Celestial Discourse: Female Spirit Mediums Channel
Gendered Communication in Modernizing Southern Thailand

Gods and spirits have come to Thailand in unprecedented numbers to help the country during economic and social crises, according to numerous spirits and their home-based mediums (khon song or raang song). The two most crucial issues facing women in the far South are black magic curses and losing husbands to mistresses. The possessing spirits appear to be both conservative in their family values and yet liberal in supporting women’s grievances. Spirits advise wives to complain less and keep a tidy house. But they also support women in negotiating their relationships by providing spiritual aids to make a husband gentler and less stingy and by tying his heart to the spouse and removing black magic from his body. Although political opinions are not a central part of the medium’s practice in the South, when asked about difficulties facing the country, several spirits spoke for the underprivileged. They condemned the greed and consumerism of modern capitalist society and considered politicians as part of the problem, voicing what appear to be commonly held working-class views. Whether one believes the words are from celestial beings or from their human mounts, I would argue the messages are significant voices from the South.

The following conversation is an example. This is an interview with a spirit named To! Ni, a male Muslim religious leader who lived three centuries ago. It took place in a female medium’s home in Pattani on August 2001. The discussion is about a significant problem for wives -- their husbands’ mistresses or minor wives (mia noi).

Marlane’s Question to To! Ni. If a woman has children, is it important that she stay with her (unfaithful) husband?

Spirit To! Ni. In that case it depends on whether that man is good or not. If he is not good, she doesn’t have to stay with him. It is depends on the man.

Question. Can women live on their own nowadays in Thailand? A woman with children, can she live on her own?

Spirit To! Ni. Yes. She can stay on her own. Nowadays women are working, but men are rarely working. In the past, women were stupid (ngoo), but now women are clever (chalaat)....

Question. What did you advise the woman who visited you today (whose boyfriend is hexed by another woman)?

Spirit To! Ni. Ahhh. I recommended for her to do everything normally. Take care of her boyfriend. In the case of a separation with a husband, I tell the wife to go back and do everything normally. Don’t complain loudly (wooi waai). Don’t talk. The husband will think that you complain about him too much.

The spirit’s advice both recognizes the economic independence of many contemporary women and yet supports the traditional gender role of the obedient "good wife" influenced by Islam (Nakamura, et al 2001) and Buddhism (Yoddumnern-Attig 1992). The spirit, speaking through the mouth of its human vehicle, answers the specific problems of the largely female clientele who need assistance in fighting evil magic, holding onto husbands and boyfriends,
curing chronic illness, and prospering during Thailand’s rocky transition to an industrialized
global economy. Similar to shamanesses in Japan, Thai mediums also "...deliver subtle
commentaries on gender relations and the manifold anxieties of late capitalist culture"
(Schattschneider quoted in Comaroff 1994: 306). Such political metacommentaries and plural
reflexivity are part of liminal possession observed in various cultures (Boddy 1989, Kapferer

This paper explores the gendered nature of these otherworldly conversations. I suggest that
the medium’s uniquely created, domestic sacred space provides clients with a protected
environment for releasing anger and fears and for obtaining spiritual strategies for resistance and
survival. Female mediums, in combination with their spirits, have developed a gendered
epistemology, a knowledge of the world that at times challenges Thai cultural concepts of proper
gender relations while not straying too far from accepted local values and responsibilities.

However, it would not be wise to romanticize these relationships or consider them ideal
sisterhoods, as there are differences and hegemonic behavior among women (see di Leonardo
1991 and Moore 1988). Female mediums themselves criticize other mediums for being
fraudulent -- taking advantage of impoverished and desperate clients by giving only ineffective
cures and charging too much. Also the spirit’s voice is often not female, but the male voice of
authority -- a stern, authoritative elite male, who inspires awe and fear, tempered with kindness.

Research was conducted over 20 months from Oct 2000 to May 2002 for a Ph.D. in
anthropology from the University of Hawai‘i. The research site focused primarily on Pattani and
Songkhla provinces but extended to the eight far southern provinces including Phuket, Trang,
Phatthalung, Pattani, Satun, Yala and Narathiwat. The doctoral dissertation in progress will
compare four types of mediumship in the South. Interviews were conducted with more than 100
persons including spirit mediums, their assistants and clients, temple committee members,
monks, government officials and university professors. This research was also informed by
interviews of spirit mediums in Bangkok and Phuket in 1989-90 (Guelden 1995).

Due to the unusual nature of possession, where two identities occupy one body, separate
question guides were developed for the medium and the spirit. Standpoint feminist epistemology
was employed with female mediums and their female clients to understand their gendered
experiences, while taking into account differences in class, ethnicity and age (Tanesini 1999: 142,
145). For this study, a spirit medium is defined as someone whose body is temporarily taken over
by a spirit so the human’s personality disappears, while the spirit asserts its self through the
medium’s voice, body posture, and actions. When the spirit leaves, the medium regains
consciousness and is unaware of what has transpired and must ask an assistant. The spirits in
Thailand include famous royal personalities in Thai history particularly deceased kings, Buddhist
monks, Muslim holy men, Chinese and Hindu foreign deities and local tutelary spirits.

This research paper discusses one type of mediumship which I call home-based professional
 mediums. They are particularly prevalent in cities and approximately 80% or more are female.
Likewise their clientele is mostly female. Considering the high numbers of females involved, I
would suggest that a thorough gender analysis of mediums and clients has been neglected.
Researchers in anthropology and political science have recognized that in the past gender has been
"under theorized" and often ignored in the literature on Southeast Asia (Jackson and Cook 1999,
Stivens 1991, P. Van Esterik 1999: 275). This is despite the fact that femininities and
masculinities are constructed at every level of society (Stivens 1991: 1). Western research on Southeast Asia has assumed that power resides with the state based on gendered theoretical dichotomies, such as the division between male public domain and female private domain, rather than in social relationships (Young 1991). As Stivens (1991: 2) writes, "This vision of women as relegated to a private sphere as feeders and breeders means that women can be excluded from the 'public.'" But home-based mediums blur the theoretical lines between private and public. They exist in both arenas, having converted part of their homes to shrines to serve the walk-in public, referred by word-of-mouth.

Dr. Walter Irvine (1982) first noted the existence of these new style professional mediums in Chiang Mai in the late 1970s when Thailand was undergoing early capitalist development. He argued persuasively that their emergence was due to the transition from an agricultural based to an industrialized society. With the development of rural land, communities fragmented and villagers migrated to cities looking for jobs. They left behind village guardian and heredity spirits and found new spiritual sustenance with urban professional mediums who accepted donations for services. At the same time, anthropologists noticed a decline in traditional village mediums -- older females possessed by matrilineal spirits who tied communities together spiritually (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984). Although village mediums dealt largely with medical issues, city mediums concentrated more on capitalist consumer needs, according to Irvine.

The phenomenon is no longer new, as some of the mediums interviewed in the South have been practicing for 20 years and more. Although southern Thailand displays regional differences in mediumship, the phenomenon is spread throughout the country. Studies have been done on the North especially in Chiang Mai (Irvine 1982, Morris 1994ab, 2000, Tanabe 1996), Northeast (Pattana 1999), Bangkok (White 1999), Center (Rataporn 2000) and Phuket in the South (Cohen 2001).

The woman-centered religiosity of home-based mediumship contrasts with other southern traditions of possession and with state sponsored Theravada Buddhism, all of which restrict women's roles. Thailand is largely a Buddhist country with an estimated 95% of the population professing Buddhism predominantly of the Theravada sect. Although historically Buddhism legitimized Thai dynastic rule and later unified the new nation, the state sponsored religion has suffered setbacks from monastic scandals and capitalist commercialism, causing some academics to question its relevance in the postmodern society (Jackson 1997, 1999; Keyes 1999). Additional challenges have come from females who have become well-known Buddhist meditation masters, joined all female nunneries, and fought to be ordained on par with monks (Kabilsingh 1991, Sanitsuda 2002, J. Van Esterik 1996).

Home-based mediums also appear to challenge established religious hierarchies by providing a direct link to the divine, bypassing official religious intermediaries. Yet all mediums interviewed said they were loyal Buddhists (see White 1999: 9) or Muslims. Nevertheless, their practices have been strongly criticized as superstitious, backward, deceptive, and in violation of scriptures by social critics, Buddhist scholars and Muslim reformers. Jackson (1989) has argued that some popular Buddhist monks and spirit mediums are viewed as a threat to the state because of their uncontrollable spiritual practices, outside the government religious structure. According to Comaroff (1994: 309), worldwide these types of cults are "inherently subversive" because they question the basis of the state. There are a few exceptions -- today some countries, such as Korea and the Philippines, are changing their stance and elevating mediums and spiritualists to be
national treasures. They are viewed as survivals of past eras, representing the original culture before corrupting Western influences invaded.

I would suggest that a major paradigm shift is occurring in the understanding of possession as academics explore both the macro level of the nation-state and the micro level of grounded experiences. The new thinking, articulated by theoretical pioneer Kalpana Ram (2001), argues that possession reflects the lived experiences of women within patriarchal systems and can only be understood by listening to women in their self-defined religious contexts. Applying Merlau-Ponty and Bourdieu, this approach challenges the dominant social science theories of objectivism and social functionalism. She argues for a change of analysis that discards Western positivist views, including Freudian psychoanalysis used by Obeyesekere and others (Ram 2002: 184-185), which distorted the personal experiences of lower-class female mediums. The key to her analysis is phenomenology, which looks to the everyday experiences and perceptions of mediums themselves. Following the approach by Ram and similar views by Boddy (1989), my research puts emphasis on listening and understanding the messages of spirits, mediums and their entourages. In that vein, I will describe two mediums of different faiths and their views.

**Two Thai mediums: Muslim and Buddhist.**

These two female mediums were rather typical of practitioners I interviewed in small southern cities, who had elementary or secondary educations and were lower-class and lower middle-class. While the two professed different faiths -- Buddhism and Islam -- they had a great deal in common. Both were born and work in Pattani and had been possessed for five and six years by spirits of the opposite sex -- powerful and saintly male figures. Such cross-gender possession is common, particularly among female mediums, throughout Thailand (Morris 1994b, Peut Pratuu Tamnag Song 1995).

The Buddhist medium might be considered culturally as a "good daughter" in following her family's matrilineal tradition of possession and still living at home, although married with a small child. Meanwhile the Muslim medium might be considered a "good mother" as she juggles the needs of a large family in which she is the primary income earner. These women are possessed while surrounded by family members and their children.

Mediumship is the primary occupation of both. It has brought a modest to significant income to their families, particularly for the Muslim medium who has gained a higher standard of living in the last few years. Each has a small residential practice serving three to ten persons a day. These mediums might be considered the younger generation as one is 21 years of age and the other is 35. Their spirits showed compassion for clients, listening to worries and complaints with attention and sympathy. The spirits were always ready with rapid diagnoses and confident cures, and maybe with a gentle humorous reprimand for improvement in the client’s behavior. After a few initial moments of uncertainty, female clients told their stories, elaborating on the unjust aspects of their lives. In the room, other clients would sit farther back and politely eavesdrop or whisper to each other while waiting their turns. Altar rooms doubled as family rooms, where sacred and secular space overlap. Commonly children played, sometimes shouting and running about until gently quieted by adults.

These two mediums and their spirits are staunch supporters of their "world" religions. In a demonstration of religious faith, their spirits will not possess on holy days -- for Buddhists that is wan phra, four times a month, and for Muslims that is on Fridays when many go to mosques to
pray (pai lamaat). The mediums make merit (tham bun), a Thai Buddhist term used by both mediums, by contributing to the local mosques and temples, in addition to giving sermons to clients on moral behavior. This strong religious self-identification is expressed linguistically as Buddhists literally call themselves person-Buddhist (khon phut), and Muslims call themselves person-Islam or person-Muslim (khon islaam or khon musalim) which stands for both their religion and ethnicity. Next I will elaborate on the two mediums and their spirits’ messages.

**A Buddhist Medium.**

The 21-year-old Buddhist spirit medium, I’ll call Pawana, has been possessed for five years by a young King Chulalongkorn, the fifth King of the Chakri dynasty (1868-1910), who also possessed her grandmother and mother. At present her mother plays a major role in her practice by explaining the family history and elaborating on the King’s pronouncements during possession. Pawana lives with her parents, one-year-old child and husband, who only has occasional employment. The front room of her cramped home in a poverty neighborhood is dominated by a six-foot shrine draped in yellow fabric and by ten large hanging pictures and puzzles of King Chulalongkorn and a smaller picture of a famous Thai Buddha statue.

Over the course of four visits, I learned that King Chulalongkorn’s spirit helped the public by bringing husbands back to their wives, eliminating black magic curses (sai dam or khun sai) and curing illness. When asked what problems plague Thais, the King said black magic spells are prevalent today because of jealousy which makes some women snatch husbands and others search for fame. Women do not get along with each other because they are too competitive in offices and factories, he added. Emphasizing that he assists only legal wives, not minor wives, the King said he uses his powers to inspire husbands to think of their families first. To assist wives in improving themselves, he identifies their flaws, such as being poor housekeepers, complaining too much and blaming their husbands. Some women become minor wives as an occupation to take income from married men, he explained. I gently mentioned that historically some kings had many wives and asked if polygamy was part of Thai culture (see Jeffrey 1999 for contested gender constructions in Thai history). But the King said that in the past it was permissible for him to have many wives because he could provide for them all financially. Today, however, such behavior causes the wife and children grief.

On the economy and politics, the King was quite critical, saying that the rich oppress the poor, influential people take advantage over the powerless, and government officials use the country’s budget for personal gain. He said Chuan Leekpai was a good prime minister because of his honesty. (This was before the 2001 elections which Mr. Leekpai lost.) Predicting that environmental problems would get worse, the King warned that disasters would kill people but it was due to their own immorality. [This is possibly a reference to the 1988 destruction of a southern village from flash floods and illegal logging. The tragedy resulted in a ban on logging. After our meeting with the King, another major flash flood occurred in the northeast, killing more than 70 persons. It was also caused by deforestation and illegal logging (Wassayos 2001).]

**A Muslim Medium.**

Twelve Malay spirits (11 males and one female) possess the Muslim spirit medium who I’ll call Sedah. But the most prominent is To! Ni, a Muslim religious man who centuries ago lived in the territory that is now Indonesia. When not possessing, he resides in a cave in Malaysia and
sometimes assumes the appearance of a tiger. I visited Sedah five times in her large, lower middle-class home in Pattani. A university professor, who found her counsel insightful, took me to meet her first in 1998 when I was doing pre-dissertation research. During three of the visits, Sedah went into trance sitting on her living room floor in front of a simple charcoal burner. Her Islamic faith does not permit a shrine with images.

At the time of the interviews, Sedah was 32-years-old and had six children, all under 14 years of age. Since her husband had a low paying job driving motorcycle taxi, client donations were the main family income with some of the money earmarked to give to a mosque. She stopped her formal education at the end of primary school, prathom six, at about 12 years of age. Sedah serves clients who are about equally divided between Buddhists and Muslims, along with occasional Christian customers.

In conversations with some Muslim and Buddhist professors at Prince of Songkla University (PSU), Pattani, I was told that Muslims believe in only one god, Allah or Anlaw!, and would not visit spirit mediums possessed by spirits. When I asked Sedah and To! Ni separately about this, they explained that To! Ni receives power from Allah, rather than claiming power in his own right. He is a lower spirit who once was human, so he can act as an intermediary between the two realms. As long as the spirit only cures people, it is not a sin (mai baap), they said. However, To! Ni cannot extend life if someone is going to die because this is up to Allah.

The number one issue facing female clients is their husbands’ extra-marital affairs. Second in importance is the problem of black magic that infests human bodies and causes employment, health and family difficulties, they said. For instance, a jealous mistress might send black magic to control a husband or to destroy his major wife. To! Ni will not assist a mistress but will help the major wife by removing the magic and tying the husband’s heart to her. To! Ni also condemns men’s drinking, gambling and financial stinginess. As noted in the opening dialogue of this paper, To! Ni recognizes the independence of modern women, like his mount Sedah who heads her own household. But he also offers traditional advice for women to placate their husbands through polite speech and to resist being possessive. His most important assistance consists of spirit manipulation.

In one session, a Pattani woman was worried about her Muslim boyfriend who she feared had been vexed by another female suitor. To! Ni remarked that the client was not in a strong position, since she was not legally married. To! Ni did indeed discover that the other woman had used an unscrupulous spirit medium to capture the man’s affections through corpse spirit oil (naamman phlaai) put in his food and a boy spirit (gumaan thawng) put in his body. Using betel leaves to represent the boyfriend, To! Ni sent the black magic back from whence it came and energetically twisted the boyfriend’s shirt while saying a prayer to tie his heart. The woman gave about 800 baht and planned two return visits.

Economics is another major concern. A Songkhla woman, whose business had fallen on hard times, came for assistance. She had an argument with the owners of a neighboring store, and they put a black screen over her shop so customers did not see it and walked by. She also had black magic in her body which made her face appear fierce, frightening customers. To! Ni physically pulled the invisible evil spirit from her body and inserted it into a soda bottle to be thrown into a river. (Shortly before this, I had taken a boat down the Pattani River and seen a floating ceramic pot inscribed with yan designs, covered by a black cloth and tied to a bamboo trunk. I recognized
the spirit pot from famous ghost stories like Mae Naag Phrakhanooong. It was the first time in Thailand that I experienced what Hawaiians call chicken skin or goose bumps, khon luq).

When asked about the expanding number of spirit mediums in Thailand, To! Ni said many spirits have come to the country because bad people, identified as corrupt politicians and criminals, destroy family unity and grab other people’s property out of greed. Nowadays, people compete with each other and covet material things. Reflecting on modern economic times, To! Ni said, “People fight each other. Each person wants to survive. He/she would like to be rich. It is not the same as the people in the past.” Politics in Thailand is always bad because “politicians buy power” (suh khwaam pen yai, suh amnaat), he said, adding that politicians do assist the public but they expect some profit in return. There is a long standing problem of disunity in Thailand, he said, due to differences among ethnic groups and their religions, such as Chinese, Thai and Islamic people. Islamic people are stubborn and do not want to lose the competition, he commented.

**Main Problems that Mediums Tackle.**

These two cases illustrate that some of the issues brought to mediums concern adultery, financial woes, and various ailments that might be caused by black magic, sent either intentionally or accidentally. Other concerns are about debt, employment, running a business, education regarding passing exams, avoidance of military service, lost objects such as gold bracelets, and family conflicts. Despite the existence of numerous modern medical clinics and hospitals in the South and the government’s new program to treat people for only 30 baht, physical ailments are still a major part of most practices from chronic health problems, such as sore knees, to incurable diseases. The spirit provides an important service by finding out whether the problem is caused by one’s health or by a spirit. If it is a health problem, the medium will send the person to a medical doctor, according to clients. If the problem is spirit induced, the medium can offer curing methods which may employ holy water, ancient coins, kris daggers, amulets and cloths with cabalistic drawings.

According to informants, black magic, such as spells to capture a man’s or woman’s affections, is thought to be a particular problem in the South because Muslim spirit doctors are considered adept at such love magic (see Johnson 1999). Dr. Louis Golomb (1985), who researched southern medical issues, found that Buddhists would go to Muslim spirit doctors because they were an outsider group, the Other, reputed to have special occult powers. The reverse situation also occurs. For instance in northern Malaysia, some Malay Muslims sought Thai Buddhist monks for supernatural assistance (Golomb 1978, Ismail 2002).

Regarding infidelity worries brought to mediums, I would suggest that three-way marital conflicts are not simply an archaic holdover from the time when polygamy was legal and practiced by the elite. Instead today these conflicts are a very real issue for some Thai women under modern capitalism. Published in June 2002, a poll of more than 1,000 couples in the Bangkok area found that 40% of the men had engaged in outside sexual affairs while 8.3% of women had. Part of this complex problem is the fear that the new mistress -- who is more than a temporary prostitute -- will drain the family resources and even take over the role of wife, as has happened in some high profile political and military cases. In a rural village in Songkhla Province, the fear of losing the husband’s financial support is an important factor in keeping marriages together despite the husband’s drinking and unfaithfulness, Dr. Jawanit Kittitornkool found.
"Surviving as a female-headed household is perceived as extremely difficult both in economic and cultural terms. Thus, women have little alternative but to accept the behaviour of their husbands," she wrote.

Linguistic terminology seems to blur distinctions between the wife and mistress (see Yoddumnern-Attig 1992: 26). The words major wife (mia luang) and minor wife (mia noi) imply that both women are legal wives. Sometimes Thais will call the mistress in English "the other wife," also indicating a more threatening position to the official wife. This emotional triangle is a common topic in popular culture, discussed in occult magazines, frequently portrayed in television soap opera dramas (lakhawn naam nao), and even analyzed in one Western dissertation on TV dramas. Therefore, not surprisingly, this difficult issue along with fears of sorcery is brought to spirit mediums. I routinely ask the spirit medium and the spirit separately whether the spirit helps with the major - minor wife problem. Almost always, the interviewees deny that the spirit would ever help the minor wife, although this was not intentionally implied by my question. The denial is a marker of the spirit's high morality, for only an evil spirit doctor would assist the other woman. But clearly it is believed that many do.

One Pattani professor suggested that Thai women have few other outlets for marital problems. "They do not have other ways to go to ask for help," she noted. "If they go to see a barrister, it means everything is broken, a broken home, and they should choose to separate or divorce with their husbands. And some women in Thailand think that a person who has more than one husband is a bad woman. So there is only one way they can help themselves, just by looking for maw duu (fortune teller) or khon song (spirit medium), who will keep their problems secret." She added that going to psychologists is expensive and clients would worry that fellow workers would find out and consider them crazy or sick. Generally Buddhist monks cannot provide assistance because their primary duties are to study Pali language, remain rather isolated and perform death and ancestor rituals, she said.

Tensions in Relating to Spirits.

While the relationship between a medium and her clients can be a supportive safe haven, it can also be fraught with tensions, as the spirit may show both a loving and a fearsome side. When angered, To! Ni would assume a tiger form, claw the air and growl fearsomely. Although King Chulalongkorn is a widely loved historical figure and subject of Bangkok cults (Stengs 1999), his spirit struck fear in the hearts of two teenage clients who were too scared to ask questions at one session in Pattani.

Dr. Pattana Kitiarsa (1999) found mediums in Khorat were often hostile to clients and psychologically manipulated them using ritual "technologies of power," exploiting the cultural relationship between master and pupil. "I noticed during my fieldwork that spirit mediums were very angry and scolded as loudly as possible to intimidate every challenging disciple," he wrote (Pattana 1999: 165). Although in the South, I found more of a supportive, sometimes humorous atmosphere, Pattana shows that browbeating can also exist.

Concern about the proper financial offerings for spirit services likewise can cause tensions. Mediums and their spirits warn of the many imposters in the field who demand too much money and fail to solve problems. Yet at times these same spirits expect large offerings themselves for crucial rituals like exorcism or to extend life. The client might not be prepared to pay. For most practices, a small initial donation to show respect to the teacher (khaa yog khruu) is required, of
possibly 12 to 59 baht, along with flowers, incense and candles. (Notably these items are also the standard offering to the Lord Buddha at Theravada temples.) But more complex rituals require further donations and several return appointments. The spirit may predict that the client is fated to die soon (sin aayu khai) but offer to divert the life threatening accident into a less serious injury or to continue her life (taw aayu). A special ritual would be held and a larger donation is expected. For some observers, this is indicative of fraud, for others it shows the life saving power of the spirit. Donations can run 3000-5000 baht and more, according to customers. Some clients feel they cannot refuse what the spirit commands. While studying mediums in Khorat, researchers recorded a spirit telling a woman that bad luck from the devil had caused her son to run away and be disobedient. To change his attitude, the mother needed to burn his photograph and pay a fee of 999 baht. In apparent surprise, the client asked "How much?" Pattana (1999: 150) commented, "But it seemed that she had no choice, since she could not refuse the medium’s demand for fear of the deity’s power." Therefore she borrowed the money from a friend.

In the session with To! Ni, I observed two working-class women, who were concerned about their failing businesses, donate 400 baht each for exorcisms. This is a large amount considering that factory workers earn 130 baht a day in the South. Yet, in this case, the women were repeat customers and did not hesitate to give the expected offering. Since clients commonly go to several different mediums for problems, I would suggest that each new encounter might involve uncertainty in this area of additional services and fees.

Another common practice is for the client to make a specific wish and promise a gift in return, a type of spiritual contract called gae bon in which the client has more control. Commenting on this process, a Pattani professor said, "The offering may be only 12 baht, very little. But if the treatment by the khon song (spirit medium) works, ahhh, you become happy and then you believe, 'You are a good doctor.' You can give lots of money or build a building...You can make a new building for him." In this case, she said, "You are not forced to do this. It is your willingness."

**Globalization, Modernity and Mediumship.**

Thai popular syncretic beliefs are expanding and diversifying in response to the challenges of modernity and the new global economy. The practices I found are similar to those recorded in Asian ethnographies in the groundbreaking book, Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia (Keyes, Kendall, and Hardacre 1994). In the past century, Asian states created nations partly through promoting state-sponsored religious systems, whose legitimacy is now being strained to accommodate ethnic, religious and other diversities, according to the authors (on southern Thailand, see Chaiwat Satha-Anan 1994: 296). In this process, "new religions" have developed across the region using "...symbols from foreign and local religions to clothe traditional cosmological ideas" (Keyes, et al 1994: 9). This is a particularly apt description of spirit mediums’ syncretic practices in Thailand, where a shrine might include elements of Hinduism-Brahmanism, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, Taoism and animism, along with ubiquitous evidence of loyalty to the nation in large glittering pictures of a youthful King and Queen. Contrary to Western rationalist predictions, rather than fade away with development, faith-based movements in Asia have multiplied (Lee and Ackerman 1997). Reflecting on the Chinese government’s attempts to stamp out "superstition" in the 1980s-1990s,
Anagnost (1994: 238) wrote, "Increasing prosperity and sophistication among the peasantry have often resulted in an increased interest in ritual display, not in its disappearance."

Globalization has also affected female mediums and their clients by creating opportunities to "rework" gender divisions and for the development of new forms of resistance, but the effects are contradictory - both liberating and exploitative, empowering and disempowering (see Laurie, et al 1999: 18). Along this line, Thai social critic Sulak Sivaraksa points out the detrimental consequences of the new economy on developing countries and the lower classes (Sulak 2002). He argues that the term globalization is deceptive and prefers to call the economic changes "free market fundamentalism" or "extreme modernism." Although globalization promotes the idea that all nations will gain from the changes, he wrote that in fact it "...has triggered the very opposite consequences, e.g., increasing dependence of 'developing' states on 'developed states', increasing inequalities between the North and the South, investors and workers, agro-businesses and peasants, widening income inequalities within and between states."

To explore how these economic changes have affected Thai women and particularly mediums, I will use a definition of globalization which states that it has two elements: the restructuring of capitalist flows worldwide and the development of supporting information technology (Laurie, et al 1999: 18). Firstly, although once called an "economic miracle," uneven capitalist development in Thailand has widened the gap between cities and villages, between rich and poor, and has been particularly harsh on women (Kittitornkool 2000: 4). Global top-down development with a male bias has eroded the rural economic base of many women and pushed them to migrate to cities for low paying work in the new international sexual division of labor (Bell 1997, Darunee and Pandey 1996). But there are opportunities too as young women follow migration routes, formerly taken mostly by their brothers, to obtain urban employment and gain new status as family breadwinners. Gender construction is in flux as women are mobile, cash earning and symbols of modernity (Mills 1999, Ogena and Kittisuksathit 1997).

In the South, modernization has tended to be detrimental to small-scale agriculturists who have protested the degradation of their environment and the threat to livelihoods. Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating in the 1980s, government policies of promoting an export economy and development have made Thailand a leading fish producer and exporter but also greatly harmed fishing communities on the southern coasts (Wattana 1999). In the past 30 plus years, depletion of fish, deforestation, and the conversion of mangrove forests to shrimp farms have all damaged the environment (Kittitornkool 2000, Ruohomaki 1999). Some young women now find jobs in the tourist and sex industry in Hat Yai, Phuket and border towns while others work in rubber factories and food processing plants, often leaving young children in the care of elderly parents (Kittitornkool 2000: 5-6, 262).

Recent research by PSU, Pattani teachers (Nakamura, et al 2001) focused on how these alterations were affecting the social and religious values of Muslim women. According to Muslim beliefs, men should be the head of the household and women should work only in the home, it reported. Yet in the South, low rubber prices, the depletion of fish by commercial trawlers and other economic difficulties have pushed Muslim women into the public workforce to make ends meet (Nakamura, et al 2001: 2). The research studied a sample of 203 Muslim women from agricultural and fishing communities, who were employed by five factories in Pattani Province. Reflecting the government’s policy to develop the South, the province has a high concentration of 825 factories dealing with seafood, rubber and construction materials. Although many religious
practices were unchanged, the study found modernization was indeed altering Muslim culture, summarized by this understated remark, "...working in a factory brings changes" (Nakamura, et al 2001: 2). In a focus group, Muslim community members reported concern about eroding family and religious values, according to Asst. Prof. Arin Sa-idi (interview Dec. 2000). They complained that young single women had little time to help with family chores and spent their leisure time shopping in department stores, while older married women were unable to look after their children, take religious classes or join community activities due to long working hours. Young women were more assertive in selecting their own marriage partners and socializing with men. Also they used their incomes mostly for cosmetics and clothes rather than helping the family, according to focus group members.

These economic and social changes in the South are reflected in the problems brought to mediums -- marital conflicts, employment and business concerns, fears of unknown evil forces -- by women who can pay cash for help and have few other outlets. Particularly for women living in cities disconnected from village structures, the medium can provide answers in today's unpredictable capitalist world (see Kendall 1996 for Korean mediums and capitalism). The demand for such services has risen to the point where, when asked by a foreign researcher, a woman can state that her profession (aachiip) is being a spirit medium (Phatthalung interview April 2002).

A second central feature of globalization is advanced information technology. Although southern spirit mediums are expanding their communication techniques, few have gone high tech as yet. Most rely on locally proven advertising methods -- large billboards in public areas, sandwich board trucks with loudspeakers which canvas the streets, local handout newspapers given to motorists, radio announcements and wall posters. Thai-Chinese Mahayana and Taoist shrines (saan jao) are more affluent and politically connected. Therefore, opening ceremonies for their festivals usually feature a speech by the city mayor and provincial governor, marching bands, and dances by school children, with mediums playing an essential ritual role from beginning to end. Colorful, computer manipulated posters, funded by the national Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and various companies, are plastered on shop walls before the event. With the largest gathering of mediums in the country, the Phuket Vegetarian Festival has its own website and receives some limited publicity from the TAT website. A "multimedia" computer show was proudly employed at a firewalking ceremony at Tong Sia Siang Teung Foundation in Hat Yai in Feb. 2002. Large images of the runners were projected on a building wall behind the actual ritual.

Smaller practices of home-based mediums in the South rarely employ such advanced technologies and tend to use word-of-mouth, probably due to their marginal status, smaller client base and more personal service. However a kind of "spirit medium phone directory" was produced in 1995 on mediums residing in central Thailand. The two-volume magazine (Peut Pratuu Tamnag Song 1995) ran stories on 69 mediums including their phone numbers, addresses and bus routes, encouraging readers to give them a try. Asst. Prof. Rataporn Patamajorn, who did her M.A. thesis on spirit mediums in the central region, displayed the magazines at a lecture at PSU, Pattani in 2000. Surprised by the open advertising, one professor compared it to a fashion magazine that highlights features of models for selection, or in this case mediums.
**Fractured Identities.**

The modern day medium lives a complex life. Spirit mediums have developed fractured identities (see Laurie, et al 1999: 3), as well as fractured bodies. Thai mediumship involves many femininities and masculinities -- tempered by ethnicity, class, geographies and histories. When not possessed, the female medium will behave according to socially constructed proper gender roles for Thai women. These mediums are good daughters and good mothers and religiously devout Buddhists and Muslims. Upon possession, a male or female spirit will also express itself in culturally believable ways. Comparative research on mediumship worldwide has found that trance is both a psychological and biological state experienced in all societies but within specific cultural contexts (Bourguignon 1973). For instance, although there are some striking similarities between Thai mediums and those in Brazil and Indonesia, mediums in Thailand have their own unique symbols, behavior, and ethical codes that are easily understood within Thai culture.

In many ways the female medium and her spirit are opposites - she is frequently a lower-class, under-educated villager who speaks a local dialect while her male spirit is usually a wealthy, sophisticated royal or religious figure who is linguistically erudite in foreign languages. Clients who find it a convincing sign of possession have remarked upon this difference in personality and skills. Male spirits are masculine, authoritative, wise, capable of violence but generally kind and helpful to humankind, as they have come to earth to make merit for themselves. A female medium possessed by a warrior might behave stridently, chewing tobacco, drinking alcohol and sometimes womanizing with audience members. Males possessed by female goddesses also undergo amazing gender transformations into feminine, high voiced, glamorous women (Morris 1994b).

The home-based medium must be capable in handling a variety of conflicting roles, schedules and projects. She usually manages an entourage of assistants and followers while accepting possession at specific times of the day or night as pre-determined by her spirit and sometimes listed on a plastic board in her home. Some of the most successful mediums, as described by White (1999), have large followings and engage in charitable deeds and construction of religious buildings. Popular mediums are positioned at the center of a hierarchical structure which depends on "...cultivating, as well as continually reinforcing and reproducing, social ties of intimacy, affection, identification and dependency..." with devotees (White 1999: 7). In addition, a medium often deals with more than one spirit identity, commonly being possessed by a group of spirits, possibly four or more. The Buddhist medium may sit on a golden throne reminiscent of the King’s royal throne in Bangkok (Morris 1994a), surrounded by statues and framed pictures of current and past royalty, famous monks and possibly Hindu and Chinese deities. The honor of her position spills over to her private life and elevates her status. Rataporn described to me one medium who no longer did housework because of her new standing.

Some scholars have painted female mediums as either victims or rebels against patriarchies (Lewis 1978). In Thailand, she may be seen as doubly marginalized as a relatively poor woman in a Buddhist dominated society where doctrinal reformists and social critics condemn her practice as fraudulent, immoral, even heretical. Some might say professing to be possessed by a king is les majeste. But the authors of Geographies of New Femininities warn against replacing one stereotype with another. "Nevertheless, it is important not merely to replace conceptualizations of women as victims with one of women as ’resisters’. Seeing women only as resisters implies that women automatically embody progressive attitudes and assumes that women are seldom
complicit with conservative or oppressive agendas" (Laurie, et al 1999: 39). Certainly the two mediums presented here support conservative family values and appeasing spouses, but they also recognize the plight of lower income women who seek magical "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985).

**Blending: A Two-way Relationship.**

As part of the identity issue, I submit there is a two-way blending in the patron-client relationship between spirit and medium. This perspective gives more weight to the medium’s agency and ability to negotiate than is implied by the English language term "possession." The medium and the spirit are two distinct entities using the same body (Ram 2001: 181) for mutual benefit ? both gain religious merit (baaramii) from the process. When the spirit is possessing, the medium becomes unconscious as if her mind is blacked out. This is key to her legitimacy; if she is awake, possibly she is acting. [A Bangkok professor once suggested in print that mediums were former actors from the traditional lige theater. She received death threats from some mediums (Guelden 1995).] In early interviews, I inadvertently questioned this unconscious state. I asked a medium what problems clients brought to the spirit. The medium emphatically said she could not answer because she was unconscious then. She said I must ask the spirit. Thereafter, I would ask the medium if possibly her assistants knew the problems of clients and later I would also ask the spirit. Although the medium and spirit do not exist simultaneously, I would suggest that the relationship is symbiotic, rather than a one-way domination. The Thai word song (n, vi) means possession or to be possessed, which implies a loss of control or ownership. An English dictionary defines the 14th century noun of possession as meaning "something owned, occupied, or controlled: property" or "domination by something (as an evil spirit, a passion, or an idea)."

American mediums in Los Angeles, California prefer the terms "blending" and "channeling" for their New Age experiences, because these mediums experience more of a cooperation rather than a total abandonment of free will, that would be anathema to idealized American culture (Hughes). I would also like to characterize the Thai relationship as blended, beginning with the selection of the mount based on family ties. For Buddhists mediums, often the spirit is related to the mount through a karmic past life or through actual blood lines. For instance King Chulalongkorn selected his medium, Pawana, because one of her great grandfathers was a royal page, the other great grandfather commanded the King’s army in Chiang Mai, and her great grandmother was a palace lady-of-honor.

As would befit these family ties, the spirit becomes the medium’s mentor. Mediums will commonly say they knew nothing of religious matters before, but the spirits educated them to practice deep meditation and give authoritative religious sermons (Peut Pratuu Tamnag Song 1995). Communication between them can occur directly through dreams or through using the medium’s mouth to inform an assistant. Using either method, the spirit must instruct the medium in many things ? such as purchasing clothes, food and shrine items and donating to religious institutions. In this cooperative venture, the medium helps the spirit construct a gendered, noble or warrior identity, which elaborates as the medium gains more income to purchase higher quality clothing and accessories. Although the medium generally complies with restrictions, there is room for negotiation because the spirit is sympathetic to the burden of being a human vessel. A Bangkok medium told me he had defied the taboo against traveling out of Thailand imposed by his Indian yogi spirit (ruusii). I met the medium as he was returning from a
flight to Hong Kong, carrying packages of cigarettes and other duty free goods. Later he told me, the yogi imposed a punishment of requiring him to be vegetarian for six months. This is an example of a medium and spirit who exchanged knowledge, abilities and merit, and worked out their differences in a flexible patron - client relationship.

Mediumship in the South.

The southern region has several striking characteristics which have produced a rich and textured invisible world. Four features of the South contribute to mediumship: 1) the important historical role of ancestor spirits in two ritual dance performances: Manooraa and Makyong, 2) the strong and growing presence of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism, which took root in early Chinese settlements and flourishes today with the arrival of tourists from Malaysia and Singapore, 3) the uniqueness and independence of the region in history, culture, economics, politics, geography and language which have been fostered by its distance from the center of government power in Bangkok (Chavivun 1992, Gesick 1995), and 4) a large and changing Thai Malay-Muslim population that can boast of having had a powerful Patani sultanate in the 17th century and yet today struggles with poverty, identity issues and a lingering separatist movement (Surin 1985).

Regarding religious composition, the four southern provinces, Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani and Satun, have Muslim population of about 60-80% (Arin, et al 1993, Surin 1985). Some of these provinces are regularly ranked among the most impoverished. Muslims generally live in rural villages working in fishing or agriculture, particularly rubber plantations, although many also live in city communities (Cornish 1989, Srisompob 1999). As elsewhere in the country, a significant number of persons of Chinese descent, who are considered fairly well integrated into Thai nationality today, live in the cities. Their roots date back more than a century, when primarily men arrived to work as tin miners and traders in Phuket and other southern towns. By 1870, 25,000 Chinese were living in Phuket Island (Chavivun 1992: 17). These immigrants established local governing bodies, schools, police and strong family associations, and today continue to be influential in local politics and business.

I would suggest the southern border region fits Dr. Thongchai Winichakul’s description of an extremity that questions the national historical narrative, "...where the domain of national history ends and another history begins..." (Thongchai 2002: 20). As a fluid boundary region, the South has long been considered a marginal, sometimes violent area. Yet the region is fraught with conflicts that defy simple scenarios of good and evil, of nation defenders versus terrorists. For instance in March 2002, the country’s attention was drawn to the South when eight police officers were killed in three provinces. Afterward the prime minister and several high government officials said the incidents were due to tangled conflicts of interest in business, probably between the police and military, rather than to separatists.

In this complex southern topography, mediumship has developed with home-based practices being only one of four identified types. Originally, I intended to study only domestic mediums, which has been the focus of other Thai research. But once at the fieldsite, it soon became apparent that there were many types of possession, whose contrasting and overlapping symbols and religious concepts clarified the significance of home-based shrines. The three others are historical traditions with strong performative bases. They are: 1) Thai-Chinese Mahayana Buddhist and Taoist shrine ceremonies, which frequently involve acts of self-mortification and
physical feats, 2) the Thai-Muslim healing drama with Malay origins called Makyong, and 3) the ancient Thai dance performance closely identified with southern culture named Manooraa (Johnson 1999).

Of these four groups, home-based mediumship stands alone as having a majority of women in the highest, most sacred roles. The restrictions on women in the other traditions might be a major factor in why there are so many women in home-based shrines. Many of the historical traditions forbid women to take part in consecrated rituals, citing problems with menstrual pollution, "complexity" of female's biology, and a belief that women are not as effective or mentally strong as men. This is not to say that women are unimportant in the other traditions. For instance, this year in Phatthalung Province, a Manooraa ceremony to pay homage to ancestor spirits had a large number of participating female spirit mediums and included females as key players in crucial rituals. Yet the highest inherited position -- to become the complete, perfect Manooraa -- is reserved for men. I hasten to emphasize that one cannot paint a black-and-white or static picture of gender constructions within these groups. While many Mahayana and Taoist shrines in the South do not allow females to run across the fire of coals, some shrines in Phuket are permitting them to do so. And a new shrine to the Chinese God Naja near Hat Yai had a significant number of spontaneous female runners this year and, more surprisingly, several females climbed the ladder of swords, formerly a male preserve.

Some mediumship traditions are thriving more than others. Of the four types, academic research has shown that the number of Manooraa families is declining as grandfathers of the inherited tradition pass away and people in modern society have less time to devote to the long, complex and costly performances (interview with Asst. Prof. Sompoch Ketkeaw, March 2001). Likewise Makyong is performed less often, partly due to a resurgence of Islam, the introduction of modern medicine, and the passing away of senior ritual performers. Similar in many ways to Manooraa, the Malay drama of Makyong involves ancestor spirits possessing descendants and dancing through their bodies. While many Muslims today know fundamentalist Islam frowns upon this practice, when deathly ill they feel there is no choice but to appease the ancestors.

Contrary to these declining practices, Mahayana Buddhism is enjoying increased popularity and financial support from Thai-Chinese, Malaysians and Singaporeans (see significant research on this topic by Jovan Maud 2002). The vegetarian festival, originally performed in Phuket and Trang, has now grown and spread to other cities, most notably Hat Yai where tourists arrive daily on crowded flights from Malaysia and Singapore (see Chavivun 1992: 147, Maud 2002).

The city’s biggest draws are low priced hotels, nightlife, gambling and inexpensive gray market electronic goods. Many travelers will also take in day-tours to famous local religious sites, like the shrine to Chinese Goddess Lim Go Niaw in Pattani City and to Wat Chang Hai, a Theravada Buddhist temple in Pattani Province dedicated to a widely revered Ayutthaya period monk, Luang Phaw Thuat (see Gesick 2002, Jory 2002 and Maud 2002). Paying respect at shrines and temples usually includes requests for prosperity and sometimes for lucky lottery numbers to be bet on the Malaysian lottery or Thai underground lottery, say tourists.

Capitalist style tourism that consumes services, products and religious sites is welcomed by the new Thai government that hopes tourism will bring in foreign exchange and pull the country out of its economic slump. In Hat Yai and neighboring towns, there is a visible spurt of religious sites which vie to become tourist draws by having the largest lying down Buddha, the largest Goddess
Guan Im, or the largest Naja statue in the South. Shoppers at the giant Tesco-Lotus mega-store in Hat Yai cannot miss the appearance of a golden Chinese deity who now towers over the store. Well-off foreign devotees have sponsored Thai mediums and their shrines because building costs are lower and rules less stringent than in Malaysia or Singapore. Meanwhile some Theravada Buddhist "development” monks (phra phathanaa) have added large Mahayana statues to their monasteries to appeal to the southern visitors and to spread the faith, in a striking and innovative mingling of the two Buddhist sects. This thriving religious expression has contributed to the number of male and female spirit mediums in the South, particularly those channeling Chinese deities, such as Goddess Guan Im and her young female helper spirits (see Hamilton 1999).

**Conclusion**

Based on a rich heritage of interaction with the invisible world, mediumship is flourishing and evolving in southern Thailand in the post-modern era. Home-based female mediums are providing open channels to the spirit realm for female customers in need of otherworldly solutions to contemporary problems, particularly in dealing with males. Their spirits offer traditional conservative gendered advice while also being sympathetic with the plight of the less privileged, who are many of their clients.

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