

MoLam Phee Fa: The Process of Learning about the Culture and Rituals of Healing Patients using Mediums

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were to investigate (i) The knowledge and wisdom of treatment with a blue spirit medium and (ii) The learning methods for treating patients with the wisdom of MoLam Phee Fa. The study was conducted by analyzing documents and collecting field data by surveys, interviews, observations, and group discussions. The results of the descriptive analysis of the data collected from a group of 40 participants indicated that: (i) Belief in Phee Fa Phaya Thaen is considered to be an ancient religion that exists in southern China along the Mekong River Basin. People who respect it believe that Phaya Thaen will bring prosperity as well as help in times of illness. This knowledge has continuously been passed on by learning the steps in ceremonies to help cure the sick. (ii) MoLam Phee Fa is a group of people who have inherited the knowledge of black magic healing by inviting the Phee Fa spirit into a medium to predict the cause of the illness of those who come for treatment. Those who come to receive the knowledge transfer will strictly adhere to the rules. Disciples must learn the skills while treating patients and memorize the literature used, including memorizing the contents of the poems and melodies and using the principles of psychiatry to empower patients to have the strength to live their lives. In conclusion, MoLam Phee Fa are in possession of a method for curing patients using magical methods that relies on building morale. This wisdom, therefore, deserves to be learned and passed on as an alternative treatment.

Key words: MoLam Phee Fa, Culture and Rituals, Healing Patients using Mediums, Art and Musical Literacy

INTRODUCTION

Humans have created beliefs as something to anchor their minds since ancient times by observing natural phenomena, believing that they were inspired by the power of God or demons, such as rain, thunder, lightning, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, and storms that affect humans. Ghosts are a traditional belief among people all over the world, including people in the northeastern region of Thailand.

Phee Fa Phaya Thaen is considered the highest god in the beliefs of northeastern society. Phaya Tan in the sky is sometimes called “Phi Fa”, sometimes also referred to as “Phee Fa Phaya Thaen”. MoLam Phee Fa is a medium who helps villagers communicate with Phaya Thaen, to make predictions and treat illnesses for the sick (Techakaew, 1997). Besides diseases, in matters related to agriculture, farming, raising animals, and the abundance of food these people heavily rely on the belief system of Phee Fa Phaya Thaen as the inspiration. Therefore, there are, for example, rocket festival for rain or for agricultural gain. Isan people’s rituals that have continued until the present day may vary from one area to the other. Kasethet (1994) stated that most Isan people

have a serious and stable belief in “ghosts” and have firmly inherited the beliefs and way of life from their ancestors. “Ghost gods” are supernatural phenomena (Champadaeng et al., 2018). There is no entity that can be seen or felt by the eye. People have faith as their spiritual anchor that has been passed down for a long time. The ghosts are believed to bring good or evil, so people must beg for mercy by performing sacrificial ceremonies to help get rid of those illnesses or suffering and to pray for protection, safety, and agricultural gain.

MoLam Phee Fa and alternative disease treatment are one of the common Isan communities, but their potential has not been seriously evaluated. Studying MoLam Phee Fa regarding their role and rituals in the treatment process leads to guidelines for promoting their use in public health. By applying health care methods to be consistent with people’s cultural thinking and beliefs about illness. Those involved should find ways to reduce conflicts and gain cooperation from service recipients in the public health service and medical care system (Saengchart, 1993). The ancient Isan people believed that disease was caused by the actions of ghosts.

Some people in the present day still have the same beliefs about healing by referring to Molam Phee Fa. These people may turn to rely on MoLam Phee Fa to recover because they do not find modern medicine helpful or because doctors have told them that their disease has no treatment. Thus, their relatives bring the patients to MoLam Pi Fa for treatment and in the hope of their recovery. Lam Phee Fa is, therefore, a psychiatrist or alternative medicine doctor who must be studied and understood. This article aims to present MoLam Phi Fa's knowledge and wisdom about healing using the Fa Spirit medium, as well as transferring the knowledge of MoLam Phi Fa's methods of treating patients.

Objectives

This study aims to:

1. explore the knowledge and wisdom of treatment with a blue spirit medium, and
2. investigate the learning methods for treating patients with the wisdom of MoLam Phee Fa.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was designed following the steps below:

Step 1

The researchers studied the content of documents related to wisdom of MoLam Phee Fa, including concepts, theories, and research to guide the study and analyze the results.

Step 2

We surveyed the research area regarding the healing wisdom of MoLam Phee Fa in the areas of Kalasin and Maha Sarakham Provinces, Khon Kaen Province, and the related areas in the northeastern region of Thailand.

Step 3

We created research tools including surveys, interviews, observation forms, group discussion guidelines, and workshop guidelines. A combination of participatory research methods and applied qualitative research were used in this study. We followed group discussion guidelines to elicit data, which we collected and synthesized from several cases in each step.

Step 4

We carefully observed the knowledge transfer between the Phee Fa ghost group leader and students in the annual ritual area. These included students participating in activities to acquire knowledge and exchange a variety of knowledge about alternative medicine in the three selected provinces.

Step 5

Data collection is divided into contents regarding beliefs and multidimensional health care in the Northeast and all

regions of Thailand. The research team designed data collection tools in the research area for analysis to meet the stated objectives.

Step 6

The research team collected the data from the research area and analyzed it to meet the research issues specified in the objectives. They verified the validity and reliability of the information before analyzing the data and reporting their research findings.

Step 7

The research team summarized the research results and presented them to a panel of experts to check their accuracy according to the academic principles before publication.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Knowledge and Wisdom of Treatment with a Blue Spirit Medium

The wisdom and development of MoLam Phi Fah in the Northeast is culturally related to the spirit gods in every society in the past, and some societies still inherit them. Phee Fa has a long history related to the culture of the Thai ethnic group and nearby ethnic groups that rely on the legend of the concept of worshiping nature and worshiping a god in heaven called Phaya Thaen. The legend of Phaya Phee Fa Phaya Thaen is the origin of a similar ritual tradition, which is a worship ceremony to ask for the rainy season because there is hope for an abundance of crops. Believing citizens would give signals to the gods by striking bronze gamelans. Rocket festival to inform Phaya Thaen to cause rain to fall. Beliefs about Phaya Thaen are considered to be the ancient theistic religion of the Mekong Basin. Southern China also has spirit-shaking rituals to heal the sick, a wisdom similar to that of MoLam Phee Fa in northeastern Thailand.

The worldview of people in the research area has various beliefs about ghosts, affecting their thinking and behavior systems. They believe that spirits reside in people, animals, and objects. Spirits, according to people's beliefs, are divided into evil and good spirits, who will help people. This concept is both knowledge and strategy that can control people in society to live together happily and continue learning from each other.

People in the Northeast have many ways to solve their health problems, such as consumption of nutritious food, use of herbs for treatment, and divination or referring to fortune tellers, shamans, and mediums to find the causes of illnesses. Ceremonies often involve musical instruments to create entertainment, magic, and sacredness at the same time. Phee Fa worshipers are divided into four groups:

1. A group of Phee Fa worshipers who do not accept Buddhism. These people are scattered everywhere in southern China, in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. In the northeastern region, there are Nong Khai and Mukdahan Provinces. The groups in these provinces worship only

the Fa spirits and the spirits of their ancestors who have been passed down through generations.

2. Another Phee Fa group that accepts Buddhism but still follows Phee Fa traditions. When Buddhism spread into the country, there was a mixture of Phee Fa and Buddhism. It was found that in the case of a network of students joining together to organize annual ghost raising activities. A place is arranged and sacrifices are prepared, including food. The remaining money is donated to the temple.
3. People who have magic that is a combination of beliefs in the Fa spirit together. They are called “MoLam Tham”, who are students of Buddhist magic like the villagers. Men take on the role of leading Phi assemblers instead of the female MoLam Phi Fah.
4. Those people, called MoLam Thewada, male mediums who treat patients and their wisdom has been passed down from teachers to those students considered suitable.

Transfer of Learning Methods for Treating Patients with the Wisdom of MoLam Phi Fah

Lam Phee Fa is a subject that has been passed down by students since ancient times as it is an alternative treatment for illnesses that people trust. MoLam Phee Fa is a method of inheriting knowledge in three ways:

1. The person who inherits knowledge from being an heir to one’s grandmother. Grandmother or mother is the lineage of descent to the female lineage.
2. Inheritors of the knowledge of those who have been cured; when they are cured, the Blue Ghost Spirit will choose a woman to be the leader of the group instead of the original person.
3. The person who is the leader of the group sees that the member who inherits the knowledge is suitable, so he passes on the leadership to him by giving him a symbol of worship, called “Khai”. When it is given to a member, he will have the right to be the leader in the ceremony.

There are three steps in which the recipient must learn knowledge and guidelines for treating patients as well as looking after students. These are discussed below.

MoLam Phee Fa and patient treatment

MoLam Phee Fa’s patient treatment is a belief that existed before Buddhism spread to the Northeast. Nowadays, although there is medical advancement that has shown empirical results, illness and death are still a huge part of human crises. When modern medicine is unable to cure the disease, people turn to various beliefs, and Mo Lam Phee Fa is a belief that some people trust. The MoLam Phee Fa group has similar treatment procedures for each group. The first step is to set an appointment between the therapist and the patient. The next step is the ceremony where the leader brings offerings to invite the spirits and blows a canclaw during the ceremony. When the Phee Fa sits down and the medium asks for the cause, if he finds an illness that

is believed to have been caused by an evil ghost, the medium will plead with him to stop harming the patient. Sometimes mediums will recommend other methods of treatment. Treat with modern medicine, traditional medicine, herbs, compression, and massage, steps that descendants will join to study and observe along with strict observance, by using the principles of psychology to see and treat patients.

Sacrifices for MoLam Phee Fa

The knowledge also involves learning to make sacrifices after the sick person recovers from their symptoms. Those who have faith in this knowledge, when patients’ condition improves, their relatives must abide by the agreement and sacrifice items, like utensils, sweets, or meat, a compensation for the Fa Phi spirit medium who comes to help with treatment. Some groups receive awards but do not set a price. It depends on the patient or relatives who will give a reward. This is considered a morality of the Fah Phi shaman network who help members of the community.

MoLam Phee Fa annual spirit ceremony

Students who have been cured of their illnesses gather at a designated place to hold the event once a year after the harvest season (Figure 1). Each Mo Lam Phee Fa group has different timings between February and May. The group leader will send news to the disciples to know the date and time of the ceremony. When the group of disciples know the schedule, they bring money or items to contribute to the ceremony of preparing offerings. In the morning or evening of the event, members come together to cook food to feed the guests attending the event. Participants will come together to the ceremony area where the leader of the Fa Phi Phee group brings offerings to invite the ghosts to come and take their place as mediums. Musicians or doctors sing songs that are regarded as invitations to spirits to join them as well as requests to help protect people, livestock, and crops to be fertile and safe. The games will continue until late at night.



Figure 1. Teachers and students learn the steps for performing rituals
(Source: Authors, 2024)

Some groups make merit according to Buddhist traditions. The recipient of the transmission must learn poems that contain knowledge to carry out the treatment.

DISCUSSION

The results were found both corresponding to and different from concepts, theories and research studies in three aspects: the results based on the objectives of the study, the body of knowledge which was found, and attitudes about the inheritance of MoLam Phee Fa.

Science and mysticism are no different in terms of systems of human thought. In the worldview of the ancient people, black magic is not a mystery but has elements of miraculous powers. MoLam Phee Fa is wisdom that has been learned and passed down through human thought and belief systems. Faith is a response to mental and spiritual needs that helps patients become stronger and have hope to continue living in the world. This is possible. The modern worldview is based on binary opposition. Science is the opposite of superstition. Nowadays, with the development of economics, society, culture and medical science, the worship of the Fa spirits has decreased. There are only certain groups of people who have inherited this wisdom. Consistent with Jantasutto and Meethaisong (2020), it is crucial for the young generations to learn and appreciate the society has changed according to the economy and culture. Currently, there are fewer people interested in the Lam Phee Fa ritual and the inheritance is discontinued. Inheriting and learning the Lam Phee Fa ritual is a form of folk medical treatment that has been diminished by developments in modern medicine and health care, causing the folk wisdom to be abandoned by the young generations. Lam Phee Fa knowledge still exists. A value that needs to be protected in a way to be considered an alternative medicine.

Learning about the art of MoLam singing requires memorizing the contents of the poems and melodies. Artists, in addition to being skilled in singing, must also be quick-witted. Such knowledge will be guided by experienced teachers and musicians. As stated by Wiset and Champadaeng (2023), the process of the learning in a real way from the transmission from the teacher in a way that entertains the audience on this issue of high singing skills must be transmitted anciently are transferring knowledge to the youth and interested people and then be further developed according to one's abilities because being a professional MoLam requires good will and finesse. Such knowledge can still be transferred and guided by experienced teachers and musicians.

The New Knowledge Discovered

People in the research area have knowledge of how to take care of their physical health, starting from a worldview of beliefs, valuing their way of life, and striving for their own health to have a balanced and complete state of health, both physically and mentally. Health that should be taken care of consists of many aspects: eating, sleeping, stress relief, mental healing, meditation, avoiding a polluted environment, age-appropriate exercise, sharing love, developing ideas, and

good relationships. MoLam Phee Fa uses principles of psychiatry to strengthen individuals' faith and beliefs. These are things that have been continuously learned. As Nantsupawatt et al. (2015) reported, Lao Hospital follows five principles as their health promotion framework, including (i) building healthy public policy, (ii) creating supportive environments, (iii) strengthening community contribution, (iv) developing personal skills, and (v) reorienting health services. Such factors obviously lead to the success of administrators, management, health care team, community, and health care network. In contrary, factors impeding success include changes in people's lifestyle, weak leadership, lacking budget, insufficiency in holistic health concept, and failing to prepare personnel to operate the project continually. Integrating natural healthcare in health services, health personnel certainly need to understand these concepts. This system needs cooperation of all parties including administrators, health care team, and community. Especially, to be successful, the top administrator must be a leader and present their full commitment. Hospital and other health care services should reorient their focus and provide supports to promote integrating natural health care in the mainstream of health care service. In addition, education sector should also develop students to have more competencies in providing natural health care practically.

The culture of MoLam singing and the playing of Khaen music is a form of psychological therapy that people in the research area understand as music of the people who have common tastes. Lam Phi Fa sings a literary song used to encourage patients and relatives. While performing the ceremony, the dancer plays the Khaen, which is an instrument that can reach the emotions of people in the same culture. Music in the ceremony is therefore considered a form of therapy. This method will improve the emotional state because listening to music therapy changes the focus of the therapist, causing relaxation and happiness, thus, reducing anxiety and stress. Consistent with the results of the study of Suntornvijit (2017), depression is one of the mental health problems found in people across gender and age groups. Interventions for depression include pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy, and alternative therapies. Music therapy is one of the effective alternative therapies in which medications are not used and which is applicable for reduction of depressive symptoms. Music provides significant effects physically, mentally, and spiritually on individuals. The stimulation of music through brain reward center in the limbic system is like a mechanism of rewarding process. This reward brings about pleasure to the individual. This helps stimulate the secretion of endorphin, the hormone of happiness, and helps reduce stimulation of sympathetic nervous system, resulting in a reduction of secretion for epinephrine and norepinephrine. Music therapy is efficient in reducing depression of individuals.

Reflection

Culture is a system of thoughts, beliefs, and a way of life that affects health. MoLam is a medium that can reach people in the research area well because the literature written for singing is able to convey content that is understandable to people belonging to the same cultural group. Government agencies

have previously used MoLam to transmit policies on many health issues to people of all gender and age groups. MoLam media can therefore be developed for learning about taking care of people's health very well. Chamnian et al (2020) proposed three health promotion models to transfer the knowledge on herbs of the folk healers using participatory action: First, is the model of community health. It involves promotional activities consisting of (i) activities related to public health to promote students' learning, (ii) herbs garden project in schools, and (iii) the first aids cure with the herbs in schools instead of using medicine. The second model involves the creation of learning materials of the local wisdom of the folk healers by publishing books, CD-ROMs (e.g., *Herbs in Loei* and *E-san Herbs Recipe*), and other learning materials. Finally, the third Model, which makes the dissemination of folk healing knowledge to people possible.

CONCLUSION

MoLam Phee Fa is a group of people who believe in the spirit of the Supreme Deity, Phee Fa Phaya Thaen, as well as the spirits of deceased ancestors and teachers who pass on knowledge. This knowledge has been passed down from teachers to students from generation to generation. People who have faith because of an illness that cannot be cured by other means, but when treated with the wisdom of the shaman, later get better. For this reason, successors still exist in the present world. Such knowledge is thus valuable to people in society in the northeastern region of Thailand.

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