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## **”Worlds Ever More Enchanted: Reformulations os Spirit Mediumship and Divination in Mainland Southeast Asia”**

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**SPIRIT POSSESSION  
IN BUDDHIST SOUTHEAST ASIA:  
WORLDS EVER MORE ENCHANTED**

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière & Peter A. Jackson  
Editors

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**Paul Sorrentino** is an associate professor of anthropology at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris, France). He studies the articulations between religious, scientific and bureaucratic authority in Vietnam. His ethnography navigates between spirit possession rituals, administrative documents and scientific laboratories or associations. His first monograph, *A l'épreuve de la possession. Chronique d'une innovation rituelle dans le Vietnam contemporain* (Société d'ethnologie, 2018), describes the invention of new communication practices between the living and the dead in post-war and late-socialist Vietnam.

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**Erick White** is an Independent Scholar who has taught at Antioch University, Cornell University and the University of Michigan. His research explores the cultural politics of popular religion in Thailand, the subculture and religious careers of Bangkok professional spirit mediums and the socio-cultural dynamics underlying claims to authority and charisma in Theravada Buddhism.

## **Burmese Transliteration**

The rendering of Burmese names and words has varied significantly, both historically and according to individual authors. This book follows this variation in the treatment of personal names, replicating the literature's most common spellings. Regarding place names, however, we defer to advances made by the government of the Union of Myanmar, which since 1989 has revised transcriptions to spellings that sound closer to the way place names are pronounced, such as Yangon now being the name of the city formerly known as Rangoon. Our exception is the best-known name of the country: Burma. Transcriptions of other Burmese-language words are italicised and follow the transcription system recommended by John Okell in *A Guide to the Romanization of Burmese* (1971) without diacritics, with the notable exception of *weikza* (according to Okell), which Niklas Foxeus here prefers to transliterate as *weizzâ*.

## **Cambodian Transliteration**

Many scholars have proposed transliteration or transcription systems for Khmer. None of these systems has been consistently established on an academic level. Khmer words are transliterated according to the system adopted by the US Library of Congress (in short: ALA-LC),<sup>1</sup> which provides the exact transcription of the spelling of the words in Khmer script. Thus, readers with a knowledge of Pali or Sanskrit are quickly led to the original meaning and origin of the word. The problem with this transliteration system is the large difference between spelling and contemporary pronunciation. Therefore, authors here have made a few exceptions in their transcriptions, which they make explicit in their chapters.

## **Thai Transliteration and Citation**

There is no generally agreed system of representing the national language of Thailand in roman script, and all systems have some limitations; the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet are not sufficient to represent all the consonants, vowels, diphthongs and tones of Thai. In this book we use a modified version of the Thai Royal Institute system of romanising Thai. This

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/khmer.pdf>

system makes no distinction between long and short vowel forms, and tones are not represented. We differ slightly from the Royal Institute system in using ‘j’ and not ‘ch’ for the Thai ‘*jan*’, except in accepted spellings of royal titles, where we revert, for example, to the more widely used *chao* rather than *jao* and *racha* as opposed to *raja*. Dashes are used to separate units of compound expressions that are translated as a single term in English, such as *khvam-pen-thai* for ‘Thainess’.

Some chapters in this book refer to regional forms of religious and ritual expression that are expressed in Northeastern (Isan or Lao) and Northern (Lanna) varieties of Tai. These regional forms are marked in parentheses, such as (NT: *yok khu*) for Northern Thai terms and (Lao: *khuba*) for Northeastern terms. Where no regional variety is denoted, a term is represented in its form in Central Thai, such as (*yok khru*).

We follow the Thai norm of referring to Thai authors by given names, not surnames, and all citations by Thai authors are alphabetised in the bibliographies by given names. We also follow authors’ preferred spelling of their own names in English when known, rather than romanising names in keeping with the system outlined above.

Thai has a large number of honorific titles that are used before the names of respected persons and revered religious personalities, deities and spirits. A person or deity may be honoured with more than one honorific by followers and devotees. To distinguish names from titles, the latter are italicised in this book, such as: *Mae Wan* (‘Mother Wan’), *Chao Dara Rasami* (‘Princess Dara Rasami’), *Ajan Tho* (‘Venerable Tho’).

## INTRODUCTION

### **Worlds Ever More Enchanted:<sup>2</sup> Reformulations of Spirit Mediumship and Divination in Mainland Southeast Asia**

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Peter A. Jackson

The failure of Weberian sociology of religion to predict the global rise of diverse and thriving new forms of religious expression has been a major theme in religious studies and the anthropology of religion in recent decades. A notable account of the religious ‘disenchantment’ that builds on Weber’s framing of the notion<sup>3</sup> is presented by Marcel Gauchet in *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (1997). Many critiques of twentieth-century sociology of religion target the failure of the teleological ground of the secularisation thesis to explain the rise of reformist doctrine-focused and fundamentalist movements within world religions.<sup>4</sup> Significantly less attention has been paid to the ways in which diverse new spirit cults challenge Weberian accounts of the so-called ‘disenchantment’ of the world in the face of modern processes of ostensible rationalisation.<sup>5</sup> Such cults have effloresced all across mainland Southeast Asia.

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<sup>2</sup>The title for this book is borrowed from Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière’s 2007 review essay, ‘Un Monde Plus Que Jamais Enchanté?’

<sup>3</sup>According to Jean Martin Ouédraogo 2010 (p. 241), Max Weber first used the notion of ‘disenchantment’ in his writing in 1913.

<sup>4</sup>Talal Asad and José Casanova, two main critics of the secularisation thesis, presented their work in 2003 and 1994, respectively.

<sup>5</sup>Important sources for this introduction are Richard Jenkins’ 2000 appraisal of Weber’s account of disenchantment and Michael Saler’s 2006 historiographic review of modernity and enchantment. Studies that draw on Southeast Asian material to critique Weberian sociology’s

This book presents novel perspectives on the growing prominence of spirit mediumship and divination across the predominantly Buddhist societies of mainland Southeast Asia; a regional phenomenon that is one of the more noteworthy and least anticipated dimensions of religious change, both in the region and internationally. The early twenty-first century in Burma, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam has been marked by an efflorescence of the presence, imagination and agency of diverse forms of spirits among many social strata, including the urban poor, rising middle classes, economic and political elites. It is especially noteworthy that processes of enchantment are becoming more visible across political divides: in the aborted democracy of military-dominated Burma; in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia; in military-monarchist-democratic Thailand; and even in ostensibly socialist Vietnam. The parallel rise of ritual practices and institutions linked to the efflorescence of spirit cults across the Southeast Asian mainland raises analytical and theoretical issues that necessitate comparative regional perspectives. What unites these societies is not their political systems but rather a relaxing of twentieth-century political interventions in the religious field, a common commitment to a market economy, growing penetration by new digital communications technologies, and their relations with international policies of ‘intangible cultural heritage’ as increasingly salient elements of understandings of ethnic, religious and national identity. In addition to the broad context of globalisation and the marketisation of social life detailed below, these societies also share a deeply embedded model of dealing with the spiritual through rituals of spirit possession in polities that have been framed historically by Indianised ideologies and technologies of power. This commonality may explain the efflorescence of new devotional figures. While previous scholarship on ‘spirited modernities’ (Endres & Lauser, 2011: 5) has dealt with spirit beliefs and practices re-entering the public field, we suggest that the way these processes are ingrained in a distinctive regional genealogy of spirit possession has in general been overlooked for reasons that are linked to orientalist-derived regimes of knowledge.

Several recent studies have addressed issues of enchantment, magic and modernity in Southeast Asia. Rosalind Morris (2000); Pattana Kitiarsa (2012) and Andrew Johnson (2014)

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account of secularisation and disenchantment include: Keyes, Kendall & Hardacre 1994, Pattana 2008, Endres & Lauser 2011, Bubandt & van Beck 2012; and van der Veer 2014.

have described the situation in Thailand; Karen Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien (2006), Kirsten Endres (2011) and Philip Taylor (2004) have detailed new spirit cults in Vietnam; and Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière *et al.* (2014) have detailed new cults in Burma. Pattana Kitiarsa (2008), Kirsten Endres and Andrea Lauser (2011) and Volker Gottowik (2014) have also edited comparative studies of related developments throughout the Southeast Asian region.

Gottowik (2014) observes that his edited collection, *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia: Magic and Modernity*, aims to ‘undermine the dichotomy by which magic, ritual and religion – that is, the whole sphere of the sacred – is pitted against modernity and to bring religion and modernity into an instructive relationship’. (Gottowik 2014, p. 22) Drawing primarily on research from Indonesia, Gottowik contends that world religions ‘are spreading [in Southeast Asia] at the expense of local religious belief systems, which are confronted by demands that they undergo similar processes of rationalization in order to meet the requirements of a modern religion in a modern nation-state’ (Gottowik 2014, p. 26). This is *not* happening in the predominantly Buddhist societies of mainland Southeast Asia, where, in radical contrast, ‘local religious belief systems’ are expanding as they modernise *without being rationalised*.

Understanding this phenomenon requires a double intellectual task: firstly, to place spirit possession rituals at the centre of accounts of religious change; and secondly, to understand how modernity produces enchantment. We seek to understand how processes that modernisation theory viewed as driving forces of rationalisation are instead producing new modalities of enchantment by reinforcing ritual-oriented forms of religiosity across all of mainland Southeast Asia. We place spirit possession at the very centre of our analyses because, as our contributors reveal, the interpenetration of spirit possession rituals with dominant religious traditions is a key aspect of this region-wide efflorescence of new enchantments.

### *International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*

Our volume investigates how modernity is inciting an efflorescence of enchantment in which spirit possession rituals are taking increasingly prominent places in the religious fields of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. This collection does not include a study from Laos, where the emergence of new urban spirit cults awaits further detailed exploration. The studies here reflect the significant recent expansion in international research on spirit possession

practices and divination rituals across much of mainland Southeast Asia, bringing together the perspectives of scholars based at universities in France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Thailand, Japan and Australia. We include contributions from internationally well-known leaders in studies of religion in Burma, Thailand and Vietnam as well as from early career researchers from Europe and Southeast Asia, reflecting the rapid development of this field of research and the emergence of a community of interpretation that draws on comparative methods which transcend the limitations of single-country studies. The chapters assembled here reflect the emergence of an international cross-disciplinary network of scholars of mainland Southeast Asia who are interested in new forms of ritual practice and belief.

This book brings together studies that show the diverse ways that cults of new spiritual agencies – which have taken form historically as well as within the modern contexts of urbanisation, capitalism and new media – both relate to and are differentiated from Buddhism. In the context of diverse processes of rapid social change, spirit cults have transformed into fully developed spirit possession cultures and communities. In some societies where these possession cultures and communities were already extant (such as Vietnam and Burma) they have seen further development and differentiation. This has taken place through multiple, mutually reinforcing processes of ritual specialisation, professionalisation, heritagisation, and delocalisation or relocation. Together, all these processes contribute to instituting spirit possession practice *vis-à-vis* mainstream discourses of religion and hegemonic power, representing major sites of negotiating and contesting established authority.

The studies collected here demonstrate the productive relations between different dimensions of Southeast Asian globalising neoliberal modernity – most notably, the marketisation of social life – and new spirit cults. In contemporary communities, the presence and agency of spirits still depends on their materialisation and recognition through specific representational regimes. Early twenty-first-century urban capitalist cultures of mass-produced commodities and digital communications provide diverse new materialisations and forms of expression that add to the variety of spiritual agencies and traditions that mediate relations between spirits and humans.

The geographically focused concentration of our collection on Buddhist societies of mainland Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, also highlights the continuing importance of spatiality in defining the religious and cultural forms that have emerged within neoliberal globalisation,

even as older locality-based forms of ritual have been increasingly replaced by national-level and urban spirit cults. The studies assembled here thus confirm the critical analyses of New Area Studies (see Jackson 2003, 2019; Houben 2013) that globalisation has not erased spatiality but rather has restructured the ways in which locatedness manifests in the contemporary period.

### *Queer Ritual Specialists and Gender Transformations in Southeast Asian Spirit Cults*

A topic not dealt with in this book is the intersection between queer cultures and the proliferation of professional spirit mediumship in mainland Southeast Asia, yet several chapters here allude to dramatic changes in the gendering of spirit mediums that have taken place in parallel with the efflorescence and professionalisation of possession rituals. Women traditionally were at the centre of many spirit possession traditions across Burma, Thailand and Vietnam, but their roles are now increasingly being performed by gay men and trans women. Several scholars, including four contributors to this volume – Peter Jackson, Benjamin Baumann, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Visisya Pinthongvijayakyul – trace the rise of queer and transgender professional spirit mediums in a companion volume, *Deities and Divas: Queer Ritual Specialists in Myanmar, Thailand and Beyond* (Jackson & Baumann 2022). The companion volume details how spirit mediumship rituals are domains of diverse feminine and masculine gendering that constitute increasingly queer-friendly dimensions of the religious field across mainland Southeast Asia. That book also explores commonalities in the aesthetic and performative dimensions of ritual in queer and religious cultures in Southeast Asia and the West. A central argument is that contemporary queer and spirit possession cultures emerge within a shared formative matrix of capitalism and new media technologies. As a result, commonalities are found where they might not be expected. For example, both the deities worshipped in Southeast Asian spirit cults and the female singer and actor divas adored by gay men and transgenders are expressions of popular cultures, and both place performance and aesthetics at the centre of technologies of ecstasy and rituals of self-transformation. Through analyses that transcend the modernist opposition of religion against secularity, the studies in *Deities and Divas* draw on transnational cultural and queer studies to detail the ways that queer ritual specialists mediate the interlocking domains of ritual, aesthetics, capitalism and media across mainland Southeast Asia and beyond.

### **Enchantment, ‘Magic’ and Modernity**

The claim that the modern world is increasingly disenchanted is a central tenet of Weberian sociology of religion. As Michael Saler observes, by the disenchantment of the world, Max Weber meant

the loss of the overarching meanings, animistic connections, magical expectations, and spiritual explanations that had characterised the traditional world, as results of ongoing “modern” processes of rationalisation, secularisation, and bureaucratisation. (Salter 2006, p. 695)

Richard Jenkins<sup>6</sup> describes the Weberian notion of disenchantment as

The historical process by which the natural world and all areas of human experience become experienced and understood as less mysterious; defined, at least in principle, as knowable, predictable and manipulable by humans; conquered and incorporated into the interpretative schema of science and rational government. (Jenkins 2000, p. 12)

In contrast, the forms of modern enchantment produced in the context of contemporary globalisation detailed in the following chapters challenge the view that modernity is necessarily a condition based on the complete rationalisation of social life. In this setting, Jenkins provides the following definition of enchantment in the contemporary period:

Enchantment conjures up, and is rooted in, understandings and experiences of the world in which there is more to life than the material, the visible or the explainable; in which

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<sup>6</sup>Jenkins 2000 (p. 19) makes the important point that secularisation and disenchantment are not the same, although they are often confused and conflated. The categorical difference between secularisation and disenchantment is highlighted by the fact that **the two** poles of the modern, ostensibly secularised world, namely, organised religion and non-religious secularism, are equally critical of ‘magical’ forms of enchantment. While secularist critics represent magical ritual as a superstitious residue of pre-modernity that holds society back from attaining rational scientific modernity, many modern religious doctrinalists see it as a form of heresy that needs to be expunged in order to attain true, pure religious insight.

the philosophies and principles of Reason or rationality cannot by definition dream of the totality of life; in which the quotidian norms and routines of linear time and space are only part of the story; and in which the collective sum of sociability and belonging is elusively greater than its individual parts. (Jenkins 2000, p. 29)

Erick White (2014, p. 433) argues that the expansion of the market and urbanisation in Thailand have fostered novel religious movements based on new forms of charismatic authority, and he offers what can be regarded as a practical definition of the production of modern enchantment when he states that these new movements reflect ‘an efflorescence of diverse and innovative models of religious personhood, devotional expression, esoteric mastery, and sacralising technique’.

While the term ‘magic’ is widely used in both academic studies and popular accounts of ritual across the region, particularly in the case of Thailand, it has proved to be a problematic analytical category. Construed as being in opposition to science, religion and modernity, ‘magic’ is typically used to refer to a wide variety of practices whose only commonality is a shared focus on acting upon concrete situations in the world rather than aiming for salvation. Because they are seen as not aiming for *nibbana* or salvation from suffering, practices labelled as ‘magical’ are often disparaged within a Buddhist system of values (Spiro, 1970: 175). Practices ranging from the recitation of protective *paritta* by Buddhist monks to witchcraft attacks have at times been equally decried as ‘magical’ according to more doctrinal reformist Buddhist points of view. The differentiation of ritual *vis à vis* ‘religious’ practice has also been at stake in the delineation of the category of ‘magic’. As the devalued other of evolving forms of ‘religion’, ‘magic’ may have lost analytic ability to describe the striking emergence of cults to new spiritual agencies in the contemporary Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia. In an effort to avoid problems associated with the term ‘magic’ as an ethnocentric grand category defined negatively against science and religion, White has coined the phrase ‘ritual arts of efficacy’ to describe the forms of ritual associated with the types of spirit cults detailed in this book. He argues that these arts display ‘creativity, innovation and adaptability’ in Asian Buddhist societies (White 2016, p. 17) and ‘have experienced a frequently underappreciated transformation in their social organisation, transmission and consumption’ (White 2016, p. 16). Despite its problematic history, it is nonetheless difficult to completely avoid using the term ‘magic’, if only because of its continued widespread use in

several fields of anthropology and religious studies, and for these reasons we place ‘magic’ in inverted commas to denote its provisional and contested character.

The studies in this collection confirm Bruce Kapferer’s observation in 2002 (p. 16) that ‘magical’ practices are ‘thoroughly modern’. Kapferer emphasises that

The crucial argument regarding modern magical practices concerns their disjunction from pasts (histories and cosmologies prior to modern periods ... before the imperial expansions of the West) and the radical reconfiguration of ideas and practices of the past in terms of the circumstances of the present.

This position presents a major corrective to accounts that see ‘magical’ practices as survivals of tradition and overlook their current reformulation in the economic, political and social contexts of their use (*Ibid.*, p. 19). As Kapferer observes, contemporary forms of ‘magic’ in Asia are significant because they reveal ‘the fabulations and transmutations of capital in globalizing circumstances, and the magical character of nationalist discourses of the modern and postcolonial state’ (*Ibid.*, p. 2).

In seeking to understand the worldwide popularity of ghost and horror movies, film studies scholars have drawn on psychoanalytic models of the return of a repressed premodernity. These scholars argue that the cultures of modernity are haunted by supernatural phenomena that were excluded in the formation of the modern as an ostensibly enlightened, rational and scientific stage of social life. However, White (2014, p. 194) argues that it is mistaken to interpret the efflorescence of popular Buddhism as primarily the resurgence of a previously repressed syncretic heritage or polytropic sensibility.<sup>7</sup> More than simply imagining ‘magic’ as never having been expelled by Weberian processes of rationalisation and disenchantment, we need to turn the relation of modernity and disenchantment on its head. We need to view the sociological forces of modernity as not merely providing spaces for the survival of residues of ‘magic’ but also as actively producing enchantment anew. *‘Magic’ is modern.* In the phenomena detailed in the following chapters, we do not see the return of a repressed premodernity. Rather, we find formulations of enchanted ritual that are completely novel, despite

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<sup>7</sup>For an account of polytropy in Asian religious cultures, see Carrithers 2000.

taking place within regional structures of religiosity that are embedded within a regional Southeast Asian possession complex.

### **A Southeast Asian ‘Spirit Possession Complex’**

#### *Reconsidering the Religious Field from the Perspective of Spirit Possession*

We regard the new forms of spirit mediumship and divination in mainland Southeast Asia as more than a resurgence; they also constitute an efflorescence and further transformation of existing forms of possession and ritual. ‘Resurgence’ connotes a return from a period of decline. However, spirit cults have long been important dimensions of ritual life, and indeed we contend that a ‘spirit possession complex’ (so dubbed by Kaj Århem [2016a] and as adopted by Benjamin Baumann in his chapter here) lies at the historical foundations of the modern religious fields of all mainland societies. Rather than merely ‘returning’ in recent decades, spirit cults have migrated, coalesced and acquired new visibility in more developed forms, compared to those that emerged in the centralising polities of eighteenth-century Vietnam and Burma, and nineteenth-century Thailand.

Spirit possession refers to a wide range of phenomena that cross analytical and religious boundaries. It can refer to pathogenic forms of spirit attack that are believed to cause illness and affliction and for which the typical response is rituals of exorcism. It can also denote voluntary possession that is viewed positively or adorcistically, in which a possessing spirit is domesticated and the attacked person becomes a medium. This form of voluntary possession or mediumship has long been present in various settings across the region, as attested by Georges Condominas’ regional synthesis (1976), and is at the centre of most of the new developments dealt with in the book.

A range of phenomena also exist on the edges of both spirit attack and voluntary adorcistic possession. In Thailand, Buddhist monks believed to have the power to sacralise potent objects such as amulets claim relations to what Pattana (2012) terms an empowering ‘superagency’. In her chapter here, Irene Stengs uses the term ‘oneiric space’ to refer to the full spectrum of dreams and visions, as well as classical forms of possession, that exist in the dynamically expanding field of the Southeast Asian possession complex. Certainly, Eric Davis’s (2016) remark that we need more accurate characterisations of the various ways to

represent and deal with the spiritual in Mainland Southeast Asia remains valid. In a paper rethinking spirit possession in Theravada Buddhism, White aptly sums up the variety of modalities of possession documented in ethnographic literature about Thailand to posit the existence of a plural and contested field of spirit possession (2017:195).

*The Independent Genealogy of a Southeast Asian Spirit Possession Complex*

Much previous research on religion in mainland Southeast Asia has focused on institutional Buddhist practice and doctrine, and has tended to overlook the invocation of spirits and other ostensibly ‘unorthodox’ forms of practice. This tendency in Southeast Asian religious studies may be seen as an enduring reflection of the relegation and dismissal of ‘superstition’ and ‘magic’, and even ‘ritual’, as disparaged others of ostensibly ‘true Christian belief’ that took place in the West during the Enlightenment, and which formed the intellectual setting within which religious studies first developed in Western universities (see Tambiah 1990). Indeed, one reason for the relative lack of studies of spirit cults in the region is that they have often been dismissed as not constituting real ‘religion’ (or ‘true’ Buddhism) by religious studies scholars, as well as by local elites influenced by orientalist forms of knowledge, and a failure to pay attention to the ritual practices of spirit possession and divination has remained an entrenched bias in the literature on Southeast Asia.

Also at stake theoretically in the study of the recent further efflorescence of ritual in Southeast Asia is the delineation of a genealogy of ‘spirit possession’ as evolving independently in this region’s cosmologies in the context of new modernities. This contrasts with other, established analyses – such as the ‘Atlantic genealogy’ of Afro-Caribbean spirit cults detailed by Paul Johnson (2014) – that have shaped the analytical category of spirit possession in past research. Our collection responds to the double omission of Southeast Asian spirit cults within both religious studies and the international literature on possession. Firstly, the chapters in this book demonstrate that possession and divination rituals are central features of the total religious fields of the Theravada Buddhist communities in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia and the Mahayana Buddhist and other religious communities in Vietnam. Furthermore, we here locate spirit possession in mainland Southeast Asia in the broader, comparative field of studies of spirit possession internationally.

A significant contribution to the international field of spirit possession studies has been Johnson's (2014) genealogical account of 'spirit possession' as a founding anthropological category. He argues that the origin of the anthropological category of 'spirit possession' lies in the intersection of post-Reformation Christianity and European contact with the spirit cults of West Africa in the context of the slave trade to the Americas. In an attempt to attend to the material economy of spirit possession, Johnson develops an argument according to which European ideas of slaves as belongings and bodies without will provide the matrix from which the particular form of the spirit's presence in the human world that is encountered in possession has been identified in the European gaze. However, similar to most literature on this subject, Johnson and the authors in his 2014 edited collection deal only with the African and Afro-Atlantic genealogy of spirit possession. By contrast, early studies on shamanism, which is grounded on a different phenomenology of the spiritual,<sup>8</sup> were mainly concerned with Siberian and Amerindian worlds. This leads one to think that the major analytical categories of spiritual manifestations, namely, spirit possession and shamanism, which together came to displace the older notion of 'animism', were respectively determined according to regional specificities.

Johnson presents a distinctly European- and American-centred perspective of spirit possession that tends to overlook and obscure the distinctive genealogies of this phenomenon in other world regions, notably Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, further developments of spirit possession studies, such as those in a collection edited by J. Brent Crosson (2019: 546), have made use of the 'curious twin production of possession' revealed by Johnson and have started to transcend the 'typical geopolitical provinces of spirit possession' to investigate modern problems of agency involved in this phenomenon.

While striking features of spirit possession, together with disseminated forms of shamanism, are found in a variety of configurations all over mainland Southeast Asia, one rarely comes across any allusions to this in the general comparative international literature on the topic. Southeast Asia is not alone in this regard. In his 'Prologue' to a volume dedicated to spirit

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<sup>8</sup>For the classical distinction between shamanism and spirit possession, see Luc de Heusch 1971. While debated, this distinction still accounts usefully for major differences between these two forms of manifesting the spiritual in human worlds.

possession in South Asia, Gilles Tarabout (1999) makes a similar observation about the marginalisation of the Indian sub-continent in the thematic anthropological literature. Reasons for this lack of interest in large geographical expanses of the international prevalence of spirit possession rituals in academic studies may well originate in the particular North Atlantic, and indeed Euro-Amerocentric, genealogy of the anthropological concept highlighted by Johnson. This conceptual preference may have been reinforced in the case of Southeast Asia by the way in which the production of colonial knowledge on the region – in line with binary oppositions between centre and periphery, lowland and upland, state and village societies – became fragmented between orientalist and anthropological approaches as well as between diverse academic traditions. To add to this state of affairs, the Cold War period caused dramatic political ruptures in the region and, with the notable exception of Thailand, the closure of a large part of it to field research, leading to around a quarter of a century of disruption in the collection of data. As a result, until very recently, religious studies scholars and anthropologists alike have often been unaware of the pervasiveness of spirit possession across the entire mainland region, not to mention its resilience and dramatic reformulation in the process of modern globalisation. Indeed, even today some sections of the international academic community remain largely oblivious to the pervasive and expanding influence of spirit cults across all the countries of the mainland.

However, since the resumption of research in the region with the opening of Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam to scholarly inquiry after a several-decade hiatus, a number of studies have contributed to the growing body of critiques of religious studies' undue emphasis on Buddhism in this religiously rich landscape. These studies have also challenged the predictions of Weberian modernisation theory that the advance of capitalism beyond the West would be predicated upon a progressive disenchantment of Asian societies.<sup>9</sup> Our collection of analyses of new forms of ritual in mainland Southeast Asia takes the previous studies of spirit possession cults in the region forward in several ways.

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<sup>9</sup>Of note in this regard are Morris 2000, Taylor 2004, Fjelstad & Hien 2006, Pattana 2008 and 2012, Endres 2011, Endres & Lauser 2011, Johnson 2014, Brac de la Perrière *et al.* 2014, and Gottowik 2014.

In the past, inquiry on these topics was sometimes limited by an emphasis on a single country. Furthermore, previous regionally comparative collections were painted with a broad brush that included, for example, explorations of the predominantly Muslim and Christian societies of island Southeast Asia together with largely Buddhist mainland Southeast Asia. This level of comparison has sometimes undervalued the distinctive processes at work on the mainland. Studies have also often postulated a divide between Buddhism and spirit cults, a separation that Brac de la Perrière has already highlighted (2007) and which Visisya Pinthongvijayakul shows in his chapter here to be highly problematic.

The Southeast Asian possession complex is dynamically related to changing external factors. As new social, economic and political conditions emerge, they interplay with the possession complex. However, in contrast to Buddhism, whose doctrinal and institutional histories are well-documented and extensively studied, the histories of spirit rituals are poorly researched. This is due to an academic orientation that defined spirit cults as lying outside the formal category of ‘religion’ and hence outside from the field of religious studies, as well as to a paucity of historical sources. Regrettably, we lack archival sources that would enable us to write deep histories of the Southeast Asian possession complex, to map long-term changes in the relations of the elements of the complex or detail transformations in the patterns of their hierarchical relations.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, rapid changes in societies across the region appear to have led to the possession complex becoming even more variegated and multiform as the number of deities and spirits has grown. Observations over recent decades from all the countries of mainland Southeast Asia consistently report an expansion of the number of spirit mediums (see for example Morris 2000) and significant changes in the pantheons and rituals of possession (see particularly Paul Sorrentino’s chapter here). However, we also cannot overlook the fact that past research emphasis on ‘religion’ that excluded supposedly ‘superstitious’ ritual may have led to an underreporting of the actual extent of spirit cults across the region in earlier periods. That is, recent critical perspectives that challenge older, more restrictive understandings of ‘religion’ may be opening the academic gaze to rituals that were ignored or overlooked in the past.

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<sup>10</sup>Drawing on literary sources, an interesting example of an historical study of a spirit possession cult that overcomes the general lack of archival sources on this topic is Dror 2007, on the Vietnamese cult of Lieu Hanh.

### *Comparative Regional Perspectives on the Southeast Asian Spirit Possession Complex*

Georges Condominas (1976) was the first to draw a regional synthesis of the Southeast Asian spirit possession complex; he tested the distinction between shamanism and spirit possession that had then recently been reformulated by Luc De Heusch (1971). Condominas proposed a general characterisation of spirit possession in the region as being based on a conception of the person as formed by a plurality of souls, and a variety of spirits that are manifested successively in a hierarchical order in public possession rituals. He also proposed that institutional spirit possession was present at all levels of social organisation in the region – including lineages, villages and polities – to serve diverse functions, from the therapeutic to promoting general prosperity, as well as maintaining the territorial integrity of political orders. Condominas further argued that spirit possession is most often embedded in complex religious configurations, often dominated by Buddhism. The Southeast Asian possession complex is an open system that is nonetheless ordered in hierarchical terms. While the number and characteristics of the spirits from different Buddhist, Brahmanical, Chinese and ethnic historical ritual systems may increase and change over time, they are nonetheless ordered within a systematic hierarchy that is open to change.

Research on forms of spiritual presence in most mainland Southeast Asian societies was only resumed after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. A reopening to field research accompanied the opening of regional economies to the global market economy and the relative liberalisation of some authoritarian regimes. While the previous period had been one of disruption of local or supra-local ritual practices in many parts of the region, notably in Cambodia under the repressive Khmer Rouge regime and in Vietnam under the Communist government's edicts against 'superstition', the new context of development and globalisation saw an amazing efflorescence of the spiritual in contemporary and urban contexts, which is dramatically reflected in the diverse studies assembled here.

As noted, this efflorescence refuted the then-dominant narrative of 'world disenchantment' and fostered a new wave of anthropological and cultural studies publications on new prosperity cults in the region. This work followed the important analyses of Jean and John

Comaroff (1999, 2000) and further built on Shmuel Eisenstadt's (2000) concept of 'multiple modernities'.<sup>11</sup> Also, a number of edited collections that did not focus on spirit possession *per se* nonetheless reported on the vitality of the spiritual in post-Cold War Southeast Asian modernity.<sup>12</sup> On the whole, these studies show that rather than erasing religion, modernity has changed the nature of religious expression in the region, in some cases towards more systematisation of doctrines and organisation. However, these studies have also shown an apparent increase in 'magical' cults, or at the very least a growth in the spirit possession cults that are now embedded within modern social formations.

Besides the fact that many of the new prosperity cults in Southeast Asia were based, either directly or indirectly, on existing forms of spirit possession, they have nonetheless experienced remarkable revivals (Vietnam and Cambodia), reframing (Thailand) and expansion (Myanmar). New ethnographies of spirit possession have appeared during this period, although very few efforts of synthesis at the regional level have been attempted. Laurel Kendall's characterisation of East Asian spirit mediumship in Karen Fjelstadt and Nguyen Thi Hien's *Possessed by the Spirits* (2006) deserves to be mentioned in this regard. As a specialist of Korean shamanism, Kendall draws a profile of Southeast Asian spirit mediumship as being based on asymmetrical relationships between humans and powerful entities.

Recent developments of anthropological theory, particularly what has become known as the 'ontological turn', have introduced still another paradigm into the conversation on the spiritual presence in Southeast Asian worlds. Central in this regard is Kaj Århem and Guido

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<sup>11</sup>See for instance Pattana Kitiarsa's 2011 edited collection *Religious Commodifications in Asia*, which applies the idea of prosperity cults to Southeast Asia as proposed by Jackson 1999.

<sup>12</sup>Some of the main publications in this regard are Keyes, Kendall & Hardacre 1994, Endres & Lauser 2011 and Gottowik 2014. Bubandt & van Beek 2012 and Van der Veer 2014, in their own ways, examine the intricate relations of spiritualism and nationalism in Asia as a result of the encounter with Western modernity. Also significant in this regard is White's 'Contemporary Buddhism and Magic' in the *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, 2016.

Sprenger's 2016 edited collection, *Animism in Southeast Asia*. In his introductory essay to that volume, Århem draws on Philippe Descola's rehabilitation of the old concept of 'animism' to qualify non-modern Amazonian ontologies in which all beings are credited with subjectivity and agency. He transposes this notion to Southeast Asia with the aim of reframing 'regional discussion on indigenous cosmology and religion' (Århem, 2016: 4). In Descola's (2005) work, Amazonian animism mainly concerns horizontal, egalitarian and mainly concerning relations between humans and forest animals. In contrast, Southeast Asian cosmologies primarily concern relations between humans and spirits (invisible others) and, as long ago pointed out by Condominas, are vertical and hierarchical.

Some contributors to Århem and Sprenger's volume adopt the notion of 'hierarchical animism' to accommodate this situation more readily. However, the use of the label 'animism' in its 'new' framing within Descola's four main ontologies – which he labels as animism, totemism, analogism and naturalism – would appear to require further debate and elaboration if it is to be analytically productive in the mainland Southeast Asian context. This is especially the case when dealing with larger societies rather than the small-scale indigenous groups on which Århem, Sprenger and their contributors focus. In particular, the configuration of dividual personhood and hierarchical relationality that is constitutive of the Southeast Asian spirit possession complex would appear to be closer to analogism than to animism in Descola's (2005) framing of four ontologies. Benjamin Baumann's chapter here on the regional Southeast Asian spirit possession complex contributes to this further elaboration of 'hierarchical animism', and he proposes to encompass analogism, totemism and animism *per se* within a broader category of 'animism'.

### **Why is Spirit Possession Efflorescing in Buddhist Southeast Asia?**

This book advances beyond critiques of the 'secularisation' and 'disenchantment' theses to explore the processes of globalising neoliberal modernity that are actively producing enchanted social, cultural and political worldviews. The studies collected here demonstrate that the cults in question are religious forms that emerged out of the productivity of ritual in the inherently modern conditions of capitalism, visual and digital media, cultural heritage industries, and the politics of national and ethnic identity. It is noteworthy that scholars of spirit cults – such as Stanley Tambiah (1985, 1990), Jean Comaroff (1994) and Rosalind Morris (2000) – have been at the forefront of theorising the processes by which modern

technologies and forms of life produce new forms of ritual practice and enchanted imaginaries. In accounting for the efflorescence of spirit cults and divination in the context of modern religious change in Asia, scholars have focused variously on the roles of state power, capitalism, media and the power of ritual. However, these accounts of processes of modern enchantment do not yet speak to one another. To date, we have a series of partial perspectives that focus on one or other of the multiple processes at work. These analyses of the multiple impacts of changing forms of modernising state power, the market, new media and ritual need to be brought together if we are to understand the full panoply of processes underpinning the diversification of religious expression across Southeast Asia today.

*From State-Sponsored to Market-Based: The Retreat of the State and the Rise of the Market in Southeast Asian Religious Fields*

The new forms of spirit possession and divination across the region could not have become so prominent without a significant shift in the relations between state and religion. Robert Weller regards one of the most important trends related to post-Cold-War market-oriented modernity almost everywhere in Asia as being ‘the decline of state-supported religious monopolies’, arguing that we ‘see the most pluralisation where institutional control over religion is relatively weak’ (Weller 2008, p. 22). Indeed, Tatsuki Kataoka (2012) points out that in Thailand, forms of ritual expression have proliferated and diversified in those fields of religious life that lie beyond the state’s supervision and management of institutional Buddhism.

Across the first decades of the twentieth century, both absolute monarchs and authoritarian military rulers in Thailand sought to establish legitimacy-enhancing relationships between Buddhism and the state by decree. Buddhism became a state-sponsored and state-controlled religion, and the Department of Religious Affairs was dedicated to monitoring and enforcing state-*sangha* relations, including the organisational structure of the monkhood. However, with the end of the wars in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam as well as the suppression of the communist insurgency inside the country in the early 1980s, the Thai state began to follow a less centralist cultural policy; affirmations of local religious and ritual cultures, often expressed in regional languages, were no longer seen as potential threats to national security. Indeed, local cultural differences are now celebrated on domestic and international tourism brochures, and are valued as instances of national cultural heritage.

In British Burma, by contrast, the colonial period was one of benign neglect of Buddhism due to the policy of non-intervention in the religious affairs of the populace by the colonial administration. This put an end to the relationships of mutual legitimation between the Buddhist monastic order and Burma's traditional Theravadin kingship (Turner, 2014). Upon independence in 1948, the question of the *sangha*'s organisation and control quickly emerged as a contentious issue. A religious administration was formed in 1950 and further developed under Ne Win's administration with the *sangha* reform of 1980. Under this reform, all *sangha* branches were unified under the authority of a single religious administration, the *Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe*, which was charged with the purification of the monastic order and placed under the civilian arm of a Department of Religious Affairs. After 1988 events in Burma, a junta (SLORC) implemented a new policy of religious donations to simultaneously enhance its legitimacy and control senior monks. As Juliane Schober observes, '[This] military regime's patronage of Buddhism provided an alternative source of legitimation and transformed a national community into a ritual network' (Schober 2011:86).

In parallel, the relative market liberalisation that occurred in the 1990s also underpinned a boom of spirit possession rituals as well as an efflorescence of new devotional practices in the Buddhist esoteric field (Brac de la Perrière *et al.* 2014). After having been under control during Ne Win's era, these phenomena – spirit possession and Buddhist esoterism --- re-emerged under the new junta as fluctuating domains and further evolved along opposite courses, depending on the context of their interactions in the overall religious context.

In Cambodia, the dramatic rupture marked by the Khmer Rouge's anti-religion politics (1975–1979) provided for a very different situation. Through the combination of Siamese and colonial French influences, a modernised Buddhism had started to emerge in the early twentieth century, with a new focus on canonical scriptures as an element of national culture that fostered a dynamic of 'religionisation' (Guillou, 2017: 75). This trend was brutally stopped by the Maoist Khmer Rouge regime. The *sangha* was disbanded, monasteries and pagodas were destroyed and Buddhist practices were forbidden between 1975 and 1979. However, those spirits (*neak ta*) viewed as protecting village establishments had a more resilient destiny. According to Ian Harris (2013), 'animism' and protective ritual practices were continued during the Khmer Rouge period, and Matthew O'Lemmon's (2014: 37) informants also reported that the *neak ta* 'remained despite the displacement of individuals'.

These authors agree that the dismantling of Buddhism drove people to turn to the spirits, particularly in rural areas, just after the war. At the same time, the lack of spirit mediums at this time appears to have facilitated the inclusion of the spirits within a Buddhist imaginary and ritual context through the notion of *pāramī* (spiritual power and also virtues of the Buddha) (see Bertrand Didier [2004] and Paul Christensen in this volume).

In Cambodia, John Marston (2014) has documented the reestablishment of the *sangha* by the new state after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime from 1979 onwards, demonstrating how the state has weighed on the organisational structure and bureaucratisation of religion. However, since the 1990s, political and economic liberalisation has re-ignited pre-war debates about the delineation of Buddhism against ‘tradition’ or ‘Brahmanism’ (see Christensen here) that thus appear as having been produced by this process (Davis 2016, Ch.8).

In Vietnam, the state had long been a central agent of the religious sphere, particularly through the Confucianisation of the society that started with the Lê dynasty (1428–1788) and contributed to the control of Buddhism and village ritual life. In contrast to Theravada Buddhism in the other societies of mainland Southeast Asia, Mahayana Buddhism in Vietnam never attained the position of a hegemonic religion, where instead the notion of the ‘Three Teachings’, namely, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, prevailed. Buddhism was positioned as an indigenous religion whose complexity allowed for significant spirit possession figures, such as Lieu Hanh, to find places in its temples (see Dror, 2007).

Under the socialist state in the period 1945 to 1985, religious affairs were placed under a government office that regulated expressions of popular religion and discriminated against forms of so-called ‘superstition’. As a result, festivals and public cults pertaining to the spirit possession complex receded into the private sphere. However, as Robert Hefner (2010: 1032) and other observers note, since the introduction of the *Doi Moi* economic reforms in the late 1980s, Vietnam has witnessed a profound reorientation of the state’s role that has been accompanied by a significant expansion of ritual practices, including support for festivals as nationalist expressions of popular Vietnamese culture (see Dror 2007, Sorrentino 2018 and in this volume).

It is indeed significant that the post-Cold War efflorescence of devotional cults and spirit possession in mainland Southeast Asia occurred with equal intensity in West-aligned

capitalist societies such as Thailand and ostensibly socialist countries such as Vietnam. In the post-World War II period, political discourses of rational modernity in both countries critiqued spirit mediumship as a superstitious residue of pre-modern tradition that held each country back from achieving the desired transition to scientific (socialist or capitalist) modernity. Both countries' governments instituted remarkably similar policies against 'superstitions' across the middle decades of the twentieth century. However, despite continuing political differences, spirit possession cults have been reformed and expanded in both Thailand and Vietnam, as well as in neighbouring Burma and Cambodia, in parallel over the period of neoliberal globalisation. The differing political complexions of post-Cold War mainland Southeast Asian societies have proven to be irrelevant to the growth of spirit presence and ritual practices, with spirit mediumship flourishing under twenty-first century versions of both market-oriented socialism and neoliberal capitalism, all in parallel with continuing processes of 'religionification'<sup>13</sup> and Buddhist reform.

#### *Marketisation and the Cultural Logic of Neoliberalism*

In Southeast Asia, the decline of political control over religion occurred at the same time that economic growth gathered pace, with economic forces rising at the historical moment that political influences over religion and other aspects of cultural production waned. The rise of the economy then created an expanded space for ritual innovation that went beyond the historical scope of state-based authority, with the differentiation of state power and the emergence of a significantly expanded market together creating a domain within which economic forces became more important determinants of religious expression.

Two sets of arguments have been presented for how we can understand the productive roles of the market, as well as new media, in the emergence of new forms of ritual practice. One argues that capitalism and new media promote the dissemination of information about novel religious movements and make them widely accessible through efficient marketing and

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<sup>13</sup> By 'religionification', Picard 2017 refers to the formation of a distinctive domain of religion, in opposition to 'magic' and so on, on the model of the Western world religions including the borrowing of the word 'religion' or the formation of a new term in local languages to translate this word.

communications. Raymond Lee (1993) proposed that religious diversification occurred in capitalist Asian societies because no single organisation can offer all the religious services for which there is a demand in the spiritual marketplace. As a consequence, there will be many faiths, each specialising in meeting the requirements of a segment of the market. In Thailand, White argues, the expansion of new wealth beyond traditional elites has also been a factor in religious diversification, with the increased wealth now circulating outside the direct control of the state and bureaucratic and economic elites enabling those outside or on the periphery of the Thai state's religious bureaucracy to have a greater degree of religious autonomy than had been the case (White 2014, p. 236). These accounts detail the processes behind the proliferation of already existing movements and, while helping us understand how new religious practices may be communicated and expand their influence, they do not describe how new movements may emerge. A second set of analyses makes a stronger case, arguing that capitalism and new media are themselves productive sources of novel forms of ritual and, in radical contrast to theories of modernity as a process of disenchantment, they contend that mediatised neoliberalism constitutes a set of productive forces that contribute to bringing new devotional cults into being.

Jean and John Comaroff argue that religions in which a 'messianic, millennial capitalism ... presents itself as a gospel of salvation' (2000, p. 292) are a worldwide phenomenon linked with the global triumph of neoliberal capitalism since the end of the Cold War. Comaroff and Comaroff argue that new forms of market-based enchantment, which they call 'occult economies' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999), emerged under neoliberalism because, 'Once legible processes – the workings of power, the distribution of wealth, the meaning of politics and national belonging – have become opaque, even spectral' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, p. 305). In this context, 'the occult becomes an ever more appropriate, semantically saturated metaphor for our times' (*Ibid.*, p. 318). Indeed, the popular religiosity that emerged in tandem with 1990s neoliberalism was paralleled by a religion-like faith in the market amongst the ideologues of finance capital. 'Magical' capitalism is not a mere persistence of pre-modern 'superstition', but rather is a refraction through local cultural metaphors of the beliefs of capitalism's ruling elites, for whom neoliberalism is 'a gospel of salvation' (*Ibid.*, p. 291).

While Weber may have described industrial capitalism as presenting an iron cage of bureaucratic reason, the complexity of postindustrial capitalist social orders has outstripped the predictive capacity of many established forms of rational analysis. White (2014, p. 232)

argues that because Buddhism has functioned as a repository of beliefs and practices designed to provide control over insecurity and uncertainty, it is not surprising that popular Thai religiosity has flourished within a social environment characterised by capitalist development. Charles Keyes *et al.* (1994, p. 15) note that the continuing relevance of religiosity may emerge from the limits of reason that are revealed in marketised neoliberal societies: '[T]he gap between the conclusions reached about the world through recourse to rational decision making and the practical reality of the world generates uncertainty and ambiguity that many seek to resolve through turning to religion.'

This is where ritual and devotional religiosity return, albeit in highly modified, mediatised and commodified forms. Ritual practice is a practical response to living in a decentralised, marketised and increasingly complex world that often defies predictability. This is not a pre-modern survival or an atavistic return to the past. Rather, it is the emergence of ritual and devotion within the conditions of late modern hypercomplexity.

#### *Mass Media and Technologies of Enchantment*

Morris (2000, p. 245) argues that new mass media have also contributed to the expanding popularity of novel spirit cults by delocalising cultic figures and making information about local deities and spirits available to national, and indeed international audiences. In this context, many in Southeast Asia now pay respect to figures linked to the common enveloping commercial space of the market. Today's most popular new spirits, which are at the centre of cults of wealth at the national level (Jackson 1999b), are those which sacralise the national scale economic space. This is especially the case when the space of commercial enterprise is linked to figures regarded as symbols of national protection, such as King Chulalongkorn in Thailand, the cult of the Mother Goddess in Vietnam (Taylor, 2004) or the Botataung Lady in Burma (Brac de la Perrière, this volume).

Contemporary media not only contribute to the popularity of one or another devotional movement by disseminating information about them. New media also create magic-like effects that can auraticise cult figures or objects, contributing to the production of new forms of religiosity and practice. In analysing popular culture in contemporary India, Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay argues that the mediatisation of myth now constitutes a political force in that country, 'Mass media have made the gods more real, not less ... . It is not a matter of

virtuality or “spectacle”. It is myth sanctified by technology—a techno-mythologisation of the body politics.’ (2006, p. 288–289) Jeremy Stolow observes that media have become central to ‘the imagined worlds that constitute the sacred in the global present’ (2005, p. 123), and contends that ‘the transcendental, enchanting, thaumaturgical, uncanny, haunting – powers of media technologies themselves’ (*Ibid.*, p. 124) induce a ‘reactivation of aura’ (*Ibid.*, p. 127).

Morris describes how the proliferation of new forms of imaging technology has re-ignited a ‘primordial sacrality’ rather than contributing to a decay of sacredness in Thailand. Morris links the resurgence of spirit mediumship in Thailand with the rise of capitalism and marketised lifestyles, on the one hand, and the explosive growth of technologies of image reproduction and mass communications, on the other. She argues that the efflorescence of mediumship in recent decades has its roots in the mass media (Morris 2000, p. 53) and mediumship’s growing popularity is linked to a radically new attitude to imaging technologies. Until the 1970s, it was uncommon for spirit mediums to permit themselves to be represented via photography or the mass media. In contrast, ‘Now all mediums display photographs of themselves, and even media personalities have joined the ranks of the possessed’ (Morris 2000b, p. 460). Morris argues that the massive scale of imaging technologies produced within a market-centred consumerist culture distorts established patterns of representation and creates magic-like effects as rational modes of analysis are swamped by waves of promiscuously circulating images. It is here, Morris argues, that we find ‘a reinvestment in the power of appearances. This is where the magic returns.... The logic of appearances has changed’. (Morris 2000, pp. 238–239).

In considering new professional spirit possession cults, Pattana plays upon the double sense of the term ‘medium’ as denoting both a technological means of communication and also the human vehicle of spirit possession rituals. To emphasise the point that new forms of ritual in Thailand have emerged from contemporary social conditions, he describes both ‘magic’ monks who sacralise amulets and spirit mediums as ‘postmodern mediums’ (Pattana 2012, p. 104).

### *Ritual and the Performative Generation of Enchantment*

In addition to the contemporary forms of neoliberal capitalism and new print and digital media in societies in which the state has largely retreated from managing religion, the very

character of ritual action is a force that produces an efflorescence of spirit cults. This is especially the case in settings like popular Buddhism, in which ritual practice is a more important dimension of religiosity than doctrine or stated expressions of faith. In ‘The Relevance of Ritual’, the conclusion to her 1994 study titled ‘Defying Disenchantment’, which in significant measure draws on sources from Thailand, Jean Comaroff (1994, p. 311) argues that ritual ‘generates the very force it presupposes’ and understanding this process must be central to our ‘assessment of religion in the modern world’. Drawing on Tambiah and his comparative studies of the Theravada cultures of Sri Lanka and Thailand,<sup>14</sup> Comaroff presents a performative theory of popular religion as emerging within settings of ritualised action. Comaroff describes ritual as being ‘positively productive’ in all societies:

Its productivity lies in its capacity to create morally charged experience, to speak with and without words, in diverse sensory registers and through “multiple channels” (Tambiah 1985, pp. 60ff) ... . [Ritual] is intensely pragmatic. It not only makes and remakes its actors, but can also call on them to make and remake worlds. Its modes are indispensable to the forging of “culture” and “society”, in the modern world as in any other. Ritual, in the end, defies disenchantment. (Comaroff 1994, p. 314)

In bringing into being ‘collective values’ beyond the mundane, Comaroff argues that the performative productivity of ritual is a powerful force that counters the presumed bureaucratic rationalist iron cage of modernity.

### *Capitalism, Media and the Enchanting Intensities of Embodied Ritual*

When we combine the empirical finding, detailed in the chapters of this study, that the new forms of spirit possession and divination focus more on ritual practice than on belief or faith,

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<sup>14</sup> Tambiah was a major figure in the development of a performative approach to understanding ritual as well as the transcultural, and indeed transhistorical, importance of enchantment in human life. Tambiah, 1977 and 1985, was among the first to draw on the linguistic philosophy of J.L. Austin, who argued that some uses of language effect changes in the world and function as forms of social action, in order to explore the performative features of ritual acts.

with the understanding that ritual is performatively productive in bringing into being that which it invokes, then we begin to understand why the emergence of new forms of enchantment has been such a distinctive feature of modern religious life in Buddhist Southeast Asia. In synthesising the several accounts of modern ‘magic’ summarised above, we can propose that the enchanting effects of capitalism and new media will be most intense in those societies in which the performative influence of religious ritual is prioritised over belief and doctrine. This finding is also relevant to other mediatised consumer societies in which embodied ritual action is emphasised over belief, faith and reason. Indeed, new enchanted cosmologies have also emerged in modern Japan. In their account of James Foard’s (n.d.) description of what he calls Japanese ‘endemic religion’, Keyes *et al.* (1994, p. 10) identify the synergistic operation of the same range of forces to those detailed above as inciting the development of new spirit cults and divinatory rituals in Japan. They describe Japanese endemic religion as being ‘nurtured by mass media and an elaborate commercialisation of ritual goods and services.’ And drawing implicitly on a notion of the performative productivity of ritual, Keyes *et al.*, conclude that ‘[e]ndemic religion derives its authority from its practice, which generates “tradition” as an ongoing process.’ (*Ibid.*) In an observation that is as relevant today as when first published three decades ago, Tambiah concludes his account of the performative force of ritual by stating that the puzzling character of enchantment for moderns, whether in Asia or the West,

will only disappear when we succeed in embedding magic in a more ample theory of human life in which the path of ritual action is seen as an indispensable mode for man anywhere and everywhere of relating to and participating in the life of the world. (Tambiah 1990, p. 83)

## **Significant Contributions of the Chapters**

### *Professionalisation of Ritual Specialists*

An especially significant development in recent decades that is reported in many of our chapters, and which marks a major transformation, is the professionalisation of divination and spirit mediumship across the region. By selling ritual services, spirit mediums and diviners have increasingly become full-time professionals and formed autonomous subcultures. In his chapter, Benjamin Baumann recognises professionalisation as a core process undergone by

lay ritual experts who act as lineage mediums of localised matrilineal spirits in a process involving distancing from locality, rurality and tradition. Through his ethnography, we see how professional mediums based in towns and who organise rituals for their entourage to pay homage to spiritual teachers (Central Thai: *wai khru*) are on the point of replacing village mediums in this region. Baumann's account fills a gap in the ethnography by enabling us to understand the pivotal role of professionalisation in the transformations of ritual from rural forms of life to new urban configurations in Thailand (see also Pattana 2012 in this regard). In his doctoral thesis, White (2014) insists on the relative novelty of professional spirit mediums as religious actors in Bangkok, where, starting in the 1970s, they formed a partially autonomous, networked subculture. In their studies in this volume of different regional possession cults in Northeast and Northern Thailand, Baumann, Stengs, Visisya, and Kazuo Fukuura all report that within the new cultures of professional spirit mediums, rituals of paying homage to the master (*wai khru* or *yok khu*) now form a significant mechanism of transmission of authority within their distinctive subcultures. This urban model of professional mediumship has proliferated and increasingly replaced older rural forms, thereby complicating local ritual configurations, as evidenced by the material about Thailand and Cambodia that is presented in the following chapters.<sup>15</sup>

In Vietnam and Burma, however, professional spirit mediumship evolved earlier, in the eighteenth century, from centralisation of rituals to tutelary spirits enrolled in polity-bounded 'pantheons'. In Yangon, Mandalay, Hanoi and Hue, professional spirit mediums have maintained autonomous networks for considerable periods. In his chapter on the Four Palaces Religion, Paul Sorrentino deals with the difficulty of researching the ambiguous histories of the pantheons of Vietnamese spirit mediums because of their open-ended natures. In these cases, professional spirit mediums respond to a vocational calling from entities from an identified institution of spirit possession and channel the collective number of tutelary spirits in spirit possession séances. In both Myanmar and Vietnam, professional spirit mediums form well-identified subcultures whose positioning in the overall religious field follows defined if fluctuating destinies.

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<sup>15</sup> Some of the earlier studies that dealt with village-based forms of spirit possession were those by Tambiah 1970, Kirsch 1977, Irvine 1982 and Tanabe 1991.

In between traditional mediums bounded to local ritual life and urban professional ritual specialists whose pantheons comprise deities worshipped across the country, Stengs, Visisya and Baumann also report a category of ritual participants in Thailand termed ‘active devotees’ (referring to the Thai expression *mi ong* ‘having a spirit’), who are in the process of developing ritual relations to a possessing entity but have not yet attained the status of full possession or mediumship.<sup>16</sup> In Burma, besides the category of ‘active devotees’ – also being preliminary to mediumship careers and evoked as ‘having a spirit’ (Burmese *nat shi*) – in their respective chapters Niklas Foxeus and Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière report non-clientelistic modes of possession in the rituals associated with new cults of pagoda guardian spirits. Degrees of professionalisation of spirit mediumship are revealed to be at different stages and levels across mainland Southeast Asia, with the relative incidence of spiritual authority and socio-religious respectability depending on specific historical contexts.

### *Dynamic and Expanding Pantheons*

The contributors to this volume support Condominas’ (1976) proposal that spirit possession in mainland Southeast Asia is characterised by a plurality of beings arrayed in hierarchical order. In his chapter, Paul Sorrentino discusses the qualification of the term ‘pantheon’ as often applied to the hierarchical assembly of spirit beings in the Vietnamese Cult of the Four Palaces; in his, Visisya Pinthongvijayakul proposes that the spirits in Northeastern Thai cults form a ‘Buddhist-mediumistic pantheon’. Following Århem (2016a, 2016b), Baumann describes the diverse spirits invoked by mediums in Thailand’s lower northeast as forming part of a ‘possession complex’. In Burma’s national cult of the Thirty-seven Lords, a hierarchy of spirits has long been recognised formally. However, Sorrentino notes that there is no vernacular concept of ‘pantheon’ in Vietnam. The same is true in Thailand and Burma, apart from expressions denoting spiritual collectives such as the ‘Thirty-seven Lords’ in Burma. Nonetheless, there is a widespread implicit appreciation of an ordered ensemble of spirits in possession cults. This is represented both materially and visually by printed pictures

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<sup>16</sup> In a study of divination in Bangkok, Siani 2018 notes that while many Thai fortune tellers (Thai: *mor du*) distinguish themselves categorically from spirit mediums (Thai: *khon song, rang song*), they nonetheless claim that their prognosticatory skills derive from an intimate association with a spiritual entity (*ong*).

of the ordered inhabitants of the ‘Four Palaces’ in Vietnam (see Figure 1.3), by statues aligned on the shelves of possession pavilions for Burma’s Thirty-seven Lords (see Figure 0.1) and by the multiple images of deities that many Thai spirit medium arrange on their personal shrines (see Figure 0.2).

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Insert Figure 0.1 Around here

Caption: Central section of a spirit medium’s domestic shrine in Yangon picturing part of the Burmese spirit possession pantheon in the hierarchical Buddhist cosmogony. Photo: Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière.

Insert Figure 0.2 Around here

Caption: Bangkok shrine displaying images of a Thai spirit medium’s personal pantheon of Indian and Chinese deities. Top row left to right: Ganesh, Guan Yin with many arms, Guan Yin, Durga, Durga. Bottom row left to right: Shiva, Krishna, Ardhanarishvara (hermaphroditic form of Shiva) with Parvati, Durga, and two Chinese deities. Photo: Peter Jackson

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What distinguishes the possession complexes studied here from older ritual forms is the expansion of local pantheons to include a proliferating array of beings whose guidance and support are sought in various rituals that in many cases may induce spirit possession. In Burma, these new beings include many figures in charge of watching over pagoda treasure-troves (See Figure 7.1) and which since the 1990s have found new representations distinct from those of the Thirty-seven Lords, as well as those produced as part of the renewed practice of Buddhist esoterism known as the *weikza* path. Baumann lists Thailand’s expanding ritual pantheon as including Hindu deities, Brahmanical hermits, honoured historical figures, child spirits and spiritually empowered Buddhist monks. Visisya includes the Buddha among the pantheon of spirits in Northeast Thailand, while Jackson (1999b) also adds Chinese spirits to the mix, describing this still emerging Thai pantheon as a ‘symbolic complex’. Rather than forming a fixed or static hierarchy, Sorrentino describes the expanding number of spirits in

the region's cults as reflecting processes of 'pantheonisation', constituting pantheons in the making. The dynamic nature of these processes is reflected by the fact that relations among new spirits, and their links to deities in established cults, are subject to ongoing change that is often marked by incoherencies and contradictions. Visisya describes the evolving affiliation of beings in the Thai pantheon of spirits as a hierarchical topography that is characterised by blurry distinctions, porous boundaries and flows of exchange.

### *Changing Relations of Possession Rituals to Institutional Buddhism*

Earlier accounts of Southeast Asian Buddhism often posited a mutually exclusive separation between possession rituals and Buddhist practices – as exemplified in Melford Spiro's 'two religions' theory,<sup>17</sup> and also between the religious roles of spirit medium and ordained Buddhist monk. In contrast, Visisya and Fukuura here report a growing number of monks participating in possession rituals in both Northeast and Northern Thailand, although not as professional spirit mediums. This appears to confirm Marjorie Muecke's observations from Chiang Mai reported almost three decades ago (1992) as well as Pattana's (2012) inclusion of 'magic monks' in his category of 'postmodern mediums'.

In his chapter, Paul Christensen argues that the relation between possession rituals and mainstream Buddhism should be depicted as one of mutual construction rather than of mutual exclusion. His account of the contemporary reconfiguration of spirit worship practice as 'Brahmanism' in Cambodia evokes a form of 'prosperity' religion aimed at accruing spiritual power (*pāramī*) for immediate benefit in this life, in contrast with 'modern' Buddhist rituals' focus on acquiring merit. The spirit-related 'ancient' religion that has evolved into 'Brahmanism' also represents an enhancement of pre-Khmer Rouge rural practice dedicated to tutelary spirits (*neak ta*).

Indeed, what further characterises the contemporary evolution of spirit cults across the whole region through their expansion from rural settings to a more 'national' and urban scale is a tendency to status enhancement when considered in relation to the whole religious field.

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<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Melford Spiro's position in the Preface to the second edition of his *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Spiro, [1967] 1978).

White (2014) contrasts professional urban spirit mediumship in contemporary Thailand with other forms of traditional spirit possession by entities labelled as *phi*, which are characteristically ludic, at times nefarious but usually emplaced within a specific territorial domain. In contrast, professional spirit mediums respond to a vocational calling from higher status possessing entities that are labelled as *thep* (Pali *deva*, ‘deities’) or *jao* (‘lords’) and which are viewed as benevolent and more Buddhist (White, 2014). In her chapter here, Megan Sinnott also reports that the replacement of older forms of preserved-fetus spirits by angel-child dolls ‘rented’ from the monasteries reflects the growing differentiation between malevolent and good spirits prevailing today in Thailand.

This enhancement of the spiritual status of entities involved in contemporary spirit possession or spirit cults in Thailand also corresponds to what Brac de la Perrière and Foxeus have observed in Burma, with the worship of pagoda treasure-trove guardians (*thaik nan shin*) growing in the interstitial spaces of esoteric Buddhism and borrowing practices of spirit possession from the contiguous *nat* cult to the Thirty-seven Lords. Foxeus details these practices as Buddhist ‘prosperity’ cults that provide devotees with Buddhist means to acquire immediate wealth and prosperity. These cults use spirit possession as a ritual tool for manifesting spiritual potency, which demonstrates the complex relationships that link Buddhism with spirit worship. In Vietnam, Sorrentino’s relation of heritagisation and patrimonialisation of the Mother Goddess religion also speaks of an enhancement of the Four Palaces spirit possession pantheon that allows spirit mediumship to avoid its former predicament of being labelled as ‘superstition’ by gaining recognition as a part of indigenous Vietnamese culture.

Furthermore, our authors show that the professionalisation and autonomisation of spirit medium circles as religious subcultures, together with the enhancement of the spiritual status of the entities at the centre of these cults, have been central dimensions of the reconfiguration of spirit possession within the whole religious sphere, both historically and in the contemporary era. These processes of differentiation have occurred across mainland Southeast Asia in the course of spirit possession’s expansion from the worship of local tutelary or lineage spirits to larger collectivities of divinities or pantheons of deities that have a national import. Rather than speaking of two separate religions, as Spiro (1967) viewed it, these processes reveal intricate and evolving relationships between spirit worship and mainstream Buddhism, providing spaces for efflorescing domains that can be framed as prosperity cults,

whether they be Cambodian ‘Brahmanism’, Burmese pagoda treasure-trove guardian cults or various polyphonic public rituals.

### *The Oneiric Space of Possession, Divination, Dreams and Visions*

In her chapter, Irene Stengs posits a continuity between the importance attached to dreams and meditation-inspired visions (Pali: *nimitta*) by many Buddhist monks and the trance states of mediums in possession. She describes all these phenomena as instances of a common oneiric space, a notion that provides an important analytical foundation for future inquiries that explore spirit mediumship, divination and Buddhism as all being dimensions of an overarching religious field rather than as distinct or mutually exclusive ritual forms.

### *Cross-border Regional Influences*

Another significant development revealed in several chapters is the growth of cross-border borrowing and influences among the ritual cultures of Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. Foxeus notes the importance of the Thai lottery to the rituals associated with Burmese lottery mania and Brac de la Perrière reports that increasing numbers of Thai tourists are among the faithful who flock to the shrine of the Botataung Lady in Yangon. The Thai cult of amulets, never a significant phenomenon in the Burmese religious field, is now influencing the material dimension of Burmese cults, with amulets of the grandfatherly spiritual figure of the Botataung Bobogyi (see Brac de la Perrière, 2019) now being produced for sale to Thai tourist-devotees. Over the past decade, the Burmese Bobogyi has been included within the expanding pantheon of Thai deities of wealth, where he has been renamed in Thai as *Thep Than-jai*, literally, ‘The deity who grants wishes expeditiously’. In her chapter here Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya observes that in the aftermath of the destruction of significant parts of the Cambodian ritual tradition under the Khmer Rouge regime, divinatory practices are being reconstituted in the country by borrowing from Thai astrological and other texts, and a number of Cambodian ritual specialists are visiting Thailand to develop skills and proficiency in both Buddhist and divinatory practices.

### **The Chapters in This Book**

Paul Sorrentino examines processes of heritagisation and autochthonisation that in 2016 led to the registration of the Mother Goddess Religion on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage as a Vietnamese 'indigenous' religion, even though the cult of the Four Palaces from which it evolved had previously been forbidden by the socialist state. He shows that these processes are grounded in the dynamics of 'pantheon' formation, a notion widely used by Western scholars although not easily translated into Vietnamese. Worship practices linked to this 'pantheon' are characterised by spirit possession séances addressed to an ensemble of spirits organised according to two main principles: a hierarchy of ranks and the attribution of an ordinal number within each rank. These practices display a complementarity between male, mandarin forms of legitimacy and a more embodied, female form of indigenous authority, analogous with the dialectics of administrative rule and regional autochthony. Sorrentino argues that the contradiction between the systematic combined structure of the pantheon and the rich collection of individual beings belonging to it has worked as a device for the integration of local deities into a dynamic aggregate at the national scale.

Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière relates the remarkable formation, since the beginning of the new century, of the annual celebration of Mya Nan Nwe (also known as the Botataung Lady), the *naga*-like guardian spirit of Botataung pagoda in Yangon, who dwells in her own separate temple. The celebration of the Botataung Lady's birthday has become one of Yangon's important new festive events, whose polymorphous dimensions combine various ritual formats in a novel fashion and give the gathering a striking *forum-like* aspect. While all manifestations of spirit possession are banned inside her temple, nearby outdoor ritual pageants prompting specific *thaik-naga* possession dances by female devotees are nonetheless *de rigueur*. These dances are particularly innovative examples of the processes of identification and differentiation operating in this *forum-like* setting. Mya Nan Nwe's ritual destiny has proved to be an interesting instance of the distinctive value of spirit possession as epitomised in the context of the Burmese Thirty-seven Lords cult, being able to display either positive or negative values in the newly emerging field of pagoda guardian worship, according to positions in the overall religious field.

In contrast to the presumed separation of Buddhism and spirit cults that dominated accounts in earlier literatures, Visisya Pinthongvijayakul examines the participation of the Northeastern Thai monk *Ajan Tho* in possession ritual through his 'having a spirit'. Based on his observation of mediumistic activity in *Ajan Tho's* monastery – and contextually refuting

accounts of the spatial separation of both domains of religiosity – Visisya forcefully argues for the reciprocal and mutual constitution of Buddhism and spirit cults. Although as a Buddhist monk *Ajan Tho* is limited in the full expression of mediumistic ritual practice, he nonetheless depends on networks of spirit mediums' clients to sustain his religious establishment in a context of rural deprivation.

Kazuo Fukuura analyses the reorganisation and realignment of Chiang Mai spirit mediums that occurred in 1996 with the invention of a ritual to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the city's founding by three legendary kings. This novel polyphonic ritual emerged independently from the historical annual ceremony at Chiang Mai's city pillar shrine (Sao Inthakhin) and the possession ritual at the shrine of the pillar spirit (Chaeng Si Phum). Fukuura locates this emergence of new rituals within the vivid landscape of Chiang Mai spirit possession, where collective rituals of professional mediums to honour their transcendental teachers (Northern Thai: *yok khu*), or at historical sites, combine with community-based matrilineal descent cults, whose mediums are also becoming increasingly professionalised. The annual celebration of the Three Kings (1996–2014) was Chiang Mai's biggest-ever collective ritual of mediumship, consisting of dance offerings by three groups of mediums: one for the Three Kings and the two others for descent group spirits. Examining the careers of two mediums who successively managed this cultural innovation, Fukuura delineates two conflicting realignments among contemporary mediums in Chiang Mai, one emphasising translocal connections with Hindu deities and the other being more purely local. Finally, he shows that this polyphonic set of rituals has been a tool for local identity politics and for an affirmation of spirit possession as a recognised form of Northern Thai cultural heritage.

Through an ethnographic account of a contemporary medium's ceremony, Paul Christensen illustrates how Buddhism and 'Brahmanism' work together in Cambodia today. In Cambodia, 'Brahmanism' now refers to a contemporary reformulation of religious practice involving spirits. After the radical disruption of the Khmer Rouge period, the rapid revitalisation of Buddhism has paralleled that of Brahmanism, a phenomenon that has not previously been analysed in the scholarly literature. While Buddhist rituals focus on merit-making, 'Brahmanist' ones aim at accruing spiritual power (*pāramī*) with immediate benefits in this life. Christensen argues that, as a contemporary phenomenon and unlike text-based reformist Buddhism, 'Brahmanism' can be understood as a 'prosperity religion' that is more relevant to a period of economic liberalisation and other 'modern' concerns.

Niklas Foxeus also examines novel Buddhist ‘prosperity cults’ to pagoda treasure-trove guardians around Mandalay, Burma. Significantly, some of these novel cults are linked to the boom of the illegal lottery in Burma. Foxeus argues that compared to *kammatic* Buddhism (Spiro, 1970) and the possession cult of the Thirty-seven Lords, ‘prosperity Buddhism’ provides an immediate Buddhist means to acquire wealth and prosperity. In the two pagoda clusters that he investigates, devotees and non-clientelistic mediums acting as ritual specialists give uncoded lottery numbers when they are possessed by treasure trove guardians, mainly child spirits who are a new addition to the local spiritual configurations. However, devotees are linked to the spirits through a conditional relationship, being helped to ‘hit the jackpot’ only if they engage in promoting and practising Buddhism in return. According to Foxeus, this in-built reciprocating mechanism is a recent and specific transformation of merit-making in Burma that helps to make Buddhism more relevant in the contemporary world.

Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya follows the search of a rural-urban Khmer migrant student for a fortune teller in Phnom Penh who can help alleviate her painful indecisiveness regarding conflicting life options. Because of the rupture of cultural traditions during the Khmer Rouge period, and also because authentic divinatory knowledge had been considered a preserve of the royal family and only transmitted orally, contemporary fortune tellers have encountered many obstacles in their attempts to establish their authority. *Gru* Bun, the diviner who finally heals the student, developed his numerological skills through self-study of the many books he has collected, in Khmer, Burmese and Thai, most particularly the Thai astrological and numerological text, the *Tamra Phrommachat*, that he came to consider as his ‘teacher’. Through her analysis of the consultation, Poonnatree shows that *Gru* Bun used numerological techniques to help him visualise the student’s life journey shaped in relation to morality, auspiciousness, spiritual power and obligation, rather than predetermination. She also reveals that Thai astrology has been an important source of knowledge for those who seek to reestablish divinatory authority in contemporary Cambodian urban culture.

Megan Sinnott’s chapter focuses on the long tradition of child spirit worship in Thailand. She observes a shift from trafficking in preserved fetus entities that were historically associated with dark magical powers to the adoption of angel-child dolls (*luk thep*), which only emerged in the past decade. This shift from necromancy to family care and love in the worship of child spirits reflects the larger phenomenon of a growing differentiation between malevolent and

good spirits. This further illustrates the fluidity of a deeply historical yet also highly contemporary belief system: because communication with the spirit world depends on the presence of a material form of spirits, angel-child dolls ‘rented’ from monasteries have been substituted for the physical remains of fetuses that were at the centre of older child spirit cults.

In her study of spirit mediumship in Chiang Mai, Irene Stengs posits a continuity between the importance attached to dreams and meditation-inspired visions (Pali: *nimitta*) by many Buddhist monks and the trance states of mediums in possession in Northern Thailand. She describes all these phenomena as instances of a common oneiric space, a notion that provides an analytical foundation for future explorations of spirit mediumship, divination and Buddhism as dimensions of an overarching religious field rather than as being distinct or mutually exclusive. She notes that cults associated with historical figures such as King Chulalongkorn and other Thai royal figures reflect strong nationalistic sentiments linked to contemporary events and settings.

In his chapter, Benjamin Baumann views forms of mediumship in Thailand’s Buriram province as instances of the Southeast Asian possession complex and locates his study within the theoretical perspective of the ‘new animism’. Baumann argues that professional mediums based in towns and who organise rituals for their entourage to pay homage to the teacher (*wai khru*) are on the point of replacing lineage mediums of localised matrilineal spirits in this region. Through professionalisation, these new mediums participate in a mystic field that enables them to establish lasting relations of mutuality with a variety of potent non-human beings. Baumann argues that this mystic field has only been separated from the religious field in Thailand since the middle of the twentieth century.

### **Further Study of the Southeast Asian Spirit Possession Complex**

The studies collected here more precisely situate and qualify the rapidly expanding field of spirit possession studies across mainland Southeast Asia. They also point to some of the important outstanding issues that future research will need to address in taking this field of study forward. For example, there is still a need to specify analytical categories that are both adequate to describe the distinctive forms of spirit possession found in mainland Southeast Asia and also permit productive comparisons to be made across the region’s several countries. The shifting place of spirit possession in ‘mainstream’ Theravada Buddhist ritual as well as in

diverse forms of divination, including astrology, also should be addressed. Furthermore, while the existence of a hierarchy of plural cosmologies is common across the Buddhist societies of the region, the ideologies of these multiplicities are not the same in each society. There are distinctive local ways of describing and negotiating the intersection of the plural Buddhist and other cosmologies that have emerged from the different histories and patterns of intersecting trends in each mainland society. An important task of future research will be to develop more nuanced analyses of the diversity of local processes and discourses of negotiating the cosmological plurality that is such a distinctive and fascinating characteristic of what is without doubt one of the most culturally and religiously diverse regions in the world.

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