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ANDREW ALAN JOHNSON
Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University

Naming chaos:

Accident, precariousness, and the spirits of wildness in urban Thai spirit cults

A B S T R A C T
Conceptions of wildness *(theuan)* and accident pervade the Thai informal economy and infuse certain forms of popular religious practice. I look at the propitiation of wilderness spirits in urban Bangkok at shrines that migrant and marginal workers see as sites of hope and danger. I argue that, by naming the potential for accident and death as a spirit with which they can communicate, informal-economy workers attempt to change the potential for misfortune into its opposite. My study draws on recent work on neoliberal and precarious labor in Europe as well as connections between the occult and the economy. [*occult economy, Southeast Asia, Thailand, migration, popular religion, urbanity, spirit cult*]

Rama II Road runs directly from Bangkok to the port city of Samut Sakhon and thence to Thailand's south. The road leading to the port is now bordered by factories on one side and gated housing estates on the other, with brief stretches of the tall grasses and marshes that dominated the area before the expanding borders of Bangkok reached and eventually engulfed it. During its construction in 1970, Rama II Road was the scene of a number of accidents, and many workers were bitten by cobras and king cobras.[1] One worker dreamed of a pregnant king cobra who appeared to him and asked him to stop the construction work for seven days. He brought this dream to the chief engineer, who dismissed it as "just a dream," but, the next day, the worker discovered the body of a snake with young crushed under his bulldozer. The man rushed home only to find his own family mysteriously dead. Heartbroken, he ran his car into a tree along a newly opened section of the road, killing himself. After the road was completed, it acquired a reputation as a dangerous stretch, owing to a high number of traffic fatalities.[2]

Now, paradoxically, the site that was once the scene of such misfortune is, instead, a place where devotees—largely migrant workers from Thailand's Northeast—come to obtain lottery numbers from Cao Mae Coong Aang (Lady Mother King Cobra, the spirit of the dead snake mother; hereafter, Coong Aang) and her children. At the shrine, mannequins decked out in Hindu-style finery stand amongst statues of snakes whose scales are believed to hide lucky numbers in their patterns. In the vacant lot next to the shrine, cobras, pythons, and king cobras are fed chickens and eggs by those seeking fortune or giving thanks for fortune granted. The malevolent spirit born of the death of a pregnant animal—a death that is considered particularly fearful—is turned into a source of charismatic or moral power *(baaramii)*, the same authoritative power that inheres in kings and monks and the gifts they give to their followers (see Stengs 2009:88; Tambiah 1984).

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In this article, I explore the connection drawn by Thai spirit-shrine devotees between fortune, charisma, and places of accident and wildness *(theuan)*. I examine the link between the Thai informal economy (*sethakit theuan,* lit. the wild economy) and these spirits. I draw on my ethnographic field research at three shrines: the aforementioned shrine of Coong Aang; the shrine of Mother Takhian, devoted to the trunk of a rainforest-grown hardwood tree *(Dipterocarpus)*; and the shrine of Mother Taanii, a banana tree chopped down by its owner near one of Bangkok's industrial estates. I explore why those in marginal positions in Thai society see places of wildness, accident, and misfortune as sites of hope (e.g., for marriage, protection from illness, or winning the biweekly lottery). Although their locations vary from within Buddhist temples to the sides of roads, these shrines all share a connection with stories about accident, trauma, and danger as well as an emergence of the wild into the planned urban environment. In addition to engaging with Thai notions of charisma (baaramii) and wildness, I address recent studies of the psychological and social effects of neoliberalism and precariousness based in Europe (Funahashi 2011; Molé 2010).[3] Thailand's economy clearly differs in many respects from that of Europe, but I see parallels between the rise in the Thai "wild" (informal) economy after the 1997 economic crisis and increasing labor precariousness in the wake of neoliberally inspired austerity measures in Europe. In both places, increasing labor uncertainty is productive of new ways of seeing sociality and exchange (Funahashi 2011:3). In the case of my interlocutors, fears concerning their own vulnerable positions and the likelihood of utter collapse should a sudden misfortune—for instance, an illness or a car accident—befall them were resolved briefly by placing such disaster within the purview of urban spirits of chance and accident. By looking at how these spaces gain significance, I address how marginal individuals attempt to interact with the ultimate causes of their economic and social precariousness via, in James Siegel's (2006) sense, "naming" misfortune as something locatable and with which communication is possible.

In *Naming the Witch* (2006), Siegel shows how Indonesian villagers in East Java attempt to locate death in the post-Suharto era. As the state's security forces cease to be an object of fear, the "menace from all directions," as Siegel puts it, reemerges in the shape of the "witch." By naming the witch—by identifying and then killing the suspected witch—East Javanese villagers are able to act on forces that otherwise go beyond their reach. By actively seeking out death, identifying its source in a specific person, and then taking action against that person (through murder), they assert control over forces that they see as otherwise uncontrollable. I argue that a similar process takes place when marginal Thai informal-economy workers identify—"name"—forces of wildness and death as beings with which they can communicate.

My research interlocutors were largely migrants from Thailand's poorest region, the Lao-speaking Northeast, or, occasionally, from Laos itself. They worked mostly as day laborers, street vendors, or taxi drivers and were often responsible for supporting a family. Such informal laborers have grown in number in the years since 1997, and in 2004 constituted nearly three-quarters of Thai workers (National Economic and Social Development Board [NESDB] 2004).[4] Without a system of social welfare or a labor union,[5] the lives of such workers rest on avoiding accident, illness, and other calamities.[6] Additionally, the margin of profit of many of these workers remains extremely thin. For instance, my own informal survey of taxi drivers attending the shrines found that they earned an average of about 200–400 baht ($6–$12) per day for an average of 10–12 hours of work a day.[7] Yet the possibility of accident surrounds them, and the limbless or burned individuals begging for change in local markets are testament to this immanent danger.

Given the omnipresent danger of traffic accidents, their catastrophic effects, and their seemingly random occurrence, it is little wonder that they figure into the stories of each of the shrines I examine. Here, I look at how ideas of city and wilderness run parallel to ideas about accident (especially road accidents) and fortune and how the devotees attempt to harness the destructive–productive power of the wild by "naming" and thus objectifying the chaotic potential in such sites.

Occult economies

This study is situated at the intersection of two theoretical strains: the study of popular religion in the context of modernity and the study of accident and precariousness. In the case of Southeast Asia, many anthropologists have noted the connection between modernity and spirit beliefs. For Vietnam, Philip Taylor (2004) and Kirsten Endres (2011) report on the revival of spirit cults and possession in the context of the opening market. But how do we make sense of such a connection between new "enchantments" and the urban and often quite modern lives of those involved?

Jean and John Comaroff (1999) examine linkages between capitalism and the occult in postapartheid South Africa, where panic over witchcraft arises when one individual becomes rich while others struggle and fail. In the Comaroffs' analysis, South Africans link the new, strange, and seemingly malevolent ways that the market works to the action of equally strange and new forms of witchcraft. The occult, in this perspective, is something that stems from a breakdown of rationalism: The market is mystical and unknowable; therefore, it gives rise to unknowable and mystical forces. This, for the Comaroffs, explains a recent

explosion in fears and panics related to the supernatural. Criticism of the Comaroffs has largely taken the tack that they do not delve deeply in an evidence-based way into the link between new "occult" practices and neoliberalism—in short, that their work is, as Sally Falk Moore puts it, "suggestive, not demonstrative" (1999:305).

But another line of criticism involves the Comaroffs' focus on incomprehension and mystification—the argument that, for those subject to it, the neoliberal market is composed of "largely invisible methods . . . always palpably present" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:293), unknown forces that are then given the name *witchcraft* and feared. Bruce Kapferer argues that such an "occult economies" perspective sees magical beliefs as a hysterical reaction to forces beyond peoples' control, a perspective that "lump[s] [such occult practices] together under the sign of the irrational, which must await the true understanding of the anthropologist, the author of the rational" (2003:18). For Kapferer, the Comaroffs' idea of "occult economies" assumes a too-perfect substitution of the occult for the market, an assumption that glosses over how magical and occult practices are deeply embedded in "structuring dynamics" (2003:18) of personhood. Instead, he argues for an analysis of the internal logics of occult systems rather than the search for what is "really" meant by this or that magical belief (Kapferer 2003:22).

I am sensitive to the critiques of Kapferer and Moore. However, I find the Comaroffs' focus on the connections between economic uncertainty and the occult stimulating. And, while scholars have argued for a synergy between new forms of religiosity and capitalism on the basis of a deep understanding (and reinterpretation) of both (Rudnyckyj 2010), there remains a margin beyond which individuals acknowledge the existence of an unknown force and, as I explore here, attempt to influence it by establishing social ties. Here, I take up the idea of "occult economies" not as a given but, rather, as a provocation.

Bearing in mind Kapferer's critique, I shy away from an overly psychological–functional connection between economic uncertainty and spirit cults while still keeping central the Comaroffs' idea of an uncertain force outside the social. This "uncertain force," I argue, is not, as Kapferer's critique would have it, waiting to be revealed as "really" the economic forces to which these devotees are subject, but, rather, it is that which is beyond the human. Building on Siegel, I point toward the act of "naming" as a means by which devotees attempt to interact and enter into exchange with this force beyond the social.

In the context of Thailand, Alan Klima also criticizes "occult economies" for overemphasizing the "moral fault line" (2006:36) between rational finance and "irrational" occult practices. Klima (2006) prefers to look at how "dark finance," as he terms Thailand's underground lotteries and lottery-granting spirit cults, acts to keep capital in local hands rather than centralized in national or international (legal or criminal) organizations (see also Sparkes 1999). What the Comaroffs see as a parallel between the logic of the market and the logic of magic giving rise to new forms, Klima sees as an effect of a more aggressive system of financial surveillance revealing practices that were always already there. In other words, the Comaroffs describe the rise of new spirits, whereas in Klima's interpretation, old spirits are newly unveiled in the light of national and international investigation, regulation, and moral condemnation.

I contend that, in the case of Thailand, both processes are in fact at work. There is an increasing emphasis in public media on exposing and condemning supernatural beliefs, but at the same time new economic forms give rise to new forms of practice. Such a process is nothing new (Jackson 1999; Pattana 2005; White 2006). A number of Thai Buddhist reforms in the 19th and early 20th centuries attempted to draw a distinction between undesirable *sayasaat* (magic) and *satsanaa* (religion), without much success outside elite circles (McDaniel 2011:6). At the same time, new social and economic changes gave rise to new religious practices (e.g., the rise of Chinese spirit mediumship). But the scale and the scope of the modern media "investigation" into the supernatural is something unprecedented. Following Klima, old spirits are indeed seeing new light, but, just as Michel Foucault might have it, out of the process of extending a regulatory gaze, new spirits emerge in greater numbers.

As the Comaroffs suggest and as Rosalind Morris (2000) examines for Thailand, the mass distribution of images in the media itself is generative of new forms of sayasaat. Such a growth of supernatural beliefs goes hand in hand with economic concerns, and Pattana Kitiarsa (2005) shows how increasingly uncertain livelihoods drive less well-off Thais toward more practical, profit-oriented forms of worship. Although networks such as those that Klima cites, based in local communities, may be replaced by those linked via television, magazine, or Internet sites, leading to decentered and displaced networks and dividing producers of content and consumers, this proliferation is also generative of new networks. Urbanism is perhaps the most transformative of these changes: Walter Irvine (1984) notes the rapid explosion of new media with urbanization in Chiang Mai, lending credence to the linkage between modernity, new ways of living, and new forms of magic. Yet these urban magics build on older ideas of the wilderness in Thai folk Buddhism. In Thai cosmology, the wilderness (e.g., *pa theuan*) is a place that is fundamentally closed and dangerous to humans (Thanet 1998), but, because of its very otherworldliness, it is a source of potential (Johnson 2011). Much as with other places of spiritual danger, such as graveyards (Klima 2002), the wilderness is a place where certain, spiritually gifted individuals (e.g., hermits, forest monks) can access power unavailable to their urban counterparts (Kamala

1997; Tambiah 1975). The wild is a place of danger but also of potential. It is both of these forces that devotees seek to address.

Spirit devotees

The devotees of Bangkok's spirit shrines are a difficult group to characterize. Some might come to a shrine before the biweekly illegal lottery numbers come out. Some may have adopted a spirit into their family and be contractually obliged to hold a weekly prayer.[8] Others come after a major donation to a Buddhist temple to "cash in" on their newly acquired karma. Still others wish to make a pact *(bon)* with a particular spirit and come to the shrine to present a gift should the spirit fulfill its end. Most move between shrines as a particular place gains or loses a reputation for giving out winning numbers or luck.

Given this shifting population, it is difficult to generalize about who "devotees" are as a group. When asked, the caretaker of the shrine of Coong Aang responded, "Poor people play the lottery [and come to call for numbers], rich people play stocks," indicating that, at least in his view, devotees were generally "poor." This is not to say that the rich do not also propitiate spirits—the largest and most famous of Bangkok's spirit shrines, the Erawan shrine to Brahma, is closely associated with the religious practices of Thailand's elites. Such elite spirit worship usually concerns particular Hindu-deity shrines (such as the Erawan) or cults of former Thai kings (especially Rama V; see Stengs 2009) and not wilderness spirits.

In my interviews and conversations during my seven months of fieldwork, certain patterns emerged among the devotees. Devotees of the three shrines that I describe here (as well as other shrines I attended during my fieldwork) tended to be taxi drivers, street vendors, or factory workers from industrial estates in eastern Bangkok.[9] Those asking Coong Aang for guidance tended to be taxi drivers or independent salespeople (i.e., those selling goods in the open-air markets; in Thai, *pho* [masc.] or *mae* [fem.] *kha*), with roughly half of those with whom I spoke coming from the Northeast and the other half from provinces neighboring Bangkok or from the adjoining neighborhood. The same pattern emerged at the Takhian shrine, albeit with a higher proportion of Northeasterners (roughly 90 percent of my interlocutors). Finally, the devotees of the Taanii shrine with whom I spoke were nearly all from Thailand's North or Northeast, having migrated to Bangkok for work. In addition, several had come from the other bank of the Mekong, in Laos (especially Suvannakhet province).

The "average" devotee, then, was a migrant from the Northeast engaged in low-wage labor or independent work (e.g., taxi driving, pushcart vending, or market vending). The gender ratio was slightly weighted toward women, especially among regular devotees or those who had made a contract with the spirit. However, my own interlocutor selection tended to favor men or older women, as my position as a young foreign man meant that approaching young women could have been interpreted as a sexual advance and made me and my interviewee subjects of gossip in the community. I collected data over three trips to Thailand, one for two months in December and January of 2010–11, the second from June to August of 2011, and the third from April to June of 2012. While I visited several other spirit shrines during these trips, I focused my interviews (formal and informal, and in Central Thai or Lao [Northeastern Thai] languages) and ethnographic observation on the three I describe here.

I argue here that the spirit shrines' emphasis on chaos and accident is reflective of the concerns of Bangkok's migrant population with regard to their precariousness. As the link between the Thai terms for "informal labor" *(sethakit theuan)* and "wilderness" *(pa theuan)* would indicate, informal workers see their situation as cut off from social ties and security. Noelle Molé (2010:38) points to the link between doubt and uncertainty and the neoliberal regime of production in Italy via the plight of temporary, "precarious" workers. Workers formerly reliant on state institutions are, in Italy's neoliberal economic regime, recast as autonomous subjects responsible for their own welfare (Molé 2010:40). Such a shift has an effect on the affective relationship that individuals have with themselves, society, and work—the future becomes imbued with a sense of anticipation, apprehension, and dread. Daena Funahashi (2011) similarly argues that such an emphasis on individual responsibility triggers an existential crisis amongst Finnish workers diagnosed with burnout.

Although the Thai context is not one of Fordist labor transitioning to neoliberalism, many of the same uncertainties and risks inhere in the transition from agricultural labor in the provinces for wage labor in Bangkok. As Mary Beth Mills (1995) writes, Thailand's migrant workers face an economic landscape of considerable uncertainty in comparison with the one they knew in agriculture. Mills reports that, in 1990, 20 percent of migrant laborers from Northeastern Thailand were cheated in the employment process—fees paid to brokers were stolen, fees were left unpaid, or working conditions were unbearable.[10]

Mills sees "uncertainty" as arising from economic conditions and lack of job security, but my interlocutors also emphasized the physical insecurity of their everyday environment. For instance, during my fieldwork, a man was electrocuted during a downpour when he took shelter in a phone booth. Such booths had been dwindling in number with the omnipresence of mobile phones and were no longer maintained. The lack of maintenance was the likely cause of the electrical short, which turned the metal frame into a death trap when it was drenched with rainwater. In a similar accident, a former teacher of mine was killed when

a faulty fan electrified his flooded basement. These events were certainly accidents, but the idea of "accident" that was most salient for and most articulated by my interlocutors was embodied by the traffic accident—especially among the taxi drivers and street vendors who made their living in the midst of Bangkok's vehicular traffic.

Traffic accidents constitute one of the leading causes of death in Thailand, with an incidence of 19.5 per 100,000 persons (as compared with 6.8 for Italy and 5.1 in Finland).[11] They constitute the highest per capita cause of premature death outside of HIV/AIDS. The cause of traffic accidents was related by my interlocutors not necessarily to poor traffic planning but to one's own personal fate *(chatta)* or luck *(chook)*, which are intimately tied with one's karma *(kam)* or store of accumulated merit *(bun)*. As one's fate is something that is only discernible when its effects are shown (e.g., when one suffers an accident), nearly all of the (Buddhist) informal-economy workers I spoke with carried protective amulets or blessed patches of cloth *(yan)*, as many other Thais do when involved in risky activities.[12] In short, traffic accidents become a key trope by which informal-economy workers (especially those working in traffic) talk about the uncertainty and capriciousness of everyday work and life. The emphasis in informal-economy labor on one's own responsibility for fortune or failure is reinforced by Buddhist ideas of karma, wherein even the seemingly uncontrollable (e.g., traffic accidents) is explained in terms of sins accumulated in a past life.

How, then, do such workers use spirit beliefs to deal with their own sense of "anticipation," to use Molé's term? Why do such practices take the form of a propitiation of nature spirits in the urban? What is the link between accident and prosperity? While I have hinted at the answers to some of these questions, here I address my ethnographic data in detail.

The spirit shrines

Lady Mother Coong Aang

In my introduction, I describe the history of the Cao Mae Coong Aang (Lady Mother King Cobra) shrine. (See Figure 1.) But this history is only speculative. In fact, according to the caretaker, the presence of Coong Aang and the narrative about the worker, his dream, and the cobra were only later discovered via the mediation of a woman possessed by the spirit of Coong Aang. The first actual signs of Coong Aang's presence were the deaths along the roadside. As the attendant related,

> This [the shrine] is the place where the worker [who accidentally killed the king cobra] crashed his car. When the cars went past here, there were many accidents. The local people, they were afraid. They wondered why so many people died in traffic accidents coming by here. So they moved a spirit shrine [to the spirits of the dead from car crashes] to this place. But it didn't help—people still died. So they brought a medium in to see. And the medium said that it was Coong Aang, and that she still wanted more lives, so it wouldn't stop at all. So they built this larger structure right next to the old one [and then the spirit was appeased].

In short, Coong Aang is identified at the site because of her connection with accident. These initial, random accidents are retrospectively related to a similar accident—the death of the worker following the death of the snake. All involve vehicular deaths—the traffic accidents, the killing of the cobra (with the bulldozer), and the suicide via car. In Thai, such deaths are, like deaths from AIDS or drowning, "abnormal" *(phit pokoti)* or inauspicious deaths *(hoong)*. Hoong deaths generate bad ghosts *(phii taai hoong)*, which in turn generate more deaths (Johnson in press).

But via the logic of spirit propitiation, this idea of accident, of inauspiciousness, generates its reverse. Despite Coong Aang's reputation as a nature spirit who spread chaos on the highway out of revenge, she is now worshipped as something sacred.

Mak was a construction worker from the Northern Thai province of Phayao. As we talked, he complained about the cost of living in Bangkok. When I mentioned new efforts to raise Thailand's minimum wage to 300 baht a day (about $10), he told me in a soft voice that such new laws were not applicable to him: He had taken his job on an informal basis and was paid "whatever my boss [*phii,* lit. older brother] wants to pay me." When I pressed him on the identity of or his relationship to his employer, he grew cagey and pointed to my digital voice recorder. After I assured him that it was switched off, he steered the conversation away from his work and back to Coong Aang. "I feel more at ease *(sabaai cai)* after coming here. I can't explain it more than that. [I] come here, greet and make offerings *(wai)* to the spirit, and go home. [Then I] can sleep more easily. [I] don't worry [as much]."

As at the other shrines, devotees like Mak bring offerings. In Coong Aang's case, they bring chickens and snake statues for Coong Aang's serpent persona and Thai dresses for her human self, to fulfill contractual gifts. Yet the shrine is known not only for its snakes but also for its films. Each night, someone who has incurred a debt to Coong Aang (either via winning the lottery or via being granted another favor by the spirit) brings three movies—most often, violent action films—to the shrine, where they are fed into a movie projector, an old device taken from a defunct cinema. The films—one Thai, one Western, and one Chinese[13]—are shown on a large screen, where the spirit as well as audience can see them.[14] This lends the shrine a

Figure 1. Shrine of Coong Aang. Photo by A. Johnson.

relaxed air, where local workers sit among statues of cobras (and not far from their living counterparts) in the open air, eating from roving vendor carts and watching films.

Lady Mother Takhian

In April of 2007, a man dreamed that a tree spirit, Lady Mother Takhian, appeared to him and asked for his help in freeing 2,000-year-old trees that were trapped in a swamp in the province of Aang Thong.[15] After finding two dead tree trunks fitting this description, the man and the villagers of Aang Thong removed the trunks from the bog and floated them down the Chao Phraya River to the grounds of a temple in Bangkok, where they were enshrined. (See Figure 2.) Over 10,000 people greeted the trees with flowers, incense offerings, and requests for lottery numbers.

In 2011–12, the crowds had thinned somewhat, but there were still large numbers of devotees on nights leading up to the drawing of underground lottery numbers. The two tree trunks were covered in white powder, used to throw the bark patterns into sharp relief, and the cracks and the corners of the trunks held offerings. These were gifts that one would give to any young woman concerned about her appearance: mirrors and cosmetics, hairbrushes, strings of costume pearls, and Thai dresses. Other dresses were put on mannequins distributed around the trunks, and still others were hung in rows behind the trees.

Requests to Takhian, like those to other spirits, were phrased in the form of a contract (bon). Devotees asked for luck—most often in terms of health but also success in a business venture, love, or the lottery. Should one's venture fail, no reciprocity was needed. But should one succeed, devotees offered certain set gifts in return *(kae bon)*. In the case of Takhian, such return gifts were these dresses, mirrors, cosmetics, and the like—all the things that a stylish woman would need.

Tawan, a devotee of the spirit, described to me what might happen should one refuse to repay such a debt. "This happened twice last week," he said to me late one night in August. "There was a young man who came to the shrine [and then won the lottery]. Later, he felt insensible [*mai ruu tua,* lit. he didn't know his body]. He said he could see the spirit. His family brought him back here and he danced [*ram,* classical Thai folk dance]. He danced beautifully!" Tawan stressed to me that the young man was lucky to have

Figure 2. The trunk of a takhian tree, enshrined. Photo by A. Johnson.

been possessed and not killed—Takhian had a reputation for angrily attacking *(hian)* those who sought to avoid repaying their gifts.

The five vendors I was with sat in silence for a while after Tawan's story. Suddenly, Somsak, a lottery ticket vendor from the Northeastern province of Loei,[16] spoke up. "Did you hear about the helicopter?" he asked me. He pulled a newspaper from that morning out of his lottery ticket case. The headlines described three consecutive crashes of Thai army helicopters on the Thai–Burmese border. The first crash, of an old U.S. Black Hawk military helicopter, had killed the soldiers inside, and the other helicopters had crashed while attempting a rescue operation at the wreckage. The article went on to talk about the concerns that the Thai public had surrounding military corruption or ineptitude, with some blaming the United States for having given Thailand outdated equipment.

Somsak, Tawan, and the other devotees, however, ignored the article's analysis to focus on the facts of the case. Somsak noted,

> They say that this place is cursed *(atthan)*. The forest there is full of ghosts. Tree spirits [like Takhian]. Small ghosts, liver-eating ghosts *(phii kohng kohy)*. It was those [forest spirits] that caused the helicopters to fail. Do you know that each helicopter crashed in the same manner? The engine that turned the blades failed, and then it crashed. It is the same spirit that caused it. Those soldiers, they don't respect forest spirits.

Somsak was also adamant that the crash occurred in Thailand, whereas in fact it happened just on the Burmese side of the border. He even maintained this was the case while looking at a map clearly showing the crash site inside the Burmese border. The ghosts that had brought down the helicopter were, like Takhian, specifically Thai spirits, and therefore, for Somsak, their potency ended at the boundaries of the Thai geobody.[17]

For Somsak, accident is something that emerges from an unknowable place beyond the scope of the everyday, but to which others—spirits—nonetheless have access. These spirits are intermediaries with whom it is possible to enter into normal social exchange—gift giving and more formal contracts. Indeed, this is why it is important for Somsak that the crash happened on the Thai side of the border. Had it happened in a foreign country, the idea of a clear social exchange would have been complicated.[18] In this conceptualization, the army fell victim to the forces of accident because it refused to name a source for it, instead assuming that it was something "natural." For the army, accident simply occurs as a result of randomness—weather patterns, helicopter maintenance, and so on. For Somsak, accident is a force that must be properly named and dealt with as a social thing and not attributed to the actions of air currents and rain.

Lady Mother Taanii and Lady Mother Praduu

Down a nondescript lane *(soi)* off a major road, famous for nothing except a nearby missionary school, was a sudden frenzy of color. Crammed into the narrow space between a barbed-wire-fenced, weed-choked vacant lot, and the paved road surface was a cluster of small spirit houses, each one at the base of a tree. Outside the largest of these stood a mannequin from a department store dressed in a bright polyester dress in the style of a traditional Thai outfit. Hanging around her were pencil portraits of a smiling woman as well as other dresses—these on hangers—draped over the barbed wire. (See Figure 3.)

From 2010 until late 2011, on the three nights preceding the biweekly Thai illegal lottery drawing, the lane became thronged with people. I joined this throng of devotees on numerous occasions. The smoke from burning incense rose in thick clouds from the sand pit in front of the mannequin, stinging our eyes. An older man stood at the entrance to the lane with a flashlight, calling out loudly whenever a car was turning in and motioning the devotees to stand aside. This was nearly impossible toward midnight, when there was simply nowhere to go, and calls of

Figure 3. Devotees search for messages from Mother Taanii. Photo by A. Johnson.

"a car is coming" drew nervous laughter as we all crushed to one side of the street, gingerly avoiding the barbed wire fence.

Many of the lane's visitors were informal day laborers at a nearby computer-parts factory. They clustered around the trees on the lane. Some of them crouched next to a tree with a candle, rubbing the bark with their fingers. Others held out their cell phones, taking photographs of a tree. Still others crowded around white-clothed mediums who claimed to be possessed by the spirits of the trees.

Each person was searching for messages hidden in the bark. These were usually (Arabic) numbers formed by faint white lines emerging when the bark was thrown into relief by oily fingers or flashing phones. Occasionally other messages would appear—in one photograph that I took, two older women said that they saw the shape of two of the lane's spirits, Lady Mother Taanii and the spirit of an aborted fetus, and they advised me to keep the photograph for luck. Ferreting out the numbers, however, was the primary goal—these were to be used in the illegal lottery drawing a few days away.

The disorganization of the lane's cult was its hallmark. It had no head, no organizer, no person who was the center of its "charisma," in Max Weber's sense. Instead, each individual was engaged in his or her own search for hidden wealth and prosperity and his or her own connection with the charismatic power of the spirits of the lane.

The lane had gone from an ordinary-looking suburban street to this massive booming religious center since early spring 2010. Early one night, before the crowds arrived, I spoke with the attendee directing traffic. He offered to tell me the story of the place, and I repeat it here:

> At first, there was a wild banana tree,[19] just about this tall [he pointed to a place about head-high on a nearby tree] with a red, red flower growing out of its center [growing in the yard of a nearby house]. People came from all around to pray to it. Whoever prayed, won [the lottery]. They won every time. Not much, just a little, but won [the lottery]. They won so that you could trust [that each time you would win]. Then, when they won, they would buy a [traditional Thai woman's] dress and leave it here. [He pointed out a particular dress.] This one! This one won a lot! Then, the owner of the house, she was frightened that a fire would break out from the candles [used to pray]. So therefore she cut [the tree down]. So people prayed to the stump. And they won again. So the owner became frightened again, and she took the clothing and threw it over there [into a neighboring vacant lot]. And she closed it all off [with barbed wire]. She forbade anyone to enter. But people started to dream more and more [about the tree] and

> they came more and more to pray, and they won more and more. And then the owner [of that neighboring lot] closed it off, too, but people came more and more. And then one day an employee of that company [a factory worker from a nearby electronics company] dreamed that it was Mother Praduu [another kind of tree] who was granting the prayers outside of the yard. At first it was Mother Taanii, but now it was Mother Praduu.[20]

Over time, more gods were added to the pantheon inhabiting the lane. One of the lottery ticket vendors described how the fetus god—*kumaan*—who had entered my camera became incorporated: "Over there," she indicated the vacant lot behind the mannequin, "people would throw things away. Lots of things. One time a Burmese girl threw away her baby in there. It was dead, just found in there."

"How do you know that the fetus was Burmese?" I asked.

"I don't know, not really. But people said that it was Burmese. Now that fetus is the kumaan, and people worship it over at that tree."

In the lane, each devotee had his or her own particular technique for finding numbers. Some used candles and rubbed the bark with their fingers—others shook their heads disapprovingly at this, remarking to me that the last thing in the world that a tree spirit wanted was fire so close to her body. "It burns her!" said one woman. "She will send them wrong numbers if they keep looking like that." Late at night—at 1:00, 2:00, and 3:00 a.m.—mediums performed in front of each tree. As I sat watching, nearly toppling over in the crush of people, a young boy sat in a meditation pose in front of his father. He held his hands stiffly in positions taken from classical Khmer dance. His face was rapt and still, but he would occasionally break away from his position and laugh. After this had happened several times, the father grew angry and shouted at the crowd to put down their cameras—the flashes were breaking his son's concentration, so vital for connecting with the spirit world. After an hour of painful sitting, broken when the crowd had to move to accommodate a passing car, many began to drift over to where a competing medium, a young man, was excitedly giving away numbers. I started to move, but then several in the small crowd of factory workers with whom I had been watching the boy stopped me. "He's not real," one woman said of the competitor, "he is just making up numbers. This boy is the real one. [You] will see."

As we waited for a new medium to appear, I spoke with Lek, a young factory worker from the Northeastern town of Roi Et. Lek had left his family's rice paddy after the market had become overly volatile in the late 1990s and worked as a part-time (informal) laborer assembling computer parts. He played the lottery and had recently won a small fortune, attributing his luck to Taanii. But he also cautioned me on the dangers of dealing with spirits.

> I came tonight because I won the lottery. I came with my mother and brother and my girlfriend—we all came here. My girlfriend dreamt that I was going to have an accident [on my motorbike]. Then, I did! I crashed my bike right here—right at the entrance to this lane where the shrine of Mother Taanii is! Then, my girlfriend dreamed of Mother [Taanii], so that's why we came here and asked for numbers. It worked—I won several tens-of-thousand baht [about $1,000]. But it's dangerous. If you ask for something, you have to be willing to give something too. This is why I don't ask to be really, really rich. If I did that, I know I would have to give something first. If I won three numbers [i.e. he got three numbers correct in the lottery, winning him his $1,000] and I had to suffer the fall, I think that if I asked to get really rich, I would die!

He was back that night to give thanks to the spirit and repay his debt (kae bon).

Around 2:00 a.m., the crowd began to die out. New people were still arriving, but far more were heading home in anticipation of the workday beginning in just a few short hours. The lottery results were announced the next day, and, as the laws of probability as well as the assurances of the devotees had it, someone in the crowd was a winner, and so there would be more devotees returning the next prelottery night.

The predictions of the tree, then, can be always true, at least for some. Additionally, since the numbers given are passed through the filter of one's individual karma, should one fail to receive the correct number, or fail to calculate it correctly, this again is one's own fault.[21] The spirit's numbers mirror the ways in which many workers characterized their own precarious positions in Bangkok's informal economy, in which their own individual fortune or misfortune, rather than a defined position vis-à-vis others, determines success or failure.

This emphasis on personal responsibility and independence instead of formal duties or rights in the move to the informal economy parallels findings of European studies of precariousness and neoliberalism, as I discuss above. The move from the Thai agricultural sector to the urban informal sector, then, can be productively compared to the move from the European welfare state into the world of austerity and temporary employment. In Funahashi's (2011) study of Finland, for instance, the retrenchment of the welfare state removed the obligation of the state to guarantee employment, thus placing the onus of finding work on the individual.

In the case of Thailand, this idea of independence, free of the network of obligations to superiors or inferiors, is explicitly linked to the idea of "wildness." Both the informal economy and the wilderness are theuan: wild, free, savage, unconnected, and unrestrained. In his study of "Thai freedom," Thanet Aphornsuvan (1998) 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. Funahashi's and Thanet's arguments parallel each other, in that such "independent" individuals—newly neoliberal workers and "wild men," respectively—fail to find their own self-definition, in the former case spiraling into despair and existential crisis and in the latter, becoming wild and dangerous. As informal-economy Thai workers face their own potential wildness—their own separation from benevolent patrons or dependents—they enter, as Lek does, into contracts with this wild potential. By adopting Taanii as a patron and entering into a relationship of exchange with her, Lek renders both himself and the chaos of his life less theuan.

The cult of Mother Taanii was not to last. Facing pressure from local city officials, who regarded the presence of the shrine as a traffic hazard, and from local landowners, who feared fire, violence, and the presence of the crowd on the street, the shrine finally succumbed. From its height in December of 2010, attendance decreased until the lottery-night crowd in the summer of 2011 consisted of a handful of local residents, a flower and joss-stick vendor, the caretaker, and a few brief visitors who had contracted long-term relationships with the spirits of the lane. By April of 2012, the shrine was stripped bare: The generator had broken down, the mannequin's wig had been stolen, and the cabinet with dresses was gone. All that was left was a litter of spirit houses, a bald mannequin in front of a crude pencil drawing, and a jar filled with ash from old incense sticks. In short, the shrine's presence in Bangkok was as transient and short-lived as that of many of its devotees.

Conclusion: Wildness and exchange with the outside

The nature spirits of Bangkok's urban space, of which the three I discuss are a representative sample,[22] share certain things in common. They are largely the spirits of women, and occasionally spirits of children are associated with them.[23] They are the spirits of inherently wild things destroyed by the city—the cobra emerges to exact revenge for the destruction of its home, the takhian tree only lives in jungles and appears in Bangkok as a dead trunk,[24] and the banana tree was cut down. They grant worldly fortune instead of fortune in the next life. One propitiates the spirits at night, rather than during the day. Perhaps most significantly, propitiation is done without guidance or direction from another—in other words, while each shrine had a caretaker who made sure that fires did not break out or people did not steal offerings, there was no authoritative person who directed how individuals should worship the spirits. One's success in making contracts with the spirits rested on one's own skill in negotiating with them. As the caretaker of the Coong Aang shrine told me,

> This is not religion *(satsanaa)*. This is a belief in magic (sayasaat). It is a personal belief *(suan bukkhon)*. Because everyone who comes here might have different beliefs. Some people come here and think that if they ask, they will achieve something in their everyday life so that their life will be better. Other people, they want a magical charm *(khathaa)*. There are other people who are suffering from something. Some people are under a suffering *(khwaam thuk)* that they can't get out from underneath. So they come here to say: "Mother, if you help me here, I will return and bring you a chicken, some eggs, a dress, or a film."

He stressed that if someone did something that offended the spirit, it was not his place to censure the person; rather, the person would become the victim of an accident, the kinds of accidents for which Coong Aang was already famous.

Klima (2002) explores Thai "funeral casinos," where individuals search for fortune via gift giving and gambling at the very site of death. Whereas he connects this idea to political violence and Buddhist corpse meditation, I see forms of exchange with forces of chaos or wildness as an attempt to exert control over their manifestations in the everyday. One engages with theuan to avoid being rendered theuan oneself. Here, I return to the Comaroffs' idea of "occult economies." Like the Comaroffs' interlocutors, Thai spirit shrine devotees equate the chaos that they experience in their everyday working lives with a form of the supernatural. But, unlike that in an "occult economy," this supernatural force is not something that lies out of their reach. Instead, spirit devotees transform this chaos into something over which they have control: a wild thing displaced in the city but one with a human face. They do so by naming it, transforming those forces of chaos that they fear in their everyday lives into entities with whom they can reason.

Wildness itself, like Siegel's idea of "death," is a thing that lies beyond communication. One cannot, for instance, communicate with a cobra or a tree. Similarly, one has no control over whether sales will be good tomorrow or if one will be the victim of a road accident. Thai spirit devotion draws on these parallels,[25] positing a force acting behind the scenes of the everyday to dole out prosperity to some and disaster to others. Yet by "naming" this force in the cults of wilderness spirits, they construct an entity with which they can communicate (via the mediation of the tree's bark, a possessed medium, or a mobile phone). Such an act turns what is invisible, omnipresent, and promising or menacing into something sensory: Tree bark can (and must) be touched and rubbed, mediums must be spoken with, and phone images must be intently examined for signs.

By naming (in Siegel's sense) the chaos of their everyday lives as personified spirits of the wilderness—that "outside" power—within the city, urban devotees allow themselves some means of control over it. Through naming, migrant workers engage with their own apprehension of precariousness. Indeed, as in the example of neoliberalized European workers, they displace their own sense of wildness (in the idiom of theuan) onto the personified figures of potentially dangerous but tragically displaced wilderness things. In this way, they seek to turn these things into their opposites.

Notes

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1. The king cobra *(Ophiophagus hannah)* is taxonomically differentiated from the cobras of the *Naja* genus (in Thailand, the monocled cobra, *Naja kaouthia,* and the Indo-Chinese spitting cobra, *Naja siamensis*). Thai language makes a distinction between the two, terming the king cobra *Coong aang* and the ordinary cobra *nguu hao.*

2. I heard this story from the caretaker of the shrine now located at the site of the construction worker's accident. I have no specific data to corroborate the story, but I note that the shrine is located where fast-moving traffic lanes from a bridge merge with other, similarly fast-moving lanes. Devotees at the shrine sometimes vary the story: The engineer is sometimes killed after discovering a cobra in his car as he speeds along the new highway, and occasionally the events happen during the construction of the elevated highway junction and not during the road's expansion.

3. *Neoliberalism* is a contested term. Here, I use it in Paul Farmer's (2003:5) sense of an ideology that foregrounds autonomy, competition, and rationalism in a way that erases realms outside the purely economic. In Thailand, structural reforms pushed by the IMF in the wake of the 1997 crisis dramatically increased these features of the Thai economy just as it increased the Thai informal sector. Indeed, Keith Hart notes the link between neoliberal economic reform and the growth of the informal sector in poor economies, as the informal sector was seen by economic planners as providing a boost to the "market" (2007:12) while bypassing a state's obligations to its workers. Yet Thailand cannot be seen as "neoliberal" in Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) sense of a break from older institutions, moralities, and solidarities. Labor unions and other types of worker solidarity so familiar in Europe, whose decline marks the neoliberal era so clearly (Funahashi 2011; Molé 2010; Muehleback 2009), simply did not exist on the same scale in Thailand. And, as I point out in this article, Thai notions of the need for bonds of duty and exchange between superiors and subordinates are not broken in the informal sector, even in the absence of any human guarantor of security. Rather, they emerge as bonds between wild and civilized, spirit and human. In this way, I follow Andrea Muehlebach (2009) in looking not at what is destroyed or ignored by neoliberalism's focus on the autonomous individual but at what ideas of morality or, as I examine here, religiosity emerge.

4. Here, I follow the Thai definition of sethakit theuan, as labor that is unregulated by the Thai government and that follows no formal contract. It includes self-directed activities such as market vending or taxi driving as well as more traditional employment (construction, factory labor, etc.) done "off the books" and outside taxation or regulatory institutions. Yet, as Hart (2007:13) and Alan Klima (2006) both show, such informal networks are not always entirely unregulated. Families, crime syndicates, powerful private individuals, and other groups often act in government's absence. For many of my interlocutors who originated in Thailand's Northeast or North, family or village ties were distant and those that existed in Bangkok were, more likely than not, exploitative.

5. Thailand has experimented with various universal health care schemes in recent years, most notably, Thaksin Shinawatra's 30-baht scheme beginning in 2001 and a free universal scheme after the military coup of 2006. The current government of Yingluck Shinawatra campaigned on a promise of a 300-baht ($10) per day wage to replace the existing wage, which varies by province (to a maximum of 200 baht per day in Bangkok). For informal-economy workers, to whom this wage may not apply, the Yingluck campaign also proposed a safety net, including sick pay, life insurance, and pensions. As of this writing, this policy has yet to be implemented. In no case would any of these measures apply to international migrant laborers.

6. According to the WHO (2006), HIV/AIDS was the leading cause of death (at 14 percent of total mortality), with road accidents being the next most frequent cause of death for younger Thais (at 5 percent of total mortality). For the total population, HIV remained the leading cause of death, followed in order by heart disease, diabetes, strokes, and traffic accidents.

7. Taxi drivers must rent a car from a central company and pay for their own gasoline. My figure of $6–$12 a day is profit after these expenses. Taxi drivers were often Lao speaking or from Thailand's Northeast but were never Lao nationals—the danger of being caught by the police for working illegally in the country was simply too great. Lao nationals I interviewed were more often maids and restaurant workers or worked in other, less easily apprehended professions.

8. Megan Sinnott (2011) studies the contracts involved in the propitiation of child spirits. In them, a woman agrees to take a ghost child as her own, with particular terms and conditions.

9. These "estates" are places where certain labor laws are relaxed to attract overseas manufacturing capital and where laborers are primarily migrants. In Bangkok, these laborers come from Thailand's outer provinces or from Burma or Laos.

10. Mills refers to international migrant work and not domestic migrant work.

11. Statistics from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Road Safety Annual Report (International Traffic Safety Data and Analysis Group 2011). WHO statistics for Thailand are from 2009 (WHO 2009).

12. Muslims account for approximately 5 percent of the Thai population but are concentrated in the country's southern provinces. Given the overwhelming predominance of Northeastern migrant workers in Bangkok and the fact that Islam, more so than Buddhism, generally frowns on spirit worship, all of my interlocutors self-identified as Buddhist. I did discuss spirit shrines with several Thai Muslims, as I lived during the course of this fieldwork in a Thai Muslim community. My interlocutors there expressed a belief in spirits, a desire to know any lucky numbers I might find, but a lack of interest in actually propitiating the spirits themselves.

13. The devotees generally identify the film according to the ethnicities of the principal cast members. The film *Unleashed* (Leterrier 2005), also released as *Danny the Dog,* was a British–French–U.S. film but starred Jet Li and featured a lot of martial arts. The person showing the film and the devotees watching it all identified it as a "Chinese" movie owing to Li's role in it. The projection has been going on since the shrine's construction in 1995, and the list of presenters is booked a year in advance.

14. Showing film or television to a spirit also occurs in Nang Nak's shrine, although in that case it appears to be solely for Nak's benefit, as, the television is turned to face the statue and not out toward the audience.

15. Aang Thong is just to the north of Ayutthaya, along the Chao Phraya River and roughly two hours north of Bangkok proper.

16. Loei produces a large number of lottery ticket vendors, recruited through informal networks. Somsak and his crew arrive in Bangkok, stay for five days around lottery time, and then return home for ten days. While in Bangkok, the crew from his home village (about fifteen people) rents a single room in a dormitory *(hoh phak).*

17. The cases of Northern Thai spirits described in Morris 2000 and Johnson 2011 present an interesting contrast to Somsak's assertion. In those cases, possessing spirits are often attributed a "Burmese" identity and a definitive origin outside the nation. Yet, as I argue elsewhere (Johnson 2011), these "foreign" spirits are explicitly spirits of cities and not those of the wilderness, as are Lady Mother Takhian and the liver-eating small ghosts.

18. Despite long religious, trade, and historical connections between Thailand and Burma, Burma often plays the role of the alien outsider or destroyer in Thai historiography, film, and popular literature, for example, in Damrong Rajanubhab's *Thai Rop Phama* (2001) and the films *Bang Rajan* (Tanit 2000), *The Legend of King Naresuan* (Chatrichalerm 2007), and *The Legend of Suriyothai* (Chatrichalerm 2001). This has undoubtedly informed Somsak's identification of Burma as an unknowable "alien" place.

19. He means a tree of the species *Musa balbisiana,* a wild variety of banana similar to a plantain. The Thai term is *kluay taanii.* These trees as well as banyan trees are thought to be especially likely to harbor ghosts.

20. Mother Praduu is *Pterocarpus macrocarpus,* a species of hardwood native to mainland Southeast Asia.

21. One young woman described how she dreamed of two fat men with "3" painted on their bellies. Thinking that this meant that the lottery number was to be "33," she played this number. But the number that in fact came out was 23—the woman realized too late that the first number, 2, was to come from the number of men!

22. Other spirit shrines abound, including those on Sathorn Road, in Wat Mahathat, and another shrine of Lady Takhian associated with the shrine of Mae Nak Phra Khanong at Wat Mahabut (see McDaniel 2011).

23. This contrasts sharply to the largely male Chinese shrines in the city.

24. Significantly, the temple in northern Bangkok where I met Somsak and the other vendors specializes in the practice of false funeral, whereby a living person undergoes a funeral to erase the stain of bad karma.

25. Here, I say "Thai" spirit devotion, as most of my interlocutors identified as such. Many might simultaneously identify as "Lao." Related practices are likely to be seen in Cambodia and Burma.

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Andrew Alan Johnson
Weatherhead East Asian Institute
Columbia University
420 West 118th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10027

aaj22@cornell.edu