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## RICE FOR THE ANCESTORS

### Food offerings, kinship and merit among the Isan of Northeast Thailand

*Stephen Sparkes*

[T]he notion of an ancestor spirit knocking about the house can cause serious contradictions in a Buddhist environment. (Wijeyewardene 1970: 252)

The aim of this chapter is to investigate aspects of food offerings, in particular offerings of rice, with the intention of shedding light on the complex cosmology and kinship relations among the Isan of Northeast Thailand.<sup>1</sup> As the quotation above suggests, there appears to be a contradiction between beliefs in ancestral spirits and Buddhist doctrine among some of the Tai-speaking peoples of Thailand.<sup>2</sup> After taking a closer look at food offerings and the role of women in their preparation and ritual performances, this apparent contradiction appears to have far less significance. Food offerings are an integral part of both spirit and Buddhist rituals, and I shall argue that there is a similar underlying logic of reciprocity in both despite the differences between the religious terminology of Buddhist merit-making (*tham bun* or *het bun*) and that used for conducting a spirit ritual (*het phithii*).

Food offerings provide an insight into aspects of gender relations and kinship. Because women are responsible for the preparation of food, including cooking and arranging food offerings, it is important to understand female perspectives regarding these events. The fact that the Isan have been described as being uxori-local, at least for a period of time after marriage, with the youngest daughter having the responsibility for looking after her parents in old age (Keyes 1975) and as having 'matrilineal tendencies' (Sparkes 1993; 1997) suggests that residence patterns are determined by women to a large extent. Women are what Hale (1979) refers to as the 'fixed points' in the kinship system, and the ancestors (*phii süasaay*,

*phii diawkan, phiiphau phiimae or phiipuu phiinyaa*)<sup>3</sup> are usually reckoned along female lines. Hence there is a cluster of associations between women, food offerings, kinship structures and the ancestors that should be investigated in order to form a better understanding of gender, cosmology and food offerings in Isan society.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. I shall first attempt to give an overview of Isan cosmology presenting both the differences in concepts in Buddhist and spirit rituals and similarities in light of food offerings. In the second part I shall discuss the important role of women in the house by means of examining the significance of food in the domestic sphere, a predominantly female one, and how relations among the living (kinship) and between the living and the dead (ancestors) are maintained. In addition, the use of rice, symbolised as a female goddess, illustrates yet another aspect of how food is intimately related to female identity. In the third part of this chapter, I shall investigate food offerings in the context of Buddhist rituals and making merit for deceased family members.

Fieldwork for this chapter was carried out in the Isan village of Na Din Dam ('Black Earth Rice Fields') in the province of Loei, Northeast Thailand.<sup>4</sup> The Isan of Loei have many cultural and linguistic affinities with the Lao on the other side of the Mekong River whence they originally came. Loei was until quite recently relatively isolated from both the rest of Northeast Thailand and from Bangkok, and elderly informants explained that less than fifty years ago, in order to reach the capital, villagers had first to take a boat down the Mekong to Nong Khai, a terminus for long-distance buses and, later, trains. It was not until the 1970s, when Loei was properly linked to the rest of Thailand via a road network, that the cultivation of cash crops began on a large scale and the general integration into the rapidly growing Thai economy commenced.

Despite the influence of the Thai Sangha or monkhood, put in place for the most part during the reign of Chulalongkorn in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the Thai education system, introduced in the 1930s, Loei has retained its own particular dialect of Lao and many cultural traits that are not only different from central Thai traditions but also vary from those of the rest of Northeast Thailand.<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in the following exploration of rituals that combine notions of kinship and food offerings.

## *Overview of Isan Cosmology*

Tambiah's ethnography on the Isan of the neighbouring province of Udorn, entitled *Buddhism and Spirit Cults of North-east Thailand* (1970), provides a general overview of Isan cosmology. He speaks of two collective representations within a single field

(1970: 337) and argues for syncretism as a useful way of understanding the workings of Buddhism, Hindu influence and spirit beliefs. In this structuralist approach, Tambiah describes the cosmology as a 'durable, if not timeless, mutual accommodation between Buddhism and the spirit cults' (ibid: 377) which includes opposition, complementarity, linkage and hierarchy. Other scholars working on Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, such as Keyes (1977) and Kirsch (1977), also claim that there is a single religious system with tensions and distinctive symbolic opposites.

Briefly, these aspects consist of the following: the dominant discourse of Theravada Buddhism, with its order of monks, written texts, the underlying theory of *karma* and merit-making activities; Hindu ritual practice derived from Khmer culture mostly in the form of royal ritual performances and medical treatises; and the original Tai beliefs (oral traditions) in nature spirits, ancestral spirits and a whole pantheon of gods and spirits that influence the cosmos. Buddhism is often contrasted with the other two aspects, in what Leach calls a distinction between 'philosophical' and 'practical' religion (1968) since Buddhism tends to be concerned, at least in doctrinal form, with reincarnation, and Hindu and animist elements, what I label as the 'spirit religion', are concerned with well-being in this world. Villagers, however, verbalise these differences by distinguishing between 'religions' (written texts) using the word, *sasanaa* as in *sasanaa phut* (Buddhist religion) and *sasanaa phaam* (Brahmin religion), in contrast to local oral traditions and beliefs in spirits (*paphenii isaan* and *süa phii*). In reality the distinction is blurred and depends very much on context and the motivations of participants as well as ritual procedures.

I shall argue in this chapter that although the structuralist approach sheds light on some of the complex elements in Isan and Thai cosmology, it focuses too much on differences between the many strains of religious belief and runs the risk of becoming an intellectual game for anthropologists and other social scientists in designing a systematic whole with numerous contradictions. A somewhat different approach to such complexities has focused not only on what is called different 'strands' but on the moving between different 'interpretative paradigms' to borrow expressions that Barth refers to in the complex array of beliefs on Bali (1993: 4). Beatty, analysing Javanese religion, uses a similar approach to Barth and speaks of 'contested ideas' in the form of debates, of the 'modalities of expression: the said and the unsaid, ambiguity, suppression and irony, unequal discourse' (1999: 5–6). Both scholars concentrate on thought in action and the way that local people express these contradictions in context.

What emerge as central in this approach are similarities rather than differences since villagers are more interested in creating continuity and harmony within an



**Photo 10.1** Monks receiving food offerings as part of a mortuary ritual. (Stephen Sparkes)

overarching set of values and beliefs than emphasising contradiction and tensions that could actually undermine these beliefs. This is not to say that villagers are not aware of differences but that they are often more focused on specific contexts and what is the suitable practice or ritual for addressing a particular problem. What constitute ritual events are a number of common features, regardless of whether one is engaged in a Buddhist ordination ritual, seeking the protection of forest spirits or making merit for a deceased relative.

These common elements that villagers described whenever asked about the performance of any ritual consisted of the following: Pali chanting, holy white thread (*saay sin*), candles, flowers or leaves, betel and home-grown tobacco (*yaa sup boolan*) and rice offerings. These elements were present in both Buddhist and spirit religion rituals. Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, was used both by monks at holy day rituals and by various ritual specialists to invoke a range of spirits, *khwan* or life-essences and ancestors. The holy thread was used to demarcate the ritual space around the offerings and participants, encircling the *baasii suukhwan* cone in *rites de passage* and transferring merit generated by monks through chanting to objects or people. Auspicious numbers of flowers and candles were presented on trays in front of Buddhist altars and when seeking favours from spirits. Food offerings were presented to the *khwan* when seeking to

call it back into living bodies but were also used to earn merit by placing rice and sweets in the bowls of monks. Food offerings are particularly important since they establish a continually renewable link between the spirit world and the world of the living. It should also be noted that these offerings are always prepared by women and symbolise the role women have in the kinship group and in maintaining a series of relationships with the monks in the temple, among kin and with the ancestors, envisaged as either spirits inhabiting the compound or souls awaiting reincarnation at the temple.

What emerges in relation to the investigation of food offerings is a notion of reciprocity. Key terms here are *lieng* and *duulé*, which can both be translated as 'caring for' or 'looking after', on the one hand, and *naptheu*, which be glossed as 'paying respect' or 'acknowledging fear', on the other. Terms in the first set refer to how humans and spirits actively take care of each other, be it a mother nurturing or looking after her children (*duulé luuk*) or the living feeding ancestral spirits (*lieng phii*); they are directly connected with feeding or offering food, an integral part of female identity. *Naptheu* is a more general term referring to respect for elders or superiors, be they living (such as grandparents, a husband or monks) or ancestors; and refers to part of the hierarchical arrangement of relationships based on age, gender and ritual-religious status. The notion of the transfer of 'power' or 'potency' (*saksit*) can also be applied in the sense that the offering of food 'transfers' merit or protection to those who carry out the act in ritual contexts. To have *saksit* implies that one receives offerings and in return benefits from protective power, similar to Bloch's notion of 'blessings' resulting in 'protection' from the ancestors among the Merina of Madagascar (Bloch 1982,<sup>6</sup> also see Telle on the Sasak in this volume). Women, having less merit than men and less social status, require more protection.

The notion of the acquisition of power and protection through offerings of food, which underlies the practices of both Buddhism and spirit religion, is a useful starting point for investigating the complex cosmology of the Isan. Tannenbaum (1995: 11) claims that power and protection imply each other among the Shan, another Tai-speaking group of Southeast Asia. This can be argued for the Isan of Northeast Thailand, and I shall explore this in the remaining sections specifically in relation to concepts of gender.

### *The House and the Rice Barn as Female Symbols*

As mentioned above, the majority of scholars have described the Northern Thai and the Lao, including the Isan of Northeast Thailand, as uxori-local or matrifocal

based on periods of post-marital, uxorilocal residence and the tendency of the youngest daughter to remain with her parents in old age (cf. Keyes 1975; Sparkes 1997: 379–437). There is considerable variation in these patterns but, nevertheless, women appear to act as the focal point in how kinship is organised. The responsibility for presenting the offerings to the ancestors is primarily female except for very large rituals when a male priest is called in.<sup>7</sup> In general, rituals that are carried out in the home involve far greater participation by the female members of the household, that is a grandmother, daughter, her daughters and other female members residing in the same compound area. On many occasions, maternal aunts and even distantly related women would gather together to participate in marriage rituals, restoring the life-essences and propitiating the ancestors. This was possible since most lived in the same village, unlike men who often resided outside the village, that is in the compounds and villages of their wives.

An example of such a ritual that I observed in Na Din Dam was called *phithii lieng phii*, which means ‘ritual for caring for the spirits’. These spirits were ancestors residing in the compound and the house, and female informants claimed that they looked after the living in that particular building or compound. The ritual was performed by a priest who was the eldest child of the old lady residing in the house. Those who participated were the women of that particular house, including her daughter-in-law, together with women from the surrounding compounds who were closely or distantly related to her. A number of offerings (candles, betel quids made with pieces of banana leaves, flowers and balls of sticky rice) were presented by the priest to the ancestral spirits that occupied a shelf attached to the spirit post (*sao phii*) of the house. The old offerings were removed and the new ones were arranged beside a small Buddha statue that shared the same ritual space. The priest then proceeded to chant Pali verses while holding a burning candle over a bucket of water, sanctifying the water by transferring the power of the texts through the fire when the hot wax fell into the water. The women had, in the meantime, changed into cotton wrap-arounds used in bathing and lined up below the veranda. At the end of the ritual the priest poured the sanctified water over their heads while continuing to chant.

I suggest that the house is a female symbol, not only because of the primary responsibilities women have in the domestic sphere for cooking, cleaning and looking after children, but also because of the duties and obligations with regard to the ancestral spirits. Recent work on the concept of the ‘House’ in Southeast Asia (cf. Sparkes and Howell 2003; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995a) shed light on the inter-relation between gender values and cosmology. The house is defined as a focal point of ideas, architecture and people and as a structure that ‘positions’



**Photo 10.2** Woman preparing banana cone offerings for the calling of the rice spirit. (Stephen Sparkes)

notions of gender within a context for analysis. Continuity in Isan society can be understood in terms of location of women, post-marital residence and the maintenance of ties with ancestors. Food offerings, as illustrated in the ritual above, are a concrete manifestation of these relations. Whenever there is contact initiated by the living, there are food offerings, at least rice but, on other occasions, more elaborate meals.

The expression *lieng phii* needs to be examined further to illustrate this point. *Lieng* can be translated in a number of ways: 'to care for', 'to watch over', 'to raise' and 'to guide'. It implies a responsibility for a particular person or spirit and a sense of dependency. The most common manifestation of caring is giving food, that which sustains life, and this is primarily the role of women. Keyes refers to women's role as 'nurturers' (1984) and this forms an important part of female identity. In return for offerings, the spirits provide 'protection' for the women participants and their families.

Cooking is the responsibility of women and except for the slaughtering of animals and preparing dishes of raw meat (*lap dip*) at large festivals, men hardly ever concern themselves with preparing meals, food offerings or alms for the

monks. The kitchen area (*haung khua* or *heun khua*) is separate from the main part of the house, usually opposite the veranda, and slightly lower than the living quarters. The reason given for this is that smoke should not enter the house proper. Food is prepared in the kitchen and then carried to the veranda where it is consumed. The washing of utensils is also done in the kitchen. In modern, two-storey houses the kitchen is sometimes located on the ground floor together with storage areas, under the sleeping quarters and veranda.

The word for kitchen, *haung khua*, is related to the word for family (*kaup khua*). *Kaup khua* literally means 'covered by the kitchen' and implies that commensal relations determine the composition of the family. This places women in a central role in the family since it is their cooking and providing food to the various members that defines the family unit rather than the more static concepts of blood relations. Analysis of households among the Isan requires a flexible conceptual model and examining the kitchen and the provision of food seems a suitable approach. Women are not only fixed points in the kinship system if one analyses residence patterns and spirit offerings but also in the day-to-day composition of the household. The importance of women in the house, however, is undermined somewhat by other factors, including gender hierarchy.

The organisation of space reflects the symbolic organisation of gender values and a general ordering of the cosmos based on the opposition of above (*suung*) and below (*tham*) that is significant among all the Tai-speaking groups. Although the house may be seen as primarily a female symbol, it is organised spatially according to the dominant discourse of Buddhist values based on male superiority (cf. Tannenbaum 1995; 53–64). The Buddha statue now occupies the shelf for the ancestors (one could say that it has usurped their powers over the household) and represents the most sacred point in the house, standing for 'above'. The kitchen, as already mentioned, is 'below' the living quarters and is associated with women. The axis of above and below also relates to the body, with the lower parts of the female body considered 'unclean' due to the association with menstrual blood and its threatening properties to male spiritual powers. Hence, the house reflects a number of gender associations in relation to space, the female 'part' of the house or at least that part that is most associated with women being classified as subordinate, reflecting the overall subordinate position that women have in the male-dominant Buddhist discourse. Despite the importance of food in all sorts of offerings, the site for the preparation of food is accorded less value than other parts of the house.

Yet another illustration of the relation between food and women in terms of beliefs is the spirit of the rice. This spirit is known by several names, revealing the complexity of Isan cosmology: these include *khwan khao* (the life-essence of

rice) or *mae kusook/mae phosop* (often translated as 'Mother Rice'). The former name shares many traits with names of the other life-essences that inhabit people, animals and other animate objects. These *khwan* are easily frightened and may flee the bodies or objects they usually possess. On such occasions the *khwan* need to be called back with offerings of food and promises of security, health and wealth. These ceremonies are called *baasii suukhwan* or 'welcoming the *khwan*'.<sup>8</sup> I shall describe such a ceremony for the *khwan* of the rice below.

The other name for this spirit, 'Mother Rice', is possibly a combination of traditions that emphasise the ideal nature of motherhood (see Hien on female symbolism of rice in Vietnam in this volume). This mythic figure is associated with self-sacrifice, that of a mother putting the needs of her children before her own. There are a number of legends which explain that a woman was actually transformed into the first rice seeds by sacrificing herself (cf. Trankell 1995: 133). This second character is more mythic than the *khwan khao*, who resides in the rice barn located in the same compound as the house and sometimes inhabits the fields. The *khwan khao* receives small offerings of sticky rice in the paddy fields before planting along with a prayer beseeching help in obtaining a bountiful harvest. There are also certain rules to be observed by villagers as to when to remove or add rice to the rice barn. On holy days (*wan phra*) when villagers attend services at the local monastery it is considered inauspicious to remove rice from the barn.

The rice barn (*heun khao*) is usually a small oblong structure on pillars about a metre and a half above the ground for protection against animals and insects. It is women who fetch the rice from the rice barn for cooking in the kitchen but it is men who carry the large sacks of rice after harvest into the barn for storage or to the rice mill for de-husking. Women are responsible for cleaning, sweeping and presenting small offerings of rice and flowers at the door of the barn on holy days and on special occasions for household rituals. The most important ritual involving the *khwan khao* is the calling of the *khwan khao* after the rice has been placed into the barn. This is done a month or so after the rice has been harvested and placed inside the barns, that is in February. Villagers explained that calling the life-essence of the rice is to thank the spirit for the rice and, as is the case for all such rituals, for 'good luck' (*sook dii*) and 'contentment' (*sabaay jai*), which could be understood as reinforcing order in the cosmos according to established tradition.

This ritual of calling the life-essence of the rice takes place inside or immediately beside the rice barn. It is one of the few rituals I observed that was conducted by a woman, and I interpret this as further evidence of the intimate relationship between women and rice. Not all such rituals were performed by women: 'Brahmin priests' (*mau*) or a male elder in the compound also conducted them. Whenever

I observed a man conducting the ritual, he sat either on a raised bed beside the barn or at the entrance, looking into the barn. When my neighbour, an elderly woman in her late sixties, conducted the ritual, she sat inside the rice barn. There is a possible analogy with the temple, which women cannot enter when Buddhist ceremonies are being conducted. Here the opposite appears to be the case, with women performing ceremonies inside the barn and men excluded. Villagers neither confirmed nor denied this association, saying that this arrangement suited them best and generated contentment (*sabaay jai*).

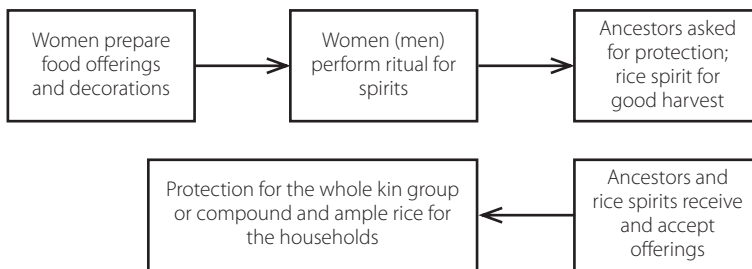
The actual ritual is similar in many respects to other callings of the life-essence for persons. A *baasii* cone was made of interwoven pieces of banana leaves and decorated with flowers. Compared to other rituals I have seen the cone was smaller and less elaborately decorated. The usual offerings of sticky rice, a choice of cooked food including meat dishes, salt, chillies and fruit that the family will consume after the ritual is complete are placed before the cone together with a clean and pressed blouse and traditional Isan skirt (*phaa siin*), a small comb and a mirror. The idea behind these offerings is to entice the *khwan* to enter the rice barn and remain in the compound to watch over that family and ensure a continued



**Photo 10.3** Elderly woman calling the spirit of the rice in a rice barn. (Stephen Sparkes)

supply of rice in exchange for respect, symbolised by the fine food and clothes of welcome. The rice spirit is not a vengeful entity and her benevolent intervention can be obtained through such rituals. The inducement consists of a verbal invitation, praising the spirit, boasting about the fine food and gifts offered and about the good moral standing of the potential host family. In most cases only the ritual expert was present in or beside the rice barn, although other family members, especially the women of the compound, prepared the offerings and partook in the meal afterwards.

Despite the fact that the rice spirit is not an ancestor there are many parallels between the relationship between the residents of a particular compound and the spirits that inhabit it. In addition to these spirits there are male spirits that 'own' the land (*jao heun*), village spirits (*jao baan*) and territorial spirits (*phii lüang*) which all crave offerings. Female spirits of rice, the earth and rivers tend to be benevolent and are often given the title of 'mother' in contrast to the sometimes aggressive male spirits which punish and require tribute on a regular basis (Sparkes 1995). The ancestors are somewhere in between, being largely protective and benevolent but at times causing trouble if they are disobeyed or ignored. What is clear is the underlying principle of reciprocity and the importance of food, and hence women, in establishing and maintaining relations with the spirits. The role of women in performing these rituals is most prominent in the examples chosen above. This is illustrated in the figure below:



**Figure 10.1** Reciprocal relationship between villagers and spirits

It is interesting to note that women serve the needs of the whole kin group or household since their families also benefit from their actions. Women's key role in preparing the offerings, participation in and even conducting these rituals is not rated as having an equal value or generating an equal status to those rituals and ceremonies conducted by monks and other male specialists. This imbalance in gender values reflects a general hierarchical relationship between the dominant

discourse of Buddhism and the spirit beliefs such as giving offerings to ancestors. The subordinate position of women is thus reflected in the subordinate function of the spirits in the overall cosmology, and these are mutually reinforcing. Women, however, play an equally important role in the preparation of Buddhist rituals and participate to a greater degree in merit-making than men. To understand this phenomenon one needs to explore the importance of food as a means of establishing relations within the context of the Buddhist monastery and in relation to the ideology of merit-making for deceased family members.

### *Rice for Merit Making*

As in spirit rituals, rice is also important in a number of Buddhist ceremonies and is related to the central concept of making merit (*tham bun* or *het bun*) in Theravada Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia. This is manifested in different forms such as giving rice to the monks on their daily early morning rounds of the village (*tak baat*) or rice offerings to the ancestors in order to hasten a new incarnation, that is to earn more merit for them and tip the balance in their favour. Through the act of accepting food from the laity, monks transfer merit to the person who is giving rice or to another who has been indicated beforehand.

It is noteworthy that this notion of transferring merit differs to a large extent from doctrinal notions of the theory of *karma* that underlie the ideas of merit (*bun*) and demerit (*baap*). Strict interpretations of Buddhist notions of *karma* state that one's circumstances are determined by previous incarnations, hence accounting for the differences between people based on social status, wealth, gender and appearance. One's actions in a particular existence will further influence future incarnations. The ultimate goal is the cessation of this pattern of rebirth and the attainment of Nirvana, following the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. Spiro (1970), in his analysis of Burmese Buddhism, labels this orthodox belief as the Nibbanic form of religious practice, a kind of ideal adhered to by highly educated monks in monastic centres. As Spiro and other scholars (cf. Leach 1968) have pointed out, the concept of *karma* and the goal of overcoming attachment to material existence and desire provides an explanation for suffering and overcoming suffering on an 'esoteric level' but does not deal with everyday problems villagers encounter and does not provide them with the means of influencing the world around them. The notion of *karma* is thus contextualised at the village level to serve the ends of the villagers themselves.

Various scholars have written about this contextualisation of doctrine. Hanks (1962) explains that this 'ideology of merit' not only explains differences but

allows for manipulation. Merit and demerit become similar to a system of credits and debits that can be altered by actions in the present existence and can be transferred to others. One can thus eliminate the possible future effects of negative actions through meritorious behaviour such as donations to a temple, and one is able to influence future incarnations by making merit. The goal, however, is not so much Nirvana and the cessation of all desire but rather a rebirth in better material conditions, with a higher social status, and, for women, rebirth as a man. Villagers interpret Buddhist doctrine in terms of the material world and the ability to change events and influence the cosmos.

The most common form of influencing the balance of merit and demerit is making food offerings to the monks on a daily basis. This is primarily the task of female village members who, as mentioned above, are responsible for cooking and the preparation and presentation of food offerings for the ancestral spirits. The role of women has been described as 'nurturers' by Keyes (1984) since they nurture both their own families and kin and ordained monks, novices and nuns in the local monastery. In this way, one could argue that the feminine ideal of providing food, of caring for others (*lieng*) incorporates a number of diverse ideologies, including fulfilling kinship requirements, establishing contact with the spirits and maintaining the sanctity of the monkhood.

This latter role requires some further explanation since the monks represent an ideal existence removed from the mundane and material concerns of daily life and especially the attachment to sexual desire and the presence of women in their midst. Many of the rules of the monkhood concern avoiding contact with women and seeking not to be aroused by their presence. This is a serious challenge for most young men who are ordained but becomes less of a worry for elder monks. The reason that this is a problem is that monks have daily contact with women of the village since women are the ones that provide them with food. A survey of average daily morning offerings from households in the village of Na Din Dam over the period of one year is presented in the table below.

**Table 10.1** Morning food offerings to monks.

Averages	Children	Adults	Elderly
Males (rains retreat)	1.5	3.5	4.7
Males (rest of the year)	0.7	0.5	1.7
Females (rains retreat)	4.5	12	12.5
Females (rest of the year)	3.8	5.9	5.9

Table 10.1 indicates that village women give food offerings to monks considerably more often than men and that this happens from childhood through to old age with daughters carrying out the responsibility for their mothers on behalf of their families. This is noticeable during the rains retreat (*phansaa*)<sup>9</sup> and during the rest of the year. One reason for this is that women prepare the food and consider that they should acquire the merit for their efforts in the kitchen. Another reason is that women see the task of providing for the monks as confirmation of their importance in the Buddhist religion and monastic routine. The abbot of Na Din Dam stated that without the women of the village the monkhood could not exist, confirming Keyes' insight of women as 'nurturers' (1984) on many levels, something that affirms their identity.

Yet another explanation forwarded by male and female villagers is that women have less merit than men do and do not have the opportunity of entering the monkhood and acquiring merit in that manner. One could interpret this in orthodox Buddhist terms as an indication of women's lower social status due to their greater involvement in continuing the karmic cycle of suffering, manifested in menstruating, pregnancy, giving birth and breastfeeding. This seems to affirm



**Photo 10.4** Food offerings for recently deceased family members and ancestors. (Stephen Sparkes)

female status in terms of the domestic sphere, providing food and looking after children (Ortner 1974). However, it is important to see these acts of providing food as complex, combining notions of the subordinate position of women according to the dominant Buddhist discourse and a strategy for overcoming this by means of establishing a relationship of dependency on women's actions from the point of view of the monks and an affirmation of female identity as nurturers.

Rice offerings for merit bring us back to the theme of the ancestors mentioned in the section above and tie together Buddhist notions of merit and of the fulfilment of kinship obligations. This apparent contradiction, alluded to by Wijeyewardene in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, is no longer present since the villagers' understanding of merit and *karma* has been thoroughly modified in contrast to orthodox Buddhist teaching such that merit may be 'transferred' in order to influence future incarnations and remove sins of the past. The notion of existing as ancestral spirits (Tai spirit concept) is limited in terms of time: they are responsible for watching over the living *until* their souls (Buddhist concept) are reincarnated. This is possible since new ancestors are constantly being created as one generation passes away and others are eventually forgotten.

An example of how merit making and acts to show respect and care for ancestors (*lieng phii*) are combined is the ritual of *khao sak*, usually held in the month of September. On the morning of these occasions, family members gather together to prepare food offerings for the ancestors. Given the matrifocal nature of the Isan, this means assembling kin at the houses of a daughter of the deceased parents. This varies somewhat due to the varied nature of the composition of compounds and the growing tendency for single-house compounds. Even though it is not as common as two generations ago, there are still many examples of several daughters residing in the same compound, often the eldest and the youngest; the former because land is usually available for at least one other house in the compound and the latter since it is common for the youngest to inherit the parental house. Hence, *khao sak*, like other rituals where kinship ties feature prominently, is an opportunity for women to meet and renew kinship ties and obligations: women as 'fixed points' in the kinship system to use Hale's expression (1979).

In the case of the *khao sak* rituals that I have observed, the time women spent together was limited to the morning, in contrast to the more elaborate calling of the life-essence for candidates for the monkhood (*baasii sukhwan naak*) or 2–3 day merit-making celebrations for the deceased held in the family compound (*tham bun uthit* in Thai or *kep khao* in Lao). The *khao sak* ritual is concerned with merit making for deceased family members and is performed by close relations and neighbours after the offerings have been blessed by the monks.

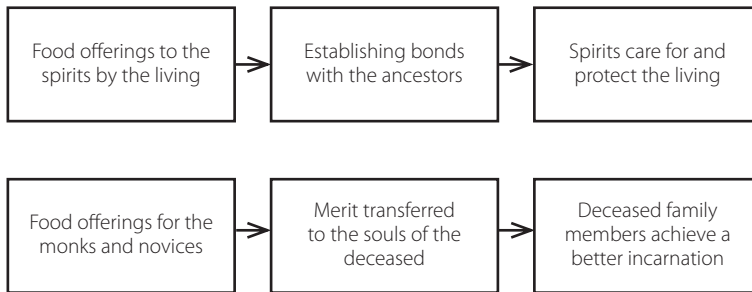
Phinthong (1990: 146) defines this ritual as one that allows the spirits to return to the land of the living for one day, a respite from hell or the shortening of time in the wait for incarnation. It also occurs when the rice is at a critical stage of maturing in the fields, and it is believed that the ancestors may intervene beneficially and ensure a successful harvest. My informants expressed the goal of the ritual in terms of making merit for the dead (*het bun khon taay*), of influencing their karmic journey and the form of their next incarnation. Many stated that because of demerit from previous existences, delays might occur before the soul (*winyaan*) can be reborn. The merit making by the living aims to shorten this interval, and is a typical example of how village notions of Buddhist karma have been strongly influenced by beliefs in ancestral spirits and the relationship between the living and the dead.

A short account of a particular ritual shows how the elements of Buddhism and the spirit religion combine.<sup>10</sup> The following ingredients were prepared and placed in packages of banana leaves: pieces of a dessert made of rice, coconut milk and sugar (*khao tum*), bamboo shoots, corn niblets, slices of yam, cucumber, oranges, custard apples, guava, pomelo, melon, pumpkin, *lamut* (a sweet tropical fruit), tobacco, local cigarettes, betel quids, areca nuts, *catechu* (reddish bark), pieces of dried fish, raw pork, wasp larvae, peanuts, flowers and small candles. Most of the ingredients represent some of the choicest delicacies of the Isan kitchen and are mostly sweet while others such as the raw pork are festive dishes. There are also tobacco and betel that are important elements in social interaction, gifts offered to guests, friends and the ancestors alike.

Villagers proceeded to the monastery for holy day services (*wan phra*) that did not differ significantly from regular rituals except that the hall was very full and villagers had taken along large trays of elaborate dishes. Towards the end of the ritual, monks and novices received these trays instead of the usual offerings of rice. Each family had acquired the name of a particular monk or novice beforehand by drawing lots. The amount of food present was enormous and the raised platform where the monks were seated was covered with trays, plates and containers of rice. The merit generated by these food offerings was transferred to recently deceased family members. Water was then poured from containers into bowls while the monks chanted, transferring the merit generated in the Pali texts into the water. After the ritual was completed inside the hall, villagers took the food packages described above into the monastery grounds and opened them, laying the ingredients out at the base of a large tree. The sanctified water was then poured slowly beside the food to transfer the merit to the deceased whose spirits are believed to inhabit the monastery since the ashes are often located in urns buried in the monastery or in small pagoda-like structures (*chedii*) along the monastery walls. Mother Earth (*mae thoranii*), another benevolent female

spirit, transfers the merit to the souls of the deceased. The terms used are *phii* (a general term for spirits, including ancestral spirits) and *winyaan* (Buddhist soul that is incarnated), and these terms appear to be interchangeable at this point, fusing together spirit religion and Buddhist beliefs.

Reciprocity is the underlying logic in both belief systems and may be illustrated in the following figure:



**Figure 10.2** Reciprocal relationships between the living and dead

The spirits care for and protect the living (*lieng* or *duulé*) as long as they remain in this world and it can take many years before they are incarnated. In the meantime, they look after the interests of the kin group. It is considered very difficult to be reincarnated and merit is required in order for this to happen. However, at some point in time, the souls will acquire a new existence. This can be greatly facilitated by the help of the living carrying out merit-making rituals. Knowing that future generations will perform this ritual on behalf of their parents and grandparents is one motivation for carrying out the ritual: it brings ‘contentment’ (*sabaay jai*) to the living and appears to be a means of dealing with the phenomenon of death. In the spirit religion, reciprocity is direct but not always manifest since ancestors influence and interfere in often unpredictable ways. In Buddhism it is delayed reciprocity over generations and preserves a pattern of ritual obligation to the dead. The role of women in these rituals is important since it is the female line (*faay phuuying*) that is maintained and affirmed. Women also affirm their identity as nurturers by providing the key element for generating protection or merit.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to show the relationship between kinship bonds, the role of women in the preparation and performance of rituals of food offerings

and cosmology. Isan cosmology has traditionally been described in terms of spirit religion practices and Buddhism but a closer look at food offerings reveals a similar underlying logic of reciprocity, of establishing a relationship between the living (primarily women because of matrifocal and uxorilocal tendencies) and ancestral spirits of that kinship group. Showing respect for and fear of the spirits results in positive interventions and ensures the material well being of the kin group.

The domestic sphere is characterised as 'female' based on the division of labour, residence patterns and obligations towards maintaining bonds with the spirits of deceased family members. Rice is the most important food offering, paralleling its importance as the staple food for Isan communities. Women prepare nearly all food whether it is intended for consumption by the family members of a household ('covered by the kitchen' – *haung khua*), as offerings for the spirits or as a means of generating merit for transferring to the souls of the deceased.

Food offerings affirm women's central role in maintaining kinship ties and in upholding the philosophy of 'retreat' from worldly concerns of the monkhood. They both confirm the dominant ideology of Buddhism and at the same time constitute the identity of women as 'nurturers' in relation to the family, spirits and the monkhood.

## *Notes*

1 The term 'Isan' refers to the Lao-speaking inhabitants of Northeast Thailand. Isan is a Pali word meaning 'northeast', that is northeast of the Thai capital. The people of Northeast Thailand refer to themselves as Isan although the term 'Thai-Lao' is also used, combining the notion of citizenship (Thailand) with culture identity (Lao) that is shared with the majority of inhabitants of Laos.

2 The quotation refers to the Northern Thai but the same phenomenon of ancestral spirits is found in varying degrees among all the Tai-speaking people of Southeast Asia.

3 There are various ways of referring to the spirits of deceased family members and the context often determines which expression is the most appropriate. *Phii* is a general word for spirits but may be combined, for example, with such words as *süasaay*, meaning lineage or line of descent, *diawkan*, meaning 'in common', *phau-mae*, meaning 'father-mother' and *puu-nyaa* referring to the father's parents. There is never any confusion between evil or nature spirits and the ancestors although the root word is the same.

4 Fieldwork was carried out for approximately one year in 1991–92) and for about 6 months in 1994–95. I have also visited the village of Na Din Dam for subsequent short visits. The first visit formed the basis for my MPhil thesis (1993). The second extended stay provided

additional data to compare the Isan of Loei with the Shan of Mae Hong Son Province for my doctoral thesis (1997). I have also worked in various parts of Laos between 1995 and 2003 and this has provided additional comparative material.

5 The Isan of Loei province have much in common with the Lao in Saiyaburi and Luang Prabang provinces of Lao PDR, directly across the Mekong River to the north. Linguistically, there is ample evidence to suggest that the Isan in Loei have migrated down the Mekong since the sixteenth century. Migration ceased completely in the 1970s due to the Second Indochina War and insurgency activities in Thailand that closed the border.

6 The Merina of Madagascar have many cultural similarities to groups in Southeast Asia, whence they originally came. Bloch (1982) argues that the blessings from the ancestors rejuvenate the social unit or *deme*. However, the symbolic association of women with death and discontinuity of the patrilineal social unit differs in many ways from the ethnographic material presented here. The mechanism of reciprocity is, nevertheless similar.

7 See S. H. Potter's account (1977) of the role of women in the domestic sphere among the Northern Thai.

8 Other expressions used by villagers were *het khwan* ('to make the *khwan*) and *riak khwan* ('to call the *khwan*). The specialist for these ceremonies is called either *mau phaam* (usually translated as 'Brahmin priest' although his techniques and position do not resemble those of the Brahmins of Hinduism) or specifically *mau khwan* (*khwan* specialist).

9 The rains retreat (*phansaa*) or Buddhist Lent refers to the three-month period from August to early October when many village boys and young men enter monastic life. For most this is the only time they are involved in full-time study of Buddhist texts and morality. There is an increase in support in terms of food offerings and attendance at holy day celebrations at this time throughout the country.

10 This particular *khao sak* ritual took place on 23 September 1999. I also observed this ritual in 1992 and in 1994. The ingredients and the procedures are similar in all cases as are the explanations given by the ritual specialists and participants. This ritual is also referred to as *khao salak*, the original Lao name.