



Manora Ancestral Beings, Possession and Cosmic Rejuvenation in Southern Thailand

Modern Adaptations of the Multi-Religious *Manora* Ancestral Vow Ceremony

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Abstract. – The *manora rongkru* ceremony is a unique institution that has developed according to social needs of the people of the mixed community on the eastern banks of Lake Songkhla, where Buddhists and Muslims live together in closely-knit neighborhoods and kinship networks. People in southern Thailand feel that they are part of an imagined community, as they are all considered descendents of the first *manora* teachers. The article argues for the continuing relevance, relative autonomy and perceived authenticity of ancestor worship in *Manooraa* ritual practice and possession for the spiritual needs and aspirations of the Southern Thai people as major reason for the revitalization of the *Manooraa* in the context of modernity and Thai popular religion.

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Introduction

The picture of religion in Thailand today is characterized by a contradictory move: While conventional

Theravada Buddhism seems to have lost much appeal with the younger generation, Buddhism is also being revived in new forms. The worship of Buddhist saints, the booming cult of Buddhist amulets, and the presence of magic monks show that a reconfigured Buddhism is able to thrive in particular niches in modern urban society (Jackson 1999; Taylor 1999, 2008). While the capitalist economy and the growing nation-state weakened ancestral traditions and traditional authority in the village, the same forces also propelled the dramatic expansion, presence, and visibility of spirit mediums in urban areas who are possessed by royalty and who speak to clientele of all classes, including the highest members of the political élite.¹ These urban spirit mediums coexist and hybridize with revitalized and fragmented Theravada Buddhism. Although processes of modernization, rationalization, and globalization put a lot of pressure on “traditional” society, its institutions do not disappear, but reappear in new configurations, satisfying the social needs of modern people. Rosalind Morris (2000) ties the rise of spirit possession in contemporary Thailand to the political economy of a modernist Thai state that has commodified spirit possession, repackaging it through its electronic mediation on video and television as an object of desire and longing. Morris shows that the process of mediation through new media tech-

1 Kitiarsa (2005); Morris (2000); Tanabe (2002).

nologies is crucial for the new configurations of spirited modernities. I choose the ethnographic example of the *Manora* to illustrate the coexistence and hybridization of spirit mediums with Theravada Buddhism and Islam and the resilience and revitalization of spirit beliefs and spirit possession in southern Thailand.² Peter Jackson argues that the modern phase in Thai religion refers to following a path of doctrinal rationalization accompanied by organizational centralization and bureaucratization, whereas the postmodern one is characterized 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 (Jackson 1999). In other words, religion can assume many different forms, such as commodity, political ideology, and marker of identity, marketing machine, or object of worship, depending on the spatial and temporal context. These different forms may exist together or overlap and contribute to their complexity.

I argue that southerners, like people elsewhere in Thailand, seek communication with the spirits to come to terms with the challenges and ailments of modern life. They hope that the spirits can influence the direction of their lives in favorable directions. The communication and interaction with the spirits is facilitated and enacted by professional mediums that are possessed by specific deities. The second reason for the resilience of the spirits, I argue, is the resistance against the growing orthodoxy in both Theravada Buddhism and in Islam. While Theravada Buddhism preaches the awakening from ignorance through mindfulness, people are more attracted to the sacredness and power of the Buddhist saints that they see as the highest spirit in the hierarchy or parade of spirits. Villagers use Buddhist festivals, such as the Buddhist festival of the tenth lunar month (*ngan deun sip*), to memorize and provide offerings to the beloved ancestors. Islam is rapidly globalizing. Muslims become involved in transnational flows, mobility, and movements and consume Islamic images that are produced by global media, such as the internet (Horstmann 2007). However, Muslim villagers still believe in ancestor spirits. For example, they believe that the ancestor spirits visit them after Ramadan and they offer their communal meal to them after prayer. Lambek calls this coexistential expression of religion “polyphony” (2000: 70). Villagers in both religions thus “navigate” among the various claims that either ancestral

power or modern religion makes upon them and in which they are not in a position to make a decision in favor of one or the other. With Lambek, I would argue for a reflexive position that recognizes the needs of people belonging to religions whose canon has developed a negative stance on spirits. While Buddhism removes itself from the ghostly realm, villagers are interested in building congenial relationships between humans and spirits (*pi*). Beliefs create a bridge between the living and their own ancestors. *Pi ta yai* (spirits of the grand-grandparents or ancestral spirits) refer to the good and benevolent ancestors who stay in the heavenly realm, not yet reborn, to protect the living, watch over them, and to provide assistance to the good people or punishments to the bad. Not all dead have the privilege to receive ancestor status and only very powerful people who accumulated a lot of merit, like Buddhist saints or Muslim kings, can receive the status of great ancestors. People who committed a lot of sin in their lives are degraded to the status of hungry ghosts. There is a large variety of offerings to the ancestor spirits, ranging from simple family reunions to the elaborate *Manora Rongkru* three-day long vow ceremony.³

The Ancestral Vow Ceremony *Manora Rongkru* (*Nora Rongkru*)

One central form of interaction and technique of communication with the spirits in southern Thailand is the ancestral ceremony *Manora*, also called by the southern people in the short form *Nora*, in which designated spirit mediums or even members of the community become possessed by the great grandparent's (*ta yai*) ancestral spirits. *Manora* or *Nora* is used to designate the dancer of the genre as well as the art form itself (Jungwiwattanaporn 2006: 377). While the word *nora* reflects its Buddhist-Indian *jataka* origin, it is important to note that the *Suthon-Manora* dramatic plot is almost absent in the actual performance of *Nora*, which depicts a folk story, containing the creation of myth (Ginsburg 1972). In this myth, existing in a variety of local narratives, the “Lady of White (hence sacred) Blood” is a princess who is put on a bamboo raft in the ocean from the palace for being incestuously pregnant while doing *Nora* dance training with her brother and who is saved by a peasant couple. Lady White Blood gives birth to a son, Si Sata, and, to make a living, teaches

2 This article is based on the ethnographic research of the author in the provinces of Nakhonsri Thammarat, Songkhla and Patthalung during regular visits from 2004 to 2007.

3 Another example for commodification of spirit possession in southern Thailand is the “Chinese Vegetarian Festival” analyzed by Cohen (2001).

Fig. 1: The grand *Manora* master (*nairong Manora*)



him how to dance *Manora*. Si Sata is the first teacher of the *Manora* dance and performance genre. Out of gratitude, Lady White Blood donated gold she found in the forest to Ta Kura temple, where it was used to model a Buddha figure (see Gesick 1995).⁴ In the climax of the *Nora Rongkru* vow-fulfilment ceremony, the ancestral spirits of the dead transcend to the medium's bodies and possess them. So possessed, the living are able to laugh and cry with the loved, lost ones and receive the wisdom and advice from the ancestral spirits.

In the grand *Manora* ceremony, entertainment, performance, art form, ancestral tradition, creation epos, and spirit possession all intermingle. This is because the *Manora* master, called *nairong Manora* (short form: *nairong*), a bird-winged shaman and dancer, uses the skilful dance and verse to call the *Manora* ancestors (Nunsuk 1980). The grand *Manora* ancestors are the first teachers of the arts and are commonly venerated by the southern villagers who host vow ceremonies in order to placate the powerful deities. The *nairong Manora* embodies the wisdom and knowledge of the first teachers venerated as mythological figures. He possesses supernatural

power that he taps by calling the great ancestors for miraculous healing and for exorcising black magic (*sayasart*).⁵

Nora Rongkru literally means “*Manora*-Stage-Teacher”: The dances performed by the possessed spirit mediums are also called vow-dances.⁶ The cycle of a full vow ceremony, called *Nora Rongkru* (short form) lasts for three whole days and takes place on a make-shift stage that is constructed only for the duration of the ceremony and dismantled after its closure. In this long vow ceremony, the *nairong Manora* invites *Nora* as well as non-*Nora* ancestor spirits to descend from the heavenly realm to witness the ceremony and to join the stage. The *Nora* ancestors are elevated to the highest status of teachers and honored in a special ceremony (*piti wai kru*). The *nairong Manora* seeks intensive preparation with the host family, which is indispensable for the success of the ritual and especially its ancestor part. He will inquire about every single deity and ancestor spirit in the house. The host aims to counter misfortune by hosting a full *Nora Rongkru* vow ceremony and to exorcise the influence of black magic. The host makes a vow to the first teachers of the *Manora* and shows gratitude by returning a boon. The host will most likely promise to host a *Nora Rongkru* every year, depending on the size of

⁴ See also Gesick's study (1995) for a reconstruction of the locality (Lake Songkhla) through manuscripts and oral history. The creation myth was told to Lorraine Gesick in different versions, depending on the locality. The play and performance for the *Nora Rongkru* ceremony has been standardized. The play and skites have been also commodified and now include elements from popular music (*luuk tung*) and TV soap opera.

⁵ See Muecke (1979) for similar healing practices in northern Thailand.

⁶ Cf. Butsararat (1992, 2003); Hemmet (1992: 276); Isaradej (1999).



Fig. 2: A man brings his baby to the *Manora* stage to have it cured through the healing power of the *Nairong Manora*.

the wish. As the *Manora* has become very expensive – due to the food and drinks and the elaborate offerings that have to be provided – some families have to wait until as long as nine years to repeat a *Nora Rongkru*. If the host does not keep to the vow, the ancestor spirits may exercise serious punishments.

The vow ceremonies, also called vow dances, are different in size. Crowning initiation ceremonies and competitions for the leading *nairong Manora* took place in the oldest and most sacred Buddhist temples. Some of the most spectacular ceremonies attracting the crowds take place in temples where the great *Nora* ancestors are supposed to stay or in temples that are associated with the *Manora*'s mythological figures. These open ceremonies constitute a public space in which the southern people are attracted to the power of the great *Nora* ancestors. In them, the southern people anonymously seek to attach themselves to the benevolent power of the great *Nora* ancestors and not to the *pi's ta yai* ancestors of the personal house or community.

In the following, I am interested in the way how the reconfigured vow ceremony *Nora Rongkru* may give us insights into the communication of the southern Thai people with the ancestor spirits. The growth in spirit mediums is a reflection of social, political, and economic changes in Thailand in the media age and religious practices of participation in spirit cults respond creatively to the social transformation of everyday life. Media are constitutive of the religious imagination about spirits and render present the transcendental realm to which it refers (Van de Port 2006: 445 ff.). The recording of

the *Manora* through video technology contributes to the commodification of the *Manora* as a necessary condition to its current boom and to its prominent place in the public sphere (Meyer and Moors 2005). Borrowing from a recent contribution of Birgit Meyer (2009), I argue that the aesthetics of the performance contribute to its sensationalization and current revitalization.⁷

The performance of the *Manora* articulates with and is embedded in the multireligious formation in southern Thailand. While the *Manora* has always had a close association to Theravada Buddhist temples and while Buddhist ordination used to be a condition for the graduation of the *nairong Manora*, the *Manora* had no religious limitation. Marlane Guelden (2007) argues that the *Manora* adjusted to the religious needs of different ethnic and religious groups. Jungwiwattanaporn (2006: 375) follows Isaradej (1999) in arguing that the *Manora* functions like a family court in settling conflicts within the family and creates the feeling of “*communitas*” by bringing together the realms of the living and the dead. Therefore, seen from this perspective, the *Manora* seems to have made a substantial contribution in levelling religious difference and mediating between the two religions. In the following, I am interested to test this assumption against the

⁷ Another study has to be written about the revolutionary impact of different media on the *Manora* performance, e.g., the impact of radio, the newspaper, the audio-cassette recorder, the VCD recorder, etc. The media took the *Manora* out of the local context and made it an object of national imagination. For a first try, see Guelden (2005a: 144–201, especially chap. 3).

current development of the *Manora*. Being a multi-religious ritual, in which the offerings include both Buddhist and Islamic sacred objects, it is an interesting question to explore if the *Manora* functions to integrate Buddhists and Muslims or to subjugate Islam to the hegemony of Buddhism and to the authority of the *nairong Manora*. Second, I argue that the carnivalesque of the *Nora Rongkru* also reflects processes of class formation and human insecurity in southern Thailand's countryside.

Religious forms are no essential phenomena, but have reacted with flexibility to the conditions of dislocation, rapid social change, and social uncertainty and developed niches in the religious market and religious forms, catering to the poor, the lower middle class, and also to the very wealthy (Guelden 2007; Morris 2000). Buddhism is by far not a united front to which *Nora Rongkru* would be positioned. How does the vow ceremony changes in this configuration? My thesis is that conventional Buddhism in southern Thailand aims to regain lost territory through appropriation of the *Manora* festivals in the public domain. I aim to show that the increasing dependence of the *Manora* on Buddhism and the state creates the conditions for the subordination of the *Manora* under the civilizing influence of Buddhist morality. The increasing Buddhization of the *Manora* marginalizes the participation of the Muslims in it and leads to the withdrawal of most of them from the multireligious rituals. While both Buddhism and *Manora* benefit from the commodification of the *Manora*, the subordination of the *Manora* is never complete and tensions and contradictions between the canon of the orthodox religions and the religion as practices in everyday life prevail. Before I present the ethnography of the *Manora*, a few words on the regional context are necessary to understand how southern Thai people speak about religion and their coexistence with spirit beliefs.

The Local Context

It is not uncommon in the Lake Songkhla area to observe a multireligious ritual, in which spirit possession blends with Theravada Buddhism or Islam (see Horstmann 2004). The *Nora Rongkru* is a unique institution which has developed according to the social needs of the people and the mixed community on the eastern banks of the Lake Songkhla where Buddhists and Muslims live together in closely-knit neighborhoods and kinship networks. People in southern Thailand feel they are part of an imagined community, as they are all considered descendants

of the first *Manora* teachers. People and houses, and sometimes whole villages are considered of *Manora* descent (*trakun Manora*).

The research area at stake is located in the Lake Songkhla area and comprises the provinces of Songkhla, Patthalung, and Nakhonsrithammarat. Tambralinga is one of the oldest kingdoms in Southeast Asia. The Isthmus of Kra on the west coast of southern Thailand was a very important trade route from mainland to insular Southeast Asia and a carrefour of culture. The region is also a site where Buddhist cultures and spheres of influence meet and cross with Islamic spheres. With the centralization of the Thai state, the Lake Songkhla area became dominated by Theravada Buddhism and some of the oldest and most sacred temples can be found in this area. These temples played an important role in the process and narrative of state building in southern Thailand. Muslims settled in the Lake Songkhla area as migrants and sometimes as slaves and played a very marginal and peripheral role. Thus, Songkhla, Patthalung, and Nakhonsrithammarat are mainly Buddhist provinces with Muslim minorities. However, with time, the communities are more clearly separated from each other along religious lines. Increasingly, Buddhists and Muslims distinguish each other by adopting more conspicuously religious dress and identity. Both Buddhism and Islam exist in the Lake Songkhla region for several hundred years and can be considered indigenous religions (Golomb 1978). Hundred years ago, the villagers were living in unison with nature and animals and believed in the power of spirits, especially ancestor spirits. These beliefs in ancestor spirits exist until today. In the Thalesap Songkhla region, a very interesting tradition of Buddhist saints exists and some of these saints enjoy great popularity among southern people. Both Buddhism and Islam had interesting variations in the Lake Songkhla region and co-existed with ancestor spirit beliefs.⁸ In southern Thailand, only the most recent ancestors are remembered except for individual persons who were known to have accumulated a lot of merit. The anonymous ancestors are conceptualized as a collective who on their way to heaven help the living and keep away the malevolent spirits. Only a few receive the title of "great ancestors." These great ancestors were known for their power, charisma, and merit and are remembered by personal name. Buddhist saints, Muslim governors and the first teachers of the *Manora* are among the great ancestors. Southern Thailand thus developed a unique ritual

⁸ For an account of curing beyond ethnic or religious boundaries, see Golomb (1985).

culture and arts that combined elements of local religion, Theravada Buddhism, and Islam. However, the influences of the national *Sangha* and the transnational Islamic missionary movements have divided the villagers and have sometimes caught them in contradictory lives. Some religious leaders were continuing with old traditions, while also being under the strong influence of forces who claimed to represent modernity. People thus find themselves in a situation, where traditional beliefs coexist with new and more orthodox ideas. In more recent times, the circulation of media images from the violence in the three border provinces Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat has engendered a heated discussion on the coexistence of Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand. After the violence, nothing is as it was before and religious and ritual spaces are more rigidly separated and controlled.

In the following, I want to give ethnographic examples of my fieldwork in order to catch the dynamics of change taking place in the reconfigured *Manora*. This is not the first reconfiguration of the *Nora Rongkru* vow ceremony. Even before, the *Manora* has been taken out of the rural ancestral context and has become a commodity and political ideology. At one time, in the era of Phibulsongkram, in the 1930s and 1950s, actors of the *Manora* epos were encouraged to change costumes into European dresses and military uniforms. Famous *nairong Manora* were appointed national artists and were summoned to perform for the Thai king in Bangkok. The first *nairong* was Nora Teum

from Trang. He was seen as a civilized and modern *nairong* who also used elements from *Lakhorn Chatri* Dance, *Luuk Tung* folksong, and TV soap opera. There was fierce competition between the *nairong* for fame (e.g., Butsararat 2003; Guelden 2005a: 190–194).

Performing the *Manora Rongkru* Vow Ceremony in Ban Dhammakhot, Songkhla

In the village of Ban Dhammakhot, on the eastern banks of Lake Songkhla, a *Nora Rongkru* ritual is underway. Designated family members of a household lightened candles and shake their bodies. Possessed by their ancestors' spirits, they begin to dance like professional dancers on the stage under the guidance of the bird-winged *Manora* dancers who please the ancestor spirits by singing *Manora* verses.

The *Nora Rongkru* ritual will be prepared months or even years in advance. It is crucial that all of the family members are present, they complete all associated financial and organizational arrangements. The head of the family will set a date in the period from May to September with the trusted *nairong Manora*. He will call to the ancestor spirits and control the harmful spirits who may enter the stage through the backdoor. During the numerous consultations which precede the performance, the *nairong Manora* inquires about the motivation of the family to invite the *Manora* and accustoms the ceremony accordingly. The *nairong* is thus best in-



Fig. 3: The possessed female host wanders to the ancestor shrine of the *Manora* stage.

formed about the situation of the host and about all the ancestors and deities present. This information enables him to contact the deities during the performance by name.

The host family will place photographs of their ancestors on the shrine in the house, prepare the offerings, food, and drinks for all the visitors for the three days, and build a temporary ritual stage on a lawn near the house. The stage serves as a ceremonial space as well as a performing area for *Manora*. The spirit shrine (*palai*) is a small elevated platform on the right side of the stage. It represents a high house where only *Manora* ancestral spirits reside, the shrine for the host family's ancestral spirits is in the main house. During the ritual, a white sacred string (*saisin*) will link the *palai* by the stage to the shrine in the host family's house. The *palai* serves as the link between the godlike realm of the *Manora* spirits and the host family's ancestors. The performance space for a *Manora* dance-drama varies. Traditionally, it was a makeshift space on the ground, with only four bamboo pillars and a roof signifying the performance boundaries. The *Nora Rongkru* is performed in the intimate compound of a private house and is available only for invited family members, relatives, and good friends. In this sense, then, it is an intimate family affair.

The stage (*rong*) is constructed only for the duration of the performance and will be completely dismantled. Music plays a hugely significant role. A *Manora* dancer's costume is layered with a chest piece, a neck piece, and shoulder ornament, all made from strings of colorful small plastic beads. Other unique features are the golden crown (*soed*), the sil-

ver wing ornament, the bird-like tail, and the long, bent fingernail extensions. A *soed* crown is considered sacred; only those who have gone through a *krob-soed* initiation ritual are allowed to wear it.

Ban Dammakhot, where I observed three consecutive *Nora Rongkru* ceremonies in the household of Wandi and Leg, is exemplary for villages in rural Thailand. Relatives arrive from all directions and help to cover the costs of the ritual. In addition to the rich offerings, the food for the guests is plentiful, consisting of southern Thai dishes. The audience comments the sketches of the *Manora* troupe and gets into an active communication with the dancers, whereby punches and jokes are exchanged after good doses of alcohol consumption.

The spirit mediums were complemented by professional mediums from the city. The ritual was used to treat some patients from the kinship group. The spirit medium was possessed by powerful ancestor spirits and moved the burning candle in circling movements over the head of the patient who sat on a mat in the *rong*. Through the therapy, the spirit medium aimed to remove excess heat, thus exorcising the harmful spirit.

Wandi, the female head of the household, appeared as a medium and embodied the powerful spirit of the domain. Returning ecstatically with the candle in her hand to the shrine in the house she paid her respect to the deities in the house, moved back to the *rong*, and climbed the ladder to the *palai* to venerate the great teachers, before returning to the core family where the spirit met the family members, beginning with the oldest grandfather and proceeding by declining age through to the daugh-

Fig. 4: A medium possessed by a Malay Muslim spirit heals a Family Member in the *Manora*-Stage.



ter. In great emotional warmth, she hugged and embraced the family members and tears were shed because they have not seen their loved ones for a long time. The spirit is joking and laughing with family members and the community. The ancestors inquired about the status of the family and provided valuable advice. Wandī almost lost conscience, fully exhausted, to reawake later as Wandī.

The Spectacular *Nora Rongkru* in Memoriam of the Ancestral Teacher Si Sata in Wat Takae

The public, spectacular performances of the *Manora Rongkru* in Wat Takae and in Wat Takura are sponsored by extremely wealthy temples, the local government, or wealthy businesspeople in the area. These public performances attract thousands of pilgrims and worshippers every year.

By the time of my research, the *Nora Rongkru* in honor of the first teacher in Takae and the Ta Yai Yarn in honor of the first teacher's mother had become highly commodified festivals that nevertheless kept the intimacy and the spirituality of the original *Manora* epos – in which all people were descendants of the first teachers and were thus expected to venerate the great ancestors. In organizing the event, the *Manora* kept what Adam Chau (2006: 70–72) calls the “coercion of the community,” meaning the successful imposition of community norms and beliefs on a particular locale.

The ceremony for the veneration of the first *Manora* teacher, Khun Si Sata, takes place every year in the last week of April on the ground of Wat Takae temple in Pattalung. Khun Si Sata, the son of Mae Srimala (best translated as: the Great Mother of the Earth), is believed to be a reincarnation of the Hindu god Shiva. Six of twelve *Manora*-founder spirits are said to possess spirit mediums in Wat Takae. The grand ritual in Wat Takae is a public spectacle which attracts thousands of people from all parts of the south to honor the first teacher of the *Manora* epos, Khun Si Sata. The *nairong Manora* who had the privilege to perform in the grand ceremony in Wat Takae is regarded as direct successor of Si Sata and has to be among the greatest living *Manora* teachers in southern Thailand. During the grand *Nora Rongkru* ceremony at Wat Takae, the successor of the first *Manora* teacher is crowned and accepted as a teacher of the grand *Manora*. The *Manora* teacher derives his power from the spirit of the first teacher, Si Sata, whose spirit is present and who observes the performance with keen interest.

Si Sata is commemorated with a statue that sits like a Buddha in a small hall (*viharn*) that has been

constructed to accommodate him. The pilgrims offered flowers and food offerings to the spirit of Si Sata in the small *viharn*. The great ritual was carried out among the *Manora* family which included all people with *Manora* descent (*trakun Manora*). As nearly all households in old villages were *trakun Manora*, everybody was called upon to join the ceremony in Wat Takae.

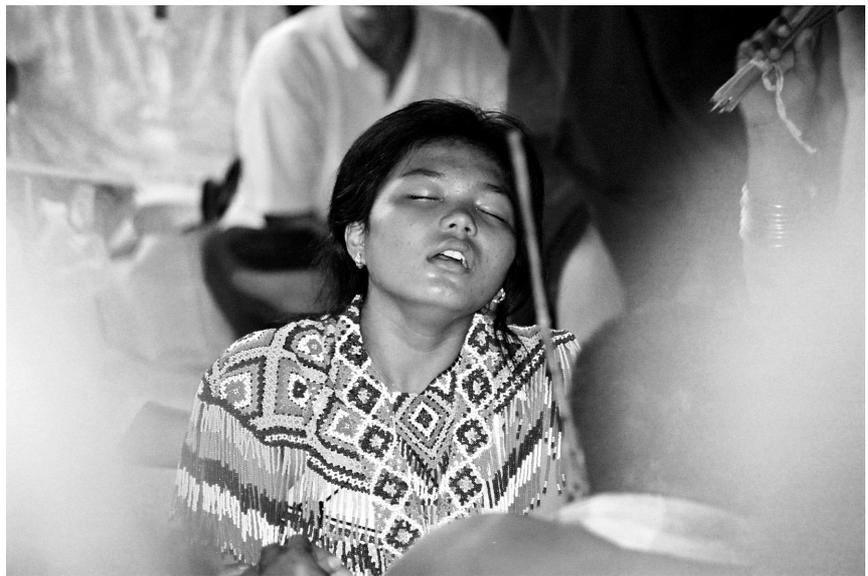
When I witnessed the ritual in 2008, it was a hot day and huge crowds came to the temple. The participants requested a boon and reciprocated by dancing with the hunter's mask in the temple.⁹ Dozens of people came in large families to party, mingle with the crowds and visit the many market stalls, selling Buddhist amulets, *Manora* music and other items, food, and drinks. The event was organized by a committee, consisting of the abbot, local civil servants, and prominent businessmen. The main representatives of the preparation committee presented the *Nora Rongkru* at Wat Takae as a Buddhist tradition. One particular businessman in construction and engineering, dressed in the traditional white clothes of the spirit mediums, was the main sponsor of the event. This businessman accumulated huge prestige, merit, and attention of the spirits by sponsoring the ceremony. He was among the designated spirit mediums that participated every year in the Wat Takae ceremony. During the ritual, he was possessed by the ancestor spirits and danced among other mediums in the pavilion. Entrance to the stage was restricted by the authority of the *Manora* teacher. Nevertheless, it seemed that people came and went and that the stage became a very fluid space. A hundred onlookers were allowed to stay closely to the stage in the hot sun to observe the spectacle and to comment on it. The music was extremely loud and loudspeakers blasted across the temple terrain.

After the performance of the *Manora* dancers, the stage filled with dancers and people who wore the *Manora* ancestral mask of the hunter. Old women, who used to visit the *Nora Rongkru* regularly for decades, joined and began spontaneously to dance. Spirit mediums in white clothes joined the scene and became possessed by the great *Manora* ancestor spirits. The stage was constantly filled with possessed spirit mediums and dancers, until the *nairong Manora* called the dancers from the stage to make space for the ritual.

After a break, the *nairong* granted waiting families the opportunity to enter the stage and to pre-

⁹ The hunter (*phran*) who wants to catch the bird-winged maiden is one of the important figures in the performance of the creation epos and one of the narrators (together with the *nairong*). The hunter's mask has become a popular item for vov dancers.

Fig. 5: A descendent of Si Sata is possessed and in Trance on the *Manora*-Stage in Wat Takae.



sent their babies and children. Some babies suffered from a skin disease that left terrible red marks on their face. The magical treatment by the *nairong* was a viable alternative to the difficult medical treatment. This special ritual – called *yiap sen* (stepping on the sore) – was performed for centuries. In the perspective of the *Manora*, the illness was caused by malevolent spirits: A female spirit selected the child and, therefore, marked it. According to the legend, Si Sata healed this illness and removed the sores from the faces of two hunters by washing his feet in sea water and putting them on the wounds. The parents brought their babies on the stage and put them on a soft pillow. In the dance, the *nairong Manora* bathed his bare foot in a bowl of sacred water and betel leaves. He wrote a mantra in old Khmer on his big toe and put it into a flame. The rhythm of the music intensified, when the *nairong Manora* moved his foot, turned around, and touched the face of the child firmly with his bare foot. The musician beat the drums strongly and increased the dramatics. The *nairong Manora* was possessed by the spirit of the first *Manora* teacher and used his power and knowledge in the healing ritual. The authority of the *nairong Manora* in healing the sores was unquestioned and widely known in southern Thailand. The *yiap sen* ritual was repeated several times as many parents came with their babies to the ceremony full of hope that the spirit could be domesticated and exorcised.

The climax of the Wat Takae ceremony was the crowning initiation ceremony. The assistant of the *nairong Manora*, who was dressed in white clothes during the ritual, was prostrating in front of the *nai-*

rong Manora. There was concentrated silence at this stage as everybody was aware of this precious moment. The *nairong Manora* put a crown on the head of his assistant, thereby transmitting the power and knowledge of the *Manora* tradition to him. The so-crowned assistant was now able to found his own *Manora* group and perform with it. The new *Manora* master was now allowed to change his costume and to wear the beautiful costume of the *nairong Manora*. He submitted himself under the authority of his teacher for the duration of the ritual, but would eventually succeed him. After the crowning ritual, he carried out his first performance under the auspices of his teacher and the spirit of Si Sata.

During the ritual, the stage was one of the main theatres of action, but in parallel, the image of Si Sata in the small temple building also attracted large crowds who offered candles, flowers, incense, betel leaves, and food in worship of the first teacher. In the Wat Takae ritual, only the great ancestors were invited to the boost, including the first *Manora* teachers, the guardian spirits of the land of Wat Takae, the kings, and Buddhist saints. Spirit mediums and masked dancers felt free to occupy the stage throughout the ritual. Every single ritual, whether in the intimate sphere of the house or in public space, represented the microcosm of the world and the universe in the understanding of the *Manora*. The public performance in Wat Takae attracted hundreds of participants and onlookers who hoped to benefit from the presence of Si Sata's spirit and his power to heal.

A Hybrid Festival: Women Ordinating as Nuns, Pilgrims Dancing With the *Nora* Mask at Wat Ta Kura, Satingphra, Songkhla

In the first week of May, another grand ceremony attracted thousands of pilgrims; families flocked to the temple of Takura in Satingphra to participate in the merit-making activities. The ritual in Satingphra was also organized by a committee consisting of local bureaucrats and the Buddhist abbot of Takura. The ceremony transformed the sleepy village of Ban Wat Takura into a huge feast in which large crowds were attracted by the healing power of the Buddha image that is stored in a box behind two temple doors. The unwrapping of the small Buddha image accompanied by the music of the *Manora* musicians was the highlight of the festival.

The *Manora Rongkru* in Takura was a hybridization of Theravada Buddhism and *Manora*. Basically, two things happened in Takura at the same time: First, Takura was an important place in the *Manora* myth. According to elder people, Mae Srimala donated the gold that an elephant has found in a bamboo tree to the temple of Wat Takura to distribute it among the people. According to another narrative, the gold was donated to the abbot to have it transformed into the holy Buddha image. The Buddha image was presented in a cage to the pilgrims who waited for hours to catch some holy water and to sprinkle it on the Buddha image. The unwrapping of the Buddha image was preceded by intensive chanting of Buddhist monks in *pali* sacred language and drum play by selected *Manora* musicians located in the temple hall in front of the door. Male dancers wearing the ancestor *Manora* mask of the hunter danced wildly in the smaller pavilion.

A special stage was again erected for the *Nora Rongkru* performance. Hundreds bought a ticket for fifty baht to enter the stage and to dance with the music transmitted by audiocassettes on loudspeakers. The dancers wore only individual parts of the *Manora* costumes or the hunter masks. After five minutes, the music stopped and the *nairong Manora* sent the dancers from the stage. He got ready for the next ritual, the *yiap sen* (stepping on the sore). Again, people bought their ticket for fifty baht and in this case mothers brought their children on the stage. Before curing the babies with his foot, the *Manora* master inquired with the mother about the illness of the child. Just as in Wat Takae, numerous families flocked to the temple in the hope of a cure.

Another event brought hundreds of young women to the temple festival at Takura. Young women were ordained resulting fulfilment of a vow they made to the mother of the *Manora*. In contempo-

rary Thailand, women are marginalized with regard to ordination into the Buddhist *sangha*. In Takura, women had the special opportunity to be ordained for one day. The young nuns-to-be were eager to perform the ordination ceremony, but because of the sheer number the ceremony was carried out in a very concise form. Every thirty minutes, ten women were ordained in a row. The young women identified themselves with the female hero of the *Manora* epos. They regarded their ordination to the status of Mee Chi in Takura as a meritorious act and as a way to reciprocate their vow. The sprinkling of the Buddha image, the dancing in the *viharn*, the *yiap sen* on the stage, the healing activities of monks, and the mass ordination of young nuns all took place in an atmosphere of a popular festival with a hundred market stalls, selling food, drinks, Buddhist amulets, handicrafts, fake hunter masks, and musical *Manora* instruments. The commodification of the *Manora Rongkru*, its hybridization and postmodernization was brought to a climax in Takura.

On the second day of the ritual, on Thursday, a striking scene took place: A young mother with a black *jilbab* (headscarf) pushed her way through the crowds. The *nairong Manora* nodded and ordered her baby on a pillow. He slowly rotated, put his foot into the holy water, in the fire, and on the face of the crying baby. In her desperate need for a cure, the young Muslim mother came all the way from the province of Chumphorn. Ready to find her way to the *nairong Manora*, she ignored the Buddhist environment. Because of her veiling, everybody recognized her as a modern Muslima. Some of the Muslim participants may have not been recognized as Muslims because they did not wear Islamic clothes. This woman made her Islamic affiliation known, but made a desperate move to find a cure for her child. She was received by the *nairong Manora* who put his foot on the child's face under loud music from the drums. The Muslim woman was unaware of the commercialization of the ceremony and deeply uncomfortable in the crowd. Finally, she bought the ticket and her right to see the *Manora* master for five minutes. This case shows that even as a Muslima, she hoped that the great ancestor spirits would aid her child's recovery, in whose power she clearly believed. A Muslim woman transgressed the space of a Buddhist temple, because she believes in the divine powers of the *Manora*. Wearing a dark veil, she was easily recognizable as a Muslim.

Conclusionary Remarks

The *Nora Rongkru* is not the tranquil rural ritual that has been described admirably by Isaradej (1999). Through modern media, the images of the *Nora Rongkru* festivals have developed a life on their own: They have contributed to enhance the potential power and charisma of famous *nairong Manora* and the prestige of the host or sponsor of the ceremony. The crowds come regularly every year as pilgrims to worship the great *Manora* ancestors. They emphasize the importance of the ritual by giving it the attribute “big” (*yai*). The noise, smells, trance, and the presence of the deities have transformed the *Manora* festivals in Takae and Ta Kura into huge sensoriums, bombarding the senses. Many people are attracted by the *Manora* troupes and the successors of the great *Manora* teachers who are considered the greatest in the region. While the reason for individual families, hosting the *Manora* is more specific and has to do with requesting boons, the visitors, and participants of the grand *Manora* festivals, is less specific and has to do with the magic of the place. To explain the agency of Thai popular religion, we have to consider the reconfigured functions of the *Manora Rongkru* during the economic boom and buzz of Thailand in the last few decades. I would argue that the decisive factor in the revitalization of the *Nora Rongkru* is the search for magical efficacy and divine benevolence in a context of modernization. The revitalization of the *Manora* is taking place against a background of the intensification and individualization of religious experience in southern Thailand. While people withdraw from conventional Buddhism and Islam, the search for an individualized spiritual experience in modern Buddhists movements and Islamic revivalist movements is more popular than ever. The communities are linked to images by national and global media and, in turn, enter the national and global flows to nourish their direction. Southerners in Thailand thus experience a very personal *Manora Rongkru* that is accommodated to meet the southerner’s particular spiritual needs.

While both Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim items were offered to the deities, Muslims were withdrawing from the *Manora* in large number. For the Buddhist participants, the religious difference of the ancestral deities is not of importance, since both Buddhist and Muslim deities are invited by the *nairong Manora*, depending on the locality. While the *Manora* seems to lose its interreligious footing, the commodification of the *Manora* does not make it less authentic or powerful. More people than ever seem to give their trust to the deities

and are willing to invest in them. The role of Buddhism in accommodating the big *Manora* spectacles in its temples is part of its spectacular revitalization. While the old *nairong Manora* who played for the Thai king did not see a difference between Buddhists and Muslims, today’s representatives of the Buddhist temple’s *Manora* committees do: They see the *Manora* as a Buddhist belief and practice. The distinction of the ancestors according to the religion constitutes a real rupture as southerner’s did not use to distinguish ancestors according to their religion. The *Manora* has become a prosperity ritual in which its commodification has contributed to the prestige of its sponsors and may provide them with incredible wealth. As such, the *Manora* resembles the Buddhist robe-giving *Kathin* ceremony, which also provides huge prestige to its main sponsor (Keyes 1995). While the original *Manora* idea of the advice by the caring ancestors and deities is not lost, only wealthy families can afford to hire a full *Manora* that keep the spirits in southern Thailand alive. While the *Manora* is firmly anchored in the lifeworld, history, and remembrance of southern Thailand, it mediates the communication between the living and the deities, enacts and displays the drama of society on its stage and thus – effective and transformative – contributes to the reconstitution of society.

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