THE RAVENOUS SPIRIT (*Php Pob*) BELIEF TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY THAILAND: PLURAL PRACTICES VERSUS MONOLITHIC REPRESENTATIONS

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Kanya Wattanagun

THE RAVENOUS SPIRIT (Phii Pob) BELIEF TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY THAILAND: PLURALISTIC PRACTICES VERSUS MONOLITHIC REPRESENTATIONS

The ravenous spirit belief tradition in northeast Thailand is practiced variably in different belief communities. However, Thai academia and mass media exclusively draw on the abusive aspects of this belief tradition. This negative and monolithic representation reinforces the preconceived idea of the “superstitious” folk whose false logic generates barbaric social practices that need to be eliminated. Also, it reinforces a simplistic but dominant understanding among non-believers that ravenous spirit beliefs are practiced in the same way everywhere and generate abusive social practices in all contexts. In response to this problem, this dissertation illustrates three main points: (1) The ravenous spirit belief tradition is practiced variably in different social contexts. (2) The dominant discourses about the ravenous spirit belief tradition produced by Thai academia and mass media are problematic because they neglect the benign variants of the tradition. (3) Ravenous spirit beliefs, rather than reflecting a false logic, are believers' logical attempts to make sense of, and devise sensible reactions to, baffling and troublesome experiences.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Problem

On October 14 of 2014, *Khao Sod*, a Thai national newspaper, reported on a strange incident that terrified the people of Ban Chaimongkol village in Sakon Nakhon province in the northeast of Thailand. Since the beginning of October, almost ten people had passed away in a mysterious fashion. They suffered from a minor illness, went to a physician, properly took the prescribed medicines, but passed away within a few days after the illness started. The most baffling case belonged to Mrs. Latt, a healthy woman in her mid sixties. Before her passing, the older woman complained of her sore throat. She immediately consulted a physician who assured her that nothing was serious and the pain would go away after a few days of medication. Mrs. Latt, however, had a convulsion and passed away shortly after she returned home. Her family sought help from a medium who claimed that Mrs. Latt was devoured from within by ravenous spirits or *phii pob* – a kind of malevolent, amorphous spirits that now roam about Ban Chaimongkol village because their host resides in the community. The medium revealed the name of the said host, whose ravenous spirits, he proclaimed, were responsible for the death epidemic that befell the community. The report ends with a description of villagers' reaction to the medium’s speculation – they pressured the headman and the district representative to banish the alleged host from the community.

For the Thai public, it seems to be a taken for granted, self-evident reality that the belief in ravenous spirits or *phii pob* held by several communities in the northeast of Thailand is the basis for atrocious ritualistic and social practices. The morning news program – *rueng lao chao nee* –, broadcast nationwide via channel three Thailand on August 13, 2015, covered a case of
filicide in which a woman stabbed her thirteen-year-old daughter to death since she believed that the girl hosted a ravenous spirit. Brutality associated with ravenous spirit beliefs in popular imagination is also patent in the domain of entertainment media. A horror comedy film – pob na pluak (The termite-faced ravenous spirit) that was on screen in Thai cinemas in June 2014 – begins its scary but funny narrative about a tenacious but ugly ravenous spirit with a homicide. In this brutal scene, an old woman was hanged by a group of frantic and bloodthirsty people who grant that she hosts a ravenous spirit.

Generally speaking, such representations as these reflect public opinion about ravenous spirit beliefs and the people who hold them. As we can see, they tend to paint a picture of an unmodern and inhumane belief system in which believers treat their own community members who have fallen victim to ravenous spirits with great brutality. But how much do these depictions tell us about the belief tradition in its real, diverse contexts of practice? Indeed, taken one step further, how is it possible to capture the diverse contexts of practice of any belief tradition?

Scholars in the field of cultural science have inquired into the literary aspects of ethnography. This line of inquiry is critical of descriptions of cultures, acutely aware of the mediating process between these written accounts and the reality they depict. James Clifford, for example, contends that ethnography is not devoid of the literary and rhetorical aspects assumed to belong exclusively to literature. “The literary and rhetorical dimensions of ethnography” (Clifford 1986:4), when duly considered, cast light on the aspects of invention and mediation inherent to written descriptions of culture. Selection and exclusion are some among several procedures characterizing these two aspects. As it is impossible to capture the described culture in its entirety, decisions have to be made about elements and phenomena considered crucial for the understanding of the described culture. These decisions, inevitably, entail the exclusion of
“incongruent voices” (Clifford 1986:6). Selection and exclusion, along with several other literary and rhetorical undertakings involved in writing ethnography, evince that the outcome of this scholarly task is a partial and mediated representation of the depicted object, and that we cannot take this representation at face value.

The outlook that discerns literary and rhetorical dimensions of ethnography illuminates the problematic way in which ravenous spirit beliefs are represented and explained by Thai mass media and academia. The Thai public in general consider the tradition a local spirit cult that perpetuates atrocious ritualistic and social practices. Adherents of the tradition, when confronted with epidemic of deaths and illnesses whose exact cause is unidentified, attribute this calamity to ravenous spirits and the people believed to host these spirits. The tradition, associating misfortunes with malicious spirits and the individuals within whom the spirit resides, is assumed by non-believers to invariably instigate inhumane treatments, such as physical abuse and banishment, of the alleged hosts and the people possessed by ravenous spirits. Representations of this tradition by Thai mass media are literary in the sense that they exclusively draw on those aspects of the tradition congruent with a preconceived image of supernatural beliefs and their holders. If literary texts differ from scientific monographs in that they select motives to fit a premeditated plot, the stories of ravenous spirit beliefs circulating in Thai mass media are highly literary. Films, documentaries, and newsreels significantly emphasize the abusive aspects of the tradition. Even though ravenous spirit beliefs are practiced in diverse ways in different belief communities, and not all of them feature abusive ritualistic and social practices, this variability is downplayed by the media in favor of sensational and violent cases. It can be said that selection and exclusion are implemented most vigorously in representations of the ravenous spirit belief tradition. The negative, oppressive aspects are highlighted while the benign, inoffensive practices
of these beliefs are neglected and omitted.

Monolithic representations that exclude the non-abusive aspects of the tradition perpetuate academic discourses whose primary concern seems to be the rationalizing of ravenous spirit beliefs. Adopting a rationalist outlook on the problem, Thai academia asks: Why does such a primitive tradition that generates inhumane ritualistic and social practices persist in modern Thailand? Due to this biased initial question, radical practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are deemed crucial for the understanding of the tradition while its benign variants are considered banal and insignificant. Beginning with the view that supernatural beliefs are anomalous and out of place in the midst of modernity, Thai academia pursues its major concern – rationalizing the persistence of the tradition and the brutal practices it breeds. Within this analytical framework, the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are left out since they are incongruent with the image of a barbaric, morbid folk tradition whose survival in modern society demands explanation.

Within this academic tradition, rationalist discourses construe ravenous spirit beliefs in light of their abusive practices. These discourses are valid when the oppressive aspects of the tradition are taken into account. However, as the focus shifts to the inoffensive elements of the practice, rationalist discourses become inadequate and inapplicable. It is, in my view, feasible to contend that ravenous spirit beliefs are a means to eliminate deviant figures as long as the claim is grounded on specific cases in which accusation and banishment were wrought upon individuals who transgressed social norm. This sociological speculation, however, is usually applied sweepingly to ravenous spirit belief communities in general in response to a popular assumption that the tradition always leads to accusation and violence against individuals identified as the hosts of these loathsome spirits. Academic discourses about ravenous spirit
beliefs in Thailand suffer from a serious shortcoming – they take the radical and atrocious practices of the tradition as its defining characteristics, then formulate their descriptions of the tradition accordingly. They neglect the benign, non-violent variants of ravenous spirit beliefs, which would warrant different interpretations were they properly considered.

Monolithic representations and rationalist discourses about ravenous spirit beliefs reinforce stereotypes of the people who hold supernatural beliefs. These stereotypes filter out aspects of the tradition that challenge their legitimacy. As Patrick B. Mullen notes in his study of folk beliefs in American scholarship, the stereotype of people who hold supernatural beliefs affects the ways scholars construe their belief traditions (2000). This observation is applicable to ravenous spirit beliefs. Exposed to the image of cruel and superstitious ravenous spirit believers constantly reiterated by media and academia, the Thai public registers the oppressive sides of the tradition while its benign variants are excluded from their view. This filter results in a simplistic but generally held notion that the tradition is intrinsically brutal and barbarous, upheld by dim-witted, frantic folk who fail to redress critical situations by rational approaches. This stereotype, inculcated by monolithic representations and rationalist discourses, perpetuates a representational and discursive convention that pathologizes and condemns ravenous spirit beliefs. In turn, this convention upholds and reiterates the stereotype to the point that other conceptions of the tradition and its adherents are unthinkable.

This dissertation grapples with the representational and discursive convention that dictates the ways in which non-believers construe ravenous spirit beliefs. The preoccupation of Thai mass media and academia with the abusive practices of the tradition breeds a simplistic but dominant understanding among non-believers that ravenous spirit beliefs are practiced in brutal
ways by all belief communities.\footnote{A survey I conducted in August 2015 of 120 college students validates this claim. It reveals that the mass media, to a significant extent, inculcates on their audiences disbelief and negative conception of the tradition. The findings of the survey are presented in Appendix A} To counter this fallacy and the representational-discursive tradition that generates it, three main points will be elucidated in this study. First, different belief communities observe the tradition in variable ways. Inhumane ritualistic procedures and abusive social practices constitute some variants among the numerous and diverse ways of observing the tradition. They are not intrinsic to it. Second, monolithic representations and rationalist discourses prevalent in Thai mass media and academia are seriously flawed since they neglect the multifaceted, variable nature of the tradition. Third, ravenous spirit beliefs are not false reasoning. They, instead, result from believers' logical attempts to make sense of baffling phenomena whose incongruity with the scientific-rationalist paradigm is too blatant to be assimilated into this conventional outlook on reality.

2. Analytical Perspective

Believers grant that ravenous spirits are amorphous, malevolent agents born from unethical or immoderate use of magical power. Mystical power in the northeastern Thai worldview can be harnessed and put to use by those equipped with technical knowledge and skill. Practitioners, however, are required to observe restrictions and taboos when initiated into the occult of magic. Once the taboos are transgressed, mystical power turns into a ravenous spirit that takes the trespasser as its host. Ravenous spirits are demonic apparitions of their hosts. They can possess and reside within other living beings then devour them from inside. When sudden deaths that elude modern medicine befall a belief community, these deaths are attributed to the voracious appetite of ravenous spirits.

These tenets about the origin of ravenous spirits and the harm they inflict on humans
induce diverse strategies to ward off their evil influence. In some cases, believers resort to radical means. Individuals accused of hosting ravenous spirits are banished from their communities by means of collective violence. The victims of ravenous spirit afflictions, in a similar fashion, are forced to attend exorcising rites in which physical and mental abuses are inflicted upon them to expel the spirit. Several belief communities, however, denounce these extreme practices. Ravenous spirit rituals performed by them are void of brutal procedures. The alleged hosts are treated benignly and re-assimilated into the community after a purification rite. In several cases, accusations are not made at all. The variable manifestations of ravenous spirit beliefs reveal that this tradition is not intrinsically vicious and barbaric, just like its adherents who are not necessarily cruel and merciless in all cases. Also, the variations evince that any postulates about the tradition and its adherents exclusively based on abusive practices are not universally applicable. In light of this rationale, this dissertation aims at elucidating the pluralistic nature of the ravenous spirit belief tradition. The benign practices of these beliefs are explored and reported to counter the negative depictions of the tradition prevalent in media and academic research.

Interest in variants, especially those of folktales, articulates the folkloristic outlook on the nature of expressive culture, which bears both universal and distinctive traits. Folklorists in the early twentieth century went out into the field, collected a large quantity of raw data, and conducted analyses that acknowledge both universal patterns and variation of folklore forms. The Historic-Geographic method and the Aarne-Thompson tale type index are the fruits of this aspiration. This dissertation is also a study of variants. However, it focuses more on diversity than on universal traits of ravenous spirit beliefs. Pluralistic forms of the tradition reify the claim that any single explanatory scheme is inadequate to make sense of the tradition in its entirety.

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The ravenous spirit belief tradition is anything but a rigid structure comprised of the same set of conjectures generating the same ritualistic and social practices in all cases. Therefore, there cannot be one final description of what the tradition is in all contexts, nor can we generalize about the people who hold these beliefs.

3. Methodology

Data collection is intended to be as extensive as possible in order to delineate the diversity of ritualistic and social practices pertaining to ravenous spirit beliefs. The following sub-sections explain fieldwork methodology employed for this dissertation and how it configures ethnographic data.

3.1 Selecting fieldwork sites

Though ravenous spirit beliefs are also practiced in northern and some parts of central Thailand, this tradition has been received by the Thai public as emblematic of northeastern Thai cultural identity. Belief communities in northeastern Thailand become objects of public scrutiny led by mass media and academia while those in other regions remain largely unrecognized. One reason for this unequal distribution of attention is that the practice of the tradition in the northeast is relatively more common than in other regions. Another reason relates to the stereotype of the northeasterners in national imagination. They are viewed as simple-minded, uneducated, and poverty-stricken.² This preconceived image perpetuates the assumption that the barbaric and inhumane ravenous spirit belief tradition are exclusively practiced among the northeasterners. It was inevitable, therefore, that I conducted fieldwork in this part of Thailand in order to explore

² In his study of modern northeastern Thai literature, Martin B Platt summarizes the stereotypes held by the central Thais in general of people in the three regions of Thailand: “[...] the north is inhabited by attractive, light-skinned people who speak slowly and behave graciously; southerners are dark-skinned, hot-tempered, and speak extremely quickly; northeasterners, who are simple, hardworking, and not too bright, speak a language something like Lao” (2013: x).
the discrepancy between representations and practices of the tradition in real contexts. Working in the field yields an invaluable insight – despite contiguity, two belief communities in the same district of the same province observe the tradition in different manners. Their distinct applications of ravenous spirit beliefs resist the generalization made by mass media and academia.

In the selection of belief communities, I primarily considered their accessibility. Believers are not oblivious to the negative stereotypes they and their belief traditions are susceptible to. This awareness results in extra caution taken by believers when interacting with outsiders who, for some reasons, attempt to probe into the practices of their beliefs. In the course of my fieldwork in northeastern Thailand, I discovered that not every belief community readily receives fieldworkers who come to their village to inquire people about ravenous spirits. Believers take necessary measures to assure that these curious visitors do not approach their communities out of some indecent ulterior motives. The principal of a secondary school in a belief community in Srisaket, for instance, thoroughly questioned me about my identity and the topic of my dissertation. Satisfied with my answers, she generously explained that the community's morale has suffered due to a documentary that condemns rather than reports villagers' practices of ravenous spirit beliefs. The documentary was made by a group of researchers who conducted fieldwork in the village before me. Due to this unpleasant past experience, she needed to make sure that I would inflict no harm on the community and that it was safe for the villagers to cooperate with me for my study. Several Buddhist monks and ravenous spirit exorcists requested to see my national and university identifications. They needed proof that I was not a journalist or an agent sent by a certain bureau to convict them of swindling.  

3 It is not unusual for practitioners of supernatural cults to be arrested for swindling in Thailand. In September of 2014, for example, a news article reported the arrest of a female medium who was
Given this circumstance, it was necessary to approach each belief community through a liaison. The liaison assured potential informants of my harmless intent and communicated my request to conduct fieldwork in the community. I selected fieldwork sites on the basis of this practical concern – the possibility of establishing rapport with liaisons through whom I gained the entry into belief communities. In most cases, I came to know the liaisons through my family members, relatives, friends, students, and the acquaintances of these groups of people. There were a few times, however, that I went straight to community leaders, informed them of my research project, and was introduced to informants through them. This manner of selecting fieldwork sites configures this study in two ways. First, the belief communities that lay beyond the reach of my social network are excluded. Second, the data collected from villages in Ubon Ratchathani – my hometown and the base of my social network – exists in a larger proportion than the data from other northeastern provinces. This, however, does not compromise the variety of collected data because the whole fieldwork covers about one third of the entire northeastern region (that is, eight out of twenty provinces, which are Ubon Ratchathani, Buriram, Srisaket, Surin, Udornthani, Sakon Nakorn, Yasothon and Mukdaharn).  

In all of these areas, the tradition is commonly practiced among the population. Also, some informants who have moved from their native villages to fieldwork sites refer to the practices of ravenous spirit beliefs in their original communities scattered over northeastern Thailand.

The majority of my fieldwork sites share some common features characterizing rural

courted of swindling. She earned a decent sum of money from selling fake gems that, she claimed, emanate sacred power (Manager, September 30, 2014). Later in October, another article featured a man who claimed to be the medium of Shiva and made several alms rounds (Post Today, October 7, 2014). He was later put in jail. Another arrest took place in November. A witch doctor, performing rituals and concocting medicine for diabetes, cancer, and other grave illnesses, was convicted for running a non-licensed clinic and profiting from sham treatments (Dailynews, November 27, 2014).

4 The location of these provinces is displayed on the map in Appendix B
villages in the northeastern region of the country. In most cases, a village comprises a Buddhist temple, a public school, and a communal health center. Residential areas are divided into hamlets, each of which has its representative who is subordinate to the village headman. Villagers' farm land is located outside the village, yet within reach by a few minutes of driving by bicycle or motorcycle. Most of my informants practice Theravada Buddhism, which they observe together with local spirit and magic cults. Economically, they primarily rely on rice farming, which here yields only one harvest per year. Therefore, many of my informants seek jobs in the nearest urban center outside harvest season. They earn daily wages working on construction crews, as maids, and as handymen. Mrs. Dang, whose story is mentioned in chapter two and three, for example, worked for my uncle at his construction site. I came to know her through him, and through her I managed to interview Mr. Saming – an exorcist and healer at Ban Namuen village.

Despite their common characteristics, my fieldwork sites vary in terms of size and distance from their nearest urban center. Nongtime Noi village, for instance, contains 307 households. It is located 23 miles from the city of Sisaket. Tung Kasem village, situated 7 miles from the city of Ubon Ratchathani, is relatively small compared to Nongtime Noi village. It comprises only 159 households. Ban Na-gnam village is not different from Tung Kasem village in terms of size, since it comprises 160 households. However, located 40 miles from the city of Ubon Ratchathani, it is relatively more remote from urban setting. All of the belief communities that I engaged with could be reached by public buses and private vehicles. I usually drove to fieldwork sites that are within the vicinity of my residence in the city of Ubon Ratchathani, and commuted from the city to these sites. When a commute was inconvenient because of a long

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5 The number of household within each community as indicated here is of 2013 and 2014.
distance, I either stayed with my liaisons or rented a place within or near the community.

3.2 Collecting data

I interviewed any individuals who claimed to have had contact with ravenous spirits, to have witnessed or participated in rituals pertaining to this belief tradition, or to have lived in belief communities while a ravenous spirit crisis – successive cases of inscrutable death and illness – took place. These individuals, who have experienced the tradition in different manners, are united through their consent to share their stories for an academic purpose.

Due to several factors, talking about experiences relating to ravenous spirit beliefs is not easy. Stigmatization associated with this tradition is a prominent factor restraining believers from talking about their experiences. Afraid of being condemned as irrational and superstitious, several informants cautiously asked me about my stance on supernatural beliefs and let down their guard after I stated my non-judgmental outlook on the matter. Another equally important factor is the traumatic component of experiences pertaining to the radical practices of ravenous spirit beliefs. Individuals who have been through violent exorcising rites and the alleged hosts of ravenous spirits who were subject to collective violence, understandably, do not want to talk about these traumatic experiences. And those willing to share their stories do so with difficulty. A female informant whose parents were accused and banished from their native community for hosting ravenous spirits broke into tears while narrating her experience of growing up as a daughter of ravenous spirit hosts. Communal censorship is another factor that demarcates the boundary between discussable topics and unmentionable ones. This censorship is implemented most vigorously in cases where the practice of ravenous spirit beliefs breeds discord in the belief community. Within these circumstances, to talk about the practice of the tradition and the context leading to it is to inflame the conflict that the community tries to overcome.
Communal censorship significantly affects the collected data. To illustrate this point, my fieldwork experience in Ban Na-ngam village – a belief community mentioned in chapter four – is given here. My informants provided detailed accounts of the accusation of Mr. Boonpeng – an elderly man believed to host ravenous spirits. The context leading to his accusation and the strategies employed by villagers to protect the community from Mr. Boonpeng's ravenous spirits are told from their viewpoints, while the accused's perspective is omitted. My intention to interview him was aborted by my liaison and my informants who insisted that I should not open old wounds. Mr. Boonpeng still lives in the community. To ask him about this unpleasant experience could rekindle the forgotten dispute.

Though Mr. Boonpeng’s view of the incident is required for a well-rounded analysis of his accusation, the circumstances render the acquisition of his perspective impossible. I was similarly restrained when doing fieldwork in Ban Nongbualong village. Learning from my informants about a woman who allegedly hosted ravenous spirits and lived in a self-imposed exile for twenty years, I discussed with them the possibility of interviewing her. They were apparently uneasy and talked me out of the plan. The woman was in the process of reintegration into the community, they rightly reasoned, and they were afraid that she would be offended by my inquiry into the matter of ravenous spirits.

In spite of my efforts to cover all sides of the story, there are boundaries and thresholds that I cannot cross. This results in the omission of the viewpoints crucial for the thorough and impartial understanding of the tradition. To remedy this shortcoming, a perspective excluded from one case is sought out in other cases. Because I, out of necessity, left out Mr. Boonpeng's viewpoint, I interviewed another man accused of hosting ravenous spirits by his native community. This informant resettled in a Catholic village where ravenous spirit beliefs and other
local spirit cults are vigorously censured. Leading a satisfactory life in the new community, he was no longer disturbed by the experience and was willing to cooperate with me. Though Mr. Boonpeng's and this informant's accusations are not interchangeable, since they took place in different contexts, they do share some common aspects and a probe into one can illuminate another. At least the perspectives of those who have experienced the abusive sides of ravenous spirit beliefs are not excluded. This inclusion is vital because it guards against the fallacy caused by the reduction of ethnographic data to fit preconceived conjectures.

Aside from communal censorship, power relations between me as a scholar and my informants who are “superstitious folk” in the popular imagination also affects the collected data. The concept of the esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore described by Americo Parades illuminates this point. According to Parades, the esoteric-exoteric factor comes into play when one enacts stereotypes associated with his group while interacting with outsiders who hold these stereotypes. In other words, this factor is “the ingroup's perception of what the outgroup thinks of it” (Parades 1977) and the impact of this perception on the ingroup's behavior toward the outgroup. Seeing me as a scholar who received an advanced education abroad, an ignoramus about local culture who harbors curiosity about ravenous spirit beliefs, and an outsider who grows up and lives outside the belief community, some informants put on their guard as they seemed to identify me with non-believers in general who either dismiss supernatural beliefs or try to explain them in scientific terms. Mr. Tongpoon, a ravenous spirit healer and exorcist mentioned in chapter four, for instance, sidestepped questions concerning his personal beliefs about ravenous spirit afflictions and became more articulate only after I assured him that I do not think the ravenous spirit tradition is groundless. An exorcist in Nachaluay district, Ubon Ratchathani, told me to state the scientific-rationalist explanations of the ravenous spirit crisis.
He then argued against them one by one, vigorously defending his faith in the reality of ravenous spirit afflictions against a skeptic whom he thought I am. The headman of Ban Pa-Ao village in Ubon Ratchathani, assuming that I preferred rationalist speculations on the function of ravenous spirit rituals to an insider's view of the subject, adopted rationalist discourses and talked like non-believers even though his behavior told a different story.

Given the esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore, some accounts given by informants cannot be taken at their face value since they serve other purposes rather than being merely informative. The interview with the headman of Ban Pa-Ao village aptly illustrates this point. He proclaimed that as community leader he has to support and facilitate the communal ritual held in the village almost every year to subdue ravenous spirits and their hosts. For him, the ritual uplifts the community's morale and dissipates villagers' anxiety and fear. To denounce this ritual is equivalent to dismissing villagers' belief which would provoke harsh feeling against him (personal interview, May 24, 2014). The functionalist view of ravenous spirit rituals and the negative implication about villagers are inconsistent with the early part of the interview, in which the informant described several bizarre incidents to convince me that the community's decision to resort to the ravenous spirit belief tradition cannot be labelled as irrational and superstitious. I interpret this inconsistency as the manifestation of the esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore. Rather than expressing disbelief, through his functionalist surmise about the ritual, the informant presents himself as a non-superstitious inhabitant of modern Thailand whose observation of a folk belief tradition is rational and deserves scholarly interest. Needless to say, his enactment of this role was triggered by my presence and his perception of what I want to hear from him.

The factors configuring informants' narratives point to an undesirable but inevitable reality of doing ethnography – collected data cannot be taken as a transparent and objective
reflection of reality since it always entails omission and the researcher's subjective interpretation of what it conveys. Arguments and postulates formulated on the basis of this inadequate data, therefore, cannot be devoid of errors. I would like to draw readers' attention to this margin of error and to the undeniable fact that, despite my effort to be as objective and meticulous as possible, this study is anything but an impartial account that unfailingly captures the reality of ravenous spirit beliefs.

3.3 Fieldwork activities and timeline

Phenomena that trigger ravenous spirit beliefs do not occur in everyday life. Instead, they are out of ordinary and threatening in the eyes of believers. Known as malicious agents that possess other living beings then devour them from within, ravenous spirits are believed to cause death epidemic prior to which its victims show no pathological symptoms. Since the belief tradition is put to use in the face of uncommon incidents that do not frequently occur, observing the practices of the tradition in situ is a matter of pure chance. Due to this limitation, interviewing is my primary fieldwork activity. Observation, however, was conducted whenever possible.

I interviewed informants at their houses or in public places (such as a classroom or an assembly hall within a village temple) in belief communities. It was not uncommon to have more people present than me and an informant in the interview. In some cases, the assembly consisted of me – the interviewer – and a number of informants. In other cases, my family members or friends who accompanied me to fieldwork sites participated in the interview out of necessity. There were several circumstances in which I was not allowed to be alone with informants (such as in the case of Buddhist monks who are prohibited from being alone with the opposite sex). In these cases, a third party had to be present in the interview. There were also times when a whole
session included me, the liaison, and the informant. I note here that the number of people present in the interview has an impact on the data I obtained from informants. However, a third party was present only when the circumstance demanded and when informants granted their consent.

Even though I managed to observe some ravenous spirit rituals in context, there is still a need to supplement these observations, which are meagre in number in comparison to interviews. Video clips, documentaries, and newsreels that record the performances of these rituals are helpful in this respect. Reference to these materials, however, entails three drawbacks. First, the recorded rituals are presented outside their contexts. A brief explanation of why these rituals are held may be given, but other details are usually left out. Second, these secondary sources are fraught with interpretations made by their producers. The rendition of ravenous spirit rituals in these sources is subjective due to judgmental voiceover and editorial processes. Third, they are highly homogenous and oriented toward the grotesque and abusive variants of ravenous spirit rituals. Though exploring these mediated substitutes cannot be the same as observing the real rituals in situ where their diversity and complexity remain intact, these substitutes provide the initial point of contact through which I acquired the rough idea about the typical procedures of ravenous spirit rituals.

The entire fieldwork consisted of four phases. Each phase lasted from May to August of 2012-2015. This manner of dividing up fieldwork sessions served a practical purpose: May to August is the summer break when I was free from educational obligations and able to have an extensive stay in Thailand. In the first fieldwork phase in 2012, I explored literature and mass media productions that feature ravenous spirit beliefs. I also interviewed believers about tenets and convictions that constitute this belief tradition. In the second phase, taking place in 2013, I primarily examined the practices of ravenous spirit beliefs in real contexts. I observed the
discrepancy between representations and ethnographic data, then developed the proposal and the
structure of this dissertation based on this finding. In 2014, I focused on informants' personal
experiences – specifically, on empirical incidents that result in informants' adoption of ravenous
spirit beliefs. More information about the content and the practices of the tradition, however, also
came forth as informants narrated their stories. The last fieldwork phase in 2015 was a
following-up session in which I sought clarification of obscure points and questions from earlier
phases.

4. The structure of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Aside from the introduction and the conclusion, the
remaining four chapters examine ravenous spirit beliefs in different respects. All of them are
oriented toward the ultimate goal of this research – to show that popular assumptions about and
academic analyses of this tradition and its adherents are problematic since they neglect the
pluralistic nature of the tradition.

Chapter two – “Emic Description of the Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition” – explains the
tradition in its own terms. A belief system is a totality of tenets that are culturally meaningful as
they are coherent with given and axioms constituting the worldview held by people in that
culture. Ravenous spirit beliefs, in a similar fashion, are logical and valid in the eyes of believers
because they are congruent with the northeastern Thai conception of reality. On the other hand,
this belief tradition becomes absurd and fallacious when viewed in light of the scientific-
 rationalist worldview, which espouses a different definition of reality. In this chapter, the
ravenous spirit belief tradition is situated against the backdrop of the northeastern Thai
worldview and cultural context in order to demonstrate how its tenets become meaningful to its
adherents. The fundamental axioms and the internal logic of this belief tradition are also
discerned to elucidate why the practices pertaining to the tradition make sense to believers the way they do. The analysis in this chapter suggests an alternative line of inquiry into supernatural beliefs. Instead of asking why people believe in things that are patently false, we can formulate non-judgmental research questions that discern the emic understanding of the tradition.

Chapter three – “Monolithic Representations and Condescending Discourses” – examines the ways in which the belief tradition is represented in Thai mass media and rationalized by Thai academia. Mass media's predilection for abusive practices of the tradition cooperates with rationalist discourses in the creation and transmission of a reductive, conventional view of the tradition. Mass media's renditions of the tradition are misleadingly homogenous in contrast to the pluralistic practices of ravenous spirit beliefs in real contexts. Within this circumstance, rationalist discourses conveniently assert their dismissive and simplistic interpretations of the tradition, construing it as a sociological or a psychological device that fulfils a certain function in belief communities as believers fail to redress threatening situations by direct, rational means. This chapter problematizes representational and discursive conventions that configure the public perception of the tradition.

Chapter four – “Pluralistic Practices in Pluralistic Contexts” – reports variable manifestations of ravenous spirit beliefs in different communities. The ethnographic data laid out in this chapter counterbalances the negative images of the tradition and its adherents prevalent in mass media. Since the basis of rationalist interpretations lies in the radical, abusive practices of the tradition, the benign variants of ravenous spirit rituals and social practices pertaining to them as presented in this chapter cast light on limited applicability of rationalist discourses. Ultimately, this chapter reveals that violence and atrocious acts are not intrinsic to this belief tradition since many belief communities observe the tradition in benign ways.
Chapter five – “Is the Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition a False Logic?” – argues that, in essence, ravenous spirit beliefs are not incompatible with scientific logic. Their ways of justifying truth claims and assessing the truth value of propositions or phenomena rest on similar principles. Experimental science grants that a thesis developed within the artificial setting of a laboratory is adequate to explain how things transpire in the natural environment. In a similar fashion, holders of ravenous spirit beliefs generalize the applicability of their personal experiences. They infer from these particular experiences the objective reality of ravenous spirits. In this respect, experimental science and ravenous spirit beliefs are equivalent in the sense that they both, by inductive reasoning, infer a general, abstract reality from a concrete effect borne by specific cases. This comparison evinces that the ravenous spirit belief tradition cannot be called a false logic because we never have such a clear and unproblematic dichotomy between false vis-à-vis valid manners of reasoning. We only have diverse heuristic tools. Each has its limits and none of them can, singlehandedly, decipher all aspects of multifarious reality.

Focusing on believers' personal experiences, this chapter pursues another goal – to falsify the label “superstitious folk” imposed sweepingly on all ravenous spirit believers. Ravenous spirit beliefs are not devoid of empirical grounds. Informants adopt these beliefs after they discovered that scientific-rationalist logic fails to unravel their enigmatic experiences but the tradition succeeds in doing so because it offers effective strategies to redress the threats pertaining to these inscrutable and troublesome experiences. Given the efficacy of ravenous spirit beliefs in redressing baffling and harmful situations, it is hardly justified to assume that believers resort to the tradition because they are ignorant and superstitious.

Chapter six concludes the study by laying out some cautions readers have to keep in mind as they learn about ravenous spirit beliefs from this monograph. Similar to the literature
scrutinized in chapter three, my own study has some flaws that need to be brought to light since they entail problematic implications about the tradition and its adherents. These implications are inaccurate but inevitable since they are inherent to the analytical stance adopted by this study. This chapter represents a gesture toward self-reflexivity, which, I believe, can remedy fallacies engendered by unwarranted belief in academic impartiality. Knowledge production always includes the adoption of a certain perspective that favors and highlights some aspects of the known objects while downplaying others. Products of intellectual activities are, therefore, always partial and contestable. Though this limitation cannot be completely overcome since it is intrinsic to human episteme, we can cope with it by the awareness that all knowledge is mediated and developed from a specific stance. The self-reflexivity displayed in this chapter reifies this outlook. This act of self-criticism, however, is accompanied by another section about the contributions of this dissertation to belief scholarship and the folkloristic enterprise.

All chapters aside from the introduction and the conclusion adhere to a common structure. They are divided into four main sections. The first part is an overview that gives a summary of the chapter. The second part lays out the theoretical perspective that informs the analysis conducted in the chapter. In this part, literature related to the inquiry in concern is also reviewed to give an overall picture of how the issue has been construed and debated. The third part presents and analyzes ethnographic data. The theoretical perspective laid out in the foregoing part is employed to explicate ethnographic cases and reify the posited arguments. The final part serves as closure, discussing the ramification of the study in each chapter. This common structuring, hopefully, will result in readable, well-wrought, and self-contained expository chapters that can be read either in sequence or independently from one another.

5. Definition of Terms
Several terms in this study denote ideas and concepts viable in northeastern Thai worldview. They convey specific meanings not within the range of general usage. Their definitions in the context of this study are given below:

5.1 Supernatural

The adjective “supernatural,” as Barbara Walker points out, denotes a specific conception of reality viable in the culture in which the term circulates. It stands for “a linguistic and cultural acknowledgement that inexplicable things happen which we identify as being somehow beyond the natural or the ordinary” (Walker 1995: 2). Walker's definition of the term is adequate to describe the concept of the supernatural in northeastern Thai worldview. The things defined as supernatural in this culture are out of ordinary but possible. They belong to an unfamiliar, inscrutable domain of reality that, in the northeastern Thai worldview, are multifarious and comprised of aspects that lay beyond human comprehension. The term “supernatural” in the context of this study is equivalent to “supranormal” or “mystical.” When placed in front of nouns such as “phenomenon” or “power,” it denotes that the modified nouns deviate from everyday reality but are still possible. Therefore, the phrase “supernatural power” is synonymous to “supranormal power” and “mystical power” in this study. They all refer to a particular type of power whose origin and operation are not subject to the rules of nature as we know them but are accepted as an enigmatic facet of reality. The concept of the supernatural in northeastern Thai culture is examined in depth in chapter two.

5.2 Ravenous spirits

*Phii pob* (ผีปอ) – a northeastern Thai term that refers to a kind of malicious spirit feared for its perpetual, unquenchable hunger – is translated here as “ravenous spirits.” The term *phii* (ผี) is used in Thai to denote both ghosts of the dead and spirits in the animistic sense. *Pob* (ปอ)
is a proper name given to ravenous spirits but also used in the following contexts to convey other things. First, the term is a metaphor for a vulgar and shamelessly greedy person who is as loathsome as ravenous spirits. When addressed or referred to as bak pob (นมผา) or e pob (นมผา), the person is attacked by one of the most humiliating and hateful terms of condemnation in northeastern Thai lexicon. Second, the term is used as a swear. It is equivalent to the expression “Damn!” uttered by a native English speaker. Third, the term, when spoken good-naturedly in a casual, teasing way, implies an intimacy between the addressee and the addressee whose affectionate and enduring friendship warrant such a license. Fourth, the term is used to denote either one's immense hunger or his gluttonous consumption of large quantity of food. The statement “ravenous spirits have descended on this meal” (“นมผา”), for example, is teasingly uttered after one sees how an ample meal is thoroughly and quickly finished by himself or by his buddies. Or the expression “I am so hungry that I am becoming a ravenous spirit” (“ตื่นจะกลายเป็นนมผา”) is uttered to emphasize how starving the speaker is.

As evinced in metaphorical usage of the term pob, the most distinctive trait of ravenous spirits is their voracious appetite and perpetual hunger. These defining characteristics are denoted by adjective “ravenous” in this study. The noun “spirit” signifies the origin of phiipob, which are not the ghosts of dead humans but a kind of malicious and amorphous entity born from corrupted magical power.

5.3 Ravenous spirit hosts

In the northeastern Thai lexicon, individuals who host ravenous spirits are referred to as pob (a ravenous spirit) or jao kong pob (a ravenous spirit's owner). The intended message of the statement, “Villagers believe that Mr. Lampoon is a ravenous spirit,” is not that Mr. Lampoon, reputedly, transforms from a human being into a malevolent, amorphous spirit. Instead, it means
“Mr. Lampoon allegedly hosts a ravenous spirit.” This double meaning of the term *pob* reveals the emic conception of the relationship between ravenous spirits and their hosts. Ravenous spirits, though considered autonomous entities, are apparitions of their hosts' corrupted magical power. They are the host's demonic, uncontrollable alter ego. Mrs. Tongsuk – an exorcist and healer of Ban Pa Ao village – described a dream she had in which a ravenous spirit assumed the form of its host and asked her not to intervene in its plan to devour a few villagers to slake its hunger (personal interview, June 30, 2013). However, there are also cases in which ravenous spirit hosts are referred to as “the owners of ravenous spirits.” Reverend Buakhao, the abbot of Pa Suankluay temple, used the metaphor of dogs and their owners to explain why ravenous spirits leave their hosts to possess and devour other people. Just as the owner cannot tame his dog when it gets hungry, a ravenous spirit host loses control over this demonic ego of himself when it is driven wild by hunger (personal interview, June 15, 2013).

*Pob* – when denoting individuals within whom ravenous spirits reside – and *jao kong pob* are translated in this study as “ravenous spirit hosts.” Literal translations of these terms are inconvenient for two reasons. First, it is not practical to maintain the versatility of the original term by referring to both the spirits and their hosts as “ravenous spirits.” While it is easy for those familiar with the belief tradition to discern from the context what the term means, this double meaning can be rather confusing especially when the belief tradition is described in English for readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Second, “ravenous spirit owners” entails several misleading implications about the spirits and their hosts. First, these wicked spirits are not assets of their hosts as implied by the word “owner.” They do not bring good fortune nor do they benefit their hosts. They are uncontrollable and therefore not subject to use. They cannot be discarded or disowned at the hosts' will. In sum, “ravenous spirit owners” is inapplicable because
it implies the kind of relationship in which the owner is the active exploiter while the owned spirit is the submissive servant. This is not what transpires between ravenous spirits and their hosts.

The term “ravenous spirit hosts” is adopted in light of parasitic character of the relationship. Ravenous spirits are born and reside within their hosts against their will. The spirits benefit from the relationship because they are strong and able to hunt down their victims as long as their hosts remain in the community. The hosts, on the contrary, are dehumanized by this relationship as they become, metaphorically, loathsome spirits that feed on human and animal lives. Also, when unable to possess other living beings, ravenous spirits eat up their own hosts who are inevitably doomed. To get rid of them, the hosts must attend a special ritual in which a qualified exorcist severs them from their spirits. Considering this relationship in which the survival of a ravenous spirit hinges on the exploitation of its host who is ruined by the contact, ravenous spirits are closely similar to parasites. It is proper, therefore, to call individuals carrying these parasitic spirits inside them as “ravenous spirit hosts.”

5.4 The possessed / the victims of ravenous spirit afflictions

Believers call those harmed by ravenous spirits as pu tuk kao which can be literally translated as “one who is possessed.” Pu is an indefinite, third-person singular pronoun. Tuk is auxiliary verb denoting the passive mode of the sentence. Kao is main verb, which means, in a general context, to enter or to get inside something. This verb, when used in the context of Thai spirit cults, means to possess. In this study, pu tuk kao is translated as the possessed, which is the literal rendering of the original term in Thai. The possessed is used interchangeably with the victims of ravenous spirit afflictions. As the passive mode of the original term is remarkable, the word victim is employed here as it implies the passive position of those referred to as victims.
Individuals suffering from ravenous spirit afflictions are victims in the sense that they become injured or harmed by malicious agents born from others' corrupted morality.

5.5 The exorcists and healers

Those expelling ravenous spirits and healing the afflictions caused by them are called moh tham. Moh is a noun meaning experts, specialists, or healers. When combined with other nouns, the compound denotes a person well-versed in a particular field of specialization. A moh phi is an expert in the matters concerning spirits. He subdues malevolent ghosts, appeases offended spirits, and provides treatments to afflictions caused by supernatural agents. Moh ngu is a person knowledgeable in the arts of capturing and taming snakes, of curing snake bite, and of guarding against their attack. Moh can also stand alone. It means physician when used without other nouns.

Tam is the Thai transliteration of the Sanskrit word dharma. When used in the context of vernacular Thai Buddhism, tam or pra tam refers to Buddhist teachings or the ultimate truth discovered by Gautama Buddha. The word, however, takes on a specific meaning in the context of northeastern Thai spirit cults. It refers to “a Shan script influenced by Mon writing” (Tambiah 1970:30), which is used exclusively in Buddhist scripture of the present-day northeastern Thailand and Lao PDR. Moh tam, therefore, means a wise, pious man who knows the sacred language of the holy scripture. Verses and incantations from the scripture are crucial components of rituals in northeastern Thai spirit cults as it is believed that they are imbued with mystical power that can dissipates evil influence. The knowledge of these sacred words enables a moh tam to solve difficulties caused by supernatural agents.

In terms of practical function, a moh Tam is not different from a moh phi since he provides similar kinds of services. The etymological construction of these two terms, however,
implies a hierarchical distinction between *moh Tam* and *moh phii*. The former, containing the noun *tam*, denotes that a *moh tam*'s mystical power derives from his affiliation with Buddhism. The latter, comprising the noun *phii* (ghosts or spirits), hints that a *moh phii* is a practitioner of local spirit cult that is pagan and illegitimate in relation to Buddhism. This distinction, though unstated, is latent in a notable way that ravenous spirit exorcists and healers talk about their practice. Exorcists and healers participating in this study invariably call themselves *moh tam*; and refer to the practitioners who adopt violent ritualistic procedures as *moh phii*. To neutralize the value judgement inherent in the usage of *moh phii* and *moh tam*, this study employs neutral terms – *exorcist* and *healer* – to refer to individuals who treat ravenous spirit afflictions.

Two more reasons warrant this etymological choice. First, *exorcist* and *healer* reflect two major activities done to rescue the afflicted from ravenous spirits: expelling the possessing spirit and healing the erratic symptoms it causes. The precise functions of exorcists and healers are described in detail in chapter two. Second, these two terms are broad enough to include any individuals who exorcise ravenous spirits and heal ravenous spirit afflictions. While the terms *moh tam* and *moh phii* exclude women and Buddhist monks as they specifically denote laymen capable of resolving the concerns about supernatural agents, *exorcist* and *healer* entail no such implication. This neutrality is required since a lot of exorcists and healers interviewed in this study are women and monks.

5.6 The ravenous spirit belief tradition

In the Thai context, the total body of tenets and practices concerning ravenous spirits are not considered a distinct tradition. The term *prayane* (*ไปโดน*), which denotes the concept of tradition in the Thai language, is a value-laden term, since it designates either elaborate royal customs, Theravada Buddhist liturgy, or folk cultural practices considered original and worth
preserving. In Thailand, therefore, the annual celebration of the royal barges is considered a
tradition, as is the candle festival that celebrates the end of Buddhist Lent. Ravenous spirit
beliefs, which do not fit into any of the above categories, are merely considered superstitions.
Both believers and non-believers refer to ravenous spirit tenets and practices as *kwam chue
reung phii pob*, which literally means “beliefs about ravenous spirits.”

The fact that the Thai public does not consider ravenous spirit beliefs a tradition reflects a
hierarchical ordering of diverse belief systems within Thai culture. At the top of this hierarchy is
Theravada Buddhism, the legitimacy of which can be transferred to local Thai spirit and magic
cults when they are aligned positively with Buddhist principles. As we will see in chapter four,
the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs significantly incorporate Buddhist ideas and
ritualistic features. Informants hold that this alignment with Buddhism evinces the harmless,
non-superstitious nature of the ravenous spirit practices they carry out. Lower down in the
hierarchy lie supernatural beliefs that, through the customs they engender, articulate the
creativity and spiritual sensitivity of folk communities that pass on these customs. The dance of
*phii ta khon* – an annual festival held in Loei province in northeastern Thailand – exemplifies
this category of customs. Compared to ravenous spirit beliefs, the festival similarly manifests
local belief in incorporeal beings that come into contact with the human community. Yet, given

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6 This distinction is apparent when we consider different designations assigned to other northeastern Thai
belief traditions. For example, the author of an MA thesis that explores the relationship between ravenous
spirit beliefs and Buddhist rituals uses the term *kwam chue reung phii pob* when referring to ravenous
spirit beliefs. She, however, calls the totality of beliefs and rituals concerning soul essence a tradition or
*prapaynee*. (Potila 2012: abstract). A similar sentiment underlies the content of www. prapayneethai.com,
a Thai website that provides information about belief traditions practiced in the four regions of Thailand.
While the cult of the celestial spirit (*phii fa*) and belief in the royal guardian spirit (*phii mahaesak*) are
included, together with other spirit cults and Buddhist ceremonies, in the list of northeastern Thai
traditions, ravenous spirit beliefs are omitted. This exclusion evinces that the Thai public does not
consider ravenous spirit beliefs a tradition.
the colorful procession, the exquisite ghost masks worn by dancers, and the rejoicing folk music that characterize the festival, the dance of phii ta khon was described in the official website of Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) as an “inherited culture and tradition”.\(^7\) The terms, *culture* and *tradition*, are never used to describe ravenous spirit beliefs in Thai context. This hierarchical ordering problematizes my choice of terming the totality of ravenous spirit beliefs and practices a belief tradition.

Despite its misleading implication, I use the term *tradition* to designate ravenous spirit tenets and practices for a number of reasons. First, the literal translation of the Thai term, *kwam chue reung phii pob*, is inadequate because it reduces an intricate network of tenets, customs, experiences, and social behaviors that revolve around the believed existence of ravenous spirits to a set of cognitive constructs. The word *kwam chue*, which means belief, does not encompass the non-cognitive facets of the tradition. Second, other possible terms, such as *complex* (as used in the compound *culture complex*), may be adopted to signify ravenous spirit tenets and practices since it denotes a network of culture traits that interrelate with all others (Wissler 1923:52).\(^8\) The term *ravenous spirit complex* adequately signifies the cognitive, cultural, and sociological components pertaining to the belief in the existence and malevolence of ravenous spirits.

Nonetheless, given the anthropological origin of the term, general audiences unfamiliar with

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\(^8\) The application of Wissler's concept of culture complex to ravenous spirit tenets and practices would result in the term *ravenous spirit complex* (Jason B. Jackson, personal communication, February 2, 2016). Underpinning this concept is the idea that a culture trait does not form a clear-cut unit. Instead, it encompasses and connects with other traits, which altogether form a culture complex. If we grant that belief in the existence of ravenous spirits is a culture trait, other relevant tenets and customs, such as exorcising rites or the efficacy of holy water, are traits pertaining to the principal element and thus constitute a ravenous spirit complex. See Wissler (1923) for discussion of cultural traits and trait complexes in early American cultural anthropology or ethnology.

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anthropological conceptions and ideas may find this designation obscure or even misleading. In my opinion, *ravenous spirit complex* tends to invoke psychological implications, since the word *complex* has been used to signify psychological anomalies; this use compromises the neutrality of the term when used in an anthropological sense. This risk is heightened in my own research context where elites have framed ravenous spirit beliefs and practices as pathological. Considering the limitations and inadequacy of other alternatives, I decided to adopt phase *the ravenous spirit belief tradition* despite its misleading implication about the way the Thai public construe ravenous spirit beliefs. The term *tradition*, I believe, is lucid and accessible to general audiences. It also encompasses different facets of ravenous spirit beliefs. While my usage responds to the needs of my research and to dynamics in Thai discussions of culture, I am aware of the ways that tradition has been theorized differently in North American folklore studies.⁹

5.7 Belief community

The term *belief community* in this study refers to a group of people who live in a specific bounded area and among whom ravenous spirit beliefs and rituals are familiar cultural practices. This definition of the term accommodates the fact that the northeastern Thai villages labeled as belief communities in this study always contain people who dismiss ravenous spirit beliefs. These non-believers, however, are accustomed to both tenets and customs pertaining to the belief tradition as they witness the believing members of the group resort to the tradition. Also, this definition rules out problems inherent to the partial nature of my fieldwork. Since I did not interview everybody in a belief community, I cannot proclaim a consensus held by all members within the group about the reality of ravenous spirits. In response to this shortfall in

⁹ For ways in which tradition has been discussed and conceptualized in North American academia, see Noyes (2009), Briggs (1996), Bauman (1992, 2001), Glassie (1995), and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983:1-14).
ethnographic data, I define a belief community by means of people's familiarity with ravenous spirit beliefs and practices. There may be a few or even a significant number of non-believers in a given village. However, as long as these skeptical members come to know about and become familiar with the tradition through their contact with the believing members, such village is qualified as a belief community in the context of this study.

It is noted here, however, that people's familiarity with the ravenous spirit belief tradition is inferred from informants' accounts, not from a direct and systematic survey. For example, the headman of Ban Pa-Ao village told me that a communal ritual is held in the village almost every year to subdue ravenous spirits, so I assume that this ritual and the belief it enacts must be familiar culture traits whose meaning – on some level – is known by the majority of villagers regardless of their varying attitudes toward the efficacy of the ritual. Based on an inference made in this manner, I consider Ban Pa-Ao village a belief community.

5.8 Believers / non-believers

The ravenous spirit believers interviewed in this study do not take the existence of these malicious spirits as evidently and indisputably true. Instead, they regard the matter as a possibility. Unlike non-believers, they do not totally rule out supernatural causes of unfortunate events that befell their communities. This disposition requires caution in the usage of the verb believe and the noun believer in this study. Believe in the context of this study does not denote a resolute commitment to a postulate received as self-evidently true. Rather, it is an act of acceptance that a postulate can be and may be true. The phrase ravenous spirit believers in this context, therefore, means people who accept the possibility of ravenous spirits' existence and the harm they inflict on humans.

In contrast to believers, non-believers are defined in this study as those who consider
ravenous spirit beliefs false and groundless. The definitions of the terms believers and non-believers given in this research are based on a particular conception of belief and disbelief. Though disbelief implies a lack of faith, its antithesis – belief – does not necessarily denote absolute faith that denies all postulates contradictory to the held belief. Ravenous spirit believers consider diverse theories before attributing unfortunate events that befell their communities to ravenous spirits. They do not readily and immediately resort to the tradition without seriously reflecting upon other possible causes of these events.

6. Contextualizing Northeastern Thailand

Northeastern Thailand, as Martin B. Platt rightly observes, “is a region distinct from the rest of Thailand” (2013:1). Its distinction from other parts of the country is not only marked by tangible, measurable features such as topography, climate, and demographics; negative stereotypes such as poverty and ignorance attributed to the northeastern people also make the region different from the rest of Thailand in the national popular imagination. The northeastern Thais “are regularly seen as poor, uneducated country bumpkins who make convenient and deserving object of ridicule” (Platt 2013:26) for the Thai public. Given this predominant stereotype, it is hardly surprising that radical, inhumane practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are exclusively attributed to belief communities in northeastern Thailand.

However, this stereotype does not emerge from thin air. It is a construct whose origin lies in the long history of the ambivalent political relationship between northeast and central Thais, in topographical shortfalls that render the northeast the poorest region in the country, and in ethnic and cultural components that exist in stark contrast with those of the central Thai – the norm “which sets the standard of what is Thai in Thailand” (Platt 2013:2). In the following subsections, I situate northeastern Thailand in its historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts to
cast light on factors contributing to the image of northeastern Thais as superstitious folk.

6.1 Historical context: The land on the frontier

Geographically, northeastern Thailand, or Isan, is located on the Korat Plateau, which is separated from central Thailand by the Petchabun mountain range (Uhlig 1995:130). The region is separated from Lao PDR by the Mekong River on its northern and eastern borders. On the south it is bounded by Cambodia (Platt 2013: 2-3). The region covers 170,000 square kilometers, which is one third of the Thai territory (Grabowsky 1995:107). As of 2015, northeastern Thailand comprises twenty provinces, with the total inhabitants numbering 21,845,254 (Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, Thailand, 2015).

Northeastern Thailand was subject to several overlords before it became a part of Thai nation-state. Prior to 1300 CE, the region was under the rule of the Khmer empire, whose power declined in the early thirteenth century (Grabowsky 1995:111). The decline of the Khmer polity was contemporaneous to the rise of the Lao and Thai kingdoms. Lan Chang (the present-day Vientiane) – the first Lao kingdom – was established by the warrior prince Fa Ngum around 1353 on the upper part of the Mekong River, north of the present-day northeastern Thailand. The Thai kingdom of Ayudhya was founded further south three years earlier (Tambiah 1970: 28-29). In this period, northeastern Thailand was largely, as Grabowsky calls it, “a demographic vacuum” (1995:112). There is no evidence of people living in this area before the onset of the eighteenth century (Grabowsky 1995: 112).

The conflict between Lao and Thai polities that determines the fate of northeastern Thailand erupted in the late eighteenth century. After winning Ayudhya back from the Burmese in 1768, King Taksin led the battle against Vientiane in 1778 (Tambiah 1970:30). The king, however, was dethroned and executed by one of his generals – Chao Phraya Chakri, who later
became King Rama I, the founder of the present Chakri dynasty of Thailand. Under the reign of the new king, Vientiane, together with another Lao polity – the kingdom of Luang Phrabang – became Ayudhya's (or Siam in that time period) vassal states.

The northeastern frontier was filled by Lao captives from Vientiane when Chao Anouvong, the ruler of Vientiane, led an insurrection against Siam in 1827 (Grabowsky 1995: 116). After the total suppression of Lao troops in Korat (Nakhon Ratchasima province in the present-day northeast Thailand), Siamese armies marched to Vientiane, raided the city, and captured its inhabitants. These captives from Vientiane and its hinterland resettled in the northeastern region and on the edge of the central part of Siam (Grabowsky 1995: 120). This historical event accounts for two characteristics that differentiate northeastern Thailand from other regions of the country. First, the majority of its population consists of originally Lao-speaking people whose ethnicity and cultural practices differ from those of the central Thais. Second, the long history of rivalry for power and domination, from my viewpoint, contributes to the condescending sentiment the central Thais harbor against the northeastern Thais, whom they consider to be Lao by origin.

Another significant event that reinforces the Siamese elites' conception of the northeastern people as credulous and troublesome is the “men-with-merit” insurrection (kabot phu mi bun) (Mikusol 1995:150). In October of 1892, Siam ceded its territories on the left bank of the Salween River to Britain. One year later, in October of 1893, Siamese territories on the left bank of the Mekong River were lost to France (Mikusol 1995:149). The Siamese court, under the rule of King Rama V, made an attempt to preclude further loss of territories by introducing a new administrative system that was “designed to bring outlying people more directly under the authority of Bangkok” (Keyes 1995:158). This administrative reform curtailed the authority of
local lords, who had to relinquish governing power to Siamese officials appointed by the court in Bangkok. The reform provoked several rebellions in the northeastern region. The fiercest ones, though, were those led by a group that called themselves “men-having-merit” (phu mi bun) in 1901-1902 (Keyes 1995:158). The movement was initiated by troupes of folk song singers (mo lam) that traveled around and sang about the advent of a valiant hero who would purge the northeast of the corrupted Siamese officials. The three leaders of the group, Thao Buncan, Phraya Thammikarat, and Ong Prasat Thong, were devoted to the group's ultimate goal – to turn northeastern region into an autonomous state not subject to Siam or France (Mikusol 1995:150). The group, however, was finally suppressed by Siamese troops in the final battle in Ubon Ratchathani in 1902 (Ferrara 2015:51).

Federico Ferrara interestingly observes that, unlike the uprisings in the northern region of Siam, which the Siamese court immediately suppressed, the court was surprisingly slow in its action against the men-with-merit insurgence, letting the group promote its cause in the northeast for several months. Ferrara attributes the Siamese court's negligence to the fact that officials in Bangkok dismissed the popularity of the group among local people as “a function of the stupidity and credulousness of the local population” (Ferrara 2015:51). This observation agrees with Charles F. Keys's comment, who notes that the men-with-merit revolts were at first belittled by Siamese elites in Bangkok. They “considered those who led them or joined them to be 'stupid' or 'ignorant,' that is, less civilized than the people of Siam proper” (Keys 1995:158). The men-with-merit insurgence was neither the first nor the only incident to reinforce negative stereotypes about the northeastern people held by Siamese officials. Contemporaneous to this infamous rebel group were several individuals who claimed to possess exalted magical power and who spread the message about the advent of the messianic leader (Mikusol 1995:150).
This significant event reveals two things about the image of the northeastern Thais as “ignorant and superstitious folk” in popular imagination. First, Siamese officials did not see the men-with-merit insurgency as a reaction and resistance to a highly centralized bureaucracy that was insensitive to the needs of local people. Instead, they took it as self-evident proof of the ignorance and credulity that characterizes people in the northeastern region. This builds to the second point.; The stereotype of the northeastern Thais as ignorant and superstitious is entrenched in the long history of suppression and domination the people on the northeastern frontier were exposed to under the rule of Siamese court.

6.2 Socio-cultural context: The land of non-Thai ethnic groups

If, as Martin B. Platt remarks, the central Thais set the standard of what is Thai in Thailand (Platt 2013: 2), then one can hardly find a Thai in the northeastern region of the country. Almost eighty percent of the northeastern population are ethnically Lao. This major group, however, contains several linguistic sub-groups. The Lao Wiang, or those people originally from Vientiane and their descendants, exist in the largest number compared to other Lao sub-groups. Other Lao tribes, such as the Phuan, the Phu Thai, and the Yo, can also be found in the region (Grabowsky 1995: 108).

The Khmer make up approximately 10 percent of the northeastern population. They settled in the south of Mun River, concentrating in the provinces of Surin, Buriram and Sisaket. The last 10 percent of the northeastern demography comprises the Thai Korat and small indigenous tribes. The Thai Korat are a Siamese-speaking people inhabiting Nakhon Ratchasima province. The Kui (or Suai) and the So are aboriginal peoples who live in small pockets amidst Lao and Khmer communities (Grabowsky 1995: 108). Aside from these peoples, Chinese, Vietnamese, and the Nyakur (a Mon group) also contribute to the diversity of the northeastern
demography (Platt 2013: 5).

Given this demographic formation of northeastern Thailand, we can conclude that the region has been inhabited by diverse non-Siamese tribes, whose languages, ways of life, and cultural practices are distinct from those of the central Thais. People in the northeast largely eat sticky rice; those in the central consume non-sticky, white rice. Shan script is used in Buddhist scriptures of the northeast, while those of the central region are in ancient Khmer (Tambiah 1970: 30). Lao curries, largely enjoyed by the northeastern population, do not contain coconut milk. Thai curries, on the contrary, cannot be made without it. The Siamese court made several attempts to curtail and homogenize these differences. These attempts, in several cases, betray the deep-seated bias and fear the Siamese officials harbor against the alien cultural practices of their non-Siamese subjects. King Rama IV, for example, issued an edict prohibiting Lao folk music performance in the capital and major cities in 1865. The decree reveals the king's fear of cultural miscegenation as Lao folk music gained more and more popularity among Siamese people. As he stated in the decree:

Different tribes of people, from near and far, gather and reside in Siam. Naturally they exchange their music and performance as they sing and play together for entertainment. This integration is good in a way as it evinces Siam's integrity and prosperity. As long as a person carries the practice of his native culture, it is proper. Thai people may enjoy the Mon, the Khmer, or the Burmese performance of the Vessantara Jataka. Yet they should not take it seriously. They should refer to the Thai performance as the original model. It is odd that Thai people nowadays neglect musical performances of their native culture, and enthusiastically adopt Lao folk music. Men and women in all regions perform and enjoy Lao folk music so much so that many Thai musical troupes disband. [...] This is extremely untoward. Lao folk music is not Thai culture. Lao is subordinate to Thai, Thai has never been subject to Lao. It is highly unbecoming to treat a Lao practice as if it is a part of Thai culture (Rama IV 1923: 23-24).

The decree clearly articulates the king's attempt to segregate “Thai” culture, which specifically means cultural practices of the Siamese tribe in the central region, from those inferior customs
carried on by the Lao population in the northeastern part of his kingdom. Despite the fact that Lao folk music, or mo lam, as adopted by the Siamese in the capital was severed from the culture of its origin and thus stripped of ritualistic features that would be considered grotesque and superstitious by its Siamese enthusiasts\(^\text{10}\), the king still regarded it as a foreign element polluting the superior, central Thai culture.

Even though this attitude has greatly diminished in present-day Thailand, given the national popularity of the northeastern Thai folk music and cuisine, its trace is still perceptible in a hierarchical ordering of the northeastern Thai cultural practices vis-à-vis those of the central Thai. The unequal value assigned to the central Thai and the northeastern Thai dialects, for instance, is entrenched in the idea that supremacy belongs to the central Thai customs. Central dialect is standard Thai, which, as Anthony Diller rightly observes, “is the leading prestige dialect favored by professionals and other high status individuals” (Diller 1991: 99). It is also an emblem of a successful assimilation into the dominant central Thai culture that, and that “most parents would like to have their children speak well for reason of social mobility and occupational security” (Diller 1991: 99). This supremacy of central Thai dialect is inconsistent with the fact that those who speak Lao as their first language in Thailand outnumber those who claim central Thai as their native dialect (Platt 2013: 5).

6.3 Socio-economic context: The poorest region in the country

Unfavorable ecological factors and erratic amounts of rainfall make northeastern Thailand unsuitable for an agrarian economy. The region is infamous for its “sandy and podzolic soils, poor in nutrients, salted-infected ground water and the relatively driest climate of the

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\(^{10}\) According to Pasuk and Baker, mo lam “was more than simply entertainment” (2002: 71). Mo lam troupes “were expected to used their skills to propitiate gods and spirits on important ritual occasions, and the art was reckoned to convey important spirit power” (2002: 71).
country” (Uhlig 1995: 130). The barrenness of the northeastern region was much abhorred by Siamese officials who regarded the area as “Thailand's Siberia” – the place where government officials who displeased their superiors in Bangkok were sent as a punishment (Luther 1995: 185). Despite its harsh climate and unyielding earth, the major economic activity of the northeastern population is farming. Forty-four percent of the region's GNP comes from agriculture. This percentage, however, does not include subsistence farming (Uhlig 1995: 136). Compared to other regions of Thailand, rice farming in the northeast is the least productive. Rice farms in the northeast yield only one harvest per year, unlike those in the north and the central regions that generally yield two and three harvests per year (Platt 2013: 3).

The poverty of the northeastern population is clearly reflected in the Gross Domestic Product. According to Thai National Statistic Office, the average GDP of Thailand in 2013 was 193,394 baht per capita. The GDP for the northeastern region is 74,532 bath per capita, which is almost three times lower than the national average. This figure is strikingly low compared to the GDP of the central and the southern regions, which are 239,078 baht and 123,270 baht per capita respectively. This economic disparity is not new. Poverty incidence made for 1962-3 shows that 77 percent of the northeastern population fall below a poverty line. This percentage reduced to 36 per cent in 1980, yet half of the nation's poor still concentrates in the northeast (Pasuk and Baker, 2002: 64).

Given poor natural conditions that yield only one harvest of rice per year, combined with a low standard of living in the rural areas of the northeast, a large number of the northeastern people emigrate to industrial centers outside the region. Some travel abroad to supply the demand for cheap, unskilled labor. A joke that I heard from several northeastern Thai wage laborers who work in Bangkok reflects a popular concept that sweepingly regards people from
the northeast as cheap, simple-minded coolies. The joke describes a pattern of job distribution among the non-central Thai population when they emigrate to Bangkok: young women from the north work as prostitutes; people from the northeast become construction laborers and housemaids; those from the South are engaged in illegal businesses. This joke, apparently, is told from the stance of the central Thais, who categorize non-central Thai peoples by different impressions they have about each regional group: Women from the north are pretty but poor and naïve, so they are usually lured into sex trafficking. Those from the northeast are country bumpkins but honest since they are simple-minded, so they are good for menial, unsophisticated tasks. The south has posed a threat to central government because of several terrorist movements, thus people from this region are identified with terrorists and fall into the criminal slot.

The image of the northeastern population as poverty-stricken and simple-minded was exploited to justify a military coup against Thaksin Shinawatra and his cabinet in September 2006. The coup makers justified their action on the grounds that Thaksin's government, though legitimized by electoral mandate, is implicated “in an unsavory tangle of money, violence, patronage” (Walker 2012: 3). Besides, “the impure electoral influence of his [Thaksin's] government arose out of populist appeals to the parochial self-interest of poorly educated voters in the rural north and northeast” (Walker 2012: 3). The coup makers, apparently, refuted the legitimacy of Thaksin's government by proclaiming that he won two national elections, first in 2001 and again in 2005, only by giving money to the poor and uneducated peasants in the north and northeast. This justification seems to be entrenched in a negative stereotype the coup makers harbor about rural dwellers in these two regions: Their political decisions cannot be taken seriously since they are based on bad judgment and greed.

I situate the northeast in its historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts to elucidate
the position its inhabitants occupy in national imagination. Historically, the northeastern population was non-Siamese people from one of Siam's vassal state. Their ways of life and cultural practices were foreign and thus regarded as inferior to those of the Siamese in the central region. In present-day Thailand, they occupy the lowest rung of socio-economic strata. Their poverty and low level of education, allegedly, render them susceptible to bribes and temptation devised by manipulative, corrupted politicians. These intertwining facts and assumptions constitute the backdrop against which the ravenous spirit belief tradition and its adherents are perceived by non-believers in modern Thailand.

7. Protecting informants' privacy

Since ravenous spirit believers are susceptible to stigmatization, informants' real names are replaced with pseudonyms. The names of belief communities, however, are maintained but their exact locations are kept confidential. Without the names of the districts and the regions in which they are situated, it is, I believe, hardly possible to identify them given the fact that the same name may denote more than ten villages scattered all over the northeast. Neither photographs nor video recording were taken during fieldwork. Audio recording was done with the permission of the informants. Only I, as the sole researcher of this study, have access to audio files and transcriptions of all interviews.

8. Note on translation

All interviews were conducted in Thai, mostly in northeastern Thai and a few in central Thai. Informants' words, when cited, are transcribed and translated entirely by me. Media scripts and academic research about ravenous spirit beliefs examined in chapter three are originally in Thai. Excerpts and citations from these sources are also translated. In a few cases when the cited excerpt is originally in English, it is thus indicated in a footnote.
Chapter 2

Emic Description of the Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition

1. Chapter Overview: The Land of Incorporeal Beings

As soon as the princess laid her eyes on the lovely white squirrel, she felt a strong desire to get a hold of it. She commanded her retinue to capture the animal; if not alive, then its lifeless body would do. The princess was oblivious to the fact that the squirrel was a serpent prince in disguise. Having heard of her unsurpassed beauty, the serpent prince took the form of a little squirrel just to admire the princess with his own eyes. Unfortunately, this act inspired by love ended with the serpent prince’s death. The squirrel was shot down by an arrow. It was skinned and its meat was distributed among the citizens of the princess’s kingdom. Nobody knew that the meat brought down on them a disastrous curse. Upon learning about his son’s death, the serpent king unleashed his magical power, enlarging the squirrel’s flesh to make sure that everyone in the kingdom had their share. No one who consumed the cursed meat escaped death caused by a big flood. In the end, the princess’s kingdom was cleansed of its cannibalistic sin by a raging torrent. The whole city was buried under water. This is how Nong Han came into being. ("The Legend of Padang and Nang Ai"—a northeastern Thai folktale)

This brief retelling of an etiological tale about a great lake in Sakon Nakhon province, Northeast Thailand, is presented here because it encapsulates the gist of the northeastern Thai view about otherworldly beings. The fundamental elements constituting this view are uncertainty and caution entrenched in the belief that no one recognizes these beings when they mingle with the creatures of this world. No one can tell how or why or when they come. It is, therefore, highly possible for a human to unwittingly offend them. The princess’s crime in the tale is exemplary of the worst but most likely interaction that could transpire between a supernatural being and a human in the northeastern Thai imagination. She does not know the serpent prince’s true identity as she cannot see through his deceptive, mundane form. Unwittingly, she offends his father who subsequently wreaks calamity on her and her people. Always cautious of offending powerful spirits out of ignorance, many northeastern Thais strictly follow a protocol that regulates their relationships with incorporeal beings. Spending the night at somebody’s house

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without asking for permission from the guardian spirits of that residence is believed to result in a nightmare or a sickness. Also, whimsically picking up a stone, a flower, or any items from a “sacred area” (a specific part of a forest occupied by forest spirits) can be taken by the offended spirits as a “theft” that deserves a severe punishment. This caution is succinctly articulated in a Thai proverb that says: “Despite one’s disbelief, it is wise not to give offense.”

Another attitude informing northeastern Thai views of supernatural beings is distrust in their whimsical and unpredictable temperament. Like the serpent king in the tale, they have no mercy for humans who offend them. They are easily irritated and wreak havoc for petty offenses. The accounts given by the informants participating in this research demonstrate how northeastern Thais construe whimsicality as a defining characteristic of supernatural agents. Mrs. Dang, for example, interprets her nonstop crying after giving birth to her second child as a punishment inflicted by the house guardians because she forgot to inform them of her successful delivery (personal interview, May 25, 2013). This whimsical mood also prevails when humans propitiate them for favor. As Steven Piker notes in “The Relationship of Belief Systems to Behavior in Rural Thai Society,” supernatural agents in Thai worldview react capriciously to human requests. There is no guarantee of benevolent intervention even if ritual is carried out properly or incantation is cited correctly. The spirit that grants a favor in one instance does not necessarily do so again when approached by the same supplicant using the same method. In the northeastern Thai worldview, there is no contractual arrangement or static pattern in the relationship between patron spirits and their supplicants (Piker 1968:389).

This overview of attitudes of the northeastern Thais toward otherworldly beings provides the backdrop against which the ravenous spirit belief tradition is created and practiced. Despite
their lack of physical form, these beings are viewed as autonomous entities whose intervention into and influence over human affairs are not only possible but also common. Believers grant ravenous spirits' ontological status as they hold the worldview in which the scope of reality extends far beyond the reach of physical senses. This worldview prescribes tenets about the reality of incorporeal beings and their roles in human life. In order to formulate an emic description of the ravenous spirit belief tradition, therefore, it is necessary to extrapolate axioms that fundamentally constitute this worldview.

This chapter aims to answer two questions: What makes ravenous spirit beliefs sensible and logical for believers? And why do non-believers fail to make sense of these beliefs in the same way? Axioms and givens pertinent to this belief tradition will be explored to lay out its internal logic. The analysis in this chapter is conducted to underscore that “ignorance,” “false logic,” and “irrationality” are all labels arbitrarily assigned to postulates that are not subsumed under the dominant belief system. Each belief system is based on its own axioms and givens that render some postulates “true” and “rational” while dismissing others as “false” and “irrational”. Truth value and falsity, therefore, are constructed concepts that mean different things in different belief systems.

In this chapter I express my personal view that a belief tradition should be described on its own terms and analyzed in light of its own logic. Explaining a belief system using the idioms of the dominant worldview only results in the description of an “irrational and ill-founded” way of thinking. This chapter aims at demonstrating that, rather than a belief system grounded on a false manner of reasoning, the ravenous spirit belief tradition operates with a different logic
which, once understood, is not as absurd as it appears in light of the scientific-rationalist paradigm.

To explicate the internal logic of the ravenous spirit belief tradition, this chapter is divided into three parts. The first section – “Belief and Knowledge as an Epistemological Lens” – lays out how belief and knowledge have been contingently distinguished by a worldview that holds epistemic authority in a specific society at a specific time period. In light of this view, belief and knowledge are cultural constructs upheld by the power relation that exists between different belief systems. The second section – “Morphology of the Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition” – delineates tenets and assertions that constitute the ravenous spirit belief tradition. Drawing on Propp's treatment of Russian folktales, this section categorizes ravenous spirit beliefs into three main sequences according to the figures who play a major role in each sequence. These tenets are analyzed and described in light of the axioms that render them meaningful and logical to believers. The final section – “Is an Emic Description of Others' Belief Systems Possible?” – concludes the chapter by discussing whether or not an emic description of a foreign culture is attainable in the field of cultural science.

2. Belief and Knowledge as an Epistemological Lens

The notion that there is no intrinsic essence differentiating belief from knowledge has been a subject of scholarly interest. Anthropologists, folklorists, and scholars from disciplines that study beliefs in different cultures and domains of life concur that belief and knowledge are culturally bound concepts whose truth value is not intrinsic but defined by several factors. David J. Hufford, Marilyn Motz, Bonnie O’Conner, and Barbara Walker are among the scholars who elaborate on this idea via the subjects of their interests. Their works demonstrate that the
polarization of two antithetical concepts on the basis of their truth value — such as “reality” versus “fantasy,” “true” versus “false,” and “natural” versus “supernatural” — are relative in the sense that they change once criteria and means of validation shift.

Hufford, scrutinizing the power relations inherent in the conception of belief and knowledge, argues that the boundary between these two terms was demarcated in the Enlightenment when science became the paradigm of knowledge and the arbiter of truth. Science, rather than a worldview with its particular set of assertions that defines reality in a specific way, was sanctified as an objective and reliable means to decipher the rules of the natural world. Science has been accepted as an accurate description of how the natural world operates, and as the reliable method used to discern the rules underlying this operation. In “Beings Without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits,” Hufford posits that science’s status as an infallible mode of knowledge production is a historical construct emerging when the accepted criteria and means of validating a proposition shifted. Scholars and thinkers during the Enlightenment narrowed down the definition of knowledge by identifying it with the scientific mode of discerning and explicating reality. What is qualified as knowledge must be confirmed by experts with technical training. It must be subject to the orderly procedures of observation, hypothesis formulation, and experimentation, which ultimately lead to the formation of a generally applicable principle. This rigid model of knowledge production excludes any propositions that do not comply with these procedures, dismissing them as unverified beliefs. With this highly specific conception of knowledge, speculations derived from direct personal experiences, intuition, and repetitious practices – all of which are prominent sources of knowledge in traditional societies – are downgraded and defined as beliefs. Calling
knowledge “justified true belief” (1995a:19), Hufford underscores his point that a proposition is defined either as knowledge or as belief depending on how well it meets the criteria of validation sanctified by the dominant belief system.

Marilyn Motz, in “The Practice of Belief,” construes beliefs as “ongoing, alternative, adaptive ways of knowing” (1998:352). For her, beliefs are remnants of traditional modes of knowledge production antithetical to the Enlightenment ideology that glorifies replicable, generalizable rules governing the natural world. While the authority of traditional knowledge lies in its faithfulness to the transmitted tradition, the validity of scientific knowledge is measured by empirical proof and replicability. While traditional knowledge includes ways of knowing necessary for a wholesome and fulfilled life – such as knowing how to form and maintain satisfactory relationships with others – scientific knowledge excludes these ways of knowing entrenched in culture and specifically focuses on generalizable facts. Motz refers to Francois Lyotard’s remark that since science’s primary concern is the discovery of replicable facts whose applicability surpasses contextual particularities, scientific knowledge categorizes propositions as either true or false. This leads to a significant difference between traditional and scientific modes of knowing: “[...]traditional knowledge can recognize scientific knowledge as an alternative mode, but scientific knowledge [...] must see traditional knowledge as illegitimate since it fails to meet scientific criteria of proof and replicability” (Motz 1998:343). The nature of traditional knowledge which is local, contextual, and variable disqualifies it from being “knowledge” in a scientific sense of the term. Motz’s comparison between traditional and scientific knowledge shows that knowledge and belief are fundamentally one and the same thing. They are ways of knowing whose validity is measured by the paradigm that holds epistemic
authority. Since this authoritative view varies in different societies and time periods, belief and knowledge are ever-shifting concepts.

The observation that “belief” in one culture is considered “knowledge” in others calls for a reconfiguration of the term “supernatural.” Since a belief system is a heuristic device that approaches reality from a specific stance and interprets it on the basis of a priori assumptions, its portrayal of reality is only partial. Taking into account variable conceptions of reality, we come to see that the term “supernatural” – a relative concept whose meaning depends on how reality is construed – is a cultural construct that is far from fixed and universal. As Barbara Walker points out, labeling something as supernatural implies a normative idea of ordinariness in relation to which the “extraordinary” is defined (1995:14). Some belief systems incorporate a wide range of phenomena into the domain of ordinariness while others have strict criteria judging what is counted as “normal.” Some cultures may possess a fine and elaborate stratification of ordinariness according to the perceived degree of normality assigned to different phenomena. In the northeastern Thai worldview in which beliefs in incorporeal beings still prevail, for example, a case of death from old age is ordinary. Several deaths successively occurring in a specific time period are unlikely but understandable if there is adequate proof of natural causes. But successive deaths, occurring to healthy individuals who have shown no signs of sickness, are out of the ordinary and require explanation. For those holding a mechanistic worldview, the death epidemic among healthy individuals may not be baffling since it can be attributed to natural agents such as an epidemic or coincidence and assimilated into a positivistic view of reality even if there is no definite and sufficient proof of the natural cause. However, for the northeastern Thais who believes in evil spirits, the same phenomenon hints at an intervention by amorphous,
malevolent beings that whimsically jeopardize the natural course of human life. The wicked influence of these spirits and its transformative effect on reality is considered supranormal rather than supernatural — that is, not ordinary but possible.

An individual's perception and interpretation of reality are molded by the belief system that person adheres to. Keeping this notion in mind, we are immune to the false consciousness that our convictions are knowledge while those held by others, especially those that contradict to our notions of truth, are beliefs. Bonnie O’Conner succinctly states this point in her comment on how the term knowledge is used in scholarship as reference to propositions verified in the context of academic disciplines by the approved validation methods. For her, the conviction that one’s claim is knowledge while others’ claims are beliefs “is inherently ethnocentric, for it takes the accepted beliefs of one’s own culture or identity group to be universally correct or normative, even sufficient in themselves to falsify competing claims without further investigation” (1995:8). A non-ethnocentric way to understand the relationship between belief and knowledge, in my view, can be achieved through scrutiny of the mechanisms underlying one’s own belief system and those of others in order to discern how they generate diverse conceptions of reality. The fundamental axioms of the studied belief system – irreducible assertions whose truth value is granted without the requirement of proof (O’Conner 1995:9) – need to be extrapolated as they are keys to the internal logic that renders sensible the tenets and truth claims subsumed under the system.

Fundamental axioms do not only generate tenets and assertions. They also form an epistemological principle – the rubric that determines “definitions and criteria for the admissibility of evidence; definitions of the kind and weight of evidence required to constitute
proof; definitions of acceptable ways of knowing; and rules of reasoning that provide both for
the proper conduct of reasoning processes and for their evaluation and validation by others”
(O’Conner 1995:11). The truth value of a proposition is not measured by how accurate it reflects
the external world, but by its congruence with the epistemological principles employed in
making an evaluation. In this light, a “groundless” and “absurd” claim may become sensible
when it is evaluated on its own terms; that is, in relation to the epistemological principles of the
belief system to which it belongs. As the relationship between tenets, axioms, and
epistemological principles that inform the ravenous spirit belief tradition is explicated, we may
see that this belief tradition is not as illogical as it first appears when we assess it in terms of the
scientific-rationalist episteme.¹

3. Morphology of the Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition

In *Morphology of the Folktale* (1927), Vladimir Propp uses the term “morphology” to
denote the motifs commonly found in Russian fairytales. Propp's word choice implies his
structural approach, as morphology means, in botany, “the study of the component parts of a
plant, of their relationship to each other and to the whole – in other words, the study of a plant's
structure” (Propp 1927:xxv). This metaphor is applicable to my analysis, which aims at
deciphering the internal logic of a belief system. Treating ravenous spirit beliefs as the motifs
that constitute a narrative, we come to see that they become meaningful and logical when their
relations with fundamental axioms are discerned. This structural metaphor has another
implication – it connotes that a belief system works on its believers' perceptions in the same way
a narrative works on its recipients'. Just as we do not question why a horse can fly in a fairy tale

¹ Bonnie O’Conner presents a diagram displaying the relationship between axioms, givens, and rules for constructing and testing facts that constitute a belief system in chapter one of *Healing Traditions* (1995:10).
since we understand and accept its internal logic, adherents of the ravenous spirit belief tradition
do not question the existence of these evil spirits because they understand and accept the
fundamental axioms that render ravenous spirit beliefs sensible and true within the logic of their
episteme.

In this analysis, I categorize ravenous spirit beliefs into three sequences: a spirit
sequence, a phenomenological sequence, and a human sequence. Drawing on Propp's
methodology of grouping motifs into different spheres of action,² this analysis classifies
ravenous spirit tenets into groups according to the subjects of their concerns. The spirit sequence
includes those propositions that explain the origin, character, and behavior of ravenous spirits.
The phenomenological sequence contains tenets about types of incidents and phenomena
attributed to ravenous spirits. The human sequence features those assertions concerning types of
personnel that come into contact with ravenous spirits, such as the host, the exorcist, and the
possessed. The connection between these three sequences is delineated in the overview of this
belief tradition, which is preceded by a brief account about the history of the tradition.

3.1. An ethnology of ravenous spirit beliefs

Based on available evidence, a few things can be said about the origin of the ravenous
spirit belief tradition. First, it seems to be a non-Siamese culture trait. A Siamese folklorist and
historian, Phraya Anuman Ratchathon, attributes the tradition to the population in the
northeastern region of Siam. He posits that “Phii pob (ravenous spirit) is a malevolent spirit in
Isan supernatural tradition” (1960: 338). Sangaun Chotisookrat, a northern Thai writer and

² Propp demarcates spheres of action according to the dramatis personae who play the central role in
each sphere. The villain sphere of action, for example, features the actions done by the villain, such as
trickery (the villain's attempt to deceive his victim) and delivery (the villain receives information about
his victim) (1927:79).
historian, however, claims that ravenous spirit beliefs are also common among the northern Thai population. He recounts an etiological myth about the origin of ravenous spirits that seems to be drawn from the northern Thai oral tradition. Given that ravenous spirit beliefs are attributed to both the northern and northeastern regions of Thailand, we can speculate that this belief tradition was originally a Lao culture trait that was practiced by the Lao population in these two regions even before they were annexed to Siam. This conjecture is verified by the fact that there exists among other Tai ethnic groups a similar category of malevolent spirits that is also called *phii pob*. The Red Tai and the White Tai – the non-Buddhist, Tai-speaking groups in the northern region of Lao PDR and Vietnam – also hold a belief about *phii pob* even though its wicked influence is slightly different from that of *phii pob* in the northeastern Thai supernatural tradition. *Phii pob* in the Red and the White Tai traditions, like its counterpart in the northeastern Thai belief, wreaks havoc on the whole social group. Yet, among the Red and the White Tai it is believed to bring about diarrhea, and to cause a death epidemic within a human community by means of the disease (Formoso 1998: 7). This tenet about diarrhea does not exist in the northeastern Thai variant, which holds that *phii pob* causes sudden, fatal pathological symptoms whose nature eludes biomedicine. Given this piece of evidence, we may conclude that the belief in *phii pob*, despite some significant differences among variants, has been held among several

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3 In the myth, a prince and his retainer have mastered the art of shape shifting. They can detach their souls from their bodies at will and possess other corporeal forms. One day, the prince spotted a deer's dead body. He then exhibited his magical art by leaving his own body and possessed the carcass. The retainer, harboring an ill will against his master, left his body and took over the prince's empty form. The villain burned his real body and returned to town, posing as the prince. The hero left the deer's body and entered that of a parrot. He then flew to his palace and told his wife about the treacherous servant. Together they made a plan to lure the retainer away from the prince's body. The princess enticed the retainer to display to her his exalted magical power. Therefore the retainer left the prince's body and entered the carcass of a dead goat. The watchful prince immediately took possession of his real body and slaughtered the goat. The retainer's soul, now that his real form was destroyed, became a ravenous spirit (Chotisookrat 2010: 283-285).
sub-groups of Tai-speaking people. People in present-day northern and northeastern Thailand are within these sub-groups. It then follows from this conjecture that the Siamese in the central region of Thailand have come to know about the tradition through contact with the northern and the northeastern populations.

A defining characteristic of the ravenous spirit – its insatiable craving for human flesh and blood – is also embodied by *tasei* or *thaye*, a kind of malevolent spirit in Burmese belief. *Tasei* is technically a wicked soul born as a malevolent spirit because of the evil it committed while still alive (Spiro 1967: 34). It is similar to ravenous spirits in two respects: its amorphousness and its cannibalistic nature. According to Melford Spiro, *tasei* “enjoy the flesh of living people, however, and at times – when feeling especially hungry or malevolent, or when under the control of a witch – they enter a village in order to attack and eat one of its inhabitants” (Spiro 1967:34). They are also believed to cause illness. In light of this similarity between *phii pob* and *tasei*, I speculate that these two categories of malevolent spirit are variants of the same prototypical image of a formless, wicked ghost that preys on human beings. The image may eventually be found to be prevalent among diverse groups of people in Southeast Asia.

Shifting to early records of Northeast Thai circumstances, the earliest practice of ravenous spirit beliefs in Siam can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century. According to the founding legend of the city of Nong Bua Lampu, a province in northeastern Thailand, the guardian spirit residing in the town pillar was accused of hosting a ravenous spirit when he was alive. Phu Lup was an able and valiant warrior in the army of Chao Anouvong – the king of Vientiane who led an insurgency against Siam in 1827. He, however, was banished from the army when the king, noting his malevolence and magical power, accused him of hosting a
ravenous spirit. The warrior then sought refuge in the forest near the town of Nong Bua Lampu. The king's accusation turned out to be true as Phu Lup's ravenous spirit devoured his wife, daughters, and other women in the vicinity. A celestial being saw what happened and caused a landslide that killed Phu Lup. Yet, his ravenous spirit still roamed about the town and consumed numerous lives for a decade after the passing of its host. Finally, a powerful magician appeared. He tamed Phu Lup's malevolent spirit and built a shrine for it on the spot of the landslide. Later on in the 1890s, the ruler of Nong Bua Lampu invited Phu Lup's spirit to dwell in the town's pillar in order to invigorate the pillar's protective power. In this fashion, Phu Lup's malevolent spirit was turned into guardian spirit (Formoso 1998: 15). The legend demonstrates that ravenous spirit beliefs circulated in the northeastern Thai cultural repertoire as early as the nineteenth century, and that they came with the people from Vientiane who, by then, had resettled in the northeastern region of Siam.

3.2. The Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition: An Overview

In December 2013, a communal ritual was held in Ban Pa Ao village in northeast Thailand to rid the community of ravenous spirits. A panic erupted when a series of misfortunes and mysterious events befell the village. In less than two months, four people died in the community, the third occurred less than ten days before the fourth. The villagers considered two of these four cases “unnatural”. The deceased in one case was a middle-aged and healthy woman who fainted and then passed away when she was cooking. Another death occurred when a man ran his motorbike into an electric pole. He died right on the spot from a broken neck. At the same time, there were reports of some strange incidents. A villager claimed to see a big black dog that swiftly cut in front of his motorbike while he was driving. Another spotted a big monkey from a
distance while he was in a car. As the car approached, however, the monkey disappeared without a trace. The final incident that led to a unanimous decision to hold the ritual was the possession of an eighteen-year-old girl, who, according to Mrs. Boonma, the girl's aunt, was usually a soft and quiet person. With a patent expression of awe, Mrs. Boonma reported on the abrupt change of the girl's character:

She stayed in bed all day and covered her face with a blanket. When people called for her, she mumbled nonsensically under the blanket. She refused to look at people. Then they called for an exorcist from Ban Ku Kad village. Once the exorcist arrived, the girl said she was not afraid of exorcists so he had better leave. Her manner of speaking was harsh and her tone was threatening. She pointed at the exorcist's face and said she was not afraid of anybody. She was not her normal self. The girl is usually obedient and polite. Then a respectable monk from Burapa Temple came and she yelled at him: “You had better crawl to my feet now. I'm not afraid of the likes of you!” You see, it was unlikely for her to behave like that to anybody, let alone to an elderly monk. But after the exorcising rite, she was back to normal (personal interview, May 24, 2014).

The successive deaths, the villagers' sightings of a black dog and a monkey that came from nowhere, and the girl's strange symptoms were taken by the community as tell-tale signs of a ravenous spirit crisis. At the end of the ritual, the host of the spirits was identified. According to Mrs. Boonsri – another villager who attended the rite – the host was a woman who married into the community. She kept a charmed beeswax that rendered her speech pleasant and convincing to whomever she wanted to persuade. The woman failed to observe the taboos required for the appropriation of magical power inherent in the charmed beeswax. As a result, the benevolent forces turned into ravenous spirits that roamed the village to slake their insatiable hunger (personal interview, May 24, 2014).

What happened in Ban Pa Ao village in December of 2013 exemplifies the context in which the ravenous spirit belief tradition is put to use. The drama that leads to the appropriation
of this tradition features three main components: the evil spirits, the mysterious misfortunes, and the human actors who play different roles in the crisis. Ravenous spirit beliefs revolve around these three components. Believers resort to the tradition whenever their community is threatened by misfortunes whose mysterious nature indicates the intervention of malevolent spirits.

The spirit sequence of ravenous spirit beliefs includes assertions about the origin and the nature of ravenous spirits. These malevolent ghosts are believed to be born from a magical power that transforms itself into a ravenous spirit when used for unethical purposes. The spirit takes the immoral user of magic as its host. Driven by hunger, it possesses both people and animals and devours them from within. As the emanation of its morally debased host and his or her corrupted magical power, the ravenous spirit is construed as a vulgar, capricious, and eccentric figure consumed by pride in its exalted magical power – the personality Mrs. Boonma's niece embodied in her possession when she demanded the elderly monk to crawl at her feet.

The phenomenological sequence consists of tenets about the “crisis” – the successive cases of misfortunes, usually death and illness, that occur in a belief community in a specific period of time. Misfortunes, however, are not always attributed to ravenous spirits. Only those considered “improbable” arouse believers' suspicions of a wicked, invisible force behind the scenes. Believers usually express suspicion of ravenous spirit havoc when deaths and illnesses occur in the any of the following manners: 1) immediate deaths occurring to healthy persons who, prior to their deaths, have shown no sign of sickness 2) deaths from natural causes that happen too often in a community over a specific period of time 3) illnesses that feature physical and mental symptoms that are unresponsive to biomedicine, and 4) epidemic deaths among cattle triggered by unidentified causes. These misfortunes, baffling believers by their unusual
frequency and sudden, unpredictable attack, are considered out of the ordinary and indicative of ravenous spirits' wicked influence.

The human sequence features beliefs about people and the relationship they have with ravenous spirits. First is the host – the person within whom a ravenous spirit dwells. The spirit is like a demonic alter ego over which the self can assert no control. A person may not know he hosts a ravenous spirit, or he may be aware of the fact but fails to prevent it from harming others. Mr. Tongdee – the principle medium of the guardian spirit at Ban Pa Ao village – stated that the host can tell there is a ravenous spirit within him when he has a recurring dream about eating raw, bloody meat (personal interview, May 24, 2014).

Next is the possessed – the person suffering from ravenous spirit afflictions. Manifest symptoms are indicative of different stages of possession. Death without prior signs of sickness indicates that the possessed person's insides were entirely devoured by a ravenous spirit, while physical and mental symptoms resistant to conventional treatment indicate the early stages of ravenous spirit possession. According to Reverend Tongchan – a Buddhist monk and an exorcist in Mukdaharn province – individuals suffering from illnesses are more vulnerable to ravenous spirits and other evil forces compared to healthy people. This is because a person's soul essence or khwan⁴ is weakened by his languishing, sickly body. The decline of spiritual vitality generates a void within that renders the self susceptible to malevolent forces from outside (personal interview, May 26, 2013). From this tenet, believers make a deduction about the severity of a ravenous spirit crisis based on the number of deaths occurring to healthy people. The healthier

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⁴ According to Tambiah, khwan is the “spiritual essences of individual human beings” (1970:57). It resides in the body of its owner but flees when its owner experiences a shock, an illness, or a mental disturbance. The khwan's departure can result in madness and other misfortunes. A ritual called su khwan is required to call a khwan back to its owner.
the deceased persons are, the more critical the crisis is. Immediate deaths among healthy people are indicative of the spirits' immense power.

Last are the healer and the exorcist – the experts equipped with skill and occult power to subdue ravenous spirits. Healers – as the term denotes – are individuals who heal the possessed's mysterious symptoms inflicted by ravenous spirits. Their practice differs from that of the exorcists in that it deals primarily with physical symptoms. Patients who show no signs of mental disturbances are delivered to healers who usually employ folk medicine in combination with a healing ritual.5 The more critical cases that feature dramatic mental symptoms, such as the case of Mrs. Boonma's niece, are delivered to exorcists. These severe cases are attributed to relentless and powerful ravenous spirits that refuse to leave until the victims are dead. However, the roles played by exorcists and healers are not mutually exclusive. Many practitioners assume both roles.

The healer-exorcist distinction is not the only classifying principle. There is also the hierarchical distinction between lay practitioners and Buddhist monks. As Tambiah points out, the supranormal powers of practitioners in these two categories are seen by Thai clients as fundamentally dissimilar (1970:51). While the source of lay practitioners's power lies in spells and incantations that merely generate a temporary inner transformation, Buddhist monks are believed to obtain their supranormal power from higher levels of meditation that ultimately bring about a permanent mental transformation or, in other words, an awakening. This hierarchical distinction and its relation with other ravenous spirit beliefs will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.

5 For example, Mr. Tongpoon – a healer in Ubon Ratchathani – chants healing spells over a bowl of water mixed with herbal extracts. The charmed tonic is then given to clients (personal interview, July 17, 2014).
This brief description of the ravenous spirit belief tradition provides a rough overview of the tenets and assertions that constitute the tradition. In the following sections, each sequence of ravenous spirit beliefs is explicated in light of the fundamental axioms that render these beliefs rational and viable to believers.

3.3. The Spirit Sequence

3.3.1. The Origin of Ravenous Spirits

According to tradition, ravenous spirits are emanations of their hosts' corrupted magical power. All verbal formulae or items permeated with mystical power are subject to restrictions of use. Once the user breaches these restrictions, the magical power transforms itself into a ravenous spirit and takes the transgressor as its host. This tenet is logical and valid for ravenous spirit believers because it resonates with an axiom about the nature of supernatural power viable in Thai supernatural tradition. This axiom grants that supernatural power is like a natural resource accessible to those equipped with the skill and technique to tap into it. Anybody who learns to master the art of manipulating this power can exploit it for their purposes regardless of their moral character.

This axiomatic tenet about the nature of supernatural power underlies the etymological construction of the term saiyasart (สงการสิ้น). Pragmatically, saiyasart is used in Thai the same way the term supernatural6 is used in English. It denotes aspects of reality that deviate from the familiar, empirical domain of everyday life. However, while the etymological construction of supernatural implies a normative conception of reality in relation to which the supernatural is defined, saiyasart connotes no such conception. On the contrary, it construes the supernatural as

6 It is noted here that supernatural is translated into Thai as nua thammachat (นว่าธรรมชาติ). This term is generally used nowadays but was not in pre-modern Thailand. At present, nua thammachat and saiyasart are equally common in everyday usage.
a discipline of knowledge regulated by experts and specialists. *Saiyasart* consists of the prefix *saiya-* (สัย-) and the root *-sart* (-ศาสตร์). In the 1999 edition of the Thai-Thai dictionary compiled by the Thai Royal Institute, the entry *saiya-* contains the following description: “the occult of magical formulae and spells derived from Brahmanic tradition.” The suffix *-sart* is a Thai transliteration of the Sanskrit term *sastra* which means “a discipline of knowledge” and is usually preceded by a noun denoting a field of study such as *manusyasart* (มนุษยศาสตร์ – Humanities), *sangkomsart* (สังคมศาสตร์ – Social Science), and *rattasart* (รัฐศาสตร์ – Political Science). Indian influence on the term is apparent, and the connection is more evident in the term *saiyavedh* (ไวยาแยย) – a synonym of *saiyasart*. The root *-vedh* (เวช) is linked with the four Hindu Vedas – a collection of praising hymns and mantras chanted in sacrificial and other rituals.

Vedic hymns and mantras, as Patton E. Burchett observes, “were used in the context of ritual sacrifices in which their primary role was to actualize and make explicit the correspondences believed to exist between powerful divine forces and various objects in the human world” (2008:820). The function of Vedic mantras that make patent the connection between human existence and “powerful divine forces” implies the nature of supernatural power within the Hindu worldview. The divine force – the cosmic rhythm that penetrates all beings and phenomena – is diffused and active within the world through the mystical interconnection that

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7 Translated from Thai by researcher. “สัทธิ์ณีเนื่องสภาพานศาสตร์จากเชื่อว่าผ่านจากพราหมณ์”

8 Translated from Thai by researcher. “ระบบวิชาความรู้ นักเกี่ยวกับหลักคำคือ เช่น วิทยาศาสตร์ประวัติศาสตร์มนุษยศาสตร์”

9 Though *saiyavedh* and *saiyasart* are exchangeable in common usage, there is a subtle distinction between them. While *saiyasart* refers to a discipline of mystical knowledges, *saiyavedh* denotes the verbal formulae and ritualistic procedures used to manipulate mystical power. The suffix *-vedh* is the Thai transliteration of the sanskrit term *Veda*. Therefore, *saiyavedh* specifically evokes the image of spells and incantations, while *saiyasart* gives a sense of the totality of knowledge and protocols concerning mystical power.
binds things together. In this view, the divine power is omnipresent. It manifests itself in multiple forms and runs through variable channels. Deities are the manifested, anthropomorphized forms of divine power while spells and mantras are means through which one taps on this power.

Burchett argues further that the image of ritual specialists who appropriate divine force through the use of verbal formulae appears absurd or even blasphemous to Protestant theologians. For them, spells and mantras uttered to produce transformative effects on reality show humans’ “irrational attempts to manipulate the Divine” (2008:831). The believed effect of mantras clashes head on with Christian theology in which God is the sole and absolute source of divine power. Humans can only perform supplicative prayers and keep faith in God’s grace; they cannot manipulate him at will. Burchett’s argument is cited here to underscore that variable conceptions of supernatural power produce different convictions about human agency in relation to this power. The function of Vedic mantras and the origin of ravenous spirits may appear illogical to Protestant theologians who hold a different concept of supernatural power. The idea that humans can tap into a higher source of power is, however, perfectly sensible to members of cultures who construe supernatural power as a natural resource accessible to those who master the required knowledge and skills.

Another source of intellectual influence informing Thai conceptions of supernatural power is Theravada Buddhism. It shares the Hindu view of supernatural power as a resource accessible to humans; however, it has a different outlook on the means of access. Buddhist monks attain supranormal power not through ritualistic knowledge, but through a mental transformation occurring when their minds dwell in an advanced meditative state.
In the Theravada Buddhist view, supernatural power is natural because it is an aspect of a still and concentrating mind. This power is attainable not only by those who adopt a Buddhist path to liberation, but also by non-Buddhist spiritual adepts practicing asceticism. Underlying this belief is the premise that a clear and quiet mind free from worldly desire automatically generates an innate power that enables its owner to transcend natural rules. The Pali canon – a corpus of Buddhist scriptures written in Pali – is permeated with accounts of how the Buddha and his disciples performed miracles to convert disbelieving ascetics. A well-known incident happened in the town of Sravasti where the Buddha preached his teaching “while emitting fire from the upper half of his body and water from his lower half” (McClintock 2011:91).

Supernatural power, called by the Buddha as one of the “mundane achievements” (Clough 2010:410), is construed in Buddhist tradition as a byproduct one attains automatically upon reaching the highest meditative stage.

The four levels of meditation in Buddhism are known as the four stages of jhanas. As the practitioner reaches the fourth level, he experiences an inner transformation brought about by the realization of six supranormal knowledges – or six abhinna – to use the Buddhist term. These knowledges and the supranormal abilities pertaining to them will be elaborated in the section about the role of Buddhist monks in the ravenous spirit tradition. For the time being, suffice it to say that Buddhism construes supernatural force not as an aspect of the Supreme God, but as an innate power emanating from a meditative mind dwelling in equanimity. In light of this axiomatic tenet, supernatural power in the Buddhist view is accessible to humans. It renders sense to beliefs about the origin of ravenous spirits – if humans can appropriate supernatural
power, they can also abuse it. Therefore, a monitoring apparatus is required to prevent and
punish the unethical use of mystical power.

Beliefs about the origin of ravenous spirits articulate ethical concerns about the use of
magic that would be irrelevant if supernatural power was construed differently. As an ethically
neutral force accessible to meditational and magical adepts regardless of their moral quality,
supernatural power becomes highly susceptible to misuse by morally corrupted practitioners. The
taboo pertains to magical formula are monitoring devices preventing the unethical use of
mystical power; while one's transformation into a ravenous spirit host is the punishment for this
crime. The tenets about ravenous spirits' origin are valid and meaningful for believers because
they resonate with the concept of supernatural power viable in northeastern Thai culture. Those
unfamiliar with or skeptical about the validity of this concept, understandably, view any
postulates derived from it as absurd.

3.3.2. The Reality of Incorporeality

When asked about the form of ravenous spirits, informants gave disparate answers. The
village headman at Ban Pa Ao posited that the ravenous spirits attacking the community in 2013
took the forms of a big black dog and a black monkey (personal interview, May 24, 2014). Mrs.
Tongsuk – a healer and exorcist in the village – recounted her encounter with a ravenous spirit in
a dream. It assumed the form of its host and pleaded with her not to interfere with its attempt to
devour some victims in order to relieve its hunger (personal interview, June 30, 2013). Ravenous
spirits' volatile and variable appearances reveal their amorphous nature and their ability to
assume any concrete form when they are in contact with material reality.
Another axiom underpinning ravenous spirit beliefs grants the reality of incorporeal beings. This axiom has its basis in a Buddhist cosmology that construes the universe as a totality of distinct but interrelated planes of existence. Each plane is subject to its own operative rules suitable to the mode of existence led by inhabitants of that plane. In the realm of humans and animals, existence is not possible without corporeal form. However, this rule does not apply to other realms such as the higher world of divine beings free from bodily forms and sensual feelings. In this multifaceted universe, corporeality is an intrinsic trait of beings of the lesser orders; their tangible and static forms bind them to cravings and desires inherent in these forms. However, this cosmology accommodates another state of incorporeality attributed to sinful spirits that wander about the earth. Unlike the incorporeal divine beings who are free from a concrete body and the cravings associated with it, sinful spirits are still plagued by these cravings (such as hunger and other undesirable sensual feelings) but their lack of form prevents them from satisfying these cravings.

The Buddhist universe contains thirty-one planes divided into three major categories: kama loka, the planes in the domain of form and sensation; rupa loka, the planes with form but no sensual enjoyment (spiritual bliss prevails among beings in these realms); and arupa loka, the planes with neither form nor sensual feeling. Tambiah remarks that the hierarchical order of this universe – with kama loka at the base and arupa loka on top – is arranged on the basis of “a progression from corporeality to incorporeality, from body to intellectual” (Tambiah 1970:36).

As this depiction of a universe is transferred to the northeastern Thai context, it merges with local beliefs in phii (̄): amorphous spirits that intermingle with humans despite their otherworldly status. Phii in the northeastern Thai worldview does not exclusively refer to ghosts
of the dead. The term is also used in an animistic context to denote the spirits of inanimate entities. Spirits guarding paddy fields, for instance, are known as *phii na*; and those guarding houses are *phii ban*. Buddhist cosmology reaffirms local beliefs in *phii* as it maintains that incorporeal beings exist in their planes of existence separated from but interrelated with the human world. Simultaneously, local beliefs reconfigure Buddhist cosmology by asserting that *phii* are not confined to their realm but are able to interact closely with humans. This reconfiguration results in a more obscure and fluid boundary between different planes of existence. In his study of the dynamic between Theravada Buddhism and Laotian spirit cults, John Holt remarks that though a “great” tradition like Buddhism imparts its content and structure to local spirit cults, it is adapted and adjusted to these “small” traditions as well (2009:7). In the same way that the Laotians interpret Buddhist concepts through the lens embedded in and informed by local spirit cults, the northeastern Thais also conceptualize Buddhist cosmology through the idioms of local beliefs in *phii*. The dynamic between imported and indigenous belief systems produces the axiom that grants a reality to ravenous spirits and other incorporeal beings.

In the cosmology as described in the Pali Canon, *karma loka* consists of six heavens and five worlds. The first four worlds are inhabited by humans, animals, ghosts, and demons respectively. Located in the fifth world are eight hells where sinners are punished (Tambiah 1970:36). The six heavens are abodes of celestial beings replete with all kinds of delight and sensual pleasure. Though these five worlds and six heavens are in the domain where form and sensation predominate, three categories of beings in this domain can exist without adhering to a fixed form. They are ghosts, demons, and the beings in the six heavens. These entities are shape-shifters; that is, they can assume any forms at will and their ability to transcend formal
boundaries is emblematic of their otherworldly status. In light of this tenet, Buddhist cosmology not only grants that there are modes of existence independent from formal configuration, it also asserts that to think about existence solely in terms of physical form is naïve and anthropocentric. Form in Buddhism is transitory. It is an ever-shifting, superficial part of the Self rather than its essence.

In comparison to positivism, Buddhism has a different conception of form and the physical senses. While positivism posits that physical senses are tools of observation crucial for the production of genuine and replicable knowledge, Buddhism construes the body and sensual perception as the profane part of beings. Form is transient, illusory, and subject to worldly suffering. Attachment to form produces ignorance – a false impression that corporeal existence is permanent and, therefore, worth clinging to. This outlook on physical form and its transient nature is articulated in “Maha-dukkhakkhandha Sutta” or “The Discourse on the Great Mass of Suffering”¹¹ in the Pali Canon. When the Buddha was asked by his disciples to elaborate on the illusory nature of form, he responded by describing a young, beautiful woman in perfect health. As time goes by, the woman's comely form languishes because of old age and sickness. Finally it becomes a decomposed carcass devoured by scavengers. Form in Buddhism is the site of suffering as much as the deceptive surface – it gives a false impression of durability and permanence despite the transcendental rule of change and degradation. Based on this outlook on form, Buddhist mind-body dualism emerges. Existence is defined not by transitory form but by

¹⁰ A broad definition of the term given in Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia (1996) is applied here. According to this source, positivism is the “school of thought adopting the view that the methods of natural science—involved observation based on sense experience—are the only route to genuine knowledge of the world.”

mind. While form is mundane and superficial, mind is the essence – the core of the Self that has the potential to obtain eternal bliss once it is liberated from the ignorance caused by attachment to form.

This axiomatic view imparts its content to the ravenous spirit belief tradition. It underpins the postulate that beings can exist without a concrete and static embodiment; and there are beings in this multifaceted universe to whom the lack of corporeal form is the natural state of existence. This postulate renders sense to the formlessness of phi in local beliefs. Ravenous spirits, like other types of phi in northeastern Thai supernatural beliefs, have no form because they are not beings of this world. Their lack of form makes sense for believers since it denotes their otherworldly status.

3.3.3. Hunger and Greed

Ravenous spirits' formlessness and insatiable hunger are retributions for their hosts' avarice. The host's indulgence in gratifying his or her desire leads to the abuse of magical power that transforms into a ravenous spirit. Though the desire it fulfills is not unethical, the magical power overused in order to appease an excessive desire is considered inherently immoral. For instance, a well-known magical formula among lay practitioners is called “rice coming to the barn” (kao keun kum – สิ้นสุดภัย). Once the formula is properly uttered, the barn of the reciter will be automatically filled with rice. However, he is restricted to reciting the formula only once in a given period of time. Immoderate usage of the magic results in a ravenous spirit. In light of this tenet about the origin of ravenous spirits, we can see that greed is identified with insatiable hunger in the ravenous spirit belief tradition. Practitioners who use their magic out of greed are punished by being turned into the hosts of wicked spirits notorious for their perpetual hunger.
Due to their lack of physical form, ravenous spirits do not have the means to gratify this craving. They personify pure hunger that will never be satiated no matter how many lives they consume.

Hunger has a special connotation in the northeastern Thai worldview. Its conceptualization as the punishment for avarice is based on the dualism of lack and excess that haunts the northeastern Thai imagination. Due to its extreme climate and sandy soil, this part of Thailand has been alternately ravaged by drought and flood – extreme conditions of lack and excess in which no living things can survive. The deeply rooted anxiety caused by these two antithetical conditions is vividly manifested in vernacular expressions such as legends and folksongs. The myth about the princess and the white squirrel recounted in the first section of this chapter, for instance, opens with the image of a vast wasteland ravaged by drought. The story ends with a big flood that destroys the princess's kingdom. Lack and excess, as cultural idioms viable in the northeastern Thai worldview, inform the image of the greedy hosts and the ravenous spirits residing within them.

While hunger is an ordeal caused by lack, avarice is a moral frailty denoting excessive desire. Ravenous spirits and their hosts are bridging figures that forge a causal link between hunger and avarice. They articulate the idea that a perpetual and acute sense of lack is a punishment for excessive, uncurbed desire. This connection between avarice and hunger is a conceptual model that configures the northeastern Thai idea about sinful spirits. Humans who are selfish, who indulge in gratifying their desire and refuse to share their abundant resources with those in need turn into spirits tortured by perpetual hunger either while still alive or after death. This tenet is manifest in multiple forms in northeastern Thai supernatural belief traditions. Its reiteration and variable expressions attest to its viability in the culture.
Another class of sinful spirits that reiterates the axiom about greed and hunger is *pretas* or hungry ghosts. *Pretas* and ravenous spirits are different variants of the same prototype that construes hunger as a punishment for selfish greed. Practitioners of magic consumed by greed generate ravenous spirits within them while still alive; stingy individuals turn into hungry ghosts after death. *Pretas* either live in a special realm of hell or wander about on earth, tortured by perpetual hunger. They are more pathetic than harmful as they loiter in different places, especially near temples, asking pious Buddhists for a small share of good karma they earn from performing meritorious acts. Tambiah vividly describes the appearance of *pretas*: “They are of gigantic size, they have dried up limbs, loose skin, enormous bellies. They continually wander about, consumed with hunger and thirst, yet never able to eat or drink because of their small mouths, constricted throats and the scorching, boiling heat that emanates from their bodies” (1970: 39). *Pretas*'s persistent hunger and thirst, as Tambiah remarks, are an extreme punishment for being stingy in merit making. Humans who refuse to offer food to monks suffer as a starved *pretas* after death.

In several cases, the stinginess characterizing *pretas* is attributed to ravenous spirit hosts. The alleged hosts are individuals believed to be well-versed in magical knowledge but isolating themselves from community. This voluntary isolation is interpreted by the community as an attempt to keep their knowledge exclusively for their private use. Mrs. Tongsuk, for instance, reported on the strange behavior of Mr. Chai, who was suspected of hosting ravenous spirits. His mysteriously accumulating wealth was read by the community as the fruit of Mr. Chai's magical knowledge. His voluntary seclusion from social interactions, according to her, revealed his intent to monopolize the use of this special resource (personal interview, June 30, 2013). As *pretas* are
punished for their unwillingness to donate their resources for the sustenance of Buddhism, ravenous spirits hosts are also punished for their refusal to use their special talents to serve the community. Both pretas and ravenous spirits suffer from perpetual hunger as the retribution for their anti-altruism. Within the northeastern Thai culture, which construes hunger as the mirror image of avarice and overindulgence in self-interest, the image of sinful spirits tortured by hunger as a result of their greed and stinginess is culturally meaningful. Ravenous spirits’ voracity is reflected in a northeastern Thai adage that says: *The greedy are always hungry.*

3.2.4 Caprice

In the northeastern Thai worldview, a trait distinguishing malevolent ghosts from benevolent spirits is caprice. The Thai term for spirit is phi - an inclusive term that denotes no distinction between different kinds of spirits that interact with humans in distinct ways. The inclusiveness of the term phi fails to reflect the disparate personalities and roles of guardian and evil spirits in northeastern Thai supernatural belief traditions. While the former impose afflictions on humans to sustain the established norm, the latter do so out of unpredictable whims (Tambiah 1970: 266). Mrs. Dang's story of afflictions encapsulates the difference between these two antithetical categories of spirits. The headache Mrs. Dang suffered after giving birth to her first child was attributed to the house spirits. Her negligence about informing them of a critical event in her life was believed to result in a physical affliction, which was a punishment for her disrespectful treatment of the household guardians. The mental disturbances she showed in a later phase of her postpartum period, however, were diagnosed as a ravenous spirit possession. Coaxed by the exorcist to reveal its motivation for possessing Mrs. Dang, the spirit disclosed that it merely followed Mrs. Dang's brother-in-law whose advertising truck with its loud, cheerful
folk music attracted its attention. The caring brother-in-law happened to visit Mrs. Dang that day. The spirit came with him, saw that Mrs. Dang was in a sensitive condition, and possessed her (personal interview, May 25, 2013). Mrs. Dang's story illustrates a defining characteristic of ravenous spirits. They are feared as much as loathed for their caprice. They bother humans not out of necessity to satiate their perpetual hunger, but merely according to their whims which seem absurd and irrational to humans. What, then, renders caprice meaningful and viable in northeastern Thai supernatural belief tradition? Why do northeastern Thais construe malevolent spirits as capricious?

Scholars studying supernatural beliefs in Thailand and other countries in southeast Asia offer various insights into people's orientations toward the supernatural world. Steven Piker contends that non-religious components, such as patterns of social interaction and interpersonal relationships, impart content and structure to Thai peasants' orientation toward the sacred world (1968:384). The pattern of relationships between supernatural agents and humans in Thai culture is like that between patrons and clients. Supplicants plead with spirits to act benevolently or not to interfere malevolently with intended tasks without any guarantees that their requests will be granted. This patron-client orientation toward the supernatural world among Thai peasants, Piker further argues, reflects the importance of networking and beneficial connections for personal success in the Thai hierarchical social structure (1968:391). As the success of an initiated task depends entirely on the patron's favor, the desirable effect the supplicant pleads for relies solely on the unpredictable temperament of the supplicated spirit. The caprice attributed to supernatural agents is an emanation of the patron-client relationship that imparts its structure and content to both social interaction and the orientation toward the supernatural world in Thai culture.
Piker's analysis, focusing on a sociological component that informs Thai portrayal of capricious spirits, downplays ecological factors that affect this depiction. Piker postulates that the patron-client mode of social interaction is an outcome of the Thai peasant's mentality, characterized by doubt about personal capacities and resources available to handle troublesome situations. This lack of confidence in one's ability to solve problems results in the anticipation of *deus ex machina* – assistance from a powerful external agent that acts in one's favor – to eliminate both mundane and supra-mundane hindrances. A major drawback of Piker's argument lies in its representation of Thai peasants as superstitious folk whose low self-respect results in the heavy reliance on a *deus ex machina* to cope with life crises and challenges. Their distrust of external agents and the sporadic granting of favors by these agents form the basis for the caprice attributed to supernatural beings. My argument is that in the northeastern Thai context, the caprice ascribed to ravenous spirits and other malevolent ghosts does not stem from a “folk” mentality characterized by dissonance between high dependency on external agents and doubt about the intent of these agents. Capricious spirits are the outcome of existence in the unique environmental context in which survival depends solely on a turbulent climate and an unyielding earth. The northeastern Thai economy primarily relies on agricultural activities – first and foremost among them is rice planting. Of all careers, agriculture is the most unpromising occupation in northeast Thailand, a region known for its infertile, salty soil and extreme weather. A green paddy field promising abundant produce may turn into a barren field yielding nothing within a few weeks because the constant and generous torrent of rain abruptly ceases. As life is dependent on unpredictable and uncontrollable nature, the northeastern Thai world is filled with incorporeal beings whose whims and interventions are accountable for human success and
failure. Capricious spirits are a projection of the insecurity and uncertainty developed from precarious existence in the midst of an unsteady and unpredictable environment. They stand for the uncontrollable forces that render hard work and persistent effort futile. A belief in whimsical supernatural agents among northeastern Thai peasants is reflective of the view that the success of new ventures requires more than personal determination and capability. There are always external forces that can nullify one's persistent effort in the blink of an eye. Supplication made to whimsical supernatural agents is not so much about low self-respect but about the acute awareness of fickle fate that prevails in the northeastern Thai worldview.

3.3 Phenomenological Sequence

3.3.1. Multiple Causations and Dependent Origination

Tambiah, in “Magic, Science, and Religion in Western Thought” (1990), remarked on the dichotomy between “true religion” and “false magic” entailed in the Judaeo-Christian conception of pagan worship. Judaic religions conceive God as the First Cause from which every existence and phenomenon arises. The universe is ex nihilo in the sense that nothing precedes God and his creation. Natural processes and creatures come into existence by God's divine decree. Morality and evil are also God-imposed as they are defined in relation to his divine will. The tenet entailed to this conception of God is that there is no “automaticity or mechanical causality” (1990:6) that systematically distributes the fruits of human actions. The relation between action and consequence transpires according to the divine plan since God is not subject to any systems or rules that transcend his supreme being. Monotheism condemns faith in other agencies and their transformative power over reality. Divine will is the first and only causal agent in relation to which everything else is derivative and consequential.
Pagan worship – or religious traditions defined as “pagan” by Judaeo-Christian tradition because of their polytheistic orientation to the divine – is “magical” and “false” in the sense that it accepts the existence of primordial forces anterior to the Supreme Being. As this primordial force manifests itself in multiple forms and functions through multiple agents, it requires pluralistic worshipping practices and supplicating techniques to address different holders of this force. In addition, since this impersonal force operates with its own rules independent from the control of a single supreme being, it is possible for different agents to tap into this force and become active agents that produce consequences in the outside world. The polytheistic worship that characterizes “pagan” religions accommodates multiple causations of existence and phenomena. While the idioms of causation in the Judeo-Christian faith are all related to God, pagan traditions believe in multiple causal agents accountable for both pleasant and unpleasant incidents in human lives. In Judaic religions, physical afflictions can be construed as a part of a divine plan, a test of one's faith in God, or a threat inflicted by Satan – God's antithesis. In traditions devoid of the concept of one Supreme Being, however, these afflictions can be attributed to malevolent spirits, to offended deities, or to causal machinations that automatically deliver the fruits of all actions to their performers.

Northeastern Thai worldview is “pagan” in the sense described above. Informed by Theravada Buddhism and local spirit cults, it accepts the roles played by multiple agents in the actions that affect human lives. Diverse theories of causation are subsumed under the axiomatic tenet that all phenomena are consequences of particular causes. Events do not pop up from nowhere or from some chaotic forces that randomly produce absurd effects. This idea is manifest through two Buddhist doctrines that, unlike most Buddhist philosophical concepts that engage
only scholarly interests and advance practitioners,\textsuperscript{12} seamlessly integrate into vernacular practice. The reason for this integration of the doctrines of karma and dependent origination lies in their congruence with the local worldview that conceives phenomena as interdependent – each is a cause as well as a consequence of others. Karmic law requires that all actions yield fruits. And causality is the governing principle by which all occurrences are interconnected. The doctrine of dependent origination reinforces this paradigm as it posits that everything lacks intrinsic essence. They are transitory and non-self as their emergences are conditioned by other external agents. Once these conditioning agents cease to exist, their derivatives cease to be. The doctrines of karma and dependent origination inform the northeastern Thai mindset in which an occurrence becomes intelligible and meaningful through its causal relation with other occurrences. In this mindset, nothing is a result of coincidence. There are always agents accountable for both the merits and miseries happening in one's life. This axiomatic tenet results in a worldview that accommodates different theories of causation. Planetary orbit, demonological or divine intervention, and karmic retribution are schemes of causality existing side by side in northeastern Thai worldview (Tambiah 1970:56).

Conflicts between diverse theories of causation in the northeastern Thai worldview are negated as they respond to the same cultural imperative – the conviction that all phenomena are subject to certain causes and these causes are to some extent scrutable. The selection and

\textsuperscript{12} Michael M. Ames comments on the divide between the “grand” Buddhist doctrines and the “vernacular” ones that answer to the more practical problems in Sinhalese Buddhist tradition. The ultimate goal of entering nirvana is construed by Sinhalese lay practitioners as a far-fetched goal that requires great deeds from uncountable lives. Only a handful of pious monks aspire to this final goal while lay Buddhists in general are more interested in accumulating meritorious karmic fruits to enhance their present life or to secure a better reincarnation. The doctrine of karma predominates in the vernacular practice of Sinhalese Buddhism. It informs the goal Sinhalese Buddhists aspire to when they perform religious activities (1964).
application of causal theories are on an ad hoc basis. A northeastern Thai may abandon a causal theory he or she usually employs and adopt another one as he or she discovers that it fits better with the experience in question. A spiritual healer may suggest his client to resort to conventional medicine as he discovers that his symptoms do not fit the description of ravenous spirit afflictions as known in the tradition.\textsuperscript{13} He would not be bothered by the idea that the scientific-rationalist paradigm and ravenous spirit beliefs are mutually exclusive; and that only one of them provides the final, correct answers for everything. As the healer discovers that ravenous spirit beliefs are inadequate to make sense of his client's experience, he suggests addressing this experience within another paradigm that may provide an effective solution to the problem. For him, different theories of causation supplement rather than negate each other. They are all valid as long as they can render baffling phenomena meaningful.

Many scholars who study the relationship between Theravada Buddhism and local supernatural beliefs in Thailand comment on the conflict between the doctrine of karma and local spirit cults. Their remark is succinctly articulated by Tambiah: “if the doctrine of karma gives an explanation of present suffering and squarely puts the burden of release on individual effort, then the doctrine that supernatural agents can cause or relieve suffering and that relief can come through propitiating them contradicts the karma postulate” (1970:41). For Tambiah, this conflict is not so much about the inconsistency of northeastern Thai worldview that accommodates contradictory postulates; but rather about the epistemic authority that makes these conflicting beliefs equally viable in northeastern Thai culture. Since the doctrine of karma fails to account

\textsuperscript{13} This is not a mere hypothetical situation fabricated to support the argument. Mrs. Dang told of a healer who told her parents to take her to the hospital. Mrs. Dang suffered from menstrual cramp misconstrued by her parents as a ravenous spirit possession. They called for a healer who, after performing a ritual to define the cause of her symptom, claimed that her illness was natural. This accurate diagnosis forms the ground for Mrs. Dang's belief in his spiritual power.
for some phenomena and this failure challenges the axiomatic tenet that all phenomena are the result of certain causes, beliefs in supernatural agents are resorted to and the validity of this axiomatic tenet is reaffirmed. Even though supernatural beliefs, Buddhist doctrines, and the positivistic conception of reality contradict one another, they are valid and logical within the northeastern Thai worldview, which requires variable theories of causation to sustain the dominant assertion that all phenomena are accountable when subject to the right heuristic frame.

The ravenous spirit belief tradition is a theory of causation that renders inexplicable, nonsensical misfortunes meaningful. Embedded in the worldview that accommodates diverse theories of causation but dismisses coincidences, the ravenous spirit tradition is a rationalizing scheme employed by its adherents to make sense of a specific class of experiences that are unaccountable in other causal schemes. Successive deaths of healthy individuals who, prior to their collapse, show no signs of illness, are hard to explain with other idioms of causation. If a death epidemic among healthy humans is caused by a natural agent, such as the failure of internal organs that causes sudden death, why did no perceptible symptoms among the victims hint at this dysfunction at all? If it is the fruit of their bad karma, how can several individuals in the same community have a similar karmic build that leads them to the same fate at almost the same time? Coincidence is ruled out as it is culturally unviable. The ravenous spirit belief tradition earns its currency from the role it plays in culture. Since everything is a consequence of something, and there exists a class of phenomena that does not make sense until it is explained in terms of ravenous spirit beliefs, ravenous spirits become causal agents whose intervention in human lives is a likely possibility for the adherents of this belief tradition. In light of this argument, ravenous spirit beliefs are not the outcome of false logic. They are, rather, products of
the constant need to formulate new causal schemes when the existing explanatory paradigms fail
to decipher the mysterious, grotesque aspects of reality. Ravenous spirit beliefs are valid and
logical for believers because they can explain a class of experiences that are inexplicable by
other causal theories and, therefore, sustain the axiomatic view that all phenomena are
consequential.

3.3.2 The Excess of Misfortune

Studying witchcraft among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard (1976) posited that witchcraft
beliefs provide the idioms through which the Azande make sense of and devise reaction to
misfortunes. Unfortunate events for the Azande require explanation as they jeopardize the
normal course of the victims' everyday lives. These events are chaos interfering with the orderly
habits that unfailingly yield predictable and expected results. A Zande potter reported his
experience of being attacked by witchcraft when he discovered that his pots broke in the kiln. He
attributed this failure to witchcraft and rationalized that he had made pottery in the kiln countless
times before. He always employed the same techniques and invested the same amount of care
and time. There were very few times that this consistent habit yielded failures and he suspected
that witchcraft was behind them. Since the potter cannot fathom the reason why the method that
is usually effective produces failure at particular times, he rationalizes this failure using the
idiom of witchcraft, construed by the Azande as an external evil force that wreaks havoc on
everyday life which normally transpires in a predictable way.

While misfortunes among the Azande are considered out of the ordinary and, therefore,
require explanation, misfortunes in northeastern Thai worldview are accepted as undesirable but
common aspects of human life. As apparent in a Thai proverb “Bad luck for seven times then
good fortune for an other seven times” (“สิ่งบุญกุศลเจ็ดด้วย”), misfortune and blessing exist in equal proportion in human life. Unfortunate events followed by good luck, or vice versa, is considered normal and understandable in the northeastern Thai worldview that favors balance over perfection. Life is not always expected to be smooth and pleasant. This conception of the balance between rise and fall in human life imparts its content to the ravenous spirit belief tradition. What is considered strange and requires explanation in this belief tradition is not misfortune in general but successive cases of misfortune.

Many informants who participated in this study stated that what strikes them as odd is not a single case of death, no matter how unlikely or strange it may be. It is a series of misfortunes that befall their communities one after another in a specific period of time that convinces them of ravenous spirits' wicked influence behind the scenes. The ravenous spirit crisis in 2013 at Ban Pa Ao village involved four cases of healthy persons suddenly dying, one fatal motorcycle accident, and a possession occurring to a teenage girl. This eruption of misfortunes is, according to the village headman, out of the ordinary and hints at an intervention by malevolent spirits: “I would not have felt suspicious at all if there had been only one or two deaths, but there had been five plus other strange events reported by villagers. The community must have been plagued by an evil influence” (personal interview, May 24, 2014). The headman of Ban Kut Chap village in Udonthani also reported on misfortunes that closely followed one another and caused a ravenous spirit panic among the villagers in 2007. The death of a young child preceded several cases of illness whose mysterious causes eluded biomedicine. Then a number of cattle died (personal interview, June 23, 2013). Ravenous spirit beliefs are resorted to whenever unfortunate
events consecutively befall a belief community. The high frequency of misfortune is considered nonsensical as much as abnormal in the eyes of ravenous spirit believers.

As succinct and condensed expressions of the postulates that have currency in a specific culture, proverbs are windows through which we can have a view of dispositions and preoccupations that prevail in that culture. Two Thai proverbs disclose that the high frequency of misfortunes suffered by individuals is associated with two agents in Thai worldview: the automaticity of one's bad karma and the intervention by phii or ghosts. Hearing of a series of misfortunes befalling a person, a Thai would respond with either one of these two statements: “The fruit of bad karma is worsened by another” (“เคราะห์กรรมในบ้านคราบครีบ”) or “Ghosts exacerbate one's falling fortune” (“ภิชิตภัยเพิ่ม”),. However, these proverbs are applicable only to an individual's misfortunes. When havoc is wreaked haphazardly on different persons in a community, there exists in culture no verbal formulations that render this phenomenon accountable and thus comprehensible.14 Ravenous spirit beliefs are heuristic devices that render sense to the high frequency of a unique class of misfortunes that, though befalling individuals, destabilize the entire community. Taking into account how successive misfortunes baffle the northeastern Thais and how this bafflement is embedded in a culture that dismisses coincidence,

14 It is noted here that though the concept of collective fate is less articulated and less common than the concept of individual destiny, it exists and has currency in Thai culture. The Thais attribute several unfortunate events, such as natural disaster, famine, war, and other calamities that have a wholesale destructive impact on the entire group, to the lax morality of the group. When a Thai remarks that a community or a country is in its “low morale,” he or she thinks that its inhabitants are morally degraded, and this degradation renders the group vulnerable to external, evil forces. The concept of collective fate is also reflected in the belief in guardian spirits who watch over the collective wellbeing. Collective entities in all levels, ranging from a village to a country, are protected by guardian spirits whose degree of power varies according to the morality of group members. A guardian spirit becomes weak and fails to rescue the community from its downfall whenever group members deviate from the righteous path.
ravenous spirit panic is not superstitious but a logical reaction to bewildering occurrences that jeopardize the familiar, uneventful everyday life.

3.4 The Human Sequence

3.4.1. The Host

Beliefs about ravenous spirit hosts articulate the ambivalent attitude the northeastern Thais have toward those possessing mystical power. Their ability to tap into supranormal forces induces respect as much as fear among those interacting with them. Northeastern Thai communities are well aware of the versatile role these adepts are qualified to play. On the one hand they can act as benevolent altruists who use their special resources to help those in need. On the other hand they can become wicked sorcerers who inflict harm on others for worldly benefits. This ambivalent attitude forms the ground for beliefs concerning ravenous spirits hosts and the crimes that bring about their demonological transformation. Spiritual healers, coercing their clients for monetary incentive, are believed to turn into ravenous spirit hosts. Practitioners of magic, in a similar fashion, generate ravenous spirits within them when they exercise harmful magic for the bribes their clients offer. The image of the ravenous spirit host is formulated in light of the fear and distrust the northeastern Thais harbor against overwhelming and abused supernatural powers. This attitude emerges from the axiom that supernatural power is ethically neutral energy secured from misuse by the principle of balance and egalitarian access. Once an agent violates this principle by getting a disproportionately large share of this force, collective

15 Reverend Somsak, a Buddhist monk in a temple in Ubon Ratchathani, explained a cause that turns practitioners of healing magic into the hosts of ravenous spirits: “They are greedy. The fee for their services exceeds the proper rate set by their mentors. Their mentors said they can collect five bahts from their clients, but they ask for ten bahts” (personal interview, July 7, 2013).
welfare is at risk. With immense power at his disposal, there is no guarantee that the person will not abuse it.

Much has been said about the Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of supernatural power that inform the northeastern Thai worldview and ravenous spirit beliefs. But more needs to be said about the way these conceptions dictate a culturally meaningful reaction to the individuals believed to possess exalted supernatural power. This reaction is translated into beliefs about ravenous spirit hosts whose undue mastery over the ethically neutral, mystical power threatens collective welfare. A comparison with the Judaeo-Christian conception of supernatural power will help clarify this point. In Judaeo-Christian theology, a mystical intervention is moral or immoral depending on its source. God and his retinue are sources of righteous divine power; while Satan and his followers master evil forces. The moral quality of these polarized sources of power cannot be altered by humans. It does not make sense in this religious tradition to say that somebody employs God's power to perform wicked deeds, or that a witch exercises Satan's power to fulfill altruistic tasks. God's power is always ethical and always serves righteous purposes; while the opposite is true of Satan's power. This clear-cut demarcation between ethical and unethical mystical power rules out the suspicion and distrust caused by the ambiguous and versatile role of individuals endowed with this power. They are either God's or the devil's agents – the former is venerated and revered; the latter is condemned and feared.

The northeastern Thai conception of supernatural power, however, does not pronounce this distinct boundary between virtuous saints and vicious sorcerers. Construed as ethically neutral, freely accessible, and anterior to deities, supernatural power in itself is beyond right and wrong. Its ethical value is ad hoc; that is, defined case by case by the manner in which
practitioners put it to use. Without intrinsic moral quality or deities to monitor its usage, supernatural power can be highly hazardous if its users employ it for unethical purposes. This conception of supernatural power as an effective force susceptible to misuse informs the northeastern Thai ambivalent feeling toward individuals known for their mastery over this power. The beliefs concerning ravenous spirit hosts articulate this deeply entrenched attitude.

As an impersonal and freely accessible force, supernatural power needs an ethical code to monitor its usage. Egalitarian access is the ethical principle that dictates culturally viable reactions to individuals who violate this code. The ravenous spirit host is an embellished variant among diverse representations of an archetypal figure whose immense supernatural power transgresses egalitarian principles. Different variants of this figure are ubiquitous in Hindu and Buddhist mythologies that impart their contents to northeastern Thai supernatural traditions. As Tambiah states, Hindu and Buddhist mythologies are populated by demons, gods, and men whose strict asceticism makes them “powerful to the point of threatening the economy of the entire universe” (1970:324). In some cases, these ascetics aim to accumulate supernatural power in order to be invincible. But in other cases, they are world-renouncers who seek spiritual liberation. Regardless of their motives, these figures instigate cosmic imbalance by acquiring a threateningly large share of supernatural power. Aware of the possible calamity brought about by this overwhelming power if misused by its owner, other beings initiate schemes of temptation to debase the ascetic vigor of these figures. An ascetic in Hindu mythology named Visvamitra, for example, practiced asceticism to the point that he could create a river and a new galaxy adorned with stars and planets. His exalted ascetic power, sufficient to eliminate the entire universe, threatened Indra – the king of gods – who sent a celestial nymph to seduce him (Van Buiten
Several versions of Gautama Buddha's encounter with Mara articulate this same culturally embedded fear of an individual whose unwavering practice of asceticism induces anxiety among others. A version recounted in The Vinaya of the Mulasarvastivadins has the Buddha displaying his mystical power to counterattack the demon king who, out of fear for the Buddha's ascetic power and his teachings that will rescue people from a demonic trap, attempts to hinder him from attaining enlightenment (Stache-Rosen 1975). Another version has it that the demon king, seeing the power of the Buddha's vow to pursue enlightenment that causes six earthquakes, was anxious about this extraordinary marvel and gathered his army to destroy the source of this exalted and threatening power (Coomaraswamy and Nivedita 1913:268).

Mythical characters whose immense supernatural power causes suspicion and anxiety among others are variants of an archetypal figure that imparts its content to the image of the ravenous spirit host. The reactions of other beings to these mythic figures agree with a prototypical scheme determining how this undue share of mystical force should be received and interpreted when it occurs in one's circle. The scheme dictates that excessive supernatural power should be viewed with suspicion and fear since one can never be certain of its wielder's moral quality, and because one can never guarantee that the wielder will not be corrupted by his or her threateningly immense power. This view underpins and justifies the acts performed to curtail this power, rendering them sensible or even the obligatory reactions to individuals believed to own exalted supernatural power. Compared to these frightening individuals, ravenous spirit hosts are even more threatening to collective wellbeing since they have shown clear signs of moral corruption; i.e. they fail to comply with the taboos that prevent the misuse of mystical power. Beliefs concerning the ravenous spirit host reiterate a culturally-bound attitude toward
individuals whose authority is conspicuous to the point that it violates the venerated principles of egalitarianism and balance. The belief that a person can host a wicked spirit if he abuses his immense mystical power is valid and viable in a culture that construes excessive and uncurbed authority as a potential threat.\textsuperscript{16}

3.4.2 The Possessed

When asked how ravenous spirits come to possess the victims and how healing/exorcising rites are conducted, informants employ imagery of interiority versus exteriority to describe their experiences. Reverend Tongchan, for instance, elaborated on how a ravenous spirit gets “inside” its victim: “The spirit detects that the soul of its victim is unwholesome and there is a void in it. This void is caused by a shock or low morale due to physical or mental illness. It makes people susceptible to ravenous spirit possession. Human souls in a normal condition are full and wholesome. Without a hole, ravenous spirits cannot get in” (personal interview, May 26, 2013). Mrs. Buasri recounted a conjecture made by an exorcist who explained to her why she was repeatedly possessed by ravenous spirits: “He said there was an unfilled hole in me. The first possession caused an opening through which the spirit returns into my body” (personal interview, June 3, 2013). Mrs. Somjai described her physical reaction, which she believed to be the sign of de-possession, to drinking a small bottle of holy water provided by a female healer: “I felt sick like a person who drank too much water and felt like

\textsuperscript{16} Mr. Samart rationalized the ravenous spirit accusation made against him using the idioms of this culturally informed fear and distrust of immense authority. He believed that certain people were offended by the way his role in local politics became more and more solid. And the fear that he would monopolize political power instigated his accusation (personal interview, 14 July, 2013). For Mr. Samart, the distrust people harbor against individuals who got a total hold on power and their attempt to curtail that power are typical social behaviors rather than mere motives found in myths and legends.
vomiting. I ran to restroom and puked. After that, this mysterious headache magically disappeared” (personal interview, June 23, 2013). What underlies these testimonies is the metaphor of the body as a vessel that contains the essence of one's identity – the soul. Once the container leaks, it is possible for an alien substance to get inside and mix with this essence. The contamination engenders a mental and emotional chaos displayed by the victims of ravenous spirit afflictions. This interior-exterior dualism dictates the idioms via which ritualistic and physical activities pertaining to ravenous spirits are understood. One is immunized against possession when one's body is properly “tied together” by a charmed white thread, so that there will be no rupture through which ravenous spirits can enter. Physical activities that feature an ejection of internal bodily substance, such as vomit, excretion, and urination, are taken as the signs of de-possession. Like many supernatural traditions around the world, the ravenous spirit belief tradition grants that the body is the abode of the soul. Those most susceptible to the possession by alien forces are people whose souls are weak and unstable in the sense that their souls tend to flee from their abodes at the slightest disturbance. This tenet explains why some categories of people, namely women and sickly individuals, are believed to be more vulnerable to ravenous spirit possession compared to men and healthy people.

I. M. Lewis observed that two mystical explanations of trance found cross-culturally are soul-loss and possession by a supernatural agent. However, these two theories are not mutually exclusive since many supernatural traditions accept that the victim's soul leaves its body first

17 According to Tambiah, the physical pain associated with childbirth renders women's *khwan* more vulnerable compared to men's: “When a woman is pregnant, it is said, she is frightened about the pains and difficulties of childbirth or that she may die. The *khwan* may in these circumstances leave her” (1970:227). Another theory given by several informants participating in this research is that women bleed more often than men do. They bleed during menstruation and childbirth. This regular loss of blood attracts the malevolent, blood-thirsty spirits to them.
then an alien force invades and occupies the empty shell its owner leaves behind. Lewis further elaborates that, in several traditions, possession is not understood as the absence of the victim's soul and the presence of a spirit that takes over the body. Instead, it denotes the stronger power of the alien force that suppresses the victim's weaker soul and manipulates him (1971:29). This view underlies beliefs about ravenous spirit possession and its potential victims. The tradition has it that a person whose soul essence or khwan is weak is highly vulnerable to ravenous spirit possession and that a latent and long term possession is common with ravenous spirits.

The two terms that denote different aspects of human souls in northeastern Thai worldview are khwan (soul essence) and winjan (soul). The former is the indigenous concept referring to the crucial but fragile core of one's being, while the latter is derived from the Pali term vinnana meaning “consciousness” (Tambiah 1970:57). It can be said that khwan is the center of a person's life force that keeps his health, morale, and fortune in good balance, whereas winjan animates his body and regulates his perception. Khwan is believed to be highly vulnerable to negative forces. It flees from its owner whenever he is ill, shocked, or in low spirits. A person whose khwan wanders away is still himself but he will succumb to chronic illness or persistent misfortunes. Prolonged absence of khwan can result in madness or death.

The informants who claimed to have experienced ravenous spirit possessions reasoned that, because their khwan were weak, they were repeatedly bothered by these malicious spirits. Nevertheless, their experiences of being possessed differed significantly. Mrs. Buasri's personality dramatically changed every time she was possessed. She hotly argued with the exorcists and vehemently fought back when they attempted to perform an exorcising rite (personal interview, June 3, 2013). Mrs. Somjai, on the contrary, experienced a more latent
possession. She was perfectly herself and conscious of everything that was going on. The only trouble for her was a mysterious headache that did not go away even after several doses and an injection of sedatives (personal interview, June 23, 2013). The ravenous spirit belief tradition accommodates the theory of a long and latent possession. In light of this theory, the victim does not adopt the personality of or the desire that preoccupies the possessing spirit. She merely suffers from a chronic illness whose cause is unidentified and unresponsive to treatments. While the parasitic spirit gets stronger and stronger, the victim withers away and dies. Reverend Tongchan, a Buddhist monk and a ravenous spirit exorcist, referred to this latent possession as “concealment” (“มัว”) rather than possession: “The spirit slips inside and conceals itself, lying low within the victim, so that it can devour all internal organs and stay there until the victim becomes hollow” (personal interview, May 26, 2013). This explanation denotes another paradigm of possession in which the alien force and the victim's soul coexist in the same body. The former gradually and silently overpowers the latter.

The axiom underlying this concept of latent possession is the view that visible traits can be deceptive. This is especially true with evil agents whose subtle camouflage enables them to survive by maintaining a parasitic relationship with humans oblivious to their presence. A distinct category of evil spirits in Northeastern Thai tradition features fiendish humans who are perfectly normal by day but turn into loathsome ghosts at night. They are known as krasue (นรีผี) and krahang (นรีผี). Similar to ravenous spirits that lie low within their victims and gnaw at their insides bit by bit, krasue and krahang live in the midst of a human community and seamlessly blend with the human environment. They only reveal their true selves when they go out hunting for food at night. The krasue – the female counterpart of the krahang – detaches its
head from its body and flies away; while krahang flies with its whole body, using a pair of threshing baskets as its wings. Humans cannot identify krasue and krahang in their communities until they run into the ghosts at night and see their faces. Belief in the existence of krasue and krahang, and of ravenous spirits that hide quietly within their victims, articulates the obscure boundary between otherworldly beings and humans. In the northeastern Thai worldview, spirits and ghosts can intermingle with humans to the extent that latent possessions and the presence of ghosts that assume human or animal forms can go on for a long while without being discovered. This indistinct and fluctuating barrier between Self and Other is embedded in a worldview that construes interrelatedness and transitoriness as intrinsic qualities of all beings and phenomena. Since the universe is believed to comprise different planes of existence that, though separated, are interrelated, it is granted that beings from these realms can cross the boundaries and intermingle with each other. Besides, the idea of a transitory and ever-shifting Self asserts that the dichotomy between Self and Other is anything but permanent and fixed. A soul may be born as a celestial being in one lifetime but becomes a hungry ghost in the next. In light of this axiomatic tenet, humans and ghosts do not only interact. They can also switch places in the hierarchy of beings as they journey from one birth to another. The image of otherness that lurks beneath the Self makes sense within a worldview that grants a non-static and non-polarized relationship between Self and Other.

3.4.3 Ordained and Lay Practitioners

As mentioned earlier in the section about supernatural power, the northeastern Thai conception of this power is informed by Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The Hindu view that supernatural power is manipulatable by the use of verbal formulae, when transferred to the Thai
context, results in the rise of lay ritual masters and practitioners whose spiritual potency lies primarily in the use of chants and spells (Tambiah 1970:51). The Buddhist view, attributing supernatural power to the practice of advanced levels of meditation, engenders the belief that pious Buddhist monks are qualified to serve as spirit doctors as well as exorcists. This difference generates a hierarchical distinction between ordained and lay practitioners. Since Buddhist monks' supernatural power is believed to be a byproduct of the vigorous practice of meditation primarily aimed at enlightenment, their power is considered purer and less mundane than that of lay practitioners.

This hierarchical distinction results in a code of conduct that lay practitioners are required to observe in order to ensure that their powers are ethical and not derived from evil sources. Mr. Saming, for example, claimed that as a lay spiritual healer, he has to strictly observe eight precepts of Buddhism in order to maintain the efficacy of his healing (personal interview, May 27, 2013). Mr. Sang, when asked what determines the level of spiritual potency of each lay practitioner, stated that it is his moral quality and his compliance with the Buddhist ethical code (personal interview, July 11, 2013). These informants’ comments indicate that lay practitioners can legitimize and guarantee the efficacy of their practices by adopting a monk's habit and state of mind.

Beliefs about the supranormal abilities of monks and lay practitioners who adopt a monk's habits are relatable to the Buddhist doctrine of six knowledges. Reputedly, such practitioners can distinguish natural illness from ravenous spirit afflictions since they are believed to have attained divine eyes and ears – the extrasensory perception enables them to see and hear activities that are not of this world. Also, they can tell fake possessions from genuine
ones because they can read people's minds. The doctrine of six knowledges stipulates that once a person reaches the final meditative stage, he attains, one after another, an assortment of supernatural abilities. First, he becomes able to perform variable supernatural feats like walking on water, flying in the air, or walking through walls. Second, he attains divine ears through which he can hear sounds from other realms of existence, both divine and mundane, both near and far. Then he gains an ability to read people’s minds, to know the direction, the order, and the basis of their thoughts. Finally, he achieves the last three knowledges – the divine eye that allows him to see phenomena and incidents that transpire in the entire universe, the recollection of his own as well as others’ past lives, and insight into impure influences and how to eliminate them. Once all six knowledges are obtained, the meditator achieves an awakening (Clough 2010).

Though the first five knowledges are considered inferior to the last knowledge in terms of soteriological value, they are more significant in Thai supernatural traditions. Buddhist monks and lay practitioners believed to have reached the highest level of meditation are automatically granted the titles of ritual master, clairvoyant, spirit doctor, and exorcist. The belief in their capability to subdue ravenous spirits is sustained by the doctrine of six knowledges. Their services are sought out by clients to solve problems concerning supernatural agents. The ordained and lay practitioners themselves also understand their supernatural abilities in the idioms of this doctrine. When asked how to tell natural illnesses from ravenous spirit afflictions, Mr. Sang explained that he would meditate and then “sight” the real culprit while in a meditative state (personal interview, July 11, 2013). Reverend Meechai – a Buddhist monk well known for his expertise in expelling malicious spirits in Yasothon – attributed his ability to communicate with otherworldly beings to the vigorous practice of meditation. Meditation renders his mind
“peaceful, pure, and firm in equanimity” (personal interview, June 26, 2013). This mental state makes him perceptive of sounds and visions beyond the scope of physical senses. The doctrine of six knowledges informs the way both practitioners and their clients make sense of supranormal abilities. It is the axiomatic postulate whose currency in northeastern Thai culture validates beliefs concerning ravenous spirit exorcists and healers.

4. Conclusion: Is an Emic Description of Others’ Belief Systems Possible?

In Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality (1990), Tambiah describes what he calls “the grand problem” – the principle concern that has been looming large in anthropology:

How do we understand and represent the modes of thought and action of other societies, other cultures? Since we have to undertake this task from a Western baseline so to say, how are we to achieve “the translation of cultures,” i.e. understand other cultures as far as possible in their own terms but in our language, a task which also ultimately entails the mapping of the ideas and practices onto Western categories of understanding, and hopefully modifying these in turn to evolve a language of anthropology as a comparative science? (1990:3)

This chapter is my personal design of how to conduct “the translation of cultures” – the task of discerning the internal logic of a belief tradition that I do not practice and rendering it intelligible to general audiences. My stance as a native northeastern Thai and a folklorist informs my analytical perspective and my sense of what fundamentally constitutes the ravenous spirit tradition. My structural approach to this supernatural belief tradition results in the argument that ravenous beliefs are logical and valid for believers because they cohere with axiomatic tenets that hold epistemic authority in northeastern Thai culture. And non-believers, either because of their unfamiliarity with these axiomatic tenets or because they do not grant them truth value, see ravenous spirit beliefs as superstitious and irrational. I have my own way of processing and
interpreting my informants' accounts, and I lay out the connection between what I take as
axiomatic tenets and ravenous spirit beliefs the way I see it. By remarking on the constructed
aspects of analyses and arguments made in this chapter, I posit two notions: 1) representation
always results in an etic description and 2) the adjective “emic” is problematic because it
downplays variability in the way people who create and “own” a particular tradition receive and
practice it.

Even though the object of representation is one's own belief, in order to make it
intelligible to others we need to convey it via etic terms – the terms we share with others when
referring to the shared concepts (Goldstein 1983:106). Besides, the term “emic” is obscure since
it implies a divide between the insiders' and the outsiders' receptions of the tradition; but it does
not provide the instructions on how to demarcate this divide. A particular tradition is interpreted
and practiced variably within the culture of its origin. Who, then, has the right to say that a
specific practice carried out by a specific sect within the group of insiders is more “emic” and
“authentic” than the practices of other sects? Even if scholars give a definite specification of the
view and practice they define as “emic,” they cannot rule out the possibility that individuals who
comprise the “emic” group may make sense of the tradition in variable ways. Taking into
account this fine-grained variability, a purely emic description of a culture or a tradition may not
be possible for two reasons. First, the variability within the esoteric group renders it hardly
possible to describe a unified, coherent description of “the emic view” harbored by the group.
Second, scholars cannot probe into the minds of individual insiders and see how each of them
receives the tradition in question.

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With this view in mind, the analysis made in this chapter is not emic in the sense that it accurately reflects how every single ravenous spirit believer conceives of the tradition. Rather, it is emic in the sense that the ravenous spirit belief tradition is situated in its own context and examined in relation to other mentifacts viable in the culture of its origin. As a non-believer, I cannot proclaim that my depiction of the tradition is in total agreement with believers' views of the tradition. I can only say that I examine givens and assertions circulating in northeastern Thai culture and discern how they render sense and truth value to ravenous spirit beliefs. This is what I mean by the phrase “emic description of the ravenous spirit belief tradition.”

This chapter serves as the antithesis of the following chapter, “Monolithic Representations and Condescending Discourses.” These two chapters, when viewed in contrast with one another, will reveal how a change of analytical lens transforms ravenous spirit beliefs from a supernatural tradition that makes perfect sense when situated within the culture of its origin to an anachronistic and irrational residue when explicated by scientific-rationalist discourses.
Chapter 3

Monolithic Representations and Condescending Discourses

1. Chapter Overview: Superstition and the Barbaric Folk

On August 19, 2014, *Thairath* – one of the best selling tabloids in Thailand – devoted its front page to the tragic story of a twelve-year-old girl who lived by herself in Ban Na Learn village in Ubon Ratchathani. Under a sensational headline that reads, “A twelve-year-old girl's tough life: lonely and impoverished; her dad accused of hosting ravenous spirit.” the story goes as follows:

A miserable life!!! A girl was left to struggle for a living by herself. Her dad was expelled from the village, accused of hosting a ravenous spirit and causing deaths in the village. The girl lived with grandparents, now dead. The provincial authority rushed to the scene to offer help.

The twelve-year-old Panjai Meesuk, nicknamed Jai\(^1\) – a student of Bankammanai Primary School, Na Learn sub-district, Ubon Ratchathani – was left alone in a wobbly, tin-roofed house. She does not know her parents' faces. The girl survives by the wage she earns from running petty errands.

On August 19, 2014, Mr. Banlue Sangchompoo – the village headman – revealed the incident behind the girl's miserable life. Nine years ago, the village was plagued by an epidemic of death and illness. The community was in a panic as the rumor about ravenous spirits spread. A fund raising was carried out to pay for a communal ritual recommended by a shaman surmising that the epidemic was caused by a ravenous spirit. Its host was said to be a non-native of the community who lived in the neighborhood of Panjai's house. Panjai's dad was then accused and banished from the village. He was not allowed to return until the spirit inside him got eliminated. Panjai's parents left their three-year-old daughter with her grandparents. The couple has never been seen in the village since then.

*Matichon* – another leading newspaper – focuses on the impact of the accusation on the girl's personality:

The twelve-year-old Panjai Meesuk, a fourth grade student of Bankammanai Primary School, Na Learn sub-district, Ubon Ratchathani, was left to struggle for a living by herself. She has won her own bread by doing petty jobs such as taking care of the sick, doing laundry and household chores, and babysitting. The income is barely enough for food and her tuition fee. Crushed by hardship and loneliness, Panjai is not as cheerful as

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\(^{1}\) A pseudonym is applied here instead of the girl's real name in the original report.
other girls her age. She was shattered by the tragic incident that happened to her family. The girl is said to be despondently quiet and lack self-confidence (August 19, 2014).

An article published in Khaosod on August 21 features an interview with the girl's parents who were tracked down by journalists. Panjai's father told the press about his hard life after his exile from the village:

The villagers believed I hosted a ravenous spirit, so they drove me out. Then I and my wife went to Bangkok to find jobs. We wandered from place to place until we settled down in Chonburi. We came to know a guy named Dang who brought us to a worker camp at this construction site. We have lived here for about a year. We live by selling used nails and shafts of used iron collected from the site. I always want to visit my daughter. I have been worrying about her. But the villagers would not let me in. They said if they see me again, they will shoot me on the spot. I am afraid so I never come back. But there are times when I miss her so much so that I would not care what they will do to me.

Needless to say, Panjai's story moved the Thai public. There was a call for intervention by the authorities. On August 22, a meeting was held in the village to straighten out the matter. Provincial and district representatives, the sub-district headman, the village headman, and three hundred villagers were present. The possibility of taking Panjai's dad back to the village was discussed. The reaction of the villagers to this issue is described in Manager:

The villagers are firm in their belief that ravenous spirits exist. Now they live in peace and they are not willing to welcome Panjai's father. They claim they have direct experiences of these mysterious, invisible supernatural agents; so they think it is better for him to find a civilized place where nobody is afraid of ravenous spirits and move there. They are happy for Panjai who is now under royal patronage and they always treat her like she is their own. The villagers firmly stand their ground: they will not take Panjai's father back at any cost (August 23, 2014).

The Thai public was enraged by this response. A special feature entitled “Criticizing Ravenous Spirit Beliefs: An Inhumane Belief Tradition?!” (Manager, August 25, 2014), presents non-believers' comments on the case. The credulous, barbaric folk and their harmful belief tradition are hotly condemned: “The villagers are more frightening than ravenous spirits. Their
belief ruins people's lives,” “Groundless fear unmonitored by reason is scarier than evil spirits,” “Superstition breeds disaster,” “Thai people should take more courses in science; the Ministry of Education should add an anti-superstition course in the curriculum.” In its conclusion, the article calls for a middle ground between belief and reason. The moral it contends is: while people have the right to practice their beliefs, they must know their limits and not doggedly follow these unverified postulates to the extreme. This “correct” attitude, as the article posits, can be promoted among “superstitious” folk like the people in Panjai's community if adequate education is provided: “Education is crucial for the correct understanding about the extent to which one can righteously practice his belief. Instead of demanding that people abandon their faiths, the authorities should promote education among Thai citizens to prevent abusive social practices caused by irrational beliefs.”

Panjai's story does not fully reflect the diverse ways in which ravenous spirit beliefs are practiced in different communities but it is representative of the cases that appeal to Thai mass media. While the more benign practices of this belief tradition are omitted because their non-sensational consequences would fail to capture public's attention, those causing heart-wrenching stories like Panjai's predominate in newspapers, television programs, films, magazines, and other media. Nevertheless, it is an oversimplification to say that sensationalism is the sole motive behind selective and monolithic representations of the ravenous spirit belief tradition. Other factors that render these one-dimensional representations convincing and sensible in the eyes of Thai audiences are the preconceived ideas about the superstitious folk and their barbaric belief traditions. Abusive aspects of ravenous spirits beliefs such as brutal exorcising rites and collective violence against the alleged host reaffirm the stereotype about believers harbored by the Thais in general. The representations that resonate with the stereotype appear, therefore, more
“accurate” than those contradicting the stereotype. Monolithic representations, compatible with preconceived ideas about the superstitious and barbaric folk, produce a false impression among non-believers that ravenous spirit beliefs always breed abusive ritualistic and social practices. As evident in the comments on Panjai’s case, non-believers make a generalizing assumption that ravenous spirit beliefs always end with brutality against the scapegoats and their families. To them, this belief tradition is a harmful superstition that needs to be, if not eliminated, closely monitored.

Monolithic representations also uphold rationalist discourses employed by Thai academia to rationalize why such an anachronistic custom as the ravenous spirit belief tradition is still widely practiced in modern Thailand. These discourses, attributing supernatural beliefs to “folk” mentality characterized by false reasoning, adopt a condescending stance in their analyses. Psychoanalytic discourse posits that ravenous spirit possession is a folk etiology of mental illness. Believers' lack of understanding of mental symptoms causes them to misconstrue a psychological breakdown as a ravenous spirit possession. Sociological discourse, observing that the alleged hosts in several cases deviate from the established norm in some ways, formulates a causal relation between ravenous spirit beliefs and the community’s latent desire to get rid of internal Others. The comments on latent functions of ravenous spirit beliefs – such as “It seemed that the mechanism of phiip pop (ravenous spirit) possession was a socially accepted way of solving social and personal conflicts” (Suwanlert 1976:86) and, “Ravenous spirit rituals are final solutions believers resort to when direct means fail to resolve the dire situation” (Potila 2012:9) – assume a condescending stance by implying that scholars see the raisons d’être of the tradition which elude believers. Underlying psychoanalytic and sociological discourses is the image of the

2 Untranslated citation
credulous ravenous spirit believers who, deluded by their false beliefs, fail to see that the
tradition responds to profane needs. Ravenous spirit possession and accusation would be taken
simply as a sign of mental symptoms or as the unjust abuse of scapegoats once believers see
through these misleading beliefs. Academic discourses reinforce bigotry against ravenous spirit
believers by falsifying their perception and reasoning, then construing their beliefs as
emblematic of believers' inability to rationally perceive and interpret reality.

Rationalist discourses are perpetuated by monolithic representations. Their applicability
diminishes once diverse practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are taken into account.
Psychoanalytic discourse is viable only in cases that feature dramatic possessions. In a similar
fashion, sociological discourse is applicable only to some cases that involve the accusation of
anti-social individuals. Their assumptions about ravenous spirit beliefs are incongruous with the
less sensational cases that contain neither abusive social practices nor dramatic displays of
strange behaviors. In this light, we can see how monolithic representations and academic
discourses cooperate with one another in the production and the reinforcement of a simplistic
understanding about the ravenous spirit belief tradition. The former engenders the false image of
a rigid and inhumane belief tradition by publicizing only its abusive aspects. The latter
exclusively draws on negative representations to support the dismissive and condescending
explications of the tradition.

This chapter problematizes the way in which the ravenous spirit belief tradition is
represented by Thai mass media and explained by Thai academia. It argues that sensational and
monolithic representations of ravenous spirit beliefs conspire with rationalist discourses to
generate and reaffirm the generally held but false conceptions of ravenous spirit beliefs. To
illustrate this main argument, this chapter is divided into four parts. The first section – “Why Do
We Need Deviant Others?” – explores how the “deviancy” of the “Others” has been overemphasized in their representations; and how this overemphasis answers to the needs of “us normal people.” The superstitious folk, the insane, and HIV patients are all demonized Others whose “deviancy” is a “social” reality in the sense that its definition and implication are construed by “normal” people in contrast to the characteristics of “normalcy” they ascribe to themselves. In light of this postulate, the image of the superstitious folk and their inhumane practices has currency in Thai culture partly because it reaffirms its beholders' status as the modern, rational, non-superstitious subjects who belong to the “civilized” class of Thai population. The second part – “Monolithic Representations” – lays out the invariable ways in which ravenous spirit beliefs are represented by Thai mass media. Despite differences in terms of genre and content, these representations underscore the aspects of the tradition that sustain the preconceived image of harmful supernatural beliefs practiced by the superstitious folk. The third part – “Condescending Discourses” – posits that rationalist discourses employed by Thai academia to elucidate ravenous spirit beliefs explain away rather than explain them. The shortcomings of academic discourses and their tendency to curb the nuance of data to accommodate rationalist explanations will be examined in this section. The final part – “Why Do We Need to Write about Others' Troubles?” – discusses the ramification of the analysis conducted in the chapter.

2. Why Do We Need Deviant Others?

In “Visualizing Madness: Mental Illness and Representation” (2004), Simon Cross reveals a startling tendency found in the way British TV documentaries visualize mental patients after the deinstitutionalization policy. Asylum closure, Cross posits, is promising in several respects. It restores patients to the society, and this reintegration is believed to accelerate their
recovery. It relieves financial burdens borne by institutions in the provision of care for their patients. Also, it ends controversy surrounding cases of long-term incarceration. The promising prospect of deinstitutionalization, however, does not outweigh the deep-seated anxieties among the British in general invoked by the fact that the mentally ill will now be able to share public spaces and intermingle with normal people. This fear that “they” will be released from the confinement that serves as the barrier separating “them” from “us” engenders visual representations and discursive practices through which “the symbolic hold of madness in the popular imagination has become reinforced” (2004:198). As Cross posited, TV documentaries produced after the implementation of the deinstitutionalization policy are replete with conventional images associated with mental patients. The insane respond to the voice that only they can hear, their hands flutter as if they are talking to somebody who is not there, and they display aggressive behavioral traits that resonate with the stereotype of the “mad, bad, and dangerous” (2004:199).

Cross's study shows that visual representations of the conditions of the mentally ill answer to two crucial needs of the sane. First, since mental patients are perceived as “mad, bad, and dangerous,” belief in visible, distinct traits of their madness creates an illusion that we can detect the threat and avoid the danger once we confront these harmful individuals. A similar logic also predominates in popular assumptions about the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. By stigmatizing specific groups as the carriers of the diseases, we create an illusion of controllable and avoidable risk since the diseases are believed to circulate only among “deviant” others such as gay men and prostitutes (Gilmore and A. Somerville 1994:1339). In this light, the perceptible differences between what we might call the “normal Us” and the “deviant Others” uphold a reassuring message: As long as we avoid “them” who are obviously different
from us, we will not suffer from the same fate.

Second, as pointed out by Sander L. Gilman, the visualization of imperceptible deviant traits assures the sane of their place in the status quo. By looking at mental patients and their perversion, one's sanity is reaffirmed. One comes to realize one's sanity and normality in light of the dramatic insanity displayed by the mentally ill. By virtue of their flagrant deviancy, the sane feel assured of the sound and sensible world to which they belong – a world that is different in every way from the world of chaos inhabited by the insane. In order to uphold the reality of our sanity, we need to demarcate the boundary between sound people in the outside world and the inmates in the asylums. As Gilman postulates, we need the mad to be conspicuously different, because only then can we be certain of our sanity:

Our shock is always that they [the insane] are really just like us. This moment, when we say, “they are just like us,” is most upsetting. Then we no longer know where lies the line that divides our normal, reliable world, a world that minimizes our fears, from that world in which lurks the fearful, the terrifying, the aggressive. We want – no, we need – the mad to be different, so we can create out of the stuff of their reality the myths that make them different (1988:13).

The assurance of one's sanity gained from viewing one's self in contrast to the mad is indicative of the power relations inherent in the interaction between Self and Other. De-identification is crucial to the process of identity construction as the sense of self emerges not only from a person's idea of who he is but also from his perception of who he is not. The insane Other is one of many figures with whom the “normal” de-identify in order to assure their wholesome and sound psyche. Other figures in the category of “deviant Others,” however, respond to other needs in other domains. Their deviancy does not really stem from their “pathological” traits but rather from the stigmatization made to them by the normal, who gain something from doing so.

In some cases, the deviant Others are created in order to justify and maintain power
relations between the dominant group and the minorities. In this scenario, the stigmatized groups and their cultural practices are branded as the source of problems that jeopardize the entire society. Folk beliefs about leprosy in nineteenth-century New Brunswick, Canada, for example, associated the spread of leprosy in the community with the Acadian way of life (Stanley-Blackwell 1993). It was believed that the Acadians’ “great sociability” and their “close intimacy of family life” (1993:29) were prominent factors that accelerated the transmission of the disease. Some physicians pathologized Acadian everyday habits by contending that their excessive intake of potatoes and salted fish, together with their tendency to overheat their households, rendered them susceptible to leprosy. In this case, Otherness lies in the image of the Acadian lepers whose unhygienic way of life and disease-generating habits exposed the community to leprosy. Their cultural practices were considered unsanitary and inferior in comparison to those of the Anglophone population who become coded as healthy and normal in this etiology of leprosy.

The outbreak of cholera in Delta Amacuro in Venezuela triggered a similar pattern of blame shifting. In this case, Warao culture was construed by public health officials as the source of this fatal epidemic. Cholera is, in Charles L. Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs's word, “tied in the popular imagination to poverty, backwardness, ignorance, and the premodern era” (2000:336). This connotation, unsurprisingly, turns cholera into a discriminating device that pathologizes Warao cultural practices as public health officials maintained that Warao customs concerning food, water, and hygiene “were responsible for high cholera morbidity and mortality” (2000:336). By this strategy of blame shifting, Venezuelan public health officials upheld the cause that justifies the subordination of an ethnic minority to the dominant group, simply by implying that since the Warao do not know how to take care of themselves and thus ruin their wellbeing by maintaining the primitive, unsanitary living habits, it is righteous for the state and
its officials to closely supervise the Warao and help them adopt the healthier way of life lived by the dominant group. According to Briggs, the major problem of this official belief about the epidemiology of cholera lies primarily in the illusion it creates. By projecting all the blame onto the Warao and their culture, officials neglect the shortcomings of healthcare institutions in the provision of medical services and other facilities necessary for prevention and treatment of cholera. In this case, the “disease-stricken Other” is created to maintain the illusion of the ideal world in which perfect healthcare service is equally accessible to everybody.

Similar to the Warao, the label “superstitious” imposed on ravenous spirit believers covers the inadequacies of healthcare services in Thailand. In the minds of many Thai healthcare practitioners, supernatural belief traditions are misconceptions about illness that lead to false diagnosis and sham treatment. A major challenge of healthcare professionals is to prevent the “superstitious” folk from letting their false beliefs ruin their health. In “Mass Hysteria: A case study of ravenous spirit belief tradition” (Pradubsamuth 1999), for example, the author states that an urgent task of healthcare professionals is to correct the false view of illness prevalent among the holders of superstitious beliefs: “The beliefs in ghosts and witchcraft make the rural folk adopt traditional healing and reject biomedicine. […] We practitioners have to promote the correct view about illness among these people” (1999: Preface). In a similar fashion to Venezuelan healthcare officials, who attribute the cholera epidemic to the Warao way of life, the author of this research assumes that supernatural beliefs render their holders susceptible to health risks. Again, attention is directed away from the inadequacies of healthcare facilities and medical services – an undeniable fact that is too poignant to be overlooked in the accounts given by ravenous spirit believers about their decisions to resort to healers and exorcists instead of physicians or psychiatrists. Mrs. Dang, for example, related how her husband's mysterious and
untreated convulsions brought about his untimely death. The ambulance that never came, the
district hospital that refused to admit Mrs Dang's husband on the grounds of its insufficient
resources to handle his case, and the physician whose speculation on the cause of death
flagrantly contradicted other empirical evidence,³ reveal the shortcomings of medical services in
northeast Thailand. These shortcomings drove Mrs. Dang to resort to a female healer who helped
her make sense of her husband's death. In her story, Mrs. Dang disclosed that the superstitious
folk serves as a straw man in popular imagination that helps the “non-superstitious people”
distance themselves from pervasive risks. Since superstitious beliefs harm only their holders but
inadequate healthcare services threaten everybody, it is more convenient to believe that the
problem lies in the superstitious folk and not in the ineffective healthcare institutions. This
conviction makes it possible for “non-superstitious” people to stay blind to the defects of their
modern society and to shrug off the responsibilities and contributions necessary for the
betterment of this society.

While mental and physical deficiencies projected onto the Other uphold the illusion that
we are wholesome, moral frailty embodied by those convicted of committing hideous crimes
reaffirms our unwavering virtue. By openly and readily condemning rapists, murderers, and
terrorists, we put our flawless morality on display, confirming our status as decent members of

³ In the interview, Mrs. Dang openly expressed her disbelief in the cause of her husband's death as
surmised by the physician. His supposition that her husband died from a heart failure does not make
sense to Mrs. Dang since it clashes head on with the evidence from the electrocardiogram. After her
husband was admitted to the provincial hospital, he remained unconscious for two days and then passed
away. The electrocardiogram indicated that after the convulsion and during the period of
unconsciousness, his heart functioned normally. Mrs. Dang's bafflement was articulated in her narrative:

He (the physician) said it was a heart failure. It was written on his death certificate.
But when they gave him a CPR and he started breathing again, the electrocardiograph
showed that his heart functioned properly. Everything looked normal; still he didn’t
wake up. It was like this until the second day, when he passed away in the hospital (personal
Interview, May 25, 2013).
society. Briggs's analysis of the Venezuelan newspapers and television infanticide stories provides an example of this scheme of demoralizing the Other. In “Mediating Infanticide: Theorizing Relations between Narrative and Violence” (2007), Briggs argues that infanticide stories circulating in Venezuelan newspapers and television adhere to a formulaic structure. This structure is constituted by typical elements: “a death, the reporter's narrative, and objects, persons, and actions that tell the stories of ’solving the crime’” (Briggs 2007:326). The most crucial element – the narrative relating how the mystery was solved and how the real culprit was identified – is most problematic according to Briggs. It reconstructs the crime scene, which the audiences did not experience directly, from the testimonies of witnesses and experts. The granted validity of these testimonies combined with the use of “authenticating” devices, such as reported speech and illustrative photographs, creates an impression that the narrative transparently reports the “truth” behind the crime rather than merely speculating about what had happened based on available evidences. Since the “crime solving” narrative is received as the transparent description of the crime, any speculations about the convicted person's character and motives presented in the narrative are likely to be taken at face value. Nonetheless, Briggs further argues that the artful and “authentic” representation is not the sole reason why audiences buy the image of the morally corrupted, perverted, and drug-addicted criminals presented in these crime stories. It is also because of a crucial function fulfilled by this image – the stories of morally degraded criminals provide the audiences with a means through which they can affirm their own status as decent and well-integrated citizens.

Media sources follow the crime solving narrative with vox populi – the coverage of expressions of horror and condemnation among lay people once they learn about the crime. Briggs discovered that audiences in the same socio-economic classes as the convicted person,
“interpellated themselves as outraged neighbors and recirculated the words of the vox populi as their own” (2007: 335). Crime stories that strictly adhere to a formulaic structure feature few roles with which one can identify. Lower class audience members, whose living circumstances and backgrounds render them susceptible to the stigmatization that associates criminality with poor neighborhoods, low income, and low level of education, cannot assume the roles of news reporters, physicians, detectives, or police officers – all are representatives of intellectual and juridical authorities monopolized by members of the higher social strata. The characters with whom they can identify are the convicted criminals and the outraged neighbors. Unsurprisingly, these marginalized and stigmatized populations “pressed themselves so anxiously into the space of moral, legal, and rational citizens – by iterating the voice of the vox populi in expressing outrage and condemning infanticides” (Briggs 2007:336). Briggs's study of infanticide stories in Venezuelan newspapers and television programs has a significant implication about the way the deviant Others are imagined. We need them to be mentally, physically, and morally flawed in most conspicuous ways in order to distance ourselves from those undesirable traits as well as to trivialize our defects. How we imagine the deviant Others is less about what they are than about our own precarious selves.

The literature concerning the representation of the deviant Others sheds light on a critical issue addressed in this chapter. It is an oversimplification to attribute monolithic representations of ravenous spirit beliefs exclusively to media sensationalism since it does not explain why these representations are received enthusiastically and unquestionably by non-believers in general. As mentioned earlier, preconceived ideas about the tradition and its adherents are in play here. Still, there is a further question: Why are they so prevalent and held so steadfastly despite their inaccuracy? A review of the literature about how the “deviant” Others have been imagined and
represented provides a possible answer – these simplistic but popular assumptions remain unchallenged because they demarcate the boundary between the irrational, cruel folk and the scientific-minded, civilized, decent citizens of modern Thailand. In this respect, ravenous spirit believers are not appreciably different from the Acadians in nineteenth century New Brunswick, the Warao in Delta Amacuro, or the criminals committing infanticides in Venezuela. They are all deviant Others whose deviation from the norm is overemphasized in order to consolidate and venerate the wholesome world inhabited by “normal” people. As John M. Townsend observes, as long as a stereotype is effective in exaggerating and erecting “a qualitative boundary where none objectively exists” (1979: 205) between “them” and “us,” it tends to persist in spite of its inaccuracy.

3. Monolithic Representations

Communicability refers to a quality of discourses that enables them to convey meaningful messages, to be understood, and to be reproduced (Briggs 2007: 332). Discourses are intelligible and accountable since they adhere to cartographies – the mappings of categories and differentiations viable in a specific linguistic community. These categories and differentiations, however, do not only refer to differences among variable sounds and alphabets in a particular system of signs in a Saussurean sense. They also denote categories in social fields – the established patterns of social roles, positions, and relations that dictate who can say what to whom. When a discourse fails to replicate this sociological aspect of communicability, it sounds absurd even though it makes perfect sense linguistically. Using this concept to analyze representations of ravenous spirit beliefs in Thai mass media, we can surmise that non-believers in general would be totally baffled by a news article, a television documentary, or a film that features non-exotic, inoffensive practices of this belief tradition. The non-sensational
representation is in conflict with the image of the ignorant, credulous, and cruel folk associated with ravenous spirit believers. Therefore, it may appear nonsensical to non-believers whose understanding of the tradition is formulated on the basis of this positioning. Besides, without sensational elements such as violent exorcising rites, grotesque and dramatic possessions, or atrocities inflicted upon the alleged hosts, the issue of accountability arises. The audiences would ask: Why in the world are such typical, unexciting belief traditions among rural people featured in media? What makes it worth talking about? In this respect, a non-sensational representation of ravenous spirit beliefs is hardly possible due to its lack of communicability. It neither fits in the cartographical slot that assigns a specific social position to ravenous spirit believers, nor is it worth telling because of its undramatic nature.

Based on similar logic, sensational representations of ravenous spirit beliefs are highly communicable because they reiterate the roles and relations between believers and audiences. In these representations, believers are portrayed as barbaric, helplessly superstitious, and totally foreign to the rational mode of thought, despite the flow of modernity surrounding them. This image of ravenous spirit believers provides the audiences an antithesis through whom they substantiate their position as civilized and rational, modern individuals. To convey the barbarism, superstition, and resilient ignorance attributed to ravenous spirit believers, the sensational representations examined in this chapter overemphasize three components in their depictions of the ravenous spirit belief tradition: violence, irrationality, and inertia. The images of violence associated with ravenous spirit beliefs cut across genres and modes of representation. Horror-comedy films, television documentaries, and newspaper features reproduce typical portrayals of violence committed by panic-stricken and barbaric believers. In these portrayals, violence becomes the badge of barbarism that persists in ravenous spirit belief communities.
Another prevailing component – irrationality – is emphasized to convey the inability of the “superstitious” folk to correctly perceive and interpret reality. Sensational representations usually position ravenous spirit beliefs in contrast to scientific-rationalist logic. This positioning renders believers' testimonies absurd and their beliefs the products of false reasoning. The last component – inertia – underlies the image of an anachronistic belief tradition that stubbornly persists in spite of scientific progress. Portraying the ravenous spirit belief tradition as frozen in time and resistant to change, sensational representations uphold the illusory divide between the “superstitious” folk and modernity. They denote that believers totally fail to grasp the scientific-rationalist paradigm. Therefore, believers readily resort to false beliefs and formulate false solutions to problems, unable to adopt the “correct” view that widely circulates in modern Thailand. In the following sub-sections, these three components covered and overemphasized by Thai mass media in their representations of ravenous spirit beliefs will be examined in depth.

3.1 Violence

In comparison to other supernatural belief traditions practiced by the northeastern Thais, the ravenous spirit belief tradition is most susceptible to public disapproval and condemnation. Ritualistic and social practices pertaining to this belief tradition, in some cases, involve physical and psychological violence against the alleged hosts and the victims of ravenous spirit afflictions. Inhumane exorcising rites and the coerced exile of ravenous spirit hosts become the defining characteristics of this belief tradition in the popular imagination. This view of the tradition is most apparent in media that fictionalize ravenous spirit beliefs for entertainment. Screenwriters and authors of television dramas have the crucial task of rendering telltale and recognizable depictions of ravenous spirit beliefs. Stereotypes and assumptions about this belief tradition held by the public, undoubtedly, are ideal materials for this task. In light of this
rationale, a melodrama film launched in 1985 provides a good case study. Analysis of this film will elucidate how violence and ravenous spirit beliefs are related to one another in the popular imagination.

*Wanlee the Grateful* (1985) is based on the true story of a girl named Wanlee whose unsurpassed filial piety never fails to draw tears from Thai audiences. In 1983, her story was first revealed by a Thai newspaper that reported on the hardships this twelve-year-old girl had to endure. Taking care of a blind grandmother and a bed-ridden, sickly mother all by herself, Wanlee had to walk at least four miles a day back and forth from home to school in order to nurse the helpless elders. Once this bare outline of her life was fleshed out and turned into a movie, an interesting embellishment was made to dramatize Wanlee's pitiful life. Superstitious and barbaric ravenous spirit believers were added as the innocent girl's tormentors. In the film, villagers construe the palsy that afflicts Wanlee's mother as a ravenous spirit possession. The panic-stricken folk impose a brutal exorcising rite on the helpless patient, who is forced to lie on top of thorn bushes. The evil of the barbaric folk and their false beliefs becomes most conspicuous during the scene in which the pitiful girl begs the heartless folk for mercy, beside the girl lays her sick mother whose body is covered with blood. The conversation between Wanlee and Suk – the leader of the group – reinforces the widely held assumption that ravenous spirit beliefs are the cause of collective violence directed against a scapegoat.

*Suk: (Talking to Wanlee, who is sobbing violently, in a harsh tone)* Stop, you wench! Your mother is possessed by a ravenous spirit. Wait until it eats your mom up and it will get other villagers. The next ones will be your grandma and you. Don't you care about your life?

*Wanlee: (Pleading in tears)* My mom is ill because she had a stroke, not because of a ravenous spirit. You let her lie on thorn bushes like that, she must be hurt. Can you take them away?
Suk: No, that is not possible! The spirit will come out and harm others.

Wanlee: *(Crawling to Suk's feet to show him her total submission)* I beg you, uncle, my mom cannot walk. Nor can she stand, speak, or move. She must be suffering a great deal. Please have mercy and do not add to her suffering. Please take the thorn bushes away.

Suk: *(Yelling)* I said no! And mark my word, if you dare touch the thorn bushes and somebody dies because of the spirit, all the villagers will be here to kill you!

While the conversation is going on, audiences can see other members of the horde of cruel folk standing behind Suk. They unanimously concur with Suk's reasoning and dismiss Wanlee's argument which is obviously superior and renders Suk's ridiculously irrational. Through this portrayal of Suk and his gang, ravenous spirit beliefs become the cause of the collective violence the superstitious folk resort to when they fancy that their community is under threat.

It is arguable, however, that the film is a fictitious, dramatic rendering of ravenous spirit believers, and that Thai audiences in general cannot be so naïve as to assume that this melodramatic rendition accurately represents ravenous spirit believers. Despite this counter-argument, we cannot ignore the fact that ravenous spirit believers were chosen from numerous villainous figures to dramatize Wanlee's miserable life and to arouse pity and empathy among audiences. What exacerbates Wanlee's misery is neither the healthcare service that never reaches the peripheral communities, nor the socio-economic disparities that leave rural areas impoverished in contrast to blatantly affluent urban centers. It is the superstitious folk and their barbaric belief tradition that make the girl's life unbearable. The denouement of the story reiterates the politics behind this negative image of ravenous spirit believers. In contrast to Wanlee's community, which neglects and worsens the girl's suffering, members of the modern, “rational” society outside “folk” community rescue her. Wanlee's problem is first discovered by
her teacher who, worried by the girl's dejected and weary demeanor, secretly follows her home and witnesses her living conditions. Wanlee's story is then passed on to journalists who publicize it. Then the girl receives help from the sympathetic public. Physicians and provincial representatives are epitomes of decent citizens in the film, which depicts how they attentively take charge of Wanlee's and her elders' welfare.

Role distribution in *Wanlee the Grateful* and its implication about violence are strikingly similar to Panpai's story and infanticide stories in Venezuela. The crime is committed by the folk whose poor assimilation into dominant culture is the primary cause of their inhumane acts. The victims are totally helpless and free from guilt. Then figures representing intellectual and juridical authorities, usually physicians, educational professionals, detectives, journalists, and police officers come into the scene to restore order. This typical pattern associates crime and violence with a group or population that is marginalized in terms of socio-economic class, educational level, culture, or even residential area. The depiction of the barbaric ravenous spirit believers in *Wanlee the Grateful* reveals that, in reality, they are marginalized in all respects listed above. Their poverty, low level of education, and residence in the “lagging behind” rural areas appear in the popular imagination as causal factors contributing to their false belief in supernatural agents. These false beliefs engender absurd violence in the belief communities that, for some inexplicable reason, have not yet overcome the barbaric stage of cultural evolution.

3.2 Irrationality

Television documentaries about ravenous spirit beliefs after the new millennium show a significant change in Thai attitudes toward folk culture. In July 1997, the Thai government announced the float of Thai baht due to the collapse of Thai financial institutions. Desperately in need of foreign currency to stabilize the exchange rate and restore the Thai economy, a tourism
campaign called “Amazing Thailand” was launched to attract tourists from around the world. The campaign turned local cultures into assets. It romanticized rural ways of life and sold them as the tokens of “authentic Thainess.” As a result of this, pride in Thai identity was invoked among Thai citizens, who were encouraged to appreciate folk cultural practices. This phenomenon engendered a new attitude held by the Thais in general toward supernatural beliefs practiced by “the rural folk”: belief traditions should be preserved as they emerge from authentic Thai ways of life; however, believers must know the limit and not practice their beliefs in ways that violate others' rights.

This attitude brought about a new representational pattern of ravenous spirit beliefs. Instead of an outright condemnation as evident in Wanlee the Grateful, the new framing allows believers to describe circumstances and rationales that uphold their belief in ravenous spirits. Then experts' comments on believers' testimonies are represented. At first glance, this framing seems to be more egalitarian since it covers believers' as well as experts' voices and positions them on an equal ground. The intersubjective underpinning of this representational pattern enables audiences to learn about the story from both believers' and non-believers' viewpoints. However, taking into account the power relation between the condemned and marginalized supernatural beliefs and the authoritative scientific-rationalist discourses, this positioning renders ravenous spirit beliefs ridiculously irrational in contrast to the well-grounded and self-evident comments of the experts.

In September of 2014, a television documentary covered a strange phenomenon occurring in a village in Buriram province. A widow and her two sons claimed to have seen a

4 The campaign displays characteristics of heritage, described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.” She explains that it is “a value added industry” and that it “produces the local for export” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995:369).
ravenous spirit as it came to their house at night and devoured an entire coop of ducks. The dead ducks were closely inspected by experts, and it was concluded that they died from bite wounds on their necks, supposedly caused by a creature or creatures with sharp fangs. The widow was firm in her belief that a ravenous spirit was behind this incident. She recounted her sighting of a grotesque-looking floating light which flew toward the duck coop and mysteriously disappeared. The witness was certain of the accuracy of her perception. She was not in a slumberous stupor, nor did she mistake a flashlight for the light emitted by a ravenous spirit. “Light from a flashlight is either yellow or white; but the one I saw was green and red. And I can tell from its movement, the strange light circled my house and it floated up and down. It's different from how we normally use flashlights. How can you see anything if you swiftly move the light all the time like that?” (Rueng Jing Pan Jor, September 2014).

An expert from the Department of Livestock Development and an assistant district officer commented upon the widow's account. The former contended that the ducks were attacked by a certain kind of carnivore. The creature supposedly bit and then violently tore off the flesh. This caused blood veins around the neck line to be damaged beyond recognition and appear as if they were sucked and devoured by a ravenous spirit. The district official took on another crucial task of reconstructing the environment that produced the strange light seen by the widow. He found a man who was out for a hunting trip in the widow's neighborhood that night. The man's flashlight was concluded to be the source of the strange light seen by the widow. In spite of the show's claim not to be judgmental nor to assert a final conclusion concerning this incident, it takes advantage of the inferior status of supernatural beliefs and their holders, a stance which becomes more conspicuous vis-à-vis the rationalist paradigms endorsed by the experts. The implication is clear – the person in the wrong is the widow. The positioning of her
account in contrast to those of the two officers underscores the absurdity of her belief. The show
betrays its deep-seated bias and its dismissive stance on the widow's reasoning through a voice-
over presented at the end of the program:

Because personal beliefs are involved, it is hard to have a final word about this
incident. People's views and judgments vary and it is quite pointless to decide
who is right or wrong. Still, it is crucial to identify the real cause of the
problem in order to find the right solution; so that history will not repeat itself
(Rueng Jing Pan Jor, September 2014).

The voice-over makes it clear that the widow misconstrued the incident, and her belief prevented
her from seeing the real culprit behind this unfortunate event. While it acknowledges the
diversity of people's worldviews and professes to not make value judgments, it implies that there
are some false views that need to be shoved aside in order to discern the true nature of the
problem at hand. In light of this closure, the validity of ravenous spirit beliefs is dismissed. They
become a set of ill-grounded postulates adopted by believers out of a presumptuous and hasty
manner of making judgment.

A similar representational pattern prevails in another program broadcast nationwide in
2011. The show's elaborate structure creates a dialogue between ravenous spirit beliefs and
rationalist discourses, covering both emic and etic perspectives on a sequence of phenomena
interpreted by a belief community in Kalasin province as a ravenous spirit crisis. The show is
comprised of two parts – a documentary featuring a male interviewer talking to believers in the
community and a talk show in the studio. The latter is structured in a way that enables a dialog
between the marginalized and authoritative worldviews. The village headman and the shaman
were positioned vis-à-vis a psychiatrist on the same stage, with two emcees taking turns asking
questions. This structuring of the show reminds us of an ethnographic work that relies on
collaboration between emic and etic perspectives in the production of unbiased, intersubjective
knowledge. The first part serves as the “fieldwork” that precedes the analysis and discussion in the second part. However, the final outcome of this structuring is the image of superstitious folk who, despite their failure to rationally describe their beliefs, stubbornly cling to them. This inability of believers to theorize ravenous spirit beliefs in a “logical” manner reinforces a general assumption that supernatural beliefs are inherently irrational. The term “logical” in this context, nonetheless, means “compliant with scientific-rationalist reasoning.”

The show opens with a documentary about a ravenous spirit panic in a belief community in Kalasin. This panic was triggered by ten deaths that occurred successively in the community within three months. Three village representatives recounted each death in detail. From time to time, they were interrupted by the interviewer who asserted his alternative explanations of the cases, anticipating the informants to defend their ground. The villagers' uneasiness is obvious as they fail to rationalize their beliefs using scientific-rationalist idioms.

Villager: Aunt Boonsin went out to cut sugar cane every day. I know her well. Her house is next to mine. One night she said she had diarrhea. So in the morning we sent her to the hospital. Later on that day, she was dead.

Interviewer: But she is old, and she got diarrhea. Perhaps she was weakened because of that, and then died.

Villager: But she was in treatment. Diarrhea could not have been the cause.

Interviewer: What did the physician say?

Villager: The physician said...umm (pause, eyes look up) blood...(a short pause) blood poisoning.

Interviewer: (adopting high pitched voice, expressing a surprise) Oh! Blood poisoning. That was fatal!

Villager: (Looking blankly at the interviewer, saying nothing. A shift to other scenes) (Johjai, April 2011)

Unfamiliar with the ravenous spirit belief tradition, the interviewer fails to see that villagers did
not base their conclusion solely on Mrs. Boonsin's death. One or two deaths, regardless of how bizarre or unlikely they are, are not adequate to be taken as a ravenous spirit crisis. In this case, the interviewee construes Mrs. Boonsin's death as one event in a chain of connected phenomena. And the totality of these phenomena forms the basis for ravenous spirit beliefs. The interviewer, however, pursues his own task of identifying a natural cause of Mrs. Boonsin's death. His remark about the severity of blood poisoning reveals his dismissive stance on the interviewee's account. For him, it is obvious that the deceased died from blood poisoning, not a ravenous spirit; and he is baffled to see how his informant dismisses the self-evidently “correct” explanation and turns to the false one. This reaction induces the interviewee's silence, which may be indicative of his inability to further explain, in a scientifically rational way, why the community attributed Mrs. Boonsin's death to a ravenous spirit. Or it possibly expresses his uneasiness as he discovered that the interviewer failed to grasp the intended message of his account of the death epidemic in the community. What primarily concerns the informant seems to be the unusually high frequency of these deaths rather than the manners in which they occurred. The editorial choice to include this awkward moment of silence in the documentary, nonetheless, hints that this silence in the eyes of editorial team is emblematic of irrationality and absurdity associated with ravenous spirit beliefs in the popular imagination. The interviewee's awkward silence when his belief is scrutinized by scientific-logic is highly representable since it reifies a power relation between supernatural beliefs and scientific-rationalist paradigm. The informant's failure to respond to the interviewer, in this case, underscores the inherently chaotic irrationality attributed to ravenous spirit beliefs. Because they are intrinsically absurd and illogical, ravenous spirit beliefs are inscrutable even to their holders.

3.3 Inertia
Remarks about durability of the ravenous spirit belief tradition are ubiquitous in Thai press and media. Observations about the anachronistic and rigid nature of the tradition stem from two general assumptions about ravenous spirit believers. First, they are passive tradition bearers that mindlessly receive and pass on ravenous spirit beliefs. They practice the tradition in the same fashion their predecessors did a hundred years ago, neglecting the outside world that spins forward and away from a primitive state. Second, since the scientific-rationalist mode of thought and supernatural beliefs are mutually exclusive, ravenous spirit believers cannot think in rationalist terms and, therefore, are trapped by their own false beliefs. These two prevalent assumptions uphold a representational pattern that exoticizes belief communities, exaggerating the divide between the modern world inhabited by the audiences and the anarchic, lagging-behind zones belonging to the primitive folk.

In October of 2008, a television documentary about ravenous spirit beliefs in Mukdaharn and Amnat Charoen was broadcast on a national station. The emcee's lead-in speech gives an overview of the documentary that exclusively covers sensational and exotic aspects of the tradition. The lead-in script construes supernatural beliefs as the cause of bizarre practices adopted by believers: “The beliefs in ravenous spirits and widow ghosts\(^5\) jeopardize the normally peaceful and uneventful lives of people in these two villages. We will see in the documentary the shocking case of a man who hacked off his penis in order to escape from widow ghosts” (Rueng Jing Pan Jor, October 2008). The show is replete with images of rural folk who carry out outrageous acts in response to their supernatural beliefs – like the man whose fear for widow

\(^5\) A category of wicked spirit in northeastern Thai tradition. The widow ghost is a female spirit that roams about at night and attacks men by having sexual intercourse with them. They are believed to cause sudden nocturnal deaths, known in medical world as SUNDS (sudden unexpected nocturnal death syndrome), among the men who have encountered them.
ghost drove him to castrate himself.

The documentary opens with general information about the ravenous spirit belief tradition. Then focus shifts to strange bodily symptoms occurring to three women in two belief communities. Visual representations capture the patients and their dramatic symptoms in the midst of the panic-stricken folk who gather in the patients' houses out of anxiety. The first scene features a woman who lies inertly on her back. A close-up captures her entire face, showing her eyes that stare blankly in the air. Around her a crowd huddles together and speak nervously to each other. The following scene shows another lady who is crying hysterically and about to collapse into unconsciousness. Her neighbors are in a panic as they try to keep her from hurting herself. The last scene is most appalling; it covers a lone woman who is shouting obscene terms at the top of her voice, verbally abusing and intimidating a group of dumbfounded males who try to get hold of her. A voice-over describes these symptoms as the ideal input that sustains ravenous spirit beliefs. Their dramatic, grotesque nature drives ravenous spirit believers to seek solutions and explanations from the tradition which is too “deeply rooted in the northeastern Thais imagination” (Rueng Jing Pan Jor, October 2008) to be erased by modern education. The voice-over asserts a dichotomy between science and supernatural beliefs as it remarks that the latter overrides the former in the believers' mentality:

Even though these symptoms are taken as the patent signs of dissociative disorder in the medical world, villagers' supernatural beliefs are so overwhelming that they rule out this explanation (Rueng Jing Pan Jor, October 2008).

The voice-over reiterates a dominant assumption about the incompatibility of the scientific-rationalist worldview with supernatural beliefs (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:64; O'Conner 1995:37-38; Mullen 200:122). The folk who believe in supernatural agents are
assumed to be unable to adopt the modern mode of thinking. This assumption perpetuates the illusory divide and the power relation inherent in the conception of rational, modern citizens versus superstitious rural folk. An outcome of this illusory divide is a supposition that folk ways of life and folk traditions are frozen in time. They remain intact in spite of the changes brought about by the modern era. In the romanticized depictions of other “harmless” northeastern Thai belief traditions, such as the cult of guardian spirits or fertility cults pertaining to the rain god and the rice goddess, this supposition upholds the image of the “authentic” tradition faithfully passed on through time. In the case of ravenous spirit beliefs, however, it reinforces prejudice against believers and their communities. It underpins an image of a barbaric folk who, by practicing their belief tradition, neglect the rules and norms of civilized society. Their communities turn into places of anarchy where anyone can become the victim of collective violence justified by supernatural beliefs.

Toward the end of the documentary, ravenous spirit belief communities are presented as an anarchic backcountry fraught with grotesque ritualistic practices and absurd violence. The voice-over remarks that ravenous spirit beliefs engender absurd ritualistic procedures that transgress the modern concern for human rights. An exorcising ritual held in a belief community in Khon Kaen is covered. The scene features an old woman sitting on the ground. Her entire body is bound by white thread. Bizarre ritualistic objects scatter around her. A male exorcist is yelling at her at the top of his voice, neglecting her repeated, tearful protests that she does not host ravenous spirits. Then viewers are shown another scene of a group of people standing around a very old woman. They are declaring the community's verdict, which sentences her to exile on the grounds that she hosts ravenous spirits. A man in the uniform of a district officer stands nearby, observing the procedure quietly. The voice-over asserts the program's
interpretation of this event regarded as a manifestation of the anarchy that characterizes ravenous spirit belief communities:

Ravenous spirit beliefs are more sacred than law in these communities. They become the indisputable basis for the alleged hosts' exiles. Once condemned, there is no hope for the convicted to defend themselves. They are forced to relocate and fend for themselves elsewhere (Rueng Jing Pan Jor, October 2008).

This voice-over stresses the state of lawlessness attributed to ravenous spirit belief communities. The image of a district officer who does nothing to stop this inhumane treatment of a helpless old woman is, in this documentary, the symbol of state law overridden by supernatural beliefs. Even though his inaction can be read in a different light, the voice-over asserts the interpretation that resonates with preconceived ideas about these anarchic belief communities. The intended message seems to be: a lone district officer does not stand a chance of overpowering a group of superstitious folk driven crazy by their groundless beliefs. This representation alienates ravenous spirit believers from the modern world inhabited by rational people. This clear-cut divide persists in spite of its inaccuracy because it fulfills a particular function. The image of the rigid and superorganic folk tradition resistant to change sustains the belief held by “non-superstitious” Thais in material and intellectual progress brought about by modernity. Without the superstitious folk and their enclosed, backward domain, the modern world and its denizens cannot be certain of their virtues.

4. Condescending Discourses

Modern scholarship has produced three categories of rhetoric to negate the veracity of supernatural beliefs and experiences related to them: survivalist, functionalist, and contextualist (Hufford 1985). Survivalist discourses ascribe supernatural beliefs to an inertia in the unilinear process of cultural evolution. They are vestiges bound for extinction once modern education...
spreads. Functionalist propositions argue against the implication, inherent in the survivalist outlook, that supernatural beliefs are useless. They contend that these beliefs persist despite their inaccuracy because they fulfil certain functions in belief communities. Contextualist postulates take the furthest step in defending the integrity of people who hold supernatural beliefs. They posit that particular ways of seeing the world and reality result in supernatural beliefs that are real on a subjective level and distinct from an “objective” reality described by the positivistic paradigm. These three rhetorics invariably construe supernatural beliefs as a distinct class of postulates that lack empirical ground. They are, as Hufford contends, mere rhetorics because they are appropriated to sustain the legitimacy of the scientific-rationalist paradigm rather than to bring forth the nuances of ethnographic data and promote belief scholarship.

Academic discourses rationalizing the persistence of the ravenous spirit belief tradition in modernizing northeastern Thailand revolve around these three rhetorics. In the context of Thai academia, these rhetorics are readily adopted by Thai scholars due to their congruence with the representations of the tradition prevalent in mass media. A functionalist surmise that ravenous spirit beliefs are social controlling devices sounds, unsurprisingly, convincing as mass media exclusively cover the accusation and the banishment of eccentric, anti-social individuals condemned by their communities for hosting ravenous spirits. Also, the psychodynamic theory of ravenous spirit possession appears feasible because mass media primarily feature dramatic mental symptoms displayed by ravenous spirit victims during possessions. Monolithic representations influence condescending discourses in the sense that they create the model of how to talk about the ravenous spirit belief tradition. This model informs scholars' views about

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6 For more on the notion of “survivals” and cultural evolutionary theory, see E.B. Tylor (1920:1-25). For a critical discussion of how this survivalist outlook relates to supernatural beliefs and traditions, see Goldstein, Gridr, and Thomas (2007:60-70), and Mullen (2000). On the influence of cultural evolutionism on folklore theories, see, for example, Dundes (1969).
the aspects of the tradition that deserve scholarly interest. The media establishes a rule of accountability dictating that ravenous sprit beliefs are worth talking about only when they engender abusive social practices and inhumane ritualistic procedures. Academia readily responds to this discursive practice because it resonates with the rationalist impulse to discern why “false beliefs” and their malignancies persist in the midst of scientific progress. A result of this cooperation between media sensationalism and biased academia is a corpus of literature that grounds their interpretations of ravenous spirit beliefs on the cases that support their theoretical orientations. I note here, however, that I do not negate the validity or applicability of this literature. Its propositions are valid and adequate given the selected cases analysed in their studies. What I argue against is their universal applicability. These propositions are invalid once the non-sensational, benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are taken into account.

Literature about ravenous spirit beliefs analysed in this section includes articles published in peer-reviewed, Thai journals and research projects sponsored by both state and private organizations. Discourses are divided into three categories according to their analytical perspectives: sociological discourse, psychoanalytic discourse, and anthropological discourse.

4.1 Sociological Discourse

Sociological discourses observe that accusations and coerced exiles of ravenous spirit hosts fulfil particular functions in belief communities. A conventional theory, drawing on cases in which the alleged hosts are “the Others” in their communities, contends that ravenous spirit beliefs sustain social norms because they provide the grounds for the expulsion of “deviant” characters. Another popular notion maintains that ravenous spirit beliefs are a strategy employed by believers to make latent conflicts explicit. In small and rural communities where charity, generosity, and selflessness are venerated codes of conduct, a ravenous spirit accusation becomes
a channel through which conflicts of interest between two parties are articulated and resolved. Another prominent theory also explicates ravenous spirit beliefs using the idioms of conflict. It surmises that internal segregation is a natural process of social life within a group that features tension as much as cooperation. Ravenous spirit beliefs are segregating devices used by believers to consolidate their faction by discriminating against the internal Other.

In “A Ravenous Spirit Village or A Village of Healed Ravenous Spirit Hosts?: A Case Study of Ban Nasaonan Village, Pannanikom District, Sakon Nakorn” (2012), Somchai Ninathi comments on the types of personality susceptible to ravenous spirit accusations. Individuals who transgress codes of conduct venerated by the community, such as “persons who exploit public properties exclusively for their personal use, who are consumed by greed and fight with their relatives over inheritance, and who are financially affluent but never do charity” (2012:2) usually become the targets of accusation. Based on this observation, the author construes the ravenous spirit belief tradition as a social regulation device employed by believers to eliminate Otherness.

In a talk show program broadcast on February 23, 2010, Ninathi elaborated this view:

All communities are regulated by norms and social roles assigned to their members. Individuals are required to be aware of their status and conform to the roles pertaining to these statuses. Ravenous spirit accusations are symbolic. It tells that the community detects “the deviants” within their enclosed and homogenous world. It is a policing mechanism put to use when somebody transgresses the norm and behaves in an untoward way in the eyes of his community. This is how a person becomes the host of a ravenous spirit (Ninathi interviewed in VIP, February 2010).

Implicit in this observation of a sociological function of ravenous spirit beliefs is the image of a belief community as a small and closely-knit social unit in which homogeneity and consensus are governing principles of social life. The more the group values these two principles, the less tolerant it is to behaviors deviating from the established norm. This sociological discourse

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7 ผู้บ้านฝ่ายบ้าน บ้านรักษาฝ่ายบ้าน: การบ้านบ้านสาวนา น. บรรณาญ จ. สกลนคร (สมชัย บลูชี่ 2012: 1-14)
implies that unity is a predominant ideal pursued by ravenous spirit belief communities to the point that it breeds abusive social practices.

Another sociological explanation contends that ravenous spirit beliefs are indirect means through which one attacks his rival to safeguard his personal interests. In this notion, social life in ravenous spirit belief communities is fraught with underlying conflicts and tension. However, as the social norm disapproves of direct confrontation between neighbors or community members regarding matters of self-interest, ravenous spirit beliefs become excuses that the cunning and sinister folk employ to settle these conflicts. A deviant figure is created and condemned as a part of the scheme to secure personal interests whose open and direct discussion is considered vulgar and untoward.

In a monograph entitled *The Epidemiology of Mass Hysteria: A Case Study of Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition* (Pradubsamut 1999), the author reports twenty-five cases of mysterious symptoms and three cases of death occurring from March to April, 1998 in a village in Ubon Ratchathani. This high frequency of unfortunate events led to the accusations of two individuals believed to host ravenous spirits – Mrs. Sri and Mr. Boonpeng. The author probes into the social life of the latter and attributes his accusation to the fact that Mr. Boonpeng was in conflict with several parties over economic and political interests. Under a sub-section entitled “The analysis of the causes leading to accusation,” the author lists four incidents believed to contribute to Mr. Boonpeng's accusation. 1) He recommended a construction crew from outside the community to the village's abbot who planned to renovate a funeral pyre in the temple. This, the author suggests, deprived the in-group crew of a potential source of income. 2) Mr. Saree – a villager – was refused when he asked the accused for water lily rhizomes. Mr. Boonpeng reasoned that he grew water lilies for commercial purposes. 3) The accused once served as a trustee for his best
friend. Some successors of this friend were offended by the way Mr. Boonpeng distributed the deceased's properties. 4) Mr. Boonpeng's son has actively engaged in local politics. Through his several attempts to be elected as a district representative, he made political enemies. The author concludes that mysterious deaths and illnesses, supernatural beliefs, and ulterior motives concerning personal interests bring forth ravenous spirit accusation (1999:65). Via ravenous spirit beliefs, conflicts of interest on a personal level that cannot be brought up and resolved by direct means are disguised as collective and supernatural problems. The belief tradition is a sinister plot to convict one's enemy of a supernatural crime and to sentence him to an inevitable destruction.

Another sociological interpretation of ravenous spirit beliefs, in a similar fashion, construes this belief tradition as a catalyst of conflicts. It posits that the segregation between “them” and “us” is a natural process intrinsic to social life in all kinds of groups. The accusation and stigmatization of ravenous spirit hosts are procedures in this segregating process in which internal “Others” are identified and oppressed to reaffirm the group's solidarity. In “Ogre-zation and Social Discrimination in Conflict Management Perspectives” (Photikanit 2012), the author coins the term “ogre-zation” to denote a social process in which individuals are transformed into ravenous spirit hosts by collective judgment. Ogre-zation is used in this article as a metaphor for any level of conflict that entails the demonization of the opposite faction in order to maintain the authority of one's faction within the group. In light of this analysis, a ravenous spirit accusation is a variant of the familiar and common process of discrediting and dehumanizing one's enemy in the rivalry for power. In his remarks about ogre-zation in politically polarized Thailand, the author's assumption that accusation and violence against the alleged hosts are defining

8 The title given here is originally in English.
characteristics of the ravenous spirit beliefs is evident:

To make sense of ogre-ization in the context of political conflicts in Thailand nowadays, we can say that it is a social process that breeds suspicion and distrust within the society. It denotes a polarization occurring when those who adopt a different ideology are defined as the “demonic Others” in relation to “Us” who hold the “right” view. Ogre-ization demarcates the boundary between the accuser and the accused. While the former is anxious and deluded by his belief that his world is now threatened by a ravenous spirit's evil influence; the latter perishes as he becomes the target of animosity and collective violence. Ogre-ization achieves its goal of creating a rupture within the society when trust is entirely eliminated (2012:135).

The shortcoming of this analysis lies in the absence of specific, concrete cases demonstrating how ravenous spirit beliefs, in some contexts, exacerbate the friction between the opposing parties and justify the discrimination one makes against another. Situating the claim on no specific cases, the author reinforces a simplistic assumption that ravenous spirit beliefs invariably engender abusive social practices in which the deviant Other is created and condemned. Sociological functions of ravenous spirit beliefs contended by literature analyzed in this chapter cannot be extended beyond the threshold of some particular cases. And it is a grave error not to anchor them to cases indicative of sociological impulse behind the treatments of the alleged hosts since several other cases challenge rather than uphold sociological discourses. Mrs. Buasri, for instance, recounted how her community identified a dead man as a ravenous spirit host (personal interview, June 3, 2013). Believing that ravenous spirits can survive even after the passing of their hosts, Mrs. Buasri's community accused a dead man who would poorly serve as an “internal Other” compared to living ones. Mrs. Boonma's account also renders sociological interpretations unfeasible. In her case, the alleged host was a man who briefly visited the village for business and left before the accusation took place. Nothing was done and the accused never returned to the village (personal interview, May 24, 2014). Accusation and collective violence
against the alleged hosts are not allowed in Mrs. Saitong's community because of the villagers' fear of legal consequences. They, instead, resort to healing and preventative rituals (personal interview, May 26, 2014).

Taking into account the variability of ravenous spirit practices, it becomes clear that sociological explanations of the tradition are valid only when benign practices of the tradition are omitted. The major drawback of sociological literature about ravenous spirit beliefs is its lack of reflexivity upon this selective nature, being unheedful of the cases that do not fit with preconceived, conventional explanations of supernatural beliefs. I do not suggest that Thai scholars are totally oblivious to the non-sensational practices of ravenous spirit beliefs or that they consciously manipulate ethnographic data to accommodate their theories. My point here is to elucidate the “tradition of condemnation” prevailing in representations and academic discourses concerning ravenous spirit beliefs. While Hufford's traditions of disbelief refer to the tendency of belief scholars to negate the validity of their informants' mystical experiences and conduct the analysis based on that dismissive stance (Hufford 1982b), the tradition of condemnation denotes the tendency of Thai mass media and academia to consider only the abusive aspects of ravenous spirit beliefs and explicate the tradition in light of these aspects. It accordingly dictates that only abusive aspects of ravenous spirit beliefs are worth studying and talking about. Formulated within this tradition, discourses about ravenous spirit beliefs are conventional in the sense that they reiterate the orthodox but misleadingly simplistic views of supernatural beliefs and make, to use Briggs's words, “only a very limited range of responses thinkable” (2007: 338).

4.2 Psychoanalytic Discourse

While sociological literature exclusively concentrates on accusations and ordeals inflicted
upon ravenous spirit hosts, psychoanalytic discourses focus on the dramatic display of mental symptoms during ravenous spirit possession. Unlike belief communities that view ravenous spirit possession as a broad category encompassing a wide range of experiences, psychoanalytic literature grounds its explanations of the tradition on specific types of possession. Cases featuring patients' abrupt change of character, hysterical laughing or crying, and incomprehensible babbling are prevalent in psychoanalytic studies of ravenous spirit beliefs. The predilection for these aspects of the tradition results in the view that ravenous spirit beliefs are a folk etiology of mental illness. Believers falsely attribute psychological symptoms to ravenous spirits; and the victims of ravenous spirit possession are, in fact, psychologically disturbed individuals who need a consultation with a psychiatrist rather than an exorcising rite. Besides, psychoanalytic discourses draw on a tenet generally held among believers that ravenous spirit hosts do not look people in the eyes and avoid making contact with them. The characteristics of the hosts as described by the tradition are similar to the traits found among passive, melancholic psychotics. This belief about the defining traits of ravenous spirit hosts supports psychoanalytic assertions that ravenous spirit beliefs are idioms employed by the rural folk to make sense of psychological deviancy.

Another view prominent in psychoanalytic literature construes underlying tension as a component of social life in small, traditional Thai communities in rural areas. In light of this

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9 The anti-social personalities of the hosts of ravenous spirits are reported by both believers and non-believers. A book about Thai folk beliefs by Phya Anuman Ratchathan, a well-known Thai scholar and folklorist, describes how to distinguish the hosts of ravenous spirits from normal people: “The folk know who hosts ravenous spirits by observing the suspect’s behavior. The hosts will show some deviant traits. There will always be a look of madness in their eyes and they will never look straight into people’s eyes” (Anuman Ratchathan 1960: 338). The same thing is stated by Rev. Boonchu, a Buddhist monk and an exorcist: “The hosts of ravenous spirits avoid people’s gaze. They never look straight into anybody’s eyes. The hosts tend to seclude themselves from their communities because of their uneasiness with people. They usually visit deserted places alone and try to hide their strange habits from others” (personal interview, May 26, 2013).
conception, ravenous spirit possession is “enacted” by the victims to release anxiety and frustration that cannot be expressed straightforwardly. The *Journal of the Psychiatrist Association of Thailand* (2000) includes an editorial entitled “Ravenous Spirits: Spirit Possession from the Psychiatrist’s Viewpoint” (Suwannalert 2000). According to this article, a possession by a ravenous spirit is a justified way to release suppressed negative feelings. The author analyzes a case in which a teenage female patient was attacked by the symptoms taken by her community as a ravenous spirit possession. She experienced a paralysis. Her hands and feet were rigid and twisted. These physical symptoms coincided with a laughing fit. The patient passed out for an hour during which an exorcist was called to expel the spirit. The author interprets these pathological symptoms as the manifestation of the patient’s suppressed frustration caused by tension with her parents. Before the possession, the patient was scolded for her habit of going out at night. Since harboring harsh feeling against one’s parents, let alone expressing them, is a taboo in traditional Thai communities, the patient consciously or unconsciously enacted ravenous spirit possession to release her depression through an untoward behavior that would be unacceptable in a normal situation. The author concludes:

Several cases of possession by ravenous spirits I have studied show that the possessed were troubled by conflicts they had with others at the time the pathological symptoms occurred. Their belief in ravenous spirits convinces them that they were possessed. Nonetheless, the possession, either consciously or unconsciously acted out by the patients, is an ideal outlet through which forbidden thoughts and feelings are released. As rural communities take spirit possession as a possibility that can happen any time, people can assume the role of a possessed person in order to vent negative feelings that cannot be expressed straightforwardly because the outburst violates behavioral codes. Spirit possession, therefore, can be beneficial in that it is a justified means to ease people from their psychological burden. Especially when it happens with a trance, the mind can be fully relaxed (Suwannalert 2000: editorial).

Speculating about a latent function of ravenous spirit possession, this analysis adopts the
condescending stance, implying that belief communities are oblivious to the covert meaning of this misconstrued psychological phenomenon. And it requires a skeptical, well-informed psychiatrist to solve the riddle for them. As rationalist discourse, this psychoanalytic interpretation rules out mystical causes claimed by the informants who allegedly adopt the role of the possessed to restore balance to their disturbed psyche. Though it lauds ravenous spirit possession for its favorable psychological effects, this analysis recapitulates a predominant but ill-conceived image of ravenous spirit believers: They are so credulous and superstitious that they attribute a psychological process to supernatural agents.

In some studies, this view about ravenous spirit possession as role-play acted out by patients connotes the debased morality of the victims who make a claim of being possessed to deny responsibility for their outrageous behaviors. In an article titled “The Effectiveness of Professional Intervention in Community Mental Health Crisis: Cases concerning Ravenous Spirit Beliefs” (Huttapanom et al 2006), the authors reports the result of psychological consultations provided by mental health professionals to a community in Khon Kaen after a ravenous spirit crisis. In the analysis of a possession occurring to a fifteen-year-old girl, the assessment of the patient's personality reveals the assessors' belief that the possession is fake:

The patient has an egocentric personality and shows a tendency toward unhealthy psychological mechanisms such as introjection, repression, displacement, and dissociation. These render her susceptible to mental disorders. It is also likely that possession is a role-enactment the patient performed to shun disapproval and criticism, as the theory of a psychosocial model suggests that patient's role can be assumed to deny social and legal repercussions of one's action. Before the incident, the patient had a heated fight with her aunt. There was an exchange of cruel words […] The patient screamed and passed out after the fight. Once she regained her consciousness, the patient claimed to be possessed by a ravenous spirit hosted by Mrs. C (Huttapanom et al 2006:147).

This case is exemplary of the ravenous spirit possessions usually cited in psychoanalytic
literature. In these cases, patients' personalities are described in a way that accommodates the preconceptualized psychoanalytic interpretation. Then the circumstances of the possession are laid out and psychological factors triggering the “enactment” of this possession are elucidated. Psychoanalytic surmises are feasible in cases where psychological components – such as the possessed's history of institutionalization or apparent traits of mental disorders – are evident. Several cases of possession, nonetheless, are forced into a psychoanalytic frame of reference that, rather than explaining them, assimilates them into scholarly tradition entrenched in scientism. In *The Epidemiology of Mass Hysteria* (Pradubsamut 1999), for instance, twenty-five cases of mysterious symptoms erupting in a village in Ubon Ratchatani are reported. While the villagers attribute these symptoms to ravenous spirits, the author contends that they were triggered by three successive deaths preceding the outbreak. To verify the hypothesis that collective anxiety combined with tension in personal life is the real cause of this mass hysteria, the author examines patients' backgrounds and speculates on possible psychological causes that expose them to the symptoms. Psychological assessments of some patients, however, contradict the hypothesis rather than uphold it. For some inscrutable reasons, the author reports these incongruous cases that problematize her psychoanalytic approach without further explanations to justify their apparent incoherence. A male patient, for example, is described as “sociable, confident, independent” (1999:73). An evaluation of a middle-aged female patient describes her as “outgoing and socially well-integrated” (1999:72). The incongruence between the data and the psychoanalytic speculation made by the author is most apparent when it comes to two patients – one is seven and another is nine years old – whose possessions are merely mentioned but not analyzed in detail.

10 For more on the shortcomings and weaknesses of psychodynamic approaches to supernatural beliefs, see Hufford (1974).
Two flaws inherent in functionalist explanations of supernatural beliefs are the lack of a causal link between the belief in question and its said function, and the impossibility of either verifying or falsifying functionalist propositions (Hufford 1985). Surmises about psychological functions of ravenous spirit beliefs also suffer from these two drawbacks. The assumption that ravenous spirit beliefs are the means through which the believers release prohibited, suppressed angst is not an adequate reason for the persistence of this belief tradition. Just as people believe in God not because faith prevents them from committing unethical deeds, functionalist explanations tell nothing about why God's existence is real for certain people; or why God is believed to assume specific forms and possess specific qualifications even though these attributes ascribed to Him do not relate to the ethics taught by the religion. In this light, psychological functions of ravenous spirit beliefs as posited by the studies examined in this chapter are unscientific in the sense that they assume a causal relation between the surmised function and the beliefs in question even though no empirical data adequately proves that they are causally related.

In the psychoanalytic literature analyzed in this chapter, any unpleasant incidents, such as a fight with an older relative or the sudden deaths that befall one's neighbors, are taken as sources of anxiety that trigger a mental breakdown misconstrued as ravenous spirit possession. These speculations can neither be proved nor disproved for two reasons. First, the evidences provided by these studies are not adequate to prove that there is an empirical, definite connection between ravenous spirit possession and the possessed's psychological state. Second, any details in the lives of those who have experienced the possession can be read in the way that supports psychoanalytic speculation. And we cannot know for certain whether these factors really trigger the possession; or how one possession triggers another and causes an epidemic. In this respect,
psychological functions of ravenous spirit possession contended in the literature mentioned in this chapter are no different from mystical explanations of ravenous spirit afflictions. They are both speculative and unverifiable due to inadequate evidence.

While sociological discourses exclusively draw on cases that feature barbaric folk and their inhumane practices, psychoanalytic discourses concentrate on cases of the “crazy” folk who enact ravenous spirit possession to vent their stress. Scholars' efforts to explain ravenous spirit beliefs through psychoanalytic idioms sometimes transforms into theoretical obsession when the cases that poorly fit with psychoanalytic views are forced into this rigid explanatory frame. The authority of psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline, in this case, is maintained at the cost of ravenous spirit believers who are portrayed as superstitious and crazy.

4.3 Anthropological Discourse

Anthropological discourses construe ravenous spirit beliefs as a distinctive trait of northeastern Thai culture. Even though the northern and the central Thais, to a lesser extent, hold ravenous spirit beliefs, anthropological literature conceives of the tradition as a northeastern Thai custom. This literature argues for the value of ravenous spirit beliefs as a token of northeastern Thai cultural identity that remains intact while other local customs perish in the face of modernity and globalization. From the stance of this literature, the ravenous spirit belief tradition persists because it is intrinsic to the northeastern Thai way of being. The tradition articulates as well as responds to needs originating within the unique context of northeastern Thai ontology.

In spite of its preoccupation with the value of the tradition, anthropological literature, like sociological and psychoanalytic research, is primarily concerned with the abusive aspects of ravenous spirit beliefs. Their initiating question is still dismissive: Why do northeastern Thais still practice ravenous spirit beliefs that lead to accusations of and violence against the alleged
hosts? Anthropological literature responds to this riddle using cultural relativist rhetoric – because ravenous spirits are real for those enculturated in the northeastern Thai worldview, it is understandable for believers to banish or harass ravenous spirit hosts. Non-believers view these practices as unacceptable and absurd because they do not perceive and interpret reality through the lens of this belief tradition. The danger of this reasoning lies in the causal relation it establishes between ravenous spirit beliefs and inhumane practices. While accusation and violence do not causally relate to ravenous spirit beliefs since several belief communities practice the tradition without these two components – as will be demonstrated in the next chapter–, the anthropological literature analyzed in this study divines this causal relation from a number of selected cases and justifies it using the idioms of cultural relativism.

In the research report titled *Ravenous Spirits: A Dimension of Northeastern Thai Culture* (Putamnin, 2011) the author describes ravenous spirit beliefs as a distinctive trait of northeastern Thai identity and worldview. As he jokingly remarks that ravenous spirits roam about wherever a group of northeastern Thais settles down (3-4), the author forges a synecdochical relationship between ravenous spirit beliefs and northeastern Thai culture, assuming that the former is adequate to represent the latter and that *all* northeastern Thais believe in ravenous spirits. The author makes two remarkable points: 1) He argues that ravenous spirits are real for believers to the extent that even the alleged hosts and their families unquestioningly accept the accusation. And 2) he depicts ravenous spirit beliefs as a strategy to maintain the “authentic” northeastern Thai identity in the midst of Western hegemony.

Informed by a conviction prevalent in Thai academia that accusation and violence are defining characteristics of the ravenous spirit belief tradition, the author presents several accounts given by alleged hosts and their relatives. However, instead of an outcry against the
groundless accusations and the traumatic experiences the informants went through, these accounts display the accused's serious belief that they really host ravenous spirits and deserve the ordeals inflicted upon them by their communities. This representation of ethnographic data supports the author's point that ravenous spirits are acutely real for their believers. Even the accused themselves do not deny this reality and readily comply with collective judgement. Considering this intense degree of belief, it is understandable that believers take vigorous steps to rid their communities of ravenous spirits. The author cites testimony given by an alleged host who was banished from her community, revealing the informant's view that her accusation is not groundless:

When I was young I learned a love spell from my guru. I was amazed by the efficacy of the spell that he showed me, so I decided to be initiated. Four or five years later villagers accused me of hosting ravenous spirits. There was a taboo prohibiting the use of spell on married men; but I broke it. I was also suspicious of myself. Whenever an exorcising rite was performed and the spirit was beaten out of the victim, I felt hurt as if I was the one beaten (personal interview quoted in Putamin 2011:6).

Another informant describes the accusation of her mother, which she believed was real and justified:

When I was young villagers accused my mother of hosting ravenous spirits. I was so frightened of my mom and her ravenous spirits usually possessed me. My husband had to learn and practice exorcising arts to heal me. Because of this he became an exorcist. When my mom passed away, my aunt inherited her ravenous spirits” (personal interview quoted in Putamin 2011:7).

Both accounts mention accusations that are real and justified in the eyes of the informants. The rhetoric of cultural relativism is implicit in the representation of these accounts. Since believers perceive and interpret reality through a cultural lens that grants ravenous spirit's ontological status, their actions are sensible since they cohere with the vision of reality they see through this epistemological lens. This assertion would be proper and feasible if the author did not use it to
justify the accusation and the abuse of the alleged hosts. In fact, there is no need for this justification for two reasons: First, these two components are not intrinsic to the ravenous spirit belief tradition; they stem from variable ways in which different belief communities convert ravenous spirit beliefs into practice. Second, an insightful understanding of this belief tradition requires a thorough examination of its multifaceted nature rather than the justification/rationalization of its negative aspects. Apparently, the author feels the need to justify the accusation and the maltreatment of the alleged hosts due to his assumption that these two components are defining characteristics of the tradition.

In the conclusion, the author argues for the value of ravenous spirit beliefs. As an intrinsic essence of northeastern Thai cultural identity, the tradition prevents the disintegration of local communities brought about by the invasion of global culture. Ravenous spirit beliefs, like other northeastern Thai spirit cults, sustain traditional social structures and patterns of social life. Implicit in this argument is the notion that ravenous spirit beliefs are resistant to change:

Spirit cults are not superstitions but useful devices meticulously constructed by the northeastern Thais' predecessors. They are social controlling apparatuses as well as conservative forces guarding against the collapse of traditional institutions in the face of external influences. Spirit cults, therefore, are priceless cultural assets in contemporary northeastern Thailand. This is what ravenous spirit beliefs are to belief communities. And this is why they persist despite the raging tide of modernity (Putamnin 2011:17).

While inertia attributed to ravenous spirit beliefs is condemned in rationalist discourses, it is valued in this study, which adopts a cultural relativist rhetoric in its explication of the tradition. In light of this rhetoric, it is not only acceptable for believers to practice ravenous spirit beliefs; they also have the right to maintain these practices since they are crucial for the sustainability of northeastern Thai cultural identity which is under the threat of dissolution. This argument, when viewed in light of the negative aspects of the tradition the author concentrates on, turns into a
radical version of cultural relativism – even abusive practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are acceptable since they are "genuine" manifestations of a northeastern Thai way of seeing and being in the world.\footnote{Clifford Geertz (1984) aptly describes a false assumption about those who adopt a relativistic stance: “To suggest that 'hard rock' foundations for cognitive, esthetic, or moral judgments may not, in fact, be available, or anyway that those one is being offered are dubious, is to find oneself accused of disbelieving in the existence of physical world, thinking pushpin as good as poetry, regarding Hitler as just a fellow with unstandard tastes”(1984:264). For Geertz, cultural relativism cannot be identified with nihilism, which means the indiscriminating acceptance of all beliefs and actions on the ground that they are accepted and viable in the cultures of their origin. Even though I agree with Geertz that such implication is not intrinsic to cultural relativism, the way Putamin argues for the value of abusive practices pertaining to ravenous spirit beliefs, in my view, warrants such implication.}\footnote{Clifford Geertz (1984) aptly describes a false assumption about those who adopt a relativistic stance: “To suggest that 'hard rock' foundations for cognitive, esthetic, or moral judgments may not, in fact, be available, or anyway that those one is being offered are dubious, is to find oneself accused of disbelieving in the existence of physical world, thinking pushpin as good as poetry, regarding Hitler as just a fellow with unstandard tastes”(1984:264). For Geertz, cultural relativism cannot be identified with nihilism, which means the indiscriminating acceptance of all beliefs and actions on the ground that they are accepted and viable in the cultures of their origin. Even though I agree with Geertz that such implication is not intrinsic to cultural relativism, the way Putamin argues for the value of abusive practices pertaining to ravenous spirit beliefs, in my view, warrants such implication.} The flaw of this anthropological study of the ravenous spirit belief tradition lies in its preoccupation with the inhumane practices of the tradition and the justification of these components. Due to this flaw, the value of the tradition the author argues for turns into an ill-reasoned cultural defense a radical cultural relativist makes in favor of the cruel folk.

5. Conclusion: Why Do We Need to Write about Others' Troubles?

When Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the author of 	extit{Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland} (1979), revisited her fieldwork site in the summer of 1999, the visit ended with her being banished from the community. Offended by her ethnography described in the Irish press as “an egregious violation of community and cultural privacy” (Scheper-Hughes 2000:117), the community sent Scheper-Hughes away in the middle of the night, warning her not to return. One of her informants stated, to her face, why he found her account about the community offensive:

\textit{Admit it. You wrote a book to please yourself at our expense. You ran us down, girl, you ran us down. You call what you do a science? [...] Sure, nobody's perfect, nobody's a saint. You never said what a beautiful and a safe place our village is. [...] And we are not such a backwater today. There are many educated people among us. You wrote about our troubles, all right, but not about our strengths. What about the friendliness of neighbors? What about our love for Mother Ireland and our proud work of defending it? [...] Look, girl, the fact is that ya just didn't give us credit} [emphasis in original] (quoted in Scheper-Hughes 2000:119).
Though articulated in a different circumstance in response to an ethnography conducted in a
different cultural and academic context, this criticism succinctly encapsulates the gist of the
tradition of condemnation prevalent in representations and discourses concerning ravenous spirit
beliefs. Thai academia and mass media, exclusively talking about the abusive aspects of the
tradition, render alternative conceptions of the tradition impossible. Ravenous spirit beliefs can
be nothing else except a barbaric custom carried out by the superstitious folk as long as the
benign, non-sensational practices of the tradition are dismissed by a false conviction that they are
not worth talking about. The factors that generate and sustain this false conviction will be
discussed in the next chapter.

The comment made by Schepers-Hughes's informant raises crucial questions about writing
ethnography. To what extent are ethnographers allowed to write about others' "troubles"? Do
they have to counterbalance negative accounts by writing about the informants' strengths? And
what if the subject of one's interest requires a probe into the unpleasant sides of a human
community such as mental illness or witchcraft accusations? From the stance of a folklorist who
studies a northeastern Thai supernatural belief tradition that, in some cases, engenders indecent
ritualistic and social practices, I own that ethnographic works scrutinizing humans' defects are as
crucial to humanistic knowledge as those reflecting the bright sides of human nature. However,
extra caution is required in writing a "dark" ethnography. What makes others' troubles more

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12 Henry Glassie, doing fieldwork in Ballymenone – a community in rural Ireland – when Schepers-
Hughes conducted her research on mental illness in the same area, comments on *Saints, Scholars, and
Schizophrenics*: “The emphasis in her book on the one in a hundred who was mentally ill is as valid as my
emphasis on the one in fifteen who was healthy by virtue of an interest in creative performance, but the
genre in which she arranged her findings (the ethnography) implied that her account was representative of
the community, and even, in rhetorical stretches, of Ireland in general” (2006:434). Glassie further
contends that Ballybryan (the pseudonym of the community where Schepers-Hughes did her fieldwork) and
Ballymenone “cannot be reduced with one another, nor can either expand to stand for Ireland”
appealing to us than our own? What do we expect from scrutinizing them? Insight into our own problems? Or a reassuring message that our world is “normal” and secure? Are we describing others' madness in a way that reaffirms our own sanity? Do we study others' “primitive” supernatural cults to venerate our status as rational and civilized modern subjects? These questions need to be thoroughly reflected upon in order to define bias and the politics of representation suffusing one's ethnography. As evident in the case of ravenous spirit beliefs, if subtle prejudice is not properly filtered out, what we produce is not humanistic knowledge but condemning and condescending discourses that assume an intellectual guise.

In contrast to this chapter, the next chapter delineates the non-sensational and benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs. These aspects neglected by Thai academia and mass media are elucidated to counterbalance the negative images of the tradition prevalent in the general perception. Also, they will reveal that dominant discourses about this belief tradition are inadequate since they downplay its variable manifestations in diverse contexts.
Chapter 4

Pluralistic Practices in Pluralistic Contexts

1. Chapter Overview: The Story Unworthy of Telling

It was an ordinary day in the summer of 2013. Reverend Sophon — a Buddhist monk and an exorcist at Ban Tung Kasem temple in Ubon Ratchathani — was about to begin his account of ravenous spirit beliefs in the Tung Kasem community. The interview was interrupted by the arrival of a young couple. Worried about their toddler son who had been possessed by a ravenous spirit and now displayed the signs of erratic symptoms, the couple visited the monk without notifying him in advance. They asked him to perform a ritual that would safeguard their son from the malicious spirit. The monk made an inquiry about the parents' birth dates. He drew an astrological chart and deciphered it; then he asked whether the couple recently received a relative from outside the community as a guest. The husband told about his mother's visit. Having received all the information needed, the monk picked three items from the assortment of his ritual objects: a ball of sacred white thread, an alms bowl filled with water, and a long, thin candle. He unwound the ball, holding one end of the white thread while passing the other end to the couple. Then the Reverend lit the candle, placed it across the alms bowl, and started a Buddhist incantation. The couple bowed their heads; their minds focused on the sacred spell that would protect their household from the ravenous spirit's evil force.

Still chanting, the monk reached for the burning candle, moved it in a circular motion above the alms bowl. His act caused tiny yellow dots to appear on the surface of water as melting wax trickled down into the bowl. Once the incantation was over, the monk dipped the burning candle right into the water; then the white thread was rewound. The holy water, consecrated by
the ritual, was sprinkled over the couple. The austere atmosphere faded away. The ritual master and the participants were more relaxed. The topic of conversation shifted to general matters of everyday life. The worried parents left light-hearted. Their jolly mood was plain as they jokingly asked the Reverend about lotto numbers before saying farewell.

The problem was later described to me in detail by the Reverend. The one-and-a-half-year-old son of the couple was possessed by a tenacious ravenous spirit. The boy was seized by crying fits. He shrieked and threw tantrums day and night without apparent reasons. The anxious and baffled parents immediately resorted to conventional medicine. After a thorough check up, the physician was as baffled as those who witnessed the boy's symptoms. Physically the boy was as healthy as a child his age should be. Reverend Sophon was called upon when the boy displayed a grotesque symptom that assured his parents of a supernatural agent behind the illness. The boy started to babble angrily even though, before the possession, he had not yet learned to talk. The monk was invited to perform an exorcising rite after which the boy was back to normal. However, as soon as his grandma from a neighboring village visited the family, the boy suffered from another crying fit. Reverend Sophon surmised that another ravenous spirit followed the old woman from her original community. The boy, still weak from the previous possession that rendered him highly sensitive to evil forces, was affected by its presence. The

1 There is not a historical connection between the two sets of cultural traditions, but the boy's symptom described here share features in common with changelings in Irish fairy lore. Barbara Reiti quotes a personal narrative collected in Newfoundland, Canada, which aptly summarizes belief about changeling: “The fairies would steal babies but sometimes instead of stealing babies they would switch them, that is, take the baby and put a fairy baby in its place. A sure sign that this had been done was a very cross baby” (quoted in Reiti 1993:43). The fairy baby that replaces its human counterpart is a changeling. Belief in changelings, like ravenous spirit beliefs, is infamous for an inhumane custom associated with it: in order to drive the fairy child away, one has to threaten to put the cranky baby on a heated coal shovel. There were cases, however, that the threat was carried out (Reiti 1993: 224). While this is not my focus here, a comparative study between ravenous spirit beliefs and similar belief systems around the world might reveal a great deal not only about issues of belief but also socio-economic, ethnic, and colonialist contexts.
brief rite performed earlier was to assure that this ravenous spirit would not be able to repossess
the boy or to take hold of other members of the household.

Taken aback by this practice of ravenous spirit beliefs – which is totally different from the
violent, abusive rites reported by mass media and academia –, I asked the Reverend to describe
the ritualistic procedures he usually carries out in an exorcising rite. My aim was to make sure
that the simple, non-violent exorcising rite that I just observed is not an “anomalous” and minor
variant of the prototype that primarily features brutal acts. In response to my question, the
Reverend generously explained:

First I chant a Buddhist incantation. This is done to communicate with the
spirit, and to ask about its motive for possessing the victim. If the spirit is
docile, then I chant another incantation that imparts to the spirit my harmless,
meritorious intent. But if it is relentless and refuses to leave, I employ the
expulsion spell. If that spell does not work, I sanctify holy water and let the
victim drink it. If the holy water fails, I mix with the water an extract from
sacred plants2 and blow the spell over the water. Usually, the possessed person vomits
after drinking this water; and that means the spirit leaves. But in the rare cases
when this method fails, the victim has to be bathed in the water while I am
chanting the expulsion spell over him (personal interview, July 11, 2013).

Reverend Sophon's exorcising methods contain neither physical violence, such as the flogging of
the victim, nor do they include the sort of mental abuse usually covered by mass media when an
exorcist coerces the possessed to name the host of ravenous spirit. Also, the rite Reverend
Sophon conducted for the young couple entails no accusation against a specific person since the
spirit was said to originate outside the community. The monk's benign practice of ravenous spirit
beliefs can be traced back to his native community, in which ravenous spirit accusation is a rare
phenomenon. Reverend Sophon described a communal ritual in which the sanctified “antidote”
is distributed among community members to identify a ravenous spirit host. The community

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2 The plants believed to inherently possess exorcising power such as Galanga leaves and Blumea.

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grants that the antidote kills the host and his ravenous spirit, while normal people are
insusceptible to its effect. With this ritual, the maltreatment of the alleged host is not possible – if
nobody dies, then the host is not within the community; if somebody dies, then he is no longer a
threat and his banishment is not necessary.

Reverend Sophon's native community, like other ravenous spirit belief communities that
practice the tradition in non-violent ways, is “banal” from the perspective of Thai mass media
and academia. Devoid of brutal ritualistic procedures and aberrant social practices that constitute
sensational stories like those mentioned in chapter three, these benign practices are filtered out,
totally neglected by media professionals and scholars. The reasons for this negligence are
variable. In the domain of mass media, the most apparent reason is the “banality” of the practices
themselves. There is nothing spectacular in a dull, non-sensational ravenous spirit ritual. And it
will, no doubt, fail to capture audiences' interest. The rite performed by Reverend Sophon is not
very different from the typical Buddhist rites one can observe in typical Buddhist temples. Then,
why broadcast these ordinary folk rituals on TV? Most importantly, how can audiences recognize
these benign practices as part of the ravenous spirit belief tradition when the defining
characteristics of this tradition in general perception are atrocious ritualistic and social practices?
Having to observe the rules of its field, mass media has no room for the “bland” practices of
ravenous spirit beliefs.

Academia also has to comply with its own traditions. Patrick B. Mullen's observation of
two trends of bias predominant in American belief scholarship is appropriate to describe folklore
study in Thailand. Romantic and rationalist views of the groups that hold supernatural beliefs are
two antithetical outlooks American belief scholars adopt when explicating folk beliefs (2000).
These traditions of bias, one romanticizing folk groups while another pathologizing them, generate a scholarship that exoticizes folk groups and their belief traditions by portraying them either as spiritual adepts or as irrational folk. Folklore scholarship in Thailand is, in a similar fashion, divided by romantic and rationalist perspectives. An item of folklore, if not assigned to the category of folk wisdom and creativity, will be construed as residue from a primitive past that will vanish in the face of modern education. The benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are problematic because their simple and “banal” characteristics make it difficult to either romanticize or condemn them. In comparison to other Thai supernatural belief traditions that feature creativity and artistry – such as the tradition in which the mediums of powerful and benevolent celestial spirits have to dance all night in order to direct therapeutic power to their sick clients, or the rites pertaining to spiritual essence (khwan) in which beautiful ritual items and sweet pleading songs are required to soothe and to restore the anxious khwan to its body – the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs lack the aspects that can be romanticized. They contain neither spectacular performances nor artistic ritualistic items that stand for spiritual perceptivity and spontaneous expression of aesthetic creativity. Nonetheless, in comparison to the violent and radical practices of ravenous spirit beliefs, the benign practices of the tradition cannot be fully

3 While much of chapter three focused on rationalist literature on folk beliefs, some examples of their romantic counterparts are given here. In an article about a worshiping ritual practiced by the Chong ethnic group in Trat Province, Thailand, the author concludes that: “The ritual performed by the Chong to worship ancestral spirits reflects their attempt to maintain collective identity and to inculcate their members with a sense of pride in membership. The Chong provide other ethnic groups with an invaluable example of how to safeguard the group's traditions and customs in the midst of the Western hegemony and capitalism that are in power in Thai society nowadays” (Kasempholkoon 2012:121). Another article about a religious festival held by the Ban Nong Khao community in Kanchanaburi province reiterates a similar view of folk beliefs as the antidote to undesirable influence from outside. The author argues about the salient point of the festival: “[...] what stands out is that people in the village all contribute to the festival, each with their own duty, it has been possible for them to retain traditional way of life in a changing contemporary society” (Jaruworn 2013:136). Both articles construe belief traditions as a consolidating strategy the folk employ to maintain group unity and traditional social relations within the declining modern Thailand.
condemned because they are devoid of brutal ritualistic and social conducts that uphold the image of “superstitious and barbaric” folk. Incongruous to the analytical schemes entrenched in popular attitudes and assumptions that the “modern” Thais in general harbor about folklore, the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs fall into the “banal” category reserved for the trivial, insignificant folk customs unworthy of scholarly interest.

Considering these preoccupations, it seems inevitable that Thai mass media and academia omit the aspects of the tradition regarded as unworthy of talking about. They breed an unstated but granted rule that nobody talks about the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs because they are trivial and

*nothing will be lost by not talking about these insignificant practices.*

This chapter is informed by my personal view that a well-rounded understanding of the tradition is impossible as long as the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are excluded. The silence on these aspects of the tradition sustains biased and inaccurate stereotypes of ravenous believers. It maintains the illusory divide between the “superstitious” folk and the “rational” modern citizens by pathologizing the former's rationality and cultural practices. Most importantly, it upholds the illusion that what circulates in academia and mass media are disinterested depictions of ravenous spirit beliefs crucial for an impartial understanding of the tradition. To make amends for what has been overlooked, this chapter reports on the “banal” practices of ravenous spirit beliefs.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first part – “Exclusion in the Production of Discourse” – argues that all discourses imply the exclusion of certain elements incoherent with their conceptions of the subject. An effective way to see through the disinterested and “natural” guise of a dominant discourse is to define what has been omitted, and explore how that omission affects an individual's perception of the subject. The next section – “Pluralistic Practices in
Pluralistic Contexts” – delineates the variable ways in which different belief communities practice the ravenous spirit belief tradition. In this section, the practices neglected by academia and mass media are reported to show that: 1) there cannot be a final answer of what this belief tradition is in all contexts since the tradition is practiced variably in different belief communities. In light of this notion, rationalist discourses about ravenous spirit beliefs are applicable only to some cases. Their applicability is limited. And 2) because the tradition is practiced in diverse ways, stereotypes about its adherents are inaccurate. The cases reported in this section challenge assumptions and conventional explanations of the tradition based on its abusive practices. The last section – “The Variability of Social Dramas”– speculates about why ravenous spirit belief communities cannot and will not practice the tradition in the same way.

2. Exclusion in the Production of Discourse

Toni Morrison, in “The Site of Memory” (1995), describes two blind spots in the autobiographies written by the former slaves and the politics of representation that render these blind spots inevitable. The first blind spot is evident in the conventional expressions the authors employ to avoid describing the sordid details of their experiences. The expressions, such as “I was left in a state of distraction not to be described” (Equiano cited in Morrison 1995:90) or “But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate” (Morrison 1995:91), are the covers for physical and psychological oppressions that need to be silenced so that the narrative achieves its intended effect. The major goal of the autobiographies written by African American ex-slaves is to appeal to their audiences' consciences. The majority of these audiences are white. In this particular context of reception, the authors need to relate their ordeals in order to underscore the atrocity of slavery and to convey the intended message that this system of oppression should be
obiterated at all costs. However, the evil of slavery cannot be given with excessive details since its proponents were white masters with whom, through a common racial origin, audiences might identify. In this respect, African American writers needed to be cautious not to turn their writings, which were intended to be denunciations of slavery, into condemnations of the White race – the barrier between the two can collapse once too much detail is revealed.

This necessary censorship of the sordid experiences of the ex-slaves engenders another blind spot – the omission of their internal lives. The exclusion of psychological states prevents the authors from being branded as subjective and emotional. By adopting an objective voice devoid of emotional strains, the authors implicitly state their stance, affirming that what they do is calmly reflecting on the hardship in the days of slavery and not sentimentally projecting blame on anyone or anything in particular. In this process in which personal experiences are converted into discourses that convey the “truth” about slavery, Morrison observes that exclusion and selection are inevitable procedures. They need to be done in order to make these discourses viable and acceptable to their receivers: “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in position to alleviate it, they [the authors] were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe” (Morrison 1995:91).

The blind spots in autobiographies written by African American ex-slaves and the politics underpinning them attest to the notion that there are always gaps between discourse and reality. For many reasons there are things we cannot talk about even though their presences and impacts are evident. Aside from conscious censorship done either by discourse producers or by the authorities when the mentioned issues challenge the existing power structure, there is also
unconscious censorship indicative of the more subtle, more implicit power relation inherent in the production of discourses. As posited by many scholars in the field of linguistic ideology, discourse production is entrenched in the system of selection and exclusion governed by desire and power.

Michel Foucault, in “The Discourse on Language” (1971), contends that a way to elucidate the play of desire and power that arbitrarily confers the status of “truth” to a discourse is to probe into the form of exclusion that constitutes the ground of its truth claim. Questions, such as what the discourse omits and what needs this omission fulfils, expose its fabricated nature and the basis of its authority. Foucault elaborates on what he calls “the three great systems of exclusion” (219) that govern discourse production: 1) prohibition, 2) division and rejection, and 3) the established, ever-shifting view of knowledge, or, in Foucault's words, “the will to truth.” These three systems dictate what is qualified to enter the stream of discourses, which ultimately becomes not only the mediated representation of reality but reality in its own right.

Prohibition refers to the innate and automatic censorship set to work by culturally informed notions of what cannot be said. Three types of prohibition reveal that freedom of speech is an illusory ideal since an individual's choice of talking or not talking about something does not stem from his free will. In every linguistic community, culture dictates that there are topics inappropriate to talk about. These are “covering objects,” according to Foucault. Individuals also learn from their cultures that they cannot talk about anything with anybody whenever or wherever they like. The rules about social occasions one needs to observe restrain his freedom of speech. Also, particular subjects are regulated by a power structure in the sense that talking about them requires exclusive right and privileged status. Not just anybody is
“qualified” to talk about them. Foucault posits that sexuality is one of the subjects regulated by these three types of prohibition. Sexuality is about “covering” bodily parts and activities allowed to be discussed only in some special contexts with professionals – such as physicians and psychiatrists – who have exclusive right to discuss this taboo subject. Prohibition, as a procedure in discourse production, reveals that not every practice or phenomenon can enter the field of discourse. The subjects circulating in a discursive domain imply the exclusion of certain topics banished by cultural authority.

Division and rejection denote the process by which the classification is made between the valid, rational statement and the nonsense babbling. To illustrate this process, Foucault evokes the image of mad men and their utterances. As a result of the established boundary between reason and folly, the speech uttered by the insane is “considered null and void, without truth or significance, worthless as evidence, inadmissible in the authentification of acts or contracts [...]” (1971:217). It is through words that one's insanity is recognized. Once branded as insane, the person's words are readily dismissed, unheard and unremembered by the sane and rational members of society.

Division and rejection imply the presence of a dominant paradigm that makes the distinction between valid and fallacious statements. This dominant paradigm – what Foucault calls “the will to truth” – is arbitrary and ever-shifting. It varies from culture to culture and from one historical period to another. For Greek poets in the sixth century, “true” discourse was a statement uttered by a man who, by his ritual right, was entitled to speak. The discourse uttered according to ritualistic rules was heard and respected. The truth value of a statement in this particular context is defined not by its content but by the manner in which it was delivered. In
Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, science emerged as the new form of the will to truth. “True” discourse was a statement supported by empirical evidences derived from observable and measurable phenomena. Its subject matter was a replicable and generalizable fact. The will to truth implies a particular conception of what counts as “true” statements. It informs our view of the known object, defines the orthodox ways of knowing, demarcates the boundary between significant subject matters worth knowing and trivial issues that deserve to be excluded from the realm of knowledge. In a way, the will to truth is a system of exclusion that suppresses those subjects that do not meet its conception of significant and valid “truth.”

Prohibition, division and rejection, and the will to truth fundamentally constitute discursive domain that marks the scope of the world in our view. Subjects that have no place in the field of discourse – either because they are taboos, because they are labelled as false and irrational, or because they are considered unworthy of talking about – are absent from our view of reality and, therefore, are regarded as not existing at all. In light of this argument, postulates and assertions circulating in discursive domains not only inform our view of reality, but also pre-empt alternative conceptions incongruous to this view. To adopt Foucault's idiom, an assertion has to be “within the true” (1971:224) – or be congruous with the existing discourses in order to be approved and accepted as valid. Foucault illustrates this postulate with the case concerning Gregor Mendel's statements about genetics which, though proved to be viable by a later generation of biologists, were dismissed by his contemporaries. Mendel's discovery, in spite of its validity, was rejected since it was not “within the true”. His rules did not conform to theoretical perspectives, nor were they conceived along the usual lines by which biological
concepts were formed in those days. A discursive domain is not merely the circle of statements that have currency within a society in a specific time period. It is the sphere where chaotic, disconnected phenomena are converted into intelligible codes believed to adequately represent reality. Unsurprisingly, what is excluded from a discursive domain is considered alien from the realm of truth.

To apply Foucault's concept to ravenous spirit beliefs, it can be said that the benign practices of the tradition are not “within the true”; therefore they are not admitted into the circle of discourses concerning these beliefs. The circle has been dominated by rationalist discourses that ground their claims on sensational cases and abusive practices of the tradition. These discursive artifacts become the reality of ravenous spirit beliefs and render alternative conceptions of the tradition impossible. In this respect, the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are similar to Mendel's statements. They are present and as real as radical practices of the tradition, but are rejected because they do not comply with the lines of inquiry that produce “knowledge” about ravenous spirit beliefs in modern Thai society. Incompatible with the dominant discourse oriented toward the brutal practices of the tradition, the benign practices – dismissed as trivial and insignificant – are excluded from the field of ravenous spirit discourse.

Pierre Bourdieu, in a similar fashion to Foucault, contends that utterances deviating from formalities and rules governing a linguistic “market” are not viable despite their adequate descriptions of the subject.4 Expressions are always situated within particular contexts or, as

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4 Dell Hymes's notions of speech community and communicability is in line with Bourdieu's view of the qualities that render a discourse intelligible. However, unlike Bourdieu who construes expressions and utterances as capital in a linguistic market, Hymes uses the metaphors of a field and a network to elucidate his concept of communicability. He posits that mutual intelligibility is not solely about the compatibility of linguistic forms (phonological, lexical, syntactic) between two languages. It also lies in the shared knowledge of “norms of interaction and conduct in conversation” (1996: 31). Given this sociological aspect of speech and communicability, a person “may be at a loss to understand fellow speakers of his own language if his assumptions as to appropriate topics, what follows what, and the
called by Bourdieu, markets that assign different values to utterances articulated by different
speakers. Each linguistic market has its own ground rules and its own interests to defend.
Competent speakers, therefore, are not individuals who can produce intelligible and
grammatically correct sentences. Rather, they are those who know the ground rules of the market
in concern and are capable of producing expressions that are viable and valued within the field
(Bourdieu 1991:18). To illustrate Bourdieu's concept of linguistic markets and competent
speakers by the case of ravenous spirit beliefs, the totality of academic discourses concerning
this belief tradition is an autonomous linguistic market that assigns the highest value to
rationalist explanations of the tradition based on abusive practices. The benign practices and
alternative interpretations deviating from rationalist discourses have meagre or no value in this
market. This manner of value distribution is dictated by a crucial interest the market vigorously
defends – its status as a scientific and scholarly field that produces disinterested “knowledge”
about a supernatural belief tradition. As the interest of the market solely relies on its coherence
with the scientific-rationalist paradigm, it is natural that rationalist lines of inquiry are
relentlessly pursued and that the aspects of the tradition incongruous to these lines of inquiry are
dismissed. Mass media and academic research concerning ravenous spirit beliefs readily perform
as competent speakers in this linguistic market. They emphasize the offensive aspects of the
tradition and reproduce the discourses that are highly valued in the market while leaving out
other facets.

Bourdieu's outlook on censorship and the formation of discourse overlaps with

functions of speech are different” (1996: 31). For Hymes, a communicative speaker performs well within
three spheres: language field, speech field, and network. Language field is a speaker’s sphere of
knowledge about language. Speech field comprises the knowledge of patterns of use. Network is an
understanding of a relationship between the first two spheres of knowledge, precisely, of how to produce
an expression that is linguistically, socially, and culturally intelligible (1996: 32).
Foucault's. They concur that “viable” discourses are what survive censorship, which occurs in different levels. Nonetheless, Bourdieu is more interested in the self-censorship that all competent speakers have been through. The production of viable utterances always implies the speaker's assessment of the rules governing the concerned linguistic market and his purview of how his utterance would be received (Bourdieu 1991:19). This assessment results in a self-imposed restriction that prevents the speaker from saying anything he likes; it also demands that he adjust his utterance according to the circumstance and the person he addresses. In this light, censorship for Bourdieu does not mean outright suppression of utterances that challenge the existing power structure. It denotes a specific type of consciousness competent speakers develop as they internalize the ground rules of different linguistic fields. They realize that in order to produce valid and effective utterances in a particular field they have to observe the rules and formalities of that field.

Censorship for Bourdieu is also about form. Aside from content that needs to be coherent with the rules governing the production and the reception of discourses within the field (or it must be “within the true” in Foucault's terms), the successful speaker needs to be competent in what Bourdieu calls “strategies of euphemization” (1991:137). The term is based on the postulate that each linguistic field has its own rules concerning the formal features of a valid discourse. A competent speaker internalizes the legitimate forms of expression in a particular linguistic field and learns to encode his message in conventional forms that render his utterance recognizable as a valid discourse in that field. A philosophical discourse, for example, is recognized as such when its formal features, such as the use of syntax and vocabulary, are shared by and unique to philosophical discourses in general. (Bourdieu 1991:139). The necessity to encode the message
in the “right” form results in the euphemization of utterance in which a simple message is conveyed through elaborate forms in order to meet the formal requirements of the concerned linguistic field. Formal restriction is another type of censorship since all expressions need to take legitimate forms; and those utterances that do not comply with conventional formal features tend to be dismissed. Intelligibility lies not only in content but also in form; as Bourdieu states: “It is good form which makes good sense” (1991:151).

Bourdieu's outlook on form provides another possible answer to the question of why the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are excluded from academic discourses. Dismissive vocabulary, such as “superstition,” “collective violence,” and “false logic” are prevalent in Thai academic discourses concerning ravenous spirit beliefs. They are conventional idioms believed to encapsulate the gist of this belief tradition, and they are typical signs a competent speaker needs to employ to ensure that his statement about ravenous spirit beliefs will be recognized as a “scholarly,” and thus legitimate, explication of the tradition. The usage of these idioms is so pervasive that they influence non-believers' perceptions of ravenous spirit beliefs. It becomes unthinkable that the tradition can be practiced in non-violent ways and that believers' decisions to resort to ravenous spirit beliefs are grounded on reasoning not vastly different from that of non-superstitious people. Just as a competent speaker in the field of ravenous spirit discourses has an impression that it is not feasible to describe the tradition as “logical” and “benign,” non-believers whose understandings of the tradition are regulated by rationalist discourses, in a similar fashion, feel that such descriptions are inapplicable. Since good form makes good sense, an expression that does not assume the approved form is void of sense. This is apparent in the domain of academic discourses concerning ravenous spirit beliefs, in which the conventional
labels imposed on the tradition falsify and pre-empt alternative conceptions.

As evident in Foucault's and Bourdieu's outlooks on discourse, exclusion is a fundamental process of discourse production. This exclusion results in an incomplete perception of reality in which many things are filtered out. However, when an individual makes a judgment about a certain thing that he has never directly experienced, he usually makes it on the basis of this incomplete perception. This incomplete counterfeit of reality – or what Walter Lippmann calls “pseudo environment” (1998:xvi) – is the product of a natural tendency of human perception to register only certain elements of the vast and complex real environment, and of discursive practices that determine what will be registered in an individual's perception and how to interpret it. The established and persistent tradition of talking about a particular subject becomes the filter in our head that separates “irrelevant” or “insignificant” details from “important” components crucial for the valid understanding of that subject. This process is evident in the case of ravenous spirit beliefs as rationalist discourses and their predilection for the abusive aspects of the tradition engender the conviction that the benign practices reveal nothing significant about ravenous spirit beliefs.

This literature review about exclusion and its role in the formation of discourse is conducted to embellish the argument that the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs have been neglected because they do not conform to preconceived ideas about the folk who hold supernatural beliefs. As demonstrated in this review, these preconceived ideas do not emerge out of nowhere nor are they purely about subjective, internal bias. Rather, they are systematically produced by dominant discourses that fail to do justice to the multifaceted nature of the tradition. Since these discourses trivialize the aspects incoherent with their conceptions of the tradition, it
is unimaginable for Thai public in general to take these “trivial” aspects into account and weigh them against the abusive sides of the tradition underscored by the dominant discourses. The omission of the benign practices pertaining to ravenous spirit beliefs is a part of discursive tradition regarded by Thai public as a disinterested and adequate description of the beliefs in their real contexts. When the world of discourses becomes the “real” world itself, what is absent from discursive realm does not exist in reality.

The following section reports on the aspects that have been excluded from the field of discourses about ravenous spirit beliefs. This disclosure, hopefully, reveals the inadequacy of the condescending discourses and forms the ground for alternative conceptions of the tradition and its adherents.

3. Pluralistic Practices in Pluralistic Contexts

3.1 Variable Approaches to the Alleged Hosts

Monolithic representations generate the false impression that the treatments of ravenous spirit hosts in different belief communities adhere to a static pattern. As illustrated in the case of Panjai’s father, mentioned in the introduction of chapter three, the fate of the alleged hosts covered by the media transpires in a typical sequence. First, the community's suspicion of a person hosting ravenous spirits is confirmed by exorcists by means of the divination rite. Then he is subjected to collective animosity that manifests through social sanction and verbal as well as physical abuses. Finally, he is forced into exile by the atrocity the community inflicts upon him. The cases reported in the sub-section that follows significantly deviate from this formulaic pattern. They demonstrate that accusation does not necessarily entail collective violence and banishment against the accused. In some belief communities, tolerance becomes the governing
principle adopted by the villagers in their treatment of the alleged hosts. Banishment and violence are replaced by a purification ritual performed for the alleged hosts in order to get rid of the ravenous spirits inside them. These variable approaches to the alleged hosts testify that ravenous spirits beliefs, in many cases, do not function as a social controlling device or a sinister plot one employs to eliminate a rival. This is because ravenous spirit beliefs do not always conclude with the coerced expulsion of the alleged hosts.

3.1.1 Case 1: Ban Nonemuang Village

Mrs. Boonta unfailingly called herself a close friend of the deceased Mrs. Nudang – an old woman infamous for her “voracious” ravenous spirit. Mrs. Boonta's story reveals three significant points. 1) Benevolent social relations and cooperation between the alleged host and believers are possible because their relationship are not constituted solely of fear and hatred. 2) Violence and banishment are not so easily contrived. Ethical issues and the fear of legal repercussions restrain believers from adopting brutal approaches to the host. 3) Taking into account variable strategies of warding off the ravenous spirit crisis – each is believed to be proper and effective in its own way – it is not necessary for believers to always resort to the radical and inhumane ones.

Mrs. Boonta is in her late forties and has lived in Ban Nonemuang village for more than thirty years. When Mrs. Boonta was eighteen years old, the middle-aged Mrs. Nudang got married to a bachelor who lived not far away from her house and became her new neighbor. At the time, there was a notorious rumor about Mrs. Nudang. It was said that she practiced love magic but failed to observe the taboos, so a ravenous spirit was born within her. Her ravenous spirit was so voracious that it caused the crisis in her previous community, which ultimately led
to her expulsion from the village. This rumor was proved to be more than groundless gossip for Ban Nonemuang villagers when several mysterious deaths occurred around Mrs. Nudang – people and animals fell ill and died in the areas where Mrs. Nudang had recently visited or was to visit. Mrs. Boonta and her family paid no heed to this rumor until Mrs. Nudang visited Mrs. Boonta's four-year-old sister at the hospital.

Mrs. Boonta's sister suffered from a dengue fever. She was sent to the hospital and steadily recovered after the treatment. When Mrs. Nudang paid her a visit, the little girl was considered fully recovered. Her physician permitted her discharge, and the family was about to take her home. However, the morning after Mrs. Nudang's visit, the girl vomited blood and passed away. This unlikely death baffled the physician, who concurred with the family that the girl was perfectly well the night before. Aside from this major incident, there were minor occurrences affirming Mrs. Boonta's belief that Mrs. Nudang hosted a tenacious ravenous spirit. There was a time when Mrs. Boonta witnessed a casual conversation between Mrs. Nudang and her father. The former commented on fat pigs the latter was feeding, remarking that they would make tasty pork. The morning after the conversation, one of the pigs was found dead. The cause of its death was a mystery. Later on, when their friendship developed, Mrs. Nudang also admitted to Mrs. Boonta that she was practicing love magic.

For Ban Nonemuang villagers in general, it was beyond doubt that Mrs. Nudang hosted a ravenous spirit. This conclusion was not made in light of the rumor about Mrs. Nudang's background alone. It was reaffirmed by several incidents. Despite this assured belief and Mrs.

5 This claim is based on the testimonies given by three informants: Mrs. Boonta, Mrs. Tongyod (Mrs. Boonta's mother) and Miss. Tongnoi (Mrs. Boonta's daughter). Mrs. Tongnoi, though still too young when the ravenous spirit crisis befell the village in 1984, learned about villagers' attitudes through their reminiscences of the incident.
Nudang's voluntary confession to Mrs. Boonta that she was indeed practicing love magic, Mrs. Nudang did not become the victim of collective violence. Though villagers kept distance from her out of fear, they did not resort to brutal means to drive her away from the community, nor did they totally shun her from everyday social interaction. In an interview, Mrs. Boonta described her relationship and her ambivalent feeling toward Mrs. Nudang:

We were neighbors, so we naturally became close with one another. Frankly, I felt close to her as much as I was afraid of her. She was extremely poor and she had no offspring to take care of her. There were many times she had nothing to eat. She would walk to my house and asked for food. And I would find something for her and send her away quickly, because I was afraid of her ravenous spirit. But then somehow our relationship developed and I felt pity for her. Sometimes I gave her a portion of my wage, so she could go to the market and buy some fresh food. Then she started to reciprocate my favor. Whenever her husband came back from a hunting trip, she would call me to her house and told me to take some fish or other things back home. Or when she had a surplus of food that her husband brought home from the temple, she would keep a portion for my family. And I would return the favor by giving her a dish of whatever we cooked for the day (personal interview, June 10, 2014).

Mrs. Boonta's description of her relationship with Mrs. Nudang has nothing in common with the popular image of the traumatized ravenous spirit hosts and the cruel folk who abuse them. Mrs. Boonta's account reflects the multivalent and subtle nature of human relationships that can be composed of oppositional feelings such as pity and fear. Despite the image of Mrs. Nudang as a demonic and dangerous ravenous spirit host, Mrs. Boonta did not fail to observe her human and vulnerable sides. She was a poverty-stricken, helpless woman who failed to make ends meet. She was also a tender-hearted human who appreciated her neighbor's generosity and returned her favors whenever her limited circumstance allowed. In comparison to the cruel folk in the monolithic representations who feel only hatred and fear toward the alleged hosts, Mrs. Boonta adopted a relatively more benign approach to the poor woman as she treated Mrs. Nudang with
tolerance. This tolerance engendered understanding and empathy when the two ladies became close enough for Mrs. Boonta to realize that the demonized Mrs. Nudang was as human as herself. Mrs. Boonta's narrative reveals that the alleged hosts are not always the victims of collective violence and animosity because they are still humans. Their communities, to some extent, still recognizes them as such. Hatred and fear, which have the basis in supernatural beliefs, do not overrule believers' empathy for the alleged hosts who, aside from the evil spirits inside them, are as human as they are. This awareness pre-empts the abusive treatment of the alleged hosts.

Not only Mrs. Boonta and her family treated Mrs. Nudang with tolerance, the entire community adopted the same principle. When the death epidemic in Ban Nonemuang village and the nearby areas reached its peak, a meeting was held to find a solution to the crisis. This meeting was described by Mrs. Boonta:

Some furious villagers said they would burn her house down. But my grandfather said there was no tangible evidences of her hosting a ravenous spirit. If they burned her house, the authorities would intervene and they would be punished by law. Then the assembly agreed that nothing would be done to Mrs. Nudang. They also said she was pitiful as she was banished from the previous village. If she were driven away again, she would have nowhere to go (personal interview, June 10, 2014).

In contrast to the TV documentaries analysed in chapter three, Ban Nonemuang village is far from an anarchic backcountry where supernatural beliefs overrule state law. Brutality was readily dismissed by the assembly since they foresaw the potential legal consequences of the act. Conscience also plays an important role here. The assembly were restrained by their sympathy for Mrs. Nudang, who would be devastated by this second banishment. Mrs. Boonta's recollection of the meeting and its result has two significant functions. First, it challenges the
simplistic assumption that ravenous spirit believers always panic and vent their anxiety on the alleged hosts when a death epidemic befalls their community. The meeting at Ban Nonemuang village shows that there are cases in which communal decision regarding the alleged hosts is carefully thought through and the impulse to resort to violence is aborted. Second, it underscores the discrepancy between two different approaches to a ravenous spirit host. While her previous community expelled Mrs. Nudang, Ban Nonemuang villagers adopted a much more benign strategy. The two belief communities practice ravenous spirit beliefs in different ways.

Taking into account variable solutions to a ravenous spirit crisis, the assumption that ravenous spirit believers always resort to radical and inhumane methods is an oversimplification fraught with bigotry against believers. Mrs. Boonta elaborated on another crucial factor contributing to the lenient treatment of Mrs. Nudang. The exorcist, an authoritative figure in the community, told the assembly that the banishment of the host was not the only solution available. Mrs. Nudang's ravenous spirit could be subdued by effective exorcising rites and preventive rituals. It would perish when it failed to possess humans. Mrs. Boonta relayed the exorcist's reasoning which denotes his belief that the subjugation of a ravenous spirit can be done without harming its host:

He said the expulsion was not necessary. Preventive rites and exorcising rites could be performed for the possessed whenever Mrs. Nudang's ravenous spirit caused a problem. He himself would do everything in his power to make sure that this spirit would not bother anybody. He was a respectable person, so the villagers took his advice seriously. He also appealed to their consciences. He said Mrs. Nudang would have nowhere to go if she were banished again. Nobody wants to be a ravenous spirit host; neither does Mrs. Nudang. Once she became one, there was nothing she could do about it (personal interview, June 10, 2014).

Some ravenous spirit belief communities, like Mrs. Nudang's previous community, identify the
spirits with their hosts. The hosts are one with their spirits. They are no longer humans in the
eyes of their communities who feel justified in treating them malevolently. The belief
communities that hold this view adopt the radical approach to the alleged hosts – they decide to
get rid of them and their spirits once and for all. Nonetheless, there are other belief communities
in which ravenous spirits and their hosts are regarded as separate entities. Communities who hold
this view adopt ritualistic strategies that harm the spirits but spare their hosts. Ban Nonemuang
village is an example of this type of community. The villagers resort to exorcising and preventive
rituals instead of social sanctions on the host to protect the community from Mrs. Nudang's
ravenous spirit.

According to Mrs. Boonta, the majority of Ban Nonemuang villagers, though taking extra
caution when interacting with Mrs. Nudang, did not shun her. She was famous for her skill of
therapeutic massage. Villagers visited her from time to time for her service. For them, she was
both a dangerous ravenous spirit host and a helpless, pathetic woman. As pity overruled fear, Ban
Nonemuang villagers treated Mrs. Nudang with tolerance. Mrs. Nudang moved to Ban
Nonemuang community in 1983. The ravenous spirit crisis befell the village in 1984. She
remained in the community after the crisis until her passing in 1995.

3.1.2 Case 2: Ban Na-ngam Village

A ravenous spirit crisis broke out in Ban Na-ngam village in 1989. The onset of the crisis
was marked by several cases of possession, followed by three sudden deaths. My interviews with
Mrs. Saitong, Mr. Sak, and Mr. Kong – natives of the village – shed light on the non-violent and
ad hoc strategy the community employed to ward off the crisis. Their narratives reveal three
significant points. 1) Instead of collective violence against the alleged host, Ban Na-ngam

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villagers primarily relied on rituals to protect themselves from ravenous spirits. Ravenous spirit afflictions were resolved case by case. 2) Villagers did not demand the expulsion of the alleged host. They expected him to attend a purification ritual believed to eliminate his ravenous spirit and his corrupted magical power. 3) It was not easy to convince the whole community to agree with the radical and brutal approach to the alleged host. In the case of Ban Na-nagm village, the factor that impedes this consensus is the social connection of the alleged host who has nothing in common with the impoverished and socially-secluded scapegoats usually seen in the monolithic representations of the tradition.

Mrs. Saitong recounted a series of incidents leading to the conviction held by Ban Na-nagm villagers in general that Mr. Boonpeng was a ravenous spirit host. In 1989, there was an outbreak of ravenous spirit possession. The spirit, coerced by exorcists to reveal the name of its host, spoke through its victims that the last name of its host started with the letter $S$. The suspicion, initially, fell on an old man who had the same last name as Mr. Boonpeng. He died from a chronic disease shortly after the outbreak. However, the crisis continued and became more disastrous. A man in his late middle age died without prior signs of sickness. At his funeral, another man fell when he was playing a dice game with other guests. He vomited blood and passed away upon reaching the hospital. A physician attributed his death to a hemorrhagic stroke. Not long after that, a woman who had suffered from diabetes died from a complication of the disease. By the time of this third death, the villagers were certain that the host was alive and well in the community, and that the old man who died earlier had been falsely accused.

Community members concluded that Mr. Boonpeng was the host when a strange pattern of de-possession occurred among the victims. The spirit was tamed and left easily whenever any
offspring of Mr. Boonpeng joined the group of onlookers who usually came to watch ravenous spirit possessions. This pattern was observed, and it became an unstated protocol to call for any one of Mr. Boonpeng's children when the exorcist in charge failed to expel the spirit. Whether out of his desire to play a prank or for other unknown reasons, one of Mr. Boonpeng's sons said to the spirit during an exorcising rite, “This is enough dad, let's go home” (quoted by Mrs. Saitong, personal interview, 26 May, 2014). This utterance resulted in an immediate de-possession. This incident instigated the villagers' suspicion that Mr. Boonpeng was the host of the spirit.

This suspicion was affirmed when Mr. Kong, an exorcist and a relative of Mr. Boonpeng, carried out a plan to test this conjecture. Mr. Kong's competency as a ravenous spirit exorcist was well known in the village. His familial tie to Mr. Boonpeng enabled him to discuss the matter with Mr. Boonpeng while other villagers felt ill at ease doing so. In their conversation, Mr. Kong mentioned a male villager who was possessed by the ravenous spirit several times. Because of this, his health deteriorated to the extent that he would die soon if the spirit kept coming back. Mr. Kong made a bluff by showing Mr. Boonpeng an antidote for ravenous spirit affliction. He proclaimed its potency of killing the possessing spirit and its host while doing no harm to the possessed. Then he told Mr. Boonpeng of his plan to give the poor man this antidote the next time an affliction befell him. Upon hearing this, Mr. Boonpeng was said to become enraged and frightened. He boldly stated that Mr. Kong would bring unwarranted troubles upon himself if he used the antidote.

In the eyes of Ban Na-ngaam villagers, this incident was solid proof of their belief. From 1989 to 1991, when Mr. Boonpeng's ravenous spirit intermittently wreaked havoc on the
community, villagers primarily resorted to preventive and exorcising rituals. They relied on sacred items, such as consecrated Buddha images and talismans, to protect themselves and their households from Mr. Boonpeng's ravenous spirit. The afflictions were resolved on an ad hoc basis. Though villagers avoided Mr. Boonpeng out of fear, no harm was done to him. In response to my question about the communal rite held by the villagers to ward off Mr. Boonpeng's ravenous spirit, Mrs Saitong explained:

No. We did not hold such a ritual. Everyone was in charge of their own safety. Each household took care of the matter in its own way. There was no discussion about the expulsion of Mr. Boonpeng. Nor was there an attempt to seek help from a famous and powerful exorcist from outside the community. Nothing of that kind. Afflictions were dealt with case by case. When somebody was possessed, an exorcist in the village was called for. And an exorcising rite was performed, and that was all. Once the spirit left, the possessed would be “tied” in a preventive rite. Or he/she would find an amulet and wear it around his/her neck to prevent further possession. These were what we did (personal interview, 26 May, 2014).

Mrs. Saitong, like other Ban Na-ngam villagers, did not consider Mr. Boonpeng's exile a feasible solution. This view is apparent in her opinion about a sociological function of ravenous spirit beliefs. When asked what she thought about the sociological postulate that the tradition is a device used by belief communities to get rid of internal Others, Mrs. Saitong replied:

When the community realized the spirit belonged to Mr. Boonpeng, what the villagers did was avoiding him. I think they just wanted him to attend a purification rite, to denounce his corrupted magical power and to have the spirit severed from him. I think that was all they wanted. Had he let go of his magical power – that evil power that grew beyond his control – our village would have been safe from the ravenous spirit. His banishment was not the point, let alone killing him or abusing him by brutal acts. You see, he still lives in the community today (personal interview, 26 May, 2014).

As Mrs. Saitong pointed out, if ravenous spirit beliefs do not lead to collective violence against

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6 A ritualistic procedure in which a consecrated white thread is tied to the possessed's wrists, ankles, and neck to prevent re-possession.
or the expulsion of the alleged host, then this belief tradition cannot be a folk strategy to get rid of “deviant Others” inside the community. This sociological conjecture is applicable neither to Ban Na-ngam village, nor to other belief communities where believers can resort to approaches other than banishment and collective violence against ravenous spirit hosts. In the case of Ban Na-ngam village, villagers' belief that the host can be severed from his or her ravenous spirit by a purification rite engenders an alternative approach to the host. Mr. Boonpeng's reintegration into the community was possible through this rite, which, had he agreed to attend, would have washed away the stigma and restored him to the community. Though Mr. Boonpeng did not attend this ritual, the community did not resort to aggressive means. They were well aware that Mr. Boonpeng was not a lone individual without social and familial affiliations, and that his banishment would cause a rupture in the community.

The monolithic representations, focusing on collective violence against ravenous spirit hosts, create a simplistic and false impression about the relationship between the cruel folk and the innocent scapegoat. The former are portrayed as members of a barbaric horde who mercilessly inflict atrocities on a lone, helpless individual. The latter, either because of his deviation from established norms or other reasons, is depicted as an internal alien who has no ties to anyone within the community. This lack of affiliation makes him an easy target of ravenous spirit accusation. This simplistic assumption about the social life of ravenous spirt hosts is challenged by the case of Mr. Boonpeng. His affiliations with many social groups restrained Ban Na-ngam villagers from using radical means against him.

In the interview, Mr. Kong gave an account of a villager who harbored a plan to eliminate Mr. Boonpeng and his ravenous spirit once and for all. Believing in the efficacy of Mr. Kong's
ravenous spirit antidote, this villager consulted Mr. Kong about the possibility of using this antidote on a female villager. She was intermittently possessed by Mr. Boonpeng's ravenous spirit over the course of a few years. Granting that the use of the antidote would result in the death of Mr. Boonpeng, Mr. Kong pondered the social repercussions that would befall him if he “executed” Mr. Boonpeng by magical means: “I have the antidote. But I did not use it. I have never used it, because I fear his (Mr. Boonpeng's) relatives and acquaintances. I dare not mess with them. I myself am one of his distant relatives” (personal interview, 11 June, 2014). Mr. Sak – another exorcist in the village – was also present during this interview. He added to Mr. Kong's point, asserting that considering social and familial affiliations of ravenous spirit hosts, it is not easy to confront them with outright hatred and violence. They, like everybody else, have their circles of friends and kin. These people would not stand idly by if atrocious acts were done to the hosts:

If one is to use the antidote, he must do it with discretion. Because word will soon spread out and people will say, “this or that exorcist used a ravenous spirit antidote with his clients and caused the host's death.” Then the poor man will never live in peace again. The kinsmen of the executed host will hunt him down to have their revenge. And it is just out of the question to openly attack the host. He and his family will not passively receive the blow. You see, they can strike back and they definitely will (personal interview, 11 June, 2014).

Mr. Sak's comment clashes head on with the image of the isolated ravenous spirit host who is totally helpless in the face of the atrocity the community inflicts upon him or her. To underscore believers' cruelty, the monolithic representations create a false dichotomy between the belief community and the lone individual accused of hosting a ravenous spirit. In these representations, the superstitious folk unanimously and readily turn against the accused, who faces collective violence on his own. Wanlee in *Wanlee the Grateful* stands alone against the barbaric horde led
by Suk. The old woman in the documentary mentioned in the previous chapter, in a similar fashion, is utterly alone when the community reads the verdict of her exile. She is represented as a socially secluded individual who has no ties with anybody. Though ravenous spirit hosts, in some cases, are isolated individuals who lack social and familial affiliations, there are other cases in which the hosts are far from secluded. Their social and familial connections render their role as a passive victim of collective violence impossible. Mr. Boonpeng has two adult sons. Also, his daughter married the headman of a nearby village. He remains close with his paternal kinsmen in his native community. These affiliations were what Mr. Kong and Mr. Sak had in mind when they explained why both direct and indirect offenses to Mr. Boonpeng were not possible. While he is the host of a dangerous ravenous spirit for some, he is a father and a kinsman to others.

Mr. Boonpeng's social network reveals that the image of the pathetic and alienated ravenous spirit host is an artifact constructed by monolithic representations to overemphasize the wickedness of ravenous spirit belief communities. By downplaying the host's social relations, it is easier to portray him or her as a pitiful victim of collective hatred and violence. In reality, there are several factors restraining ravenous spirit belief communities from abusing the alleged hosts. One among them is concern about a social repercussions instigated by the conflict between the community and the allies of the alleged host. It is biased as much as oversimplifying to say that ravenous spirit belief communities whose practices of the tradition are reported in this chapter refrain from adopting radical means against the alleged hosts solely because of their unblemished morality. As evident in the case of Ban Na-ngam village, this abstinence can also be attributed to

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7 For example, Mrs. Dee – a ravenous spirit host mentioned in an article entitled “Ravenous Spirits, State, and Social Welfare” (Chuengsatiansup 2009) – is an old woman living alone in a house isolated from the community. The author describes her as “uninterested in socializing with others” (2009:54).
collective attempts to maintain affinity and unity when fear and suspicion upset social relations. Besides, revenge by the kinsmen of an alleged host is another issue that belief communities consider. Banishment and collective violence against the alleged hosts are not always possible given the hosts' social and familial ties. Several informants interviewed in this study expressed this opinion. Mrs. Saitong stated her belief that no harm was done to Mr. Boonpeng partly because not everybody in the community granted that he hosted a ravenous spirit (personal interview, 26 May, 2014). Reverend Tongchan posited that it is hardly possible to randomly convict a person of hosting a ravenous spirit. To solicit collective consensus about the matter, one needs empirical evidence and convincing reasons. He also needs to confront the accused's kinsmen and acquaintances, who may harbor different opinions (personal interview, May 26, 2013). It may be convenient to imagine an entire community turning against a single person on supernatural grounds without knowledge about the intricate web of his or her social network. When this web comes into view, however, it problematizes the simplistic dichotomy between the barbaric folk and the isolated, alienated scapegoat.

3.2 Benign Ravenous Spirit Rituals

Three rituals associated with ravenous spirit beliefs in the popular imagination are 1) violent exorcising rite, 2) brutal inquisition rite, and 3) the Hunt – a communal ritual in which a divination rod is consecrated and employed to identify the whereabouts of ravenous spirits. Thai mass media are replete with the image of repulsive ravenous spirit exorcising rites in which physical violence is inflicted upon the possessed in order to expel the spirit. The exorcising method enforced on Wanlee's mother in *Wanlee the Grateful* exemplifies the type and the degree of violence associated with ravenous spirit exorcising rites. Forcing the possessed to lie on top of
thorn bushes, lashing them with a whip, or trampling on different parts of their bodies are
exorcising strategies typically found in representations of the tradition. A brutal inquisition rite is
another characteristic believed to be intrinsic to the tradition. It is conducted to coerce the
possessing spirit to reveal the name of its host. Though this rite is not obligatory and thus omitted
in several cases, either because the spirit voluntarily exposes its host or because the exorcist in
charge skips the procedure, it has been represented as a defining characteristic of the tradition. 8
The last ritual – the Hunt – attracts media attention because of the social drama entailed in it.
Despite its variable manifestations, the variant prevalent in media coverage includes public
accusation of certain individuals identified by the divination rod as ravenous spirit hosts. These
three rituals are far from static in the sense that they are not carried out in an orderly sequence.
Nor do they adhere to a standardized pattern. The monolithic representations in the media,
nonetheless, breed a false impression that these rites always end up in an ordeal of the possessed
and the alleged hosts.

The cases reported in the following sub-sections prove otherwise. In numerous cases,
these rites are carried out in lenient ways, and the benign approaches are adopted out of concern
for the possessed and the hosts, as well as for the community as a whole. Many ravenous spirit
believers denounce atrocities inflicted on the possessed and the alleged hosts, maintaining that
such conduct merely breeds evil and conflicts in human communities while the wicked spirits
remain as tenacious as ever.

3.2.1 Case 1: Ban Donklang Village

8 For instance, a book entitled Folk Traditions in Northeastern Thailand (Chareonsittichai 2011), defines
the inquisition rite as a core component of the ravenous spirit belief tradition. In order to give the readers
a general idea of ritualistic procedures done to the possessed, the author describes an inquisition rite in
which the exorcist, mistaking a natural illness for a ravenous spirit possession, forced the spirit inside the
possessed to name its host. The patient, who tried in vain to tell him the real cause of her sickness, finally
gave in and randomly uttered a name she came up with just to end the abusive rite.
Mr. Tongpoon is a herbalist and a ravenous spirit exorcist in Ban Donklang village. His methods of expelling ravenous spirits from the possessed and from their hosts are devoid of violence. His benign exorcising and purification rites are designed according to his personal belief that ravenous spirits can be subdued by the exorcist's spiritual power, not by mutilation of the victims' bodies. His narrative illustrates three significant points: 1) Violence is not required in the ravenous spirit exorcising rite. Physical abuse done to the possessed indicates the spiritual impotency of the exorcist who resorts to violent means when he fails to expel the spirit by his spiritual power. 2) The inquisition rite is harmful both to the person identified by the spirit and to the community, which would be plagued by suspicion and anxiety once a certain individual was accused. Mr. Tongpoon decided not to perform this rite because he wanted to safeguard the community and the individual named in the rite. 3) As a respectable exorcist in his community, Mr. Tongpoon is well aware of his ability to help the alleged hosts reintegrate into society. He has performed purification rites for alleged hosts with the intent to clear their reputations. These three points show that Mr. Tongpoon's practice of ravenous spirit beliefs has nothing in common with those of the cruel exorcists prevalent in the representations of the tradition.

In 2011, an outbreak of ravenous spirit possession took place in Ban Donklang village. Three elderly women were possessed by a ravenous spirit. All of them were attacked by a convulsion followed by nonsensical babbling. Then a toddler suffered from a fit of melancholia. He fell into a listless silence, staring blankly in the air and avoiding its parents' gazes. Mr. Tongpoon was constantly occupied during the outbreak. A possession took place every two or three days. The simple ritual he performed for all the possessed contains neither physical violences nor aggressive acts:
I learned the art of exorcising from my mentor. I do not use a whip, nothing of that kind. I just blow9 on the clients' heads or perform a ritual to sanctify holy water. Then I let the clients drink it. In no time the spirit leaves, and that's that (personal interview, July 7, 2014)

Unsurprisingly, this simple and non-sensational ritualistic practice is unappealing to mass media and academia. It is devoid of elements that justify the conventional explanations of ravenous spirit beliefs. Nothing in Mr. Tongpoon's exorcising ritual warrants the label “barbaric” imposed on the ravenous spirit belief tradition. On the contrary, the use of holy water for purification purposes or for conveying a blessing is a fundamental procedure in all Buddhist rituals that are too common to be called bizarre or exotic. It is normal for a person who has just recovered from a grave illness to drink or bathe in the holy water he receives from a revered monk. Equally common is a sprinkle of holy water to mark the completion of religious activities, such as a Buddhist service10 or a donation officially made to and in front of Buddhist monks. Mr. Tongpoon's simple and non-exotic exorcising rite challenges the imagined divide between the superstitious, cruel ravenous spirit believers and the inhabitants of “modern,” “non-superstitious” Thailand. It is not very different from the Buddhist rituals every Thai Buddhist has experienced in their everyday lives. Ritualistic practices pertaining to ravenous spirit beliefs, in this case, closely relate to conventional religious activities void of atrocity and other “primitive” elements attributed to local spirit cults.

Mr. Tongpoon's benign exorcising rite is the outcome of his belief that the powerful

9 “Blowing,” when used in the context of the northeastern Thai ritualistic practices, denotes a procedure in which exorcists or spiritual healers chant a spell used for the affliction that befalls the client and then “blow” the spell on him/her.

10 Buddhist services are held every Buddhist holy day, which always falls on the new moon, the full moon, and the quarter moon days of every month. On these days, Thai Buddhists attend the service – i.e., the preaching of Buddha's teachings – at temples.
exorcist can expel ravenous spirits without mutilating the possessed's body. To him, ravenous
spirits are overcome by the exorcist's spiritual potency, not by the violence done to its victim:

> Usually, powerful exorcists do not use violent means. Their exalted
magical power is more than enough. They would perform rituals to
consecrate holy water, and their powerful expulsion spells are enough
to agitate the spirit inside the possessed. Then the water is given to the
possessed, who may drink it or bathe in it. These are all one needs to
expel ravenous spirits. The real adept does not even touch the
possessed's body. His magical power alone is sufficient to overcome
the spirit (personal interview, July 7, 2014).

As apparent in Mr. Tongpoon's account, a violent exorcising rite is not intrinsic to ravenous spirit
beliefs. Instead, it stems from the variable ways in which different practitioners interpret and
convert these beliefs into practice. While some practitioners justify brutal exorcising strategies,\(^{11}\)
other practitioners – like Mr. Tongpoon – regard them as degrading since they announce their
deployer's spiritual impotency. Physical violence is required only when the exorcist in charge
fails to ward off the possessing spirit with his magical power. Diverse ways of interpreting the
tradition result in variable practices that have been left out of media representations because they
are incompatible with the conventional views of the tradition upheld by the monolithic
representations and the condemning academic discourses. Mr. Tongpoon's benign exorcising
methods and the rationale behind them are among those that have been omitted.

Mr. Tongpoon's choice to omit the inquisition rite exposes the inadequacy of the label
“cruel and superstitious” imposed on ravenous spirit believers. Being aware of social
repercussions that would befall the person named by the spirit as its host, Mr. Tongpoon

\(^{11}\) For instance, in the television documentary about ravenous spirits and widow ghosts analysed in
chapter three (Rueng Jing Pan Jor, October 2008), a Buddhist monk who whips his clients and tramples
on their bodies in order to expel ravenous spirits is interviewed. The monk maintains that the spirits, not
the possessed, are affected by the blow. The absurdity of his reasoning is underscored as the program
reports that some of his clients were injured severely in his brutal exorcising rite and were admitted to
hospital.
deliberately avoids this ritual:

There is a way to coerce the spirit to identify its host, if you really want to know it, I mean. First, you hold a ritual to consecrate a ball of white thread. Then you tie this white thread on the possessed's wrists, ankles, and neck. When all are securely tied, you can start the inquisition. The white thread will prevent the spirit from leaving before revealing its host's identity. Then it will tell its host's name and whereabouts. I do not perform this rite, though, because the whole community will be ill at ease once the news spreads. Also, no one wants to become ravenous spirit host. His/her reputation and social life will suffer from this exposure. After the spirit leaves, I tie the white thread on my clients to prevent re-possession. And I think it is better to leave the matter at that (personal interview, July 7, 2014).

Mr. Tongpoon's decision to leave out the inquisition rite is in conflict with the assumption that the ravenous spirit belief tradition is a blame-shifting strategy the superstitious folk resort to when confronting an inscrutable crisis. Panic-stricken, they single out a scapegoat upon whom they release anxiety and fear. Mr. Tongpoon's practice of ravenous spirit beliefs is a tactic that counters this strategy. He deliberately omits the inquisition rite to prevent scapegoating that could ensue from the identification of the host. Mr. Tongpoon's ritualistic practice is governed by his concern for the individuals named in the inquisition rite and the entire community. He is far different from the cruel ravenous spirit exorcists typically found in the monolithic representations.

In cases when the spirits voluntarily expose their hosts, however, Mr. Tongpoon performs a purification ritual for the named persons to facilitate their reintegration into the community. Like several ravenous spirit believers who disapprove of the inhumane treatment of the alleged hosts, Mr. Tongpoon rejects these radical approaches and resorts to more integrative methods. His aim is to restore the severed ties between the alleged hosts and the community. In the case of Ban Donklang village, the ravenous spirit crisis in 2011 concluded with the rehabilitation of the
alleged host, not with her expulsion:

A woman was named by the spirit in several cases of possession. And the villagers started gossiping about this. Then the lady came to me. She admitted that she was the host of the spirit, but she could not help it. So I offered my help. I said I could get rid of the spirit inside her, if she followed my advice. Then I brought her to the village temple. She accepted the five precepts of Buddhism and avowed to take refuge in the Three Gems – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. There were also some rules she was required to observe. Every Buddhist holy day she had to bathe in holy water. I was always there to pour the water over her. And she also had to perform a Buddhist service\(^\text{12}\) every evening. All worked out well since she was determined to renounce her corrupted magical power, and she strictly followed the rules. Then ravenous spirit possession diminished and vanished completely, so I told the community that she was cleansed. Now everybody can be at ease (personal interview, July 7, 2014).

Since banishment is not the only solution available, there is no reason for all ravenous spirit belief communities to exclusively take up this solution. Ravenous spirit believers, like human beings in general, embody both defects and virtues. To assume that they always practice ravenous spirit beliefs in inhumane ways undermines their intricate human nature, reducing them to a group of faceless and flat characters in a simplistic myth about the virtuous and rational modern individuals versus the superstitious and sinister folk. Mr. Tongpoon employs ravenous spirit beliefs for an integrative purpose rather than for exclusion and discrimination. As he further elaborated, some people are stigmatized because their family members are accused of hosting ravenous spirits. The purification rite can clear the names of these people and enable them to start anew in the community. Atrocity and oppression of the alleged hosts are replaced by sympathy and support in the ravenous spirit rituals performed by Mr. Tongpoon.

3.2.2 Case 2: Ban Nongbualong Village

Ban Nongbualong village was ravaged by ravenous spirits in 1993. Instead of the Hunt, a

\(^{12}\) That is, chanting Buddhist prayer and meditating on the Three Gems.
massive-scale purification ritual was performed for the entire community. No accusation was made against a specific person. However, the self-imposed exile of an old lady after the ritual convinced the villagers that she was the host. Mrs. Somporn and Mrs. Jandee – both of whom live in the village – explained the rationale behind the community's choice to hold a communal purification rite instead of the Hunt. This rationale reveals the degree of caution ravenous spirit believers take in the practice of their beliefs. Well aware of the non-empirical basis of ravenous spirit accusation, Ban Nongbualong villagers were skeptical of its accuracy, and thus they disapproved of any harm done to the alleged host on the grounds of this unreliable accusation. Out of this skepticism, the villagers resorted to the communal purification rite that, they believed, would force the host to reveal him/herself. The precautions taken by the community to prevent the abuse of ravenous spirit beliefs challenge the rhetoric of surveillance prevalent in mass media and academia. Underpinning this rhetoric is the assumption that ravenous spirit believers harbor no doubt about the accuracy of their beliefs, and this results in the radical practice of the tradition. They, therefore, need to be closely monitored by those who know better. The Ban Nongbualong villagers' decision to avoid the Hunt tells a different story. Another significant point in their narratives is about the blessing rite performed individually by all community members. This rite is another integrative strategy employed by the community to promote the reintegration of the alleged host.

When asked to describe the ravenous spirit crisis that befell the village in 1993, Mrs. Somporn and Mrs. Jandee noted the non-empirical, unverifiable basis of their beliefs. They adopted an unassuming standpoint, acknowledging different possible explanations of the misfortunes. For them, what happened in 1993 remains inconclusive, and the ravenous spirit's
wicked influence is, rather than an indisputable fact, a likely possibility that they accept as long as no better explanation comes into view. They claimed that this sentiment was shared by the villagers in general. It informed the community's view that people should not be ill-treated merely because they are accused of hosting ravenous spirits in inquisition rite.

Mrs. Somporn: There was no concrete evidences to prove that a ravenous spirit was behind the incident. Several people died in a mysterious manner. Their deaths were too sudden, I mean. Like, they were perfectly well the night before, then they fell ill and passed away the following morning. Some villagers said a ravenous spirit was behind this. But there was no concrete proof. Physicians said it was the malfunction of their internal organs, like a heart failure. Still, to us villagers it did not sound right. They looked perfectly healthy, how could their organs just stop working all of a sudden? There was only one way to make sense of this strange incident – the evil influence of ravenous spirits. But, again, these spirits are amorphous. Their existence is unverifiable.

Interviewer: Are you saying that perhaps ravenous spirit beliefs are false? Because there is no concrete evidence to prove their existences?

Mrs. Somporn: Yes, I agree that perhaps the beliefs are false. But my point is that since there is no concrete evidence, you cannot accuse people of hosting these spirits. The community may know who practices what magic. And the possessed may name that person as the spirit's host. But these are vague and insufficient. They are not enough to form a final conclusion. The accusation in this manner is just unverifiable. I mean, there is no concrete and definite proof of a person hosting a ravenous spirit.

Mrs. Jandee: In some cases, the exorcists may ask the possessing spirit the name of its host. But we cannot use that information to accuse or punish anybody. It is just too obscure. And we never know what the truth is (personal interview, June 13, 2013).

The interview reveals that there is a discrepancy in the etic and emic understandings of the verb “believe.” While non-believers in general assume a neat dichotomy between belief and disbelief, Mrs. Somporn and Mrs. Jandee challenge this dichotomy, showing that reflexivity and skepticism about one's own belief is possible for some ravenous spirit believers. An assumption underlying monolithic representations and rationalist discourses concerning ravenous sprit
beliefs is that believers are too blinded by their beliefs to see the “correct” explanation of the misinterpreted phenomenon that lies plainly in front of them. If Suk in *Wanlee the Grateful* were critical of his belief, he would not fail to see the validity of Wanlee's reasoning. In the popular imagination, ravenous spirit believers uncritically grant the existence of ravenous spirits. They tenaciously stand their ground and dismiss views that contradict their beliefs. However, Mrs. Somporn and Mrs. Jandee, who practice ravenous spirit beliefs in a real context, are reflexive about their own belief tradition. Aware of the orthodoxy of the scientific-rationalist paradigm and its conception of reality, Mrs. Somporn and Mrs. Jandee are cognizant of the fact that the existence of ravenous spirits is unverifiable and highly subjective in relation to the concrete and replicable facts valorized by science. Out of this awareness, they and their community practice ravenous spirit beliefs with discretion. The intervention of ravenous spirits in the 1993 incident was, for Ban Nongbualong villagers, possible but unverifiable with available resources. It, therefore, cannot be the reason for the maltreatment of anybody. This view resulted in a purification rite that features neither accusation nor violence.

*Mrs. Somporn:* The crisis became more severe, so the community decided to held a purification ritual to purge the entire village of ravenous spirits. We invited the famous Buddhist monks from all over the northeast. Together, they chanted Buddhist prayers and held a ritual to consecrate a large quantity of sand and rice. Then the monks walked around the village. They chanted Buddhist prayers and strewed the consecrated sand and rice along the way. The front yard of every house was covered by these sacred substances. Then four wooden poles with a spell inscribed on each of them were erected at the four corners of the village. These poles marked the boundary of the sanctuary, making it impenetrable by ravenous spirits. And some activities were prohibited inside the sanctuary. We could not burn trees for charcoal nor could we slaughter large animals, such as pigs, cows, or buffalo inside the village.

*Mrs. Jandee:* Every house was blessed by the monks. The community did not suspect anyone in particular. The host revealed her true color after the rite.
She immediately moved out of the village and lived alone near her paddy field. This was how the community found out about the host. The accusation made in the inquisition rite was not accepted.

*Interviewer:* And no harm was done to the host?

*Mrs. Jandee:* No. This purification rite is the end of everything. She could not stand the power of the ritual; so she voluntarily moved out. And that was it (personal interview, June 13, 2013).

Ban Nongbualong community, skeptical about the ravenous spirit accusation made by a third party, devised a method that prevents false accusation. In this case, nobody would have been defined as a host if an old lady, for some inscrutable reasons, had not voluntarily isolated herself from the community right after the ritual. However, no abuse was done to the lady even when she resettled in the village twenty years after the incident. Mrs. Somporn explained that some villagers had compromised the protective power of the sanctuary by violating the taboos, so that the host could re-enter the village. The community reacted to her return with neither violence nor banishment, but by performing another ritual that rendered her reintegration into the community possible.

There is a protocol the majority of Thai Buddhist strictly follow. After the completion of a religious activity believed to produce a good karma, such as almsgiving or “ransoming” – the purchase of animals before they are sent to slaughter houses – the performer of the noble deed pours a cup of water upon the root of a tree, dedicating a share of his merit to his deceased relatives, his enemy, or wandering ghosts and suffering spirits. This dedication is believed to enhance the giver's spiritual progress as well as ameliorate the receiver’s ordeal. This brief and simple rite was adopted by Ban Nongbualong villagers to subdue the ravenous spirit inside the old lady, believing that shares of merit will sate the spirit's hunger and keep it from harming
people.

*Mrs. Somporn:* Her ravenous spirit has been quiet because the shares of merit villagers dedicate to her. We can quench the spirit's hunger by performing good deeds. The abbot said when making merit, we may direct our minds to her and her ravenous spirit and wish them well. It will work better if her name is said out loud as one pours the blessing water. And one may also say, “By the power of the meritorious act I have performed today, may this lady have a share of its noble fruit. If she is in anguish, may she be relieved from it. If she is in bliss, may she be more blissful.” As one says so, the merit is transferred to the lady. And can you imagine? Every villager has done that for her. How much she has been blessed by their merits and how full her ravenous spirit must have been all these times.

*Mrs. Jandee:* This method has worked out well. There has been neither deaths nor possessions like twenty years ago. Peace has returned to the village (personal interview, June 13, 2013).

The practice of ravenous spirit beliefs in Ban Nongbualong village is oriented toward integration and collaboration rather than stigmatization and expulsion. In this case, the entire community cooperated for the rehabilitation of the alleged host. The villagers perform good deeds and wish the host well in order to calm the spirit and keep its host in the community. The discrepancy is remarkable here. While ravenous spirit belief communities in mass media and academic research unanimously and invariably wreak atrocity on the alleged hosts, Ban Nongbualong villagers cooperate to safeguard the community's as well as the old lady's well-being. This discrepancy sheds light on the pluralistic practices of the ravenous spirit belief tradition. It supports one of the arguments made in this research – neither abusive nor benign practices are intrinsic to the tradition. In order to formulate a valid and well-rounded understanding of ravenous spirit beliefs, one needs to take into account both aspects. While some alleged hosts – like Panjai's father, who was mentioned in the beginning of chapter three – are banished, the old lady resettled in Ban Nongbualong village after her self-imposed exile. By the time the interview was conducted, she
had started to renew her ties to the community. Mrs. Somporn and Mrs. Jandee remarked that she was seen more often at the Buddhist service held at the village temple every Buddhist holy day. The villagers took this as a sign of the spirits’ declining power and the return of her wholesome self.

3.3 Void Accusation

A ravenous spirit crisis, in several cases, leads to an accusation. However, the accusation pre-empts the abusive practices of the tradition since the identified host is absent and thus not subject to collective violence and banishment. In these cases, the crisis simply ends either with exorcising rituals performed for the possessed, or with other undramatic activities done to safeguard the community from ravenous spirits. Social drama is absent from these cases.

3.3.1 Case 1: The Possession of Mrs. Buasri

Mrs. Buasri was possessed by a ravenous spirit when she was eighteen years old. After the first possession, she experienced several more. The second took place after she gave birth to her first child. Then the affliction befall her once in a while. By the time I interviewed her (June 2013), Mrs. Buasri was in her late fifties and the latest possession occurred to her ten years earlier.

Mrs. Buasri is a native of Ban Ratsamran village in Ubon Ratchathani province. Her case is exemplary of a void accusation – an accusation made against a person who is not there to receive the abuse provoked by collective anxiety and fear. This manner of accusation pre-empts any inhumane practices of ravenous spirit beliefs. Since the host is absent, neither harm nor banishment can be done to him or her. Void accusations invalidate several speculations about the social functions of the ravenous spirit belief tradition. The panic-stricken folk will not be able to
release their anxiety and fear through collective violence against a scapegoat if the selected victim is insusceptible to the blow. Also, a void accusation would serve poorly as a scheme to discredit and demonize the rival fraction as it does not implicate the members who are present and involved in the social life within the community. When a dead man is accused of hosting a ravenous spirit, like what took place in Ban Ratsamran village, these social functions attributed to ravenous spirit beliefs sound infeasible.

On the night of her first possession, Mrs. Buasri went out with her elder sister to catch crickets. Upon returning home, she was overwhelmed by an irrational fear and an unusually intense exhaustion. Then she fainted and when she came to her senses was told that she was possessed by Mr. In's ravenous spirit. Mr. In, however, had died before Mrs. Buasri's possession. Shortly after his death several cases of ravenous spirit possession took place in the village. The spirit, speaking through Mrs. Buasri, stated that it resided within Mr. In's ashes buried under a mango tree on the deceased's estate:

The villagers who witnessed my exorcising rite told me later that the spirit identified the deceased Mr. In as its host. I mean, that man was dead by the time I was possessed. They said his corrupted magical power still lingered, so did his ravenous spirit. The spirit said it hid away in the ashes of its dead host. And the ashes were buried under a mango tree in Mr. In's field. The villagers looked for this particular tree in the location described by the spirit. When they dug to its root, they found Mr. In's ashes (personal interview, June 3, 2013).

One can argue that this accusation of the deceased Mr. In cannot be totally “void” since it ruined the deceased's reputation which, undoubtedly, had a negative impact on his family members who were still in the village at the time the accusation took place. Also, an inquiry into the deceased's character and social life yielded a piece of information that supports a conventional theory concerning a sociological function of ravenous spirit beliefs. Mrs. Kampa, a native of Ban
Ratsamran village, testified that Mr. In was a reserved introvert when he was alive. He hardly attended social events and his social life was confined to a circle of a few close relatives and friends (personal interview, June 3, 2013). More importantly, he was relatively wealthy compared to average villagers, despite the fact that his sole occupation was rice farming – the career pursued by the majority of Ban Ratsamran villagers. This sparked a rumor spreading after Mr. In's death that he abused his magical power to procure this wealth, and this abuse resulted in the birth of his ravenous spirit. Considering this backdrop, it is arguable that Mr. In is an “eccentric” figure whose introverted personality was misinterpreted by the community as a strategy to safeguard his wealth. The stinginess and anti-altruism attributed to Mr. In by the villagers rendered him susceptible to a ravenous spirit accusation which, in this case, functions as a folk strategy to demonize the internal other. This explanation, however, sounds unlikely when we consider Mrs. Buasri's narrative about the community's benign treatment of Mr. In's cremains:

The community then sought help from a famous exorcist, and he gave us some consecrated items that would subdue Mr. In's ravenous spirit. My elder brother was assigned by the community to place these items next to Mr. In's ashes inside the pit. And he had to do so on the night of a new moon. Mr. In's family kept his ashes there and the community respected their decision. But nothing offensive or insulting was done to his cremains. We did not throw his ashes away, nothing of that kind. We just placed these consecrated items in the same pit. And when this was done, ravenous spirit possession vanished altogether. Then the villagers lived in peace (personal interview, June 3, 2013).

There was no molestation or removal of Mr. In's cremains. Also, there was a concern about the emotional impact of this ritualistic strategy on Mr. In's family – evidence of the community's attempt to minimize the repercussions of their practice of ravenous spirit beliefs. In this case, the accusation was void for two reasons. First, it involved no abuse whatsoever to the deceased Mr.
In or his family; the latter continued their lives in the community as normally as other villagers (this claim, though, is based on Mrs. Buasri's and Mrs. Kampa's testimonies). Second, it aborted any complications that may have developed if the accused were a living person. The accusation was completely void in this case because it had no repercussions on living individuals or the community as a whole. The problem ended simply with an undramatic ritualistic action – the placement of sacralized items inside the pit where Mr. In's ashes were buried.

Void accusations are not unique to Ban Ratsamran village. The identification of an absent person as a ravenous spirit host is common even though it has been neglected by academia and mass media. Mrs. Boonma, for example, related how the ravenous spirit that possessed her identified a peddler goldsmith as its host. By the time the possession occurred, the goldsmith had left the community and had not been seen in the village since then (personal interview, May 24, 2014). Mr. Namchai gave an account of a ravenous spirit that possessed his fiancée. The spirit revealed in the exorcising rite that a customer who bought goods from the possessed's shop on the day the affliction occurred to her was its host. No attempt was made to track down the man, and the exorcising rite finalized the matter (personal interview, May 26, 2013). Void accusation – a benign practice of ravenous spirit beliefs – questions both the monolithic representations and the condescending discourses since it engenders neither a social drama nor the “barbaric” treatment of an unfortunate scapegoat.

4. Conclusion: The Variability of Social Dramas

In his study of conflicts and redressing strategies employed by a Ndembu community in Africa to resolve fissures in social life, Victor Turner coins the term “social drama” to denote a social situation in which actors, actions, and circumstances, all set in motion by conflicts and
“cumulating towards a climax” (Turner 1996:xxi). Max Gluckman, in the preface he wrote for the 1972 edition of Turner's book, defines social drama as a series of crises – such as a fight between competing fractions or the misfortunes ascribed to ancestral spirits or sorcery – that precipitate threats to the whole community (Gluckman in Turner 1996:xvii). As apparent in the term “social drama,” Turner draws on the concept of a play on the stage to denote human interactions in a real social context. This metaphorical connection conveys Turner's view that social conditioning and human agency are equally important in the development of a social drama and its denouement. Just like what we see in a play in which circumstance conspires with characters' motivations and their relations with one another to bring about a certain conflict and its climax, a social drama, in a similar fashion, emerges and transpires within the intricate interplay between these factors.  

13 This dynamic is described by Turner:

Yet the social drama itself represented a complex interaction between normative patterns laid down in the course of deep regularities of conditioning and social experience, and the immediate aspirations, ambitions, and other conscious goals and striving of individuals and groups in the here and now (Turner 1996:xxii).

What, then, can Turner's concept of social drama tell us about ravenous spirit beliefs? If a ravenous spirit crisis and the actions taken by the belief community to ward off this crisis constitute a social drama, it is natural that each belief community, with its unique social conditioning and particular concerns that occupy its members, enacts this drama in its distinctive

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13 Clifford Geertz's “Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese example” (1957) provides a case that illustrates this point. Geertz analyzes a Javanese funeral and a social drama that renders it incapable of fulfilling its proper function. Javanese funeral rituals “which had for generations brought countless Javanese safely through the difficult post-mortem period” (Geertz 1957: 35) are no longer efficacious within the new phase of Javanese society. This has happened mainly because social and cultural changes have altered the social structure and people's sense of belonging and membership that underpin the efficacy of funeral rituals in traditional Javanese society. Geertz nuances Turner's concept of social drama by emphasizing that, even within a particular community, the same type of social phenomena never transpire in the same fashion.
way. Although there are normative patterns that limit the variability of their choices, it is a grave misunderstanding to assume that all belief communities respond to a ravennous spirit crisis in the same way. When it comes to the treatment of an alleged host, for instance, a ravennous spirit belief community does not necessarily resort to collective violence and banishment, since inhumane treatment is not the sole solution to the problem. Also, several factors and concerns restrain believers from adopting radical approaches to ravennous spirit hosts. Fear of legal and social repercussions, sympathy for the alleged hosts, and awareness of the non-empirical grounds of ravennous spirit accusation, are considered by belief communities whose benign practices of ravennous spirit beliefs are reported in this chapter. Their cases reveal that when we take into account the distinct social conditioning and concerns that preoccupy each ravennous spirit belief community, it is hardly possible to defend the supposition that ravennous spirit beliefs invariably engender abusive social and ritualistic practices. This is because the application of the tradition is embedded in a social context, social relations, and individual as well as communal concerns and desires. Believers do not practice the tradition purely out of superstition and a cruel temperament; they observe the tradition within an intricate web of several factors that do not necessarily favor abusive conduct and atrocity.

Aside from the variability and complexity of social dramas that resist crude generalization, the benign practices of ravennous spirit beliefs reported in this chapter evince the power of exclusion inherent to dominant discourses. As Foucault posited, the field of discourses filters out aspects incongruent to the dominant view of the discussed subject matter. A discursive field inculcates its audiences with a certain disposition toward the subject in question as it dictates what constitutes the “truth” about the subject and what is to be ignored or falsified
because it deviates from this “truth.” The benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs, as they contradict the discursively constructed “truth” about the barbaric and superstitious folk promoted by Thai mass media and academia, are shunned from discursive realm. What is absent from discursive field does not exist in reality. Even so, we cannot deny that the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs, though “without the true,” reveal significant things about the reality of the tradition and the people who practice it.

The next chapter – “Is the ravenous spirit belief tradition a false logic?” – discerns believers' reasons for adopting ravenous spirit beliefs. It argues that the reasoning that underpins ravenous spirit beliefs is not vastly different from the logic used by “non-superstitious” people. As the link between cause and effect in scientific logic is only inductive –, that is, a conclusion derived from a specific case is generalized and believed to be reflective of how a particular phenomenon transpires in reality – so is the reasoning that underpins ravenous spirit beliefs. Believers grant the existence of ravenous spirits by making an induction from their personal experiences. The next chapter cooperates with the present chapter in de-exoticizing ravenous spirit beliefs. They demonstrate that the practices of and the reasoning pertaining to this belief tradition are not as bizarre and irrational as generally assumed by non-believers.
Chapter 5
Is the Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition a False Logic?

1. Chapter Overview: The Air Pump and the Malicious Spirit

An experiment initiated in 1659 by a natural philosopher – Robert Boyle – generated a series of controversies fueling the debate between experimental philosophy and demonstrative philosophy (Shapin and Schaffer 1985:7-8). While the former asserts that objective knowledge can be produced in an experimental setting, the latter – one of its major proponents was Thomas Hobbes – argues for the opposite. Experiments conducted in artificial settings are no different from the natural phenomena one observes in everyday life in the sense that they are mere experiences. They are only manifestations of natural facts that reveal no definite link between the cause and the manifested effect. They are unlike geometry in which one knows for certain that three angles formed by three straight lines always produce interior angles whose total measurement is invariably 180 degree. Demonstrative philosophy defines objective knowledge as the right method of reasoning that can accurately discern the link between cause and effect. Experiments done in laboratories that replicate facts in an artificial setting but provide no certain knowledge about the cause of the phenomenon in its natural environment are, in this light, unqualified as a means of producing knowledge.

Against this intellectual backdrop, Boyle' designed and conducted his pneumatic experiments. It is interesting to see how Boyle became successful in establishing experimentaion as the means of producing “disinterested” and legitimate knowledge in mid-seventeenth century England; especially when his conception of knowledge collided with an authoritative assertion that “truth” was about flawless reasoning rather than about empirical experience. Experimental science in its infancy was in a peripheral position occupied by
supernatural beliefs nowadays. Its method of constructing matters of fact from experiments conducted in artificial environments was received with skepticism by scholars who harbored different views about “objective” knowledge. As Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer delineate in their *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (1985), pioneers of experimental philosophy like Robert Boyle maneuvered both methodological and rhetorical strategies to transform the results of his experiments into matters of fact. Interestingly, the line of reasoning which justifies the truth value of these results is strikingly similar to that adopted by ravenous spirit believers when they explain why the spirits are real to them. This observation informs the main argument of this chapter – ravenous spirit believers go through a reasoning process before attributing a series of misfortunes to ravenous spirits. The reasoning that justifies their beliefs is very similar to the logic that secures the truth value of empirical science.

In order to delineate this argument, believers' reasoning must be compared and contrasted to “scientific” logic. However, the term “scientific” logic needs to be disambiguated. In this chapter, “scientific” logic refers to a particular manner of reasoning which underpins the conviction that what is verified by and replicable in scientific experiments is “real and true” at an objective level. Robert Boyle's air pump experiments are referred to in this chapter as the origin of and the model for this reasoning. But why Robert Boyle and his air pump? Why not other scientists and other experiments in other time periods? Three reasons govern this choice. First, Shapin and Schaffer contend that Boyle's air pump experiments “have a canonical character in science texts, in science pedagogy, and in the academic discipline of the history of science” (1985: 3–4). They set up the protocols of experimental science as well as mark the onset of this discipline which subsequently becomes the arbiter of truth. Second, as a pioneer of the field, Boyle's experiments were received and evaluated in a transitional period when the definition of
reality and the discerning method these experiments espouse were not welcomed by everyone. In this context, scientific logic is not different from ravenous spirit beliefs in the sense that it was condemned by its opponents as seriously flawed and inadequate to depict reality. Third, Boyle's experiments and the controversies surrounding them demonstrate that there are no such things as “valid” logic or “false” logic. Any speculation about the cause of the observed phenomenon, regardless of the line of reasoning it adheres to, is a mere conjecture about the relationship between cause and effect. In this light, ravenous spirit beliefs and natural science are equivalent in that their speculations about cause and effect are anything but certain.

Boyle's air pump experiments were conducted amidst a plenists-vacuists controversy. The plenists asserted that a space totally void of matters cannot exist in nature; the vacuists argued for the opposite. Despite Boyle's proclaimed disinclination to contribute to the plenist-vacuist debate, his adversaries, especially Hobbes, attacked his experiments for their orientation toward a vacuist outlook (Shapin and Schaffer 1985:19). Boyle had a large air pump constructed. The machine consisted of a receiver, which is a glass globe, and a pumping device operated by human labor. In order to remove air from the receiver, a wooden piston within the brass cylinder attached to the base of the receiver is moved up and down to suck the air out of it. In his first experiment, Boyle put a glass tube of mercury inside the receiver. As receiver was evacuated, the column of mercury sank lower and lower. The pumping continued until the mercury fell no further; then the valve at the top of the receiver was opened to let air in. As the receiver was filled by air, the mercury rose. For Boyle, this phenomenon implied that the space inside the receiver was in the state of a near vacuum.

Hobbes, however, pointed out that the phenomenon was also explicable in plenist terms. Several pieces of evidence derived from the experiment seemed to support plenist rather than
vacuist theory. For Hobbes, the receiver was always filled with air. The maneuver did not suck out aerial particles. Instead, it pressed them together and caused air pressure which was accountable for the fall of mercury. Hobbes drew on the fact that the mercury never touched the bottom of the tube; it just reached the lowest possible point and fell no further even though the pumping continued. This evidence flagrantly contradicted the vacuist theory; if the receiver was totally void of air, the mercury would touch the bottom of the tube. To verify the state of vacuum inside the receiver, Boyle subsequently conducted several more experiments. At one time he put a mouse inside it and had the pump activated. After a while the animal fell down and died. At another time a burning candle was placed inside the receiver. As the pumping continued the flame soon extinguished. The dead mouse and the extinguished flame were, for Boyle, empirical evidences that the machine removed the air and the receiver became a void space as the pumping persisted. Hobbes, however, held the opposite view. He argued that the mouse might not die from suffocation. It was possibly pressed to death by the densely compressed air particles caused by the operation of the pump. In a similar fashion, the flame might be extinguished by the convulsive air flow that occurred when the dense quantity of air was forced into and confined within a small space.

Hobbes questioned the authority of empirical science as a means of producing knowledge. He argued that it may succeed in imitating natural facts within artificial environment, but it cannot account for the certain causes of these facts. Just as what transpires in the receiver can be explained in both plenist and vacuist terms, empirical science is vague and obscure when it comes to the relation between cause and effect. For Hobbes, factual knowledge is inferior to causal knowledge – the greater type of wisdom pursued by philosophy. As Shapin and Schaffer comment, philosophy for Hobbes is a causal enterprise: “causal knowledge was one of its
starting points” (1985:107). It is “such knowledge of effects or appearances, as we acquire by true ratiocination from the knowledge we have first of their causes or generation: And again, of such causes or generations as may be from knowing first their effects” (Hobbes cited in Shapin and Schaffer 1985:107). Boyle's experiments that cannot provide the definite view of causal relation which regulates natural phenomena were, therefore, unphilosophical and the lesser forms of intellectual activities.

Hobbes' criticism of empirical science contributes to another main argument of this chapter, which is that the ravenous spirit belief tradition is not a false logic. If we grant that “valid” logic means a manner of reasoning that can discern a certain link between cause and effect, then all reasoning schemes employed to decipher the real causes of natural phenomena are false. All causal speculations about non-human made phenomena are conjectural in the sense that we can never be certain whether the supposed cause is the real cause of the occurrence in question. Natural science cannot secure the same degree of certainty as we have in mathematics or geometry, in which static formulae pinpoint a definite relation between cause and effect (i.e., it is always the case that “one plus one equals two” and “three angles formed by three straight lines produce a triangle”). As we can never be certain why a medicine that works effectively in the majority of people has serious side effects on some, or why series of sudden deaths abruptly erupts in a northeastern Thai rural village, we can only be speculative about their causes and redress the problems accordingly. This uncertainty is not about the validity or invalidity of the logic deployed to make sense of the concerned phenomenon. Instead, it is about the impossibility of omniscient viewpoint – the ability to know and understand everything transparently. In this light, ravenous spirit beliefs and scientific logic are neither false nor valid. Both of them can only offer conjectures about phenomena not of human construction.
Scientific logic and the logic underpinning ravenous spirit beliefs are strikingly similar in terms of the justification of truth claims. In order to establish the results of his experiments as matters of fact, Boyle replicated the procedures in front of a group of witnesses. As Shapin and Schaffer point out, witnessing is fundamental in the process of validating a truth claim (1985:25). An experience witnessed by a single individual cannot be accepted as a matter of fact. On the other hand, the larger the number of witness, the more concrete and “real” the observed experience becomes. This principle is also at work in the ravenous spirit belief tradition. Mrs. Saitong, when asked what convinced her of ravenous spirits' wicked influence, referred to the high frequency of mysterious death and illness that befell several individuals in her community in a specific time period (personal interview, May 26, 2014). Though the manner of replication is different (ravenous spirit afflictions are extended to multiple witnesses in different times by unknown agents, not by the executor of experiment protocol who extends the experience to a number of people at the same time), the idea that the number of witnesses testifies to the reality of an experience underlies both experimental science and ravenous spirit beliefs. These mysterious deaths and illnesses, if afflicting only a few people, are not adequate to alarm the community. However, as more and more people are afflicted, these unfortunate events become concrete phenomena that constitute a concrete threat to the entire community. Just as the results of Boyle's experiments became matters of fact as they were replicated in front of eye witnesses, successive deaths turn into an actual crisis as the number of the victims increases.

The number is as crucial as the qualifications of the witnesses. To assure the public of the integrity and the reliability of his experiments and their outcomes, Boyle gave the names of honorable witnesses whose intellectual integrity guaranteed and validated his truth claims. In his report of the first air pump experiment, Boyle proclaimed that it was observed by “those
excellent and deservedly famous Mathematics Professors, Dr. Wallis, Dr. Ward, and Mr. Wren” (Boyle cited in Shapin and Schaffer 1985:58). Just like Boyle who mentioned authoritative figures to corroborate his truth claims, Reverend Somboon of Ban Ratsamran temple referred to Gautama Buddha to justify his belief in ghosts and spirits. He cited a sutra in the Pali Canon about five hundred Buddhist monks who were haunted by arboreal spirits and the spell given to them by the Buddha to ward off these spirits (personal interview, July 4, 2013). As the Buddha himself granted the existence of otherworldly beings, and his attitude is clearly reflected in the most authoritative text in Buddhism, Reverend Somboon harbors no doubt about their ontological status. In this respect, Robert Boyle the scientist is not far different from Reverend Somboon the ascetic. Both of them appeal to authority to reaffirm their truth claims.

The brief analysis presented in this overview is exemplary of what will ensue in subsequent sections. It also delineates the methodology and the goal of this chapter, which are, comparing the reasoning processes that underpin ravenous spirit beliefs and scientific knowledge to show that the former is not the product of false reasoning. Besides, the two are not incompatible. Boyle and Mrs Saitong seem to concur that an experience that extends to a multitude of witnesses is relatively more real than one occurring to a few individuals. In a similar fashion, Boyle and Reverend Somboon are well aware that an authoritative third party should be mentioned to bolster the truth value of their claims. Ravenous spirit beliefs and scientific logic, therefore, are not as estranged from one another as one may assume. They may be different in terms of content but not in terms of strategies of validating postulates.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first part – “Is Magical Logic Antithetical to Scientific Reasoning?” – describes the divide in different domains that results in the rise of science as the dominant paradigm of reasoning. This divide also generates science's opposition –
the magical mode of thought – which is attributed to women, children, and “primitive” people. The boundary between empirical science and magic has been questioned by many scholars, such as Bruno Latour, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Stanley J. Tambiah, who contend that the two share several common characteristics; they mutually influence rather than negate one another. The subsequent section – “Is the Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition a False Logic?” – analyzes informants' accounts of how they came to believe in the existence of ravenous spirits. The schemes of reasoning that uphold ravenous beliefs in each narrative are discerned and compared to those employed in the production of scientific knowledge. The third part – “The Inscrutable Experience” – argues that, rather than false logic, ravenous spirit beliefs are the outcome of believers' logical attempts to make sense of enigmatic phenomena that cannot be assimilated into the mechanistic view of the world espoused by science. The conclusion – “Beliefs, Science, and the Scope of Rationality” – discusses the implications and the takeaway points of the analysis.

2. Is Magical Logic Antithetical to Scientific Reasoning?

In We Have Never Been Modern (1993) Bruno Latour remarks on the holistic approach European anthropologists adopt when writing an ethnography of an indigenous culture. He contends that they would never treat their own cultures in the same way. In a monograph about the Cherokee, for instance, it is common that the topics of kinship systems, healing traditions, mythology, and astrology are combined in a single volume. This holistic approach to indigenous cultures is reflective of the view that, in these cultures, nature and culture are intricately intertwined. European anthropologists believe that indigenous conceptions of how nature works are entrenched in their worldviews, which are, in turn, embedded in culture. It is, therefore, proper to situate ethnoscience within the cultural domain and study them in relation to other cultural artifacts such as mythology and superstitions. For Latour, this holistic treatment of
indigenous culture implies that ethnosience for European anthropologists is not “true” science since it is not free from the subjectivity of its makers.

The same thing cannot be done to European science. Research that puts together French history, new medical discoveries made by French biologists, and French philosophical tradition would be regarded as odd or even seriously flawed. The boundary between science and other subjects that fall into cultural and social categories are clearly demarcated in European culture. To mix them up is to equate science with ethnosience; to hint that the former suffers the same flaws intrinsic to the latter. Latour posits that European science has been treated as if it is independent from socio-cultural conditionings. It has been viewed as a paradigm that discovers rather than constructs facts about nature. This is the major reason why it cannot be equated with ethnosience nor can it be positioned on the same ground as humanistic knowledge. Science is extra-human and thus not “humanistic” in the sense that its content derives directly from nature. It is not like sociology or economics which study human activities and produce knowledge that, when compared to science, is a mere human-made postulate, not the discovery of existing natural laws.

From Latour's outlook on European science three types of segregation come into view. First is the divide between the knowing subject and the known object. European science is believed to be superior to ethnosience since it is, reputedly, able to separate the knowing subject from the known object. Scientific knowledge is received as the discovered rule of nature unaffected by the presence of its discoverer. It is a “thing” out there whose essence will not change no matter whom the discoverer is. Construing scientific discoveries as known objects independent from knowing subjects, scientific logic grants that they are generalizable and replicable even though the scale and the setting has changed. Latour takes this as an irrational
aspect of scientific logic. He questions how discoveries made in the artificial setting of a laboratory can adequately and accurately represent the way nature transpires in reality (1993:22). This “change in scale,” as termed by Latour, is not different from a leap made by a “superstitious” person who infers from his personal experiences of ghost sighting that ghosts objectively and universally exist.

Second comes the divide between science and other disciplines of knowledge. This divide sustains science's authority as the arbiter of truth. While ethnoscientific can be positioned on the same level as other disciplines in indigenous cultures, this practice is unthinkable in the case of European science. Latour describes this asymmetry of power as emerging from the false dichotomy between the Truth/Nature pole and the Falsehood/Society pole. Science is the sole occupant of the first pole. It is not only the paradigm that unveils the mystery of nature. It is also disinterested, totally void of politics, and free from “the constraint of social categories, epistemes, or interests” (1993:94) that are constituents of falsehood. Other disciplines are automatically assigned to the second pole in comparison to science as they are not as transparent and oriented toward “pure and disinterested” knowledge as science is. In light of this dichotomy, science deserves absolute trust while others deserve constant scrutiny in order to guard against falsehood. The asymmetry of power lies in the assumption that science, unlike other disciplines, is concerned solely with natural reality and thus immunized against scrutiny. This divide sustains science's authority because it promotes the illusion that science produces objective knowledge devoid of social preoccupations and interests. Its attempt, method, and product are transparent and self-evident. It is, therefore, beyond scrutiny.

Third is the divide between the Europeans and the non-Europeans demarcated on the grounds that the former possesses science while the latter has only ethnoscientific. European
cultures are described as “civilized” by the virtue of scientific progress, which ushers them away from savagery and barbaric stages – the lower rungs on the ladder of cultural evolution occupied by non-European cultures. Latour posits that science demarcates the boundary between the West and the Rest. The former, by the power of science, is able to harness nature whereas the latter fumbles and stumbles along the road toward civilization since it possesses the mere symbolic representation of nature:

We Westerners cannot be one culture among others, since we also mobilize Nature. We do not mobilize an image or a symbolic representation of Nature, the way other societies do, but Nature as it is, or at least as it is known to sciences – which remain in the background, unstudied, unstudiable, miraculously with Nature itself. Thus at the heart of the question of relativism we find the question of science (Latour 1993:97).

At the core of this divide is a contingent identification. The West is identified with science which is in turn equated with nature. The Rest is associated with ethnoscientific which implies a flawed and culturally informed view of nature. Latour reveals that science is a silent but powerful agent behind a classifying scheme like the theory of cultural evolution.¹ The place of a culture in this scheme is determined by its affinity with European science.

The third divide sustains a dichotomy that segregates humankind into two camps according to their manners of reasoning – modern people who adopt “scientific” logic when assessing and interpreting phenomena, and primitives who do so by means of “magical” logic. These two manners of reasoning are, supposedly, distinct from one another in terms of the mental operations involved and the accuracy of their outcomes. Postulates derived from the scientific process of thinking are deemed superior and more reliable as they result from a

¹ O’Conner notes that cultural evolutionism left “a pervasive and often damaging legacy,” that lies in the idea that folk belief and traditional knowledge are false premises that will ultimately besuperseded by modern science. This problematic conception of folk belief has “until very recently focused the attention of scholars of folk belief almost exclusively on nondominant groups defined by virtue of their social position and difference from the dominant culture as ‘the folk’” (1995:37-38).
systematic use of instrumental reason that features the neat ordering of intellectual procedures. A scientific inquiry strictly follows a series of protocols starting with observation, forming a hypothesis, conducting experiments to prove or disprove the hypothesis, then devising a conclusion or a revision of the erred hypothesis. In the magical scheme of reasoning, on the contrary, intuition outweighs instrumental reason. A conclusion is divined rather than inferred from well thought-out empirical experiments. Primary inputs derived from physical senses are taken at their face value which is usually misleading. Due to this disorderly and ill-founded manner of reasoning, primitives are naïve enough to believe that like affects like even though there is no empirical connection between them. The concept of sympathetic magic extrapolated from primitive thought by Frazer seems to be an ideal example of how “modern” people conceptualize magical logic. In their view, it is governed by intuition and misunderstanding derived from superficial observation.

There are, however, scholars who take the opposite stance. They argue that scientific and magical logics are not so disparate, and that the latter, in some cases, moves ahead of the former. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *The Savage Mind* (1966), contends that scientific and magical logics are fundamentally similar since the mental operations and intellectual needs that underpin them are the same. For him, science and ethnoscientific stem from the same root. Both of them respond to the human need to classify things in the chaotic universe in order to make sense of them. This sense-making is the first and foremost step that necessarily precedes practical knowledge. In this respect, the value of a superstition, held among Siberians, that a woodpecker's beak cures toothaches lies not in its practical value, but in the classifying scheme that asserts the connection between human teeth and a woodpecker's beak. This scheme, though inaccurate, introduces an initial order into the intelligible chaos: “Classifying, as opposed to not classifying, has a value of
its own, whatever form the classification may take” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:9). The systematic
cataloguing of things and of relations among them is the basis for a more practical knowledge.
From this outlook, magical logic is an outcome of an intellectual exercise that dispels chaos
which clouds human minds. Without this initial exercise, practical and “accurate” scientific
knowledge is not possible. Humans cannot craft the latter out of pure chaos.

Lévi-Strauss lays out some examples in which classifications done on the basis of non-
scientific principles agree with scientific classifying schemes. This agreement reveals that
magical logic does not always result in a “distorted” view of nature (“distorted” in the sense that
the view is incongruent with the scientific conception of nature and its laws). It can arrive at the
same conclusion as that of science via a different route. In this light, empirical science lags
behind the intuitive methods attributed to magical mode of thought as it merely confirms what
was discovered by the latter. Lévi-Strauss draws on a classification made by modern chemistry to
elucidate this point. Based on the presence and the quantity of five elements – carbon, hydrogen,
oxygen, sulphur, and nitrogen – culinary herbs and plants are classified. Wild cherries,
cinnamon, vanilla, and sherry fall into the same category by the virtue of aldehyde they all
contain. In a similar fashion, onions, garlic, cabbage, turnips, radishes, and mustard are grouped
together because they all consist of sulphur (1966:12). This categorization was divined before
the inception of modern chemistry by means of intuitive method that categorizes these plants
according to the distinct tastes and smells they produce. Modern chemistry, in this case, merely
reaffirms the existing classification and explicates it in scientific terms.

Considering the aforementioned case, modern chemistry and intuitive methods are similar
in that they make an induction from what is perceptible. What separates them, however, is a
different view of the reliability of sensory perception. While the primitives grant that a poignant
smell and a hot, bitter taste are qualified to form a classifying scheme that groups garlic and onion together, modern chemistry holds that these perceptions are insufficient. Sensory perception can be misleading so it needs to be confirmed by a deeper level of perception made possible by modern technologies and scientific procedures. Lévi-Strauss's point is that the intuitive method attributed to primitive mentality is not really “intuitive” since the truth claims it formulates still have a basis in empirical experiences. It is, rather, relatively intuitive compared to modern science which is equipped to see through the deceiving and superficial sensory perception. Putting aside this distinction, primitive and scientific schemes of reasoning are fundamentally similar. They are “the science of the concrete” – an understanding of the world based on what is known to the senses.

Lévi-Strauss not only argues against the divide between scientific and magical logics, he also challenges the dichotomy between “Us modern people” and “Them the primitives.” This dichotomy is upheld by the assumption that “Us modern people” are faithful adherents of scientific logic and thus naturally recoil from the false, magical mode of thought belonging exclusively to “Them the primitives.” The opposite is true to primitive people who are totally estranged from the thought process that has become the defining characteristic of experimental science. In fact, the procedures associated with experimental science, which are observation, experimentations, and validation or revision of a hypothesis, are generally found among diverse tribes of men in different cultural settings and historical periods. These procedures were as common among Neolithic men as they were among the members of Royal Society in the seventeenth century England. This point is succinctly illustrated by Lévi-Strauss:

It was in Neolithic times that man's mastery of the great arts of civilization – of pottery, weaving, agriculture, and the domestication of animals – became

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2 The title of the first chapter of The Savage Mind.
firmly established. No one today would any longer think of attributing these enormous advances to the fortuitous accumulation of a series of chance discoveries or believe them to have been revealed by the passive perception of certain natural phenomena. Each of these techniques assumes centuries of active and methodical observation, of bold hypotheses tested by means of endlessly repeated experiments (1966:14).

The methods of experimental science are by no means foreign to primitive mentality. This outlook de-racializes scientific logic by contending that it is the product of human intellect in general. It does not attest to the ingenuity of a specific race in a specific time period. Though the dichotomy between “Us the modern” and “Them the primitives” is not totally dissolved due to the hierarchical distinction between European science and ethnoscience as pointed out by Latour, the view that the primitives can adopt a scientific mode of thought invalidates the imagined incompatibility between the West and the Rest. Primitive mentality is not totally estranged from intellectual procedures espoused by science. In this respect, the West/science versus the Rest/superstition dichotomy is far from accurate.

Another popular but inaccurate assumption about the relationship between magic and science is that the former, not holding onto a mechanistic outlook, is false and irrational. The latter, espousing this dominant worldview, is always right and adequate. This assumption engenders a problem when the adjective “scientific” comes to denote a mechanistic idiom rather than a meticulous procedure of testing a hypothesis. Tambiah, in Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality (1990) lays out historical cases to show that mechanistic speculations can be as superstitious as magical ones. A medical text dated back to the late fifth or the early fourth century B.C. – On the Sacred Disease – rejects the mystical cause of epilepsy. It argues for a natural cause of the disease (1990: 9-10). The significance of this text, according to Tambiah, lies in its dismissal of the etiology branded as “magical” nowadays and its adoption of
the mechanistic view of disease prevalent in modern medicine. However, taking into account the lack of medical technology to empirically prove and pinpoint the physical cause of epilepsy during that time period, naturalistic etiology of the disease was “superstitious” in the sense that there was no exact and concrete evidences of the natural cause. Regarding this point, Tambiah notes: “[…] naturalistic explanation sheltered in early Greece many fanciful explanations, which had a weak empirical base and were ground in doubtful inferences.” It is proper to call these explanations “fanciful” since their proponents “appealed to naturalist causes without possessing a real positivist methodology or an efficacious technology of curing, including pharmacopeia” (1990:10). Tambiah points to the fact that many postulates and theories labelled as scientific lack the virtues associated with this label. This remark is applicable to the psychodynamic theory of ravenous spirit possession. It has been accepted as “scientific” and superior to the belief in a mystical cause even though its empirical base is doubtful and its naturalistic postulates, in several cases of application, are unverifiable due to the inadequacy of available evidence.3 The proclamation of a causal connection between two phenomena despite the lack of empirical evidences is not exclusive to supernatural beliefs. It is also common among “scientific” postulates.

Tambiah, like Latour and Lévi-Strauss, challenges the dichotomy between magic and science. He achieves this task by elucidating three significant points: 1) The scientific conception of nature, by the time it was conceived, did not separate from nor was it unaffected by other

3 Hufford's remark on the “scientific” facade of psychodynamic theory that makes it appealing to students of belief nuances this argument. He observes that: “Psychodynamic thought is attractive to students of belief in part because it is more scientific in ideological terms than are the social sciences. It is called scientific by its proponents, and those proponents occupy a position within the academic world that is in closer proximity to the scientific center than folklore or anthropology; especially since psychoanalytic writers are physicians and there is a popular belief that physicians are scientists” (1983:23). It is apparent in Hufford's comment that in several cases, psychodynamic approach is adopted not because it elucidates the belief being studied, but because it is generally considered “scientific.”
human activities. Its advent was possible because of the changes occurring in several domains of society. One among them is the reformation in the religious domain. 2) Magic and science are complementary rather than antagonistic to one another. As we shall see later, interests in occult science during the Renaissance accumulated into scientific discoveries. 3) The divide between science and magic did not exist before the late seventeenth century. This divide was later demarcated to support the illusion of linear progress. It does not reflect an intrinsic incompatibility between the two.

To elucidate the first point, Tambiah mentions a revision of Christian cosmology introduced by a prominent figure in the Protestant Reformation – John Calvin – who rejected the hierarchical conception of the universe that had currency in medieval times (Tambiah 1990:16). Arthur Lovejoy's concept of the Great Chain of Being pronounces this cosmology, which holds that universe is comprised of different orders of existence. The pinnacle of this hierarchy is God the Creator who embodies the maximal perfection. Lower down are the places for angels, humans, and animals, respectively. This variety of beings and their places in the hierarchy constitute the doctrine of plenitude which asserts that the diversity and the hierarchical classification of beings are principles decreed by God. Calvin substituted this view with the concept of Providence, which can be roughly described as the belief in the absolute power of God's will. God does not act whimsically. His divine power is channelled through regular courses and manifested in regular forms accessible to human intellect. Despite Calvin's insistence that God can perform miracles if he wishes, many theologians in the seventeenth century came to hold that God usually complies with the law he creates and sets in motion – the laws of nature (Tambiah 1990:20).

Tambiah construes this change as fertile soil for the growth of empirical science. The
change of God's role from the supreme being who regulates the universe by a hierarchical order to the Creator of natural laws who exercises his divine power through natural phenomena forms the basis for the scientific conception of nature. Also, the idea that human intellect can decipher these laws stimulates scientific endeavors, which ultimately result in the institutionalized and authoritative science as we have nowadays. As these endeavors have constantly yielded new discoveries contributing to material and technological progress, faith in human's ingenuity replaces faith in the sovereign God who has become, in the mechanistic worldview, the product of men's religious aspiration rather than the Creator of the universe. In this example, Tambiah delineates that the scientific view of nature emerged from the reconfiguration of religious ideas. The latter renders the former possible.

While the reformation of religious doctrines engendered scientific aspiration, the interest in occult science among scholars and philosophers in the Renaissance formed the basis for the formulation of scientific theories. Tambiah comments on Keith Thomas's Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971), noting that the author construed the relationship between magic and science in the late seventeenth century England as an inversion – that is, the growth of science results in the decline of magic. This explanation is problematic because it downplays the coexistence of and the overlap between the two, which were most evident in the fact that “[...]magic and science had originally advanced side by side, and mystical-magical theories and preoccupations advanced the formulation of those theoretical systems that would later be seen as the triumphs of the new science” (Tambiah 1990: 21). The interest in astrology significantly contributed to the development of astronomical observations. This remark is illuminated by the life and works of the renowned Isaac Newton whose interest in astrology formed the basis for the scientific theories he subsequently formulated. Newton's interest in occult sciences, mainly
astrology and alchemy, was erased from his biographies by the post-Enlightenment biographers who venerated him as an epitome of scientific reason. However, Frances A. Yates's “The Fear of the Occult” (1979) reveals that one of Newton's motives to start his research in mathematics was his curiosity about judicial astrology – he attempted to prove whether or not planetary phenomena predictable by calculation could bring about or influence events on earth. Several prominent theories in modern science were unveiled due to their discoverers' interests or even beliefs in the “occult” descriptions of natural phenomena. Heliocentrism and the infinity of the worlds⁴ – condemned as occult and blasphemous in the Middle Ages – fundamentally constitute the Copernican view of the universe, which contends that earth revolves around the sun and that the universe is an infinitely vast space adorned with trillions of galaxies and planets.

The interplay between religious ideas and occult science on one side, and the scientific mode of thought on another has been, according to Tambiah, neglected by scholars who position these actors on the opposite sides of the dichotomy. The critics of this dichotomy, such as Frances A. Yates, Hildred Geertz, and Tambiah himself take up another task – to explicate not the decline of magic vis-à-vis the rise of science, but the sociocultural and historical factors that led to the demarcation between the two and the emergence of the labels “science” and “magic.” Tambiah cites Hildred Geertz's critique of Thomas's Religion and the Decline of Magic that “It is not the 'decline' of the practice of magic that cries out for explanation, but the emergence and the rise of the label 'magic'” (1990:23). The view that these two terms are newborn cultural categories is supported by the historical fact that several individuals venerated as the pioneers of scientific knowledge, such as John Dee and Giordano Bruno, also conducted experiments on

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⁴ The heliocentric view of the universe raised a debate about its nature and extent. Is it a “finite sphere of fixed stars” or “the sphere of fixed stars” which is “infinite outwards”? (Granada 2008). Copernicus raised this question which contradicted the Aristotelian and Ptoleismic view that universe is a sphere of fixed stars in motion, and earth is at the center of this universe.
occult sciences. The former, described as “a genuine mathematician of considerable importance, intensely interested in all mathematical studies, and in the application of mathematics to produce results in applied sciences” (Yates quoted in Tambiah 1990:26), was also astrologer to Elizabeth I and used talismans to channel heavenly power. The latter, renowned for his proposition that the universe is infinite and the stars are distant suns with their own systems of exoplanets, was attracted to the religious practices of the ancient Egyptians and their techniques of channelling cosmic power through the use of talismans (Tambiah 1990:27). Before the seventeenth century, the value-laden usage of the terms “science” and “magic” seemed not to exist. Several prominent scholars espoused occult sciences and scientific endeavours without drawing a hierarchical distinction between them.

For Tambiah, the divide between magic and science is introduced when historians look back at the past from their stance in the present. It is inherent to their hindsight rather than reflective of the incompatibility between the two. The interplay and the overlap between them have been reduced, while their distinction has been overdrawn in order to assimilate the story of their mutual antagonism into the scheme of “the linear march to modernity” (Tambiah, 1990:28). Mainstream historical and sociological accounts construct the paradigmatic postulate that “the decline of magic was caused by the rise of science,” by erasing the details that hint at the obscure boundary and continuum between the two. As “one generation's conscious omissions become the next generation's genuine amnesia” (1990:28), magic and science become two incompatible modes of thought that automatically negate one another.

The literature review in this section serves as theoretical framework for the analysis in the subsequent sections. Ravenous spirit beliefs are not the products of “false” or “magical” logic since they involve mental operations and reasoning processes similar to scientific logic. As laid
out in this section, the divide between magical and scientific modes of thought is, in fact, a
historical construct that downplays the commonality between the two. With this notion in
purview, the hypothesis about ravenous spirit beliefs should be modified as follows: ravenous
spirit beliefs cannot be false logic since we never have an all-encompassing reasoning scheme
that can adequately explain every aspect of the phenomenon. Nor do we have its antithesis,
which is, in all cases, wrong and inadequate. In addition, schemes of reasoning that underpin
ravenous spirit beliefs and “scientific” logic are equivalent in that they resort to the same tactics
of formulating and validating truth claims.

Another salient point this review illustrates is that even in the time before the advent of
empirical science, people applied the mode of thought termed nowadays as “scientific”. Given
the technological progress achieved by ancient civilizations, it seems infeasible to assume that
there existed in reality specific tribes of people totally ignorant of the thought process empirical
science espouses. Even more naïve is the belief that this mode of thought did not exist before the
birth of empirical science. This observation informs the salient point delineated later in this
chapter that ravenous spirit believers, despite their lack of education in scientific methods, can
effectively employ scientific reasoning to solve practical problems.

3. Is the Ravenous Spirit Belief Tradition a False Logic?

3.1 The Problem of Making Inductions

Latour relays the discrepancy between Boyle's and Hobbes's views about the major
skepticism as doubts about the integrity of his air pump, took several measures to reaffirm that
the glass receiver was void of ether wind. At one time he put a chicken feather into the receiver
and triumphantly declared its motionlessness which, he believed, cleared his experiments of

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Hobbes's critique. The crucial problem of Boyle's experiments from Hobbes's view, however, was philosophical rather than technical. His focus was not the absence or the presence of air in the glass receiver, but the possibility of a vacuum in a natural setting outside the artificial, controlled environment of Boyle's laboratory. Hobbes's concern was primarily about the problem of making an induction, that is, how can a result derived from an artificial and enclosed setting represent reality which is beyond human control? This sentiment is reiterated by Latour in his own words:

If science is based not on ideas but on a practice, if it is located not outside but inside the transparent chamber of the air pump, and if it takes place within the private space of the experimental community, then how does it reach “everywhere”? How does it become as universal as “Boyle's laws” or “Newton's laws”? The answer is that it never becomes universal – not, at least, in the epistemologists' terms! (1993:24).

A result derived from a specific case or a group of cases, from Hobbes's and Latour's viewpoints, seems to be inadequate to represent what transpires in reality beyond the confinement of a laboratory. The problem lies not in the validity of the finding, which is viable in its particular context, given the meticulous protocol of experimental science. Rather, what bothers Hobbes and Latour is the leap of scale when knowledge of a particular is generalized and received as universal fact. How can a finding obtained from experiments conducted in a human-made, artificial setting adequately epitomize the operation of a natural world full of external forces beyond human control and knowledge? And how can we be certain that what transpires in laboratory unfailingly replicates every single case of the studied phenomenon when it occurs in natural world? Undeniably, laboratory findings, to a significant extent, cast light on the phenomena examined by experimental science; otherwise we would not be benefited by scientific and technological progress as we are nowadays. The applicability of these findings,
nonetheless, are far from total. There are always cases that deviate from these findings and thus elude experimental science. Latour and Hobbes's question about the leap from laboratory findings to universal fact articulates the idea that empirical science is a cogent line of reasoning and heuristic tool. But what it offers is inductive knowledge about the world of phenomena, not a transparent reflection of reality.

The ravenous spirit believers participating in this research make a similar leap. The only difference is that, while empirical science generalizes experimental findings, the informants generalize their personal experiences. They induce that ravenous spirits objectively exist after having troublesome, enigmatic experiences that resist other explanatory schemes but become solvable and sensible when viewed in light of ravenous spirit beliefs. The adherents of experimental science and the ravenous spirit believers interviewed in this research rely on inductive reasoning in the making of truth claims. They make assumptions about the universal by knowing the particular. The former asserts that the experiments conducted in laboratories replicate what universally transpires in reality; the latter holds that their personal experiences unfailingly attest to the ontological status of ravenous spirits.

To assume that individuals who hold supernatural beliefs do so due to their ignorance of the scientific-rationalist paradigm is to disregard the complex and multifaceted nature of their mindset. The ravenous spirit believers whose voices are presented in this chapter are familiar with this dominant conception of reality. As will be seen later, they think and behave rationally according to the standards of modern society that upholds science and its logic. Their acquaintance with the scientific-rationalist outlook can be attributed to the fact that they are constantly exposed to modernity and absorb the sentiments and values it inculcates. Unlike ravenous spirit believers in monolithic representations who, due to their embeddedness in rural
localities, have meagre contact with the modern world and remain unenlightened by scientific thinking, the informants interviewed in this chapter do not fit into such a reductive category. Also, their stories ratify the notion that modernity does not negate supernatural beliefs. Some, like Mrs. Somjai, though born and residing in a rural village where supernatural beliefs are practiced, is not cut off from modern influences. Mrs. Somjai frequents the city of Udornthani – an urban center located twenty-eight miles away from her village – for both errands and recreation. She is a loyal fan of television dramas. She also, once in a while, makes recreational trips to neighboring countries with her husband on holidays. Others, like Mrs. Jampa and Mr. Namchai, live in the midst of modernity, still they believe in supernatural agents. Mrs. Jampa – a native of a rural village in Nakhon Phanom province – moved to the city of Ubon Ratchathani and set up her food stall in a business complex. Mr. Namchai, on the contrary, has been a city dweller since birth. He was born in the city of Sakon Nakhon and runs his clothes shop at the city market. While Mrs. Somjai and Mrs. Jampa attended primary school but dropped out, the former at grade six and the latter at grade four, Mr. Namchai did not receive formal education at all.

A brief account of the backgrounds of my informants is given here to contextualize their narratives. Modern sentiments and values are not foreign ideas to them. Like “non-superstitious,” modern people in general, they adopt these values and turn first to a conventional approach when

5 A characteristic attributed to ravenous spirit believers by the media is an embeddedness in their local context and their estrangement from the virtues of modern world. Suk and his gang in Wanlee the Grateful mentioned in chapter three fail to grasp Wanlee's mechanistic explanation of her mother’s illness which the film suggests to be the real cause of her affliction. The implication is that they are not familiar with modern conception of illness, living largely in a rural community fraught with superstitions. Another documentary analyzed in chapter three depicts the public accusation of a lone old woman who passively accepted the verdict of exile decreed by the community while a district officer idly stood by, doing nothing to help her. This representation reiterates the disconnection of the belief community from the modern Thailand. State rules and the concept of human rights are not viable in this primitive backcountry.

6 Surveys conducted in United Kingdom, United States, and Canada show that the formula “supernatural belief ≠ rational, therefore modern/educated = no supernatural belief” (Goldstein 2007:66) is inaccurate. For more on these surveys, see Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas (2007:65-66).
confronting with health problems. Their narratives highlight two salient points. First, scientific reasoning and supernatural beliefs can exist side by side in a single mindset, and that the degree of exposure to modern education is not causally related to the ability to perform scientific thinking. Ravenous spirit believers in real contexts are not ignorant of the scientific-rationalist paradigm. On the contrary, they are individuals open to diverse views of reality. Second, as Lauri Honko cogently observes: “Belief in the existence of spirits is founded not upon loose speculation, but upon concrete, personal experiences, the reality of which is reinforced by sensory perceptions” (1964:10). As we will see later, informants' narratives are laden with empirical details that highlight the materiality of the narrated experience. 7

When asked how they came to believe in the existence of ravenous spirits, Mrs. Somjai and Mrs. Jampa narrated their personal experiences, which are incongruous to other causal theories but sensible when viewed in light of the ravenous spirit belief tradition. The stories analysed in the following pages delineate two points. First, before attributing their experiences to supernatural agents, both informants went through a reasoning process that is proper and valid. There is nothing “superstitious” in their reasoning. Second, their inductive reasoning is similar to that employed by experimental scientists when formulating truth claims based on laboratory findings.

Mrs. Somjai is a native of Nonesung village in Udornthani. After a mysterious headache that she experienced in 2009, Mrs. Somjai came to believe in the existence of ravenous spirits. She inferred their ontological status from this mysterious headache, which was unresponsive to biomedicine but immediately disappeared after a female healer performed a healing rite for her.

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7 Honko (1964) draws on the term *memorate* coined by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow to signify a category of personal experience narratives told to state and describe one's supernatural belief. For problems pertaining to the conception of memorate as a personal experience narrative, see Dégh and Vázsonyi (1974).
I had this symptom when I was returning home after a grocery shopping. I felt the sudden attack of pain on my neck and shoulder. I sometimes have this kind of pain before and after my period. But this time the pain got worse at night. It was so severe that my head throbbed. I felt like my head was going to shatter into pieces and my eyes were about to leap from their sockets. I could not open my eyes. The pain started from my neck and shoulder and it went up to my head. I took some painkillers, but the pain did not subside so my husband brought me to the hospital. The doctor gave me an injection but the pain was still severe. The medication was just totally useless. Then my husband called for a healer. She visited me at the hospital and performed a brief healing rite. She tied sacred white thread round my wrists then let me drink a small bottle of water. A short while later I felt sick to my stomach. It was strange because there was not much water in the bottle, and it tasted just like normal water. Then I went to the restroom and vomited. And you would not believe, the pain just totally disappeared (personal interview, June 23, 2013).

After her discharge, Mrs. Somjai visited a female healer who attributed her illness to a ravenous spirit. It attempted to possess her but failed, so it perched on her shoulder. Mrs. Somjai's experience is quite similar to Mrs. Jampa's. The latter, though dismissing the existence of ravenous spirits, proclaimed belief in the power of witchcraft. The connection between direct experience and supernatural belief is more apparent in Mrs. Jampa's case. She claimed that, since the class of experiences ascribed to ravenous spirits never occurred to her, she did not believe in ravenous spirits. On the contrary, because she had experienced phenomena that signify witchcraft, she came to believe in its power.

Mrs. Jampa witnessed a ravenous spirit possession occurring to a middle-aged woman in 2004. In Mrs. Jampa's opinion, the possessed suffered from a high fever that subsequently caused a delirium – the real reason for her strange behaviors and nonsensical babbling taken by other observers as the signs of ravenous spirit possession. When she experienced an inscrutable incident in April 2013, however, she changed her view toward supernatural beliefs. She had previously dismissed them once and for all. But by the time I interviewed her, Mrs. Jampa
professed her belief in the power of witchcraft. Her personal experience forms the basis for this belief:

I am not credulous. I did not believe in these invisible agents, but this incident changed my view. It happened last year in April. I suffered from a skull shattering headache. It was unusually severe. I have constantly suffered from a chronic migraine and I always have migraine pills with me. Whenever I have the symptoms I will take these pills and it will go away within one or two hours. It is always like that. But last April the pain had been torturing me for three days. It did not subside no matter how many pills I took. My blood pressure dramatically rose, though I never had that kind of problem before. I felt like the veins in my brain were bursting. It was unbearably painful. So I went to the hospital. They gave me more pills and an injection. But the pain did not subside. Then one of my friends told me about a physician famous for her effective migraine treatment. I visited her and she commented that I was possibly overdosed. That was why my migraine resisted medication. She gave me another injection and more pills. I felt a little bit relieved but the pain was back the following day. Again, an acquaintance recommended another hospital. He also suffered from a chronic migraine and developed a complication due to overdosing. I went there and got double shots of injection. The physician said if it was really a migraine I would feel better, but it did not work. I coped with the pain for five days. Then I recalled a Buddhist monk who was also a herbalist. He once told me that he has a kind of root effective as a headache treatment. I went to his temple and he let me take the extract of this root. The pain went away for half an hour; but then it returned. I called him and he speculated that it might not be a natural illness. He told me to prepare a worshiping tray adorned with flowers, incenses, and candles and brought it to the temple. He performed a ritual and sprinkled holy water over me. And you know what? My headache was totally gone after the rite. The moment the holy water fell upon my head I felt like fresh, cool water was poured down all over me. Its relishing coolness diffused and pervaded my body. I felt that my vision became clearer, like the fog that covered my sight was dispelled. I felt light and relieved. After I went back home the Reverend gave me a call and asked about my headache. He said the holy water was mixed with a sacralized ointment, which is the antidote to witchcraft. He thought my headache was caused by somebody's witchcraft. I tried to figure out the mastermind behind this evil scheme against me. But as far as I knew I did not offend anybody. A part of me said it was impossible, but I could not find a better way to explain my headache. If it were a migraine or other natural causes, how could it elude medical treatments but respond to the Reverend's holy water? This incident convinces me of the power of witchcraft (personal interview, June 15, 2014).

The first remarkable point is the informants' reactions to their mysterious headache, which are not different from what “non-superstitious” people would do in a normal situation. Mrs. Somjai
and Mrs. Jampa initially attributed their symptoms to natural causes. They referred to their past experiences as they speculated about the possible causes of their headaches. The former took it as menstrual-related symptoms, while the latter attributed it to her chronic migraine. They then addressed the problems according to the formulated hypotheses. As the adopted solutions proved ineffective, the two ladies revised their initial, self-help approaches to the problems. They sought help from experts who failed to provide effective solutions. Upon this failure, the informants tried out different approaches until the problems were solved. This method of forming an effective solution to a problem is not far different from what rational people in general do when facing a health problem. They pondered the problem, formulated hypotheses on the basis of their background knowledge and experiences, tested the hypotheses, and revised them until the problem was fixed. In this respect, the incidents that form the basis for Mrs. Somjai’s and Mrs. Jampa's beliefs in supernatural agents were not falsely perceived or misconstrued due to the informants' credulity or rash judgment. Their initial responses to the incidents are conventional; that is, they are rational according to the standard of the dominant worldview and representative of what people with a sound mind would do. Mystical beliefs came into play only after the informants discovered that conventional solutions to the problems were ineffective.

Mrs. Somjai’s and Mrs. Jampa's mystical beliefs, like scientific theories formulated in laboratories, are the results of what Hobbes calls the analytical method in philosophical enquiries (Shapin and Schaffer 1985:148). It is one of the two mental schemes – another one is called the synthetical method – for discerning the causes of things. The synthetical method denotes the inference made from cause to effect. A theorem or a fundamental principle is first defined, then comes a demonstration of how the anticipated effect necessarily follows. The analytical method, on the contrary, is the inference from effect to cause. One notes the conceivable effect and
speculates about its possible cause. While the synthetical method is prevalent in Mathematics and Geometry, the analytical method has been adopted primarily by the natural sciences. According to Shapin and Scaffer, Hobbes seems to favor the former over the latter. The synthetical method assures a certain link between cause and effect. As long as the theorem or the fundamental principle remains the same, the ensuing effect will not change. The analytical method, on the contrary, cannot guarantee this certainty. From a perceptible effect we can only conjecture about its cause, which is not necessarily the real agent of the effect in question.

This leads us back to Mrs. Somjai and Mrs. Jampa's mystical beliefs. Another noteworthy point in their narratives is the relation between the analytical method and supernatural beliefs. Both informants inferred mystical causes of their headache from the efficacy of mystical treatments. To them, the failure of biomedicine and the efficacy of mystical methods evince supernatural causes of the symptoms. As pills and injections failed to produce the desirable effect, the causal theory they espouse was ruled out. On the other hand, the efficacy of rituals performed by the healer and the Buddhist monk testified to the mystical conjectures they asserted. In this respect, Mrs. Somjai and Mrs. Jampa are not far different from the great scientist like Robert Boyle who inferred vacuum from the dead mouse and from the extinguished candle in the glass receiver of his air pump. All of them made an inference about an invisible cause from certain empirical effects. Their conjectures are susceptible to doubts harbored by those who espouse different views. Just as Boyle's induction was challenged by Hobbes who attributed a different cause to the same effect, Mrs. Somjai's and Mrs. Jampa's mystical conclusions are also assessed and weighed against other possible causes by non-believers.

This analysis supports my argument that the informants' mystical beliefs and scientific theories are equivalent in many respects. First, the mental operation behind them is the same.
Second, they are mere conjectures about a possible cause of a specific phenomenon which is equally open to other causal schemes, and whose real cause we never know for certain. Taking this symmetry into account, it is baffling to see how scientific theories have become the products of reason while mystical beliefs are labelled groundless superstitions. In the West, it is suffice to say that the emergence of this divide coincides with the rise of empirical science and the Enlightenment which downgrades all modes of thought whose conceptions and validating criteria of truth claims differ from those of science. In the context of northeastern Thailand, however, this divide has been demarcated by media and academic sources that construe the ravenous spirit belief tradition as a primitive occult that provides false solutions to the crisis vis-à-vis science that, if believers resorted to it, would definitely yield the effective and rational explanation. Putting aside this imagined divide, natural philosophy and occult science seem to be equal in that they can only divine the probable causes of natural phenomena from their empirical effects. As Hobbes contends, the causes of phenomena not of human construction can

8 A morning news program broadcasting nationwide via Channel 9 on September 1, 2014, featured a three-minute special report on the scientific-rationalist explanation of phenomena that trigger ravenous spirit beliefs. The voiceover asserts that these phenomena are caused by natural agents, and that health professionals and Thai authorities need to communicate with believers about natural causes of the phenomena:

In fact, the occurrences attributed to ravenous spirits are explicable by science. Doctor Kanokwan Kittiwattanakul – a physician who has worked with patients suffering from ravenous spirit afflictions for more than ten years – confirms that the majority of individuals dying in a ravenous spirit crisis had beforehand suffered from particular diseases. In a similar fashion, morbid physical and mental symptoms the afflicted displays can be caused by the unsanitary habits of living and eating or by brain diseases. They have nothing to do with spirits. [...] As some supernatural beliefs persist in spite of scientific progress, health professionals should be cognizant of the influence of these beliefs over believers' healthcare behaviors, and in the meantime put in an effort to help them assess and solve their health problems in a rational way (Pra ram kao khoa chao, September 1, 2014; emphasis added).

In this report, ravenous spirit beliefs are positioned vis-à-vis science. The former is a local spirit cult that breeds false views on natural phenomena. The latter is the arbiter of truth that dispels these false views.
only be speculative (Shapin and Schaffer 1985:151). What one discerns from an empirical effect may not be its real cause, but it suffices to have the cause that satisfies one's reason. As apparent in Mrs. Jampa's narrative, she accepted the mystical cause of her headache because there was no better causal scheme to account for its baffling nature. The informants adopt mystical explanations not because they are irrational or superstitious, but because their experiences become most sensible when viewed in light of these explanations.

Mrs. Somjai and Mrs. Jampa referred to their personal experiences as evidence that ravenous spirits and the power of witchcraft exist. They generalize their conclusions derived from particular cases, believing that their experiences reflect what transpires universally. As mentioned earlier, this manner of inducing a “universal fact” from particular cases is also prevalent in empirical science, which grants that natural laws can be discerned in the artificial and controlled setting of the laboratory. However, the production of a universal fact from particular cases is not possible without evidence of replicability – the proof that the phenomenon or the experience in question can be extended to the multitude of observers. Just as replicability is crucial in the construction of scientific facts, so is it in the formation of ravenous spirit beliefs. Ravenous spirit believers proclaim that, since the phenomena attributed to these malevolent spirits occur to too many people, it is hard to dismiss them as the products of individual's fancy. This issue will be analysed in depth in the next section.

3.2 The Making of Objective Reality

Mr. Pan is a native of Ban Pa Ao village. He attended the communal rite held almost every year in the village to ward off ravenous spirits. When asked why Ban Pa Ao villagers harbor a strong belief in the existence of these amorphous spirits, Mr. Pan gave an interesting answer:
If you ask all Ban Pa Ao villagers whether they believe in ravenous spirits, no doubt the majority will say “yes,” because our village is often troubled by the ravenous spirit crisis. But if you went to another village where the crisis never occurs and asked the same question, the people there would definitely say “no.” But we and they are the same, none of us ever see what a ravenous spirit looks like (personal interview, May 24, 2014).

Mr. Pan's answer conveys two significant messages. First, it reiterates what was demonstrated in the earlier section – the existence of ravenous spirits is inferred from concrete phenomena. Without these phenomena, such inference is not possible. That is why those who never experience the crisis, understandably, dismiss ravenous spirit beliefs.9 Second, the existence of ravenous spirits is manifest through a series of phenomena that affect the whole community. A few cases of mysterious death or possession cannot be called a crisis. This term denotes both the frequency and the extensive scope of the phenomena experienced by a considerable number of people.

Since ravenous spirits beliefs are possible only when misfortunes attributed to the spirits are unusually frequent and the number of the afflicted people is substantial, it is more difficult to assimilate a ravenous spirit crisis into the rationalist discourse. It is one thing to ascribe a case of spirit possession to the malfunction of possessed person's psyche. It is another thing, however, to explain the epidemic of possession that afflicts ten or twenty people in a specific time period. The attempt to explain these collective afflictions in rationalist-scientific idioms results in the wholesale falsification of believers' experiences and the claims they make on the basis of these

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9 Mr. Pan's comment points out the asymmetry of credibility between scientific postulates and supernatural beliefs. Surrounded by modern ethics, values, and aspirations, ravenous spirit believers cannot remain intact and be faithful to their supernatural beliefs in spite of the dismissive sentiment the society in general harbors against these beliefs. Mr. Pan seems to be testifying that, given the orthodoxy of scientific-rationalist paradigm in Thailand nowadays, it is more difficult for people to adopt supernatural beliefs. People in general may receive a scientific postulate without a further inquiry into its evidence. When it comes to supernatural beliefs, however, one always needs ironclad evidence. Given this disparity, it is understandable that people who never experience a ravenous spirit crisis dismiss ravenous spirit beliefs.
experiences. Psychoanalytic discourse construes the epidemic of ravenous spirit possession as a manifestation of mass hysteria. In doing so, it must find psychological flaws in all individuals who experience the possession, and it must also elaborate an explanation how and why one possession triggers others. In a similar fashion, a sociologist is required to contrive an explanatory scheme rationalizing why, in several inquisition rites performed for the victims of possession, all the victims invariably utter the name of an individual who is subsequently suspected by the community of hosting a ravenous spirit. The point of interest here is not the condemning sentiment of rationalist discourses, which has been delineated in chapter three. The intended message is that the phenomena attributed to ravenous spirits have the quality of objective reality which makes it harder to reduce them to subjective truths. If what we mean by “objective” reality is tangible phenomena accessible to a multitude of witnesses regardless of their belief or disbelief, a ravenous spirit crisis qualifies as an objective reality. Its frequency and the number of its first-hand witnesses form the basis for ravenous spirit beliefs.

As demonstrated in chapter two, the ravenous spirit belief tradition is resorted to when an unusually high frequency of death and illness that elude scientific explanation befalls a belief community. Underlying this conviction is the idea that the reality of a phenomenon is undeniable if it is experienced by a significant number of witnesses. The same idea prevails in empirical science. A postulate formulated and verified in experimental setting is turned into a matter of fact when the phenomenon that constitutes its empirical basis is demonstrated in front of witnesses, as Shapin and Schaffer posit:

Matters of fact were the outcome of the process of having an empirical experience, warranting it to oneself, and assuring others that grounds for their belief were adequate. In that process a multiplication of the witnessing experience was fundamental. An experience, even of a rigidly controlled experimental performance, that one man alone witnessed was not adequate to
make a matter of fact. If that experience could be extended to many, and in principle to all men, then the result could be constituted as a matter of fact (1985:25).

If we slightly modify the above passage, we will have a succinct explanation of how ravenous spirit beliefs are received as matters of fact by believers:

Ravenous spirit beliefs are the outcome of the process of having an empirical experience, warranting it to oneself on the ground that the same baffling experience has recently befallen others in the same community. This collective aspect of the experience assures believers that the grounds for their belief is adequate. In this process a multiplication of witnesses is fundamental. An experience, especially one likely to be dismissed as “an individual's fancy,” that one man alone witnesses is not adequate to make a matter of fact. If that experience extends to many, and the number of witness is substantial enough to stir the whole community (as in the case of ravenous spirit crisis), then it can be constituted as a matter of fact.

This parallel is demonstrated to convey two points. First, ravenous spirit beliefs and empirical science rely on the same notion of objective reality. A phenomenon becomes an irreducible “objective” reality when it is empirically experienced by a multitude of witnesses. In this respect, objective reality is a social category. Its truth value is determined both by its accessibility to sensory perception and by the agreement of the witnesses. Second, considering the “objective” aspect of a ravenous spirit crisis, the ravenous spirit belief tradition cannot be called false logic.

It is rational for believers to suspect the presence of ravenous spirits when a lot of people die the same sudden, inscrutable death and all the victims of possession name the same person as the host. As death and possession multiply, the crisis and the malevolent agents it implies become too substantial to be dismissed as coincidence or as the victims' individual misfortunes. By then the crisis becomes a replicable phenomenon – not by human contrivance as in an experimental setting, but by evil influence of the voracious spirits whose reality is granted by believers.

Ravenous spirit beliefs are informed by this view of objective reality, as apparent in
informants' narratives. Mr. Tongpoon, when asked about the trustworthiness of accusations made during inquisition rites, referred to the congruence between different testimonies given by a substantial number of the victims: “What counts as trustworthy evidence is the accusation against the same person made by different victims in several inquisition rites. The exorcists will coerce the possessing spirit to reveal the name of its host. If the spirit names the same person every time, then you can be quite certain that the named person really hosts the spirit. One or two accusations made by a few individuals are not enough” (personal interview, July 17, 2014). The same opinion was stated by Reverend Wan – the abbot of a temple in Warin Chamrap district – who also acknowledged the possibility of false accusation: “One has to be extra-cautious when it comes to an accusation made in inquisition rites. The background of the named person and his character must be considered. Also, the number of the accusations made against him must be taken into account. If he was accused and banished from his previous community on these grounds, then there is a reason to suspect him of hosting ravenous spirits. The state of the possessed can also tell you something, if they die after the spirit that possesses them identifies its host, then it is hard to say that they devised the plot against the named person in such a critical condition”^{10} (personal interview, June 12, 2013). For both informants, the reality of the possessing spirit and its host is correlative with the number of people possessed and the commonality between multiple possessions experienced by different individuals.

^{10} Several informants told about cases in which the possessed died shortly after the possessing spirits named their hosts. For instance, Mr. Khao – a native of Ban Had Suanya village in Ubon Ratchathani, gave an account of his maternal aunt who died on the day she was possessed. The aunt was in her early sixties and showed no signs of physical or mental illness prior to the possession. The exorcist failed to expel the spirit that possessed the lady for an hour. However, the spirit revealed the name of its host and left of its own will. The possessed died in the evening of the same day on the way to hospital (personal interview, August 19, 2014). Mr. Khao and other informants who witnessed similar incidents testified to the reliability of the accusations made in this manner. They share Reverend Wan's view that people on the verge of death are not likely to enact the possession for certain ulterior motives, such as to frame their enemies.
Because the reality of an experience is determined by the number of witnesses, one tactic to transform an experience into a matter of fact is to multiply its witnesses. This, in the field of empirical science, is achievable by facilitating the replication of the experience. Shapin and Schaffer describe Boyle's employment of this technique to turn his air pump experiments into matters of fact. He reported and published experimental protocols to “enable readers of the reports to perform the experiments for themselves, thus ensuring distant but direct witness” (1985:59). Underpinning this practice is the conviction that matters of fact must be replicable. The reality of an experience is dependent upon its ability to be repeated and re-demonstrated to the physical senses. This replicability, most importantly, is not susceptible to its witnesses' personal attitudes or beliefs. Whether the observers are skeptical or credulous, matters of fact will be unfailingly revealed in front of them when the phenomena that bring forth these “facts” are replicated. Phenomena affected by personal preoccupations and beliefs fall into the domain of subjective truth – the antithesis of matters of fact.

The replicability of phenomena attributed to ravenous spirits upholds the informants' belief in the ontological status of these malevolent spirits. Several informants participating in this research made comments that are similar to the concept of replicability prevalent in empirical science. Ravenous spirits' wicked influence is replicable in the sense that a lot of people have suffered from the afflictions caused by it. Even non-believers who initially dismissed ravenous spirit beliefs as groundless eventually resorted to the tradition after they had tried different solutions to their health problems but found them ineffective. The informants referred to these cases to support their view that the existence of ravenous spirits cannot be groundless because there are people who still suffer from ravenous spirit afflictions. These afflictions are wrought haphazardly on both believers and non-believers. And despite the latter's reluctance to believe,
they cannot find a better explanatory scheme to account for their mysterious illnesses. In this respect, we can say that ravenous spirit affictions have characteristics that define matters of fact. They can be experienced and re-experienced by the same individual or by different people. They are as concrete and inscrutable to believers as they are to non-believers.

Mrs. Boonma gave an account of ravenous spirit affictions that befell the family of a non-believer. Mr. Pong was a member of Ban Pa Ao village and a sub-district representative by the time the incident took place. His wife and daughter were possessed by ravenous spirits:

This Mr. Pong was a sub-district representative. He openly expressed his disbelief whenever the community held ravenous spirit rituals. Once he said loudly in front of me and several others, “You guys should not be so superstitious. Those people were just sick. There are no spirits.” But then his wife and his daughter were possessed by ravenous spirits. He took them to hospitals and tried everything he could, but nothing worked. Finally he had to call for an exorcist, and they recovered. From then on he kept silent when it came to this matter. I think he is now less certain about his disbelief (personal interview, May 24, 2014).

The experience of a lay non-believer like Mr. Pong may not have the same impact as that of a physician – the embodiment of reason. Mr. Sang, the exorcist and healer who was mentioned in chapter four, gave an account of a physician who visited him due to her chronic headache. In response to my question about whether one's belief in the existence of ravenous spirits renders him or her more susceptible to the afflictions caused by them, he reiterated a conversation between him and this physician regarding her attitude toward the supernatural:

I performed a healing rite and sprinkled holy water over her. Then I asked why she decided to come to me. She said, “I am at my wit's end about my headache. I have come up with different causes and tried several methods, but it did not get better.” So I asked her, “Do you believe in spirits? Do you think maybe your headache was caused by them?” She said she did not know, and she fell into silence (personal interview, July 11, 2013).

Through their narratives, Mrs. Boonma and Mr. Sang proclaimed that the attitude of the afflicted
does not render him/her more or less susceptible to ravenous spirit afflictions. As “objective” phenomena, everybody is equally susceptible to the afflictions. This conviction is derived from informants' direct experiences. As they see how non-believers suffer from ravenous spirits' evil influence, they realize that one's belief or disbelief does not change the nature of the experience nor does it reduce the possibility of having the experience.

The argument delineated above is not intended to prove that ravenous spirits really exist, and that since they exist, ravenous spirit beliefs are valid and logical. This issue is suspended for the same reason given by the physician in Mr. Sang's narrative: we cannot know, neither can we prove or disprove their ontological status with the resources we now have. Nonetheless, we can say for certain that the phenomena that believers attribute to ravenous spirits empirically and objectively exist. They have been experienced by a multitude of witnesses regardless of their belief or skepticism. The epidemic of death and possession, with physical symptoms inscrutable to biomedicine, are empirical phenomena whose causal link with ravenous spirits is established by believers when they discover that the scientific-rationalist explanatory scheme fails to make sense of these phenomena. In this respect, ravenous spirit beliefs are not false logic, but the products of the intellectual need to make sense of intelligible chaos. This point will be elaborated in the following section.

4. The Inscrutable Experience

Needless to say, empirical science considers direct experience the first and foremost source of knowledge. Natural phenomena are susceptible to human intellect mainly because they are observable. An individual's direct experience supersedes religious scriptures or traditional accounts in the validation of a truth claim. Empirical science decrees a new rule of knowledge production: one cannot accept a postulate until its validity is empirically proved by systematic
and reliable procedures. These verifying procedures should be, ideally, directly experienced before a person grants the validity of the truth claim in question. This rule dictates that witnessing is a prerequisite for knowing.

A Thai proverb encapsulates this view of the relationship between knowledge and direct experience espoused by empirical science: “Ten oral accounts are worth less than witnessing by one's own eyes. Ten times of seeing is not as trustworthy as one touch.” This proverb reiterates the importance of direct, sensory experience in the validation of a truth claim. A person can be certain about the reality of a thing only after he or she has sensory contact with it. The ravenous spirit believers interviewed in this research hold this view. They ground their belief in the existence of the spirits on first-hand experiences. Some suffered from the afflictions, others witnessed ravenous spirit possessions and crises. In this respect, empirical science and ravenous spirit believers share a common view about the validation of a truth claim – only direct experience can warrant the label of truth.

However, a crucial difference lies between them. In empirical science, the inefficacy of sensory perception is remedied by experimental protocols and elaborated devices. The former consists of experimental methods employed to minimize possible errors, the latter renders the imperceptible perceivable.11 With these two elements, scientific experiments are believed to overcome the inadequacy intrinsic to human perception and are able to cast light on the mysteries of the natural world. Ravenous spirit beliefs, on the other hand, are the outcome of the view that there is a class of phenomena that elude scientific protocol and modern inventions.

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11 Shapin and Schaffer comment on the role of scientific instruments in the establishment of empirical science: “The power of new scientific instruments, the microscope and telescope as well as the air-pump, resided in their capacity to enhance perception and to constitute new perceptual objects.” Natural philosophers in late-seventeenth century England like Boyle trusted not the information directly derived from physical senses but observation enhanced and assisted by elaborate devices (1985:36).
These phenomena belong to the mystical side of reality that needs to be discerned by a different paradigm. The world in the eyes of ravenous spirit believers has other facets aside from the mechanistic one.

All informants unanimously agree that the phenomena attributed to ravenous spirits are baffling, and this quality is unaltered by the witnesses' attitudes. They maintained that anyone who witness these phenomena would find them perplexing and inscrutable. The only difference is that some adopt ravenous spirit beliefs as the most adequate explanation available, while others prefer to leave the matter in the dark or to adopt conventional explanations that are obviously insufficient.

Mr. Namchai narrated an enigmatic incident that resulted in his adoption of ravenous spirit beliefs. Through the story, he asserted that since the dominant heuristic device, the scientific-rationalist paradigm, cannot penetrate the inscrutability of some incidents, it is rational to resort to other explanatory schemes and ponder other possible causes of the experiences. He underscored the mysterious aspects of his experience to make the salient point that, though the incident is inexplicable by science, its reality and the enigmas pertaining to it cannot be denied:

You can listen to my story and see how to make sense of it. But I am sure you will find it strange, very strange. One of my friends – Mr. Liam – was possessed by a ravenous spirit. He is also my distant relative. The incident took place when we were in our late twenties. Liam was thin and lean. He was not like me. I was bulky and sturdy. I was a sporty man. You will not believe, when Liam was possessed he writhed and kicked so hard that I and other friends – all of us were bigger compared to him – could not hold him still. Four or five sturdy men joined forces to hold Liam down. Then we sent him to the hospital. The physician – Dr. Sompong12 – said we need to calm Liam.

12 I interviewed Dr. Sompong in July 2015 to obtain his perspective on the incident. The informant testified that Mr. Liam's peculiar resistance to the sedative baffled him and the other physicians who were in charge of Mr. Liam's case. Nonetheless, he thought it is infeasible to attribute Mr. Liam’s symptom to supernatural agents. Since a thorough study of Mr. Liam's condition has never been done, it is somehow hasty to assume that the patient's peculiar illness did not relate to some biological causes. He extended this view to death epidemic that triggers ravenous spirit beliefs. Dr. Sompong argued that a
down first. So he gave him three shots of sedative. Normally a person will pass out just from one shot; but after the third shot Liam was still kicking and screaming. Don't you agree that this is very strange? Then he said he was hungry, and he asked for whisky and a whole chicken. Liam was not a drinker, he did not drink alcohol. But when he was possessed he poured one after another bottle of whiskey down his throat. Even the most relentless drinker cannot do things like that. And the way he ate chicken, he chewed its bone like it was just a gum. I was bewildered by the whole incident, but there were more baffling things. Liam did not get better, so we took him out of the hospital and called for a famous exorcist. By the time the whole neighborhood was astir because of Liam's mysterious symptoms. A lot of people, around twenty or thirty I think, came to his house to observe the exorcising rite. When Liam was brought into the room, he leaped to the exorcist who stood among the crowd, and started to shout insulting words at him. How could he know that man was the exorcist? Nothing marked him out. He dressed like other people and he was just quietly observing Liam when he entered the room. This exorcist failed to expel the spirit, so he recommended us another one who lived in Ban Kho village. We brought him there. An exorcising rite was performed for him for two full days, then he was back to himself again. This struck me as most peculiar. Modern medicine failed to explain his symptoms, let alone cure him, but he recovered after an exorcising rite! How will you explain this incident? Can you describe it in terms of science? I have tried to explain it in a more rational way, but many details remain perplexing. I know this incident is too bizarre to be true, but it did happen (personal interview, May 26, 2013).

Mr. Namchai’s narrative points to the discrepancy between multifaceted reality and the heuristic comprehensive medical research is required to warrant the conclusion that this epidemic really eludes biomedicine. Medical records of those died in the epidemic need to be checked. Their living conditions need to be examined. Also, the locations and the sanitary habits of the communities plagued by this epidemic must be considered. As thorough research on the matter has never been taken up, we cannot be certain that the cause of the epidemic is not biological. Not all physicians, however, agree with Dr. Sompong. Dr. Boonchai, also a physician, holds a different view. Throughout his career, he has witnessed numerous cases of illness and death unresolved by medical science. If modern medicine is sufficient, he argued, there will not be alternative medicines whose efficacy is testified by their persistence despite the orthodoxy of biomedicine (personal interview, 31 July, 2015).

13 Mr. Namchai's narrative clearly displays characteristics of a memorate or a personal experience narrative, which is, as cogently described by Goldstein: “detailed and careful, incorporating numerous strategies that outline the nature of the observations, the testing of the alternative explanations, and often including an indication of reluctance to interpret what occurred as 'supernatural'” (2007:70). Mr. Namchai’s effort to seek for more feasible explanations and his reluctance to adopt a supernatural conclusion are apparent in the questions with which he ended his narrative. Mr. Namchai seems to be “conscious of the potential for being judged irrational and therefore assume a stance that anticipates contestation of observations and conclusions (Goldstein 2007:71). Configured by this awareness, his narrative is “in opposition to the traditional academic assumption that supernatural beliefs traditions arise from various kinds of error, impaired reasoning, or poor observation on the part of believers and
devices we have to make sense of it. Mr. Liam's bizarre symptoms represent the grotesque, inscrutable side of reality inexplicable by an arbiter of truth like science. Though it is inscrutable to science, what happened to Mr. Liam is too tangible to be dismissed as Mr. Namchai's illusion. Nobody, regardless of their opinions about the reality of supernatural agents, would fail to mark the incident as peculiar. The patient's resistance to three shots of sedative, his supernormal strength, and the efficacy of mystical treatment vis-à-vis the failure of biomedicine, are all concrete facts that cannot be denied even though they resist scientific explanation. An inscrutable phenomenon like Mr. Liam's possession, which challenges the conventional view of reality, can be explained by Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic. The term denotes the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity felt by readers when a bizarre phenomenon takes place in a story. The fantastic reaches its full effect when the story does not offer an explanation of the phenomenon; making readers unable to decide whether the incident in question is caused by natural agents that cooperatively create a false mystery, or by supernatural agents that really exist and baffle people with their mystique.¹⁴ Mr. Liam's possession is fantastic in this sense. Its reality cannot be denied, its inscrutability is apparent, and it significantly challenges the illusion that the scientific-rationalist paradigm can account for all phenomena; therefore, the application of other schemes to make sense of phenomena is irrational.

¹⁴ Todorov defines the fantastic as the suspension between belief and disbelief – the moment of hesitation readers experience when an apparently supernatural phenomenon occurs in the text with no clues about its cause. If, in the end, the phenomenon is rationally explained and the law of nature remains intact, what we have is the uncanny. On the contrary, if the phenomenon is actually supernatural, the story falls into the genre of the marvelous. The narrative ceases to be an example of the fantastic once a final conclusion is provided, as Todorov states:

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov 1975:25).
This brings us to the subject of our interest – if the ravenous spirit belief tradition is not a false logic, then what is it? This belief tradition is less about the existence of ravenous spirits than about the reality of the *phenomena* attributed to the spirits. As long as these peculiar phenomena exist and remain inscrutable, the ravenous spirit belief tradition will be resorted to in order to make sense of and determine sensible reactions to these baffling phenomena. In this respect, the ravenous spirit belief tradition cannot be called a false logic, since the adjective “false” denotes the presence of a “valid” logic that can adequately decipher all phenomena. As a “valid” logic does not exist in this case, ravenous spirit beliefs and the scientific-rationalist paradigm stand on the same ground. Both of them are explanatory schemes that provide possible explanations of a class of phenomena whose cause and nature have not yet been clarified. In the eyes of believers like Mr. Namchai, science cannot be “valid” if it fails to provide effective methods to handle these phenomena, and ravenous spirit beliefs should not be “false” because they ultimately supply efficacious solutions. Nothing in this reasoning deserves the label “false.”

Just as science valorizes empirical, direct experience as the source of knowledge, ravenous spirit believers are well aware that only first-hand experiences that have been rationally and carefully thought through are adequate to justify their supernatural beliefs. It may not be quite right to assert that as modern education spreads, supernatural beliefs vanish. It is, however, feasible to claim that modernity upholds the scientific-rationalist view of the world and turns it into a mode of thought that mirrors reality. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, ravenous spirit believers realize the marginalized status of the belief tradition they practice as well as the negative value ascribed to it. They know too well that they appear irrational and superstitious once they resort to these beliefs instead of science. However, what they have witnessed is too bizarre to be assimilated into the scientific-rationalist paradigm. In response to this dilemma,
ravenous spirit believers choose to be “superstitious” rather than to leave the phenomena unexplained and left to become another fantastic episode in their lives, or to explain them away by some scientific postulates that are apparently incongruous. The problem is less about false logic and superstitions than about our failure to recognize that sometimes reality lies beyond our grasp and all we can do is to construct a story that satisfies our reason. Mr. Kom, a villager of Ban Pa Ao community, aptly stated this point:

For people in general, ravenous spirit beliefs may appear superstitious. But can you give me a mode of thought or a mental scheme that can explain everything out there in the world? Even science does not have explanations for everything. If it does, then we would have known by now what happened to that missing Malaysian plane.\(^\text{15}\) Everything should be clear and there should not be mysteries in the world. The thing is, reality can be much, much more complicated than we can imagine. And what we have is different versions of what is likely to have happened (personal interview, 30 May, 2014).

5. Conclusion: Beliefs, Science, and the Scope of Rationality\(^\text{16}\)

In *Magic, Science, and Religion* (1948), Malinowski mentions a prevalent assumption about the incompatibility of magic with science.

Science is born of experience, magic made by tradition. Science is guided by reason and corrected by observation, magic, impervious to both, lives in an atmosphere of mysticism. Science is open to all, a common good of the whole community, magic is occult, taught through mysterious initiation, handed on in a hereditary or at least in very exclusive filiation. While science is based on the conception of natural forces, magic springs from the idea of a certain mystic, impersonal power, which is believed in by most primitive peoples (1948:3).

The analysis made in this chapter revisits this juxtaposition. If a crude reduction is allowed, ravenous spirit beliefs will be equated here with “magic” in order to delineate the argument. Just like science, ravenous spirit beliefs are firmly grounded on experience. Without the baffling

\(^{15}\) The informant referred to Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which disappeared while flying over the Andaman Sea on March 8, 2014.

\(^{16}\) Adapted from the title of Tambiah's *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (1990)
phenomena that believers attribute to ravenous spirits, this belief tradition lacks the context necessary for its manifestation. Like science, which “is guided by reason and corrected by observation”, ravenous spirit beliefs are the result of believers' proper observation and valid reasoning. As apparent in the informants' reported experiences of mysterious illnesses, they were open to different possibilities. They revised their hypotheses of and approaches to these illnesses until the problems were solved. They did not uncritically believe in science, nor did they blindly cling to supernatural beliefs. As science fails to secure the “common good” of the whole community in the face of the inscrutable death epidemic, ravenous spirit believers rationally resort to “non-scientific” methods when it is apparent for them that science does not have answers for the riddles that jeopardize their familiar and predictable world. Rather than its antithesis, ravenous spirit beliefs supplement science in the explanation of the fantastic side of reality – the side fraught with perplexing occurrences, unanticipated twists and turns, and happenings that lay beyond the scope of human rationality. The ravenous spirit belief tradition is a reaction to this side of reality which is as grotesque as it is real.

As it is hinted in the use of the word “scope,” rationality is a finite field of givens and assertions about the relationship between cause and effect that cannot account for all emerging phenomena. It is, therefore, inadequate. In light of this view, the belief in the “false” vis-à-vis the “valid” logic seems to be misleading in two ways. First, as demonstrated in chapter two, false logic emerges when we evaluate a postulate using the criteria of a foreign belief system unrelated to the concerned postulate. Unsurprisingly, ravenous spirit beliefs become false as they are assessed in light of the scientific-rationalist paradigm. In this respect, the label “false” emerges from the power relation between the dominant and the marginalized worldviews. It does not reflect the tradition's intrinsic irrationality, which is believed to invariably engender a “false”
view of reality among its adherents. Second, the dichotomy between “false” logic and “valid” logic upholds an illusion that there exists a reasoning scheme that can clearly and thoroughly account for all occurrences. Due to this illusion, supernatural beliefs become products of false logic adopted by credulous and superstitious people who, for some reasons, fail to accept the “valid” logic that can provide rational and self-evident explanations for all phenomena. The analysis in this chapter has shown that since the perplexing aspects of the phenomena cannot be reduced and assimilated into the scientific-rationalist paradigm, ravenous spirit beliefs are employed to fill in the void caused by the discrepancy between the available heuristic devices and the intricate, multifarious world of phenomena.

As Mr. Kom stated, the scope of reality is not the same as the scope of human rationality. The former is far vaster than the latter. Scientism, denoting an unwavering belief in the adequacy of science in this context, may satisfy one's illusion that humankind knows reality in its full extent. This illusion, however, will be constantly challenged by fantastic occurrences that wreak havoc on people's faith in their intellectual capability. Supernatural beliefs and other “non-scientific” assertions are sustained by these inscrutable occurrences, not by an “irrational” mode of thought. What we have is not a “false” logic vis-à-vis the “right” one. We only have a collection of heuristic devices, none of which can singlehandedly and sufficiently decipher all phenomena.
Chapter 6

Cautions and Takeaway Points

This monograph, like all descriptions of culture, offers only a partial view of the subject it describes. As a product of human intellect, it necessarily omits stories incongruent to the view of the ravenous spirit tradition it espouses. I do not deny the partial nature of my own scholarship, which is intrinsic to all human-made knowledge. However, I am not apologetic for my choice to privilege the voices of my informants, whose benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs have been excluded from general perceptions due to their incongruence with the problematic but conventional view of the tradition. I advocate what David Hufford calls “methodological populism” (1998: 302), which means a serious consideration of an “unofficial” viewpoint when its veracity is prematurely negated because of its non-compliance with “official” views.¹

Intentionally and purposefully approach the tradition from the stance of believers who have been misrepresented by Thai mass media and academia. This monograph may be an intellectual construction in the sense that it cannot cover all aspects of ravenous spirit beliefs and thus can only offer a partial view of the tradition. Nonetheless, I believe that this partial view contributes to a more complete, nuanced and deeper understanding of the tradition.

I recommend that readers to receive subsequent sections in light of the claim stated above. My reflection on the drawbacks and merits of my own scholarship, as shown in the following sections, articulates my belief that an awareness of the inadequacy of human-made knowledge, rather than depreciating human aspirations for wisdom, contributes to the realization of this aspiration. My caveats in the pages that follow may highlight the partial, constructed

¹ In Hufford's words, methodological populism “requires that, when comparing official and unofficial views, we always begin with a serious consideration that the unofficial position may be correct. And we should avoid developing interpretations that conflict with that position unless we are convinced by sound reasons and arguments” (Hufford 1998: 302).
nature of this monograph, but they are by no means intended to negate or undervalue the arguments that I have made. These reflections are my strategy to guard against bigoted and one-sided speculations mistaken for impartial truths.

1. Cautions

1.1 This monograph necessarily downplays cases and perspectives incongruent to the view of the ravenous spirit tradition it espouses.

Focusing on inoffensive aspects of the tradition while criticizing mass media and academia for their preoccupation with its abusive sides, my own study understates the ordeal of those victimized by the radical practices of the tradition. By claiming that this predilection is a result of sensationalism and bigotry, the study appears to trivialize the inhumane practices of ravenous spirit beliefs and their consequences for the victims. Arguably, it creates an impression that the victims' miseries are exaggerated by media sensationalism and bigoted scholarship.

Though this is by no means my intention, such an implication may be inferable from the treatment of ethnographic data and the analytical stance this study assumes. One caution readers have to keep in mind while reading this monograph, therefore, is that the non-violent and moderate variants of the tradition do not negate the reality of their radical counterparts. All of them are real to the people who are affected by their consequences. The traumatic experiences of those oppressed by inhumane practices of ravenous spirit beliefs are laid out here to give voice to their ordeals that have remained in silence in this study.

There are several communities in Northeast Thailand disparagingly called “the village of ravenous spirits.” This appellation derives from the pattern of settlement among alleged hosts who, banished from their original communities, either establish new villages or settle down in communities that do not practice ravenous spirit beliefs. Ban Nongtime Noi village in Sisaket is
one such community. Practicing Catholicism, the community has been a refuge for those in exile due to ravenous spirit accusation. I interviewed several displaced individuals and their families in Nongtime Noi village in July 2013. Their accounts unveil the somber dimensions of the tradition.

Mr. Sawang and Mrs. Sunee experienced collective violence when Mrs. Wilai – Mr. Sawang's wife and Mrs. Sunee's mother – was accused of hosting ravenous spirits. To Mrs. Sunee's knowledge, her mother was not on bad terms with anybody. Mrs. Wilai was a pious Buddhist well-known in the village for her exceptional voice and the rare talent she displayed when singing Buddhist gospels. Rumors spread when ravenous spirit afflictions befell a female neighbor. It was said that Mrs. Wilai had her tongue tattooed, and that the magic inscribed on her tongue was the source of her beautiful voice as well as the origin of her ravenous spirit. Mrs. Sunee experienced collective violence and social repercussions instigated by her mother's accusation. Their house was stoned at night. Her friends avoided her. She was subject to ridicule and harshly banished from social life. Mr. Sawang fell victim to the same oppressive treatment. But he was less fortunate than his daughter since the accusation, first targeting his wife, was later extended to him. The community pressured the couple to attend a divination ritual in order to prove their innocence. Though they were pronounced not guilty in the rite, the assaults in the dark and the social sanctions persisted. The family, traumatized by these ferocious treatments, finally left the community (personal interview, July 16, 2013).

Mr. Kamdee moved to Nongtime Noi village for the same reason. He was accused of hosting ravenous spirits because, from his viewpoint, his paddy field unfailingly yielded ample produce while those of his neighbors became barren. His barn was ransacked and more than half of his produce was stolen. Mr. Kamdee reported the incident to the district police bureau. Officers came to the scene to investigate but nothing more was done. Then a negotiation was
arranged. Villagers insisted that Mr. Kamdee attend a purification rite in order to have his ravenous spirits excised. He complied and paid a fee of five thousands baht (about three hundreds US dollars) to the exorcist. Still, the harassment continued and exacerbated after the rite. One night, Mr. Kamdee's house was attacked by petrol bombs. He decided to leave the community after the incident (personal interview, July 27, 2013).

Mr. Samart was a newcomer to the Nongtime Noi community. As of July 2013, he had lived in the village for four months. His previous community accused him of hosting a ravenous spirit. Mr. Samart's standing in his previous community, however, contradicts the image of the socially isolated and melancholic ravenous spirit hosts prevalent in sociological and psychoanalytic literature. He usually attended social events and was drawn into local politics. The village headman offered him the position of vice-chief, which he declined. Then his proponents persuaded him to apply for a position in the district council and promised him their support. Mr. Samart, however, decided to stay away from politics because his elder daughter was going to college. He was resolved to focus solely on his job so that he could raise money for her education. In Mr. Samart's view, his accusation was instigated either by his political supporters who were offended as he turned down their proposal, or by his opponents who feared that he would decide to take part in local politics and earn more advocates. He was called to the village assembly one day and interrogated about the magic they believed he was practicing. They remarked that Mr. Samart's fields yielded more and more produce every farming season; and that he had lately been obsessed with financial pursuits. The assembly suspected that Mr. Samart overused his magic which transformed into ravenous spirits. They coerced him to pay for a purification rite which would cost almost all of his savings. Mr. Samart chose exile over the rite. Still, he was nearly bankrupt because of the resettlement (personal interview, July 14, 2013).
Undeniably, the miseries the accused persons and their families went through elucidate another side of the tradition. Their views of ravenous spirit beliefs are as valid as mine and as those of the other informants whose voices this study privileges. The radical practices of ravenous spirit beliefs these cases illustrate, however, should be interpreted and considered in light of the benign cases reported in chapter four. My call for a counterbalance in this issue responds to the problem of writing “dark” ethnography mentioned in the conclusion of chapter three. I advocate that when exploring cultural practices that reflect the dark side of human nature, aspirations toward objectivity must entail reporting perspectives that do not register only the brutal aspects of those practices, but also their benign variants. As this monograph does not totally rule out voices that contradict the view of the ravenous spirit tradition it espouses, I call for the same act of counterbalancing from ethnographers who are interested in the unpleasant sides of human societies.

1.2 Arguing for the empirical basis and proper reasoning that underlie informants' belief in the ontological status of ravenous spirits, this study inadvertently implies that these spirits objectively exist.

Relating cases in which a mysterious illness unresponsive to biomedicine and other therapeutic methods were successfully cured by ravenous spirit rituals, this study seems to attest to the objective reality of ravenous spirit afflictions. Attempting to denounce traditions of

2 Nancy Schep-Hughes's “Ire in Ireland” (2000) is a gesture toward this counterbalance. In response to her informants' criticism of Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics (1979), in which she explores the socio-cultural conditions in a rural Irish community that contribute to mental illness, Schep-Hughes devotes a section in “Ire in Ireland” to describing the virtues of this community to counterbalance her own negative depiction in Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics.

3 Henry Glassie also advocates balance, which he thinks can save the studied community from repercussions caused by an honest but unpleasant ethnography. In the first chapter of The Stars of Ballymenone, he wrote: “in writing, injurious facts can be suppressed, compassionate explanation can muffle shock, and balance is not impossible” (2006:4).

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disbelief that have dominated belief scholarship since the Enlightenment (Hufford 1982b:48), this study emphasizes the reasoning processes and rational behaviors that justify informants' belief in the existence of ravenous spirits. This emphasis, however, creates an impression that I am arguing for the reality of the supernatural world. The effort to diverge from traditions of disbelief, and to advocate for methodological populism in the discussion about the underrated supernatural beliefs, automatically indicates my allegiance to traditions of belief.

Hufford's traditions of disbelief refer to explanatory schemes that indiscriminately falsify supernatural beliefs. Problematically, this biased stance has been received as an objective and authoritative approach to the issue. Underlying these traditions is the view that the scholarly and scientific way to study supernatural beliefs is to examine the sources of error that engender and perpetuate them (1982b:47). Inevitably, traditions of disbelief, to a certain degree, have an impact on the reception of this study. The phenomenological basis and rationality underpinning the ravenous spirit beliefs this study argues for may be received by the audiences of this monograph as positive bias when viewed from the dismissive stance that mistakes negative bias for neutrality. This warrants another caution: despite my effort to avoid implications about the ontological status of ravenous spirits, this goal seems to be unattainable. I attribute this unattainability to the fact that this study is conducted and received within two oppositional traditions that take specific stances on the validity of supernatural beliefs. The traditions of belief and disbelief make it hardly possible to conduct research about supernatural beliefs that is totally void of implications about the truth value of the studied beliefs. If one explains these beliefs in scientific-rationalist terms, he is suggesting that they are false. If he does the opposite, he is convincing readers of the objective reality of these beliefs.

Even though the implication about ontological problems is unavoidable and the attempt
to deny it sounds apologetic, I cannot leave my true intent unstated. My treatment of informants' accounts may warrant such an implication, but it is not my intention. The ontological status of ravenous spirits cannot be proved or disproved with the resources we now have. Because of this, the suspension of judgment is, in my opinion, the true neutral stance. My argument for informants' proper reasoning and their logical attempt to make sense of baffling phenomena is not intended to vouch for the existence of these spirits. It is an attempt to demonstrate the inadequacy of the scientific-rationalist paradigm as the arbiter of truth evinced in its failure to thoroughly and clearly decipher all phenomena. Also, it is intended to unveil the abusive side of scientism and rationalism apparent in the way in which blame is always deflected on individuals who adopt unconventional explanatory schemes. It is unimaginable that the mechanistic view of the world espoused by science is insufficient to explicate phenomena occurring under this sky. Therefore, individuals who make sense of extraordinary phenomena by alternative conceptions of reality do so because of their false logic, ill-founded judgment, or any other perceptual or intellectual defects, not because the mechanistic worldview is inadequate to explain these phenomena. The rationality that underlies informants' decisions to resort to the ravenous spirit belief tradition is extrapolated to draw attention to this power relation. This study is, therefore, not about the empirical existence of the supernatural. It is about an ingrained illusion that a human-made heuristic device like the scientific-rationalist paradigm can transparently and entirely decipher the multifaceted world of phenomena.

Though the problem itself can lead us nowhere, reflexive thinking about our preoccupation with this ontological problem of the supernatural calls our attention to a crucial question: why this issue always lingers whenever supernatural beliefs are discussed? Is it because traditions of belief and disbelief have predominated to the extent that neutrality is
impossible? Is it because researchers, their informants, and their readers hold personal beliefs and adopt specific stances on this ontological problem? Is it because the problem, neither proved nor disproved, nags at human aspiration to know and control everything? No matter what the answer is, what concerns me is the fact that belief study is a field in which neutrality itself is a controversial issue⁴. It seems hardly possible not to assess the truth value of a belief that becomes the object of speculation, and there is nothing wrong in doing so. However, as readers draw conclusions about the existence of ravenous spirits thought to be suggested by this study, they are, hopefully, aware of the intellectual and discursive traditions that evoke the ontological question whenever supernatural beliefs are discussed.

1.3 This study is not an altruistic task conducted by a “know-it-all” scholar who writes an ethnography for the sake of misrepresented subalterns. Instead, it is the outcome of an ethnographer's cooperation with her informants in the production of humanistic knowledge.

Representation is a political activity implying several assumptions about the silent, repressed Others and those who claim the right to speak for them. First, representation equates voice with agency and power. People who, for whatever reasons, cannot speak for themselves are therefore subalterns deprived of power and agency. Second, the act of speaking for the suppressed and silent subalterns is philanthropic in the sense that power and agency are restored to these people through the well-meaning spokesperson who makes their muted voices heard. Third, the product of this philanthropic act has been received as the voice of the represented subalterns. This product is valuable as it casts light on lives and thoughts of the silent others about whom we – the normative mass – know so little. Fourth, representation is, if properly

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⁴ To get a sense of this controversy, see Hufford (1990), Simpson (1988) and Goldstein (1989).
done, righteous and praiseworthy since it is conducted primarily for the interest of the voiceless and powerless people.

This train of thought about representation has rendered folkloristic inquiries meaningful. As Susan Ritchie rightly states, “[...] folklore has a long history of interest in the local subjects that were stripped of agency – subjects that because of their embeddedness in their local contexts were invisible within the abstracting masternarrative of modernism” (1993:366). For folklorists, representation is meant to benefit the represented folk group. It is undertaken to induce appreciation for folk aesthetics and creativity, to render their cultural practices understandable to outsiders, as well as to bring their problems and concerns into the larger dialogue. Yet, these selfless goals, when based on inaccurate, negative, or preconceived ideas about the people who become objects of academic scrutiny, merely perpetuate power relations between scholars and the people they study. There have been times when scholars' altruistic intent turned into a patronizing voice because it was informed by a condescending view of people who, allegedly, did not know what is good or bad for themselves. For instance, in a pamphlet entitled “Cancer Quackery: What Can You Do About It?” the author proclaims that health professionals “must enact laws to combat quackery and make funds available to enforce these laws. And we must educate the public about quackery” (Brown 1975: 25; italics added). The author's call for this altruistic task is, apparently, based on her condescending view of “the public” who “simply don't know the difference between a medical doctor and those who call themselves 'doctor'” (Brown 1975: 24). The author's altruistic intent, in this case, merely perpetuates the conventional, unequal relationship between healthcare professionals and their clients. Her good intention turns into a patronizing, condescending voice that, from Hufford's view, “arouses a good deal of righteous indignation and does not challenge medical authority – but provides no understanding”
(Hufford 1998: 304).

This monograph may be altruistic in the sense that it is aimed at dispelling bigotry against those who believe in ravenous spirits. I note here, however, that this altruistic purpose does not entail my superiority over my informants. I do not better than my informants about what they need in order to overcome their predicaments. Besides, their contribution to my personal goal is more concrete and more certain than my contribution to their wellbeing. I am a doctoral candidate required to write a qualified dissertation in order to get a degree. I, then, turned to ravenous spirit belief communities that I thought had been falsely represented and asked them to cooperate with me in the study. They did not ask me to speak for them. On the contrary, they are the ones who helped me realize my aspiration for knowledge. In light of this reflection, I recommend readers to take this monograph, first and foremost, as evidence of a contribution “ordinary” people made to the repertoire of humanistic knowledge through an ethnographer.

2. Takeaway Points

2.1 The Glamor of Everyday Practices

Michel de Certeau, in The Practice of Everyday Life (1984), observes that dominant social and economic orders have been constantly challenged by everyday practices at ground level. The institutional power that inculcates normative mindset and habitus on common men is compromised as these men subvert the power structure by manipulating its apparatuses to meet their demands.\(^5\) The production of codes, ideologies, and other controlling apparatuses by social

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\(^5\) Habit, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, means the most intimate level of control operated through the constant discipline of the body until it acquires certain habits and demeanors, which ultimately become the “nature” of the trained individual. Several factors “mold the body” (Bourdieu 1991:12) and inculcate habitus. Social etiquettes and somatic patterns when interacting with mass-produced objects are among these factors. Before Bourdieu, Marcel Mauss recognized the social nature of body movements and gestures, which are configured by social, psychological, and biological elements. In “Techniques of the Body” (1968), Mauss uses the term *habitus* to refer to somatic patterns and attitudes that a person learns from his society. He expounds the point by describing how people from different cultures and generations
and economic institutions is one trajectory that needs to be explored in order to discern the pattern of power relations. How common people respond to these apparatuses and put them to use in everyday practices is, however, another line of inquiry that promises an insight into the dynamic within this power structure (de Certeau 1984:xiii). For de Certeau, the neglect of typical, banal practices among common people breeds a simplistic view of power relations in which the elites of the dominant order always exploit and the nameless, faceless crowd is invariably passive and compliant within the system.

De Certeau's view articulates the appreciation of anonymous people and the common, banal practices they carry out. He contends that everyday practices are crucial for an understanding of comprehensive phenomena such as the operation of institutional power and the dynamics within its structure. A cognate field of folklore studies and cultural anthropology known as European ethnology harbors a similar sentiment. Its interest lies in ordinary phenomena and activities whose banality renders them invisible; in this way it counters a tendency of human perception to be “preoccupied with the explicit, eventful, and dramatic” (Ehn and Löfgren 2010:4) and argues that the overfamiliar, unnoticed activities “play such a powerful role, especially in the reproduction of society” (Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2016:1). This awareness of the impact of everyday practices informs this study, which demonstrates that the omission of non-sensational practices of ravenous spirit beliefs results in a misunderstandings of the tradition. A ramification of this study lies in its de-trivialization of cultural practices that have been taken for granted. Their typicality covers their significance, which can initiate a paradigm shift once it is duly acknowledged. As shown in de Certeau's monograph, in the sentiment that informs European ethnoLOGY, and in this dissertation, analysis of the undramatic, unoriginal, swim, walk, or sit at a dining table in diverse fashions.
repetitious practices of the nameless and faceless crowd overturns persisting but invalid assumptions. These banal practices of common men reveal a lot of significant stories crucial for a well-rounded understanding of the world we live in.

The concept of knowledge inevitably entails its antithesis – petty issues considered trivial and unworthy of serious interest. Profounder insights into human activities brought about by a probe into everyday practices problematize the way we construe the trivial and the significant. Who has the right to say what deserves to be included in the repertoire of knowledge? What criteria we employ to distinguish the constructive topics that extend the horizon of humanistic wisdom from the unpromising and tedious ones? What assumptions and motives inform these criteria? This dissertation has shown that the labels “significant” and “trivial” can neatly cover latent but deep-rooted bigotry. Scholars and non-believers neglect the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs largely because they blend seamlessly into everyday reality. The undramatic, inoffensive exorcising or healing rites do not stand out from typical religious activities that take place everywhere in everyday Thailand. Nonetheless, other factors contribute to filtering their perception. Scholars do not write about these “banal” practices because they do not support the scientific-rationalist discourses that pathologize supernatural beliefs. Lay people fail to register them because they believe that “cruel and superstitious” ravenous spirit believers always observe the tradition in brutal ways. These benign practices are invisible to the Thai public not only because of their unspectacular nature, but also because of their incongruence with the negative stereotype Thai people hold about ravenous spirit believers. Undeniably, deep-rooted bigotry renders the benign practices of ravenous spirit beliefs, and the reality of the tradition they evince, invisible.

The attention to everyday practices can also counterbalance the crude generalization
inherent to ill-wrought grand schemes. The debate about adequate and legitimate ways of theorizing has been a persistent but unresolved issue in many disciplines. Grand theories are criticized for their detachment from concrete, diverse, and context-bound phenomena at ground level. Their broad and inclusive explanatory scheme, immanently, renders them insensitive to the particularity and variability of the objects or phenomena they explicate. The problem arises when the neglect of these distinct characteristics breeds a misleading and simplistic view of the matter in question. However, how can a grand theory be a grand theory if the broad applicability it promises is outweighed by acute awareness of diversity and particularity? And can scholarship do away with grand theories, relying solely on unconnected postulates extrapolated from numerous distinct cases?

This study shows that attention to everyday practices can guard against fallacious generalization pertaining to ill-conceived grand schemes. Sweeping and condemning surmises about ravenous spirits beliefs and their holders are put in check by a return to non-sensational and unspectacular sides of the tradition. In a similar fashion, grand theories can be monitored and nuanced by a close look into everyday practices. This examination also counters imperious and inadequate masternarratives received by their proponents as incontestable and universally applicable. Theorizing, as Dorothy Noyes suggests, should be firmly based on particular cases and keeps their complexity and subtlety in purview (2008). This study offers a lesson that adds to this point: When bad theorizing breeds a generalizing and simplistic scheme that, for some reason, is readily and unquestionably received, we can turn to the domain of concrete, everyday reality to see what has gone amiss with this crude generalization and revise the problematic scheme from there.

2.2 Revisiting the definition of belief
Scholars have noted how religiosity, cutting across diverse domains of human activities, was identified specifically with cognitive artifacts such as tenets and doctrines after the Enlightenment. Post-Enlightenment scholarship turned the complex of cognitive, somatic, and sociocultural behaviors that pronounce the conceived relationship between the mundane and the sacred into an object of academic speculation by reducing them to a system of postulates and truth claims. The preoccupation with cognitive components of religion is, as Tambiah points out, manifest through the naming of world religions as *-isms* (Tambiah 1990:5). Designations such as Buddhism and Hinduism reveal academia's predilection for the doctrinal, cognitive aspects of religion. This tendency is also observed by Sabina Magliocco, who remarks that by the eighteenth century, the Protestant Reformation construed religiosity as an internal state of faith unknowable by other individuals outside the believing subject. She further notes that the definition of religion as an intricate body of tenets and doctrines “became so predominant among the European intellectual classes that it served as a lens through which the religions of other cultures, as well as those of the lower classes, were understood” (Magliocco 2012:138).

Needless to say, the emphasis on cognitive components of religion undermines other dimensions of religiosity. Don Yoder, for example, long ago noted a trend in the teaching of religious studies in American academia, which “has concentrated largely on the theological and institutional level” (1974:7) and thus neglects the interpretation and the practice of religion at the ground level. Talal Asad, in his critique of Clifford Geertz's definition of religion, expresses his view that religion should not be defined merely by its philosophical components and scholastic tradition. Construing religion as a system of symbols that constitute people's conceptions of existential problems and their spiritual aspirations, Geertz inadvertently “places belief before practice, thought before action, and privileges ideas above customs and traditions” (Asad quoted
Asad's observation articulates a crucial problem inherent to the construction of belief as cause and practice as its effect. If religion is a system of beliefs and values, it follows that these convictions, constituting the lens through which believers view the world, dictate their behaviors and practices.

This relationship between belief and practice generates an explanatory scheme that asserts that false beliefs engender irrational behaviors. This scheme, as evinced in several cases laid out in chapter five, understates the role of practice as the source of belief. In contrast to the general assumption that individuals seeking help from exorcists and healers in the ravenous spirit tradition due to their steadfast beliefs in the malign influence of these spirits, informants' accounts presented in the previous chapter reveal that efficacious practices form the basis for the belief in ravenous spirits. Troubled by health problems, informants employed conventional strategies to grapple with these problems and resorted to alternative methods only after the first attempt failed. They were convinced of the reality of ravenous spirit afflictions when an appeal to the tradition yielded efficacious solutions while other approaches failed to redress the problems. Considering this process of believing, a different image of people who hold supernatural beliefs emerges. Rather than a credulous and misinformed folk who thoughtlessly receive and pass on anachronistic beliefs that are accountable for their irrational behaviors, we see reasoning individuals who infer abstract cause from observable effects. They do not merely believe but *come to* believe, persuaded by troublesome empirical phenomena that resist other causal theories but become sensible and solvable in the idiom of ravenous spirit beliefs.

When beliefs are objectified as tenets or truth claims, their nuances are curtailed in the following respects. First, as demonstrated above, the reasoning process that results in the adoption of certain beliefs is omitted. This process, when excluded from purview, perpetuates a
condescending assumption that people who hold “false” beliefs do so because of their credulity and thoughtlessness. Sociocultural and intellectual activities that constitute the act of believing are downplayed since the term “belief” has been reduced to a cognitive postulate. Second, the conception of belief as a cognitive object undermines variable degrees of believing and its changeability. Conceived as cognitive content, belief and disbelief are taken to be the total acceptance or the resolute dismissal of a truth claim. This dichotomy does not accommodate the more moderate stance in which the truth claim in concern is accepted as likely but contestable possibility. Several informants participating in this study adopt this moderate stance. Their testimonies problematize the preconceived image of the superstitious folk who steadfastly cling to false beliefs, resolutely rejecting the views incompatible to the beliefs they held. Besides, the accounts about how and why informants come to adopt or abandon ravenous spirit beliefs reveal the mutability inherent to the act of believing. Mr. Namchai's and Mrs. Jampa's stories presented in chapter five show how indifference or even skepticism about the reality of ravenous spirit afflictions transforms into belief (in the moderate sense) after the mysterious incidents of which informants cannot make sense in other terms. Indifference can also change to disbelief as evinced in the case of Mrs. Somjit, whose declining health in the post-natal period was taken by her community as ravenous spirit affliction. Trying in vain to explain the natural cause of her illness, Mrs. Somjit was forced to attend a healing rite that, as she clearly stated in the interview, only prolonged her suffering (personal interview, June 5, 2014). The definition of belief as a cognitive postulate is inadequate to convey the complexity of the act of believing that has been displayed through ethnographic cases presented in this dissertation.

The call for a broader definition of belief that appreciates non-cognitive aspects of believing is, in fact, not new in belief scholarship. As Leonard Primiano rightly observes,
folklorists have long investigated the relationship between belief and lived experience, bringing to light “the experiential factors behind many human belief systems” (1995:41). David J. Hufford's experience-centered approach draws our attention to empirical experiences and how they constitute the basis of some supernatural beliefs. The collection of essays titled *Out of the Ordinary* (1995) edited by Barbara Walker, features articles that examine the mutable nature of believing. Maxine Miska's article on the functions of skepticism in the maintenance of accepted beliefs, for instance, elucidates the continuing process of adopting, revising, and reaffirming or renouncing beliefs (1995:90-108). I situate this dissertation against the backdrop of this dialogue which proclaims that belief is a dynamic process instead of a static cognitive object.

2.3 Rationality of believing and the empirical context of belief

The treatment of ravenous spirit beliefs in this study shows that it is possible to examine a folk belief tradition with a less biased initial question. Instead of falsifying ravenous spirit beliefs and surmising about the errors that sustain them, this study pursues a different line of inquiry that asks: How do believers make sense of ravenous spirit beliefs? And what renders these beliefs viable within the context of northeastern Thai culture? In chapter one, we learn that ravenous spirit beliefs are meaningful as they cohere with other postulates and convictions that inform the northeastern Thai worldview. In chapter five, the contexts in which ravenous spirit beliefs are adopted are elucidated. Relaying informants' reasons to hold ravenous spirit beliefs, this study explores not only the content of these beliefs but also their rationality – the accounts given by informants about situations and contexts that result in their acceptance of the tradition. Hufford advocates that this rationality should be examined and collected, as he clearly states: “We should be collecting not only supernatural beliefs and narratives, which are important in their own right, but also people's reasons for holding those beliefs so that we can inductively
describe their empirical and logical components rather than always deductively constructing
them in the safety of our offices” (1982b:54).

Hufford's comment casts light on one of the problems this study grapples with – the
condescending attitude rationalist discourses adopt toward ravenous spirit believers and their
reasoning power. These discourses speculate on various reasons believers hold ravenous spirit
beliefs. None of these reasons, however, come directly from believers. They are constructed, as
Hufford wrote, in the safety of analysts' offices. Without believers' perspectives on this matter, it
is convenient to describe ravenous spirit beliefs as products of false reasoning and label their
holders irrational beings. The various reasons people hold these beliefs and the context that
warrants their believing are reduced to erroneous reasoning, hasty observation, and fallacious
interpretation attributed to credulous and misinformed folk. The omission of the rationality of
believing as given by believers facilitates sweeping and reductive explanatory schemes that
depreciate believers' judgments.

This dissertation advocates that rationality of believing should replace traditions of
disbelief in the study of supernatural beliefs. Rationality of believing, as a line of inquiry that
focuses on believers' reasons for holding particular beliefs, diverges from traditions of disbelief
in the following respects. First, the former discerns logical components of the studied beliefs
based on the view that supernatural beliefs do not necessarily imply erroneous observation and
reasoning; the latter holds that these beliefs are all false and thus the thought process that
underpins them must also be false. Second, the former positions believers' voices over analysts'
voices as it relays believers' rationality for holding beliefs instead of privileging scholar's one-
sided speculation; the latter does the opposite. Third, the former is more neutral compared to the
latter when it comes to ontological problems of the supernatural. While the latter rules out a
whole category of explanations – the supernatural ones – the former does not do so. Rationality of believing may be a diverging path from traditions of disbelief, which has long predominated belief scholarship. It has the potential to bring into view what have been amiss due to the sweeping falsifications done within traditions of disbelief.

As apparent in chapter five of this study, ravenous spirit beliefs persist because there are concrete phenomena that reaffirm their validity. Nobody would practice the tradition if ravenous spirit rituals failed to heal mysterious illnesses unresponsive to other therapeutic methods. The tradition would eventually become extinct if the strategies it proposes could not stop the deaths and afflictions that occur in belief communities. This is not to say that ravenous spirit rituals are always efficacious when dealing with these problems. However, the number of successful cases warrants people’s decisions to turn to ravenous spirit rituals as the last resort when all other solutions fail. Indifferent individuals are converted into believers when the appeal to the tradition yields desirable effects and the problems are solved. This empirical context casts light on the logical components that underpin ravenous spirit beliefs. It counters rationalist notions about sources of error that breed supernatural beliefs by drawing our attention to a different scenario of believing. It reveals that supernatural belief is not necessarily a misinterpretation of natural phenomena caused by cultural notions. Nor does it relate to false observations or any human-made or drug-induced illusions. It is, instead, mainly about efficacious practices that address practical problems and empirically affect believers’ lives. Analysis of empirical incidents that warrant and perpetuate a belief is another line of inquiry that can be pursued along side the analysis of its logical components. The rationality of believing and the empirical context of belief are optional topics that enable us to talk about supernatural beliefs without falsifying them and disparaging their holders.
3. Afterword

In “The Scholarly Voice and Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies,” Hufford observes that objectivity has become a rhetorical style instead of a goal pursued by conscientious scholars.

Unfortunately, this is what objective has come to mean, descriptions and analyses in which reference to the subject, the describer or the analyst, is omitted. This makes objectivity merely the name of a rhetorical style. If we obtain the appearance of objectivity by leaving ourselves out of our accounts, we simply leave the subjective realities of our work uncontrolled. If we manage to make our facts speak for themselves, those “facts” cease to be evidence in an argument, and we become ventriloquists instead of scholars (1995b:58).

To control, as Hufford calls them, the “subjective realities” of this work, a brief reflection on subjectivity of this study is delineated in the foregoing section. A knowledge claim always implies the presence of the subject who makes that claim. To say nothing about the knowing subject is to turn the claim into “the view from nowhere” (Nagel quoted in Hufford 1995b: 60) which reiterates a problematic assumption that knowledge is a self-evident truth existing out there and discovered by the knowing subject. This study is, just like any other pursuit of knowledge, a view from somewhere and, therefore, approaches the known object from a specific angle. Nonetheless, it is a view that privileges the under-represented side of the story, the side that has been considered not worthy of talking about by Thai mass media and academia. This side, once revealed, defies negative, sweepingly applied assumptions about the “superstitious” folk and their barbaric belief tradition.

Though this monograph cannot offer an all-inclusive and impartial account about ravenous spirit beliefs. It casts light on those facets of the tradition that are indispensable for a well-rounded view of ravenous spirit beliefs and the people who practice them. As Hufford's

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6 For more on reflexivity in belief scholarship see Hufford (1995c).
methodological populism seems to imply, objectivity, rather than an omniscient viewpoint that is cognizant of all perspectives, simply means a serious consideration of diverse voices regardless of different degrees of veracity a human community assigns to them. This monograph adds more alternatives to a homogenous, exclusive repertoire of interpreting schemes Thai media and academia use to make sense of ravenous spirit beliefs. It also demonstrates that these alternatives, though deviating from the conventional way ravenous spirit beliefs are interpreted and received, are no less significant. Despite its inevitable partiality, this monograph, I believe, brings the discussion about ravenous spirit beliefs closer to that much desired but unattainable state we call objectivity.
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“Shocking! A twelve-year-old school girl in Ubon was left to live by herself; the parents accused of hosting ravenous spirit.” (ช็อค! นักเรียนอายุ 12 ปี ที่อุบลฯ ถูกรับผิดชอบเรื่อง เฮหูผอมบางครั้ง ขาดแคลนที่อยู่อาศัย) 265


“Terror in a Sakon nakhon village. Ten cases of death in a roll. Villagers believe ravenous spirits are roaming about !!” (สุนัขหนังผีในบ้านเมืองบ้านบึงบ้าน ผีมีผีมากถึงร้อยตัว) Khaosod (Thailand), October 14, 2014.

http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.013.than.html


“Villagers are firmly against the return of Somjai's dad, insisting ravenous spirits exist.” (ชาวบ้านไม่ยินยอมให้พ่อแม่กลับมาอยู่ในบ้านค้าแม้จะชี้ไปถึงอิทธิพลผีปืน). *Manager* (Thailand), August 23, 2014.


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Appendix A

The Summary of Survey Findings

A survey I conducted in August 2015 with 120 college students reveals that mass media, to a significant extent, inculcates on their audiences disbelief and negative conception of the ravenous spirit belief tradition. I undertook this survey to figure out whether or not the channel through which one receives the information about ravenous spirit beliefs influences one's view of the tradition. 120 undergraduates from different departments of Ubon Ratchathani University were asked to complete a questionnaire which requires them to: 1) describe the belief tradition as they see it by three keywords and 2) define the means through which they learn about the tradition. Out of 120 respondents, 17 people (14.17%) have experienced the tradition firsthand. They witnessed ravenous spirit afflictions or have observed ravenous spirit rituals. Two individuals in this group (11.76%) use keywords that denote disbelief and disapproval to describe the tradition. Eleven people (64.71%) use affirmative terms that indicate belief. Four people (23.53%) expressed indifference. Words such as “objective reality” and “scary spirits” are recurring keywords given by respondents in this group.

63 respondents (52.50%) are exposed to the tradition through oral tradition, i.e. through orally transmitted accounts conveyed in a face-to-face interaction. Twenty individuals (31.75%) describe the tradition using dismissive terms. Twenty-five respondents (39.68%) use words that denote belief. Eighteen people (28.57%) adopt neutral terms. Keywords prevalent in this group are “real,” “personal belief,” and “unverifiable”.

39 respondents (32.50%) learn about the tradition through mass media. Twenty people (51.28%) express disbelief. Eight individuals (20.51%) express belief. Eleven respondents
(28.21%) adopt a neutral stance. Prominent keywords are “groundless belief,” “superstition,” and “fanatic”.

One incomplete response was disqualified. The result of the survey is summarized in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct Experience</th>
<th>Oral Tradition</th>
<th>Mass Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disbelief/ Disapproval</td>
<td>2 (11.76%)</td>
<td>20 (31.75%)</td>
<td>20 (51.28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief/ Affirmative</td>
<td>11 (64.71%)</td>
<td>25 (39.68%)</td>
<td>8 (20.51%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifference/ Indecisive</td>
<td>4 (23.53%)</td>
<td>18 (28.57%)</td>
<td>11 (28.21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17 (14.17%)</td>
<td>63 (52.50%)</td>
<td>39 (32.50%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 120 (1 incomplete response)

More than half of the people exposed to the tradition through mass media hold dismissive view of ravenous spirit beliefs. This percentage is relatively high compared to those who received the tradition via different channels. Only one third of the respondents receiving the tradition through oral narratives express dismissive attitude. The figure drops to one tenth in the group of the respondents who witnessed the practice of the tradition in real situ. It is feasible to conclude from this survey that monolithically negative representation of the tradition prevalent in mass media inculcates on Thai audiences negative attitude toward ravenous spirit beliefs and their holders.
Appendix B
Locations of Fieldwork Sites

Northeast of Thailand

Provinces Covered in Fieldwork

Source:

Source:
Kanya Wattanagun

Education:

2005 Bachelor of Education, Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand
2007 Master of Arts, Department of Comparative Literature, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand
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Research Interest:

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Areas: Northeast Thailand, Southeast Asia, Asia