

## LEARNING 'SHAMANISTIC HEALING' AMONG THE LANTEN (YAO MUN) OF LAOS

By Joseba Estevez (University of Münster, Germany)

In the Northern Lao province of Luang Namtha, the Lanten (Yao Mun), one of the 39 ethnic groups that populate the area, conduct 'shamanistic healing' ceremonies (Lanten: *ai kwa*), aimed at identifying the socio-cosmological origin of a particular 'disease' (Lanten: *sang goon*; see Estevez 2016).

For the Lanten, 'disease' is the result of the weakening or the loss of one or more 'souls' (Lanten: *hon*). The *hon* is conceptualised as a 'gift of life' that has been granted by the deities and the ancestors. Disruptions to the relationship with those who give life can cause the withdrawal of their gift, which will cause disease and, if not properly treated, death.

When somebody in the house is 'sick for a long time' – that is to say, not responding to traditional or modern remedies – the head of the household requests a 'shamanistic healer' (Lanten: *kwa mun*), also called 'healing master' (Lanten: *kwa tai*). This ritual expert will try to identify the deity, group of deities, or the ancestors responsible for the withdrawal of the gift of life. When *ai kwa* is successful, the *kwa mun* can recommend a suitable ceremony that will re-establish the balance of the socio-cosmological relationships of the patient as a whole, which also includes all the family members, animals and crops of his or her household.

The *kwa mun* is a ritual expert who has been previously ordained as a 'priest' (Lanten: *tao kong*) and 'master' (Lanten: *tai kong*) and has accomplished a ritual training referred to as 'learning shamanistic healing' (Lanten: *ho kwa*). In the course of the ceremony, the attending apprentices receive a spirit-horse (Lanten: *ho kwa ma*) along with 'military training' that is conceptualised as the knowledge required to 'ride' the stars with their spirit-horses and to 'fall' back to the Earth. Moreover, they learn and practice diverse 'shamanistic healing' tech-

niques and study selected elementary manuscripts about healing.

Nowadays, the *ho kwa* ceremony is rarely conducted amongst the Lanten of Laos. In the last decade, the role and tasks of the 'shamanistic healers' have been incorporated into those of the 'priest' (Lanten: *tao kong*).

The following images correspond to a *ho kwa* that took place in 2013 in Nam Lue Village, Luang Nam Tha, Lao PDR. This three-week-long ceremony, which includes all the required stages to become *kwa mun*, was documented as part of my ongoing anthropological research on the role of the Lanten ritual experts.

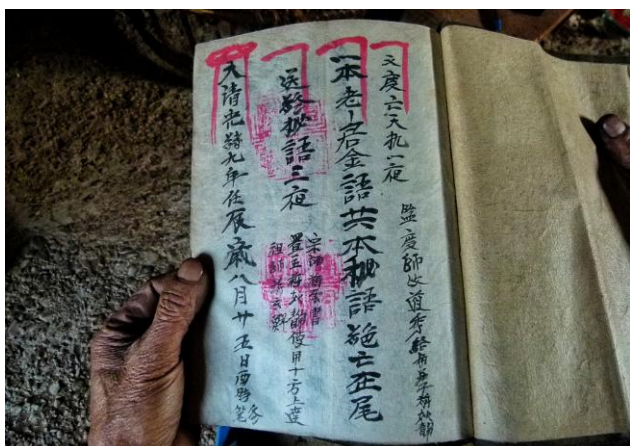
### References

- 2016 Estevez, Joseba. Healing and cursing among the Lanten (Yao Mun) of Laos, in L. Prager & M. Prager & G. Sprenger (Eds.) "Parts and Wholes: Essays on Social Morphology, Cosmology, and Exchange in Honour of J.D.M. Platenkamp". Lit Verlag, Münster.

## Photos



The ceremony starts with the preparation of the altars (Lanten: *tan*). The ritual experts and the apprentices work together on the making of the ritual decoration. Centre of the picture: A fruit tree made of paper that will feed the visiting deities and ancestors; the ritual experts will make its fruits delicious in the Otherworld.



The Lanten manuscripts play a fundamental role in the transmission of the ritual knowledge and in building a hierarchy among the ritual experts. In Nam Lue Village, there was only one copy of this particular manuscript and its owner had to be invited to lead the ceremony so his manuscript could be available for the ceremony. The 'magic' (Lanten: *pap*) of the manuscripts is transmitted from masters to apprentices only after the apprentices have copied the text, learnt how to use it in the ritual context, and fulfilled the agreed ritual payment. Without the associated 'magic', a ritual expert cannot use the manuscript or perform the ceremony; with-

out the related manuscript(s) a major ceremony cannot take place.



The two attending 'tea ladies' (Lanten: *cham cha kwan*) must be unmarried Lanten girls. During the ceremony, all the participants will drink a special blend of tea collected by the ritual experts in the forest. The duty of the 'tea ladies' is to keep the cups always full. They may also receive ('be possessed by') a spirit-horse. If this is the case, they have to receive the proper training. This occurrence was not unusual in the past, and neighbouring villages such as Nam Dee have had well-known female 'shamanistic healers'.



Once the ritual decoration and the altars are ready, the apprentices must visit all the ritual experts in the village and request their blessing and assistance. As a token of respect, they offer them two glasses of rice whisky.





The owner of the manuscript that opens the ceremony announces its commencement to the Lanten deities and the ancestors of the participants.



A general view of the house where the ceremony took place. Note the white cloth on the ceiling. Rolls of cotton cloth made by the Lanten women are used in this ceremony to connect the altar of the masters with that of the apprentices (left and right sides) and the house with the road so the spirit-horses can easily find their way in. In the centre, traditional Lanten food is ready to be consumed by the male participants.



A view of the altar of the masters. On the left side of the picture are the bamboo sticks that will be used to call the spirit-horses. On the right of the picture, a ritual expert writes down the names of all the invited deities and ancestors. In the centre, the ritual expert who opened the ceremony follows the required procedures.



The apprentices start calling their spirit-horses; they will hit the ground with bamboo sticks for hours. Although the apprentice's ancestors usually send these horses, however, other deities can also provide them. Two to four boys will get their spirit-horse each day.



Four ritual experts lead the ceremony; they represent the four Deities of Healing (Lanten: *pat teen*; also *kwa man*). In the picture, the ritual experts check the shoulders of the boys looking for signs that may reveal the presence of the spirit-horse in the body. This ceremony had not taken place in Nam Lue for thirty years and attracted many visitors.



The two ritual experts who 'tame' the spirit-horse take turns until the extenuation makes the boy collapse. They will fall to the ground and 'die' to be 'reborn' again as a 'shamanistic healer'.



One of the boys has received his spirit-horse. It will be 'tamed' by the ritual experts who will make the boy 'ride' the room until he physically collapses. The ritual experts, in the context of this ceremony, imitate the movements and sounds (i.e. whinny) of a horse and keep their hands on their backs to control the reins of their spirit-horse. Although horses were common in the caravans that crossed the Southwest Silk Road route that connected Yunnan (China) with Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, there have not been horses or mules in Northern Laos for decades.



The attending ritual experts lead the boy to the altar of the masters where his feet will be in contact with the wall, i.e. the altar that constitutes a bridge to the deities and the ancestors. For the rest of this part of the ceremony, he will be a member of the 'herd' and will assist the masters in the 'taming' of the forthcoming spirit-horses.





On the right-hand side, a ritual expert announces the introduction of the boy to the 'herd'. On the left, a ritual expert gives the boy war-horse garments such as a saddle, stirrups, flanges, and horseshoes. In this realm, the bronze stamp and the bamboo papers create and represent all these objects, which are made real in the Otherworld by the ritual expert's spiritual assistants.



A boy receives a new ritual identity. It entails a ritual name and two spiritual guides that are selected by means of a raffle. The names of the deities that qualify as spiritual assistants are wrapped in bamboo paper. One of the small packets will fall in (or be picked up by) the left hand, another in the right hand. From now on, the boy will honour these two deities, invite them to any ceremony that he leads, and request their mediation and assistance when it is required.



The full list of the deities invited to the ceremony hangs on the wall (centre of the picture). Each apprentice offers two small pigs to his ancestors after receiving his spirit-horse. His offerings are added to those required to initiate the ceremony. The assistants will consume all the sacrifices. Nowadays, the high cost of this ceremony has made it a rarity. The apprentices cannot attend school or join work parties for three weeks, a situation that was difficult to combine with living the modern life in the Lao P.D.R.



The masters ride their horses at the masters' altar. Note the hands on their backs holding the 'reins'. If one of the ritual experts falls out of the wooden bank where all must stand together while 'riding' the spirit-horses – that is to say, if he 'loses control' of his horse – he may be disqualified as a master.



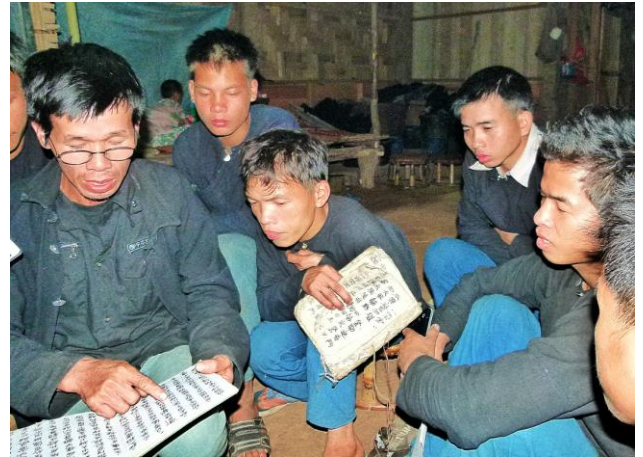


The apprentices learn how to 'ride' the stars. Sheets of paper on the ground create a path – an asterism – that the apprentices must follow. Although diagrams representing asterisms such as the Big Dipper appear in many Lanten manuscripts and even in one of the bronze seals used by the ritual experts, the Lanten lack knowledge about the celestial objects. In the ritual context, the Sun (Lanten: *manoy*) and the Moon (Lanten: *laa*) are a couple and the stars (Lanten: *ting dao*) are their children. The stars are divided into those that are close to the viewer and those that are far.



The masters demonstrate how to forward roll on the ground, which represents 'falling back' to the Earth. This exercise is conceptualised as 'military training'. It also offers a great entertainment and attracts many viewers as all the old ritual experts show their skills. The major Lanten ceremonies such as learning shamanistic healing (Lanten: *ho kwa*) and ordinations (Lanten: *jai sai*) include parts with performances

that can be considered comic relief.



A master teaches the basic healing texts. For many of the apprentices in this ceremony, this was their first contact with the Lanten written language. Although most of the boys in the village have been ordained as 'priest' (Lanten: *tao kong*) and 'master' (Lanten: *tai kong*) few had pursued further training. The Lanten ordination (Lanten: *jai sai*) only provides the accreditations and the socio-cosmological relationships with the masters, ancestors, and deities.



A ritual expert shows the most basic technique to identify a particular deity accounted with retaining ('eating') the *hon* of a person. The major deities are asked one by one, while grains of rice are dropped over a cup containing water and a straw crossing its rim. If one or more grains of rice remain on the straw when a particular deity is questioned, the event is taken as a token of accountability. Experienced ritual experts enter trance states and 'ride' their spirit-horses looking for the lost soul(s). These techniques are combined with questions about the

activities of the sick person and those in the household. The 'shamanistic healer' acts as an investigator who dictates the origin and cause of the disease and prescribes the proper treatment (ceremony).



One of the masters demonstrates how to consume 'malevolent magic' (Lanten: *deh*) out of a sick person. The spirit-horse can feed on the cursing that has triggered the disease, and temporarily neutralises it until the proper ceremony that counteracts the cursing can take place. Lanten healing is combined with visits to the hospital and the use of modern medicine. However, for most of the Lanten, modern doctors and drugs can only treat the symptoms and not the origin of the disease, so only by re-establishing the appropriate socio-cosmological relationships with the deities and the ancestors can a person fully recover.