

# Bewitching Women, Pious Men

*Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
Berkeley Los Angeles London

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## EIGHT

# Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand

*Mary Beth Mills*

*Mary Beth Mills examines some of the local meanings and material consequences of modernity in northeast Thailand, a region situated at the margins of the national polity and culture, and subject to profoundly transformative changes associated with the monetization of the economy and the attendant decline in the viability of a broad range of village-based social, economic, and other institutions. Mills's essay illustrates that local understandings of gender are most profitably viewed against the backdrop of national developments, especially the deeply ambivalent nature of nationalist discourses bearing on modernity, progress, and the like. Her analysis of the outbreak of "hysteria" focusing on man-eating, sexually voracious "widow ghosts" bent on consuming male hosts reveals that official, state-sponsored discourses on modernity and progress do not resonate with the lived experiences of Thai citizens, the majority of whom experience wage labor, out-migration, and other aspects of "development" in decidedly threatening and otherwise negative terms. Local Thai fears of widow ghosts and the beliefs and practices associated with them are thus interpreted as constituting an alternative, largely counterhegemonic discourse on modernity, the meanings of which are in some ways similar both to capitalist-era South American narratives and practices bearing on the Devil (Taussig 1980), and to various aspects of large-scale spirit possession ("mass hysteria") on the shop floors of modern factories in Free Trade Zones in Selangor and other parts of Malaysia (Ong 1987, 1988). In all three cases we see a ritual dramatization of subalterns' fears, anxieties, and ambivalences about dealing with the wider (capitalist) world. In Mills's case we also see a clear dramatization of tensions between males and females, and of male fears, anxieties, and ambivalences toward women and their sexualities and embodied powers in particular—all of which reveal that in Thai culture women are viewed as having the capacity to both save and devour men. More generally, the trope of man-hungry (female) ghosts suggests that, for Thais, modernization has heavy gender ramifications, especially in marital and cross-generational terms; and*

*that the modernization-driven transformation of gender relations is seen as putting everyone's lives in greater jeopardy, even though capitalism itself is not. Because widow ghosts do not "take issue" with capitalism and modernity and do in fact confine their "critique" to the transformation of gender relations that is linked to capitalism, they simultaneously resist and bolster the very structures against which they are arrayed (see also Krier, this volume).*

In the dry season of 1990, for a period of about six weeks, villagers in the northeast of Thailand came to believe that they were in imminent danger of attack by marauding "widow ghosts" (*phii mae maai*).<sup>1</sup> Rural communities throughout the region called Isan, erected large, carved wooden penises, often two to three feet long or more, on village gateposts and at the entrances of most houses in an attempt to ward off these deadly female spirits. *Phii mae maai*, it was believed, were roaming the countryside looking for men to kill and take as "husbands." The fearsome power of these spirits reflects, in part, Northeast Thai cultural understandings of gender difference and the dangers inherent in female sexuality. But the gender symbolism which underlies widow ghost attacks does not explain why the fear of these spirits became a sudden, regionwide phenomenon in April and May of 1990.

To understand the massive scale of this episode, we need to see how local beliefs in these spirits and their deathly powers came also to represent some fundamental dilemmas in the contemporary experience of Northeastern peasant producers. In order to earn the cash income that is essential to sustain household production and reproduction, Isan villagers have turned increasingly to wage work outside their home communities. Labor migration by men as well as women (especially unmarried youth) provides a key source of cash earnings for rural families at the same time that it allows some villagers to participate in the prestigious domain of Thailand's modern urban centers. On the other hand, migration for wage work has introduced new strains into village social relations. These relate partly to the prolonged absence of many household members, as well as to the competing demands made on migrant earnings by obligations to rural kin and the attractions of commodity-oriented consumption. Furthermore, customary patterns of generational authority and gender role expectations are often challenged by the mobility and economic autonomy of village members who are off working in distant places. The widow ghost scare played directly upon these tensions within rural households through the explosive idiom of female sexual powers and appetites rampaging out of control; yet, the scale of the episode suggests that the *phii mae maai* also spoke to a more profound sense of rural distress. The explicitly gendered messages of

impending widow ghost attacks can be read as a more general text, a symbolic dramatization of villagers' fears and experiences of vulnerability as a politically and economically subordinate population within the wider Thai society.

More than a static text, however, this episode provides insight into the dynamics of cultural production: the active construction and negotiation of meaning in everyday life. I draw here on the critical theory of Raymond Williams (1977) and his identification of the complex relationship between, to use his own terms, dominant, residual and emergent culture. In any society the hegemonic reach of dominant meanings and practices over subordinate groups can be extensive but is never complete; the persistence of traditional (residual) forms as well as the production of new (emergent) ideas and understandings provide the basis for alternative and at least potentially oppositional interpretations to arise. In a recent restatement of Williams's ideas, William Roseberry (1989:45) argues that to understand the dynamics of cultural production and the creation of meaning in social life, it is crucial to identify the points at which lived experience breaks with the representations of dominant cultural forms. It is in this gap between meaning and experience that the possibility exists for people to construct new, alternative understandings of themselves and the world around them.

It is essential, however, to note that the production of these alternative understandings, no less than the forms and representations of dominant cultures, are contingent processes shaped by specific social and historical contexts. Analyses which seek to uncover signs of class-based "resistance" in every moment of social conflict risk losing sight of the variety of cultural meanings involved and the often limited range of choices available to social actors (cf. Scott 1985). The structural inequities entailed in market relations, lack of available credit, and widespread dependence upon powerful patrons, including local merchants and state officials, present the peasant farmers and small commodity producers of Isan with few viable avenues of opposition. Furthermore, local perceptions of exploitation and disadvantage must compete with and are often mediated by powerful messages within the dominant national culture which contrast rural poverty and the practice of "traditional" ways (*chiwit samai kaw*) with the social and economic comforts of life in more "modern" urban centers (*chiwit than samai*).

The widow ghost scare of 1990 reflected the ambivalent response of Isan villagers to the profound social and economic transformations that they confront as a subordinate population in contemporary Thai society. In order to understand the dynamics at work here, I prefer to follow the suggestion of Aihwa Ong who, in reference to newly industrialized workers around the globe, has argued that their varied responses to the experience of subordination can be seen as "cultural struggles." Encounters with new forms of control and domination, rather than provoking explicit resistance

to structures of power, tend to find expression in localized struggles over "cultural meanings, values and goals" (Ong 1991:281). While the cultural meanings which people appropriate or seek to defend may challenge existing arrangements of political and economic power, they are just as likely to promote understandings (or to return to Williams's term "structures of feeling") that are limited, fragmentary and ambivalent (*ibid.*).

In the following I examine the threat of widow ghost attacks in Northeastern Thailand as one such instance of local cultural production or struggle. I discuss villagers' constructions of and responses to these deadly spirits in terms of three areas of cultural production that the episode served to highlight. These are, first, local commentaries on the problematic linkage between gendered meanings and images of modernity; second, the particular dangers of overseas labor migration; and third, the uneasy relationship between sources of local knowledge and the prestige of information emanating from the dominant culture, particularly that conveyed by the mass media. I argue that what I call the "widow ghost scare" captured the imagination of communities throughout Northeast Thailand not only because it expressed the fears and frustrations of a subordinate peasant population but also because it played directly on the break between dominant representations of "modernity" in Thai society and villagers' own experiences of social change. My discussion is based primarily upon observations in the community of Baan Naa Sakae, a Theravada Buddhist, ethnic-Lao, rice-growing village in Mahasarakham province where I resided at the time that *phii mae maai* became a matter of regionwide concern.<sup>2</sup>

During the past century the people of Isan, the majority of whom are of Lao ethnicity, have been incorporated into the Thai nation-state. This consolidation of state authority, as in other regions of the country, was accompanied by the spread of commercial capitalism, the impact of which has accelerated since the end of the Second World War. During the past several decades, rural Northeastern communities have become firmly integrated into the national and transnational market economy both as producers of cash crops (most notably cassava and kenaf) and as cheap migrant workers for Bangkok's expanding industrial and service sectors. While the labor of Northeastern peasants has contributed to the high rates of economic growth that Thailand has enjoyed in recent years—averaging over 7 percent annual growth between 1960 and 1985, with even higher rates in the late 1980s—they have not shared equally in the resulting prosperity (Suchart 1989:17). National measures of Thailand's economic boom only mask a reality of widening disparities between a primarily urban (*i.e.*, Bangkok) elite and the country's majority rural population, of whom the inhabitants of Isan consistently represent the poorest regional segment (Suntaree 1989:22–23; Saneh 1983:15).

Throughout most of the twentieth century, this extension of both Cen-

tral Thai state authority and capitalist relations of production into the daily lives of Northeastern villagers has been depicted as a necessary movement toward national "modernity" and away from localized "tradition." Dominant forms of cultural production—such as the rhetoric of state officials and policy analysts, or the more pervasive imagery disseminated in the popular media—frequently contrast the "modern" institutions and practices located in urban centers of power with the "traditional" ways of rural communities and regional minorities. I use the terms "modern" and "traditional" for the Thai and Lao terms *than samai* or *samai mai* and *samai kon* or *samai kaw*. These translate as "in step with the times" or "new times" and "times before" or "old times." This language is employed by people at all levels of Thai society in reference to perceived differences not only between the present and the past, but also to contrast the status and prestige of images and practices which originate in the dominant culture of the urban-based middle and upper classes as against the customs and beliefs of rural communities and regional minorities. These concepts provide a common ideological framework for explaining ongoing disparities in the distribution of wealth and power as matters of having (or lacking) knowledge and experience of "modern" ways rather than as inequities of class, gender, ethnicity and/or regional underdevelopment.<sup>3</sup>

The cultural prestige associated with urban "modernity" (against the purported backwardness and ignorance of peasant "tradition") has been most widely disseminated in Thailand through standardized public education, mass-consumer markets, and perhaps most powerfully, by the pervasive presence of television and other forms of national media production. Consequently, the rural inhabitants of communities like Baan Naa Sakae are well aware of the physical comforts and material conveniences which define a *samai mai* consumer lifestyle at the same time that they find themselves excluded from full participation in this primarily urban form of social status. As a result, *than samai* styles and commodities within the Bangkok-based dominant culture have become more and more important markers of status and economic success in rural communities. This is particularly obvious in the construction of new village houses that imitate urban architectural styles by incorporating such features as a ground-level story enclosed by concrete walls, glass windows, machine-tooled shutters and other trim. In addition, a variety of commodity items and modern technologies may also be deployed by rural households in displays of wealth and status. The most desirable of these include televisions, trucks, motorcycles, refrigerators, electric fans, and stereo players.

The glamor and prestige associated with the acquisition of such "modern" commodities can, however, obscure the extent to which rural households must participate in market transactions as a matter of economic necessity. Many basic requirements of household production and



reproduction—including fertilizers and seeds, school fees, bus fares, medicines, even many essential food items and clothing—must be purchased either on a daily, weekly or seasonal basis. Although the Northeastern staple crop of glutinous rice continues to be grown almost entirely for subsistence and not for sale, rice production alone is not sufficient to ensure economic survival. Having access to a cash income is imperative for rural families. Most also raise cash crops (cassava and kenaf being the most common) but this is rarely a secure source of income, given the unpredictability of world markets. In Baan Naa Sakae, like other Northeastern communities, many households have turned to labor migration as a way to supplement (or in some cases replace) cash earnings from crop production. Even wealthier village families often have members working in Bangkok or elsewhere; their wages provide a kind of cash reserve that can be utilized to reinforce household claims to wealth and social standing in the community. Nevertheless villagers' participation in these "modern" market-based forms of production and employment carries with it considerable risk; successes or failures are subject to impersonal systems of knowledge and power (such things as employment contracts, labor laws and international markets) over which rural farmers and migrant laborers have little or no means of control.<sup>4</sup> Consequently a gap exists between the urban-based production of meanings about Thai modernity—characterized by glamorous images of material wealth and the sophisticated use of market commodities—and villagers' own experiences of disadvantage and marginalization. The deep anxiety with which people all over Isan responded to the threat of widow ghost attacks was both an example and an expression of this sense of vulnerability in their dealings with the wider society. At the same time, however, it was an occasion to affirm the significance of village life and village meanings for interpreting social experience and to question, if only partially or implicitly, the moral authority of change, or "progress," as defined by the dominant or "modern" Thai culture.

#### ATTACK OF THE WIDOW GHOSTS

In April 1990, I returned to Baan Naa Sakae village after a few days' absence to find the entire community of two hundred households festooned with wooden phalluses in all shapes and sizes. Ranging from the crudest wooden shafts to carefully carved images complete with coconut shell testicles and fishnet pubic hair, they adorned virtually every house and residential compound. The phalluses, I was told, were to protect residents, especially boys and men, from "nightmare deaths" (*lai taai*) at the hands of malevolent "widow ghosts" (*phii mae maai*).

Certain spirits (*phii rai*) are a recognized source of death, illness, and other misfortunes in Thai and Isan culture. *Phii* of many sorts permeate

the social space of Northeastern villages. Every community has a spirit guardian (*phii puu taa*) of somewhat vague ancestral origins; other spirits are attached to plots of land or to unusual features of the local landscape. Although any *phii* can act upon the living, the spirits of the dead are especially unpredictable and most likely to present a significant danger. In the Northeastern belief system any death risks loosing the deceased's spirit (*phii*), with its unpredictable powers and potential malevolence, on the lives of kin and neighbors left behind. Funerary rites held prior to and for several days after the cremation of a corpse serve to ensure the full separation of the deceased from the living and to start the former on the path toward rebirth. Sudden and/or violent death can produce a particularly dangerous and uncontrollable *phii*, especially if the victim was young and had not gained the experience and moral discipline that are features of mature age. Among the most dangerous are *phii phrai*, the spirit of a child and mother who die during pregnancy or in childbirth, and *phii tai hoeng*, the ghost of someone who has died suddenly and usually in the prime of life (Tambiah 1970:315-316).

A widow ghost is the sexually voracious spirit of a woman who has met an untimely and probably violent death. They are therefore similar in conception to other dangerous spirits. To my knowledge, there is no record of "widow ghosts" in the ethnographic literature on Northeast Thailand but, if this is the spirit held responsible when an otherwise healthy man dies in his sleep, it is not surprising that *phii mae maai* are rarely encountered. During the regionwide scare of 1990 the residents of Baan Naa Sakae could not identify the specific origin of the *phii mae maai* threatening them but several villagers pointed to a character in a television drama as a kind of *phii mae maai*. The character in the show had been raped and then abandoned to die by her attackers. She returned as a beautiful but malevolent spirit who, like the *phii mae maai* of news reports, attacked men indiscriminately and often with fatal consequences. In Isan-Lao as well as Thai, *mae maai* means "widow" but it can be used colloquially to refer to any woman who has lost a husband whether through death, divorce or desertion. This broader connotation of the term underlies the identification of the rape victim in the television drama as a widow ghost. The value attached to female purity and virginity in Thai and Isan cultural ideals, while not always upheld in practice, means that at one level a single act of sexual intercourse between a woman and a man (whether by consent or not) establishes a marital bond. In the television drama, the conjugal union implied by the act of sexual intercourse was ruptured by the violence of the attack, the woman's abandonment and subsequent death, effectively making her a "widow." A *phii mae maai* is thus a female spirit of sexual experience whose carnal appetite is both virtually unquenchable and potentially fatal to the living who become its targets. *Phii mae maai* roam the countryside looking,

as villagers said, for new "husbands." A widow ghost is thought to come to a man in a dream, often taking the form of a young and beautiful woman; she lies down upon him, draining him of strength and life but leaving no other sign. To the victim's friends and family, the man simply goes to sleep one night and never wakes up.

The unnatural and voracious appetites of widow ghosts present a frightening image of female powers of generation and sexuality run violently amok. Both Lao and Thai gender systems attribute potentially harmful powers to female sexuality when not contained within the marital relationship and circumscribed by appropriate displays of physical modesty and/or maternal solicitude. By contrast, male sexual powers pose little danger to the social fabric and phallic representations can be employed to preserve or restore spiritual strength, and physical and social health. This dichotomy is explicit in the way Northeasterners reacted to the widow ghost threats. The wooden phalluses which Baan Naa Sakae villagers hung on gateposts and on the steps entering their homes were envisioned as protective devices. At a crudely functional level, informants described these giant penises as decoys that would distract the interest of any *phii mae maai* which might come looking for a husband. The greedy ghosts would take their pleasure with the wooden penises and be satisfied, leaving the men of that household asleep, safe in their beds.

At another level, however, the phalluses invoked understandings of male sexual potency as a positive force for social and cosmological regeneration. The same kind of wooden phalluses are familiar to Isan villagers as props in the annual rocket festival, where they appear in the company of large bamboo rockets which are fired into the air to call down the first rains after the long dry season. Furthermore, several informants referred to the phalluses as *palat khik*, the term for a particular class of penis-shaped amulets that men may wear on strings around their waists as protection against loss of virility and physical vitality. Such amulets may be sacralized by famous monks (Tambiah 1984: 228). They also evoke the powers of stone *lingam*, phallic shrines of Indic origin which can still be found in different parts of the country, often on the grounds of old Buddhist temples. These represent the linkage of cosmic and human fertility in the *devaraja* or divine kingship, aspects of which continue to shape popular Thai conceptions of royal authority (Tambiah 1976: 98-101).

The phalluses I saw both in Baan Naa Sakae village, as well as in dozens of other communities in the region, were only the most dramatic and collective response by villagers to the widow ghost threat.<sup>5</sup> Talk of widow ghost attacks had in fact been growing in the area for the preceding two to three weeks. This was triggered by revelations in the national news that over two hundred Thai men had died mysteriously while working in Singapore since 1983. Beginning in late March national newspapers and television broad-

casts publicized these deaths, cases of what medical experts have called "Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death" (SUND), a rare syndrome often described as a kind of adult "crib death" that afflicts men from different parts of Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup> Most news stories focused on the deaths in Singapore, but as the coverage continued through April and into May the press noted that sleeping deaths of Thai workers had occurred in Brunei and many Middle Eastern nations as well. For several weeks the news media were preoccupied with the need to find the cause of this malady. Several government commissions, research teams, and expert panels traveled to and from Singapore searching for answers. As reports of more sleeping deaths came to light, the press coverage reached a fever pitch of speculation. Theories flew about thick and fast. Chemical poisoning from unsafe cooking procedures, vitamin B deficiency, bootleg alcohol, unhealthy work and living conditions—all were proposed as potential causes. Unlike the medical experts and government officials, however, villagers in the North-east of Thailand had no difficulty explaining these sleeping deaths: the dead men were the victims of *phii mae maai*. According to older men and women in Baan Naa Sakae, in the past *lai taai* deaths were very unusual; no one had heard of any such victims for at least the preceding ten years and probably longer. Moreover the rash of deaths reported in the media and the wide geographical area affected had no precedent in living memory.

Initially, then, residents of Baan Naa Sakae reacted to the radio and television news reports with concern for the welfare of the almost two dozen men—sons, brothers, husbands, fathers—who were away working in Singapore or other countries. Soon, however, many began to fear for their own safety, especially when the national media began to report not only cases of overseas deaths but also a few that had recently occurred in Isan. The most anxious tended to be men who had been to Singapore or who had tried to go there sometime in the past, as well as a few who were preparing to go for the first time. The first protective measures began in early April even before the wooden phalluses appeared on doorsteps and gateways. A number of village men started to wear red nail polish, some on only one finger, others on several. Most in this group had experience with overseas migration. For example, Pho Sit, a man in his late forties, was among the first to paint his nails. He had traveled to Singapore several years earlier but was deported soon after his arrival because an illegal job agency had provided him with faulty papers. I also began to see some of this same group wearing women's clothes in the evening. One man in his mid-thirties, who had spent three or four years on construction sites in Singapore, even donned a long black wig on several occasions. During the weeks that followed, full or partial transvestism remained an infrequent tactic limited to a few adult men on a few evenings. Thus costumes like that of Pho Dam—who appeared at the height of the scare in a brassiere

and a woman's *phaa sin* (a sarong-like skirt) with his cheeks and lips heavily rouged—were noteworthy but relatively rare. Nonetheless, as reports of nightmare deaths continued, anxieties in Baan Naa Sakae grew; throughout April and into May more and more villagers began painting one or more fingernails with red polish, including children and many women. No one suggested that these latter groups were likely “husbands” for *phii mae maa*, but given the general unpredictability of malevolent spirits most people in the community preferred to adopt whatever precautions they could.

A variety of additional protective techniques were also employed. These included several all-night drinking and gambling parties to help men avoid sleeping on certain nights, tying a red or multicolored string about one's wrist to prevent the soul's “vital essence” (*khwan*) from leaving the body, as well as the wooden penis images already mentioned. Villagers' explanations of these tactics often shared the same substitution logic as that of the phallic decoys. The nail painting and the transvestism were, as residents readily admitted, attempts at disguise to trick the widow ghost into thinking a man was a woman and therefore not a potential victim. Two of the most common measures, the nail painting and the wrist string, required the services of a living widow (to apply the polish or tie the string). In this way, people told me, the ghosts would see that another widow had already claimed that person and so leave him alone.

These were always older women well past menopause. Women at this stage in life have often relinquished some of the day-to-day responsibilities of household cares to their adult children and begin to spend more time attending temple ceremonies, listening to monks' sermons and making daily offerings of food. At the same time older matrons, such as these widows, are not required to uphold the same strict code of physical modesty that is expected of younger women; elderly women in particular will frequently work around their homes or visit neighboring compounds while clothed only from the waist down. They also enjoy greater license than younger women to participate in the ribald verbal exchanges and witty double entendre that is a primary form of humor in the Northeast. Moreover, age, for women as for men, entails a degree of social status; reverence for an elder's wisdom and experience is expressed (at least by superficial deference and more often with real respect) in any relations between senior and junior. Older women's claims to such age-based standing is not altered by the death or other loss of a husband. Widows are not expected or required to seek alternate sources of male protection or authority; in Baan Naa Sakae the vast majority of older women who have lost husbands continue to live in their own homes, sometimes, but not always, with a married daughter or son in residence. These women are fully active in the community, both socially and economically; however, the strains on household income and assets that often accompany the loss of an adult

male (especially if still in his prime years of productive labor) usually mean that such female heads of household have neither the time nor resources to participate in local politics and community decision making. The latter are areas of social interaction in which their husbands were more likely to have been involved at least at some level. Thus living widows represent a category of female sexual experience and social independence that poses no threat to local men. Finally, as mothers of children grown to adulthood and as active supporters of the Buddhist faith, these women have earned considerable religious merit of their own; this status may also contribute to their ability to save men from the sexual predations of other (spirit) "widows."

Over a period of five or six weeks, rumors and predictions of widow ghost attacks circulated freely in Baan Naa Sakae. These were prompted on at least one occasion by dreams, as when a local man dreamed of being seduced by a strange woman. More often, however, villagers told me that their concerns were based on local radio broadcasts. These were usually shows conducted in the Isan dialect, mixing news reports with traditional horoscope and other sorts of regional entertainment.<sup>7</sup> On several occasions men in the village stayed up all night, gathering in groups to gamble and drink, because they said radio reports indicated that those nights were especially dangerous. Local anxiety reached its peak when one man had a seizure after napping in the sun on a day identified as one when no one should sleep. A week or so later, women in the village were alarmed by rumors that the widow ghosts had taken enough husbands and now wanted some "bosom friends" (*siaw*) to keep them company.

Nevertheless, I do not mean to imply that people in Baan Naa Sakae were paralyzed by fear during these weeks. Responses to the widow ghost threat presented many opportunities for community entertainment. Several of the village's more energetic and witty widows became the centers of lively groups that would gather in the early evenings to have their nails painted or wrists tied amidst much joking and laughter. Moreover, some of the protective tactics employed by villagers, notably the wooden phal-luses and male transvestism, are more familiar as features of community festivals where they contribute to an atmosphere of bawdy license and symbolic reversal that is enjoyed by all. Although deployed here against the serious threat of *phii mae maai*, they did not thereby lose all their humorous associations. In a similar fashion, public discussion of widow ghosts often involved jokes and ribald banter. As the weeks passed, toward the middle of May, media stories about nightmare deaths grew less and less frequent and finally disappeared altogether. By the end of the month most Baan Naa Sakae households had taken down the wooden phalluses; the nail polish and special wrist strings faded away soon thereafter.

Widow ghosts may serve to explain a particular form of death that afflicts

some men in Northeast Thailand but the problem remains: how does one account for the massive scale of the response? How is it that this particular form of gendered death came to threaten an entire region comprising a third of the area and population of Thailand? As with any cultural phenomenon, the widow ghost scare involves multiple levels of meaning. In the following discussion I will show how the widow ghost threat reflected emergent tensions in contemporary Isan household and gender relations. More profoundly, however, the gendered idiom of the episode served to highlight a central dilemma of Isan peasant life: as villagers attempt to pursue the standards and symbols of modern wealth, comfort and status, they encounter major obstacles in the day-to-day realities of political and economic dependence, exploitation, and poverty. In both content and structure, the widow ghost scare did more than speak to these fears and frustrations; it also offered a reinterpretation, however temporary and limited, of the consequences of social change and the meaning of modernity in rural life.

#### GENDERED MODERNITY, GENDERED DEATH

By threatening the well-being of men, the widow ghost scare invoked an idiom of gender and sexuality which is already rife with contradictions in contemporary Thai and Isan experience. On the one hand, gendered meanings help explain why widow ghosts are considered dangerous to men; the power of female sexuality to harm the spiritual potency and physical well-being of men is a feature of cultural beliefs in many parts of Thailand, and indeed throughout much of Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> In addition, gender meanings and images, particularly those concerning women and women's bodies, have become key points of tension in present-day Thailand concerning the meanings and consequences of modern life. The threat of widow ghost attacks became a regional phenomenon, not only because it highlighted common problems of overseas migration, but because it addressed a similar gap between dominant meanings and villagers' experience of gender relations and sexuality. Specifically, this episode highlighted tensions in the way gender images have come to represent modernity and progress in contemporary Thai culture.

As is true for many Southeast Asian societies, gender identity does not determine an individual's social identity along rigid or easily predictable lines. In everyday life Baan Naa Sakae men and women share the burden of many domestic tasks and farm chores. Similarly, practices such as equal inheritance of land by sons and daughters, marriage payments from the groom to the bride's family and a preference for postmarital residence with the wife's parents (at least in the initial stage of a union) provide many women with access to key economic resources and the emotional support

of close kin throughout their lives. While men, as husbands and fathers, are the recognized "heads" of households and occupy most positions of community leadership, women nonetheless exercise considerable economic and personal autonomy in their roles as respected mothers and the managers of household finances.

If gender difference is often muted in everyday interaction, it remains an important aspect of Northeastern Thai social life. Gender meanings are manifested subtly but directly in a body code which stresses the limitation of contact between men and women and the special necessity of controlling the movement of female bodies.<sup>9</sup> The key element I want to highlight here is the way these gender-appropriate body codes make clear a close association between spatial mobility and sexual activity. This linkage draws in turn upon key cultural understandings about the differential moral status of male and female sexuality. In general, spatial mobility is perceived as a natural and appropriate characteristic for men, while women's bodies and their movement are subject to far greater restrictions.

The highest social and spiritual reverence is reserved for men who forgo sexual activity as members of the Buddhist monkhood, but for the majority lay population sexual prowess is a positive aspect of masculine identity (cf. Keyes 1986).<sup>10</sup> Visits to massage parlors and brothels (for those with the money to do so) or telling bawdy stories and participating in exchanges of sexual banter are features of male peer group activity and act, along with drinking and gambling, as markers of masculine strength and sociality. Female sexuality on the other hand presents a more troublesome moral problem. Women are spiritually and ritually subordinate to men; they cannot ordain as monks, only as inferior nuns (*mae chii*), because it is believed their biological sex binds them more closely than men to worldly attachments and desires (Kirsch 1982). Although women make important contributions to ritual and religious life as mothers of monks, as nurturers of the faith and their families (Keyes 1984), when female sexuality is not contained within a conjugal relationship it is considered immoral and the social equivalent of prostitution. Monogamy is the only acceptable practice for women. Prostitutes and other "loose" women may be described as "having many husbands" (*mii phua laai khon*) but the derogatory connotation of this phrase does not carry over to the male equivalent. A man with "many wives" is more an object of admiration, especially among other men.

Furthermore, both men and women attribute a polluting and destructive capacity to female genitalia and bodily fluids that can be dangerous to the physical and spiritual well-being of men (cf. Thitsa 1980). For example, women's underwear and lower garments, such as the *phaa sin* skirt, should not come into contact with men and more importantly with men's heads, the most ritually pure part of the body. Even when washing or hanging



clothes to dry women must be careful to keep their lower garments separate and on a level beneath any men's laundry. Drying underwear and *phaa sin* are generally hung at waist height or lower and in a spot slightly out of the way, as it is believed that a man may suffer headaches or other physical harm if he walks under the washline (ibid.; see also Irvine 1984:320). Similarly, sacred objects such as the protective amulets which men often wear can also be damaged, their magical effectiveness destroyed by contact with women's lower garments or if a woman steps over them (Terweil 1975).<sup>11</sup>

In everyday life the destructive powers of female sexuality remain a passive force. These polluting effects are inherent in the female body and not subject to women's volition or control; however, standards for proper social behavior ensure that women's garments and bodies do not inadvertently threaten male potency. In addition to the care taken with laundry, etiquette prohibits such potentially polluting actions as stepping over food (meals are generally prepared and served on the floor) or sitting on a cushion that is normally used as a pillow for the head. Moreover, Baan Naa Sakae women are usually careful to avoid any sort of public physical contact with men as this can be (and generally is) construed as sexual interest on their part. Even long-married couples rarely touch each other in public. In the case of widow ghosts, however, these patterns of proper behavior are inverted as the passive force of female sexuality is transformed into the fearsomely active powers of sexually voracious and deadly spirit beings. *Phii mae maai* take the initiative, seeking out "husbands" and seducing them. This is a reversal not only of proper courting practices but also of the proper hierarchy of male and female bodies; the *phii mae maai* are thought to lie on top of their chosen "husbands" in contrast to the more usual positioning of the man above the woman in sexual intercourse. The Baan Naa Sakae man who dreamed of a strange woman seducing him reported that she lay upon his chest, her weight almost suffocating him. Widow ghosts thus provide an object lesson in the unnatural and dangerous consequences of allowing women to roam freely, their bodies and sexual powers unconstrained by the controls of society or of men.

However, this is exactly the problem that currently confronts Northeastern understandings of gender and gender relations. Not only are men leaving village homes to find work overseas or in the cities; rural women are also moving into wage labor in Bangkok and other urban centers. In fact, surveys of recent migrants to metropolitan Bangkok over the past fifteen years show women outnumbering men by almost two to one (Aphichat 1979; Wilson 1983:58). Beginning in the late 1960s, roughly equal numbers of men and women have left Baan Naa Sakae to find jobs in Bangkok where they may work for periods of a few months to several years. Some marry and settle permanently in the city, but most eventually return home.

This mobility has involved well over half the community's households. Like many Third World nations, Thailand's strategy for economic development has focused on attracting transnational capital investment through export-oriented manufacturing as well as services for international tourism. The economic boom that Thailand has enjoyed, especially since the 1970s, was made possible by cheap labor moving into the Bangkok metropolitan area from the outlying provinces. Among these rural-urban migrants—most of whom work in the city on a temporary or circulating basis—it is women, usually young and unmarried, who constitute the primary labor force in the areas of greatest economic growth: textile and garment manufacturing and the service industries (including the commercial sex trade) (Bell 1992).

Although long-distance mobility has historically been an acceptable, even a valued aspect of masculine identity, the same is not true for cultural understandings of female gender roles. In the Northeast, geographical mobility is associated with male obligations to the state, such as *corvée* labor duty (in the nineteenth century) and present-day military service; more informal "traveling" (*pai thiaw*) is also a common practice among young rural men who may thereby seek opportunities for social and economic advancement (perhaps by searching out new farmland or acquiring a skilled trade). Travel of any distance offers a chance to gain greater knowledge and experience of the world as well as to look for attractive women to court (cf. Kirsch 1966). In Baan Naa Sakae, the experience of long-distance travel, the acquisition of new job skills and the ability to survive and communicate in a foreign society were all matters of considerable pride among men returning from work overseas.<sup>12</sup> By contrast the new geographical mobility of young unmarried women challenges the customary male monopoly over these sources of prestige. Bangkok employment provides young women with direct access not only to a cash income but also to an experience of independence and self-sufficiency that no previous generation of rural women has ever shared. At one level the migration of young women from Baan Naa Sakae to Bangkok (and more rarely overseas)<sup>13</sup> can be and is seen as appropriate gender behavior—i.e., dutiful daughters upholding their obligations to help support parents and younger siblings. But this movement also raises tensions that are absent or much less problematic in the case of migrant sons. These conflicts most often take the form of parental and community concerns that the experience of personal and economic autonomy undermines the sexual propriety and moral safety of women living away from home. Parents worry about the physical safety of absent sons and daughters alike but usually only daughters are considered at risk for inappropriate sexual activity. Virginity (or at least its appearance) is an important part of a young woman's reputation in the village but, in the absence of parental supervision, the sexual

propriety of women working in Bangkok becomes a matter for uncertainty and speculation.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that within the dominant culture, women or women's bodies represent powerful images of modernity and progress. The active, mobile, beautiful, "modern Thai woman" is celebrated and promoted in the entertainment media, beauty contests, shopping malls, beauty salons and a wide range of advertisements, all of which tend to link feminine beauty and sexual attractiveness to the acquisition and display of the latest market commodities (Van Esterik 1988; Mills 1993). Such symbols of modern style and commodified status proliferate wildly in urban Thai settings; however, the beautiful modern woman is also a familiar figure to most rural audiences for whom television is an increasingly commonplace form of entertainment. Urban employment promises village youth the opportunity to participate in these images of modern style and physical beauty; indeed a colloquial term for migrants heading to the city refers to those "going to get (white) skin" (*pai aw phiw*). Pale coloring is perhaps the single most important criterion of beauty (both for men and women) in Thailand and one which peasant farmers working in their fields cannot easily achieve.

There is, however, a flip side to this glamorized image of modern female beauty and sexual attractiveness. Only a fine line separates it from the stigma and moral degradation of the prostitute. The prostitute is, of course, another prolific image of female sexuality in present-day Thailand. Northeastern villagers are well aware that commercial sex services proliferate in urban areas.<sup>14</sup> A majority of the women working in the sex trade come from rural backgrounds and many are native to Isan. Although to my knowledge no women from Baan Naa Sakae worked in the sex industry, the possible sexual experience of these young migrants in the city was a common subject of community gossip. Villagers' fears of widow ghosts bring into play these conflicting meanings of female sexuality in contemporary Thailand. The idea of sexually promiscuous women roaming the country with murderous intent turns the seductive image of the modern, mobile Thai woman on its head. Female labor migration serves as an important economic resource for many rural households but it also provokes widespread ambivalence. Women's new geographical mobility and wage earning power challenges the economic and moral authority of parents and particularly men—both fathers and potential suitors—over female productive and reproductive capacities. Moreover, in Thai popular culture a steady stream of (advertising and other) images highlights the "modern" (*than samai*) woman's autonomy and freedom of movement. *Phii mae maai*, with their rapacious and uncontrollable appetites, translate these same characteristics of modern womanhood into frightening harbingers of death and destruction.

## WAGE LABOR, WAGERED LIVES

The widow ghost episode addressed more than masculine distress in the face of rural women's increased economic and social independence. News reports of mysterious deaths among Thai workers in Singapore triggered widespread anxiety because these cases resonated with Northeastern villagers' more general perceptions of vulnerability in their relations with the wider Thai society. This sense of danger and risk is particularly acute in the context of overseas labor migration. Since the late 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Thai men have gone abroad on temporary labor contracts, the large majority heading to destinations in the Middle East. According to the Thai Department of Labor, the number of individuals leaving for international contract work rose from less than 4,000 in 1977 to over 85,000 in 1986, with the number peaking in 1982 at 108,000 (Charit 1987:6; cf. Witayakorn 1986). This is only a conservative estimate of the total overseas migration, because the existence of many unlicensed employment agencies has meant that an unknown number of Thai migrants are not accounted for in official statistics. Northeastern men have long made up a significant proportion of Thailand's labor exports, representing between one-quarter and one-half of all overseas workers, according to one survey in the mid-1980s (cf. Charit 1987:7).<sup>15</sup> By 1990 in Baan Naa Sakae these figures were reflected in the fact that approximately 50 percent of all adult men (age 25-45) had gone, tried to go or were at the time working outside Thailand.

The main attraction of overseas work lies in the high wages paid for contract labor, much higher than anything an unskilled or semiskilled worker could hope to earn if he remained in Thailand. In the early to mid-1980s—the peak period for migration among Baan Naa Sakae men—the high exchange rates for Middle Eastern currencies meant that a man could earn as much as ten or fifteen thousand baht every month (U.S.\$400 to \$600). Monthly remittances of between 7,000 and 10,000 baht, transferred directly into Thai bank accounts, were not at all uncommon among this group. This provided the men's families with an income well above what their village neighbors could earn through farming or even from wage labor in Bangkok, where the minimum daily wage only rose above 70 baht (U.S.\$2.80) in 1987. For example, two local men, by working overseas for nearly a decade, earned enough money to build substantial "modern" houses and educate their children through college. But most men from Baan Naa Sake who worked overseas only did so for one or two contract periods, a total of two to four years on average. These migrants' earnings have financed the construction of numerous houses, the purchase of motorcycles, televisions, refrigerators, electric fans and a variety of other large

consumer items. In a few cases returning migrants have used their money to buy new farmland, small freight trucks or mechanical plows.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the seductive potential for material gain, the decision to work overseas is not made lightly. To begin with, finding a job abroad can be very expensive. The first men from Baan Naa Sakae to go overseas in the late 1970s paid relatively small advance fees, a little over 10,000 baht (around U.S.\$400 to \$500) in most cases; however, as the number of applicants rose in the 1980s, employment agencies began to charge the equivalent of between one thousand and two thousand dollars (U.S.) for arranging jobs, travel, passports and work permits. Only the richest families had ready access to such large sums of money. Although less well documented than in other regions of Thailand, economic stratification is a widespread feature of Northeastern rural communities (cf. Turton 1989; also Tarr 1988). Landlessness and tenancy affect only a small proportion of households in Isan but disparities of wealth and social influence between larger and smaller landowners are commonplace. Baan Naa Sakae is no exception. In 1990, approximately one-third of village households owned more than 45 *rai* (18 acres) of land, enough in many cases to plant both rice and cash crops as well as to raise cattle which can provide a steady income and act as a reserve of wealth. The relative comfort of these families contrasted with the daily struggle of poorer households, usually those with holdings of less than 20 *rai* (8 acres)—another third of the community—who had to supplement subsistence rice production and small amounts of cash crops with occasional day labor.

Given these economic circumstances, it is not surprising that most village households have had to go into debt in order to finance a husband's or son's search for overseas employment. If, as was often the case, they could not raise the funds from relatives, families often turned to merchants in nearby market towns; but these creditors routinely demand very high rates of interest on their loans—anywhere from 5 to 10 percent per month. Such high initial costs put overseas work beyond the reach of Baan Naa Sakae's poorest families, while it dramatically increased the risk for those who had enough resources to support a loan but no margin to fall back on in case of failure. For the majority the risks have paid off. After enduring difficult working and living conditions, as well as the strange language, food and customs of another society, many Baan Naa Sakae migrants were able not only to pay off their debts but to return with significant sums of cash and modern commodities.

The successes of the first men to go overseas inspired similar ambitions in friends and neighbors, but the hardships and difficulties of other Baan Naa Sakae migrants present a very different picture. In 1990 20 percent of village households with members who had gone or attempted to go over-

seas reported they had been cheated at least once in the process. Usually this meant that an agent, who claimed to be recruiting workers, collected the advance fee and then disappeared never to be seen again. Pho Som's experience, while worse than most, demonstrates the risks villagers run when choosing to work overseas. He was cheated four times by various job agencies; as a result he lost not only the money borrowed to pay the advance fees but also several thousand baht more that he spent making numerous trips back and forth to Bangkok (a day's journey from Baan Naa Sakae either way) to do the initial paperwork and later to try to recover his money. Finally he was able to go to Singapore but ten days after his arrival he was deported because the last employment agency had not provided him with the proper work permit. When I met Pho Som in 1990 he and his wife had been forced to sell all their land and water buffalo to pay debts of more than 100,000 baht (U.S.\$4,000); they lived in a tiny, ramshackle hut and survived by renting a little farmland supplemented by occasional remittances from two teenage daughters working in Bangkok. In other cases, hopeful migrants were never able to leave the country and their families were forced to sell whatever they could—land, livestock, tools—to pay off the debts. Other village members arrived in Singapore or someplace in the Middle East only to discover either, like Pho Som, that their papers were not in order or that employers refused to pay their wages or broke job contracts with impunity. Some returned home with barely enough money to cover their debts; others were still paying these off years later. In this way a half dozen local families have been reduced to penury.

Besides the monetary risks, a few Baan Naa Sakae men were injured, became ill, or got into legal difficulties while overseas and had to be sent home. Thus, for example, Mae Thong told me about her son who was caught distilling alcohol while working in Saudi Arabia; he was publicly flogged and then deported to Thailand "with no money and still in his underwear the way he was caught." It cost her 3,000 baht (U.S.\$120) to meet him at the Bangkok airport, buy him clothes and bring him back home. Furthermore, during the decade and a half since local men began to go overseas, at least three community members had died while working abroad. The most recent of these deaths occurred just one month before the widow ghost scare began. In February 1990, a man in his late twenties died in a traffic accident while employed in Israel. His body was flown back to Bangkok where his parents had to go to collect it for cremation back in the village. It was barely six weeks later that the unexplained deaths of Thai men in Singapore became national news. Whether by personal experience or that of their neighbors, many villagers in Baan Naa Sakae have seen the promises of wealth and new opportunities through overseas employment replaced by economic hardship, exploitation, trickery, and even death.

The widow ghost scare played directly on this gap between widespread

aspirations for material and status gains through overseas migration and the very real possibilities of failure. The news of Thai overseas workers dying in their sleep served as a dramatic reminder to villagers that they risk potential disaster when moving into a world beyond their knowledge and control. In this context, the threat of widow ghost attacks symbolizes the way exploitative economic relations and cultural demands for commodity consumption devour the physical and economic vitality of Northeastern men. A striking example of these fears emerged at the beginning of the widow ghost outbreak in stories about the Thai Queen and a dream she was said to have had. According to these rumors, the Queen had dreamed that there were no men left in Thailand; the widow ghosts had taken away the entire adult male population, leaving only women, children and the elderly still alive.

In the Northeast, as in the rest of Thailand, dreams are a respected means of predicting the future or receiving messages from ancestral or other spirits. In the ordinary course of events most people review their dreams for clues about the next winning lottery number.<sup>17</sup> However, in the case of rumors concerning the Queen's dream a much more urgent matter was at stake: here was a warning of the potential for personal and collective disaster that participation in modern institutions and economic relations could or would entail. A nation without men is a sterile and ultimately lifeless society, unable to sustain or reproduce itself for the future. Members of Baan Naa Sakae village were well aware that the decision to migrate overseas involves the possibility of economic ruin and even death. The reports of mysterious sleeping deaths among Thai men working overseas placed these chances of disaster into sharp relief, both for individual migrants and their families. The Queen's dream went a step further and implied that these fears and experiences of personal vulnerability might extend to the nation as a whole. For the residents of Baan Naa Sakae, malevolent widow ghosts represent the risks that rural men and their families run by participating in modern economic relations like overseas migration. While my informants did not make the connection themselves, their accounts of the Queen's dream suggest that for Northeastern peasants the consequences of modernity may assume a very different form than the life-enhancing images of economic and social "progress" promoted in the dominant culture.

#### DOMINANT CULTURE AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

The widow ghost scare can be understood as a local response to the gaps villagers perceive between popular conceptions of and aspirations for "modernity" and their own lived experiences of exploitation and insecurity. In its symbolic content the episode questioned the moral status of dominant

cultural meanings regarding both labor migration and "modern" understandings of gender and sexuality. At the same time, the structure of the six-week episode reflected similar disjunctures between meaning and experience in the life of Isan villagers. Specifically, the widow ghost scare highlighted the subordination of local sources of knowledge and authority to systems of expertise that lie outside villagers' control. For example, the widow ghost scare was initiated not by any local cases of nightmare deaths but by reports of these in the national news. In addition, advice gleaned from radio broadcasts, rather than villagers' own assessments of imminent danger, helped to determine the timing and even the choice of particular protective strategies, such as the setting up of wooden phalluses or the identification of specific days and nights when people were not supposed to go to sleep. Residents of Baan Naa Sakae themselves acknowledged the power of the wider society to shape local perceptions. As one man admitted at the height of the scare: "We Northeasterners are great followers of the news. If it says to stand, we stand; if it says to sit, we sit." According to this speaker, it was better to follow whatever suggestions were offered in order to be sure, to "protect ourselves ahead of time."

In this way responses to threatening *phii mae maai* were triggered by information originating outside the community's experience or control. By contrast, the protective actions themselves served to reinforce the village community and its traditions as a place of refuge for its members and a source of support and moral order in a dangerous and uncertain world. For example, the tying of red and multicolored strings around the wrist was an adaptation of a key Northeastern ritual of healing and blessing, the *su khwan*. In this rite a white string is fastened about a person's wrist in order to bind the vital essence or soul (*khwan*) to the body, thereby ensuring his or her safety and well-being. The full ceremony involves a variety of preparations and must be conducted by a lay ritual expert (*mo sut*). A formal *su khwan* is usually held when someone is about to enter into a new social identity (through marriage or ordination, for example) or at the beginning of a journey, when an individual is preparing to leave the safety of the village community. It can also be performed as a healing ritual to call the soul back into the body (Tambiah 1970:223 ff). *Su khwan* rites are of Lao origin and their continued practice throughout Northeast Thailand is a conscious marker of ethnic pride and identity in Lao-speaking communities like Baan Naa Sakae. The way in which people received strings from widows most closely resembled an informal version of the *su khwan* in which an older man or woman, or a venerated monk binds a supplicant's wrist to bestow a blessing for safety and good health.

Perhaps more dramatically, the wooden phalluses presented a similar statement of collective, local identity. The widow ghosts placed the whole community in jeopardy; no family was too rich or too poor, too powerful



or too humble to be safe without the protective phallic images. In addition, the fact that these phalluses are more commonly used as objects of bawdy play during the annual rocket festival (*bun bang fai*), strengthens their power as symbols of communal unity. The *bun bang fai* is another consciously Isan ritual held at the end of the long dry season; its high point is a contest in which rockets made of long bamboo sections loaded with gunpowder are fired into the sky, partly as offerings to the village guardian spirit. The rockets help to ensure plentiful rains and an abundant rice crop for the year to come. The phallic imagery of the rockets calling down rain from the sky is supplemented by carved wooden phalluses, similar to the ones used as protection against the *phii mae maai*, which villagers use as props in the raucous banter and joking that takes place during *bun bang fai* celebrations (cf. Condominas 1975:265). It is probably not a coincidence—although no one in the village commented on the connection—that the celebration of *bun bang fai* appeared to mark the end of the widow ghost scare in Baan Naa Sakae. The rocket festival is a rite of fertility symbolizing the power of human (and specifically male, phallic) activity to bring forth life at the same time that it strengthens the collective bond between village members and the community's guardian spirit. The latter, when properly respected and cared for, provides a key bulwark against the potential incursions of malevolent spirits as well as other dangers which may threaten the livelihood of peasant agriculturalists. In different ways, then, reactions to the widow ghost scare called upon the efficacy and moral centrality of local forms of knowledge and communal identity in the face of external threats.

However, this remained an implicit affirmation. Throughout the episode, many residents tended to downplay the extent of any threat, at least when talking to me. This was especially true of those higher status community members whose social position derived mainly from their association with "modern" standards and practices, usually through their higher education and/or employment in the civil service. The embarrassment that the episode caused some people in Baan Naa Sakae was related to the fact that, as an educated foreigner, I represented particularly strong associations with modernity and its high social status. At the same time it reflected the ambivalence with which many people in Isan assess local practices and traditions against the prestige of "modern" beliefs and attitudes in the dominant culture.

It is in relation to this ambivalence between local and dominant sources of knowledge that one can also assess what might otherwise seem a puzzling failure of people in Baan Naa Sakae to mobilize the authority and power of Buddhism against the threat of widow ghosts. *Phii mai maai*, like other malevolent spirits, are traditionally believed to act outside the scope of Buddhist ceremonies, which focus on the accumulation of religious merit

(*bun*); protection from *phii rai* usually requires different kinds of ritual action presided over by lay experts or, in some cases, spirit mediums (cf. Tambiah 1970:286). Still, in Baan Naa Sakae, monks are frequently involved in merit-making ceremonies immediately prior to the performance of a rite directed at deflecting misfortune or distress due to spirit activity. But the monks of Baan Naa Sakae, the spiritual and ritual foci of community life at most other times, had little or no role to play during the scare. Nor was there any noticeable change or increase in merit-making activities by villagers during this time. While no one said so directly, it was my impression that in local eyes the many "traditional" (read "superstitious") characteristics of the widow ghost scare created an embarrassing gap between local fears and an increasing awareness of and interest in more doctrinally pure forms of Buddhist practice.<sup>18</sup> In only one case that I know of did any villager approach local monks in response to the threat of *phii mae maai*: a man in his fifties with two sons working in Singapore, asked the oldest monk at the village temple to bless two white *su khwan* strings which he then mailed to his sons to wear as protection.

#### CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the widow ghost scare had only minor, temporary effects on Baan Naa Sakae villagers' participation in migration streams and other "modern" forms of social and economic activities. The most noticeable change was that a few men decided not to go work in Singapore; however, most of them later went to Bangkok instead. Nor did the collective threat posed by these spirits mobilize community energy to address or protest more systematically the problems of social and economic subordination that many rural households face. Despite the regional scale of the phenomenon it did not herald (not even in the form of rumor) the kind of social upheaval or protest movement that has periodically arisen in the Northeast. Since the late nineteenth century, Isan has been the site of one large and several small millennial Buddhist movements led by local figures claiming prophetic and other spiritual powers (*phuu mii bun*). These movements sought, albeit unsuccessfully, to counter the growing presence of state authority and a capitalist economy in the region (cf. Keyes 1967; Chattip 1984). By contrast, the widow ghost scare offered neither prophetic figures nor an explicit rejection of the moral and material conditions of contemporary Thai society, rallying points that were characteristic of these earlier movements. Even less did it resemble the specific program and clear-cut organization of the communist revolutionaries who conducted an armed insurgency in the Northeast (and other regions) during the 1960s and 1970s. As an example of peasant "resistance" the widow ghost scare is weak at best.

The episode is much better understood as a case of cultural struggle. Attacking widow ghosts represent an alternative interpretation of the consequences of "modernity" in Thailand and one that resonates more closely with the actual experiences of Northeastern peasants than do the images of comfort and convenience promoted in the dominant culture. Anthropologists have often identified malevolent spirits as vehicles for expressing the ambivalence and distress that may accompany social and economic transformation. For example, in a Northern Thai case, Anan Ganjanapan (1984) noted that early twentieth-century accusations of *phii ka'*—a form of spirit possession that turns its victims into sorcerers—reflected growing social and economic differentiation within rural communities due to the consolidation of large landholdings. Stephen Griffiths (1988) reports similar beliefs in witches and sorcerers as an expression of the profound social tensions resulting from long-term overseas migration in an Ilocano village in the Philippines. It is perhaps a sign of the alienating effects of social change in Northeast Thailand that none of the more common origins of supernatural attacks—local historical figures, deceased ancestral spirits, or the possessed hosts of sorcerous demons—were connected to the *phii mae mai*. The widow ghosts remained a diffuse and unlocatable menace much like the power that institutions of global capitalism and the nation-state wield over the lives of village residents. In this way *phii mae mai* are akin to accounts of Devil beliefs among miners and plantation workers in Latin America, where satanic destruction threatened those in transition from precapitalist to capitalist forms of labor and production (Taussig 1980), or to rumors of "construction sacrifice" in different parts of Indonesia, in which state officials and their foreign agents were believed to be seeking human heads from the local population to place under the foundations of major construction projects (Drake 1989; Erb 1991; Forth 1991). Aihwa Ong's (1987) study of spirit possession among neophyte factory workers in Malaysia offers an especially apt comparison to the Isan experience. Ong found that incidents of mass possession in transnational factories challenged the moral legitimacy of industrial discipline and the depersonalized forms of control Malay women encountered through wage employment; however, the momentary effectiveness of spirit possession in shutting down production lines did not contribute to a broader reworking of an inequitable social order.

The threat of attacking widow ghosts in Northeast Thailand highlighted several important gaps between dominant meanings of modernity and villagers' own experiences of dependence and exploitation. But the resulting assessments of modern images and institutions were in no way revolutionary. Widow ghost beliefs offered at best only a temporary and largely implicit critique of the political and material disparities that mark Northeasterners' experiences in contemporary Thai society. This is hardly surprising

given the tremendous reach of dominant ideas and cultural authority in Thailand today. The widow ghost threat did not constitute a rejection of the styles and standards of modernity; it was instead a momentary break, which placed into sharp relief the tensions and disjunctures that permeate Northeastern social relations both within rural communities and as subordinate members of the wider nation. For people in Baan Naa Sakae, an outright rejection of modern institutions and ideas is economically and conceptually unfeasible. As is reflected in the widow ghost episode itself, daily life in the rural Northeast is already profoundly shaped by the rhythms and relations of commodity production, modern media, and (less obvious from this account but equally true) the institutions and authority of the Thai nation-state.

The significance of the widow ghost phenomenon is not diminished, however, by the continuing subordination of Northeastern village life to ideological and economic forces of the wider Thai society. What is interesting and instructive about the widow ghost scare is how it revealed, on the one hand, an explicit critique of the transformation of household and gender relations by capitalist modes of production and, on the other hand, more fundamental (if still implicit) sources of tension and ambivalence in popular experiences of modernity. While such conflicts fueled the dramatic episode, they found no resolution in it. The *phii mae maai* attacks offer useful insights into ongoing dilemmas in contemporary peasant life. However, for the people of Baan Naa Sakae and other communities like it, the widow ghost episode did not offer any effective alternatives to the hegemonic forms and practices of modernity that they now confront.

#### NOTES

1. This study is based on research conducted in Thailand during 1987-88 and 1989-90. Financial support for the research and writing was provided at different stages by doctoral fellowships from the National Science Foundation (U.S.) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; and by Social Science Research Council and Fulbright-Hays doctoral dissertation research grants. Additional support was received from the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (through a grant from the Luce Foundation) and the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. I have benefited greatly from the comments of Herbert P. Phillips, Ara Wilson and Linda Green on an earlier version of this paper. I am especially grateful to Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz for their thoughtful criticisms and suggestions. Of course, any shortcomings or errors that remain are entirely my own.

2. Baan Naa Sakae is a pseudonym, as are all names of individuals cited in the text.

3. In contrast to the ignorance and backwardness frequently associated with the traditions of rural populations, the twentieth-century Thai state has sought to

promote (or one might argue, "invent" [Hobsbawm 1983]) a number of national "traditions." Based on the symbolic trilogy of "Country, Religion and King," these "traditional" images and practices constitute an ideological foundation for constructing and disseminating a Thai "national identity" (cf. Girling 1981; Keyes 1989).

4. My understanding of villagers' risk in the face of modern social life draws here upon the work of Anthony Giddens (1990), in particular his discussion of the vulnerability of individuals in modern societies to "expert systems," impersonal institutions which operate according to expert knowledge unavailable to ordinary citizens and over which they can exercise little or no control. As a result all modern individuals live with a degree of uncertainty and (potential) insecurity (Giddens 1990:92 ff). What Giddens fails to address adequately is how and with what effects certain groups or segments of modern societies are systematically disadvantaged in their access to politically and economically important areas of knowledge and control.

5. During this same period of time in the spring of 1990 I saw similar phalluses set up to ward off widow ghost attacks in every village that I visited or passed through. This was true of all the communities within the area immediately surrounding Baan Naa Sakae as well as villages in several different provinces through which I traveled in April and May, including Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Roi Et, Yasothon, and Ubol Ratchathani.

6. There have been a number of Western-style medical studies of this phenomenon in recent years focusing in particular on Southeast Asian refugees relocated to the United States. See for example Kirschner et al. (1986); Munger (1987); and Goh et al. (1990).

7. Radio stations in Thailand are owned and operated either by the national government or the Thai army. Commercial sponsors can rent broadcast time but it is not clear to me whether the broadcasts which included news about widow ghost attacks were scripted by private or state agents.

8. Although conceptualized in different ways, many Southeast Asian cultures distinguish between male and female sexuality and reproductive powers, attributing special, often polluting forces to that of women. See for example several contributions to the volume edited by Jane Atkinson and Shelly Errington (1990).

9. I draw here on the work of Penny Van Esterik who has suggested that the gender system in Thai society is deeply intertwined with the way bodies are conceptualized, mobilized and experienced (cf. Van Esterik 1990).

10. In Thai (and Isan) Buddhism, only adult males can ordain as monks; however, their vows of worldly detachment prohibit sexual activity and for the period of their ordination monks are classed as members of a "gender" or category of person (*phet yang song*) that is quite separate from that of lay men (*phet chaai*) (Keyes 1986:86). In Baan Naa Sakae, the local monks were not deemed to be in any danger from the widow ghosts, perhaps because of this classificatory difference but also because of the spiritual merit and power that monks accumulate through their ascetic practices. Indeed the Buddhist temple was the only part of the village where protective wooden phalluses were not hung.

11. Amulets are worn by Thai men (and to a lesser extent women) in all regions of the country. However, the high price which the more powerful of these sacred

objects can command means that their use is more extensive among urban populations than in rural areas (see Tambiah 1984:228–229).

12. In most cases, however, these experiences did not in themselves contribute to an improvement in returned migrants' social status unless accompanied by significant cash savings or remittances. A few men in Baan Naa Sakae were able to turn truck-driving skills acquired overseas into a form of livelihood back home by purchasing a freight truck with their earnings. When referring to overseas experiences, Baan Naa Sakae men revealed an ambivalence similar to that which Jane Margold (this volume) found among returned Filipino migrants. Pride in their own skills and competence warred with memories of fear, loneliness, and resentment against the harsh discipline, racist employers, and difficult living and working conditions.

13. The movement of Thai women into overseas employment has not occurred on the same scale as that of men. Since the late 1980s a growing number of women, usually of rural background and many from the Northeast, have gone abroad to work as domestic servants primarily in Hong Kong (Nayana Suphaphung, personal communication). More often employment overseas for Thai women involves work, either by force or by choice, in the commercial sex trade. See for example Siriporn Skrobanek (1985). In 1990 no women then living in Baan Naa Sakae had ever been overseas and only one woman born to a local family had done so. This woman, now in her forties, had gone to work near one of the U.S. military bases during the Vietnam War. She married an American and later moved with him to the United States.

14. Thailand has an enormous sex industry. Estimates range from official figures of 80,000 to well over one million sex workers (see Muecke 1992:892–893; Truong 1990:181).

15. The enthusiastic support of the Thai government for this type of labor mobility is no doubt related to the substantial wage remittances that have flowed into the country as a result. The earnings of these workers as remitted through Thai banks (not counting cash and goods carried in by returning migrants) constitute a significant proportion of Thai foreign exchange earnings. In fact, for most of the 1980s these were roughly equivalent to the value of rice exports, or more than 800 million U.S. dollars annually (NSO 1988:17, 64).

16. This pattern of expenditures, heavily weighted toward consumer items rather than productive resources, is comparable to that found in an official survey of returned migrants (cf. Witayakorn 1986:332).

17. Playing the underground lottery, although officially illegal, is a widespread form of gambling throughout Thailand. Many people in Baan Naa Sakae wagered small amounts in the bimonthly drawing. Winning selections are based upon the first or last digits of numbers announced in the national (legal) lottery. Dreams are among the most common sources for lucky numbers, sometimes with startling results. For example, one schoolteacher residing in Baan Naa Sakae dreamed that the village guardian spirit told him the next winning numbers. He wagered heavily in the next drawing and won 10,000 baht (U.S.\$400).

18. Buddhism in Isan is an important point of community identification—especially through the village temple and annual festivals—at the same time that it clearly links each village to the wider national society. Monks are residents in village

temples and themselves are often natives of these communities but as members of the ordained Sangha, they are involved in a hierarchy of authority that encompasses the entire nation. Buddhism, moreover, is explicitly proclaimed by the Thai state as one of the cornerstones of a national identity. Purifying reforms of regional practices have periodically shaped state religious policy over the course of Thai national development. While I am unaware of any special campaigns or programs of this nature that might have affected the events with which this paper is concerned, a number of women and a few older men from Baan Naa Sakae at the time were active participants in meditation and dharma classes being held at the temple of a neighboring village. The prestige of this temple and its abbot, reflected in the recent construction of an elaborate new ordination hall (*boot*), was a source of considerable envy in Baan Naa Sakae, where many felt that their own temple seemed decrepit and their monks somewhat lacking in spiritual achievements by comparison.

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