Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand

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This article challenges the dominant paradigm of 'inclusive syncretism' in the study of Thai religion. By taking the worship of multi-original deities in the popular spirit-medium cults in contemporary Thailand as a case study, it argues that practitioners and specialists working on Thai religious studies need to refresh and update their analytical paradigm to incorporate the concept of 'hybridization'.

Syncretism is a proven analytical model, particularly in studies of Thai Buddhism, but it is neither a perennial nor a flawless one. It cannot be denied that Thai religion by and large has maintained its complex syncretic outlook. However, it is argued here that the focal point for students and specialists should be not the harmonious continuities and transformations of a syncretistic religious system, but rather the ruptures and breaks from its seemingly homogenous tradition. Based on a close consideration of the 'parade of supernaturals' flooding spirit-shrine altars in popular spirit-medium cults since the 1980s, I propose that Thailand's popular beliefs and religiosity in the past few decades have been undergoing a significant degree of 'subtle hybridization', where religious commodification and capitalist consumerism have been increasingly prominent.[1]

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1   The phrase 'parade of supernaturals' is from Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the spirit cults in Northeast Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 351–66. For studies of these developments, see the following: Marlane Guelden, *Thailand – into the spirit world* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995); Peter A. Jackson, 'The enchanting spirit of Thai capitalism: The cult of Luang Phor Khoon and the post-modernization of Thai Buddhism', *South East Asia Research* (henceforth *SEAR*), 7, 1 (1999): 5–60; Jackson, 'Royal spirits, Chinese gods, and magic monks: Thailand's boom-time religions of prosperity', *SEAR*, 7, 3 (1999): 245–320; Pattana Kitiarsa, 'You may not believe, but never offend the spirits: Spirit-medium cult discourses and the postmodernization of Thai religion' (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1999); and Pattana, 'You may not believe, but never offend the spirits: Spirit-medium cults and popular media in modern Thailand', in *Global goes local: Popular culture in Asia*, ed. Timothy J. Craig and Richard King (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), pp. 160–76.

Religious syncretism and its conceptual limitations

In Thailand, the study of religion is by and large synonymous with the study of the dominant Theravada Buddhist tradition, and most scholarship over the past four decades has naturally been devoted to the state-sponsored religion.[2] Popular religion has been subsumed under the formidable umbrella of state-sponsored Buddhism under various names: 'popular Buddhism', 'village Buddhism', 'magical Buddhism', 'urban Buddhism' and 'practical Buddhism'.[3] In other words, for most scholars popular religion is virtually non-existent outside the Theravada cosmology and structure. The traditional Buddhist-centred paradigm has been organized around the proposed model of 'inclusive or integrative syncretism', which argues for an integral complex religious system composed of Theravada Buddhism, folk Brahmanism and animism or supernaturalism.[4] This dominant paradigm not only works to submerge popular religious beliefs and rituals under the shadow of state-sponsored Buddhism, it also summarily denies the visibility of previously existing or recently emerging popular 'civic religious practices' by classifying them as 'continuities and transformations' within Theravada itself.[5]

Scholarship on Thai religion, which has developed primarily since the Second World War, has generally agreed that it should be considered as a syncretic and complex entity.[6] Thai religion as 'a cultural system' is indeed complex, syncretic and contingent on

2   See, for example, *Phya* Anuman Rajadhon, *Life and ritual in old Siam*, ed. William J. Gedney (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1961); Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, state, and society: Thai Buddhism in history*, tr. Peter Hawks (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986); Craig J. Reynolds, 'The Buddhist monkhood in nineteenth century Thailand' (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1972); Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Tambiah, *The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of the amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); J. L. Taylor, *Forest monks and the nation-state: An anthropological and historical study in Northeastern Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); and Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism: Its rites and activities* (New York: AMS Press, 1960).
3   See *Phya* Anuman Rajadhon, *Popular Buddhism in Siam and other essays on Thai studies* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1986); Anuman, *Essays on Thai folklore* (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1988); William J. Klausner, *Reflections on Thai culture*, 3rd edn (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1987); Tambiah, *Buddhism and the spirit cults*; Phra Phaisan Visalo, *Phutthasatsana Thai nai anakot: Naewnom lae thangok chak wikrit* [Thai Buddhism in the future: Trends and a solution to the crisis] (Bangkok: Sotsri-Saritwong Foundation, 2003); B. J. Terwiel, 'A model for the study of Thai Buddhism', *Journal of Asian Studies* (henceforth *JAS*), 35, 3 (1976): 391–403; Terwiel, *Monks and magic: An analysis of religious ceremonies in Central Thailand*, 3rd edn (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994); Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation, and conflict: The political functions of urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989); and Yukio Hayashi, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the making of the region* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press, 2003).
4   A. Thomas Kirsch, 'Phu Thai religious syncretism: A case study of Thai religion and society' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1967); Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai religious system: An interpretation', *JAS*, 36, 2 (1977): 241–66; Klausner, *Reflections on Thai culture*; Terwiel, 'Model for the study'; Terwiel, *Monks and magic*; and Swearer, *Buddhist world*.
5   Frank E. Reynolds, 'Buddhism as universal and as civic religion: Some observations on a recent tour of Buddhist centers in Central Thailand', in *Religion and legitimation of power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg, PA: ANIMA Books, 1978), pp. 194–203; on 'continuities and transformations' see Tambiah, *Buddhism and the spirit cults*, pp. 367–77.
6   An overview of this scholarship is in Charles F. Keyes, 'Ethnography and anthropological interpretation in the study of Thailand', in *The study of Thailand: Analyses of knowledge, approaches, and prospects in anthropology, art history, economics, history, and political science*, ed. Eliezer B. Ayal (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1978), pp. 1–66.

particular cultural and historical circumstances.[7] *Phya* Anuman Rajadhon, the late *doyen* of Thai studies, was among the pioneers who wrote about this syncretic nature. He identified 'two strata of beliefs of [sic] Thai people': animism and Buddhism, the latter with elements of Brahmanism and Hinduism. He argued that these two layers of beliefs and conceptions 'have become intermingled in [sic] an inextricable degree', noting that 'in every village, there is at least one Buddhist temple with a monastery called *wat* in Thai, and a shrine of the village tutelary guardian'.[8]

Thomas Kirsch took a step forward by systematically outlining and interpreting the complexity and syncretism in the Thai religious system as being composed of three components rather than two: Theravada Buddhism, folk Brahmanism and animism, with official Theravada obviously occupying the central position. He asserted that 'Buddhism stands at the apex of the Thai religious system and forms a central part of Thai social values. Buddhism provides a coherent and integrated system of beliefs, practices, and specialists – sustained by a codified orthodoxy of the *Sangha*, political authority, and the Thai masses. . .'.[9] In the mid-1970s, B. J. Terwiel pointed out the differences between the syncretist and compartmentalist approaches to the study of the Thai religious system. The syncretists argue that Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is 'a harmonious blend of Buddhism and local creeds', whereas the compartmentalists believe that there are two or more distinct strata of religious practices in the country, specifically those subscribed to by the elite and by the rural population. This argument is very much similar to Spiro's distinction between magic and Buddhism in Burma.[10]

The work of Terwiel and Kirsch was arguably the most influential in establishing syncretism as the dominant paradigm in studies of the Thai religious system. Extending the influence of the syncretic model, Donald Swearer has characterized the popular religious systems in Buddhist Southeast Asia (especially Thailand) as an 'inclusive syncretism' in which the 'seeming contradictions' between the highest ideals and goals of Theravada Buddhism and the living popular traditions 'are necessarily intertwined'. For Swearer, 'the goals of Buddhism are both ultimate (*nibbana*) and proximate: a better rebirth and a better social and economic status in this life. Theravada Buddhism also provides the means for people to cope with the day-to-day problems of life and to justify worldly pursuits'.[11]

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7   See Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a cultural system', in *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966), pp. 1–46.

8   Anuman Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai folklore*, pp. 48–9.

9   Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai religious system', p. 261. Elsewhere Kirsch suggested that Thai religious syncretism has been apparent since the early days of Sukhothai (Kirsch, 'Modernizing implications of nineteenth century reforms in the Thai *Sangha*', in Smith ed., *Religion and legitimation of power*, pp. 52–65). Drawing mainly from his fieldwork among the Phu Thai in a village then under the local administration of Nakhon Phanom province, Kirsch used his Weberian-Parsonsian approach to outline complex and syncretistic components of the Thai religious system, where 'elements derived from several historically discrete traditions [Theravada Buddhism, Folk Brahmanism, and animism] have combined to form a single distinctive tradition' ('Complexity', p. 241). He also excelled in demonstrating how the three different religious components have functioned and interrelated to one another, with Theravada 'maintain[ing] a paramount position within a complex religious system' (p. 244).

10   Terwiel, *Monks and magic*, p. 1 (quotation); Terwiel, 'Model for the study', pp. 402–3. On Burma see Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and society: A great tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

11   Swearer, *Buddhist world*, pp. 5–7 (quotations from p. 6).

Swearer's interpretation of the syncretic popular Buddhism found in Thailand and other Theravada societies resembles what Yoneo Ishii calls 'magical Buddhism'. Adopting Spiro's conceptual typology of 'apotropaic Buddhism', Ishii argues that 'the existence of Buddhist magic allows people to satisfy their desire for magic, while it is incompatible with the principles of Buddhism, whilst remaining within the framework of Buddhism'.[12] Magical Buddhism has revealed certain practical aspects of Thai Buddhism, and Yukio Hayashi proposes the term 'practical Buddhism' as an analytical model to explain the complexity, diversity and dynamism of religious practices among Thai-Lao villagers in Northeastern Thailand and parts of lowland Laos. His main focus is on Buddhism as practised in everyday life rather than its canonical version, an approach which offers a closer look at syncretism in action.[13]

Both the magical and practical Buddhist models demonstrate how 'traditional' magical, supernatural, Buddhist and other components are blended in the practices of Thai religious syncretism. They seem to be rather less relevant, however, when it comes to current sociocultural turbulence and the effects of what Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles Keyes call the 'crisis of modernity' in contemporary Thailand.[14] While the syncretic model seems to have been kept alive in studies of Thai religion in the twenty-first century, its persistence and continuity raise some theoretical and empirical concerns. How effectively can this religious paradigm of Buddhist-centred complexity and syncretism explain the realities, diversities and dynamism of Thai religion in the new millennium? Does it still make as much sense now as it did 30 or 40 years ago? Is it adequate to treat the forms and content of pre-Buddhist magic and supernaturalism under the authoritative banner of dominant Buddhism? Are there any alternative ways to scrutinize and interpret changing religious realities in the sociocultural context of contemporary Thailand?

In response to these questions, this study suggests that the syncretic model has been gradually losing its power to explain the rapidly changing landscape of Thai religion, for several reasons. First, the syncretists – whether integrative/inclusive or compartmental – have placed Theravada Buddhism in a tight and rigid paramount position, while the larger and more dynamic picture of Thai religion tends to be misrepresented or ignored. Kirsch once predicted that 'the Buddhaization process' would 'upgrade' Thai religion, facilitate the spread of Buddhism among Thai peoples and transform their religious and social system. Modernization in Thailand, he argued, served to emphasize 'the center

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12 Ishii, *Sangha, state, and society*, pp. 23–4. Spiro, *Buddhism and society*, outlines his seminal classifications of Buddhism based on his fieldwork in Burma in the 1960s as follows. 'Buddhism is best viewed as comprising not one, but three separate if interlocking systems: two soteriological systems (one normative and one non-normative) and one non-soteriological system. Since the latter is primarily concerned with protection from danger, I shall call it *apotropaic* Buddism. The two soteriological systems may be called nibbanic and kammatic Buddhism, respectively. Since its major concern is with release from the Wheel, or nirvana (*nibbana*), nibbanic Buddhism is an appropriate term for normative soteriological Buddhism. Non-normative soteriological Buddhism, concerned with improving one's position on the Wheel by improving one's karma (*kamma*), is appropriately termed kammatic Buddhism' (p. 12).
13 Hayashi, *Practical Buddhism*.
14 Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes, 'Introduction', in *Cultural crisis and social memory: Modernity and identity in Thailand and Laos*, ed. Tanabe and Keyes (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp. 6–25.

position of Buddhism in Thai religion and society and to elevate the level of religious sophistication within the *Sangha*'.[15]

However, this type of prophetic prediction is far from the reality. Since the 1990s, the *Sangha* has no longer been the sole authoritative force monitoring and handling Buddhist affairs. As many scholars have pointed out, Thai Buddhism has lately been facing 'crises' of various kinds.[16] Keyes sums up the current crisis of authority and faith as 'Buddhist fragmentation', meaning that in the new millennium it is possible for Thailand to embrace more than one official version of the Buddhist faith or even to undergo a transition to a post-Buddhist society.[17] In addition, Bhikkhu Visalo (Phra Phaisan Visalo) criticizes the *Sangha* for having 'fail[ed] as a moral force', noting that 'the moral-ity and behaviour of monks are increasingly questioned' and that 'moral decline [is] manifest[ed] in widespread crime, corruption, drugs, and various social problems throughout the country and in the *wat* themselves. . .'.[18]

The second limitation of the syncretic model is that it seems to be too broad and all-encompassing. In fact, none of its religious strata or components (Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism) has ever been static or existed as a completely separate entity. Kirsch argued that Buddhaization entails 'twin processes of universalization and parochialization, which facilitated the spread of Buddhism among the Thai peoples and simultaneously transformed their religious and social system'.[19] These twin processes, however, do not necessarily produce consequences that benefit Buddhism and elevate it to a central role in Thai society.

Phra Phaisan Visalo, in his monumental work on Thai Buddhism, contends that over the past few decades it has been weakened and threatened by both internal and external constraints. Its commercialization and the rise of magic and supernatural cults have had a stunning impact on public faith in the *Sangha*, directly or indirectly challeng-ing the latter's authority (openly in the case of new sects like Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke) while sustaining and fulfilling popular religious interest in everyday mundane matters. Overall, he concludes, Thai Buddhism in the new millennium has been losing the moral and ethical grip necessary to lead its people out of the destructive globalizing

15 Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai religious system', p. 265. Kirsch used the term 'upgrading' to refer to the centralization and rationalization of Theravada Buddhism by the Thai state and *Sangha*, to purify or make it more rational by consulting the *Tripitaka* and other authoritative sources in order to sift out its syncretistic components, namely animism or folk Brahmanism. It also meant that Buddhism would be made a state-sponsored and state-legitimated religion, as distinct from a popular tradition.

16 See, for example, Phra Phaisan Visalo, *Phutthasatsana Thai*; Phra Thepvethi (P. Payutto), *Sing saksit, thevarit, patihan* [Magical entities, supernatural power and miracles] (Bangkok: Phutthatham Foundation, 1993); Sanitsuda Ekachai. *Keeping the faith: Thai Buddhism at the crossroads* (Bangkok: Post Books, 2001); Sulak Sivaraksa, *Phut kap sai nai sangkhom Thai* [Buddhism and magic in Thai society] (Bangkok: Commission on Religion for Development and Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute, 1995); Charles F. Keyes, 'Moral authority of the *Sangha* and modernity in Thailand: Sexual scandals, sectarian dissent, and political resistance', in *Socially engaged Buddhism for the new millennium: Essays in honor of the Ven. Phra Dhammapitaka* (*Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto) on his 60th birthday anniversary* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation and Foundation for Children, 1999), pp. 121–47.

17 Charles F. Keyes, 'Buddhism fragmented: Thai Buddhism and political order since the 1970s', keynote address for the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, July 1999.

18 Bhikkhu Visalo, 'Buddhism for the next century: Toward renewing a moral Thai society', in *Socially engaged Buddhism*, pp. 235–52.

19 Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai religious system', p. 264.

forces of consumerism and materialism. He argues that it 'has entered a critical stage where a radical overhaul is urgently needed'.[20]

Finally, it is argued here that the syncretic model does not take into account some key emerging factors such as the influences of mass media and religious commodification; it seems to be the case that social reality has outgrown this proposed model. Kirsch perceived animism in Thai religion as 'fragmentary, disorganized, and unsystematic' and argued that it 'does not appear to be an autonomous or coherent system of beliefs and practices parallel to those of Buddhism and Brahmanism'. At best, he felt, it functions to 'provid[e] an image of the kind of chaos and disorder which *might* exist if a Buddhist order did not prevail'. However, the boom in supernatural beliefs and practices – spirit cults, amulet cults, worship of supernatural beings and what Peter Jackson has called the 'boom-time religions of prosperity' – would have tempted him to rethink and revise his generalization.[21] The chaotic re-emergence of various forms of animism and supernaturalism in Thailand's contemporary popular religion landscape has been highly visible and audible despite their symbolic inferiority to the dominant state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism.[22]

Framing the hybridization of Thai popular religion

I consider 'hybridity', a keyword in postcolonial discourse, as a potential conceptual tool to make sense of the changing landscape of contemporary Thai religion. Its genealogy can be traced back to the controversial debates on human race in the nineteenth century and to its usage in natural history in the centuries before. However, my understanding of the term relates to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha through the concise interpretation of Robert J. C. Young. Although Bakhtin and Bhabha have different points of entry since they work in different fields, they seem to end up with well-connected theses on hybridity. For Bakhtin, hybridization is 'a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor'.[23] He identifies two types of

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20 Phaisan Visalo, *Phutthasatsana Thai*, p. 472; all translations from the Thai are mine. Studies of the new movements include Apinya Fuengfulsakul, 'Empire of crystal and utopian commune: Two types of contemporary Theravada reform in Thailand', *Sojourn*, 8, 1 (1993): 153–83; Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation, and conflict*; Keyes, 'Moral authority'; J. L. Taylor, 'Embodiment, nation, and religio-politics in Thailand', *SEAR*, 9, 2 (2001): 129–47; and Edwin Zehner, 'Reform symbolism of a Thai middle-class sect: The growth and appeal of the Thammakai movement', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 21, 2 (1990): 402–26.

21 See Jackson, 'Enchanting spirit' and Jackson, 'Royal spirits'; the quotation is from Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai religious system', p. 262 (emphasis in the original).

22 In addition to the sources already cited, see Peter A. Jackson, 'Withering centre, flourishing margins: Buddhism's changing political roles', in *Political change in Thailand: Democracy and participation*, ed. Kevin Hewison (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 75–93; Rosalind Morris, *In the place of origins: Modernity and its mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Shigeharu Tanabe, 'Spirits, power, and the discourse of female gender: The Phi Meng cult of Northern Thailand', in *Thai constructions of knowledge*, ed. Manas Chitakasem and Andrew Turton (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991), pp. 183–212; Tanabe, 'The person in transformation: Body, mind and cultural appropriation', in Tanabe and Keyes ed., *Cultural crisis and social memory*, pp. 43–67; and Susuke Yagi, '*Samnak puu sawan*: Rise and oppression of a new religious movement in Thailand' (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1988).

23 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 358.

hybridity: intentional and unconscious organic. The former refers to the 'ability of one voice to ironize and unmask the other within the same utterance', while the latter means language change 'by means of a mixing of various languages co-existing within the boundaries of a single dialect, a single national language'. Bakhtin believes that unconscious organic hybridity 'gives birth to the new forms of amalgamation rather than contestation'.[24] Bakhtinian linguistic hybridity could offer an insightful explanation for cultural phenomena, which are basically considered as social utterances. A cultural event like the rise of 'prosperity religion' in contemporary Thailand is definitely a complex utterance where many beliefs and practices converge and produce new forms of amalgamation and sets of meaning relevant to the present sociocultural and economic situation.

Bhabha's hybridization forms a major part of his postcolonial criticism. He explains hybridity as 'a problematic of colonial representation . . . that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other "denied" knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority'. As noted by Young, Bhabha uses the hybridity of colonial discourses to describe 'a process in which the single voice of colonial authority undermines the operation of colonial power by inscribing and disclosing the trace of the other so that it reveals itself as double-voiced'. This double-voicedness is made possible in the moment that colonial authority 'loses its univocal grip on meaning and finds itself open to the trace of the language of the other, enabling the critic to trace complex movements of disarming alterity in the colonial context'.[25] Indeed, Bhabha's focal point for hybridization is a form of counter-authority, which is the product and consequence of the practices of colonial authority itself. The Foucauldian notion of power and resistance is apparent here.[26] The work of colonial power is never an absolute domination and control; in many ways, it produces – through hybridization – forms of counter-discourse and cultural practices.

Placing Bakhtin's and Bhabha's versions of hybridity in the contemporary context of Thai religious transformation, I believe that the years since 1990 have indeed constituted an intensive hybrid moment of rapid sociocultural and religious transmutation. I am aware that the histories of most modern societies and cultures are underlined by 'hybridity all the way down'.[27] Hybridization is as old as human history; Mitsukuni Yoshida, for example, argues that Japanese culture is indeed a very hybrid one:

> The tradition of 'hybridizing' culture goes back to the very earliest history of Japan. Transplanted to Japanese soil, every aspect of foreign culture brought to these islands – rice cultivation, *kasuri* [cloth] weaving, Chinese orthography and writing, Buddhism, and art, to name only a few – was crossbred with the indigenous culture, producing the hybrid culture we know today.[28]

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24 Robert J. Young, *Colonial desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 20 (types of hybridity), 21 (amalgamation); my thanks to Mark Frost for bringing this book to my attention.
25 Quotations from ibid., pp. 21–2.
26 See Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977*, tr. Colin Gordon *et al.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).
27 Renato Rosaldo, 'Forward', in Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid cultures: Strategies for entering and leaving modernity*, tr. Christopher L. Chiappari and Sylvia L. Lopez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
28 Mitsukuni Yoshida, 'The hybrid tradition', in *The hybrid culture: What happened when East and West met*, ed. Mitsukuni Yoshida *et al.* (Hiroshima: Mazda, 1984), p. 11.

In Latin America, 'where traditions have not yet disappeared and modernity has not completely arrived', Nestor Garcia Canclini employs the concept of hybridity to describe culturally and historically situated strategies for entering and leaving modernity. This is a particular Latin American style of hybridity which Amia Loomba reads as a post-colonial cultural weapon inherited from the colonial era; indeed, 'anti-colonial movements and individuals often drew upon Western ideas and vocabularies to challenge colonial rule'.[29] In mainland Southeast Asia during the 'Age of Commerce', cultural and religious hybridities were made possible by what Anthony Reid calls the 'miracle of tolerance', whereby people found it was 'natural that different peoples should have different beliefs'. In a specifically Thai context, Charnvit Kasetsiri discusses the tolerance between Theravada Buddhism Hinduism and supernaturalism during the Ayudhaya period.[30]

Many scholars may explain sociocultural hybridization in modern Thai history through sets of keywords, such as 'selective modernization' for Siam's civilizing project since the nineteenth century or 'religious syncretization' for the complex religious transformation which followed the emergence of the kingdom of Sukhothai in the thirteenth century.[31] However, the case of urban spirit-medium cults, with the worship of their diverse religious deities over the past two decades, constitutes a rather distinctive story and requires an explanation. Following Bhabha, I shall call them a 'third space' where conventional Theravada Buddhism, state and *Sangha* authorities, multi-original religious beliefs and the drive for material success in the capitalist market all come to coexist and produce a hybrid moment of religious change. ('Multi-original' refers to a set of religious beliefs and practices from various different sources held by a particular person. Thus Thai who identify themselves as Buddhists may also worship Hindu deities, the Chinese *Bodhisattva* Guanyin, the spirit of King Chulalongkorn, etc.) 'Here the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One . . . nor the Other . . . but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both'.[32] In the third space, 'something else besides' is formed out of various components and elements with specific new sets of different meanings and connotations.

The emergence of hybridizing beliefs in the popular spirit-medium cults

This article will use case studies of popular spirit-medium cults to show not only the limitations of the syncretic model for understanding the changing landscape of Thai popular religion, but also the reasons why this particular analytical tool should be updated. It argues that the spirit-medium cult is the place where the most dynamic and articulated religious beliefs are put into practice by mediums and followers. While spirit

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29 Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid cultures*, p. 1; Amia Loomba, *Colonialism/postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 174.

30 Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680, volume 2: Expansion and crisis* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1993), p. 193; Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The rise of Ayudhya: A history of Siam in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976).

31 Barbara Watson Andaya, 'Statecraft in the reign of Lü Tai of Sukhodaya (ca. 1347–1374)', in Smith ed., *Religion and legitimation of power*, pp. 2–19; Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai religious system'. On the modern period see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: History of the geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 13.

32 Homi K. Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', *New Formations*, 5 (1988): 13.

mediums have stood as 'living proof' of the Thai religious past, their survival means that they have continued to adjust themselves to modern or even postmodern circumstances. They also possess a greater degree of religious autonomy, being relatively independent from the official gaze. Despite their historical roots, which are as old as the origins of the various Tai-speaking polities, urban-based spirit-medium cults have emerged in modern Thailand's cultural landscape only in the last few decades.[33] As part of urban popular religious tradition, it is almost impossible to locate exactly when, where and how these cults came to exist. Diversified and scattered in urban areas all over the country, they gradually developed from individual mediums' practices into a regional informal network. Moreover, there are no written records pertaining to the origin of the cults, and even now there is still no formal organization representing them at any level. Periodicals and publications devoted to urban-based spirit-medium cults, magic and commercial Buddhism – such as *Mahalap* (The Great Piece of Luck) and *Lok Thip* (The Heavenly World) – have existed only since the 1980s.

Despite these constraints, a brief genealogy of urban-based spirit-medium cults in modern Thailand can be traced through (1) Buddhist millennialism; (2) the persistence of folk spirit cults and the consequences of rural-to-urban migration and rapid urbanization; (3) the influence of court Brahmanistic rituals; and (4) the religious influences of Chinese and Indian communities in urban areas.

Buddhist millennialism

In Thailand Buddhist millennialism is known as *khwam chua Phra Si-An*, referring to the Ariya Maitreya Buddha. This prophecy has received widespread acceptance, especially in folk tradition. In modern Thai history, the beliefs and practices of such millennialism have, from time to time, inspired peasant uprisings against Siamese state dominance, such as the Holy Men resistance movement in the Northeastern provinces in 1901–02.[34] In general, Buddhist prophecy depicts a foreseen future of Buddhism and the Buddhist universe. According to Jagadisa Kashyap, 'there have been many Buddhas in the past and many more will follow in the future. As long as there are beings in need of emancipation from the bonds of this inexorable process of birth and death, Buddhas will appear with their liberating Truth and will lead beings to deliverance, Nibbana (Nirvana)'.[35] In Thailand, 'Buddha' specifically refers to Gotama, a man who lived in India 2,500 years ago, and to Maitreya (*Phra Si-An*) – the only *Bodhisattva* mentioned in Thai Buddhism – who will come to save the earth 5,000 years after Gotama. Thais believe that the latter's religion will last for a period of 5,000 years and that it has entered a state of decline since the half-point of its life in the year 2500 of the Buddhist Era (1957 CE). Wo. Cinpradit has reproduced the Buddhist prophecy as follows:

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33 Suchada Chakpisut, 'Khon song' [The spirit mediums], *Sarakhadi* [Feature Magazine], 3, 36 (1988): 82–98; Yagi, '*Samnak puu sawan*'. For a historical perspective see Pattana, 'You may not believe'.
34 Tej Bunnag, *Khabot Ro. So. 121* [The 1903 rebellion] (Bangkok: Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences Textbooks, 1981).
35 Jagadisa Kashyap, 'Origin and expansion of Buddhism', in *The path of the Buddha: Buddhism interpreted by the Buddhists*, ed. Kenneth W. Morgan (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), p. 4. The term 'Buddha' means 'Enlightened One'; it is not a proper name, but a title applied to one who has reached the very peak of transcendental wisdom through the practice of the ten great spiritual Perfections through innumerable rebirths over an incomprehensible length of time. In Buddhist mythology, a number of Buddhas are mentioned, such as Gotama, Dipankara and Sumedha.

In Buddha's prediction of the future of his own religion . . . there would be no female monks (*bhikkuni*) within 500 years after his death. Within 1000 years, there would be no *Arahat* [Buddhist saints] capable of travelling through the air. Over the next 2000 years, things would get worse; no pundits would ever master the *Tripitaka* [Theravada scriptures]. Three thousand years later, the *Sangha* would no longer exist. Four thousand years later, monks' bowls and robes would disappear. Five thousand years after Buddha's death, his religion would come to an end.[36]

Buddhist prophecy provides an authentic, authoritative point of origin for urban spirit-medium cults because guardians of the religion are to be assigned throughout the period of 5000 years. Deities and spirits (*thep*, Pali *deva*) are among the guardians of Buddha's religion; they can protect and foster it by possessing and using human mediums, helping poor, suffering people and then encouraging them to make merit through the *Sangha*. The role of deities and spirits as the protectors and sponsors of Buddhism appears in the following quote:

In Buddha's conversation with Ananda [Buddha's constant companion] and other disciples prior to his death, he asked by whom and how his religion would be fostered in the next 5,000 years. Ananda proposed that the *Sangha* would foster and bring Buddha's religion into its glory in the first 2,500 years; *deva* in heaven and other guardian spirits would share the rest.[37]

According to Wo. Cinpradit, it was the turn of *thep* and other guardian spirits to help the *Sangha* foster Buddhism after the year 2500 BE. This is a major reason why *thep* and spirits from heaven have come down to possess human bodies and use them as mediums in recent decades. Deities and spirits from heaven came to the earth in order to save Buddha's religion, especially during the period after 2500 BE, interpreted in Buddhist mythology as a time of moral decline.[38] Divine spirits see the human world in its liminal state, filled with moral chaos, suffering and decay; it is their sacred duty to save struggling human beings. With their supernatural power, the human world's social and moral order can be restored, but ordinary people can reach these spirits only through mediums and their rituals. This can be seen as the canonical origin of current urban spirit-medium cults.

The persistence of folk spirit-medium cults and the consequences of rural–urban migration and rapid urbanization

Susuke Yagi's study of the origins of the urban *chao pho* (godfather spirit) cults in metropolitan Bangkok shows that they began after the Second World War and grew

36 Wo. Cinpradit (pseud.), *Amnat luklap khong rang song* [The mysterious power of the spirit medium] (Bangkok: Central Library Press, 1995), p. 94. An *arahat* is 'a saint who has dispelled ignorance and all other fetters that bind a being to the cycle of birth and death; after death he does not take a birth again, he is freed from this bondage' (Kashyap, 'Origins and expansion', p. 9). It is very interesting to note that Wo. Cinpradit seems to be the only writer mentioning Buddhist mythology to legitimize the existence of urban spirit-medium cults and their close association with Buddhism. However, he does not cite a source for his account.

37 Wo. Cinpradit, *Amnat luklap*, pp. 15–16. The Venerable Ananda was famous for his extraordinary memory and intelligence. He was able to remember Buddha's teachings and was known as Buddha's storekeeper.

38 Wo. Cinpradit, *Khumu rang song* [Manual for spirit mediums] (Bangkok: Central Library Press, n.d.).

rapidly in subsequent decades. These cults were part of a broader pattern of multi-dimensional urban religious change which has seen the urban population diversify their religious affiliations beyond traditional Buddhism. Urban Thai religious change in the 1980s involved the invocation of magico-religious protection through the use of amulets, fortune-telling, magical and traditional healing, 'instantly effective merit-making', meditation and the rise of new religious movements such as Santi Asoke and Thammakai.[39] Yagi's explanation, however, tends to look at these specifically religious phenomena without reference to the rapid changes which were taking place in Thai culture and society in the 1970s and the 1980s. Urban religious change should be seen in light of the persistence of folk ancestral spirit-medium cults, which is itself a consequence of rural-urban migration and rapid urbanization.

Bangkok and its outlying areas constitute the country's largest centres of urban spirit-medium cults; Suchada Chakphisut estimates that there could be more than 10,000 spirit shrines located in an area stretching from Phrakhanong district in Bangkok to the suburban provincial capital of Samut Prakan. Together with Thonburi district, she believes that these are the areas with the highest density of spirit mediums in the country.[40] Spirit-medium cults also exist in other urban areas, especially Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Lampang in the North; and Phuket, Phang-nga, Songkhla and Chumphon in the South. An informant in the Northeastern city of Khorat confirms from her years of experience in cross-provincial networks of spirit mediums that Chonburi on the Eastern coast, Nakhon Sawan in the upper Central region and Khorat and Buriram in the Northeast are the 'capitals' of spirit-medium cults in their respective regions.[41] By the 1990s, one study estimated that 'there are more than 100,000 mediums in Thailand whose services generate over 20 billion *baht* a year. Fortune-tellers guide the lives of people from all walks of life, from beggars to national leaders'.[42] Urban religious phenomena – especially spirit-medium cults, amulet cults, fortune-tellers and new religious movements – have developed from indigenous religious beliefs and practices. They are definitely not 'brand-new' religious innovations; rather, they appear to bring together pre-existing religious practices, adapt them to urban environments and make them meaningful to the lives of the urban population.

Animism and spirit mediums indeed represent indigenous religious beliefs and practices common among Tai ethnic groups in mainland Southeast Asia. For the Siamese and the Lao, ancestor cults and cults of *phi fa* and *phi thaen* (divine spirits of the sky) were popular prior to the adoption of Brahmanism and Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent through the Khmer and the Mon. These cults have persisted until the present, especially in rural areas.[43] Walter Irvine points out that there are two types of spirit-medium cults in Chiang Mai, rural and urban. He argues that rural cults, especially those worshipping ancestral spirits, have declined since the 1970s due to the impact of modernization and urbanization. Kinship and other traditional institutions have changed rapidly, and

39 Yagi, '*Samnak puu sawan*', pp. 13–27; see also Maja-Leena Heikkila-Horn, *Santi Asoke Buddhism and Thai state reponse* (Turku, Finland: Abo Akademi University Press, 1996).
40 Suchada, 'Khon song', p. 91.
41 Interview with Aunt Toi, Khorat, 14 Aug. 1996.
42 Sanitsuda, *Keeping the faith*, p. 30.
43 Charles F. Keyes, 'Thai religion', in *The encyclopedia of religion*, vol. XIII (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 133.

land ownership has declined as landless farmers have migrated to work in urban, industrialized centres. In 1977, Irvine estimated that the number of urban spirit mediums in Chiang Mai municipality ranged from 250 to 300, 84 per cent of whom were women; of this number, only ten had been active for more than 20 years. The proportion of spirit mediums in the Chiang Mai population was 0.45:1,000 in the 1950s; by the late 1970s, this figure had increased to 3:1,000.[44]

A study of urban spirit-medium cults in greater metropolitan Bangkok shows similar findings. Yagi cites empirical research showing that modern-day cults originated in Bangkok and then spread to first to Thonburi (probably about 40 or so years ago) then to the outlying provinces of Samut Prakan and Nonthaburi about two decades later.[45] Although this hypothesis does not provide specific information on the origin of these cults, it suggests a significant correlation with urbanization. Bangkok and other areas of the Central Plain began the process of urbanization and industrialization well before other regions. These urban centres have provided a home to rural migrant labourers and, in turn, nurtured groups of marginalized people, who tend to search for religious beliefs and practices beyond traditional Buddhism. The other groups within the displaced urban population need religious practices that are meaningful and relevant to their urban lifestyle and environments, including fortune-telling, meditation, and amulet and spirit-medium cults.[46]

The influence of Brahmanistic court rituals

If we consider the major spirits and ritual components of these cults, it is evident that Brahmanistic beliefs associated with the royal court have had considerable influence. During the annual ritual of 'paying homage to teachers' spirits', hosted by a senior female medium in Talingchan district of Bangkok in 1996, I noticed that the whole ritual centred on sophisticated arrangements of flower and *bai sri* trays (normally used for the soul-tying ritual). A male senior medium who supervised the whole ceremony told me that all of the arrangements of flower and *bai sri* trays followed the prototype of those used in court Brahmanistic rituals. The entire ritual process, in fact, had been learned from one of his Brahmin relatives who had served in the palace. This medium believed that royal rituals are more sacred and efficacious (*saksit*) than their ordinary folk counterparts.[47]

44 Walter Irvine, 'Decline of village spirit cults and growth of urban spirit mediumship: The persistence of spirit beliefs, the position of women and modernization', *Mankind*, 14, 4 (1984): 315–24. See also Irvine, 'The Thai Yuan "madman", and the modernising, developing Thai nation, as bounded entities under threat: A study in the replication of a single image' (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1982); and Christine C. Mougne, 'Spirit cults and matrifocality in Northern Thailand: Demographic perspective', *Mankind*, 14, 4 (1984): 300–7.

45 Yagi, '*Samnak puu sawan*', p. 32.

46 Tanabe suggests that displacement among rural-to-urban migrants 'involves a general sense of confusion experienced by a local subject who moves into a new environment, which can induce emotional disorders and psychosomatic disturbances. ... For the newcomers to Chiang Mai, the displacement often evokes feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, and insecurity in everyday life' (Tanabe, 'Person in transformation', p. 50).

47 Sumruay Somchit, personal communication, Bangkok, 14 Aug. 1996. '*Bai sri*' is originally a Khmer term referring to the rice offerings to spirits in a propitiatory ritual; in its present Thai usage, however, it refers to the soul-tying ritual in general.

The influence of court rituals on the folk or popular tradition is nothing new in Thailand. King Chulalongkorn's essay on 'The Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months of the Year' not only presented the historical roots of each royal ritual, but also explained how they should be properly carried out, especially those that dealt with state affairs.[48] These rituals were highly structured and were performed on sacred occasions, as they represented a means of communication between the rulers and the deities. The public soon adopted elements of the royal ceremonies and incorporated them into their own practices.

In urban spirit-medium cults, the influence of royal rituals can also be seen in the popularity of major Hindu deities (Brahma, Siva and Ganesh) and in the veneration of spirits of national heroes of royal origin such as Kings Naresuan, Taksin and Chulalongkorn and Prince Chumporn. The worship of Hindu deities in these popular cults indicates that ordinary people share common icons with the royal court. In the ritual propitiation of royal spirits, mediums 'invent' ritual attire and use their own version of court language (*ratchasap*) in their communication with the spirits. I use the verb 'invent' because it is impossible for spirit mediums to copy historically authentic royal attire and language, which would seem to be far beyond their knowledge and experience. What mediums do in the cults represents their own invention, sometimes created under the influence of the spirits by which they are possessed. A recent account of how mediums select their attire or have it tailored reports that they follow the spirits' as well as their own personal preferences. Many mediums also simply copy or borrow their attire from their fellow mediums.[49]

The religious influence of the Chinese and Indian communities in urban Thailand

Keyes suggests that together with learning the Thai language in school, and government policies and legislation favouring foreign immigrants, religion has been one of the key factors facilitating the assimilation of Chinese, Indian and other ethnic migrants into Thai culture and society. The cultural assimilation of these immigrants proceeded far more smoothly than was the case in European colonies such as the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya and French Indochina. Chinese immigrants who came to Siam between the early decades of the nineteenth century and the outbreak of the Second World War 'could become Theravada Buddhists without having to abandon their own religious practices, including ancestor worship'.[50] Indians and other immigrants enjoyed relative religious freedom as well; despite their linguistic and cultural diversity, immigrants from the Indian subcontinent formed communities in urban centres such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and their religious beliefs and practices had an impact on the Thai cultural landscape just like those of the Chinese.

In 1822, the British diplomat John Crawfurd led a mission to Siam; in his journal he described his experience encountering a Chinese religious festival in Bangkok:

> The Chinese festival of lanterns commenced to-day [11 April], an occasion which seems to be equally respected by Siamese. No business whatever was transacted, and the time was

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48 Chulalongkorn, *Phraratchaphithi sipsong duan* [The royal ceremonies of the twelve months of the year] (Bangkok: Phrachan Press, 1953).
49 Jutarat Tongpiam, 'Clothes make the medium', *Bangkok Post*, 22 Feb. 1996.
50 Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist kingdom as modern nation-state* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), p. 133.

devoted to amusements, to religious ceremonies, to feasting, and to making presents to the Talapoins [Buddhist monks]. At night the Chinese vessels in the river were decked with lanterns, presenting a fanciful and striking appearance.[51]

On the same mission, Crawfurd also had a chance to visit an Indian temple (*Wat Khaek*) located in Bangkok's outskirts, which he referred to as the 'Hindoo place of worship'. He seems to have been very impressed with the diversity of urban religious practices in Bangkok, and with Siamese tolerance towards immigrants' religious identities. He talked to the Brahmin who took care of the place and learned that he represented the fifth generation of his family resident in Siam, his ancestors having emigrated from the sacred island of Ramiseram, situated between Ceylon and the main Indian subcontinent. Crawfurd wrote that inside the 'Hindoo place of worship', 'the most distinguished was a figure of Mahadewa, nine feet high. There were several smaller ones of the same deity, with figures of Prawati, Padmi and Vishnu, and one statue of Brahma'. The 'worship of the linga' was also practised by this Hindu religious community.[52]

In the nineteenth century, Chinese religious influences began to have a presence in the Siamese religious world, as indicated in the establishment of their temples. G. William Skinner noted that there were a considerable number of such temples in Bangkok and many trading centres throughout Siam, where Cantonese, Hokkien and Teochiu were settled in communities. Take the Hokkien, for instance; since they were exclusively merchants and sailors, their temples were dedicated to Tianhou Shengmu, the Holy Mother and Empress of Heaven, who is the patron deity of sailors. The Hainanese were among the first 'pioneers' within the Chinese community to move from Bangkok to upcountry areas. Their oldest temples in Paknampho and everywhere north and east of that communication centre are dedicated to Shuiweiniang, the Hainanese deity *par excellence.*[53]

Both Chinese and Indian deities have coexisted and blended into the Thai religious world in a very harmonious manner. In the 1930s, Kenneth Landon observed that Chinese deities – especially Bentougong (Dabaigong), Mazu (Tianhou Shengmu) and Guanyin – and the practice of *fengshui* were 'fairly popular' in Thailand.[54] One scholar has argued that

> the Thai and Chinese are alike . . . in having a belief in spirits through whom the individual may gain protection in times of danger and uncertainty. Often these animistic beliefs appear to be of greater importance in the daily lives of the people than Buddhism itself . . . . [B]oth peoples share a common appreciation and respect for this world of the spirits, and in fact the Chinese have readily adopted certain Thai animistic practices.[55]

A recent study of religious eclecticism among the Chinese in Chiang Mai further confirms the localization and syncretization between popular Chinese religion and

51 John Crawfurd, *Journal of an embassy to the courts of Siam and Cochin China* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967 reprint), p. 106.
52 Ibid., p. 119.
53 G. William Skinner, *Chinese society in Thailand: An analytical history* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 84.
54 Kenneth Perry Landon, *The Chinese in Thailand* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1941), pp. 107–8.
55 Richard J. Coughlin, *Double identity: The Chinese in modern Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 92.

Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. This religious eclecticism also reflects 'an identity-building process that continually reformulates "tradition" for Chinese-identified communities in Chiang Mai'.[56] The common appreciation and respect of mutual religious beliefs and practices is also applicable to the case of Indians and Nepalese in Thailand. Trilok Chandra Majupuria confirms that 'Hinduism and Buddhism flourished side by side so much so that in many cases, the same persons could be indistinguishably the followers of both these pantheons'.[57]

Religious diversity and tolerance were the consequences of urban growth in Siam. Since Chinese and Indian religious practices were 'equally respected by the Siamese', urban Bangkok and Siamese society as a whole were fertile ground for the growth and expansion of Chinese and Indian religious cults in subsequent decades.[58] Siamese joined Chinese and Indian immigrants' religious festivities from time to time and, in turn, immigrants found Theravada Buddhism very familiar because of their own beliefs. In addition, later generations of Chinese and Indians, with their wealth and social connections, proved to be capable supporters of local Buddhist monasteries and lay communities. They sponsored annual Buddhist rites and local festivities while localizing their foreign religious practices, and established themselves as part of their local communities.[59] Therefore, it is possible to assume that the popularity of Chinese and Indian spirit-medium cults such as Guanyin, Brahma and Ganesh has developed out of religious, ethno-cultural assimilation and the growth of urban areas since the early Bangkok period.

The parade of hybrid deities in popular spirit-medium cults

Thai religion since the 1990s has been increasingly hybridized or postmodernized. Moving far away from the conventional interpretations of syncretists, a number of recent studies taking postmodernist stances read the confluences of contemporary Thai popular religion as a system of signification.[60] They no longer discuss the paramount position of Theravada Buddhism in Thai society, nor do they seek to explain changes or persistence within the harmonious blend of diverse religious traditions in the country. Rather, they focus on the body of politics, symbolic power, or marketing and globalizing forces which have shaped popular religious meanings and identities.

J. L. Taylor is among the first scholars to interpret the ongoing religio-political changes in contemporary popular religion as the 'hybridization of Thai Buddhism'. Hybridization does not simply mean the conventional coexistence and tolerance of various religious components, but a temporal moment and site of contestation for spiritual meanings and relevance. Following a postmodernist line of thought, he argues that the rise of civic religious movements – such as Thammakai or the post-1997 economic

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56 Ann Maxwell Hill, 'Tradition, identity and religious eclecticism among Chinese in Thailand', in *Alternate identities: The Chinese of contemporary Thailand*, ed. Tong Chee Kiong and Chan Kwok Bun (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2001), p. 300.
57 Trilok Chandra Majupuria, *Erawan shrine and Brahma worship in Thailand with reference to India & Nepal* (Bangkok: Craftsman Press, 1987), p. 29.
58 The quotation is from ibid., p. 106.
59 See Stephen F. Tobias, 'Buddhism, belonging and detachment – Some paradoxes of Chinese ethnicity in Thailand', *JAS*, 36, 2 (1977): 303–26.
60 See Jackson, 'Enchanting spirit'; Jackson, 'Royal spirits'; and Morris, *In the place of origins*.

crash 'Thais Help Thais' campaign by the monk *Luang Ta* Maha Bua – are 'responses to the wider, largely economic-impersonal forces of globalization that have profound ramifications for Thai social life'.[61]

Besides hybridity, another way to transcribe Thai religious realities since the 1990s is also made possible by a postmodernist lens. Peter Jackson uses the term 'postmoderniz-ation of Thai religion' to refer to current developments in Thai religion, which has already passed out of its 'modern' stage. He argues that the 'modern' phase in Thai religion refers to 'following a path of doctrinal rationalization accompanied by organiza-tional centralization and bureaucratization', whereas the postmodern one is 'character-ized by a resurgence of supernaturalism and an efflorescence of religious expression at the margins of state control, involving a decentralization and localization of religious authority'. Within this religion–capitalism convergence have emerged certain forms and meanings of religious movements based on 'marketized spirituality', 'boom-time prosperity religion' or 'commercialized religiosity'.[62] In other words, religion in con-temporary Thailand has become multi-faceted sites of production and contestation of meanings: it could, among other things, be a commodity, political ideology, marker of identity, marketing machine or object of worship.

Deities and spirits as worshipped in the 'prosperity religious movements' are hierar-chically arranged on the rather unique perceptual and practical terrains of spirit altars in the urban spirit-medium cults. The altar represents the physical and spiritual universes in any shrine; generally called '*hing bucha*' (worship shelf) or '*to khru*' (table for the teacher spirit), it marks sacred boundaries or spaces reserved specifically for ritual pur-poses and separates a certain room or corner of a room in a medium's house from other domestic space. It is normally cut off from profane activities or access by other household members, and it demands respect and ritualized conduct from everyone entering or making an offering before the sacred beings inhabiting the altar. In ritual terms, the area surrounding the altar belongs to the chief spirit, which possesses the medium's body; in practice, however, the human medium has total access and authority to use this space in the name of the spirit. Coming in various shapes and sizes, altars for spirit-medium cults are rather elaborate versions of ordinary household altars, and they are better organized and maintained. They tend to have more statues, icons or pictures of deities with more flowers, incense and other decorations. Most altars use multi-levelled tables for religious worship (*to mu bucha*), which in Thailand are specifically designed for religious worship, as are the shelves where religious icons, statues and other worship objects are placed.

Wo. Cinpradit, a Bangkok-based senior medium and the author of several books on spirit mediumship, popular astrology and Buddhist-animistic beliefs and rituals, classi-fies widely regarded deities in Thai urban spirit-medium cults into five groups: *thep*, *phrom* (Brahma), *chao*, *phi* and *winyan phanechon* (homeless or wandering spirits). *Thep* and *phrom* refer primarily to Hindu gods and goddesses, while *chao* is used to indicate Chinese deities and their rituals, which are connected to the Sino-Thai population. *Phi* in

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61 J. L. Taylor, '(Post-) modernity, remaking tradition and the hybridisation of Thai Buddhism', *Anthro-pological Forum*, 9, 2 (1999): 163–87; and Taylor, 'Embodiment, nation, and religio-politics in Thailand', *SEAR*, 9, 2 (2001): 129–47.
62 Jackson, 'Enchanting spirit', p. 49; on 'commercialized religiosity' see Suwanna Satha-anan, *Ngoen kap satsana* [Money and religion] (Bangkok: Komon Keemthong Foundation, 1994).

this context are benevolent spirits (*phi di*) like ancestral and guardian spirits, while *winyan phanechon* are bad spirits (*phi rai*), such as those who died a violent or untimely death and without proper funerals. These classifications represent a popular understanding which dictates actual beliefs and practices in spirit-medium cults.[63] They nonetheless serve as ideal types to understand the increasingly chaotic practices in the complex terrains of urban and rural/traditional spirit-medium cults; these practices cut across the existing borders of different religious traditions. With the exception of purely bad or harmful spirits, the abovementioned deities in various names and representations have their images, icons or statues in most individual households' or mediums' altars. During my fieldwork in the Northeastern town of Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) and its vicinity, I have usually encountered the following deities arranged on most mediums' altars.[64]

Buddha as the supreme deity

Any discussion of the spirits or deities worshipped in urban spirit-medium cults must begin with the presence of Lord Buddha. Such a statement sounds very strange since Buddha is by no means categorically regarded as a 'spirit' in canonical or official Buddhism. However, in popular beliefs and rituals he is worshipped as the supreme deity, occupying the highest position in both the symbolic and cosmological pyramids of spirit cults. Once removed from its canonical doctrines, 'Buddhism in fact has many gods from local bodisattavas to the Buddha himself.'[65] Majupuria, a Nepalese religious scholar, notes that 'in Thailand, Buddhism is practiced as an amalgamation of animism or belief in spirits and Hinduism'. He also points out that the most important deities in Thailand include Buddha, Brahma, Vishnu and Indra (the last three being designated in Thai as *thewada* [deities living in heaven]).[66] In Thai Buddhist temple halls as well as on spirit-mediums' altars, the Buddha statues must be arranged on the top shelf. They are placed in the highest and most prominent position since Buddha is the symbol of the most powerful Lord in the Thai spiritual world. He is believed to be the deity of deities and the teacher of teachers. Any rituals taking place in the sacred realm of these cults must begin with the recitation of Buddhist prayers, and every medium is strictly required to observe at least five or eight Buddhist precepts.

The most significant point concerning the belief in Buddha as the supreme deity, however, is the fact that no spirit medium has ever claimed to be a human channel for his spirit – it is simply epistemologically and cosmologically impossible. Lord Buddha as a historical person and as a supernatural being has transcended beyond the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). He also has perfect representations in his *Dhamma* and *Sangha*, which are

63 Wo. Cinpradit, *Phithikan waikhru, rup khan, khrop khru* [Rituals of paying homage to teachers' spirits and spirit mediums' initiation] (Bangkok: Central Library Press, n.d.); Wo. Cinpradit, *Khu mu rang song*; see also Anuman Rajadhon, *Life and ritual* for a discussion of the various types of spirits.
64 Marlane Guelden, based on her fieldwork in Southern Thailand, identifies spirit mediums like my informants as 'home-based professional spirit mediums', indicating that they open their spirit shrines and provide services at home, symbolizing their female-gendered domestic religious realm; Guelden, 'Celestial discourse: Female spirit mediums channel gendered communication in modernizing Southern Thailand' (unpublished manuscript).
65 Stewart E. Guthrie, *Faces in the clouds: A new theory of religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 191.
66 Majupuria, *Erawan shrine*, pp. 21 (quotation) and 6 (*thewada*).

considered as sacred entities (*sing saksit*) in their own right; Ishii notes, for example, that 'in Buddhist magic, the source of magic is the *Sangha*'.[67] Human mediums, who are mostly elderly women, occupy far inferior cultural and cosmological positions compared to men within the Buddhist hierarchy, let alone the spirit of Lord Buddha. Even monks can only consider themselves as Buddha's humble disciples and practitioners of his teachings. Therefore, Lord Buddha remains the only deity who has never had a human medium in Thai popular spirit cults.

Spirits of famous Buddhist saints or magic monks

There are many spirits of dead Buddhist saints from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who have appeared or reappeared in contemporary spirit-medium cults. Most are well-known forest monks who attained spiritual perfection and acquired super-natural charisma through years of training; some were even believed to have achieved *arahat*ship.[68] When they were still alive, these monks' magic and amulets were very much sought after by lay believers, especially those from urban areas. In Thai popular religion, humans have lives after death; one's life is transformed into either soul or spirit, depending on one's karmic accumulation. Buddhist monks, with their good karma and charismatic and magical qualities, are believed to reside in Heaven after their death. Their spirits can be propitiated and invited to possess a human medium in order to save their desperate followers.

Along with famed forest monks, Jackson shows how statues, images and various amulets and memorabilia associated with many famous magic monks – living and dead – have been produced and consumed as commodities for the prosperity of religions in the 1990s. They have formed the core of 'marketized religiosity', which has occupied prominent public spaces, media and private spirit shrines. Jackson discusses *Luang Pho* Khun and other famous monks as signifiers of prosperous religion during the boom time. Magic monks' images have also entered the altars of urban spirit-medium cults, the most prominent examples being *Luang Pu* To and *Luang Pu* Waen. Some of the spirits of these monks have even had human mediums, especially those with commercially distributed posthumous biographies.[69]

On the altars in urban spirit-medium cults, images or statues of famous monks are arranged and placed on the second level from the top, one shelf below the image of Buddha, and they are the most revered and worshipped spirits after Buddha. One of the most famous Buddhist saints in the early Bangkok era, Somdet Phra Phuthachan (To Phromrangsi, 1788–1872) was a native of Ayudhaya who was ordained under King Rama I's royal patronage at the age of 20 and served in the monkhood until his death 64 years

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67 Ishii, *Sangha, state, and society*, p. 29.

68 'Forest monks' and 'magic monks' are not exactly the same, but the two categories closely overlap. The first term primarily refers to forest-dwelling monks (*aranyawasi*), as distinct from city/village-dwelling monks (*khamawasi*). They are generally regarded for their strict meditation training and practice and are believed to have acquired a high quality of mind perfection (*barami*) and to possess supernatural knowledge and skills such as invulnerability. Some of them have become practitioners of magic or supernaturalism, and with the rapid commercialization of Thai Buddhism in recent decades, many are now considered as 'magic monks' (*kechi achan*), a term which in its current usage simply refers to any monk involved in the use of magic for commercial purposes.

69 See Jackson, 'Royal spirits'.

later. In spirit-medium cults, it is widely believed that *Luang Pu* To was reborn in heaven as a *thep* and that his spirit comes down to possess a body to help human beings. Remembered as a highly charismatic and intellectually renowned monk, he is also popular in amulet cults; his amulets are 'the most sacred of all auspicious materials and his magical spells (*katha*) are the most recited religious verses'.[70]

Aunt Khamthong, 42, who has been a medium for the spirit of *Luang Pu* To since 1981, revealed that when this spirit came to possess her body, she made three requests: 'I begged him to refrain from doing three things: (1) writing the *Khom* (ancient Khmer) script; (2) taking notes on any subject; and (3) relating his own life story since it is already well known to the public. This request saves the medium much energy and time'.[71] How well or accurately this medium knows the history and works of this famous Buddhist saint is not the point. She pays less attention to the life history or background of *Luang Pu* To as a once-living Buddhist monk, but nonetheless performs rituals and manipulates magic in his name at her shrine. It can be suggested that the mediums and their followers wish only to utilize the spirits' supernatural power and miracles; the objective knowledge of them as historical persons or legends means fairly little compared to the strong faith and desire for miracles.

Indian gods and goddesses

The worship of Brahma and other Hindu gods and goddesses at the famous Erawan Shrine in Bangkok is a clear example of the influential place of Indian deities in Thai popular religion. The most popular of these deities worshipped in urban spirit-medium cults are Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu, Indra, Ganesh, Laxmi and Kali. Locally known as '*chao Khaek*' ('Indian lord/spirit') or '*thep*', they are considered to belong to the class of *thewada*. These syncretized versions of Brahmanist or Hinduist tradition originally came via Indian traders, religious teachers and migrants in the broader context of Indianization. Two possible channels for the spread of Indian religious traditions among the contemporary Thai population are (1) the model of royal ceremonies and Brahmanistic practices and (2) the Indian migrant communities throughout the country. In urban spirit-medium cults, icons of Indian deities are usually placed a level below the shelves for Buddha and Buddhist monks. Since each possesses a clear identity and personality, his or her human channel has maintained a tradition of distinctive dress and behaviour, especially during the annual ceremony for teachers to pay homage to spirits. Colourful attire, Indian music and speaking in tongues during the trance or spirit possession are the physical components, identifying the spiritual and personal attachment of mediums or followers of these deities.

Indra (known to the Thai as Phra In) is one of the creator gods in Hindu cosmology. He lives in heaven and is the god who generates rain and fights Mara, who causes drought and darkness; after killing Mara, he returns rain and light to the earth. In Hindu

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70 Wanlapha Khwanyun, 'Latthi phithi bucha Somdet To Wat Rakhang' [The cult worshipping Somdet To Wat Rakhang], *Sinlapa Watthanatham* [Art and Culture] (henceforth *SW*), 15, 4 (1994): 160. For *Luang Pu* To's biography see *Yot phra kan Tripitaka* [The best collection of mantras from the *Tripitaka*] (Bangkok: Metta Press, 1995).
71 Interview, Aunt Kham Thong, 14 July 1996.

mythology, Indra is also the god of war.[72] Phra In, in Thai popular belief, relates to the image of a rain-making god; people worship him primarily for the fertility generated by rainwater, which is crucial to their traditional system of agriculture. The worship of Phra In in this way has changed considerably in modern urban spirit-medium cults, the majority of whose members are city-dwellers and do not engage in agriculture. In urban cults, people believe that he comes down to the earth to help people who suffer and struggle in day-to-day life. His supernatural power enables him to help his followers in various ways, such as winning the lottery or prospering in business, reuniting a happy family, or being cured of serious illness. Through the magical expertise of mediums, Phra In's power as it appears in Hindu cosmology is transformed into specific practices; in the cults, he is a deity who demands proper worship and offerings.

Chinese deities

The most popular Chinese deities found in urban spirit-medium cults include Guanyin (Kuan Im in Thai), Mazu and Bentougong. The popularity of these deities not only indicates the integration of people of Chinese descent into the Thai socioeconomic structure since the Second World War, but also points to the rise of specifically Sino-Thai sociocultural identities. On urban spirit altars, the images and statues of Chinese deities – especially Guanyin – are usually arranged on the shelf below the Indian gods, indicating the inferior status of females and the relatively late integration of Chinese religious components into the larger Thai religious system. In an article dealing with the Guanyin cult, Nithi Aeusrivongse suggests that its wide-scale popularity among the urban Sino-Thai middle class is linked more to moral than to political or economic aspects of life as experienced by urban dwellers.[73] By establishing some religious restrictions for its followers (observation of Buddhist basic precepts, strict vegetarianism and merit-making with monks), the cult provides moral and ethical practices for achieving success in life and solving hardships and difficulties. Guanyin is well known for her compassion and kindness and is believed to help her followers to prosper in business.

The Guanyin cult in Thailand has been transformed from an imported religious element into a Thai syncretized cult, incorporating elements of indigenous animism and Buddhist amulet cults. In Mahayana Buddhism, Guanyin has the double status of goddess and *Bodhisattva*. The fact that she derives from both Mahayana and Chinese folk religion makes these beliefs very compatible with the Thai religious terrain. Recently, Guanyin statues have been placed inside many Theravada temples in Thailand.[74] Worshipped at altars in private homes or businesses and through spirit-medium cults, she is among the most popular deities and draws a large number of mediums around the country, predominantly women of Sino-Thai origin. Many senior mediums have even opened spirit shrines for their desperate disciples. During an 'annual paying homage to

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72 Jiraphat Praphatwitthaya, 'Khwam samphan rawang satsana Phut kap satsana Phram' [The relation-ship between Buddhism and Brahmanism], *SW*, 13, 9 (1992): 96–117. Mara refers to 'the embodiment of evil'; Richard B. Davis, *Muang metaphysics: A study of Northern Thai myth and ritual* (Bangkok: Pandora, 1984), p. 223.

73 Nithi Aeusiwong [Nithi Aeusrivongse], 'Latthi phithi Chao Mae Kwan Im' [The cult of Guanyin], *SW*, 15, 10 (1994): 79–106.

74 Ibid., p. 85.

teachers' ritual in 1996 in Bangkok, I met three Guanyin mediums from different provinces (Krabi, Nakhon Sawan and Nakhon Ratchasima); they claimed that different versions of Guanyin possess their bodies and use them as human mouthpieces.

The most prominent and famous Guanyin shrine (*tamnak*) is located in Bangkok's Lad Phrao district; constructed in 1983, it is reported to have cost 40 million *baht*, all donated by followers. The shrine is a luxurious and well-designed building with a number of statues of Guanyin and other figures from Chinese mythology located around the compound. This particular cult is led by Waraphon Lertrungsri, a medium and *bhikkuni* (female monk) who was ordained (in the Mahayana tradition) and trained in Taiwan; under her leadership, it has been extremely popular among members of Bangkok's middle class.[75]

Royal spirits

Rosalind Morris reports that in Northern Thai spirit cults there are mediums who claim to be the mouthpieces of royal spirits, especially great kings from the nation-state's historical records like Ramkhamhaeng, Naresuan, Taksin and Chulalongkorn.[76] Some prominent princes and princesses whose names and reputations have registered a lasting place in the public memory in national monuments, school textbooks or national holidays have also made their way into these cults. Among them are Prince Chumporn, Chulalongkorn's son and the father of the Thai Royal Navy; Queen Sunantha, Chulalongkorn's wife, who was drowned in a boating accident in Ayudhaya; and the media-promoted Princess Phra Suphankanlaya, the elder sister of the sixteenth-century King Naresuan and Queen Suriyothai. The status of these royal spirits in urban cults varies from being the chief spirit of one medium's shrine to being completely absent from another's. The spirits of the great kings are usually revered and placed above the princes and others of lower rank.

The oldest son of King Mongkut, Chulalongkorn, ruled Siam from 1868 to 1910. He led the kingdom through a time of political crisis, especially the threat of Western colonization, and is seen by many Thai and foreign scholars as the founder of the modern state of Siam. In the 1990s, more than eighty years after his death, he became one of the most popular spirits in Thai urban-based cults. Chulalongkorn's cult probably represents the first time that there has been a spirit originating as a historical figure who is accessible to the general public without any formal regulation of ritual and worship; Nithi argues that conscious knowledge of him as a historical person is in fact essential to the cults.[77]

Aunt Sai, 71, a medium for Chulalongkorn's spirit in Khorat, believes that

> All Thai kings are descended from Vishnu [the Hindu god of creation, called Phra Narai in Thai]. King Rama V [Chulalongkorn] was reborn as a god in heaven after his death. He is a *thep*, not a mere spirit. *Thep* also follow Buddha's teachings; I can tell this from the fact that the reigning King has to pay homage to a Buddhist monk. King Rama V modernized our

75 Phonpiya Khwanbunchan, 'Latthi phithi Chao Mae Kwan Im' [The cult of Guanyin] (B.A. thesis, Silapakorn University, 1994). Since Theravada no longer has female ordination, several Thai women have chosen to be ordained as Mahayana *bhikkuni*.
76 Morris, *In the place of origins*, p. 164.
77 Nithi Aeusiwong [Nithi Aeusrivongse], 'Latthi phithi Sadet Pho Ro. Ha' [The cult of King Rama V], *SW*, 14, 10 (1993): 83.

country when he was alive. He introduced schools, the railroad, cars, etc.; he also founded the military academy, colleges, etc. He is 'the great king'. At the present time, our country is struggling; we have so many problems, so the spirit of King Rama V cannot rest in peace. He has to come down to earth and help people [by possessing a human medium].[78]

Swearer believes that this nostalgic feeling – shared by many Thais – underlines the emergence of the cult, arguing that '[p]rimarily . . . [it] seems to reflect a nostalgia for the early days of the twentieth century when . . . the monarchy was strong, the country relatively prosperous, and traditional values informed the progress of modernization'.[79]

Like deities in other cults, Chulalongkorn is widely recognized and popular because of his reputation as a charismatic king during his lifetime and because of miracles attributed to his spirit. People believe that with proper worship, this spirit will reward them in various forms, such as a profitable business, good health, and a happy family. Wandee, a Bangkok medium, relates her spiritual encounter with the spirit of the great king as follows:

> One night, after my daily chanting session, when I was deep in my meditation practice before the family altar, the spirit of the Father [*Sadet Pho*] appeared to my mind. He came out of the altar. He was surrounded by an aura of sacredness. He gave a little smile. 'Why have you come here, Father?' I asked with great respect in my voice. 'I want to stay with you and help you', said the spirit. Suddenly the spirit came to possess my body while I was meditating. After that moment, my illness disappeared and my business [selling curtains and running a drapery installation service] improved steadily.[80]

Local guardian and other tutelary spirits

The last group of spirits on most mediums' altars is comprised of local guardian and other tutelary spirits, which are subsumed under the categories of '*chao pho, chao mae*' (godfather and godmother spirits). They represent original local animistic elements in the cults, and most of them do not have icons or images on the altars, except for those who occupy a place in official history, such as Thao Suranari in Khorat, King Mengrai and Queen Chammathevi in the North, and *Chao Mae* Limkoniew in the South.[81]

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78 Interview, Aunt Sai, 14 June 1995.

79 Swearer, *Buddhist world*, p. 104.

80 Mahalap, *Poet pratu tamnak song* [Inside the spirit shrines] (Bangkok: Than Tawan Books, 1995). King Chulalongkorn is widely known in the cult as 'father' (*Sadet Pho* or *Pa*), which indicates how closely the Thai regard their great king and how influential he was, and still is, on popular thinking and religious tradition.

81 On Thao Suranari see Charles F. Keyes, 'National heroine or local spirit? The struggle over memory in the case of Thao Suranari of Nakhon Ratchasima', in Tanabe and Keyes ed., *Cultural crisis and social memory*, pp. 113–36; and Suriya Smutkupt *et al.*, *Song chao khao phi: Watthakam lae wikhrit khong khwamthansamai nai sangkhom Thai* [Spirit-medium cult discourses and crises of modernity in Thailand] (Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhon Anthropology Center, 1996). The Northern Thai figures are discussed in Rosalind Morris, 'The empress's new clothes: Dressing and redressing modernity in northern Thai spirit mediumship', in *The transformative power of cloth in Southeast Asia*, ed. Lynne Milgram and Penny Van Esterik (Montreal: Canadian Asian Studies Association, 1994), pp. 53–74; Morris, *In the place of origins*; and Shalardchai Ramitanondh, *Phi chaonai* [Spirits of the lords] (Bangkok: Phayab Offset Print, 1984).

Most guardian spirits belong to or are associated with the local *lak muang* (city pillar) shrines, which every village, town or city in Thailand is required to build and maintain. Other tutelary spirits found in urban cults are those of children, sacred animals, forests or local sacred geographical sites. The presence of local guardian and tutelary spirits in these cults should augur well for the permutation of traditional animism and supernaturalism in the context of current trends in Thai popular religion. Whether it is called syncretization or hybridization, the localization of popular religion has always been there; spirits of local domains have never been excluded from contributing to the ongoing evolution of the Thai religious system.

Thao Suranari (widely known as Ya [Lady] Mo) is a historical figure who has become the most popular spirit in Khorat. Her legend is inscribed at the base of a monument erected in her honour in the town centre:

> In 1826, King Anuvong [of the Lao kingdom of Vientiane] rebelled against Bangkok and led the Lao army to seize Nakhon Ratchasima. The people of Nakhon Ratchasima and their families were forced to resettle in Laos. On their way to Vientiane, when they reached Thung Samrit, Ya Mo led the Khorat groups in revolt against the Lao army. They won, the Lao army lost, and King Anuwong was eventually captured by the Siamese army from Bangkok. Since then, Ya Mo has been known as a heroine who saved the city of Nakhon Ratchasima from the enemy. King Rama III promoted her to the rank of 'Thao Suranari'.

This version of Ya Mo's life history is condensed from a detailed record in the *Bangkok Chronicle* written by *Chao Phraya* Thipakorawong. Her presence in the Khorat cultural landscape is quite problematic and has become controversial in Thailand's recent historiography, thanks to the book *Politics in the Thao Suranari monument* by Saipin Kaew-ngamprasert. Reviewing the March 1996 demonstration against Saipin and Matichon Press, the publisher of the book, Charles Keyes argues that Ya Mo, in popular belief as well as in Thai official discourse, has been re-invented as a core element of Khorat people's identity and, in the process, has become a major figure in spirit-medium cults.[82] In other words, she has been created and represented in modern Thailand's cultural politics and nationalism.

Ya Mo's spirit is very dominant in the Khorat cults: there are more than 20 mediums in downtown Khorat alone who claim that she comes to possess their bodies.[83] It can be said that the economy, politics and local culture of downtown Khorat are organized around the legend and rituals pertaining to Ya Mo, and an annual fair is held during the last week of March every year to celebrate and remember her victory against the Lao army. Needless to say, there are a number of businesses operating around the monument, as it is situated in the business centre of the town, including amulet traders, *phleng Khorat* folksong troupes, and vendors selling offerings.[84]

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82 Keyes, 'National heroine'; see Saipin Kaew-ngamprasert, *Kanmuang nai anusawari Thao Suranari* [Politics in the Thao Suranari Monument] (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1995).
83 Interview, Aunt Toi, 45, 14 Aug. 1996.
84 *Phleng Khorat* is a genre of folksong which features pairs of male and female singers exchanging impromptu compositions. It is believed that this kind of song is Ya Mo's favorite entertainment; when people pay homage to her, a troupe of *phleng Khorat* singers is usually hired to perform. There are troupes for hire available in business compounds around the monument.

The abovementioned are among the most widely worshipped spirits and can be found on most altars in urban cults. From my observation in Khorat, the hierarchy of spirits and their respective positions on the altar are based on state-power legitimation, class and gender. The statue of Buddha is always positioned at the top, since he is regarded as the supreme deity in Thai religious cosmology and since Buddhism is the country's state-sponsored religion and has traditionally formed its sociocultural foundation. Below the statue of Buddha are those of Buddhist saints, male Indian and Chinese deities and royal spirits; these male deities are positioned higher than female deities like Guanyin, Uma or Kali. The bottom of the altar is the usual place for tutelary local spirits and other minor spirits, while flowers, incense, candles and offerings are placed in vases or other proper containers on the floor. Spirit altars in their symbolic and physical sense bring together deities from diverse backgrounds and origins; the altar is the sacred site where the religious hybridization of popular beliefs actually takes its concrete, collective form.

Conclusion: The subtle hybridization of Thai popular religion

The conventional syncretistic approach seems to be inadequate when it comes to the emergence of urban spirit-medium cults in Thai religion. Syncretism implies something contentious, unauthenticated and impure.[85] As shown in the parade of deities worshipped in the cults, the icons and statues on the altars of spirit shrines demonstrate diversified and stratified orders of hybrid religious beliefs and practices. The collection of icons, images and statues on the same altars symbolizes both emerging hybrid religious beliefs and practices and a call for students of Thai religion to revise the analytical model. It is suggested here that the hybridist approach could serve as an alternative model for the study of Thai religion in the new millennium. Since the 1990s, the hybridization of Thai popular religion has been both visible and subtle. It is visible because religiosity has expanded beyond its confined conventional spaces (temples) into the mass media and the marketplace, becoming 'prosperity religion' or 'commercialized religiosity' with symbolic and direct aims to bless the worldly desires guided by capitalist logic. As Jackson notes in his study of the cult of *Luang Pho* Khun, 'we must even look outside the monastery, to department stores, shopping malls, and market-places, for it is in these locations that contemporary forms of Thai religiosity are now most visibly expressed, where popular Thai religion is commodified, packaged, marketed, and consumed'.[86]

The hybridizarion of contemporary Thai religion is subtle because the practices of Thai religious beliefs have turned to the discipline technologies and the politics of body and soul in order to produce a new sense of religiosity underneath what seems to be the authority and surveillance of state-sponsored Buddhism.[87] Hybridization has taken place

85 Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, 'Introduction: Problematizing syncretism', in *Syncretism/ anti-syncretism: The politics of religious synthesis*, ed. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.
86 Jackson, 'Enchanting spirit', p. 50.
87 The term 'discipline technologies' is informed by Foucault's notion of the 'technology of power', whereby technology is used as a tool to restrict, control and dominate; it is turned into a means to exercise power and to dictate the will of the subject. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punishment: The birth of the prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977) and Foucault, *Power/knowledge*. In Thai urban spirit-medium cults and popular Buddhism, practitioners utilize new audio-visual devices, fantastic attire and restrictions on their diet, activities and other private behaviour as part of the teaching and ritual process.

in bits and pieces as its momentum has accumulated behind the scenes. Many substantial changes have gone unnoticed in places like spirit-medium cults, while most public attention has focused on major reform movements like Thammakai or Santi Asoke. The hybridization of Thai religious beliefs and practices has strong foundations in the cults which have been flourishing in cities and towns throughout the country. It takes place among the broader population beyond the authoritarian gaze and control of the state and the *Sangha*.

Hybridization through the rise of spirit-medium cults can be characterized by taking into consideration the following features. First, these cults along with other prosperity religious forms could be read as complex signifiers and products of interaction between religion and the formal and informal market economy. It is the hybridization taking place in the 'betwixt and between spaces', where several religious faiths come together and where popular concerns over the impact of the market economy are channelled. This religious hybridity is what Richard Roberts explains as 'new synergies of various forms of "prosperity religion" which may lend substance to claims to speak of a "new spirit of capitalism"'.[88]

Second, beliefs in collective deities have become hybridized through the commodification and consumption of religious symbols, for the other side of hybridization is commodification: icons, images and statues of deities in the spirit-medium cults are among the religious goods in the Thai marketplace. The commercialization of Thai religion has been very conspicuous, especially in financial terms. In December 1995, the research unit of Thai Farmers' Bank stated that spirit-medium shrines exist in almost every community around the country, especially in urban areas. It estimated that Thai people from various socioeconomic backgrounds spend more than 20 billion *baht* ($800 million at that time) a year for mediums' services.[89]

Third, religious hybridization in the realm of urban spirit-medium cults has been fostered through symbolic and practical deterritorialization among religious components. The harmonious coexistence of deities from diverse religious traditions, ranging from Buddha to local and royal spirits, indicates a degree of transgression of the existing religious hierarchy and order. In this case, the blurring of distinctions between court and folk religious traditions or between official/doctrinal and popular Buddhism is particularly apparent.

Fourth, hybridization implies fragmentation of dominant religious components, in this case state-sponsored Buddhism and the moral authority of the *Sangha*. With the decline of the latter's centralized authority, numerous versions of religious practices (including reformist Buddhist movements) have appeared, especially in urban or suburban areas. William Callahan describes these fragmented and hybridized beliefs as occult practices which:

> coexist with Buddhism, Brahmanism, and the local religions. The more orthodox official
> rituals and the Buddhist Law of Karma are criss-crossed with the spiritual services which

88 Richard H. Roberts, 'Introduction: Religion and capitalism – a new convergence?', in *Religion and the transformations of capitalism: Comparative approaches*, ed. Richard H. Roberts (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.
89 *Matichon Daily*, 23 Dec. 1995.

aim to determine and often circumvent one's fate: astrology, numerology, naming, *fengshui*, horoscopes, palm reading, psychic prediction, and spirit consulting are among the methods used.[90]

Fifth, the hybridization of Thai religion over the past three or four decades has been facilitated by a high degree of urban expansion and demographic mobility. Garcia Canclini argues convincingly that 'urban expansion is one of the causes that intensified cultural hybridization'.[91] The sense of displacement, frustration and helplessness among the urban population often leads them to seek spiritual sanctuary through the worship of hybrid deities and their mediums. 'The "superstitions" of astrology are certainly not limited to traditional village life. The more Thailand modernizes and the economy rationalizes, the more people are displaced – spiritually as well as socially and geographically'.[92] Dhepanom Muangman, a medical doctor and long-time observer of spirit cults and psychic practices in Thailand, confirms that 'people nowadays feel empty inside, and this makes them easy prey for those who have turned spiritualism into big business'.[93]

Sixth, the mass media is the most decisive catalyst for religious hybridization. The heavy religious content and coverage in the popular media have shaped the public's beliefs and practices in the direction of a more prosperity-oriented religion. The popular media, especially mass-circulation daily newspapers (*Thai Rath, Daily News, Khao Sod*), weekly or monthly periodicals (*Maha Lap, Lok Thip*) or some popular television shows, have run content such as commercial biographies of popular magic monks, astrologers or spirit mediums; famous amulets; or tips for winning lottery numbers. This media coverage performs the double function of encouraging the hybridization of beliefs and serving as virtual sites of religious hybridity where public attention and the desire for luck, wealth, good health and a happy life are put in juxtaposition to people's common religious experience and imagination.

Finally, hybridization has been made increasingly visible and had a far-reaching impact on contemporary Thailand because its process and goals are subject to open interpretation and contestation of meanings. Robert Young suggests that 'there is no single, or correct, concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes'.[94] This is always true in the case of religious hybridization in present-day Thailand. While spirit medium and other supernatural cults have achieved considerable popularity by offering services intended to ensure luck, wealth, good health and happiness for their clients, Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), a highly revered scholar-monk, argues that these hybrid beliefs are unethical and go against Buddha's teachings:

> [It is] . . . a waste of time to debate such fruitless questions as whether or not spirits or supernatural powers exist. For Buddhism believes that it is only through one's efforts that one can learn to rise above greed, anger, and delusion. Buddha himself never displayed any

90 William A. Callahan, *Imagining democracy: Reading 'the events of May' in Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), p. 11.
91 Nestor Garcia Canclini, 'Hybrid cultures, oblique power', in *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 488.
92 Callahan, *Imagining democracy*, p. 11.
93 Quoted in Sanitsuda, *Keeping the faith*, p. 36.
94 Young, *Colonial desire*, p. 27.

supernatural powers to help anybody because it would have encouraged dependency and foster the weakness in the mind of the person in question.[95]

In contrast, Jackson argues that 'the commodification of religion that accompanied the boom years was not a symptom of cultural collapse, as many doctrinalist Buddhist critics in Thailand have contended, but rather became the productive core of a new, highly popular expression of religio-cultural symbolism and ritual'.[96]

Given these contestations and debates concerning religious hybridization in Thailand, there have been and always will be endless contested explanations and visions of religious meanings. Amid the urban spirit-medium cults and the wide spread of supernaturalism, the contestation of discourses to justify and control religious spaces will become truly open fields within the capitalist cosmopolitan politics and civic sentiments in contemporary Thailand. These features suggest that a model of religious syncretism in the study of Thai religion has been left behind by fast-track, cut-and-paste postmodernizing realities. The hybridization of Thai popular religion may imply a superficial homogenization, but I would suggest instead that it is the historical and cultural 'magic of tolerance', coupled with the fertile ground of a cosmopolitan life-style and irresistible desires corresponding to the resurgent spirit of global capitalism, that makes the notion of religious hybridity appropriately relevant and meaningful in contemporary Thailand.

95 Quoted in Sanitsuda, *Keeping the faith*, p. 6.
96 Jackson, 'Royal spirits', p. 248.