge required to perform these rituals can only be effected by the initiation rite, which requires numerous ritual practitioners. These *ai-ma:n* rituals (discussed below) and their associated familial and social objectives incorporate supreme deities and necessitate the assistance of other ritual practitioners. Although the *ai-soŋ* concerns the relationship of the village to the village deities and is pertinent to the prosperity of the coming year, it also binds the village-community—represented by individual households and their ancestors—within a celestial bureaucracy governed by the supreme deities. It is only within this framework that protection in the material world and salvation in the afterlife is assured. A balance thus exists between the self-sufficiency and autonomy of a household and the cooperation of multiple households (here, as a village-community) to secure the welfare of each household and lineage. This cooperation is apparent in the three ritual leadership positions<sup>35</sup> that govern Kim Mun village-communities, which are called:

- |                    |   |   |
|--------------------|---|---|
| 1. <i>set-tɕu:</i> | 主 | House which constitutes the ritual seat of the village.   |
| 2. <i>set-θai:</i> | 師 | Head ritual practitioner of the village.                  |
| 3. <i>gjaŋ-ku:</i> | 官 | Person in charge of the religious affairs of the village. |

The three ritual practitioners who serve in these positions are responsible for the performance of the *ai-soŋ* (and all village-level rituals).<sup>36</sup> This is unlike the case of the majority of rituals, in which ritual practitioners are engaged because of kinship ties, proficiency in ritual, or availability. All village-level rituals are performed in the house of the *set-tɕu*. Village members (typically representatives from each household) come to the house to help build the altar, to construct necessary ritual instruments, to prepare food and drink to be offered to the deities and ancestors and for community consumption, and to assist in the performance of the ritual, while others just relax and converse with neighbors and friends. Although recognized by the village-community as the ritual seat of the village, outside of village rituals, the house of the *set-tɕu* holds no other function; individuals do not perform rituals for their own household in the house of the *set-tɕu*.

<sup>34</sup> However, the soul is thought to be two entities: one is enshrined at the household altar while the other resides in the heavens. This bipartition of the soul is a central belief in Taoism and Chinese popular religion.

<sup>35</sup> These three positions are also found among Kim Mun villages in Yunnan and Guangxi. While the names given vary in different locales, I have been told by several ritual practitioners in China and Laos that even today all Kim Mun villages must have people performing these three roles.

<sup>36</sup> This organizational structure for governing ritual affairs in the village was also used prior to the war as a form of leadership hierarchy when large groups of Kim Mun households act in concord.



The position of *set-təu* is neither hereditary nor a lifelong appointment. Along with the *set-θai* and *gjaŋ-ku*, the position of *set-təu* is occupied for a limited period of time after which the village-community gathers, new candidates are nominated (either by themselves or others), and three new representatives are selected.<sup>37</sup> A ceremony is then performed and a stake planted in the front of the house of the *set-təu*. This informs the deities and ancestors of the new identities of the village-community's ritual leaders and discloses the location of the house serving as the new ritual seat. The *set-θai* is the lead ritual practitioner of the village-community. He is in charge of all village rituals and hence of maintaining the relationship between the village-community and the deities. The *gjaŋ-ku* is responsible for the organization of all village rituals and associated affairs.



**Figure 1:** The *set-θai* reciting the names of the Village Deities.

At present, in villages where the majority of the population is Kim Mun, these positions often overlap with political-administrative positions; the *set-təu*, for example, can also serve as the village chief.<sup>38</sup> However, when this is the case, authority does not reside entirely with the three ritual leaders. While village-level rituals require the village to cede authority to the chosen three ritual practitioners, there are mechanisms in place that check the extent of their power within the village. For instance, often the most senior

<sup>37</sup> One or all of the incumbents can be re-elected. A ritual may also be performed to acquire the deities' consent for the new candidates.

<sup>38</sup> In villages where the Kim Mun population is not the majority, this overlapping of positions is much less common and hence ritual and politics in the domain of the village are separated. However, within the Kim Mun component of the village, the ritual leadership positions will be occupied and the leaders will fulfill their roles accordingly.

members of the village—retired from such ritual and political roles—are involved in decision-making processes, as are the peers of the ritual leaders.<sup>39</sup> Thus, while these positions, like village-level administrative positions, carry significant social responsibilities and rights, power is diluted both by the inclusion of peer groups in major meetings and the limited tenure of the positions. The format of the *ai-soŋ* was altered after the war, whereby the present *pun-keŋ* were established as a group and incorporated into the ritual. It is also important to note the incorporation of spirits acknowledged as not belonging to the Kim Mun themselves, as well as the invitation of non-Kim Mun households to participate in the ritual.<sup>40</sup> The *ai-soŋ* was performed prior to the war, but performances focused on linkages between households and household deities as well as with the larger celestial framework; the concept of the village and associated village-community differed.

### Ritual Activity and Household Interdependence

The *tsai* (齋) and *θiu* (醺) are two of the most vital (*ai-ma:n*) rituals in Kim Mun religion, and both are central to Taoist liturgy in southern China.<sup>41</sup> In Taoism they are called purifications (*zhai* 齋) and offerings (*jiao* 醺) respectively, and along with ordinations (*jie* 戒) constitute the three categories under which Taoist ritual formats were first standardized (Bokenkamp 2001: 181-99). The *jiao* may be performed as a recurrent ritual for revitalizing and blessing the community or for addressing crises such as droughts or epidemics (Andersen 2008: 539-44; Davis 2001: 227-41). A modern *jiao* is a ceremony held by communities and performed by Taoist Masters and local Ritual Masters that reaffirms the semi-contractual relationship between the community and its tutelary deity and realigns their relationship within the Taoist cosmos (Schipper 1974: 324). This cosmos is presided over by the Three Pure Ones (三清) and is governed by a celestial bureaucracy administered by deities and exalted historical figures. The alignment of village and deity within the cosmos is realized through Taoist liturgy—which enacts the invested authority of the Taoist Master to mediate with the Taoist pantheon via ritualized bureaucratic processes. The *zhai*, in its traditional format, is no longer an independent ritual but is now performed as the first half of the *jiao* ritual (Andersen 2008: 539-44).<sup>42</sup> In general, it is a recitation of repentances, followed by the

<sup>39</sup> Although women do not hold positions of ritual power, senior women in the village are considered part of the governance structure and are involved in decision making at the village-level. They also have their own leadership group that is responsible for matters concerning women in the village, such as work, dress, traditional skills and customary knowledge.

<sup>40</sup> The *pun-keŋ* are specifically honored for their past achievements and service in aiding the Kim Mun in the ritual *həp keŋ ma:n tiu* (合境神酒 Drinking with the Village Deities), which seeks their continued assistance in protecting not just the villages in which it is performed but also the greater Namtha area. The ritual was created after the war by several Kim Mun leaders.

<sup>41</sup> For English language works on Taoist ritual in southern China and Taiwan, see Dean (1993), Lagerwey (1987), and Schipper (1985). For Chinese language sources, see Li (2007), Shi (2005), Chen (2003), and Fu (2003).

<sup>42</sup> According to Andersen (2008: 539-44), the liturgical development of Taoist ritual during the Song Dynasty led to a situation in which the *zhai* and *jiao* merged and the two terms became interchangeable. The growing importance of the *jiao* component led to the use of this term as the general designation of the combined liturgy



presentation of the memorial to notify the deities of the merits accrued from repentance, after which the *jiao* begins and the deities are thanked and given offerings (Yamada 2008: 1216–17).

In the Kim Mun liturgy, the *tai* and *tiu* are performed to address major illnesses or misfortunes afflicting an individual or an entire household. The causes of the affliction can originate from various sources, such as the displeasure of ancestors, household deities or local spirits with a member (or members) of the household, or from opportunistic and hostile wild spirits. In contrast, it is also customary for a household to perform a *tiu* every three years to make offerings and pay respects to the ancestors.<sup>43</sup> The ancestors will be presented with a banquet of food, provided with rice seeds to plant in their fields, bathed and clothed in new attire and will receive a multitude of gifts. Likewise, a household will also periodically conduct a *tai* in order to release the souls of the ancestors from the underworld prisons and to provide them passage to their place in the heavens—collectively referred to as *ja:ŋ sou miu* (陽州廟). It is the *tai-kŋ* and *tou-kŋ* who mediate between households, ancestors and deities. Equipped with great powers invested by their patron deities, these ritual practitioners can navigate the rules and procedures of the celestial bureaucracy using petitions, talismans and incantations, or perform violent martial exorcisms. Kim Mun *ai-ma:n* rituals focus on the household, but ritual practitioners do not perform them for their own household; they are conducted instead by ritual practitioners from other households. The degree of this inter-household dependence becomes more and more acute the larger and more complex the required ritual.

The *tai* and *tiu* both begin in the evening.<sup>44</sup> The two lead ritual practitioners cleanse the ritual area, activate the altar, purify their bodies, and call on their protector-deities who will guard them from attack and be at their post throughout the ritual. Although the ritual itself will have only just begun, related work will have been carried out since morning; both rituals require detailed preparation that is not undertaken by ritual practitioners. The mother of the household, along with her daughters, relatives and women of neighboring households, will begin cooking the cauldrons of rice required for offerings and the meals provided for the ritual practitioners and other attendees.<sup>45</sup> This responsibility brings many women together, in particular the next generation, who learn how to manage the endeavor. Sons and nephews also help. Accompanied by friends, they slaughter the animals and prepare the meat required for offerings and food, and construct the ritual altars under the guidance of a ritual master. Although six to eight ritual practitioners are adequate to perform the *tai* and *tiu*, there are frequently many more in attendance to assist with recitation or performance. Furthermore, a few youths who have begun their studies are taught ritual practice through participation.<sup>46</sup> Other

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of ceremonies for the living. The term *zhai* continued to be used for communal services but it became more associated with ceremonies for the dead, and today refers to Taoist funeral liturgy.

<sup>43</sup> In reality, financial situation and need determine if and when these rituals are performed.

<sup>44</sup> A *tai* will typically run continuously for two nights and two days (though traditionally it was three nights and three days) and a *tiu* for an evening and a day (previously two nights and two days).

<sup>45</sup> A ritual practitioner in Namdy Village talked of a great-aunt capable of assisting in *ai-ma:n* rituals and reciting texts. I am told women who demonstrated both interest and skill were once permitted and encouraged to undertake initiation and assist in rituals, but at present this is neither actively encouraged nor discouraged.

<sup>46</sup> Such as *diu-ma:n* (調神), the ritual music, dance and manipulation of objects used for ritual purposes.



**Figure 2:** Preparation of offerings and food.



**Figure 3:** Preparation of offerings and food.

members of the village or of other Kim Mun villages will also come to socialize. Although the cost of a ritual is borne by the household holding it, preparation is shared between households. A theme of a village-community begins to emerge here. The more people in attendance—either to help or watch—the more efficacious the ritual becomes, and the scene depicted above is then repeated in other households as they hold rituals.

The *t̤ai* and *θiu* rituals can both be performed to address similar dilemmas, however in doing so they differ with regard to the texts utilized, deities invoked and methods employed.<sup>47</sup> The two rituals can be surmised as a series of offerings to deities and ancestors, all of which secure merit for the household. Table 2 lists customary items (often symbolic representations fabricated from bamboo paper) that are included in most offerings; large and valuable items such as buffalos, pigs or chickens (offered in the flesh) are special offerings or constitute the final offering of the ritual.

**Table 2:** Types of Offerings

Mun	Graph	English	Mun	Graph	English
<i>hɔŋ</i>	香	Incense	<i>na:n bɛ</i>	錢	Spirit Money
<i>fa:ŋ</i>	花	Flowers	<i>ham</i>	銜	Meat (diced)
<i>tɔŋ</i>	灯	Oil Burner	<i>ku</i>	鼓	Drum
<i>t̤a</i>	茶	Tea	<i>t̤ei</i>	旗	Flag
<i>na:ŋ</i>	食	Rice (cooked)	<i>ma</i>	馬	Horse
<i>gjei</i>	菜	Food (general vegetables)	<i>lɔ</i>	鑼	Gong
<i>dau</i>	盐	Salt	<i>tiu</i>	酒	Rice Whisky

During a ritual, these offerings are presented and requests are made for assistance in addressing the issue at hand. As different maladies require the assistance of different deities, additional offerings are made to particular deities for their explicit help. Ritual offerings constitute a significant portion of the *t̤ai* and *θiu* rituals, thematically running the gamut from bribery to tribute. Another component is ritual exorcism. The ritual practitioner has an arsenal of tools at his disposal and an array of methods for employing them. One form of illness is caused by a wild spirit or lost soul attacking, and at times replacing, the soul of an individual. During a ritual, the tool, *bɔ-lɔŋ* (毛郎), is used by the ritual practitioner to trick the marauding soul out of the body of the ill individual and return the individual's soul to its proper place. Ancestors can also be a source of trouble. For example, a man killed during the war who had no son of his own was believed to have begun attacking his grand-nephew in an act of jealousy and regret. Through a version of the *t̤ai*, his anger was placated and assurances made that he would receive due care.

<sup>47</sup> A key difference is that a *θiu* ritual does not entail offerings made at the exterior altar 城都府 (also known as *din-teŋ* 天廷—where powerful but dangerous deities not permitted to enter the household sit and receive offerings).





Figure 4: The lead ʔau-kəŋ conducting offerings (placed on the table in the background).

The *ʔai* and *ʔiu* rituals require the support of the community both in terms of preparation and performance. This support often comes from households linked by marriage, kinship or the bond of friendship.<sup>48</sup> Should a household cease to offer support, the act will be reciprocated by other households in the village.<sup>49</sup> In order to hold an *ai-ma:n* ritual, a household requires the support of other households, and receiving this support incurs obligations to these households to support them when they hold a ritual. In sum, Kim Mun ritual engenders social norms within the village-community which reinforce inter-household networks and punish those households that do not fulfill their obligations.

### Inter-lineage Networks and the Rite of Re-Birth

The *ʔei-sei* (戒子) ritual is a cornerstone of Kim Mun religion and a central medium for the reproduction of Kim Mun society through each generation. The ritual itself effects a metaphysical transformation ('re-birth' in Kim Mun vernacular) of a male youth; it is not contingent upon physiological changes indicative of puberty rites nor tied to an age of majority (Turner 1966). The *ʔei-sei* is undertaken by youths between the

<sup>48</sup> Ritual practitioners are usually paid for their services with choice cuts from a sacrificed pig. Money is also often given, but payment is, or at least should be, an ancillary motivation for a ritual practitioner to perform.

<sup>49</sup> If a household is without a resident ritual practitioner, other ritual practitioners will continue to perform rituals for the household provided its members assist their household during rituals, e.g., in matters of preparation.

ages of 12 and 17, but can be performed for younger youths and men up to old-age. The transformation, and thereby initiation, of the youth is measured by the conferral of a ritual name, the bestowal of registers, and the provision of protector-deities from both the *θai-kəŋ* and *təu-kəŋ* traditions.

The transformation of the youth is enacted in two domains: celestial and societal. First, the initiated youth receives two ritual names, which are recorded under the auspices of their respective patron deities in the heavenly realm—i.e., the *θam-nun* of the *θai-kəŋ* tradition and the *θam-teŋ* of the *təu-kəŋ* tradition. The youth is no longer deemed a child by the deities and is therefore no longer under the protection of *tai-mu* (帝母 Flower Goddess and Protector of Children). Instead, he now possesses his own protector-deities and is accepted as an initiate by the deities of the ritual practitioner. The youth also receives registers, which confer the authority (but not yet the means—this is achieved through study) to invoke his protector-deities and to perform rituals incorporating his ancestors and minor deities. Initiation is confirmed by a contract, one for each tradition, which outlines its precepts and rewards the youth with his ‘passport’ to the heavenly realm—another copy is transmitted to the heavens and kept on record.<sup>50</sup> Second, the youth is reborn in the eyes of the community. His ritual names now bind him to the lineage of his ancestors via the familial clan-name and sacerdotal generation-name (*ŋu tai pan* 五代班). The generation-name is a group of five names. Each ritual tradition has its own group, one of which is allocated to each generation of initiates. While the clan-name is inherited and the given-name chosen by the youth’s father and teachers, the generation-name alternates in perpetuity.<sup>51</sup>

**Table 3:** Generation-Names

<i>θai-kəŋ</i>		<i>təu-kəŋ</i>	
法	<i>pap</i>	道	<i>təu</i>
應	<i>eŋ</i>	經	<i>keŋ</i>
顯	<i>hin</i>	玄 or 金	<i>jon</i> or <i>kjam</i>
勝	<i>θeŋ</i>	雲	<i>wan</i>
院	<i>nun</i>	妙	<i>miu</i>

Initiation alone does not grant the youth immediate rights or privileges within the community, as he is physically and psychologically not yet an adult, but it does guarantee their acquisition at a future date. Typically, when the youth has mastered basic *na:m-ma:n* rituals and is married and has a child, he will be deemed an adult. According to custom, men who have not undertaken the *təi-sei* are not considered full members of the community and are therefore seldom permitted to take up positions of authority or participate in decision-making at the village-level.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The *θai-kəŋ* and *təu-kəŋ* contracts are known as *θou jam tip* (左陰牒) and *jau jam tip* (右陽牒), respectively.

<sup>51</sup> The example presented here is of the *taŋ* (鄧) clan. The order of the names differs between clan-names; differences in order within clan-names and between locales, however, were also evident and usually explained as errors.

<sup>52</sup> The adherence to traditional religious practices and its influence on social structure varies between Kim Mun villages. I can speculate that this is due in part to the number of ritual practitioners living in a village and the

The complete rite can last seven days and nights.<sup>53</sup> The youth's father will consult a ritual practitioner to set an appropriate date to begin the *tæi-sei*. Once set, the father will seek out and invite six ritual practitioners to fill the six roles of the *tæi-sei*.

**Table 4:** Six Roles of the Initiation Rite<sup>54</sup>

<i>θai-kəŋ</i>			<i>təu-kəŋ</i>		
<i>kai-tu</i>	戒度師	Master of the precepts	<i>tæŋ-tu</i>	正度師	Master of the orthodoxy
<i>jen-kjau</i>	引教師	Master of the teachings	<i>ka:n-tu</i>	監度師	Master who examines
<i>wək-ði</i>	畫字師	Master of the script	<i>təŋ-dan</i>	洞坛師	Master of the altars
(or <i>pou-kwei</i> )	(保舉師)	(Master of guarantees)	(or <i>pou-kin</i> )	(保見師)	(Master who protects)

The selection of a ritual practitioner is influenced by his relationship to the father and son, and their proficiency in ritual practice. First, the relationship of the youth to the six ritual practitioners is imperative to the teacher-student bond that exists between them after the initiation. These six teachers are responsible for instructing the youth in ritual practice and proper behavior. Relatives and men who are close friends will often take a role in the *tæi-sei* for each other's sons; for a father to perform in the initiation of his son is anathema to the deities and ancestors and is reproved by the community. Informal systems also develop whereby a man will accept a role in the *tæi-sei* of, for example, the grandsons of his six teachers. Second, the competence of the ritual practitioner is important for the quality of instruction given to the youth, so highly skilled ritual practitioners are also in great demand.<sup>55</sup> The *tæi-sei* effectively binds successive generations to their teachers and incurs obligations for each initiate with regard to ritual performance and support for their teachers and their households.

A powerful theme of re-birth runs throughout the rite. I will elaborate on one component of the ritual which brings this theme to the foreground. The youth, in traditional Kim Mun clothing, occupies a room secluded from the main ritual area and only appears when required to participate in the ritual.<sup>56</sup> A large blanket symbolizing a womb is wrapped over him. It is within the womb that the latent skills and knowledge of the ritual practitioner are instilled in the youth. However, the womb is not of his mother but is the womb of the ritual practitioner (often represented by the youth's father), and

community's demography (in cases where the community has merged with that of another ethnic group to become a single village).

<sup>53</sup> If funds are insufficient or if the son is not considered ritual master material, a father may elect to conduct a smaller version: the *tæi-θai* (戒師) or *tæi-təu* (戒道). Here, the youth still receives a ritual name, registers and protector-deities, but only those corresponding to the tradition under which he is initiated. These two smaller forms of the rite are of course less time consuming and expensive.

<sup>54</sup> The English language translations are offered as a rough interpretation of the roles.

<sup>55</sup> An initiate may seek out a ritual practitioner who is not one of his teachers to serve as an instructor. The rite does not limit the relationship in this manner. However, if a youth wishes to do so (perhaps as one of the six teachers has passed away) the *dau-tu θai-bu* (投度师父) ritual must first be performed.

<sup>56</sup> It is possible for up to three siblings or agnatic cousins of the same generation to be initiated together.



it is he who ‘gives birth’ to the initiated youth.<sup>57</sup> In the room, one of the ritual practitioners will introduce the youth to the deities and ancestors, and the youth will pay respects and present offerings accordingly. The youth will also read and write the texts which contain all the *tau* (咒 incantations) used in Kim Mun ritual. This learning is acted out, and the names and texts are recited and written in mimicry. It is symbolic of the basic skills with which a ritual practitioner is by definition imbued, and which when re-born he (the youth) must activate through study.<sup>58</sup>

On the final day of the rite, the moment arrives for the initiation of the youth into the two ritual traditions and his re-birth into the world. First, the youth is initiated into the *thai-koh* tradition. He will remove the blanket and don the red robe (*bu-wah ji-hah* 婆王衣紅) of the *thai-koh*. Seated in front of the main altar, a *thai-koh* ritual practitioner will cleanse the body and soul of the youth of any harmful entities. The ritual practitioner does this, quite theatrically, by shooting a bamboo rifle<sup>59</sup> with ammunition made of paper and rice-wine. Now pure of body and soul, the *thai-koh* ritual practitioners begin the gestation of the youth, represented by three coins connected with white string and draped in a Y-shape across the head of the youth. As gestation proceeds, a coin is cut, with each coin representing a three-month period.<sup>60</sup> After the final coin is cut—nine months—a white cord that joins the *thai-koh* ritual practitioner with the youth, symbolizing the umbilical cord, is severed and the youth is re-born. On completion of the *thai-koh* initiation, the youth puts the robe of the *tau-koh* (*tham-ten ji-bok* 三清衣服) on over the red robe. The *tau-koh* ritual practitioners initiate the youth into the *tau-koh* tradition in the same format as the *thai-koh*. Once completed, the youth is presented with the accoutrements, registers and protector-deities of both traditions, and the rite is brought to a close through a proclamation that the youth has been initiated and gratitude to the deities and ancestors is then expressed through the final offering.

The necessity of producing male progeny in Kim Mun society brings up an interesting phenomenon: adoption. Kim Mun society is patrilineal and without sons, the lineage ends. Furthermore, if the family line produces no male offspring then there is no one to perform the rituals required to care for the ancestors in the afterlife.<sup>61</sup> Adoption is a widely accepted practice used by parents to obtain a son; some families cannot conceive children while others only have daughters.<sup>62</sup> Once adopted, a ritual is performed to place

<sup>57</sup> This is a practical reason why a father cannot perform in his son’s initiation rite.

<sup>58</sup> Traditionally, the initiation rite ran for many more days and I was told that the youth would be required to learn the texts by heart while confined to the room.

<sup>59</sup> Bamboo crossbows, a more traditional instrument, are also used.

<sup>60</sup> For the *thai-koh* initiation, the three coins represent the Three Generals and for the *tau-koh* initiation, the Three Treasures (三寶): namely the *tau* (道 Tao), *keh* (經 Scripture) and *thai* (師 Master). The three terms can also refer to the names of Three Pure Ones; see Lagerwey (1987: 169–237).

<sup>61</sup> If care for the ancestors is discontinued, their place in the heavens may be forfeited, and eventually they will be lost as wild spirits with no home or purpose, possibly taking revenge on their own and other families.

<sup>62</sup> As a social norm, adoption is well supported; a family may adopt a child of a relative or friend in their own or another Kim Mun village. Otherwise, there are channels via local markets and the hospital that feed information about children available for adoption for a price. I cannot comment on the psychological effects of adoption for the child or parents, yet I suspect they are more acute than acknowledged here.



**Figure 5:** Three apprentices performing the * ai-k  * initiation rite for a Kim Mun youth (seated).

the boy under the protection of *tai-mu*, introduce him to his ancestors, and select his name. There is no stigma attached to adoption, and the boy will be treated as if he were born of his adopted parents and will assume all familial rights and privileges that come with his position in the household. When the boy reaches the appropriate age, he will undertake the initiation rite as a son of the family lineage into which he was adopted. A son is one of the most primary concerns for a family.<sup>63</sup> It is the male line that ensures the continuation of the lineage through the initiation of successive generations of male progeny and their care of the ancestors. It is also through the male line that women are assured their own protector-deities and place in the heavens. Although a woman keeps her own surname when she marries, she marries into the family and ancestors of her husband and it is through her husband and their sons that they both secure their place in the heavenly realm.<sup>64</sup> The *t  i-sei* ritual not only links successive generations of a lineage but also binds males of each generation to other households as a teacher or an apprentice. These relationships carry their own religious responsibilities and both straddle existing familial bonds and form new social relationships.

<sup>63</sup> Kim Mun society values both sons and daughters; families also adopt daughters, and the role of young women in the household and their involvement in maintaining cultural knowledge and practices is equally important.

<sup>64</sup> Her husband is, however, required to include his wife's ancestors—three generations—in all rituals that include his own ancestors. After marriage, females typically maintain very strong links with their siblings, and their influence on men to ensure the lineages of their siblings are maintained is quite strong. Lemoine (2006) notes that kinship networks via females tie village households together more efficiently than relations through male descent.

## Social implications of Ritual Activity

Kim Mun rituals predominantly focus on addressing the needs of the individual, their household and, by extension, its lineage. However, as a ritual system it inculcates the necessity of inter-household support. The impact of this dependence and the incurred obligations spans multiple layers of social relations within a Kim Mun village and the greater ethnic community. As described above, the relationships created between teacher and student by the *tæi-sei* ritual engender enduring obligations that traverse households, villages and lineages. The array of *ai-man* rituals requires support from other households, and a household must fulfill its obligation to other households in-kind—those who are senior in the village have ample influence to reproach those who are not. These obligations can project across villages and lineages, where support, such as for a son-in-law's household, is also common (see Lemoine 2006). So long as the notion of an after-life and a belief in the need to care for one's ancestors dominates Kim Mun culture, a household and its members can only ensure their own prosperity and salvation if they continue to perform the requisite rituals and, in return, to fulfill the obligations they incur. Even if a household was to rely solely on pharmaceutical medicine and refrain from using rituals to address health issues, the rituals needed to care for its ancestors and to maintain its lineage would still subject it to obligations to other households. Furthermore, all households are required to assist in, or at the very least present offerings in, village-level rituals. Hence the complete cessation of all ritual activity by a household would disconnect it from a central mode of Kim Mun religious and social life, and in consequence the village-community.

Ritual activity among Kim Mun villages in Laos is neither antagonistic toward nor aligned with the state or notions of a national citizenry. Having sided with the Pathet Lao during the war, they have faced little of the overt suspicion that some other ethnic groups received, though traces of the stigma of being 'newcomers' and of the *Lao Soung* designation remain. In the context of the modern village in (rural) Laos, the concept of village solidarity is pervasive, in part due to government efforts to administrate and control the population (Baird and Shoemaker 2005; Évrard and Goudineau 2004). Village-level rituals such as the *ai-soṇ* have developed a symbiotic relationship with this notion of village solidarity, and now in addition to the religious component, such rituals underscore ethnic identity as well as village harmony; in 2012, a Kim Mun New Year celebration (the religious component was postponed), endorsed by the provincial government with help from Kim Mun working in local government, brought together Kim Mun from villages across northern Laos to a single village to celebrate their shared ethnic identity. The effect of the state is much more prevalent in Kim Mun rituals that operate above the level of the household (see Petit 2013 for an example among the Khmu.) In villages where the Kim Mun live with other ethnic groups, despite varying degrees of tension due to dissimilar or conflicting cultural practices, efforts are made to incorporate all members of the village within village-level rituals in the name of solidarity—either nominally or by their actual presence/participation in the ritual.<sup>65</sup> The religious

<sup>65</sup> There are specific names, which correlate to one's clan-name, used in Kim Mun rituals, and a list exists that includes names to be used for the clan-names or family names belonging to other ethnic groups (apart from the



objectives remain, but the emphasis on solidarity and harmony has greater voice in this current epoch of settled, and in many cases multiethnic, village-communities. Although the leadership positions associated with village rituals existed prior to the permanent settlement of villages after the war (what might better be thought of as supra-household rituals and not village rituals), the current administrative system for governing village political life has reconfigured the formation of these roles—especially in multiethnic villages—and the conceptualization of the village in religious terms, with the creation, for instance, of the ritual *Drinking with the Village Deities*. Nonetheless, in the majority of rituals, which are performed at the household level, the impact of the state has been minimal.



**Figure 6:** Banner announcing the 2012 New Year festival (written in Sino-Mun) as a cultural festival (written in Lao and English).

While the links between ritual activity and social life are pervasive at the level of the household, village and ethnic community, at the individual level it is more ambiguous. Individual aspirations can run counter to what might, in the present context, be of benefit for the household and village community. In the last thirty years, the growing relevance and importance of village rituals has been offset by a decrease in the performance of *ai-ma:n* rituals. A Kim Mun elder, who is not a ritual practitioner, remarked that since the end of the war, government-NGO development projects, formal education and news broadcasts on television have changed people's perspectives on religion in terms of utility. People may go to the local hospital instead of holding a ritual when a family member is ill or address 'hard times' without resorting to the assistance of deities through rituals. Alternatively, a senior ritual practitioner locates a problem with the unwillingness of youth to study the body of Kim Mun religious knowledge. He argues

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Iu Mien). I do not know when or how this list was developed, but it is indicative of the changing nature of Kim Mun ritual and the manifestation of multiethnic spaces within Kim Mun ritual activity.

that there are too few who can properly perform the rituals, as is also indicated in the *kjen* above. His issue lies with the loss of ritual knowledge more than with changes in use or frequency of ritual performances. While neither statement contradicts the other, they highlight two key phenomena occurring within the Kim Mun community. First, the motivations and uses for ritual activity are shifting, and second, a reconfiguration of religious knowledge as a form of cultural and economic capital within the village and the ethnic community is underway as access to new forms of economic and cultural capital outside the village increases.

Economic modernization in northern Laos has brought new technologies and opportunities for local communities: communication technologies, cash-crop farming and access to new markets, affordable transportation and public education are just some examples. Kim Mun in Namdy Village have recently reestablished connections with 'kin' in China and Vietnam, which has fostered visits between groups, the exchange of cultural materials such as songs recorded on DVDs, and the replication of ritual texts once thought lost. Youth have also begun attending tertiary colleges in both countries, rubber cultivation methods were acquired from 'kin' in Yunnan, and a senior ritual practitioner has also traveled to Mengla to perform in a *tæi-sei* ritual. There is concern about an impending loss of 'traditional' knowledge. Yet with the formation of new networks with other Kim Mun in China and Vietnam, as well as a deepening association with a growing cultural Sinosphere, reconfigurations of ethnic identity and new interpretations of religion and culture continue to take shape. I do not venture to guess what impact this will have on ritual activity and social life in Kim Mun villages, nor how religious and cultural affiliations with a cultural Sinosphere may influence Kim Mun perceptions of ethnic solidarity and identity as citizens of Laos. The ramifications of these developments will however be played out in concert with other Kim Mun communities further afield as they continue to reconnect, and as region-wide economic and cultural forces further bear on northern Laos.

A ritual's primacy is its objective, but the cohesion and sense of unity that ritual creates helps shape social life in Kim Mun villages. Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of Kim Mun ritual activity is the precept that a ritual practitioner cannot perform in *ai-ma:n* rituals for his own household. This is despite the fact that there is clear evidence of alterations or modifications to *ai-ma:n* rituals, such as shortening sections, reducing the duration or removing elements, which are readily acknowledged by ritual practitioners. However, upon pressing to know why this taboo remained, I was told that the deities absolutely forbade it: "such a thing cannot be done." The obligations ritual activity produces, which in an increasingly urbanized and individualized milieu might be deemed a burden, will endure as long as ritual activity continues and this taboo remains. There are men who have opted out at the individual level and chosen not to undertake their ritual studies, yet as members of households, they rarely fail to meet their obligations. Both young and old frequently affirm that it is important to do so, not just for one's household but also for village and ethnic solidarity. There is thus an impasse: the benefits offered by formal education, cash-crop farming and urban employment require an investment of time and effort, which detracts from the time available for ritual studies. Despite changes to ritual practices, there persists a strong desire to continue these ritual practices, or at least some of them, especially those that also express identity and ethnic solidarity. This is particularly true for the *tæi-sei*, which is vital not just for its religious

purposes but also because the name bestowed during the ritual is fundamental to Kim Mun social identity for the husband, his wife and their children. There are many who believe it is important, if not imperative, for such rituals to continue and for religious knowledge to be preserved, but at present, few are willing to invest the time and effort needed to do this.

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