GHOST MOTHERS

Kinship Relationships in Thai Spirit Cults

Andrew Alan Johnson

Abstract: This article examines the process of building kinship relations between Thai spirit devotees and violent spirits. I examine three spirit shrines on the outskirts of Bangkok: a shrine to the ghost of a woman killed in childbirth, a shrine to a cobra spirit that causes accidents along a busy highway, and a household shrine to an aborted fetus. The devotees to whom I spoke actively sought out such places known for death in order to 'adopt' or 'become adopted by' the spirits in those locations—an action that, I argue, allowed for a renegotiation of the devotees' position vis-à-vis accident and trauma. I suggest that becoming a spirit's 'child' forms a mutually dependent relationship that allows for the domestication of forces outside of oneself.

Keywords: ghosts, gift exchange, kinship, popular religion, Thailand, violence

Grandmother Nak of Phra Khanong district (Ya Nak Phra-Khanong)[1] and her unborn child are among the most feared of Thai ghosts. Nak's story has been the most popular of all time, appearing in genres ranging from horror to animation to comedy to melodrama (Nonzee Nimibutr 1999). She is featured in present-day stage musicals and radio dramatizations, and her name is instantly recognizable to most Thais. Her story varies from telling to telling, but the mutually understood portions are as follows.

Once upon a time, Nak lived with her husband Mak on the banks of a canal in what is now Bangkok's Phra Khanong district. Phra Khanong is quite urban nowadays, boasting a giant Tesco superstore and a skytrain station, but at the time of this story it was a small water-based village connected by canals. When the country, then known as Siam, went to war,[2] Mak was conscripted into the Siamese army and left Nak at home, alone and pregnant. While he was serving in the army, Nak's time came, but she died while giving birth, thus becoming the worst of Thai ghosts—the spirit of a pregnant woman.

Social Analysis, Volume 60, Issue 2, Summer 2016, 82–96 © Berghahn Journals
doi:10.3167/sa.2016.600206 • ISSN 0155-977X (Print) • ISSN 1558-5727 (Online)

Mak returned from the military campaign to find that the villagers had fled down the canal, leaving his neighborhood abandoned and devastated. Only his house remained upright. And there was Nak with their infant son, waiting to welcome him home. Mak and Nak lived together, then, for some time. But Mak was unable to see his former neighbors. His friends would come close, only to die horribly—unbeknownst to Mak, by Nak's hand. One day, a monk approached, obviously fearful for his life. He confided in Mak that, should he wish to see the truth, he should bend down, place his head between his legs, and peer at his house upside down. Mak did so and saw Nak for what she was.

The story ends in a variety of ways, depending on the teller. Some versions have Nak being chased comically around the house and finally leaping into a jar that is sealed shut with a sutra and stored away. In other versions, Nak is buried, and a tree is planted on her head to keep her still.[3] Some tell of a spirit medium confronting Nak, while others feature the famous Thai monk Somdet To (see McDaniel 2011). In some accounts, such as Nonzee Nimibutr's (1999) film *Nang Nak*, Somdet To takes Nak's frontal bone and turns it into a magic amulet. This amulet is rumored to be in the possession of Thailand's royal family, thus sealing the link between the appropriation of violence (cf. Siegel 1998), necromancy, and hidden sources of state power.

The story is interesting enough as it is. In this article, however, it is Nak's second afterlife that I seek to explore. Nak's primary spirit shrine stands in Wat Mahabut, in what is now the eastern outskirts of Bangkok, near the busy Sukhumvit Road and on the edge of the canal where her house allegedly was located (fig. 1). Her community is today a divided one. New condominium blocks geared toward wealthy and trendy Thais and foreigners alike line Sukhumvit Road, while just behind them slum communities spread out along the canal. On the lane to the shrine, a small group of mediums and fortune-tellers have set up shop.

Devotees appeal to Nak for a variety of reasons. Young women seek out her knowledge of the risks of childbirth and ask her to spare them her fate. Young men call upon Nak's anger at the military for having broken apart her family and ask her to spare them from conscription. Others come for Nak's child, offering it toys and food. And some choose to bring Nak or her child into their family.

One might think that Nak would be ineligible for such a role, since a devotee—and, for that matter, a researcher—has no way of knowing if familial affection is reciprocated. But even our fellow humans are always other to us. We imagine that a mother or a child reciprocates the tie that we feel toward them, but we can never be completely certain. We are always forging a bond between ourselves and an Other.

In Bangkok, Thai spirit devotees establish kin relations between themselves and ghosts like Nak, that is, the ghosts of violent death. Here, a 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins 2013) encompasses a person and an invisible, intangible thing that lies across a barrier to understanding. Individuals in the midst of uncertainty seek out and tie themselves via a link of kinship to the very sources of death, danger, and pollution to which they are subject (see Johnson 2012). But

Figure 1 Shrine of Grandmother Nak, Bangkok, Phra Khanong District

Photograph © Andrew Alan Johnson

instead of fear, spirit devotees speak of affection for and devotion to forces that terrorize them. How can we make sense of this?

Kinship with the Other

Marshall Sahlins (2013) has defined kinship as a 'mutuality of being', one that is not necessarily biological but is manifest as a fundamental link. Kin share obligations and duties and are often bound by affective ties of love, care, and kindness. Sahlins's foray here into kinship studies is an attempt to reconfigure a field of anthropological inquiry that has languished in recent years, an attempt that recalls Marilyn Strathern's (1992) effort to situate kinship within larger social networks. Where Sahlins is particularly productive, though, is in placing kinship as a kind of linkage, a mutual interdependency of a general sort, before the sorts of typification that had become the hallmark of early kinship studies (cf. Morgan 1871).

Sahlins's notion of kinship is open to other kinds of linkages, for instance, the *phi-nong* (older sibling-younger sibling) relationship that is ubiquitous in Thai and Lao society, or the *phu yai-phu noi* (big person-little person) divide that dominates Thai political life, from villages to Bangkok. As in other areas of

Southeast Asia (cf. Sidel 1999), in Thailand powerful patrons assume responsibility for and claim the loyalty of those beneath them.[4] Are these relations, too, a kind of kinship? In a realm where karmic ancestry (i.e., who you were in your former life) does not necessarily follow biological ancestry, and where royal power is not necessarily inherited (a situation that Thailand is currently grappling with), does an idea of kinship that rests on linkages above and beyond biology make more sense?

I choose to focus on ghosts here because of the problems they seem to pose. According to Western definitions, ghosts are abstract, ephemeral. Even were we to call a ghost 'mother', we would be unable to tell if 'mother' sees us as her 'child'. Recent work on popular Buddhism, spirits, and spirit cults in Southeast Asia complicates this picture.

But first, a caveat. Benjamin Baumann (2015) prefers to translate the Thai term *phi* as 'uncanny beings' instead of using loaded English terms, such as 'ghost' or 'spirit'. *Phi* refers to Nak, but also to decidedly physical liver-eating goblins (*phi kom koi*), witches (*phi pob*), zombies in George Romero films (*phi dip*), and, in northern Thai and in colloquial central Thai, an entirely inanimate corpse (*phi*). Baumann is certainly correct to link the term *phi* with the emergence of the uncanny. During my fieldwork, Nak's devotees rarely used the term *phi* for Nak herself, but non-devotees certainly did.[5] I will continue to use 'ghost' and 'spirit' here to refer to Nak, both out of sheer convention and in deference to a non-Thai-speaking audience. Readers are therefore advised that when I use the term 'ghost', I mean *phi*.

Justin McDaniel (2011) argues that popular religion—specifically devotion to Nak—deserves mention as a part of Thai Buddhist practice. He makes the case for "religious repertoires" (ibid.: 225)—spheres of knowledge about religion that are infused with emotional and social connections and are often contradictory. For instance, when advising a person whose love is unrequited, a Buddhist monk might suggest resigning oneself to the state of affairs and letting go of attachment. But at a spirit shrine, a person might be able to convince the spirit to intercede and change matters.[6] This divide in repertoires between Buddhist practice and spirit devotion is brought out in the Lao case by Patrice Ladwig (2013), who shows that Buddhist laypeople and monks have very different perspectives on the materiality of goods donated to the temple. While villagers see a material link between the world of spirits and the world of people, monks, following rationalizing socialist and orthodox Buddhist discourse, disavow such links.

The apparent ease with which Thai popular religious devotion can be divided into differing realms may invite a structuralist analysis. Spirit devotion often occurs at night, as opposed to daytime ceremonies at temples. Spirits are often female, as opposed to male monks and the Buddha. Visitors to shrines are often female, but not exclusively so. Such divisions appeal to a separation of fields of the sacred and less sacred, where a 'minor tradition' of 'animism' persists beneath the 'great tradition' of Buddhism, each appealing to a different need. But here I seek to examine something different. Specifically, why do spirits in Bangkok—at those shrines where devotees come to allay their own fears—so

often carry the taint of death and destruction? Why do their devotees not only propitiate them, but also speak of their bond to them in terms full of affection, love, and kindness? How does violence go hand in hand with devotion?

This fusion—holding together apparent contradictions—is something common to rulers in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, along with the idea that the ruler's power exists within an invisible realm, one that is revealed only through hints and signs (Wiener 1995). Such hidden power is often made visible through violence and is taken as a sign that the ruler has captured and appropriated the power of *dis*order as well as order. For instance, James Siegel (1998) describes how the Indonesian New Order sought not only to portray the threat of criminality (*kriminalitas*), but also to demonstrate its own mastery of criminality. Tony Day (2002) argues that visible displays of violence were means through which pre-colonial Southeast Asian states built a magico-religious sense of awe, and, in Day's terms, 'beauty'. According to Day, in viewing such displays of violence as the manifestations of stronger, deeper powers, those on the margins of the state projected their own fantasies and transformed the state into an "object of worship" (ibid.: 284, citing Michael Taussig). The effects of state violence were all too real, but the source of this power was necessarily hidden from the general public. For the marginalized then, state power operated in the realm of fantasy.

Here, I do not delve into this idea of magical fantasies of state violence, although it has received a good deal of attention in both Thai publications (e.g., Wassana Naunam 2010) and English analyses (e.g., Klima 2002). Instead, the spirit shrines that I address in this article deal with everyday violence: car accidents, deadly childbirths, and so on. But I do wish to build upon Day's idea of 'violence as attraction' to help explain why one would desire to be bound in a formal, kin relationship with a violent, invisible, and ultimately unknowable Other—an Other that by definition cannot be inhabited or represented.

In seeing spirits in this way, I draw upon Siegel's (2006) work on 'naming' as an attempt to fix this Other in place. Siegel describes how, with the disappearance of Suharto's New Order, East Javanese villagers attempted to locate the Other—'death', in Siegel's terms—in the form of 'the witch'. But for Siegel, such efforts to find and eliminate the Other—by naming and killing the witch—are impossible. One always feels the gaze of the Other. Thus, the attempts at naming are doomed to recur: more witches are 'named', and more people die.

Siegel's perspective on death is quite different from that of Alan Klima (2002), who also writes on violence in Southeast Asia. In Klima's case, the death of Thai political protestors in 1992 becomes a 'gift', one that is impossible for the state to repay but still begs for a return. Such an idea of death as a gift deals with it as something already understood. If one dies 'for' something, as the pro-democracy activists did in the Black May violence, such a death is not something that is still at large. It has entered the historical narrative and points to a clear path toward a political solution. It has ceased to be simply 'death' and has instead been domesticated as 'martyrdom'.

Here, I take up Siegel's (2006) notion of death as an *a priori* Other in order to examine not its life after domestication, but the process of domestication

itself, and how such attempts are framed in terms of kinship and contract. I draw upon a year's worth of field research in Bangkok in 2011 and 2012, where I visited several spirit shrines on the urban periphery of the city. In this case, Other refers to hidden sources of power and potential. Like classic analyses of *mana* (e.g., Durkheim [1912] 2013) in which individuals attribute hidden sources of efficacy to everyday objects, for my interlocutors, everyday places have within them something otherworldly, something that is productive of danger and fortune. It is this potential for something other than the everyday that they seek to bring into their kin networks.

Pong and Grandmother Nak

Pong was one of Nak's devotees whom I met at a shrine in March 2012.[7] He came from a lower-middle-class family who lived nearby. A young man, Pong was approaching the age when he would be entered into the military conscription lottery. An unlucky number would cost him two years of his life, years he would rather spend elsewhere ("to study," he told me). But not all young Thai men are drafted into the army. For Thais with 'connections' or *sen* (lit., 'strings') to military officials, or enough money to arrange something,[8] which includes most middle- and upper-class Thais, such a lottery is meaningless. But Pong had no such connections. While we sat together in the shrine of Grandmother Nak, Pong said: "If I had such connections [in the army], I wouldn't need to come here. But I have a different kind of connection here. We are [Nak's] children in this neighborhood. Grandmother looks after us [*du lae*]." Pong had arranged a contract with Nak whereby if he did not have to serve in the army, he would return with the gift of a Thai-style silk dress for the spirit. I asked him: "And if you have to go?" "If I have to go, I have to go," Pong replied. "Then I don't have to bring the dress. Sometimes there are other things that influence [the lottery]. My fate [*chatta*], my karma [*kam*]. Grandmother Nak can try, but maybe she can't change things." "And if you don't have to go, but you don't bring the dress?" I asked. "I'm not brave enough!" Pong replied. "Have you heard her story?"

It seemed like a simple enough deal. Pong had hedged his bets. By showing his devotion, he had perhaps influenced fate just a small amount. Yet if nothing came of it and he had to go, he had lost only the candles, flowers, and incense that he had offered to Nak on the day we met. Such is the deal struck by villagers to local spirits (see Rhum 1994; Tambiah 1975), part of what Klima (2006) refers to as 'dark finance'. But here I am not concerned with how such systems create small-scale, locally centered financial institutions. My focus instead is on the affective relationship between Pong and Nak. Why would Pong choose Grandmother Nak and not some other spirit with a less bloody history?[9] Why would he actively draw connections between himself and the spirit who allegedly was responsible for the death of his own community about one hundred years ago? I attempt an answer below, but first I explore more of my ethnography.

Gamrai and Mother Cobra

Another interlocutor, Gamrai, earned her living selling grilled meatballs in a neighborhood on the western edge of Bangkok. She had to push her vendor cart alongside a highway, which was a dangerous one, as it funneled the traffic heading to Thailand's southern provinces into a single fast-moving pipeline. One day, as she passed by the shrine of Lady Mother King Cobra near her house (fig. 2), she was struck by a cargo truck. "One of my shoes came off and flew a hundred meters down the road!" she recounted. "After that, I slept for a long time [in a coma]. When I awoke [in the hospital], I saw the Lady Mother. I knew that it was her who did it to me. When I could walk, the first thing that I did was come and pledge myself to be her daughter. That was years ago. Now, the Lady Mother takes care of me, and I am a good daughter to her. She is so kind."

The shrine is a concrete and tile structure on the side of the busy highway. The shrine's cool, florescent-lit enclosure houses department store mannequins of the Lady Mother, her consort, and their nine children,[10] as well as concrete images of cobras. Live cobras thrive in the vacant lot next door,[11] and devotees drop chicken and eggs from a window to watch the snakes feed. It was here that I met Gamrai and where we sat together for many nights in April and May 2012.

Gamrai saw her accident as an act of violence against her, but she did the opposite of what we might expect. Her first reaction was not anger or fear, although she confided in me that Lady Mother Cobra was terrible to enemies

Figure 2 Shrine of Lady Mother King Cobra, Bangkok

Photograph © Andrew Alan Johnson

and strangers alike. Rather, Gamrai answered violence with devotion. She became the 'daughter' of the very force that had nearly killed her. Even more, she described this force as 'kind'. When speaking of Lady Mother, Gamrai used the term *nam chai,* a noun that means 'loving kindness'. It is the sort of affection that a parent feels for her child, not (necessarily) what rulers feel toward their subjects or devotees toward their god.

Today, Gamrai is one of a few select devotees of the spirit. Most worshippers of the Lady Mother come on an ad hoc basis, sometimes during nights preceding the release of lottery numbers, sometimes when they feel a particular need for luck or protection. But Gamrai has done more than these casual worshippers, whom I address elsewhere (see Johnson 2012). Instead, she has entered into a contract with the Lady Mother, pledging to be her child—her *luk*.

The Thai term *luk* means more than simply 'child', of course. It denotes a subordinate relationship to power, but one that shares a connection. The followers of a certain monk or famous teacher, for instance, might call themselves *luk sit* (disciples). Similarly, the term *mae* (mother) that Gamrai uses, might also be used in more informal, non-familial interactions between a younger person and an older woman. But it is in Gamrai's ascription of *nam chai* (loving kindness) to Lady Mother King Cobra that demonstrates how the two are linked by an affective bond: the Lady Mother now sees Gamrai with affection, whereas previously she saw Gamrai and tried to kill her.

There is one additional element to Gamrai's relationship with Lady Mother King Cobra: the contract (*bon*). While Gamrai was recovering from her injury, she came to establish this bond with the Lady Mother. The contract involved promises of loyalty and the exchange of gifts: Gamrai promised the Mother she would be dutiful and regularly come to display her devotion (*napteu*) and respect (*wai*). She called herself the Lady Mother's daughter, and she gave a gift, arranging for three films to be shown at the Lady Mother's shrine. "What films?" I asked Gamrai. "I still don't know," she responded. "There is a queue a year in length for films. I put my name down and let [the projectionist] choose. But they were my gift." In response, the mannequin that serves as the Lady Mother's image was silent. Gamrai did not receive any kind of sign that the Lady Mother had heard, accepted, or acknowledged her gift. When I asked Gamrai about this, she responded quite simply: "[I] don't need [such a sign]. I already know [that] she sees me."

Pla and the Golden Child

Another interlocutor, Pla, ran a print shop in Thonburi, near the Chao Phraya River. As with most Chinese-style shophouses, she lived in the apartment above the store with her husband and children. I found Pla purely by accident: I needed to make photocopies, and her shop was near my apartment. When I went in, I noticed a small statuette of a young boy in Thai royal dress on the altar where Thai shopkeepers normally put images of famous monks, the Buddha, or the Thai king (cf. Jackson 2010). "Is this a Golden Child [*kuman*

thong]?" I asked. She told me her story, and I came back to her shop regularly during the early part of 2012.

"When I first moved in," Pla said, "we heard strange sounds throughout the house. I kept thinking that there was another child running around. We could hear the footsteps and laughter. At first, we were very frightened. We got a Chinese spirit doctor [*sin sae*] in, who told us that a child's ghost haunted the place. The ghost appeared to me [in a dream] and told me that he wanted me to be his mother. So I adopted him. The spirit doctor performed the ritual. I brought the fetus [spirit] toys and good things to eat and raised him [*liang*] as one of my own." Pla explained that "he gets older now," although he did not age before he was adopted.

Golden Children are as much a feature of Thai spirit belief as are Lady Mothers. Indeed, the two are often associated with each other: Lady Mother Cobra has nine *kuman* children, and Grandmother Nak has her own child to whom people bring presents. Another shrine at which I worked was devoted to the spirit of a 'Burmese' infant who had been aborted and discarded in a vacant lot (see Johnson 2012). Many of my interlocutors there had 'adopted' the spirit into their families, just as Pla had done. Finally, some Buddhist temples transform the corpses of (illegally) aborted fetuses—inauspicious things in Thai spirit belief—into such *kuman* by finding adoptive mothers for the children's ghosts.

At first, Pla did not believe her visitations were from a friendly Golden Child seeking a mother. Rather, she saw the child's spirit as something unwelcome and dangerous, a 'ghost of bad death' (*phi tai hong*). Such ghosts are markers of stasis, misfortune, and sickness (Johnson 2013). They exist in opposition to those other figures atop Pla's spirit shrine: monks and the monarchy. But instead of attempting to expel the ghost, Pla took on a menacing spirit and transformed it—by adopting it—into something auspicious. In doing so, she directly engaged with danger. Pla believed her house to be haunted, yet she did not seek an exorcism. Rather, she assimilated the ghost. She not only made peace with it but also brought it into her family, binding it to her with a tie of affection and mutual obligation. She described to me the warm feelings she had toward the Golden Child when he appeared to her in her dreams. "He just smiles and plays," she said. "I take care of him [*du lae*] by offering toys and food. It gives me happiness."

A Kinship with Death

Other authors have written about ghost-human kinship. Among Southern and Southeast Asian Chinese families, ghost marriages between two dead individuals or between a living person and a dead spouse help to restore proper filial order (e.g., that elder brothers should marry before younger ones) or provide for the continuation of the patriline in the case of an untimely death (Wolf 1974: 151). Similarly, E. E. Evans-Pritchard ([1940] 1969: 156) found that, for the Nuer, ghost marriages allowed a man's goods and name to be passed on. But spirits such as Nak do not ensure the continuation of social order, as in the

Chinese and Nuer cases. They have little to do with lineage or the continuance of property. Rather, the experience of ghost marriages in Thailand emerges as more of a psychological, individual connection that deals not with the problems of maintaining structure in the face of untimely accidents, but with managing luck, chance, and personal anxiety in a time of rapid change.

In a similar vein, Jean Langford (2009) examines the continuing role that dead family members play in negotiating the uncertainty of life in Southeast Asia. She describes "ongoing relationships with dead who might at any moment intervene in everyday life, leading your son to get AIDS, or your friend to die suddenly in his sleep, or, then again, enabling your brother to survive a battle, or your daughter to have daughters of her own" (ibid.: 701). Langford's emphasis on the exchange between living and dead kin resonates with the contractual nature of dealings with the spirits that I have just described. *Bon,* deals, and bargains are what solidify kin networks. Indeed, many Thais with whom I spoke talked about their relationship with their parents as such a contract: parents have given their child life, a gift that the child cannot repay but tries his or her best to do so by caring for the parents in their old age. But the spirits that I describe here are *not* dead family members with whom one continues a relationship. To adopt or to allow oneself to be adopted by such a spirit is a conscious decision, one that arises when faced with the danger and chaos of everyday life—the military lottery, traffic accidents, the strangeness of a new house. In Gamrai and Pla's stories, the initial action was taken by the spirits: Lady Mother King Cobra gave Gamrai the dubious 'gift' of near death, while Pla was visited by the child-spirit in a way that was, at least at first, quite unwelcome. But in response, they forged a contract with the spirit that established a kin relation and with it a system of mutual obligation.

Writing in another Theravada Buddhist context in Sri Lanka, Bruce Kapferer (1997: 202) notes similar ties of gift exchange between individuals afflicted by witchcraft and their afflicting sorcerer. As the demon tormenting the victim receives a gift, a channel of sociability opens, which at the same time opens the potential for such links to be severed or reversed. The victim-as-giver is able to renegotiate the terms of the 'gift' and in the process reflect back upon the sorcerer something of the violence that he has inflicted.

In the Thai cases, there is an engagement with violence and danger, but there is no sorcerer. The demons[12] that emerge to afflict individuals—Nak, Lady Mother King Cobra, or the haunting child-spirit—do not have an agentive power behind them or outside of themselves. Instead, they are acting on something more abstract—'death', in Siegel's terms. In each of these stories, individuals are subject to something uncontrollable: the military lottery, traffic, and a haunted house. In each case, the individuals—Pong, Gamrai, and Pla—see this uncontrollable force as existing beyond the reach of the social, at least, *their* social. In *Naming the Witch*, Siegel (20006) describes how East Javanese villagers depended on being 'seen' by the Suharto regime. With the fall of Suharto, this gaze disappeared. Mass and random killings resulted. Siegel argues that Suharto's gaze was one that oppressed but also fixed one as a member of the New Order, as a person who was *not* a force of violence

and death. That force was instead given the form of the New Order's enemies: Communists, criminals, and so forth. Without the New Order's gaze, villagers felt the menace of this force and the need to fix it into place. They did so by 'naming'—by identifying this 'death', which seemed otherwise to be everywhere. They named certain members of the community to be witches and killed them, thus serving the function of displacing death and—temporarily—annihilating it, providing for a time the reassurance that previously would have stemmed from the New Order.

The Thai situation is similar, if not exactly the same. Thanet Aphornsuvan (1998) has written about the horror of 'wildness' (*theuan*), of the person who exists without connections to others, without kin. A *theuan* person is one who is not 'seen'—one who is wild, free, savage, and of the jungle. In his study of 'Thai freedom', Aphornsuvan argues that *theuan*, in the sense of being removed from obligations to superiors and inferiors, is a dangerous state as a *theuan* person exists in a condition similar to that of an animal (ibid.). As my informants faced their own potential wildness—their own separation from benevolent patrons or dependents—they sought out such relationships with those very forces of wildness. By adopting the spirits of dead fetuses, or being adopted by murderous mothers, Pong, Gamrai, and Pla rendered both themselves and the destructive forces that these spirits represent less *theuan*. In short, by naming the unassimilable, uncontrollable, and wild as a kin relation, they were able to impose some sort of control over it and to recognize their own intimacy with death and danger. They saw what was previously unseen and, in turn, were seen by it.

As in Kapferer's case, the bond of gift exchange that was opened between victim and death allowed for a renegotiation of the victim's position. But in the Thai case, this was not a channel that could be closed, allowing social relations to return to what they had been before the trauma. Rather, the channel turned into a link defined as kinship. It became a site not to enact vengeance, but to build a new structure of social relations—one that incorporated the wild, bringing the omnipresent specter of death into the household.

In doing so, devotees identify the potential for death in places both already marked by death (Nak's house, the roadside), but also in themselves. Childbirth, military service, traffic accidents, haunting, and other events point to the manifestation of a destructive power—a power that cannot be prevented from acting, but instead must be incorporated into one's own being. Death is inescapable: one must make friends—or family—with it.

Loving Kindness

Kapferer's analysis of channels of exchange opened between victim and sorcerer does not involve love, but all of my interlocutors emphasized the loving connection between themselves and the spirits. Why does Pong emphasize Nak's generosity? Why does Gamrai love the Lady Mother? Why does Pla love her adopted ghostly son?

By 'love', I make reference to the terms my informants use, words that denote a certain kind of affective mutual bond. Gamrai describes the Lady Mother's 'loving kindness' (*nam chai*). Pong refers to Nak's ability 'to look after [me]' (*ao chai sai*) and 'to take care [of me]' (*du lae*, or, occasionally, the English-derived *tek khae*), as does Pla. In no case did my informants use the terms associated with romantic love or love in the abstract—the 'dictionary definition' of 'to love' (*khwam rak*). Rather, the above terms are ones that emphasize the *obligatory bond* between parent and child.

Love, then, comes with duties. Elsewhere, I have written about older American, Australian, and European men engaged in long-term relationships with Thai women on the fringes of Thailand's sex industry (see Johnson 2007).[13] In such liaisons, especially in more established arrangements, the question of authenticity inevitably arises. Men expect bonds of long-term commitment, exclusivity, and even marriage to come independently of financial support for women and their extended families, and they see requests for money as evidence of an insufficient and inauthentic affective relationship. It is a problem of causality: the foreign men desire love before financial obligation, while their paramours see financial obligation as the prerequisite for actual affective bonds. As in what Peter Jackson (2004) dubs the 'regime of images', inner emotional states are subordinate to the outward display. In other words, love in this case is an active word, and inner states follow outer states.

To return to my interlocutors, Gamrai cannot be indifferent to Lady Mother King Cobra. As do many of the Mother's devotees, she exists enmeshed in the constant risk of traffic accidents, illness, and financial troubles, all of which could potentially destroy her. We see this enmeshing as anxiety, as fear, but with it comes a form of intimacy with forces beyond the everyday. Death becomes a friend; it comes with an affective bond of kinship, something that makes the forces of death and chaos—Nak, the Lady Mother, the Golden Child—obligated to the world of the living. By stating and showing their devotion, Pong, Gamrai, and Pla are upholding one side of a kin relationship in the hopes that the unseen and unknowable other half will do so as well. Their displays of devotion and their claims that the other party is as equally devoted are signs of what Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004: 9) describes as "hope," as acknowledgment that "reality is still in a state of not-yet." The military lottery is not yet out, Gamrai has not yet been struck again by a truck, and Pla's haunting has not yet become malevolent. Indeed, as Sahlins notes, just as the social structure of kinship defines how we see biological ties, here, claims toward the social structure of kinship determine how devotees see affective ties.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the organizers of this special section, Kathryn Goldfarb and Caroline Schuster, as well as the editors of *Social Analysis* and the anonymous reviewers. Most of the research for this project was done when I was a

Postdoctoral Fellow at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute in Tim Bunnell's "Asian Urbanisms" section, and I thank him and the ARI for their time and generosity, as well as Michael Dickhardt and the Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia group at Göttingen University, where "Ghost Mothers" was a working paper. I thank Daena Funahashi for her help during fieldwork, and, finally, I wish to thank the late Bernard Bate for his friendship and assistance in Singapore and elsewhere. He is sorely missed.

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Notes

1. In popular culture, this ghost is referred to as Mother Nak (Mae Nak) or Mrs. Nak (Nang Nak). 'Grandmother' (*yaa*) is how devotees refer to Nak. In this article, I have used the Royal Thai General System of Transcription for Thai words, although it does not capture vowel length or tone, two important features in the Thai language.
2. The enemy is usually unspecified or is understood to be Burma. However, the dates generally given for Mak and Nak's existence (mid-nineteenth century) and the dates of the historical wars with Burma do not align. Many interlocutors pointed to the era of the fall of Ayutthaya (1767 CE) as a likely time, although this would predate Bangkok's existence as a city. Ultimately, for many of my interlocutors and many of Nak's devotees, the reasons for conscription were unimportant. What was important was that a distant state exerted its power to break the family unit.
3. Significantly, the story tells of a dipterocarp, a tree known for its powerful spirit.
4. See, for example, Yoshinori Nishizaki's (2011) look at the local networks of the politician Banharn Silpa-archa, who served as prime minister of Thailand in 1995–1996.
5. Note, in contrast, the interchangeability of *phi* and *chao* (lord) in northern Thai, and the use of a common classifier (*ton*) for monks, ghosts, and kings.
6. As Peter Jackson (1999) and Pattana Kitiarsa (2005) argue, many Buddhists also dabble in this-worldly concerns. Both treat such 'magic monks' as examples of popular Buddhism akin to spirit devotion, as opposed to orthodox Buddhism.
7. The names of my interlocutors in this article are pseudonyms.
8. This would run the gamut from legal measures to outright bribery. For instance, wealthy Thais might have access to advanced schooling, which would allow their sons to be exempt. For others, a doctor might be persuaded to give a medical exemption, or the military officials might, for an under-the-table fee, take the individual off the conscription list for his hometown.
9. There are many shrines in the area, such as the shrine of Brahma on Rama I Road.
10. In Thai, the word 'nine' (*kao*) is a near homonym for 'progress' (*kao*). The words differ in vowel length.

11. Specifically, the lot houses cobras (*Naja naja*), king cobras (*Ophiophagus hannah*), and reticulated pythons (*Python reticulatus*). This mixture of snakes includes those already living in the site and those found in residents' homes. People leave the snakes in the lot as an alternative to accruing sin from killing an animal.
12. Here I am using the term 'demon' as a reference to Kapferer (1997), although the various terminologies should be noted. Kapferer's demons are *yakku*, what in Thai would be called *yak*. While *yak* can Kitiarsa be and are dangerous in Thai cosmology, the spirits I discuss in this article are varying types of *phi* (ghost). *Phi* are the remnants of once-living things (Nak, the snake, the fetus) that have yet to be reborn, while *yak* have been 'born' as *yak*.
13. See Erik Cohen (1996) for another Thai example, and Christian Groes-Green (2013) for a study on 'transactional sex' in Mozambique.

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