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Where Do the Ravenous Spirits (*Phi Pop*) Go? Nakasang Village in Southern Laos as a Place of Cultural Healing

Ian G. Baird*

Spirits are ubiquitous and important in the everyday lives of ethnic Lao people. Amongst the most feared of those are ravenous spirits (*phi pop*), which are believed to use human hosts to cause illness or even kill other humans and livestock by eating their internal organs. Because of the severe danger that ravenous spirits are believed to pose, those believed to be harboring them are typically forced to leave their communities, sometimes permanently. So, where do these ravenous spirits go when they are chased out of their villages? Many accused *phi pop* from as far north as Luang Prabang and as far south as northeastern Cambodia end up in Nakasang, a bustling trading center on the banks of the Mekong River in Khong District, Champasak Province, in southern Laos. That is because Nakasang—and a few surrounding villages—are well known for welcoming those who are shunned in their own communities. In this article, I describe the process that allows those accused of harboring ravenous spirits to stay in Nakasang, and the cultural healing ritual program that they undergo once they have moved there. More important, I explain how the belief in ravenous spirits allows communities to expel disliked people even when they are not actually *phi pop*. Indeed, the belief in ravenous spirits has become a convenient way of ridding undesirables, with Nakasang playing a critical role in Lao cultural healing. Cultural healing helps locals deal with *phi pop* and position themselves in relation to the state.

Keywords: spirits, spirit mediums, cultural healing, Laos, possession

Introduction

Within the cosmology of ethnic Lao people living in Laos, northeastern Thailand, and northeastern Cambodia, spirit beliefs/beliefs in occult forces are frequently intertwined with Buddhism (Esterik 1982; Holt 2009; McDaniel 2011; Terwiel 2012; Kanya 2017). Ethnic Lao people in mainland Southeast Asia typically believe in a particular type of malevolent spirit (*phi*) that enters human bodies and causes other people and livestock

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to become ill or die, especially young children, by eating their livers and other internal organs without their victims knowing. They are ravenous spirits or *phi pop* (*phi pope*, *phii pòòp*, ຜີປອບ) (Hours 1973; Sangun 1976; Supaporn 1999; Pasakorn 2011; Kanya 2016; 2018), a type of *phi* frequently portrayed in Thai films (Tanadet n.d.) and reportedly similar to *phi ka* in central Thailand (Phya Anuman and Coughlin 1954) and northern Thailand (Anan 1984). They are also similar to *phi phu* amongst the ethnic Shan in northwestern Thailand (Tannenbaum 1993). *Phi pop* can anthropologically best be described as types of "witches," a term that E. E. Evans-Pritchard defined based on work in Africa as involving "belief that a certain individual has immanent mystical powers which can be used to harm others" (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 21). Indeed, Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg (2013, 2–3) include "witchcraft" in a long list of phenomena that are frequently included under the heading of "magic."

I first heard of *phi pop* in 1993 when I was living in Hang Khone Village, on Khone Island, in the southernmost part of Laos. I had been residing in the village for less than a year when locals suddenly declared that a *phi pop* had been eating the livers of babies who had recently died in the village. At first the villagers did not know who the culprit was, but eventually evidence emerged that a man in the community had been practicing magic before becoming the host of the *phi pop*. Finally, many villagers reportedly approached the man and asked him if he was connected with the deaths. He initially denied any involvement but later reportedly admitted (*oke pak*, ອອກປາກ) that he was a ravenous spirit. According to Phya Anuman Rajathon and Margaret Coughlin:

> The obsessed person when ill will say something like this: "I get inside this man as a revenge for a wrong he has done me. My name is so and so, my wife and children are so and so, and I live in such and such a village." (Phya Anuman and Coughlin 1954, 165)

Referred to as *oke pak*, this is a kind of confession in Lao. Thus, it became untenable for the man to remain in the village. He and his family had to abandon their house and farmland and move elsewhere.

The man accused of being the *phi pop*, Mr. Bounsou, had previously been in charge of Hang Khone Village's accounts. He collected land taxes for the state. However, some people claimed that his misuse of magic had resulted in him becoming corrupted and thus vulnerable to being possessed by a *phi pop*. In any case, Bounsou soon realized that if he remained in the village he would be blamed for all unnatural deaths, thus putting his own life at risk, due to potential retribution from other villagers. Therefore, he took what he could and left, and soon after his wife and daughter followed. I will return to the story of Bounsou's dramatic departure from Hang Khone, but for now it is worth mentioning that even thirty years on, Bounsou has not returned to the village he was

forced to leave in 1993. After departing Hang Khone, Bounsou initially resided near the Mekong River in Nakasang Village, also in Khong District, but later moved to Mai Sivilay Village (officially part of Nakasang Village), where he told me, in 2017, that it was easy for him to make a living building cement chedis (stupas). He squatted on a piece of land and built a small house. When I met him again, his first wife had died eight or nine years earlier and he had remarried.

Phi pop, or ravenous spirits, are sometimes accused of being active when an unusually large number of people in a community experience health ailments that cannot be easily explained, although people typically rely on empirical evidence to assess the circumstances (Kanya 2018). This is a common trope in studies on "magic" and/or "witchcraft," presenting this as a "residual category" when other explanations fail (see Otto and Stausberg 2013). If a *phi pop* is believed to be causing illness or killing people, community members typically attempt to identify the spirit's host. That person, once identified, is then chased out of the community,[1] and sometimes his or her house is burned down. This article seeks to answer a number of questions. Where do these human hosts of *phi pop* go when they are forced to leave their villages? How does Lao society address this group of outcasts? What cultural healing process is adopted for addressing the *phi pop* phenomenon? I also intend to answer a question that I did not initially raise, but which emerged from my informants during fieldwork: Is there a particular social function played by the expulsion of people accused of being *phi pop*, and if so, how does that work?

Cultural healing is a key concept in this article. There are many kinds of cultural healing, associated with different types of mental and physical illness. Jean Comaroff (1980), for example, emphasized how shared symbolic categories amongst particular cultural groups are often used for cultural healing processes. R. Vance Peavy (1996) has also advocated for considering certain types of counselling as cultural healing. In addition, Indigenous societies in Canada have long utilized visual arts, dance, music, drama, and storytelling for purposes of cultural healing (Archibald and Dewar 2010). Here, I consider cultural healing to be something that can occur in a variety of ways, often using multiple approaches, and is frequently related to traditional forms of justice.

Kanya Wattanagun (2018) studied the subject of ravenous spirits by examining ideas about magical beliefs vis-à-vis scientific knowledge in northeastern Thailand. Here, however, I adopt a different approach. On the one hand, in line with Kanya (2018),

1) According to Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954, 154), after an accused *phi pop* is chased away, sometimes villagers will ask a Buddhist monk to chant certain inscriptions in the middle of the village to keep the *phi pop* from returning. However, I have not heard of this happening in southern Laos.

I do not pass judgment about who is and who is not afflicted by a *phi pop*, or whether *phi pop* are real or not. Instead, I accept that *phi pop* are malevolent spirits that have a significant meaning for ethnic Lao people. However, based on my interviews with the headman of Nakasang Village, people previously accused of harboring a *phi pop*, and regular ethnic Lao people living in Nakasang and other villages in the area, I have come to view the ravenous spirit phenomenon as often serving as a vehicle for dealing with community social conflicts caused by individuals in the community.

In this article, I focus on the five communities clustered around Nakasang Village, an important transport and market hub adjacent to the Mekong River in Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos. However, I also draw upon other interviews conducted in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia. I am interested in the centrality of the Nakasang cluster of villages, including why it has emerged as a location for the cultural healing of *phi pop*. Indeed, the Nakasang cluster is possibly the only grouping of communities in southern Laos that explicitly accept people accused of being *phi pop* for the purpose of being cured from the affliction.

I am particularly interested in other functions associated with the belief in *phi pop*, and how the idea of *phi pop* sometimes serves to reduce social conflict in ethnic Lao communities. One contention of the village headman of Nakasang, Phone Savanh—one of my main informants—is that the idea of *phi pop* can address community social conflict by allowing people to accuse someone of being a *phi pop* and then using that pretext to force the accused to leave the community, thus reducing exploitative economic relations of various kinds. Furthermore, at least three years of disciplining away from the home village can have an important effect. People who are seen to incite conflict are removed from the community, which often leads to improved social harmony (*khvam samakhi*, ຄວາມສາມັກຄີ). Here, I make three main arguments. First, that Nakasang Village serves an important social purpose offering cultural healing for people afflicted with a *phi pop*. Second, I contend that the idea of *phi pop* itself is more than just about malevolent spirits. It is often a means for expelling unpopular people from communities. Third, even though the idea of *phi pop* is used to expel unpopular people, that does not mean Lao people do not believe in *phi pop*, even if they recognize that most people accused of being afflicted with a *phi pop* are not actually so. Thus, this article contributes to better understanding how cultural healing related to *phi pop* is typically conceptualized and conducted in southern Laos, what the social role of *phi pop* within southern Lao society is, and how local people position themselves in relation to the state when it comes to dealing with accused *phi pop*.

The article includes the following sections: First, some background about beliefs in *phi pop* is provided, in the context of more general Lao beliefs and practices. I then

turn to providing more information about the methods used for this study, before explaining and interpreting the system of cultural healing of *phi pop* adopted in the Nakasang cluster of villages, including providing a firsthand account of one of the rituals associated with this process. I then consider the social purpose of *phi pop* in Lao society, before finally providing some concluding remarks.

The Lao and the *Phi Pop*

Phi pop, or ravenous spirits, are widely known as *phi* spirits in ethnic Lao cosmology.[2] As Kanya (2018, 79) has perceptively argued, belief in *phi pop* can be seen as part of the broader Lao belief system, one that—like science itself—is often based on (1) a body of propositions and practices grounded in the assessment of the empirical evidence, and (2) speculation on the possible causes of a phenomenon. The latter is inferred from the phenomenon's manifested effect, albeit one that is only partial.

One thing that needs to be clarified is that *phi pop* are not the same as standard Lao spirit mediums (known as *nang thiam* to the Lao in Laos and Cambodia or *lang song* or *rang song* in Thailand). Spirit mediumship has been subject to considerable academic inquiry in recent decades, and it typically involves a person becoming possessed by one or more spirits, often the spirits of important and respected ancestors or community leaders (Tambiah 1970; Turton 1972; Irvine 1984; Muecke 1992; Mills 1995; Morris 2000; Cohen 2001; Grow 2002; Denes 2006; Stengs 2009; McDaniel 2011; Nilsen 2011; Baird 2014). In such cases, spirit mediums frequently provide advice about various important aspects of the lives of the people who call on them. They help to cure people who have been cursed, but they also provide information about stolen water buffalo and cows, help with personal relations between husbands and wives, and provide unsolicited advice to community leaders at certain times of year. Spirit mediums are not blamed for things they say when possessed, as they are understood to have no control over their words. As Guido Sprenger (2021) pointed out, possession and shamanism are typically differentiated, with the former being involuntary and the latter requiring a quest for information. Roy Ellen (1993, 6) similarly differentiates between witchcraft and sorcery, with the former being seen as involving involuntary possession and the latter intentional magic, although Otto and Stausberg state that both often come

2) Tanadet Torsri (n.d.) translated *phi pop* as "ogre," but I do not think this translation fits well with what ethnic Lao people understand *phi pop* to be. Following Benjamin Baumann (2016), even the word *phi* cannot be translated unambiguously. We need to see *phi* as having a more complex meaning.

under the heading of "magic," a term that is used "to refer to a wide range of phenomena" (Otto and Stausberg 2013, 2–3). However, there are various subtle differences between types of possession, and the intertwined nature of influences is important. In this case, we are talking about involuntary possession, witchcraft possession. The host is not fully blamed for the actions of the *phi pop*, but the situation is somewhat different from spirit mediums because *phi pop* spirits are much more malevolent and dangerous. In addition, the hosts are often believed to have become involved in magic or sorcery, thus unintentionally, but still carelessly, facilitating the possession. Therefore, the host is somewhat to blame.

Crucially, *phi pop* are widely recognized as malevolent and dangerous, unlike spirit mediums. Thus, even if the hosts of *phi pop* are not explicitly blamed for the harm that *phi pop* do, because they are hosting a dangerous spirit, it is recognized that the only way to rid the community of this danger is to either kill the host (which rarely happens today) or expel the host along with the *phi pop*. In addition, it is recognized that *phi pop* hosts can be cured through particular culturally grounded practices, something that is not required for spirit mediums.

While Lao people typically refer to ravenous spirits as *phi pop*, these spirits are also sometimes referred to as *phi pop phi phong*. According to ethnic Lao informants from Sesan District, Stung Treng Province, northeastern Cambodia, *phi pop* are a less dangerous version of *phi phong*. These informants believe that *phi pop* can cause someone to become ill but that they typically do not kill people. *Phi phong*, on the other hand, are believed to be much more dangerous and are the extreme version of *phi pop*, the one that kills people. Sometimes ethnic Lao people say that people "*pen pop pen phong*" (are *pop* are *phong*), indicating that the latter is more dangerous than the former.[3] However, according to Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954, 161), the word *phong* means "glowing," making *phi phong* the "glowing *phi*." Ethnic Lao informants also report that those who become *phi phong* often possess a tuberous plant or *van* believed to have special powers. These people are often considered quite contagious, especially if they spit on someone. Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954, 163), however, claim, in contradiction to my ethnic Lao informants, that *phi phong* do not harm people. In any case, due to these unresolved contradictions, in this article I refer to both *phi pop* and *phi phong* as simply *phi pop*, conflating the two as most Lao people do, even though such a practice may not seem correct to some. Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954, 165) also claim that it is believed that *phi pop* cannot harm their own kind, and that they do not hurt digni-

3) Ethnic Lao couple, personal communication, Phluk Village, Sesan District, Stung Treng Province, June 10, 2022.

taries or people from cities, for fear of becoming impotent.[4] According to the anthropologist Katherine Bowie, the northern Thai equivalent of *phi pop*, *phi ka*, can be translated as the "greedy spirit," a point I will return to later.[5]

Sangun Suwanlert (1976), a Thai psychiatrist, provided some other clues for understanding the phenomenon, through the following observation about the type of people he saw being accused of being *phi pop* in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

> Working in the health station and in the villages, I was soon able to recognize a person who had been possessed by a *phii pob*. A possessed woman was usually distinguished in her beauty, dramatic in manner and charmingly seductive . . . the possessed hosts were sensitive and easily stimulated, quick-tempered, self-centered, and susceptible to suggestions. (Sangun 1976, 81)

However, one difference between the past and present is that Sangun found that most *phi pop* hosts in northeastern Thailand were women, while more recently I found that most *phi pop* hosts in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia were men. This fits Kanya (2018), who also found that most *phi pop* in northeastern Thailand were men. This may be because the role of women in matrilineal Lao society in the past was stronger, and so they were often seen as the greedy ones and thus worthy of being accused of being *phi pop*, whereas nowadays men have gained more prominent social roles and thus are more frequently accused of being greedy (Baird and Soukhaphon, forthcoming). Furthermore, Sangun (1976) did not suggest that the personality of those accused of being *phi pop* could be a major reason why others did not like them and accused them of being *phi pop*. As will become evident below, it is not just wealth but how people use their wealth and power that is important.

One important aspect associated with the beliefs and practices connected to *phi pop* is that people in the Lao-speaking world typically consider Buddhist rituals and rituals related to spirits, *phi pop*, or spirit mediums to be firmly separated from Buddhism, even if certain ritual aspects have been borrowed from that religion. Crucially, Buddhist monks do not attend spirit medium or *phi pop*-related rituals, and spirit mediums do not participate in Buddhist rituals, and spirit mediums and Buddhist monks are not considered compatible.

Following is a short account of one recent incident that was alleged to have been associated with *phi pop*, which I present here to provide a better sense of how beliefs related to *phi pop* often play out in Laos. In May 2019, a healthy middle-aged woman in

4) Anthropologists typically refer to possession involving the involuntary hosting of a spirit in a human body as witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937), including in Laos (Sprenger 2021) and Thailand (Tannenbaum 1993).

5) Katherine Bowie, personal communication, Madison, January 17, 2023.

Hatsaikhoun Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, fell down in her bathroom. She was rushed to the provincial hospital in Pakse, but ten days later she died without the doctors being able to say what the cause of death was. In June 2019 her husband, Somphong, an old friend, explained that other villagers told him that they believed his wife's internal organs had been eaten by a *phi pop*. Somphong said it was not easy for him to believe that she had died due to this, but there was no other explanation. What he meant was a scientific explanation, one that conformed with the Marxist-Leninist state's insistence on exclusively physical causation. There was more to the story, however. Prior to the woman's death, a man from Pakse had come to live in the village. He was a professional fortune teller (*mo dou*), and he rented a house in the village. Soon after the man's arrival, two people became inexplicably ill, although they were reportedly cured by someone in the village before their conditions became too bad. Later, other villagers chased the fortune teller away—but since he did not have any government paperwork affirming his residence, he could not move to Nakasang. At the time I spoke to Somphong, the man's whereabouts were unknown.[6] This sort of story is common, with there being typically various unresolved aspects of a particular situation, as is the case here.

Methods

This ethnographic qualitative study represents the accumulated work of many years of casual and more focused research among ethnic Lao people in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. As mentioned in the introduction, I first became aware of *phi pop* in late 1993, and I have been informally learning about the belief system surrounding them ever since. I have also developed long-standing relationships with many of them living in the Nakasang area. However, in 2017 in particular, I decided to focus on studying the circumstances in Nakasang Village, the central location for receiving and curing people afflicted by *phi pop* in southern Laos. In May 2017 I conducted a long interview with the village headman, Phone Savanh, who was responsible for managing the new *phi pop* who arrived to stay in the community each year. On the same day, I also attended a ritual and curing session for *phi pop* who had come to stay in Nakasang and a few surrounding villages: Phiang Dy, Hat Khi Khouay, Mai Sivilay, and Phon Pho. These five communities are included in three official villages. On the same day, I also interviewed Bounsou, the man whose circumstances were recounted in the introduction. I conducted

6) Somphong Bounphasy, personal communication, Hatsaikhoun Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, June 22, 2019.

other key informant interviews with people in Khong District and in Paris.

In May and June 2022 I conducted ten additional interviews about spirit mediums, including in some cases about *phi pop*, with ethnic Lao people living in Preah Vihear, Stung Treng, and Ratanakiri Provinces, in northeastern Cambodia. However, my focus during those interviews was more on spirit mediums, and there was not as much detailed discussion about *phi pop* as had been the case in southern Laos. These interviews deepened my general knowledge of local understandings about *phi pop* but were hardly the core of my research on *phi pop*. However, they did allow me to confirm that ethnic Lao villagers from northeastern Cambodia also send accused *phi pop* to the Nakasang cluster for cultural healing. They have heard about Nakasang from relatives and friends crossing the border, and it has not been difficult for people in northeastern Cambodia to come and stay in southern Laos. Some stay just for the three years of treatment, some for longer, justified by the need for cultural healing.

Managing *Phi Pop* in Nakasang Village

Although Nakasang and the surrounding villages encompass the only known place in Laos where *phi pop* can reportedly be culturally healed, Nakasang is better known as a thriving trading community. Its inhabitants are almost all ethnically Lao and are involved mainly in either fishing, fish trading, or small consumer goods trading. Some villagers work for a sawmill in Phiang Dy. However, most people also cultivate rainfed rice, mainly for their own consumption. Except for Mai Sivilay Village, which is located about two kilometers from the Mekong River, most of the wooden stilted houses in the villages stretch along the edge of the Mekong or are close to other houses adjacent to the river.

Nakasang is an economic center and transport node, although this development occurred long after Nakasang started culturally healing *phi pop*. Essentially, public transportation to Pakse and Vientiane leaves from Nakasang. In addition, Nakasang is the main trading hub for the many villages located on islands in the Mekong River in the southern part of the Siphandone area, including the Khone Falls. Each morning dozens of motorized long-tail boats can be found docked at the banks of the river in front of Nakasang, since many villagers from dozens of island villages go there to sell fish, buy various consumer items, board buses to travel elsewhere, or simply have a morning coffee and talk with friends.

In May 2017, Phone Savanh had been the headman of Nakasang Village for many years and was quite familiar with the *phi pop* situation in his village and the other sur-

rounding villages that are considered extensions of his community with regard to accepting and curing *phi pop* (the Nakasang cluster).[7] The cultural healing process, which includes important rituals overseen by village spirit mediums, also connects the communities. Phone explained that each year about ten people accused of being *phi pop* elsewhere come and ask to move into his village in order to undergo the cultural healing process. This process is a necessary precondition to coming to the Nakasang cluster to cure afflictions related to ravenous spirits. Once the people take up residence in the communities of the Nakasang cluster, they need to undergo a series of rituals designed to cure their affliction by ravenous spirits. Sometimes these people, mainly men, come alone, but the majority arrive with their immediate families, predominantly spouses and children.

There are important similarities between *phi pop* beliefs and practices and aspects of what is referred to as witchcraft in Africa. As is the case with *phi pop*, just being labeled as a witch in South Africa can cause serious problems (Mavhungu 2000), with the stigma being as significant there as in Laos. However, there are also important differences. For example, in Nigeria witches have demanded that witchcraft be recognized as a religion (Bachmann 2021), a debate that is not occurring in Laos or other parts of Southeast Asia, at least as far as I know.

Phone explained that there was now a clear system for accepting people accused of harboring *phi pop*, as more people were coming to the village than ever before. However, Nakasang has been essentially accepting people accused of being *phi pop* for as long as anyone can remember. Phone emphasized that it was important for him to follow the state law (*kotmai*, ກົດໝາຍ) but that he also needed to consider cultural and social norms. He explained that there were two main rules that had to be followed by everyone who came to stay in the Nakasang cluster: first, they had to bring official paperwork from the leadership of the village where they previously lived, indicating that their departure from that village was recognized and acceptable (see Fig. 1 for an example). This was important, Phone explained, to prevent criminals from coming to his village pretending that they were *phi pop* when they were actually trying to evade the authorities. People were also not allowed to come to Nakasang to escape debt. Phone claimed that in the past a few murderers had come to the village falsely claiming to be accused *phi pop*. In those cases, Phone reported the newcomers to the police, and they were arrested. He also required that family members, at least initially, accompany the new arrival. In addition, if a Buddhist monk was a *phi pop*, he was required to disrobe before

7) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, May 1, 2017.

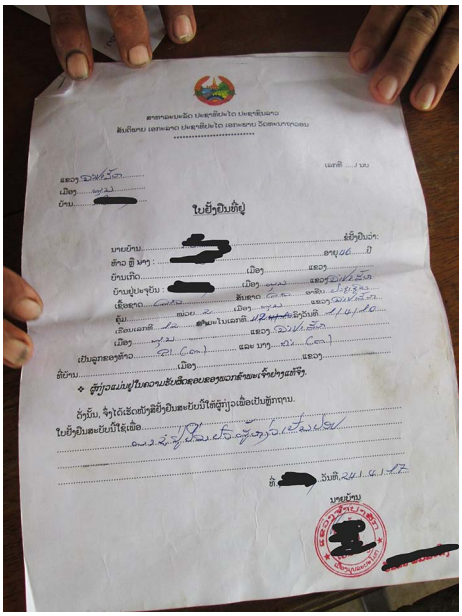


Fig. 1 An Official Residence Document Confirming that a Man, Aged 46, Who Lived in a Village in Mounlapoumok District, Champasak Province, Wanted to Go to Nakasang Village to Receive Treatment for Being a *Phi Pop*. The Document Is Dated April 24, 2017 and Is Signed and Stamped by the Village Headman

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

coming to Nakasang. Phone also claimed that the village spirit medium warned him if something was wrong. The second rule was that those who wanted to move into the Nakasang cluster had to admit that they were *phi pop*. If someone came and did not accept that they were a *phi pop*, they would not be accepted by the community leadership; the rationale behind this is that a person can be treated only after accepting their circumstances. Thus, acceptance of being a ravenous spirit is a necessary precondition for being allowed to live in the Nakasang cluster. Here we can see how pressures related to social relations can lead to the acceptance of cultural healing.

Furthermore, once a new arrival has accepted that he or she is a *phi pop* and has moved into the Nakasang cluster, that person is required to participate in the community's healing program. That means the person has to participate fully in two ritual sessions a year over a three-year period, or six sessions in total. These sessions typically occur on the third day of the third lunar month according to the Lao lunar calendar (typically in February) and the third day of the sixth lunar month (typically in May). If an accused *phi pop* comes to the village and refuses to participate in two sessions per year for at least a three-year period, that person will be expelled from the community

due to not being willing to receive treatment. Details of how these sessions are conducted are explained in the next section of the article.

Phone explained that if someone missed one of the six required sessions for whatever reason but still agreed to be treated, that person had to start over and complete six consecutive sessions before they were deemed to have been cured. However, if someone was sick and could not attend a ritual for medical reasons, he or she was allowed to make up the missed session—but before the session started, that person's relatives had to come and explain why the accused *phi pop* could not attend. Clearly there is some discipline to the process. Phone said that about 90 percent of the *phi pop* who came to his village followed the rules. He claimed that those who refused to do so and left the village often died soon after. He was essentially suggesting that refusing the cultural healing offered in the village could have life-or-death implications.

Phone said that in one case, a person who had come to Nakasang as a ravenous spirit wanted Phone to prepare a letter explaining that he had never been a *phi pop*, even though he had initially agreed that he was one in order to be able to move to Nakasang. However, Phone told the man that even if he was not a *phi pop*, he needed to continue to acknowledge that he was one, at least until he had completed the three-year treatment program required by the village leadership in the Nakasang cluster. If not, other villagers would chase him away.

Phone claimed that about 70 percent of those who came to Nakasang as accused *phi pop* ended up staying in the community permanently, while the other 30 percent eventually returned to their original villages, the ones they had been expelled from. He said that he gave those who completed treatment documents allowing them to return home, but that he always wrote on the documents that the returnee needed to listen carefully to other villagers. However, he admitted that some former residents lapsed and had to return to Nakasang for a second round of treatment. When people first arrived in his village, they were required to offer a pig to the local spirit medium, and the total cost of the offering ritual was about 500,000 kip (about US$50 at the time of the interview). However, if people had to return a second time, they were required to pay 1 million kip, a measure that was presumably intended to punish those who had not sufficiently heeded community advice. Phone noted that almost everyone accused of being a *phi pop* could afford the cost of coming to Nakasang, suggesting that very poor people were hardly ever accused of being *phi pop*. Phone said that traditions (*heet khong*) were used to benefit the community. He did not refer to the law, but he implied that *heet khong* functioned like traditional law, thus indicating how traditions could be used for the benefit of the community. Phone acknowledged that he served as a sort of traditional authority, although he also represented the state and recognized the need to uphold

government law as well. He insisted that as village headman, he did not keep any of the money for himself or his family but used it for developing the village. He also claimed that even though not all the rules related to *phi pop* were written down, the district government knew about them and did not object. He said *phi pop* had been coming to Nakasang for so long that nobody could remember how many people in the village were previously connected with *phi pop* accusations. However, most of those in the cluster of villages had once been accused of being *phi pop* themselves, were relatives of someone previously accused, or were descendants of a person accused of being a *phi pop*—although nobody could provide any definitive statistics, since there was no village-wide data collection on the subject. I was told by villagers that many did not want to admit they had been accused in the past.

One of the differences between *phi pop* in southern Laos and *phi ka* in northern Thailand is that while the former are not typically considered to run in families, heredity is more common in northern Thailand for *phi ka* (Anan 1984). This may also reflect regional differences between spirit mediums, or cultural differences between the Lao and Nyouan/Lue in the area, as I have noticed that spirit mediums in central and northern Laos, and upper northeastern and northern Thailand, tend to have more hereditary links to other spirit mediums compared to southern Laos, lower northeastern Thailand, and northeastern Cambodia. Evans-Pritchard (1937, 23) reported that witchcraft in the area of the Sudan that he studied was largely hereditary.

Phone could not tell me how long Nakasang had been serving as a center for curing *phi pop*, but he said that it had served this purpose since before he was born. However, he explained that the characteristics of *phi pop* coming to his village had changed in recent years: in the past, *phi pop* were usually above fifty years old; but an increasing number were now just over thirty years old.[8)]

Phone claimed that people came to Nakasang from ethnic Lao villages as far north as Luang Prabang in northern Laos and as far south as Stung Treng Province in northeastern Cambodia.[9)] Word about Nakasang appears to have traveled extensively but not uniformly by word of mouth. However, Phone noted that only three or four families

8) When I was in Paris in 2013, a Catholic priest told me that while he lived in southern Laos, between 1969 and 1976, a Lao Catholic priest known as Khoun Pho Thansamai lived in Phia Fai District (now Pathoumphone District), Champasak Province, and protected people accused of being *phi pop*. Villagers reportedly gave the priest fruit for solving the *phi pop* problem (Father Moreu, personal communication, Paris, August 2, 2013).

9) Villagers in Srekasang (Nakasang Village) in Siem Bok District, Stung Treng Province, northeastern Cambodia—the ethnic Lao village farthest down the Mekong River in Cambodia—confirmed that if they had a *phi pop* in their village, they would tell that person to go to Nakasang Village in Laos for treatment (personal communication, villagers in Srekasang Village, June 13, 2022).

had previously come from as far away as Luang Prabang. He reported that nobody from northeastern Thailand came to be treated in Nakasang, as they typically did not know about the role played by the village.[10] He also emphasized that the only people who came from Cambodia were ethnic Lao, and that no ethnic Khmer people came to be treated at Nakasang.[11] Confirming Phone's claims, an ethnic Lao 76-year-old spirit medium living in Phabang Village, Siem Pang District, northeastern Cambodia, told me that many years earlier a man and his whole family had been banished from her village because the husband was accused of being a *phi pop*. She said that they went to live in Phiang Dy, one of the villages in the Nakasang cluster. Later the villagers in Phabang Village burned down the house of the expelled family, and they never returned.[12]

Phone said he had heard there was a place in northeastern Thailand where those accused of being *phi pop* were also treated, but that there the cure involved certain chants (*mon*).[13] He claimed, however, that the method of cultural healing used there was not as effective as that used in Nakasang.[14]

Curing the *Phi Pop*

On May 1, 2017, I attended one of the two cultural healing sessions held each year for *phi pop* living in the Nakasang cluster. The day of the ritual was chosen according to the Lao lunar calendar: the third day of the Lao sixth lunar month. However, it was the beginning of the rainy season, and there had been very little rain so far. This made the curing pond, or *nong cheut* in Lao, quite dry, with only a little water at the bottom. It resembled a small mud hole more than a pond. According to villagers, this natural pond was made sacred (*saksit*, ສັກສິດ) for cleansing before anyone could remember, and

10) The political divide between the Lao PDR and Thailand that has existed since 1975 may have prevented information about Nakasang from traveling to Thailand, and it may also have kept people from crossing from Thailand to the Lao PDR for treatment.

11) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, May 1, 2017.

12) Me Thao Peng, personal communication, Phabang Village, Thmor Keo Commune, Siem Pang District, Stung Treng Province, northeastern Cambodia, June 7, 2022.

13) Banna Saonan Village, Nahuabo Subdistrict, Punnanikom District, Sakhon Nakhon Province is one place in northeastern Thailand known for curing people accused of being *phi pop*, but patients are required to drink holy water as part of the treatment (Tanadet n.d.). Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954) also reported that sometimes many people accused of being *phi pop* in Thailand form a village and live on their own.

14) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, May 1, 2017.



Fig. 2 Villagers in Nakasang Bring *Khanh Ha* to the Village *Ta Ho*. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

the spirits that inhabit the bodies of village spirit mediums are still responsible for sanctifying the villages for the purpose of dealing with *phi pop*. The *nong cheut*, sanctified by the spirit of *pho thao* Teum (Grandpa Teum) and rituals conducted by spirit mediums at the adjacent *ta ho* (spirit house), are intended to neutralize or make "tasteless, bland, watered down, or weak" (*cheut*) the *phi pop* in those afflicted; this hints that being a *phi pop* is viewed as an illness that needs to be weakened or cured.

The *ta ho* is a simple wooden building on stilts, like many others found in villages or in forests near villages. This is where the rituals occur. One of the two female spirit mediums in the Nakasang cluster arrived at the *ta ho* at the agreed-upon time, and she went up into the spirit house and sat down.

Apparently every family in the Nakasang cluster sent a representative to the ritual, so as not to anger the spirits. They all came with a small assemblage of flowers, candles, and a small amount of money (*khanh ha*), materials that typically accompany spirit medium rituals (Fig. 2). In effect, they are required to make the spirits happy. Villagers also brought small bottles of Lao whiskey and hard-boiled eggs (one of each per family) as offerings for the spirits. As they arrived, a member of each family carefully placed these items on a long wooden plank on the ground in front of the *ta ho*, which had been set up in advance by the spirit medium assistants, known as *cha ho* in Lao. I asked a few people why these particular offerings were made, but nobody could provide a clear



Fig. 3 Accused *Phi Pop* Sit under the *Ta Ho* in Nakasang Village, Awaiting the Healing Ritual; Other Villagers Look On. May 1, 2017
Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

answer. The ritual started after lunch, with people gathering at about 2 p.m., and the whole process took about three hours. The people took the bottles of whiskey home at the end of the ritual, and the eggs were consumed by the attendees. The candles and flowers used to make *khanh ha* were left behind at the *ta ho*.

Apart from regular villagers, the accused *phi pop* who had not yet completed the healing cycle also assembled at the spirit house. Eventually they were instructed to sit, crouching as a group, directly under the floor of the *ta ho*, where the first spirit medium and other villagers were sitting and standing. There were 28 people receiving treatment that day, six of whom were women (Fig. 3). The positioning of the accused *phi pop* is important: they are required to sit on the ground under the *ta ho* in order to demonstrate their willingness to follow the village rules, with other people above their heads (in Southeast Asia it is considered degrading to have people's feet above one's head).

Most of the villagers sat outside of the perimeter around the *ta ho*. Their presence forced those accused of being *phi pop* to degrade themselves before the whole community. There are two spirit mediums in the Nakasang cluster, one in the northern part of the cluster and the other in the southern part. The first spirit medium from the southern group of villages (Nakasang, Mai Sivilay, and Phon Pho) arrived at the *ta ho* together with a drum (*kong*) player, a Lao mouth organ (*khene*) player, and a small cymbals (*ching*) player. There were also three *cha ho* assistants and a *me khanh mak*, a woman who

prepares the *kheuang* (ເຄື່ອງ) (including powerful occult items) for the spirit medium.[15] They arrived first, since the *ta ho* is located in their village. The first spirit medium to arrive was dressed in red. She became possessed by the spirit of *pho thao* Teum. Nobody remembers exactly who *pho thao* Teum was, but he is assumed to have been an early inhabitant of the Nakasang area. Oddly, even though *pho thao* Teum is referred to as a man, Teum is actually believed to be a woman. So, in the end, a woman spirit medium channeled the spirit of a woman, but one referred to as a man. Crucially, *pho thao* Teum, as a spirit, is believed to be able to heal people afflicted by *phi pop*. However, there is more to it. There are two spirit mediums involved, but only the one for the northern villages—*me nhai* Thone, based in Phiang Dy Village—is able to cure *phi pop* as well as provide more general curing for the community. The spirit medium for the southern villages, based in Nakasang, *nang* Douang, also channels *pho thao* Teum but only supports the healing of *phi pop* and does not do regular healing like *me nhai* Thone. They both attend the biannual rituals at the *ta ho* in Nakasang. Therefore, during the ritual, both *me nhai* Thone and *nang* Douang channel the spirit of *pho thao* Teum. They both join in and dance during the *phi pop* ritual.[16]

Once she became possessed, the spirit medium from Nakasang wrapped a red scarf around her forehead. She then drank whiskey directly out of a bottle. Within a short time, she had consumed a small bottle of whiskey. The claim is that spirit mediums cannot get drunk, and the spirit medium is able to impress the villagers by being able to drink so much without becoming inebriated—but the reality of her sobriety may be quite different. In any case, she started dancing with an old sword she had, while the musicians played, in order to create an atmosphere appropriate for facilitating spirit medium dancing. This was part of the process, along with chanting—inspired by Buddhist chanting—for sanctifying the water that was then used to bathe or cleanse those who harbored *phi pop*. Lit candles were placed on the sword (Fig. 4). All this was done as part of the process to sanctify the water so it could be used to cleanse the *phi pop* under the *ta ho*.

Then the second spirit medium from the northern villages (Hatkhikhouay and Phiang Dy) arrived with her own entourage of villagers, young and old, male and female. They came later because they were from other villages, not from the village with the special cleansing *ta ho* and pond, a place powerful enough to control the *phi pop*. Soon, the two spirit mediums were dancing together in the *ta ho* as the cultural healing ritual

15) There are normally two *cha ho* per spirit medium, but the headman of Nakasang told this spirit medium to choose three in case one could not attend certain rituals due to sickness. In addition, the village is large.

16) Phongsavath Kisouvannalat, personal communication, Hatsaikhoun Village, January 20, 2023.



Fig. 4 Spirit Medium at Nakasang Village Dancing in the *Ta Ho*, with Musicians to the Left. She Drinks Lao Whiskey from a Bottle as She Dances. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

continued (Fig. 5).

Meanwhile, the villagers had prepared buckets of water with fragrant herbs in them. The buckets were brought up into the *ta ho*. Eventually, the spirit mediums turned their attention to the buckets. Candles were lit on the rims, and the water was made sacred. The spirit mediums then dipped their feet in the water and moved them around until the buckets tipped over and the water spilled onto the floor of the *ta ho*. It flowed through the cracks between the floorboards and onto the heads of the accused *phi pop* crouching below (Fig. 6).

It is significant that the spirit mediums' feet are used to stir the water. The feet are the lowest part of the body, so using them to stir the water would normally be considered impolite, degrading. But in this case it shows that the community spirit mediums are in control of the *phi pop*, since the accused *phi pop* hosts are willing to have water stirred by the spirit mediums' feet poured over their heads. Regular people would not condone



Fig. 5 Two Spirit Mediums Dance in the *Ta Ho* of Nakasang Village. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird



Fig. 6 Spirit Mediums Tip Over Buckets of Fragrant Water in the *Ta Ho* of Nakasang Village, Wetting the Accused *Phi Pop* Underneath. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

this, but the *phi pop* are located in a power relation that forces them to be humble and oblige.

Moments later, the spirit mediums stamped their feet on the floor of the *ta ho* three times. The accused *phi pop* below, recognizing the signal, immediately stood up and started running into the *nong cheut* pond nearby. Most ran unhesitatingly straight into the pond, but a few stopped short and put water over their heads before running in. The *nong cheut* is believed to have sacred cleansing properties. That is why everyone must pass through it and wet their bodies with its water. Before, *phi pop* were required to take off all their clothes when passing through the pond, but that has now changed because some were embarrassed to run naked. Some did, however, take off their clothing, discarding items randomly along the way. The accused *phi pop* did not stay long in the muddy pond before running out to the nearby Mekong River. This seemed to symbolize that they were fully devoted to the ritual and were prepared to swim in the river for hundreds of meters. Once they reached the Mekong River, the accused *phi pop* jumped into the water and started swimming downstream with the current, situating themselves ten to twenty meters from the shore. Again, their actions showed that they were obeying the ritual requirements and were willing to humble themselves and be humiliated in front of the whole community. However, villagers were also there to support the cultural healing process, so it was a mixed situation.

Once the swimmers reached a designated location in the southern part of the community, near the *ta ho* there, they came out of the water and put on new dry clothes provided by their waiting relatives. The *phi pop* then separated into two groups. The group from the southern villages gathered at the *ta ho* of the southern villages adjacent to the Mekong River (not the one near the *nong cheut*), while the other group assembled at a different *ta ho* for the northern villages in Phiang Dy Village. However, I was told that both groups then did the same thing, just at two different locations, since each spirit medium and *ta ho* is designated for people from the associated community or communities.

Once assembled at the southern villages' *ta ho*, an elderly man, one of the *cha ho*, recited Buddhist-inspired chants before the *phi pop*. Meanwhile, the *cha ho* took attendance, recording in a simple notebook how many times each *phi pop* had participated in the ritual so far. In addition, a woman was admonished for undergoing the ritual twice and then leaving the village before eventually coming back. She was told that she would have to start over. The spirit medium then used leaves to splash some water over the *phi pop*, who were sitting in the center of the *ta ho*. This water splashing was intended to bless them at the end of the ritual (Fig. 7).

There are clearly aspects of the rituals related to spirit mediums that have been



Fig. 7 After Swimming in the Mekong River, the Spirit Medium at Nakasang Village Splashes Holy Water on the Heads of the Accused *Phi Pop*, Marking the End of the Healing Ritual. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

borrowed from Buddhism, including lighting candles, sprinkling water on people, and chanting; but the villagers are emphatic that these rituals are not related to Buddhism, at least in their understanding. As a result, Buddhist monks never attend events involving spirit mediums, and vice versa. In southern Laos, monks and spirit mediums are often situated as being opposed to each other or in competition with each other, even though most villagers believe in both.

Phone, as the village headman, then gave a speech in which he emphasized the need for everyone to follow the rules. He also said that all the *phi pop* had a disease (*phanyat*, ພະຍາດ) that needed to be cured,[17] and for that reason they had to follow the rules. Once his speech was over, the ceremony was complete, and the attendees dispersed and returned to their homes. A pickup truck came and collected the people from Phiang Dy Village, since they lived farther away, about three kilometers from the *nong cheut*. We returned to Nakasang and had a short discussion with Phone before leaving the village.

17) Referring to this as a biomedical condition, or *phanyat*, can be considered one way in which the *phi pop* tradition is reconciled with party policy.

Local Functionalist Understandings of the *Phi Pop* Phenomenon

Crucially, Phone explained that there are four types of *phi pop* that come to the Nakasang cluster. The first is the traditional *phi pop*, which can be called *phi pop sing* (a ravenous spirit who possesses people). *Phi pop* typically enter a person's body and use the person as a host for attacking and causing illness or killing other people (Sangun 1976). Phone claimed that this type of *phi pop* used to be common in the past but is now rarer.

The second type of *phi pop* is *phi pop visa*, someone who has studied magic or sorcery related to *phi then*, a type of spirit, but does something wrong in relation to the teaching, such as breaking taboos (see also Sangun 1976), and becomes a malevolent *phi pop* spirit instead.

Phone's explanation of the next two types of *phi pop* was initially surprising to me. One is a person who does many bad things in their original village, such as engaging in petty thievery or beating their wife or children. It may not be possible to arrest this person and send them to jail, due to a lack of evidence or for other reasons. Therefore, the person is instead accused by other villagers of being a *phi pop*, in order to provide a culturally acceptable excuse for expelling the person from the village.

The final type of *phi pop*, according to Phone, is similar to the third type but involves a person who subtly cheats other villagers. That person, who is essentially considered a troublemaker who damages the tranquility of the community through legal means, typically does not listen to appeals to change his or her ways from the village headman and other community members. Neither can the person be killed. Phone explained that in Laos, "Socialism does not allow that (people be killed)," thus again reconciling *phi pop* practices with party policy. So instead, the person is accused of being a ravenous spirit, and that becomes the stated reason for expelling the person from the village, thus solving the social problem that the accused is believed to have caused. However, Phone added that sometimes these accused people are killed by others who have special abilities.

Crucially, the above two non-magical reasons for accusing people of harboring ravenous spirits are intertwined with continued beliefs in magic or sorcery. In line with this, Tanadet Torsri (n.d.), when writing about *phi pop* in northeastern Thailand, pointed out that rich traders are often accused of being *phi pop*. However, he failed to make a clear connection between their behavior and their being accused of being *phi pop*. Anan Ganjanapan (1984) discussed how accusing someone of being *phi ka* allowed other people in the village to take control of their land. This may occur in some cases, but my research results differ from Anan's in that in southern Laos it is typically the richer villagers, the greedy ones, who are accused of being ravenous spirits—not the poorer

villagers, as Anan suggested. My understanding is in line with that of Bowie, who came to a similar conclusion during her own field research on this topic in northern Thailand.[18] In other words, Bowie and I similarly see this practice as being what James Scott (1985) referred to as "weapons of the weak," a way for people who typically have less power to assert their influence relatively safely. In this case, normal villagers are considered to be weaker than the rich and greedy villagers usually accused of being *phi pop*.[19]

Phone provided some examples from the Nakasang cluster. He spoke of a man named Simuang, from Long Island in Khong District. Simuang had been accused of being a *phi pop* and had come to stay in Nakasang. He had already been there for two years at the time I interviewed Phone. Previously, Simuang held a strong economic position amongst the villagers on Long Island. However, he got into many conflicts with other villagers, and he was believed to have advanced at the expense of other community members. Therefore, the other villagers thought that Simuang was too rich and greedy, and they claimed that he must have studied magic or sorcery to get so much money. Eventually this led to him being accused of being a *phi pop*. Once he was accused, and he realized the seriousness of the accusation, he decided to leave the community—he felt that would be better than losing face by being physically forced to leave. However, his wife and children remained on Long Island. Phone said that Simuang's family often came to visit him in Nakasang. He added that Simuang had been behaving well, and that he thought he would be able to return to Long Island after finishing the three-year treatment program. Phone explained that Simuang was being treated using *visa* (knowledge about magic or sorcery) known as *vetsouan*, which is applied to fight against Hanuman, the Hindu monkey god, who was believed to have caused Simuang to behave poorly in the past. However, Phone emphasized that Simuang would need to be careful not to instigate conflicts with villagers after he returned to Long Island. Phone concluded the story by explaining that most of the accused *phi pop* who arrived in the Nakasang cluster had been relatively wealthy in relation to others in their village.[20] Apart from being similar to the situation of *phi ka* in northern Thailand, the situation in Laos also parallels the circumstances regarding witchcraft in parts of Africa. For example, Alison Berg (2005) reported that in 2005 there were one thousand women living in "witch camps" in northern Ghana, after they had been accused of being witches and forced to flee on pain of death. In one district in southwestern Kenya, more than three hundred people were reportedly killed between 1992 and 1994 after they were accused of being

18) Katherine Bowie, personal communication, Madison WI, January 17, 2023.
19) Villagers who are just rich are not seen as particularly problematic. It is the combination of wealth and greed that is the deciding factor.
20) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, May 1, 2017.

witches (Ogembo 2006). As in the case of *phi pop*, in Africa those who are believed to be harboring spirits often face considerable hardship.

I met a 69-year-old woman originally from Champasak named Oky. She had also been banished to Nakasang for two years. Later she moved to Thateng Theung Village in Thateng District, Xekong Province. She told me, when I met her in Nakasang, that when she was in Thateng District she was accused of being a *phi pop*, but she claimed that she had never studied magic or sorcery and that she was not afflicted by a *phi pop*. However, people in the village died, and other villagers blamed her. She reported that she had no choice but to leave the community and come to Nakasang. She arrived with her whole family, seven people in total. Oky admitted that she had had conflicts with villagers before she was expelled. She also acknowledged that she was wealthier than other villagers. However, she claimed that her economic situation, outside of the norm, had actually improved since coming to Nakasang, since she was able to sell one hectare of lowland rice farmland in Thateng and buy five hectares of rice farmland in Nakasang for the same amount. She said that even when her treatment was completed, she would not leave Nakasang. She did not have words to describe her feelings about the ordeal. She explained that she was born a Christian but now believed all religions were good. She claimed that she had abandoned Christianity in order to embrace the treatment she was receiving in Nakasang.[21] However, she did not elaborate.

I now return to Bounsou, who was expelled from Hang Khone Village in 1993 due to accusations of being a *phi pop* and ended up in Mai Sivilay Village. He explained that before 1975 he had been a sergeant in the Royal Lao Army, under the command of General Khong Vongnarat; the general was previously also the governor of Attapeu Province, before Attapeu was overrun by North Vietnamese forces in 1970 (Vongsavanh 1981). Bounsou was a native of Attapeu. He said that he had lived in Hang Khone Village from 1970 until 1993. Bounsou then opened up and told me that he was never really a *phi pop*, but that people in Hang Khone caused him problems because he was economically better off than them due to having some lowland wet rice fields (many other families in Hang Khone do not have rice fields). He claimed that everyone in the village disliked him. He argued that if he had really been a *phi pop*, he would have died in three years.[22] In fact, Phone confirmed Bounsou's story, stating that if someone was a real *phi pop*, that person would die within three years and three months of first becoming a vector for a *phi pop*.[23] This is one of the reasons that Phone believes most people accused of being *phi pop* are not actually so. Otherwise, more would die after three years and

21) Oky, personal communication, Nakasang Village, May 1, 2017.
22) Bounsou, personal communication, Mai Sivilay Village, May 1, 2017.
23) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, May 1, 2017.

three months, but he sees that most do not.

Bounsou also claimed that he never had any magical objects (*kheuang*), as some in Hang Khone Village alleged. He lamented that he had lost everything when he was forced to leave Hang Khone. He reported that he had left on his own, because he had heard rumors about the accusations toward him and was fearful that he would have problems.[24] Nobody actually told him to leave, but he recognized the warning signs. He heard that people were saying he was no good. Hosts of *phi pop* are blamed more than spirit medium hosts, as the former are often believed to have brought on *phi pop* through their risky engagement with black magic. Bounsou felt it would have been worse for him to wait until he was chased from the village. He explained, as I had heard earlier, that only 5 percent of those accused of being *phi pop* are actually *phi pop*. In any case, he went along with the system and completed his six rituals over a three-year period. He accepted that he had to follow the traditions (*papheni*, ປະເພນີ) even though he had been wrongly accused.[25] It was power relations that had compelled him to participate, and he was forced to be humble and accept his fate.

Phone believed more people were being accused of being *phi pop* than before because in this era of economic development there were greater inequities among villagers; this was leading to more resentment against villagers who became wealthier than the rest.[26]

Over the last few decades, scholars and practitioners have taken considerable interest in traditional forms of justice, and how those systems often operate in tandem and intertwined with more formal and official justice systems (Van Kessel and Oomen 1997; West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999; Care and Zorn 2001; Hinz and Mapaure 2010; Ayodele 2018; Winters and Conroy-Krutz 2021). While traditional forms of justice typically adopt different tools apart from incarceration, the fines that the traditional justice system often imposes on offenders are, like the cultural healing described here, designed on the surface to cure people. Deeper down, however, the intent is to partially control people and keep them in line, within certain limits set by whatever cultural beliefs and practices are the norm. Similarly, we can think of the *phi pop* phenomenon as another form of traditional justice, one that applies social understandings and a cultural healing process to discipline people considered unmanageable, to ensure that they adhere to socially approved ideas and practices when interacting with other members of their social and cultural groups. Indeed, accused ravenous spirits are forced to accept their fate

24) Tanadet (n.d.) claimed that accusing someone of being a *phi pop*, and the rumors associated with accusations of being a *phi pop*, are both crucial.

25) Bounsou, personal communication, Mai Sivilay Village, May 1, 2017.

26) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, May 1, 2017.

and admit that they are afflicted by *phi pop* even when they believe they have been unjustly accused. Then they must adhere to a cultural curing process that compels them to become humble and modest, at least at certain times, and follow the requirements of the program. Finally, these people have to live in the Nakasang cluster for at least three years, which puts them in a subjective position that further compels them to be more modest and humble and not greedy. Based on my discussions with villagers, all this tends to lead to some of the accused recognizing that they have crossed a social line in the sand. They will have to adjust their behavior if they want to return to their original villages, or even if they decide to continue to live in the Nakasang cluster after their required treatment has been completed. The idea of cultural healing is critical.

Crucially, however, I am not suggesting that this cultural healing process is the only way to deal with social problems. Nor am I claiming that this process always works, or that it always works in the same way. The woman who acquired the rice farmland in the Nakasang area shows, for example, that reform is not always easy or successful. However, the people I spoke with in Nakasang, particularly Phone, made it clear that they believed that those who went through this process were often more careful about what they did or said afterward. Moreover, they reported that overall the results of the three-year process were positive, although they recognized that they were not always successful or even helpful, for a range of reasons. Indeed, this cultural healing process is associated with various outcomes.

Conclusion

Everyone I interviewed for this study, including the village headman of Nakasang and people expelled to Nakasang under accusations of being *phi pop*, recognized that the cultural healing process designed to cure those accused of harboring ravenous spirits was a form of disciplining. To be sure, it is intended to help them reflect and improve their behavior in Lao society, whether they return to their original villages or remain permanently in the Nakasang cluster. It is not that people do not believe in *phi pop*, but many recognize that most people accused of being *phi pop* are not actually so. As Phone put it, "There used to be more real *phi pop* in the past, but nowadays most are not really *phi pop*. About 95 percent are just accused of being *phi pop*. The other 5 percent are real *phi pop*." Phone also made it clear that Nakasang is proud of the service it provides to the nation and beyond by being willing to take in *phi pop* and help cure them through a particular type of cultural healing designed to reduced community social conflict. It is recognized that this cultural treatment includes social sanctions for moral transgressions.

Indeed, the cultural healing process that occurs in the Nakasang area can be seen in three ways. First, and most obvious, it is explicitly intended to neutralize the influence of ravenous spirits. Second, the process—which requires those accused of being *phi pop* to acknowledge their position as such, attend six consecutive rituals over three years, and live in the Nakasang cluster for three years—does in fact serve to culturally heal in another sense. From a local perspective, the cultural healing process is intended to make use of community power—the social influence of people living in the Nakasang area—to discipline those accused of being *phi pop*, so that they learn how to follow orders, become modest, and follow community social norms. The process is intended to reduce social conflict and give the accused time to reflect on their past behavior and to adjust it so that they get along better with others, either in their original village or in their new abode in the Nakasang cluster. For example, they might think twice before engaging in predatory financial arrangements with other villagers or moderate how they speak with or interact with others. One might ask, why would people who are not actually *phi pop* agree to leave their villages or undergo treatment for something they are not afflicted with? The answer appears to be that they recognize that denial would make things even worse for them, as they could be attacked or killed by other villagers if they do not leave, and a precondition for staying in Nakasang is admitting that one has been afflicted by a *phi pop*. Finally, the idea of cultural healing helps local people position themselves in relation to the state, which desires to follow a Marxist-Leninist understanding of scientific cause and effect.

Thus, it is appropriate to see the *phi pop* phenomenon, at least as it relates to the Nakasang cluster, as a cultural healing process with more than one dimension, a process that is less fixated on physical or bodily health than on the ways in which people behave within ethnic Lao society—although it is certainly true that the two are often variously intertwined.

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