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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MANORAH STORY INTO RELIGIOUS PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL ROLES OF THE MANORAH MASTER

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ABSTRACT

This article presents research on the transformation of the Buddhist Manorah story into a work of Southern Thai dance theatre and explores its changing social and spiritual roles. The main objectives are to study the transformation of the Manorah story into religious performance, to study the Manorah master, to study modernity, causes, and changes. The research setting was in Nakorn Si Thammarat and Trang. The research studies the threats of modernity affecting Manorah masters and investigates how Manorah can survive in the modern world in conjunction with Buddhism through different case studies. This qualitative study mainly uses two research models: Descriptive and Explanatory research. The content analysis and data collection are from a review of Jataka's story and the fieldwork. The findings are that Manorah's beliefs and practices have been syncretized well with Buddhism. Also, Manorah in related literature, had distinctive characteristics and concrete values from legends. The roles of spirit medium and ritual practices from the Manorah master are at the gate of co-existence and hybridization. Manorah can survive in the modern world within the Buddhist community. The study concludes that traditional Manorah masters can coexist with modernity and maintain the Manorah ceremony in the community. The new generation of Manorah can also be community leaders by maintaining aspects of internal peace.

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INTRODUCTION

Each region of Thailand has its unique performing arts, spiritual beliefs, and culture.¹ Thai performing arts are the sum of the learned behavior of Thais that are generally considered to be the Thai tradition that has been transmitted from one cohort to the next cohort. For example, in the Southern region, performing arts are influenced mainly by Javanese; therefore, some performing arts are formed by a mixture of Buddhist and Islamic ways. Islam's influence on the arts of Southeast Asia should not be underestimated.² For example, this influence can be seen as Shadow Dance/*talung* dance (หนังตะลุง), *sampeng* (ซั่มเป้ง), *long yeng* (ลองแย่ง), *ligay hoo loo* (ลิเกฮูลู), etc.³

The Thai word “*Chadok*” (ชาดก) means tales of the teachings of the Buddha that are the Buddha's past stories when he was a Bodhisattva who performed various good acts. Each rebirth will have a different story. The word “*Jataka*” is a Buddhist scripture created to teach Buddhist Dharma.⁴ By performing a dramatic style, the Dharma that teaches the most is the matter of “*karma*.” “*Chadok*” was originally a main part of the *Tripitaka* (พระไตรปิฎก). There were 547 *Jataka* stories and 22 *Nibata* (นิบาต) that are types of scriptures in Buddhism. For example, *Suttha Nibata* (สูตรนิบาต) consists of miscellaneous Buddha's teachings or various allegories together by subdividing into different categories. *Nibata Chadok* (นิบาตชาดก) is a scripture that collects various *Jataka* in *Tripitaka* and is sub-divided into different categories. The most well-known *Nibata Chadok* is the “Great Story” or “*Maha Chad*” (มหาชาดก), which is the story of *Phra Wessadon Chadok* (พระเวสสันดรชาดก), that was the last *Chadok* of rebirth before becoming the Buddha.⁵

The origins of the Manorah story, belief, performance, and emphasis may date to India. The purpose is to worship the three Hindu Gods or The *Trimūrti* (the Triple Deity of supreme divinity in Hinduism), namely Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu. Manorah was influenced by Indian performances and transferred to the southern region of Thailand by bringing the Buddha's relics to the Borommathat Chedi area in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.

This research fieldwork was organized in Nakorn Si Thammarat and Trang in Southern Thailand; it provided an opportunity to encounter Manorah's performance and the rite of transformation directly. It transforms an ordinary Manorah dancer into the status of a Kru Manorah/Manorah Master (venerable teacher). An annual special worship ceremony to pay attention to the essential people knowledgeable of Manorah culture and its respect for the spirit of the deceased revered Kru Manorah is a part of the research fieldwork. In the cultural aspect and the religious dimension are Manorah Pensri Yodrabum (มโนราห์เพ็ญศรี

¹ Nilratana Klinchan, “Thai Culture That ASIAN Students Should Know,” *Mahachula Academic Journal* 4 (2018): 188–203.

² “Islamic Influence on Southeast Asian Visual Arts, Literature, and Performance,” Asia Society, Accessed March 7, 2024, <http://asiasociety.org>.

³ Niyada Lausunthorn, “Paññāsa Jātaka [Panyasachataka],” *Wathanatham Journal: Department of Cultural Promotion*, yr. 54 1 (2015): 34–41.

⁴ Isaline B. Horner & Padmanabh S. Jaini, *Apocryphal Birth-stories (Paññāsa-Jātaka)* (London; Boston: Pali Text Society, distributed by Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

⁵ Arts Program for Thai language major (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, *Thai literature: Phra Wessadon Chadok* (Yala Rajabhat University, 2018).

ยอกระบำ)⁶ and Manorah Nuttawut Ketkor (มนิราห์นัฐวุฒิ เกตุก่อ).⁷ Their stories are the primary case studies of the research fieldwork.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THAI SOUTHERN CULTURE

The history of southern Thailand can be traced back to prehistoric periods in the Malay peninsula due to the discovery of ancient remains, pottery, born and horn artifacts, as well as shells and plant seeds at numerous cave sites, i.e., Moh Khiew cave and Tham Lang Rongrian cave.⁸ In the 1000s CE, according to Chinese records, there were several seaside cities in the Malay peninsula; the most remarkable city-states were Langkasuka (ลังกาสุกะ) (the Patani Kingdom) and Tambralinga (ตามพรลิงค์) (Nakhon Si Thammarat Kingdom). Both city-states were greatly influenced by Indian culture, and Brahmanism and Buddhism were later adopted as their religions.⁹ While Srivijaya in Chaiya increased its influence, the city-states became branch entities of Srivijaya. Chaiya city in Surat Thani province contains several ruins from the Srivijaya period. After Srivijaya declined and its influence vanished, Nakhon Si Thammarat became the leading kingdom in the region. Throughout the reign of the Great King Ramkhamhaeng of the Sukhothai Kingdom, Siam's influence primarily reached Nakhon Si Thammarat. Later, Nakhon Si Thammarat became a dependency of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. In the 18th century, the Malay sultanates of Pattani and Kedah controlled the deep south; Bangkok controlled the northernmost part of the peninsula. A large section of the population in the peninsula was practicing Islam in this period. They were called “*khaek*” (แขก) by many Thais and later “Muslim.”¹⁰ During the significant political restructuring at the end of the 19th century, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Pattani were combined into the central state. The land was divided into five regions to control the city states better amalgamated into larger areas. The Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 was established to form the current 14 southernmost provinces along with the modern Malaysia–Thailand border.¹¹

The resulting political boundaries established that the area around modern Pattani, Narathiwat, Songkhla, Satun, and Yala remained under Siam (Thai) control. The Malay Peninsula, which connects to Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma), has been an important cultural crossroads for over two millennia. The Chaiya district in Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Songkhla exemplifies this intersection of cultures and nationalities. Later the Hindu-Buddhist Srivijaya Empire later controlled most

⁶ Manorah Pensri Yodrabum is the most leading female Nora/Manorah in Nakhon Si Thammarat. Her nickname is the queen of hymn and ancient dance. She has the most Manorah work on CDs among other Manorah artists. Her performance is in the TV drama “Nam Tha Nora” (Nora’s tear) on the Southern Channel. She is the only one Manorah who represents Thailand on her way to performing in the United States. See an example at <http://202.29.16.43/opac/BibDetail.aspx?bibno=1083902>.

⁷ Manorah Nuttawut Ketkor was the Buddhist monk who finally becomes a new generation of Manorah in Trang in order to follow the bloodline of his Manorah family.

⁸ Martin Ellis, *The Caves of Peninsular and Southern Thailand*, Accessed March 8, 2024, <http://grotto.org/en-trance/FMPLj1kC>.

⁹ John Guy, *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2014), 28–29.

¹⁰ Patrick Jory, “From Melayu Patani to Thai Muslim: The Spectre of Ethnic Identity in Southern Thailand,” *South East Asia Research* 15 (2007): 255–279.

¹¹ “Britain and Siam, Treaty signed in Siamese capital,” *Straits Budget*, Accessed May 17, 2024, <http://www.ere-sources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitsecho>.

of the region from the 7th to 13th centuries. After Srivijaya's collapse, Arabian traders introduced Muslim beliefs to Siam, and the significant cultural impact of Islam in the peninsula's southmost region exists to the current period.¹²

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF MANORAH

Manorah, or Norah, is a performance associated with southern Thailand. This strong association between Manorah and the South has logically led to the presumption that the performance originated in the South of Thailand. Until when the studies are made about *Suthon Jataka* (*Chadok*), which is one of the 50 Jataka stories included in the book "*Panya Chadok*" or "*Paññāsa Jātaka*".¹³

The word "Norah" comes from the word "Manorah", which is the protagonist in the story of *Suthon Chadok*. It is known that "*Panya Chadok*" is the main Buddhist story, and an old monk called Phra Thera, who was the Chiang Mai philosopher, compiled a legend that was prevalent in folk tales in that period.¹⁴ Later, the folk tales were brought up as an allegory during 1453-1479 AD (2000-2022 BE), written in Pali. There was poetry in prose, spell, and verse, totaling 50 jatakas. The book was in the time of the Mengrai Dynasty (ราชวงศ์เม็งราย/ราชวงศ์มังราย) of Lanna Kingdom in the reign of Phra Muang Kaew/ King Phraya Kaew or King Siridharma Chackapad meaning King of Dharma (พระเจ้าศิริธรรมจักรพรรดิ) in 1495-1525 AD (2038-2068 BE).¹⁵ Although the original titles and texts were written in Pali, they were translated into Thai because many Thai scholars and historians were not specialists in Pali. In the old times, Pali literature was very prosperous in this era. It was the golden age of Buddhist Pali scriptures in Lanna and Suvarnabhumi. Many Pali texts, which are known to the present, were written in this era, such as *Shina Karn Mali Pakorn* (ชินกาลมาลีปกรณ์), *Dhamma* (ธรรมะ), *Cham Devi Wong* (จามเทวีวงศ์), or *Mangklat Thiepani* (มังคลัตถทีปนี/มงคลทีปนี), a scripture describing the 38 sacred meanings that are used as essential textbooks in Thai Buddhist universities.¹⁶ Therefore, it is believed that Panya Jataka's books should be composed during this time.

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¹² "The Srivijaya Empire: trade and culture in the Indian Ocean," Accessed March 3, 2009, <http://www.khanacademy.org>.

¹³ Niyada Lausunthorn, "Paññāsa Jātaka [Panyasachataka]," *Watthanatham Journal: Department of Cultural Promotion*, yr. 54 1 (January–March, 2015):34.– 41.

¹⁴ Toshiharu Yoshikawa, *A Comparative Study of the Thai Sanakrit and Chinese Swan Maiden*, (Osaka University of Foreign Studies, Japan. 1984), 197-213.

¹⁵ Hans Pentth and Andrew Forbes, *A Brief History of Lan Na* (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Centre, 2004).

¹⁶ Phramaha Adul Khonraeng, "An Analytical Study of the Mangal Atthadipani," (M.A. theses, Silpakorn University, 1998).

¹⁷ Isaline B. Horner and Padmanabh S. Jaini, *Apocryphal Birth-stories (Paññāsa-Jātaka)* (London; Boston: Pali Text Society, distributed by Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

of scriptures in Buddhism. For example, *Suttha Nibata* (สูตรนิบาต) consists of miscellaneous Buddha's teachings or various allegories together by subdividing into different categories. *Nibata Chadok* (นิบาตชาดก) is a scripture that collects various Jataka in *Tripikata* and is sub-divided into different categories. The most well-known *Nibata Chadok* is the "Great Story" or "*Maha Chad*" (มหาชาติ), which is the story of *Phra Wessadon Chadok* (พระเวสสันดรชาดก), that was the last Chadok of rebirth before becoming the Lord Buddha.¹⁸

CONCEPTS

The transformation of the Manorah story into a religious performance is extraordinary. The Manorah story originated from a Buddhist Jataka tale popularized by becoming a folklore and a Southern dance-theatre.¹⁹ Manorah is transformed from tales, legends, and folk literature and becomes a kind of religious performance.²⁰ Manorah is more than just acting on stage; it also combines beliefs, rituals, and the relationship between the Manorah and the southern people. In addition, Manorah has a variety of purposes. For example, Manorah links to the belief of "*Kru Manorah*" and "grandparents," meaning the ancestral spirits descend from their divine realm to pass into the trance mediums.²¹ Therefore, Manorah is a cult of performing rituals related to superstition (เชื่อโชคลาง) that shows unawareness of the laws of nature and faith in magic. Manorah is a kind of religious cult that is directly related to superstitious beliefs. For example, they can show respect and worship to their deceased ancestors, whom the villagers call grandparents. The villagers perform Paying *Mei* (pronounced *Mei*) (แก้เหมา), which means to pay homage and to treat various diseases.²² They believe in witchcraft, especially the Manorah Rong Kru dance. For instance, Nora Yai, the Head of the Order, must have a magic spell to prevent misfortune and evil spirits from entering the ceremony.

Performing some spiritual rituals will require the use of magic, such as the ceremony of crowning or tying a large cloth, the cloth-tying ceremony, the votive ceremony, the *Yeap Sen* ceremony, the *Phi Cho* hair-cutting ceremony, etc.²³ Manorah cult unifies how it strengthens community connections between people of various classes and professions. This phenomenon is a part of hybridization, which means the mixture of two or more different things aimed at achieving a specific objective or goal. The transformation of Manorah involves the Manorah story into a dance theatre and a religious cult that occurs due to the changing status of the Manorah leading dancer from being an entertainer into a Manorah master or a cult leader with supernatural and spiritual powers.

¹⁸ Arts Program for Thai language major (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, *Thai literature: Phra Wessadon Chadok* (Yala Rajabhat University, 2018).

¹⁹ "Nora: Icon of the South," *Thailand Foundation*, Accessed March 8, 2024, www.thailandfoundation.or.th.

²⁰ Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *From the fifty Jātaka: Selections from the Thai Paññāsa Jātaka* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2019).

²¹ Parichart Jungwiwattanaporn, "In Contact with the Dead: Nora Rong Khru Chao Ban Ritual of Thailand," *Asian Theatre Journal* 23 (2006): 374-395.

²² Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, "Encyclopedia of Southern Thai Culture," *Thailand Cultural Encyclopedia*, Accessed January 7, 2024, <https://www.mapsguide.info/phetthalung-go-green-festival/>.

²³ Suthiwong Phongphaibun, *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture B.E. 2529* (Bangkok: Amarin Publishing, B.E. 2529).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Thai Religious Syncretization of Beliefs and Practices

Kitiarsa's book *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* is a study of popular Buddhism in post-modern Thailand.²⁴ By popular Buddhism, he means Buddhism that is different from its scriptural or canonical counterpart due to its loosely organized and pragmatic natures.²⁵ Concerning magical monks and spirit mediums, he makes it clear that they “*help their clients morally or spiritually in modern life.*”²⁶ By looking to Manorah in the relation of magical monks and sacred objects, many famously magical Buddhist monks (i.e., Great Father of Chao Saeng (พ่อแก่เจ้าแสง), Great Father Kheaw (พ่อท่านเขียว), and so on) or *Phra keji arjarn* (พระเกจิอาจารย์) i.e. Luang Pho Khun (หลวงพ่อกุณ) sanctify Phran Boon red mask as a supernatural power object.²⁷ It is known as a divine or magic artifact and holds a significant place in mythology. Without consecration from these magical Buddhist monks, the red mask of Phran Boon may not be sacred according to spiritual belief. In his study, Kitiarsa is more concerned with how people act, why they do it, and what they do. His focus is the heart of folklore. For example, he pointed out Luang Pho Khun as a post-modern famous Thai monk, “Thailand’s most famous superstar magic monk, seen in photographs as a wizened, skinny figure squatting with banknotes. His amulets and blessings are sought by devotees ranging from poor villagers to the nobility.”²⁸ It makes popular Thai Buddhism a subject of study and research for folklorists, anthropologists, and students of religion. Besides, in “*Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand,*”²⁹ Kitiarsa pointed out Shigeharu Tanabe, Professor of Anthropology at Otani University, Kyoto, and Charles Keyes, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and International Studies, University of Washington, about “crisis of modernity” in contemporary Thailand. It comes from the combination of supernatural, Buddhist, and other spiritual parts in Thai religious syncretism. They can cause socio-cultural turmoil and the effects of the crisis of modernity in contemporary Thailand. In the world of Manorah, the southern Thai culture is unique and robust. For example, there are many exciting ceremonies in southern Thailand, especially in terms of Theravada Buddhism, i.e., the essential ceremonies in Nakhon Si Thammarat, such as the Ceremony of “*hae par kheun tard*” (แห่ผ้าขึ้นธาตุ)³⁰ or bringing a long piece of cloth to cover the pagoda (*Phra Chedi*) of the Lord Buddha on important religious days. Also, the Ceremony of “*sard doern sib*” (สารทเดือนสิบ)³¹ or making merit on the tenth month, is an important merit-making event for the southern Thai people, especially in Nakhon Si Thammarat. “It reflects the practice of honoring and showing gratitude to

²⁴ Pattana Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (WA, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Pattana Kitiarsa, “Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (2005): 461-487.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Nakhon Si Thammarat Provincial Cultural Center, *In Important traditions of the people of Nakhon Si Thammarat* (Bangkok: Krung Siam, Harphakhunthatu Tradition, 1985).

³¹ Gaysorn Ponjamong, “Sarh Duan Sib Muang Khon: Strategies hidden in traditions, examples of beliefs Southern region regarding the tenth lunar month tradition that is conveyed through the art of Sarh Daen Sib Silpakorn University,” *Journal Thai language edition* 37 (2017): 233-248.

the deceased, especially among the people of Nakhon Si Thammarat, influenced by a blend of Brahmanism and Buddhism.”³² In many cases, the southern Thai socio-cultural context is characterized by a combined belief in Buddhism and Brahminism.³³ As we shall later see in Manorah performances, Buddhist culture can absorb influences from other religious traditions.

As previously discussed about Hindu deities appearing in Thai “Buddhist” practice, the ability of these traditions to not only coexist but also converge is evidence of their harmonious historical development. Several major deities are exceptionally inspired by Hindu traditions, i.e., and Shaktism. The significant deities are Parvati, Vishnu, Sri (Lakshmi), Shiva, Sati, Brahma, Saraswat, and Ardhanārīshvara (half Shiva, half Parvati).³⁴ According to Kitiarsa, he mentioned worshipping Hindu deities and stated, “The worship of Hindu deities in these popular cults indicates that ordinary people share common icons with the royal court. In the ritual propitiation of royal spirits, mediums ‘invent’ ritual attire and use their version of court language (*ratchasap*) [คำราชาศัพท์] in their communication with the spirits. I use the verb ‘invent’ because it is impossible for spirit mediums to copy historically authentic royal attire and language, which would seem to be far beyond their knowledge and experience...”³⁵

Hybridization in Contemporary Thai Society

In the 21st century, Thailand is now a hybrid that is a simple mixture of Western culture. Hybridity is not a new cultural or historical miracle in Thailand. The present country has become more modern than the past. For hybridization (ความเป็นลูกผสม)³⁶ it is something that is combined. Prof. Dr. Bussakorn Binson pointed out, “*A hybrid is the combination of two or more different things aimed at achieving a particular objective or goal.*”³⁷ Hybridity is different from syncretism (การผสมผสานความเชื่อ), which is an attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, and thought. Syncretism is the fusion of different religious beliefs and practices. Religion in Southeast Asia is characterized by a combination of religious beliefs, which consists of primitive religion/spiritual religion, Brahmanism, and Buddhism.

Many modern changes in Thailand come from Western culture that came to Southeast Asia and produced three consequences: Westernization, Neo-traditionalism, and Industrialization.³⁸ Even though Europeans or other countries have never colonized Thailand, the country is influenced by Western culture and has experienced some changes in its modern identity.³⁹ Modernity mainly comes from *Westernization*,⁴⁰

³² “Sart Duan Sib: Nakhon Si Thammarat,” *Thailand Connex*, Accessed March 7, 2024, <http://www.thailandconnex.com>.

³³ Nathan McGovern, “Intersections Between Buddhism and Hinduism in Thailand,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, Accessed March 10, 2024, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>.

³⁴ Lisa Hark and Horace DeLisser, *Achieving cultural competency: A case-based approach to training health professionals* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 310.

³⁵ Pattana Kitiarsa, “Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (2005): 461-487.

³⁶ Bussakorn Binson, “Music Healing Rituals in Thailand,” *Voices: Special Issue on Medical Ethnomusicology and Music Therapy* 15 (2015).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pattana Kitiarsa, “Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (2005): 461-487.

³⁹ Maurizio, Peleggi, and Von Der Mehden, Fred R, “Lord of things: The Fashioning of the Siamese monarchy’s modern image,” *Pacific Affairs* 76 (2003): 499-500.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the adoption of Western civilization. It has never been used in past Asian societies, i.e., in Thailand. A democratic regime and new educational and legal systems can characterize Western civilization. How does Manorah survive in contemporary Thai society? Manorah can survive like Thailand and Buddhism in serious crises. Manorah can survive in several ways; for example, it can mix itself from representations, images and statues of deities or gods/goddesses in the spirit-medium cults. They are among the cult products in the Thai bazaar. In Thailand, the financial value of Thai sacred objects has been noticeable. According to the total numbers from Thai Farmers' Bank [Kasikorn Bank now] in December 1995, spirit-medium shrines exist in almost every community around the country, especially in urban areas. Kitiarsa⁴¹ pointed out, "There are more than 100,000 mediums in Thailand whose services generate over 20 billion baht [800 million US dollars at that time] a year."⁴²

The reasons behind the numerical expansion of spirit-medium shrines are related to widespread belief in deities and spirits, such as *pi* or *thep*, among local populations. These deities and spirits need to be worshiped on spirit altars that are called "*hing bucha*" (หิ้งบูชา)--worship shelf or "*to khru*" (โต๊ะบูชา)--table for the teacher spirit.⁴³ A worship shelf or a teacher spirit's table limits sacred borders; they are for specific ritual purposes and distinguish a convinced room or corner of a room in a medium's house from other inner spaces. A worship shelf or a teacher's spirit's table cannot be placed in a toilet or a kitchen. Manorah's shelves and its Khru Manorah, or teacher spirit's table, are very important; they lead to sacred rituals and bring people from far-away regions or nearby regions to see and join spiritual cults in local rituals.

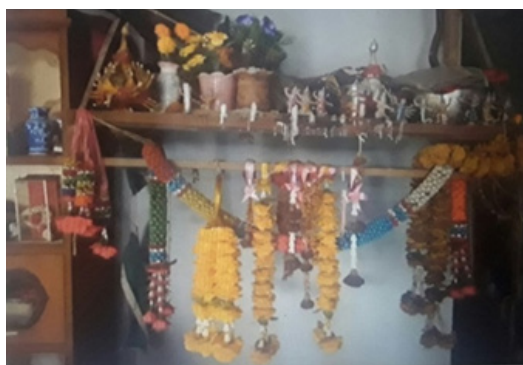


Figure 1: This wooden worship shelf is at Manorah Pensri's place. It is decorated with flowers, garlands, beads, incense sticks, and small dancing dolls. The shelf looks messy but holy.
(Photographed by author)

Next, "religious hybridization in the realm of urban spirit-medium cults has been fostered through symbolic and practical deterritorialization among religious components."⁴⁴ Also, the veneration of famous Buddhist saints is included i.e. Khru ba Siwichai (Sirivijayo Thera) (ครูบาศรีวิชัย/พระสีวิไชย) of Lanna Kingdom (B.E. 2440-2482) (A.D. 1897-1939); and Phra Ajarn Mun Bhurithat (Bhuridatto Thera) (พระอาจารย์มั่น ภูริทัตโต

⁴¹ Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (2005): 461-487.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "*hing bucha*" is an attached wall shelf for enshrining Buddha images, monks, or sacred objects that are revered. The shelf is made from many materials i.e. wood.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

/พระครูวินัยธรรมัน ฐิตโต). He lived in B.E. 2414-2492 (A.D. 1871-1949).⁴⁵ They were forest monks and acclaimed by the Western term “Saints,” meaning in Thai “*Arahant*,” which is the person who can attain enlightenment by himself by following the teachings of another. However, the Buddha only attains enlightenment by himself. “*Arahant*” can be Buddhist monks or Buddhist laymen who can reach nirvana and end all past to present sins and the cycle of rebirth. Forest monks have great salvation to the Buddha’s teachings and practices and usually live mainly in a forest.

Religious hybridization in Thailand gets involved with modern mass media, i.e., e-Newspapers. According to Funk, “Thai-language newspapers are also popular in Thailand. Among the most widely reading newspapers are Daily News, Khao Sod English Edition, Matichon, Naew Na, Manager Online, Prachatai English Edition, Thai Rath, Thairath Online, and The Standard.”⁴⁶ “In Thailand, social media platforms are used extensively as a means of communication. The most popular social media platforms in Thailand are Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.”⁴⁷ Manorah is also seen in newspapers, i.e., Bangkok Post, Outlook section, *A political take on Manorah*, and TV Thai dramatic folktale (*Lakorn Boran* movie), channel seven as well as on YouTube, i.e., the latest version in 2008 Prasuton-Manorah. According to Kitiarsa, “This media coverage performs the double function of encouraging the hybridization of beliefs and serving as virtual sites of religious hybridity where public attention and the desire for luck, wealth, good health and a happy life are put in juxtaposition to people’s common religious experience and imagination.”⁴⁸ The practices of Thai religious beliefs have turned to the publishing and electronic technologies that are found in social media. The growth of spiritual beliefs and possession in contemporary Thai society to the political economy of modern Thailand has commercialized spiritual beliefs and possession, wrapping them through electronic mediation on a traditional video, VCD, CD, DVD, Blue-ray Disc, and TV programs as a needed object.⁴⁹

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is a qualitative study. The author uses two types of research models: Descriptive research and Explanatory research when deemed necessary. The study uses qualitative research methods, i.e., deep interview and observation, to determine people who undertake particular behaviors so the author can access the thoughts and feelings of research participants, i.e., Manorah masters or Khru Mor Manorah, or Mor Manorah and their people. The qualitative methods help the author understand how and why such behaviors take place. Within the context of Manorah research, qualitative approaches are used to examine the different roles of Manorah masters, both spiritual and social roles. The author uses interviews over

⁴⁵ Charles C. Keyes, “Death of Two Buddhist Saints in Thailand, Charisma and Sacred Biography.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Thematic Series* 4813-4 (1981): 149-180.

⁴⁶ Sascha Funk, “Current influential Media in Thailand,” *My-Thai.org*, Accessed 23 November 2023, <https://my-thai.org/current-influential-media-in-thailand/>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Pattana Kitiarsa, Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (2005): 461-487.

⁴⁹ Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 10-18.

questionnaires for data collection and observes a group of target people who are Manorah masters or Khru Mor Manorah or Mor Manorah and their people in all aspects depth. Use participatory observation method and informal interviews, primarily in collecting data, analyzing data, and using rational analysis.

THE CASE STUDY OF MANORAH PENSRI YODRABUM

In the case of Manorah Pensri, she plays an important spiritual role in Nakorn Si Thammarat as a professional healer who understands and cures psychological illness that is caused by spiritual belief. When a patient comes to see her, she knows what happens to the patient, especially when the patient has strange behavior after talking to her. The interaction with the patient and the spirit that possesses the patient's body gets her attention. She can know what the spirit wants from the patient, i.e., to take a vow, to worship the spirit, to follow what the spirit requests, and so on. Manorah Pensri has performed the traditional spiritual ceremony for over three decades, and people in her community have much faith and respect her as an elderly Mother. Also, she performs healing rituals for children whose parents took them to meet her. The parents dedicate their faith and money to her to help their children from unexplained illnesses, i.e., insomnia or crying at night. However, she never asks for much money or anything in return; her actions reflect how much of an ethical mind she has.



Figure 2: Manorah Pensri touched the child's breast and prayed for him to recover from illness.
(Photographed by author)



Figure 3: The author and Manorah Pensri (blue dress) were at her performance place. After finishing dinner, she would prepare her performance. (Photographed by author)

In addition, Manorah Pensri plays the role of a spiritual medium who can heal her patients with unexplained supernatural forces; she was the medium of Khru Mor Manorah and can organize the spiritual ceremony. In the spiritual ceremony, she dresses in a normal daily style; there is nothing that looks different from the others. The most significant thing is her ability to communicate with the spirits of Khru Mor Manorah so that she can possess her body and perform Manorah rituals. Certainly, Manorah Pensri's spiritual performance is a relatively common phenomenon, and it occurs in Manorah, where she heals patients. She tries to heal sick people in traditional ways even though she is not medically trained. This unexplained treatment can produce an opposing effect on a person's health as serious illnesses, but nobody has died because of her treatment for almost four decades.

Manorah Pensri has several interesting and important social roles as a Manorah entertainer on stage, a Khru Manorah, and a spirit medium in her community. For Manorah's performance, she has been unique and popular in the South; everybody in Manorah's world knows her. Now, she has used modern social media, i.e., Internet, to promote her work to the outside world.⁵⁰ Her Manorah troupe is famous, and her social role as Khru Manorah is seen. Because she is teaching Manorah dancing to many students in universities and schools in her hometown, the new generation enjoys learning Manorah, and some of them want to be like her as a national artist. For spirituality, she is a truly spiritual person who faces modernism wisely and can learn many new things. For example, she understands the world has changed and Manorah must survive. She can continue Manorah as an artistic work and a piece of spiritual task during the time of modernity from the East and the West. She believes in spirituality through the three views. She firstly believes there is more to the living world than meets the eye, that is, more than the material world. She can also contact the death that lives in the spiritual world, i.e., past Kru Manorah and ancestral spirits. Then, she tries to invite spirits into her inner life, i.e., she can be a good spirit medium who knows her mental and emotional states. Believing in the supernatural powers of spirits leads her to become a well-known spirit medium. This can help her to get closer to gaining a certain kind of self-knowledge and self-confidence for what she has done.



Figure 4: Manorah Pensri's team dancers were on the stage. Manorah Pensri was waiting at the back of the stage. The music was very loud but got the attention of the audience.
(Photographed by author)

⁵⁰ To see clips, go to the show "Manohra Thai Values to the World" on Channel 9.; http://web.facebook.com/mano-ra.pensi/?locale=th_TH&_rdc=1&_rdr.



Figure5: Manorah Pensri wore a fully beautiful and magnificent Manorah dress.

(Credit Image: [//web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=108782019297813&set=ecnf.100004980461454&locale=th_TH](https://web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=108782019297813&set=ecnf.100004980461454&locale=th_TH))

THE CASE STUDY OF MANORAH NUTTAWUT KETKOR



Figure 6: Phra Nuttawut Ketkor gave his interview to the author. (Photographed by author)⁵¹

In Trang, Manorah Nuttawut is a new spiritual healer who has studied becoming a competent spiritual leader. Manorah Plaek, his grandfather, taught him about spiritual possession and related matters. Because Manorah Nuttawut is the last descendant of the bloodline of Great-grandfather Kaew, he will marry and produce an heir to continue the bloodline in the future. To have an heir is his responsibility and hope. He is the successor who dances, sings, and plays Manorah well. This is a surprise because he could dance like Manorah when he was just a boy without anyone told him. Perhaps he might see and remember all the dancing styles of Manorah Plaek's troupe. In reality, it is not easy to be Manorah if he does not accumulate enough or is not a part of the Manorah bloodline. He believes that his ancestral spirits chose

⁵¹ Before Phra Nuttawut Ketkor becomes Manorah, he was a Buddhist monk. He is a bloodline of Manorah Dang. In figure.6, Phra Nuttawut Ketkor (monk), Mr. Prasong Prasertyothin (middle), and the author.

him to be a Manorah. In the beginning, Manorah Nuttawut was an assistant to his grandfather for spiritual possession and healing. When he is older and gains more experience, like his father and grandfather, he will become an expert in spiritual matters. If Manorah Nuttawut is a competent Manorah, he must now perform spiritual treatment in general cases, i.e., for children. If the child has *Sen* (เสน) (black or red birthmark), the parents will take the child to join the rite of *Yip Sen* (stepping on birthmark), which is traditional knowledge. The rite is one of the highlights of the child's event that a supernatural healer, Mor Manorah, performs. Almost every Southerner knows *Sen* that is a red or black birthmark and has a large convex appearance on the face. It causes the child to look ugly and may lose confidence when he/she grows up in the future. Therefore, parents take their children to join the rite of *Yip Sen*, which is southern folk medicine in Ranong, Surat Thani, Trang, and other southern provinces.



Figure 7: Phra Nuttawut Ketko was saying words about leaving his monkhood to become a proper Manorah. (Photographed by author)



Figure 8: Manorah Nuttawut Ketko, with the completed tiara, sat between two standing Manarah's teachers. Manarah Preak was in the white shirt and blessed him to be successful in Manarah's life. (Photographed by author)

The ceremony should begin with the basic processes of chanting the three refuges of Buddhist primary chants are “buddham saranam gacchāmi” (To the Buddha I go for refuge.), “dhammam saranam gacchāmi” (To the Dhamma I go for refuge.) “sangham saranam gacchāmi” (To the Sangha I go for refuge.)⁵² Because Buddhism has more dance than any other religion, the culture gives growth to Buddhism for spiritual life i.e., the folk healer like Manorah Nuttawut. Then, he puts *Yan* (mystic symbol) on the right thumb with a chanting crayon. Next, he dances the pose of Manorah. And then he touches *Sen* (or birthmark) on the child. He has repeated it three times. After all the steps have been taken, Manorah Nuttawut puts the exorcist’s knife on *Sen*. Then, he puts the *pang yaya* sticks (spells of removing *Sen*) and places the garuda coins on *Sen* and also Manohra masks (Pran Boon’s Mask) is also placed on *Sen*; and he recites the mantra. Buddhism has three jewels (triple gems): Buddha, Dharma & Sangha.⁵³ It is important to chant in Thai only “*Put Thang Raksa, Dharma Raksa, Sangha Raksa*” (“the Buddha protects, the Dharma protects and the Sangha protects”). Finally, he scatters sacred water at the end of merit-making. People dedicate merit to the dead by pouring water on the ground. Manorah Nuttawut cannot only perform the rite of *Yep Sen* but also do spiritual possession from his ancestral spirits. The spirit of his great-grandfather takes his physical body and mind during possession; therefore, he can connect with the loved ones who are missing and receive the sense and advice they have to give from the other dominions.



Figure 9: Manorah Nuttawut Ketko (middle) and his teachers were sitting to be photographed.
(Photographed by author)

⁵² Sean Oakes, *The Triple Gem the Three Refuges* (Spirit Rock Insight Meditation Center, 2017).

⁵³ See Clip VDO “Buddha Dharma Sangha Buddhist Devotion Summarized” from <https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-triple-gem-of-buddhism-buddha-dharma-sangha.html>.

OFF-STAGE IMPACTS ON YOUTH

Manorah Nuttawut is an example of the new generation of Manorah; he has interestingly social roles that are as the young Manorah troupe leader, Khru/Mor Manorah, community leader, and social healer. To encourage many teens in the community to do a good activity, i.e., to be Manorah, is great. His outstanding social roles, i.e., to be a leader in the community, can lead others to impress him and use him as a Manorah model for the new generations. For teens who waste time on drugs or liquor, consumers can change their wicked behaviors and become Manorah preservers. He can teach them to be good and spend their time doing beneficial things for the community, i.e., practicing Manorah dances in groups or preparing Manorah songs. The result is acceptable. Crime in the community does not appear, so his role as a social healer is practical. Besides, his mystic concept consists of a practice of religious ecstasies, ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magics related to the ecstasies. This mystic concept goes together with spiritual matters, i.e., spirit possession, spirit mediumship, and spirit worship. Therefore, he is an important man in his community for mysticism.

THE ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDIES

The author has found the case studies were developed from Jataka when Manorah masters show on the stage performance. The shows were adapted from an ancient legend, i.e., Suthon-Manorah in Suthon Jataka (See fig. 4). The author has found that Manorah has some impacts because it is a part of southern culture that cannot resist the stream of transferring culture. Therefore, it is blended with modernity. The result of the impacts produces some results of cultural hybridization; in other words, a blend is too difficult to separate from any part of blended culture. The cultures of all world nations can be originated by borrowing and exchanging from each other. It is, therefore, not surprising why the case studies of Manorah can be a hybrid of transferring culture. In addition, the author has also found that Manorah beliefs and practices have been syncretized because Manorah can reconcile, unite, or blend with Buddhism well. Even though Manorah's beliefs and practices are different from Buddhist beliefs in some parts, they can be blended with these beliefs. For example, Manorah strongly believes in the power of ancestral spirits. Still, Thai Buddhists believe in the power of Buddha, Triple Gems (พระรัตนตรัย), and *karma* (กรรม), especially with partially good and bad results of karma. The author has seen many male Manorah people are previously Thai Buddhist monks, and they leave monkhood later to become Manorah masters, as in the case study of Manorah Nuttawut Ketkor (See fig. 6-9). Male Manorah people also use Buddhist knowledge to be part of their Manorah work. For example, they tell people to follow five precepts from Buddha's teachings. They also pay more attention to morality and gratitude for the dead and the living.

On the other hand, Buddhist monks still join Manorah rituals or ceremonies (i.e., they perform leaving monkhood ceremony in Manorah Nuttawut's case). Sharing a sacred ceremony shows the good and bonded relationship between Manorah and Buddhist monks who are representative of Buddhism. The bonds between Manorah and Buddhism are expressed in the form of kinship as well as morality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article investigated the transformation of the Manorah story from Jataka to beautiful shows on stage and then religious performance as seen in ritual ceremonies; the social and spiritual roles of Manorah masters are well observed. Manorah dance is intensely related with Southern beliefs and is usually performed at several important festivals every year. Certainly, the Manorah performance consists of holy dances that are the main Manorah performances. Why are the holy dances important? Because the holy dances are the essential parts of Manorah performance culture, the spirits of dead Manorah teachers give magical power to the living Manorah master. Therefore, Manorah is not only a fascinating dance on stage but also a sacred ritual connecting to ancestral spirits who possess a medium, i.e., Manorah master/Khru Mor Manorah, who can communicate with the bystanders. The rituals cannot be completed without the power or blessing from the spirits of Manorah teachers. Hence, the Manorah master must prepare proper offerings to them and ask for their blessings and wishes during ceremonies or rituals. Manorah culture is great in the form of showing gratitude of humans to each other and includes the dead people in Manorah's family. Ancestral spirits, i.e., dead Manorah teachers, are invited and worshipped by living descendants. The ceremony of worshipping ancestral spirits reflects eternal gratitude to the dead. Why? Because gratitude has been a part of Thai culture that the living do for the dead, the ceremony is important and needed. This belief creates a bond between the living and their ancestors. In addition, Manorah masters' social and spiritual roles are changed because of modernity. Manorah needs to co-exist with the steam of modernity; therefore, a syncretization of beliefs and practices and hybridization of Manorah in modern Thai society is involved.

Besides, Manorah has its off-stage impacts on religious, recreational, ceremonial, or community-building that can be a major tool for cultural expression and asserting one's ethnic identity. The social and spiritual roles of the Manorah master (i.e., as being Khru Manorah/Mor Manorah/Khru Mor Manorah), have been gradually changed to survive in the South. Because there are several factors resulting from social changes from the past to the present, Manorah's master, who is the honorable and beautiful leader of the southerners, like other folk plays, is affected by those social changes, i.e., social media. Also, the differences can be seen in both the style of the show and the opportunity for dramatic performance. Nowadays, Manorah performance can be seen on different modern media i.e. printable media (e-News-papers, e-Books, e-Magazines, e-Posters, e-Graphic Novels), television, music, Internet broadcast and different kinds of software.

For Manorah masters such as Khru Manorah and Mor Manorah/Khru Mor Manorah, it is necessary to retained traditional way of healing, worshipping ancestral spirits, and the ancient rituals/ceremonies as much as conceivable. Maintaining the procedure and the ancient rituals or ceremonies like the traditional way is a respectable thing. According to the interviews and observing studies of Mor Manorah, the rituals/ceremonies can be blended with modern treatments together (i.e., taking medicines, seeing a doctor, consulting a psychologist, etc.). By adapting and changing the roles of Manorah masters, they must preserve southern tradition and culture and study the complete retention of the old and the context of traditional performance. Modernity rapidly comes into a community, but the conservation and inherited rituals or ceremonies of the ancient Manorah in the south are still needed so that the new southern generations can follow and keep the preservation.

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