Performing the Isan Subject:
Spirit Mediums and Ritual Embodiment
in a Transitional Agrarian Society

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
The Australian National University

July 2015
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis is the original work of the author
All sources used and assistance obtained have been acknowledged

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30 July 2015

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Abstract

This thesis examines spirit mediumship in Chaiyaphum, a province in northeast Thailand. It explores the subjectivity, sociality, personhood, and religiosity of Isan people in relation to modern processes of state formation and socio-economic change. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Chaiyaphum, the thesis maps the rich pantheon and networks of spirit mediums in this province and pays close attention to ritual embodiment, performativity and personhood. Documenting the centrality of mediumship in domains that range from political legitimation to healing, the findings challenge the presumption that this form of vernacular religiosity is archaic, marginal or waning. Supernaturalism is strongly manifest in the lives of the people of contemporary Chaiyaphum and functions as a supple node for assimilating new concepts and symbolizing and negotiating new relationships in society.

The thesis analyzes Thailand as a ritual state where people’s life and the state’s affairs are full of ritual practices. Spirit cults crucially contribute to state formation and nationalism. Ritual performances around historical figures that are enacted by the local people reproduce their subjection under the Thai state. Such spirit practices from the margins contain spectral power and maintain the central state’s power and the monarchy’s auratic potency. At the same time they draw the charismatic power of the central state into local circuits of sociality and meaning. In a region considered the powerhouse of state Buddhism, local spirit cults are not subservient to, undermined by, or detached from, state Buddhism. They form a mutualistic relationship with Buddhism to serve people’s proximate needs. The thesis documents the intriguing world of medium-abbots, medium-monks, and spirit mediums whose techniques and authority are modeled on Buddhism, introducing the reader to a cast of practitioners whose identities disrupt the presumed hierarchies between Buddhism and mediumship.

Spirit mediumship is central to the reproduction of Isan personhood in a dynamic and shifting globalized social landscape. In a region marked by high levels of labor mobility and social fragmentation, spirit mediums serve as the linchpins for recombinant forms of sociality and selfhood built around an idiom of spiritual
kinship. Spirit mediumship can be considered as a contemporary vernacular of empowerment. Spirits facilitate the recognition of female desire and the enactment of extra-domestic feminine social projects. Mediumship encompasses heterogeneous forms of desire and sexuality that conflict with conventional modernist identities. As a healing discipline, mediumship illuminates a material theory of the self and comprises a corporeal technology for mending afflicted personhood through ritual enactments. The multisensory and performative aspects of ritual healing shed light on the relevance of spirit mediumship in reconstituting selfhood in a region undergoing turbulent social change.
Acknowledgements

The completion of this PhD gives me, a neophyte of the discipline, an initiation into the world of anthropology. It is similar to the ritual process of becoming a member in a mediumistic network. First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Philip Taylor, my thesis main supervisor. He teaches me how to craft anthropological magic and the art of ethnography. He is an exceptional master who enthusiastically engages with my materials and ideas. His excellent supervision enables me to be confident to become an independent scholar. I am deeply grateful to Peter Jackson for his guidance, patience, and friendship. His critical thinking and wisdom in Thai history constructively contribute to my thesis. I also thank the other two members of my supervisory panel, Jane Ferguson and Andrew Walker, for their support and advice to better my project. My questions and problems are always solved with their advice.

Anthropology at ANU is an engaging community. I thank the academic staff who provided help and support throughout the course of my academic journey: Alan Rumsey, Francesca Merlan, Andy Kipnis, Kathy Robinson, Andrew McWilliam, and Assa Doron. Matt Tomlinson read one chapter and gave very useful suggestion. I thank Jo Bushby for her generous support. This thesis received editorial input from Maxine McArthur, CHL editor. Karina Pelling, at the Cartography Unit of the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific helped me with map production. I would like to extend my gratitude to Craig Reynolds, Tyrell Haberkorn, and Chintana Sandilands for giving me guidance and support.

During my fieldwork in Chaiyaphum, northeast Thailand, I received help and hospitality from a number of people. My informants were sincerely helpful and supportive. All their names were changed in this thesis to protect their identity. I deeply thank them for welcoming me into their families and communities. They were wonderful people with wisdom, integrity, and talent. I am thankful to Ajan Sanon Danpakdee, Ajan Sochok Sunontat, Mae Pum Sathaphorn Sunontat, Pu and Sak of
Somtam Hiso at the Chaiyaphum Night Bazaar, Phor Thong, nurses at the public health stations, and policeman at the police station.

In Canberra, I was indebted to a lot of people. In the Anthropology Department, I thank to friendly companionship of Darja Hoenigman, James Coates, Bo Seo, Stella Hutagalung, Yen Le, Hoang Anh Thu Le, Geng Le, Xuan Dong, Viet Quan Ha, Udeni Appuhamilage, Annie MaCarthy, Jaimie Coates, Lena Heinzmann, Isabela Burgler, Andrei Damaledo, Lan Thai, Wahyuddin Halim, Benjamin Hegarty, Shiore Neoh, Asrun Lio, Yani Taufik, Gita Nasution, Shiore Shakuto, Adlin Sila, Francesca Mosca, Saskia Lillepuu, Lina Jakob, Tiffany Cone, and Roger Casas. I would like to extend my gratitude alumni and students in Thai community: Pongphisoot Busarat, Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, Nattakarn Akarapongpisak, Vasoontara Yieng Sbirakos, Duangyawa Uterasint, Todsapon Suranukkharin, Prajak Kongkirati, Saran Sarnisart, Alisa Nana, Preedee Hongsaton, Phataraphorn Khumphai, Sawang Petvises, Nattawut Chonggamornkul, Benjawan Tawatsupa, Passot Lasuka, Sirichinda Thongchina, Supawan Pingjai, Prasert Rangkla, Natanaree Posrithong, Thanyaporn Soontornthum, Ladawan Khaikham, Wimalin Rimpeekool, Tepsuda Rungrat, Supanimit Chiampanichayakul, Nitipong Boonyaleepun and Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya for providing me friendship. I also thank Chawarote Valyamedhi for advice and moral support from Thailand.

I have been a dorm student (dek hor) from undergraduate to PhD years. At ANU, wonderful people have facilitated my work by providing a good and supportive environment of accommodation. I thank Tony Karrys at University House, and Kaori Oikawa-Ruthven and Gina Denman at Graduate House.

My study at ANU was made possible by sponsorship from Chandrakasem Rajabhat University in Bangkok where I teach. Associate Prof. Sumalee Chaisuphalakul, the President, and Ajan Rachen Mueanchorp, the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, are generous and supportive. I thank Kanjanee Phumphanuen for administrative assistance. I received the ANU Thai Alumni Scholarship for living expense with the kind help from Assistant Prof. Julaphorn Euea-raksakul at Thammasat University, Bangkok. In conducting fieldwork, I received research funding from Department of Anthropology at the ANU College of Asia and the
Pacific. This financial support helped me carry out fieldwork without difficulties. Moreover, I was granted the Thai Studies Field Research Grants from the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne to facilitate my financial matters in the field. As well, the Thai Studies Institute at Chulalongkorn University provided me with funding from the project ENITS to present a paper at their conference which has been adjusted to be a part of Chapter Two in my thesis.

At the heart of my gratitude are my close friends in Thailand and my family who teach me to be who I am. I gratefully acknowledge my beloved parents, Prawit and Ratchani, who nurture a love of learning in me and believe in the way I choose the life I want to live. I thank my brothers, Kosin and Kitisak, whose support is all around. I also thank my aunts, Juea and Muai, whose love and care are always waiting at home. Lastly, my love and thanks go to my partner, Cameron, who makes me smile, happy, and believe in myself. His care and love have nourished me through the hard time of writing this thesis.
Note on Transliteration

For the transliterated words, I follow the Royal Institute of Thailand’s guidelines in “Principles of Romanization for Thai Script by Transcription Method.” The system makes no distinction between long and short vowel forms, and tones are not represented. In this thesis, I transcribe both Central Thai and northeast dialect into romanized spellings. The Central Thai transliteration is identified as “CT” while northeast dialect as “NE.” Otherwise, both of them share the same pronunciation or I indicate directly in the text. I do not follow the Royal Institute of Thailand’s system in some respects. The exceptions include the use of some consonant and vowel. First, “j” is used for the Thai consonant jor jan and “ch” is used for chor chang. If one follows the system, the word for “lord” and the first syllable of the word for my field site “Chaiyaphum” are to be identically spelled with “ch.” In order to avoid confusion, I transliterate “lord” as jao. Second, the system uses “o” for both /o/ and /ɔ/ sounds in Thai spellings. In this thesis, I use “o” to indicate the sound /o/ as in the word ong /on/. And I deliberately use “or” to indicate the sound /ɔ/ as in the word orp /orp/. Third, some specific and individual names remain what the owner uses, for example, Phra Paisal Visalo.

Titles are written in italic to protect confusion. For example, in “Mae Mala,” the word “Mae” is not a proper noun but a respected kin term that addresses female senior, which is equivalent to the English word “mother.” So, “Mae Mala” means “Mother Mala.” Finally, it should be noted here that there is no use of a consonant cluster in northeast dialect. So the word “teacher” in Central Thai is transliterated as “khru ba” while it is transliterated as “khu ba” in the northeast dialect.
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Introduction

Rationale and arguments

This thesis explores the place of spirit mediumship in contemporary Thai northeast (Isan) society. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Chaiyaphum people in both rural and urban settings. Chaiyaphum Province is located in the western part of the northeast region of Thailand. The majority of its population is ethnic Lao who depend for their lives on agriculture, to which they attach a high ritual value. It is not an overstatement to say that Chaiyaphum people live their life with the spirits. These entities have a significant place in the people’s worldview. Many Chaiyaphum people attach great importance to ritual. They have a series of complex rites throughout the life cycle that connect to contemporary social conditions. The ritual practices are intimately linked to a wide range of spirits that form a hierarchical pantheon. They feature exuberant symbolism and performative processes. My interest in the relationship between spirit cults and contemporary Isan society forms the subject of this study.


Regarding the religious domain, however, Isan is not placed at the periphery but rather at the center of the Thai national religious imagination as a powerhouse of Buddhism (Hayashi 2003, 113). Scholars who study Isan religiosities focus on the political configuration of Buddhism in the region. Several studies show that the northeast region
is a place where the modern Thai state has placed great focus on religious indoctrination in Theravada Buddhism (Tambiah 1970, Keyes 1987). In contrast to the political-economic view that situates Isan at the margins of the Thai state, they argue that Isan is the heartland of state Buddhism. The far-southern Thai region is a stronghold of Islam. The northern region has experienced historical tension between Lanna Buddhist practice and belief and Bangkok Buddhism (Bowie 2014, Cohen 2001, Keyes 1971). Isan contains one-third of the country’s population and occupies one-third of the country’s area. It is an important center for the nation’s forest monks, ascetic practices, and meditation traditions (Kamala 1997, Taylor 1993).

![Map of Thailand](image)

Figure 1 Map of Thailand
Isan is the area where the Thammayut reform sect of Bangkok Buddhism, has been cultivated since the early nineteenth century. In 2013, about half the temples in Thailand were located in Isan and 40 percent of the monks and novices in Thailand lived in the region (National Office of Buddhism 2013). Also, it should be noted here that a great number of monks in the central part of Thailand, especially Bangkok, come from Isan. In recent history, the monarchy has given patronage to Isan monasteries. In Chaiyaphum, a magnificent Lao-style temple has recently been constructed with the support of a royal family member, Princess Somsawali. Phra Paisal Visalo, a celebrated monk who is nationally recognized as a public intellectual figure, resides in his temple in Chaiyaphum and has promoted modern Buddhism for decades. In the popular Thai Buddhist imagination, Isan features as a destination for Buddhist pilgrimage, the home of respected Thammayut forest monks, and a place for ascetic meditation.

Even though the Isan region has been recognized as the center of state Buddhism, its people are often seen as religiously peripheral. Central Thai commentators have noted that Isan people are steeped in non-Buddhist practice, intensively engaging with spirit cults and other unorthodox practices. Derogatory comments proliferate in mainstream central Thai discourse that can be glossed as indicating that Isan people are credulous and superstitious (khon Isan ngo ngom-ngai). Such commentaries originating from Bangkok and central Thailand imply that Isan people are not only marginal to the state in socio-political terms but also are peripheral to Theravada Buddhism. What is the place of spirit mediumship in Isan society? What is its relation to state Buddhism? And how can we understand the religious equivocality of Isan people and society?

Some anthropologists have viewed local spirit cults as subordinate to the institutions of Thai Buddhism (Wijeyewardene 1986, 142, Hayashi 2003, Tambiah 1970, Pattana 1999, 2012). Yukio Hayashi proposes (2003) the notion of “Buddhicization” which refers to the process “by which the world religion of Buddhism is indigenized within village

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1 The founder of this reform sect was King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851-1868) during his time as a monk. After ascending to the throne, he initiated modernization of the country when Siam encountered colonialism in the nineteenth century. Concerning religion, he sought to rationalize state Buddhism, removing superstitious elements and making it more orthodox. In nationalist historiography, King Mongkut is recognized as the father of Thai science.

2 Phra is the title for a Buddhist monk, like “Father” for Roman Catholic priests.
society and the parallel process by which indigenous beliefs are incorporated within Buddhism” (2003, 200). He argues that both local ritual practices and specialists embody the process of Buddhicization. In Isan villages, indigenous spirit cults have been embellished with or replaced by Buddhist rituals. Spirit practitioners have been subsumed within Theravada Buddhism’s system and rely on buddhicized power (Hayashi 2003, 199-201). This approach considers Isan spirit cults as subject to state rationalization, associated with the past, and destined to be further marginalized with modernization. Isan spirit practices are thus portrayed as a disappearing, marginal, inferior, and now purely mystical phenomenon.

However, the findings of my study offer a different perspective. While Hayashi reports that spirit cults in northeast villages in the 1980s and the 1990s were in decline with a corresponding rise in the popularity of Buddhism (Hayashi 2003, 196), my account shows that, no more than two decades later, Chaiyaphum spirit mediumship were continuing to flourish strongly. Studies in northern Thailand have reported a boom in urban spirit mediumship since the 1970s (Irvine 1984). In the twenty-first century, I would suggest, local Isan rituals have not been buddhicized, but both incorporate and are embroiled in mutual exchanges with Buddhism. Regarding the relationship among spirit practitioners, while Hayashi’s (2003, 214-216) account shows that Buddhist monks and mor tham3 (ex-monk specialists) have surpassed in importance the indigenous female practitioners who rely on local spirits in the regional form of mediumship, my account shows a significant rise in spirit mediums’ influence over monks and mor tham. Spirit mediums in Chaiyaphum possess high status and conduct Buddhist rituals in a manner that makes their religious stature almost equivalent to monks in the eyes of villagers. Mor tham who rely on buddhicized power have a weak presence in Chaiyaphum Province. From the standpoint of locals, spirit mediums’ functions reach beyond the limits conventionally assigned to spirit cults. They are considered as fields of merit like Buddhist monks, even more intimate and proximate. No boundary is drawn between spirit mediumship and Buddhism. My study intends to provide a new vantage point for seeing spirit cults in Isan. It primarily questions the way in which mediumistic practice

3 Mor tham combines two words. “Mor,” as appears in the thesis henceforth, in Thai means specialist in ritual traditions associated with healing and now the modern Thai word for “doctor.” “Tham” is from the Pali Buddhist term “dharma” meaning the teaching of the Buddha. So, “mor tham” are ritual specialists who have Buddhism-based power. All of them are former monks. There are many types of mor in Isan culture.
is portrayed vis-à-vis state Buddhism. It argues that spirit mediumship is not hierarchically subordinate to transcendental Buddhism but a vernacularized morality that is inspired by Buddhism. It is not categorically separate from or eroded by state Buddhism. On the contrary, spirit cults form complementary, mutually constitutive relationships with Buddhist institutions, symbols and practitioners. The analysis shows that spirit mediumship is placed at the center of the ritual and religious life of Isan people.

My study also extends the investigation of spirit cults from the religious domain to the socio-political environment, human relationships, and subjectivity. It argues that spirit cults are crucial mechanisms that work from the periphery to contribute to nation building. Local rituals around historical heroes are infused with public discourses and notions of nationalism and patriotism. The state’s power and the charisma of the monarchy are made manifest locally to a substantial degree through the spirit practices performed in everyday and calendrical rituals in the margins. Thus, spirit mediumship is not subordinated to Thai political power but is potent and central. It is not always resistant to state building but also implicated in it and empowers it. In a similar vein, I approach spirit mediumship as a dynamic contemporary phenomenon that is not withering away but rising to meet the challenges of the present. Peter Jackson (1997) notes that already in the 1990s, state control over Buddhism had noticeably declined while a diverse range of religious phenomena in Thailand was on the rise. In this context, I see spirit mediumship as not a relic, a vestige, or a pure and frail indigenous tradition under assault but as a supple node for assimilating new concepts and symbolizing and negotiating new relationships in society.

Spirit mediumship conveys the subtle nuances of meanings of sociality and community. Its practices and practitioners resynthesize human relationships in moments of socio-political transformation. My study shows that the dynamics of social identity in Isan can be understood by examining spirit cult practices. Moreover, spirit mediumship gives insights into a material theory of personhood. It is a religion of material practice that rescues the study of personhood from a focus on mystical and intangible traces (see Bautista 2012). Anthropological enquiries have analyzed the concept of personhood in ritual through cultural representation and cognitive categories (Geertz 1973). In Buddhism, personhood is often seen as shaped by Buddhist self-cultivation and orthodox
practices. In my study, however, Isan personhood in spirit mediumship is shaped by materiality in ritual, which is not otherworldly and ephemeral. We learn about the construction and the meaning of Isan personhood through bodily practices, materiality, and performance in ritual processes.

This thesis therefore looks closely at the body in ritual. It pays attention to how the body speaks and performs. It seeks to understand Isan embodiment through ritual enactment in spirit mediumship. The overarching argument of the thesis is that spirit mediumship can be located in a transbodily habitus whereby human ideas are performed through the body. It is through this habitus that human beings are co-present, transact, and interact. In Chaiyaphum, spirit mediumship is the religion of the body and the locus that expresses and manufactures Isan personhood and society. This study of spirit mediumship is not so much a search for the ideas or theories that inform ritual as an examination of the body in ritual, of the body that ritually enacts. Through spirit cults, one can apprehend the religiosity and politics of human relationships as performed through the body in ritual enactment.

In the following sections, I offer a review of the literature of spirit mediumship across three domains to develop a conceptual framework for my analysis of the ritual life of Chaiyaphum people and the place of spirit cults in Isan society. These domains are mediumship studies in Thailand, mediumship and the body, and performance in mediumship.

**Studies on Thai spirit mediumship**

This section surveys how spirit mediumship has been approached in previous studies on Thai religiosity. The spirit cult has been viewed from diverse perspectives that situate it in different landscapes and functions. According to structural functionalists, spirit mediumship constitutes an integral part of the complex system of Thai religiosity and sociality. Thomas Kirsch (1977) categorizes spirit mediumship as a form of animism that serves primarily instrumentalist ends and gives voice to social actors’ proximate emotional, cognitive and socio-political concerns. He argues that it can be understood only in relation to Buddhism, which provides a transcendental morality and explanatory
framework, and integrates the entire system of beliefs, practices, and practitioners. The structuralist Stanley Tambiah (1970) investigates the relationship between Buddhist rituals and spirit cults in an Isan village. He suggests that Buddhist texts and doctrine provide the cosmological and supernatural classifications that are enacted in the local village rituals. While mediumship and exorcism, along with Buddhist monasticism, form part of a linked village complex, spiritual propitiation is categorically subsumed by Buddhism, as nature is by culture, in a locally salient hierarchy that situates Buddhist monasticism as superior to spirit worship. However, Hayashi (2003) criticizes Tambiah’s excessive concentration on Buddhist doctrine and texts at the expense of putting religion in socio-political context. He examines the religious practices of an Isan village from the point of view of the localities in which they are actually practiced. By focusing on changes to the mediumistic cult in the process of state formation, the historical dynamics of this practice come to light. Structurally, folk religion in Isan villages has been reorganized historically with the rise of the nation-state (Hayashi 2003, 23).

Anthropological researchers in the northern region have extensively contributed to the study of Thai spirit mediumship. Many also adopt the ethnographic approach of structural functionalism in their treatment of this cultural phenomenon. The cult of ancestral spirits (phi pu ya\(^4\)) is the central subject of examinations. These household cults are deemed to give expression to the underlying logic of northern Thai society and gender relations. Northern Thai society is formed of matrilineal descent groups that are constituted and maintained through this spirit cult practice (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, Cohen 1984, Walker 2006, Wijeyewardene 1977, 1984, Turton 1984).

From a critical perspective, some studies on northern Thai religiosity discuss how gender hierarchies are manifested and institutionalized through spirit mediumship. The matrilineal spirit cults are to be seen as part of the construction of gender in northern Thailand. However, this process circumscribes and subordinates female roles and authority. The cults are a mechanism that provides both circumscription and compensation at the same time (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, 260). Spirit mediumship is open for women to challenge male power not only in the domestic

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\(^4\) “Phi” means ghosts or spirits. “Pu” refers to male ancestor, literally paternal grandfather. “Ya” refers to female ancestor, literally paternal grandmother. “Phi pu ya” are the spirits of ancestors.
domain but also in public space. Walter Irvine (1984) gives an account of female mediums in urban Chiang Mai who negate the physiological facts of their sex and act like males. They even encroach on the masculine space of Buddhism by stating that the curative power of their lord-spirits is superior to that of monks. Regarding the urban market economy, spirit mediumship becomes an avenue for women to compete for material success as they incorporate traditional medical practices and challenge the power of men (Irvine 1984, 320-322). However, Irvine argues that female spirit mediums who identify with masculine power confirm men’s monopoly of “sacred” values and superior authority. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, male spirit mediums argue that women can only be possessed by low spirits. They say that only men can be the “worthy bodily receptacles of disembodied, immaterial, and morally faultless spirits” (Irvine 1984, 321).

Through a critical Marxist and post-colonial lens, some anthropological studies have analyzed local spirit cults and the rise of regionalism, positioning spirit mediumship as a form of political representation and resistance to Thai state hegemony. In the far south of Thailand, Marlane Guelden (2005) examines a genre of dance-drama performance which is called nora. It is a local form of spirit mediumship that serves as a means to communicate with ancestral spirits around Songkhla Lake. Guelden suggests that nora has become significant as a constructed symbol of southern culture under nationalism. It articulates the relationship between the nation state and its politically and ethnically diverse margins. In this complex relationship, she argues, nora is a syncretic belief system that gains legitimacy from association with state Buddhism.

For Rosalind Morris (2000, 2-5), the melancholia of spirit possession has become a dramatic icon of postmodern nostalgia in Chiang Mai, a city dominated by ethnographically informed discourses of nostalgic cultural revival. She points out that contemporary mediumship is inseparably bound up with the traumatized rendition of “absence and partiality.” Thus, Morris suggests that in mediumship, one can notably see the disturbed consciousness of northern Thai modernity that was forged through the processes of state formation, and the monetization and capitalization of the economy. In mediumship, as well as other mediumistic forms of cultural reproduction, such as

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5 Nora is southern Thai word. It is manora in Central Thai.
photography, printing, and writing, it is possible to capture the relationships between new forms of representation and subjectivity, as well as new modes of magic and political power. And it is apparent that origin narratives in mediumship are frequently given through substitutions, displacements and translations, rather than offering a unique vantage onto pure or resistant identities.

As for northeast Thailand, the research on spirit mediumship often deals with health and healing by adaptation of the symbolic approach. The use of symbols to achieve therapeutic efficacy is manifest in healing rituals. Mariko Kato (1995, 171-180) explores symbolic meanings from the props prepared and actions expressed by the spirit medium in a village in Khorn Kaen Province. She argues that all symbols convey the ultimate meaning—“the patient will recover” (Kato 1995, 171). The spirit medium conducts a diagnostic process employing local materials: candles, betel nuts, eggs, champak flowers etc. All these ritual components are interpreted to the patient as a sign of recovery. Then, the medium performs “cutting karma” when she dances with a sword. She cuts the threads tied to the patient’s body to symbolically sweep away afflictions.

Most literature indicates that the spirit medium is an ex-patient (Hien 2008, 309-312, Tanabe 2002, 59-61). Kato (1995) demonstrates the development of the kinship between the medium and the patients. Once the illness is cured, the initiation ritual will be performed for the patient to become a disciple. There is a condition for the patient that after recovering, she should enlist in the spirit cult and become a disciple. The disciple is promised the protection of phi fa, the sky spirit, in the long run. The disciple’s duty is to facilitate the medium to cure other patients in the healing ritual. Once she is expert and chosen by phi fa through possession, she becomes a master medium (Kato 1995, 101-103).

The recent flourishing of spirit mediumship in globalizing Thailand and Southeast Asia challenges the Weberian concept of the disenchantment of supernaturalism in modern society (see Weber 1971). In the past few decades, anthropological research has reported on the proliferation of spirit cults in many parts of Thailand (Pattana 1999, Irvine 1984) and other Southeast Asian countries (Endres 2011, O’Lemmon 2014, Evans 1998, 74). Such studies show how supernaturalism contests and complementarily coexists with world religions and new religious movements (Cannell 1999, Bertrand 2004, Hayashi
The change of political economy after the Cold War—the emergence of capitalism and market-oriented forces—to a certain degree makes the flourishing of supernaturalism possible (Jackson 1997, Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006). The literature contributes to an argument on re-enchantment and brings the term “spirited modernities” into discussion (Lauser and Endres 2011).

The financial crisis of 1997 in Thailand and Southeast Asia together with the occidental idea of postmodernity paved the way for a new anthropological enquiry into spirit mediumship in Thailand. Political-economy and cultural representations are domains in which anthropologists increasingly situate their research of spirit cults. Pattana Kitiarsa (1999, 3-15) observed the efflorescence of urban spirit cults in contemporary Thailand. He studied the unofficial voices around mediumship in Bangkok and Khorat, arguing that the rise of this phenomenon can be seen as a crisis of modernity or a postmodernization of Thai religion, which he characterizes an ongoing sociocultural and religious experience in late twentieth-century Thailand. He contends that the exceptional rise of urban spirit mediumship and personality cults in Thailand in the 1980s and the 1990s represents a radical turn in the process of modernity in which religious rationalization and centralization were rivaled by capitalist forces and a desire for symbolic and material wealth.

These anthropological approaches that focus on the social, cultural and historical contexts in which mediumship is embedded offer many valuable tools for understanding spirit mediumship in contemporary Thai society. However, in their concern to offer a totalizing explanation for this phenomenon, such approaches might overlook crucial characteristics of spirit mediumship that are bound up in bodily performance, ritual experience and everyday life practices. Singing, dancing, movements, and multisensory experiences are central to practice in spirit cults. Clothes, ritual articles, participants, and places are indispensable in order to achieve ritual efficacy. Examining the ways in which the body is imagined and interacts with others and its environment in ritual practice offers insights into personhood, power, healing and community. My ethnographic account suggests that it would be misleading if we omit the realms of experience, performance, and material ontology from the study of spirit mediumship. I therefore shift from the arena of socio-political functionality and cultural representations to more
bodily, material, and mundane registers of spirit mediumship to understand Thai religiosity and ritual praxis in the early twenty-first century.

**Spirit mediumship and embodiment**

In the last few decades, anthropological studies that concentrate on the body have proliferated. They reorient the investigation away from cognitive representations of experience and abstract semiotic models and instead prefer to look at bodily praxis (Halliburton 2002, Jackson 1983). They question how humans perceive the world and express themselves through the body and suggest that humans are acculturated through the body (Mauss 1973) and make some sense out of the world and their society through the metaphoric operations of the body (Douglas 1996, Turner 1967). Thomas Csordas (1990, 5) argues in his seminal essay *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology* that “the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture” (emphasis in original). From this methodological postulate, a paradigm of embodiment has developed that can be elaborated for the study of culture and the self.

The body has been a crucial subject in anthropological studies on spirit mediumship. A certain number of works identify the body as the central subject in trance possession and ritual. Rebecca Seligman (2005) questions the way in which psychological and mental health assumptions have dominated the theoretical landscape of becoming a medium. She uses a biocultural approach to study Candomblé, the Afro-Brazilian religion in Salvador, Brazil. She proposes an alternative model, in which the combination of social environments and somatic susceptibilities causes certain people to identify with the mediumistic role, and predisposes them to dissociate. However, Seligman argues that the dissociation is not a pathological experience, but a therapeutic process that benefits people with a strong tendency to somatize. Robert Desjarlais (1992a) studied the concept of “soul loss” in shamanistic practice of the Yolmo in Helambu, northeast of Kathmandu, Nepal. He produced an ethnographic account of Yolmo shamanic healing from the local form of experience of the body: the sensory, the visceral, and the unspoken. He suggests that to understand the phenomenological experience of what it feels like to grieve, to lose one’s spirit, and to be healed, we need to “sketch out the
political tensions and social formations that give rise to these bodily experiences” (Desjarlais 1992a, 32).

Bodily senses constitute the ground for perception of the world. Studies on spirit cults explore the meaning of being in the world in practitioners’ multisensory experiences. Paul Stoller (1992, 57) indicates that it is crucial for anthropologists to consider the body’s smells, tastes, textures and sensations in the societies in which Euro-centric notions of text and textual interpretations are not central. Stoller criticizes the tendency to consider possession rituals as discourse. He shows that this orientation leads to two major results: the failure to consider possession ceremonies’ association with history and the reproduction of the mind/body split found in discursive analysis at the expense of sensory analysis (Stoller 1992, 60).

Raquel Romberg (2012) studied the sensuous spirituality of healing and magic rituals in Puerto Rican witch-healing. She focuses on the way in which crafted gestures, meticulously manipulated objects, poetical words, and inspired music and dance create an inter-temporal and inter-ritual dramatic experience that is in itself healing. She suggests that ritual communications make participants aware of and moved by intangibles while also mobilizing them to take some form of action. Apart from their main purpose of healing, these processes create multisensory dramas to ignite the imagination, stir bodily senses, move emotions, and mobilize both participants and spirits to answer their pleas. She argues that corporeal aesthetics is the basis of the technologies of magical healing and is essential to their ethics, affectivity, and effectiveness.

Examination of the body in relation to the social context of spirit cults reveals the understanding of afflictions and gender relations. Bruce Kapferer (1983, 100-110) provides an explanation of the place of the body that brings about illness in Sinhalese culture. Women are more vulnerable to the attack of demons and ghosts than men because their bodies have regular contact with the objects of pollution: cooking, cleaning, funerals, menstruation, and childbirth. This female bodily position attracts demons and ghosts who are conceived of as being filthy and polluting creatures and tending to control human beings. Moreover, women are culturally constituted through everyday embodiment in the world where they incorporate emotional disturbance and
excess, difficulties in relationships, and cultural subordination. Furthermore, it should be noted that Sinhalese exorcisms are domestic or household rituals. So, women’s bodies and selves, associated with the domestic and the house, become the focus of the practice.

Within the anthropological literature, there is a growing account that associates the body with the experience of human beings. Marjorie Balzer (1981) provides clear insights into the way we consider the relationship between gender and power by taking the bodily dimensions of age and taboo into account. Women in Siberian shamanism are respected for their expertise in raising the family, knowledge of the mysteries of birth and death, midwifery, tattooing, and preparing bodies of the deceased. Interestingly, they become shamans when they get older.

The body of the practitioners in rituals become a transgressive domain of the concept of gender and sexuality. Barley Norton (2009, 71-72) emphasizes that for gay mediums, len dong (Vietnamese spirit mediumship) is a site where their sexual orientation is acknowledged as the aptitude to be possessed by female spirits and to act like women since there is not often a public discourse of homosexuality in Vietnamese law and society. Len dong performed in a transnational context seems to be more explicit in terms of gender transgression. Karen Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien (2011) explore Vietnamese spirit mediumship practiced in Vietnam and the US. They indicate that being mediums opens subjects to the negotiation of non-normative sexual orientations. Mediums, notably male, are claimed to have the root of a spirit of either genders. In the public sphere, people say an effeminate man is “womanly.” But in the spirit possession context, when he becomes a medium, other mediums say, “he has female spirit root.” They even greet each other by saying “Hello Miss” (Fjelstad and Hien 2011, 86-87).

Ana Bacigalupo (2004, 443) presents a case of a medium in Chile which outstandingly accounts for the transgression of gender lines in everyday life through the ritual body. She studies a male transgendered shaman’s identity in relation to the normative gender ideologies of Catholicism, shamanic lore, the Mapuche, and dominant Chilean society. Martha, formerly Bernardo, invents her divine heterosexual womanhood by combining local and national feminine personas: the Virgin Mary, her great-grandmother spirit, a virgin nurse, a traditional female shaman etc. Martha seeks to become a woman on an everyday basis by dressing in woman’s clothes but it is reinterpreted as transvestitic
outside the ritual. However, “her husbands participated in her gender fiction, read her
gender as that of a heterosexual woman, and legitimated her as wife and mother”
(Bacigalupo 2004, 445-446).

Recently, the notion of body and memories in spirit mediumship has been intensively
discussed. The medium’s body becomes repertoire of ethnic groups’ memories
expressing historical past in particular societies. Lindsay Hale (1997) studies the
construction of *pretos velhos*—the old-slave spirits of the Umbanda or the spirit
possession religion. She considers *pretos velhos* as mediators connecting Umbanda
bodies with key themes of racism, national identity, domination, suffering, and
redemption in Brazilian collective memory and religious ideology. Hale depicts the
notion of “the body inscribed.” *Preto velho* suffering of slavery in the past has been
transmitted into the medium’s own body. The medium’s body, whose life is shared with
the poor, black residents of the shantytowns, is a reservoir of memory and feelings. The
memories of torture, slavery, and victimization have been stored in the body. Hale
proposes that these memories constitute the emotional raw material from which
Umbanditas form their old-slave spirits. So, the mediums perform emotional attachment
to their old-slave spirits, which represent history and national identity. Also, Stoller
(1994) considers the sentient body of the spirit medium in Songhay, the Republic of
Niger, as a repository of cultural memories. The horrific/comedic embodiment of the
ritual and its mimetic connection to colonial memories evokes the history of social
affliction. Songhay spirit possession is a sensuous domain of countermemory, which
makes it a stage for re-enactment of the experience through bodily practices—gestures,
sounds, odors, and tastes.

My ethnographic data on spirit mediumship and the body in Chaiyaphum are rich and
intriguing. In this thesis, I draw upon the anthropological literature on mediumship,
particularly that which focuses on ritual embodiment. Then, I analyze to what extent this
approach can be applied to the study of spirit mediumship in northeast Thailand. I am
concerned to know how certain local forms of social life shape the bodily and mental
structures through which life itself is understood (see Desjarlais 1992a, 32). As in
Desjarlais’s account, the main aim of healing in northeast illness is the lost soul. I am
interested in testing the idea of the lost soul as bodily experience in ritual life.
Significantly, studies of mediumship about the body revolve around gender and power
relations, sexuality, health, and illness. I aim to focus on the potential for understanding the medium’s bodily practice and knowledge which are already enacted through their “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1973) and “technologies of the self” (Rabinow 1994).

Space and time have been omitted in much of the scholarship on Thai spirit cults. Close examination of Chaiyaphum mediumistic practices through the body and ritual enactment casts light on the exuberant complexity and meaning of the two domains. Ethnographic studies on spirit mediums in Thailand have disregarded the centrality of the body. I intend to bring the body to the foreground of analysis. Isan spirit mediumship is primarily positioned in an oral-based or non-literate culture. Knowledge transmission from masters to disciples is based on bodily processes of learning and embodying. Thus, the methodological postulate of the body provides an apt lens for this study. The body becomes a crucial instrument for acquiring knowledge, communication, and power through visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile modalities.

**Ritual performance in spirit mediumship**

Why is ritual and religious life important? In his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Victor Turner (1969) contends that ritual practice is interrelated with social structure and social processes. Ritual is the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies. In Chaiyaphum, religious activities of spirit mediumship are highly significant in people’s lives. They constitute ways of life, attitudes, and social practices. Spirit shrines⁶ are placed at the center of people’s lives and relations. In the fields, peasants organize shrine worship (*liang phi na*—literally “worship spirits of the rice fields”) in order to secure their yield. They get possessed, sing, and dance to please the spirits. At home, a household shrine maintains family members’ wellbeing and human relationships. Family members invite spirit mediums to celebrate the household guardians. At governmental offices, hospitals, schools, colleges, and universities, spirit shrines provide care and protection over their jurisdictions. Spirit

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⁶ The single English phrase “spirit shrine” misses the diversity of local terms used to call the places where spirits reside. In Central Thai language and Isan dialect, we use *san* to mean spirit shrine located outside the house while we use *hing, han* (NE), or *hor*—all used by my informants—to mean an altar located in the house.
mediums run around in certain periods of the year to organize shrine worship for state officials. At the heart of the city stands the monument of Phaya Lae, the heroic figure and divine governor. The provincial authority organizes a big annual celebration at this location, as well as at his main shrine not far away. In both official rituals, spirit mediumship is indispensable.

Chaiyaphum people call themselves “children of Phaya Lae” (luk Phaya Lae) to associate themselves with the spirit of the heroic figure who existed in national history. The Phaya Lae cult is prominently characterized by ritual and performance. Luk Phaya Lae share the common idea that dancing is the best way to celebrate and please the deity (NE: lam thawai jao phor—literally “dance to honor the divine father”). So music and dancing have become the fundamental elements whenever there is a ritual organized to pay respect to the deity. Spirit mediums are the group of religious practitioners who are the exponents of Phaya Lae. People call them mor lam song—religious practitioners who enter trance and sing and dance. The word mor lam means those who have expertise in reciting chants and improvising lyrics. The word song in Thai language means “entering trance.” So, we might call spirit mediums in Thai language in different ways: khon song (a person who is possessed) or rang song (the body that is possessed). Their well-known characteristics are to sing and dance with the music of khaen—the bamboo mouth organ—which is a key symbol of Isan cultural identity.

Questions around the ritual enactment of spirit mediumship in contemporary Chaiyaphum inevitably set in train a number of related investigations into local sociality and political citizenship. How can we understand the subjectivities and self-identifications of villagers through ritual enactment? Ritual performances in spirit mediumship suggest that local identity is constructed under state formation. How then might the spectacle of subordination to a regional spirit found in Chaiyaphum mediumship relate to the concurrent identity of local mediums as citizens of the modern Thai nation-state?

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7 The local terms for spirit mediums account for the bodily performance. They might suggest the body of the mediums as the vehicle for the spirits. In Isan, mediums can be called nang thiam (lady who is harnessed). Northern Thai mediums are called ma khi (a horse who is ridden by the controlling spirit). In Vietnamese spirit cults, the medium is called “the seat for the spirits.”
The performative outlook of spirit mediumistic ritual has been subject to scrutiny. John Beattie (1977, 2) defines any ritual as “the performance of expressive acts” involving the use of symbols, with the underlying conviction that the performance will be causally effective. He says spirit mediumship is a form of dramatic art in its own right. In what sense is the mediumistic ritual a drama or performance? Edward Schieffelin’s (1996, 59-60) definition of performance brings fresh insight to a conceptualization of spirit practice. He thoroughly delineates performance, of interest to anthropologists, as “the creation of presence” where fresh enactments beguile, amuse, or terrify. It deals with the transformation of moods, attitudes, social statuses, and states of mind. In contrast to texts, performance is ephemeral. It creates effects and then is gone, leaving behind reverberation, for example, fresh insights, reconstituted selves, new statuses, and altered realities.

A large number of studies deal with mediumistic rituals in terms of performance and investigate its dramatic elements, for example, actors, spectacle, music, language and aesthetics. Anthropologists explore these elements in diverse cultures in which the manifestation and the meanings of ritual actions elucidate the particular logics and experiences of local people, society, and politics.

Anthropological works often regard the medium as a performer whose ritual achievement depends on his/her skills and power. Similar to a stage play actor, the medium is required to have artistic and expressive integrity: the spectacular movement of body, the pleasant sound of the projected voice, and the sustaining power that draws the audience’s attention and maintains the right unity of mood throughout the ritual. Schieffelin (1985, 1996) underscores the importance of the medium’s performative capacity among the Kululi people of Papua New Guinea. The medium calls upon a parade of spirits to heal the patients and find the lost pigs. The spectacle happens when villagers gather at the nighttime ritual and interview the spirits of nature and the spirits of the dead. They know each spirit’s characteristics and can identify them from the performance of the medium. So, the medium must be adept at performing multiple characters and composing as many as 30 new songs during a performance, each one with a different set of underlying implications (Schieffelin 1985, 714). The medium’s body and movement are tremendously crucial for ritual actions. Mattijs van de Port (2006, 445) examines Camdomblé—an Afro-Brazilian spirit possession cult I mentioned
earlier on page 11—where the human body in performative action is held in high esteem and believed to gain access to the mysterious deep knowledge. For Vietnamese spirit mediumship, “correct movements and facial expressions are constitutive of proper performance” (Endres 2006, 91).

Two ethnographic works examine the failure of possession ritual. The major cause is from the medium’s lack of performative ability. Schieffelin (1996, 62) analyzes an event that was in part a performative failure in which the principal Kululi medium was forced to leave the ritual due to his mediocre performance. He discusses the risks of performing in spirit rituals and says the medium must master his creation of “performative authority” (1996, 80). It should be noted here that it is insufficient to generalize Kululi spirit mediumship from the perspective of Euro-American theatricality. Schieffelin demonstrates the performative localization and the indigenous meaning of ritual drama. He argues that for the Kululi, the performer is the spirit, not the medium. The interaction between the spirit and the audience is not a theatrically created imaginative reality, but rather a sort of cultural specific type of interview (1996, 82). Laurel Kendall (1996) also illustrates the failure of a Korean shaman in her initiating ritual. It is the ability to perform that she lacks. By the senior shamans’ logic, she cannot perform because she does not give herself to the flow of inspiration invoked by drum beats, dancing, costumes, and by their own guidance (1996, 50).

In ritual, the role of the audience has largely been ignored (Kapferer 1983, 183). What agendas does the audience have when it participates in the ritual? Do they evaluate the medium’s performance? The role of the audience is important in the Kululi ritual (Schieffelin 1985, 707-720). Spirit mediums alone cannot construct and articulate every day and cosmological reality. Together with the audience, they co-create a reality that re-contextualizes particular social circumstances and enables action to be taken in regard to them. Kapferer (1983, 181-191) suggests that the meaning of Sinhalese exorcism is progressively disclosed in its performance because of the engagement of the audience. They reposition themselves in readiness to be re-contextualized in the symbolic world of the patient and placed in process with the patient. The active role of the audience in spirit mediumship is testified. Firth (1967, 179) raises a significant role of the audience as the medium’s external control. In the healing ritual of Kelantan in Malaysia, family members, neighbours, and kinfolk “sit around and by their behaviour help to channel the
medium’s expressions and acts in the desired direction.” The audience living several miles away in other villages participate. They compare and criticize mediums in terms of singing (1967, 201). Endres (2006, 92) clearly reports that the audience in len dong, Vietnamese spirit mediumistic ritual, will criticize the medium if he/she does not follow the “regulations of the spirits,” assuming the wrong facial expression or bodily posture.

Some of the literature explores music and songs in the spirit mediumship that play the function of momentum, driving the ritual actions forward. Music and songs have the capacity to bring about the realm of mental transformation and move the heart-soul so that bodily possession of the spirit is conceivable (Kapferer 1983, 181, Norton 2009, 113). They expose in some part the ritual mechanism that regulates sequential events and ritual actions. Norton (2009) shows that the “songscape” or sequence of songs in Vietnamese spirit mediumship manifests the incarnation of a spirit and reflects the identity and ritual actions of the embedded spirit. Likewise, the music of the Main Peteri—the Malay shaman’s séance—conducts the audience into the realm of the sacred, transitions the shaman from one persona to the next, and helps the patient into and out of trance (Laderman 1996, 132). Song content and the sound of music connote nostalgia and the pathos of the place. Songs bring the Kululi’s divided attention together and enable them to speak with the spirits of the dead or the spirits of the land (Schieffelin 1985, 713). Stoller (1996) explores indigenous musical instruments performed in shamanic rituals of the Songhay in the Republic of Niger. The godji, monochord violin, and the gasi, gourd drum, are sacred and should not be played on non-sacred occasions. The sound links the Songhay to the past and their ancestors (Stoller 1996, 174).

Like dramatic performance, mediumship features certain actions embroidered in storytelling. To what extent are the medium’s ritual actions prescribed? Are there scripts or texts that direct the medium’s performance? Jeffrey Alexander (2004, 530) proposes that “symbolic reference” provides the background of collective representations for social performance at one part. Another part composes the foreground—the referential script or text of action. Some anthropologists explore the source where the spirit medium derives the referential scripts and how he/she associates with them. S. Simon John (2008) inspects the role of shamanistic rituals in the worship of Sudalai—a folk deity of the Kaniyan in Tamil Nadu, South India. The Kaniyan are untouchables, a low status in
the social hierarchy. The rituals are enactments of myth to legitimate their claim of divine origins. Kapferer indicates that the ritual actions in Sinhalese exorcism deal with the enactment or execution of a “cultural text” invented from local myth and Buddhism (1983, 187). Kendall (1996) also verifies that the afflicted Korean shamans construct the logic of their story from a history of family crisis and fortune then the story is enacted and interacted with performatively. Kunimitsu Kawamura (2003, 263) indicates the formulated concept of spirit possession as performative communication by contesting that “possession is based on a belief that is socially constructed through the interaction between the religious practitioners themselves and their clients, as well as people around them.”

Apart from individual identity, anthropologists have demonstrated how spirit mediumship may be involved in contesting the identity and history of marginalized or minor groups in the nation-state. Ritual fundamentally creates a sense of community. The performative process in ritual events creates a symbol of what Kapferer (1983, 207-215) calls “we-relationship,” causing the sense of community or communitas. Music in Vietnamese len dong mediates people and places. Through songs, the mediums make connection with spirits associated with different parts of the state and with ethnic minorities in the remote northern and central mountainous regions (Norton 2009, 129). Temiars in Kelantan, Malaysia, have marginalized and traumatic experiences of living among other major ethnic groups. Their ritual practices are social healings and address the scars of history (Roseman 1996). In Thailand, the practices of spirit mediumship function as the marker of the historical past through state formation. Michael Rhum (1994, 5) reports that Yuan or northern Thai mediums typically dress up in clothes resembling a Burmese man’s costume and are processed by Lords of Ava, historical figures of Burma. They are believed to be the Ancestral Lords in Ban Com Ping, the location where Rhum conducted his research. Both in Thailand and the United States, the performances of Hmong shamans are a vital and contested part of the current refugee diaspora and struggle for identity (Conquergood 1992, 42). In many parts of the United States, especially Chicago, shamanic performance significantly restores Hmong identity and functions as a marker of resistance to Christianization (Conquergood 1992, 50-53).

Some literature indicates how spirit mediumistic practice actively engages in national identity and describes transnational concerns in legitimating its people’s identity. Barley
Norton (2002) examines how Pre-Renovation Vietnam’s political and cultural forces have impacted on *len dong* and *chau van* music. The state set in train the anti-superstition campaign to eliminate mediumship and transform *chau van* from “superstitious product” to “cultural product” promoting revolutionary socialism. However, from Revolution, *doi moi*, in the mid-1980s onward, possession practices and spirit music have been promoted in the official discourse of cultural tradition and national identity. Spirit mediums justify their activities as the remembrance of historical figures who had sacrificed their lives for the Vietnamese nation. In 1998, The Party permitted the Phu Giay festival—an event held annually to commemorate the death day of the First Mother Spirit, one of the most revered spirits of the pantheon in *len dong*. Official policy was explicitly declared by the banners slogan “promote the cultural character of the nation.” Likewise, by the early 1980s, *zar*—an African spirit cult—was becoming publicly identified with traditional Sudanese culture. The performance in trances and rituals was televised through media events (Kenyon 1995, 115).

Morris (2000, 107-121) looks at the practices of spirit mediums in Chiang Mai as the theatricalized miniaturization of northern socio-political order in line with the globalized history of a nation. She suggests that the architectural and bodily performance in the exterior spatial domain literalizes the logic of “both order and its dissipation, of masculinity and its effeminization, of national unity and the fear of displacement” (emphasis in original) (Morris 2000, 121).

In Chaiyaphum, there are two spirit houses (*san*) in one family. One is the usual residence of the Hindu guardian spirit (*san phra phum*); another is a local version of spirit protector that is generated in the mediumistic belief system and provincial spirit pantheon (*san jao thi*).8 When a new spirit house for the spirit protector in a household’s yard is raised, the medium identifies a spirit that will come to stay at the spirit house. The medium names and characterizes the spirit so that the households can have shared information about the protector: what should they call the spirit; what he/she looks like;

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8 In general, Thais interchangeably use *san jao thi* and *san phra phum* to mean the spirit house in which the guardian spirit resides. Linguistically, *jao thi* are the Thai terms meaning lord of the land/space while *phra phum* are Pali/Sanskrit adapted terms referring to a deity in Buddhist cosmology who protects the land or area. In Chaiyaphum, a spirit medium told me *san jao thi* is the shrine where a localized protective spirit is invited to live to take care of the patient and households.
how to interact with him/her. Then, the spirit medium directs and demonstrates how to please the new member of the house to protect their health and chase away bad luck. The characterization of the spirit in Chaiyaphum is remarkable and different from other areas of northeast Thailand where the practice of naming of spirits is uncommon. Outside the household domain, there are many spirits of the places that villagers share in their experience: spirits of the forest, spirits in the temple, and spirits who rule the land, and some have names while others do not. Spirit mediums usually pick up some names from Isan tales or Buddhist stories that they learn from the monastic chants. The interaction between human beings and these spirits can be observed through ritual enactment.

The performative authority in Chaiyaphum that brings about ritual efficacy does not rely only on the mediums’ mastery of performing but also tightly depends on the individual medium’s morality as observed by the community in their everyday life. Thus, the enactment in ritual domain and everyday social experience cannot be separated. Moreover, the role of the disciples and the audience of mediumship is often omitted in studies of spirit possession in Thailand. Do they play an important role in the trance activity and affect the way the spirits speak, act, and interact? To what extent does the moment of interaction between the spirits and the audience influence human relationships? How does music communicate northeast identity under the Thai state? Chaiyaphum spirit mediums report that they gain power and knowledge from their spirits and deities. How can we unpack this explanation? My research project intends to examine the dimension of ritual enactment in spirit mediumship that is left unattended by some scholars. I aim to illuminate the meanings of power, sociality, and the body through ritual performance with the aim to better understand the relationship between mediumistic practice and Isan society.

Through these three thematic installments in my survey of the literature, I consider the body and ritual enactment essential constituents to effectively explore the performative, embodied nature of Isan spirit mediumship.

This study is about the ritual life of those who are involved in spirit mediumship in northeast Thailand. It tells the stories of the specialists, their ideas, practices, as well as their relations with humans and the world. In the thesis title, I deliberately use the
keyword “performing” both literally and conceptually. By literally, I highlight the characterization of the mediums. They conduct ritual by performing. I call them, as they call themselves, “mor lam song”—the specialists who sing and dance after entering trances. Singing and dancing are essential to the efficacy of their rituals. Throughout the following chapters, the vivid and dramatic nature of mor lam’s ritual performance will be illustrated. Conceptually, the term “performing” enables me to analyze mediumistic concepts and practices in the social, political and economic context of contemporary northeastern Thai society. I form my arguments around an ethnographic analysis of power, performance, embodiment, gender, kinship, healing and religiosiy in this setting.

Setting: Chaiyaphum Province in Isan

My field research was conducted in Chaiyaphum Province in northeast Thailand, 332 kilometres or an approximately four-hour drive up from Bangkok. The province has sixteen districts and ranks third in size in the northeast region and seventh in the country. About fifty per cent of the landscape is forests and mountains including four national parks. The remaining parts are flat and upland. Chaiyaphum is divided into two parts by the Phetchabun mountain range that runs through the center of the province from east to west. The east part of the province is on the Khorat Plateau. Winter, summer, and the rainy season influence people’s agricultural and ritual life. Spirit mediums conduct rituals of healing and shrine worship all year round but some of them stop in the rainy season when peasants start harvesting. Their retreat corresponds to the Buddhist calendric interval of Buddhist Lent from July to October during which monks stop travelling and reside in only one temple.
Historically, Chaiyaphum people are of Laotian ethnic descent from Vientiane in Laos (Toem 2003, 16). They speak a distinctive Lao dialect. But nowadays when the province is growing, people from nearby areas migrate to the province, especially Chinese ethnic groups that have moved in following the expansion of roads and railways in the northeast region since the late twentieth century. Their first language is Isan, a dialect of Lao language. The majority of people still make their living in the agrarian domains: paddy field, crop plants, and fruit plantations. The population number surveyed in 2013 is 1,127,423 (Office of Information 2013). Even though the province is large in terms of area and population, my focus locations will be in the area of Muang Chaiyaphum and nearby districts where spirit mediumship rituals have been intensively practiced.
In 1922, the Bangkok government officially designated the term “Isan”, the Pali word meaning the northeast direction, to distinguish the Lao under its control from the French Lao (Dararat 2003, 19). “Isan” as it is used today consists of multiple meanings: the region, its people, culture, and language. Isan is positioned on the periphery of the national politics, economy, and culture but not religion. However, its people have struggled for a better livelihood by engaging with labor markets in state industry and global migration. The name given by the Thai state has been problematic in some occasions in which it has been used. In contrast to the original intention of government polity, the meaning of Isan as a regional identity is relative to the context in which it is used and can be shifted by users to reflect their relationships with others (Hayashi 2003, 48). To a certain degree, it connotes the region’s inferiority to other parts of the state in terms of ethnicity, culture, and economy. When they speak their local language, they call themselves as khon Isan—Isan people. Even though they have ethno-linguistic characteristics similar to the Lao, khon Isan comply with Thai bureaucratic project to differentiate themselves from the Lao. In this thesis, I will use “Isan” to refer to the people who live in the northeast region, and their language and culture.

Around the early twentieth century, the Bangkok government began moulding Isan people into the notion of nationhood through legitimated institutions and intensive administration. One of the important institutions was education, initiated by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910), making northeast people aware of their inclusion within a Thai nation-state (Keyes 1967, 19). Linguistically, the Lao language was restricted in schools. It was the central Thai government’s way to “dilute Lao identity” by replacing “Tai-Lao language of the northeast region with the Bangkok Thai dialect” (Holt 2009, 10). Other institutions the Bangkok government introduced to the region were the military, police, elections, public ceremonies etc., which in some ways affected Isan people’s everyday life. Besides establishing new institutions, the centralization of the state’s bureaucratic administration had a huge impact on Isan livelihood. This scheme repressed both local elites and villagers. “Many of the traditional cao muang rulers with their local roots and local bases of power were replaced by central Thai officials with more ties to Bangkok than to the provinces and districts to which they were posted” (Keyes 1967, 17). For villagers, taxation was obligatory. It caused financial difficulties since most of them were self-sufficient and rarely used currency (Suwit 2006, 85, Keyes 1977, 294). As a result, there were
religiously inspired millenarian movements led by the holy men (*phu mi bun*) to rebel against the Bangkok court, intensively at the turn of the twentieth century (Baird 2013, Wilson 1997, Keyes 1977). By the end of the twentieth century, Lao people in the northeast became politically and economically subordinated to the Bangkok government.

Historically, the central Bangkok government indoctrinated the Lao in the northeast region with elite Buddhism, the state religion, replacing their indigenous beliefs. The area on the Khorat Plateau “was baptized as Thai by the state and, religiously, was incorporated within the state’s religious policy by the central Bangkok government at the beginning of the twentieth century” (Hayashi 2003, 100). As I have mentioned, Hayashi defines this program as “Buddhicization”. This type of spiritual hegemony has suppressed indigenous knowledge. For example, students, novices, and monks were prohibited to study Isan dharma scripts, religious texts recorded with the localized alphabets (Suwit 2006, 94) which preserved and transmitted knowledge of Lao Buddhism. Moreover, a central government ordinance in 1929 decreed the abolition of spirit beliefs in regional areas and the propagation of obedience to Bangkok Buddhism (Hayashi 2003, 292). One question arises: how have these subaltern indigenous knowledge and spirit beliefs survived? It should be noted that even though there is a wide range of contemporary studies on spirit cults in Isan nowadays, very little attention has been paid to how they have negotiated with the state’s power and in what ways they have transformed into their existing configuration. The question will lead to the understanding of the production of twenty-first century spirit mediumship.

Why is Chiyaphum suitable for the study of spirit mediumship? Chaiyaphum is an area where the Thai state’s polity and local spirit power noticeably coexist in its jurisdiction. People live their ritual life in relation to Buddhism and spirit cults. In Chaiyaphum, there is a wide range of renowned spirits that people worship. The supreme deity who rules the spiritual landscape of the province is *Phaya Lae*. He is one of the highly revered spirits in the mediums’ pantheon who comes down to possess them and chase away villagers’ sufferings. Pramot Thatsanasuwan, a renowned contributor to Thai culture and tourism, writes “*Phaya Lae* is the one who constructed the history of Chaiyaphum” (1982, 5). Local settlement narratives around the early nineteenth century revolve around the story of *Phaya Lae*, the heroic figure who later became the provincial
founder and the revered emblem of the community. His story has been incorporated into Thai national history. Provincial organizations arrange two annual festivals at his monument and main shrine to commemorate his acts of bravery and loyalty to the state. Among the various groups of people who come to worship Phaya Lae in both activities are spirit mediums.

Other figures that Chaiyaphum people worship are the spirits of the numerous powerful Buddha statues, Hindu gods and goddesses, and territorial spirits. Besides this, they worship Ong⁹ Tue—the ancient Buddha statue in Sila-art temple (phu phra) in Muang Chaiyaphum District. The temple is the center point of the regular meetings four times a year in which all mediums in the province worship the Buddha statue to renew their power and to reunite the spirit community. Interestingly, this relationship with the Buddhist temple and the Buddha statue redefines these mediums’ identity and determines their practices. A number of Chaiyaphum spirit mediums imitate monks’ practices in their everyday life and restrain from breaking some taboos corresponding with some of Buddhist precepts. They even dress up in yellow, the colour of monk robes, in their rituals and declare their superior Buddhism-based power. Sometimes they are called mor lam Phu Phra (the practitioner of the Buddha statue on the hill). My key informants are spirit mediums who subscribe themselves to the local pantheon where Phaya Lae rules spiritual bureaucracy and Ong Tue presides over the domain of popular Buddhism.

**Methodology**

This research project is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork—from April 2012 to March 2013—in Chaiyaphum Province, northeast Thailand. In the first month, I began my ethnographic journey at the Phaya Lae Shrine in the provincial city center on the occasion of the Sixth Lunar Month Festival, a weeklong celebration organized to commemorate the celebrated deity. There, I observed several mediumistic networks and introduced myself to some master mediums (NE: khuba; CT: khruba) selected according to criteria for a variety in age, gender, and socio-economic status. With the benefit of

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⁹ *Ong* is a title and classifier for sacred and royal beings.
Isan kinship and its inclusive nature, my identity as *luk* Isan (a child of the northeast region), and my ability to speak Isan dialect, I was embraced into these circles. In Chaiyaphum, it is not unusual that people associate each other with kin terms. I called senior spirit mediums and disciples *mae* (mother) and *phor* (father). They call me O, my nickname. Thais usually have two names: a nickname and a given name. In quotidian settings, nicknames create informality and intimacy.

*Figure 3  Map of districts of Chaiyaphum Province*
After this period of observation, I started following and engaging with male and female mediums and their networks in both everyday life and ritual practices. I became one of the members of their entourage in healing rituals. Patients and their family members who were at the rituals did not feel awkward at my presence. I often used my mobile phone to record the scenes, a practice that family members of the patients also did, and which was not discouraged by mediums. In the healing setting, I would sit with the patient’s families and other attendants and chat with them. They shared intimate, private matters of the patient and the family. Before and after the healing process, I had conversations with the patient. Isan villagers do not feel offended to share their personal stories because, to some extent, it is the way they can release their suffering and life difficulties into the form of narrative. Also, there is no strict public discourse or social perception of privacy in Isan society. When we finished the healing ritual and were about to leave, the patient’s family often put some banknotes in my hands after distributing envelopes of money to the mor lam song and their assistants.

Since the mediums are required to travel to heal the patient at his house, the car I borrowed from my brother made it possible to do multi-sited ethnography. I became a chauffeur, transporting mediums and their entourage to their patients’ and devotee-customers’ places. While I was driving, the car provided a space for sharing reciprocal information. Conflicts, secrets, gossip, and mediumistic knowledge were passed back and forth. I sometimes drove mediums from different networks to meet each other in pilgrimage sites or at their houses. Their conversations broadened and deepened my understanding of comparative notions and practices.

Ritual is the major domain where I learned about ideas and practices of Chaiyaphum spirit mediumship. Isan villagers are not resentful of an outsider’s interest in their ritual processes and are well prepared to admit to its performances anyone who treats their beliefs with respect. Many khuba told me they were upset when some researchers approached and asked them to “act out” ritual for them to record and observe. The khuba emphasized that they could only conduct ritual when villagers need help. I formed intimate relationships with them through both ritual participation and everyday engagement. Sometimes, khuba even called me to join the rituals that they were about to conduct. I became aware that a close look at the ritual complex provided a grasp of
quotidian sociality: economic activities, livelihood, conflict, social dynamics, and political forces. I learned about the mediums’ everyday lives, the way they lived their lives with family members, neighbors, and disciples. I observed the way they relied on morality inspired by Buddhism and ascetic practices. I realized the way they spent money that they received from their customer-devotees. Outside mediumistic circles, I set up a series of interviews with local monks, politicians, officials, and people in everyday settings. I learned a lot from the interviews and I made some visits to temples, markets, provincial offices, and local hospitals to grasp the wider social contexts.

Anthropologists have long made use of the method of life history collection in ethnographic research. Life history provides information about the particularities of people’s experiences under their conditions and specific cultural settings. As my ethnographic questions aim to understand spirit mediums’ experiences and local people’s religious worldview, life history research offers the way of exploring both individual lives and collective cultural constructs. Then, to analyze and interpret the collected life histories, I propose to consider them as ethnographic events in which my informants and I conduct a collaborative act in constructing the narratives. For the life history method, the relationship of the informant and anthropologist is crucial. Life history is a collaboration projection produced by both of them. Ethnographic life history is a dialogic discourse that my informants and I co-create. It will illuminate the voices and experiences of the informants, embracing my analysis of social and cultural circumstances in the locality.

**Thesis outline**

Subsequent to this Introduction, the thesis has five core chapters, followed by a conclusion. Chapter One examines the way in which Isan identity is constructed in relation to the ritual enactment of the local spirit cults. Isan subjectivity has been extensively explored through political and economic lenses. This chapter aims to look at neglected religious experiences and ritual performances that crucially manufacture a local version of personhood. The spectacular performance of social memory and historical commemoration constitutes present identity. I argue that ritual enactment around the *Phaya* Lae cult enables the people to perceive their subjectivity under the
Thai regime where the deity is integrated into the historical imagination of the state. I argue further that this local ritual performance sustains Thailand as a “theater state” in which power and prestige are maintained by ritual enactments both in everyday life and ceremonious events. Through mediumship, I contend, the periphery draws charisma from the central Thai state and in turn ritually sustains the potency of the centre.

In Chapter Two, I seek to document and develop an ethnographic analysis of spirit cults and Isan kinship. It raises the main question: how does mediumistic practice re-craft human relationships? The chapter suggests that the Isan spirit cult is the religion of those who are excluded from descent groups. Given the idiosyncratic regional sociality of mobility, the spirit cult is not an indicator of kinship continuity but a marker of social rupture of descent groups. The chapter argues that the turbulent, divergent and contingent constitution of Isan social groups in the villages finds resonance in the synthetic and substitutionary nature of spirit cult composition in Chaiyaphum. Spirit mediums are not representatives of a cult of ancestral spirits. Rather, they acquire a significant task of being masters of Isan’s “spiritual polities” and resynthesize linkages between old kin and new.

Chapter Three explores how spirit mediumship expands our understanding of Isan sexuality in relation to the Thai state. It argues that spirit mediumship is the crucial ground for the enactment of heterogeneous modes of sexuality and desire that exceed the limits set by the Thai modernist project. Under the state’s project of heteronormative domestication, women are inducted as subjects of conjugal desire and sexuality is tied to the production of offspring in the household. Ritual performance by spirit mediums materially vocalize an expanded and more diverse repertoire of desire and offer new frameworks for sexual identifications. Launched into projects of extra-domestic nurturance, mediums become linchpins holding together the community. The mediums draw in spirit partners and work with them to reconfigure and solidify Isan sociality. This chapter shows that the sexual and the spiritual constitute a key dualism in local religiosity.

Chapter Four examines the materialistic dimension of khwan or embodied experience and deals with its presence in illness and healing. I suggest that khwan represents a person’s phenomenological existence and is central to the domains of boundary
containment, social nurturance, and equilibrium. I argue that khwan anchors bodies; both khwan and bodies are anchored in families, which in turn are anchored in particular localities. These embedded anchorings give people a degree of control over themselves and, potentially, others. When control—especially control of the body—is in crisis, people attend to the crisis through intensified, multisensory, and intersubjective ritual practices focused on recovering khwan. Spirit mediums are successful in healing by identifying, locating, and capturing what is bodily disemplaced in these processes. They re-domesticate and re-center the Isan body. Mediumistic healing and khwan calling excite intercorporeal re-engagement between the patient and the participants.

Chapter Five challenges understandings of the relationship between Buddhism and spirit mediumship delineated in some Thai studies scholarship which conceptualizes this relationship as one of presumed functional, social and spatial segregation and of hierarchy. I argue that Buddhism and local spirit cults in Isan coexist in a mutually constituted and reciprocal relationship. Their statuses cannot be separated but are unbounded, interpenetrated, and interdependent. Exploring the practices of monks, mediums and medium-monsks, the chapter shows that this relationship can be represented as a form of “religious mutualism.” Chaiyaphum Buddhism cannot be comprehended without factoring in the sustaining and enlivening contributions made to this institution by spirit mediumship. The reverse is also true as mediums are inspired in numerous ways by the formats and identities of Buddhism. Furthermore, this kind of relationship can be characterized as one in which hierarchies between state Buddhism and local spirit cults are not unilineal and fixed but are shown to be transposable and inverted in religiously significant junctures.

In the Conclusion, I draw on the findings and arguments presented in the preceding chapters to underscore the crucial importance of the body and its enactment in ritual. Regarding the position of spirit mediumship in Isan society it shows that the spirit cult finds its efficacy in the transbodily domain of human agency and at the intersection of diverse religious practices in a society undergoing profound transformation. Explored through the lens of the body and the performance, we see that spirit mediumship constitutes, diversifies and enlivens Isan religiosity, power, livelihood, wellbeing and social identity.
Chapter 1

Personhood and State Polities through Ritual Enactment

In the heart of Chaiyaphum city, the Phaya Lae monument stands prominently at the roundabout where two main roads meet. He is encircled by the buildings of the provincial bureaucracy: the city hall, provincial court, police station, culture office, and school. He turns his face southward to Bangkok as a sign of loyalty to the Thai monarchy and nation. The logic underlying this orientation shows the place of centralization and urbanization in Thai modern state-building whereby urban monuments such as this present allegiance to the Bangkok court (see Johnson 2011). Phaya Lae’s soaring monument functions as the Chaiyaphum city pillar (lak mueang) and is central to provincial power. According to Barend J. Terweil (1978, 159), lak mueang represents provincial authority under modern Bangkok’s effective control and also involves the religious practices connected with the local guardian spirit reminiscent of an attitude towards a seat of political power. In his ethnography of a northern Thai village, Andrew Walker (2012) suggests that lak mueang is closely associated with chiefly power. He reports that an old “lucky” tree where the shrine of the guardian spirit is located is considered the lak mueang of the village. He concludes that supernatural power’s aristocratic splendor is internally re-created. “The presence of these protective spirits is a clear sign of the ability of villagers to draw seemingly remote forms of power and authority into local domains and to replicate the trappings of chiefly authority” (Walker 2012, 104).

According to official history, Phaya Lae was a Laotian chief who led his group of people from Vientiane to migrate to the Khorat Plateau in the early nineteenth century. He sought political protection from the Bangkok court in the reigns of King Rama II and King Rama III. In a battle against an invading Laotian army led by Jao Anuwong, Phaya Lae was killed. His courageous act of defense was praised. He is recognized as the first governor of Chaiyaphum province and the local heroic figure (Toem 2003, 16-17). My informants told me different versions of his life narrative. They connected him to the Thai state, associated him with provincial history, and identified him as their
possessing spirit, as general, father, or husband. Nowadays, Phaya Lae has become the divine ruler in the local cosmology and the supreme deity in mediumistic practice. He shares similar authority and auratic power as other Southeast Asian heroic figures: Jao Luang Kham Daeng in Lanna (Johnson 2014), Ya Mo in Khorat (Keyes 2002), and Tran Hung Dao in Vietnam (Pham 2009). They governed their political polities in the past and emerge to administer spiritual polities in the present.

The image of Phaya Lae is reproduced in the public domain through intensive celebrations arranged by provincial organizations. The two main annual occasions are the Jao Phor Phaya Lae Festival and Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair in January, held at the monument, and the Sixth Lunar Month Festival in May, held at his main shrine at Norng Pla Thao Public Park. During both week-long occasions, people participate in a wide array of spectacular performances and social events: marching processions, competitions of giant votive flower offerings, concerts, shows and temporary markets. In every part of Thailand, similar seasonal celebrations are held in remembrance of local heroic figures. In such events the past is made present and is re-enchanted through spectacles and performance. The spectacular performance of social memory and historical commemoration constitutes local identities in the present.

Figure 4 Phaya Lae monument in Mueang Chaiyaphum

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This chapter examines the way in which the people’s subjectivity is manufactured through ritual life around the Phaya Lae cult. Prior studies have discussed Isan identity from social, political and economic perspectives (Hesse-Swain 2011, Keyes 2014, McCargo and Krisadawan 2004). However, Isan religious experience and ritual enactment—which crucially form a local version of personhood—have been largely understudied. With the benefit of ethnographic investigation, I clearly see the way in which the local people actively and creatively define themselves in relation to local and national religio-political power. First, I argue that Chaiyaphum personhood implies the duality of religious and political subjection in relation to the Phaya Lae cult. On the religious side, people submit themselves to the spiritual power of the supreme deity in
local cosmology. They ask him for protective power. Monks, spirit mediums and laypeople are under his spiritual territorialization and jurisdiction. On the political side, ritual enactment around the Phaya Lae cult enables the people to perceive their subjectivity under Thai sovereignty where Phaya Lae is embodied into the historical imagination of the state. My second argument extends to the way in which the local affective power of ritual enactment entangles with the state. By revisiting the frameworks of “theater state” and “galactic polities,” I suggest that we can identify Thailand as a ritual state. State political order and Isan peripheral religious power are mutually constitutive. The mandala-type power of the Thai charismatic state is perceived to radiate out from the center, but its charismatic potency and power are ritually maintained by the work done at the periphery.

**Isan personhood and state performance**

When Thais use the terms “luk Isan” (children of Isan),10 luk khao-niao (children of glutinous rice) and khon khai raeng-ngan (people who sell their labor), they specifically mean those who come from the northeast region. These terms have a collective nationwide connotation that defines Isan personhood and subjectivity in a particular way. They refer to impoverished peasants in the region who have encountered life difficulties, unjust political and economic opportunities, and labor mobility in the hope of a better life. We learn about these circumstances from scholarship on Isan identity from social, political and economic points of view but we lack foundational knowledge of how Isan personhood is rooted in the religious domain. Chaiyaphum people regard Phaya Lae as their divine lord-cum-father. They call themselves “luk Phaya Lae” (children of Phaya Lae). What do they mean when they call themselves this? How does one become luk Phaya Lae? And to what extent does the informed subjectivity that is performed through the body and ritual constitute regional identity in relation to the state?

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10 *Luk Isan* is also the title of a famous novel written by Khamphun Bunthawi, a man from the northeast region. It revolves around the main character, Khun, who is a child of a poor family. The novel portrays the hardships of life in an Isan village in the 1930s based on the writer’s experiences.
Ritual performance is a practice by which aspects of personhood and subjectivity are constructed. Lauren G. Leve (2002) studied the politics of Newar personhood in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal prior to the movement for democracy in 2006. She points out that Theravada Buddhists distinguish themselves from Vajrayana Buddhists and Hindus by corporeal practice and ritual performance where their casteless, egalitarian and intellectual subjectivity is created. Leve exemplifies her point with the practice of Theravada vipassana meditation. She observes that vipassana meditation “reconfigures its practitioners’ bodies as sites of realization and truth and, in the process, offers a different conception of personhood and self that implies changed understandings of morality, society, and interpersonal relationships” (2002, 851). This bodily practice and ritual enactment rework moral personhood in Newar Theravada Buddhism in the Hindu state in ways that influence political changes in contemporary Nepal.

In search of personhood through Africanist-Melanesianist comparisons, Andrew Strathern and Michael Lambek (1998) follow Csordas’s (1990, 1994a) phenomenological attention to the condition of embodiment. In conjunction with Marcel Mauss’s notions of “techniques of the body” (1973) and “the person” (1985), they argue that “[p]ersons (and selves) need to be understood with reference to the body, and vice versa” (Strathern and Lambek 1998, 14). Bringing this frame into my ethnographic analysis, I believe that an examination of ritual enactment, which is attentive to what people do, sing, say, and experience, offers a crucial lens to understand the construction of Chaiyaphum personhood. Also, this subject formation in ritual is crucial for understanding Isan personhood as an identity politics distinct from and, at the same time, assimilated into national identity. Peter Skilling describes social and political orders in polities fashioned through ritual and ritual status as “ritual states” (2007, 182) and argues that ritual was crucial to the political operations of the states that evolved within and beyond the boundaries of modern Thailand. Isan personhood has been ritually encompassed within national identity through the central mediating figure of Phaya Lae.

The magical image of Phaya Lae is reproduced in various iconic forms and disseminated into everyday life in the context of the market-oriented economy. In the household, people put his picture on the wall under portraits of the Thai monarchs. Spirit
mediums place his sculpture next to Buddha images in their shrines. Monks make amulets in his image in temples for distribution to the occult market. Traders sell his pictures. Drivers stencil his figure on their cars. Phaya Lae’s image as hero and divine governor is embedded in social life and the religious world. His charismatic power within Chaiyaphum is manufactured in a way similar to how the potency and sovereignty of the wider symbolic order of nation, religion, and monarchy (chat, satsana, phramahakasat) are reproduced. Many scholars have observed how the persistence and intensification of the Thai monarchy is implicated in processes of nation-building (for a discussion, see Jackson 2004, 2009). By expanding Clifford Geertz’s (1980) notion of “theatre state,” Jackson has described Thailand as a performative state where the monarch is represented as a demi-god king by the mass media and in public social events (Jackson 2004, 2009). Such a divine image is made possible through performance, which places the king at the pinnacle in religious and national ritual hierarchies.

In a similar way, whenever provincial rituals are organized in Chaiyaphum, Phaya Lae is respectfully addressed and invited to preside. In the pantheons of spirits mediums, he sits at the apex of the hierarchical structure. When spirit mediums conduct rituals, they notify him. Sometimes they call on him to possess them in the early stage of trance sessions. While the monarchy’s political legitimation is mediated through everyday mass media and public rituals in Thai society, Phaya Lae’s authority is enacted through local celebrations, social events, and mediumistic rituals. This process has the characteristics of mimesis (Taussig 1993), whereby enchanted kingship provides the template for local authority and, together with his placement in national and local history, establishes Phaya Lae’s supremacy in Chaiyaphum’s religious world. However, I suggest, this mimesis does not mean that Phaya Lae’s power solely relies on that of the monarchy, as in a one-way flow. Rather, the relationship between national kingship and local lordship is one of reciprocity, whereby the monarchy too gains meaning and potency by virtue of its similitude, in local eyes, to the charismatic local lord. Thai ascendant kingship is verified and reassuring as long as there exists a symbolic resonance between locally experienced charismatic power and that of the nation, both of which are performed, and sustain each-other, in a mandala formation.
Material representation of Isan personhood

Nancy Eberhardt (2006) explores the concepts of self and the life course in a Shan village in northern Thailand. To understand the construction of personhood in socio-economic institutions and rituals in this particular culture, which is encountering regional and national political economic transitions, she draws upon the history of personhood construction in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, at a time when the industrial revolution was bringing about crucial changes in social and economic organization. Changes in the family structure of the urban middle class in the western world owing to industrialization brought into existence modern ideas of self, gender relations, and the demarcation of work and domestic life. Eberhardt employs these notions to conceptualize Shan villagers’ view of self-transformation in a community where the peripheral ethnic people in the Thai state are “in transition” toward a market-oriented economy. Given that village life in the northeast region has been undergoing similar political economic transitions and that a modern idea of the northeast social self is emerging in line with the state’s nation building and development agendas, I will examine how northeast personhood is constructed in both ritual and socio-economic contexts by analyzing ethnographically my informants’ life stories.

In the religious world, Chaiyaphum personhood is ritually constructed with reference to Phaya Lae. People consider themselves as subjects under his protection. A newborn child is registered at birth not only at the district office but also at the god’s shrine. Parents bring their children and make their presence known to him. When a mother gives birth to a child, if family members associate themselves with a mediumistic network, they will go to see their master. They bring khan\textsuperscript{11}, a bowl of five pairs of flowers and five pairs of candles, as an offering to Phaya Lae and lesser spirits of the network. The master medium accepts the bowl and holds it in front of her shrine. She prays to the god and asks him to wield his power to protect the newborn baby and accept it as his child (luk jao phor). The child is now baptized into Chaiyaphum personhood under the tutelage of the local spirit. The same notification practice should be done when the child goes through subsequent rites of passage. Thus a person lives through the

\textsuperscript{11} “Khan” is a Thai word, which means “bowl.”
course of life with the underlying logic that life transitions and experiences have a firm connection to Phaya Lae and his power.

*Khan ha* is the material representation of northeast personhood. It is the salient personal totem whenever that person is present in a ritual domain. On the one hand, the word “khan” means “bowl,” a metal water container that the northeast people use in their everyday life. *Ha* is the number five. Villagers create *khan ha* in various ways. The mediums and disciples skillfully put a pair of specific flowers and a pair of small candles together in five banana leaf cones inside the bowl. Lay people might roughly take five pairs of flowers and five pairs of candles to put in a bowl or a dish. In this way, the *khan ha* functions as ritual prop, as gift, tribute, or totem that indicates the person’s existence and participation in the ceremony. On the other hand, the word *khandha* (the Pali spelling pronounced in Thai as “*khan*”), which is homophonous and present in Buddhist doctrinal knowledge, means “aggregate,” referring to the way in which a person is metaphysically constituted. In Buddhist canonical texts, *khandha ha* (the aggregate formed by five elements) is the notion that a person is constituted by the composition of five elements: corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

*Figure 6*  Khan ha

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Northeast villagers derive their philosophical notion of the constitution of personhood from participating in monastic activities. They create and understand selfhood in material form in the ritual domain of the monastery. Their interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine in material practice occurs whenever a religious ritual or rite of passage takes place. For example, at the temple, when a man wishes to be ordained, he will offer khan ha to the abbot as the symbol of asking to transfer his personhood into the monastery. Before disrobing to re-enter lay life, he will bring khan ha to the abbot again and ask for permission to leave and transfer his personhood out of the monastery and back to secular life. In the disrobing rite, the man holds khan ha and reminisces about all materials his body has engaged with while being in monkhood: temple, dwelling, monk robes, bowl, dish, spoon, etc.

On Buddhist holy days (NE: wan sin wan pha), which follow the lunar calendar, northeast villagers—especially the elders—bring their khan ha to the temple where they stay overnight and practice Buddhist precepts. Mor Num told me that this performance using the material prop in the monastery signifies that the attendants dedicate themselves (NE: morp kai thawai siwit) to Buddhism. This practice resonates with the way parents offer khan ha, which is the representation of their newborn child, to Phaya Lae at his shrine to request that he accept the child under his spiritual protection. It also echoes the practice when disciples in mediumistic networks carry their khan ha to their masters’ houses on the occasion of the annual shrine reconsecration ritual. The masters accept khan ha, then pray and put them in their shrines (NE: ao dork mai khuen han) to signify disciples’ resubmission to the membership of the masters’ network and the protection of the possessing spirits of the shrines. It should be noted here that the accession to membership in any of Chaiyaphum mediumistic networks automatically registers that person under Phaya Lae’s regime because all the networks in Chaiyaphum are within the pantheon of which he is the presiding spirit. It is his principality within the hierarchical mandala form of the feudal polity.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that a person is not obliged to rely on a single power. In the evening before the a Buddhist holy day, disciples will gather at their master medium’s house and offer khan ha to the shrine. Then at night, they will pick up another khan ha for the local temple and sleep there. In their religious world, the spirit shrine
and the monastery are the two realms of power to which they concurrently devote themselves and rely upon (NE: morp kai thawai siwit). This religious practice is reminiscent of the nineteenth century Southeast Asian polity prior to the emergence of the modern state, whereby a chiefdom located as a peripheral satellite to two kingdoms might seek protection from both powers. Scholars have noted that pre-modern chiefdoms in the northeast region, including in Phaya Lae’s story, simultaneously paid tribute to both the Bangkok and Vientiane courts (Toem 2003, Thongchai 1994). The present religious practice reprises the pre-modern form of power relations in the multi-concentric mandala system. Northeast personhood is maintained in equilibrium by paying symbolic tribute in the form of khan ha to mediumistic authorities (the vessels of local regional power), and Buddhism (the religion of the central state), tributes to which make manifest the nature of the modern northeast identity as part of the intricate weave of modern Thai subjectivity.

In domestic ritual, one could observe the materialization of northeast personhood in transition with the emergence of khan ha in a wedding. Among other ceremonial props and gifts, khan ha represents the personhood of the bride and the groom. The ritual exchange of khan ha in the wedding rite symbolizes the transfer of the self from dependent status in the natal family to spouse in the new marital relationship. At funerals, khan ha will be placed next to the corpse or put into the corpse’s hands. In some villages, five pairs of flowers are tied with the palms of the hands together at the corpse’s chest in a sign of respect as if the dead would bring them after the cremation somewhere beyond imagination. Here, we can observe the manifestation of northeast personhood in the material form of khan ha in all rites of passage from birth to death. Through this means, personhood is identified, embodied, and transformed in the critical time and space of ritual.

In mediumistic rituals, all disciples have to present khan ha to their master to indicate a request for permission to enter and leave the ritual space. The master will grant her permission by imitating the way the monks accept offerings from laypersons; the master medium softly touches the khan ha as a sign that she accepts the disciple’s request. The master also has her own khan ha and will present it to Phaya Lae and the possessing spirit at her shrine. In possession sessions, she will shake the khan ha as a sign of
entering into trance and before the spirit leaves her body. Such symbolic interactions materialize the hierarchies that structure northeast personhood in ritual and everyday realms.

For spiritual practitioners, this manifest personhood is prominently perceptible in everyday life practice and rituals. All master mediums have their own shrines in their houses. Apart from being the material abode where the possessing spirits reside, the shrine functions as the place where the mediums locate their personhood. In my field site, every master medium took good care of their shrines. They carefully decorated and cleaned their shrines on a regular basis. The shrine is a house within the house. It is the central generator of power for the medium and her disciples. Mediums sit and chant before it before going to sleep. They often pray to Phaya Lae and their possessing spirits to cast their power to protect their disciples. During the course of healing a patient, mediums meditate and pray for the sufferer in front of their shrines where sometimes they come up with visions of the cause of illness and omens of remedy. During the long subsequent procedures of healing that might take at least one or two weeks, I often heard that when the mediums slept, they dreamed about the patient’s life story and familial relations. Many times, the ill-wishing spirits who caused the patient’s suffering visited the mediums in their dreams. Accordingly, Chaiyaphum spirit mediums’ personhood is reconstituted, maintained, and attached to the household shrine.

**Cosmological and spiritual polity**

In the Chaiyaphum cosmology, Phaya Lae plays the role of supreme ruler. Villagers realize that every spirit within his sacred territory yields to his power. His territorializing border is coextensive with the province’s bureaucratic administration and the Thai nation state. He is the divine governor of the entire spirit population. He orients the feudalistic order in his supernatural realm. His shrine is a royal palace where he can be found sitting on the throne encircled by his attendants and possessions. Mediums call his shrine the house of the lord father (*ban jao phor*). It is not only the center of spiritual sovereignty but also the significant symbol of political power. Local political candidates often announce their policy to promote the shrine as an item of provincial heritage. There, people pay tribute to him for their wellbeing and prosperity. They present floral
offerings, figures of concubines, servants and soldiers, wooden elephants and horses, and swords that mark the status of traditional kingship and warriors. One of the best ways to please him is to dance in front of him. This performance of tribute is widely practiced among those who recover from illness with his help. Anyone who passes by the shrine on a celebratory occasion in early May will hear the non-stop music of khaen, a long bamboo mouth organ, and see an overcrowded congregation of people dancing in unison. An observer might recall Thai traditional plays or Thai morning TV series that show the king and queen sitting on their thrones and enjoying watching a performance in the throne hall.

At Phaya Lae’s shrine, one of the dancing tributes that many mediums perform is to imitate warrior actions. They hold one or two swords in their hands and wield them in the air. They put a sword on their heads and maintain their balance while closing their eyes and dancing. Loincloths are worn around the body at the hip or the head to depict a traditional battle suit. The use of the sword as a prop in mediumistic trances can be found in both the north and northeast regions. The performance sends the message to the deity that these mediums commit themselves as loyal servants to him. They play the role of warriors to protect the shrine and indicate Phaya Lae’s sovereignty.

The origin of Phaya Lae in Chaiyaphum cosmology is told in the story of a military journey and territorialization of the spiritual world. One female medium explained to me that when Phaya Lae came over to Chaiyaphum, he dropped his soldiers over the landscape. They have become the guardians of forests and fields since then. This military-cum-ecological metaphor, suggestive of spiritual rain, offers a specific cosmological notion of fertility and provides a version of the genesis of the local spirit pantheon. However, her intriguing explanation possibly suggests the political dynamics of state formation in the northeast where villagers have encountered a multitude of imposed authorities since the distant past. In the colonial period of the nineteenth century, Isan was a region of conflict between the Thai and French powers. Later in the twentieth century, in an era of neocolonialism, it became a US military base against the Lao-Vietnamese communist movement in mainland Southeast Asia. The idioms of colonization are imprinted in village’s historical consciousness. In their religious world, there had been pre-existing spirits of the region before the arrival of Phaya Lae. But once the god and his army arrived, he colonized the scattered spirits and put them in
administrative order. Chaiyaphum spirits are beholden to *Phaya* Lae’s new regime as his citizens and soldiers.

At his shrine, *Phaya* Lae’s image depicts him as a traditional warrior sitting on his throne and watching the flow of people commemorate and pay homage to him. At the monument, he stands in front of the provincial hall. He does not hold a sword but a book in his left hand. The god is dressed in traditional official uniform and represented as an intellectual governor. The two avatars of *Phaya* Lae constitute the poles of a sovereign transformation, which commenced with his legendary military actions to defend national territory followed by the act of establishing a bureaucratic organization over local society. Thais have become accustomed to manifold features of the charismatic ruler such as the way in which the Thai monarch’s depiction as Buddhist-King (Thai: *thammaracha*; Pali: *dhammaraja*) intertwines the ruler with notions of Buddhist merit. A wealthy Chinese man told me that *Phaya* Lae does not make war but he sustains wisdom. The god holds a book not the sword. It represents him as the governor more than the soldier. Some local people read him as the model of wisdom. He emphasized, “we as Chinese have been taught by our parents that we must focus on study like the *Phaya* Lae Monument which represents wisdom.” *Phaya* Lae’s identity encompasses the roles of warrior and intellectual governor in a society with the multiethnic makeup of Chaiyaphum. The Chinese associate themselves with the avatar that is responsive to their position as the middle class in Chaiyaphum’s urban world.

**The politics of time and space**

Chaiyaphum people live their lives in time and space constituted dually by Thai state power and the local religious way of life. This constitution shows the complexity of the local version of personhood that is both subject to state construction and a grounded experience of being in the world. In the period of colonial expansion, King Vajiravudh’s court issued the decree of standard time according to the Western solar time system in 1920 in response to global political and economic contact. Later, Thais became accustomed to the Western calendar in their modern and industrial society where working life arose. State bureaucracy was centrally entrenched in Bangkok and stretched over other regions to prosecute the nation-building scheme. Local administrative offices
introduced “governmental time” (wela ratchakan) to villagers’ social life. On the one hand, it provides them, as citizens, access to state benefits, but on the other, office hours entrench state power in the regulation of villagers’ daily habits and awareness.

Previously, time perception in the northeast agrarian world was different from the state’s imposed official time. It relied on agricultural activities and the monastic domain which adopt the cadences of agrarian and religious time. Villagers have their own working hours according to harvest seasons. They live their life and practice religious activities following the time of the lunar calendar in which the monastery is the central pivot of the annual organization of time. The northeast’s twelve rituals (hit sip sorng) fill up twelve months in which those villagers who reside locally and do not engage in labor migration keep themselves busy between fields and temples. Each month has its own ritual activity in response to climatic conditions and the mode of agrarian production.

However, Isan people have become acclimatized to state-assigned time. When villagers are present in the bureaucratic realm, they are expected to speak central Thai, don proper dress, and perform good manners in front of the portraits of the monarchs and in the presence of state officers, who are locally born but possessed by the spirit of nationalism. State time produces techniques of control over the body. At 8am and 6pm every day, all bodies and activities become motionless as if under a spell when the national anthem, the magic of the state, resounds through the air from the village hall, central speaker, or local school. Thais live their everyday life within a politicized time that demarcates the social self within the categories of state subjectivity.

The other clock that has enormous influence on Chaiyaphum life is Phaya Lae’s. Spirit mediums and disciples live their life according to Phaya Lae’s time. Devotees and villagers know the official hours of the spirit pantheon that makes their offerings most efficient. Phaya Lae’s day (wan jao phor) is Wednesday. At his main shrine in Mueang Chaiyaphum and other shrines throughout the province, people offer gifts and offerings for the purposes of praying, wishing, and redeeming a vow to him on Wednesdays. At the Sixth Lunar Month Festival in May, organized at his main shrine at Norng Pla Thao Public Park for nine days and nights, the peak number of participants, the main ceremony, and the procession around the city occur on the Wednesday of the festival period.
In Thai and regional lunar time systems and beliefs, Wednesday is outstanding and different from the other days in many ways. First, because it is the middle day of the week, it is said that Wednesday can be divided into two symmetric phases of daytime and nighttime. In the monastery, we learn that Thai people have their own Buddha images with specific gestures that represent the day of the week on which they are born. Exceptionally for those who are born on Wednesday, there are two different Buddha image gestures as the emblems for daytime and nighttime. Due to the double-phase of time, Thai astrological knowledge predicts the characteristics of those who are born on Wednesday as stubborn, sensitive and ambivalent. Second, Thais recognize some taboos on this liminal day of the week. For example, cutting parts of the body—nails and hair—is prohibited. Those who transgress this taboo will encounter unfortunate events. There are different explanations dealing with particular astrological phenomena. One is that Wednesday night is considered as the Black Shadow time (wela Rahu\(^{12}\)) and that a person should take good care of their person in this risky period of time. Dissociation of body parts is the action that makes people symbolically prone to spirit attack. Those who are unconvinced of superstition and want to have their hair cut on Wednesday might fail to find an open hairdresser’s shop. Thais are knowledgeable about the idiom “no cut on Wednesday” (phut ham tat). Finally, Wednesday is the threshold of the week when the ghost gate opens and all spirits can come out to the human world. Villagers told me it is the day for feeding the spirits (wan liang phi). Thus, they believe that Phaya Lae and other spirits will certainly receive their gifts and offerings on Wednesday. And the offering processes should be finished before noon to secure the most effective result. It seems that the time designated by devotees to present offerings to the deity and spirits resonates with the time Buddhists offer meals and alms to monks at monasteries: this should be done before noon before the monks resume ascetic practice and self cultivation. The right time for reciprocity with the monks, the field of merit, parallels the time for the spirits, the field of magical power, which secures devotees against the uncertainties and hazards of life.

Wednesdays and Buddhist holy days are Chaiyaphum mediums’ days off. Mediums told me that on Wednesdays, Phaya Lae and their possessing spirits do not come to possess

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\(^{12}\) Rahu is a Hindu deity who is believed to swallow the sun, causing eclipses.
them but stay at their shrines. They added that on Buddhist holy days, all spirits go to heaven to listen to monks’ prayers. The notion of a spirits’ retreat mimics the monks’ own monastic routines of staying in and abstaining from performing rituals outside the temples. Buddhists know that they will not invite (CT: nimon; NE: mon) monks to conduct any rituals on Buddhist holy days. Similarly, mediums will not invite (NE: mon) Phaya Lae and their possessing spirits to come to their bodies on a Buddhist holy day. It should be noted here that mediums used the same term for invitation (NE: mon) with their spirits as Buddhists use with monks.

On 12 January 2013, I went to participate in the Jao Phor Phaya Lae Festival and Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair at Phaya Lae Monument. It was about 3 am. A great number of people flowed into the venue. Some were peasants making their way together in pick-ups and cars from their villages. Some were people from the Mueang Chaiyaphum area. All were dressed in their neat clothes. In front of the monument, civil servants, elites and Chinese entrepreneurs formed the front rows behind tables full of gifts and offerings. Around the monument, scattered groups of mediums and devotees danced in tune with their mor khaen’s music. On the green yard in front of the Culture Office far across the road from the monument, a large number of wreaths stood in rows. Each had nametag to identify the individuals or organizations that sent them. The most prominent one exhibited the name “Yingluck Shinawatra”, the Prime Minister. Even though all temporary shops and food stalls encircling the monument and lining up along main roads were still closed and covered by tent canvases in the dark, chatting, songs, intermittent announcements, and laughter spread the cheerful and lively air over the city center. When the inaugural ceremony was scheduled to officially start at 4am, the area was already crowded with thousands of people. Then, about ten elephants walking on the road led the parade of the provincial governor and high-ranking officers, each holding baisi,13 bowls of banana leaf cones with flowers inside, in their hands toward the Phaya Lae Monument.

13 Baisi, a Cambodian term, literally means “auspicious rice” or in other word the “khwan rice.” The word “bai” also means leaf. So, “baisi” could be understood as “auspicious leaf.” It is a conical arrangement of folded banana leaves and flowers.
The provincial governor was invited to deliver the oration to Phaya Lae, and to open the ceremony. Then, a combination of music from the town’s public address system, villagers’ mobile speakers on pick-ups, and polyphonic sounds of khaen swept through the throng who spontaneously danced to celebrate (chalorng) the special occasion. Dancing is the tribute that pleases Phaya Lae (lam thawai Jao Phor). One medium told me that on this occasion, “dancing to worship Phaya Lae is supposed to enhance his auric power (barami).” After the celebration for those who participated, their family relationships would be better, children easily raised, and barami distributed to all villagers. Participants were free to join in different ways. Some stood on the footpath looking and smiling. Some clapped their hands. Some sneaked up to the monument when space became available and paid respects close to the base. Most danced on the intersecting roads around the monument. Phaya Lae’s festive time democratizes persons’ bodies. As opposed to “wela ratchakan,” the deity’s time provides an occasion for human actors to freely carry out bodily performances and express their aspirations in the creation of an affective space. Four o’clock in the morning is the auspicious time to re-enchant the deity’s power. This commencement time for ritually efficacious action follows the rhythm of agrarian life and of the monastic realm in village experience. Four o’clock is the time before peasants wake up and get ready to begin their daily agricultural work. In the temple, it is the time when monks wake up to practice prayer in the morning round (NE: tham wat sao) before going about with their bowls to receive food (binthabat). Thus, celebration of the deity prior to other activities of the daytime promises prosperity in life, just as northeast villagers start the annual celebration at the shrines and spirits of their fields and farms (NE: liang phi hai14 phi na) before harvest season.

After dancing with the songs for a while, people formed into groups in a circle around the Phaya Lae Monument and started walking clockwise. Many held baisi in their hands and would put these around the monument base after finishing the triple circuit. Some walked and danced along. People derive the practice of walking around the monument from monastic ritual when on Buddhist holy or auspicious days, Buddhists hold flowers and candles and walk three times around the monastic chapel (ubosot), which represents Meru Mountain, the center of Buddhist cosmological cartography to commemorate the

14 Hai in Isan dialect is equivalent to rai in Central Thai language meaning farmland. So, phi hai are those guardian spirits of farmlands.
three Refuges: Buddha, dharma and Sangha. At Jao Phor Phaya Lae Festival and Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair, spirit mediums, devotees, and participants formed the wave to move clockwise and wind up Phaya Lae’s clock to reactivate and reradiate his time and power.

We witness the radiating projections of Phaya Lae’s sovereignty by the replication of his monuments. In the past three years, the miniature monuments and shrines of Phaya Lae have been constructed in two districts. Located in the same bureaucratic setting as the prototype at Mueang Chaiyaphum, Phaya Lae monuments at Ban Khwao district and Khonsan district stand prominently at roundabouts encircled by district halls, hospitals, police stations and other bureaucratic offices; the shrines stand not far away. We see not only the replication of topographic cum cosmological representations of the polity but also the reproduction of the public ritual. After the province finishes the celebration event of Jao Phor Phaya Lae Festival and Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair on 12 January, the two districts usually organize the same celebration officially patronized by the district offices and private sectors. The districts’ ritual processes imitate the province’s but on the small scale. For example, at Mueang Chaiyaphum, ten elephants were brought into the practice of “offering elephants” (NE: thawai sang) to Phaya Lae, a practice which mimics a tradition from the Bangkok court in the past when a white, majestic elephant found in the provincial deep forest would be offered (CT: thawai chang) to the king. In the past, Chaiyaphum’s forest was one of the main population areas for wild elephants. The concept of a majestic elephant as the manifestation of charismatic kingship (CT: chang khu barami) is obtained from Buddha’s life accounts and portrays Thai kings as bodhisattvas, future Buddhas who have deferred the goal of nirvana for the purposes of distributing merit among mortals and redeeming them from sufferings and rebirths. In Ban Khwao and Khonsan, wooden artificial elephants have been installed. On this auspicious occasion, politicians, elites, and entrepreneurs donate money to the province or the districts by paying 2,500 Baht for an elephant offering to accumulate and access auratic power (barami).

Stanley J. Tambiah (1976, 102-131) has coined the term “galactic polity” to understand the political form in Southeast Asia and Siam in pre-modern history. The term mediates religio-politico-moral conceptions of kingship and the geometric constitution of complex communities. By characterizing the traditional polity and the concept of
territory, Tambiah suggests that royal power in the mandala form radiates from the center.

The concentric-circle system, representing the center-periphery relations, was ordered thus: In the center was the king’s capital and the region of its direct control, which was surrounded by a circle of provinces ruled by princes and governors appointed by the king, and these again were surrounded by more or less independent “tributary” polities (1976, 112).

At Chaiyaphum, we can see the reproduction of Phaya Lae monuments as the performance of the pre-modern polity of Brahmanic-Buddhist states. His monuments and shrines are miniature representations of the cosmos, with the main, original figures in Mueang Chaiyaphum being the central icons of Meru Mountain, the pillar of the Buddhist universe. Then, we have lesser duplicated monuments and shrines representing the hierarchy in the same cosmos in other districts. As in the galactic polity, Phaya Lae’s power radiates from the center to its peripheral tributary realms in the concentric-circle system. Each district’s unit is an imitation and reproduction of the centric Mueang Chaiyaphum where each district chief relies on the figure and shrine as the provincial governor relies on the main Phaya Lae Monument and Shrine. What has happened in Chaiyaphum is the reproduction of pre-modern religio-political form which I would call “the living galactic polity” and is significantly driven by mediumistic power.

Spirit mediums are the crucial affective channel that makes possible this mutual dynamics of religiosity and polity. Spirit mediums, the main group of Phaya Lae’s exponents, participate every time the commemorative celebration is organized. A well known, respected medium who was recognized and selected from the province assumed the leading role in the Jao Phor Phaya Lae Festival and the Chaiyaphum Red Cross Society Fair. A few days earlier, before the annual event took place, the provincial governor, state officers, and event organizers conventionally went to the private shrine at the medium’s house to ask for permission from Phaya Lae to officially inaugurate the event in public mass. The deity came down to possess the medium, giving permission and blessing for the organization’s success. On the opening day at the Phaya Lae Monument, the medium showed up and played the leading role as the voice of Phaya Lae communicating to the audience. However, the medium passed away a few years ago
without choosing the next successor. The province is discussing who should be selected as the new one. At Ban Khwao, Mae Bun, the local master medium, performed the role as the official channel of Phaya Lae in playing the central role at every celebration when the deity was invited. She stood in front of male officers and elites and conducted all ritual sequences. I observed the way in which state officers in Chaiyaphum relied on the power of the spirit pantheon performed and operated by spirit mediums.

**Affective space, monument, and shrine**

Looking at objects closely, we can observe the spirit of things (see Bautista 2012). Space, monuments, and shrines in Chaiyaphum shape people’s experience and craft their subjectivity as part of the nation state and under local authorities. In public spaces, we see the replicating expansion of Phaya Lae monuments and shrines as the materialization of the “living galactic polity” through which the deity’s power radiates from the center in the provincial city to districts. In domestic space, such power disseminates into mediums and villagers’ houses. It materializes in the form of objects in the household shrine. At the heart of their shrines, mediums and villagers put a tiny sculpture or a picture of Phaya Lae, either in the pose of standing and holding a book duplicated from the main monument or in the pose of sitting on the throne duplicated from the main shrine. These household shrines are the miniaturization of multi-mandalas within concentric power relations. In both public and domestic spaces, mediums and villagers rely on and interact with the shrines: they give them offerings, ask them for everyday success, put them into discourse, sit and talk to them, sing and dance before them, laugh and cry in front of them, and so on. I would suggest the way to attend the centrality of these spaces, monument, and shrine is to understand these objects as nonhuman actors in the manufacturing of power, politics, and emotions.

How could space, monument, and shrine become central objects in mediumistic practice? To what extent do they have affective influence upon spirit mediums and villagers? Is it possible to consider the space and object as the sites where mediums’ personhood is reconstituted and maintained? To unfold these issues, I would like to engage the theories of Actor Network and affect and develop the idea that the space, monument, and shrine are active agents that socially interact with humans, discharge
energy into their emotion and attitude, and generate melancholic interiorities. Bruno Latour’s work on Actor Network Theory (ANT) contributes to the upturn in the critique of human subjectivity and philosophy in the social sciences. He pays attention to the power and politics of the objects that generate a different pattern of emotions and disruptions (Latour 2005a). He argues that object entities might be interpreted as effecting agency and we should pursue their meaningful behavior as nonhuman actors (Latour 1993). According to the ANT slogan, “to follow the actors themselves,” Latour suggests that social scientists should realize the active role and power of objects in social relations. Moreover, they should understand the collective existence, methods, and accounts that define the new associations that these nonhuman actors have helped to establish (Latour 2005b).

Thinking about objects through the exercises of ANT, however, might constrain their qualification and emotions. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009) criticizes Latour’s work as disregarding ethnographic specification or historicization and claims that “actor-network theorists limit themselves in their imagination of any agency that is also or especially ‘human’ in its associations, like the imagination or the emotions” (2009, 10). She argues that the relations which people formulate with objects must be examined in historical contingency and political specification. She, therefore, introduces the theory of affect which has been influential in human geography and cultural studies. Affect, synonymous with subjectivity in the psychoanalytic tradition, refers to a broad emotive field that can be studied in sites and spaces beyond the range of the “human subject,” his or her “subjectivity,” or “psyche” (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 12). To reconcile the object-oriented approach and the subject-centered one, Navaro-Yashin suggests that both of them produce and transmit affect relationally in her ethnographic account of Turkish-Cypriots’ ruination. Living in the context of a community officially construed as the enemy’s and appropriating the others’ loots, Turkish-Cypriots are embroiled in the surrounded ruins and the affect of melancholy (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 2012).

Following the theory of affect and ANT helps me think through my ethnographic findings on the relationship between spaces/objects and human subjectivities/emotions. Three main points can be made.
Firstly, sacralized non-human agency socially interacts with and transmits politics and history to spirit mediums and villagers in their social world. The shrine room at the medium’s house is the place where dialogue between the medium and the shrine takes place. “Speaking to the shrine” (NE: khao han) is a practice in which the medium sits and talks to her shrine either before going to conduct any rituals or simply on an everyday evening. The medium uses the routine to report on her mission of healing and helping devotee-customers, consult about everyday life matters, and ask for spiritual support from the shrine. Whenever I went for initial visits to mediums’ houses, they would take me into the shrine rooms for khao han, introduce me to the shrines, and ask them to protect and help me carry out my research project. When I embarked upon research in my field site, the most important initial meeting was not to make my presence known in front of local bureaucrats and introduce them to my objectives, but was conducted while sitting before local and household shrines and listening to the mediums habituate me into spiritual sociality. These nonhuman entities were the crucial authorities that allowed me to conduct my research project. Without their permission, according to spirit mediums and villagers, my studies could not be successful. They told me that Jao Phor and other spirits would open the path for me (NE: phoen si poet thang hai).

Monuments and shrines speak about power and history directly to people. The inscriptions about Phaya Lae’s life story and the formation of Mueang Chaiyaphum carved on the shrines’ wall and monuments’ base manufacture their subjectivity under national politics and history. They historicize Chaiyaphum. Villagers refer to these sources, recently invented and derived from some nationalist texts, to understand their local identity as part of modern Thai state construction. Mediums put them into ritual discourse and practice. They create a variety of imaginative versions that could date back even before the time when these objects were built. The inscriptions are part of the genesis of the mediumistic repertoire that they expand to create new characters, include pre-existing local spirits, and form their relationships. Narratives in the repertoire are slippery, multifarious, and rich. They are not meant to be contested for authenticity or historical accuracy but they are used in the discourse of interpreting uncanny events and healing rituals.

15 Khao in Isan dialect and Central Thai means to enter or to get into a space.
Secondly, space, monument, and shrine are active agents that discharge energy into people’s emotion and attitude. They set human beings in motion and propel them into a variety of sensations. They should be defined by their capacity to affect and to be affected. In the experiment of affect theory, things “have to be mapped through different, coexisting forms of composition, habituation, and event” (Stewart 2007, 4). At the Phaya Lae Shrine, it is not uncommon for us to see the devotees sob, cry, or even hysterically tumble down on the floor space in front of him. Through rituals and worship, people have accumulatively projected emotions and attitudes onto him. His figure has been animated and is able to discharge energy to the devotees in a two-way flow of affect. We see the forces that come into view as affective interactions between humans and nonhuman actors. Khaen music is another invisible nonhuman actor that has a great emotional upsurge and captures spaces and human bodies. It animates the shared experiences and memories, pleasures, and compulsions. In ritual trance, objects, bodies, and emotions are attuned to the transpersonal state that registers collective intensities.

The materialization of energy charge in Chaiyaphum spirit mediumship manifests in an empowering procedure when power from objects has the potential to be transferred to humans. Monuments and shrines are like fuel stations for mediums and villagers to recharge their charismatic, affective power to achieve success in their everyday life practice and ritual processes. At Sila-art temple (phu phra), one of the important pilgrimage sites where mediums’ networks gather many times a year, the respected Buddha statues of Ong Tue and his seven disciples carved on big stones reside in the main pavilion. I observed mediumistic networks led by their masters moving in and out of the place. Each network performed a similar pattern of ritual. They sat down on the floor. The master conversed with the Buddha statues in the fashion of “speaking to the shrine” (NE: khao han) that I have already described. Then, they offered gifts to them and rose up to dance, with the songs sung by the master and the music of khaen in order to celebrate (chalorng) this auspicious occasion. At this final process, the lyrics and bodily performance indicated the transference of energy.

I met Mae Jaem for the first time at Sila-art temple on the occasion of the 5th Lunar Month Festival in April 2012. She was an adept master medium with performative talents. Her spectacular performance attracted the people at the pavilion. She dressed up in white. Her voice was beautiful and resounding. She stalked back and forth, floated
here and there, and swayed hands up and down. Her movements were charged with power and emotion. On the floor in front of the Buddha statues, Mae Jaem put her wooden basket of props full of clothes, metal bowls, flowers and other things that she usually used in her rituals. While the mor khaen, who was her husband, played the music, she danced along with a meaningful bodily grammar; she waved her hands over her head and then delightfully tiptoed closer toward the statues. She did not touch them but moved her palms lightly up and down in order to softly squeeze invisible liquid from each statue. Then she put her palms together at the Buddha statues’ laps as if she was fetching water there to put into her basket. These actions were repeatedly enacted. Mae Jaem called the invisible things that she had fetched into her basket “magical herbs and medicines” (wan, ya wiset) that would consecrate her ritual props and help healing her devotee-customers effectively. She told me that the spirits released them into the wind. This religio-ecological discourse demonstrates the way in which power and energy are discharged from the spirits and nature and encapsulated in the objects. These Buddha statues, then, became the reservoirs where power and energy were kept before being harvested and discharged into spirit mediums’ bodies and their props.

Such collective intensities are the product of historical and political trajectories. The northeast region has been considered backward, poor, and politically and economically inferior when compared to other regions. Under the national discourse of development, the region’s average income is the lowest in the country and the population’s education standard is also low. The northeast’s self-perceived identity has been problematic. The derogatory term “Lao” is often used in spoken language by speakers of Central Thai to impose ethnic subordination upon northeast villagers’ attitude. The central Thai middle class looks at the political identity of the northeast as unsophisticated and venal. The northeast region has recently become the powerhouse of the pro-Thaksin movement, and is represented as a red area by the Thai middle class and authorities. “Red buffalos” (khwai daeng) is a pejorative moniker in public discourse and social media used by the middle class to refer to northeast villagers who are involved Thaksin’s redshirt movement to connote their “stupidity, affliction, and poverty” (ngo, jep, jon).

I would suggest that the historical and political projection of these collective intensities is discharged from space and object—the repository agency—to the bodies of humans at the moment when ritual performance takes form. Here, the humans are the mediums of
emotions and attitudes produced by space, shrine, and monument. By looking through
the lens of post-subjective theory, northeast corporeality does not produce sensations
from within but operates as an agency of transfer that social memories of the historical
past and coercive, collective identity move through. Following the theory of non-
subjective affect developed by Gilles Deleuze in his reading of Benedict de Spinoza,
Navaro-Yashin (2009, 2012) discusses that affects are not feelings but sensual intensities
that might move through human bodies, but that do not necessarily emerge from them.
To some extent, I read the affective performance of sobbing, crying, and tumbling,
apparently irreducible to singular individuals, as collectively non-discursive sensations
which the northeast repository of nonhuman actors generates. Sacralized spaces and
objects make mediums and villagers cry. They cry for the disparate assemblage of
political suppression and critical identity through historical and social memories.

Monument and shrine discharge collectively sensual intensities into humans not only to
make them cry but also to move people to raise a storm of protest or even to command
them to act violently. I remember in early 1996 when I was in high school, there were
flyers circulated and words spread in the northeast about a big protest in Khorat against
the publication of the book *The Politics of the Monument of Thao Suranari* (*Kanmueang
nai anusawari Thao Suranari*) whose content “uncovered a political history that had
been suppressed and, at the same time, raised critical questi-
on the past that had shaped the social memory of Thao Suranari [Ya Mo]” (Keyes 2002). The
monument of Ya Mo was erected in 1934 to commemorate her heroism in 1827 in
helping to defeat the Vientiane army during the attack of Siam and symbolically
represent Khorat’s allegiance, after failing in accommodating the rebellion platform
Saipin Kaew-ngamprasrer, the author of the book, raises the question of the construction
of Ya Mo’s image and political identity under Thai nationalism, which defames her
prestige and honor in the eyes of the Khorat protesters. Keyes (2002, 116-117) argues
that northeast collective social memory was infuriated by those questions through the
production of recalling and remembering the past. Here, I would extend the
interpretation to say that it is Ya Mo’s monument and space, having been forced to
establish this socio-political specification and contingent historicization, which transfer
affective imaginations to the protesters in the name of a group of descendants of Ya Mo.
Thirdly, shrine and space generate melancholic interiorities that significantly impact on spirit mediums. The shrine becomes the house within the house where the mediums’ subjectivity and personhood are located. We have already learned that the displacement of persons and objects accounts for melancholia in the theory of affect (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 2012). Master mediums cannot be far away from their shrines for extended periods of time; they told me they missed the shrine and their possessing spirits (NE: *khuet hort phoen*). The use of this vernacular highlights the ties of personhood between the mediums and the shrines. The mediums encountered mental and physical deterioration when they were at a distance from their shrines. Given that all spirit mediums’ personhood is crystallized and placed at their shrines and there are expeditions between the subjectivity of the mediums and the agency of the spirits at the shrines, I will discuss the meaning of their personhood and the expression of a melancholic emotional disposition when separated from the shrines.

*Mae Som, Mor Dom, and Mor Num* shared a common sentimental attachment to their shrines as well as everyday practices in front of the shrines. *Mae Bun* told a story about when she moved from her natal house in Ban Khwao district to live in Mueang Chaiyaphum. Even though she built a new shrine for her spirits in the new house, she did not belong to the new place that her daughter provided. As a master (*khuba*) at Ban Khwao, the local *Phaya Lae* Shrine is her powerhouse. *Mae Bun* developed high blood pressure; villagers commented on her emaciated look. She just moved back to Ban Khwao two years after the period of discomfort. She said she was worried about *Phaya Lae* in Ban Khwao. “I can’t tell. I worried about *Jao Phor*. I missed him. I felt depressed. I felt forlorn and slept alone. And when people needed my help, I had to come back to the local shrine at Ban Khwao. I couldn’t go away. When I left I had to offer him *khan ha* and asked for permission. I have no idea why I became like that. I was also amazed.”

*Phor Aet* is another master medium who underwent mental abjection when he was separated from his spirit shrine. His life experiences illuminate the way northeast personhood is much embedded in local belief system and affected when his personhood undergoes separation from his spirit shrine and home. He told the story of when he went

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16 *Khuet hort phoen* literally means “I miss them.” In Central Thai, the phrase can be transcribed as *khit thueng than*. 

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to work in a construction site in Saudi Arabia many years ago and he missed the shrine so much (NE: *khuet hort*; CT: *khit thueng*). Every Buddhist holy day (NE: *wan sin wan pha*) in Thailand, he would pluck flowers planted by Thai workers at the site to inhale and pray to his shrine across the continent. While working abroad for two and a half years, he still kept practicing his everyday mediumistic routine by sitting and mumbling mantras to the shrine in the evening. Phor Aet’s wife said when he arrived home on his return to Thailand; he tumbled down on the street and hysterically cried as if he was going crazy. She told me that Phaya Lae and his possessing spirits might be punishing him because he had been away for so long.

In every case of spirit mediums’ relationship to their shrines, we observe that their personhood is strictly centered on the site. It is as if their heart or soul were crystallized and attached to the shrines. In *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the *Ramayana*, which was composed and dispersed in Siam courts as a literary work that legitimizes kingship in the hierarchical power relations of the kingdom, Thais perceive the motif of “segregation of the heart out of the body” (*thort duangjai*) that some characters perform to protect their lives in battle. They cannot be killed because their hearts are kept somewhere else at special, secret sites. At some contemporary Buddhist meditation forums, practitioners perceive the same idea of “separation of the soul out of the body” (*thort duangjit*) as the technique to gain divine, esoteric knowledge by which the human soul can be momentarily removed from the body and travel to see heaven and hell and learn the past and the future. My interpretation is that the mediums’ personhood, by way of comparison to the literary and religious imaginations, is the projected objectification of heart or soul that is located at their shrines. Spirit mediums often recounted the similar experience through their trance that, even without the expression of “*thort duangjit,*” they acquired mediumistic knowledge by the invocatory assistance of the spirits. They said they could thoroughly see (NE: *hen sort*) the customer-devotees’ fortunes and the patients’ cause and remedy of illness because of the omniscient power of the shrines. I often heard them expressing the melancholy that descended on them when they stayed away from the shrine.

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17 *Thort duangjai* is poetic language. We usually find the terms in Thai literary narrative. *Thort duangjit* are the terms found in the discourse of meditation.
After the mediums are healed by their masters and the masters identify that spirits will stay with them, the mediums have to build shrines to welcome their protective powers. This ritual reconstructs their subjectivities and encapsulates them in objects. One medium told me she had died three times before she accepted her possessing spirit. So, the shrine becomes the affecting agency for the mediums that gives rise to their new personhood in the post-illness community. Those mediums who could not keep practicing regular shrine ceremonies properly and were afraid that their spirits would be angry, asked their masters to dissolve their private shrines and invite the spirits to stay at the masters’ shrines instead. The nonhuman actors are therefore objects of power that actively coerce and manipulate human actions.

The shrine and space discharges an affect of melancholy and abjection to those whose connection to the sites becomes disengaged. The ruin of a master’s shrine results in the doom of the disciples. When a master medium became ill and was about to pass away, the central shrine was unattended. The disciples were in an anxious vacuum and wanted to officially ask for resignation from the network before the master passed away and the shrine was demolished. Otherwise, they would have become ill and gradually deteriorated because the central shrine of their own spirit shrine’s operations was out of service. During my fieldwork, I learned that half of the population in a village simultaneously left their old network before the master died to join a new one in another village by taking their khan ha to place on the new shrine, multiplying the new master’s number of followers and charisma.

Space, monument, and shrine in Chaiyaphum spirit cults define the beliefs and practices that craft the people’s subjectivity as part of the state and local jurisdiction. Ritual practices around this material culture of religion cover a field of emotional sentiments and their expressions that shape Isan personhood.

**Conclusion**

What has been absent from many anthropological discussions of personhood in northeast Thailand is a detailed attention to how ritual life and ritual enactment produce Isan subjectivity. This chapter has examined the political life of the populace through the
lens of the Phaya Lae cult. Within the political boundary, it argues that the identity of “Luk Phaya Lae” implies the duality of religious and political subjection to the state. Mediumistic activities in the household, community, and province are the performative locus of the political adaptation of a northeast periphery to become a part of state sovereignty. The mediumistic practice of collectivity is one of the processes that create subjects of the state and transform the nonstate space of the northeast periphery to become incorporated as part of the country. The transition to the new order of the nation state has been made to make sense with reference to the cult of Phaya Lae.

However, the chapter argues further that ritual enactment not only reproduces Isan personhood as a vernacular form of modern Thai citizenship but also draws upon and performatively sustains heterogeneous varieties of sovereign power at local and national scales. At the local level, we see Isan personhood as materialized, emplaced, and affectively energized through performative interactions with potent sovereign spirits of place. At a wider scale, individual rites and collective religious celebrations in Chaiyaphum validate and sustain royal and national powers. I would suggest that Isan ritual enactment around spirit mediumship is not backward and nonsensical, as potentially seen from the bureaucratic point of view or in modernist scientific discourse. Rather, this ritual format is a relay for the spectacular transference of power, suggestive of a mandala type relationships, one that anchors and energizes a local sense of self; maintains the auratic power of the nation; and enhances the charismatic potency of the monarchy in the Thai modern state, which I define as a ritual state.
Figures 7-8 Annual celebration at Phaya Lae monument in January
Chapter 2

Isan Sociality and Spiritual Kinship

To understand mediumistic practice in relation to kinship in Isan today, this chapter begins by asking some simple questions: Who are the spirit practitioners of contemporary Isan? Who are their spirits? How do they become spirit mediums? And how does mediumship constitute social groups? This set of questions will help us to navigate a complex social disposition of local kinship that entangles with the religious system. A large number of anthropological studies on northern Thai social composition make a distinction between two types of spirit phenomena. The first group of works studies the cults of ancestral spirits (phi pu ya). They describe the cults as northern Thai matrilineal spirits and argue that these spirits are locally significant and that matrilineal linkages remain ideologically and practically important in the constitution of the groups (Walker 2006, 2012, Wijeyewardene 1984, 1977, Hale 1979, 1984, Turton 1972, 1984, McMorrnan 1984, Davis 1984).

The second group of works on northern Thai spirit phenomena focuses on the cults of territorial spirits (Morris 2000, Walker 2012, 2006, Rhum 1994, Wijeyewardene 1986). The cults often spiritually constitute social groups bridging people from different social backgrounds in urban society. They have mediums, disciples, shrines, and regular congregations. The tutelary spirits are not localized like the matrilineal spirits. They have territorial domains, appear in all sorts of locations, and to a great extent parallel the administrative structure of village, district, and higher levels. These spirits often have a mythical history of lordship, warfare, and social formation. I found both types of spirit phenomena in Chaiyaphum. The matrilineal spirit cults are confined within villages and are less visible to the public. In this chapter, I will mainly deal with the cults of territorial spirits, which are manifest in urban areas and are significant in terms of social group formation. The localized, lineage-based spirit practices are much less common in Chaiyaphum. Even though there are a number of studies on Isan spirit cults, the connection of these cults to Isan kinship and social group formation has not received
adequate attention (see Pattana 1999, Starkes 2005, Tambiah 1970, Holt 2009). This chapter aims to explore this question by looking closely at my ethnographic data.

Most of the spirit mediums I interacted with are female. There are a small number of male practitioners. All of them are associated with Phaya Lec’s pantheon and live in different localities, both rural and urban. When I asked them who their possessing spirits were and where they were from, the answers were intriguing. My informants reported that the spirits of the possessing cults are of the guardian and territorial type: some are locals attached to the settlement; others are peripatetic. They are lords (jao phor), customhouse chiefs (khun dan, nai dan), spirits of city pillars (phi lak mueang), administrators (samian), and village territorial guardians (ta pu ban).\(^\text{18}\) Interestingly, they share bureaucratic and political characteristics. So, I would call them “polity spirits.” These spirits are transmitted neither patrilineally nor matrilineally but by way of extra-familial social networks. When I asked one khuba medium\(^\text{19}\) whether the possessing spirits of the practitioners would be transferred to their children or not, he told me it was not necessary. The spirit will pass to a disciple who is the prospective khuba. He gave a metaphoric explanation that unfolds the importance of power relations rather than descent relations in spirit inheritance by saying, “spirit master is like the position of village head that will pass to the new elected or the deputy.” In spiritually constituted social groups, disciples are more significant than siblings and children. What does this mean? How does the spirit inheritance system relate to the establishment of kinship and social groups in Isan? And what is its implication in relation to Isan sociality nowadays?

\(^{18}\) It can be argued that ta pu ban are the spirits of ancestors. Ta is the kin term for maternal grandfather and pu for paternal grandfather. However, I am skeptical that they do not really represent ancestral spirits even though some villagers can claim that their dead ancestors unite with the material shrine of ta pu ban. Rather, the shrine functions as collective polities of the village. Rituals can be organized for a group on regular occasions or for individuals on special occasions. But no one claims that the shrine belongs to a particular household. The spirit who resides in the shrine of ta pu ban functions similarly to the village head, who takes care of the population under his jurisdiction.

\(^{19}\) “Khuba” means “master.” Disciples call their master mediums Khuba, the way the master mediums refer to themselves. In Isan, both monks and spirit practitioners who are well respected and are in top-ranked position in the networks can be called “Khuba”—which in Central Thai appears as “kruba.” The term is equivalent to “Ajan.”
Based on my data analysis, I would suggest that the Isan spirit cult is the religion of those who are excluded from descent groups and kinship. It is not a marker of kinship continuity but an indicator of social disjuncture from descent groups, which results from the idiosyncratic sociality of mobility in the region. Isan has been an area of high internal, national, and recently global migrations (Starkes 2005, 20, Keyes 2014, 151-182, Whittaker 2000, 35-42). Jonathan Rigg and Albert Salamanca (2009, 263-264) point out that “migration and mobility have come to be defining features of life and living in northeast Thailand.” Outstanding characteristics of Chaiyaphum villages include recent settlement in the 1980s, and multi-ethnic and multi-descent make-up. This was already observed by an earlier generation of scholars working in the 1970s and the 1980s (Pasuk and Baker 2002, 64-65, Keyes 2014, Baker and Pasuk 2009, 162-163, Mills 2005), who note how a poor and marginalized ethnic Lao population was being structurally excluded from Thailand’s era of modernization and frequently migrated to more dynamic urban centers to make a living. If anything, such processes have only been exacerbated by the economic boom and bust taking place in Thailand in the 1990s and 2000s, leading to even greater mobility and social turbulence among Isan peasants than was observed in the previous era.

I contend that in this context, kinship and social groups that are formed around spirit cults in Isan reflect these disruptions to lineal descent and inheritance. Kinship is never really based on biological relations (see Carsten 1997, Sahlins 2013). My argument is that the turbulent, divergent and contingent constitution of Isan social groups in the villages finds resonance in the synthetic and substitutionary nature of spirit cult composition in Chaiyaphum. Here, mediums play a key role in resynthesizing linkages between old kin and new via their mastery of an idiom of spiritual kinship that makes them provisory nodes of reconstituted sociality in a society in transition.

**Spirit inheritance and the formation of social groups**

The cult of matrilineal spirits (phi pu ya) of northern Thailand has been intensively examined. The matrilineal relationships are practically and ideologically crucial in the constitution of society. In northern Thailand, kin groups are referred as “people of the same spirit” (Turton 1984), “matrilineal spirit cults” (Wijeyewardene 1984), and
“unilineal descent groups” (Cohen 1984). Central to observations of this cult is its socially limited scope as essentially a domestic religious practice restricted to intimate family kin; the way that the role of medium in the cult is passed down through the female line from mother to daughter; and the identity of the possessing spirits who generally are the same spirits who possessed one’s senior matrilineal kinswomen.

While studies of northern Thai mediumship have brought to prominence the phenomenon of female-centric spirit cults in Thailand, providing a counterweight to studies that emphasize Buddhism or the modern nation state, the form they have profiled may be regionally specific. This may possibly be related to some social characteristics peculiar to Lanna society such as the relative wealth, stability and autonomy of this region, owing to its independence from the central Thai polity and its tribute-taking and centralizing imperatives, most particularly strong state-initiated Buddhicization. Lanna has long been an economically dynamic center by virtue of its connection into the ancient and lucrative trade networks of the upper Mekong basin and the China-Burma trade corridor. All this may have resulted in a set of spirit practices whose distinctiveness has entranced generations of anthropologists.

However, the fascination with Lanna matrilineal spirit cults potentially responds to an anthropological preoccupation to seek out resistant cultural forms of the periphery that have thus far evaded the imputed centralizing dynamics of a powerful standardizing state. In a state such as Thailand’s in which royalty and Buddhism have been the pillars of central state power, one can sense how anthropologists may have seized upon matrilineal spirit cults as an icon of grassroots resistance or countercultural form of the margins. However, at the same time one can postulate that the anthropological fetishization of resistance might have led some observers to attribute greater stability and coherence to this female-centric form than might actually be warranted.

Based on field research recently undertaken in a village in Chiang Mai province, Andrew Walker (2012, 2006) suggests some alternative points of reference to the matrilineal spirit cult and political society. He proposes that the puya spirits can also attenuate attachments to matrilineal kin and introduce alternative sources of spiritual power. They are malleable and provide an idea for a variety of orientations to spiritual power. He reports the way in which the protective spirits (ahak) intermingle in the
existing puya spirits and provide a new lens to the local perception of power, demonstrating how the peripheral and parochial draws regional power into more intimate domains. Walker’s ahak is placed betwixt and between the two types of northern Thai spirit phenomena: matrilineal spirits and tutelary spirits. Stephen Sparkes (2005) also makes some comments in terms of the thin attachment of descent groups to matrilineal association. In contrast to the findings in the northern Thai society, Sparkes shifts from the term “matrilineal” to “matrilocal” in order to label Isan kinship as the continuity of the female descent groups. He asserts that the term “emphasizes location rather than descent groups or lineage” (2005, 71).

However, for Isan, I am skeptical of claims about the imputed relationship between the location of matrilineage and the spiritual practice. In my field site, descent groups and spirit inheritance are not always correlated. Even though Chaiyaphum mediumship can be defined as female actor-centric, there is no such clear connection between matrilineage and spirit inheritance in the same communities. To perceive the relationship between kinship and spirit cult as “matrilineal” or “matrilocal” might be misleading and overlook other social dynamics among cognate members. It overlooks the flexible and synthetic nature of mediumship in which pantheons might be assembled from a diverse array of sources outside matrilineage or close networks of female kin. It also misses the conflict, tension and discontinuity of socio-religious inheritance of spirit cults and kinship. Instead, I propose that to understand Isan kinship and spiritual sociality, we have to see how migration, mobility and cultural practices intertwine with the formation of social groups.

When I asked my informants about their spirit inheritance, I found that, for most of them, possessing spirits did not come from their descent groups but from different villages or places. This phenomenon demonstrates the mobile, flowing, and “exogenous” quality of the spirits, rather than their “rooted” nature (see High 2006). The way in which the spirits travel through villages, search for their mediums, and settle on particular private shrines resembles the way Isan persons move out of their communities and find new places to make a living. Mor Num (20), a young male khuba at Ban Silatham, told me that the spirits of his shrine came from a medium in another village. When that person died, his spirits did not go to his siblings or children. But they searched for the new medium and found him. Mor Num’s paternal grandmother is a
medium in one spirit network. Now she is 90 years old and too weak to perform rituals. But there is no perception that the grandmother’s spirit will be inherited by Mor Num’s mother or by him.

Ban Silatham, the village where Mor Num’s family moved and lives nowadays, was established in the 1980s. It is located at the southwest of Mueang Chaiyaphum on the mountainous border of the northeast and central Thai regions. The village is in a highland area where people have recently cleared land for farming. The population is composed of migrants from other parts of Chaiyaphum, other northeast provinces, and central provinces. Some even moved from Udorn Thani Province, which is close to the Thai-Lao border. There is a diversity of language. Most speak Isan dialect while some speak central Thai. Mor Num is recognized as the khuba in the mediumistic network in his community and nearby villages. His lords (jao phor) provide protective power for his disciples who rely on his shrine and expand their role to preside over other rituals in the villages.

One of Mor Num’s chief disciples who moved from Udorn Thani Province plays an important role as the jam—the intermediary of the village’s ta pu ban, the spirit cult of territory. Membership of the cult is not based on descent but residence (see High 2006, 257). All villagers who live in the village are believed to be located under his jurisdiction. The disciple (luk sit) did not inherit the spiritual function from her parents who lived far away in Udorn Thani but just recently gained this role from the assistance of Mor Num’s lords. The purposes of ta pu ban ritual, which is collectively organized once or twice a year, are to ask for his residential protective care and to renew the membership of the village. Individuals make their presence known to the shrine of ta pu ban when they move in or out of the village. It should be noted here that mediums who perform the jam role in ta pu ban cults in Chaiyaphum are mostly female while in the other places in Isan and Laos, the role is strictly restricted to men (see High 2006, Tambiah 1970, 274-276). Moreover, we clearly see how the ta pu ban spirit of territory co-inhabits with Mor Num’s travelling spirits who come to live in his household shrine. In Ban Silatham, mobility and migration characterize the ethno-linguistic multiplicity of the population and formulate spirit power relations. While the spirit of ta pu ban is recognized as the lord of land who is an essentially local character, being bound up with a settlement (see Tambiah 1970, 168), Mor Num’s travelling and provisional spirits are
perceived as the lords who presume rotating administration to govern and provide everyday wellbeing upon request. The spirit of *ta pu ban* and *Mor* Num’s spirits work hand in hand in the local spirit bureaucratic polities. *Mor* Num told me that when he dies, his possessing spirits would set off for new mediums in other villages.

In Chaiyaphum, a spirit who is believed to cause a patient’s affliction neither originates in his natal hometown nor belongs to his bilateral ancestors. It is generally an unknown, peripatetic spirit who wanders all over the Isan region. Turner (1969, 11-15) observes a different orientation in the Ndembu society. He documents the usual afflictions that are caused by the ancestral spirits or “shades.” Persons who fail to meet an obligation to venerate the ancestral shades fall sick. The curative rites are organized for them to remember those shades who are “not only their direct ascendants but also the immediate progenetrical of their matrikin—who form the core membership of villages” (Turner 1969, 13).

In contrast, the Isan spirit that causes illness is not normally an ancestral “shade” but has an exogenous origin. It is a spirit that the medium should interact with, deal with, and identify in healing processes. Once the deal is successful, the spirit agrees to become the protector of the patient. A house will be constructed for the spirit. The medium names the spirit so that the family members know how to call it and how to treat it. The spirit becomes a virtual household member and its existence is recognized. The way the spirit is embraced by family and society echoes the way in which the multifaceted Isan social group is constituted from different kin. It begins with interaction, goes through conflict, and settles with co-residency. Members of Isan villages come from different descent groups, live together, and form an unofficial, practical kinship of “mutual being” (Sahlins 2013) in their society. Moreover, by looking through the relationship between the human and spirit worlds, we observe a characterization of Isan society that is dynamic, penetrable, and contingent.

**Mediumship as a mode of synthetic and substitutionary kinship**

In a fluid migratory and socially fissiparous context where relations can break down as people move and families come under strain, spirit cults suggest the way that, for individuals, spirit possession can be a mode of synthetic and substitutionary kinship. As
people move to migrate and families come apart, the spirits can be recruited into relations of familiarity that provide solace and care.

*Mae* Sim OK (74) is a celebrated *khuba* medium. I first met her at the Sixth Lunar Month Festival at Phaya Lae’s shrine in April 2012. On that occasion, a large number of her disciples were dancing and parading after her. They were holding buckets of wooden sticks clipped with colorful banknotes (*ton pha pa*). They collected a lot of money and donated it to the office committee of the shrine. Her performance and entourage suggested her auspiciousness and power. But when I visited her at Ban Laonadi, located in Kaengkhor District northeast of Mueang Chaiyaphum, I found her living alone with a young girl, her left-behind grandchild, in a small wooden house. There was nothing on the open-air ground floor but a bamboo chair and one old toilet. She slept on the second floor where one bedroom was on the left hand side and the spirit shrine was far back next to the window. Her house was enclosed with fences of the neighbors’ houses. There was no connecting path from her house to the village street. We had to pass through her neighbors’ area when we went in and out of her house.

*Mae* Sim OK was not originally a local. When she was young, her family had moved from Ban Thakhilek in Mueang Chaiyaphum to Ban Laonadi. Those kin in Ban Thakhilek were rich but her family was poor. After moving, her father sold his field and left her only the house. She lived among people from different descent groups. When I asked about her spirit inheritance, she told me that she did not receive spirits from her parents’ families. *Mae* Sim OK said that spirits of three *khuba* mediums came to her after they died. But when she died, her possessing spirits would go back to stay with one of her nieces in Ban Thakhilek. A repeated self-description that *Mae* Sim OK gave me is that she was excluded from her kin and very poor. Because of her poverty, life hardship and having no kin, three spirits came to stay at her shrine and maintain her life.

Social relationships in mediumistic networks are formed in the same formats of descent groups. One prominent format is a lexicon that addresses relationships in kin terms. Spirit mediums call their possessing spirits “*i phor*” or “*khun phor,*” the vernacular kin terms meaning “father.” The disciples call their *khuba* mediums “*mae*” (mother) or “*phor*” (father). Among the same mediumistic networks, members are associated as “*phi norng*” (brothers and sisters), and so are their possessing spirits. It should be noted that
in Isan society, the terms “mae” and “phor” can be used to refer to senior villagers who are not related by descent relations but who are old and well respected in the locality. The extension of the kinship idiom, talking of fathers, mothers, and so on, is a standard part of political discourse, locally and nationally. When Mae Sim OK meditates and talks to her spirit, she addresses him as “i phor.” When I sat next to her in the shrine room on an occasion of “speaking to the shrine” (NE: kha han), I was amazed by the long conversation Mae Sim OK had with her deity who then became her pseudo father. In this regular activity, she sat with legs tucked back to one side and pressed the palms of the hands together at the chest in a sign of respect looking up to the shrine. She reported her ritual activities in the past week, consulted about everyday life matters, and asked for power from the deity whom she called i phor. This regular activity practiced among spirit mediums builds up kinship ties between the spirits and the practitioners. Moreover, it demonstrates that Isan mediumship is centrally enacted in a household format from the heart of the house.

Mae Sim OK had built up her kinship group through her mediumistic networks. She was very proud of items and personal belongings that her luk sit gave her. They were pillows, blouses, mats and blankets. She claimed that they were the evidence of her power and authority. On special occasions when her luk sit gathered, some of them gave her money like the way children give money to their parents on Songkran, Thai New Year’s Day in mid-April. They put the money in white envelopes and dropped them into Mae Sim OK’s bag. Then, they paid respect and showed gratitude.

The sense of gratitude and piety is significant in the spirit network. It is intimately bound up with mediumistic sociality. Khuba mediums often complain that some of their luk sit ignore and forsake them. Those who recover from illness often stop seeing them. Some leave the network without notice. Mae Sim OK often shared the stories of those disciples who quit her network without asking for permission. After they left, they became severely sick or died. She was very upset when they returned to her and asked to be accepted into the mediumistic group again.
Tensions of kinship through mediumistic ritual

In my field experience of attending mediumistic rituals, it was not unusual to observe the way in which the social groups’ conflicts come into view. The sacred domains where participants initially worship their spirits often turn out to be a platform where disputes among kin and members are revealed. Conflicts on an everyday basis—land ownership, household debt, and scandalous affairs—are ritually performed and commingled with episodes of singing and dancing. Through mediumistic rituals, I learned a lot about their relationships, not by interviewing but by watching their dramatic performance. They were rendered with incredible comprehensiveness through the lens of ritual processes. They sang with improvised lyrics that portrayed the stories of tension among social groups. Sometimes, the boundary of ritual aesthetics is transgressed by aggressive and uncontrollable human emotions that lead to fights and physical violence. Ritual activities in spirit cults crucially expose conflict and tension in kin and social groups.

On 3 November 2013, I went to Mae Som’s house to attend a regular celebration at the end of Buddhist Lent. A short, plump woman in an orange t-shirt and blue jeans was moving her hands and body in accordance with the slightly fast tempo of the khaen music. Tears rolled down her face. On the other side, her younger sister in a green t-shirt and blue jeans was dancing in tears too. They were similar in general appearance as if they were identical twins. Between them, Mae Som (71), the khuba mor lam in yellow shirt and yellow sarong with headscarf, was clapping her hands. All disciples encircled three of them to form the central arena. They were sitting, clapping to accompany the sound of khaen, and witnessing what was going on. Afterwards, the elder sister started to sob uncontrollably. Suddenly, she felt down on the floor and suffered from attacks of choking. Some disciples nearby helped to comfort her. They told me the two sisters had been in financial conflict. Mae Som, possessed by Karaket, a male deity at her shrine, was trying to resolve the conflict of the family.

Karaket was singing a song whose lyrics attempted to reconnect the sisters’ relationship. The spirit used a poetic language in Isan dialect. He dramatized the song by alluding to the two sisters by way of the characters who were their possessing spirits in heavenly court. The ritual enchantment was augmented by the performance of the romanticized story as if we were watching a drama of Thai myth or fairy tale. All the disciples became
an audience; they were deeply moved and cried. Then, the *kaen* music stopped. Karaket brought *khan ha* for the elder sister to hold and bow. Then, he gave it to the younger sister and said in central Thai accent as the shifting mode of performative possession, “my dear sister, turn your face and beg her pardon for what you have done. From now on, the problem will be resolved; both of you will reunite. We have the same High Father and Mother.” The younger sister cast her tearful eyes in another direction to perform inattention. Karaket persevered, “Kinnari (her possessing spirit’s name), are you listening to me? Do it for me. Don’t be angry. Everything will be fine.” Karaket touched the younger sister’s hand and tried to make her bow in order to pay respect to her elder sister. The spirit asked the younger sister to touch the elder sister’s leg. The *khaen* music began as if it would start a new act of performance. But it stopped suddenly once the younger sister put the *khan ha* down on the floor and paid respect to Karaket as the obvious sign of her refusal to submit to Karaket’s intention in the argument.

The performance of familial relations is central to *Mae* Som’s mediumistic event. She tried to mediate in the dispute and revitalize the sisters’ household relationship. She improvised a song to directly address family members and situations in order to maintain familial boundary. However, her attempt to reconnect the two sisters on this occasion failed. Spiritual power is the supreme remedy that *Mae* Som drew on to heal her patients. Also, her powerful song and performance assisted participants in attuning their personhood in the domestic realm. When addressing to her devotee-customers in rituals, *Mae* Som had her idiosyncratic idioms “we are kin” and “we have the same parents.” She constantly reproduced familial ties in the spiritual world that connected spirits at her shrine with the spirits of her disciples. Her mediumistic discourse and practice constitute a form of kinship in her pantheon.

We can glean from this anecdote about the two estranged sisters some sense of the strains experienced within families in the region of great social differentiation, mobility and change. These tense dynamics put families under great strain and lead them to explore remedies in which the idiom of spiritual kinship comes to the fore as a recurrent “idiom of communication for therapeutic efficacy” (Turner 1969, 13). Such familial tensions are nowhere more evident than in the life of *Mae* Som, the medium who had on this occasion been unsuccessful in resolving this family conflict.
A lovelorn lady

Mae Som’s life narrative mainly deals with grief and abandonment by her children and relatives. Her son and his wife moved away to live and work in the central region. They left their infant daughter with Mae Som. She told me she had to buy a kind of medicine to make her lactate to feed the baby. Shortly thereafter, her husband passed away. Now, she was staying with her daughter on a housing estate in Mueang Chaiyaphum. The daughter who was a nurse was unhappy with the mediumistic practice. All-day visits from Mae Som’s devotee-customers interrupted the daughter’s private space in the single-storied house. Sometimes, she could not take a rest after the night shift at the provincial hospital. The daughter asked Mae Som to retire from her lifelong profession. Mae Som did not read it as care but treated it as a sign of irritation. The daughter neither showed an interest in the practice nor assisted her mother in ritual activities. She usually left the scene when there was a network meeting in the house. When possessing spirits left Mae Som’s body, she frequently asked her luk sit where her daughter was or whether she went out to work. She felt neglected by her children. She emphasized that even though living in the same house, her daughter rarely talked to her because she was busy with irregular shifts at hospital and a souvenir shop that she recently opened at a local gas station.

Mae Som felt excluded by her kin. She had lost contact with her siblings and relatives for a long time. Since her mother died in a motorcycle accident, her brother had never come to see her. Her sister who lived not far away had never been in contact with her either. Mae Som cried when she learned from one of her luk sit that her sister had said she did not know where Mae Som lived. Mae Som’s husband also experienced exclusion from his own family. He had moved from a province in the central part of Thailand to work and live in Chaiyaphum. After getting married, he came into conflict with his parents and never returned home. No one from his family attended his funeral. The sad familial narrative often triggered Mae Som to cry. She often asked about my family and said that no matter how far I lived and worked from home, my mother still had family and relatives around her. Once, Mae Som mentioned that, “I felt miserable when I went to heal patients and saw them surrounded by their relatives while I have no one.”
Spirit mediumship makes affinity possible for Mae Som. Activities in her mediumistic practice maintain Mae Som’s personhood. She had been a spirit medium since she was 19 years old. Now, she was 71 years old and very active in conducting rituals. Even though Mae Som had chronic arthritis that made her walk uncomfortably and painfully, she often traveled to villages at the invitations of devotee-customers. It seemed that the busy schedule provided an escape from her forlorn house. She confided that on Buddhist holy days and Wednesdays, which were the days off for mediums, she felt very lonely because she had to stay at home alone. No luk sit and devotee-customers\(^{20}\) came to fill her social space. Only Mor Dom the beloved disciple regularly paid a visit to Mae Som on Wednesdays. He came to clean the house and have lunch with her. The had developed a close relationship five years ago when Mae Som healed Mor Dom after a spirit had attacked him. Since then, he became the most loved luk sit and she treated him like her own son.

A deserted child

Mor Dom (24) lived with his grandmother in a village about 15 kilometers north of Mueang Chaiyaphum. His father, a non-native villager, left his mother while she was pregnant. After giving birth to Mor Dom, his mother left him with his grandparents and moved to make a living in Saraburi province until the present time. She occasionally came back to see him. Mor Dom had unpleasant relationship with his grandmother. The conflict was most intense when he determined to become a spirit medium. After Mor Dom graduated from university, his grandmother expected him to look for a job and earn a living. But he engaged in the mediumistic circle and became a practitioner whose livelihood relied on low, unpredictable income. Like other families in the village, they needed money for everyday subsistence expenditures and to pay off debt. In general, children are required to fulfill filial obligations by returning care and financial support to their parents or guardians. Mor Dom’s grandmother was discontented with his failure to do so. Moreover, she witnessed the large amount of money that Mor Dom spent on

\(^{20}\) Spirit mediums do not call those who come to see them customers (luk kha). Mediums usually call them luk sit because they initially pay an amount of money to the spirit shrine as the subscription fee before conducting any ritual. So, devotee-customers automatically become a part of the network.
organizing the annual shrine worship (NE: pong pha khao) ritual which she considered wasteful. Recently, she was very angry when Mor Dom thought about extending the second floor of their house in order to renovate the shrine and provide more space for devotee-customers.

The conflict between Mor Dom and his grandmother was enacted both in everyday life and in his ritual practice. Neighbors were aware of the situation. In northeast villages, neighbors were relatives who built their house compounds in the same area. Everyday life and private matters were normally circulated, gossiped about, and criticized. Some of Mor Dom’s neighbors had already engaged in the mediumistic circle before he became a medium. They formed a group to support Mor Dom on a daily basis and ritual occasions. They cooked and shared food with him. They sat and helped him prepare votive offerings. In doing so, they hoped to gain wellbeing and prosperity from the spirits’ power. Neighbors realized that Mor Dom’s grandmother was quick-mouthed. She always complained about the financial burden of the family that she had borne since Mor Dom was very young. She expressed her dissatisfaction at the way her grandchild spent money on his mediumistic activities. Many times, she embarrassed him by spreading the word about his non-normative sexual orientation and his mother’s scandalous affairs with her partners and unsuccessful business.

Mor Dom’s grandmother slept on the ground floor in a small room next to the kitchen and bathroom. She often went up to the second floor where Mor Dom met his devotee-customers to observe his activities. Many times in mediumistic gatherings, she complained directly to the possessing spirits when they possessed Mor Dom that she had poor living conditions and her grandson never tried to find a job to make a good living to give back to the family. The spirits were irritated and lectured her in front of participants. Neighbors kept warning her not to do so. They said she should be proud of her grandson because he was never involved in drugs or liquor or roamed around like ordinary young male villagers (NE: phu bao). The grandmother also criticized him in front of Mae Som, who had initiated Mor Dom into the mediumistic world. Mae Som and other neighbors shared their opinion: seeing that Mor Dom could not resist the spirits’ request and make his choice of living, his grandmother should become supportive of his practice. However, the grandmother persistently aired her grievances to Mor Dom and protested against his spirits in rituals. Her words made him irritable and
depressed. So, Mor Dom sought moral support and care from Mae Som, his respected khuba.

Mae Som extended her role beyond the ritualistic domain to become a mother for Mor Dom in everyday life. She provided both material and financial support for him. When Mor Dom became Mae Som’s luk sit, he had two more years before graduating with a bachelor degree in business administration. Because of his financial difficulties, he decided to quit studying many times. But Mae Som provided him his tuition fees and occasional expenses until he graduated. She also supported Mor Dom’s everyday life payment sometimes. For example, on his twenty-fifth birthday when he wanted a motorcycle that would help him to travel to Mae Som’s house every Wednesday and to his patients’ houses to conduct rituals, Mae Som gave him the deposit to buy the motorcycle. Some of his clothes and personal belongings were provided. In winter, Mae Som asked her own son to install a water heater in Mor Dom’s bathroom so he would have hot water for a shower. When he became a neophyte in her network, she provided all items that were necessary for the rituals. Moreover, she still distributed items and belongings in her shrine to Mor Dom regularly. Mor Dom’s assistants told me that some of Mae Som’s luk sit in the same village were jealous of Mor Dom. Remarkably, Mae Som promised to provide financial and material support for his ordination. She told me that she would die without concern if Mor Dom found a good woman to marry. In Thai society, the expectation and support of a man’s Buddhist ordination and marriage lie with the parents, especially the mother. Mae Som’s aspiration to build a mother-son bond illustrates how spirit mediumship provides kinship substitution and resynthesizes human relationships.

**Kinship by spiritual operations**

Mediumship constitutes a form of kinship; the form that Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 33-38) defines as “practical” and “non-official.” Kin relationships made out of ritual associations in Chaiyaphum can be regarded as the “utilization of connections.” They provide insight into human interactions that might not be seen as kinship by the criteria of genealogical kinship and biological relations. Nevertheless, they show us the way in which people socially and economically engage with groups. Marshall Sahlins (2013, 2)
proposes that kinship is grounded in “mutuality of being” that begins with the perception of connectedness between persons. Kin “are members of one another, intrinsic to each other’s identity and existence” (2013, 62). Janet Carsten (1997, 4) argues similarly that sharing substantive human activities is the basis of kinship, which is seen as a processual phenomenon. For her, kinship is defined by living together and sharing food, actions that create bodily substance and incorporation. Activities in spirit cults certainly generate intensive incorporation. In Chaiyaphum, spirit mediums spend time together, share food and belongings, and most importantly, perform rituals together. The divine activities and communities create practical kinship and spiritual interconnectedness.

Mediumistic practice brings about a form of kinship among those who are excluded from their descent groups. Not only did Mor Dom become Mae Som’s luk sit, but he also turned into her virtual son. “I love him like my own son” is what Mae Som kept telling me and other people. In the early years of becoming a new medium, an attentive luk sit might accompany the khuba medium to help in ritual activities. Every khuba usually has an entourage that consists of one mor khaen and a number of luk sit to help conduct the rituals. By this means, the attentive luk sit gradually acclimatizes to mediumistic practice. He will be embodied in the performative forms of singing and dancing. If the khuba considers that the luk sit has become a skillful practitioner, then, she might let him to autonomously heal and help villagers. In the last two years of his university life, Mor Dom spent his days off from his study in traveling and helping Mae Som in her ritual activities. When he graduated, he became her full-time assistant. The intensive accompaniment in mediumistic practice establishes an intimate rapport in the form of mother-son relationship. While Mor Dom became an established spirit practitioner, Mae Som who was his giver of birth in the spirit world became his virtual mother in everyday life. She substituted for his real mother. And Mor Dom showed his affection and piety toward Mae Som more than to his own mother who forsook him long time ago. In this case, we observe that, by looking through mediumship, practical kinship is more significant and active than descent kinship in terms of incorporation and sociality.

Mae Som’s house constitutes the central hearth of her spirit kin network. Its shrine room plays a role as the central powerhouse that discharges auric and protective power to all
her luk sit. It is located on the ground floor on the right hand side and opposite her bedroom. Significantly, the shrine room can be viewed as the spirit womb where Mor Dom’s personhood as a mediumistic practitioner is produced. Even though Mor Dom has already had his own shrine room at his house and conducted rituals in his village in the last two years, he often joins Mae Som’s ritual when he is available. I usually observed dual roles of Mae Som’s ritual processes. One is to primarily heal her patient. Another is to resynthesize khuba -luk sit and mother-son relationships. Through the ritual processes in which Mae Som’s patient remained the central subject, while she was in the possession of her deities, Mae Som always addressed Mor Dom directly about his progress in professionalizing his status. She investigated his routine and ritual schedules that took place at his own shrine. Mor Dom thoroughly reported his success and failure in healing. She attentively gave him advice how to improve his power and stabilize his mediumistic operations.

Mae Som’s shrine room is the stage of spirit academy and reunion where Mor Dom is trained and their spirits perform connecting kinship. On the morning of 7 August 2012, more than 100 luk sit gathered at Mae Som’s house on the occasion of the end of Buddhist Lent. It was an auspicious time that spirits at her shrine would come down to possess her and speak to and bless all luk sit. When the ritual commenced, Phaya Lae was the first deity to preside over the ritual opening. When Phaya Lae entered Mae Som, she changed her clothes into warrior form with white shirt and loincloth sarong. She wrapped one scarf around her head and held a sword. She called herself “phor” (father) and addressed her disciples as “luk” (my children) to create a familial milieu. The deity in Mae Som’s body blessed his disciples and spoke to all of them, “take care of yourselves. You are the same family. You have the same parents.” Then, the deity accused Thipkesorn, another spirit who functioned like the maternal spirit in Mae Som’s network, of being too kind to her children and letting them become less pious and undisciplined.

When the spirit of Phaya Lae left her, Mae Som went into her bedroom and came out in a yellow dress. Then, we knew that she was possessed by another deity, Karaket. This male spirit was perceived as young, fun-loving, and good hearted, the opposite to Phaya Lae, who was authoritative and powerful. Disciples recognized that Karaket and Thepphorn—Mor Dom’s possessing spirit—were brothers in Mae Som’s spirit
When Karaket spoke to Mor Dom’s spirit, he called himself “phi” (elder brother) and called Thepphorn “norng” (younger brother). Karaket was supportive to Thepphorn and knew his mind because they were brothers and had been through hard times together. When I met Karaket for the first time, I asked him where he came from and who he was. Karaket told me the story further back into the past when his family scattered in war and he had to take care of Thepphorn, his beloved brother who was weak and young at that time. They escaped to a deep forest and conducted asceticism there together. When they died, they went up to stay in heaven. Then, learning of human illness and sufferings, both brothers chose to come down and stay with Mae Som and Mor Dom to help the wretched. It should be noted here that when Mor Dom was sick, Mae Som was invited to heal him. Her possessing spirits assigned Thepphorn to come down and protect him. Spirits in the same family incorporate people from different descent groups.

After Karaket left her body, Mae Som went in her bedroom again and changed her dress to white to welcome Thipkesorn to possess her. Once the spirit settled in her body, she cried a lot and addressed Thepphorn. Thipkesorn felt sympathy for Mor Dom because he was often sick after being possessed by Thepphorn in order to conduct ritual. She sobbed and warned the spirit not to hurt his medium’s body too much. Thipkesorn spoke to Thepporn, “don’t do this to the medium [Mor Dom]. You like to hurt him when many devotees come. Do you understand? Whatever you want I will seek and arrange for you, my son.” After that, Thipkesorn turned to speak to other disciples in the shrine room who were mesmerized by her performance. The goddess started to sing in her tears that she was weak and felt sympathy for Mae Som, her medium, who was old and dying. The audience sobbed and cried with the goddess.

The last spirit who came to possess Mae Som was Jao Phor Inpaeng. He was a hot-tempered and strong spirit in green clothes. He blessed disciples and commanded Mor Dom to change his clothes to welcome Thepphorn to his body. Shortly after, it was time to dance in order to celebrate (chalorng) the special occasion. Disciples moved out of the shrine room to form a circle around a mor khaen who started the music. The space was too small so the crowd stretched out to the verandah. After Mor Dom changed his clothes to yellow shirt and loincloth sarong, he walked into the shrine room where another mor khaen had already started his instrument. Then, he danced. Now, the two
strident, clashing sounds of the two khaen territorialized two domains between the central area of the house where the crowd of disciples was dancing and the shrine room where Mor Dom was dancing alone. Mae Som clapped her hands, danced with her luk sit, and blessed them for a certain period of time before she toddled into the shrine room.

There, Mor Dom had already immersed himself into trance. He closed his eyes and danced with contemplation. In front of him were Mae Som’s ritual props. He bent down to get them one by one to practice as if he was a warrior in training with different weapons. He swung swords, tied his head with yellow scarf, and put a metal bowl on his head. Flowers, bunches of candles, incense sticks and other items were incorporated in the way he moved and danced. He learned to be well equipped and capable in using the props and environments of ritual. At the door next to the mor khaen, Mae Som stared at him with arms akimbo. She attentively observed him and guided him how to dance and use the props properly. This is a core practice of becoming kin in the spirit cult where spirit power and inheritance manifest. Other disciples perceived that Mor Dom is Mae Som’s son who would continue her spirit legacy after her death.

Mae Som’s shrine room becomes the spirit womb where divine kinship is reproduced. It should be noted here that spirit pantheons in Chaiyaphum’s mediumistic network are malleable. New spirits can be subscribed into the social groups. When a person becomes a member of a spirit network, she usually has one protective spirit that a khuba medium assigns to take care of her. She builds an altar for the spirit to reside in her house. Her spirit will come to her when she engages a ritual. She performs mediumistic ritual with her fellows. In Burma, the spirit pantheon of the official cult of Thirty Seven Nats is finished and exclusive (see Spiro 1978, 51-54). It is less likely for new spirits to be included into the cult. But in Chaiyaphum, it is not unusual that, in one mediumistic network, new spirits are incorporated into the social group. The provincial cosmology is open for mobility of the spirits. Some move from neighboring villages, for example, Mor Num’s spirits. Some travel from other parts of Isan and Laos. Mae Som’s Jao Phor Inpaeng is the spirit of the famous and respected Buddha image in Ubonratchathani Province. This malleable and open quality of spirit population in Isan mediumship demonstrates the constitution of social life, social groups, and kinship, which are mobile, contingent, and penetrable.
Tension among people of the same spirit and descent group

Next, I will show how spirit mediumship brings out tension in a descent group. It demonstrates that a form of matrilineal spirit cult exists in Isan. However, the spirits in these matrilineal groups are not necessarily inherited through descent or shared within the lineage. Instead, each member of a matrilineage may be assigned a different spirit. Furthermore, the spirits might be drawn into the articulation of personal ambitions and affiliations that are in conflict with the maintenance of solidarity within matrilineal groups. Hence to assume that the spirits necessarily connect and incorporate a matrilineage might be misleading. In my ethnographic exploration of kinship and spirit cults in Chaiyaphum, I found that human relations based on lineal and descent groups are contingent upon intrafamilial tensions and complex socio-economic dynamics. The inheritance of spirits may express and exacerbate such conflicts rather than smooth them and bind families together.

In the following, I provide an extended case study of one female medium’s self-construction that reflects the local problem of tensions within matrilineal kin groups. This medium’s life-narratives of struggle to exist as a good daughter and a good wife of her family highlight the tension in the social group. I try to explore the working relationship between the medium’s status and her socially conflicting world. I would like to demonstrate how she negotiates her existence in domestic encounters, deals with local political battles, and practices as an honest wife without her husband’s protection in specific situations by the appropriation of spirit mediumship.

On 24 May 2012, I visited Phaya Lae’s shrine at Norng Pla Thao Public Park where the Lunar Month Festival took place. Spirit mediums from Chaiyaphum and nearby provinces came to worship Phaya Lae. They offered food and gifts to the deity. The most spectacular activity was the possession performance when the mediums and their network sang and danced to the music of khaen. It was on this occasion that I met Busaba. She came with six other people from the same village. They were relatives and friends. When they stopped singing and dancing, I approached and asked them who the master in the group was because I had observed that every mediumistic network was comprised of a prominent master or khuba and followers. Busaba said she had not
become a healer yet because her master and her mother suppressed her from healing people. Busaba said that a mediumistic network was similar to a Thai entertainment circle, full of hatred and jealousy. She mentioned her situation was even more complicated. After the festival, every medium would arrange shrine worship rituals at their houses. Busaba invited me to visit her village and attend their rituals.

From May to June 2012, I intensively participated in Busaba’s ritual activities and her everyday life. She was strong, expressive and talkative. Her close relatives and friends looked up to her with great respect. However, she told me that these authoritative characteristics were not her original self. It was Thongdam, the samian guardian god of the locality, who had made her like this. She told me that she had died and had been revived three times from accidents and disease since her childhood. “The other half of me is the god,” she said “without him, I can’t live my life like this. Thongdam is inside me, he never leaves me,” she emphasized, “if he leaves me for even 5 minutes, I will die.” For Busaba, the main function of Thongdam is to help her to live, to work, and to help other villagers. Busaba’s self can switch back and forth between herself and Thongdam for particular purposes. Interestingly, during the many times Busaba quarreled with her mother, Thongdam came to teach and chase her mother away. Here, the questions of kin relationships and selfhood are intriguing and should be addressed to understand the relationship between the operation of spirit possession in terms of the self and the social world where domestic conflict has taken place.

Busaba is 37 years old. She is the fourth child of her parents. There are two elder brothers, one elder sister and a younger brother. Now she lives with her two daughters, 17 and 7. Her husband left the family and has been working in Taiwan for 12 years. He usually only visits his family once every three years because of the high cost of travel. Busaba told me that her second daughter is unfamiliar with her father because after she was born it took two years before she even saw her father’s face. It should be noted here that in the village and nearby settlements, there has been a huge amount of labor mobility to Taiwan in the past two decades. These male and female labor migrants leave their children behind with their spouses and families (see Graham and Jordan 2011). The

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21 Most of the mediums have their own shrines at home where their gods and goddesses preside and will come to possess them at invitation on special occasions.
money her husband sends to the family and her own hard work has secured their income and has allowed them to live their life without debts.

Thongdam came to possess Busaba when her first daughter was two years old, right after her husband left for Taiwan. When Busaba had a leg pain, she went to see Si, a medium who later became her khuba. Si told Busaba’s mother that the spirit would come to Busaba. Then Busaba went to her mother to accept the god and raise her own shrine. Her mother also was a medium. Her own god’s name was “Phaengsi,” a female spirit. It should be noted here that for local villagers, especially women, having gods in the shrine guarantees healthiness.

After her husband went to Taiwan, Busaba’s bond with Thongdam grew significantly. Not only did she believe that the god protected her from afflictions, which is a notion that most local women regularly share, but she also considered that the god rescued her from physical deterioration and empowered her mental strength. She insisted that she could live her life only because of the god. According to her perception of the medical explanation of her physical problems, she thought her brain had been mostly destroyed. What revitalized her strength to work hard in the farming domain and motivated her to live was the god. “I’m different from other human. I’m human, but not human. I’m a half human. The other half of me is Thongdam. Nowadays, he never leaves me for even 5 minutes. If he leaves me, I will chase my sister away from my house. I will be mad and cannot control myself.”

From Busaba’s personal life stories, Thongdam has been intensively involved in her therapeutic procedures for more than 15 years. The god not only appeared in a healing dimension, but was also drawn into Busaba’s narrative of the self in her familial life. He had been reconstructed, substituting for her husband’s position in terms of family protection and security. When I spent time with Busaba and her family, I always heard them talk about Thongdam and other gods as if they were around all the time. Before going to bed, they mentioned Thongdam’s missions as if he existed as a human with flesh and blood, participating in all their everyday activities and helping them get through hard work on the farm and arrange rituals. Busaba acted out her personality like a male on an everyday basis. Her sense of self, in some part, derived from the
constructed personalities of Thongdam who had the position of a warrior and guardian of the locality. Busaba interpreted the god’s maleness and power and developed her sense of self through hardships in her life and traumatic experiences. As a single mother with two children, she struggled with her situation by incorporating the male qualities of the god into her self.

**Family Conflict**

“Hatred and jealousy” were the terms Busaba used to describe her relationship with her mother. Even though Busaba’s mother was the one who had taken care of her when she was sick until she recovered, family tensions began a few years ago. The conflict between Busaba and her mother resulted from two major stories. First, Busaba lent her younger brother an amount of money for his re-marriage the previous year. She asked for a piece of his land as a guarantee. Busaba’s mother loved her youngest son and wanted to take the land back for him. According to Busaba, the mother cheated and tried to reduce the amount of the debt by claiming she had given some to Busaba’s elder sister. They quarrelled about the issue and Busaba threatened to sell the land to a land speculator who would give a lot of money. Moreover, she announced that she would keep the land until 1 January 2015 and then she would return it to her brother after he returned the money without interest. Busaba told me that she knew her brother’s nature. He was a spendthrift and often got drunk. She wanted to teach him how to spend and save money because she was sure that all the land would be gone if she gave it to him without conditions.

Busaba’s mother spread the news that Busaba had cheated her brother and was going to sell the land away. The gossip circulated over the farms and fields. The villagers started to alienate Busaba from their communities and activities. This caused Busaba a lot of trouble and mental disturbance. Busaba said she was grateful for her mother’s assistance when she was sick and she already returned all the money her mother spent to heal her because her mother condemned Busaba as ungrateful. Busaba suffered from the gossip. She told me she was very tired of laborious work in the fields and was very hurt from what the people said about her. She often came back home and cried.
The second cause of the conflict related to the power of the spirit. Both Busaba and her mother were mediums of spirits in the local pantheon. Cosmologically speaking, Thongdam, Busaba’s spirit, was believed to be superior to Phaengsi, her mother’s spirit. However, it should be stressed here that the power of the god is related to the medium’s self. Even though Busaba’s elder sister’s god had a higher ranking than Busaba’s, her sister acknowledged and admired Thongdam as the chief saviour of the villagers. For Busaba, spirit possession enables her to evolve and to recontextualize her personal experiences of kin relationship. She drew the spirit figure of the community into her own private realm. She transformed Thongdam from a local guardian to an instructive god, and this transformed the position of the god and Busaba’s personhood in the public community. The process of reconstructed selfhood both empowered Thongdam and allowed Busaba to transcend her constrained conditions.

Busaba recounted how on one particular occasion her mother was discontented when Busaba was possessed by Thongdam and gave the mother a didactic lesson. Last year before the conflict regarding the loan and land had taken place, Busaba often wondered why her mother left a ritual after Busaba changed her clothes in preparation for Thongdam’s descent to her body. This might have represented a change of Busaba’s self and identity that threatened her mother. Her mother left the ritual and from then on, never appeared in activities that Busaba would join. I asked Busaba if she knew the reason. She told me that her mother might not be able to accept the didactic messages from her daughter in front of other mediums and audience. Busaba insisted that it was the nature of Thongdam to teach all people who joined the activities including her own mother.

Their conflict intensified and expanded from the domestic domain to the public domain when Busaba intended to contest the election of village head. Busaba always said that Thongdam did not let her leave the villagers. Busaba insisted that he wanted her to be the village head since the current one was corrupt and would lead the community to downfall. She narrated that drugs and corruption had been increasing in her village. There would be a new election soon. But Busaba’s master’s son also wanted to enter the election. So, the medium who was the master was unhappy and later excluded Busaba from her mediumistic network. This master was a close friend of Busaba’s mother. Both of them helped spread news in order to ruin Busaba’s reputation.
It should be noted here that I do not want to join Busaba in her dark opinion of her antagonists. Busaba related all these stories. I only listened to the stories from her side. She emphasized that it was her mother who told the villagers that she was mad. However, what I witnessed when Busaba’s mother showed up at a shrine worship ceremony confirmed the intense conflict between them.

**Dramatic scene of contrition**

On June 13, 2012, I participated in the annual shrine worship at the house of Busaba’s friend. The host invited other mediums to join, including Busaba’s mother and some senior mediums. The house was not far from Busaba’s place. The host built a small room especially for the shrine. Around 8 am, they started the ritual. They sang and danced to show their respect to the spirit of the shrine. I noticed that Busaba always performed alongside the mor khaen. She dominated the central space of the ritual while other mediums, especially her mother, danced outside the shrine room. They started drinking white liquor and smoking which signified the beginning of their entrancement. It should be emphasized here that, on a trance occasion, these mediums could switch between their selves and the alternate ego of a variety of spirits.

In the entrancement, the familial tensions were exposed in the mode of performative interaction. This was the first time Busaba and her mother had met in a ritual activity since the previous year. Busaba said that her mother never joined any rituals when she invited her. It is conventional that the hosts must invite their masters and senior mediums when they organized any ritual activities. Busaba and one of her cousins sang to bless the host and show respect to the god of the shrine. Then a spectacular and climactic scene took place when the senior mediums advised Busaba to ask for a pardon from her mother among the participating witnesses. They told Thongdam to leave Busaba’s body and Phaengsi to leave her mother’s body and let the daughter pay respect to her own mother. All this time, the khaen music was played with a strenuous rhythm.

When Thongdam left Busaba, she stepped towards her mother and fell to her knees. She put her hands together in respect and threw herself at her mother’s feet three times.
Suddenly, her mother spoke out loud “I’m not your mother. I’m Phaengsi, the goddess.” She shook her hands off and left the group while saying to other mediums, “I don’t pardon her. She must go to her mother’s house and bow to her there.” I saw that Busaba was very sad and hopeless. Later, she told me that all the stories were not about conflict between the spirits, but between the mediums. Busaba said she was being considerate towards the host, who was her friend. If this situation had taken place at Busaba’s shrine, Thongdam would not have let her be calm and still, but would teach and chase her mother away. Busaba’s mother sat for a while before she left the house. The singing and dancing scene proceeded onward until 1 pm.

After we had lunch, Busaba mentioned that she had had a presage of her mother’s unmerciful message. Last week she had dreamed of her mother. In her dream, Busaba was meditating in a white dress. When she opened her eyes, she saw her mother coming. Busaba asked for forgiveness from her mother. But her mother did not accept the request. She said she would only forgive her if Busaba died in front of her. When Busaba heard what her mother said, she bowed at her mother’s feet three times and died there. Then, Yomara, a goddess in pink who came to possess Busaba three years ago, appeared and called her back from death. Yomara touched Busaba’s head and said she would never let Busaba die. Yomara was a spirit from her husband’s family that had traveled to stay at her shrine after her husband left for Taiwan.

Busaba went on that after waking up from the dream, she cut her hair. She told me she was born as a new person. She changed her name to “Bun” or merit. She asked me to call her “Bun.” She was not afraid of death because she had encountered it many times since she was born. One point I should add here is that since her husband left for Taiwan, Busaba has turned to the monastic domain. Every morning, she gives food offerings to the monks and dresses in white to meditate in the temple every Buddhist holy day. Busaba even declared that if she gave up being the medium of Thongdam, she would renounce secular life and live in a temple. I observed that the assertive spirits present in Busaba’s kin group were enmeshed in a conflict that closely intertwined with the tensions that existed between family members themselves. Busaba’s own spirit had empowered her and reconstructed her identity but also had escalated conflict with her own mother. We see here the place of the spirits as actors drawn into the fissiparous dynamics of kinship and community in a rapidly globalizing agrarian society.
Busaba’s account shows us that tensions exist in the families of those who share the practice of spirit mediumship. Together with other mediumistic networks in my ethnographic study, there is no clear evidence of spirit inheritance among people from the same descent groups; nor is there evidence of the incorporation of matrilineages through spirit inheritance. On the contrary, the spirits, who come from beyond the family, may set individuals at variance with family members and launch projects of personal reconstruction and social renewal that conflict with received family identities and kin ideologies. Isan mediumistic beliefs and practices may deconstruct and reconstruct kin groups in this fissiparous matrifocal social landscape rather than necessarily consolidating and enhancing them.

**Conclusion**

The dynamic characteristics of spirit cults and kinship in Isan are correlated to the social dynamism of the region, which is marked by migration, mobility, and contingency. There is a disjuncture in the lineage of spirit worship in descent groups. Most spirit practitioners are not central to their descent groups but are excluded from kin groups as a consequence of migration and socioeconomic tensions. The most heard aphorism from the Isan mediums, that spirits come to help them from poverty and suffering, suggests that the spirits come from a domain outside of local sociality and descent groups. They are “exogenous” spirits not “rooted” ones. In villages and the urban city of Chaiyaphum, the mediums’ possessing spirits are not native to the locality but they are traveling lords with the qualities of administration, governance, and territorial bureaucracy.

The establishment of Isan social groups as seen through spirit cults reflects the way in which its population is subject to socioeconomic and political ruptures. The “polity spirits” that are assigned to mediums and condense new social groupings are significantly predominant in the Isan spirit landscape. They ritually constitute practical kinship and reconstitute social groups. The main argument of the chapter is that the turbulent, divergent and contingent constitution of social groups in Chaiyaphum finds resonance in the synthetic and substitutionary nature of spirit cult composition in Isan society. Spirit mediums perform a key role in resynthesizing connections between old
kin and new kin through their mastery of an idiom of spiritual kinship. This process sees spirit mediums emerge as central nodes in the reconstruction of personhood and the recomposition of society along spiritual lines. Female spirit mediums are thus key in the reformulation of a mode of relatedness that is both matrifocal and inspired by a logic of familial nurturance, but may be at variance with actual matrilineal descent and with conventional kinship ideologies and their emphasis on biological descent.
Chapter 3

Possession, Desire, and Embodiment

*Mor lam song* often talked to me about their bodies as if they were foreign to them. The body is an un-subjugated materiality beyond their control. It is a separate, unfathomable entity. They said the body is weak, penetrable, and unwell (NE: *orn-ae, siap khao siap ork, miay*). It is prone to melancholy and affliction. Senior female *mor lam* medium shared similar experiences when they talked about what their bodies were like when they were young. The bodies went naked, ran amok, and escaped from home. They often cried. Interestingly, holy days in the Buddhist calendar brought about bodily and mental vicissitudes. One medium gave a mesmerizing account about how she cried a lot and felt intensely lonely on Buddhist holy days. Another medium’s hair became curly and entangled every Buddhist holy day. Villagers called her hair as “nested lock hair” (NE: *phom hang nok*; CT: *phom rang nok*).²² A mother of a young son felt hatred, without rhyme or reason, for her husband and wanted to run away from home on *wan sin wan pha*. *Mor lam* mediums observed and had a lot of questions about the bodies that they lived with. Their corporeal vicissitudes were spelt out in relation to spiritual power in a variety of manifestations in different age stages. After the spirits took and controlled their bodies, the *mor lam*’s violent, unpredictable, and uncontrollable intensities of the body had gradually diminished. The spirits, mostly male, were invited and welcomed to stay in the *mor lam*’s houses and protected them. They gave these *mor lam* strength and vitality. When *mor lam song* described to me the ways that their bodies were taken by lords of land and roaming spirits, the relationship they portrayed was akin to conjugal rapport. They had developed intense intimacies with their possessing spirits. How can we make sense of the relationship of these bodily phenomena and spirituality? Why do Buddhist holy days bring brooding melancholy to these women? How can we understand the carnal intensities that are influenced by the spirits? In addition, what do spirituality and sexuality mean from the vernacular perspective of mediumistic practices?

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²² Gananath Obeyesekere in his book, *Medusa’s Hair*, tells some fascinating accounts on spirit mediums whose hair become locked when they welcome the spirit’s visitation. His main argument is that this bodily phenomenon shows personal symbol of the repression of sexual intensity.
We can observed the way in which sexuality in the Thai context has been given meaning in relation to the project of modernity since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Siam encountered imperialism and started its modern nationalism (Loos 2006, Jackson 2003, Reynolds 2014). Siam’s authorities executed civilization plans that reflected Victorian values (Chanan 2013, Reynolds 2014). King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910-25), educated in England and known as the Victorian Siamese Prince, ruled during the time that “the Victorian ecumene evolved from globalizing trends and came to be expressed in a variety of local settings” (Reynolds 2014, 271). Together with Buddhist values, a legal code of conforming to Victorian era sexual norms and European norms of civilization was entrenched in the first decade of twentieth-century Siam. Drawing on Foucault’s (1990) notions of historical forms of bio-power and intensification of the state’s interference in everyday life, Jackson (2003, 1-2) argues that both modernity and globalization lead to an international homogenization of sexual cultures in Thailand. In research on related themes, Tamara Loos (2006) indicates how the legal regime of imperial modernity has played an important role in Siam’s marital, gender, and sexual hierarchies, showing the ways in which this cross-border negotiation has created internal gendered and sexual meanings (2006, 11). Loos (2006) explores the Siamese legal project to create modernity in the encounter with imperialism. She studied family law as it was deployed by Siamese authorities. Family law is an arena that demonstrates Siam’s embedment within the ideology of nineteenth-century colonial modernity that was reflected in a legal standard of marriage that was monogamous and heterosexual.

Foucault’s investigation of sexuality in Victorian regime sees it as a constitutive power to confine sexuality into a morally reproductive function.

Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social
space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents’ bedroom. (Foucault 1990, 3)

To insist on its modernity against nineteenth-century colonial criticisms, Siam initiated self-civilizing plans through legal and institutional acts that rendered eroticism private, gender hetero-normative, and sexuality beneficial to the family and nationalism (Jackson 2003, 12-13, Loos 2006, 131-132). When getting married, women nowadays are expected to be housewives who take care of the household (CT: mea ban mae ruean). This domesticating discourse prescribes female identity after marriage and limits their sexuality to the realm of the household. Using Michel Foucault’s (1990) interpretation of the repressive hypothesis that gives revolutionary importance to discourses on sexuality and supposes that the operation of power is productive rather than repressive, I propose that spirit mediumship gives reign to localized register of desire and sexuality that have eluded discursive normalization. Through mediumship, non-normative female desire is enacted, performed, and endorsed on the stage of ritual and everyday life. It is not hidden and yet nor is it vocalized. Following Judith Butler (1999), the feminine sexuality embodied in the mediumistic domain is performatively enacted, rather than discursively expressed, and is not contained to binary coupling with men. It is an embodied relation with an extra-domestic ensemble of possessing spirits and community consociates.

This chapter argues that spirit mediumship is a pivotal arena which illustrates the contours of an alternative sexuality that exceeds the boundary of heterosexual domesticated project of the state. This project limits the diverse meanings and practices of sexuality to the domestic realm whereby women are exhorted to the conjugal instrumentalization of pleasure and the utilitarian reproduction of offspring. The subjectivity creates women as the anchor holding together the modern family and community (see Loos 2006, 12). However, in mediumship, women’s heterogeneous sexuality expands beyond the containment of the modernity project that reduces female subjectivity to wives and mothers who function symbolically for their husbands and the state. Interestingly, female practitioners who embrace this alternative sexuality express authority that is gained through the channel of the spirits, thereby embodying a religiously productive and spiritually reproductive mode of power.
Spirit mediumship expands our understanding of Isan sexuality. It sheds light on the twining of sexuality and spirituality in local religiosity. Mediumship brings sexuality into public via the idiom of spirituality. The spiritual relationship entailed is equivalent to an alternative sexual relationship. Examination of the body in spirit mediumship sheds light on an alternative sexuality that is not limited to reproductive function in the household of the modern society but responds to heterogeneous desires. This alternative sexuality does not operate in the service of modern society’s division of labor and reproduction. It gives reign to bodily pleasures that expand to homosexuality, homoeroticism, and the physiological intensities aroused by human and non-human subjects. Such sexualities are prominent in the ecstatic comportment typifying this register of spirituality. The sexual and the spiritual are the dual qualities of mediumistic cults.

**Corporeal visitations and social prefigurations**

In the late morning of 20 February 2013, I went to Mae Mala’s big house where she lived with her niece. The house was isolated and surrounded by her 30-rai paddy fields. At the age of 72, Mae Mala was well off. She was a loved and highly respected senior woman in the village. Her husband had passed away in March the previous year. He had been village headman and then sub-district headman until he retired. They had two sons and two daughters. Three of them were working in the civil service and living in other provinces. One daughter ran a grocery store across the road. Mae Mala had been a mor lam medium for 35 years. There was no record of anyone in her genealogy being a mor lam like her. Even though Mae Mala’s official initiation into the world of mediumship commenced when she was 37 years old, the story of her contact with spirits can be traced back to when she was a teenager.

“Were you ever attacked by a ghost when you were young?,” I asked Mae Mala with curiosity, since some of the informants I engaged with had experienced preceding encounters with spirits before they became professional mor lam mediums. Mae Mala told me a story about when a malign ghost whom her parents believed to be porp, one of the entities in the bad spirit category, attacked her. It happened when she was about 18 years old. She could not identify the cause but what she really remembered was that the
porp penetrated in and out of (NE: siap khao, siap ork) her body. She felt depressively forlorn and wanted to cry over and over again without reason (NE: khuet yak horng kor horng, khuet yak hai kor hai). Her parents did not take her to hospital but sought help from local spirit practitioners. They did not like mor lam mediums so they invited a mor tham to heal their daughter. When he fell in love with Mae Mala, her husband, whose father was a mor tham, also asked his father and looked for another mor tham to help.

The mor tham exploited their magical technology to bear down on the porp but it was ineffective. Mae Mala recalled the series of violent healing episodes she received from a variety of mor tham both at the village temple and her house. They bathed her at the temple until she shivered with cold. On one occasion at her house, a mor tham came and poured holy water (nam mon) on her body. The more he poured on her, the more she screamed because she felt that the nam mon was very hot (NE: haeng ap haeng horn, haeng ap haeng horn). “Who are you?” the mor tham asked her. Then he pointed his finger to Mae Mala’s father, “do you know who he is?” She yelled out, “I don’t know who the hell he is! How can he dare be my father?” She was conscious of who she was but her mouth let the words go out. The malign ghost who possessed her triggered such frantic physical and verbal responses. The mor tham poured nam mon and beat her with a bamboo stick. She was unsure whether it was the ghost or herself who felt the pain but screamed “beat her if you want to see your daughter die!” Mae Mala’s father was angry and slapped her hard across the face. The porp said, “slap her if you are not afraid that your daughter will hurt or die! I will penetrate in and out of your daughter’s body. Once you slap her, I will escape and then return!” Her father remembered the incident and often mentioned it to her afterward. The possessions continued until another mor tham who was more proficient came, and her porp symptoms gradually diminished when she transitioned from adolescence to adulthood.

Mae Mala encountered spirit phenomena again after she was married and had children. But the experience this time was not violent and menacing. It brought nurturance and protection to her family. The spirits who visited her were the guardians of the field (NE: phi hai phi na). They requested Mae Mala to become their medium and build a shrine for them in her house. Through the regular course of worship at the shrine and participation in mediumistic practice, Mae Mala acclimatized her personhood to the
mediumistic habitus and oriented herself in developing a relationship with her possessing spirits. Later, she learned that they were Phaya Lae’s soldiers.

Mae Mala’s possessing spirits have been reified and domesticated in terms of age and personal character. They are Phor Somsak and Phor Somsong. The first one does not drink, smoke, or dance. He is quite a pious spirit. But the latter is the opposite; he likes drinking liquor, smoking cigarettes, and enjoying entertainment. Both of them helped Phaya Lae to help and heal suffering villagers. In the past, Phor Somsong was the main possessing spirit who came to possess Mae Mala when she provided mediumistic rituals for her devotee-customers. But nowadays, Phor Somsak usually came to help because Mae Mala was old now and could not drink, smoke, and dance as in the old days. The way that she found out the name of Phor Somsak was when she and her husband had their first child. Whenever they punished their son, whose name was Sirisak, their cows became ill and plants withered. The spirit told Mae Mala not to punish the boy too much because they had similar names. To hit him was like hitting the spirit, causing negative outcomes to occur. Mae Mala’s husband, previously doubting the existence of her spirits, gradually came to accept this explanation. Naming the spirits is a reflection of personal aspirations and social relationships in mediumistic settings.

In Mae Mala’s case, psycho-cultural and social strains were her principal afflictions since she had never had any seriously physical problems. She had never been in hospital until 2008, when she had an intestinal operation that left long scar on her stomach. The main phases of her spirit attacks might be interpreted as responses to social liminality (Turner 1969) when she negotiated the thresholds of critical life-stage transitions. The first porp attack happened when she was an adolescent, signaling the psychological disturbance and risk that crescendoed during her teenage years. The next spirit visits came when she first became a mother and then when her oldest child was on the threshold of maturity. Critical and threatening changes to her social status were objectified as attacks by intrusive spirits, which were then transformed and redirected as protective power and personal symbolic totems that would bring prosperity to her family.

Spirits accompanied Mae Mala in these life transitions from child to wife and mother and beyond. Conjured in moments of crisis and transition, they give bodily form to the
turbulent emotions of desire and dread aroused in these transitions in status. Making demonstrable her ambivalence at her prospective transition from child to adult, the malignant porp spirit makes violently manifest the coercion, loss and violation of physical boundaries entailed for a girl in the process of maturation and betrothal. Like the guardian field spirits with whom she later, as a married householder, entertained relations of protection, nurturance and guidance, her incorporation and domestication of these spirits also afford her a measure of autonomy. Her relations with these male spirits articulate her fears and model her desires. Her physical intercourse with these spectral beings bespeaks not of passive submission to the demands of social others but precedes her relations with those others as potent acts of prefiguration (Castoriadis 1997). Through these relations with spiritual others, she prefigured and thereby also at the same time delimited the relations she was to have with her male kin.

**Desire, celibacy, and power**

In some cases, the spirits can provide protection from the oppression of heteronormative demands. Mae Sim OK’s life history suggests the way in which mediumship expresses her desire and crafts her self. Her mediumistic activities empower her and enable her to free herself from patriarchal domination. When she was young, her family moved from Mueang Chaiyaphum to Kaengkrhor district. Her father sold up his property and left no field for her. She was poor and had no family. But, like other poor mediums, the discourse of life hardships accounts for the visitation and aid of spirits. The claim of having deprivation and living in asceticism brings about power and charisma. The suffix name ‘OK’ came from her magical efficacy to make people’s wishes come true. Men who did not want to be conscripted into military service, women who wanted Western husbands (phua farang), those who wished to win at the lottery and so on came to see her. A former minister also relied on her spirit shrine. So, villagers knew that whatever request was brought to her would be ‘OK.’

*Mae* Sim OK participated in mediumistic circles since she was young and had been a master for 40 years. Now, she was 74 years old but very strong and active in spirit worship. She said that spirits from three master mediums came to stay at her shrine after the masters passed away. They gave her a shortcut to efficient power and prestige. *Mae*
Sim OK had her slogan: “I chew and eat chili and salt” (NE: pak kin phik kin kia) which means her words are powerful and could bring both auspicious and ominous consequences. Villagers were afraid of making her angry and being condemned. Male villagers did not want her to pass by while they were fishing because they would not get any fish. They believed that Mae Sim OK’s protective power prevented the fish from being caught.

One afternoon during a pilgrimage to Phu Phra, we sat and chatted in the temple’s main hall. Our conversation led to her telling an episode of her marital life. She told me that she had a relationship but it had ended with separation. She claimed that her possessing spirits rendered her marital tie unsuccessful. They did not allow her to have a husband but advised her to help mankind. The spiritual sign of resistance to conjugal life manifested in her body.

“My cunt was inflamed and swollen without explanation and I had to keep doing this.” Mae Sim OK flapped her sarong while she described the bodily symptoms in her teenage years. She went on, “I couldn’t sit with my thighs closed. When I walked, it squeaked. Villagers called me “Sim the ball-cunt.” They said I had AIDS. Whenever my husband was about to have sex with me, I became sick. He said my cunt constricted and he couldn’t penetrate it. Then he left me.” Mae Sim OK emphasized that those who would become masters were destined for this ascetic life. Even though she did not have any of her own children from her unsuccessful conjugal life, she considered her mediumistic function as a master made her a mother to her disciples (luk norng) in the network, who were like her own children (luk). Even though Mae Sim OK recounted her celibacy and suggested her mediumistic motherhood, her disciples and people in other networks knew that she did not live a heterosexual life. She used to have a same-sex partner.

Megan Sinnott in her book, *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-sex Relationships in Thailand*, (2012, 111-131) explores female same-sex relationships which are constructed within Thai hegemonic gender norms that dissuade female heterosexual promiscuity. On the understanding that female heterosexuality is perceived

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23 In my field sites, khuba interchangeably called their disciples as “luk sit” and “luk norng.”
as a morally dangerous affair and women are ideally asexual except for their receiving role in relation to men, Sinnott argues that Thai women have considerable space to engage in homoerotic behaviors free from much public notice. Their cohabiting space and everyday activity are possibly seen as aspects of female friendship. Sinnott’s refreshing analysis casts light on Peletz’s documented examination on permeable categories of gender identity and sexuality in Southeast Asian societies (2009). I frame a ground from these two postulations about female same-sex relationships within Thai moral norms and the tolerance for transgendered ritualists in Southeast Asia to look at the stories of Mae Sim OK in terms of non-normative sexual lives within the mediumistic field.

I argue that mediumship, which lies at the conjuncture of moral asceticism and Thai gender norms, provides a considerable domain for practitioners to express their same-sex relationships and homoeroticism, which are less scrutinized by the public. Their unexpressed homosexuality is tolerated and partially legitimated because of the nuanced combination of spiritual functionality and Thai hegemonic heterosexual and gender norms. Homosexuality is not officially recognized in public discourse and policy. Mae Sim OK’s same-sex cohabitation was understood not to transgress the spirits’ demands. She had to follow their will. She said, “They don’t allow me to have a husband” (NE: phoen bor hai ao phua). The spirits could be seen as the moral guardians of women’s precarious moral reputations and heterosexual celibacy.

In my field site, homosexuality was prominent in spirit mediums’ everyday life. One interesting case is a spirit medium who had a homosexual daughter. Busaba read her daughter’s non-normative gender as a way of protecting her virginity. During the long-term absence of her husband who had been working in Taiwan for 12 years, Busaba constituted her gender role as both father and mother. By nature, she had a strong personality and worked in the field like a man. Busaba tried to raise her children to be strong so that they could take care of themselves without paternal care and protection. Busaba’s first daughter was 17 years old in 2012. She was a tom, the Thai term referring to masculine woman. She is a school player of sepak takraw, a ball game mostly played among men. The daughter’s girlfriend came to stay at Busaba’s house for many months. The girlfriend’s mother put the blame on Busaba but Busaba told me it was not problematic since neither of them would fall pregnant. Busaba stated that being a tom
protected her daughter from premature sexual intercourse with the opposite sex and the
daughter would quit being a tom when she finished high school.

The idea of homosexual relationships, gender norm and heterosexual celibacy is not
limited to female practitioners. Those homosexual male mediums who lived together
were understood as being beloved friends (NE: pen mu hak kan) or older/younger
brothers (NE: pen ai pen norng kan). For example, one master medium read her male
disciple’s non-normative sexual life as a temporary journey. We who were close to her
knew that when she mentioned those terms, they connoted her apprentice medium’s
homoerotic relationships with his same-sex partners. The master medium did not
interpret his homosexuality as being a morally dangerous affair. She spoke instead
about the future when he would be ordained and married with a good girl.

**Choreographing desire**

Thai regional folk performance is a site where we can observe the discursive practice of
fertility and desire in agricultural society. One prominent feature is the element of
sexuality. Songs and dances present human celebrations of the harvest. They loosen
everyday norms and create intimacy. Thai villagers are accustomed to the sexual
elements involved in the performances and enjoy them communally. It is a genre of folk
eroticism, a medium of desire. However, under the modern Thai state, some folk
performances have been modified to fit in industrial and civilized Buddhist society.
Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Pibun), whose military regime ruled from
1934-1957, established the idea of cultural mandates (ratthaniyom), which were a series
of changes in cultural practices from 1939 to 1946 (see Sinnott 2004, 187). The Fine Art
Department modernized a central Thai folkdance. “Standardized Thai dance” (ramwong
mattrathan) was named to deploy strict dance postures for civilized performance of
male and female bodies. This scheme has been incorporated into Thai social life and the
school curriculum. It renders one salient female role in the modern identity of Thai
nationalism as “the flowers of the nation” (dork mai khong chat). The new
performance scheme governs sexuality and choreographs desire. The body is
symmetrical, controlled, and moved by rigid patterns. Dancing partners move with a
certain pace and leave space between their bodies. Bodily and emotional intimacy is restrained.

In contrast, dancing in spirit mediumship illuminates the negotiation of choreography and desire. Mediumistic dance shares some northeast common patterns of performance. Yet, individual mediums have their own freedom to freely express intensities. While dancing, tears roll down their faces; sweat soaks their bodies. Laughter and cries resonate through the ritual space. At Phaya Lae’s shrine at Norng Pla Thao on the occasion of the Sixth Lunar month festival, I observed a mass of mediums intimately crammed in front of the statue of the deity. They blissfully danced along to the loud music. One of them collapsed on the floor and hysterically spun around. One of her fellows fetched a nearby bucket and threw water on her. She stopped, rose, grabbed a sword, and ran to the statue. She placed the sword on her head and continued dancing. Mediumistic corporeality is the site that is not yet governed by the rigid mode of state-regulated performance. It is interesting to revisit the performance in mediumship and raise some complex questions about the relationship between body and desire. Does dance in mediumship account for the irrepressibles and the irreducibles of sensual intensities? In what ways does it reveal a sexuality which connects to everyday life practice?

Gananath Obeyesekere (1981) examines repressive marital life and desire of female Hindu mediums in Sri Lanka. The relationship that moves from being expressed by conjugal contact to an idealized union with a divinity is established by “orgasmic” shaking of the body. He explains that since there is no technical term for orgasm in Sinhala and many ascetics have not experienced it in their daily life, “The pleasure and release achieved through ‘shaking from within’ is translated into religious language as a divine ecstasy” (Obeyesekere 1981, 33). Obeyesekere’s postulate casts light on my observation on Chaiyaphum spirit mediumship pertaining to sexual physiology. Mediums’ discursive and bodily practices reveal sensual intensities through the vernacular. Dancing sessions will not stop until the mediums achieve the condition of “being thrilled” (NE: mi haeng). In the northeast dialect, the term to a certain extent denotes the description of achieving “orgasm.” Another term used to describe the result of dance is suang. It, too, possibly suggests sexual release.
If mediumistic dance allows for the performance of subtle nuances of sexuality, sexual behaviors, and corporeal sensuality, it can be said to choreograph desire into the religious form of blissful exaltation. The choreography is inspired by the indispensable music of the khaen. The symbolic behavior communicates pleasurable intensities. The substitution of orgasmic bliss is enacted in the form of dance-compulsion. There is no particular term to explain the achievement of orgasm in northeast dialect. The modern medical discourse in central Thai translates the English word for “climax” as thueng jut sut yort (reaching the apex) to mean orgasm. In northeast dialect, people describe the corporeal intensity as the result of sexual intercourse as mi haeng or suang. Khaen music, the translated release in ritualistic language of ecstasy, spurs the process of the “shaking from within.”

Bodily shaking in mediumistic dance is a form of female libido that is repressed in the everyday and stirred in the extraordinary. The oscillation between the two occasions illuminates female sexual physiology which connects to menstruation and reproductive circle. In many ritualistic trances, I closely observed female mediums whose dance-compulsion was enacted in a variety of bodily patterns. At the Jao Phor Phaya Lae Shrine on the occasion of the beginning of Buddhist Lent, a high school girl came to dance in front of Phaya Lae to heal her hand pains. After being diagnosed by doctors with nothing wrong, she came to a local mor lam and joined the network. While the mor lam sang to the deity asking him to heal her, the girl in neat black blouse and green sarong with a white scarf crossing over her chest danced along in contemplation. She held a small baisi on one hand; the other moved slowly and gracefully (CT: ram; NT: lam), following the sound of khaen. The mor lam led her to dance in front of the Phaya Lae statue. She left the baisi, closed her eyes, and massaged her hands. Her parents and folks from the same village were supportive. After the khaen stopped, the girl’s hands still shook. She could not promptly bring them to a rest but needed time to regain bodily calmness. She told me she was blissfully relieved. I read this episode of bodily shaking as an ecstatic scheme in which subjectivity is transformed in the sexually charged physiological encounter with the superagency of the spirit. The momentum that drove the process is the ritualistic ambience of musical enchantment and the mor lam’s discursive practice.
Another episode that exposes the unleashing of bodily ecstasy by the sound of music occurred in the possession trance at a shrine reconsecration ceremony. Late one night at Ban Laonadi, Kaengkhro district, we gathered on the second floor of a medium’s house. It was the time that all participating mediums would invite their possessing spirits to come to them and dance to celebrate the occasion. Musicians started playing the khaen, drum, and cymbals; mediums rose up and danced ecstatically. However, when half an hour had elapsed, the female mor lam master told the musicians to stop playing the drum and cymbals. She claimed that the only musical instrument for Phaya Lae was the khaen. The dancing session went on until the mor khaen were tired and stopped for an intermission. All the mediums sat down on the floor wiping the sweat from their faces and bodies. It seemed that most of them were not satisfied (CT: mai im; NE: bor im). They felt like they had been dragged from a blissful state. Some complained in a funny way. The master teased her followers that next time she would bring a cassette player for the followers so that they would enjoy nonstop music and dancing. One woman’s body and hands were still shaking. She could not stay still. Another scratched her palms and hands. She shook and rubbed them vigorously on her thigh. The others watched and said she expressed her dissatisfaction at stopping dancing through deliberate itching and scratching symptom. In this ritualistic time and space, the female body of the medium was the venue for a communal experience of ecstasy, unleashed by the music of the khaen.

The relationship between female mor lam medium and mor khaen is sometimes viewed as sexually risky. They might develop intimacy outside the ritualized domain. They have to travel together to conduct mediumistic rituals at the patients’ or hosts’ houses. Each mor lam medium has her own regular musician with whom she gets along well in their conducted performance of ritual. They might come from the same village. If they live in different places, their everyday life schedules will be planned together. In pilgrimage seasons, they travel and stay together for many days. Because the two practitioners are complementary in ritual practice, long companionship might lead to affection and sexual relationships. Village folk recognize this outcome of being involved in mediumistic circles. Thus, whenever a young woman is attacked by a spirit and compelled to join a network, her family is worried that she might end up living with a mor khaen. Singing and dancing in mediumistic rituals is an intimate bodily practice. In the ritual session, mor lam moves, touches, and talks to mor khaen and patient.
The disposition of the musical instrument and the player in khaen performance already implies sexuality and desire. It embodies the sensual power of masculinity. The musical instrument’s shape and function signify the phallic symbol representing fertility and power. The long shaft of bundled bamboo reeds mediates power in northeast rituals and transacts the release of physiological intensity through the sound of music. Its sexual symbolic representation is similar to other sacred objects in northeast cultural practice, for example, the wooden phallus (palat khik) and the rocket (bang fai). The khaen is the male apparatus in village courtship traditions. Among other musical patterns, “love-suit to a girl” (lai kiao sao) constitutes a carpe diem genre of music in folk knowledge. It is not unusual to learn that most of the mor khaen, before being retired from mor lam music caravans and later joining in mor lam mediumship, have had sexual experiences with female performers in their bands. There is an internalized image of the young mor khaen as a Casanova figure who has a joyful, free, and hedonistic life (NE: mak muan; CT: rak sanuk). In Chaiyaphum, I found some couples of mor lam mediums and mor khaen. In one case, the husband who had never played a musical instrument became mor khaen after the wife was made a master medium (NE: khuba; CT: ajan) from her possessing spirit. It is risky for a married woman to travel alone with a male mor khaen who is not her own partner. Thus, deriving the musical talent claimed from spiritual power helps to protect conjugal life from the dangerous sexual potentials of the mediumistic partnership.

Over many weeks from the middle of January 2013, a great flood of people had flowed into the vast empty paddy field in Ban Bungkhla, five kilometers southward from Mueang Chaiyaphum. They came to see the supernatural phenomenon of a naga footprint on a pickup truck (CT: roi phaya nak). The vehicle owner found the superhuman trace and built a canvas pavilion as a temporary shelter. The isolated field turned into a market place and sacred site overnight. Mobile stalls selling food, drinks, flowers, offerings, photos of the naga footprint, and lottery tickets mushroomed in the area. Devotees came to pay respect to the naga revelation. Luck seekers came for the

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24 The naga footprint is a supernatural phenomenon in which the footprint or track of the mythical snake is found on the road or a car. Isan people believe that the sign is auspicious. In my field site, a villager found the naga footprint on his pickup truck in a vast plot of land that was being filled with soil. A few weeks later, the shrine of the naga was raised, and the deserted area became crowded with villagers who came to worship the spirit of the naga.
lucky numbers for the lottery. The cloud of smoke from incense sticks never vanished during the daytime. Mor lam and mor khaen came to mediate the enchanted visitation. A local grocery owner informed me that there were about ten mediums from different places coming to communicate with the spirit of the naga and identify his demands. They revealed that he was the spirit of young male naga whose parents were the great naga residing in Mekong river. Those who won the underground lottery provided the budget to build a fine, permanent shrine for him near the pond and next to the temporary pavilion.

Among the villager folk was Nuan (40s), who communicated with the spirit of the young naga. I met her on the afternoon of the sixth February 2013 at a local grocery store. A number of villagers joined us after they finished attending a funeral at the nearby temple. Nuan accepted that her psyche was weak and she was easily possessed or touched (NE: sun) by spirits passing by. She went to the sacralized spot with the intention of looking for lucky numbers. But the spirit of the young naga possessed (sun) her. When she heard the sound of khaen, she could not control herself; she danced without restraint in front of the villagers. Her father, husband and children were unhappy and warned her not to attend or stay around festive events and rituals. The spirit of the naga forced her to dance. Nuan insisted that she herself did not want to dance in front of hundreds of people because she was also ashamed. “I was not paid to dance;” she emphasized. But she told me that when the spirits wanted to dance, they came to a human body.

There is something unusual in my body when I hear the sound of khaen. When I want to dance, I never call upon any masters (khuba). I just start dancing. If any spirit comes to my body (she paused) I have no idea. That’s the way it is, it just goes. My mind becomes empty and serene and I dance. After the spirit gets out of my body, I have tried to ask myself what just happened to me but I don’t know how to explain it. (My fieldnotes, 6 February 2013)

Nuan mentioned that her blissful compulsion to dance had never happened to her until ten years ago when a mor lam came to heal her illness. When she was in her 30s, she was diagnosed with mouth cancer. Her throat was blocked and she could not breathe.
Some time later, her father could not afford hospital expenses and looked for herbal medication. Then, she went to Ramathibodi Cancer Center in Bangkok. The doctor there said that she had no cancer but lacked some necessary vitamins and nutrients. When she was on the way back in Khorat, she could not breathe. But when she was sent back to the hospital, the symptom disappeared. The family considered that her condition might be caused by spirit attack so they went to consult a mor mor, or local fortuneteller (CT: mor du). He said her possessing spirit (ong) wanted a shrine (NE: phoen yak dai hing dai hor). Thus, a mor lam medium came to heal her. The medium identified that the spirit who attacked her was the spirit of her field whose name was Jummari. So, a healing ritual was organized to turn the hostile spirit into her possessing spirit (ong) at her shrine.

After the khuba passed away, Nuan quit the mediumistic network and changed to join a mor tham network in which singing and dancing were banned and considered as unorthodox and improper. However, Nuan still had a predilection for dancing. Her neighbors realized that she was psychologically weak and had been attacked by passing spirits many times. “I want to run into the pond,” was her response when asked to describe her possession episode at the site of the naga footprint during the music session. Her body became incredibly flexible and bent. She was amazed when she went back home and watched a video clip of the episode that had been recorded by her children’s friends. Nuan locked herself in her bedroom and tried to dance and bend her body like when she was possessed but she could not. She said, “I can’t dance beautifully and flexibly like him.” When Nuan woke up in the next morning, her body was sore. She had to call a masseur and take pills. Nuan emphasized, “when I hear the sound of khaen, my mind leaps up with joy. My body is not mine anymore I also have many questions in my mind and observe what happens to me but I never find any explanation.” The only thing that she could tell was that when she danced she felt blissfully relieved (suang). Nuan’s compelling disposition to dance symbolically communicates her sexualized desire and stands in contrast to the lack of blissful contact and the moralizing suppression in her ordinary life.
Permeable bodies and substantive pleasures

Mor Dom, who knew Nuan, shared with me in a conversation his point of view toward her preponderance to irrepressible spirit possession and dancing by giving a metaphorical explanation. Mor Dom was a young khuba who had developed his mediumistic profession over a period of five years. Deriving most of the mediumistic knowledge from his own khuba, Mor Dom explained that the body of a prospective medium was transparent like glass (CT: sai muean kaew; NE: sai khue kaew), available for the designated spirit to occupy. In the study of len dong, Vietnamese spirit possession, Nguyen Thi Hien (2007) demonstrates that spirit mediums refer to themselves as “seats” upon which the spirits of Mother Goddess religion will sit. The image implies that in Vietnamese mediumship, specific spirits land on the body and sit down. But the notion of the medium’s body in Chaiyaphum reveals contested spaces and the etiology of illness. While the prospective medium’s glass body is waiting for the appointed possessing spirit (ong, thao nang), a roaming spirit or a mischievous ghost might see and want to stop over. Mor Dom diagnosed Nuan’s glass body as a tempting space that attracted transient spirits. He mentioned, “when a spirit passes by, he might see your body as transparent as glass (sai khue kaew). So he wants to stay in your body (phoen yak ma yu nam).” Mor Dom told Nuan that before becoming a mor lam medium, he also had the dance-compulsion symptom. Every time he heard the music of the khaen, he would automatically dance in an overwhelming trance and could not control himself. He used to be easily entered by roaming spirits. Mor Dom continued that the disposition of the “glass body” endured in the early stage of illness. But when the patient entered the initiation and accepted her possessing male and female spirits (NE: hap thao hap nang), the roaming spirit or mischievous ghost would stop bothering her. She would be capable of dealing with transient spirits and preventing herself from being drawn into unconscious dance.

However, a mature medium can sometimes encounter bother from guest spirits when he or she takes a short leave from her possessing spirit on special occasions. At Ban Norngkhorntham after a female mor lam master finished a healing session at the patient’s house, she led me to the village temple where she always went to stay

25 Thao is a title for male spirits while nang is for female spirits.
overnight on Buddhist holy days. Next to the temple hall, there was a huge takhian tree trunk covered by garlands and colorful clothes under a canvas tent. It was coated by white stains, which showed that villagers had come to apply powder and rub for lucky numbers. Four sets of Thai traditional female suits of different colors were hung over the trunk. In front of the tent, there was a table full of offerings: baisi, bottles of red Fanta, and trays of cosmetic sets. The medium told me that recently villagers found the sacred trunk in the river nearby and moved it to the temple. They believed that the female spirit of the takhian resided in the trunk. When the medium came to meditate in the temple on the Buddhist holy day and walked by the trunk, she was invaded by the spirit. She fainted and was almost possessed many times. Another local medium also encountered the same situation. As discussed in detail in earlier chapters, for the practitioners, the Buddhist holy day is their possessing spirits’ day off. The spirits will go to meditate in heaven. Mediums do not heal and help villagers but go to the temple to meditate. In such a state the vacant body might appeal to the transient spirits.

When we left the village, Mor Dom told me that Nuan was running into trouble because she was bewildered by the overlapping of networks. Previously, when Nuan was afflicted, she was healed by a mor lam, her khuba, and became a member of her master’s mediumistic network. Nuan asked permission for leaving the network before her khuba passed away. But she did not ask permission from her possessing spirit. This caused her psyche to become unsound. Mor lam mediums take the relationship with their possessing spirits into account seriously. Once they are committed to engaging the spiritual ties, they have to be mindful of treating the spirits appropriately. They should not neglect the possessing spirits who were primarily invited to heal and protect them. Mor Dom criticized Nuan for going on the wrong track, moving from a mediumistic network to mor tham network, which is based on Buddhist disciplinary practices. Members in a mor tham network are ostensibly prohibited from singing and dancing which manifest a celebration of spirits.

By observing mediums’ behavior and events and questioning ritual participants about their meaning, I was able to elicit the key notion of the transparent body in relation to the process of becoming a mor lam medium. Another set of interactions that enabled me

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26 Iron Wood.
to understand why women have preponderance of spirit contact was when I helped mor lam and their followers to prepare food and offerings for ritualistic occasions. In preparation sessions, we usually cooked, ripped banana leaves, cut sacred white threads, and counted flowers and candles for the arrangement of baisi offerings. In the course of preparations, I asked fellow participants, “why do females tend to experience spirit contacts or attacks more than males?” Many mor lam mediums and followers from different networks shared the term “soft hand” (mue orn).

The notion of “soft hand” (mue orn) accounts for sexual division of labor in both household and ritual domains. Men usually work in the farm and fields and engage in labor migration more than women. Mediumship is a household-based practice; the mother, wife, or daughter who remains at home takes care of the shrine. The husband of a medium told me in a possession session that while his wife was dancing, sometimes he wanted to dance but he was too strong to engage. For him, the stiff, labor-hardened male body does not fit in the mediumistic domain. Mor Num, a young mor lam master at Ban Silatham, shared his view that women pluck flowers and prepare offerings. The requirement for delicate craftsmanship potentially excludes men from the central stage of the mor lam network. Those attentive women in the mediumistic circle know what kinds of flowers are suitable for particular respected spirits. He explained that lotus, champak, and put27 were common flowers for the rituals pertaining to Phaya Lae. For Ong Tue, any kinds of flowers were acceptable. Spirit mediums emphasized that mediums must go to pick flowers, make the decoration from banana leaves and create crafted works for the shrine. Men were too strong to do so. Mor Num described that, “men’s hands are too hard to do decorations. Female hands are soft and creative for making decorations.”

This commentary and practice proposes a corporeal affinity between the female body and the disembodied spirit. What is suggested here is a conception of the female body as particularly susceptible to spirit possession owing to its soft, permeable, yielding, and responsive qualities. In cases such as Nuan’s and that of many other female mediums, we can also discern the medium’s body as a field of libidinal potential and virtuosity, stirred in the presence of sexual symbolism and demonstrably competent in obtaining

27 Crepe Jasmine
gratification. For its part the spirit is, on the one hand, active, opportunistic, enterprising and penetrating; it is desirous of the flesh. On the other hand, like the flowers offered to it, the spirit is fragile, insubstantial, and limited in its power to take bodily possession. It finds its ideal complement in the corporeal form of the female medium who is able to host, give expression to, and take substantive pleasure from, a presence of the most insubstantial kind.

**Mitigating desire**

Cross-gendered possession is a crucial subject in the anthropological studies of spirit mediumship. Certain works focus on women as the central actors in the possession rituals. They demonstrates that by being possessed by male gendered spirits, women have an outlet for seeking power against male domination and social norms (Norton 2006, Irvine 1984, Kendall 1985, Lewis 1975, Wijeyewardene 1986). For homosexual male practitioners, transgendered mediumship is the site where their sexual orientation is acknowledged in ritual and gender lines of everyday life are transgressed (Fjelstad and Hien 2011, Norton 2006, Bacigalupo 2004, Wijeyewardene 1986). However, a detailed account of a heterosexual male practitioner who is assigned to worship a female spirit and performs transvestite ritual in Thailand is left unattended (Pattana 1999, 2012, Rhum 1994, Wijeyewardene 1986, Morris 2000).

This section examines the unexplored correlative space of body, age, and gender relations of the northeast structure of experience vis-à-vis its cross-gendered mediumship. It delineates the relationship between the male sexed body and the female gendered spirit. It demonstrates that the male practitioner is empowered by means of embodying cross-gendered possession. Aged femininity in the Thai context of locally respected female figures provides the young male medium a shortcut to authority, power, and wisdom.

Substantial ethnographic works explore ideologies of gender and power in localized cultural constructs. They discuss the contesting power that is drawn from heterogeneous sources by different gendered agencies in their socio-cultural settings. Beginning with the concept of power in the Southeast Asian context, Benedict Anderson understands
power in Javanese world as spiritual potency. It means “divine energy and mystical inner strength that enables an individual to control himself, other people, and his environment without the use of crude physical, political, or material force” (Anderson in Brenner 1995, 28). It is attained and accumulated by means of ascetic exercises and diverse forms of self-discipline. However, studies on Javanese spirit potency are explicitly male-centered and see men with superior performance of self-control over women at their ideologically dominant public space. Suzanne Brenner brings female agency into focus in the everyday life environment. She argues that, at the marketplace and the home, women alternatively perform superior self-control and dominant representation (Brenner 1995). Drawing on the ideologies of gender and spiritual potency gained through self-control in Javanese culture, I set out my analysis of the body and cross-gendered mediumship in Chaiyaphum. In addition, my ethnographic account suggests that age difference is indispensable for understanding the linkage between gendered ideologies and spiritual potency.

In northeast Thailand, elderly women are perceived as moral guardians and domestic leaders. They share prestigious status with other women in matrilineal Southeast Asian societies. Senior women in northeast villages are addressed as mae yai meaning “grandmother.” The dialect term is a respected social title and embodies the qualities of experienced personhood and self-control. At home, they are the central figures of the household and manage domestic affairs. Mae yai are the center of social and biological reproduction. It should be noted here that the terms mae and mae yai which mean “mother” and “grandmother,” respectively, are not restricted to those who are married and bear children. Aged women who are not married can be called by the terms because they are in kin relations in the villages. Mae in the Thai language alludes to the birth giver, caretaker, and nurturer. This female gendered term is put in front of personified nature and spirits, for example, Mae Khongkha (the Mother River), Mae Thorani (the Mother Earth), Mae Phosok, (the goddess of rice fields), and Mae Yanang (the goddess of boats).

We are not surprised to see aged women’s dominant role and the absence of senior male members in northeast villages. The male population engages in labor migration, physical work, and often abuse of alcohol. So, their average life span is shorter than female villagers. Once I asked one female khuba why women occupy the mediumistic domain.
She just simply said, “men die fast.” This observation applies to all the villages I visited. At the temple, senior women perform leading roles in kitchen and ritual. They intensively attend the temple on Buddhist holy day to meditate and practice precepts. They lead the prayers and arrange temple affairs. By engaging in domestic matters and ritual practices, mae yai attain moral duty and self-control. They are the locus of authority, power, and wisdom.

When it gets old, the female body speaks louder than the male body. The female aged body actively participates in everyday life at home and in ritual time at the temple. Since the male body has been absent from household and community during the period of labor migration and mobility, it loses its connections to place and time. And when it moves back to its natal place, it becomes weak and timeworn from participating in laborious work in both national and global market economies. The male body is put in jeopardy in situations where urban time goes faster than time in the villages and consumes its vitality and strength. One medium’s brother went to work in a suburb in Bangkok but came back after having a psychological breakdown. Another had an accident and became disabled. When the male body moves back to community, it turns weak, docile and silent. It loses the authority and power that had been previously superior to the female.

In contrast, female corporeality gains authority and prestige over time. The bodies of mae yai move energetically and voice their concerns loudly in domestic and public spaces. In social events, the bodies will control sequences and direct participants’ actions. If we sit in a northeast temple, we can always hear female orchestrated voices. Previously, a male liaison (makkhanayok) regularly performed the leading role in monastic rituals. But today, the male body is absent from the dominant role. At the daily late morning meal for monks, a mae yai will sit in front of attendants, direct ritual processes, and begin prayers. In Chaiyaphum today, the number of mor tham is decreasing. The number of mor tham networks is declining. Those disciples in mor tham networks move to mediumistic networks. The social bodies of female religious figures become prominent. The aged female figure of the mae yai predominates in the religious domain.
In contrast to mae yai’s self-control and moral observance, young men in the northeast are perceived as morally vulnerable and prone to social pollution. They are involved in drugs, alcohol, gambling, and violence. Phu bao is the term used to refer to northeast male teenagers. They are fun-loving (NE: mak muan) and unruly (NE: na muen). In the Buddhist perspective, they are considered “raw” (dip) before entering the self-transformation process of ordination when they become adults. Those men who pass the rite of passage and disrobe are called thit, the culturally ripened (suk) male persons who are socially recognized and full and ready to have families. The two-dimensional configuration of mae yai-phu bao, aged femininity with self-control and young masculinity in moral jeopardy, sheds new light on northeast cross-gendered possession and the phenomenological experience of the body.

Wijeyewardene reports that in northern Thailand, the male mediums of Chiang Mai are likely to display tranvestism or homosexuality both in possession rituals and everyday life. But for female mediums, he argues that princely or warrior costumes create “the impression of an intermediate sexless category, rather than transforming females into males” (1986: 158-159). Similarly, Kapferer (1983) argues that cross-gendered costumes do not always indicate transvestism but should be construed in the context of the ritualized domain. During the gathering time for the dance of the Great Cemetery Demon at night, the Sinhalese male exorcist-dancers wear female costumes and perform the major dances. Kapferer reminds us that it would be a mistake to interpret the male practitioners as transvestite. They are “males in female attire” and function as mediator between the demonic and the world of human beings. He explains that the demonic is attracted to enter into the male body of a dancer dressed as a female and then becomes trapped in a male body. This domain is healthy and non-afflicted. Then the demonic can be controlled and expelled (1983: 150).

Ton (22) was a new graduate from a provincial university. He lived with his father, mother, and grandmother in a village north of Chaiyaphum city center. His first contact with spirit mediumship took place four years ago when he had a great pain on his right knee but no physiopathology was found. Then, his grandmother’s khuba came to heal him. She was successful and gave him one possessing spirit (ong) whose name is Buasi. Ton told me “I wanted to cry. I wanted to run away. I felt angry. I felt annoyed at that time. But nowadays, the feelings have been relieved.” Buasi is a female spirit who
chews betel nut and is good at entertaining. In general, the names of possessing spirits are taken from folktales and localized Buddhist narratives.

Another possessing spirit that often comes to possess Ton is Ya Di (grandmother Di). She is one of the most important and powerful spirit figures in Chaiyaphum cosmology. According to oral history, she was a real person in local history who flourished in the mid-1950s. Ya Di was a traditional medical specialist and a professional spirit medium who healed a great number of patients and became the prototypical exemplar for spirit mediums in Chaiyaphum’s collective experience nowadays. Oral stories from many sources recount her moral observance and religious dedication. After her death, Ya Di’s spirit became a main figure of spirit worship. A black and white photo of Ya Di with short hair, wearing white dress with a scarf across her chest and sitting on the floor with legs tucked back to one side, is placed on spirit mediums’ shrines. Her subjectivity is reproduced through the embodiment of possession in a variety of places and occasions.

Both Buasi and Ya Di constitute a mae yai body that Ton embodies in his mediumship practice. This embodiment provides him moral protection and a shortcut to authority, prestige, and power. Ton’s family had empathy for his situation. Even though spirit mediums in Chaiyaphum have respected status, being a medium can be socially stigmatizing. But they were happy that Ton had his protective power (khorng raksa). Ton’s grandmother was worried about his phu bao hot temper. She told me he had a lot of girlfriends. Many times he was upset and swore at them on the phone. Many phu bao in the villages were prone to precarious conditions. They were wild and out of control. One of his close friends had gone mad. His parents said he was attacked by black magic from his wife’s family. But it was rumored that he took drugs until he lost his consciousness. Then, this young man became Ton’s patient and disciple, and was taken care of by Ton’s mae yai’s nurturing and healing power.

Ton’s embodiment of the mae yai figure brings about cross-gendered mediumship. When he was possessed by Buasi or Ya Di, Ton changed his clothes to female dress. He put on a female red sarong and green t-shirt. He hung a scarf across his chest. He chewed betel nut and sang in a weak and high tone like an old woman. Ton had some performative ability. He had been a singer and master of ceremony of the village musical band. The band usually performed in local festivals and social events. He told
me he was very proud when he won a competition of Buddhist chanting (saraphanya) and northeast didactic songs (NE: phaya) when he was in high school. Male embodiments of aged femininity already exist in the northeast structure of experience. In northeast folk and popular culture, we can often observe the mae yai figure impersonated by male performers in the local radio station, music industry, and shows by musical caravan bands. The sharable intersubjective body of mae yai is expressed as witty, outspoken, and authoritative. The embodiment of aged femininity in Ton’s performative ritual is not static but active and creative. It establishes his spiritual potency and gives him a shortcut to mediumistic power.

**Conclusion**

This chapter situates spirit mediumship at the intersection between sexuality and spirituality. It argues that spirit mediumship is a site where undomesticated modes of desire and sexuality become discernible. Such modes can be constructed as the opposite of sexuality in the modernizing project of the state where sexuality is controlled, channeled, and contained. In mediumship, sexuality eludes the hierarchical and formalistic rigidity of the project of modernity whereby sexuality is confined to be reproductive functions of the connubial union and ethical values. Spirit mediums are virtuosos who venture in the oscillation between sexual asceticism and sexual supersensuality. This circling transposition of personhood between ascetic celibacy and unshackled sexuality renders power and religious ecstasy and reveals that the sexual and the spiritual as the constitute dualism of local religiosity.

The mediumistic cult puts sexuality into the public arena via an Isan vernacular idiom of bodily practices. It is a venue where sexual feelings and practices can be ritually and performatively enacted. It is a domain where gender/sex pluralism is manifest. The practitioners’ same-sex relationship and homoeroticism in everyday life are tolerated. Cross-gendered mediumship can be understood as means of gaining recognition and power. Physiological intensities attached to the spirits are considered sacred. These kind of diverse sexualities in mediumship are transformed to become productive power. This chapter expands the understanding of what it means to be spiritual by tracing in the body of the mediums an ecstatic state that is not private and bound to the conjugal
relationship. The productive power of ecstatic performance in mediumship is publically expansive and spiritually exciting and animates human subjects and communities.
Chapter 4

Khwan and Control: Afflictions and Healing of the Body

This chapter focuses on the Isan body and its illness and healing. It examines the way in which the Isan body encounters transformative conditions, becomes sick, and gains back control and equilibrium. The chapter also thoroughly explores the processes of healing. It looks closely at the body of the medium and the body of the patient. Robert R. Desjarlais (1992a) explores illness and healing in the Yolmo society of Helambu, Nepal. He illustrates that the Yolmo body is a corpus of space, which embraces and engenders meaning and experience. Ghosts cause illness on different loci of the body. Tibetan tantric words and images are projected onto the body and give rise to the remedies (1992a, 39). Similarly, the Isan body is a primary site of giving sociocultural form and meaning to experience. A newborn child’s body is ritually given its spiritual anchoring before the child begins to learn about the world by cognitively sorting his or her perceptions. The parents ask a spirit medium to tie the newborn child’s wrist with sacred cotton thread in order to anchor its young, fragile khwan in the child’s body and protect the khwan from malignant spirits.

Subsequently, khwan becomes the attached, latent foundation of the person. It is the domain where essence of life is contained (Heinze 1982). Khwan will be manifest when the person moves through ritual space that deals with his or her life transitions: ordination, marriage, returning home and so on. Tham khwan28 or the ritual to re-anchor khwan in the person is performed to make sure that it is still maintained and stabilized in transitional conditions. In Chaiyaphum, the most significant life transition in which we can observe the detailed manifestation of khwan is illness. Khwan is the main locus of diagnosis and remedy in Isan mediumistic healing. When a person is sick, the family will bring that person to see a spirit medium. The medium organizes a series of healing

28 Tham khwan is Central Thai which literally means to “make khwan.” In Isan dialect, we use “oen khwan” which means to call back the lost khwan. We also use “su khwan” in both Central Thai and Isan dialect.
processes. The last and indispensable process is to call the *khwan* back to the body (NE: *oen khwan*).

*Khwan* is understood as the essential constituent of an individual subject in the Thai context. To describe Khon Mueang personhood in northern Thai spirit mediumship, Tanabe (2002, 45) explores the notion of *khwan* in the construction of a person and coins the term “the person-spirit schema” as an abstract organization of experiences that is accentuated in critical moments of rupture or transition. The schema organizes perceptions and inferences to enable the individual subject to react to changing conditions. Among the critical moments that unsettle the sense of personhood, he explains, the most consequential in recent times have been the displacement and insecurity caused by capitalist transformation and the growth of the nation-state. Likewise, Isan persons encounter crises under similar political and economic conditions. However, Tanabe focuses his examination on cognitive aspects involved in the construction of the person. He still sees the person constructed from the segregated domains of *khwan* and the body. He also leaves out of his description of the processes how the embodied knowledge of mediumship is utilized or articulated in healing afflicted persons (Tanabe 2002, 64). What I propose to do in this chapter is to rethink the relationship between *khwan* and the body from my ethnographic account of Isan. I will shift the idea in which the person is cognitively constructed to one in which the material aspect of personhood in ritual is paramount. Moreover, I will elaborate the way in which the materially constructed person is healed when he or she becomes afflicted.

I would suggest that in Isan *khwan* is a vernacular concept of embodied experience that represents a person’s phenomenological existence. I propose that the key ideas of Isan illness and healing are concerned with the body and the embodied experiences of disordered relations of control. I argue that *khwan* anchors bodies; both *khwan* and bodies are anchored in families, which in turn are anchored in particular locales.29 These embedded anchorings give people a degree of control over themselves and, potentially,

29 By “locale,” I am trying to get at the idea of home or of neighbourhood, of socially intimate and culturally familiar lived space. In his study *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai spoke of “locality” as “a structure of feeling,” and as “always emergent from the practices of local subjects in specific neighborhoods” (1996, 199). Elsewhere he explained: “I see it [locality] as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts” (Appadurai 1996, 178).
others. When control—especially control of the body—is in crisis, people attend to the crisis through intensified, multisensory, and intersubjective ritual practices focused on recovering the *khwan*. Mediums are successful in healing by identifying, locating, and capturing what is disemplaced bodily in these processes. They re-domesticate and re-center the Isan body. Mediumistic healing and *khwan*-calling excite intercorporeal re-engagement between the patient and the participants. Isan spirit mediums interweave intersubjective ties and provide care by returning the lost, affected embodied experience, and joining the patient’s personhood with the locality where his *khwan* first developed.

**Khwan as embodied experience**

*Khwan* is central to Isan ritual life. It appears at the same time a person is born. The newborn child is introduced to *khwan* through the bodily practice of wrist-tying before it gains awareness to know the world. When the person grows up, his or her *khwan* becomes stronger. When he or she becomes sick, it deteriorates and loses equilibrium. When the person dies, *khwan* will no longer exist. It is believed that men have strong *khwan*, while women are regarded as having weak *khwan*. It is believed that *khwan* is plural; there are thirty-two *khwan* in a person, the number that is equivalent to the number of parts of the human body according to a Buddhist meditation sutra.\(^{30}\) *Khwan* becomes inactive and extinct when the person dies. In mediumistic healing, *khwan* is the locus where the person’s illness is diagnosed and healing is actuated. The last indispensable ritual process is to call the *khwan* that has been lost back to the patient’s body. Also, *khwan* calling (NE: *oen khwan*) is essential to other northeast rites of passage: ordination, marriage, and returning home.

A substantial literature on Thai religion explains that *khwan* is an indigenous Thai word that can be defined in English terms as “spiritual essence,” “essence of life,” or “soul” (Anuman 1968, 1986, Heinze 1982, Tambiah 1970, Tanabe 2002, Whittaker 2000). It is

\(^{30}\) The sutra in Tipitaka aims to contemplate the impermanent quality of the human body, which includes a variety of external parts and internal organs. However, Thais in general understand this concept in a different way. They realize that number 32 consists of external bodily parts. When a child is born, parents wish he or she comes out with 32 bodily parts (*khrop sam-sis-sorng prakan*) meaning the child is not disabled. In healing ritual when a medium conducts *khwan* calling, she will sing a song to call *khwan* back to the external body parts.
an immaterial entity that resides in the physical body of the person and animates his or her life. It might flee the body when the person encounters fright, illness, and misfortune. The rite for *khwan* calling is organized to bring it back to the person’s body. However, the existing literature seems to understand the relationship between body and *khwan* as two segregated domains. Even though the rites for recalling the escaped *khwan* treat the totality, body and *khwan* are considered as “separate essences” (Tambiah 1970, 58). The observations from my fieldwork, however, demonstrate that *khwan* is attached to and correlative with the lived body in transitional experiences. It cannot exist and be understood without thinking of the body. How can we answer the questions about *khwan* vis-à-vis the person’s body and illness? Are the patient’s body and *khwan* healed separately in ritual? And how does the understanding of *khwan* illuminate Isan illness and healing?

To re-conceptualize *khawn*, I borrow from the anthropological conceptualization of embodiment. Thomas J. Csordas (1993, 135) proposes that “embodiment can be understood as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world.” It is a fruitful lens for my investigation of *khwan* because it collapses the duality of body and mind in the religious healing domain (see Csordas 1990).

[W]e find that the ambiguity between subject and object extends to our distinctions between mind and body, and between self and other. With regard to the first of these distinctions, if we begin with the lived world of perceptual phenomena, our bodies are not objects to us. Quite the contrary, they are an integral part of the perceiving subject. (Csordas 1993, 149)

Thus, in this chapter, I understand *khwan* as “embodied experience” that constitutes the perceiving subject through bodily experience. It is the point of intersection between the body and experience in the world. I propose that *khwan* or “embodied experience” covers memory, sensation, and desire gained through the affected body. The conceptualization of *khwan* gives us a starting point to understand how an Isan person becomes sick and disordered when he or she engages in socio-economic transformations. It also provides a crucial lens to analyze healing rituals where spirit mediums, patients, and audiences participate in material and corporeal processes.
Isan *khwan* is an ethno-medical signifier. It is the key idea for dismantling the complexity of health, illness, and remedy in the northeast. It is reworked through Thai geopolitics and geo-economics. Isan corporeality is not constituted of only biological but also sociocultural elements. *Khwan* is an Isan subjectivity that is socially and ritually constructed by people who perceive themselves as part of the group. The diagnoses of affliction and healing processes around *khwan* are a mechanism to reassemble fragmented identity and sociality. They are formulations of territorializing ethnosociality.

With reference to atomism, *khwan* can be defined as a sub-personhood, an irreducible constituent unit of the person. It is materialized through bodily senses when a person is born and accumulated embodied feelings in his memory. At the point of encountering critical moments, afflicted physicality opens a Pandora’s box of afflicted memory and emotion. Through healing rituals, spirit mediums provide multisensory operations on the patient’s body to deal with the afflicted memory and emotion. Through the perceived body, those afflicted sensations are healed and repositioned. In the mediumistic worldview, when one becomes ill, it means that one’s body loses *khwan*. To say that a person loses their *khwan* is to say that their body loses an aspect of its materiality. When a medium identifies a person with absent *khwan*, she implies a bodily lack that needs to be restored.

**Afflictions from disordered relations of control**

This section presents an ethnographic account of the interconnections between the different kinds of affliction people face. Men’s masculinity is challenged both when they are made to perform feminized labor and when they are given urban jobs that are more physically demanding than their traditional agrarian roles. Women who are left alone by the same processes that drive their husbands into external labor markets are vulnerable to evil spirits. Agricultural workers who withstand the forces that take others away from the village are nevertheless exposed to dangerous and sickening agrochemicals. These examples share the theme of disordered relations of control. They show that control over the body becomes disturbed. Isan language has a rich lexicon of the body and its
phenomena. In the mediumistic domain, the affliction recounted by patients can be glossed as “loss of bodily vitality.” In the field, I encountered many Isan vernacular expressions that account for struggle for mastery over corporeality: “miay” (feeling tired), “bor mi haeng” (feeling weak), “kin khao bor saep” (loss of appetite), and “hai jai bor im” (being starved of air). In healing ritual, these expressions are translated into a notion that khwan loses its place in the body. In my ethnographic description below, I will treat Isan khwan as embodied experience. Then, I will closely look at the way in which Isan khwan is harmfully affected in the dynamics of socio-economic transitions in the Thai state and global domains.

To strive for more income, Isan male villagers move from the margins of village-based sociality to urban, industrial milieus. There, they face profoundly transformative changes and experience displacement of the self. They are afflicted with a variety of psychosomatic symptoms that, when they return home to be cured by spirit mediums, are construed as spirit attacks or the loss of khwan.

When industrialization and modernity open their paths to rural areas, Isan male villagers began to take part in labor migration both internally and globally. Pattana (2014) examines Isan migrant workmen in Singapore. Based on Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life,” he argues that by experiencing a “bare life” in the context of transnational labor migration, the person undergoes social sufferings, tragic death, and a process of re-crafting masculinity and identity (2014, 3). Jane M. Margold (1995) studies Filipino migrants in the Middle East. She argues that geopolitics and geoeconomics crucially transfigure the migrant’s masculine identities: “He is ghettoized, ordered to work at top speed and quickly repatriated, often before his economic gains outweigh his feelings of shock” (1995, 286). Men in villages I visited had similar experiences. Spirit mediums’ fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons had experienced the displacement moving to work in industrial centers in Thailand and abroad in order to search for the opportunities of a better life. Thinking about “bare life” through the concept of khwan as a form of embodied experience, I see the way in which Isan khwan is stripped and becomes spatially and socially disordered.

Workplace traumas can lead to uncanny psychosomatic conditions. Bars, karaoke venues, and massage parlors are places that migrant men, as visitors or customers,
perform their desire and masculinity. But when they turn to be workers at such places, as is the case for many Isan migrant laborers, their identity is inversely crafted. Their desire is mutilated and masculinity subdued. Their personhood deteriorates and turns submissive. The patriarchal role they performed in agrarian society is twisted as they do feminized work in the market economy and industrial regime. The routine bodily subordination in alienated space can be traumatic. Dam (20s) and his mother went to work as cleaners at a nightclub in Phuket, the island province that has become a global city of tourism in southern Thailand. After a period of time, Dam became sick with severe absent-mindedness and feebleness of the left-hand side of his body. Sometimes, he went mad without control. Hospital doctors checked his body but found nothing wrong. His mother took Dam to see a local spirit practitioner. He said Dam had accidentally kicked the offerings to the guardian god at the nightclub. So, they offered sacrifices to the guardian god’s shrine to ask for forgiveness. But Dam’s symptoms did not disappear. The mother said that when Dam saw any spirit shrines, his symptoms would suddenly recur. She often said to her son that they did not attack him but Dam could not resist and had no idea why his body responded to the visualization as such. All these events happened in Phuket.

Later, they decided to come back to Chaiyaphum and arranged a mediumistic healing for Dam. They returned to the natal home where Dam’s khwan became known to the world and his body had been emplaced. One late morning in October 2012, Dam’s family took him to Ajan Tho’s temple in Chaiyaphum. The khwan-calling rite was organized. His mother said that he was the only refuge of her life. With his small income, he had not been able to send remittance back home but had invited his mother to move from Chaiyaphum to Phuket and work as a cleaner in the same nightclub. Dam’s parents had previously separated. The mother had re-married many times. The father had become a monk. Both of them were present in this healing session. I observed Dam’s wrecked phu bao (masculine) physicality as he sat immobile at the corner of Ajan Tho’s dwelling. He was numb and speechless. Moving from the slowness of the village social stream to Phuket’s rapid tourist economy was a financially, socially and emotionally precarious experience that had rendered his body mute and insensate. Dam’s embodied experience or khwan was disemplaced and stirred. His rigid body was out of synch with the fluid rhythms of the local social tide.
Another case, Dech (30s), a brother of a spirit medium, also lost control over his body. He was the subject of a deadly attack when he went to do construction work in Bangkok. He recalled hallucinations in which he travelled to heaven, hell, and unfamiliar places. One day when he was working in a building, a ghost came to possess him. Then, he began to have leg pains. He could not get up. On a later day, an unknown strong force attacked him and left him unconscious. His sister in Chaiyaphum asked for help from her spirit shrine. She offered offerings to the deity and then he recovered. Dech moved back to Chaiyaphum and stayed at his sister’s house. But his body was by then already degraded and feeble. He was constantly intoxicated with alcohol and drugs. He lost the capacity to articulate and move in accordance with local utterance and corporeal rhythms. Even though he was still in his young manhood, he drawled when he spoke and always sat immobile. It is as if he failed to act out the local speed of social performance. He could not regain control over his own body.

In Jane Margold’s (1995) study of the Filipino life in the transient industrial environment of the Middle East, she says, “[t]he lightning speed of these industrial arrangements, which orbited men away from their homelands, instantly set them to work and ejected them out of the Gulf before they could regain their equilibrium, instilled new forms of alienation” (1995, 286). In Chaiyaphum, I observed a lot of men who slowed their life pace down after their previous experience of whirlwind speed in industrial societies. Many men who came back from the socio-economic venture lapsed into a state of chronic drunkenness and feebleness. Transient life in displaced conditions left them as listless and vacant as zombies. Their masculinity and power that previously prospered in agrarian society had degenerated after their experience as subalterns in the market economy (see Margold 1995, Pattana 2014). When back in the household, they would sit motionless in a corner of the house while wives and daughters actively moved here and there. Building on the experiences of these men, I regard this problematic return of the self to their natal place in a zombie-like state as a form of “crisis of Isan masculinity.”

Here I use the term “zombification” to describe the wrecked physicality of the person who encounters the transformative forces of modern Thai society and the global market. E. P. Thompson (1963) explores the history of the making of the working class in the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century English society. He considers the way in which the experiences of groups of workers were forged in social life and
organization. During the Industrial Revolution, the stiff, compulsive and agitated physical demeanor of the returned labor migrants was frequently noted by concerned family members. In the Isan context, it is the migrant body that when returning home, lacks the capacity to attune into the local rhythms of intercorporeal communication and interaction in everyday life. Agrarian society has its specific spatio-temporal tempo that carries the physicality of the person in social synchronicity to which he is habituated. Life in industrial society requires high-speed productivity. It has re-created the self under the condition of aggressive market and industrial forces. When the person comes back home, he cannot sync back into the socio-temporal rhythms of village life.

In Isan, women often face disordered relations of control over marital life. The dismemberment of the population from the familial institution results in moral disorder in the locality. Not only do men who go urban cities to work get caught by unexplained power, the left-behind wives are also affected by a wide spread of black, malignant power. Phor Aet is a senior male medium who specializes in undoing black magic. He mentioned to me a significant phenomenon in which many women in a village were attacked by phi porp, a category of malignant spirits. They were brought to see him to chase away the malignant ghost and withdraw black power from them. Phor Aet’s wife added that they were the left-behind wives of those men who went to work abroad. They liked to do black magic to seduce other male villagers while their husbands were absent. And the black magic returned to attack them, turning them into phi porp. Phor Aet and his wife had an interesting way of theorizing this phenomenon. From their experience of healing these women who shared the common symptoms of black magic and phi porp attacks, they told me the number of cases of phi porp attacks in each village corresponded to the number of male migrants at work in other countries.

Transnational migration, local sexual morality and the phenomenon of afflictions become closely intertwined. The outbreak of phi porp accounts for the crisis of familial relationship in the midst of life mobility in line with local ethic perceptions. The disruption of partnerships makes people prone to malignant power. The issue of malignant power that results from social and bodily disorder also appears in a different culture. In a western Cretan mountain village of Greece, the rural villagers discuss the symptoms in which they attribute a considerable range of ailments and misfortunes to thiarmos, or “evil eye.” Michael Herzfeld (1986) posits that thiarmos expresses the
ultimate unpredictability of social relations in the society. He argues further that the illness is “the expression of disorder in the patient’s social, moral, bodily, or material environment” (1986, 108). My ethnographic data on the migrant villagers in many locations indicate that some husbands who went to work abroad cohabited with female colleagues at the working site while their left-behind wives entered into adulterous relationships. Robert R. Desjarlais (1992b, 1107) states that affliction relates intrinsically to what it means to be a good and hence healthy person. He mentions that the local understandings of “propriety,” moral perspectives, are forged by the values of harmony, purity and wholeness. Mobility in the context of global economics brings a precarious moment to the local sense of propriety and causes affliction. Marriage tensions in the setting of labor migration are manifested in a form of malignant power and ghost attack.

On August 9, 2012, Neng, a pale, thin woman in her 40s came with her female relatives to Mae Mala’s house for the khwan calling ritual. She had left her home in Chaiyaphum and worked at a nylon factory in an industrial quarter in Samutprakan province. She had a recurring hallucination of an awful man turning black and white. Neng was much worried about her health so she went to see a doctor for a checkup but no troubles were found. Some friends criticized her for her abnormal behavior. However, she told me that the environment at the work place was good and her employer was kind.

After the healing session, Neng’s mother revealed a story about Neng’s familial problems to me. She said her daughter lived separately from her husband and two sons. Recently, her husband had had an affair. This event interrupted her sense of normality and distressed her. Neng faced a personal traumatic situation and unexplainable sickness. She could not work and then took leave for one month and came back home for healing. Mae Mala in trance state commented that Neng’s khwan was too sensitive and stirred. She asked the woman to become a daughter of Phaya Lae and other deities in the provincial pantheon. After the ritual, Neng said she was happy since she understood what had happened to her.

Shifting from the psychological domain to the phenomenological one, I read Neng’s story, and other similar cases of domestic tensions and marital separations, as the loss of intersubjectivity. Marriage is a transformation that links individual subjectivities. A
couple shares intimate bodily space and actions. They transact desire, emotion and memory. They become subjective extensions of each other. When a couple or family members are separated, their intercorporeality is partly diminished. These dynamics have created a condition wherein the key sensation of misfortune “has become one of loss, fragmentation, an erosion of form” (Desjarlais 1992b, 1112). In these conditions, khwan—the embodied experience of self—becomes lacking. It is disturbed, detached, and in need of healing. To extend this discussion to the issues of the ontology and the materialization of spirits, I would suggest that spirits of late family members and ancestors can be understood similarly as intercorporeal fragments of self who continue to be present through embodied memory.

Agrarian life in Isan today is imbued with the risk of losing control of human and environmental health. Chaiyaphum is home to intensive crash crop agriculture to supply global markets. The intensive use of agrochemicals is unavoidable in the context of this capitalist force. Chemical contamination and pollution disorders the Isan body, turning it zombielike. Zombification from the effects of agrochemicals is a local affliction of modernity. In agricultural society these days, fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides have been intensively used to maintain high yields. Villagers who have had contact with these pollutants become severely sick. They make the body lose its control and vitality. Every day at local public health stations, it is not unusual to observe people come to ask for medicine to treat their skin affected by agrochemicals. Their hands and legs are tense and full of blisters. One of my informants reported how the weed killers can turn to human killers. Her friend put pesticide on his sugarcane field. It rained at night. So he took his fishing net and swam in the field. A few days later, the lower part of his body turned black and he died.

By contacting agrochemicals, small children as well develop stiff and uncontrollable bodies. Villagers maximize the land use by planting cassava around their household grounds and using pesticide. When children play on the grounds with bare hands and feet, they touch and walk on the invisible menace. Their bodies are affected by the chemicals and become burned. When I spent time with some village families, I often wondered about the blisters and scars on the young children’s skin. At that time, I had no idea what caused such horrid injuries. At dinner when we sat on the floor, I saw children scratching compulsively at their hands and legs. While we were chatting after
that, I observed parents applied balm to heal the blisters. They told me some insects bit their children. However, nurses at local public health stations informed me that the burns and blisters on children’s skin resulted not only from insects but crucially from the contamination of pesticide in soil. Nowadays, agrochemicals play a central role in the villagers’ everyday life. The chemicals not only occupy fields and household grounds, but also wash up and insinuate their way into the house. They are put on standby in cars and vehicles. In the bedroom, villagers sleep next to cartons of pesticides lying on the floor. In the bathroom, they reuse the cartons as water containers. Agrochemicals have become spectral figures that are closer to the villagers than their own shadows.

Like malign ghosts that can intrude into and attack the human body, chemicals occupy and erode the person’s physicality. They are the haunting ghost of modernity. Crop intensification and commercialization are possibly fatal to the villagers. Patients who come to see spirit mediums share some common symptoms. These symptoms, as I have observed in healing rituals, include headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, numbness, and itchiness. They are the conditions of those patients who are affected after the use of pesticides (see Kunstadter et al. 2003 cited in Forsyth 2008, 196). Some local public health stations conducted blood tests to detect chemical contamination. They reported that a high number of villagers are at risk. Here, we see the dual cause of affliction that can be spelled out as the duality of localized cultural belief and bio-conditions from agricultural life.

**Materialization of embodied experiences and control**

One materialized concept that is related to *khwan* and significant in Isan healing ritual is *khorng raksa*—the protective power. It is the material representation of control that represents the common idea of health protection in the rural northeast region. It prevails not only in mediumistic practice but also in other local religious practices. If we ask a villager what is his *khorng raksa*, he might answer that his *khorng raksa* is Phaya Lae (NE: *khorng raksa yu nam jao phor*). One might say he relies on *tham* (Buddhist temple and monk). Another might say he relies on *mor tham* (Buddhism-based magical practitioner). Another might say he is with *Ong Tue*, locally respected Buddha statue, or *Mae Thorani* (the goddess of Earth). The idea of *khorng raksa* is explicitly materialized
in the household shrines which accommodate these spirits. In the mediumistic domain, the material form that represents *khorng raksa* is the possessing spirit shrine. For the practitioners, the power of *khorng raksa* is embodied by the possessing spirits that they derive from the masters to protect their health after being healed.

Why is the concept of *khorng raksa* crucial in mediumistic healing and other religious domains? First, it is an indicator of the healing boundary. A patient whose *khorng raksa* relies on one particular domain cannot cross to another domain to seek help. A veteran who had long suffered from stomach and leg pains considered modern medicine and religious healing complementary to each other. While he was waiting for the checkup results from the hospital, his sister took him to some religious practitioners. They shared an interesting anecdote with me, which demonstrates how *khorng raksa* territorializes the power and limit of healing. On one occasion, the veteran’s sister brought him to see a monk. But the monk could not help because they already had sought the protective power of *phi fa*, a mediumistic practice, not *tham* practice. The monk said he could not suppress the power of *phi fa*. Both practices were different systems and the practitioners could not cross the boundary. The veteran had to resign from the *phi fa* network and submitted himself to the *tham* network.

However, when he resigned, his conditions grew worse and could not be healed by *tham* power. Later, he had to return to the *phi fa* domain for healing which made him gradually recover. It was said that the veteran’s dead mother was very angry when he changed from *phi fa* to rely on the *tham* domain. So, she gave him worse symptoms. The monk learned this situation and told the veteran to maintain his family’s protective power. *Tham* power could not help him any longer. When villagers encounter health problems and go to healing sessions, spirit mediums firstly ask them whether they take good care of their *khorng raksa* or not. In the field, I came up a lot of cases of villagers whose lives fell into health crisis when they changed their *khorng raksa* from one to another.

Another significant dimension of *khorng raksa* that is related to healing limits and efficacy is its implication in shared, collective health. In the village idea, health and wellbeing are not individual matters. *Khorng raksa* is a religious inheritance that one
derives from one’s parents and ancestors. It is the protective power that ministers to the household. Khong raksa is collectively imagined. It is a communal concept of being in good health. Each household has different khong raksa. Since it is the entity that has been materialized in family members and handed down from generation to generation, all generations of family members, alive and deceased, become the included in the protective power. As such, khong raksa is a domain where mediumistic diagnoses take place that investigate not only individual health but also that of a whole constellation of familial relations over time.

In what way are khwan and khong raksa interrelated in mediumship? As I have mentioned earlier, khong raksa can be materialized in the shrines at the mediums’ houses; similarly, in ritual time, khwan will be materialized as khan ha, enabling people to transact with such forces through material and corporeal practice. Spirit mediums put their khwan are under protective power by presenting their khan ha to the master medium’s shrine. Spirit mediums always bring their khan ha whenever they participate in rituals. Mediums make khan ha by putting five pairs of flowers and candles in a bowl. Every Buddhist holy day, they bring khan ha to their master’s shrine to ask for permission to put khan ha on the shrine. This kind of practice can be linked to the notion of “protective power” (khong raksa) that villagers make specific reliance on for their health.

Khan ha is a representation of the person in ritual time—the materialized, symbolic form of the ontology of khwan. When a person becomes sick and attends a healing session, the medium will make khan ha and put it into a khan khwan. Khan khwan is a big aluminum bowl, which contains a variety of items. It is the central object in the healing ritual and serves as a technology for revitalizing the patient’s khwan or embodied experience. Most importantly, the khan kwan is the conveyance that contains khwan and delivers khwan back to the patient. The spirit medium and her assistants prepare khan khwan with great attention. Firstly, they put baisi, refined flat pyramid wraps made from banana leaves in the bowl. Next, they place in the bowl a khan ha, which is the emblem of the patient’s personhood, followed by a shirt, a ring or a necklace, a boiled egg, rice or steamed sticky rice with banana fillings, powder, a comb, a mirror, chunks of betel nuts, cigarettes, and some coins.
In *khwan* calling, the final session of the healing ritual, the medium holds the *khan khwan* and sings a song whose lyrics describe the episode of the patient’s lost *khwan*. The music is soft, slow, and gentle like a lullaby. Through the song, she asks local tutelary gods and respected deities where the *khwan* is and begs them to help lead it back. She communicates with spirits and ghosts and tells them not to hide the *khwan*. Then, the medium recites a ritual litany ending with the dialect phrase “*ma doe khwan oey*”. The patient’s family members, relatives, and other participants call out in unison, “*ma doe, khwan oey.*” This Isan incantation means “come forth, dear *khwan*!” It is repeated over and over. This is similar to the Nepalese way of calling the “lost soul” in healing rituals, “[p]articipation is the key. Both patient and audience aid in retrieving the lost ‘life.’” (Desjarlais 1992b, 1114). It is the way to “reintegrate the ‘social body’ as much as the patient’s own form” (Desjarlais 1992b, 1115). Some of the audience might turn and talk directly to the patient, saying that his lost part is coming back to him soon. Then, the medium stops singing, rises up with the *khan khwan* in her hand, and starts dancing. The music shifts to a quick and exciting tempo, as if it will lead to the climatic moment. Shortly, each participant will spread cloths that they have prepared on their laps.

*Figure 9  A medium monk preparing khan khwan*
The session reaches its climax when the medium throws the *khan khwan* randomly to one of the participants. Suddenly, the music stops, the recipient is told to hold the *khan khwan* tight and wrap it carefully with the cloth to prevent the *khwan* from leaping away again. The recipient can be anyone in the family: son, daughter, partner, sister, aunt etc. It is believed that the patient’s *khwan* will go to the one that can take the best care of the *khwan*. The patient observes the way in which his *khwan* is brought into play. Then, participants will help to unpack the *khan khwan*. Inside it, there are food, clothes, and ornaments. They put new, colorful clothes on the patient. They powder his face. They each feed him with sticky rice with banana fillings and boiled egg. The practice of dressing up and feeding the patient by fellow participants in the healing session

*Figure 10  Items in khan khwan*
facilitates the afflicted person’s bodily re-engagement in society and the world. It is a
crucial act of intercorporeal communal nurturance.

**Multisensory experience and the re-emplacement of the body**

Healing in Chaiyaphum mediumship is essentially phenomenological. It deals with
multisensory experience. If we are present at the ritual, we usually see the medium’s
spectacular performance, hear *khaen* music, smell burning incense sticks and feel damp
thermal hovering in the air above. These sensations are further significant to the patient
because they provide remedy directly to his body. The apathetic state of the zombified
body is revitalized and returned to control by this means of multisensory re-baptism. The
process of re-immersing the numb body into the sensorial habitus of the *khan khwan*
healing rite enables the patient to restore his bodily responsiveness to the world. And to
recreate such sensorial habitus, the participation of ritual attendants is crucial to the
success of the phenomenological healing. This section provides further evidences of the
experience of intercorporeal healing by which the patient is returned sensorially to
wellbeing. I argue that with the presence and participation of ritual attendants, a
multisensory operation is put into action to heal the apathetic body of the patient and
create a sense of re-emplacement.

Chaiyaphum mediumistic practice features the process of re-cultivation of personhood
through sensations. In annual shrine worship (NE: *pong pha khao*), the mediums
attentively clean and embellish their shrines. Like the spirit shrine, the Isan body needs
to be revitalized. It is the shrine of a human’s *khwan* and possessing spirits. The body is
a subject to be adorned, indulged, and nurtured. The vernacular concept of health deals
with fertility, consumption, and strength. Healing in mediumship re-invigorates a body
that has been frayed, worn or fragmented by life’s vicissitudes. *Khwan* calling is
conducted not only when the person is sick but also takes place to ritually re-animate a
person in a variety of life transitions. Isan healing thus significantly centers around
transformations of personhood. Mediumistic healing becomes particularly significant in
villagers’ life experiences in modernity where they encounter multibple social, political,
and economic changes.
In *khwan* calling rite described above, the role of ritual attendants is significantly to nurture the patient’s *khwan*. Most of the attendants are female seniors in the family and village. Their presence constitutes an act of collective nurturance by *mae yai* (senior female) figures who provide care and protection for the afflicted patient. When the mediums are about to cast *khan khwan*—the materialized representation of *khwan*—all the *mae yai* will spread their scarves and cloths to capture the scurrying *khwan* and soothe it. While the medium sings and dances, they cry and comfort the patient.

When *khan khwan* is cast to someone, they will help to unpack the bowl and use the items to reactivate the patient’s sensations. They will apply perfume power on the patient’s cheek, combing his hair, dressing his up, and feeding him with food from the bowl. This activity is very intimate. The practice lies in the idea of collective nurturance, which manifests in the form of intercorporeal contact. Ellen Corin (1998) examines the initiation of spirit mediumship in Mongo, Zaire as the refashioning of the body with sensory practices that nourish the body of the person.

The work done on the body during initiation may be interpreted as reshaping several corporeal and sensory envelopes and as participating in the recreation of a sense of self; its reconstructive value should be enhanced by its symbolic reference to loving and protective spirits who are the real recipients of what is done to the body. (Corin 1998, 92)

*Khwan* calling is a procedure of masking and adorning the person. The *khwan*-calling session re-fashions the self. It is a re-adornment of personhood after one’s mantle is worn out in a socioeconomic context of displacement and rupture. Masking and adorning the person is a method to reanimate the zombielike body. The process of healing the afflicted Isan self recalibrates embodied experience through a person’s re-anchorage within their autochthonous milieu. Here, I will discuss the technology of re-capturing the *khwan* in the mediumistic domain. It ranges from masking to adornment and feeding.

*Khwan*-calling is the re-territorialization of the body within an agrarian regime of sociality and wellbeing. Feeding the patient with sticky rice and boiled egg is an act of nurturing and re-imposing a familiar regime of corporeality. When looking through a
phenomenological lens, the healing ritual of *khwan-calling* effectuates the re-emplacement of the body into local’s “structures of feeling” (Appadurai 1996, 199), from a state of dispersal and bodily estrangement. Sticky rice and boiled egg are consumed by the body to address its ethnic identity and culturally meaningful wellbeing. Through such processes of familiar nurturance, the person is restored bodily to the social health.

The bodily sensations accumulated in one’s natal place generate the power of healing. Home is crucially the place of origin for the Isan body. In the matrilineal society of the northeast region, *khwan* correlates with the place where one’s personhood came into being. The *khwan-calling* rite is a process in which the patient’s body goes through a multisensory evocation of primary nurturance, inducing it to be re-moored to its original anchorage. In the African spirit possession cult among the Yaka of Zaire, the therapeutic initiation of the afflicted “reenacts the process of gestation, reconnects the person to the uterine sources of life, and reintroduces her progressively in the social order regulated by the laws of patrilineage. It is through her re-anchorage within the traditional sources of life that the person can be reinvigorated” (Devisch 1993 cited in Corin 1998, 89). *Khwan* calling, the final procedure of the Isan healing session, similarly reconnects the displaced person to the origins of being.

The patient’s personhood is redefined and re-crafted by a multisensory ritual technology. The medium identifies that the body is interrupted or occupied by malign spirits. She sings and dances to push the spirit away with respected spirits’ assistance. It is the way the medium cleans up previous precarious memories and bodily experiences of suffering. Then, images, music, fragrance of incense and perfume, food, and heat are appropriated to reactivate the body. Tactile communication stimulates sensation. This bodily intimate method is led by the medium. Burning candles are an important ritual accessory. The medium might swallow a bunch of burning candles and blow out hot stream on the patient’s head or body parts. She might dance around the patient who is sitting or dancing. Then she will put one hand over the burning candles. Next, she grips the patient’s limbs with her warm palm. This thermal sensation animates the patient’s body. Family members and relatives also touch the patient’s body at the end of the *khwan-calling* rite.
Communal dance retunes the zombified body to local rhythms. Isan ritual time is ultimately founded on the pulsing rhythms of khaen music. This musical instrument crucially embodies the regional identity of the Lao. It has become an ethnic marker of Isan identity in Thai public consciousness and a symbol of local pride and belonging. Khaen is present not only in the religious and ritual life but also in everyday life. It is played in secular performances in Isan concerts and festivals and meaningfully undergirds the villagers’ way of life. In Chaiyaphum mediumship, it is a compulsory element of all rituals. Mediums cannot sing and heal without khaen. Possessing spirits will never come down without its music. After a khwan-calling session, the medium will call upon the patient and the ritual participants to dance while the mor khaen plays his musical instrument. In terms of phenomenological healing, this dancing to musical accompaniment helps re-attune the patient’s physicality to that of his or her intimate consociates.

In Ellen Corin’s (1998, 91) study of Zebola initiation, the female spirit possession ritual among the Mongo in northwestern Zaire (now Congo), the initiate is the person that encounters illness of spirit attack and needs the therapeutic process. The body of the initiate is embellished, cared for, and animated for its pleasure. The initiate’s body learns how to dance and becomes the shrine for the spirit. In Chaiyaphum mediumship, the ritual attendants will start dancing first and then they will encourage and accompany the patient to dance. This practice is similar to the way in which Isan parents guide their children to toddle and encourage them to dance. The parents usually clap their hands and the children start to dance following the given rhythm. Likewise, the ritual attendants will clap their hands and encourage the patient to dance. To dance is not only to show the patient is going to recover soon but also to choreographically emplace the body to move in tandem with the local tide of movement and rhythms.

**Healing by embodying**

Spirit mediums use their own bodies to heal their patient’s bodies. As such, mediumship is a form of bodily instrumentalization. According to Marcel Mauss, “[t]he body is man’s first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is
his body” (Mauss 1985, 75). Voice, hands, fingers, head, hips, arms, legs and bodily movements constitute the mediums’ techniques of healing. Most spirit mediums are ex-patients who went through the healing processes before becoming masters. Their embodied experiences of affliction in the past are revisited and performed through ritual acts that redeploy their bodies as instruments of healing.

In most cases, spirit mediums of Chaiyaphum perform rituals by singing and dancing along with khaen. They possess artistic capabilities that capture the participants’ visual and auditory senses. But I encountered one case in which the medium has no talent for singing at all. She had recently gained the position of a khuba in a mediumistic network from her mother who had become too old to perform rituals. Nevertheless, this medium’s utilization of the body is striking and significant. Her intercorporeal ritual technique offers a vivid example of how losing control of one’s embodied identity may enable another to regain control of their own.

Mae Kaew (60s) has a particular intercorporeal method in the healing ritual. She embodies her patients’ afflicted conditions and performs their symptoms with dramatic intensity. She renders in herself and her patient a state of alterity in which I would call “self estrangement.” Through this process, the afflictions are temporarily relocated from the patient’s body to the medium’s body. Then the patient observes the way in which her afflictions are performed and treated. On May 31, 2012, I attended a healing ritual conducted by Mae Kaew at her patient’s house in the village. The patient was an old lady in her late sixties. She had been hospitalized for a certain period of time. Her body was weak and her legs were feeble. She could move only slowly along the floor by using her hands to support her body. At the beginning of the healing ritual, the patient’s husband and relatives were summoned to sit behind her. Mae Keaw looked around to investigate the household environment. In a far corner of the room stood a table with a photo of a young man and two flower vases on top. She turned to the patient and asked how long ago her son had died. They discussed this a little while. Then, Mae Kaew started the ritual by lighting candles on the offering set under the windows and prayed to her possessing spirit. Her sister who accompanied her in the ritual helped dress her up and arrange things.
The sound of *khaen* started; *Mae* Kaew held a flower bowl, stood up, and walked to the patient. The sound of music was peculiarly sad. She moved the bowl with candles around the patient’s body and mumbled. The flame flickered over the patient’s skin. Then, *Mae* Kaew turned toward the *mor khaen* and walked around him. Shortly, she started to sob and cry. The tears rolled down her cheeks. She staggered from one side to the other as if she would fall down on the floor. She collapsed on the patient’s lap, rose up, and then collapsed again on another woman’s lap. *Mae* Kaew moaned with pain. At this point, it was obvious that she was embodied by the patient’s bodily symptoms. She played the role of the patient asking the husband and the audience to help. As a result, the audience spoke in unison to support *Mae* Kaew in trance. Afterward, *Mae* Keaw told the patient and the family that the spirit of the past son was unhappy that they still lamented his death. She told them to let him go peacefully.

*Figure 11* Mae Kaew healing by embodying
Mae Kaew’s body became a site of meaningful instrumentalization. The patient’s symptoms were projected onto her body. The patient observed her alter-self attached with affliction enacted out by the medium. She perceived the way in which her alter-corporeality went through illness and healing. In this process of “self estrangement,” the patient observed the way in which her family members and participants interacted with her afflictions. The collective spectacle of healing reactivated the patient’s personhood. After the ritual, Mae Kaew told me that her body was very heavy like she was the patient. She shared her idiosyncratic method of healing to embody her patients’ symptoms. Mae Kaew said her “possessing spirits brought the sufferings of the patient to her body” (NE: phoen ao ma sai). Her body embraced what the patient felt. She lost control of the self in order for the patient to regain it.

The Isan body is an intimate intersubjective domain where villagers, especially females, partake in intense corporeal exchanges. Mothers chew and soften the food in their mouths before feeding their children to make the food easier to digest. Commensality around shared food in the middle on the floor occurs in a close, circular space of bodily contact. People sit knee to knee at congregations in temples, shrines, and ritual spaces. At a religious meeting, especially on auspicious days, the room that is crammed full of people in intimate, sweaty, and heated bodily contact is considered ecstatically sacred and exultant. Thus, the Isan body, especially in ritual time, has a potential to become a shared domain that is permeable and interpenetrated.

Mae Kaew’s intercorporeal healing rites exemplify the potent aesthetics of the shared body. Her body becomes the instrument for healing another person’s body. The patient’s pain, illness, and trauma are perceived by, transferred to, and enacted through Mae Kaew’s body. One concept that can make some sense out of this intercorporeal process is “protoritual.” It is a “shared somatic state of the social body that generates special kinds of feelings and apparently spontaneous movements and interaction between bodies in space and time” (Blacking 1977, 14). “Protoritual” mediumistic performances such as Mae Kaew’s bring about healing in a series of steps. First, the medium’s body and the patient’s body become a shared habitus. Then, the patient’s pain, illness, and trauma are temporarily relocated into the medium’s body. Through such means, Mae Kaew acted out the patient’s sufferings to the patient and other participants. Her body became a stage of the patient’s bodily experiences of illness and emotion. In doing this, she also
revisited her own bodily experience of illness that she had encountered in the past. Moreover, Mae Kaew incorporated the patient’s afflicted memory of the lost son into her discursive performance. The performance momentarily took the patient out of her own self and brought about the patient’s self-alienation. The patient’s bodily and memory afflictions were thereby staged and healed on the mediums’ body.

The operation of healing by the shared body reassembles the patient’s imagination of the self. The loss of her vitality and the loss of her son become an inseparable dualism that Mae Kaew demonstrated through her ritual performance. The subjectivity of the dead son was brought into play in order to identify the partly lacking self. So, it is not only the weak body that is healed but also the painful memory of bereavement.

**Healing embodied memory**

Embodied memory is a site for understanding the cause of illness and of healing the afflicted subjectivity. Conversation in ritual significantly draws on biographical memory. Verbal interaction illuminates the way in which the patient’s body is socially remembered and connected to collective experiences of bodily sufferings in family and community. This crucially discursive practice brings about another domain of healing through biographical and social memory.

On 11 September, a 52-year-old woman and her family came to see Mor Num for diagnostic performance (NE: _lam sorng_). During Buddhist Lent in 2012, Mor Num became a monk and stayed at the village temple. He temporarily relocated his spirit shrine from his house to his monastic cell. Before the healing session, the _mor khaen_ and the patient’s family members discussed her sufferings on the veranda of Mor Num’s monastic cell. Her husband had died of cancer one month before. Then she had developed her symptoms of headache, depression, and absent-mindedness. She did not want to speak, smile, or laugh. She despised the people around her. In the _lam sorng_ session, we moved into the shrine room. Mor Num’s possessing spirit who came down to his body said the woman’s _khwan_ was absent. Her body was “empty.” He described that her _khwan_ got lost in a jungle and was captured there like a chicken caught in a bamboo cage. He also mentioned that it was the woman’s former husband that partly
caused the symptoms because he wanted her to stay with him. Mor Num instructed the patient’s family to build a spirit house in the patient’s field and bring a small human figure to the next meeting.

A few days later, the woman and her family came to see Mor Num again for a healing session (NE: lam raksa). When we sat and chatted outside the shrine room, Mor Num asked the family right away if the woman had given birth to a dead boy! They were surprised to hear the question. Mor Num said that two nights ago he dreamed of a spirit of a two-year-old boy paying a visit and interrupting him all night. The spirit wanted the woman to make merit for him. The woman revealed that she had been pregnant with her first husband. But she was too young and had given birth prematurely. Fifteen days later, the boy died. The woman buried her memory of the child’s death and had never made merit to him. The story was collectively told in detail by the woman’s memory and family members’ anecdotes.

Looking at the woman’s body as a site of discursive corporeality, comments by the ritual participants identified her personhood as lacking. Loss of persons in family and community constitutes the disintegration of intersubjectivity. Death, divorce, and mobility affected her person psychologically and spatially. Mor Num identified how the woman’s personhood encountered loss by speaking about the lost child and the lost husband. In the healing session, he identified how her personhood had been taken and disrupted by the spirits of her past son and husband. The proposed cure was that she should negotiate and exchange with them by building a spirit shrine. Even though we were not sure that it was the spirit of her husband or her son, we assumed that the attacking spirit would thus be turned into a protective one at the shrine.

Spirits of dead family members are often referred to as the major cause of the patient’s illness. The conversation after a healing session reveals biographical and collective memory that rationalizes the bodily sufferings. Let us go back to the veteran in his late 40s who had severe stomach ache and a rash on his body. He claimed that he had an allergy to the medicine he had taken. He was waiting for the result of a cancer checkup. He considered mediumistic practice as complementary to the healing. His family also sought modern medicine. He could not sleep and eat. He tried to explain his blocked cholangitis in accordance with the doctor’s description. He seemed to understand what
the doctor told him but the pathology was also intertwined with the unfortunate events of his life, his family history and the spirit’s power.

The veteran felt pain in his right leg as if it was rotten. The physiotropic illness was linked to the death of his mother many years ago, he attested, when we started a conversation after the healing session. This was the healing after the healing. The man told us about the incident. One day his mother went to the field. She accidentally cut her right leg while cutting wood. Then her leg became inflamed. The doctor said her leg must be amputated to save her life. But she died outside the operation room before the scheduled time. The man, his family and the medium interpreted his leg pain as punishment from the late mother because he quit his mother’s medium network three months ago as he searched for new ways of healing from the tham network. The belief system is not constructed only by mediums but it was co-created by both the patient and the medium. It was the patient who tried to understand and identify the origin of his physical pathology.

Thomas J. Csordas (1994b) examines Charismatic healing in a contemporary North American religious movement called the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. He discusses a healing genre of “ancestral healing.” Its important attribute is that afflictions can be passed to successive generations through the “bloodline.” He explains that such attribute is ambiguous whether the illness “is caused primarily by learned and transmitted behavior patterns, by the spiritually transmitted effects of emotional woundedness or sin, by the influence of evil spirits that prey upon successive generations of a family, or by the unrestful spirits of forebears themselves” (1994b, 43). However, Csordas argues that the ancestral healing is comprised of several ritual forms. The ancestral healing rests on the premise that both ancestral souls remaining afflicted after death in Catholic Purgatory and the living patient are subjects of actual healing. It is a performance of the mass to remember the deceased. Thus, it bears on the biographical scope of healing of memories that harks back to earlier generations of a genealogy. Significantly, the genre of ancestral healing can be seen as the domestication of deliverance as “the source of affliction is shifted from unpredictable demonic spirits to more manageable human spirits” (1994b, 44).
From the two cases of the patients I have presented and the detailed conceptualization of “ancestral healing” by Csordas, we see that biographical memory plays a crucial role in healing the afflicted body. The body is the repository of biographical suffering. It may be for instance the unfulfilled social obligations of parental care and filial duty that cause the person traumatic memory (see Obeyesekere 1981). This memory is embedded in the body and later exhibits on bodily loci as illness. Discursive practice in both healing and post-healing sessions indirectly identifies experiential de-integration of the social self and effects the reintegration of memory and embodiment. Furthermore, biography created around the healing represents knowledge of the self, an identification of the cause of illness, and the starting point to heal. Spirit mediums interface the past memory with the patient’s body, which is the actual site of healing. They set in train the performance of remembering the deceased and turning them into a form of protection.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that khwan is essential to the understanding of Isan illness and healing. By applying phenomenological and anthropological theories of embodiment, I theorize khwan as “embodied experience” which is constitutive of memory, sensation, and desire gained through bodily interaction in the world. I propose that illness can be identified as a phenomenon in which embodied experience is interrupted by loss, disruption, and mobility. It is entailed in the disordered relations of control. Why is spirit mediumship effective as a mode of embodied healing of the Isan experience of losing control? I would suggest that the practice situates the Isan body in a biographical and sociocultural constellation rather than in merely a biological one. It sees loss, disruption, and mobility as phenomenological afflictions that can be healed through rites that re-integrate and re-emplace the body.

In this chapter I argue that khwan anchors bodies; both khwan and bodies are anchored in families, which are emplaced in affectively resonant locales. These embodied anchorings give people an extent of control over themselves and others. When control—especially control of corporeality—is lost in critical moments of change and rupture, people recall, re-enact and redress those moments through intensified, multisensory, and intersubjective ritual practices focused on regaining the khwan. Spirit mediums are
virtuosi who capture intersubjective embodied experience and translate it into a meaningful form of intercorporeal performance with the redemptive aim of healing the self.
Chapter 5

The Buddhist-Mediumistic Pantheon: A Symbiotic Relationship

At Ajan\textsuperscript{31} Tho’s temple on the occasion of the Third Lunar Month Festival in February 2013, cars, tuk tuks, and motorbikes overfilled the parking area in the morning. A crowd of villagers was sitting at the central court and in a pavilion nearby. On an ordinary day, anyone on their first arrival might not recognize the place as a Buddhist temple since they would not find a chapel, pagoda, or crematorium when gaining access through the main entrance. Instead, it was encircled by a continuous range of spirit shrines and cement statues of mythical figures hiding the usual Buddhist assemblages and monk dwellings from view. On that day, Ajan Tho’s disciples (luk sit), mostly women in their 50s and 60s, were dressed in neat and colorful clothes. Each of them wore a long saffron scarf, a minimalized mimicry of a monk’s robe, on their shoulders crossing their chests to the right side of their waists to mark it as a ritual uniform. They carried khan ha. On the far side of the crowd which was supposed to be the front arena of this gathering, some of them were preparing trays of food, fruits and gifts on long white tables aligned with each other in many rows.

This was not a usual Buddhist festival organized according to the Buddhist calendar. Nor was it a festival that customarily took place in other local temples. This was not the day that temple affiliates would come to listen to prayers, give alms, or make merit. And it was not a scheduled monastic gathering for meditation or practice of Buddhist precepts. Rather, it was an occasion on which Ajan Tho and other monks would make contact with their possessing spirits. It was the stage on which the abbot would sing to the accompaniment of mor khaen’s melodies casting an enchanted overture over the ensemble of his luk sit. It was the rendezvous where these luk sit would be entranced and dance unceasingly following the musicians’ shifts of pace and pattern. It was an occasion of communitas in which they would perform a topsy-turvy burlesque in the monastery: getting possessed, transgressing gender categories, drinking liquor, and

\textsuperscript{31} “Ajan” can be equivalent to “master.” The locals use this title to refer to monks or teachers.
signaling lucky numbers for the lottery. It was a venue where all food, fruits and gifts would go through processes of reciprocal exchange to please respected spirits and ensure the worshipers’ wellbeing. And it was a time for the renewal of barami, charisma or auric power, to revitalize local religiosity.

The events depicted here represent an instance of mediumistic activity in a monastery. The Buddhist temple provides space for the shrines of local gods and human congregations in celebration of spirits. Consequently, mediumistic practice adds vitality to the monastic domain. The ritual sequence was supervised and directed by the medium-abbot. All temple-goers on this occasion were Ajan Tho’s luk sit in his mediumistic network who put their khan ha in his shrine as the symbol of entrusting their personhood and fidelity to his spiritual protection. They had been healed and taken care of by his Buddhist mediumistic power. In their perception, Buddhist altars and spirit shrines constitute composite images of local religiosity, which becomes meaningful in their everyday life. The opening vignette raises a number of questions: How can we define the relationship between Buddhism and spirit mediumship? How can we understand the copresence and interpenetration in these mediumistic rites of elements that commonly are held to belong to distinct religious realms? And how can we make sense of the transgression and inversion of hierarchy in the monastic domain?

This chapter intends to explore an aspect of religious dynamism and modification in contemporary northeast Thailand. It questions understandings of some previous relevant works, which tend to conceptualize the relationship between Buddhism and spirit mediumship as a presumed one of segregation: functionally, socially, and spatially. I would suggest that the relationship should be perceived as reciprocal and mutually constitutive in an inextricably composite domain of religiosity. Buddhism and spirit cults form a symmetrically compatible rapport. I draw upon ethnographic observations from my field site and investigate existing literature to re-conceptualize the interplay between Buddhism and spirit mediumship as one in which the processes of exchange and mutual incorporation are manifest. I argue that the realms of Buddhism and spirit mediumship are not segregated but unbounded, interpenetrated, and dependent on each other (see Spiro 1978). By appropriating an ecological notion, I propose a model of the relationship as “religious mutualism” whereby both religious constituents partner to
meaningfully exist and function in the villagers’ world. Official Buddhism and spirit beliefs comingle in complex ways that go beyond syncretism and hybridity. We might call this comingling Thai ecumenism. In Chaiyaphum, Buddhism cannot be defined in terms of the absence of spirit mediumship or vice versa. And spirit cults are not always subordinate to Buddhism. Finally, I argue that processes of exchange and mutual incorporation makes explicitly tangible the transposable inversion of hierarchy between the two realms.

Figure 12  The Third Lunar Month Festival at Ajan Tho’s temple
Re-examining the relatedness of Buddhism and mediumship

One morning, I discussed the relationship between Buddhism and spirit mediumship in Chaiyaphum with Ajan Tho. He told me:

Firstly, villagers believe that the Buddha, his teachings, and demerit (bap)/merit (bun) exist. However, in their consciousness and spiritual world (jit winyan), they believe in local supernaturalism (sing saksit): tutelary gods (pha phum), guardian spirits (jao thi), and those spirits in their fields (phi hai phi na). They don’t only believe in Buddhism. Supernaturalism and Buddhism coexist in people’s way of life. In their ritual practices and everyday life, they don’t neglect any of them. It is impossible to prohibit villagers from worshiping their pre-existing beliefs that have been transferred from their ancestors. (My fieldnotes, 13 March 2013)

Ajan Tho emphasized that in the villagers’ religious life, it was impossible to separate spirit cults and Buddhism (NE: khat yang dai yang nueng bor dai; CT: khat yang dai yang nueng mai dai). His opinion illuminates his ecumenical ritual practice and depicts the way in which villagers believe and perform in their everyday life. The explanation brings forward the idea of incorporation between Buddhism and supernaturalism. Existing works compartmentalize Thai religious complexity into sub-components of principal Theravada Buddhism and lesser supernaturalism (Kirsch 1977, Wijeyewardene 1986, Tambiah 1970, Hayashi 2003). The spatio-temporal segregation that they try to impose needs to be challenged. To re-conceptualize the relationship between Buddhism and spirit mediumship, I will highlight a quality of interpenetration of the two realms and show the processes of exchange and mutual incorporation. While existing literature demonstrates that the relationship between Buddhism and mediumship is functionally, socially, and spatio-temporally segregated, I argue that the complexity is reciprocally unbounded and co-dependent. Buddhism cannot be defined in terms of the absence of spirit mediumship. And spirit mediumship cannot be understood without Buddhism.
Anthropologists have investigated and characterized the Thai religious system as structurally and functionally segregated in hierarchical relations. Thomas Kirsch (1977) proposes that the interrelation of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and animism forms a pattern of Thai religious complexity. Buddhism provides an overarching framework and gives a consistent and integrated system of beliefs, practices, and specialists. He states: “both Brahmanistic and animistic components can be understood only in relation to Buddhism” (1977: 261). Kirsch thinks through the lens of the functional division of labor in religiosity and sees the relationship between Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism, and animism as complementary to that of the human needs. While Buddhism represents the transcendent solution of ultimate and other-worldly concerns, Brahmanistic and animistic beliefs respond to this-worldly attitude and proximate aspirations. There are some anthropological studies on the relationship between official Buddhism and local spiritualisms in Burma and Thailand that propose their co-existence, not segregation (Spiro 1978, Pattana 2012). Nevertheless, they still see spirit cults as subordinate to official Buddhism.

Stanley J. Tambiah (1970) identifies northeast religion by investigating Buddhist rituals and spirit cults in an Isan village. He conceptualizes local religion by relating Buddhist texts to villagers’ religious behaviour. When Tambiah focuses on ritual complexes, he employs the concepts of reciprocity and complementarity. Both Kirsch and Tambiah try to look at the interdependency and interpenetration between Buddhism and non-Buddhist components but their examinations do not discuss the dynamics of how the practitioners or believers interact with each other. Buddhist monks in Tambiah’s account do not take part in spirit worship (1970, 264). Tambiah says spirit mediums showed little interest in Buddhist worship at the temple and were not involved with the administration of monastic affairs and the organization of Buddhist calendrical rites (1970, 279-280). They functioned distinctly as ritual specialists in the village cult of guardian spirits. However, both Kirsch’s and Tambiah’s accounts about hierarchical segregation of Buddhism and local spirit cults were presumably accurate and correct for 1970s Thailand. The incorporation of both realms into Thai religiosity might be historically recent.

Barend Jan Terwiel (2012) defines Thai religious complexity by the approaches of the compartmentalized model and syncretism. He makes a distinction between magico-
animistic Buddhism in the rural domain and the rational Buddhism of the educated Thai
elite. Terwiel pays attention to the Buddhist outlook of the unsophisticated sections of
the rural population and argues that all the Theravada Buddhist and non-Buddhist
components in such a context combine into one inclusive category. Terwiel’s work is
an early study about monks as pluralistic, multitasking agents who have multiple
capacities and participate across the spectrum of religious activities but there is no
discussion about spirit mediums and the relationship between religious practitioners.

It is the functional-structural viewpoint that presents the model of Thai religion as
separated sub-components that serve in the different domains of the monastery and spirit
cult. In this approach, religious practitioners function according to their segregated
domains (Hayashi 2003). Monks function as the intermediaries in the temple while spirit
officiants do their job for local cults. Anthropological studies of Thai religious practices
recount the details of practitioners who specialize in particular rituals and purposes
(Tambiah 1970, Hayashi 2003). They categorize the practitioners by reference to the
power derived from distinct religious institutions and their respective functions.

However, there is no such functional separation among officiants in specific domains in
Chaiyaphum religiosity. Spirit mediums are active monastic attendants. Monks become
prominent specialists in village spirit cults. Some of them perform mediumship by being
possessed by spirits. Chaiyaphum monks and mediums’ religious efficacy is
comprehensive, correlative and interchangeable. Mediums are usually invited to conduct
life cycle rituals and rites of passage in the same way monks do. Mae Mala is famous for
her ability at reciting with her beautiful voice and incredible memory. Her hobby is to
read and memorize books of Buddhist mantras. She embodies Buddhist power not only
from her active learning of local Buddhist texts but also from her active engagement in
monastic affairs. Villagers often invited her to perform new house ceremonies (khuen
ban mai), the rituals that monks usually perform in the Thai context. Mor Num is a
young male medium who had been ordained as novice and monk. His Buddhist
knowledge is incorporated into his mediumistic practice. He becomes a famous
specialist of all rites. Like Mae Mala, he recites Buddhist mantras and sings mediumistic
melodies. Whenever someone dies in the village, the relatives will invite Mor Num to
conduct the funerary processes. Additionally, it should be noted here that, in rituals
revolving around Phaya Lae, it is not unusual to see that Buddhist monks and spirit
mediums are present and perform rituals at the same time. At one ceremony during the construction of a statue of Phaya Lae in a temple, while monks were chanting Buddhist sutra in the temporary pavilion, a group of mediums were dancing and leading participants to parade around the pagoda. Or at a celebration of the deity in Ban Khwao District, a Brahmanistic priest and Mae Bun, the khuba medium of Ban Khwao, swapped the leading role in the ritual back and forth between them.

Spatio-temporal segregation is the other lens that scholars employ to investigate the relationship of Buddhism and spirit cults through time and historical changes. This diachronic approach often suggests state power in formulating Buddhism as the national religion has had the effect of suppressing local supernaturalism. Hayashi (2003) studies the religious practices of a northeast village from the aspect of the locality in which they are actually practiced. He introduces the historical process of village formation in relation to the construction of the modern Thai state. Hayashi recounts that the northeast was baptized as Thai by the state and was incorporated within the state’s religious policy by the central Bangkok government at the beginning of the twentieth century (2003, 100). He defines this program as “Buddhacization” that likely colonizes local belief systems. He states that this type of hegemony turned the northeast into the “power house” of the state religion (2003, 111).

Peter Jackson (1997, 2012) and Pattana Kitiarsa (Pattana 2005, 2012, 1999) investigate the dynamics of Thai supernaturalism according to historical changes. They suggest that the unleashing of animism and traditional pre-modern religion resonates with postmodern conditions: the decline of the nation state’s centralized power and the claim of new media and technologies. Jackson (1989) suggests that the socially all-encompassing form of Buddhism in Thai modern society has been established by its historically legitimating function and that intensive state control over a variety of social institutions has stabilized the nation building project. The role of the state religion is to legitimate the rule and domination of the political elite and make the hierarchical social structures of the Thai state natural and inevitable. However, he argues that after the end of the cold war (1980s), the Thai state began to engage in globalized socio-economic change and stopped promoting the policy of “Buddhacization” (Jackson 1997). Consequently, the state’s interest in centralized control over Buddhism and regional religions has significantly declined. Both market-oriented forces and the weakening of
political suppression have led to more opportunities for regional and unorthodox Buddhist religiosity to expand.

Andrew Walker (2012) argues that we need to take a serious look at political economy. He integrates a Marxist approach to investigate Thai rural transformations where villagers’ political economy is characterized as diversified and supportive by the state. In this way, he identifies the emergence of the new political agents in Thai power relations: “middle-income peasants” whose primary livelihood challenges “have moved away from the classic low-income challenges of food security and subsistence survival to the middle-income challenges of diversification and productivity improvement” (2012, 8). This new characterization of middle-income peasants, according to Walker, not only contributes to the new environment of their political actions but also, I suggest, their religious behaviors. Melford Spiro (1966) discussed the relationship between Buddhism and economic action in Burma half a century ago. By dispelling the myth that the Burmese at the time were opposed to material values and were barely concerned with the future, he argues that the Burmese consumption behavior with regards to religion was provident and rational. The Burmese are not essentially a spiritually oriented or other-worldly people. They consider proximate prosperity important and that the financial support of religion is the most effective instrument for the satisfaction of such desire. Spiro gives an intriguing anecdote that his informants would stop their support of the Buddhist monks and monasteries if merit were not to be obtained from their charity (Spiro 1966, 1117).

We have already learned that, in Thailand, the urban middle class has spurred the growth of supernaturalism (Pattana 1999, Irvine 1984). In contrast to Max Weber’s classic speculation in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1985) about the termination of religion after the rise of capitalism, both the middle class in urban society and middle-income peasants create their religious behaviors that give rise to re-enchantment of Thai spiritualism. In the past, court support, governmental programs, and state monks’ practices contributed to the institutionalization of Buddhism. But there is a new shift driven by the power of political economy. The new emerging rural middle class and urban middle class, and their religious culture are taking a dominant role in the practice, sponsorship, and the representation of religion in Thai society.
The early studies of the relationship between Buddhism and non-Buddhist beliefs tend to segregate and compartmentalize the religious complexity. They have omitted the idea of co-dependency and interpenetration. They also have emphasized the primacy of Buddhism over animistic beliefs. Moreover, the relationship between religious practitioners across the religious field is unattended. Buddhist monks have previously been portrayed as superior to other religious practitioners. However, in Chaiyaphum, I often observed the way that female mediums actively distributed blessings and drew audience’s attention more than monks and a Hindu priest (mor phram) in the same arena. I will try to develop a discussion of such issues through my ethnographic account. At my field site in Chaiyaphum, a middle-aged Phu Thai lady, one of my key informants who married a local high school teacher and practiced mediumship, provided a complementary form of religious rapport. She compared the relationship of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and local superstitious belief with the pastoral imagery of “three supporting poles” and “a traditional stove formed by three bricks” (NE: mai kham yan, korn sam sao) as the indispensable assembly that any kind of religious practitioners require to help mankind. Without one or the other, the poles cannot be mounted and maintained; nor can the stove be used to cook. Other mediums also gave me similar metaphoric explanations that claimed the three belief systems could not be divided but should be incorporated into complementary effective power. The Phu Thai lady told me that at one household ceremony, monks are invited to have late morning meal at the house for auspicious session. Then a spirit medium will come and perform dancing blessing in the celebration session. Both monks and medium work hand in hand to bring the sense of “auspiciousness” (sirimongkhon) and “celebration” (chalorng) to the one ceremony.

**Medium-sponsored Buddhism**

In Chaiyaphum, Buddhism is lacking in potentiality and functionality if it is practiced without the presence of spirit mediumship. This section explores the reciprocating flow from spirit mediumship to Buddhism. It suggests that mediumship brings both materiality and ideas to the monastic domain. People and money are the prominent elements that mediums draw to temples. But I also intend to demonstrate the input of life and frameworks, namely ideas, new trends, religious formats and excitement that
mediums formulate in rituals at temples. These subtle sub-components are vital in terms of upgrading temples, updating religious practice, and making the temples more contemporary.

In Chaiyaphum, spirit mediums play a crucial role as the sponsors of local Buddhism. Spirit mediumship, I would suggest, is like the womb in which local monasteries originate and flourish. Important temples are built upon the sites where spirit shrines and statues preexisted. These sites were the locations to which spirit mediums had made pilgrimages prior to the emergence of the temples. Up to the present day, spirit mediums’ congregations many times a year have crucially drawn public attention, temple goers, activities, and financial support to these temples.

Many Buddhist temples rely on mediumistic practices. Ajan Tho’s temple has been nurtured by his mediumistic network for more than ten years. Through his network, the establishment of the temple was made possible. According to the National Office of Buddhism, to build and register a temple with the state requires the availability of communal property and consent. The evidence of a section of land, a certain amount of money, and clear evidence of benefits for the nearby community are required. Ajan Tho went to ask for some help from his luk sit from his mediumistic network in the village. They asked him “Ajan, will you stay here with us?” The monk replied, “I will die here”. So, these spirit mediums helped him to buy the land and build the monastery. After the establishment of the temple, Ajan Tho as a new abbot needed to expand the temple’s reputation and invite villagers to participate in monastic activities to maintain the temple. He revealed to me his strategy to achieve the aim of enhancing the number of temple-goers by means of his mediumistic power. As a medium, he went to heal villagers and conduct rituals in everyday life. Later, these people and their relatives became not only luk sit in his mediumistic network but also intensive attendants at his temple who helped him in monastic activities. I do not intend to exaggerate the mediums’ role in contributing to Ajan Tho’s monastic activities and flourishing. It is true that the medium-abbot also had some luk sit who were not spirit mediums and who donated to the temple and helped him. But it was these spirit mediums that intensively came to help the monk on an everyday basis. They told me they had to stop working in the fields and gardens once the monk called them to help in mediumistic practice and monastic activities. They considered it compulsory to help the monk because he was
their *khuba* and by doing this, they also gained merit and prosperity. The notion of
“supporting and maintaining” (NE: *kham khun*) between Buddhism and mediumship is
crucial. Without them, *Ajan* Tho could not perform mediumistic functions. As a monk,
he was limited in conducting the full mediumistic processes. Singing and dancing are the
salient components in the ritual. The medium-abbot usually initially sang and then three
mediums would take the stage and played the role as three muses singing and dancing to
heal or conduct ritual processes.

Previously, the Thai state had supported national Buddhism by implementing many
schemes: establishing monastic universities, supporting new temple registration to the
state especially in the northeast, and disseminating monks who were in favor of
reformist notions to the regions. Nowadays, Thais observe this centralization practice to
be in decline. Monasteries spreading over the regions especially in the northeast have
been maintained by local communities. Villagers are now the practical supporters of the
temple in everyday life.

In Chaiyaphum, villagers frequently request help from lords and spirits in everyday life.
Other services of mediums are therefore in high demand. Housewives, students,
policemen, politicians, and peasants are all customer-devotees who pay money for the
reciprocal process mediated by spirit mediums. They will put some money in white
envelopes and give them to the mediums, assistants and *mor khaen* when the ritual is
done. The amount of money given varies according to the customer-devotees’ financial
status. The master mediums divide this money into two parts: for personal spending and
for charity, which is mostly distributed to the monastery. Because of their social status
as senior family members who are financially supported by their children or as peasants
with living sufficiency, they do not spend considerable money on an everyday basis.
However, some mediums who live in the city tend to spend much more on living costs
than those who live in rural areas, because of the urban economy. But spending on
money that they get from mediumistic practices should be carefully considered because
overspending of money will be criticized by disciples, neighbors, and mediums in other
networks. One *khuba* told me that such a scandal would bring about the deterioration of
their magical power and turn them into malignant ghosts or practitioners (*phi porp*). In
the mediums’ cosmological idea, the moral notion of sufficient gain moderates their
management of income and expense.
With their substantial income from mediumistic missions, individual mediums are intensively supportive to local monks and temples. Their income from mediumistic vocations is overwhelmingly spent on maintaining monasteries. *Mae* Mala was an intensive patroness of local temples and monastic charity. She was a respected master medium in her sub district (*tambon*). She was now well off and all her four children had good jobs and sent money to her regularly. Due to the gradual decline in the number of everyday temple-goers nowadays, each village has attempted to arrange a daily timetable in which a few villagers, mostly female, from the households bring and prepare food for the monks both in the early morning round at 7:30am (NE: *janghan*) and the late morning round at 11am (NE: *phen*). *Mae* Mala committed to go to the temple both rounds every day, except for the day she scheduled for her ritual missions. Apart from consistently attending and preparing food, she always paid her personal money for various temple expenses. For example, she paid a monthly remittance for novices’ transportation to commute to study at the other monastery. *Mae* Mala revealed to me that she opened a bank account under the name of *Phaya* Lae (*banchi jao phor*) where all money she received from conducting rituals would be deposited and spent to support temples and other local charities. She told me when her children needed money urgently they could borrow from this account. But they had to return it because it was not her money but that of *Phaya* Lae (*ngoen jao phor*). Likewise at *Mae* Som’s shrine room, customer-devotees would put money envelopes in the wooden bucket in front of her spirit shrine after the ritual process was complete. She had to ask for permission from the shrine to split some money for her own use. And she would spend most of it on monastic charity and preparation for every morning’s food offering for monks.

*Mae* Sim OK could be described as an unfortunate woman but was a powerful, charismatic *khuba* medium. She lived in an old house with a small living area with her niece in Kaengkhror District. She had her own rule about managing the money she earned from mediumistic rituals. She did not spend it but gave all away to monasteries and charities. She supported herself by feeding pigs and selling them at the local market. *Mae* Sim OK got her interesting nickname from villagers and her customer-devotees. Politicians won elections. Couples got children. Women were successful in finding white, western husbands (*phua farang*). Male youths were omitted from military service. They came to ask her to negotiate with lords and spirits in temples and shrines to
achieve their aspirations. Villagers knew her reputation and shared the motto that everything you brought to her would be arranged smoothly and OK. That’s why people gave her the name Mae Sim OK. The lady considered her poverty as the moral renunciation of secular greed. She provided all facilities that monks in the village temple asked for from refrigerators to satellites by using the money from her mediumistic profession. What she considered valuable for her as a practitioner were her shrine full of her luk sit’s khan ha and some items that they gave her on special occasions, for example, pillows, blouses, and towels.

Monasteries embrace spirit mediumship because it recruits and attracts patrons to them. When Mor Num was ordained at his village temple, he moved his spirit shrine into his temporary dwelling at the temple. During the three months of Buddhist Lent in 2012, Mor Num conducted many mediumistic healing rituals there. Like Ajan Tho, he could only sing at the early stage of the mediumistic ritual. He had three medium assistants who would dance and touch the patients instead of him. I asked him if the abbot was worried about the unorthodox practice in the temple. Mor Num told me he did not mind. One reason is that there were only a few monks residing there and the abbot might need to recruit male youths to be ordained at the temple. Mor Num told me the abbot often asked him if he could permanently stay in the temple. But Mor Num refused to do so.

Even though Mor Num conducted mediumistic rituals while he was ordained as a monk in the temple, the abbot saw this as an opportunity to draw a number of temple-goers. According to the ritual processes organized by Mor Num at the temple, the patient would be healed in the morning and then the khwan-calling ritual would be conducted in the afternoon. Thus, patients and their family members would stay in the temple and go for the food offering in the morning round (NE, phen) where Mor Num also sat at the second place after the abbot. The abbot seemed to be happy with the increase in attendants. He communicated to the patients and their family members that the way they offered food to monks would speed up the healing efficacy of the mediumistic power and all family members would be blessed from this as well.
Monk-sponsored spirit worship

The previous section demonstrates the ways in which spirit mediumship brings vitality and excitement into the monastic domain. It gives to the place meaning and emotion. This section suggests that, in return, spirit worship in Chaiyaphum is maintained by monks’ practices and places. By working hand in hand with *mor lam* mediums, monks involve themselves in spirit worship and promote the mediums’ practices.

*Ajan* Torphong was an aspiring Chaiyaphum native monk. He went to study at a monastic educational institute in Bangkok from the time he was a young novice and became a monk as a result of the King’s favored benefaction. He was a deputy abbot at Wat Arun Ratchawararam, one of the most famous temples on the banks of Jaophraya River in Bangkok. However, he was not overwhelmingly captivated by the spirit of national Buddhism. The Phu Thai lady told me that when he was young, a *khuba* medium of the village predicted that *Ajan* Torphong would become a renowned, charismatic monk who would help develop Chaiyaphum. The medium foretold that his power and charisma would be augmented and more prosperous if he promoted Lao heritage in Chaiyaphum. This is the reason he recently initiated the construction of the Lao-style Arunthammasathan temple in Chaiyaphum Province. This costly project was largely supported by HRH Princess Soamsawali (a member of the Thai royal family), elites, and wealthy entrepreneurs. *Ajan* Torphong told me he wanted to revive “Laoness” (*khwam-pen-lao*). It should be noted that the monk’s life and self-perceived identity has been partly oriented by mediumistic power. Apart from the *khuba* medium’s messianic prophecy, his childhood memories revolve around spirit mediumship and local religious dynamism. He recounted that when he was young, he had to wait for spirit mediums’ singing and dancing all day long until night before he could eat buffalo meat in the local festivals.

*Ajan* Torphong brought a modern awareness of local identity and regionalism back with him to his hometown. As a novice from a remote northeast village, he felt slighted because of the question that his urban fellows at Wat Arun kept asking, “Where is Chaiyaphum in Thailand?” Thus, he told me he had a determination to promote “Chaiyaphum-ness” (*khwam-pen-chaiyaphum*) as best as he could. On Songkran Day, the Thai New Year’s festival in April 2012, *Ajan* Torphong organized the ceremony of
molding the *Phaya* Lae statue at Arunthammasathan. The monk drew a parallel between the northeast heroic figures *Ya Mo* in Khorat and *Phaya* Lae in Chaiyaphum. Compared with *Ya Mo*’s expansive power and acceptance regionally and nationwide, he said *Phaya* Lae’s recognition should be similarly promoted by building monuments and statues of him in every district in Chaiyaphum Province. On this special occasion, *Ajan* Torphong invited spirit mediums to celebrate the molding ceremony. In the ceremonial context at Arunthammasathan, mediums were addressed with an embellished term: “the auspicious ladies of the town” (*mae-si-mueang*). I read this amalgamation of *Phaya* Lae iconography and spirit mediumship as a step in the historicization of Chaiyaphum. Spirit mediumship is incorporated into the cultural representation of the distant past of the province and remains the indispensable aspect of rituals in the eyes of the monks. The ethnographic evidence of both *Ajan* Tho’s and *Ajan* Torphong’s relationship with spirit mediums demonstrates that spirit mediumship is the active power that helped materialize the monks’ aspirations.

Villagers consider a monk proficient not only in following monastic rules but also at having good relationships with spirits and performing an array of rituals in the right way. They hold in regard the monks who support spirits. *Ajan* Tho was a good exemplar of a medium-abbot availing himself of a full range of powers in his Buddhist power and the local spirit pantheon. On the 8th September 2012, *Ajan* Tho and his troupe including two *mor khaen* and some assistants went to the Institute of Physical Education of Chaiyaphum (IPEC) at the invitation of the director—who was his disciple—on the occasion of an anniversary ceremony and the opening of a new building. There were three stations of spirit images at which the monk would lead lecturers and students to pay respect. Firstly, the group of people formed lines in front of the statue of Phalabodi (the god of strength, the emblem of IPEC) located at the main gate of the institute. At this station, Brahmanistic rites were enacted. Three male assistants changed their casual clothes to white robes in the Brahmanistic style. Each of them held a conch, a bell and a small drum. They started playing the instruments when *Ajan* Tho lighted incense sticks and prayed to the god. Then, while teachers and students were offering food, fruits and gifts on the altar in front of the statue, *Ajan* Tho and one *mor khaen*, a man who previously held the conch and blew it, then changed to pick up his *khaen*, and walk toward a red spirit house across the campus street. It should be noted here that it is not unusual to see houses for spirit guardians in Thai governmental venues: schools,
The music commenced and Ajan Tho started singing his mor lam lines to inform the guardian spirit of his visit and ask him to bless the college with success in its arranged activity. This practice is the common ritual that Chaiyaphum mediums perform to mediate between villagers and local guardians whenever divine communication takes place.

When all teachers and students had finished their offering rites at both the statue of Phalabodi and the red spirit house, they formed a procession behind Ajan Tho and two mor khaen. The director and teachers held baisi in different sizes and colors. When two mor khaen began their music, all moved and cheerfully danced along toward the last station where the statue of Phaya Lae was located in front of the new building which was named after the divine governor. When all arrived, Ajan Tho led the director to offer food, fruits and gifts that were already arranged on the tables in front of Phaya Lae statue. Some teachers and students danced and clapped their hands following the songs of khaen to delight the god (lam thawai jao phor) in conformity with the tradition widely practiced in Phaya Lae cult. Here, we can see the convergent disciplines of the practitioner, a Buddhist monk, who deployed an array of spirit practices in the diverse local pantheon: Brahmanistic rites and symbols, reverence for the guardian spirit, and propitiation of the heroic god.

As mentioned in the introduction, previous anthropological research often imposed the idea of functional segregation and hierarchy on the relationship between Buddhism and spirit cults (Tambiah 1970, Hayashi 2003). Buddhist practice is considered ritually dominant in the villagers’ religious world. However, in my ethnographic account, Buddhist monks reciprocally support supernaturalism. Such findings suggest that spirit worship in Chaiyaphum is maintained by monks’ practices and in monastic places.

**The Buddhist monastery as the mediums’ powerhouse**

Local and provincial monasteries function as a power source for spirit mediums. This section shows that Buddhist-based plances, ethics and practices provide the ground for understanding these practitioners’ notions of power. Spirit mediums share the idea that the monastic domain is their powerhouse and the practices of Buddhist precepts charge
them up with power.\textsuperscript{32} They rely on both mediumistic power and Buddhist power. Many of them intensively depend on both their master mediums and local famous monks to “pursue wellbeing” (NE: \textit{yu di mi haeng}). Lords and spirits recruit a person to be their medium through his or her qualification of wide social acceptance and interaction with the monastic domain and its activities. \textit{Mae Sim OK} believed that her mediumistic power had been maintained by her charitable deeds to temples and shrines. She told me that “only people who had Buddhist precepts (\textit{sin}) are allowed by the lords and spirits to let them be mediums.” \textit{Mor Dom} shared the way he spent a certain amount of money each month buying offerings for his shrine and preparing alms at the village temple. His constant schedule of food offerings to monks every morning was recognized by his \textit{luk sit} and neighbors. Seeing him as different from the peripatetic male youths in the village, they appreciated his charitable deeds to the local temple and monks. In village life, where everyday practice is spatially and communally intimate, master mediums’ regular, public engagement with the monastic domain is closely observed by their \textit{luk sit} and customer-devotees and secures their respectability.

Spirit mediumship has a long history of affiliation to Buddhism. A practitioner can be officially affiliated to both religious institutions. Some monks were mediums. Some mediums actively sought \textit{thamma} power from the monastic domain and monks. \textit{Phor Aet} was a spirit practitioner who started his mediumistic profession when he was young. Later, he developed his interest in magical power from one of his friends who took him to learn with a famous magical monk (\textit{keji Ajan}) in Khorn Kaen Province. \textit{Phor Aet} was a master medium who had two equivalent protective shrines from different religious domains at his house. One was for his possessing spirits. The other was for his master monk who had already passed away. On the latter, he put a dagger, which the late monk had given to him, as the main prop that he often used to ward off black magic from his customer-devotees. He showed me some photos of the monk. I asked him if \textit{thamma} power and mediumistic power would conflict but \textit{Phor Aet} said they were complementary to each other. For some mediums, Buddha images, which represent \textit{thamma} power, are put next to \textit{baisi}, which represent mediumistic protective power (\textit{khorng raksa}) in a single shrine. Both of them are integrated into one domain.

\textsuperscript{32} The power is both spiritual and political. Like my argument about the spirit mediums’ shrines as their generators of magical power, the interaction with temples forms a concept of the mediums’ attitude to power in a similar way, with Buddhism-based authority.
In their everyday lives, we observe the way in which Thais go to the temple for the reciprocal processes aimed at gaining wealth and fortunes. It is the domain where materials are put into exchange to secure their spirituality and aspiration. Monks are considered as the intermediary to facilitate these processes. In school textbooks, monastic teachings, and public discourse, there is a Thai idiom, which identifies and characterizes the ideal Sangha in terms of reciprocal function: “the monks are the world’s great field of merit” (phra song pen nuea na bun an yort yiam khong lok). This figure of speech compares monks with the good paddy field as a merit field (nuea na bun) in which peasants sow the seeds and from which they reap the good yields of rice. For Thais, making merit is like reaping a harvest in which monks mediate and process the transformations of materiality to gain power. Similarly for spirit mediums, monks can grant them barami or auric power. At the annual ceremony of spirit shrine re-consecration organized at the mediums’ houses, they invite monks to pray at the morning and evening round. In Chaiyaphum, it is not unusual to see mediums invite monks to pray and have their morning meal at their shrine rooms.

Different spirit mediums have different ways of maintaining and augmenting their barami and mediumistic power by adopting the monastic schedule and ethics of modern society. One medium practiced vegetarianism during the three months of Buddhist Lent roughly during July – September every year to purify her body. One of her close luk sit who was a master medium who had his own network in his village practiced the same, but he chose to do it during the Chinese vegetarian festival in October. Even though there is no concept of abstaining from eating meat in Thai Buddhism, we witness the influence of Chinese urbanization in the city center of Chaiyaphum. And these mediums follow the middle-class ethnical practice that has recently emerged in Thai consumerism. Spirit mediums in urban areas have different ways to access power based on Buddhism from those who live in villages. They might not need to go to temples everyday. But they usually offer food to monks in the morning round and donate money for charity. Most of the mediums in villages intensively participate in monastic activities. Their regular commitment is observed from their networks as the indication of reliability and accountability.
The temple is considered as a special domain separate from the residential areas in the village. The Thai village is considered a small political unit under the nation state. In many villages, guests who pay a visit might see a sign in front of the entrance road as “the village comprised of home, temple, and school” (mu ban borworn), a project initiated by King Bhumibol’s idea that was later incorporated into the state’s discourse of community development. This idea gave rise to the constructed Buddhist village in which the temple functions as the pillar of morality. Thais acknowledge the monastery as the site of “animal sanctuary” (CT: khet aphaiyathan) or “Sangha boundary” (CT: khet sangkhakam/khet phatthasima). However, the state-oriented institution does not only transmit the state legitimacy in hierarchical power relations but also becomes a site where local uncanniness emerges. The monastery is the site for both material and spiritual transformations. We have already learned that folk go to the temple for reciprocal relations between charitable offerings and wellbeing.

For spirit mediums, the temple functions as both a distribution center and repository of magical power. To undo their customer-devotees’ bad fortunes and ward off malign spirits, mediums process ritual operations in the temple: sacred water bathing, offering gifts to the Buddha image, or offering alms to monks. They ask those customer-devotees to buy animals from the market to release them in the local temple. Monks at Wat Sila-at often blamed Mae Sim OK because she set chickens free in the temple. There were now so many of them that they interrupted the temple business. At a festival in the temple, Mae Sim OK sat down, brought her palms to her chest to show respect to the monks and said she could not stop it because this practice helped her luk sit and customer-devotees. The monks were in an awkward situation and joked that they could not eat these chickens. They were worried that the temple would become an overcrowded chicken reservation.

It could be said that there are two traditions of spirit mediumship in Chaiyaphum: the old tradition and the new tradition. The old tradition is connected to the pantheon of the cult of sky spirits “phi fa” in remote villages, while the new tradition is comprised of mediumistic networks which have developed in urbanized communities and incorporated Theravada Buddhist ideas and practices into their belief system. Mediums in the Phaya Lae’s pantheon and the Ong Tue’s pantheon are in the new tradition. I did not engage with practitioners who identified themselves as phi fa mediums. But I often
heard some master mediums I was familiar with making comments on representation of *phi fa* practices which seemed to be excessive in their eyes. They said that those mediums in *phi fa* cults did not hold Buddhist *thamma* and were immoral. There were criticisms around *phi fa* mediums’ swindling, intensive liquor use in ritual, and sexual scandals in their circles. It seems that my informants considered *phi fa* mediums as savage and backward. This excessive quality is present because of the absence of Buddhist control. It should be noted that it is difficult to identify whether any one network is part of the old or new tradition. This issue is ambiguous. A master medium might deny that she was *phi fa* medium while her *luk sit* understood that they were in a *phi fa* cult. What I infer from the observation is that Buddhist influence accounts for the shift in identification between the two traditions. The more mediums refer to Buddhism and base their ideas and practices on it, the less the influence on them of *phi fa*, or rather, the more they dissociate themselves from its purportedly savage qualities. A *khueba* medium’s husband emphasized that mediums in the *Phaya* Lae pantheon and the *Ong* Tue pantheon count on “Buddhist virtues” (*thamma khun*).

Buddhism provides formats and languages for mediumistic practices. As I have mentioned in Chapter One, Wednesdays and Buddhist holy days are Chaiyaphum mediums’ days off. Mediums told me that on Wednesdays, *Phaya* Lae and their possessing spirits do not come to possess them but stay at their shrines. They added that on Buddhist holy day, all spirits go to the heaven to listen to monks’ prayers. The notion of spirits’ retreat mimics monks’ monastic routines of staying in and abstaining from performing rituals outside the temples. Buddhists know that they will not invite (CT: *nimon*; NE: *mon*) monks to conduct any rituals on Buddhist holy day. Similarly, mediums will not invite (CT: *nimon*; NE: *mon*) *Phaya* Lae and their possessing spirits to come to their bodies on Buddhist holy day. It should be noted here that mediums used the same term of invitation “*mon*” with their spirits in the same manner they and laypeople use with monks. This parallel is stimulating. Buddhism contributes scripts and stage directions in order to form relationships between human and superhuman agents in mediumistic theatricality.
Mutual incorporation

Wat Sila-at, one of the most famous pilgrimage sites in Chaiyaphum, has flourished and been maintained by spirit mediumship. Villagers call the mediums who come to this place the ghosts or practitioners of the hill (NE, phi phu) because of its rocky hillside landscape. This temple was constructed to accommodate Ong Tue, the name of an ancient stone caved Buddha image that can be dated back to around the thirteenth century. He is the supreme spirit in phi phu’s pantheon that comes to possess them. Ong Tue had been the mediums’ figure of worship prior to the rise of Phaya Lae. When they are in trance, they sing and call him “father” (NE: i-þhor). This elucidates the way in which mediums, mostly women, associate themselves with the spirit of the Buddha image in terms of gender relations and patrilineal power in family relationships. Spirit mediums will travel from their villages in Chaiyaphum and nearby provinces to Wat Sila-at four times a year: the third lunar month (February); the fifth lunar month (Songkran or Thai New Year days in April); the eighth lunar month (the beginning of Buddhist Lent in August); and the eleventh lunar month (the end of Buddhist Lent in October). After visiting Sila-at temple, on the same auspicious occasions, mediums might travel to other pilgrimage sites located elsewhere in Chaiyaphum.

Figure 13  Ong Tue at Wat Sila-at
At these four meetings, Wat Sila-at, which is situated far away from the community on the vast rocky hill and empty on the ordinary days, is occupied by hundreds of mediums from different networks. Most of them stay overnight because they have to offer food and gifts to the spirit shrines and statues located in the temple’s area at specific times, mostly in the early morning. They also believe that spending nights there with Ong Tue will bring more barami to them. This notion is similar to the way the villagers go to spend one night at local temples on Buddhist holy days to practice moral precepts and pray. One medium told me last year she had been frequently sick because she did not stay overnight at Wat Sila-at. It should be noted here that the relationship the mediums formed with Ong Tue is like father-children while at the Phaya Lae Shrine, a lord/governor-citizen relationship is clearly perceived. The relationship of spiritual figures and his attendants at both sites demonstrates the local socio-political transformations throughout historical changes. While at Wat Sila-at, we see the pre-modern polity of peasant community based around patriarchy, the transition to modernity and the urbanized polity of state bureaucratic administration is seen at the Phaya Lae Shrine.

Anyone who walks into Wat Sila-at in these pilgrimage periods will see the festive temple fair at first sight. Behind the gate, dozens of temporary food stalls and shops are lined up along the street that leads uphill to the temple hall and the Ong Tue pavilion. There is a big stage on the left-hand side of the central ground that will become the site for an earsplitting concert and entertainment at night. In northeast Thailand, communal monasteries usually provide areas for hosting seasonal caravans of mor lam concert troupes, a massive entertainment industry that attracts a great number of viewers from nearby villages, districts, or even distant provinces. On stage, attractive singers perform series of luk thung and mor lam songs. Many rows of pretty women, lady boys, and gay men with their thick cosmetics and spectacular costumes dance behind, moving and gesturing among glittery lights according to each song’s lyrics and rhythms. We often see some monks among the audiences in the front rows. Food stalls and shops encircle the viewers and the central stage at the far front. The monastic domain, with the emergence of this secular liminality of entertainment and market, turns out to be the place where human desires and emotions are intensively expressed. We should
acknowledge here that northeast monasteries have been the matchmaking point where village youths come out at nighttime temple fairs to seek out and build up romantic relationships.

For Wat Sila-at and other monasteries, this kind of throng and event is central to their development and functions. There is a lot of cash flow and donations into the temple. And there is a commodity economy operated through the production of iconolatry. When one walks into the pavilion where Ong Tue resides, he/she will hear a combination of the sound of khaen music and monks’ chants and see spirit mediums dance in front of the Buddha image. Transparent donation cabinets are constantly filled with coins and colorful banknotes by mediums and temple-goers. At the chamber on the opposite side, a monk holds a microphone and asks passers-by to buy from glass cabinets a variety of amulets made in the image of Ong Tue. Thailand has rarely been given to iconoclasm, but instead, there has been persistent and unquestioning popularity of image representation and idolatrous fetishism. The occult market operative through monasteries is an important source of income, apart from daily and seasonal donations, that will suffice in the main to cover the regular expenses of the monastic facilities. Nowadays, many local temples find some strategies to attract villagers’ attention and public interest by promoting sacred objects and supernatural shrines in the monastic space. When I was in Chaiyaphum, I heard many stories of local temples where sacred tree trunks (takhien) were retrieved from rivers in the villages and exhibited under temporary pavilions close to the main halls or pagodas. Monasteries embraced these occult objects because they drew in people, money, and activities. Villagers went inside the main hall or pagoda to pay respect to the principal Buddha images and then they went to worship these sacred, uncanny objects. A few days before the national lottery, groups of villagers came to rub the trunk’s surface with baby powder and used their mobile phones to take pictures in the hope that they would thereby find some lucky numbers.

Here, we see a popular reclassification of the Buddha as a member of the northeast spirit pantheon. A young monk at Phu Phra told me that in his own view, Ong Tue was the Buddha in national Buddhist belief. And I observed that it was Ong Tue who emerged at will whenever mediumistic rituals took place and possessed spirit mediums in the inaugural stages to grant auspicious blessings. Everywhere in the Khorat Plateau of the
northeast is full of mythical stories of the flying Buddha who is said to have come to meet local guardians, deities, and spirits and left his footprints on the rocks as the memorials of his visit. A lot of temples were built to accommodate these vestiges later on. When Lao people in the northeast of contemporary Thailand talk about Buddha, it is not the same Buddha as the one imagined by average central Thai Sangha authority. The Buddha of the northeast might be akin to the magical, supernatural travelling Buddha of the Lao That Panom Chronicle, as documented by Constance M. Wilson (1997), or the “inspired” Buddhas of Laos described by John Holt (2009). He is regarded as one of the members in the northeast spirit pantheon. Even at the heart of the Thai royal temple and palace in Bangkok where a great number of Thai and foreign tourists visit every day, the Emerald Buddha (Phra Kaewmorrakot), the national Buddha statue, can be seen as the “inspired” Buddha since his devotees customarily offer him sticky rice, boiled eggs, and fermented fish on the altar outside the chapel in the belief that he was native to Vientiane in Laos and fond of these specific culinary offerings.

I observed the way Chaiyaphum mediums undertook rituals by recourse to the existing powers in the local spirit pantheon repository. It seems that every domain of power already has some authorities from the pantheon in positions of care and government. Mediums and villagers often told me that everywhere in Chaiyaphum has been protected by gods and spirits. Phaya Lae is the divine governor who takes care of city space. Ong Tue is the Buddha statue that functions as the pillar of local Buddhism. Fields, forests and mountains are protected by specific local guardians and spirits. Individual mediums, even though they are limited to their one or two possessing spirits, can call upon all spirits in the pantheon from the three domains to visit them and conduct the rituals.

**Transposable inversion of hierarchy**

Modern South and Southeast Asian states share an outstanding religious feature in which world religions coexist with autochthonous belief systems. Similarly, Theravada Buddhism and local animism constitute Thai religious complexity. This complexity has been characterized as “syncretic” (Kirsch 1977, Terwiel 2012, Muecke 1992) and “hybrid” (Pattana 1999, 2005, 2012). Even though these characterizations derive from structural-functional and postmodern anthropological frameworks respectively, they
equivalently present the relationship between Buddhism and supernaturalism as separate realms in a hierarchical topography in which the former is paramount. Substantial ethnographic studies attempt to indicate the contestation of the hierarchy in which mediumship gives a stage for human agency in the regimes of gender and power (Lewis 1975, Irvine 1984, Balzer 1981, Norton 2006, Bacigalupo 2004). However, the contestation in the regime of religion is unattended. Anthropologists of Thailand seem to accede to the notion that spirit mediumship is subordinate to Buddhism (Pattana 2012, 1986, Hayashi 2003).

In this section, I aim to explore the hierarchical disposition of Buddhism and spirit mediumship. I have laid out the processes of exchange and mutualistic incorporation between the two realms and presented the relationship as unbounded and interpenetrated. Because of this quality of co-dependency, it is difficult to define Buddhism as in a higher place and mediumship as in a lower place even though that is what official discourse suggests. But the local experience provides the sense of dynamic and egalitarian pairing. Here, I argue that there cannot be a stable hierarchy between the complementary pair but a form of transposable inversion. My argument potentially makes sense of the transgressory nature of ritual actions in monastic and mediumistic domains. By interrogating previous models of power and relationships that are more rigid, segregated and compartmentalized, I suggest that the border between the two realms is porous, allowing flows of exchange. The relationship of power between Buddhism and spirit mediumship is like tidal amplitude in particular reciprocal moments in ritual space and time. I provide the ethnographic data that testifies to the transposable inversion of hierarchy in the spatio-temporal respect of ritual.

In the Thai social context, Buddhist temples disseminate the idea of ethical life and determine everyday behaviors. But when a ritual takes place there, we can observe the inversion of hierarchy where spirit mediumship regulates villagers’ actions according to its divine cosmology. It was 9:20am on the occasion of the third Lunar Month Festival at Ajan Tho’s temple. When the ceremony began, some devoted luk sit moved into his dwelling, which was located far at the back of the central court. The medium-abbot and other monks were sitting there. They turned their faces to the left wing of the dwelling. In front of them was the room full of Buddha images in many sizes. Luk sit lightly sat down and were hemmed in knee to knee. Two mor khaen behind the monks started a
slow line of harmonic music. Ajan Tho closed his eyes and sang. Others put their palms together at chest level and bent their heads slightly down. The crowd’s noise outside stopped. The song lifted up and radiated over the landscape. The temple was being transformed into a stage where the episode of divine communication, human aspiration, and idioms of fertility would be enacted.

I sat outside the roof of Ajan Tho’s dwelling and observed the commencement of the ritual. What struck me was the composition of the second row behind Ajan Tho that was formed by two laymen and two monks. Supposedly, in temple rituals, monks should sit in front of and separately from laymen and in order of seniority. But the first and the second positions were laymen with monastic robes on their left shoulders. The first one was Ajan Tho’s chauffeur who had been in the monkhood but disrobed to have his family. The second was a university lecturer who had also been ordained by Ajan Tho and had stayed in this temple for a while. The third position was taken by a young, thin monk who remained in the monkhood because he was fated to be sick and die if he disrobed. When he was a layman, he had encountered life difficulties and accidents. His parents took him to Ajan Tho’s and a soothing ritual was organized. The monk’s possessing spirit told the parents that their son should be ordained at once. The last in the row was a plump monk who looked more solemn than the others. This sitting pattern of hierarchical order typically took place on other occasions of mediumistic ritual.

Ajan Tho finished singing but the mor khaen continued their music. All luk sit took their own khan ha and kneeled to form a single line arranged in order of seniority. The chauffeur and the lecturer bowed and presented khan ha to Ajan Tho to touch as an indication of asking permission to enter the ritual realm. What surprised me then was that both of the monks joined in the action, after presenting their khan ha to Ajan Tho, and showed respect to the two laymen. They bent down their heads and presented their khan ha to the chauffeur and the lecturer to touch. Other luk sit followed the pattern on and on. Ajan Tho explained to me later that the possessing spirits of the chauffeur and the lecturer were in higher rank so the monks had to pay homage to them. It should be noted that all their possessing spirits were the spirits of Buddha statues in Chaiyaphum’s religious cosmology. I found a similar spiritual structure and arrangement in other mediumistic networks: the spirits’ power relations in the local religious cosmology would determine humans’ relationship and actions in ritual time. At villages, senior
female mediums went down on their knees to present khan ha to young male mediums, who were the same age as their sons, before entering into trance because these young male mediums’ possessing spirits were of higher ranks in their spirit pantheon.

The inversion of hierarchy between Buddhism and mediumship happens not only in the monastery but also at spirit medium’s houses. In Chaiyaphum, it is not unusual that Buddhist monks are among the customers who attend the spirit shrine for suggestions about their everyday lives, luck and fortune. Previous ethnographic research reports the scene of interaction between the two parties in the medium’s house. Pattana (1999, 153-154) observes an interaction between a female medium and two visiting monks at a deity shrine in Khorat. He reports that, according to the medium, “monks and Buddhism have a higher religious and spiritual rank when compared to mediums and deities. Buddhist monks never pay respect to spirit mediums. The mediums, on the other hand, have to pay homage to the monks.” However, I found my ethnographic experience to be in opposition to Pattana. In Chaiyaphum, spirit mediums take the dominant role over Buddhist monks. At Mae Som’s private shrine, monks who sought divine help had to pay respect to the shrine and the medium because her possessing spirit was the spirit of a celebrated Buddha statue in Isan: Jao Phor Inpaeng. She often complained to me about some monks who went to beg for help but showed an arrogant manner in front of her shrine and didn’t bow before her.

Pattana depicts elsewhere (2012, 107) spirit mediums having no Buddhist authority and considering themselves inferior to Buddhist monks. In my investigation of monks’ contact with spirit shrines in Chaiyaphum, if they wished to be successful in resolving personal matters or recovering from illness, they had to “surrender” (NE, orn yorm) to the shrines. On one occasion at Mae Mala’s house, an abbot was diagnosed with illness caused by the attack of the spirit of a late abbot in the temple who was angry at his offence. The monk’s luk sit visited Mae Mala in two pick-up trucks while the abbot was hospitalized. They called him and exhorted him to surrender to Mae Mala’s shrine. They turned on the mobile phone’s speaker and said, “Venerable father, just surrender, surrender!” (NE: luang phor, yorm phoen, yorm!). The abbot complied with their request. He said, “Yes, I surrender then!” (NE: yorm, yorm yu!). Once the monk expressed his subjectivity as subordinate to the spirit power, and only then, he could be helped in recovering from his illness.
Marjorie Muecke (1992) presents an astonishing account of the interaction between monks and mediums in the ritual of the Buddhist Lent-entering (*khao phansa*) ceremony organized by a master medium at her house in Chiang Mai in 1978. She describes a situation when the monks kneeled before the master medium who sat elevated on a platform before them and paid respect “*wai*” to her three times “then received her blessing: ‘she’ cupped the head of each monk in ‘her’ hands as ‘she’ recited *khathaa* and blew on their heads, then “she” did the same over a bucket of water that each monk present to “her,” thereby sacralizing into *naammon* (bold in original) (Muecke 1992, 101). She also portrays an episode when the monks performed a meditation dance of elaborate choreography. Muecke interprets this fascinating vignette as religious syncretism in which the customary relationship between Buddhism and spirit mediumship is reversed.

However, Muecke sees it as a paradox concerning the social and moral supremacy of orthodox Buddhism over folk religion and overlooks the transposable reversal in this religious mutualism. She still situates the relationship between Buddhism and spirit cults as separate domains that practitioners cannot cross over. Muecke reports that once possessed, spirit mediums in Chiang Mai did not participate in Buddhist ritual. They recognized functional boundaries between the two forms of religion. She writes, “Both groups, mediums and monks, aspire to the same end, an end that each group complements the other in achieving. Monks, after all, are not permitted to become mediums, and mediums, usually by virtue of their gender (or if male, by virtue of their homosexuality … may not become monks” (Muecke 1992, 102).

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33 *Wai* is the action when a person puts their palms together at chest level and bends the head down in order to show respect to another senior person.

34 *Khathaa* or *khatha* could be magical or Buddhist mantras.

35 *Naammon* or *nam mon* in Thai means sacred water made by monks or religious practitioners. It is believed to contain magical power that can protect a person from bad luck and bless him with prosperity.
Likewise, Pattana (2012) studies the life of Luang phor Khun, a famous Isan magical monk (CT: phra keji ajan) in Khorat. He argues that the monk is a postmodern medium “whose religious charisma and ascetic practices have had phenomenal implications for contemporary Thai popular religion and public culture” (Pattana 2012, 85). However, both Pattana and Muecke locate the magical monks in their accounts within the institutional framework of official Buddhism while situating spirit mediums into separate, inferior positions of authority and power in Thai popular religion. My account shows that monks and mediums in Chaiyaphum correlative operate their function and power in the same domain of religiosity. Monks are spirit mediums. Spirit mediums become monks. Within a single body, the subjectivity is comprised of Buddhist authority and spirit power. The expression of “having a possessing spirit in the body” (mi ong) is the discourse in spirit cults that describes the way in which a person consents to permit a spirit to possess him. Ajan Tho, the medium-abbot, is a Buddhist monk who has possessing spirit (mi ong). He is an exemplary figure that demonstrates the way one body can contain the mutual domains of Buddhist charisma and mediumistic power and perform the transposable inversion of religious hierarchy.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the relationship between Buddhism and spirit mediumship in contemporary northeast Thailand. It reviews the understanding from some of the existing literature, which tends to theorize the relationship between Buddhism and spirit mediumship as a presumed one of segregation in three ways: functionally, socially, and spatially. By drawing upon ethnographic information from Chaiyaphum, I argue that, firstly, the domains of Buddhism and spirit mediumship are not segregated but unbounded, interpenetrated, and dependent on each other. The interplay between Buddhism and spirit mediumship can be understood as processes of exchange and mutual incorporation, as “religious mutualism.” Buddhism and spirit cults form a symmetrically compatible rapport. Religious practitioners in both domains cross over the boundaries to cultivate and perform power. This complexity goes beyond syncretism and hybridity. It is a Thai religious ecumenism. In Chaiyaphum, Buddhism cannot be

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36 Luang phor is a Thai term we use to address a monk. It might be equivalent to “Father” or “the Venerable father.”
defined in terms of the absence of spirit mediumship or vice versa. And spirit cults are not always subordinate to Buddhism. Secondly, I argue that the understanding of the processes of exchange and mutual incorporation between official Buddhism and supernaturalism makes the transposable reversal of hierarchy between the two realms explicitly tangible.
Conclusion

This thesis examines the place of spirit mediumship in Isan society, and broadly speaking, in the Thai state. It sheds light on the presence of spirit cults in Isan people’s way of life. Works of scholarship on spirit mediumship are inevitably yoked to the domain of ritual. The study of ritual remains central to the scholarship of religion and spirit mediumship. Victor Turner (1969) sees ritual as the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies. He suggests that “religious beliefs and practices are something more than ‘grotesque’ reflections or expressions of economic, political, and social relationships; rather are they coming to be seen as decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about those relationships, and about the natural and social environments in which they operate” (1969, 6). Chaiyaphum mediumship serves as the underlying motif of villagers’ ritual life in relation to the world. Politics, power, health, kinship, and identity interlace with the religious practice of spirit mediumship in everyday life. Thus, these entanglements raise some key questions in my thesis: How can we understand the sociality, cultural practices, and religiosity of Isan people in this twenty-first century through the lens of spirit mediumship? To what extent has northeast identity transformed in relation to Thai state modernization? In addition, how can we understand current religious movements in contemporary Thai society?

This chapter brings together the findings and contributions from my study of spirit cults in Chaiyaphum Province in order to present some general conclusions. It shows that mediumistic practices solidify Isan vulnerable selfhood and relationships, make spiritually manifest heterogeneous relations of desire and care, and confirm religious authority from the periphery.

**General findings**

This study shows that supernaturalism has a strong presence and centrality in the contemporary lives of the people of Isan. It shares the view of a number of anthropological studies on spirit cults in different societies that have observed the
dynamic nature of spirit phenomena in modern society. These comparative studies challenge Weber’s (1971) rationalized notion of disenchantedment. They illuminate the turn of re-enchantment in modern societies (Taylor 2007, Comaroff 1994, Endres 2011, Jackson 1997, Pattana 2012). Isan spirit mediumship is not an anachronistic phenomenon under assault but a supple node for assimilating new concepts and symbolizing and negotiating new relationships in society. This has been noted by many scholars who work on Thai and other Southeast Asian societies (see Jackson 2012, DeBernardi 2012, Wong 2001, Endres 2011). My research brings to light some previously invisible and unexplored dimensions that unfold the reasons why mediumship and Buddhism exist in Thailand in their current form. Spirit belief and official Buddhism comingle in interesting and complex ways, and in a manner that takes us beyond syncretism and hybridity. We arrive at the idea of religious ecumenism.

My study explores spirit mediumship as a contemporary vernacular of empowerment. While several recent studies address how spirit mediumship in Southeast Asia domesticates and is refigured by global market forces (Pattana 2012, 1999, Endres 2011), this thesis also attends to the ways spirit mediumship is implicated in contemporary modalities of power and governance. It suggests that Thailand can be seen as a ritual state where people’s life and the state’s affairs are full of rituals. Isan spirit cults and local monthly monastic festivals form what their participants call “rituals for merit” (ngan bun). Chaiyaphum Province is full of these seasonal activities at which its people celebrate Buddhist-cum-supernaturalist processes at temples, public shrines, and home. The province’s deity Phaya Lae and local spiritual figures are central to the understanding of the relationship between national and local political spheres. Phaya Lae is a heroic figure who plays a role as the mediator between state identity and vernacular subjectivity. Chaiyaphum people construct their sense of belonging and allegiance to the Thai state by participating in rituals in their localities. In a manner similar to that identified by Walker in northern Thailand (2012), I contend that mediumship in Isan serves as a means for drawing the charismatic power of the central state into local circuits of sociality and meaning where it is refigured and made central to local projects of status, personhood, wellbeing, and control.

By drawing on the literature on Thai mediumship, the body, and ritual performance, this thesis studies the body and ritual enactment in Isan spirit mediumship. These two
domains are crucial for an understanding of the relationship between the local spirit cult and sociality. Spirit mediumship in Chaiyaphum is distinctive in terms of its performative elements. Its charismatic power is constituted by the practitioners’ aesthetic skills, participating audience, and multisensory ambience. All these constituents cooperate in order to achieve ritual efficacy of healing patients, blessing attendants, and celebrating the spirits. Those who participate in mediumistic rituals are transformed in intense bodily experiences that involve heat, damp, sweat, music, smell, movement, and spectacle. However, the existing literature on Thai spirit mediumship has effectively disembodied the corporeal elements of the medium’s experiences. Scholars have overlooked the idioms in which the body speaks. Moreover, the underlying logic of ritual enactment, which crucially illuminates the vicissitudes of the body in a context of social, political, and economic change, is not sufficiently examined. Thus, my research project emerges out of discontent with the insufficient scrutiny of spirit mediumship in relation to bodily practice and ritual performance in Thailand.

The framework of ritual performance in spirit mediumship brings about a number of novel ideas concerning Isan subjectivity and its meanings in the world. Spirits help Isan women whose voice is muted to vocalize their subjectivity. They are the spiritual prosthesis of desires and aspirations. The performative lens in spirit mediumship illuminates the agency of female virtuosi to reconfigure their conventional statuses as conjugal partners, domestic nurturers, caretakers, and comforters in Isan and Thai contexts. And spirits make this excessive desire possible in particular situations. We have observed Mae Som’s desire to nurture her luk sit and become a mother, Busaba’s desire for political status in her village and dreams of a better place, Mae Sim OK’s claims on her superior asceticism, Mae Mala’s desire for prestigious recognition from her community, Nuan’s desire to express her libido and distressing intensities, and Ajan Tho’s female assistants’ aspiration to help their khuba’s missions to ease human sufferings. Significantly, we have witnessed the important role of women in rituals. They actively engage in spirit communities. They undertake physically and mentally laborious tasks both in mediumistic circles and Buddhist monasteries. Isan women seek autonomy and governance by means of participating in supernaturalism, which gives them voice and authority in a particular form of cultural practice. Spirits model female
excess in forms, actions and functions, and in ways that provide female social actors contentment, recognition and prestige.

Spirit mediumship is a node for symbolizing and negotiating new relationships in Thai society. It resynthesizes human relationships. The notion of the family in socio-economically transforming Isan has come into view in the past few decades. Isan is the area where the population intensively engages in national and international labor migration to make a living. This mobility has brought about the disjuncture of descent groups and social formation. Spirit mediumship offers the new meaning of sociality and community for those who are excluded from kin and autochthonous social groups. Also, this thesis demystifies the complex idea of personhood in the Thai context. It offers a material theory that demonstrates the making of a person through ritual enactments. The material and multisensory makeup of ritual performance rescues the examination of human subjectivity from a focus on intangible traces. My study looks at the body in mediumistic practices and argues that Isan personhood is shaped by materiality in rituals, which are not otherworldly but bodily and affectively constructed.

Empowerment, personhood and healing

My research extends the examination of spirit cults into the realms of Thai politics, kinship, human relations and personhood. Against the secularist notions that mediumship is a localized archaic trace that somehow has survived modern state-making processes or, alternatively, a counter-cultural expression of defiance or despair by locals who are threatened by state subjectification, it has argued that local spirit cults crucially contribute to state formation and nationalism. Ritual performances around historical figures that are enacted by the local people reproduce their subjection under the Thai state. Local spiritual figures, like Phaya Lae, will have little authority if they have no connection to Bangkok power. These vernacular performances replicate the state’s and monarchy’s ceremonies. However, it is incorrect to conclude that they are hierarchically subordinate to national ceremonies. I propose that spirit practices from the margins contain spectral power and maintain the state’s power and the monarchy’s auratic potency. Both the state’s and the monarchy’s presence is made manifest locally through
the embrace of spirit cults. Thus, the spirit cults are not always resistant to state building but implicated in and empowered by it. They are not subordinated to Thai political power but are mutually potent and central within it.

This recalls the theories of the “galactic polity” (Tambiah 1976) and “theater state” (Geertz 1980). Southeast Asian polities form with centers that have minor satellites orbiting them. This mandala topography shows that smaller centers replicate the larger ones in the performance of a hierarchical relationship. Georges Condominas (1990) also discusses a similar relationship. He coined the term “emboxment” to characterize the way in which Tai states organize their societies, after the manner of Chinese boxes that fit one within another (O'Connor 1990, 2). Kirsch (1990) elaborates that Condominas’s theory of emboxment can be applied to mainland Southeast Asian societies. He says the term “involves the notion that the various social/cultural entities of the Tai consist of a hierarchically ordered, inclusive, and nested set of ‘units,’ each lower unit neatly included in the next larger unit” (1990, 70). In a northern Thai case study, Alan Johnson suggests that Lanna can be seen as an emboxed unit in Thai state that contains animist tropes in Buddhist clothing (2014, 42). Here, I link the hierarchical-mandala emboxment with ritual performance and argue that, ritually, power and authority cascade from the margins to the state center and monarchy. Ritual practices in villagers generate small rivers of charisma to form the confluence of collective charisma in the nation’s repository. Mediumistic practices are not at the periphery but the core of the theater state’s power. We have recently observed modern states in Southeast Asia building national identity and a sense of belonging by relying on supernaturalism from the margins. Vietnamese central authorities, who previously condemned and prohibited mediumship, have supported and promoted local spirit cults as the nation’s identity and intangible cultural heritage (Salemink 2008, Norton 2002, Doan 2011).

The thesis shows that the status and efficacy of local elites is significantly premised upon the mediumistic act of drawing power from the center. The central figure of Phaya Lae is figured in the iconography of the local public sphere as both a soldier and a bureaucrat. These distinct qualities of power and efficacy are channeled through the bodies of spirit mediums into accessible power and formats for making intelligible one’s claims upon others. Through his small army of mostly female spirit mediums, Phaya Lae’s spirit becomes a source of empowerment and a template for prestigious, potent
and efficacious personhood. We thus can re-envisage the medium’s body and acts of performative virtuosity as an efficacious nexus by which the power of the state is drawn down, made accessible, and redeployed into locally meaningful projects of personhood, status and efficacy. And the most striking feature of this process is the empowerment and recognition obtained by women through the mediumistic cult to Phaya Lae.

Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Thailand has been observed as the cultural template for the notion that women have spiritual inferiority, more attachment to the realm of worldly desire that hinders nirvana attainment, and devaluation of social self when compared with their male counterparts (Kirsch 1996, Esterik 1996). However, Keyes (1984, 226) argues that both women and men confront worldly attachment and sufferings in different ways. The characteristic tension for both sexes is expressed in distinctive sets of gender images from the Buddhist worldview. For females, Buddhism provides public space where they predominate as lay devotees and assume the responsibility for providing major support to the religion and the Sangha by their nurturing and maternal role (Andaya 2002, Keyes 1984, Tambiah 1970). While Kirsch explains women’s much greater enthusiasm, relative to men, about supporting the Sangha through the preparation and offering of daily food as an indication of their greater aspiration for merit, Keyes sees it as reflecting a notion of woman as nurturer, not only for her own children but of the religion (Keyes 1984, 230).

Here, I would extend Keyes’ reflections on the nurturing mother image to suggest that spirit mediumship enables women to negotiate their limits of expressing power and to bring nurturance into wider realms of sociality and human–non human relationships. It draws upon women’s desire to nurture, give and support; builds upon their physical substance and power; and takes inspiration from their imaginative construction of the world. For them, a crucial means by which they can express their desire and power is by way of nurturance. They bring spirits into human forums to facilitate livelihoods, security and and recognition. In Thailand’s religious system, spirit mediumship gives women the entrepreneurial opportunity to accumulate prestige by being sponsors of societal wellbeing, enabling them to cross over forms of cultural capital and became central to community. It is an empowerment mechanism. By looking at the relationship between spirit sociality and Buddhism, we see female gender in Isan society in a new light.
Mediumship also facilitates the expression and recognition of female desire. Spirit mediumship is a performative register of productive sexuality (Foucault 1990), that does not so much give release or voice to some innate reservoir of repressed sexuality as to articulate and make public alternative sexual identities. We see this in Mae Sim OK’s life account, whose non-normative sexuality is subtly displayed by her union with a spirit that makes her body sexually unavailable to her husband. Some of my informants cry a lot and despise their husbands very much especially on Buddhist holy days. These phenomena are recognized by the communities and witnessed translocally. In one village, a woman wanted to run away from her husband and her son. In another village, a married medium undressed and ran away into the forest. The modernist Thai conjugal relationship channels female desire and sexuality and ties them to a reproductive function. Mediumship draws women from such pursuits and invokes an alternative sexuality from the local perspective, one which might predate the modernization of sexuality in relation to state formation and needs to be understood from vernacular discourse and practice. The sexuality of women is made manifest too in the highly public rituals of ecstatic possession whereby women’s extra-marital sexuality is evoked, sated and recognized. Another example from Chapter Three investigates women’s bodily pleasure and public enactment of ritual as a dualism of the sexual and the spiritual. Both desire and its limits are drawn and expressed. In short, mediumship articulates sexuality that is plural, diverse and unlimited to the conjugal domain. It encompasses heterogeneous forms of pleasures: contact between the body and the spirits, homoeroticism, and other kinds of relationships outside the reproductive function.

The practice of spirit mediumship serves as a critical resource for consolidating and reaggregating the dispersed self. This thesis contends that the Isan self is mobile, contingent, and penetrable. At the same time, it is vulnerable to fragmentation as a consequence of engaging in extra-local processes of labor and consumption in a precarious political and economic context. To remain coherent and locally intelligible in the face of engagement in powerful economic and cultural currents, the self needs nurturance. It is a provisional assembly that is tenuously held together through ritual maintenance. Spirit mediumship makes the Isan self more solid but at the same time flexible. The self is restated and re-confirmed in its existence by modes of ritual enactment. Through mediumship the migrant, the contract farmer and the left-behind
family member gains recognition and nurturance from others. Isan spirits, like Phaya Lae, provide magnetic power to reassemble the defragmented self. In such ways, spirit mediumship is central to the reproduction of Isan personhood in a dynamic and shifting globalized social landscape.

This study explores some essential constructions of Isan illness that specifically relate to Thai social dynamics of industrial life and global market forces. It shows that in the midst of transformative monetization, Isan personhood encounters loss, disruption, and mobility and becomes subject to affliction and loss of control over the body. This discussion of disorder and control expressed in the body and ritual contributes to the anthropology of illness. As much pre-existing literature on mediumship notes, people enmeshed in profound social transformation in different societies commonly encounter disharmony and dissociation of personhood. Often such studies focus on human cognitive processes and interpret affliction as the “loss of soul” (Desjarlais 1992a, Heinze 1982, Kunitz and Levy 1983, Spector 1985, Tanabe 2002). My thesis shifts to the investigation of materiality and indicates that affliction is not only a “loss of soul” but also a “loss of the body.” The embodied experience of affliction in Isan is represented in a variety of material forms. These material forms point to how villagers perceive experiences of affliction and healing. My investigation of the bodily dimensions of displacement and disorder in Isan healing contributes to anthropological enquires into affliction. The focus on embodied affliction and memory in Isan mediumship demonstrate that illness is a socio-culturally bound ontology.

Religious complementarity and exchange

I have argued that supernaturalism is situated at the center of Isan religious life. Local spirit cults are not subservient to, detached from, or undermined by state Buddhism. They form a mutualistic relationship with Buddhism to serve people’s proximate needs. There is no borderline between spirit mediumship and Buddhism. Chaiyaphum mediumship is a local modality that is inspired by Buddhist morality. I have suggested that Thai Buddhism cannot be comprehended without the presence of local supernaturalisms. Spirit mediums mediate the two religious realms to maintain their prestigious status and assist people in achieving their aspirations and healing their sick bodies. Questioning some pre-existing anthropological works that argue that Thai
supernaturalism continues to be weakened by the consistent escalation of state Buddhism, I demonstrate that spirit mediumship in Isan has continued to thrive in the early twenty-first century. Chaiyaphum spirit mediums are viewed as exponents of Buddhist-cum-mediumistic rituals. They perform a wide range of rituals that are almost equal to what monks can offer for the villagers. They are financially and physically supportive of quotidian and ceremonial activities in Buddhist temples.

Potentially, Thai Buddhism serves not only as a field of merit for humankind’s ultimate needs but also as a repertoire for techniques for all religious practices and practitioners across the religious field. Spirit mediums are practitioners who need barami from Buddhism. They need the prestige from the national religion, which provides the feasibility for them to access the magic of the state—its power. By linking themselves to Buddhism, spirit mediums are not regarded as mad, deceitful and cheating. They get a license of recognition, respect, and legitimation from state Buddhism. At the same time, spirit mediums reproduce a particular form of Buddhism. They are therefore important stakeholders in Buddhism.

In this process of mutual exchange between mediumship and Buddhism, the scope of what it means to be a Buddhist is expanded. Such is evident in the figure of the “medium-abbot.” He is the abbot monk who is also a master medium. His dual leading role is present in the monastic realm as the abbot (jao awat) and in mediumistic realm as the master (NE: khuba; CT: khruba). He is an ideal practitioner who can draw on both state Buddhist representation and local spirit power to benefit individuals and community. In this respect, his partial unorthodox practice is acceptable. He is an exemplary figure who comingles spirit belief and official Buddhism as religious ecumenism. My ethnographic accounts also introduce a number of “medium-monks” who perform Buddhist ritual and secure spirit cults. These monks are possessed by their possessing spirits and perform mediumship. Another religious figure is the “medium-mor tham” (mor tham rang song) who is a male layperson simultaneously practicing Buddhism-based power and maintaining the legacy of spirit cults. Such a figure has two shrines (NE: han) of phi (spirits) and phra (Buddha statues). These Buddhist figures add to our understanding of the wide array of monk categories: magical monks (keji ajan) (Jackson 1999, McDaniel 2011, Pattana 2012, Terwiel 2012), Buddhist saints (arahants) (Tambiah 1984), and forest monks (phra pa) (Kamala 1997, Tambiah 1984, Taylor
The medium-abbot and medium-monks (phra mor lam, phra rang song) in my thesis draw attention to the multidimensional characteristics of Thai monks, especially those who rely on localized spirit cults.

While both medium-abbot and medium-mor tham figures illustrate the ecumenical nature of modern Thai religion, the mor lam points to its fluidity and changes in the scope of services religious practitioners may enact. The mor lam is a female medium who has an independent base of power. In Chaiyaphum, I observed the decline of mor tham and the mobility of luk sit who moved from mor tham networks to mor lam networks. One important reason is the rise of the Phaya Lae cult, which has the centrality in mor lam practice. The provincial cult requires bodily enactment of dancing and singing to celebrate (chalorng) in ritual, corporeally expressive acts, which are considered inappropriate in mor tham’s Buddhism-based notion.

With its focus on vernacular religiosity, this thesis puts mediumistic spiritual enactments at the center of power, identity and social renewal in Isan, thereby challenging characterizations of this important region as a national or civilizational periphery. It demonstrates that the spirit cult is a politically significant religion, crucial to anchoring national and royal power in diverse localities, giving expression to local aspirations, and promising empowerment and control to rural communities and individuals. Spirit mediums work continuously to reconfigure culturally and reassemble socially a region in tremendous political, social and economic flux. In their idiomatic enactments of regional dilemmas and aspirations, they serve as exemplary figures of Isan modernity. The emphasis on illness and healing in spirit mediumship illuminates foundational premises of Isan personhood and sheds light on corporeal identities that are grounded in an environment of uncertainty and risk. Lastly, spirit mediums are crucial actors who offer new insights into the characteristics of Isan religiosity. As the central arena in the interplay between Buddhism and the spirit cults in this region, mediums’ ritual enactments reveal the complementarity between these two significant religious domains. The ideas, practices and techniques exchanged and deployed by these practitioners have been crucial in shaping contemporary Isan personhood and society.
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